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LPN-Q, The Quarterly Journal of the Life Planning Network is produced by members of the Life Planning Network, a community of professionals from diverse disciplines dedicated to helping people navigate the second half of life.

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Introduction

Confession: When I scheduled “spirituality” as the theme for this issue of *LPN-Q*, I didn’t stop to consider the meaning of the word. Not very deeply anyway.

Sure, I had a vague idea of what most people mean when they use the word spirituality. Though I was, admittedly, only a mediocre student of high school Latin, I knew that the word was rooted in *spiritus*, and that it meant breath. Breathing is, of course, essential to life—and therefore it’s easy to assume that spirituality conveys something mysterious about the essence of life. Still, the more I thought about the word, the less certain I was that I knew what it meant. A quick, informal survey confirmed that I was not the only one with a less than sure grasp of its meaning. “Spirituality is seeking after God,” one friend replied when I asked her to define it. Another said, “Spirituality is feeling a presence greater than oneself.”

Merriam Webster tells us that in English spirituality is derived from the 15th century French *spiritualité* and that its usage was originally attached solely to Christianity. Even the word “spirit” comes to English from Latin through French and means soul, courage, vigor as well as breath. Its original uses in English are themselves mainly translations from Vulgate Latin Bible, and the use of the word in Latin results from Saint Jerome’s fourth century translations of the Greek and Hebrew words for breath, *pneuma* and *ruah*, respectively. Over time, the material substances (breath, air, wind) signified by the original Hebrew and Greek words gave way to immaterial metaphor.

Language is fluid. Our inability to define a word often has less to do with our failure to master vocabulary than language’s restless nature.

I am not proposing that the notion of spirituality is as new as the English word for it. I only mean to illustrate that its meaning and history are not as clear as we might assume. Harry R. Moody is surely correct that the spiritual has been an element of the human condition “at the heart and soul of every human culture since primordial times,” as he writes in [*The Five Stages of the Soul*](#). “Without this vitally essential component, no theory of human development can be authentic or complete.”

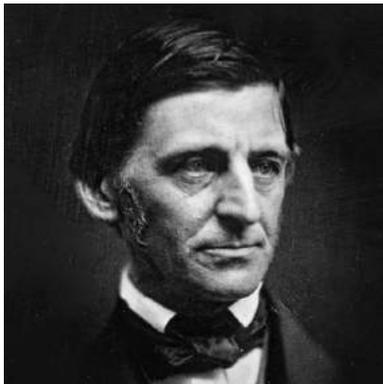
My little investigation into the word eventually led me to see how the volley of competing ideas and arguments between philosophers and theologians, especially during and after the Enlightenment, gave rise to a radically different use and understanding of spirituality. In particular, it’s interesting to consider how it came to mean an unmediated experience with the divine.

Our current usage of spirituality—in fact our contemporary door into the realm of spirituality—is hugely indebted to German philosopher, theologian and classicist [Friedrich Schleiermacher \(1768-1834\)](#), the 19th century father of modern liberal theology and the muse of American Transcendentalism. Arguing against the rationalism of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, he asserted that we have a direct apprehension or intuition of God. He identified feeling rather than reason as the core of liberal faith.



In 1799, Schleiermacher published his most important and radical work in the philosophy of religion, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Human immortality and God were inessential to religion, he claimed. Moreover, religion, he said, had been corrupted by bourgeois culture and state-interference. Further, he asserted that there exists an endless multiplicity of valid forms of religion. He called artists the true priests of religion and cast aside the Bible, creeds, church tradition, and even belief in God as a requisite of religious experience.

The work made Schleiermacher famous in Germany and soon in America, too. His work profoundly influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Mary Moody Emerson, Theodore Parker and other Transcendentalists; it urged them “to rekindle the quenched fire of their ‘corpse cold’ Unitarian faith.”



That leads us to Emerson and the transfiguring moment of his then-notorious, now-celebrated [“Harvard Divinity School Address.”](#) In the summer of 1838, Emerson was invited to speak to the seven members of the graduating class of the Divinity School where he himself had been trained as a minister, a role from which he had by then resigned. Emerson delivered a searing indictment of a Christianity that he accused of robbing human beings of their natural divinity. To Emerson, according to Jeff Carreira in “Ralph Waldo Emerson, Spiritual But Not Religious,”

Jesus was not so much divine as he was “the greatest example so far of what humans could and should aspire to.”

Emerson accused the church of elevating the figure of Jesus Christ above the rest of humanity, of offering not a doctrine of the soul but a noxious exaggeration of the person of Jesus. The church had relegated the holy to the past and was withholding the idea of individual spiritual emancipation from the present, he charged. “Men have come to speak of the revelation...as if God were dead,” he told his audience.

Emerson excoriated preachers as dulled to authentic spiritual experience because they seemed only able to parrot an intellectual understanding of the divine. As a result, they were, he said, incapable of provoking others to a genuine experience of the divine. “The spirit only can teach...The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach.”

He concluded by telling the graduates, that to lead others into an encounter with the spiritual nature of life they needed to first experience it on their own, directly. “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, — cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity. Look to it first and only, that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money, are nothing to you, — are not bandages over your eyes, that you cannot see, — but live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.”

“Aging serves as a spiritual alarm clock” and is “one of the ways the soul nudges itself into attention to the spiritual aspect of life,” writer Thomas Moore tells us. Our bodies slow and the breath of mortality focuses us on the larger questions. Aging triages and distills. However, as Moody says in his *Five Stages*, there is no guarantee that age will lead everyone to seize the opportunity to participate in the drama of self-transformation. “Our spiritual capacity exists as a possibility only. If it is to unfold...it must be intentionally and consistently encouraged over a period of time via struggle, commitment, and effort.”

In this issue of *LPN-Q*, we are lucky to hear the voices of six writers who have committed themselves to exploring spirituality and struggling with the questions important to them. We begin with an excerpt from Carol Orsborn’s forthcoming book, *Older, Wiser, Fiercer: One Woman’s Meditation on The Measure of Our Days*. In it, the co-author of [Spirituality of Age: A Seekers Guide to Growing Older](#), tackles the paradox of aging, including the recognition that nothing is serene but that she feels a growing sense of “numinous beauty” and a love that grows deeper and wider. In Barbara Abramowitz’s “Dancing with the Divine,” we are led to ask ourselves how we tend to our souls, how we soften our hard edges and surrender to wonder, and how we enter into a state of being in love with being.

In “The Call and the Spiritual Search,” Harry (Rick) Moody ushers us through the dreams and writings of Rumi, Martin Buber and Rilke, into a deeper understanding of the inner voice. If we listen deeply to it, he writes, it will grant us true personality and a chance—no matter how old we are—to “live everything,” including our questions. Rabbi Richard Address writes about a different spiritual opportunity as we age: to harvest our experience and, importantly, share our harvest with others. In his piece, John Robinson examines the “three secrets of aging”: initiation, transformation, and revelation. Consciousness restores us to a vision of the world as sacred. Seeing the world as sacred in turn presses us into action to heal and safeguard it, allowing us to integrate newfound spiritual meaning into our actions.

Finally, Chuck Yanikoski in “What About Non-Spiritual People,” pushes back against the notion that people who are not spiritual are missing something wonderful. For him, being freed from the concerns of what a higher power intends or wishes of him is comforting and liberating. He has a message, too, for LPN’s professionals working with non-spiritual clients: be respectful of them the way you might any other minority. “Spirituality,” he writes, “is fundamentally not about our feelings and experiences, but on how we interpret them.”

Following each of the pieces in this issue, you’ll find a poem. *LPN-Q* asked each of the contributors to this issue to select a poem to follow their piece and tell us something about why they chose it. Enjoy!

Bruce Frankel - Issue Editor

Wondrous and Wild

The paradox of aging

Carol Orsborn

*"We who are old know that age is more than a disability.
It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our
capacity at times, but something to be carried high."
Florida Scott-Maxwell, *The Measure of My Days**

What is age to those of us living it? Poised on the eve of my seventieth year, I am filled with equal portions of wonder and dread. The young cannot possibly fathom what it means to live with one's cheek pressed hard against the shadows. Earlier in our lives, we had expected either to continue on as is forever, punctuated by a hard stop at the end, or to fade away gently into the dark night. We did not expect to be facing a new threshold, feeling more alive than ever. The irony nearly breaks us, as we leapfrog through the mystery of age one paradox at a time.

Aging is a time full of irony. We find ourselves brimming with unexpected passion, but frequently lack the energy to see things through. We experience ourselves to be at the peak of our knowledge and abilities, only to realize that we are masters of a world that no longer exists. We who are old discover untapped reservoirs of compassion for humanity, while having less patience for individuals than ever before. We crave to be included while yearning to be left alone. We worry we won't have enough for the demands of a cavernous future while fearing that tomorrow may be our last. It seems just yesterday, we found our own aging parents' crankiness to be irritating. Today, we realize that insisting we be allowed to do things our own way—no matter how inconvenient for others—is not only our hard-earned right, but the essence of what we want most: the freedom to make our own choices to the very end.

Aging is a time full of irony.

There is nothing quiescent or serene about any of this, even should there be moments or even long stretches of indescribable peace and joy. But in their place, we can discover that we have become somehow transformed by aging to become not only older and wiser but something wondrous. More and more I feel myself to have a numinous beauty, not what the young refer to as pretty, but expressive: a natural wonder eroded by time into something wonderful. It is as if with every

lightning strike, every assault endured and paradox accepted, God has been saying: “Now do you understand?”

This transformation cannot be forced, only allowed. And it is only by dint of how we formulate our answer to the question that we become something to behold rather than a pile of rubble.



Love is the answer, bursting inside of me, begging for expression yet often confined to the page. For in real life, sharing everything I am is often too much for others. Especially the young. They need their energy for their own lives while I blaze secretly beneath as serene a facade as I can manage. When my heart burns clean, remembering that I

have chosen to temper the full expression of myself out of love, I gaze clear-eyed at the whole of life—every act of the human drama—feeling a peace that goes beyond mere acceptance.

Ah, the privilege of life—something I’ve longed to experience through my achievements, by doing. With a love this big, I now feel as if I could conquer the world—it feels endless, infinite. And yet, how ironic, I write one page and feel worn out. Anything that requires effort lifts me up then drops me back down again, but it is to a place new to me, where the love is not conditional nor exhaustible—back to where I can simply be.

This is a newfound ability, a gift of age: newly able to detach from the fray of life, and my own ambition, to descend—or is it elevate?—into solitude. In this place of being, I grow deeper and I grow wilder. After years of having to channel the essence of my vitality to make a living, to be part of the world, my spirit has found sanctuary. I am, in this place, not only fierce with age, but with life.

Carol Orsborn is the author of more than 25 books including *The Spirituality of Age: A Seeker’s Guide to Growing Older*, coauthored with Robert L. Weber. It was the 2015 Nautilus Book Awards gold winner in the category of Consciously Aging.

This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Older, Wiser, Fiercer: One Woman’s Meditation on The Measure of Our Days* by Carol Orsborn, PhD, editor-in-chief of *Fierce with Age: The Digest of Boomer Wisdom, Inspiration and Spirituality* (www.fiercewithage.com)

On the sunny days of aging, when one intuits the inherent meaning of one's life, it is easy to have faith. But do we have a relationship with God that will go the distance in those stormier spells, when we are forced to confront the inevitabilities that positive thinking, alone, cannot forestall? It was in such a season of my life that my coauthor on The Spirituality of Age, Robert L. Weber, introduced me to this poem by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. For me, these inspired words were as much prayer as poem. Soon after encountering de Chardin's words, I emerged from my dark and stormy night grateful not only for this poem, but for having such a friend as Bob, who graced me with it at the exact moment I needed it most. – Carol Orsborn

Bear Me Away

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

When the signs of age begin to mark my body
(and still more when they touch my mind);

when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off
strikes from without or is born within me;

when the painful moment comes
in which I suddenly awaken
to the fact that I am ill or growing old;

and above all at that last moment
when I feel I am losing hold of myself
and am absolutely passive within the hands
of the great unknown forces that have formed me;

in all those dark moments, O God,
grant that I may understand that it is you
(provided only my faith is strong enough)
who are painfully parting the fibres of my being
in order to penetrate to the very marrow
of my substance and bear me away within yourself.

Dancing with the Divine

Barbara Abramowitz

*“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a miracle.”*

Albert Einstein

Sometimes I forget. I forget to access a portal that quiets the ego. I forget to dance with the divine.

Sometimes in this time of volatility I forget amid the onslaught of social media, news of refugees worldwide, rising sea levels, dying bee colonies, politics; lost in a compulsion to keep up to date, to move on to the next thing on the list.

In the opening scene to the movie *August Rush*, wide eyed, dimpled child actor Freddie Hightower is twirling in an undulating field of wheat under a clear blue sky. Listening to the breeze, hearing music in the wind-blown shafts of grain, he says “Music is everywhere; all you have to do is listen.”

Music is one of those portals that quiet the ego. A lyric from Van Morrison’s “Sweet Thing” can bring me to a transcendent state.

We shall walk and talk
In gardens all misty and wet with rain
And I will never, never, never
Grow so old again.



Plato had it right: “Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.”

In her book *Big Magic, Creative Living Beyond Fear*, Elizabeth Gilbert talks about what distinguishes ego from soul. “My saving grace is this, though: *I know that I am not only an ego; I am also a soul.* And I know that my soul doesn’t care a whit about reward or failure. My soul is not guided by dreams of praise or fears of criticism. My soul doesn’t even have language for such options. My soul, when I tend to it, is a far more expansive and fascinating source of guidance than my ego will ever be, because my soul desires only one thing: *wonder.*”

Soul, of course, needs ego. We need an ego and soul partnership as Alan Seale reminds us in, *Intuitive Living, a Sacred Path*. Ego, the physical body and personality, is our vehicle for putting into action our soul's desires.

How do we tend to our souls? How do we soften our hard edges and surrender to wonder, to the appreciation and *experience* of aliveness... to a love for just being? I suggest that being in love with being is dancing with the divine.

Surrendering to wonder opens us to something larger than ourselves, beyond our ego minds. As I age, aware that I've passed through the acquisition stage of life with its often consuming focus on career, raising children, accumulating material things, I notice a more active intention to tend to my soul, to slow and savor, to not miss the root experience of being alive.

Intention setting is another portal through which we tend to our souls. The reticular activating system (RAS) of our brain, with its great influence over our cognition and motivation, acts to filter all the information around us affecting what we pay attention to. So simply asking how can I connect with spirit today will signal the RAS to be alert to opportunities to dance with the divine.

In addition to setting an intention, we can take advantage of time between tasks to connect with spirit. Hugh Prather, in *Notes on How to Live in the World and Still Be Happy*, suggests using transitional periods, the space *between* activities, during the day to settle the mind and body.

So rather than rushing mindlessly from one activity to another, take a moment to pause and acknowledge what you've completed, center, and breathe. The Latin translation of spirit is breath. In the car, take a moment before heading to your destination. Breathe. Take time between appointments. Breathe. Or stare at the sky or your garden and reconnect with your senses and soul, to experience being. Breathe.

We're discovering a neurobiology of spirituality. It is, as Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant in *Spiritual Evolution* tells us, a mystical experience rooted in the limbic system. Our human spirituality, he says, is evolutionary and has a biological basis. Our brains are hardwired to generate positive emotions. The following positive emotional states of awe, love, trust, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, joy and hope not only define spirituality, but they are portals to spirituality. He emphasizes that these states are not only about emotion but also about social connection, and they are the key to our cultural evolutionary process.

This confluence of emotion and social connection brought an audience to tears when Fred Rogers in his Emmy acceptance speech asked the attendees to take a moment and “Bring to mind someone who has loved you into being.”

The heart is a gateway. When we shift awareness to the area of the heart, breathe in and out through our heart area, and then conjure feelings of appreciation, care, gratitude or compassion, we tune the neural network that exists between the heart and brain, according to researchers from the HeartMath Institute. This neural tuning creates a sense of ease and flow as the energies of the heart, mind and emotions become balanced.

Ease and flow are an essential substrate for accessing states of wonder. Activities such as art, music, dance, walking in nature, hugging, and practices of meditation, gratitude, compassion, prayer, and mindfulness can all be portals for quieting the mind, opening to positive emotion, and connecting to divine spirit.

“I got it all done and I died anyway,” jokes comic Loretta LaRoche.

So whether or not you got it all done today, did you find your way to be in love with being and to dance with the divine?

Barbara Abramowitz is a *Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, and Certified Body-Mind Life Coaching™ Specialist.*

Max Ehrmann's "A Prayer" touches me deeply because he underscores what's truly important in life: relationships, hope, walking in your own truth, being kind to yourself as well as to others. "May I not forget that poverty and riches are of the spirit." These heart-centered core values resonate with me. Ehrmann, best known as the author of the prose poem "Desiderata," reminds us to embrace gratitude for life itself though we may not have attained our dreams, to soften, "gentle still" even at the time of death. I feel that he is tending to his soul, using an interplay of intention and prayer, intention acknowledging oneself as the source and prayer addressing a higher power. – Barbara Abramowitz

A Prayer

Max Ehrmann

Let me do my work each day; and if the darkened hours of despair overcome me, may I not forget the strength that comforted me in the desolation of other times.

May I still remember the bright hours that found me walking over the silent hills of my childhood, or dreaming on the margin of a quiet river, when a light glowed within me, and I promised my early God to have courage amid the tempests of the changing years.

Spare me from bitterness and from the sharp passions of unguarded moments. May I not forget that poverty and riches are of the spirit.

Though the world knows me not, may my thoughts and actions be such as shall keep me friendly with myself.

Lift up my eyes from the earth, and let me not forget the uses of the stars. Forbid that I should judge others lest I condemn myself.

Let me not follow the clamor of the world, but walk calmly in my path.

Give me a few friends who will love me for what I am; and keep ever-burning before my vagrant steps the kindly light of hope.

And though age and infirmity overtake me, and I come not within sight of the castle of my dreams, teach me still to be thankful for life, and for time's olden memories that are good and sweet; and may the evening's twilight find me gentle still.

The Call and the Spiritual Search

Awakened in our dreams by the inner voice

Harry S. Moody

The Call is the moment when the spiritual search begins. There's a famous song by Peggy Lee that runs "Is this all there is?" There is no better summary of the Call than that question. Whether we have fulfilled our hopes in life, or realized that we never will, the question of the Call is still the same. "Is this all there is?"

The Call is the moment of awakening of our "soul," the first of the stages of the soul when this inward dimension comes to life. It is that moment when we "come to ourselves" and ask the perennial questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What is this life all about? These questions are painful because, as James Hollis puts it, by midlife what we have become is frequently our chief obstacle to listening to the Call.

"Only the man who can consciously assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality."

Yet this inner voice demands to be heard. As Jung put it: "Only the man who can consciously assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality." Yet this "still small voice" is hard to hear. Like other great mystics, Jalal ad-Din Rumi has compared our everyday life itself to a dream:

The Dream That Must Be Interpreted

This place is a dream.
Only the sleeper considers it real.

Then death comes like dawn,
and you wake up laughing
at what you thought was your grief.
A man goes to sleep in the town
where he has always lived
and he dreams
he's living in another town.
in the dream he doesn't remember
the town in which he's sleeping in his bed:



he believes the reality
of the dream town--

the world is that kind of sleep

But there's a difference with this dream.
Everything cruel and unconscious
done in the illusion of the present world
all that does not fade away at the death-waking.

It stays,
and it must be interpreted...

Humankind is being led along an evolving course,
through this migration of intelligences,
and though we seem to be sleeping,
there is an inner wakefulness
that directs the dream,
and that will eventually startle us back
to the truth of who we are.

The Call is that moment of "startling us back to the truth of who we really are. It is a wake-up call. Yet all too often, we do not wake up or hear the summons. Life carries us along, and habits do their work. There is no compulsion to listen to the Call: we can ignore it and dismiss it. It is like an alarm clock that goes off, waking us from the slumber of daily life. We always have the option of pressing our "snooze alarm" and going back to sleep, as Gurdjieff insisted, and then drifting back into our habits and ignoring the message received.

But if we ignore the Call, there may be consequences. For instance, in ancient Shamanic traditions, the Call was recognized as an opening to initiation into the world of the spirits. This Call of initiation could come through dreams. Stanley Krippner notes that in Okinawa, it was understood that spirits could communicate with a potential shaman in just this way, through dreams. Some who hear the Call try to ignore it, but at their peril: "Most shamanic traditions take the position that refusal to follow the call will result in a terrible accident, a life-threatening sickness, or insanity."

Is this warning just an ancient superstition? On the contrary, it is all-too-accurate depiction of what happens when an entire culture, a global civilization, turns away from the Call. Today, as we see the world around us plunged in all manner of collective insanity, we must wonder: how many around us have ignored the Call or dismissed its message? How many of have ignored our dreams?

The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber begins his book *Between Man and Man* by telling about one of his own dreams, a classic dream of the Call. Buber tells us that it was a recurrent dream that comes to him again and again, sometimes after an interval of years. In the dream he finds himself in a “primitive” world, in a vast cave or a mud building, or “on the fringe of a gigantic forest whose like I cannot remember having seen.” Or have we perhaps seen that gigantic forest in the “dark wood” where Dante found himself as he began his spiritual journey? Here, at any rate, is Martin Buber’s dream:



The dream begins in very different ways, but always with something extraordinary happening to me, for instance, with a small animal resembling a lion-cub (whose name I know in the dream but not when I awake) tearing the flesh from my arm and being forced only with an effort to loose its hold. The strange thing is that this first part of the dream story, which in the duration as well as the outer meaning of the incidents always unfolds at a furious pace as though it did not matter. Then suddenly the pace abates: I stand there and cry out.

Buber goes on to tell us that, in terms of waking consciousness, he might suppose that his cry could be joyous or fearful, depending on interpretation. But when he remembers the dream in the morning “the cry” is “neither so expressive nor so various.” Instead, he remembers that “Each time it is the same cry, inarticulate but in strict rhythm, rising and falling, swelling to a fullness which my throat could not endure were I awake...” The cry becomes a song, and “when it ends my heart stops beating.

Buber's dream continues:

But then, somewhere, far away, another cry moves towards me, another which is the same, the same cry uttered or sung by another voice. Yet it is not the same cry, certainly no ‘echo’ of my cry but rather its true rejoinder, tone for tone, not repeating mine... so much so, that mine, which at first had to my own ear no sound of questioning at all, now appear as questions, as a long series of questions, which now all receive a response.

A dream like this cannot be translated into rational discourse: "The response is no more capable of interpretation than the question. And yet the cries that meet the one cry that is the same do not seem to be the same as one another. Each time the voice is new." Yet if the rational mind cannot grasp the meaning of this Cry, still Buber came away from the dream with a sense of certitude: "a certitude, true dream certitude comes to me that *now it has happened*. Nothing more. Just this, and in this way--- *now it has happened*."

Martin Buber had this recurrent dream over and over again, until the last time just two years before he wrote it down in his book. In the last dream, "At first it was as usual...my cry died away, again my heart stood still. But then there was quiet. There came no answering call. I listened, I heard no sound."

Buber was surprised by this absence, and he waited, in vain, for the response. But then something happened to him, a change of awareness, as if his senses had suddenly become magnified. "And then, not from a distance but from the air round about me, noiselessly, came the answer." Rather, the answer was already there, was present even before his cry: "when I laid myself open to it, it let itself be received by me." What he received at that moment he received "with every pore of my body." Once again, he experienced profound certainty, "peeling out more than ever, that *now it has happened*."

What Buber has so beautifully described in this dream is the powerful, overwhelming reality of the Call. It is what Rilke speaks of in the *Duino Elegies* when he tells of listening to the call of "the Angel," realizing then that to have lived on earth, "To have been here once, if only for this once, can never be cancelled." In essence, *it has happened*. The Call is a moment of certainty, but not a dogmatic conclusion that can be put into words. On the contrary, it is a hunger for the Infinite.

Rilke put it beautifully in his *Letters to a Young Poet*: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions."

The Call, then, is different from some intended or imagined “religious experience,” or any sort of “conversion” that we might believe would give us clear or definitive conclusions. Quite the contrary. The Call is an encounter with emptiness, with longing, with our own deepest questions, questions no longer experienced as doubt but as certainty: *it has happened*. But to listen to the Call we must learn to listen to an “Inner Voice.” The good news is that as our life goes on, even into old age, it is never too late to hear the Call.

Harry (Rick) Moody is recently retired as Vice President of AARP. He edits the monthly newsletter “Human Values in Aging” and promotes positive and conscious aging in his work.

The Call is the same. “Is this all there is?”

Psychotherapist James Hollis tells of a patient who came to him and put it in these words: “I always sought to win whatever the game was, and only now do I realize how much I have been played by the game. I played the game hard and willingly, always thinking I was winning something. But in the end there really was nothing to win, or what I did win really didn't matter in the end.” James Hollis, *What Matters Most: Living a More Considered Life*, Gotham, 2009, p. 91.

as James Hollis puts it...

Ibid., p. 9.

as Jung put it...

Carl Jung, *Collected Works*, 17, par.308.

The Dream That Must Be Interpreted

Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, p. 113

as Gurdjieff insisted...

The spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff famously insisted that “Man is asleep:” that is, unconscious of “the terror of the situation,” at virtually all times. For more on the Gurdjieff Work, see James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers*, Putnam, 1980.

Stanley Krippner notes that in Okinawa...

Stanley Krippner, “Tribal Shamans and Their Travels into Dreamtime,” in *Dreamtime and Dreamwork: Decoding the Language of the Night*, Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1990, p. 186.

The Cry

Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, New York: Macmillan, 1965, pp. 1-3.

See also Kenneth Paul Kramer, *Martin Buber's Spirituality: Hasidic Wisdom For Everyday Life*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.

I love John Masefield's poem, "The Passing Strange," because it heightens mortality and the sense of passing time but concludes with the hope of legacy, what we leave behind for others. I believe doing our legacy work is an indispensable task of later life: for example, in the practice of making an "Ethical Will," which is something I'm working on myself right now – Rick Moody

The Passing Strange

John Masefield

Only a beauty, only a power,
Sad in the fruit, bright in the flower,
Endlessly erring for its hour,

But gathering, as we stray, a sense
Of Life, so lovely and intense,
It lingers when we wander hence,

That those who follow feel behind
Their backs, when all before is blind,

Our joy, a rampart to the mind.

Harvesting Our Life

The longevity revolution drives spirituality—and legacy

Rabbi Richard F. Address

The Spiritual question for we human beings is, I suggest, the issue of time. It is one of the great inventions of the human race. We cannot control it, no matter how technologically astute we become. We are all subject to it and the older we get; the more profound is time's impact on each of us. In many ways, one of the interesting realities of our own aging is, rather than us controlling time, time controls us.

In *The Gift of Years*, author Joan Chittister quotes a Hasidic source: "For the unlearned old age is winter; for the learned, it is the season of harvest."

As we encounter this revolution in longevity this little statement begins to ring increasingly true. For many of us, as we age, we realize that we are in a state of transition from the acquisition of material things to the evaluation of things spiritual. This often is being translated into a greater awareness of our own legacy. In other words, we begin to internalize our own mortality and begin to be concerned about what aspect or essence of us shall be carried on.

This internalization of mortality leads, I think, to a sense of trying to harvest the life experiences we have and, in doing so, see how we can become symbols or role models for those who follow us. I sense this in the growing desire of so many Boomers to "give back" to their community.

"For the unlearned old age is winter; for the learned, it is the season of harvest."

I sense this, too, in a growing trend to reinterpret rituals in light of contemporary life situations. This is partly a result of new life stages becoming a reality due to increased longevity. Issues such as care-giving, cohabitation and the various challenges associated with chronic illness, all have contributed to a rise in the creation of new rituals. We have a need to mark these new moments with a sense of meaning and also a relationship with something beyond our own self.

This need also speaks to our need for relationships as we age, a profound and core need for each of us, for as we get older, we become more aware of the value of and the need for sincere human relationships and community.

It is in this fabric of life that many elders are increasingly focusing more and more on “harvesting” the experiences of a lifetime and finding ways to share them with others, through mentoring programs in general or via increased opportunities with family. It is therefore no coincidence that the rise in interest in genealogy parallels the lengthening of life spans and the increasing awareness of a desire to find out more about who I am, where I came from and what that means for the future of my family.

This harvest time of life can be a stage of great creativity, discovery and growth. It is a time for renewal and challenge as we reap the blessing of life within the randomness of time.

Rabbi Richard F. Address, is the founder and director of [Jewish Sacred Aging](http://www.jewishsacredaging.com)[®], LLC, and the web site www.jewishsacredaging.com.

Here's a saying on a universal theme that works like the briefest of poems. It is drawn from Pirkei Avot, which translates in English to "Chapter of the Fathers," and is a collection of sayings and maxims of the Mishnaic-period of Rabbis, from around the year 200 of the Common Era. It is sometimes described as the "Bartlett's Quotations of Jewish knowledge." This phrase, authored by Hillel, one of the greatest sages of Jewish history, speaks more to today's world than ever. – Rabbi Richard Address

In a world where no one acts
like a human being, strive
to be a human being.



New Ideas on the Spirituality of Aging

Three secrets of aging and how conscious elders become spiritual activists

John Robinson

My generation of Elders has entered a new developmental stage in the human life cycle. It's an amazing time for spiritual awakening! Driven by our unprecedented longevity and three powerful psycho-spiritual forces, we are starting to experience a new kind of aging, creating possibilities for social and metaphysical transformation unparalleled in human history. As a psychologist, minister, and mystic, I'd like to share with you four rather startling revelations I've had in recent years about this new spirituality of aging: The Mystical Nature of the New Aging, The Coming Reality of a Sacred World, How Conscious Elders Become Sacred Activists, and the Great Work of Creation Calling Us to Renew the World.

The Mystical Nature of the New Aging

We Elders are living in an extraordinary time. For nearly all of recorded history, only one person in ten could hope to live to the age of sixty-five. With the medical and dietary advances in the last one hundred years, however, nearly 80% of us in developing countries will live to 65, and if we get to 65, we will average 16 more years for men and 19 for women. But what is this revolution in longevity for? Is aging just about getting old, falling apart and dying? The answer I've received from hundreds of older people in Conscious Aging workshops and conferences across the country is, "No! This is our time for profound psychological and spiritual renewal." Why is that?

This is our time for profound psychological and spiritual renewal.

I believe that three powerful psycho-spiritual forces now drive this New Aging. I call them *The Three Secrets of Aging* because the media (and most new Elders) are focused instead on overcoming aging with creams, exercise, vitamins, hormones, cosmetic surgery, and positive thinking, but that only works for a while. In the end, aging wins. But that doesn't mean we lose, rather we have to surrender to a life transforming process. What are these three forces? They are: *Initiation, Transformation, and Revelation.*

Secret I. Initiation:

The first secret of aging says, "Aging is an initiation into a new and extraordinary stage of life. The events and processes of aging—changing bodies, fading identities, and losses of all shapes and sizes—represents an initiation into an entirely new dimension of life, a time of personal and spiritual growth unprecedented in human history. While aging may represent the end of our old life, it is also the beginning of a new one."

**Aging is an initiation
into a new and
extraordinary stage of
life.**

To really appreciate this secret we need to examine the nature of initiation. In its simplest form, initiation means being moved from one state or stage of life to another. Indigenous cultures understood this better than we do and created rituals to place initiation in a sacred context, like rites of passage.

For "modern" Elders, retirement, aging bodies, and accumulating life changes can represent powerful and disorienting initiation experiences. One day in our aging we realize that everything has changed: we have left the old world of middle-aged goals and values for a completely new and unknown land. Huge questions rise up inside: "Who am I now?" "What do I do with myself?" "What is this time for?" "How will I face my own future, including decline and death?" But here's the magic: if we can pay attention, we will discover that an unexpected adventure in consciousness has also begun.

If we can pay attention, we will discover that an unexpected adventure in consciousness has also begun.

Secret II. Transformation.

The second secret says, "Aging Is a transformation of self and consciousness. It is enlightenment in slow motion. It begins spontaneously, naturally and subtly. As we wake up from the illusions of mind, we transition from personal identity to the consciousness of Divinity, giving birth to the enlightened Elder." This secret is as enormous as it is unexpected. Let me try to unpack it a little.

Aging is indeed a transformation of body, self and consciousness. The body part, of course, is obvious. I ask conscious Elders if they've seen their latest photos; they report that the first glimpse of their current visage is always a shock! But more importantly, as we age, we surrender our old identity, schedule, roles and purposes. In the process, our sense of self changes. For the motivated and prepared, however, this natural emptying of age presents some wonderful opportunities! No longer constrained by the rules of the middle years, we have the freedom to do and be whatever we want. Growth possibilities abound as the unfinished self blossoms with new interests, goals and inspirations. My older friends are doing the most amazing things that I never would have expected!

But the spiritual/mystical dimension is even more astonishing. With the dissolution of our familiar identity, social status and long-term goals - structures of mind that dominated our consciousness for decades - we can become conscious of consciousness itself, that pure space of awareness that held all those thought forms.

Then, if we are perceptive, we discover that this consciousness is not just in me, I am in it, and it is divine, a realization the mystics have described for millennia and one that is central to enlightenment. Given its nature and origin, experiencing consciousness as divine progressively changes you. In fact, it is our opening into Christ Consciousness, Buddha Mind, and the Divine Human. We are not who we think we are - we the awakened consciousness of the divine universe - timeless, ageless, and transformative. And there's more.

Secret III. Revelation.

Carl Jung suggested that aging would not exist without an evolutionary purpose, and I believe one of the most important purposes of aging is to transform our experience of the world itself. More to the point, Pierre de Chardin, the French philosopher, priest and paleontologist, considered evolution to be a spiritual process leading to the "divinization" of the world. Our third secret addresses this evolutionary spiritual purpose directly. It says, "Aging is a Revelation of Heaven on Earth. As the veil of thought dissolves in conscious aging, Heaven on Earth begins to shine everywhere and the world is sacred once again. We have come home from our long journey through the world of thought and invite others to join us in a new consciousness of Creation."

This realization, too, is incredible. Who can possibly believe in Heaven on Earth? But let me tell you, our spiritual teachers have been describing Heaven on Earth for eons. For example, Jesus proclaimed, "The father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people do not see it...What you look for has come, but you do not know it." Ramana Maharshi, the famous Hindu sage added, "This is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The realized being sees this as the Kingdom of Heaven whereas the others see it as 'this world.'" And Thich Nhat Hanh, the beloved Buddhist monk, advised, "You don't have to die in order to enter the Kingdom of God. It is better to do it now when you are fully alive...The Kingdom doesn't have to come and you do not have to go to it. It is already here...There is not one day that I do not walk in the Kingdom of God." The reader will discover scores of similar pronouncements in *Finding Heaven Here*.

Who can possibly believe in Heaven on Earth? But let me tell you, our spiritual teachers have been describing Heaven on Earth for eons.

The Coming Reality of a Sacred World

If Secret III tells us that Heaven on Earth has already arrived, why don't we see it? First of all, we do see it but fail to realize what we are seeing. We tend to experience Heaven on Earth when we are in love; incredibly happy; in the midst of heightened natural beauty; at the birth of a child; during the runner's "high;" or with spontaneous mystical experiences. Does this list jog your memory? Abraham Maslow, the father of humanistic psychology, called these moments of altered consciousness "peak experiences" and found that, with guidance, nearly everyone could remember them. Sadly, we typically dismiss these Heavenly glimpses, telling ourselves that it was "just" a beautiful day or temporary mood.

Why are people so blind? For most of our lives, we're trapped in that dominant thought world described above. As human beings developed their amazing capacity for thought, we fell in love with ideas, creating a virtual second reality in the mind. Over twenty-five hundred years ago, Buddha observed, "We are what we think. Everything we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world." In this thought world, we disproportionately experience our concepts, beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices in place of reality: we see a "run-down building," an "old man," a "forest," a "chair" or "table," an "alcoholic." These concepts filter our experience so completely that we stop witnessing the infinite beauty of what is right before us. Buoyed by the transformations described in *Three Secrets of Aging*, conscious Elders are beginning to break free from these "chains of illusion."

How Conscious Elders Become Spiritual Activists

Riding the energies and revelations of this new evolutionary consciousness is a growing movement of older people envisioning aging as a time for personal and spiritual growth. I witness this collective new inspiration when I present at Conscious Aging conferences and workshops across the country, including Sage-ing International, The Conscious Elders Network, The International Conference for

Ageing and Spirituality, Creation Spirituality Communities, and The Mankind Project. This new consciousness is everywhere!

The goal of the Conscious Elders movement is to age courageously, consciously, and in community, transforming both our aging and our work in the world. We lovingly embrace workshop topics like "Releasing the Identity and Roles of the Middle Years;" "Discovering the Language and Wisdom of the Aging Body;" "Learning to Grieve and Survive;" "Finding the Hidden Meaning and Value of Change;" "Life Review, Understanding and Repair;" "Growing the Unfinished Self;" "Discovering Meaningful 'Work;'" "Clarifying Religious and Spiritual Beliefs;" "Leaving a legacy;" "Preparing for Death;" "Opening the Heart;" "Speaking Our Moral Voice," and "Staying Involved as We Age."

What does all this mean? Here's the answer: we don't get wise just by getting old, but if we do this inner work, a whole new life of creativity, wisdom and spirituality opens up to us. And that leads to the importance of "giving back."

Conscious Aging organizations encourage Elders to contribute their time, energy, wisdom and experience in giving back to the world in countless ways. Elders volunteer at food banks, mentor youth, meditate for world peace, and start discussion groups. We pursue political action on causes like climate change, income equality, homelessness, racism, ageism, sexism, sustainable living, education, and world peace. There is virtually no limit to our volunteer opportunities or the world's needs.

This question of how to "give back," however, is a challenging one. When I do workshops designed to help Elders find their calling, I ask, "How many of you have experienced moments of doubt or burnout in your "giving back" activities, evidenced by declining interest, loss of motivation or commitment, or questions about the real effectiveness of what you're doing?" Virtually everyone's hand goes up, which inspired me to examine the role of discernment.

From my own unique blend of professional experience, I view discernment from a spiritual and depth-oriented perspective where it implies a prolonged and heartfelt search for one's truest nature, vocation or calling. "Who am I?" "Why am I really here?" "What did I come here to do?" How do we respond to these questions? Here's one brilliant answer eloquently expressed by theologian Howard Thurman. He said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

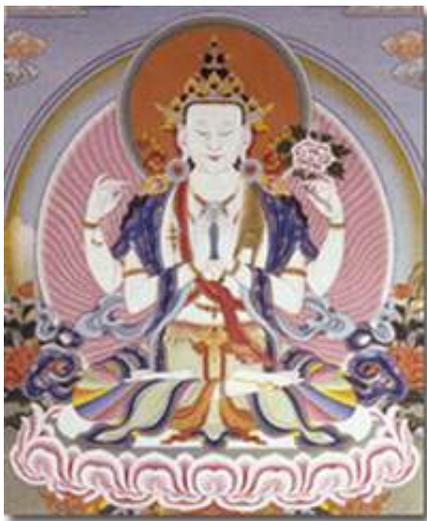
How do you respond to Thurman's question? Find the answer and you've found your own source of authentic passion.

But how do enlivened Conscious Elders become Spiritual Activists? The kind of discernment I am describing leads naturally to Spiritual Activism, for the deep questions Elders are asking are fundamentally spiritual in nature. We are, in effect, seeking to integrate spiritual meaning into our giving back activities. This integration can occur in three ways.

In Sacred Activism, the depth of our spirituality moves us to care for the world as spiritual commitment, deepening the personal significance of our work. In Subtle Activism, a gathering of like-minded people creates a subtle force field to bring healing energies to traumatized peoples and places in the world. Lastly, we can dissolve the self-idea and its thought world into the omnipresent Divine Consciousness. In this third form, our resulting divinity—remember Secret II?—leads spontaneously to sacred action. The mystic now becomes the prophet, called by unitive consciousness to interfere with injustice and suffering wherever it is encountered.

The Great Work of Creation Calling to Us to Renew the World

Finally, I want to discuss the idea of the Great Work. We Elders are all potential bodhisattvas aboard Mahayana's Great Vehicle, the all-inclusive Big Boat of sacred consciousness committed to the enlightenment of all sentient beings. And in this journey, we are called upon to do the Great Work. What is that?



Mathew Fox, who has been one of my teachers, writes about the *Re-Invention of Work*. He says, "We are being challenged today - in light of the wounded Earth, the one billion unemployed adults, the billions of despairing young people who see no guarantees of either work or jobs, and the needs of other species - to redefine work." And then he adds, "Cosmology teaches us that there is only one work going on in the universe, the 'Great Work' of creation itself — the work of creation unfolding..."

And it unfolds through us! When we wake up to who and where we really are, and express the resulting aliveness, we join this work and become everyday Bodhisattvas, knowing that there's more than enough work for everybody and everybody's gift is needed. Then The Great Work of unveiling Heaven on Earth lives through us.

Conclusions

The theme of spirituality and aging is much larger than simply applying our spiritual beliefs to the aging experience. As awakening Elders, we are re-inventing our place in the world. Indeed, the ongoing political turmoil of our times may be opening the door to the next stage of spiritual evolution, raising human consciousness toward the realization of a "New Heaven and New Earth."

Everything we've ever done in our lives has led us to this moment. This New Aging experience is so powerful because it offers us the possibilities of spiritual initiation, mystical transformation, divine revelation, sacred activism, and a place in the Great Work of Creation itself. We may be finally waking up as Divine Humans in to a Divine World. Are you ready?

John C. Robinson is a clinical psychologist with a second doctorate in ministry, an ordained interfaith minister, the author of nine books on the interface of psychology and spirituality.

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I love this poem because it speaks so poignantly about the subtle and progressive awakening of consciousness that can happen in aging if we pay attention. I've been on a journey into the deep mysticism of aging and it is changing me. I am lived now by an awakening presence that is not my own yet is. This mystery grows deeper every year. – John Robinson

Lost Son

Theodore Roethke

*It was beginning winter;
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.*

*It was beginning winter;
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.*

*Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.*

*Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?*

*A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.*

What About Non-Spiritual People

Advice from one to those helping others

Chuck Yanikoski

Are there non-spiritual people, and if so, what does that mean? How are they different from the majority, and how do we deal with them?

Wait — did I say “them?” I meant “us.” I feel reasonably qualified to address these questions, thanks to the somewhat odd combination of self-identifying as a non-spiritual person and being an alumnus (though not quite a graduate) of the University of Chicago Divinity School.

So to begin: what does “non-spiritual” mean?

Just as there’s more than one way of being spiritual, there’s more than one way of being non-spiritual. For starters, we have the cognitively impaired and the psychosocio-pathologically impaired. While members of these groups can be legitimately spiritual, probably the majority are non-spiritual, because they’re intellectually or emotionally impervious. My focus, however, is on people who aren’t abnormal in those ways, but only in their lack of spirituality. There are at least three varieties:

- **The anti-spiritual.** These are most often people raised in a religious or spiritual tradition, but usually because of some acquired negative association with spirituality have come to reject it. Such associations might include, for example, an over-strict religious upbringing, sexual abuse by clergy, experience with religious or spiritual fakery, a “bad trip,” or rejection of specific doctrines (regarding sexual mores, perhaps) or attitudes (such as religious guilt, or fear of damnation).
- **The philosophically opposed.** Most thinking people, at some stage of their youth — or later in life after some crisis — question their fundamental beliefs. A majority return to their spiritual roots, but many walk away instead.
- **The purely practical.** These are not usually very philosophical people, and unlike the anti-spiritual they may have never even thought much about spirituality, at least not as affecting themselves. They probably pride themselves on living in the “real world,” and don’t see much reason for contemplating any other.

From the standpoint of someone who is deeply spiritual, all of these other folks are missing out on something important and wonderful. If you're working with such people, though, you don't do them justice if you start out with such an assumption.

It surely is true that many non-spiritual people have a spiritual spark, or even a simmering flame, inside of them, and that part of them yearns to bring it to life (just as some self-identified religious people have none at all). But imagining that everyone has this, or wants to have it, is simply mistaken.

I present myself as a case in point. Despite a devout upbringing in a family that pretty much epitomized the ways in which religious belief can fortify truly good and loving behavior, at the age of nineteen I wondered what my best path in life might be, and whether religion should be part of it. My underlying goal was to establish a truth-based existence, and given my own history to that point, I acknowledged the possibility that truth had been divinely revealed. If so, this could make my quest relatively easy.

But four years of concentrated effort brought me to the conclusion that most of what I'd been taught didn't stand up well to close examination. Nor did other spiritual traditions seem to offer anything better grounded. Of course, vast aspects of reality remain unexplained by science and philosophy, but that seemed to be mainly an argument for intellectual humility, not a compelling reason for a leap into the Unknowable.

All this puts me in the philosophically non-spiritual camp.

Do I miss the comforts of my religious youth? Not really. I find that I can experience all the desired benefits of religion or spirituality in other ways. If I need comfort, if I need confidence, if I need love, if I need community, if I want the pomp of ritual, if I need time out to contemplate, if I wish to experience elation or wonder or awe, if I need forgiveness, if I want to express gratitude, if I need to be taken down a peg or two, if I could benefit from a sense of mystery or specialness or insignificance – or any other affect or outcome that spiritual people derive from their approach to life, all of that is accessible to me in other ways. The main advantage of religion is that it offers all those benefits in one place, but one-stop shopping is a convenience, not a necessity.

And feeling that my life is *not* in the hands of a higher power is a comfort rather than a loss — I neither need to try to discern the intentions of this power, nor wonder why it so often seems to be lacking in actual capability.

None of this is meant to promote non-spirituality, but instead to explain how it can be a fully functional and fully rewarding approach to life. Although most non-spiritual people are probably not this philosophical about it and therefore might not describe it or stand up for it in this manner, they can still derive the same benefits I do.

And feeling that my life is not in the hands of a higher power is a comfort rather than a loss — I neither need to try to discern the intentions of this power, nor wonder why it so often seems to be lacking in actual capability.

If you have clients (or colleagues or friends or family members) who are non-spiritual and you're inclined to regard them as somehow deprived, I am here to spread the good news that they might very well not be. They're not necessarily better adjusted than religious or spiritual people, but nor are they necessarily less so.

How, then, do you approach non-spiritual clients specifically?

The main idea is to treat them with the same fundamental respect you normally apply to your other clients.

You probably wouldn't approach, say, a gay or lesbian client with the idea that this is something you need to cure them of. You probably wouldn't advise someone who wanted to retire, and could afford to do so, that they're being selfish to think of their own happiness. For that matter, you probably wouldn't advise someone who was devoted to another religion or spiritual tradition that they should switch to yours.

So don't do it with non-spiritual people.

Now it might be, as it might be with the gay or lesbian person, with the would-be retiree, or with the partisan of another faith, that their behavior or decision happens to be wrong for them. Perhaps if you're very astute and you get to know your client really well, you can discern this, or at least raise the question in a constructive way. But short of that, you wouldn't normally treat them or even think of them as being defective.

So don't do it with non-spiritual people.

If your service as a life planner is primarily spiritual, this could put you in something of a bind. But if you keep in mind that the non-spiritual are not so much *unbelievers* as believers in something *different*, much like people of spiritual traditions other than yours, you should get along fine with them.

Another point: since some level of spirituality is commonplace in our society, you might feel comfortable at least referring to your own attitudes and practices in that area. But be advised that some non-spiritual people will take your embrace of spirituality as suspicious or even disqualifying. This is not necessarily to their credit — non-spiritual people can be just as inappropriately doctrinaire as anyone else. But you can avoid such conflict by approaching spiritual matters with the same care as you would political ones — and ideally leave them out entirely unless they're clearly relevant to the service you're providing.

However, as with politics, if you detect that someone shares your views, or you choose to put out a gentle feeler to discover whether they do, you may have something to bond over—but please enter such dark caverns cautiously.

Taking a step back, though, must you bother to tiptoe? Must you recognize yet another minority group needing special consideration? The practical answer is “Yes,” because there are a lot of us.

According to the Pew Research Institute, comparing data from their Religious Landscape Study of 2014 to that of 2007 Americans are less religious than they used to be. Nearly a quarter are religiously unaffiliated, though as of 2014, 89% still professed belief in God. Further analysis published early in 2016 suggests that spirituality is actually increasing, but that interpretation, from the point of view of this particular non-spiritual individual, misreads the data.

The interpretation is based on the number of people saying they experience a sense of spiritual peace and well-being and/or a sense of wonder about the universe. I agree, even strongly, with both of those statements, but not because I’m “spiritual.” I feel a sense of spiritual peace because I have no unease about spirituality, mainly because I don’t participate in it, and don’t feel any need to. I feel wonder about the universe because it’s visually and conceptually awesome, and I don’t claim to understand how it all came to be. But this is a normal intellectual and visceral response, not a spiritual event.

I want to elaborate because spiritual people sometimes say we non-spiritual people really are spiritual, but we just don’t think of our spiritual experiences as being such. While kindly meant, such an assertion is disrespectful. Although you may believe in this statement, non-spiritual people not only don’t, but some of them take the exact opposite view: that the spirituality of the spiritual person is delusional, and at bottom it is actually something much more materialistic or at least biological or biochemical.

I’m not taking sides on this question here, only saying that either point of view is equally un-provable and therefore equally valid (or invalid) as far as we can tell with legitimate certitude. Therefore it’s condescending for anyone to use his or her preferred doctrine as a sort of trump card against someone who feels the opposite way

But really, aren’t certain kinds of experiences inherently spiritual? As a non-spiritual person, I believe not.

My own position comes down to this: spirituality is fundamentally not about our feelings and experiences, but on how we interpret them, on what we decide they mean. There’s something direct and unarguable about the *content* of any experience, including our reaction to it. But the *meaning* of experience is always inferred, even when it appears otherwise, and is the result of the intellect making

judgments about the experience. And judgments can always be in error. Even what is obvious is not always true. Other people are entitled to their own judgments about my experiences, but they should also acknowledge my own entitlement to my own judgments.

“... spirituality is fundamentally not about our feelings and experiences, but on how we interpret them, on what we decide they mean.”

So let us be left to determine for ourselves what to make of these questions and how to interpret our own experiences.

This is certainly the attitude I commend if you're in the business of counseling or coaching others. And while I'm emphasizing the importance of spiritual people not trying to impose their own judgments on clients who appear or profess to be non-spiritual, the reverse applies. Non-spiritual people should show equal respect for the right of spiritual people to interpret their own experiences and hold their own beliefs about them.

Intellectual modesty is warranted, even while our hearts crave certitude. Wisdom probably lies in not denying that craving, but also in not fully giving into it. We experience what we experience, to some extent we choose what to believe, and then we make our commitments and act on them. In doing so, we behave as if we're certain, but if we're wise, we know we can't truly be certain.

Nor can anyone else.

So let's allow others to believe as they choose or as they must, and as long as they do others no serious harm, let's acknowledge that they might even be right. And if we're there to counsel them on their lives, let's let *them* define the terms of that discussion, at least in the realm of spirituality.

Chuck Yanikoski is the founder and president of *Still River Retirement Planning Software, Inc.* and its consumer subsidiary, *RetirementWorks, Inc.*

There are many reasons why people are, or become, separated from faith or other fonts of spirituality. Some never need it or want it, others want it with all their hearts and lose it anyway. Here's a poem by a great friend of mine, who seemed comfortable when I told him recently he might be the least spiritual person I know. But as a poet, he can still grasp what the loss of faith and trust means to people, as you will see in this sonnet. - Chuck Yanikoski

Thoughts of the Last Cistercian to Die At Tintern Abbey

Robert J. Ward

The winding Wye reflects the hills and sky
only upon the stone walls of my cell.
Two endings loom, mine and Tintern's. I tell
myself, "Envision both safe and strong. Try."

But we hear news: our brethren shut and shooed;
the abbey, God's bestowed on men. This king
will take ours, too; then he'll try straightening
our river, make it reflect just his mood.

I pray to die before this can begin.
Or will I linger? Will my brothers need
to haul me with their clothing, books, and feed?
Will burdensomeness be my final sin?

All my years here I've believed; now comes doubt.
If God lets king be faith, I'll go without.



Contributors



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