

Figuring Out Spirituality

You may laugh, but I always assumed I had some notion of what spirituality is, that it was a word I could at least put into a sentence. So, just for fun – try defining it. Not easy, right? Did you come up blank or just totally vague?

I wanted to nail this one down. Current thought says spirituality is driven by a search for meaning and purpose, and that it produces inner harmony and peace, neither of which says exactly what it is. Spirituality remains a fuzzy concept in our culture.

For some reason, the word often evokes nervousness, distaste, a hint of guilt. Many perceive it as a solitary pursuit, the work of retreats and chunks of time (though never enough) carved out of busy schedules. Or sometimes there's a distancing, as if spirituality belonged to a strange sub-culture that's either on drugs or needs to be.

There's something iffy about it, a bit frou-frou, a whiff of ether. I wanted something more, like something sturdy enough to drive through a brick wall.

I did a little research. Spirit, according to Bahá'í teachings, encompasses and infuses all of existence, everything seen and unseen, although it may be hidden to us by the veil of material reality. It also says that the essence of the spiritual world is joy, and that our work on this earth is to make the material world increasingly reflect that world, whether it's through the arts, sciences or our behaviour towards one another.

If that's the case, spirituality isn't peripheral or part-time, although our consciousness of it may be. It's our essence – our true identity, and that of every other created thing. It's not the purview of a select few, or even a purely personal matter. It's a community enterprise as well as an individual one. Who could deny that culture and community hugely affect spiritual development, through the values we consciously (and subliminally) teach our children?

Still, the large and small choices we all make on a daily basis are intensely personal. They're almost binary – on or off; stepping up to our values as best we can, or numbing ourselves to escape. Ways to connect to our sacred core are also highly personal: reflection, meditation, prayer, the arts, stories, cultural mythology and communing with nature among them.

Observation tells me that here, in this city, surrounded by so much joy, laughter, health and connection, our society is managing to nourish spirituality through a lot of unsuspected means, in addition to those we expect. I don't doubt the power of media and the internet, with their ability to explain and inspire, to occasionally lead us to those sweet spots of spiritual alignment.

So this is my take-away definition of spirituality, to date: The ability to connect with our true selves, with others, and with the transcendent or sacred.

Possibly the most important insight came from a visiting cousin. He said, "Doesn't this all come down to love?" Good point. Ability can be latent, unexpressed. We can get inspiration wherever we want, but it's what we deliver that counts. Would this not be the test of spirituality, and the measure of spiritual well-being? We need to powerfully support one another, whether it's in families, classrooms or work places.

That kind of spirituality is something solid.

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