

Authentic Spirituality: Balancing Spirit and Soul

Leading a spiritual life is something many people strive for. But what does it really mean to be spiritual? For myself, I think of being aligned with something bigger than I am; something upright, direct, stalwart, and uplifting; something which carries me along with it or toward which I can direct my actions and intentions. To me there is a clear upward and outward movement associated with spirit. This movement involves action, potentiality, trust, and hope. However, it can be easy to be carried away by the powerful upward momentum if one is not strongly grounded in the earth and the body and not connected to others through compassion and service. Thus, authentic spirituality requires a balance that is achieved through intention and engaged action while keeping one's feet firmly on the ground, enlaced in the pattern that holds us.

Psychologist and author, Stanley Keleman (1999) points out that D.H. Lawrence referred to how fearful an experience it is *not* to be held in the hands of a bigger force, reminding us we are part of a process of life that is larger than our individual ego self with its perceived boundaries and delimited power and connection. Many of us go about our busy lives without being aware or conscious of our everyday relationship to the larger whole in which we live, move, and work.

Spirituality can be contrasted with the concept of evil. Twentieth-century psychologist Carl Jung (1933) suggests that most of the evil that is done in the world is a result of the fact that humans in general are “hopelessly unconsciousness” (p. 210). We can combat evil, he contends, by going directly to the source: ourselves. “It is from the depths of our own psychic life that new spiritual forms will arise” (p. 221). Intention and engaged action begin with me observing and coming to consciousness about my own psyche, and learning to embrace the dark, shadowed parts of me that block my engagement with spirit, dislodging me from the fabric of being in

which we all naturally reside and are held. Mythologist Joseph Campbell (1991) reinforces that thought, believing that the highest spiritual realization is compassion; the capacity to “suffer with others”, the elimination of boundaries between the self and the “other” and the felt experience of being one being, one life.

Indeed, findings from a recent study published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* found that:

people who feel that their lives have meaning and value and who develop deep, quality relationships--both measures of spirituality, the researchers claim--are happier. Personal aspects of spirituality (meaning and value in one's own life) and communal aspects (quality and depth of inter-personal relationships) were both strong predictors of...happiness. ("Spirituality, Not Religion, Makes Kids Happy," 2009, para 2-3)

Researchers in this study defined spirituality as “one's sense of meaning or purpose in life or one's sense of connectedness to the sacred or divine” (para. 16) and suggested increasing a sense of personal meaning through serving others is linked to happiness. Thus, one must be engaged, serving spirit through participatory action in order to achieve an authentic spiritual life.

About Spirit

The word “spirit” comes from the Latin *spiritus* meaning "soul, courage, vigor, breath," (EtymologyOnline, n.d.). Thus spirit imbues one with vitality and inspires one with energy and bravado to act in the world. It is an animating or vital principle in man and animals. As such it is inextricably intertwined with movement and action, an outward seeking motion to form bonds and to serve them.

Jung commonly employed two words in his native German: “spirit”(Geist) and “soul” (Seele) to refer to this animating force, claiming they are reside on the same end of a continuum that is opposed to matter and earth, inseparable but distinct. Spirit rises upward and it belongs to nature, Jung insisted, saying, “Spirit is the inside of things and matter is their visible outer

aspect” (Sabini, 2005). Soul, though at the same pole as spirit, by contrast, is a quality of matter that can’t be measured and moves downward into darkness, nature, the underworld, the body, and earth. If we disregard nature and the physical, embodied world around us, we also disregard the spiritual realm. We cannot be spiritual and be caught up in our thoughts, our judgments or our daily lives while disregarding the living world around us.

Perhaps the concept of spirit is well illustrated with what Buddhists call “right action,” one concept of the Noble Eightfold Path, a guideline to ethical conduct and moral discipline. Right action involves the body as natural means of expression, and correlates actions of the body with sound states of mind. Unwholesome actions lead to unsound states of mind, while wholesome actions lead to sound states of mind. In its positive aspect, right action means to act kindly and compassionately, to be honest, to respect the property of others, and to keep physical and sexual relationships harmless to others (The Noble Eightfold Path, n.d.). Right action, and therefore spirit, requires the correlation of spirit and body, mind and matter.

About Soul

To be “soulful” means “full of feeling” as well as the “spiritual and emotional part of a person” (Etymology Online, n.d.). According to best-selling author of *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore (1992), “soul” is not a thing but rather a dimension of experience. It is related to depth, to substance, and to relationship to the world (Moore, 1992). Moore insists, “When people observe the ways in which the soul is manifesting itself, they are enriched rather than impoverished,” (p. 6), noting that it is essential to *observe* the soul with an open mind. To “observe” includes the word “serve,” connecting back to the concept of finding meaning through compassion.

Moore (1992) reminds us that “it is the soul that makes us human. . . . it is when we are the most human that we have greatest access to soul” (p. 9). If we truly wish to regard and honor

soul, it is crucial to find respect for what is. The process begins with deep curiosity rather than judgment.

James Hillman (1975), pioneer of Archetypal Psychology, outlines five functions of soul: (1) it makes all meaning possible, (2) it turns events into experiences, (3) it involves a deepening of experience, (4) is communicated in love, and (5) has a special relation with death (Hillman, 1975) (p. xvi). For Hillman, as a result of these five characteristics, the soul represents the imaginative possibility of our nature, a possibility that is realized in reflective speculation, dream, image, and fantasy.

The Danger of Spirit without Soul

Author and psychologist, Morris Berman (1989), also insists on the importance of the somatic aspect spirituality, warning that striving toward consciousness, what he refers to as the *ascent model*, results in a tendency or preference to flight away from the body, a leaving behind of the earthly plane and all it pain in an attempt to reach heaven. Rather than staying on earth and being in our bodies, we attempt escape.

Though ecstasy or ecstatic energy is the goal of the ascent experience, Berman asserts, it can also be a problem. While he gives credit to the experiential knowing that comes from an ecstatic experience, an event where everything takes on much more life, vividness, meaning and numinosity, he also suggests we can easily fall into the trap of taking action based on revealed knowledge gained during an ecstatic experience, citing stories of people who take lives, set bombs, or make other damaging and life-altering decisions based on their interpretation of an ascent experience because they felt charged to do something specific.

Instead, Berman challenges the assumption that we should ascend by instead, staying in our bodies here on earth exactly where we are and living every moment in its fullness, practicing

self-remembering. All of life, especially the ordinary moments, are sacred; not the just the ascent moments. “The real goal...should not be ascent, but openness, vulnerability, and this does not require great experiences but on the contrary, very ordinary ones” (1989, p. 310). This leads to a shift in body awareness, of being more fully here, alive, and present, a sense of heightened reality.

The benefit of deriving truth from an unconscious process that remains unconscious, a kinesthetic knowing from a ground of being that is not labeled, analyzed, or even put into containers and forms like words and language. By being with things as they are rather than quickly attempting place every event into a labeled container that fits into a safety net of our own making, based on a culture that has evolved on a foundation of disconnect from nature and a reflection of our true selves, we need to just allow the Mystery. Even if we do not immediately (or ever) apprehend conscious meaning, the allowing of what is can serve to promote new growth, without stifling the potentiality of the next moment. This allows us to live in life, not transcend it (Berman, 1989, p. 315). Keeping soul in mind, staying in the body and the felt experience of life allows true spirituality, authentic engaged alignment with the bigger force, to solidify and take root.

Balancing Spirit and Soul

I am struck, suddenly, while regarding the word “spiritual,” that it contains the word “ritual,” designating action that connects and aligns with the bigger pattern of which I am a part. Ritual is an action that allows us to be grounded here in the now, on earth, in the physical dimension: allows access to the divine that is here rather than relying on or seeking the divine that abides in the heavens. Performing ritual imbued with intention and emotion serves to connect the yang energy of spirit, the upward, outward, engaged movement in the form of action

with the yin energy of soul, the force that pulls us down and in, demanding its due in abiding fertile darkness like a seed awaiting its moment to sprout and take root in the dark body of earth.

Ritual opens magical space where spirit and soul intersect, enabling intangible, numinous power to be translated into ordinary reality and form. Ritual must be infused with attention and intention in order to assert the true power it carries (Campbell & Moyers, 1991). It establishes boundaries which set apart sacred time and space, creating a container in which something is allowed to manifest, inviting potentiality, and setting the stage for spirit to enter in (Eliade, 1972), allowing us to truly lead a spiritual life of right action balanced by the deepening, yearning pull of the soul to center, stabilize, and ground us as a brilliant thread in the greater fabric of being.

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