

Reflecting on the State of Your Spirituality

Are you happy with the state of your spirituality, however it is defined or conceptualized? Do you feel that it makes your life more meaningful, fulfilled, happy, contented, worthwhile, etc.? If the answer is yes, you probably do not need to read the rest of this essay. On the other hand, Do you feel that your life would be “better,” (however you define better) if you were more spiritual or had better spiritual practices, or were as spiritual as other people or a specific person? Read on, if you answer “yes” to this question.

The presentation was stimulated by a question posed to the Ann Arbor Friends Meeting by the clerk at a recent meeting for business. The question came from the Lake Erie Yearly meeting and asked “What is the spiritual state of the meeting?” I got to thinking about that question and began to wonder how you would assess that? It seemed to me that you couldn’t really assess the spiritual state of a meeting without, in some way, assessing the spiritual state of the members in that meeting. So the question for this presentation. “What is the state of your spirituality?”

Is there something that you can count? Perhaps, how much time you spend in silence each week is a good measure. Or, your activity in social justice programs. Would the amount of time that you give to your local meeting as a chairperson, convenor, committee member or dedicated worker be a good measure? Would the amount of time you spend reading “spiritual materials” be a good measure?

On the other hand, spirituality may not be countable. An individual’s spirituality might be too amorphous and mysterious to be reduced to countable events. Spirituality might be more of a diffuse emotional experience not subject to anything more than a gross assessment such as “great,” “Not too bad,” or “about the same as always.”

Either way, I think that there is value in trying to think about the state of our spirituality in an evaluative way. It is easy to become complacent about many important things in our life because trying to evaluate them is hard. It takes time that we do not often have and it may dredge up thoughts and feelings that we would rather ignore.

At the same time, it seems to me that spirituality is like a garden. Let it go untended and it will soon be overrun by weeds and no longer useful to you. It may produce a few small vegetables but nothing like it could produce if the weeds were removed and some fertilizer applied.

The presentation is based on the assumption that our spirituality should be useful to us. Furthermore, usefulness can be a variable that we might be able to assess and evaluate. Does my spirituality have a positive impact on my life? If so, how? How does it affect my outlook on life? My ability to solve personal problems? My relationships with others? Is there a spiritual presence in every aspect of my life? If not, why not? Are there spiritual practices that I don’t engage in which might make my life better? As Quakers, we have a tradition of spiritual practices being seen as an essential part of our faith and life.

How useful you see your spirituality may depend on how you define it and there are lots of definitions to choose from. Theists tend to see spirituality as a way of becoming closer to that Supreme Being whom they believe is the source of all life. For them, spiritual practices are designed to help the individual find what God intends for them and to experience the unconditional love promised in the scriptures.

Obviously, nontheists will prefer definitions that do not rely on a theistic image of God. Let me offer two that I find meaningful. One comes from psychology and the other from nursing. First, from Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005):

Spirituality has come to represent individual's efforts at reaching a variety of sacred or existential goals in life, such as finding meaning, wholeness, inner potential, and interconnections with others. (Pg. 24)

Then, from Murray and Zentner (1989):

In every human being there seems to be a spiritual dimension, a quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose, even in those who do not believe in God. The spiritual dimension tries to be in harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite, and comes essentially into focus in times of emotional stress, physical (and mental) illness, loss, bereavement and death. (Pg. 259)

Spirituality and spiritual practices ought to take us away from our preoccupation with trying to solve the “place” concerns in our world. Concerns such as using our tangible assets (house, car, clothing, job, income, etc.) to define and represent us to others in the world. These are the “whats” in our life. Spirituality gives us the opportunity to explore the “whys.”

A spiritual experience need not be a one time, breath taking, life changing event. It can be a series of deliberate and practiced behaviors that allow us to reflect on our life and ask the big questions as well as the little ones. What is there to life beyond those tangible “things” that I work so hard to obtain and use to define me to others? How will the new friend I made last week, make my life richer? And me, theirs? It can add depth to our lives by helping us recognize qualities in ourselves and others that can lead to feelings of peace, value and purpose not attainable any other way.

If a spiritual practice is to be helpful, it must provide a method and encouragement to free ourselves, if just for a moment, from the assumptions that govern how we define our “situation” in the world. Spiritual practices must encourage us to ask, “what if I am wrong?” Would I be in a better place if I could see this particular person or situation in a different way? Would we both be in a better place? Spiritual practices can give us the opportunity to try on different identities. To be a different person in terms of how we think and feel about people or events. As long as it is in our mind, we are not vulnerable to the ridicule of others. At the same time, we might be able to craft new ways of responding to ourselves and our world that would lead to better outcomes for us. And others. That is, translate what we can imagine into reality.

So, what is the state of your spirituality? Some question to help in the exploration:

- Does your spirituality influence how you make sense out of new and novel

experiences on your life?

- Do you sense a purpose in your life? Has your spirituality helped you recognize that purpose?
- Do you wonder if you are all you can be?
- Is your spirituality truly comforting at those times when you most need comfort?
- Do your spiritual practices provide a path for understanding the unconscious reasons you do what you do? Especially when something you have done, doesn't turn out as you had hoped and you are bewildered as to why.
- Does your spirituality help you to understand and deal with personal problems such as depression, anxiety, feelings of failure, betrayal or being excluded?
- Does your spirituality help you face/deal with/manage what may seem to be an increasingly dangerous and at times hostile world?
- Does it help you connect with people (interconnectedness) who may seem alien to you—make sense out of their behavior?
- Does it help you make sense out of the direction your life seems to be taking? Help you feel like you are in control of that direction?
- Do you engage in spiritual practices that will help you clarify options in your life, guide choices toward outcomes that would satisfy more than the acquisition of things?

Is all of this, asking too much from our spirituality?

What do you do that you recognize as spiritual or a spiritual practice? Spend time in silence? Meet with friends? Participate in a spiritual companion group? Read certain publications? Make a point of going to places that are beautiful (in your eyes)? The beach, forest, mountains, your own garden? Listening to music that you find — what? Uplifting, peaceful, meditative? Connecting with old friends? Zooming with NFN? Listening to podcasts by people who think like you do? Holding a baby? Or puppy?

Our Quaker faith provides us with the values that are the truth for life, namely, those qualities that are (of) God. In a contemplative practice we can apply those qualities to an evaluation of life in the past and as guidance for our relationships in the future. We were meant to live by the values; loving, merciful, kind, caring, supportive, inclusive, just, warm, friendly, etc. There are indications that when those standards guide our behavior, we will flourish and be more fulfilled in life. Perhaps our spiritual life is meant to bring us in contact with those values and to find ways to regularly incorporate them into our lives.

Shawn Meyers, the wife of the contemporary theologian, Robin Meyers, offers a substitute for the Christian holy trinity. One that is certainly suitable for us nontheists. “Be present, be grateful, be kind.” In the silence, we have the opportunity to reflect on our life in general or the past week. In particular, we can ask ourselves; “Was I present? Was I grateful? Was I kind?” Were my motives in accordance with “that of God” that is within me?

So, the question of the day: What is the state of your spirituality?

References:

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Zinnbauer, B.J. & Pargament, K.I. (2005). Religiousness and Spirituality. In R.F. Paloutzian & C.L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. The Guilford Press.

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