THE MYSTIC ON THE CONCRETE:
EXPLORING HOW REPORTED EXPERIENCES OF DIVINE GUIDANCE ARE
INTERPRETED FOR MEANING AND DECISION-MAKING

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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Many Americans report experiences of divine guidance. For example, the 2004 General Social Survey showed that 57% of Americans selected ‘most days’ to ‘many times a day’ when asked if they ‘feel God’s guidance in the midst of daily activities.’ Further, a 2008 study by Baylor University found that 20% of Americans agreed with the statement, “I heard the voice of God speaking to me,” and 44% agreed with the statement, “I felt called by God to do something.” Thus it is well established that many people in the US claim to experience divine guidance. However, much less known is how people who report these experiences actually understand and interpret them, and what kinds of decision-making result.

This thesis explores this gap in knowledge through in-depth interviews with 20 carefully selected respondents from various Christian and spiritual backgrounds, each of whom reported high levels of experiencing divine guidance. Patterns are discussed around how people understand and describe these experiences, as well as the ways in which the experiences helped facilitate narration of the respondent’s life-storyline and decision-making processes. Resulting theoretical hypothesis are also discussed.

Keywords: Divine Guidance, Spiritual Experiences, Meaning Making, Decision Making
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY DIVINE GUIDANCE?

Author’s Biographical Background

All meaningful research agendas arise from life-experiences. What else would cause a topic to be interesting enough to be worth the investment of so much time and energy? Those life-experiences also create value sets that cannot be fully removed from the methodology pursued, no matter how objective we attempt to be. This is especially true in the softer sciences, like sociology or religious studies. So in the case of a project like this, which is both sociology and religious study, it is only methodologically appropriate that I begin with autobiography.

I grew up in an energetic Pentecostal church affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination. In denominations like these people are taught to listen for a God that they believe not only can speak, but likely will. I learned that my consciousness was not exclusively mine, but was a space that could be shared with a higher power. Prayer was not a monologue to a transcendent being ‘out there’, but a dialogue with a force somehow more immanent than one’s own breath. I was trained to attend to thoughts within my own consciousness that would emerge from somewhere else. They would feel similar to normal thoughts, yet louder, and somehow substantively different in tone and content. I was taught that this was God speaking to my spirit from his own. I was trained to pay attention to these thoughts, to journal them, and to obey them. They ranged in content.
Some were simple, like devotional practices to undertake or ways to prioritize the events of the day. Other messages were more milestone in nature, like the college to apply to or the girl to marry. I experienced this as a teenager. At the age of 16, I informed my girlfriend that we were going to be married. Let’s just say it took her a few years to come to a similar conclusion. Apparently saying, “God told me that I’m supposed to marry you,” isn’t always a great pickup line. Sometimes the messages were meant for other people, so I would share them. This came with mixed results.

As time went on I found that I was also developing a very analytical mind and viewed most things with a fair level of suspicion. I began a long process of deconstructing many of my inherited childhood beliefs: first through a frustrating seminary experience, then as a pastor of a progressive non-denominational church, and then as a ‘returning’ grad student in the field of sociology of religion. I no longer identified as a Pentecostal (nor even the broader category of Evangelical for that matter), and at times have looked down on my past mystical experiences with suspicion and even derision. Though, in truth, they had felt sincere enough at the time. Yet, despite my more empirical grad-school mind, I would occasionally have recurring experiences of that internal voice still speaking. This ‘silent whisper’ would continue to prompt me from somewhere within my own heart or mind. This was perplexing. Was it the residue of powerful childhood socialization, a residue worthy only to dissect, if not simply to disregard? Or perhaps it originates from a spiritual dimension to the human heart that should be paid attention to, even if its ontological source may always elude me?
I consider myself partially agnostic, by which I simply mean that I can accept that many (most?) of the BIG questions of existence and Ultimate Reality will remain a mystery to humans. Yet, I also choose to identify with the historic tradition of Christianity, particularly the versions of it that inspire positive social change, justice, and equity in the world (far from the Fundamentalist versions). In time I have become more comfortable with my hybrid identity, agnostic-believer, hopeful-skeptic. But neither the part of me that accepts mystery as inevitable, nor the part that hopes for the transcendent knows exactly what to do with this ‘voice.’ I have let it guide me at times. I have disregarded it skeptically at other times. In an eerie way, when I follow its guidance I do feel more at peace with my decisions, and I feel a greater sense of meaning in my life. Other days I just feel foolish.

If I were a pure positivist or empirical naturalist, I would have rejected the notion of a speaking God a-priori. But I am not a pure positivist. If I were a true theologian or cleric, I wouldn’t spend so much time scrutinizing the experiences, and would simply embrace the broad historic stream of religious literature offering many spiritual disciplines and practices to enhance them. But neither am I a true theologian or cleric. I am somewhere in the middle. As I previously mentioned I am a perpetual doubter-believer, a hopeful-skeptic; and while such a dialectic can throw one into a sort of existential crisis (at least twice a week), some of the agony can be productively applied in the form of curiosity. Do other people have these experiences?

According to GSS data from 2004 and a Baylor study in 2008, which will be discussed more later, huge swaths of the American population claim that they do
experience God’s guidance. Between 20-56% depending on exactly how the questions are phrased. Thus, if so many people believe God guides them, or speaks to them, or calls to them (etc.), how do they understand these experiences? How similar or different are their experiences from my own? What concrete life-choices do they make? How do they interpret the outcomes? How much do they second-guess the choices that they have based on divine guidance? Do different segments of society experience this differently? And so on.

Theoretical Frame- Critical Realism

Not only is my conflicted worldview motivational to these research questions, but it also contributes to a theoretical frame. For example, on one hand, I could simply take these experiences for granted as some religionists do. Or I could reject them as silliness, social-performance, or even psycho-pathology as some secularists do. But I avoid knee-jerk reactions in either direction. I accept that some things may exist that cannot be measured by positivist-scientific-method, so I am a post-structuralist of sorts. Yet, not everything religious or spiritual can be boiled down to simply matters of taste or culture, so I am no relativist, nor fully Post-Modern. Perhaps the closest theoretical lens would be that of Critical Realism (See Archer et al. 1998; McGrath 2001; Coelho 2010). Critical Realism is an extension of Post-Modern thought against Modern Empiricism, but also a critique and reconciliation of some of the challenges asserted to Post-Modern Theory (Lopez and Potter 2001). At risk of an oversimplification think of it like this: The ‘realist’
part of Critical Realist is ontological, holding that there may very well be things that exist outside of us as individuals- or outside of us as social groups; even fuzzy things like society, truth, or God. The ‘critical’ part of Critical Realist is epistemological, maintaining that the human condition is inherently limited in our capacity for knowledge- limited to our contextual and subjective perspectives of the world; limited by our social location, among other things. Thus to the Critical Realist, quests to understand truth or reality are not rejected before they begin because of a-priori assumptions that such things (e.g. Truth or Reality) cannot exist in universal ways. Even so, quests for truth must be undertaken with deep humility because while capital ‘T’ – Truth just may turn out to exist, it is not likely grasped with simple correspondence theories of truth. Further, from a Critical Realist lens, any conclusions reached are stated modestly because however ‘universal’ a conclusion may seem at the time, it is anticipated that we will likely discover many exceptions to our rule(s) in due time once they are viewed by others with differing perspectives. Another valuable feature of Critical Realism is that it identifies how the objects we perceive in the world are actually mediators between the independent real objects and the perceivers of the objects. What we perceive are not really objects at all, but the properties of objects. So when a person perceives divine guidance, they are perceiving a property of something. It may be a property that arises in certain sets of conditions, and not in others. It may be a property of the brain or something else, or both. Those ideas frame our starting point for this exploratory study.

This is the spiritual and intellectual journey I have been on for the past decade, and still find myself trying to understand. As previously stated, at times I want to believe
that there is a voice that guides people who choose to listen, as this would certainly offer
a powerful sense of destiny to our lives. At other times I believe that such a proposition is
absurd, simply an act of self-narration to aggrandize our short and tragic existence.
Between these polarities, I am at all times curious about how people understand the
experiences they have, and how they respond to them. Exploring those curiosities is the
project attempted here.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE: CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL CONTEXTS IN THE USA- EPISTEMOLOGIES IN SHIFT

Culture Shift

Thirty is the new 20, green is the new black, spirituality is the new religion, and the mystical is becoming the new empirical. Empiricism is (by definition) when a hypothesis can be affirmed or rejected based on sense experience, observation, or experimentation. Oddly enough, this defines quite aptly the shift in American religiosity over the past three decades. Multiple works have traced shifts away from institutional religion toward seeker spirituality (Wuthnow 1988, 1998, 2007; Bellah et al. 1985; Wolfe 2003; Stark 2008; Smith 2005, 2009). In the mid 1990’s a nationwide poll revealed (Roof 1999) that while 65% of Americans believed that religion was losing its influence in public life, at the same time, a nearly equal amount, 62% claimed that the influence of religion was increasing in their personal lives. Similarly, the sharp decline in memberships within mainline denominations has been a well-documented reality in the U.S., yet concurrently that decline has been easily offset by other remarkable bursts of growth in experiential religious expression: from the Jesus Movement in the 60’s to the rise of Evangelicalism in the 80’s with its increased emphasis on emotional authenticity and intimate spirituality. As Pentecostalism explodes globally, the U.S. has gone through its own charismatic shifts particularly in the 60’s and 80’s, which even included
Catholics. Nor are these shifts isolated exclusively to Christianity. We have seen an increase in the New Age movement. Even Judaism shows an invigorated mystical interest with the Kabbalah Center’s rise in 1965, and spreading to include 50 centers in major cities around the U.S. and internationally. At the conclusion of their 2000 book, *GenX Religion*, USC sociologists of religion, Richard Flory and Donald Miller conclude that to many of the younger religious today (2000:241), “rationalistic apologetics are largely irrelevant to their religious commitments, having been replaced by an experience-based epistemology.” Eight years later they did follow-up research and echoed similar conclusions, noting that most of their subjects had a spirituality (Flory and Miller 2008:168), “centered on experience, lived community, and the body.” They are not alone in this observation.

Sensual Knowledge

Stanford anthropologist, Tanya Luhrmann has been studying experiential religion for decades among multiple religious traditions including Wiccans and New Age movements. In an evocative article titled “Metakinesis: How God Becomes Intimate in Contemporary U.S. Christianity,” she introduces a new term to this discussion. She borrows *metakinesis* from the field of dance criticism. It describes the process a viewer of dance engages in (Burke 2009):

(It is) an inner mimicry of the movement onstage, essentially internalizing the dance into his own neuromuscular system. The initial act of perception took place through the external senses, a passive absorption of spectacle and sound through the eyes and
ears; this evolved, however, into a feeling deep within the spectator’s own body. (P. 292)

Luhrmann notes (2004, 2005, 2010) the similarities in how this idea also fits the ways that worshippers and spiritual practitioners experience themselves. She writes (2005:148), “Words like *peace, grace, falling in love with Jesus, and being filled with the Holy Spirit*, model specific ways of experiencing the body.” To put it simply, people engaged in various forms of mystical experience can feel the spiritual encounter within their bodies. Luhrmann further discusses (2004, 2005, 2010) how they can also train their minds and bodies to increase this capacity. This is a powerful form of personal evidence for people. Religion and culture journalists, Cimino and Lattin, (2002) note:

> Whether these soul-shaking experiences and religious conversions are the true action of the Holy Spirit, hypnotic trance states, or some other psychological trick makes little difference. They feel real. They inspire people to change their lives and commit themselves to another power, whether it’s a higher power outside themselves or an inner voice crying out from the depths of their soul. (P.125)

> These are not isolated cases. Reports of mystical experiences have spiked in recent decades on nationwide surveys as well. Consider that in 1962, at the beginning of these shifts, a Gallup Public Opinion Poll asked the vague and broad question of whether people felt they had, “undergone a religious experience of some variety.” The context was implying mystical experiences. Only 20% said they had. Contrast that with the 2004 General Social Survey, which asked questions about daily spiritual experiences. When asked how often they feel God’s presence, 60% of respondents said most days to many
times a day. When asked how often they felt guided by God in the midst of daily activities, 57% of Americans said they do most days to many times a day. When asked if they feel God’s love for them directly, 45% said most days to many times a day. Only 12-15% said they never experience these feelings. In 2008, Rodney Stark asked respondents to agree or disagree with questions even more specific: ‘I heard the voice of God speaking to me’ (20% Yes); ‘I felt called by God to do something’ (44% Yes).

Comparing that 1962 Gallup poll to the 2008 Baylor poll, we find that 46 years later the same percentage of Americans who originally claimed to have undergone a vague ‘religious experience of some variety’ are now saying they hear God speak to them directly. And only 12-15% claim that they do not personally feel God’s guidance, love, and direct presence. Worldviews are clearly changing.

Religious And/Or Spiritual

This marked increase in reported mystical experiences seems to parallel a related growing phenomenon. This is the same era where the concept of being a religious person versus being a spiritual person is increasingly decoupling (Roof 1993; Princeton Religion Research Center 2000; Cimino and Lattin 2002). It is worth keeping in mind though, that multiple studies have shown that the majority of Americans will identify with both terms, religious and spiritual, when given a both/and option rather than simply framing the question in an either/or approach (Hadaway and Marler 1992; Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Scott 2001). This makes sense if one conceives of spirituality as something intrinsic (e.g.
prayer practices, affective sense of God, mystical experiences) and religiosity as something extrinsic (e.g. church attendance, affirmation of official dogmas, denominational membership). One commonly hears contemporary Evangelical’s describe their faith as, ‘A relationship, not a religion,’ revealing their growing preference for experiential forms of faith over institutional forms. Pargament (1999) argues that this distinction (spirituality=intrinsic, religion=extrinsic) is how social science terminology has traditionally understood these two concepts. Further, Marler and Hadaway (1997) identify that many people who may be ‘mistakenly’ classified as religious (Methodist in their study) are in point-of-fact ‘self-authoring’ their religious identity in much broader terms. It might not be uncommon for someone to see themselves as simultaneously atheist and Jewish, or spiritual and agnostic. Putnam (2010) was surprised from his Faith Matters Survey done in 2006 and repeated in 2007, at how frequently people classified themselves differently only a year later. So on one hand we see the headlines summarizing reports that America is becoming increasingly more secular, and this is true. Yet, these reports are usually noting the decline in people holding to orthodox creeds and dogmas or the decline in official church, temple, or synagogue membership. What is not declining are peoples reports of transcendent or mystical experiences that they are likely to articulate as a ‘spiritual’ rather than as a ‘religious’ experience, even if the experience took place during a church service or is described using the language of a particular religious tradition.

Our social-reality is in a multi-decade state of flux. Globalism marches on. Communication technologies rapidly alter our social landscape and practices of social
life. New ideas go viral. Worldviews collide. Thanks to the ambitions of Modernity, religious organizations have imitated (at least to a degree, over the past century or two) scientists’ ideals of *mastery over mystery through methodology*. The byproducts include complex Systematic Theologies, headache-inducing treatises’ in the Philosophy of Religion, reinvigorated Apologetics discourses, and an endless parade of innovative Hermeneutical Methods and Textual Criticisms- all in an attempt to rationally make-the-case for God, Christianity, belief, or whatever else. Their clever construction of ideas and arguments are notable achievements. Their endeavor loses steam not because they have been out-argued per-se, but because popular cultural understandings of ‘evidence’ and ‘proof’ have shifted from the Modern ideals most of their structures have so rigorously built upon. A Cartesian focus on Modern Rationality and an epistemological Foundationalism in theology is seen as skeptically as are the ‘Grand Narratives’ of pure Positivist Naturalism. The social construction of religion and the social construction of science is becoming ever more apparent to larger audiences. This generation looks behind Oz’s curtain, so-to-speak, and yet curiously, the result is not disenchantment. Rather, as the locus of authority shifts from external ‘legitimating’ structures to internal centers of personal experience – an ironic way of trusting evidence develops in the realm of the spiritual. People begin paying more attention to what they can actually *feel* with their five senses. This is the very definition of empiricism, but without the Positivist or Naturalist emphasis it has become nearly synonymous with. This *subjective empiricism* (as I call it) is the primary method of collecting evidence for growing numbers of people. Evidence they find compelling. They will believe it when they see it, touch it, taste it, smell it, hear
it—when they feel it. And it just may turn out that our bodies have powerful capacities to be trained (or socialized, or discipled, or whatever your preferred terms may be) to experience transcendent experiences. Some may see these experiences coming entirely from somewhere internally (e.g. psychological states). Others will explain it with traditional religious language (e.g. the Holy Spirit). Others will innovate new language to discuss it (e.g. absorption [Lurhman et al. 2010]). One thing is sure, while our ability in U.S. culture to explain Ultimate Reality may be none the clearer, our ability to experience it is showing signs of growth.

This opens up many avenues for future research and exploration. Christian Smith (2008) recently said that among the future directions important for the sociology of religion, two of the areas of needed focus include more research on emotions and on the body. Looking at the work of Lurhman (2004, 2005), Flory and Miller (2000, 2008), Taves (2009), and Bender (2010), we see that emotions and the body must be studied together as component parts of an integrative system when applied to religion and spirituality.

Finally a concluding comment on humility is in order. Theologians can be some of the most irritating scholars, declaring certainties from the data of ancient texts. Scientists can be the same, declaring certainties from the data of formulaic methods. Yet these new directions emerging in the social scientific study of religion embrace the messiness of phenomenology, ethnography, and—mystery. Reductionism has no place here. The sentiments of Donald Miller of USC in his 2006 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion frame this well. As he has studied the
unprecedented explosion of global Pentecostalism (the fastest growing religion in the world), and traveled to more than two-dozen countries gathering ethnographic (and often video and photographic) data, his own methodologies and worldview have been shaken (Miller 2007):

I have become deeply suspicious of reductionistic and purely functional theories of religion. Increasingly, I think we might be well served to allow for the “S” factor (i.e., the Spirit) in attempting to understand social movements such as Pentecostalism. By including the “S” factor, I am not discounting in any way the role of social class, race and ethnicity, cultural worldview, or a myriad of other variables that help us understand social reality… Beliefs are important, but religion is not something located exclusively in the head; it involves all of the senses… Perhaps the most difficult question is what to do with the “S” factor in religion. I, for one, am still struggling with this issue. (P.438 and 445)

Dr. Miller’s sentiments are shared by many.

A Relevant Core Question

The core question explored in this thesis is how people understand their experiences of divine guidance and its related impact on their life decisions. This question takes on particular importance because of the shifts happening in our culture that have been outlined. As more people look to mystical and spiritual experiences, and to divine guidance, to give direction and meaning to their lives (and decreasingly turn to formal ecclesiastical structures) how will this change the kinds of lives they lead? As people ‘encounter’ God or experience the transcendent (however they describe it), how do they expect these events to alter their everyday reality? What implications do they take
from it? What changes and choices do they make? Perhaps your next romantic partner will leave you, or propose to you, because he believes God told him to. Perhaps your next employee will quit her job because of divine guidance, or your next supervisor will relocate the office out of state for the same reason. Perhaps your next President will conduct foreign policy based on what she believes God told her. Perhaps your adult child will finally forgive you for that ‘thing’ from years ago because God led him to. In contemporary American society it is no longer a safe bet to assume that an individual’s religion or spirituality will remain ‘safely’ tucked into the sphere of their private lives once they begin making serious life choices: life choices that may affect you.

Sick or Saintly? Divine Guidance, Psycho-Pathology, and Mental Wellbeing

To some people the thought of hearing God speak, or trance-states, or mystical encounters, etc. immediately brings up suspicions of psychopathology. So, before diving into the interview data, let’s address this assumption at the outset. First, the sheer quantity of people having these experiences rules out the likelihood of psychopathology as a satisfying explanation. Mass psychological dysfunction on this scale is implausible. Yes, many people diagnosed with various forms of abnormal psychopathologies do often have symptoms of hearing voices inside their head or other hallucinations. However it does not logically follow that all people who hear voices within one’s head or have hallucinations have abnormal psychological functioning. Just as all children are human beings, not all
human beings are children. Crazy people sometimes have hallucinations, but not all hallucinations happen to crazy people.

Further, using GSS data Ellison and Fan (2008) found that daily spiritual experiences are correlated positively with psychological wellbeing. Using a different data set, Bradshaw and his colleagues (2009) discovered that those who prayed frequently to a God whom they envisioned as close, loving, and caring were less likely to show symptoms of psychopathology. However, those who prayed frequently to a God whom they envisioned as remote and distant did show a positive correlation with psychopathology. This reveals a more complicated relationship between spiritual experiences and psychopathology than simply assuming that it is ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ to pursue mystical encounters. One study on charismatic Anglican clergy (Francis and Thomas 1997) found that while these ministers are more likely to be extroverted, they are not more likely to show signs of mental instability. Others have addressed the limitations in the DSM-IV to distinguish ‘ordinary’ or ‘healthy’ spiritual experiences from one’s indicating psychopathology (Heery 1989; Liester 1996; Cowley 2001; Luhrmann 2005; Johnson and Friedman 2008). As more research is done on the complexities and varieties of religious experience, no doubt the language to discuss it will develop more as well. A century ago study of religion by the social sciences was quite ambitious. Famous projects ranged from mystical religious experiences (James 1902) to the interaction of religious beliefs on societal structures (Weber 1905). Later it shifted mostly to the quantitative tracking of trends in beliefs, ecclesiastical organizations, and religious practices (e.g. The
Gallup Org.). These boring sensibilities are finally shifting. The field is overdue for more messy and ambitious projects.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Screening and Selection

A convenience sample of 81 people were surveyed at a progressive, non-denominational Christian church in a college town in Northern California to identify candidates for follow-up interviews. To view the instrument used to screen candidates, see Appendix A: Pre-Screening Survey. Though it was a convenience sample, there were some additional advantages to collecting the pool from this church. First, the church is non-denominational and only a few years old. This would allow the sample to include Christian religious perspectives with more diversity than what would perhaps be found in a more established denominational church. Indeed, the results revealed that it contained members from multiple denominational (and even religious) backgrounds (see Table 1). Also, I originally founded this church, and though I no longer acted as its primary pastor at the time of the surveying, I still had a fairly high level of trust established with many of the people involved. This would allow for a more transparent sharing of spiritual experiences.
Table 1. Demographics of Screening Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N = 81</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/Hawaiian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Alaskan Native</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Denom or Unspecified</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian: Evangelical</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian: Mainline</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian: Emergent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian: Pentecostal/Charismatic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian: Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Age / Universalist /</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendentalist /Spiritualist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiccan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with some demographic questions, the screening survey replicated three questions from the 2004 GSS. The three questions asked the respondent to give a 1-6 frequency score for each of the following items: I feel Gods love directly, I feel God’s
presence, and I feel God’s guidance in daily activities. The number selected (1-6) for each was then combined into a score that could range from 3 to 18. This was broken into quartiles: 3-6 Very Low, 7-10 Low, 11-14 High, 15-18 Very High. To be selected for a follow-up interview the respondent had to have a combined frequency score from the three GSS questions in the top two quartiles, and preferably from the top quartile.

There were two questions from the 2008 Baylor Study: “Have you ever heard God speak to you?” and “Have you felt called by God to do something?” An additional question was written for its relevance to the purpose of this study, “Have you ever made a significant life decision because of divine guidance?” To be included in the follow-up interviews the respondent had to answer ‘yes’ to at least one of the two Baylor questions, and ‘yes’ to the question I added about significant life choices.

Finally, to be included in the follow-up interview the respondent had to indicate a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview by giving their contact information at the end of the pre-screening survey. Thirty-two people would have qualified for a follow-up interview, but only 24 volunteered their contact info. Of the 24, eighteen were selected for a follow-up. Six single-white-females in their twenties were excluded because that demographic was already well-represented in the eighteen that were selected. This six that were excluded were selected for exclusion because of either scheduling conflicts in setting-up interviews, or because their responses to the pre-screening questions were not as strong as the other respondents (e.g. a 15 instead of a 17). Two additional respondents
were found from outside groups to help add diversity of perspective to the pool of respondents, one was as a Buddhist respondent and one a Catholic respondent.

The Twenty

As mentioned previously, this is a qualitative piece of work, consisting of twenty pre-screened respondents who participated in a semi-structured face-to-face interview that lasted between one to two hours, depending on how ‘talkative’ they were. Each interview included both Likert type and open-ended questions (see Appendix B: Script Used for Semi-Structured Interviews). Table 2 shows the demographics of the twenty people finally selected for the in-depth interviews. Overall, the twenty turned out to be 70% female, 75% in their late teens or twenties, 90% white, highly educated, and variously single, married, or in relationships.
In addition to the above information about each respondent, three other items are worth commenting on: their religious backgrounds, their sexual orientation, and their mental health.

*Religion/Denomination:* All twenty interviewees had experienced significant exposure to Christianity over their life-course, even the Buddhist practitioner. One said she currently practiced New Age, another claimed to be Unitarian. Of the remaining 17 that currently identified as Christian, 11 said they were Non-Denominational. Of the seven who selected a denominational/movement affiliation, there was one Catholic, one
Presbyterian, two Baptists, and two who said they were part of the new Emerging Church Movement.

*Sexual Orientation:* Sexual orientation was not expressly asked about in the interviews, however one young lady self-identified as lesbian, and two respondents (one male, and one female) self-identified as bi-sexual.

*Mental Health:* Each interviewee was asked questions relating to their overall satisfaction with their work, spirituality, and life in general. They were further asked questions about the state of their mental health and whether or not they have been depressed lately. I wanted to narrow the variables at play, so it was important for this work that all twenty subjects were high functioning, mentally stable, and generally happy with their life, work, and spirituality. They all were. Whatever may be going on to elicit the responses I was collecting, a few items are unlikely as underlying causes: mental disorders, neuroses, clinical depression, and psychopathology. Only one of the twenty had previously suffered bouts of clinical depression, which she claimed to have since recovered from. A second said he had previously had an anxiety disorder accompanied with panic attacks, but had also, since recovered from it. Despite the psychological maladies of these two in the past, all twenty identified their mental health as ‘very healthy’ at the time of the interview.

**Coding**

The interviews were coded for a variety of topics. Most of the codes were parts of two main sets. One set is geared toward trying to understand how divine guidance was
experienced and understood (e.g. internal voices, dreams, coincidences). The other set is geared at trying to understand the types of life decisions made based on divine guidance (e.g. career decisions, romantic decisions, political decisions). A few other codes were looking at content related to decision outcomes, doubt, manipulation, and more. Most of those extra codes were not analyzed for this thesis. At the end of each interview the respondent had the choice to select if they would like an alias to be used, and all but three respondents opted to have their real names used (85%). Though, I later determined it would be more appropriate for an alias to be used for all of them. Nevertheless the small number requesting an alias could be indicative of a shift in willingness to be open about these experiences in ways that may not have been as true only a couple decades ago.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS: HOW DIVINE GUIDANCE IS EXPERIENCED AND UNDERSTOOD

Twenty Modern Day Mystics

The twenty respondents represent modest diversity of backgrounds and worldviews, yet as a group they are quite the cluster of modern-day-mystics. Looking at the GSS questions, the Baylor questions, and the life-decision question across sample groups (i.e. the US Population, the screening sample, and the 20 interviewees) reveals the level of stratification achieved in singling out the twenty chosen for interviews. A total breakdown of results comparing nation-wide averages, the pre-screening pool, and the twenty chosen for interviewing can be seen in Table 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GSS 2004 Questions</th>
<th>US Population GSS 2004</th>
<th>Screening Sample</th>
<th>Selected Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel God’s love, directly.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - Never or almost never</td>
<td>N=1,317 14.8</td>
<td>N=81 2.5</td>
<td>N=20 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Once in a While</td>
<td>1- 195 1.2</td>
<td>2- 6 7.4</td>
<td>2- 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Some Days</td>
<td>2- 147 11.2</td>
<td>3- 17 21</td>
<td>3- 2 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - Most Days</td>
<td>3- 130 9.8</td>
<td>4- 26 32.1</td>
<td>4- 7 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - Every Day</td>
<td>4- 185 14</td>
<td>5- 16 19.8</td>
<td>5- 5 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - Many Times a Day</td>
<td>5- 386 29.3</td>
<td>6- 14 17.3</td>
<td>6- 6 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel God’s presence.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - Never or almost never</td>
<td>N=1,312 12.9</td>
<td>N=81 2.5</td>
<td>N=20 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Once in a While</td>
<td>1- 169 12.7</td>
<td>2- 9 11.1</td>
<td>2- 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Some Days</td>
<td>2- 166 11.3</td>
<td>3- 23 28.4</td>
<td>3- 2 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - Most Days</td>
<td>3- 148 11.3</td>
<td>4- 25 30.9</td>
<td>4- 8 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - Every Day</td>
<td>4- 186 14.2</td>
<td>5- 11 13.6</td>
<td>5- 5 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - Many Times a Day</td>
<td>5- 347 26.4</td>
<td>6- 11 13.6</td>
<td>6- 5 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - Never or almost never</td>
<td>N=1,318 16.4</td>
<td>N=81 7.4</td>
<td>N=20 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Once in a While</td>
<td>1- 216 16.4</td>
<td>2- 11 13.6</td>
<td>2- 2 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Some Days</td>
<td>2- 179 13.6</td>
<td>3- 22 27.2</td>
<td>3- 4 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - Most Days</td>
<td>3- 181 13.7</td>
<td>4- 22 27.2</td>
<td>4- 5 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - Every Day</td>
<td>4- 181 13.7</td>
<td>5- 11 13.6</td>
<td>5- 5 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - Many Times a Day</td>
<td>5- 336 25.5</td>
<td>6- 9 11.1</td>
<td>6- 4 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two Baylor Questions &amp; The Life-Decision Question</th>
<th>US Population Baylor Study 2008</th>
<th>Screening Sample</th>
<th>Selected Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ever Heard the Voice of God Speak?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Called by God to do Something?</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made Significant Life Decision Based on Divine Guidance?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ever Heard the Voice of God Speak?</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Called by God to do Something?</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made Significant Life Decision Based on Divine Guidance?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note that of the twenty interviewees, 90% said they felt God’s love directly between ‘most days’ to ‘many times a day’; 90% said they felt God’s presence ‘most days’ to ‘many times a day’; and 70% said they felt God’s guidance in the midst of daily activities ‘most days’ to ‘many times a day’ (compared to 64%, 63%, and 56% respectively, of the US population). Sixteen of the twenty (80%) said they have heard the voice of God speak to them, compared to the 20% of the American population from the Baylor Study (Stark 2008). All twenty said they had felt called by God to do something at some point in their lives, compared to the 44% of the American population from the same Baylor study. Finally, all twenty of them said they had made a significant life decision based on divine guidance (of course, as this question was a screening condition for being included in the follow-up interviews). Thus the sample screened for interviewing shows much higher levels of reported divine guidance than the general population. This increased frequency and intensity of reported divine guidance make these twenty excellent candidates for qualitatively exploring how some people understand and respond to these experiences.

The Ten-Item List

Each of the twenty were asked to give a frequency score to a list of ways that they may or may not have experienced God communicating with them. The list of items was shown and described to them as follows:

- **Internal Verbal:** You heard God speak from within your heart and/or mind?
• **External Verbal:** You heard God speak audibly with your ears?

• **Internal Visual:** You saw an image from God in your minds eye?

• **External Visual:** You saw a literal vision from God with your eyes?

• **Intuitive:** You sensed God communicating with you through what some may describe as promptings, leadings, intuition, subtle feelings or gut feelings?

• **Emotive:** You felt an overwhelming emotion that you knew was from God? Could be positive emotions like peace, joy or love; or negative emotions like fear, awe, or conviction.

• **Circumstantial:** You knew God was trying to communicate with you through circumstances in your life (e.g. the words of others, opening and closing of doors or opportunities, blessings or pain, coincidences that you believed were not just coincidence)?

• **Written:** You clearly sensed God communicating with you through written works, such as the Bible or other books? Not in the sense that everything you read in the Bible is ‘God speaking to you,’ if you believe the Bible is the Word of God, but in the sense that a line or passage jumped out at you in a way that you felt was uniquely from God for you in that moment.

• **Aesthetic:** You sensed God communicating with you through art, music, film, or nature? Not in the sense that all humans can appreciate beauty or be moved by it, but in a way that felt uniquely from God as communication to you in that moment.

• **Dreams:** You received communication from God in a dream?

• **Other:** Have you had experiences of God guiding or communicating with you in any other ways than what was discussed above?
The ‘Other’ Category

Notice that in the above list of ways that people may experience divine guidance, the respondents were each asked if there were any ‘other’ ways they had experienced God communicating with them that we had not yet discussed. In the very first interview the respondent, Jillian, frequently talked about the ways that nature, music, and art were the vehicles through which God would most often communicate with her. She said a category like that was needed in the list, instead of lumping it in with the emotive category. I took her advice, and added it for subsequent interviews, and was glad I did, as it became the most frequently cited category of all.

After that, only three other respondents added suggestions. One respondent said he felt God leading him through the smiles of children, another said prophetic words given to him by other people, and a third said she experienced God guiding her through the physical touch of other people. I did not add categories for these responses because I felt they could appropriately fit within the pre-existing categories once the experiences were broken down a little more. The smiles of children was an emotive response, as they reminded this older gentleman of his own kids when they were young, and he felt it was a way God was saying that he (God) is smiling down at him (the respondent) as God’s child. The physical touch category almost had me almost convinced to add another section, but with further explanation the young lady said that when she felt a tough decision needed to be made, or she was feeling depressed, sometimes someone would put
a hand on her shoulder or back, and she would instantly get the sense that it was God
patting her to comfort her through the act, which fits the circumstantial category. Finally,
the statement about ‘prophetic words’ from other people also fits in the circumstantial
category. In the description of that category, ‘the words of others’ were included. Overall,
the resulting ten-item list proved to adequately capture the vast majority of experiences
reported by the respondents.

Let Me Count the Ways

To each of the ten items in the list the respondents gave a frequency score of 1
through 5, which was rated as follows:

1. **Never** Experienced
2. **Rarely** Experience: once to a few times ever
3. **Occasionally** Experience: perhaps a few times in a year
4. **Frequently** Experience: monthly to weekly
5. **Constantly** Experience: multiple times a week or more

Table 4 shows a summary of the frequency scores given to each item. The ‘Sum Score’
represents the total value of the frequencies selected (1-5) multiplied by the number of
respondents that chose each frequency (1-20). It is arranged in order of highest Sum
Score to lowest with the most commonly selected (mode average) frequency within each
category shaded in gray. The gray boxes show a fairly smooth drift in the drop-off from
most-frequent to least-frequent types of reported divine guidance experiences.
In addition to a numeric (1-5) frequency score, the respondents were also asked to share stories or examples about times when they had these experiences. Particular attention was given to collecting stories and examples about the items that respondents gave the highest frequency scores to (4’s or 5’s).

**Performance Behavior Off-Script?**

It seems that even though the Biblical accounts of divine guidance are full of dramatic visions, voices, and dreams these are not the most commonly selected methods through which people tend to expect God to communicate (See Table 4). One may think of Moses and the burning bush (external visual and external verbal), Samuel’s childhood call by God (external verbal), or Paul’s Damascus road vision of the resurrected Christ (external visual and external verbal). As far as dreams go, we may think of the childhood dreams of Joseph foretelling his rise to greatness, or Paul’s dream to go to the man from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>-1- Never</th>
<th>-2- Rarely</th>
<th>-3- Occasionally</th>
<th>-4- Frequently</th>
<th>-5- Constantly</th>
<th>Sum Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstantial</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Verbal</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreams</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Visual</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Verbal</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Visual</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Macedonia, which first brought Christianity to Europe. Examples of divine guidance through coincidence are a bit thinner in the Biblical account. Perhaps we could reference Gideon asking God for a sign with his fleece test. Or perhaps we could take the whole book of Esther as a story of divine guidance through coincidence, but the text never explicitly says that, as a matter of fact it does not mention God at all. The Talmudic origins story of Hanukah may come to mind, the candles burned for eight days despite insufficient oil.

The point is, while Scriptural examples seem to frame the intervention of God into everyday reality as the *modus operandi* of divine guidance, that is far from how the respondents discuss their experiences. As a matter of fact, the Scriptures run dry for examples matching the most frequently cited methods of experiencing divine guidance by our respondents.

So before we attempt to blame experiences of divine guidance on sheer performance behavior or mimicry (and perhaps to some degree it is), it is at least noteworthy that most of their accounts of divine guidance are expressed in ways that do not correspond with the primary methods of divine guidance chronicled in their own Scriptures. It seems that somewhere along the way, they each picked up the idea that God guides and communicates in much more complex ways than the Bible indicates. On one hand this allows divine guidance to become a far more common fixture in daily life than waiting around for a burning bush to start speaking, but on the other hand it requires some creative methods of interpretation: just how *does* one distinguish divine guidance
from all the other emotions, intuitions, circumstantial happenings, or moments of beauty in life?

In the pages that follow, we will listen to some of the stories and accounts that the respondents themselves gave to each of the methods of experiencing divine guidance. They will be approached in reverse order of their frequency scores, beginning with the most rare (external visual) and ending with the most frequently reported (aesthetic).

**External Visual Guidance**

**Table 5. Reported Frequencies of ‘External Visual’ Divine Guidance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>-1-</th>
<th>-2-</th>
<th>-3-</th>
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<tr>
<td>External Visual</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
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**Audrey:** “I do a lot of processing when I’m driving, and I had a rough day. So I’m sitting there in my driveway, I take a deep breath and I just sort of got my head against the window and I’m looking up and it’s sort of a foggy night but the moon was full and as I am looking at it, I had this intense feeling of beauty in that moment. I was thinking about how God is that beautiful. I am acknowledging that, and all of a sudden the fog parts and starts swirling around the moon… it was a breath-taking moment… I felt a direct connection between God being there and seeing it.”

Stories like these were very rare in my sample, there were only three stories of seeing a vision with their literal eyes, and one story was second hand. The second hand story came from a respondent who said that a friend of his, “that he trusts,” was on a thirty-day spiritual retreat. One day while jogging in the forest his friend had a vision of
Jesus jogging right next to him in a full jogging suit complete with sweatbands. They had a conversation and his friend found it to be a meaningful moment in his retreat. In the final story shared with me, it was the practicing Buddhist, who saw the vision.

**Phillip:** “I was looking out at the whole view of the ocean horizon and the sky and it was a beautiful day and suddenly the sky was sort of... the whole view opened up into a laughing face. And it was [one of my favorite spiritual writers’ face]. And then his guru, who is also my guru, came right next to him and they were both just laughing. It was like a cosmic laugh... Bliss.”

He also acknowledged that he had been smoking marijuana in that case, which casts a certain level of suspicion on the account. Not only were these stories rare, even among this group of mystics, they had elements about them that were not what I would have expected from stories of visions. All took place in nature, were from the distant (relatively speaking) past, and all left the participants with a sense of peace, joy, or beauty. They were not visions that led to decision-making, action, or a sense of future-direction as in many of the stories of visions found in the sacred literature of most monotheistic religions.

Few conclusions can be drawn from this sliver of data, except perhaps that most people who speak of having experiences of divine guidance rarely mean that they have had some sort of direct vision from God or the transcendent. The most revealing thing about this theme is simply that it happens so seldom. It is possible that when recalling a visual memory from the mid-range past (a few months or years) to long-range past (childhood), it may be difficult to distinguish whether the images stored in the brain’s archives originated from a vision seen with the literal eyes, or the mind’s eye. Sort of like
the time I told my wife about a funny childhood experience I remember having. Only to my embarrassment, she said that it sounded curiously similar to something she had seen on a sit-com a number of years back. It donned on me that I might have gotten the images in my mind mixed up; had I witnessed that on television rather than in real life? I was not totally sure. In addition, our brains are masterful at filling in the gaps of missing details upon retrieval, and also at enhancing the vividness of the memory if it is surrounded by an emotional charge. As a sociologist, my purpose is not to determine whether or not the respondents actually had transcendent visions, but rather to look for the meaning they gleaned from the experiences. In each of these cases, the respondents felt more at peace with themselves and connected to their conceptions of the divine.

However for further study on people’s experiences of visions of the ‘external visual’ sort, it would be recommended to narrow the sample to experiences that were in the very recent past to help the participants minimize possibly confounding cognitive phenomena. Finally, experiences linked to hallucinogenic substances will want to be strained out, and classified separately.

### External Verbal Guidance

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>-1 - Never</th>
<th>-2 - Rarely</th>
<th>-3 - Occasionally</th>
<th>-4 - Frequently</th>
<th>-5 - Constantly</th>
<th>Sum Score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External Verbal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 6. Reported Frequencies of ‘External Verbal’ Divine Guidance
**Jared:** “I’ve heard… I feel like I’ve heard a voice a couple of times… One was, um, what led me to my current vocation and career as a pastor. I was deciding whether or not to relocate to join a church planting team. I very much sensed this audible, like: ‘You, go!’… a voice.”

When people think of the concept of divine guidance, this is often the kind of idea they think of most. This is also why the concept strikes many with such instant reactions of skepticism, it sounds downright incredulous. However, it seems that hearing an externally audible voice speak is not actually an experience of divine guidance very often reported, even among those who report high levels of divine guidance. Only 30% (6 of 20) of the respondents in this sample said they had *ever* experienced an externally audible voice, and of those who said they had, five of the six could only recall having experienced it once or twice. Only one person said he experiences this on an annual basis or more. Further, many of the stories of hearing an externally audible voice were also accompanied by feelings of uncertainty or doubt as to the legitimacy of their own experience. For example, the respondent, Jared, quoted above then went on to say, “I might experience a lot of these things, but I’ll just second guess myself… as… not, um, as not an authentic, divine image, or… voice… or… whatever. So I tend to not walk in those ways as frequently as I experience them… just out of sheer doubt.” The Catholic respondent shared a story about hearing a voice as a child:

**Lawrence:** “The one time that I heard an audible voice was when I was like, 6 or 8, when I would get into trouble, I would go into my parents bedroom and hide under the covers… and [this time] I saw a really big light, like the light in the room was turned on extremely bright and I heard a really deep voice say, ‘Lawrence.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah?’ and it wasn’t a warm feeling… it wasn’t
like a peaceful feeling… it was just like someone was calling me and I went downstairs and I was like, ‘Dad, did you call me?’ And he said, ‘No.’ And I was like, ‘Ok…?’ Um, and that’s the only time I’ve ever had anything like that. Um, I don’t know what it was… I’m convinced it was real. I’m not gonna say I swear it wasn’t a dream, but if I had to bet my next paycheck on it, I’d say it was a real thing that had happened.”

This story perhaps illustrates the classic stereotype of ‘Catholic-guilt’ playing itself out in a unique way, complete with a father-like God-figure ready to sternly correct this respondent for whatever it was that he had done wrong (I realized later that he did not actually mention what it was that led him to hide under the covers in the first place). Whatever else it illustrates, it is a great example of the significant segment of the American population that has no problem believing that this sort of thing is at least plausible. Further, when the respondent instantly starts questioning its legitimacy it again illustrates that previously mentioned marker of doubt accompanying some of the more extreme types of divine guidance experiences.

Another possibility is that the talk of doubting these experiences may not actually represent authentic doubt, but may have been more of a linguistic strategy to increase the believability of their story. By qualifying their stories with, ‘I could be wrong,’ it gives them the chance to pick up on their listener’s reaction before continuing with the story. In each interview I intentionally tried to come off as non-judgmental and as supportive as possible. I used standard active listening strategies, nodding my head, maintaining eye contact, and giving occasional support phrases: “interesting,” “wow,” “cool.”

A final story, illustrates a different kind of complexity than the two above. In this story the respondent is a 23-year-old woman who had previously shared that she had
experienced repeated physical and sexual abuse from her father and other family friends throughout her childhood. She said that her grandfather played the role of ‘protector’ in her family, in the sense that whenever she was in his home she knew nothing bad was going to happen to her. She said her grandfather’s home was the only ‘safe place’ she had growing up. This story is about her experience learning of his death.

**Lyndsay:** “I was in eighth grade, so like 13, and my grandfather died in New Zealand. And so, we found out. I was at church and my dad came in and pulled me out of choir practice and was like, ‘Grandpa is dead.’ Or whatever he said, and, but he said, ‘Grandpa died tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.’ because of the time difference. It was actually, the date was tomorrow even though it was at night cause of the time difference... And not that I didn’t understand time differences, but that sounded weird to me, how could he die tomorrow? So it was kind of a weird thing to come to terms with. Anyway, I had a history test the next day, and so I’m in class and... we’re all trying to concentrate, and I couldn’t tell you what this history test was about, but, I heard somebody distinctly say, ‘He is with me.’ To the point where I looked around the whole classroom to be like, ‘Who’s talking?’ And everyone else is just taking their tests and I’m just like, ‘What in the world!?’ ‘He’s with me, okay...’ And I looked up at the clock and it was the exact time that my grandfather had passed away. And so, it was a very unique experience, and a very comforting experience to me.”

She goes on to talk about how she then found the inner strength to move out of her family’s house to find another ‘safe place’ and end the cycles of abuse. She attributes much of the source of that inner strength to experiences of divine guidance, or as she recounted it in another experience of God speaking (internal verbal this time), “not only did God give me the strength for that… but it almost wasn’t a choice… ‘You have to do this if you want to be a whole human being.’” Much literature exists about the powerful ways our brain will work to protect us from trauma. From Dissociative Identity Disorder
to some of the amnesia-like effects symptomatic of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But before we become so reductionist as to classify any unexplainable experience had by a victim of trauma as a disorder, it is worth noting the healthy way that her experience led her to find strength to act in her own best interest. If this was a disorder, perhaps it is a kind of disorder that would be helpful to others as well.

Internal Visual Guidance

Table 7. Reported Frequencies of ‘Internal Visual’ Divine Guidance

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<th></th>
<th>-1- Never</th>
<th>-2- Rarely</th>
<th>-3- Occasionally</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
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</table>

**Interviewer:** “Have you ever seen an image from god in your mind’s eye?”

**Phillip:** “Yea totally, it’s like your heart’s projector screen.”

This category represents the shift from the extremely rare phenomena to the modestly occurring. Most (13 of 20) of the respondents had experienced some sort of internal visual occurrence that they attributed to a transcendent source, however it was very much still seen as something that happened rarely. One respondent tells her story of being at peace with giving up a child for adoption. She knew it was the right thing to do because she saw a, “hopeful image of [the baby when older] being reconciled with his father.” Phillip said he would occasionally see images when deep in his Buddhist style meditations. Jared, the pastor, shared about his experiences, which similarly, seemed to
occur when in deep prayer. He recounted how things would get brighter, and white. Then in his mind’s eye:

**Jared:** “Suddenly nothing is around me. No surroundings… I’m there in space. I mean I can feel the floor, but there is nothing else around. Sometimes I can see people around me, I am looking down [from an elevated visual perspective] on them… I’ll be so in the moment that everything is just white and gone.”

This kind of absorption in the mind’s eye is common in the descriptions of spiritual practitioners who meditate or pray often. Exciting new directions in the anthropology of religion are suggesting that absorption states (as these are called) have a learned quality that can be enhanced with training (Lurhman et al. 2010). In that same article she speaks of internal visual experiences that arose in some of her ethnographic research. She recounts (Lurhman et al. 2010: 69), “Congregants at the Vineyard also expected God to speak back to them by placing mental images or thoughts (sometimes called ‘impressions’) in their minds….”

A final story is worth noting, Richard is in his 50’s, and recounts a brush with death that he attributes to narrowly avoiding due to divine guidance.

**Richard:** “When I first got out of the Service, I got a job at a cement block factory in Idaho and I was real reluctant to wear the hard hat even though the hard hat was the required safety gear. My job was to drive a forklift to unload the kiln before everyone got there; and set everything up so that when the foremen came in he could start mixing concrete and start making blocks. I would get to work, I would throw my hardhat on the back of the forklift, I would empty out the kilns, I would bring in an empty kart or rack, and then I would open the kiln doors. And the kiln doors were hinged in the middle on counter weights, so you would pick them up, throw them up, and the counter weights take over to lift the doors up. There were three doors, and after I got the doors up I
would put the hardhat on because the foreman was going to show up at any moment.

This one morning, I got this strong visual image that I really needed to put the hard hat on. So I get to work, I put the hard hat on. I do everything. Flip open the first door. Flip open the second door. And, bam, the cable broke. The door came down on top of the hard hat and it really screwed up my neck but I didn’t get killed.”

**Interviewer:** “Wow…”

**Richard:** “Yea, It was just- it was so compelling, ‘You have to wear it!’”

**Interviewer:** “Did you hear a voice like that internally?”

**Richard:** “No voice, just a picture.”

Experiences like Richards are slightly harder to classify. It was not the result of a regimen of honed spiritual practice. It was something he did not expect, but that he believes made all the difference one day. Perhaps it was intuitive thinking, his subconscious throwing an image into his conscious mind. Nobel laureate and psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2003) might say his ‘system-one thinking’ (intuitive) told him to wear a hard had through a mental image, and his ‘system-two’ thinking (reasoning) later attributed the meaning of it to divine intervention. As discussed in the section on External Visual, the tricky part about memories like these are that they are years old, and emotionally charged with significance. But whatever the reason behind Richard’s choosing to wear a helmet that one day, he is grateful that he did.
Dreams as Guidance

Table 8. Reported Frequencies of ‘In-Dream’ Divine Guidance

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<td>Dreams</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>45</td>
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**Vivian:** “(God) has spoken to me before in dreams. And most of the time it’s just a warning about something. So, I will have a dream about a circumstance that I am in and I will see, like a snake (for example), and I will feel fearful and then later I’ll be in that situation and I will realize that was what my dream was about.”

One of the most unique aspects of the dream category compared to the others, is that it was the only category where every story told by the dozen respondents who had experienced it were told in the same time orientation. In each story the respondent had a life transition, choice, or decision to figure out in the very near future and the dreams helped them know what choices to make. Many of the other categories will contain stories in multiple time perspectives. For example most of the ‘coincidental’ stories tend to be retro-active, where they discovered how divine guidance was at work because of the outcomes or life-lessons learned *after-the-fact*. Many other types of divine guidance experiences are stories simply about the present, statements of God’s love or presence or protection that elicit some sort of *in-the-moment* emotive response. But all of the dream stories happened to be about pending life situations being faced in the very *near-future*.

The respondent quoted above, Vivian, went on to say:

**Vivian:** “I had a dream when I was starting to date my husband and I was gonna be entering his friend group that was a lot different from my previous (growing up), and I faced a pretty mean
situation (from my childhood family and friend group) that I was not necessarily ready for. And so, I had a dream that William and his friends were all on one side of this field and I was on the other, and they were all telling me to come to them, but there were snakes and bugs and rats and everything in between us. And William was trying to guide me through the transition of my life that I was really scared (to make) and it represented me making this, like, crossover into an adult world… Coming of age.”

A respondent named Millie said:

**Millie**: “I dream a lot, I really do. Sometimes, after waking up, I’ll have a certain feeling about something afterwards. I will kinda go with that gut instinct as far as… like, if I have a burning question on my mind before I go to sleep I tend to dream about it and have a feeling for it afterwards.”

Her response illustrates quite well this sense of near-future time orientation that became a pattern in these stories. Another respondent, a licensed doctor of psychology and therapist at a local university said:

**Mary**: “There were a few times (I experienced divine guidance in dreams), it is usually at a crossroads where I have to make a big decision in life. (In the dream) I am reminded of what can happen if I don’t choose one thing and I go down that other path. I feel like often it is when I am slightly afraid to choose something (that) would be better for me.”

A final story included here comes from the pastor, Jared said he had only experienced two dreams before that he would attribute to divine guidance. When asked to share one he said:

**Jared**: “When my wife and I first discovered we were infertile… uhm… [he looks away, clearly it was an emotional memory] there was a very intense season in our life when we were trying to discover what the next path was for us… and I particularly
remember a dream where there was, not a visual, but an audible thing that happened in my dream where I felt like we were supposed to be adoptive parents. Um, and there was a number, ‘five’ that sort of stuck out in this dream. The ‘five’ to me represented the amount of kids that we were going to have at some point in our life.”

Jared and his wife had then gone on to pursue multiple painful and un succesful adoption attempts before finally adopting a baby boy. They later successfully adopted two more children, now they are parents of three kids under the age of four. When asked if they still plan on having five, he nodded his head, and said they were looking to start the process for the next child at the end of the year. Clearly this family has put a lot of trust in the significance of a dream. Certainly, they may very well end up with five kids, and it would be easy to say that it is a superb example of self-fulfilling prophecy. But what is perhaps more significant, is the kind of meaning this gives to their family life. They fully believe that somehow they are meant to parent five adopted children, that there is a kind of *destiny* to how their family life is *supposed* to look. Whether real or imagined, this kind of meaning-making is certain to buttress the psyche from feelings of randomness and inconsequentiality.

As a final note, future research on reports of divine guidance in dreams should take a look at time orientation. Perhaps there is a simple cognitive explanation, such as the brain subconsciously processing imminent-life-decision-making information while we sleep, and feeding our conscious mind our decisions through symbolic images or words in dreams (e.g. snakes or the number five), or through some sort of emotive or intuitive insight upon waking. Or perhaps the consistent time orientation found in these
dream stories is due to random chance per the small sample size. Whatever the reason, dream experiences in this sample are unanimously linked to looming and significant life choices needing to be made in the near future.

Internal Verbal Guidance

Table 9. Reported Frequencies of ‘Internal Verbal’ Divine Guidance

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<th>-1- Never</th>
<th>-2- Rarely</th>
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<th>-4- Frequently</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal Verbal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>66</td>
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**Interviewer:** “So, have you heard God speak from within your heart and/or mind?”

**Derrick:** “I just feel like God’s putting things on my heart that I’m thinking about, that I’m wrestling with… and I feel like there is a dialogue going on.”

One of the largest surprises for me was seeing that internal verbal did not rank higher on this scale. This was the method that had dominated my personal experiences, and what I believed the American Christian sub-culture broadly promotes as the most common form of experiencing divine guidance. Stanford anthropologist of religion, Tanya Luhrmann talks about this from her own ethnographic interviews with charismatic Evangelicals in the Vineyard Movement, saying that (2010):

“Congregants explicitly understood this process of recognizing God in their minds as a skill, which they needed to learn by repeatedly carrying on inner-voice ‘conversations’ with God during prayer and being attentive to the mental events that could count as God’s response.” (P. 70)
One of my respondents, Jillian, expressed this well when talking about a time she felt God speaking to her in an internal verbal way about the need to forgive a friend who had wronged her. She said, “It didn’t feel like an everyday, ‘oh that’s what I should probably do.’ It was like within a conversation.” Notice that she was sure to separate the experience of, A) everyday internal self-talk, from B) a conversation with God within her own mind. This is not surprising, as so much of the formal rhetoric (i.e. from pastors, authors, theologians) surrounding divine guidance implies that there is language taking place. For example people talk of, ‘hearing God speak,’ ‘listening to God’s voice,’ or that prayer is ‘conversing with God.’ Three of the best-selling Evangelical titles on the topic of divine guidance in the last decade have the following titles, Dallas Willard’s (1999), “Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God,” Henry and Richard Blackaby’s (2002), “Hearing God’s Voice,” and Bill Hybel’s (2010), “The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond.” On a side note, it is worth mentioning that these are not the obscure titles of fringe authors in extreme niches. Each book places quite well on Amazon.com sales rankings; Dallas Willard even carries the credentials of Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California. My main point, however, in bringing them up is to show how these titles are dominated by what would at least imply a certain aurality to the nature of divine guidance. As one reads these books, you realize that while the authors do believe that God can speak in an external verbal capacity, they are quick to mention that he rarely does. Instead, they say that all Christians should be able to develop what we are describing in this paper as an ‘internal verbal’ capacity to ‘talk to God’ and to ‘hear God speak.’ It is also worth noting
however, that all of these authors also talk about God communicating through circumstances, the words of others, or what they may vaguely describe as ‘promptings’ or ‘leadings.’ It seems that there is a certain accepted jargon or code in which to speak about divine guidance within the contemporary Christian community that involves a variety of terms, most of which are terms of aurality or language (e.g. speak, hear, listen, whisper, talk). Despite this dominance in the parlance of aurality, the sample in this study did not identify it as the most common method of experiencing divine guidance. Nevertheless, there is an over-use of the terms and language of aurality for the proportion of experiences that actually fall in this category. This may be attributed to the cultural trend to talk about divine guidance with this terminology. While all but one respondent claimed to have had internal verbal experience of divine guidance, the general consensus was that this is something that happens occasionally (not frequently) and a few noted that it can be difficult to interpret whether the ‘voices’ are coming from God versus coming from one’s own thoughts.

Language as Metaphor

At one point in the interviews it became so clear that many of the respondents were saying they heard God speaking, but were not actually referring to an experience of ‘language’ that I directly asked about this:

**Interviewer:** “I have a question for you, I notice that you use the language of God speaking to you a lot… as do a lot of people it seems… but it doesn’t sound like the verbal is actually a very common example [in your descriptions of what the experience was
like]. Why do you tend to use the metaphor of language if the experience doesn’t usually involve language?"

**Vivian:** “Uhm, probably, honestly, just through habit and my teaching… that’s what we called it… um… or like, ‘God moving,’ but yeah… I would say it was mostly just habit.”

**Interviewer:** “Is that what you heard growing up in that [charismatic Evangelical] setting?”

**Vivian:** “Yes.”

All of the respondents were asked the 2008 Baylor question about whether they had ever, ‘heard the voice of God speaking to them?’ (remember, 20% of Americans said yes). One respondent replied in the affirmative, but then added, “But it’s not what you’d typically think of like God coming down and saying, ‘What are you doing?’ No actually it’s sometimes… a humbling experience where all of a sudden I get overwhelmed with the feeling of ‘hey, this isn’t right’ or, ‘you’re on the wrong path.’” She was distinguishing between emotional feelings that she interpreted as divine guidance, and the language she used to describe the meaning of the feelings. Yet, when asked if she had ‘heard’ the ‘voice’ of God ‘speak,’ she said yes. Strong ‘emotional feelings’ in her conscience was something that she attributed to a divine origin. Future research and nationwide surveying of people’s experiences of divine guidance should pay attention to the fact that many Americans will answer in the affirmative to ‘aurally’ phrased questions, even though they may not have had ‘aural’ experiences. They will assume the aural phrasing is a metaphor, if the interviewer does not clearly articulate that they intend it to be interpreted literally.
Hard to Interpret

The other theme that began to emerge from this experience was the difficulty with which the respondents had trusting the source of the voice on the occasions that they actually did claim to have experiences involving internal verbal words. One young lady shared a time she believed God told her that her friend would eventually be converted. She seemed quite confident in the experience until I asked her to explain what it was like and what words were said. Her response is as follows:

**Daneen:** “Uhm, I don’t know necessarily if I had a specific vocal voice or something, but, like, somehow the words are in… I don’t know if it’s in your mind or where it is, but it said, ‘I will win him.’ And then, uhm, yeah, I think- I know there’s all kinds of analysis about like, if we tell ourselves things or whatever… But, I guess why I thought that that would be a voice from God is because I know that He does, uhm, well, I guess I believe that He does tell us things.”

Another respondent was fairly articulate when asked if he had ever heard God speak using language from within his heart or mind. He said:

**Phillip:** “At this point in my walk, I wouldn’t want to mistake [God’s voice] for just my own thoughts. So I’d say I’m agnostic about it. I mean, I certainly experience, like, a voice, but I’m like, ‘where does it come from?’ (laughter) So I don’t want to claim that I know that it’s God in this situation, but then I can’t say that I’ve never experienced it…”

One last example is from a respondent named Audrey, she says:

**Audrey:** “With hearing God’s voice I get tripped up because I never know if it’s me thinking, or if it’s directly from God, so I never know how much to trust it or how outside of myself it is. So,
the hearing God speaking in my head thing is, I don’t quite trust that enough. I like, second guess it.”

Divine Encouragement

For those who were able to confidently articulate the words that they heard from God in their hearts or minds, the general consensus surrounded words of encouragement, particularly in trying times. One young lady named Lauren said, “I hear Him speak… in a way that’s like my own voice in my head, like: ‘Lauren, calm down.’ Or ‘Lauren, see this differently.’” Another said, “I definitely have heard just like, ‘Trust me.’ ‘Be still.’ Or small phrases like that, that are very profound to me in that moment.” Another one said she heard, “If you follow me I’ll lead,” and “I love you, I know the way.” One more example, highlights the comforting effect this sort of experience had for the respondent:

Katie: “I was just laying in bed crying and talking to God saying, ‘I don’t know what to do!’ and I just felt… like I heard words… and He said, ‘I’ll take care of it.’ Like, ‘I’ll take care of it.’” [repeated with emphasis] And I just felt like, ‘Well, I guess there’s nothing I can really do. It’s out of my hands.’ It has nothing to really do with me but it affects me, so, I just felt like, ‘throw up your hands’ [in a gesture of surrender] and say, ‘go for it!’ because He knew what’s best and took care of it.”

Each of these experiences shows a type of surrender or acceptance in the midst of their situations. These changes of emotional state brought what they described as peace, comfort, and encouragement.

To summarize, virtually all of the respondents claimed to hear God speak to them. But then when asked to share the exact ‘words’ that they had heard, many would have
difficulty articulating it, or would back-peddle and reveal that they used the terms in metaphoric ways to refer to being guided by God in other ways. Of those who were able to clearly recount actual phrases or conversations that they had with God, these respondents seemed to be broken into two groups. One group were those who had serious questions about whether the experiences were authentic, or just aspects of their own internal self-talk that they were attributing to God. The other group seemed quite confident in the experiences of hearing God speak using real language from somewhere inside their mind. This group most usually expressed the voice as a voice offering comfort or encouragement, rather than explicitly as a voice telling them to do something. On that note, when a few respondents attempted to articulate how this voice in their heads was different than the ‘sound’ of their own thoughts, they would point to how it was a voice of confidence and wisdom that they claimed was outside of their own capacity for confidence or wisdom at that time. Somehow they identify God’s advice or words as the most ‘mature,’ or ‘wise’ advice they are receiving. For those who had an easier time trusting that this voice was authentic, they would then lean into that decision with a sense of confidence. A few respondents went so far as to say it was, “the only decision I could make,” or they, “felt compelled,” “had to,” “had no choice,” or “couldn’t do anything different.”
The Written as Guidance

Table 10. Reported Frequencies of ‘Written’ Divine Guidance

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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

This particular form of divine guidance was the most difficult of all to gather specific examples of. All of the respondents claimed to have experienced some sort of divine guidance coming from written works, yet when pressed for examples they seemed tongue-tied. I had the sense that it was like asking someone if they had ever eaten pasta, the person knows they have, but has difficulty recalling a specific example of it. A great case in point is the following interchange:

**Interviewer:** “What about written? Have you ever clearly sensed God communicating with you through written works such as the Bible or other books?

**Tami:** “I would say a five.” [Responding to the frequency scale, five equals ‘constantly: multiple times a week or more.’]

**Interviewer:** “A five? Okay, and is that normally through the Bible or other books, or both?”

**Tami:** “Both.”

**Interviewer:** “Both. Okay, and what’s that like?”

**Tami:** “Uhm, it’s really good… I read the Bible every day and I just go through books of the Bible and… it’s crazy to see how much it speaks to me, and I read the Old Testament and the New Testament… a lot of time I’m scared of the Old Testament and then I’m like, ‘Ohhh!’ and then it does speak to me. And… a lot of times it is about things that I’m struggling with in my personal life. And I also read ‘Imitation of Christ’ regularly, (which is) about…"
the internal spiritual walk, and that speaks to me almost every time I read it because its internal, so its really stuff that happens, like all the time.”

Even when pressing for more specific examples, it tended to elude the respondents. I picked up on this behavior very early in the interview process and added a standard line to my description of the ‘Divine Guidance- Written’ type. I would say:

**Interviewer:** “What I do not mean, is if your worldview is such that every time you read the Bible you view it as the ‘Word of God’ and thus as divine guidance. I mean specific instances where a line jumped out at you in a way that was somehow distinct from the rest of the material that you sensed as communication from God to you. Does that make sense?”

They all said yes. Even so, the transcriptions revealed a dearth of concrete examples. One respondent said that she could sense when a line in a text is something God wants her to be thinking about. The practicing Buddhist mentioned a few books (one a book of ‘mystical poetry’) that he said instantly puts his mind in a state of meditation. Another respondent said that a particular passage in the Bible jumped out to him coincidentally as it echoed an ‘internal verbal’ message he had heard from God earlier, and then later a person encouraged him in a similar way. He saw the coalescence of these three piggybacking experiences as divine confirmation regarding a choice he was supposed to make about a career move. Thus the written experience had its significance only because of its placement connecting the dots between two other experiences that stood out in his mind as more meaningful. It would seem that some methods of experiencing divine guidance come across as more *blasé* to people than other types, to the degree that their
brains inherently filter them out as the stuff of everyday life rather than encode them with levels of significance that make details easy for later recall. For example, try to think about the pair of sneakers you owned three pairs ago. Can you call that particular pair to mind? Can you remember its colors and contours? The moment you saw it, you would remember it, but it is hard to recall with certainty on the spot. You would probably talk more ‘generally’ about the types of sneakers you tend to buy, than you would talk about that exact pair of neon pink and lime green Puma’s that came from the local jogging shop (or maybe you would remember that pair). Future research on the topic of divine guidance via written works should be sure to ask plenty of explicit questions about concrete examples to help respondents recall just what they remember reading that jumped out at them, and exactly how it applied to a concrete situation in their life.

**Circumstantial Guidance**

**Table 11. Reported Frequencies of ‘Circumstantial’ Divine Guidance**

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<td>4</td>
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</table>

**Alicia:** “I moved here from Chicago in July and... I was doing a lot of searching for answers... and I definitely felt like things just fell into place. It worked out perfectly, and it was just like, you know, ‘God loves me. He’s caring for me and carrying me toward this place that I’m moving to.’ And it was just like, doors kept opening, doors kept opening.”
The section on divine guidance through circumstantial factors in life hit a clear chord with people. This category turned out to be the exact opposite of the previous section in terms of story collection. Divine guidance stories of significant moments, life lessons learned, life paths altered, and surprising everyday coincidences seemed to pour out quickly and fluidly. Through the many stories, it seemed as if they could be clustered into a few categorical typologies:

1. Everyday events as reminders of God’s love or presence.
2. Coincidences or positive event outcomes that served as ‘confirmation’ of other forms of divine guidance (e.g. internal verbal, written, or intuitive).
3. Reflection on pivotal moments that had previously altered one’s life course, and sensing that God was at work in that process.

**Everyday Events as Reminders**

The opening caption in this section illustrates well how people often saw everyday events as reminders of God’s love or presence. That same respondent, Alicia, mentioned multiple instances of small everyday things (e.g. seeing a father kiss his daughter, catching an unexpected concert at a coffee shop, and finding a free water filter she needed) as reminders to her of how God was nearby and looking out for her. Another respondent shared how he lost his wallet while travelling across the country. A hundred miles down the road he noticed it was missing and suddenly realized the restaurant he had likely left it at. He went back with no phone and just enough gas to get there (and the inability to fill up again without a wallet), and sure enough, the restaurant staff handed it
to him saying a customer had found it in the parking lot and brought it in. It still had the $300 cash inside. The respondent did not see this as a fortuitous stroke of luck, or as the pro-social behavior of rural town etiquette, but rather as a marker of God’s guidance that this trip (and its destination) was clearly God ordained. It would be easy to attribute these happenstances to confirmation bias, as people are adept at seeing patterns that they want to see. At any rate, for those experiencing them, they still act as powerful meaning-making devices in everyday life.

Coincidence as Confirmation

The next category has to do with coincidences that confirmed or ‘proved’ other forms of divine guidance experienced by the respondent. One young lady, Audrey, had a favorite Bible verse that had given her a lot of emotional encouragement over the years. She called it her, ‘life verse,’ a practice not all that uncommon in Evangelical circles. She was having a hard time lately and doubting that her current course of life was what God wanted, even though she believed he had led her in this direction. Then one day during a particularly hard time she looked at a plaque on her wall that she had received a few years before as a Christmas gift. It had her name on it, the meaning of her name, and a Bible verse address (but not the actual verse written out). She said she didn’t think she had ever really looked up the verse before, and when she decided to that night, it turned out that it was her life verse. She recounts:

Audrey: “Right then I realized, ‘Wow, that’s it. I had made that my life verse and the fact that it had been with my name, on my wall, right in front of me this whole time… it was sort of a blatant
‘wow’ moment. And so, two days after that night I decided, I want to get that tattoo.”

She then lifted her wrist to show me the address of that Bible verse tattooed on her arm. It was confirmation that her life was indeed within ‘God’s will.’

Another young lady, Charity, woke up in the middle of the night after a bad dream with a strong urge to pray. She said she ‘just knew’ (implying an intuitive sense of God guiding) that she needed to pray with someone else, and not just alone. She was debating on whether or not to call her God-mom, when suddenly she received a call from her God-mom. Charity recalled:

Charity: “I don’t think it was a coincidence at all. It was clearly God because I was hesitating whether or not I should call her, and I didn’t call her. But she said that her phone rang, but my name came up on her phone, but I never called her. But she called me and prayed with me.”

Another story from Carrie had to do with the difficulty she was having deciding which parent to live with after their divorce. She said that if she moved in with her dad she was going to have to, “Take care of him emotionally, and help him through my mom leaving him.” If she moved in with her mom, then her mom would take care of her through the transition. She sensed living with her mom was best for her, and what God wanted. She didn’t know how to say to her dad that she wanted to live with her mom, but then her mom had a heart attack, so Carrie was needed to literally help take care of her mom physically. She saw this as a way that God helped her go where she needed to be, without having to emotionally hurt her family.
The last example of this type of circumstantial guidance comes from Lawrence. He recounted how he had just gotten his job in California and had to drive out here from his parent’s home, where he was staying after college, in the Midwest. He was in his car and did not have a cell phone at the time. He said he had a sudden strong feeling:

**Lawrence:** “A feeling like, ‘I shouldn’t drive to California, I should stay (and fly later).’ The thought came to me in my car, just really randomly. And had I been driving I wouldn’t have had a phone on me and I wouldn’t have had any way of knowing that my dad had died. So I… attribute that to God.”

His dad had been sick for years, but took a sudden turn for the worse a few nights later and died. By choosing to fly instead of drive cross-country Lawrence was able to spend a couple full days with his dad beforehand, and then be there with his mom and sister when it happened. Had he been driving, he not only would have not been there when it happened, but likely said he wouldn’t have even called home to find out until a week later.

God All Along

The final category in the stories of coincidental divine guidance comes in the form of reflection on major shifts in respondents’ life-courses that they attribute to God.

Our pastor respondent, Jared, had originally felt God calling him to be a firefighter.

**Jared:** “I felt very strongly that I was supposed to jump into the firefighting application process and… I ended up going and getting a job as a paramedic, which was one of the first steps before you become a firefighter and then within a few weeks, it was just a nightmare. Like I literally sort of destroyed everything about who I was for six months. And by that, I mean I developed anxiety and had a very debilitating life for an extended season… But, looking
back now at the outcome of it, I know that I felt God leading me into being a firefighter and going down that route and now looking back I see that he led me there because I wouldn’t have been able to close that door had I not at least gone down that route. I still would have today, been, ‘Oh, maybe I should have been doing that.’ I saw the divine guidance in the whole thing because of where I am now.”

Note that he felt God lead him into a situation that ended up turning out very poorly for him. Yet, rather than be angry at God or even doubting the authenticity of his original sense of guidance, instead he sees it as a story of how God allowed him to get closure on something that would have otherwise continued to haunt him. This kind of retroactive meaning-making could cause any outcome to be interpreted as a positive. If the outcome was beneficial to the individual, then it was a sign of God’s hand and providence. If the outcome was harmful to the individual, then it was a journey of discovery and a learning process that God wanted them to experience and grow from. Another young respondent, Derrick, said that he saw how God was guiding him when he failed to find housing in a town he was hoping to move to, which meant that he had to stay in his hometown and go to community college. When asked why he saw this as divine guidance he replied, “because of that, then other things happened, like I was meeting people, that changed my life in (important) ways.” With this type of retro-active perspective of divine guidance on life events, it is hard to imagine situations that the respondent would not see as divine guidance. Every life event can become evidence of God’s guiding presence. In the words of our Buddhist respondent:

Phillip: “Each circumstance you find yourself in… there’s a way to surrender to it… and be the unfolding of the big picture. Think
of how small you are. It’s kind of useless to try and swim upstream against the whole Universe’s flow.”

In this same vein, an interesting story came from Richard, the 50 year old mill-worker. He explained how God’s *circumstantial* divine guidance led him to marry his wife of three decades.

**Richard:** “Sherine and I were done in 1974. I got home from work and the next day I was going to move to San Jose State, finish up my art degree and get on with my life, cause the relationship was just not fulfilling or satisfying or anything close to what I wanted. I was 24 years old and I got stopped for curfew violation, which is ridiculous! And ended up getting arrested on three counts of drug possession and a misdemeanor of open container, and because of that I could not leave. They put me on six months probation. And during that six months we more or less worked out our differences and ended up getting married.”

**Interviewer:** “So you would attribute that to [divine guidance]? 

**Richard:** “In retrospect you can certainly see God’s hand in it, because who gets busted at age 24 for a curfew violation?”

It seems that God’s guidance functions as the proverbial ‘silver lining’ in these life transitions. The young woman, Lyndsay, who shared that she had a family history of repeated sexual and physical abuse mentions a similar view of divine guidance.

**Lyndsay:** “From a very young age I can remember praying to God that I needed a guardian angel and I didn’t understand why I didn’t have one. Because I was being hurt at home all the time… physically and sexually and everything else and I just didn’t understand why… everyone else has a guardian angel, but where’s mine? And I waited everyday for my guardian angel, and I kind of felt like God had abandoned me, like he’d forgotten about me. But I was 16 and I met a lady who came into my life who didn’t stand for the abuse and was gonna do something about it, and said ‘I can’t let somebody hurt you.’ ‘It’s not you, it’s them.’ You know? ‘You don’t deserve this.’ And I ended up moving into her house.
But you know, I remember recognizing that she was my guardian angel that I’d prayed for my whole life. It wasn’t just a circumstance. It didn’t just feel like, ‘oh this one woman cared about me.’ To me it was very much a spiritual experience that she’d been compelled by something greater than herself even to come into my life and to do something about it and that our lives had met up for that purpose.”

Lyndsay clearly shares the perspective of the previous stories, that God can be seen amidst the life transitions. This seems to occur despite whether the outcomes are negative, or positive as in this case. While this way of understanding divine guidance may seem far from convincing when a person steps back and looks at it objectively, it clearly becomes a powerfully emotive form of evidence and meaning-making for the respondents. This was articulated nicely by Lyndsay when she said, “For me, it’s the circumstantial stuff that brings me to the point that I can’t deny the existence of God.” It was not a voice or a vision, or a religious organization that made God real to her, but the fact that someone helped her escape her cycle of abuse.

The circumstantial view of divine guidance proved to be one of the most compelling factors for people in trusting that God was working in their lives. Even for those who had significant doubts about other more explicit forms of divine guidance (such as internal verbal), the circumstantial was what finally convinced them. Common phrases heard in the interviews were speak of, “things coming together,” “doors opening (or closing),” or “thing just working out.” Circumstantial seems to function most powerfully for people in combination with other forms of divine guidance, as it ‘confirms’ their original sense of divine guidance, whatever the outcome ends up being.
Emotive and Intuitive Guidance

Table 12. Reported Frequencies of ‘Intuitive’ & ‘Emotive’ Divine Guidance

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<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>82</td>
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</table>

[Intuitive] Lawrence: “I get these gut feelings about stuff. Like with my last girlfriend, I just had a gut feeling that it was a real serious one. I felt like God wanted me to date her. It was like, ‘Check this girl out, check this girl out, just try, try, try.’”

[Emotive] Richard: “(When I finally gave up photography as a career goal) there was such a complete, overwhelming feeling of right. So overwhelming that I felt a peace I had not felt in years.”

Divine guidance that is emotive and/or intuitive are being discussed together because they are conceptually related, had identical score outcomes, and proved to be difficult to separate in the minds of the respondents. In the questions being read to the respondents each was described as follows:

- **Intuitive**: You sensed God communicating with you through what some may describe as promptings, leadings, intuition, subtle feelings or gut feelings?

- **Emotive**: You felt an overwhelming emotion that you knew was from God? Could be positive emotions like peace, joy or love; or negative emotions like fear, awe, or conviction.

Both are rooted in the affect, but are separated by degree of intensity. The key phrase for the intuitive category was ‘subtle feelings’ and the key phrase for the emotive category was ‘overwhelming emotions.’ It seemed that some people were able to catch the
distinction, but the language in the stories for both categories is hard to distinguish from each other. Perhaps when people are remembering past experiences it is very difficult to remember ‘degrees’ of emotive impact. This may be particularly true since the items most likely to be available for recall are the things that inherently carry a higher level of emotional charge. A more nuanced way of saying that is that the difficulty in trying to parse these two constructs out for later memory recall is confounded by the documented gap between the ‘experiencing-self’ and the ‘remembering-self’ (Kahneman, 2003).

Three themes emerged within these categories:

1. Some of the responses were difficult to distinguish from one’s own sense of conscience.

2. These two categories rarely stand on their own, but are in the majority of cases accompanied by another form of guidance that we have discussed (e.g. circumstantial, internal verbal, internal visual).

3. The respondents often spoke of getting better at (or learning, progressing, growing, etc.) in their ability to sense and/or trust these.

Difficult to Distinguish from Conscience

Among some of the respondents it was hard to tell if they were able to distinguish experiences of divine guidance from their own ethical drives or conscience. One girl reflected on whether she should quit her ultimate Frisbee team, but determined God was telling her not to. When I asked why, she said, “Just that feeling like it would be really,
really wrong. It wouldn’t be what Jesus would do. He wouldn’t give up on these people. He would continually try to be relational.” On one hand it is amusing that she assumes to know Jesus’ stance on Ultimate Frisbee. But on the other, her statements reveal more about her own system of ethical reasoning than any sort of ‘mystical’ experience. Or take a couple more examples, the pastor said:

**Jared:** “Often I feel God leading me towards our family needing to volunteer at the soup kitchen. I’ll feel something leading me toward it, so we’ll make the decision as a family to go do that because it’s something that I felt, or my wife felt.”

No voices or visions, simply something inside that draws him to think that serving at the soup kitchen would be a good thing for him and his family to do. Or, once again, let’s take our Buddhist practitioner. When discussing divine guidance through emotions he told the following story.

**Phillip:** “It’s like something resonates in your being when it hits home. Like last week I gave a bum six bucks. Which, I have never given anyone that much money before. But it’s like, it just felt great. Like I can’t really describe it. It’s like the whole Universe is back in order.”

At first look, one may think he is quite miserly for his largest charitable gift ever being six bucks, but to be fair, he is a young man (early twenties) who is living at a near subsistence level. The point being illustrated though, is that each of these individuals identified offered these stories as stories of divine guidance through intuition or emotion. Yet, apart from taking their word for it, one could easily imagine them feeling the same way with the same emotional reactions about each choice based on their own internal
moral compasses, or conscience. Perhaps this form of attributing divine guidance to such everyday ethical prompts is a byproduct of a worldview that says that divine guidance is happening constantly if we are ‘listening’ for it. At one point Jared told me he tries to listen for divine guidance on every decision in his life, Phillip said that we must learn to surrender to every situation, and Katie said, “I feel pretty convicted that (God’s) communicating with us all the time. That maybe we’re just not picking up on it.” If one’s worldview is such that every instant, every conscious decision, every breath is somehow infused with divine guidance or must be surrendered to it (as many of the respondents in this sample do believe) then one would expect an eventual fusion between the idea of divine guidance, and the idea of independent decision making. These two would become more difficult to distinguish from each other. All of life becomes enchanted. The only haunting question in my mind is, if every situation is surrendered to the will of God, then what purpose does developing one’s own ethical system of decision making have? Are ethics even necessary?

**Blended with Other Forms of Guidance**

Another trend that clearly arose was that for each of the respondents, divine guidance works as a complex blend of experiences. It is not usually a singular method (e.g. dreams or external verbal) through which people define their encounters with divine guidance. For many of them there began to be patterns, or ‘signature styles’ of interpreting divine guidance. Such as intuition followed by written followed by circumstantial. Or internal verbal followed by emotive followed by circumstantial.
Circumstantial was usually the last in the sequence, as it served as the ‘confirming agent’ to their strategies of interpreting divine guidance. For example, Vivian recounts the following story of how divine guidance led her to get married to her boyfriend whom she had been dating since they were both teenagers:

**Vivian:** “I think probably the most significant decision I’ve made in my life was to get married. And I can’t say that there was a booming moment in my life where it was like, ‘Yes, this is what I’m supposed to do!’ But we waited for a long time and people would say, ‘When are you getting married?’ and we’d say, ‘Whenever we feel like it’s time.’ When we both felt like it was time simultaneously, then it was time. And it’s worked out so far.”

**Interviewer:** “So you would say it was circumstantial guidance?”

**Vivian:** “I would say it was intuitive and circumstantial. It was intuitive on an individual level. And then the fact that it was intuitive to both of us at the exact same time was the circumstantial proof that we were ready.”

Vivian went on to recount many stories that had showed repeating patterns. Either ‘intuitive-dreams-circumstantial’ or ‘intuitive-aesthetic-circumstantial.’ When asking Alicia about her experiences of internal verbal she identified that they were always blended with others:

**Interviewer:** “When you think of the moments of internal verbal guidance that you’ve experienced, what are some of the words or phrases that you have heard? Just examples, if you don’t mind.”

**Alicia:** (recounts some examples, before adding the following.) “It’s never been like full paragraphs.”

**Interviewer:** “So more like short phrases that give you direction?”
Alicia: “Yeah, definitely. And, it’s always accompanied by emotions for me. So I guess emotive too… or intuitive. Probably both, yeah.”

Interviewer: Okay.

A final story, as Phillip tells about an intuitive/circumstantial combo:

Phillip: “I had a friend and we would surf a couple times a week, and one time we were out surfing and he had been (out of sight) for a while… And like, we had been separated before for longer periods of time, but something was different. And like I sensed something was wrong… And it’s amazing that I went in the right direction to see him floating face down in the water… he would have drowned if I hadn’t found him like 20 to 15 seconds from when I did.”

This blend factor seemed to occur for every respondent. But it is worth mentioning in this section because the intuitive or emotive experiences seemed to find their way into nearly every blend combination. Divine guidance does not seem to function for people as a simple mono-typical kind of experience. It is a complex weave of instinct, emotion, life happenstance, ‘luck,’ hallucinations, dreams, memories, and more. This is perhaps why experiences of divine guidance can be such a widespread phenomenon in American culture, and yet continue to be something that seems so confusing to talk about, even for those (half or more of the population) who claim to experience it.

Increased with Experience or Training

A final point that became clear as the ‘intuitive/emotive’ stories were being re-read was the theme of learned behavior or increased sensitivity with training. Listen to
the language used by Jillian as she talks about her early stages of learning how to be sensitive to divine guidance:

**Jillian:** “I dated this guy in high school, and one day I looked into the room where he and his dad were sitting and I just had this weird feeling like something was wrong with his dad’s heart. And I never said anything because I, well, it was before I was really experienced in this stuff and really knew how to listen to it. And then he ended up having, he passed out at work one day. And he ended up going to the doctor and had a weird thing with his heart where it wasn’t pumping enough blood and so enough blood wasn’t getting into his head and he started having his passing out spells, and, I mean they fixed it, and it wasn’t anything really serious, but it could have been serious.”

**Interviewer:** “And you didn’t talk to him?”

**Jillian:** “No, and afterwards I was like, ‘I really had that feeling’ and they (the leaders from her church) were like, ‘Always say something.’”

As time went on she found herself being apprenticed in the ability to hear ‘promptings’ or get ‘impressions’ from God and obey them. One time she recounts be prompted to go to the hospital to pray and someone meeting her there that she did not know, who had been expecting her. In another example the pastor, Jared talks about his increasing confidence in his abilities to accurately respond to divine guidance:

**Jared:** “As my life progresses along, as I am getting older, I am feeling more confident to be obedient to the intuitive senses of the way God is leading me.”

**Interviewer:** “So you feel like you second-guess less?”

**Jared:** “I second guess less and... the more that I feel this intuitive sense of doing, or prompting to do certain things throughout my week or my month or my year, and I act on those things, and I see the fruit from those experiences, they give me more confidence to
move forward. And when I do hear them, I continue to lead more of my life through that.

These respondents seem to indicate being trained into, or improving, their abilities to sense God’s guidance. The idea that divine guidance is learned behavior, and that a person can be better at or worse at it due to practice is not antithetical to the Christian sub-culture’s view of divine guidance. This is at the very heart of the ancient Christian tradition of ‘Spiritual Disciplines,’ concepts that can be traced back to the Desert Fathers, Christian mystics who formed ascetic and monastic communities in the deserts surrounding Egypt in the third century. Most middle-age monastic revivals continued to draw heavily on the tradition of the desert for inspiration, and passed the ideas and literature on. It has continued to inspire segments of modern contemplative Christian practitioners. In Christian parlance we may speak of Spiritual Disciplines or Mystical/Contemplative Prayer Practices, but in the social sciences we might call this socialization or even performance-behavior. It also dovetails perfectly with the work currently coming out of the anthropology of religion on ‘absorption’ as learned behavior, which we have already discussed, (e.g. Luhrman 2010). It may seem counter-intuitive that religious people would admit that the same experiential practices that they so often use as the anchor of legitimizing evidence to their worldview, is in-fact learned behavior. Some would be resistant to such an idea. Mostly though, it has to do with the terms one uses. As a child growing up in a Pentecostal tradition I can vividly remember attending kids summer camps where we were directly taught in workshop sessions how to ‘get better’ at speaking in tongues. We were simultaneously told that it would be the ‘Holy
Spirit’ speaking through us- not our own words, and that God would not force himself on us- so we had to open our mouths and use our own voices as we surrendered them to ‘His Spirit.’ Once we opened our mouths to make various noises in hopes that we were achieving this delicate balance of ‘surrender’ and ‘volition,’ the adult staff would enthusiastically encourage us for having achieved the ‘Baptism of the Holy Spirit.’ We were then told to practice everyday, and that over time it would begin to feel more natural. I obedient, and they were right, over time it did start to feel more normal and was easier to practice. The phonetics gradually began to sound more and more like those of the pastors and visiting preachers and missionaries. By junior high I was a recognized expert, and given permission by my pastor to publicly practice it during church services.

Terms matter. They would never have stood for anyone calling it ‘learned behavior,’ but would have had no problem talking about how to become more ‘disciplined and effective’ in my ‘prayer language.’ They would never have allowed anyone from the pulpit to call it ‘socialization,’ but would have no problem talking about how our denomination was better than others at getting people to pick-up on these practices.

Toward the end of each interview the respondents were asked if there were any practices that they use to try to enhance these experiences. The question on the script reads, “Do you do any practices specifically to increase the frequency or vividness of experiences of God guiding or communicating to you?” All twenty said yes. A few initially hesitated in answering, but when asked about the kinds of practices they used, each of them had something to offer. Table 13 shows the short list of the practices that were cited by at least two or more of the respondents, and how many times it was cited.
Table 13. Practices Cited as Aiding Experiences of Divine Guidance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music / Worship</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat / Nature</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible Meditation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breath Work</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aids: Icons / Rosaries / Images</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excluded from the list are practices that were mentioned by only one person. The practices cited only once included practices such as celebration (literally- partying), community, tattooing, journaling, dancing, and giving affirmations to people. Of the items that were cited multiple times, it is not surprising that prayer tops the list. It is plausible that the ten who did not cite it may have simply overlooked it as something to mention as it would be an obvious behavior, or perhaps they assumed that it was implied in their other items such as retreat, silence, fasting, breath work, etc. In fact, according to 2004 General Social Survey data, prayer has a clear correlation to experiences of God’s daily guidance, feelings of his presence, and feelings of his love directly. When the scores of those three items are merged into a single variable and tested for a relationship with frequency of prayer, the result is a strong positive correlation (using Spearman’s Rho \( r_s \), which is ideal for bivariate ordinal data) at the 99.9% level of confidence \( r_s = .603, p < .001 \). The only variable that showed a higher correlation was the, ‘Desire to be closer to God’ \( r_s = .685, p < .001 \). At risk of stating it as an oversimplification, it would seem that the people with the highest frequencies of these experiences are the
people who both want them and seek them. Traditionally Christians have a phrase for this, they say that, ‘God is a gentleman,’ meaning that he would not force himself on those not seeking him. Social Scientists on the other hand, might simply call it confirmation bias. Clearly Lurhman’s (2010) conclusions that ‘absorption’ behavior can increase with training and repeat practice squares with both the GSS data, and the responses of the participants in this study.

A final observation is the surprise fact that yoga (a historically Buddhist practice) was so close to the top of the list, tied with fasting and beating out worship and Bible meditation (historically Christian practices). Also showing some Eastern influence is that breath-work was cited three times, and while the Buddhist respondent was one of them, two Christian respondents cited it as well. It would suggest a possibility that the spiritual training practices of various religious traditions are coming to find increasing levels of cross integration among contemporary Christian practitioners in the US.

The Aesthetic as Guidance

Table 14. Reported Frequencies of ‘Aesthetic’ Divine Guidance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>-1-</th>
<th>-2-</th>
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<th>-4-</th>
<th>-5-</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jillian: “I feel like I have experienced God through art, and I don’t know if either of those [other categories] cover that.”

Interviewer: “Okay, what kinds of art?”

Jillian: “Specifically I was talking about painting or music.”
Interviewer: “Okay, interesting. That would be a great category to add probably. But explain to me how, or what that is like. Because I am sure that most people experience a stirring or emotional movement to art or music. In what distinctive sense would you attribute that to God?”

Jillian: “There is just a certain, you know, I see a certain picture and I feel beauty. Some would say it’s the artist’s pain coming through. And it doesn’t necessarily have to be pain… it could be pain, or love or joy. But I just feel, I feel the romanticism of life. You know? And I attribute that to the higher power.”

This conversation took place in the very first interview, and as I continued to read her transcript it was full of descriptions of experiencing God in music, art, nature, and even ‘beauty’ in general. While I was not fully convinced that ‘beauty’ or the aesthetic (as it came to be called) should be its own distinctive category apart from emotive, I went with her input and added it to the list in subsequent interviews. It turned out to be the most frequently experienced type of guidance. This was surprising to me. Certainly it would make sense that if someone were going to participate in a contemplative practice (e.g. prayer or meditation) that doing so in a sunny meadow, or at the ocean, or to the backdrop of moving music would aid in the enjoyment of the experience. But I assumed people could distinguish between the increased pleasure gained from engaging in these contemplative practices when surrounded by beauty, and actually receiving communication from God via the beauty itself. But that is exactly how the comments began to roll in. That God was somehow speaking or guiding from within the beauty. In all twenty cases I was very specific to ask them to make a distinction between the times they felt beauty move them simply because they are human, and the times that God was
somewhat guiding from within it. The way I read the question from the script was as follows:

**Interviewer:** “What about the aesthetic? Aesthetic means beauty. Have you sensed God communicating with you through beauty, art, film, music, or nature? And I don’t mean in a way that everyone can find appreciation for beauty, or be moved by it, but going beyond that to an experience where you somehow had the distinct sense that it was from God?”

They would nod, as if that made sense to them, and then give me the following types of responses:

**Charity:** “Through music… I will just start praying and I can feel God telling me certain things or maybe just comforting me. Gospel (music) definitely. Like, music is a strong way for me to connect (with the Holy Spirit).”

**Lyndsay:** “Nature has always been the place that I have run to in more of a spiritual way. It was common for me to be struggling, so I would go to the middle of the woods and just find God there…”

**Carrie:** “Feeling (God’s) presence is a powerful, awe thing… when looking out over a cliff or staring out over the ocean.”

**Katie:** “I feel like he is everywhere and everytime I see something that I think is pretty, like a flower, it just overwhelms me. I am like God is sooo good! He did this.” [Later she said,] “But I see God everywhere, especially when I see pretty clouds. It almost overwhelms me. I should have been a meteorologist.”

**Daneen:** “I see a flower and I am like, wow, God!” [Later she said,] “There are spider webs on the steps up to my house and often I will stop and go down and look at it and be like, how it works, how amazing God is! And even in the backyard when I am at home and I am outside and close my eyes and listen to the birds, it feels like how heaven must feel, when you just know that everything is going to be okay. I mean how can He make something so beautiful, you know?”
Becky: “I feel like emotive (divine guidance) and beauty go hand in hand for me, when it comes from nature. That is when I feel like, that ‘peace, joy, and love.’”

Lawrence: “I am a big nature guy. Like, take Arizona. If you drive to the desert, I don’t understand how you can’t see God.”

Vivian: “I kind of had this thing growing up where, and this is so cheesy now, but whenever there was a pretty sunrise or sunset, God was saying like, ‘Look at this painting.’ It’s so corny, but because of that… whenever I see a sunset it always seems to be a moment that I am stressed or hectic and it has kinda just become this thing between me and God… he is saying, ‘Relax.’ you know?”

Jared: “So, I will be sitting along a river, sitting in the mountains, or on a rock, or in the forest, or go out to the beach and something will come over me… I will be thinking about a particular situation in my life and things will begin to make sense because of something I saw. Like internal visual (guidance). Things become very metaphorical. So I might see a river flowing and make a connection, where my life is a river and it is constantly flowing and sometimes there are rocks and there are things in the way and there are obstacles. Primarily through nature is when I end up seeing something visual (from God).”

As I read the stories, my first impression is admiration at how impacting beauty seems to be for them. It is clearly a source of joy and peace for the respondents. But my second impression is that not all of them seem able to actually articulate any clear sense of the distinction between the way beauty would move them naturally (due to being ‘human’), and when they sense divine guidance through beauty. It is as if they can understand the concept of this distinction when posed to them, nod in agreement, but in the next instant show through their storytelling that in actuality they do not see a dichotomy. Traditional Christianity has distinctions between the sacred and the profane,
yet many of the respondents see a spiritual integration in all of life and the natural world. Popular new strains of Christian thought do support ideas that, ‘all things are spiritual’ (Bell 2007) or movements emphasizing the immanence of the divine in all, rather than the transcendence of a creator God as ‘other.’ The fact that they see divine guidance in their emotions, intuitions, nearly all life events, flowers, spider webs, rivers, and clouds seems to speak of an inherent theology closer to that traditionally found in Eastern religions than Western Christianity (though I do not want to overstate the case, because examples do exist). This may be a natural byproduct of the decrease in the influence and trust Americans put in organized religious structures altogether (Putnam 2010). As the older ecclesiastical institutions lose influence, their instructions on how the transcendent should be understood or how it is to be appropriately experienced weakens. People trade the external scripts for internal exploration and method. Put simply, people become more spiritual and less religious, even when continuing to identify themselves within historic religious traditions. In Peter Berger’s classic on the sociology of religion, Sacred Canopy (1967), he talks of how we socially construct our world and it in-turn shapes us back. This dialectic works best when it is taken for granted, placing the individual in a meaningful world of existence. Further, ‘plausibility structures’ are social processes that reinforce the ‘legitimated’ world and institutions (e.g. churches). When there are strong plausibility structures to the people (e.g. churches in medieval Christendom) the acts of legitimacy can be simple (e.g. papal edicts declaring something true). When there are weak plausibility structures (e.g. churches in a post-industrial society), the attempts at asserting their legitimacy must get much more sophisticated to be convincing. At that
time of writing, Berger, along with many others assumed that organized religion was on a steep and irreversible decline toward extinction, as the new rational-atheist-man arose. While secularization processes certainly do continue, and ecclesiastical structures have lost much of their legitimization, the result was not a pervasive atheism, but rather emerging forms of spirituality. On a side note, Berger himself acknowledges this unexpected outcome, evidenced quite well by the title of his 1999 edited book, “The Desecularization of the World.” In these spiritualities, be they clothed with the language of Christianity, or any other religion, people still go through the dialectic process of creating and being created by their social world. The kind of powerful legitimizing evidence gained by the respondents in this section of excerpts (e.g. seeing God in clouds and flowers) goes to show how they have developed their own plausibility structures. Not in the form of sophisticated apologetic argumentation, but in the visceral reactions they have to beauty, emotions, and life circumstances. While this may not be true for all contemporary Christians, the group in this sample have all changed religions or denominations at some point in their past, showing that they had each experienced a break-down in plausibility structures for their participation in some other Christian denomination. They are likely a slightly more religiously independent group with less denominational affiliations (11 self-identified as non-denominational) than what we would have found if the sample had primarily come from, say a Baptist or Episcopalian church. But they are not that unique, as Putnam (2010) reports that the fastest growing denominational affiliation is America, is in fact, ‘no denominational affiliation.’
The Primacy of Natural Beauty

Each of the respondents had positive experiences of divine guidance in and/or through beauty, and especially natural beauty. While there were stories of art, film, and music they were few and far between compared to the weight of stories about natural beauty. Interestingly this squares with recent psychological discoveries about beauty. Deissner and his colleagues (2008) developed a scale to measure people’s engagement with beauty. The scale has three subscales, one for natural, artistic, and moral beauty. After demonstrating the reliability and internal consistency of the scale, they compared correlations found within the subscales to other variables. They write (Deissner et al., 2008), “Engagement with natural beauty correlates more with being grateful, satisfied with one’s life, spiritually transcendent, hopeful, and less materialistic.” It is as if they are describing my sample.

The Body as a Source of Guidance

Interviewer: “When you think of the most significant times that you’ve experienced divine guidance of any sort would you say that there was any way that you felt it in your body?”

Karl: “I think the tingle, like static electricity. Uhm, where your hair stands on end. It feels like somebody is making the hair on the back of your neck (bristle), like (God’s saying,) ‘Take note of this. I want you to listen to this.’ ‘I’m about to move and say something.’”

In this interaction, Karl explains how he can feel in his body clues that experiences of divine guidance are about to happen. In this final section exploring the
ways people experience divine guidance we turn our attention to the body as the locus of experience itself. When the respondents were asked the question above, 17 of the 20 (85%) said yes, they had felt divine guidance in their body in some way. The physiological responses had similar features. Some seemed stimulant-type: heart beating faster, hyper-awareness, hair standing on end, euphoria, etc. Others seemed more depressant-type: relaxation, brain and breath slowing down. Here is a sampling of the responses to the question about what they feel in their bodies when they receive divine guidance:

Charity: “I would definitely say yes… goose bumps, or like a surreal presence. I can like, feel the presence of Him near me. At times I’ve prayed for peace and comfort and I mentally and physically feel kind of lighter and more whole.”

Lyndsay: “Mmhmm, especially the auditory experience that I described earlier it was definitely like full panic, my heart was beating fast, I had no idea what to do with that. But most of the time I feel something physiological you just get this peace that comes over you and it’s very much like, calming.”

Derrick: “Sometimes you get the tingling at the back of your spine. Sometimes it’s just like, when you get that load of stress lifted off of your shoulders and you can breathe easy. Just a big deep breath.”

Tami: “I’ve definitely felt warmth, sometimes I almost feel like God’s hugging me.”
Interviewer: “How?”
Tami: “Through that warmth.”

Katie: “Whenever I feel God is super with me, I feel really peaceful, serene. Like, he’s saying, ‘God’s got you,’ ‘I’ll take care of it.’ I feel… lighter, and I feel my body relax. My body and my emotions relax.”

Lauren: “I’ve gotten like, goose bumps.”
Audrey: “It is just like, (God’s saying,) ‘Take a deep breath.’ [she sighs deeply] And it goes back to the contentedness, the safety, the reassurance feeling… that impacts me physically.”

Becky: “Yes, but mostly just like, heart beating faster, goose bumps, light headed type of thing.”

Vivian: “Yeah, like kind of like, dizzy almost. But it’s not a bad dizzy, it’s just kind of like, a good dizzy. (Especially,) in the most powerful times of crisis when I really need to feel God is with me, this happens.”

Jared: “I’ve felt goose bumps, a sense of nervousness, increased heart rate, sweatiness, or uhm, an ability to only think about that particular situation or whatever it is that God is showing me and sort of everything else is like not around at all.”

Alicia: “I’ve gotten chills, goose bumps from head to toe. More recently I was having a really spiritual connection with a friend and he said that his head chakra was tingling, and I was like, ‘Oh! My head’s tingling too!’ I thought it was just cause I wasn’t breathing because we were talking so fast. Uhm, and I’ve become more in tune with that.”

Speculation as to what exactly is going on in these physiological responses is better left to other forms of science. One could argue they are evolutionary artifacts of primal, ‘fight or flight’ response systems. Others could point to the kinds of chemicals released in the brain and body during bouts of ‘positive-thinking.’ Still others could use theological language, like Alicia’s friend who used Buddhist speak of ‘chakras’ (energy centers along the spine) or in my childhood tradition, Pentecostals would speak of ‘Spirit Indwelling’ causing these feelings. Again, all ontological assumptions as to whether certain spiritual entities do or do not exist are outside the scope of this paper. However, what is worth noting is the epistemological effect of these physiological occurrences.
They have a profound legitimizing feature that anchors the worldview of these respondents in lived experience. They may have doubts about how God operates at times, and even doubt their own abilities to accurately interpret divine guidance, but then they see the circumstances of their lives come together in some way that acts to confirm their beliefs, and on top of it all, they have felt God move within their bodies. This creates a powerful form of evidence for them.

**Properly Basic or System One**

Atheists and Christian apologists usually disagree as to which side is responsible to carry the burden of proof as to whether God does or does not exist. Alvin Plantinga is the most renowned (widely read, and written about) modern philosopher defending both Epistemological Foundationalism and orthodox Christianity. He argues that belief in God is ‘properly basic’ (1991, 2000). In Foundationalism all beliefs must be justified in order to be believed. Further, justified beliefs fall into two categories, contingent and basic. Contingent beliefs depend on other beliefs to be true, basic beliefs do not. Basic beliefs are *properly basic* if they are self-evident (axiomatic- such as, ‘circles are round’) or evident to the senses (empirical). Though I am no Foundationalist like Plantinga, it is on this point of his where the experience of divine guidance in the body becomes so powerful to people, as they experience it with their senses (empirically). It is certainly not the Cartesian ‘objective’ Empiricism that Positivist science has become known for. But it does have features akin to a Post-Structuralist experiential epistemology. It is a ‘sensual knowledge,’ which is quite literally empirical, though not in the way ‘Empiricism’ has
traditionally been understood. This takes us back to some of the opening literature in this paper. Let me refresh the memory with a few quotes:

USC Sociologists of Religion, Richard Flory and Donald Miller discussing Gen X religion (Flory and Miller 2000:241), “Rationalistic apologetics are largely irrelevant to their religious commitments, having been replaced by an experience-based epistemology.” Eight years later they write (Flory and Miller 2008:168), “[Gen X spirituality is centered on] experience, lived community, and the body.” Stanford anthropologist of religion, Tanya Luhrmann, discusses her idea of *metakinesis* when she writes (2005:148), “Words like *peace, grace, falling in love with Jesus, and being filled with the Holy Spirit*, model specific ways of experiencing the body.” Religion and culture journalists Richard Cimino and Don Lattin note (2002):

> Whether these soul–shaking experiences and religious conversions are the true action of the Holy Spirit, hypnotic trance states, or some other psychological trick makes little difference. They feel real. They inspire people to change their lives and commit themselves to another power, whether it’s a higher power outside themselves or an inner voice crying out from the depths of their soul. (P.125)

While the future for Foundationalist epistemologies look bleak, perhaps Plantinga was not too far off in suggesting that belief in God is *properly basic* because it is based on sense experience. Touching again on the work of Daniel Kahneman, who created the field of behavioral economics, if we have two systems of thinking, system one (intuitive) and system two (reasoning), then, while belief in invisible agents (i.e. God) can be quite difficult for our system two thinking, it is very instinctual for our system one thinking.
System one thinking is (Kahneman 2003:698): “typically fast, automatic, effortless, associative, implicit (not available to introspection), and often emotionally charged; they are also governed by habit and are therefore difficult to control or modify.” See figure one for a visual breakdown of system one and system two thinking:

![Figure 1 Process and Content In Two Cognitive Systems](From the American Psychologist, September 2003)

Imagine your life is full of turmoil, you step outside and pause, reflectively looking at the clouds languidly crawling across the sky. You pray, wordlessly, deep inside your being. A warm breeze blows across your face, like a caress. A tingle begins to rise in the back of your spine. You sense a presence, even though nobody is near you, yet you know you are not alone. Everything will be okay. Suddenly, you remember the
surprising and fun thing that happened to you at work earlier that day, a reminder that life isn’t that bad. Then that related compliment your friend gave you this morning pops into your head. It’s a pattern. Something bigger is at play. Time will show what it all meant.

This kind of thinking pattern is human. It is system one. It is instinctual. It is spiritual. However naïve or insightful it may actually be, it does seem to have the positive capacity to give life meaning; or at the very least, the potential to help carry people through difficult times.
At the beginning of this project we set out to explore two related phenomena surrounding people’s experiences of divine guidance:

1. How people experience, understand, and articulate divine guidance.
2. The kinds of decisions people make based on experiences of divine guidance.

At the outset I anticipated the first set of questions to be a minor exercise in preparation to exploring the second set of questions, which would be the more significant and interesting material. However, in the process of analyzing this material, I have been convinced that the reverse is true.

Intervention vs Integration

There really do not seem to be patterns in the kinds of choices people make based on divine guidance (with a few notable exceptions), quite simply because divine guidance seems to only rarely be used as an intentional decision-making strategy. Rather, divine guidance appears to function more as a lens for viewing the world, for viewing all of life, and all of its myriad decisions and happenings. Nearly every decision is attributed to divine guidance; a few before the event itself, most retroactively as the person looks back on the experiences and draws their narrative.
At the beginning I thought, perhaps people will talk about having interventionist type experiences where God speaks in some distinct way into the midst of their ordinary life, after which, they will have to decide how to respond. For example, perhaps the respondent would experience God telling her to become a teacher (maybe in a dream or through an internal voice), and thus she pursues that vocation with a sense of calling (occasionally wrestling with doubts). Instead it ended up sounding more integrated in ‘normal life.’ For example, here Vivian recounts how she felt God call her to become a teacher, “(It was) definitely an intuitive thing, that later when I was sitting through my classes and loving them, it was confirmation.” The blend of intuitively wanting to be a teacher, and later enjoying class- somehow created a pattern of experiences that she would attribute to divine guidance. No voices or visions intervening, just normal life happening, with divine guidance somehow integrated within.

Respondents were asked about whether or not divine guidance had influenced their decision-making in multiple arenas of life (e.g. romantic decisions, career decisions, religious practice decisions). The script asked them to use a 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) in their response to each arena. The script read as follows:

Many people have made different kinds of decisions based on their experiences of Divine Guidance, using **Scale B**, let me know which of the following types of decisions you have made based on God communicating to you:

**Have you experienced God asking you to do something in relation to:**

- **Day-to-day Tasks** (e.g. a route to drive, a gift to buy, an appointment to change)
• **Romantic Decisions** (e.g. a person to date, marry, or break-up with)

• **Career Decisions** (e.g. a job to take or quit, or a school or degree to pursue)

• **Relationship Decisions** (e.g. a friend to make or cut, to forgive someone, to challenge someone with something)

• **Religious Practice Decisions** (e.g. a church to join or leave, a devotional practice to add, increase, or stop)

• **Political Decisions** (e.g. a politician to vote for, a position on an issue to take)

• **Theological Decisions** (e.g. a belief to add or change, a particular interpretation of a Biblical passage)

• **Philanthropy Decisions** (e.g. a donation to a charity or church, a gift to give, volunteer hours to serve)

• **Other**: What other types of decisions have you made based on God communicating to you?

The question regarding philanthropy was added late in the interview process, because it seemed that multiple stories contained material surrounding giving or volunteering. Separate from the above list, questions were also asked regarding whether they had experienced divine guidance in relation to their academic careers, or any leadership roles they may have had. The script read:

**STUDENT**: Are you currently a student? Where?

Have any of your experiences of divine guidance been related to your student experience, such as picking a school, major, course, project, internship, etc.?
Did it help you persist in academics or towards graduation?

**LEADER:** Are you currently a leader in any capacity? Where?

How has divine guidance influenced your experiences as a leader?

Can you give me an example of a leadership decision you made that was influenced by divine guidance?

Table 15 shows a summary of results that the respondents gave for the questions asked in the list. The ‘Sum Score’ represents the total value of the frequencies selected (1-5) multiplied by the number of respondents that chose each frequency (1-20).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 15. The Types of Decisions Respondents Attributed to Divine Guidance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question: Have you experienced God asking you to do something in relation to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romantic Decisions</td>
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<td>Relationship Decisions</td>
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<td>Career Decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious Practice Decisions</td>
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<td>Theological Belief Decisions</td>
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<td>Day to Day Decisions</td>
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<td>Political Decisions</td>
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Going back to the point being made at the opening of this section, this list actually tells us very little about the kinds of decisions people make based on divine guidance. The respondents in this sample tend to speak of divine guidance less in ‘interventionist’ ways (God *intervening* in their ordinary lives), than they did in ‘integrationist’ ways (God being an invisible hand *integrated* within the midst of the complexities of life). Thus Table 15 is not a list of *interventionist* experiences of divine guidance, but really just a mean-average ranking of the sorts of things dominating the minds of these twenty people (i.e. the things *integrated* into the fabric of their everyday lives), most of whom were young white females. Romantic and relationship decisions top the list. Questions regarding academics were asked separately from this list, but had they been formatted in this same way, academic decisions would also have been very high in the list.

Respondents were asked if they had made life choices in multiple arenas, most of which were listed above, but others would arise in the flow of the semi-structured interviews. Nearly every decision asked about ended up being answered in the affirmative by most respondents. This would be expected in light of the above discussion on how people tend to understand divine guidance. There was one notable exception though, which was political decisions.

**Political Decisions**

Most respondents disagreed with God guiding them to make political decisions. It seems God is squeamish at the voters box. Or more likely, this crowd- who are mostly progressives- have a visceral reaction to the divisiveness and polarizing rhetoric that has
surrounded religiosity and politics over the past couple decades. While questions were not specifically asked about political affiliation, the language used in the interviews would suggest that on average, this pool of respondents is a bit left of center. The ‘God gap’ in American politics (defined as the reported positive correlation between religiosity and conservative politics) has been quite distasteful for liberal Christians. As it is, many Christian traditions have historically steered clear of politics, and many more individual practitioners have as well, even if their denominations or congregational leaders have chosen to engage in them. Consider this respondent, who was one of the few who said divine guidance did influence his politics:

Phillip: “I’m just gonna get trapped in talking about this whole thing, but, uhm, I don’t even view politics as who we vote for… but more like the way I orient myself.”

Interviewer: “Like an orientation toward politics?”

Phillip: “Well, like, what I should be buying at the grocery store, which is kind of politics. Everyday life is politics, purchasing, the politics of everyday life. The politics of the dollar, where we put it.”

This view of divine guidance again reinforces an ‘integrationist’ rather than ‘interventionist’ view. God guides him in the way he lives his life, in what he eats, in how he uses his resources. God does not tell him the politician to vote for on a specific day in November.

We will not handle the material surrounding types of life decisions the way we did in the section on the ways people experience divine guidance. Rather, we will treat it much more briefly. There is little point in scouring all of these topical areas, nor in
looking for patterns within each topical area. Instead we will examine the four most popular topical areas: Romantic Decisions, Relationship Decisions, Career Decisions, and Academic Decisions. For each we will look at a handful of examples that represent the diversity and rising themes in the responses. We will draw connections at the end.

Romantic Decisions

**Charity:** “Recently I was in a relationship and I felt that in order to get closer to God, I needed to not be in a relationship and solely focus on Him and not anyone else and I felt like being in a relationship was distracting me from God so we actually broke up because of that.”

**Interviewer:** “And did you sense God speaking to you or leading you to do that?”

**Charity:** “Yeah, definitely, because since I’ve broken up with him, I’ve gotten a lot closer, and a lot more things have happened in my life.”

**Audrey:** “I was cutting off a relationship and… I didn’t feel like I had the strength to do it… but somehow I ended up doing it… I was like, ‘That must have been God.’ Because every ounce of me was screaming, ‘Don’t do it!’ I just had to be patient in it, he’s (God) continually giving me reminders of why I made that decision and why it was right, and so I started to feel like that was the right decision when originally I didn’t. So it’s great reassurance that what I did was right.”

**Millie:** “I am recently unengaged… we were together for six years. I prayed about it for a long time… I broke it off. It was a lot easier than I thought it was gonna be.

**Interviewer:** “And you definitely felt like God was telling you to do this?”

**Millie:** “Oh yea, oh yeah. I couldn’t let it go. It was just in the back of my head and no matter where I went it was there, just nagging, so yeah, I couldn’t go through with it.”
Mary: “I dated my ex for a year but didn’t feel peace… and I kept praying to God asking Him to give me peace if we were supposed to be together. We were kind of at that ‘get engaged or break-up’ point. I wrestled with it… and ended up breaking up with him. And I felt like God was very much guiding me and trying to encourage me in that for a while and I’d fought it because I didn’t want to break up with him.”

Interviewer: “You felt that you did that based on divine guidance?”
Mary: MmHmm (nodding).

Becky: “I did break up with a person, well, God didn’t tell me to, but I used it as an excuse. (laughs) But, I feel like God did lead me very much to marry my husband. There was just a clarification within our, just, everything was very clear, whereas with other boys it wasn’t.”

Jared: “Uhm, yeah, I’m married so the (‘romantic’ divine guidance) experiences I would talk about would be like, you know, ‘I feel like our sex life isn’t as healthy as it could be.’ And often I’ll pray about it and then do something that I’ll feel led to do with my wife.”

Interviewer: “Like what position? No, I’m just joking!”
Jared: (laughing) “No, just uh, for instance, my most recent one was like, we’re coming up on a season of Lent, and I feel very strongly about making love every day over the course of lent, so 40 days in a row.”

Interviewer: “Nice. What’d she say?”
Jared: “Hell yeah!” (laughs)

Relationship Decisions

Jillian: “I’ve felt like God is saying, ‘You’re hurting and the reason that you’re hurting is that you haven’t forgiven this person, and that is what you need to do.’”

Richard: “I had a friend from high school. We communicated while I was in the service, so he writes me this letter when I’m
getting out. ‘Come up to Idaho. If you want a job, we’ll find you a job. If you want to go to college, we can find a way to get you into the University of Idaho. If you want to climb inside a bottle I can help you with that. If you want to whore around, we can probably work that one out as well.’ And being the good friend that he was, he was good on all four. (laughter) But after I came out to California, I went back up there to see him and we had a falling out over a situation that, uhm, he was right, I was wrong. But we didn’t communicate to close to 25 years. And, uhm, I had to make the decision to accept my wrong in it.”

**Interviewer:** “And you felt God’s hand in that?”

**Richard:** “Oh yeah, kind of like a tap on the shoulder, ‘Stop being so hard hearted about this,’ you know, ‘You were wrong.’”

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**Career Decisions**

**Jillian:** “I’ve kept jobs over (divine guidance). There were points where I wanted to quit jobs and I felt like I was supposed to be there for some reason, even though I wasn’t enjoying it at the time.”

**Katie:** “When deciding whether I wanted to do elementary school or pre-school... I’ll pray about it, and then I’ll just feel so convicted that working with young children is what I need to be doing and just, it’s almost like there’s nothing else I could do, I just couldn’t imagine it.”

**Richard:** “I got my masters degree in ’82 in photography, and... after graduate school I got some shows in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and Seattle... and things seemed to be progressing on track... And then... in early ’86 my wife ended up having brain damage in a freak accident. And everything had to get put on hold. And I tried to jumpstart it again over the years, the photography aspect, and it just never happened. And it got to the point where I was extremely bitter, extremely pissed off about it, and, uhm, I became really difficult to live with because I’d had so much wrapped up in the notion of becoming like one of my mentors, and it was getting to the point where this was never going to happen. So I remember I reached a point where I basically said, ‘Fuck it, this is not it.’ And a couple years later, a church we were going to
was having a rummage sale, and I felt this, this huge compulsion to just box up the entire dark room and take it up to the (sale) and say, ‘Here, put this in your rummage sale.’ And it was probably four or five thousand dollars with of equipment, and I think they made $300 on it, and that’s not important. What is important is that afterwards I felt so, I don’t know if relieved is the word, but it felt right. Well, getting rid of the photography stuff was actually only part of the story, the biggest part of the story was that I realized that this was not the path that God had chosen for me, and as painful as that was to acknowledge, I mean, for crying out loud, God and I were not on the same page. And, try as hard as I could, I could not get him on the same page. And so it was the realization that this was not the path that God had chosen for me.”

**Millie:** “(Divine guidance led me to) switching jobs. I recently switched from Mad River to St. Joe’s. I was in the night shift weekends over there and it was just kiiiiling me and I didn’t think I would be able to survive there much longer on the night shift. But I’m such a new nurse, the idea of getting a new job so soon was just, like, this huge risk. Like, there’s no way someone’s gonna hire me when I’m only seven months into nursing, but St. Joe’s hired me as a surgical nurse, which is, like, beyond belief. It’s, like, my dream job.”

**Vivian:** “I waited for a really long time to try to hear from God about taking my current job that I have and I feel like He spoke to me through that. And what happens is I feel kind of an intuition, gut feeling, that I feel is God leading me towards one way or another. And then, just like, things happen. Like doors open, uhm, I kind of take as confirmation.”

**Academic Decisions**

**Charity:** “I had schools that I applied to and my initial thought was that I was going to move out of state. But, I was in the middle of deciding which school I would go to and I was just praying about it for a long time. And then, actually, I went to the hair salon. I went to a new lady, and she was like asking me about school. And I just explained to her that I was trying to figure out what I was doing and she was like, ‘Oh, but you’re leaning more toward
going to Humboldt huh?’ And I was like, ‘Kind of, because I feel like if I go out of state I am going to be too far from home.’ And then she was like, ‘Yeah I think that you’re supposed to be there and I think that you are supposed to be spreading the word of God on your campus, and that you were supposed to go to that school.’ And kind of after she said that to me it was kind of confirmation that this was the school that God wanted me to be at.”

Lyndsay: “Moving across the country by myself to go to grad school… was something I was really scared to do and I didn’t want to do it, and everyone thought I was crazy. There was no person on the outside who was like, ‘Yes Lyndsay. That’s a really good idea to pick yourself up and move across the country to go do this.’ And I think that had a lot to do with the aesthetic side of it because I had come out here before, uhm, to work at a camp, but anyway, I kind of really felt God’s presence in the nature and in the beauty that surrounded this area… And circumstances that led up to that, that just worked out, that there was no explanation for it… I came out here with no job but I had a job within a day. Within 24 hours I had employment. Within 72 hours, I had a grant for school for $18,000 a year. And, yes they were things that I was working toward… It’s not like somebody called me up randomly and was like ‘Hey, here you go.’ But they were by no means things that were promised, or things that I knew about when I came out here. It was just kind of trusting that things would work out. And then everything fell in place within a week. So, that kind of circumstantial thing.”

Carrie: “I guess most recently um making the decision to stay in school. Last semester was just really hard, I was struggling with everything, and I didn’t want to be in school anymore. I wasn’t going to class, and I decided to talk about it, which is a huge decision and once I started talking about it, then I could hear people saying to me the same thing over and over again, as if God were saying the same thing over and over again to me until I heard it.”

Tami: “I guess it’s more like the frame of mind that I got from (divine guidance), because I think I would have continue in school anyway, but with more complaining. But I like, it was like my
mindset changed. Like I love it more, and can be more thankful for it. And, uhm, try to be excellent in the things that I did for the professors and stuff like that.”

**Richard:** “When I was in art school I felt like I was divinely led into photography not so much for what my intensions were, which was to be a famous photographer, but I think I was led to that so I could see.”

**Interviewer:** “What do you mean, ‘to see’?”

**Richard:** “Uhm, it’s kind of hard to explain, but you could live on this planet and go thorough it everyday and never truly see Gods wonder.”

**Interviewer:** “Hmm, almost how a photographer picks out images? They see things that other people don’t see?”

**Richard:** “Yeah.”

**Interviewer:** “Do you feel that divine guidance helped you persist toward graduation?”

**Richard:** “Oh, it was definitely divine guidance. I was working 40+ hours a week, I was going to graduate school full time, Sherine was undergoing a difficult pregnancy, and we already had one child. Uhm, without divine guidance it never would have happened.”

**Interviewer:** “Okay, what do you think divine guidance offered you? If you had to articulate that in a couple words or sentences?”

**Richard:** “It was like during that two year period of time there were no physical or emotional obstacle that, uhm, couldn’t be overcome.”

**Millie:** “Yeah, getting my nursing degree. I was constantly praying, ‘Is this what I am supposed to do?’ And it wasn’t until I had the job I have now that I finally was like, ‘Oh, this is what I am supposed to do!’”

**Daneen:** “Whether to go to Taiwan to study abroad. Because… when I don’t want to, I think about the people, and they need help, and then I feel that I want to, not that I have to. Well, I do have to, but more of a want-to than a have-to.”
Lawrence: “I felt I should go to school there. But I wasn’t sure if I was going to get in, because my grades were ok, but they weren’t awesome, and I wasn’t even going to try. And, I just felt God was like, ‘You have to.’ God like literally, despite my own will, basically picked me up and planted me there. And it was the best decision I ever made.”

Alicia: “Divine guidance has helped develop me as a person in the pathways that God’s still guiding me towards. Uhm, but like where I’m at in my life, even though I know what I am majoring in, I still feel like it’s a connect-the-dots kind of thing and I can’t see the whole picture yet, I’m just kind of blindly trusting I guess.”

In all of these stories we see a continuation of the themes we opened this chapter with. The experiences of divine guidance are most often talked about not as interventionist encounters of the divine breaking into their everyday life to give them a clearly course-changing message. Instead, divine guidance weaves itself throughout multiple complex details as an integrated part of how they came to understand what brought them to the place where they are now.
Religion and Spirituality: Cousins with a Strained Relationship

As we think back to the opening literature that surveyed the culture shifts happening in the United States around decreasing ‘religiosity’ and increasing ‘spirituality,’ this thesis has something to add. As discussed by Pargament (1999), the social sciences have generally conceived the notion of spirituality as something intrinsic (e.g. prayer practices, affective sense of God, mystical experiences) and religiosity as something extrinsic (e.g. church attendance, official dogmas, denominational membership). When bureaucratic ecclesiastical structures lose influence in people’s lives, what is the result? At one time the scholarly hypothesis in vogue was an, ‘inevitable slide toward humanistic atheism.’ That clearly did not happen. Putnam (2010), found in his representative nationwide sample that only three of his 3,108 respondents self-identified as ‘atheists.’ Certainly plenty have rejected monotheism, or even theism, but hardly anyone uses the language of ‘atheism’ anymore. The assumption that the decline of religion would lead to broad atheism was the result of an over-identification of two related but distinct constructs: religiosity and spirituality. Rather than extrinsic religion being replaced by ‘non-religion’ or ‘anti-religion,’ it simply triggered an upswing in its related, but not identical, construct: intrinsic spirituality. Remember, Roof’s nationwide poll (1999) revealing that while 65% of Americans believed that religion was losing its
influence in public life, at the same time, a nearly equal amount, 62% claimed that the influence of religion was *increasing in their personal lives*. People were intuitively aware that not only are religiosity and spirituality *not* the same construct, but were aware that their relationship to each other could operate with a negative correlation: one going up while the other goes down. Without external scripting, people create their own scripts.

When the priests’ advice telling you how to live your life is no longer compelling, you don’t automatically embrace humanism or naturalism (or any other –ism). Perhaps you craft new ‘plausibility structures’ (Berger and Luckmann 1966) in your ‘social construction’ of reality; plausibility structures that you find more compelling than what was being previously offered to you. At this juncture in American religious history, the more intuitive, embodied, affective aspects of spirituality seem to be the most compelling.

**Theoretically Speaking**

Berger and Luckmann are micro-sociologists, but certainly each major theoretical school of sociology could speak to the phenomenon of religiosity being on the decline, while spirituality is on the incline. The big three might explain it as follows:

**Conflict**

Spirituality is the religion of the populace in open rebellion against a fallen elite ecclesiastical hierarchy.
Functionalist

Spirituality is ‘informal-religion’ meeting the needs of society, bringing it back into equilibrium, after it fell into disequilibrium by the decline in ‘formal’ religious structures.

Interactionist

This one is previously alluded to in the discussion of Berger and Luckmann. People give symbolic meaning to their experiences, which en masse, project and reify society as an object. As religious structures fail to effectively pass on to successive generations their ‘legitimate’ symbolic meanings of the transcendent, then as meaning-making animals, people begin to find alternative understandings to give it meaning.

The newer sociological streams may see it somewhat alternatively:

Feminist

The male dominated ecclesiastical structures, most of which model themselves after modern enlightenment models of ‘objective and disembodied’ thought (at least in the West), are crumbling. The rising ‘subjective and embodied’ ways of thinking and seeing the world change the emphasis in American Christianity from a focus on a masculine, ‘God the Father,’ to a focus on an androgynous, ‘God the Spirit.’
Post-Modern

The Meta-Narratives of most world religions give way under more modest epistemologies of localized knowledge, even if still using the language of a specific religious tradition. For example, the Pope in Rome, or the seminarian at Princeton Divinity have no more legitimate authority to determine ‘my spirituality’ than my own experiences give me.

Exchange

The cost-benefit ratio of being highly committed to a religious denomination is not worth it in a secularizing society. A much higher return can be found with equal investments of time and energy (and probably a lot less money) in more informal spiritualities with less demanding rules and less rigid dogmas. The list of ways to explain this shift could go on with about as many theoretical orientations as exist. The purpose of theory is never really to solve our great questions anyway, but rather to give us lenses and language with which to frame them.

Four Key Themes Observed

There are four key themes identified in the respondent transcripts that have been mentioned already in various sections, that are worth briefly summarizing here again:

1. The *time orientations* in the stories
2. Languaging that often uses a *parlance of aurality* as metaphor for many types of guidance

3. Guidance types most commonly *functioning in tandem*

4. Respondent perspectives on guidance most often being *integrated* within daily experiences, rather than *intervening* into them.

I. Time Orientation

*Present*

When first undertaking this project, I assumed that most people would approach divine guidance from a ‘future’ orientation. In other words, I thought people would seek to utilize divine guidance primarily to help them make life-decisions that were confronting them. This did not seem to be the case. In terms of sheer quantity of stories, the vast majority was framed with a ‘present’ time orientation. Especially when discussing ‘aesthetic’ and ‘emotive’ forms of divine guidance the respondents primarily spoke of how they felt God’s presence in the moment. Note that these were the first and third forms most frequently cited in the quantitative portion of the survey. They felt, “close,” “connected,” “comforted.” They felt, “peaceful,” “at rest,” “relaxed.” They felt, “aware,” “assured,” “reminded.”
Past

The second most common time orientation found throughout the stories was a ‘past’ orientation to time. Especially in the ‘intuitive’ and ‘circumstantial’ forms of divine guidance. These were the second and fourth most frequently experienced in the quantitative portion of the survey. They were retroactive ways of understanding how God led them to where they are now through circumstances and events. They saw his invisible guiding hand in how things, “worked out,” or, “came together.” They spoke of “realizing later,” “seeing afterall,” or “discovering in time,” just what God was doing, “all along.”

Future

The future orientation toward time, the kind of orientation necessary for advance decision-making strategies, was the least commonly cited. It seemed to dominate the ‘dream’ category, and had a fair sprinkling in the ‘writing,’ ‘internal verbal,’ and ‘internal visual’ categories. A few people did speak of discerning a, “calling,” “direction,” or “decision” that God was leading them to make.

II. A Metaphoric Parlance of Aurality

This was another surprise for me as the author, who had a past of ‘participant observation’ which had been primarily dominated with ‘internal verbal’ forms of divine guidance. But it seemed that while all the respondents would constantly use the language of aurality, they did not necessarily mean it literally. Sometimes when telling a story they would break into the second person as if God had directly spoken to them (e.g. “Lauren,
calm down.”). I would use active listening and say something like, ‘And those were the exact words you heard God say?’ and then I would repeat back what I just heard them say. Sometimes I would get a confident affirmative. Other times, a weak nod or ‘Mm-hmm.’ Often I would get a confused reflective look. Their eyes would usually look upward as they attempted to ‘hear-it’ in their long-term memory. It was as if they really were not sure if they heard it directly, or if those were simply the words they used to interpret the guidance. Often times they would acknowledge that it was not actually ‘words.’ Yet, a moment later they would again be mentioning how they “heard God say,” or “listened” for God. The parlance of aurality seems to dominate the language of Christian divine guidance. Much less used are words of visualization, such as ‘God gave me an image,’ or, ‘God showed me.’ But these terms did come up at times. It was not clear whether these were more literally intended to invoke ‘internal visual’ type experiences of divine guidance, but it seems reasonable to assume there may be a similar ‘metaphorical’ use being broadly used.

III. Guidance Types Functioning in Tandem

In very few stories did the respondent indicate that it was only a singular form of divine guidance at play, but rather multiple forms functioning in tandem. Often this would be partially masked by the ubiquitous use of terms of ‘aurality’ as metaphor for other types of divine guidance, but upon further probing it was clear that it was more than just a ‘voice’ being experienced (or sometimes no voice at all).
Signature Patterns of Guidance

Most of the respondents seemed to have similarly recurring patterns of divine guidance types. For example, Karl often talked about having a physical experience (tingling which ‘clued him in’ that God was trying to speak), followed by an aesthetic experience, followed by an intuitive experience. Vivian repeatedly talked about having an intuitive experience, followed by an aesthetic or dream experience, followed by a circumstantial experience as confirmation. Those with the higher levels of confidence in their experiences of divine guidance also seemed to be the same people with more settled signature patterns of divine guidance. Future research would be necessary to confirm this ‘hunch.’

Intuitive and/or Emotive in Most Cases

The intuitive and/or emotive were in nearly every story. Remember, this does not simply mean they had an emotional reaction ‘to’ the experience of divine guidance. That would be too obvious to mention. Rather it means that they often viewed the divine guidance as coming ‘via’ the emotions as a conduit or channel for it. This shows something deeper about their epistemological orientation: new knowledge coming from emotion, not just emotion in response to new knowledge.

IV. Interventionist vs Integrationist

As discussed in Chapter Five, most respondents did not indicate that their experiences of divine guidance were centered around interventionist experiences
breaking into their daily lives. While, a few did have experiences of voices or visions creating fork-in-the-road moments of choice for them to respond to, even to these people, it happened very infrequently. Rather, most experiences of divine guidance were perceived to be much more *integrationist*, the hand of divine guidance at work in the midst of the minutiae, rhythms, and patterns of their daily lives. Stated another way, *divine guidance was ubiquitous within daily experiences, not unique to them.*

**Two Concluding Hypotheses**

After being reflectively immersed in these interviews and their transcripts, I conclude with two hypotheses. These hypotheses move in a more inter-disciplinary direction toward a social psychological discussion of wellbeing. This proposal stands apart from any presupposition about whether or not their experiences were ‘real’ in the sense that God did or did not actually speak-to or guide them. Remember, I am taking a Critical Realist stance. Hence, to me these experiences *could be* objectively authentic at an ontological level, but even if they were, they would be subjectively interpreted at an epistemological one. That said, here are two potentially positive things I see in their stories and general view of life:

1. The God of Silver Linings: The respondents tended to frame the world in a psychologically nurturing, ‘best possible light.’

2. The God of Limited Options: The respondents sensed a constriction of options in their lives that boosts their wellbeing.
Whether or not their experiences are simply the naivety’s of weak minds needing the opiate of the masses, or the mystical discernments of ‘in-tune’ individuals, their construction of the world has some potent advantages.

I. The God of Silver Linings

All of the respondents share a common base assumption that some transcendent force cares about them, loves them, wishes the best for them, and sees intrinsic worth in them. Out of this starting point, they tend to see situations in the best possible light. Indulge me the use of a couple more examples from the transcripts to illustrate this.

**Daneen**: “It’s like I get this sense of peace sometimes in knowing like… it’s going to be okay. Like, every time my mom loses her glasses or something, she gets really anxious and everything, and I’m just like, ‘No it’s going to be okay. We’re going to find them if he (God) wants us to find them, and if he doesn’t, we won’t, and it’s going to be good.’” (emphasis hers)

Consider what this kind of thinking implies. It is not just that she has a theological belief that ‘God is loving.’ It goes so much further, so that the actual outcome of a situation doesn’t even matter, because that was the outcome that was supposed to happen. Certainly this worldview would have considerable difficulty in explaining serious theodicy issues (e.g. Why did the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan?). But at the level of daily-life wellbeing it totally changes one’s outlook and attitude. For most of us, going through our day without our glasses could be a disturbing thought. Especially if our vision would cause impairments for transportation, reading, work, etc. But in Daneen’s worldview, if they find the glasses, then it is a reminder that God is looking out for them.
If they don’t find the glasses, then they have just been invited into some sort of ‘divine adventure’ that they have to discover the meaning of. An adventure that in her words is, “going to be good.” Or take this example:

**Alicia:** “I had a feeling that a guy I dated for a year wasn’t right for me, but I didn’t listen (to God) and I kept swallowing that and pushing it aside. And then he ended up cheating on me and hurting me pretty bad. I really strongly believe that everything happens for a reason, and I definitely think that that experience happened so that I can relate to other people who had that happen to them.”

What is amazing to me in this story is not that she believed God was telling her to leave her boyfriend, and because she disobeyed God’s good intentions for her, it worked out bad. Nor is it surprising that she saw a painful experience as divinely orchestrated so she could better serve others. What is amazing is that in the same paragraph she declared that God was telling her not to do something that he was destining for her, and she was not picking up on the inconsistency in her own story. My point is not to say that all the stories of divine guidance are full of inconsistencies or paradoxical logic. My point is to illustrate that her mental frame is that: A) God wants the best for me, and wants to help me avoid being hurt, and B) God has a plan for all of my life experiences so that they can be used in positive ways. It is a no-lose scenario for God, and I suspect a win-win worldview (most of the time) for her as well. Most of the respondents revealed this propensity to constantly reframe a scenario to see the inherent good intent, or potential blessing. However simplistic or Pollyannic it may appear at times, I imagine it beats the probable emotional responses the average American may have to similar circumstances. In losing their glasses: frustration, anger, anxiety. In being cheated on: depression,
despair, self-destruction. There is a long literature in positive psychology about the benefits of positive self-talk and positive-thinking. I will not go into it here, but the worldview evidenced by these respondents seems to tap into those benefits.

II. The God of Limited Options

Choice Has Diminishing Returns

We live in a world full of choice: from thirty-plus types of salad dressing to pick between at the supermarket, to over three thousand colleges to choose from across the country. Having no options is rightly considered an evil condition to live in. Moving from no options to a few options suddenly gives us, ‘freedom.’ Freedom to choose for ourselves. Freedom to command our own destinies. Freedom is seen as a virtue over the evil of no-choice. Choices give us freedom, thus increased choices means more and more of a good thing, right? One problem with the post-industrial world we live in is the nascent assumption that endless expansion is always positive. We have come to see the tragic consequences of that thought in many areas of life, the environment as a chief victim of this way of seeing the world. Perhaps the same is true in the area of ‘choice.’ Behavioral scientist, Barry Schwartz (2004) is doing widely acclaimed work around this theory. Schwartz (2002, 2004, 2009) speaks of ‘choice overload’ and it’s deleterious effects to our general wellbeing. Specifically it results in paralysis of decision-making (anxiety in choices, or choice avoidance), inferior performance (spending our time trying to maximize our options, rather than maximize our decision), and dissatisfaction (much
higher likelihood of ‘buyer’s remorse’). Studies supporting his ideas range from the simple to the complex. People bought more jam, at a ten-to-one ratio, at a grocery store display offering only six flavor-samples, than one offering thirty (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). They found the same thing when offering college students choices to write extra credit papers, those give many topic options turned in less papers than those given just a few. Workers invested less in retirement plans when they had many mutual-fund options, rather than just a few (Iyengar et al 2004). People felt worse when trying to find the ‘perfect job’ rather than being happy with one ‘good enough’ (Iyengar and Schwartz 2006). In addition Shwartz notes (2009) that:

Self-blame for disappointing results becomes more likely as the choice set grows larger. And because large choice sets increase the chances of disappointing results (because of regret, missed opportunities and raised expectations), self-blame becomes a common occurrence. (P. 397)

People can end up being dissatisfied, even with good decisions, and when adding a dose of self-blame, they are experiencing the symptoms of clinical depression (Schwartz 2004). Depression not ultimately even due to the quality of their actual decision-making, but as a result of an overload of options, which almost ensures dissatisfaction.

*Language of Compulsion*

This is where my hypothesis comes in. The language of the respondents in this sample revealed a perception of a reduced choice-set. They spoke often of being, “compelled” by God to do something, of literally having, “no other choice.”
Richard: “I knew in my heart that it was the right decision no matter how distasteful it was to me personally, I was being compelled by God to do right.”

Lyndsay: “Not only did God give me the strength for that… but it almost wasn’t a choice… ‘You have to do this if you want to be a whole human being.’”

Daneen: “I feel that I want to, not that I have to. Well, I do have to, but more of a want-to than a have-to.”

These are just a small sampling of the language of compulsion shared by the respondents. For those addressing a decision with a future time orientation, they truly viewed themselves as having limited options. For those looking with more of a past-time orientation of guidance, they saw how God had brought them along the ‘right’ path. The very idea that ‘circumstantial’ guidance is ‘proof’ or ‘evidence’ to the respondents of God’s presence in their life reveals their inherent assumption that the choices made and the way things worked out, are the way things were ‘supposed’ to be. Even when they find it distasteful or uncomfortable, they do not have a language of worrying about missed opportunity costs. Instead of self-blame for poor decision-making they tend to have a sense of how they ‘learned a lot,’ or how God ‘built their character,’ or ‘taught them patience.’ Their mental framing of the limited choices in their life protect them from the deleterious effects on wellbeing that large choice sets tend to lead to. Instead their mental energies went into making the ‘most’ of the outcomes that they fully believed were ‘meant to be.’
ETHNOGRAPHIC POST-SCRIPT

Reflecting on this work I have come to a few thoughts about divine guidance, a topic that has haunted me for most of my life. As I read my observations about the divine guidance shared by the respondents, and as I think about the many hours spent at coffee shops or library study rooms interviewing them, I can’t help but remember how they poured out their hearts on topics absolutely central their understanding of themselves and the world. They spoke of break-ups, lost loved ones, chosen career paths. They spoke of the things that gave them hope in times of despair. They spoke of ways they have intentionally tried to shape their lives for decades. That form of disclosure is a sacred trust, and one that I do not wish to do violence to. In a sense I want to walk away from this project like an ethnographic field-worker, having observed, having participated in, but trying to avoid fundamentally altering the worlds of the objects of study. In that vein I see four ways to see this work:

1. **Disenchanting:** The social-scientific theories presented here ‘explain-away’ the divine altogether, and reveal the underlying naivety of the participants.

2. **Disenchanted:** As a social scientist I have totally missed the point of the faith experience and the mystical by even attempting to treat it as an object open to study.

3. **Dialectical:** The social scientific and the spiritual/mystical are not at odds with each other. Rather they enhance each other in dialogue. Sometimes they help rub
off sharp edges in each other; other times they simply offer different languages to use in discussing the ideas with various audiences.

4. **Defunct:** My thinking caries some grave theoretical errors, not clear to me, that greater minds will point out in the potentially very near future. Of-course one could also reject my proposition that these four are the *only* options. But assuming these are the ways of viewing the topics and work at hand, I offer my personal sentiments.

1. Is my work corrosive to faith? Maybe just a little, or at least to ‘establishment’ dogma.

2. Is my work missing the point of faith? Doubtful. The ineffable is meant to be reflected on. The rabbinic traditions see that as an act of devotion in itself.

3. Is my work possibly enhancing to those looking for a *praxis* of thoughtful reflection and experiential spirituality? I would like to think it could be.

4. Does my work need others to offer correctives? This is the only one of the four that I am quite certain of.

Language is a telling thing. For some the word faith is a synonym for *proof*. Rather, I see faith as an antonym of the word *proof*, and a synonym of the word *hope*. Faith may be much less than proof, but hope isn’t half as bad.
REFERENCES


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SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES SURVEY

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age: 18-29 30-49
3. Ethnicity: _______________

4. Faith/Denomination:
What Christian denomination, religion, or faith perspective do you identify with most? Below are some possibilities to help you think. Circle one, or write in your own in this space: _______________

Catholic Orthodox Baptist Evangelical Emergent
Presbyterian Lutheran Episcopal Pentecostal Charismatic
Jewish Muslim Buddhist Atheist Agnostic
Anabaptist New Age

The questions that follow include items you may or may not experience. Please consider if and how often you have these experiences, and try to disregard whether you feel you should or should not have them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Never or almost never</th>
<th>2. Once in a while</th>
<th>3. Some days</th>
<th>4. Most days</th>
<th>5. Every day</th>
<th>6. Many times a day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Using the key above, circle the number that corresponds to the frequency of your experience:

5. I feel God’s love for me, directly. 1 2 3 4 5 6
6. I feel God’s presence. 1 2 3 4 5 6
7. I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities. 1 2 3 4 5 6
Please indicate whether or not you have ever had any of the following experiences:

8. I heard the voice of God speaking to me. Yes  No
9. I felt called by God to do something. Yes  No
10. I made a significant life decision because of divine guidance. Yes  No

We would like to have more in-depth interviews (about 1hr) with a portion of our respondents. Would you be willing to be considered for such an interview? If yes, please put your name, phone, and/or email below:

Name:

Phone:  Email:
APPENDIX B:
SCRIPT USED FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Survey #:
Draft 3.3 (March 2011) of:
Spiritual Experiences Structured Interview

CHPT 1- SOUND CHECK/SET-UP

Interview Date:
Interviewee Name:
Interview Location:
Alias Required?:
Verbal Informed Consent?:

CHPT 2- DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender:
Ethnicity:
Age:
Highest level of education completed:
Marriage/Relationship status:
Denominational Affiliation:
What denomination(s) and/or other faiths have you been a part of from childhood to now?
Please share them in chronological order if you can.

Using Scale ‘A’ on your card, how would you rate your level of commitment to your denomination?
CHPT 3- GSS QUESTIONS:

These are the frequencies the GSS uses that correspond with the each of the numbers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Never or almost never</th>
<th>2. Once in a while</th>
<th>3. Some days</th>
<th>4. Most days</th>
<th>5. Every day</th>
<th>6. Many times a day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When asked if you feel God’s love, directly, you marked ________.
When asked if you feel God’s presence, you marked ________.
Can you tell me what those experiences are like? Are they basically the same or different?

When asked if you feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities, you marked ________.
Can you tell me what those experiences are like?

CHPT 4- GOD SPEAKING/CALLING:

When asked if you have ever heard the voice of God speaking to you, you selected ____.
Can you tell me what that experience was like?

Some people claim to experience God communicating with them in different ways. I am going to read to you a few ways that people commonly claim. Using Scale D on your card, tell me the level of frequency that you have or have not experienced God communicating with you in each of these ways:

- **Internal Verbal**: Heard God speak from within your heart and/or mind?
- **External Verbal**: Heard God speak audibly with your ears?
- **Internal Visual**: Saw an image from God in your minds eye?
- **External Visual**: Saw a literal vision from God with your eyes?
- **Intuitive**: Sensed God communicating with you through what some may describe as promptings, leadings, intuition, subtle or gut feelings?
• **Emotive**: Felt an overwhelming emotion that you knew was from God? Could be positive emotions like peace, joy or love; or negative emotions like fear, awe, or conviction.

• **Circumstantial**: You knew God was trying to communicate with you through circumstances in your life (e.g. the words of others, opening and closing of doors or opportunities, blessings or pain, coincidences that you believed were not just coincidence)?

• **Written**: You clearly sensed God communicating with you through written works, such as the Bible or other books? Not in the sense that everything you read in the Bible is ‘God speaking to you,’ if you believe the Bible is the Word of God, but in the sense that a line or passage jumped out at you in a way that you felt was uniquely from God for you in that moment.

• **Aesthetic**: You sensed God communicating with you through art, music, film, or nature? Not in the sense that all humans can appreciate beauty or be moved by it, but in a way that felt uniquely from God as communication to you in that moment.

• **Dreams**: Received communication from God in a dream?

• **Other**: Experiences of God guiding or communicating with you in any other ways than discussed above?

When asked if you have ever felt called by God to do something, you selected ____.

Can you tell me about one or two of the more significant experiences of this that you have had?

Using **Scale D**: How often do you experience being called by God to do something?

Using **Scale B**: How do you feel about the following statement:

“I always do the things I feel that God called me to do.”

Can you tell me about why you do or do not go through with the things you feel God guiding you to do?
CHPT 5- LIFE DECISIONS

When asked if you have ever made a significant life decision because of Divine Guidance, you selected ____.

Can you tell me about one or two of the more significant experiences that you have had?

Many people have made different kinds of decisions based on their experiences of Divine Guidance, using Scale B, let me know which of the following types of decisions you have made based on God communicating to you:

Have you experienced God asking you to do something in relation to:

- **Day-to-day Tasks** (e.g. a route to drive, a gift to buy, an appointment to change)
- **Romantic Decisions** (e.g. a person to date, marry, or break-up with)
- **Career Decisions** (e.g. a job to take or quit, or a school or degree to pursue)
- **Relationship Decisions** (e.g. a friend to make or cut, to forgive someone, to challenge someone with something)
- **Religious Practice Decisions** (e.g. a church to join or leave, a devotional practice to add, increase, or stop)
- **Political Decisions** (e.g. a politician to vote for, a position on an issue to take)
- **Theological Decisions** (e.g. a belief to add or change, a particular interpretation of a Biblical passage)
- **Philanthropy Decisions** (e.g. a donation to a charity or church, a gift to give, volunteer hours to serve)
- **Other**: What other types of decisions have you made based on God communicating to you?

DECISION OUTCOMES

Using Scale B: How do you feel about the following statement:
“After I have made a decision that I believed God was guiding me to make, I typically feel very confident that it was the right choice.”

Tell me about that response. How confident do you typically feel about these types of decisions?

Do you sometimes doubt or second-guess their validity? Tell me about that.

Using Scale B: How do you feel about the following statement:

“After I have made a decision that I believed God was guiding me to make, the outcome is typically very favorable to me.”

Tell me more about that. How favorably do the outcomes of these types of decisions usually turn out?

CHPT 6- UNIQUENESS and OPENNESS

Using Scale B: How do you feel about the following statement:

“My experiences of divine guidance are very unique, and I feel like I’m the only person who has them.”

Why? Tell me about how unique or common you think your experiences are among other people.

Do you know other people who have had similar experiences as you?

If you had to make a rough guess, about how many people do you know, who have had similar experiences of directly hearing from or being led by God?

Of the people you know of who have had similar experiences, do they include the following (Yes or No):
- People from church
- People from work
- Friends outside of church or work
• Spouse or significant other
• Immediate family (family living within your household, other than your spouse or significant other)
• Extended family (family that does not live within your household)
• Minister or religious leader
• Other: What other relationships do you have with people who have had similar experiences

Using **Scale B**: How do you feel about the following statement:

> “I openly and frequently discuss these experiences with others.”

Why? Tell me about how openly and frequently you discuss this with other people.

With whom do you primarily discuss these experiences?

Do you have a person or group of people that you consult with to help you make up your mind about how to respond to or understand these experiences? Tell me about that.

**CHPT 7- OTHERS’ DIVINE GUIDANCE**

Using **Scale B**: How do you feel about the following statement:

> “It is totally appropriate for __________ person to make a decision that effects me and claim that divine guidance was part of reason for the decision made.”

• A clergy person (pastor, priest, rabbi, etc.)
• Your boss or supervisor
• A political leader (i.e. the President, or a senator or governor)
• Your spouse or significant other
• A member of your immediate or extended family (other than your spouse)
• A close friend of a different denominational background than you
• A close friend of an entirely different religion than you
• A co-worker at a ‘secular’ job
• An acquaintance from your church
• An acquaintance you barely know
• A total stranger

Do you think that people often reference divine guidance as a form of manipulation to get their way?

Have you ever referenced divine guidance as a form of manipulation to get your way?

When referencing divine guidance, are there things you tend to say or do to try to assure people that you are sincere? For example, saying “God told me to tell you” or avoiding God language for something like, “I feel like maybe you should…”, etc.

CHPT 8- BODY AND PRACTICES

BODY: When you think of the most significant times that you experienced divine guidance of any sort, would you say that there was any way in which you felt it in your body? (If they ask for clarification, say: “For example some people have said their body felt lighter, they could feel their heart beat faster, or that they felt warmth spread over their skin. Have you experienced anything like that, or anything different?”)

PRACTICES

Do you do any practices specifically to increase the frequency or vividness of experiences of God guiding or communicating to you?

If yes, what types? Use Scale D to capture frequencies for each.

Are any practices physical/bodily (e.g. yoga, postures, fasting, hiking/pilgrimage, etc.)

If no, why?

CHPT 9- STUDENT/LEADER

STUDENT: Are you currently a student? Where?

Have any of your experiences of divine guidance been related to your student experience, such as picking a school, major, course, project, internship, etc.?

Did it help you persist in academics or towards graduation?
LEADER: Are you currently a leader in any capacity? Where?

How has divine guidance influenced your experiences as a leader?

Can you give me an example of a leadership decision you made that was influenced by divine guidance?

CHPT 10- SATISFACTION AND WELLBEING

Using Scale C, please share with me how satisfied or unsatisfied you are with your job and/or work?

Using Scale C, please share with me how satisfied or unsatisfied you are with your life in general?

Using Scale C, please share with me how satisfied or unsatisfied you are with your spiritual wellbeing?

Not using the scale, would you say that you are depressed these days?

How would you describe the state of your mental health?

Has financial hardship or abundance ever affected your sense of divine guidance? How?

OTHER

Are there any other factors you can think of that contribute to your experiences of God’s guidance that we have not yet discussed? If so, please tell me about them.

Thank you so much for participating!