

Preface

*I would not talk so much about myself if there were anyone else
whom I knew so well.*

THOREAU¹

I WAS A high school senior, and though I was doing well in my classes and had friends and a wide range of interests, I was also bitterly disappointed that after three years on the wrestling team I simply wasn't good enough to make the varsity. An unexpected sophomore, tutored by his star athlete older brother, arrived at practice one day and promptly beat me out for the 145-pound spot. Like pretty much everything else in my life, I'd worked hard at wrestling. But unlike some other things, mainly those concerned with books, it hadn't come easy. I wasn't very strong, and no matter what I did, I couldn't seem to get that much stronger. But wrestling meant something to me, something it took me years to fully understand. It was a way to prove that even though I was an intellectual who loved reading and classical music, I, too, was a real man, as tough as the other types of guys—not just a soft Jewish kid with thick glasses. And here, in my third year of grueling 2½-hour practices, I was failing. I obsessed over my failure, tried to lick my wounds and get over it, but felt it as a relentless, nagging unease.

Fortunately, at the same time, I was rereading Thoreau's *Walden*. While in my first encounter with the book, I had been taken by his celebration of nature and, perhaps even more, the way he thumbed his nose at what a few years later I would disdainfully call "The Establishment," this time something else struck me. "Live as deliberately as nature," he counseled, and instead of seeking wealth or success or status, find a center of awareness and serenity that no accomplishment or possession can replace, and no social failure dislodge. Dig deep into your soul and reach out to the universe, and you will find contentment.²

And so my first encounter with spirituality's wise and healing response to the pains of life came to me from Thoreau. I would like to say that his soothing insights calmed my disappointment and insecurity, but they did not. Although I

sensed that he was, in the deepest sense, “right” about how to live, I still held a burning hunger for achievement and recognition, a painful belief that I deserved love only if I succeeded, over and over again.

Eighteen years later, after encounters with Zen Buddhism, Kierkegaard, psychedelics, Hasidic mystical stories, yoga, meditation, and Jewish Renewal and a yearlong trip through India vastly enlarged my sense of what spirituality could be, I faced a much darker and more demanding test. My first child, Aaron, was born a month early with severe brain damage, never left the hospital, and lived only 65 days. My hopes for bonding with an infant and raising a son or daughter turned into the nightmare of Aaron connected to tubes and beeping machines, tormented by the hospital’s well-meaning and near-endless tests. In his final moments—lungs and immune system overwhelmed by pneumonia—he died in our arms.

What was I to do with my grief? My rage at fate and bitter envy of people who had normal, healthy children? No psychotherapy could cure this malaise, nor could the banal pieties (all of which my wife and I actually heard) of “God took Aaron’s spirit,” “You must have done something bad in a previous life,” or “You’re better off.”

Only a “spiritual” response could even temporarily sooth my aching heart. I would think of the love that, despite everything, we had been able to show Aaron and of a similar desperate love against all odds I saw from other parents on the neurology floor of Children’s Hospital. The ways I would usually distance myself from those other parents—who weren’t leftists, or educated, or counterculture types—were erased by a commonality of shared suffering and compassion. I tried to see the miracle of life that was in all children, even if none of them were mine. I realized that unless I faced both the depth of my grief and my crushing sense of failure over my inability to protect my son, I was doomed to endless heartache.

And I began to understand that the radical politics I had been part of for a decade, the hyperintellectualized techniques of academic philosophy in which I’d earned a doctorate, and my conventional pursuit of pleasure and career success simply paled in front of Aaron’s death. This other thing, spirituality, was my only hope.

Spirituality



Introduction

*Not God but life, more life, a larger, richer more satisfying life,
is in the last analysis the end of religion.*

WILLIAM JAMES¹

AMERICA IS FILLED with people who say they are “spiritual but not religious,” a news story tells us, as if the two ideas repel each other.² Yet a leading Catholic publisher advertises extensive offerings in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic “spirituality.”³ Amazon lists 282 books in the general area of “spirituality and aging” and 14 on “spirituality and art therapy” alone. A casual Internet search turns up a listing of more than 400 “spiritual retreat centers.” Alabama’s Blessed Trinity Shrine Retreat Center offers “Ongoing Spiritual Direction,” in which a person “meets with a director on a regular basis to share one’s journey of faith and to discern the direction in which the Lord is leading the person in prayer and daily life.”⁴ Alaska’s Stillpoint at Halibut Cove, by contrast, provides guests a chance “to create a safe contemplative environment to rekindle their spirit and re-connect with themselves, nature, and a source beyond themselves.”⁵

These examples could be multiplied indefinitely—into politics and art, medicine and poetry, exercise and gardening; into virtually every religious tradition and into contexts where the ideas of God, church, or scripture do not appear at all.

What is spirituality, and is there any coherent way to understand it? How can we make sense of ideas like “a spiritual center,” “a spiritual director,” or a “spiritual experience” or know what a person is doing when she responds to a life crisis “spiritually” instead of some other way, taking a “spiritual lesson” from a disappointment that might otherwise be a crushing setback?

But first, is it so important that people use *spirituality*, *spiritual*, and *spiritually* in a wide variety of often contradictory ways? Is that not just like the ways people talk about religion or marriage?

True enough. But it is also true that our understanding of an idea is not something that interests only authors of dictionaries, but is an embodiment of our

values and ideals. That is why differences over what *religion* or *marriage* really means lead to intense conflicts. How we understand something shapes how we live it.

But why should we want to understand—or live—spirituality?

This deserves two answers.

For a large group of people in today's world (including myself), spirituality is essential to who we are. What it asks of us is a, perhaps *the*—central task in life, and therefore it is important that we understand it as best we can.

But what of those people whose focus in life is traditional religion, art, the military, career advancement, or economic success; who seek social status, political power, cutting-edge scientific knowledge, or simply a good time—why should any of them care about what spirituality is or isn't?

The rest of the book is an answer to this question, but here is the highly condensed version. In the early 1970s, I was a somewhat hard-nosed philosophy graduate student but had also begun to study Kundalini Yoga, a practice involving dynamic postures, intense breathing, chanting, and meditation. One evening I went to a lecture by the guru of Kundalini, Yogi Bajan, a cheerful, bearded Sikh with a booming laugh and a big belly. He offered what I would later recognize as the basics of nondenominational spirituality: make a fundamental change in your life by letting go of your ego, surrendering your attachments, doing away with greed, and manifesting kindness and compassion. When he asked for questions, I stood up and, in a slightly pretentious “I'm an academic philosopher” tone, asked him: “I see what you are saying, but tell me why I *ought* to do any of these things.” In other words, why *should* I live a spiritual life? Where were the justifications and the motivations? Undaunted by either the question or my manner, Yogi Bajan was relaxed and clear in his response: “I am not saying you ought to, I am simply saying you will never be happy, never have real peace of mind or serenity, unless you do.”

This, in essence, is the point. For all their association with soothing music, peaceful country settings, and nonjudgmental love, spiritual teachings are actually quite radical. They propose a sweeping transformation in how we live and assert that only through such a transformation are lasting happiness and true contentment possible.

Of course, if things are going really well for you—if you are healthy and good-looking and smart, successful and well taken care of—you might not take up spirituality on its offer to make your life better. Spiritual values typically enter our lives when something goes wrong or at least isn't working right. When a beloved child is hopelessly disabled by a drunk driver, a husband walks out on a 20-year marriage, you get everything you thought you wanted and are still unsatisfied, go to church and wonder what you're doing there, or find out that modern industrial

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society is extinguishing a species every 10 minutes—then it is to the spirit that you may turn.

Or spirituality can come into our lives as something unexpected and miraculous. We feel a source of joy so profound, a connection to everyone and everything so complete, that our usual goals, pleasures, and sense of self dwindle in comparison. Some people call these moments of God or truth or the real self; Freud talked of an “oceanic feeling”; an 11-year-old boy excitedly asks his older brother, “Does everyone really know they are alive?”⁶ We may be awed by the wonder of birth, an unexpected kindness, music that for a few moments makes life seem utterly complete, or a universe of stars in a night sky. So powerful and true are these moments, we tell ourselves, that we will do anything to hold on to them, so we can live in their light.⁷

In the face of sorrow, in response to joy, with or without organized religion and belief in God, in tight-knit communities or in silence and solitude, in disciplines of our minds or bodies or hearts—in all these ways, spiritual life beckons, offering incomparable rewards and (as we shall see) an equally extreme set of demands.