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The Life Planning Network is the leading association supporting professionals who assist people at this life stage. We intend to bring into everyday use proactive and purposeful planning for the second half of life. Learn more at [lifeplanningnetwork.org](http://lifeplanningnetwork.org).

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## What About Non-Spiritual People

Advice from one to those helping others

Chuck Yanikoski

**A**re 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.

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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.

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.

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

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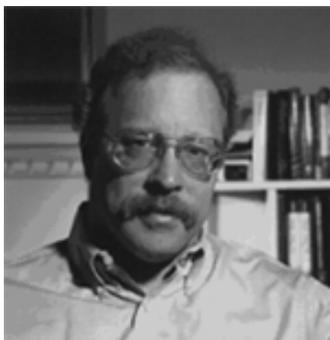
So let us be left to determine for ourselves what to make of these questions and how to interpret our own experiences.

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.



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([www.RetirementWorks2.com](http://www.RetirementWorks2.com)). He is active in the Society of Actuaries Committee on Post-Retirement Needs and Risks. Chuck attended Harvard College and the University of Chicago Divinity School. His financial articles have appeared in numerous financial

publications. He sometimes serves as a “retirement adviser” to individual clients. You can reach him at [csy@StillRiverRetire.com](mailto:csy@StillRiverRetire.com).

*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 abbeys, 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.

