

What is Spirituality?

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The very essence and nature of spirituality—to be discussed in this article—does not enable me to define what spirituality is for everyone. At best I can only define what spirituality is for me; perhaps my view will help others on their personal journey of discovery and healing.

The impetus for this article was to support my own spiritual journey. It is hoped that given my commitment to *serve*, this article will help others on their personal journey toward enlightenment. This article will first explore how others view spirituality and how they define it. It will conclude with my view on the subject along with some traits that I think characterize what it is to be spiritual and live a spiritual life.

What do Others say About Spirituality?

Let us explore what others think about spirituality so we may see the plethora of views on the subject. Different people come at spirituality from different perspectives. Perhaps it is the totality of these perspectives that is truly what spirituality is all about. You decide.

Rev. Dr. Phyllis Smyth, in her address to the Ontario Multi-Faith Council at a conference entitled “Aging, Spirituality and Health”, defined spirituality as “an individual, anthropological phenomenon through which a person grows in understanding of his or her connection to or place in the universe and thereby finds meaning and purpose in life.” Reverend Dr. Smyth goes on to share that “the word for spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures, which gave rise to the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is the same word as that used for breath and wind. It is onomatopoeic: “Ruach”. Unpredictable, uncontrollable energy, powerful as the wind in a hurricane, wind which we cannot see but the results of which we know; energy gentle as the invisible breeze that caresses our cheek on a hot day and refreshes us; energy as close to us as our own breath, the source of life but visible only if it mixes with the air on a cold winter day; this same idea of mystery, energy and power is used to describe spirit.”

The preceding definition focuses on spirituality as a form of power to which we are somehow connected. The reference to ‘breath’ or ‘wind’ suggests this spirit is ‘unpredictable’, ‘uncontrollable’ and ‘powerful’. It is interesting to note that Rev. Dr. Smyth suggests spirit cannot be seen but we somehow know it is ever present.

The internet contains no shortage of references to, and definitions of, spirituality:

Wikipedia defines spirituality as “an ultimate or immaterial reality; an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of their being; or the “deepest values and meanings by which people live.” There is also a suggestion that the word spirituality is often associated with the concept of a spiritual path.

AllAboutSpirituality.com suggests that “Spirituality extends beyond an expression of religion or practice of religion. True spirituality involves a daily trust in the One that created us.” AllAboutSpirituality.com goes on to further intellectualizing the topic: “Recognizing the root word as being *spirit*, let’s look at its definition first. The English word *spirit* comes from the Greek word *pneuma* and the Latin word *spiritus*, both meaning “breath,” or “of wind.” The spirit is vital in giving life as humankind is made up of mind, body, and spirit.”

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary says it this way: “the force within humans being thought to give the body life, energy, and power. In this search, you may be seeking a greater understanding for the purpose of your life, the make-up of a human being, or a deeper understanding of God. Spirituality is usually related to theology and religious studies. It is that part of us through which we are connected to divinity.”

The on-line sources bring into this discussion the concepts of ‘ultimate reality’ and discovering who we are through something often referred to in spiritual writings as ‘the path’. There is reference to the idea of ‘trust’ in ‘the One that created us’. This idea of trust is central to spiritual living and will be discussed later. Common to Rev. Dr. Smyth’s definition, the on-line sources do reiterate that spirituality is a ‘force’ or ‘power’ that exists within each of us.

In his book Cunningham’s Guide to Hawaiian Magic and Spirituality, Scott Cunningham states *Manu* is a Hawaiian term that is commonly defined as ‘spiritual power’ and is referred to as “a form of non-physical energy” [p.61]. According to Cunningham, in Hawaiian culture everyone and everything, including all of nature, contains *Manu*. Cunningham writes that *Manu* is a mysterious force by its very nature and that the Hawaiians accepted this *Manu* as a gift from their *akua* and ‘*aumakua* (Hawaiian gods, goddesses and deified ancestral spirits).

Rev. Dr. Jonathan H. Ellerby writes eloquently about spirituality in his new book Return to the Sacred: Ancient Pathways to Spiritual Awakening:

In the most profound of spiritual practice, regardless of the practice, we awaken to a reality that feels more true, more permanent, and more substantial than anything else we’ve ever experienced. What burns away in such flashes of brilliant Light are all the falsehoods that limit health, self, and society. For a moment, we touch the eternal. The more we expose the limits and false elements of our identify, the closer we come to understanding ourselves as an expression of a Great Miracle and Divine Spirit. The further into the nature of The Sacred we go, the more it teaches us about ourselves. [p.13]

The very definition of spirituality is a personal process. The definition that’s comfortable for you today will evolve over time if you’re growing and maturing. Nevertheless, to help in the process of discussing spiritual matters, you can think of spirituality as ‘your relationship to whatever you consider to be most sacred’. In this case, the term ‘sacred’ refers to things of ultimate meaning, power, and value: worthy of deepest reverence. It’s impossible to examine your relationship to The Sacred without being led to the challenging questions of identity and higher

*power. You may consider these the central elements of 'spirituality'.
[p.16]*

Rev. Dr. Ellerby adds to the ideology of spirituality the concept of 'eternal' and how spirituality is a personal process of understanding our true 'identity' and connecting with a 'higher power'. Like the on-line sources, Ellerby also makes reference to getting to know who we are as part of spirituality.

In an ambitious literary work, Elizabeth Lesser wrote about spirituality in her book The New American Spirituality: A Seeker's Guide. Ms. Lesser writes that spirituality itself is a simple concept but that our search for it is not. Why? Because each human being is different and complex. Ms. Lesser suggests that by the time we consciously embark on our spiritual journey, we have already lived and created layers of experience and personality. Our spiritual journey is not only about finding what ever it is we are looking for, but our spiritual journey is equally about unraveling "the garden-variety twine that is wrapped tightly around our hearts and minds" [p.4] and, more importantly, how we unwrap it.

I smiled when I read Lesser's words "No one has *the* answer; only you know the way home". [p.26]. She goes on to write:

I have been following a path that I call spiritual for most of my life, yet I hesitate when people ask, "What do you mean to Spiritual?" I would like to give a quick and easy answer; it seems that I should have one. I have certainly met enough people whom I call spiritual beings, and have had many experiences that lifted the veil between my usual consciousness and another, vaster reality. Yet, there is no one-liner that could adequately describe the mysterious nature of these beings or states of consciousness. Besides, the spiritual quest is different for each one of us, and it changes as we change. [p.27]

After hearing from some of the world's wisest hearts and brightest minds, I must report that all of us, from the unusually sage to the normally confused, can add only our own bits of wisdom to the poetry of mystical conjecture. So right at the get-go we can let ourselves off the hook, accept our confusion as par for the course, and relax a little as we search. We can feel part of an ancient and ongoing community of seekers. [p.28]

Elizabeth Lesser never comes right out and defines what spirituality is, but rather emphasizes the need for each person to create their own definition. She does share some offerings for consideration, however.

While spirituality is about bliss, it also is about balance. Without some degree of sacrifice for the greater good, spiritual self-discovery eventually leads to plain old self-indulgence. When we witness people using wise teachings to justify unwise and selfish behavior, spirituality seems like a game people are playing to get what they want. Spirituality is not the abdication of responsibility; its' not a magic carpet ride to la-la land; and it's not sunny, easy answers to life's complexity. Rather, spirituality is a long, slow process—a patient growing into wisdom. [p.30]

Lesser goes on to write that “inviting spirituality into your life is like packing for a long journey. As you search for your own definition, here are some of the most important things to pack: openness to things you may have been conditioned to reject; comfortableness with the unknown; and fearlessness.” [p.30]

While there are some commonalities in how different people and organizations think of spirituality, there are far more differences in philosophy and meaning; which brings me to my main point. How is it that something so present in our society today, something so ubiquitous, something so recognized, can mean so many different things? Why is there no single, definitive, recognized, and accepted definition of spirituality?

What do I think Spirituality is about?

Our human condition creates the need to ‘define’ things and put things in their ‘rightful’ place. Defining something is, in part, how we learn, how we make sense of the world around us and how we bring meaning to our daily lives.

Spirituality is one of those things that, by its very essence, defies a finite definition. If one views spirituality as a ‘personal journey toward enlightenment’, it becomes a challenge to create a definition for spirituality that serves everyone. There are three key words in that supposition that deserve further exploration: personal; journey; and enlightenment.

Because spirituality is ‘personal’, it cannot be defined in the same way for everyone. Each person experiences spirituality differently; and no one way is right or wrong, better or worse than another. It is this personal nature of spirituality that makes it infinite—as it should be.

The ‘journey’ aspect of spirituality is key. Spirituality is not about any specific act, behavior or practice. Spirituality is, in one sense, about the culmination of all of these actions, behaviors and practices in our daily lives. Spirituality is about what happens between all our focus on spiritual acts, behavior and practice. Spirituality is about how we live our lives. Spirituality is what happens to us, what we learn, how we feel, what we think, from the time we come into this existence to the time we leave. It is this dimension of spirituality that is often associated with the concept of ‘the path’.

Lastly, ‘enlightenment’ is a state we will all achieve, in some incarnation (should one believe in such matters)—a state of becoming one with the Divine. For some, enlightenment can mean to ‘bring light into’ or ‘become part of the light’. Given we are ‘divine light’, spirit existing in a human body form, most may experience this ‘en-lightenment’ when they pass on from this existence. For some (a fortunate few), enlightenment may be achieved in their time in this human body existence.

What are Some Traits or Characteristics of Spirituality?

As I progress through my own spiritual journey, I have come to recognize some traits or characteristics that are commonly present as one grows spiritually and lives a spiritual

life. If it helps to relate to these traits or characteristics, think of them as values one may live their life by.

Love: The one key trait that must be present in order for all other traits to exist is love. Love is all there is. Anything other than love is merely the absence of love. Love for people, animals and nature (the sea, sky, and land). Above all else, love is the Divine and our connection to our true selves.

Gratitude and appreciation: Learn to accept and embrace an 'attitude of gratitude' and you will be amazed at how your life changes for the positive. Learn to release yourself from the illusion of being unhappy for what you do not think you have, and learn to accept and embrace what you do have.

Forgiveness: Forgiveness enables and positions us to love, and love is all there is. Conversely, an inability to forgive can hold us back from the joy of love and all it offers. An inability to forgive—in most cases, forgive ourselves—is one of the greatest impediments to growing spiritually.

Peace and harmony: Peace is a state of being brought on by a connection with the Divine. When one begins to connect with the Divine—their true selves—one experiences peace. Peace is a state of mind that imbues a spiritual existence.

Balance: One of the more intangible characteristics of spirituality may be balance. In the corporate world, it is often spoken of as work-life balance. That is a good start, but it is only a beginning. Balance also speaks to our state of being and how we see the world around us. Balance is about caring as much about ourselves as we do for other people; and balance in caring about ourselves and other people include caring for body, mind and spirit.

Understanding: Understanding matures as one embraces faith and trust in the Divine. Faith and trust in knowing that: everything we need to know, we know; everything we need in order to be the success we want to be, already exists within us; everything we need to grow in spirit is staring at us when we look in the mirror. Understanding is wisdom that comes with spiritual maturity.

Compassion and empathy: When we come to accept, realize and understand that we are all 'one', we begin to experience compassion and empathy. What we extend, we receive, and vice versa. What we give, is given back to us—regardless of what it is we give. "Treat thy neighbor as thyself" is a popular Christian teaching that speaks of the same trait.

Acceptance: Learn to accept the world the way it is. Learn to accept what happens in your life. Learn to accept who you really are. Learn these things and life will be a blessing for you. Acceptance does not have to mean 'putting up with' or 'making do'; accepting is a necessary step to 'understanding' (see above). All people and events pass through your life for a reason. Do not question why; ask only what you are to learn from the person or event.

Kindness and consideration: One of the easier traits to exhibit in our daily lives is kindness and consideration. A kind gesture or a simple, considerate gesture is

all we need to do to begin feeling the Divine in our lives. Kindness and consideration open the door to many of the above traits and characteristics.

A modern-day spiritual course—*A Course in Miracles*—also provides insight to spiritual traits or characteristics. In the *Manual for Teachers* section of the Course, the following characteristics of God's¹ teachers (something that exists in all of us) are presented.

Trust: The Course suggests the teachers of God must have trust in the world. The Course states that the world “is governed by a power that is *in* them [the teacher] but not *of* them. It is this power that keeps all things safe. It is through this power that the teachers of God look on a forgiven world.

Honesty: “Honesty does not apply only to what you say. The term actually means consistency. There is nothing you say that contradicts what you think or do; no thought opposes any other thought; no act belies your word; and no word lacks agreement with another. Such are the truly honest. At no level are they in conflict with themselves. Therefore it is impossible for them to be in conflict with anyone or anything.”

Tolerance: The Course suggests that to judge is to be dishonest because in order for one to judge another, you are placing yourself in a position, at a level, that simply does not exist. “Judgment implies a lack of trust” and trust (see above) is what all other traits are based upon. It stands to reason that without judgment everything is equally acceptable.

Gentleness: A spiritual existence is one characterized by a wholly gentle person. Gentleness is the antithesis of the perception of weakness. Gentleness is strength; strength to recognize that ‘harm’—in its many facets—is the outcome of judgment and that harm is an impossible state.

Joy: The Course writes that “joy is the inevitable result of gentleness” and that “gentleness means that fear is now impossible”. When in a state of joy, one does not experience pain and, therefore, cannot suffer.

Defenselessness: Living a spiritual life means you have learned how to live ‘simply’. When one lives a simple life, one does not need to defend against the truth. Because you have grown to recognize who you are, you recognize you do not need to ‘make’ yourself and you recognize there is nothing about you that needs defending. Defenses are but guardians and illusions to the truth.

Generosity: Generosity ultimately rests on trust (see above). From the Course’s perspective, generosity is not about ‘giving away’ or ‘giving up’, generosity means “giving away in order to keep”. What ever we extend, we receive. What ever we ‘give’ we ‘get back’. Being generous is a means to enrich our lives.

Patience: Patience is easy when you are certain of the outcome, when you ‘know’. Even though the outcome may be at a time unknown, the patient person waits without anxiety because he/she has no doubt of what the outcome will be.

¹ The Course’s reference to “God” is a term that the Course uses to describe the Divine, the Source, or whatever term you may use to identify with the Sacred.

Faithfulness: When all the preceding Course traits and characteristics are present, faithfulness emerges. For the Course “the extent of the teacher of God’s faithfulness is the measure of his advancement in the curriculum”. ‘Readiness’ is not faithfulness; one must be willing to “give up all problems to one Answer”.

Open-Mindedness: This trait comes when one accepts forgiveness into their lives. Open-mindedness is the absence of judgment. Open-mindedness leads to peace and joy.

What Do You Think?

What do you think spirituality is, or is not? You are invited to share your thoughts and experiences with Robert. He can be reached at meagher@istar.ca.

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