



On Spirituality

Spirituality is a complex topic. It conjures up images of ghosts and unseen forces and gods that cannot be proved. We tend to begin to think of things and forces that are mythical, mysterious, magical and miraculous. While the topic of spirituality encompasses all of these ideas it is a much broader topic than these initial thoughts imply.

For the purposes of this writing spirituality is defined generally as the realm of existence that cannot be seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelled. It is the realm of existence that has no boundaries in time or physical form. Spirituality lays in contrast to the realities that science explores and defines. It is a vast area that includes language, history, thought, dreams, unconscious mental processes, prayer, miracles, music, all visual art forms such as paintings, movies, and plays, books, poetry, love, hate, religion, God, gods, beliefs, money, and the preponderance of human experience. Spirituality encompasses the mysteries of the universe, its course and reason, the mystery of time and the illusion of times predictable continuity.

Faith, hope and love are all spiritual qualities. Faith is the belief in something that is not provable to anyone who does not embrace the faith. Many people of faith experience their faith confirmed and develop a relative certainty about their faith but this cannot occur until after the person has already embraced their chosen faith. To those who do not embrace that faith the certainty of the faithful appears to be a self-fulfilling delusion. However is this necessarily the case?

Another usual tenet of faith is that anyone who adopts the faith will also experience the confirmation of his or her adopted faith. Further the adoption of a faith does have objective scientifically measurable results. People who embrace a faith generally live longer, are healthier and wealthier, have more stable interpersonal relationships, are less likely to divorce, and are less likely to abuse alcohol, nicotine or other drugs. Adopting a way of thinking that results in changes in what happens in ones world is a spiritual as well as physical phenomenon – a thought being transformed into a physical actuality.

As John says in the Gospel according to John, the word is made flesh. This is not substantially different from placing a plant in a window where it gathers light and grows into something much more than it was before, rather than placing the plant in a dark closet where it withers and dies. Light and darkness are profound spiritual issues not only in the concrete presence or absence of photons but also in the metaphorical but just as concrete choice actively to expose ourselves and those around us to loving energy and actively avoiding dark energy such as hate, anger, envy and nihilism, the belief that nothing really matters. One suggestion regarding nihilism is to be nihilistic about nihilism too.

We become whatever we spiritually embrace and we cannot avoid making the decision of what to embrace. Even the belief that we may refuse to decide what we choose to believe is itself a choice with clear spiritual consequences – usually stagnation and frustration. The choice not to decide about faith was Camu's choice. Despite being a world acclaimed author of politically thoughtful plays he died by suicide. This extinguished a light that otherwise had great potential. However the communications that he set in motion before his death continue to percolate in the world.

The choice of a faith can only be done by the chooser. True faith cannot be forced on anyone. The use of threats of dire consequences of choosing the wrong faith does not promote faith. Religious institutions that believe they can force faith upon a person through fear, intimidation, or indoctrination are incorrect. It is certainly possible to brain wash someone in cults and other relatively small group organizations but this results in a person who functions in a dissociated state and ultimately fails to benefit from the alleged benefits of that faith. It is the free will to choose that produces the deepest benefit of any faith. The strongest results of faith are the result of a personally made choice. Indeed this choice can produce miracles.

When miraculous recovery from a disease that is ordinarily fatal occurs, research has shown that it is often associated with a sudden and profound change in the sick person's spiritual beliefs towards a more gentle and loving faith that is clearly noticed by people that knew the ill person before and after the miraculous cure. This change in belief occurs before the healing rather than being the result of the healing.

This does not mean that the only people who die are spiritually incomplete people. Even the healed go on to die of other illnesses at some later point in their lives. Sometime spiritually complete people die spontaneously seeming to know that their work is done. As a medical resident I had several elderly hospitalized patients who were otherwise medically quite stable and approaching discharge calmly say goodbye to me during rounds and tell me that they were going to die that night and did so! When this first happened I tried to reassure one of them that they were much better medically and could go home in a day or two. They agreed with me that the illness they were hospitalized for

was better but the time to die had nonetheless arrived and they would die that night most likely but first they wanted to thank me for caring for them while they were ill! The first time this happened I was astounded. These were people who were quite at peace with dying and were not depressed in anyway.

A deeper theme of spirituality relates to the metaphysical questions of where did the universe come from, what happens after our death and does prayer really change anything. The universal questions of spirituality are so far beyond the ordinary experience of most of us that we cannot relate to the concepts. The statement that string theory likely provides a unifying theory for all the forces in the universe means little to most of us and even to those few of us for whom it does mean something it is still something that we are unable to relate to at a gut level.

The closest human experience of the generative and sustaining forces of the universe is Love. Love creates boundaries between forces that enables interaction and uniqueness while still maintaining the universe as a whole. Love also transcends human time. Love is a spiritual concept of connection and oneness that preserves separateness and uniqueness at the same time. For Love there is no beginning and no end but it is rather like water moving from the ocean to the clouds to the rain to the rivers and back to the ocean. Where did it start? It is only in giving Love away and letting it go that we find more. This is a spiritual mystery.

Within our own minds spirituality is at work as well. There are unconscious forces constantly at work in us. At a non-spiritual level there is our brain unconsciously controlling our breathing, our heartbeat, our metabolism, our hunger, our sexuality, and our attention to the next physical sensation, our alertness or somnolence. All of us have had intuitions and inspirations (“breathing ins”) that have occurred in response to major events in our lives – births, deaths, marriages, divorces, new loves, lost loves. All the major themes in the Bible either occurred during sleep – Eve being drawn from Adam – or were predicted in dreams – from Joseph’s dreams in Exodus, Mary’s husband Joseph’s dreams, and Pilot’s wife’s dream. Dreams can contain answers to the most important issues in our lives as well as encoded proclamations of what may become depending on the choices we make in our lives. Dreams are necessary to produce novel ideas and behaviors. Without dreams mammals are unable to create new responses to challenges of living. Many believe dreams are one of the ways that spiritual forces communicate with us.

Some people look with skepticism on spiritual issues seemingly not aware that magical thinking is a universal trait of all humans. Our choice is not whether to have or not to have magic thoughts and beliefs. Our choice is only, which magic thoughts to choose. The choice to believe we have no magical thinking is itself a silly magical belief no more sensible than deciding that we do not really have a heart either. Which magical ideas we choose to embrace has significant consequences for what happens to us and how we

experience life. Our experience of life is not the result of what happens to us rather it is the result of our understanding of the meaning of what happens to us. This meaning is directly determined by what we have been trained to believe. These beliefs become the unconscious guides that determine how we react to and feel about what is happening.

Our very sense of what is or is not real is a direct result of what spiritual beliefs we embrace over time. Indeed just as the plant that is placed in the sunlight to grow, what we become and precisely who we are is a direct result of past beliefs or faiths that we embraced interacting current beliefs and these sets of beliefs interacting with the current events of our lives. So choose carefully, thoughtfully and lovingly because you will become whatever it is that you choose to become. If you choose to remain as you are that too will happen.

© James H Thomas MD 2010