

‘Spirituality’ seems to be one of those words whose meaning we all know until we are asked to define it. Some years ago, in response to a questionnaire sent out by *Time* magazine, people offered the following definitions of spirituality:

- connection to a reality that is more than self and that comforts and guides us
- magical, innocent, like a child viewing things for the first time
- belief in a higher power
- a connection to all living things and to the earth and universe
- the essence of a person’s character without any material trapping

Although none of the respondents really managed to define spirituality, each managed to capture some aspect of what most of us think of spirituality. People who have made longer, more serious study of the matter offered these descriptions:

- “our deepest values and desires, the very core of our being” (psychiatrist Gerald May)
- “expanding our awareness, strengthening our center, clarifying our purpose, transforming our inner demons, developing our will, and making conscious choices” (psychologist Molly Brown)
- “a holy longing, a yearning to know the meaning of our lives, to have a connection with the trans-personal” (Jungian therapist Jeremiah Abrams)
- “how we express ourselves in relation to that which we designate as the source of ultimate power and meaning in life and how we live out this relationship” (theologian Kathleen Fischer)
- “our lived relationship with Mystery” (university president Stephen Sundborg, S.J.)
- “the human response to a transcendent reality, regardless of how one might name or experience that reality” (theologian Barbara Bowe)
- “becoming a person in the fullest sense” (theologian John Macquarrie)
- “theology on two feet” (theologian Philip Sheldrake)
- “a search for divine union now” (spiritual writer Richard Rohr, O.F.M.)

It seems valid to say that spirituality is a complex, many-faceted reality that defies a simple description. This is not surprising when we consider the great diversity of capacities, needs, and wants of the human person at its deepest level. Yet we can nevertheless identify some common threads that run through the above-mentioned descriptions of spirituality:

- it embraces our deepest values and desires
- it embraces every aspect of our life
- it seeks to cultivate and enrich our inner life
- it enhances the quality of life by giving it meaning, direction, and connection to all things.
- it seeks to promote a stronger relationship with some higher power

Spirituality seems to encompass whatever gives a person’s life meaning and direction. It is that quality which animates a person and integrates all that gives meaning to her life. Spirituality can be defined as a way of being, thinking, choosing, and acting in light of one’s ultimate values. What is noteworthy about spirituality is that, unless it is in some manner qualified – e.g., Christian spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, Sufi spirituality, and such – spirituality is distinct from religion. In other words, a person can be spiritual without being religious, just as a person can be religious without being spiritual.

Let’s look at what this definition implies about spirituality:

- Spirituality entails, not only what a person does, but who she is.
- Spirituality is that which gives a person’s life value and meaning.
- Spirituality is inherently personal, i.e., I have my mine, and you have yours.
- Spirituality is a universal phenomenon: each and every person can be said to have a spirituality.

- Spirituality evolves, just as people do; spirituality is not static.
- Spirituality may be an unconscious dimension of a person's life based simply on social convention and/or the way in which she has been raised, yet it can be made explicit and conscious by reading, reflection, and conversation – and thus be subject to development, growth, and deepened understanding.

The word 'spirituality' derives from the word 'spiritual,' which seems to have originated in the letters of St. Paul. St. Paul used the Greek word *pneuma* (*spiritus* in Latin) – meaning breath or wind – to refer to the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Trinitarian God) and *pneumatikos* (*spiritualis* in Latin) to refer to a person inspired by or empowered by the Holy Spirit. The modern-day understanding of 'spirituality,' however, developed more slowly. In fact, as recently as the late 1940s, 'spirituality' was not a word in the English language, but this would soon change. The horrors of World War II forced people to look within themselves, and they were confused and saddened by what they saw. In 1948, a Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, published a reflection on his life he entitled *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It became an overnight sensation. In his book, Merton described his dissipated youth, his doubts, his conversion, and his eventual decision to enter a monastery, yet it did so in a manner that gave eloquent expression to the widespread rootlessness and spiritual hunger of the time. Merton and others like him began to write or speak about what we now call spirituality, and they found eager audiences receptive to their message. Suddenly, it seemed that spirituality had become of great interest to people everywhere. Moreover, its focus has broadened considerably. Spirituality today focuses on becoming a human person in the fullest sense. ("The glory of God is the human person fully alive." – St. Irenaeus, c. 125- 202)

Ronald Rolheiser has observed that it is very difficult to walk this earth and find peace. He points out that it seems that something inside us is at odds with the very rhythm of things. We are forever restless, dissatisfied, unable to express all that we sense within ourselves. Put more simply, there is within us a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace. This desire, this yearning, lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones, in the deep recesses of our soul. We are not serene human beings who are occasionally restless, who occasionally become obsessed with desire. Actually, the reverse is true. We are driven persons, forever obsessed, living lives, as Thoreau suggested, of quiet desperation, who only occasionally experience peace. Desire, he points out, is the fuel that fires us.

Spirituality begins with our deepest desires, those yearnings that spark us and drive us, and ultimately it is about what we do with these deepest desires. Plato spoke of these deepest desires when he said: "We are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods and which would have us believe that we can have a great love, perpetuate our own seed, and contemplate the divine." St. Augustine expressed these same sentiments when he cried: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Ultimately, spirituality is about what we do with our deepest desires.

The word "soul" is how we normally translate the Greek word *psyche*, a word which happens to be the root of "psychology" and "psychiatry." We thus speak of psychologists and psychiatrists as "doctors of the soul." The word "soul" is associated with the whole range of the human psyche: from the senses and emotions, through the intellectual and rational capacities to the higher forms of consciousness, psychic gifts, super consciousness, and cosmic consciousness. The rational mind is not separated from the soul, but is simply an element of the soul. A person's "spirit," however, is beyond thoughts, forms, images, and understandings. The 14th-century mystic, Meister Eckhart, spoke of our spirit, when he observed that "there is in the soul a 'something' in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a 'something' in which the soul dwells in God." In a passage of astonishing clarity and beauty, Thomas Merton took this insight a step further when he spoke of what this "something" is:

"At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from

which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fancies of our mind or the brutalities of our will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God written in us... It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven.”

Spirit is dynamic, energizing, vitalizing, enriching. Like fire and wind, spirit ignites and animates. It is, as it were, the fire in our belly. Yet it should be immediately apparent that we need something to help contain this fire – and this is what the soul offers. We live our lives, as it were, within a forge: our spirit keeps our inner world molten owing to our inner fire, while our soul helps us contain and direct this fire. The result of this is that without spirit we congeal and die, and without soul we are unable to withstand the tension of being molten and are thus pulled apart.

A healthy spirituality channels our spirit in a way that integrates and orients us toward the transcendent. In other words, it guides our response to our deepest longings and provides the framework within which our life becomes meaningful. Although spirituality can never be reduced to practices, it shapes our lives and thus must be lived.

Christian spirituality can thus be defined as a way of being, thinking, choosing, and acting in the light of one’s lived relationship with God, who is understood to be both transcendent mystery –utterly beyond all that is – and immanent presence – within all that is – and who became incarnate – i.e., human – in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BCE - 30/36 CE) and was eventually revered as “the Christ” – the “anointed one” – by believers.

. Christian spirituality today exhibits:

- greater willingness to enter into dialogue with adherents of other spiritual traditions (reflecting a respect for truth wherever it may be found)
- greater focus on community: prayer groups, faith-sharing groups, and spiritual companioning
- greater awareness of the importance of self-awareness and self-understanding in spiritual growth: aided by developmental psychology and personality type indicators (Myers-Briggs, Enneagram)

Christian spirituality today is concerned not simply...

- with the ‘interior life,’ but also with all aspects of human life and experience that are directed toward God
- with the head, but also, and even more importantly, with the heart (“by love can God be grasped and held, but by thought, never” – *The Cloud of Unknowing*)
- with personal holiness (explicit directedness toward God), but also with personal wholeness, i.e., becoming a person in the fullest sense: the person God desires us to be, our truest self

The True Self:

I suspect that all of us have had moments when it is clear that the life we are living is not the same as the life that wants to live in us. In such moments we occasionally catch glimpses of our true life, the life we are meant to live, hidden in the depths of our person. We live our lives searching for that true life, that way of being that is truly authentic. We are most conscious of this search during our adolescence, when it takes center stage. During these tumultuous years we try on identities like clothing, looking for a style that fits with who we think we are or how we want to be seen. But even long after our adolescence has passed, we know the occasional feeling of being a fraud. We are brought face-to-face, not with who we are, but with who we most truly are not. We are brought face-to-face with our own pretense, hypocrisy, and deceit. We are brought face-to-face with our false self.

Much of the search for our true self involves our letting go of the need to be somebody else. It is not uncommon that we not only compare ourselves to some other person; we almost want to be him/her. But this is not only false; it is dangerous. Our own life is always an interweave of good and bad, whereas we falsely view the other as perfect in everything. We thus tend to minimize our own gifts and graces while

maximizing those of the other. The other always seems more intelligent, more attractive, more popular, more whatever than we – but no one leads the proverbial ‘charmed life.’ When I was in high school. I read Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem, “Richard Cory”:

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean-favored and imperially slim.

And he was rich, yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine – we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good Morning!” and he glittered when he walked.

So on we worked and waited for the light,
And went without the meat and cursed the bread,
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet in his head.

The story of Richard Cory attests that every life is a full measure of graces, blessings, struggles, and challenges. Yet if we consistently compare our own complex reality with the supposed perfection of another’s life, is it any wonder that we wish we were someone else? This is not so say that we cannot find goodness and holiness in another person, or that we should not wish to emulate his/her goodness and holiness, but we need to appreciate ourselves for who we are. God loves us just as we are because God made us just as we are. Christian spirituality entails a transformation of the human person which occurs only when God and the person are both deeply known. We come to know God and we come to know ourselves by coming to know that we are loved by God: not simply knowing *that* we are loved by God but by truly experiencing God’s love. The Psalmist caught a sense of this when he exclaimed: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14). The Psalmist praised God by thanking God for making him exactly as God had made him.

Jesus of Nazareth: The Truest Self: A Reflection:

Christian spirituality is defined by the adjective ‘Christian,’ and at the heart of this spirituality is Jesus Christ. As a Christian, I believe that the human Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, possessed the truest self, but I have often wondered who he understood himself to be. Did he know that he was the Son of God, and did he understand all that this implied? As Christians, we believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. In Jesus, God became human. God became what we are. The Eternal Son of the Eternal Father became one of us. Luke the evangelist captures the sense of what this meant when, in speaking of the boy Jesus, he said that “the child grew and became strong, and was filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was with him” (2:40). I believe that the first three words of that verse help us understand Jesus: “the child grew.” Jesus grew! I believe that we can understand how the divine melded with the human in the person of Jesus only if we respect the fact that Jesus grew as each of us does. Like each of us, Jesus grew physically, but during these same years he grew intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually as well – just as you and I do – as he gradually became a human person in all its fullness.

One of the most insightful stories about Jesus is the story of his visit to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old. We’re told that during the visit he became separated from his parents and that after a frantic search “they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” I suspect that during his visit to the temple with his parents, Jesus, a boy from a small town in the hill country of Galilee, perhaps seeing the temple for the first time, was profoundly moved by everything he saw there. But as he and his parents were wandering through the temple, I suspect they happened upon some teachers of the Law sitting in an alcove discussing the Law. Jesus was captivated. He simply had to investigate it. So when the opportunity presented itself, as any 12-year-old boy might do, he very naturally gravitated back there – forgetting that he was supposed to be somewhere else, that is to say, with his parents on their journey back to Nazareth. I suspect that Jesus stood just outside that alcove for some time, listening to the teachers, entranced by all that was unfolding before him. But after

some time passed, he interjected a question. I suspect that the teachers turned to see who had asked such an insightful question and were surprised to see he was simply a boy – but his question evoked a deeper discussion, which Jesus continued to follow. Soon he interjected another question. We wish we knew what Jesus asked the teachers that day, or what he may have said in response to their questions because Luke tells us that “all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers” – but we don’t. But I suspect that Jesus was already pondering many of the issues he would later address during his public ministry. Like other pious Jews, Jesus had listened in the synagogue to what Isaiah had said about the type of fasting God wished: “releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (58:6-7). I suggest that as Jesus was developing as a person, he was becoming increasingly attentive to the world around him and, like his mother Mary, he was beginning to ponder many things in his heart.

Eighteen years passed and Jesus began to hear people speak of the preaching of John the Baptist. As he listened to them speak of the great impact John’s message had for them, he began to inquire about what John was saying. As he listened to their answers, he began to sense a resonance between John’s message and all that he himself was already pondering. We are not told why Jesus left Nazareth and made his way to the place where John was baptizing, but he did. And he sat there and listened to John. And after doing so, we are told that, along with so many others, Jesus made his way forward and was baptized by John. But why? Why did the Sinless One so humble himself and choose to be baptized by John? Was it simply to express his solidarity with those who recognized their sinfulness and sought God’s forgiveness in a baptism of repentance? In effect, this is what he had done, but was this really what had motivated him? Could it have been out of a sense of his own humanity, his own need for God? When all is said and done, I believe we have to wonder if Jesus really knew who he was. Did he know that he was God’s Son, and did he understand all that that implied? And the answer is probably both yes and no. Yes, I suspect that Jesus sensed a special relationship with God, but not in the terms that we know and understand today. This understanding would unfold slowly over the course of his life. To the people of Nazareth with whom he had lived for almost thirty years, Jesus was ordinary in every way. When he later returned there and preached in the synagogue, the people were astonished. “Where did he get all this?” they asked one another. “What is this wisdom he has, and these wonders that are worked through him? ... Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” (Mark 6:1-3). It is not unreasonable to imagine that Jesus thought of himself in these same terms – as an ordinary citizen of Nazareth.

And we are told that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. It is difficult, however, to piece together exactly what happened that day. The imagery of the heavens torn open, a dove descending, and a voice being heard projects a profound experience of God, yet it leaves much unsaid. At first glance, it seems to describe what may have been simply an affirmation of God’s great love for Jesus. Yet it is important to recognize that within a brief moment of time the unassuming carpenter from Nazareth had begun to speak with authority and act with power, so we have to wonder: What really happened at the Jordan?

Perhaps it was that in choosing to be baptized by John, Jesus had made a radical self-offering to God – and in response to that offering, God had embraced Jesus as a father would embrace a son. For Jesus, it was a profound and even overwhelming experience of God, and of being loved by God, and what may have been a new understanding of himself: as God’s ‘Beloved’ and of God as his Father. The heavens in all their majesty had been revealed to him, and the Holy Spirit had descended upon him and entered into him, empowering him. But in the midst of all this Jesus had been brought to understand that God had chosen to make his decisive intervention in history at this very moment and that he was to be the means of bringing this about. It would not be unreasonable to say that Jesus was almost overwhelmed by all this. Mark’s words only hint at what must have been the whirlwind of emotions and the inner turmoil that was surging through him: “and at once the Spirit drove him into the desert” (1:12).

Almost eight hundred years earlier, God had spoken through the prophet Hosea of his great love for the faithless people of Israel and his desire that they return to him: “I will lure her into the desert and there speak to her heart” (2:14). “I will lure her into the wilderness,” God was saying. “I will lure her into a place of solitude and quiet. I will lure her into a place where she and I can be alone, and it is there that I will speak to her heart.” And now the Spirit had drawn Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness is often understood primarily in terms of the fasting he did and the temptations he endured, but that is to ignore what ultimately drew him there: a desire to be with his loving Father, to assimilate all he had just experienced, and to prayerfully ponder the mission his Father had given him.

Jesus had been graced with a profound sense of being loved and called by God from the depths of time and a sense that throughout the hidden and seemingly wasted years in Nazareth God had been shaping and forming him, guiding him and protecting him for the life that he was meant to live. Isaiah’s words about the mysterious Servant of God stirred within him. The words seem almost to be those of Jesus:

“The Lord called me before I was born; from my mother’s womb he pronounced my name. He made me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow and hid me in his quiver. ‘You are my servant,’ he said to me, ‘through whom I shall be glorified’... ‘It is too little,’ he said, ‘for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the survivors of Israel. I will make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth’” (Isaiah 49:1-3,6).

“I will make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” As Jesus pondered not only his experience at the Jordan but also all that had happened to him until that moment, he had a profound sense not only of having been loved by his Father from the depths of time, but also of having been called and empowered and sent forth by him. Yet as his thoughts turned toward his future mission and to the power that had been given him, he found himself severely tempted. He foresaw great crowds flocking to him, acclaiming him, and wishing to crown him king. If we pause for a moment to consider the temptations Jesus experienced in the desert – to turn stones into bread, to throw himself off a great precipice, and to worship the devil in return for all the kingdoms of the earth – we realize they had a single purpose: the temptations were all meant to highlight him. “Look at me!” they were saying. “Look at all I have done; look at the people flocking to me. They love me! My life is about me!” But as Jesus pondered all this he knew in the depth of his heart that his life was not about himself. His life was never meant to glorify himself or shine a spotlight on himself. It was directed entirely toward his Father and the mission his Father had given him. “I have come not to do my will,” he would later tell his disciples, “but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). “He must increase,” he might have added, “and I must decrease.”

Jesus’ Yes to God began with his Yes to his own humanity: his radical acceptance of that most human of all human qualities: his utter poverty before God. In choosing to become what we are, in choosing to share in our human existence, the Son of the eternal God did not cling to his equality with God. Rather, as St. Paul tells us, “he emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7). He emptied himself of any desire to glorify himself and of any desire to be anyone other than who he was: a beloved child of God and a loving servant of his Father. And it was with these sentiments that Jesus made his way out of the desert and, as Luke says, “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14).