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THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY IN PEOPLES LIVES

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Introduction

This essay is concerned with the importance of spirituality in the lives of human beings. It is proposed that a sense of spirituality in our lives enables us to find our true identity and our sense of purpose in life. It is also proposed that the soul is the home of the divine spirit within each of us and that our soul needs to be nurtured if we are to express our true spiritual selves.

Our world is filled with human suffering and turmoil - this not being an assumption but a reality of the human plight. Many of us have been touched by tragedy in our own lives and we are all exposed to human suffering at a universal level through the media. What is even more disturbing than the reality of human suffering and turmoil is the way in which we react to such turmoil and suffering. We have come to accept the suffering of others with an attitude of indifference or with the belief that we are powerless to reach out to those in need.

When we hear of disastrous situations, particularly those that take place in areas outside of our geographical reach, we often react to the plight of others with comments like, "Thank God I don't live there," or "God works in strange ways". And so our relationship with 'God' or some undefinable 'Godlike' power is reduced to a knee jerk response to human suffering. We are either relieved that God has not picked on us this time or we are busy ducking the wrath of God. We spend our lives 'observing' the suffering of others or protecting ourselves, and perhaps those closest to us, from suffering. According to Berman (1984, p.3) we have become alienated, non-participants of life, who hold the belief that:

This world is not of my own making; the cosmos cares nothing for me, and I do not really feel a sense of belonging to it. What I feel, in fact, is a sickness in the soul.

What has caused this sickness to the soul? It would seem that we are infected by a 'soul destroying virus' very early in life and its symptoms are manifested later in our lives when we become preoccupied with achieving success, power, money, status, material possessions and whatever other superficial 'want' that is valued by society. Marcus (Berman, 1984, p.4) has elaborated upon this notion in his suggestion that, "people recognize themselves in their commodities....(T)hey have
become what they own." Modern Western civilisation has failed to offer human beings a sense of 'soul identification' and safety. In other words, society has failed to nurture in human beings a sense of spirituality.

According to Fox (1983, p.10) this grim characteristic of the human condition can be traced back to the perceived conflict between religion and science in Western culture during the seventeenth century. In previous eras, human beings were able to embrace a harmonious relationship between science and religion which allowed them, "...to understand their universe, to find meaning in it, and to live out their lives with meaning" (Fox, 1983, p.10). In the centuries that have followed, human kind has been seduced by the explosion of scientific genius and discovery, so much so, that many have rejected spiritual wisdom and turned to science in their quest to understand the universe and themselves. And then there are those who, on the other hand, reject scientific understanding in favour of a rigid commitment to religious laws. Fox (1983, p.10) has described the ramifications of this type of dualistic thinking in the following statement:

This split has been disastrous for the people: religion has become privatized and science a violent employee of technology, with the result that the people have become alternately bored, violent, lonely, sad, and pessimistic.

How difficult it must be for the soul not to suffer contamination from "...a modern landscape (that) has become a scenario of mass administration and blatant violence" (Berman, 1984, p.3). We are steeped so far in the meaningless lifestyle that has been dictated to us by the 'modern landscape' that it becomes extremely difficult to be able to conceptualise, let alone adopt an alternative lifestyle. As Neill (1990, p.24) has noted:

It is particularly difficult just now when many, feeling very insecure grasp frantically onto the way of life that they have known and been taught is the 'good life' even if it is killing them.

A premature physical death may well be the result of a meaningless existence on both an individual level and a universal level: individuals turn to drugs, alcohol, and other forms of self abuse that often result in death, in an attempt to escape societal manipulation; while nations sacrifice countless numbers of lives to war because they value supremacy and power. What is even more frightening than the consequence of physical death is the dying process that precedes death itself. As mentioned previously, this dying process or infection of the soul begins early in life. Berman (1984, p.9) has suggested that the process by which our 'whole' is divided into the acting out of "...social roles, interaction rituals, and elaborate game playing...", begins in the third year of life and continues to be reinforced throughout the schooling years and into the working lives of people. What occurs as a result of this falseness in people is described by Berman (1984, p.6) as the splitting of the self in two:

...the 'inner' self retreating from the interaction and leaving the body-now perceived as false, or dead (disenchanted) - to deal with the other in a way that is pure theatre, while the 'inner' self looks on like a scientific observer.

It is at this point that we must ask ourselves whether the 'good life' is worth sacrificing our inner self for, particularly as, in doing so, we are left with only,
"...the terror or our own betrayal, and the emptiness of our manipulated successes" (Berman, 1984, p.7). The logical answer is 'no', and yet, despite the deep yearning that we may experience, (consciously or unconsciously), to find our true spiritual selves, we still find it difficult to accept a spiritual alternative. This contradiction may be due to the fact that words cannot adequately describe the true nature of the human spirit to those who have long forgotten the power of their own spirit within. As Barnes (1975, p.9) has stated:

...in the impact of lateral thinking or bisociation there is no exact description or explanation of the life of the spirit.

However we can come part of the way in describing some of the characteristics of "the spirit: human and holy" (Barnes, 1975, p.78), even though we cannot define the experience of its pure wholeness. For Barnes (1975, p.87), the spirit is illuminated by, "...its energy, its freedom, its infinite capacity to transform the human predicament." The spirit is not bound up by laws and absolute truths. Rather, it includes in its wholeness, "...our sensitiveness to what is happening within ourselves, our capacity for reflection, our imaginative ability to see a little of what is possible" (Barnes 197, p.83). Although Barnes does not reject the necessity of laws that are based on the preservation of the very human qualities that liberate the spirit, he has cautioned against, "clinging to the law at the expense of an understanding of the spirit."

Those laws that have done nothing to liberate the spirit and have, in fact, suppressed or actually annihilated the human spirit, can be found in most, if not all institutions, including religious institutions. For spirituality is not a religion. Rather, it is a pathway to becoming at one with God, to responding to God, in all of its 'Godlike' goodness. Fox (1990, p.25) has described spirituality as, "...a way of life", the central core of which is a compassion for others. He is critical of religions that help sustain empires, since, "...empire-builders, have very little use or interest in compassion." Fox (1990, p.26) has cited Eckhardt's findings that, "Compassion was not consistent with conventional religiosity...in the Western world today" and yet Eckardt has noted that, "Christianity and other great faiths as they were originally taught...did in fact, have a connection with compassion. Thus, as Christians we would do well to question our commitment to religion...in so far as it serves empire builders and ... (because) this commitment has taken precedence over a way of living called compassion" (Fox, 1990, p.26).

A rigid commitment to the laws of science also hinders us in the search for our inner spirit, as compassion is not an embodiment of science, nor is it a spiritual quality inherent in religion. Religion and Science are but the activities that human beings engage in. As MacMurray (1974, p.35) points out:

Science can be applied for good or for evil purposes, for destruction or for construction, to minister to human greed and selfishness or to human love and sympathy.

The same can be said of the many acts both noble and evil that have been committed in the name of religion. It is our own compassionate spirituality that gives meaning to scientific and religious activity; that helps us to decide what are worthwhile scientific and religious acts.

We cannot trust in our compassionate spirit if we deny its mystical nature. When we try to explain away all that is mystical and miraculous in life through rational,
and logical thought, we limit our capacity to share in the divinity of Jesus. Fox (1988, p.6) draws our attention to Paul’s understanding of the mystical way in which humankind experiences divinity: "...everyone moved by the spirit is a son or daughter of god...the Spirit of God has made a home in you." If we were to stop and consider the spiritual possibilities inherent in this mystical notion, we can begin to understand the process by which we can free ourselves of the sickness and disenchantment that has contaminated our souls-our spirit. If we accept the revelation that God’s spirit is part of us nothing else in life can ever be as important or meaningful. Our relationships with others begin to take precedence over the superficial, meaningless wants that are valued by society, since our interactions with people who share the spirit, (either knowingly or unknowingly), are interactions that we share with God.

And so, it is our acceptance of the mystical conceptualization that God’s spirit is within all of us, that brings us together as one. When we can see ourselves as being a part of others through our own spirituality, we begin to value and cherish others as we do ourselves because in each of us there is a divine and perfect spirit. That is not to say that we are not prone to human weakness. Rather, it is an acceptance that we are both flawed and perfect at the same time. It is only the boundaries created by dualistic thinking (a symptom of the ‘soul destroying virus’) that prevents us from recognising and experiencing this possibility.

We can learn much about an holistic conceptualization of ‘reality’ from children. Young children, whose view of the world has not been affected by the ‘virus’ to the same extent that adults perceptions of the world have been affected, do not limit their creative and playful imagination in the way that adults do. Through their play and fantasy they allow themselves to be open to the mystical and are therefore, more in touch with their own spirituality than many adults. Fox (1988, p.61) has described the mystic as, "...a child at play - the mystic within us is the child within us." Fox (1988, p.61) has also reminded us of the way Jesus celebrated the child’s spirituality: "...until you change and become as little children you will never enter the kingdom/queendom of God."

As educators the question we should be asking is not ‘how can we teach spirituality to children?’ but instead, ‘how can we nurture the spirituality that is already within the child?’ The answer to this question can be found in the following statement by Fox (1988, p.61): "to the extent that adults allow children to be children and do not project adultism onto them, all children are mystics."

Educators need to be confronted with the fact that every time they approach the child with disdain and hate, they are in fact, conspiring in the erosion of the child’s spirituality, and that spirituality is what is crucial to the child’s very identity; to their capacity to respond to God and; to their desire to show compassion for others. Teachers need to accept the child’s feelings without judgement and encourage the child to explore and express his or her feelings, since those feelings are the child’s pathway to understanding his/her unique and yet universal spirituality. By modelling such acceptance, teachers also model the spiritual qualities of tolerance and compassion for others.

As Fox (1990, p.233) has observed:

Here lies the true meaning of revolution (to revolve, to turn around) - education is about revolution in the sense of people on a ladder learning to look around them, and not just above them, to
see and feel, and then to lead out from the ladder and form new energy systems. Here lies true spiritual and compassionate revolution and education.

Nurturing the child's spiritual self is perhaps the greatest gift that we can give a child. Such a gift supersedes any other tangible materialistic item. If the soul suffers dismemberment, nothing else can compensate for such a profound loss of identity. This notion has been proven time and again in the lives of those people who supposedly have 'everything' and yet they are not happy. Their unhappiness in almost all cases stems from a lack of purpose and meaning in their lives. It is our spirituality that provides meaning and purpose and a sense of 'I am' instead of 'I've got'. Here lies our spiritual oneness with God. As Fox (1988, p.154) has stated:

The Cosmic Christ is the "I am" in every creature. The divine mystery and miracle of existence is laid bare in the unique existence of each atom, each galaxy, each tree, bird, fish, dog, flower, star, rock, and human.

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