

A Conversation about Spirituality

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Several years ago, I participated in a workshop on Spiritual Care, which offered caregivers in the region the opportunity to reflect on how we offer spiritual care for people in our hospitals, care homes, churches, and other groups.

I was particularly struck by a conversation about spirituality. Spirituality is one of those words we often have difficulty defining. Sometimes we use it to talk about what we're not—I'm spiritual but not religious, which is a negative way of locating where we belong. Other times, spirituality is a way of talking about people's religious commitments and practices. Or we use this word to talk about the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.

A University of Minnesota website suggests that spirituality is "a broad concept which ... in general includes a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves; it typically involves a search for meaning in life. As such, it is a universal human experience."

I like this concept of connection, and I've written about it before. For me, when I talk about spirituality, it means being connected in four distinct and related ways: to our deepest and best selves; to others; to nature or creation; and to a higher power, the divine or something bigger than ourselves, however you name it.

This way of thinking about it helps make spirituality less nebulous, less vague and hazy. It also points to the importance of spirituality for living in a whole-hearted kind of way. We are not just physical beings; we are also emotional beings, social beings, psychological beings, and spiritual beings. Just as we all have a physical life, I also believe we all have a spiritual life, even if we define it in different kinds of ways. I am convinced it's an important part of who we are.

What struck me at this Spiritual Care workshop was a series of slides which tried to illustrate some of the dimensions of spirituality. Each slide began "Spirituality is about ..."

... sources of inner strength. These inner resources help us maintain our equilibrium when everything around us is falling apart. Where do you find your strength? What helps you keep your head when all around you is falling apart?

... sources of peace and calm. Related to the first, this has to do with maintaining a calm centre amid all the noise that badgers us from the outside. What keeps you grounded? Where do you find your calm centre amid all the noise around us? Personally, I find my calm centre when I take time to reflect, often with music playing. For others, it's running, or going for a walk in the forest, or being out in nature, or helping another person.

... sources of meaning and significance. What fills your life with meaning? Where do you find significance in your life? Douglas Hall, a Canadian theologian, thinks that this is the great existential question of our age. He claims that we are living in a time of meaninglessness, and the profound question we all face is, 'Where do we find meaning in our lives? What do our lives mean?' Spirituality is one way of beginning to answer those questions.

... a sense of purpose or vocation. Part of discerning meaning has to do with our purpose in life. The word "vocation" comes from a Latin root meaning "to be called." We often find a source of meaning in our lives as we do what we are called to do. It's that internal sense that I'm doing what I was meant to do. Again, this is as individual as the people experiencing it. Nurses experience this kind of calling. So do teachers, or counsellors, or people who reach out to help

other people. I also think that shop keepers and plumbers and mechanics and janitors can also find their work to be a vocation.

... the stories we tell about ourselves and our world. How do you tell the story of your life? Is the world you live in empty or full? Is it warm and loving or cold and uncaring? Is there a purpose to the universe or is it largely meaningless. The way we tell our stories reveal the kind of spirituality which we live out. How do you tell your story?

... the values according to which we live our lives. Spirituality often includes our deepest values, the basis on which we make major life decisions. What are the values by which you live? How do those values help you determine what you choose when faced with a major life choice?

... religious commitments, connections, and practices. Spirituality is not just a feeling, an emotion. It is embodied in our lives in some way. Some embody their spirituality by trying to live with others in a community which gathers regularly and frequently. Others embody it in working with others for the healing of the world. Still others embody their spirituality in being creative, either in the arts, or in relationships, or in community service.

That's why people with a religious affiliation gather. Christians or Buddhists or followers of Wicca or any other religious practice come together for mutual support and encouragement in living their spiritual life. I have also learned that many atheists gather on Sunday mornings to sing songs from their childhoods (often the so-called protest songs of the 1960s), to read from selected poetry or other works of literature, and to take time together to talk, eat, and share the moment.

In these gatherings, we embody our spirituality. We live it out in community with other people.

These slides from the workshop help me think about spirituality in helpful ways. These words may even help us to talk together across spiritual divides about our lives and the world in which we live.

How do you embody your own spirituality?