

What is 'Spirituality'? – 28th September 2014

So many, many people I know like to describe themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious' and they would never come near a church. Ordinarily I would not dare to try to capture a definition of spirituality in the teeth of so many warring 'Spiritual Authorities' and so many saintly individuals to whom 'spirituality' is ascribed? Yet so much is talked and written about it that we are all often left rather, if not totally, confused. So what is this 'will o' the wisp' named by so many people in so many contexts as 'spirituality'?

Let us begin with a short period of contemplation

Contemplation

Let us lose the focus of our concentration

Let us cease to focus on that seat we are sitting on or on those thoughts that are passing through our mind, on that face, or that memory. Let us just let them go. Let us stop focussing just on narrow things

Let us think widely, not just of this church or this city or that country but rather of the whole world we live in, of the strange kaleidoscope of the many varied people we know. Let us think of the mystery of humanity, of this strange human animal, product of evolution, perhaps still evolving, even still evolving through US, here.

Let us let the whole of existence sink in.

SILENCE

Let us think of the blindness of all the best minds we know to the final destination of evolution – and let us breathe deeply in reverence, reverence of the limitless powers that we cannot control and of which we know nothing.

SILENCE

O Source of all being,
Name unnamed,
You are the pattern of the flight of birds,
You are the silence behind the wind,
You are the wave and the water.
We do not know the pattern,
We do not listen to the silence,
We do not see the water, only the waves.

You are the Great Origin and the Final End:
empty yet inexhaustible,
giving birth to infinite worlds.
You are always present within us.
May we know the way of the universe,
May we find the pattern,
May we hear the silence,
May we be like water,
Flowing in harmony with the All

(Adapted from a prayer by Yvonne Aburrow Inspired by the Lao Tse
Ching)

SILENCE

At least one kind of spirituality is about when you take your eyes off the road of life immediately ahead of you, and see the mountains – birth, relationships and death, the whole framework within which life is lived And this is where imagination broadens into contemplation, leading to awe, reverence and so to ‘worship’.

SILENCE

Reading

For the past century and more, organised religion has suffered increasingly severe blows to its credibility. But the religious sense ‘of the sacred’, ‘of the numinous’, of a coherent pattern transcending one’s

personal experience – remains for a great many people essentially intact. The traditional custodians ‘of the spiritual’ may have been compromised or have compromised themselves. We may even have become self-conscious about using that word ‘spiritual’ except in inverted commas. And yet for a great many people ‘the spiritual’ remains a reality, even if organised religion no longer speaks on its behalf.

There is an entire facet of twentieth century thought and culture which reflects an aspiration towards meaning and the spiritual OUTSIDE of the context and framework of institutionalised religion.

From Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, *The Messianic Legacy*, p 234

Address: The Boundaries of Spirituality

There was a time when large tracts of Scottish land were covered in great marshes and peat bogs. Much of the Forth river valley above Stirling is a good example. They were dangerous places, these marshes, because one step too far on what looked like solid ground could send a person plunging away over their head into a sink hole where death was certain. Of course most of them are well drained now except in the far north. And there were great marshes in England too. These marshes still give off great vapours and, if you are crossing them in a mist the rising vapours can cause turbulence in the mist which can give rise to the appearance of forms that can look like people and change before your eyes and especially at night in the light of a lantern or in the moonlight. These experiences of a person out there in the lonely marsh gave rise to the English term ‘will o’ the wisp’. I cannot help likening trying to describe spirituality to pointing out will o’ the wisp.

One moment he is there, vivid and seemingly real and the next he is formless and gone.

It is an old rule of logic that in attempting to describe or define any entity, we need to both say what it is and say what it is not. So let us begin with what spirituality is not.

What spirituality is not is a very dangerous question to attempt to answer. Here I will briefly try to identify one boundary between spirituality and what is sometimes called “the occult” and another boundary between spirituality and superstition and somewhere tangled up in this mix up is something called ‘magic’. I have run into trouble trying to draw boundaries around spirituality before, usually with the pagans but sometimes with Jungians, so please forgive me if, in my attempts to draw boundaries, I offend the beliefs and practices of anyone. This is just my lone attempt.

Superstition seems to be about beliefs that are acceptable to neither orthodox religion nor scientific enquiry. But it probably extends beyond that to many common-place minor irrational nonsenses such as avoiding walking under ladders or throwing salt over your shoulder and so on. One man’s superstition may be another man’s religion. Perhaps if Unitarian humanist agnostics had any non-historical beliefs they would immediately be labelled by someone, as superstition too. So superstitions are beliefs not accepted by more orthodox religion or by science. The word ‘Superstition’ also has a connotation of fear and ignorance. Superstition is supposed to occur in inferior, so-called ‘primitive’ cultures ruled by religious institutions that are seen as fear-inducing, greedy but powerful. Sometimes the word ‘Superstition’

carries an overtone of excessive ritualistic religious observation of duties or of excessive worship. I once had to assess a candidate for the ministry of the Church of Scotland who could hardly take two steps without stopping to pray. That was clearly not merely excessive piety but also Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Turning to the word “Occult”, it seems to refer mainly to hidden or secret knowledge, teachings or practices of a religious or spiritual nature. Some of the world’s major religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism have many hidden teachings which are only revealed to adherents as they progress in loyalty or for a price. But, in the West, the word ‘occult’ is most often applied to secret bodies such as the Rosicrucians and the alchemists of the Middle Ages, and perhaps, dare I suggest, to the Masons.

Both the words ‘superstition’ and ‘the occult’ may often include ‘magic’, a word commonly used to classify some power or operation which we do not understand which we may either treat with contempt as incredible or with awe as possible.

In contrast to the ambivalence with which magic, superstition and the occult are commonly treated with either contempt on the one hand, or with curiosity and awe on the other hand, almost all people in the West seem to treat ‘spirituality’ with respect.

If these words ‘occult’ and ‘superstition’ are commonly used to describe mysteries which are not respected in the same way as spirituality, then what is spirituality?

In a sense there may be a kind of blasphemy against the spirit in the very attempting to talk about it. But then, how could there be a community of spirituality without trying, however inadequately to talk about it and, of course, theologians have been disputing with each other about their God for centuries and even killing each other – or more often having each other killed by someone else. So, in comparison, this, here, this morning, is a relatively innocent attempt at finding light.

It may seem to some that the very undertaking of an attempt to speak to this title “Spirituality” is a piece of arrogant hubris since the speaker is not the Pope or even a minister or anyone who is identified in our culture as supposed to have specialised knowledge or authority about these things. I would plead that ordinary people like me are the very people who SHOULD be trying to speak about spirituality because an imaginative awareness of the experiences of the spirit are universal and innate, and a very rare person is without them. These experiences are certainly not the dependent product of organised religion. Rather the reverse – these experiences are the origins, the founts and the inspiration of all organised religion and without them organised religion would simply be a dead political game of power. So I am pleading that arrogance on my part is far from the case here. I am simply pursuing my own best thoughts and experiences but in public in the hope that some of you will find that what I struggle to express links with your thoughts and experiences and may even stimulate you to seek further, yourselves. All I can do to help here is to offer my best thoughts and perceptions in the hope that they might be helpful to some of you. That, as I shall argue later if I have time, is actually **spiritual** leadership, but NOT necessarily in my view, please note, **religious** leadership which I see as being about institutions.

I had a comical experience many years ago, well at least I thought it was comical. A fellow student in my hall of residence was friendly with a long time good friend of mine. This man was, even as a student, more than a little superior about the fact that he was saved from damnation and so supremely happy. Nevertheless I visited him in Edinburgh for old time's sake. I knew that he had become a Church of Scotland Minister but It turned out that he had also become a recipient of the Toronto Blessing (where, you may remember, in the presence of an allegedly powerful spiritual person, a recipient would swoon backwards into the arms of waiting acolytes) and he had begun to speak in tongues (babble in unrecognisable languages in public, you may remember). As, at that time, a fully paid-up card-carrying humanist, I was, of course, wholly unimpressed and even dared some slight scepticism. As he ushered me out the door that evening, he said "Iain, You are spiritually dead."

So, according to people like him, I am a dead man walking, and so are all of you.

Spirituality, I am convinced, is about the imagination, maybe a special kind of imagination. Possibly the easiest place to identify the genuine article of spirituality is, I guess, in the spirituality of childhood and perhaps of adolescence. You each will have your own examples, times when your imagination soared in wonder and elation and, perhaps, other times when it shuddered in fear. I will give you a couple of examples. The first time I was allowed to go for a walk on my own, about aged four, was magical. I wandered up a farm track, up the hill completely alone, with wild flowers on the verges and rustles in the hedgerows on either side; and then a lark, even at that age I knew it was called a lark, rose into the sky and soared singing above me in the open sky and the sunshine. But back down in the house I was very afraid of the cupboard

where all the electricity meters hummed menacingly day and especially at night. There were eyes in the dark there. We tend to think of the wonder and the elation as spiritual and we put the fear outside of the boundaries of our concept of spirituality and call it superstition. This is a mere superficial sunshine spirituality, what the Quakers used to call a 'daffodil' spirituality.

Then, in early adolescence, I used to cycle out some nine miles beyond the city of Edinburgh alone to a Norman church. It was always open then. The dim Norman apse, lit from either side by small narrow windows, was, for me, standing at the back of the nave, a concentration point of reverence. Many adolescents have intense experiences of spirituality, some connected with organised religion and elicited by it, and others wholly unconnected with anything and anybody else. Later when I read of Otto's concept of what he called 'the numenous', I knew exactly what he meant. Even the animists, who used to be called, quite wrongly, the most primitive forms of religion, had their numenous experiences. Certain trees, certain waterfalls or pools; certain caves where something mysterious was thought to dwell – perhaps a spirit or even a God. Later I learned that this awe, appreciation and reverence could easily be extended to the whole Universe, including humankind and perhaps beyond. That is the foundation of my sense of worship which I try to share here in our small community. It is, I believe, the very core of what binds us together. If I had no sense of the presence of what we might call, for the moment, THE DIVINE, I could not and would not dare to pretend to lead a meeting for worship. Sadly I have listened to many services of worship, a few, even lead by eminent religious leaders, have had that sense absent.

Almost a decade ago I preached on the title "Religion as an Art Form" and I said then: "For me, most spirituality is about the interface between imagination and reality." I maintain that this point, where imagination and imaginative awareness takes off, is seen and understood and experienced in so many different ways in so many different cultures but always it is there at the heart of all religions. The interface between imagination and reality, that taking off point, is there at the heart of every single person's lone individual religion, atheist and agnostic and humanist too. It is there at the heart of the great religious traditions of the world and at the heart of every tribal belief system and ritual in Africa, South America or Australia - indeed anywhere in the world. It is there at the heart of those religions passed on to us by our parents - whether rejected or accepted by us. It is there at the heart of this community here which, like any other religious community in the world, is about the sharing of our imaginations and our perceptions of what we like to call reality. I have no quotes from great men or women to back me up on this - just my own perception.

So what is that interface, that taking off point? One of those points is where imagination meets reality in similar yet different ways in each of the great art forms, above all for me in music, but also in the visual arts, often in poetry, drama and fiction. All of these can inspire and lift me, and probably you too, are lifted out of the concrete stimulus-bound hum-drum world that is too often the boring everyday reality of our toiling lives.

The experimental psychology of perception can demonstrate that all our everyday perceptions are constructions. We create every experience out of the raw data of sensations from our eyes, ears, touch and so on but each one of us interprets that raw data according to systems that

have been mostly learned but are sometimes innate, to make a construction which is what we experience. Today's psychologists are quite clear about how our perceptions are formed - and so too were some of the philosophers. And we have to trust these constructed perceptions to live. If I misinterpret the shadows on my stairs I may fall down them but I can only proceed on the interpretation that my senses and my mind together produce for me, or I do not proceed at all. Without constructed perceptions nothing is possible. That interpretation and that construction is imagination at work at the simplest and most pedestrian level.

Imagination is an essential element in the advance of science as the greatest of the philosophers will tell you. Technology and all creativity is the product of an interaction between imagination and reality. Spirituality is imagination which is deployed as an art form, perhaps most often alone, but also in the organisation of communal worship and in more elaborate organised religion. It is the application of the imagination to all the main events of life. Spiritual awareness might be shared in community and the best of religious organisation is sharing that spiritual imagination and the feelings and experiences that might go with it. Philosophers of the social sciences talk of 'negotiating reality' and 'agreed reality'. Large communities need organisation, so shared reality becomes embodied and protected by institutions, religious institutions, even creeds. And, as soon as we have all that, we are at risk of having conformity, imposed, managed, contrived, conjured-up imagination. There often follows the oppression of originality and creativity and this leads to social control (religion has played a massive part in this in the past) and so in the worst cases to the thought police administered through fear and the confessional.

Social control through religion rests on the problem that imagination can be fearful as well as joyous (remember my lark and my meter cupboard). The manipulation of the emotions of fear, anxiety and uncertainty conjured up in the imagination of the people in the service of the power of the few are as old as humankind itself.

I agree that there is a reciprocal relationship between institutionalised traditional religion and spirituality. There is at least one provocative research study which seems to show that the higher up the hierarchy in a religious institution you rise, the more concerned with power and the less spiritual you become. Whether that is true or not, “for the past century or more, organised religion has suffered increasingly severe blows to its credibility”. On the one hand spirituality shared communally is the basis of all religious organisations and religious organisations probably do, mostly, support and enhance our experience of the spiritual.

Actually, I am not sure of this. They may rather train us into experiencing a narrow spirituality of their's at the expense of drawing out and enhancing our own innate spirituality. Among religions, Unitarians and Quakers are probably least likely to train people into a narrow Procrustean bed at the expense of their own unique development.

I guess I am in danger of being accused of confusing spirituality with mere imagination. I do not believe I am. I identify spirituality as a special kind of imagination, closely akin to aesthetic appreciation but special in its both its overall wide focus and in some of its specialised foci. I am fairly sure that your spirituality is a special branch of your creativity, your unique creativity but with a special range and focus. This

spirituality may be focussed quite narrowly on the possibility of life beyond death or on the mystery of human relationships or experienced most strongly in the ethereal sound of the choir in King's college Cambridge or in the spirituality of everyday life, but all those spiritualities are specialist branches of your imagination.

Your private spiritual practice, if you have one, is also your creation. It may be derived from some teaching from a tradition or put together from many traditions as a unique almagam of your own. But even without any conscious disciplined practice, you may be practicing the spirituality of living and what I call 'small mysticism' – a subject I shall return to in a moment.

If religious worship and institutions really are art forms, what would be the effects of cutting out an art form from your life? Say you neglected music to the point that it no longer moved you? You do not need me to tell you that you would be sadly much the poorer. So it is with spirituality, cut it out and you are inevitably the poorer.

Of course imagination can get completely out of hand and lose touch with reality as in hallucinations, with or without drugs, and in psychosis which can sometimes be frightening to other people and at other times can lead to the acceptance that a person out of touch with reality may have special powers. We also have a capability of being hypnotised and humankind can be susceptible to the conjuring up of spirits, to the drama of ritual with its manipulation of lighting, sound and ideas or to the power of communal flights of imagination.

There are Individual differences in each person's habitual balance between flights of imagination, detailed analysis and dynamic action. In

so far as we Unitarians are rationalists, we are not quite anti-imagination but we strenuously require that our beliefs and world view should meet the tests of informed criticism. In so far as we are spiritual people we do not let rationality interfere unduly with our sense of the unseen. I cannot see that we are very good at dynamic action. Perhaps we talk so much that we are all tired out before we even start any action!

I said earlier that I make a distinction between what, for present purposes, I shall call 'small Mysticism' and 'large Mysticism'. There are some religious traditions, I believe, which have made this distinction better than others.

I quote, "As in all the mature mystical traditions, the aim of the quest for the Sufi is not to live in a trance of bliss in God, but to live as a part of God on earth and in time, loving and serving all beings with some small power of God's selfless humility".

Many of the greatest Sufi masters have not been recluses or hermits, but tailors or potters or small-town businessmen, men and women, who live their supreme realization realistically and humbly at the center of ordinary life. As Abu Sa'id wrote in the eighth century, "The perfect mystic is not an ecstatic devotee lost in contemplation of Oneness, nor a saintly recluse shunning all commerce with mankind; but the true saint goes in and out amongst the people and eats and sleeps with them and buys and sells in the market and takes part in social intercourse and never forgets God for a single moment."

Of course no one is suggesting that a 'small mystic' goes around all day and everywhere in a daze of utterly impractical focus on the eternal or does not become angry or sad but what I think is being suggested is

that, as far as possible at every opportunity focus is returned to that which is beyond language.

There is another aspect of spirituality which I, personally, think I wrestle with, not only as a human but also in my work with other people in my roles as several kinds of psychologist. I would call it the spirituality of transcendence.

That kind of spirituality is about transcending emotion, especially rising above strong negative emotions like fear anger, jealousy, loss and despair. It is about rising out of them and beyond them. It is not mere self-control, which can so easily lead to over-control. It is much more than the kind of critical examination of negative thinking that Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapy is so good at. But rather it is a quality of vision through which, even in the midst of overwhelming feelings, a wider view is maintained and the narrow present is still seen in a wider framework.

I recognise it as expressed in a poem by C.D. Lewis: **The Conflict**

“I sang as one

Who on a tilting deck sings

To keep their courage up,

Though the wave hangs

That shall cut off their sun.

As storm-cocks sing,

Flinging their natural answer in the wind's teeth,

And care not if it is waste of breath

Or birth-carol of spring.

**As ocean flyer clings
To height, to the last drop of spirit driving on
While yet ahead is land to be won
And work for wings.**

**Singing I was at peace,
Above the clouds, outside the ring;
For sorrow finds a swift release in song
And pride its poise.”**

More than that, I would suggest that spirituality is about transcendence, not just of emotion and feeling as in that poem but it also encompasses a transcendence of ethics. It is what is meant when Jesus is alleged to have said that the Jewish law of the Old Testament is not enough, that the spirit is above the law and adherence to the rules and laws of ethics is not enough without love, implying to me that sometimes the rigid application of even the best rules and laws without imagination, empathy and love is an abomination. Now, to the unimaginative rule-observers that is dangerous stuff and I leave you to decide for yourself whether you can, or want, to take those kinds of risks in the way you live your life, for example to defy the law for compassion?

I guess there are many other manifestations of spirituality that I am not aware of and have no time to consider here. Like ‘Will o’ the wisp’ they may be here and gone but their presence can be terrifying or wonderful beyond words and their effects can be lasting life-long.