



the nature of spirituality

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What is the nature of spirituality?

According to Thomas Merton, "our greatest journey in life is interior." Such an interior journey is named as a spiritual journey. Even though the spiritual journey requires us to journey within, the focal point of such journeying is the way we live and act in our daily life; in our outer world. Therefore, spirituality encompasses both our inner being and our outer world. As a result spirituality draws from and flows back into daily life.

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Spirituality involves both intention and practice:

Intention: within the context of our daily lived experience, to seek and discover personal wholeness, authentic communal belonging and, in the words of James O'Dea, "reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life and humility regarding the human place in nature."ⁱ

Practice: to engage in practices which assist in the discovery, expression, exploration, deepening and integration of such an intention.



spirituality involves both intention and practice

photo by Kaye Twining

A further entry point into understanding the nature of spirituality comes from the writing of John Swintonⁱⁱ where he makes a distinction between the human spirit and spirituality.

The human spirit

Swinton argues that the human spirit is like an "integrative presence" or "essential personal, dynamic life-force" which both drives and enables a person to respond to their lived experience in a meaningful way. Within an individualistic, western cultural context, meaningful refers to questions around personal identity, purpose and belonging. Questions such as:

Who am I? Who do I know myself to be in my world at any given time?

Why am I? What is the purpose of my existence?

How do I experience belonging in my world? Here belonging takes form in the three areas of: 1. within our own person (intrapersonal); 2. with others (interpersonal); 3. within a big-picture shared belief system (transpersonal) which responds to questions like "where did we come from?" and "where do we go when we die?"

Questions such as these are time honored spiritual questions. Even so within differing historical times and places the response to such questions will change. Why? Because our ever expanding knowledge of our world and what makes us humans tick keeps reframing the responses.

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photo by Apollo 11 Astronauts. NASA

Also known to be intrinsic to the human spirit are three human qualities of faith, hope and love.

Faith: "a way of seeing depth and meaning in the ordinary."ⁱⁱⁱ As such faith is a human capacity for giving meaning to our living and our dying.

Hope: the possibility of transformation . . . grounded in reality.^{iv} Within this context transformation involves breaking through the limitations of our current view of Selfhood.

Love: to offer and receive love is understood to be the essence of human belonging. Love is experienced as an energy^v calling forth authentic relationships in the areas of the intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal. Love on the intrapersonal realm involves a healthy love of self. Love on the interpersonal realm manifests in different ways depending on the relationship. For example: love between intimate partners will differ from love between friends. In turn love between friends will

differ from love of the wider Earth community. Love on the transpersonal realm is experienced as being metaphorically *taken hold of* by the field of love within Life Itself.^{vi}

Faith is central to giving meaning to our living and dying; hope is central to ongoing identity formation; love is central to our experience of belonging.

Spirituality

In light of the above understandings of the human spirit, spirituality is known to be: a common human activity^{vii} involving an individual's intentional practice of naming and claiming authentic Selfhood-in-community. Therefore, spirituality takes an individual on an interior journey of growing towards personal wholeness, authentic communal belonging, and connection with the mystery of Life Itself. Such an interior journey is taken in response to the drive of the human spirit to give meaning to our living and dying and contextualized by current knowledge, beliefs, values and lived experience. Which is why, as mentioned previously, spirituality draws from and flows back into daily life.

One dynamic within such an interior journey is the ability to befriend our current Selfhood while remaining open to transformational shifts in our view; shifts which break through the limitations of our current Selfhood. Such shifts in our view may be experienced as an ever expanding horizon. Also, within the ongoing interior journey we may experience pivotal moments when our view of Selfhood is drastically restructured. At such times it is as we were now metaphorically *viewing ourselves through new eyes*.

We cannot embark on such an inner journey unprepared, or we may find we become lost in the cave; the cave of the heart. We need to engage in practices which will nurture, sustain, challenge and pave the way for us to continue to engage in the ongoing adventure of growing in compassionate self knowledge towards authentic living. (For more on practices see: *Contemplative Practices*)



don't get lost in the cave of the heart

photo by Andrew Twining

RESOURCES

- ⁱ James O'Dea, *Cultivating Peace: Becoming a 21st-Century Peace Ambassador*
- ⁱⁱ John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Healthcare*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lawrence Freeman, *Jesus: Teacher Within*
- ^{iv} Kaye Twining, MA Thesis: *The contribution of a spiritual director to the spiritual journey of a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder*
- ^v Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love*
- ^{vi} Rosemary Haughton, *Transformation of Man: A Study of Conversion and Community*
- ^{vii} John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Healthcare*