



## SPIRITUALITY FOR SKEPTICS

By T.Collins Logan

In *Integral Lifework*, acknowledging and nourishing a spiritual dimension is a critical aspect of self-care. However, the benefits of that nourishment are more readily appreciated firsthand than through other people's descriptions of them. And this creates a difficult hurdle when presenting any logical arguments for a spiritual dimension of being or the importance of spiritual nourishment. It is also my experience that there is no single path to inner awakening or spiritual contact that can appeal to everyone. Consequently, various spiritual practices would need to be sampled in order to understand their inherent value. If we remain open, curious, adventurous and persistent in our exploration of a spiritual path that is uniquely appropriate for us, we will eventually encounter transpersonal and self-transcendent events that vastly expand our understanding and enrich our being. Why is it important to pursue such understanding or enrichment? Only in that if we do not, if we neglect this or any other dimension of wholeness, we will inadvertently seek to compensate for what is missing with other things; we will, in effect, substitute more and more until our lives become increasingly out-of-balance. On the other hand, if we attempt to address each dimension of self to some degree, we will heal, grow and transform ourselves in exciting, unexpected and evolutionary ways. This is a fundamental assumption of *Integral Lifework*.

Some of the more substantive barriers to exploring spirituality are various forms of skepticism regarding a transpersonal or self-transcendent aspect of self. In fact, asserting that spirituality is an important facet of personal development tends to alienate people who self-identify as skeptics. However, a chief characteristic of all types of integral practice is the inclusion of a spiritual component. For example, in George Leonard and Michael Murphy's *Integral Transformative Practice*, requisite meditation is described in part as "the spontaneous turning of the heart and mind toward a Presence beyond the ordinary self."<sup>1</sup> In *Integral Life Practice*, based on Ken Wilber's AQAL framework, the Spirit Module seeks to employ "a handful of characteristics that regularly recur and connect humanity's attempts to know God."<sup>2</sup> In *Integral Lifework's* "Authentic Spirit" dimension – one of twelve essential nourishment centers – the aim is to regularly encounter a spiritual ground of being through both interior and exterior effort; that is, to connect with a fundamental essence within and around us, and to express our ongoing relationship with that spiritual ground through compassionate action.

For those already immersed in some form of spiritual practice, this inclusion of spirituality in integral models of self-care has intuitive validity, but for others, the use of any kind of spiritualized language can be a real show-stopper. In countless conversations over the years, I have encountered everything from dismissive indifference to outright hostility when the topic of spiritual nourishment is raised. Years ago, when I attended an Atheists of Washington dinner party in Seattle, I was saddened to discover much of the evening's discussion orbited around bitter, personal stories of abusive religious leaders and oppressive religious communities. One man's father, a spiritual leader in their town,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Life We Are Given* by George Leonard & Micheal Murphy, Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1995, p.107

<sup>2</sup> *Integral Life Practice* by Wilber, Patten, Leonard & Morelli, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2008, p.199

physically and emotionally brutalized his own wife and children. One woman's family had been torn apart after induction into a religious cult. An elderly couple's son had been sexually molested by a predatory priest. A once devout believer had been driven from his faith community because of his sexual orientation. And so on. No matter whom I spoke with, I was confronted with heartbreaking stories of betrayal, hypocrisy and enduring emotional damage in the guise of spiritual nourishment. It seemed the only associations most people at that party had with spirituality were disappointment, anger and an understandable rebelliousness toward anything smacking of religious faith.

At other times, I have witnessed less reactive and less extreme skepticism. For a number of years, I taught mysticism classes at a San Diego Unitarian Universalist church, a community with a strong tradition of intellectual rigor. Sometimes this rigor caused church members to act disinterested and aloof about what I was teaching, and sometimes it inspired them to be more thoughtful and methodical in their curiosity. But it always challenged me as an instructor to introduce the mystical adventure in philosophical, psychological and experiential terms – rather than spiritual ones. By exploring a logical sequence of interior development, and practicing each mystic principle in group exercises, many students reliably achieved access to a different way of seeing, an alternative perception-cognition that was distinctly mystical in nature. As one of my more skeptically inclined students commented after attending the classes: "I think I'm beginning to get a grasp of the ineffable..." He was willing to consider that there was something valid and affirming in the mystical experience; it just took a little openness and persistence to find out what it was. However, some students simply couldn't cross the barrier that their intellect erected between methodical analysis and mystical insight.

Exemplifying another level of skeptical inquiry, a friend of mine with no personal religious experience or convictions once became fascinated with his Mormon ancestry. Over the course of a year's research, he kept discovering surprising coincidences and a strong, faith-based life vision in the stories of his relatives that led him to ponder his own agnosticism. Our discussions during that year sounded some interesting philosophical and spiritual depths. What does it mean when unlikely events align perfectly into a predicted outcome? Why do clear, traceable patterns keep appearing in a family's history? Why do certain people have qualities that inspire unwavering loyalty and devotion? Is synchronicity just random luck, or is it fate, the work of some unseen agent...or something else? And so on. Ultimately, none of this exploration persuaded my friend to embrace Mormonism or adopt spiritual answers for his own life. When I asked him about this, he shrugged and said matter-of-factly, "I guess I don't have the religion gene." In his view, he needed something more concrete than his family's history to bridge the gap between the terra firma of his life experience and the abstract possibility of spirit.

I have also discussed spiritual beliefs with philosophers, scholars, scientists and intellectuals who, although they have tried to remain open-minded, just can't consider the greatest scriptures of world religions anything more than elaborate fairy tales, full of inconsistencies and preposterous assumptions that can't be validated. Although they may have once been genuinely inquisitive in an intellectual way, they eventually became frustrated and dismissive of a spiritual dimension because they could not find an analytical foothold among sacred texts. For the same reason, they also avoided initiating a spiritual practice of their own. Consequently, they were never able to experience the transformative depths of a committed interior discipline firsthand, and remained wary of the assurances of passionately "spiritual" devotees. For them, intellectual pride and mistrust of non-rational approaches disparaged the possibility of spirit as an innate component of self; from a distance, and through the filter of rational discourse, it all seemed like so much smoke and mirrors.

And of course there are those who have not explored spirituality in any way, but may nevertheless have strong opinions about it. Assembling an understanding from mass media, popular culture, the prejudices of their peers and the values transmitted by their parents, they may confidently reject spirit without any personally acquired knowledge about it. For skeptics in this category, the dismissal of all things spiritual is a reflex borne out of fear of the unknown, misinformation, and conformance to social pressures – which often results in a potent combination of arrogance and ignorance. It has always been surprising to me that, in a technological world where vast stores of verifiable information are so readily accessible, accurate understanding of any topic is so easily obscured. Even amid overwhelming data that support reasonable and even obvious conclusions about the benefits of spiritual practice, a critical mass of fear-based, tribal groupthink and can still silence or distort any version of the truth.

Finally, the anguish of long held guilt, insecurity or self-loathing can also alienate some people from spiritual experiences. If I am convinced I am unworthy of greater connection with myself, the Universe or some concept of the Divine, how could I ever permit any sort of transpersonal connection to occur? Why would I risk polluting the possibility of a revealing Light of spiritual knowledge with my own darkness and imperfection? What would compel me to sully something pure, good and holy with my own wretchedness? If I identify strongly with my own failings, I will tend to avoid any circumstances that might rectify my disfigured self-worth. I can become so attached to my own limitations – so guided by them in all of my reflections and decisions – that I forcefully reject any way out of the maze they have created for my life. Spirituality then becomes just one more avenue to healing, and I will therefore assiduously avoid it.

So the range of skepticism is quite broad, from hostile and attacking, to aloof and condescending, to contentedly indifferent, to mildly curious, to dourly frustrated, to reflexively avoidant. How then can the importance of regular spiritual practice be introduced to this diverse array of skeptics? I think the response differs for each form of skepticism. In the case of a devout atheist who has been sorely wounded by their exposure to corrupted religion, there is little room for rational discussion or a safe launching point for new spiritual experience. Intense emotional pain simply carries more weight than intangible hypotheticals, impassioned testimonies or the curiosity to try something new. Rejection of “all things spiritual” is a pragmatic survival mechanism for such victims, and in most cases the heart and mind must fully heal before spiritual nourishment can be explored, accepted or integrated. In the face of such deeply felt hostility, even the most powerful and life-changing exposure to any kind of transpersonal or self-transcendent information will tend to be resolutely dismissed. So the first step in a spiritual direction will almost always involve healing on an emotional and psychological level.

In my *Integral Lifework* coaching, I have learned that it is never advantageous for us to aggressively confront the most pronounced or rigid barriers to nourishment in ourselves, especially when they are the product of enduring woundedness. Forcibly confronting just evokes more confusion, pain, resistance and, in extreme cases, complete disintegration of our well-being. Instead, we can gently and compassionately probe the core material behind such barriers to uncover the nature of our beliefs and disbeliefs. So my clients and I will inventory nourishment routines and perceptions in each of twelve dimensions, then begin addressing undernourishment where there is already motivation to heal. When we encounter barriers, we connect the dots by isolating causal experiences and relationships from the past, then identifying what nourishment we feel was being restricted or denied at that time. Once it become clear why we are resistant to certain types of nurturing in the present, we can explore

reasons to mend the injuries, brokenness and depletions we experienced earlier in our lives. In this way, an organic path of least resistance to incremental positive change reveals itself.

This is an equally helpful approach for anyone who feels trapped in a prison of guilt. Here, however, instead of deeply felt anger at spiritual prospects, there can be uncontrollable, almost animal terror. To explore any new dimension of reality inherently unveils many uncomfortable truths about the self, and this is no less true of spirit. If part of that truth is raw, debilitating shame and a lifetime of self-limiting beliefs and habits that have resulted from that shame, the first steps to freedom can be extremely difficult. There is only one force I have encountered that can reach into such hurt and despair with a healing touch, and that is love. If love is genuine and skillful, offering its encouraging support to the innermost depths of our darkness, then even the most beleaguered soul will find a compassionate, responsive resonance in its core. A spark will inevitably ignite that leads to higher and clearer levels of understanding, providing the fortitude and insight to reprocess memories that have cultivated guilt, revulsion or shame over time. Eventually, once caring warmth and tearful laughter prevail against fear, the first hints of light can grow into a warming sun. Once again, this is part of a long, continuous arc of healing. There are seldom any epiphanies or breakthroughs that unconditionally welcome spirit, but there is a gradual building of confidence and compassion that support openness to spiritual experience.

For those who remain aloof from spiritual topics because of intellectual pride, ego may remain a barrier until the limitations of an analytical approach are laid bare. For me this discovery occurred when I tried to reason my way through romantic relationships as a young man. I found a universe of emotions far too sophisticated and subtle to reduce to logical descriptors. Can love be explained in purely rational terms? Perhaps in the most clinical sense it can, but love can't be fully felt, successfully navigated or holistically understood with intellect alone. We can experience love and intuit our way through it, but we must subject our minds to its interior movements rather than forcing love into Cartesian structures. And the same is true of comprehending spirit – though I think spirit is subtler still, further abstracted from conscious reason. Yet once the leap is made that some aspects of our existence are inaccessible through an analytical approach, the door to spiritual exploration can begin to open. Of course, intellectual pride can sometimes mask deeper, more chaotic insecurities about both self-concept and uncharted interior dimensions. Here, too, there may be wounds to heal and compassion for self to learn. But these are prerequisites for any type of wholeness, not just spiritual exploration; spirit is, after all, just one more dimension of self.

For those who avoid spirituality out of conformance to peer groups, or who miscomprehend the transpersonal or self-transcendent through simple ignorance, or who doubt their own facility for spiritual experience, the journey to rudimentary understanding is a relatively short one. All of these barriers to spiritual exploration can relax when fears relax, and this is most readily accomplished through sharing our adventure with a group of other seekers and experienced practitioners. When we feel safe, accepted and supported by others, and perhaps even inspired by the example and testimony of those with a longstanding spiritual discipline, more soulful proclivities naturally tend to seek expression. Ideally, both our doubt and our curiosity should be supported equally. For all of these flavors of skepticism, if a person can quiet anxiety and mistrust long enough to experiment with meditation, mystic activation or other spiritual practices with honest intentions, reasonable expectations and a modicum of stick-to-itiveness, they will begin to answer the most challenging questions about spirituality on their own. For anyone willing to let go of their prejudices just a little,

the rapid benefits of an appropriate spiritual regimen will soften doubt and plant a seed for growth. Once again, this requires confidence, compassion and self-awareness along with a healthy tolerance of ambiguity and doubt. To achieve the inner quiet necessary for spiritual perception, we must make peace with all of those inner voices clamoring for love and attention.

I recall one student who attended my series of mysticism classes for two years. She had been deeply antagonized by religious experiences early in her life, and as a result had been unable to provide adequate spiritual nourishment to herself for many years. But she intuited that a part of her longed for spiritual connection, and this drew her to my class. She listened attentively to the accounts others shared of their experiences, took copious notes, and diligently experimented with mystic activation, yet nothing really resonated for her. However, because she longed to heal the part of her that had been wounded into silence during her childhood, she kept attending. Then, late one night near the end of a class series, we sampled a heart-centered mystic activator she hadn't yet tried. After just five minutes of practice, she was in tears. An inner door had opened, and the light of insight flooded her being. All the discussion and observation of the past two years finally had a personal context for her, and a felt spiritual awareness blossomed within. But it took time, and persistence, and a willingness to be vulnerable. It took eagerness to learn, to expand beyond previous boundaries of self, and to take certain risks. I have witnessed this process dozens of times, and the lesson for me as an instructor is that everyone can find their way to spirit – they just need the space, time and loving permission to do so.

In this context, I think it is also helpful to discuss approaches that aren't particularly supportive of genuine spiritual experience. Perhaps as a response to skepticism, or out of a need to more quickly generate interest in various systems, some Western practitioners who promote a particular spiritual tradition have excised spiritual language from their discourse, or obscured the doctrinal roots of a given practice, to make it more palatable. Hatha Yoga, for example, is routinely presented as a physical fitness regimen rather than an integral part of Hindu paths to spiritual enlightenment. Buddhist meditation is sometimes couched as a mental discipline that positively reshapes consciousness and enhances happiness, rather than as a deliberate effort to encounter Buddha nature or an avenue to karmic opportunity. In Transcendental Meditation, the personal mantra a practitioner receives from their guru may invoke a Hindu deity, though this has likewise rarely been disclosed. The charitable outreach of many Christian organizations often becomes an effort to proselytize those being served without the transparent disclosure of this agenda. And the self-improvement techniques of some New Age systems may share deep wisdom or promote immediate tangible benefits without always revealing the system's spiritual origin or history. All of these examples seem to operate within a fundamental insecurity about advertising the spiritual provenance of certain insights and practices.

However, relying on secrecy, the lure of immediate benefits, or a linguistic slight-of-hand to lull people into a receptive state is not very ethical. There are certainly many well-meaning folks whose confidence in their beliefs and earnest desire to do good may inadvertently lead them down this path, and there are other, not-so-well-meaning folks who strive to manipulate the unsuspecting. But regardless of the intention, the results of such dishonest sales efforts are predictable: Those who would have eventually found their way to a personal expression of spirit are often sidetracked, distracted or disillusioned; those who are most interested in quick fixes to personal challenges can become addicted quasi-spiritual substitutions; and those who naturally resist the spiritualization of their existence can be

estranged even further. In other words, this approach can actually become a barrier to a healthy, viable, enduring dimension of spirit.

And yet the seeker is there in all of us, no matter how muted it may have become through misguided religiosity, unpleasant memories, societal pressures or natural fears and doubts. So is there perhaps a constructive way to introduce spirituality to a broad spectrum of the curious, including those subject to such a variety of skepticism? Is there a straightforward and transparent means of encouraging beneficial self-care in this crucial dimension?

## A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO SPIRIT

If we step back for a moment from acknowledging the transpersonal or self-transcendent as *spiritual*, what are some of the characteristics of a “spiritual experience?” Here is a short list of some of the terms I’ve heard people use in the course of my teaching and *Integral Lifework* coaching:

- Uplifting gratitude, thanksgiving, joy or bliss
- An observed stream of synchronicity – a series of meaningful coincidences
- An intuitive aha, insight, deep knowing or revelation
- Self-knowledge that evokes surprise, shock, disquiet or fear
- A sixth sense awareness, *déjà vu*, or distinctly felt presence
- Intense feelings of love, compassion or empathic connection
- Emotional release, freedom of conscience, a letting go, forgiveness, acceptance
- A profound sense of wonder and awe
- An abiding trust, confidence or faith
- Inner stillness, expansiveness, nowness, quietude

Clearly, many of these characteristics are not unique to spiritually-oriented people. In fact, almost anyone could experience these patterns without accrediting them to a spiritual cause. We may accept or dismiss them at face value, as predictable reactions to a perpetually mysterious, wonder-filled Universe. The friend who concluded he doesn’t have “the religion gene” can still feel awe and exhilaration when he catches a good wave at the beach, or when he stands before a beautiful waterfall in the desert. My father, a deeply skeptical man, can still feel elated and grateful when he masters a whitewater river in an open canoe, skis a difficult line through dense forest, or finds a hundred-dollar bill in his driveway. A writer acquaintance of mine who vehemently rejects all romanticism and magical thinking can still soar with joy, surprise and revelation as she writes or reads a well-written

story. And so on. Anyone, no matter how steeped in their native skepticism, can experience emotional release, non-rational confidence, synchronicity, wonder and bliss.

So should we even try to differentiate the spiritual from the material, biological or psychological? Is it at all necessary to call upon transpersonal vocabularies to describe or duplicate these experiences? In terms of actual holistic nourishment, our subjective well-being doesn't require such spiritualization. We can be "spiritually nourished" without acknowledging the existence of our soul – or Angels, Buddhas, Deities, Spirit Guides, Magick or anything else attributed to a spiritual dimension. However, in order to create a structured self-nourishment regimen that really works, three things are helpful. The first is a sense of openness to the *possibility* of spiritual realities; the second is an admission that reason alone can only get us so far in our journey of self-discovery and self-nourishment; and the third is a gradual recognition of the interrelatedness of everything around us.

Let's discuss each of these. As we've already touched upon, our facility for a carefully reasoned, analytical approach isn't the only tool available to us, and relying on these faculties alone is inherently self-limiting. During what we may interpret as rational motivation and decision-making, our affective system (the source of our emotions) plays a critical role.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as well-documented cases have shown, people whose brains are injured or impaired in a way that reduces their emotive capacity have difficulty making decisions at all – or tend to make decisions detrimental to their own well-being.<sup>4</sup> We are feeling beings, and our felt experience has tremendous influence on how we navigate reality. In the same way, paying attention to physical sensations – pain, pleasure, tension, release and so on – can likewise inform our understanding. Why would we spend time and energy measuring the exact temperature, surface geometry and moisture content of a rock, then calculate the potential impact of these factors on our clothing or skin, when simply touching the rock will tell us it's too hot, or too wet, or too rough to sit upon? So a variety of input streams shape our rational navigation, including our physical sensations, our felt emotions and our conceptual ideation. And if we possess such somatic intelligence, emotional intelligence and analytical intelligence...is it such a stretch to believe we also have spiritual intelligence? At a minimum, we can allow our hearts and bodies to have a say in how we assess or access the possibility of spirit.

This segues neatly to the topic of openness. Earlier, when I alluded to the atheist organization's dinner party, we caught a glimpse of how closed-mindedness can be created by traumatic life experience. To be entirely resistant to some possibility is usually a self-protective reflex grounded in past suffering. It may require years of conscious self-healing to soften such barriers to well-being, but they are indeed barriers. And of course these kinds of interruptions can spring up in any nourishment dimension. I may refuse to eat green things because I became sick from spinach at a young age, or avoid intimate relationships because I have been emotionally hurt by them in the past, or insist on being the driver in someone else's car because I was severely frightened by a car accident once. Although these may originate from legitimate survival reflexes, such reactions are closing us down, preventing us from exchanges and environments that can nurture and sustain us. Likewise, if I vehemently refuse to

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<sup>3</sup> *Do emotions help or hurt decision making?: A Hedgefoxian Perspective* by Kathleen D. Vohs, Roy F. Baumeister, George Loewenstein. Russell Sage Foundation, 2007

<sup>4</sup> "The role of emotion in decision-making: Evidence from neurological patients with orbitofrontal damage" by Antoine Bechara, Department of Neurology, University of Iowa. Published in *Brain and Cognition* (Issue 55, 2004) p30-40

consider the possibility of a spiritual dimension of being, that refusal is probably anchored an unresolved sense of woundedness, frustration or grief. Such rigidity indicates that healing in one or more dimensions of self is necessary, and that alone should motivate us to seek out such healing.

We can also close ourselves off to new understanding when we have already embraced a specific spiritual belief system. Many years ago, in my late teens and early twenties, I participated in a fundamentalist perspective that resisted ideas and experiences that weren't sanctioned by my religious community. Over the years, I have witnessed the same sort of resistance among many different faiths. And because strict conformance tends to benefit and empower religious institutions, entertaining contrary ideas can be challenging in this context. It requires both courage and fortitude to escape what are essentially tribal pressures, especially with respect to alternate approaches to spirituality. To remind myself of this potential pitfall of religious overcommitment, I often recall some instructive counterexamples. Thomas Merton, for instance, who discovered a profound affinity with Zen Buddhist monks and surprising intersections between Zen practices and his own Trappist disciplines. Or J. Krishnamurti, who insisted that our journey to truth is a pathless land, devoid of spiritual gurus or authorities. Or Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist who considers Jesus to be one of his spiritual ancestors and many of the Christians he has met to be holy people. Or the Sufi poet Hafiz of Shiraz, who praised Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Zoroaster equally and without reservation.

Somewhere between the extremes of reflexive rejection and blind conformance lies the seeker's heart. Here we question with purpose, we doubt because it helps us penetrate illusions we ourselves have constructed, we selectively challenge our beliefs because through such efforts we strengthen our understanding. At the same time we are also willing to suspend our disbeliefs, to entertain the validity of the ridiculous, because in honest humility we recognize that our comprehension remains incomplete. In this way we learn to laugh at ourselves, to take our own assumptions with a grain of salt, while also learning to avoid laughing disdainfully at others. And all of this allows us to open up new channels of nourishment, to access new experiences and insights, to be delighted and surprised with unexpected wisdom and joy. That is, to be integrally enriched.

At some point in our future, humanity may well be able to catalogue biology of consciousness right down to the causality of all events in the brain – whether emotional, analytical, spiritual or some new categorization. Right now neuroscience and other biological approaches to consciousness are evolving rapidly. But if and when the entirety of the human mind is fully mapped and the billions of neural interactions can be precisely predicted, the human need for context will not be alleviated. The question of “Why?” will remain behind every scientific observation. Innocent children, wizened elders and everyone in between will still ask: “What does it mean?” and “What does it mean for me?” And so the context for new ideas and information will continue to evolve in unexpected ways. *Integral Lifework* seeks to provide one such context for spirituality as part of a broader integral practice. It places our efforts into a simple framework: that all interactions, all relationships, all impulses stem from our imperative to nourish and be nourished. And no matter what dimension is involved – physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, etc. – nourishment occurs through an open, receptive, multifaceted engagement with our inner and outer environments. Remaining open is crucial for all dimensions of being, both in promoting the optimal function of each nourishment center, and in welcoming powerful synergies between all dimensions.



This brings us to the idea of interrelatedness: the contention that everything interacts on some level with everything else; that a complex web of interdependence supports our consciousness, our community, our society and our world; that certain forces and factors pervade and unify all of existence. Various belief systems have expressed intuitions of this possibility differently. There are the age-old ideas of pantheism and panentheism. The Vedantic concept of Brahman in Hinduism. The Buddhist doctrine of *pratīyasamutpāda*. The monism of Neo-Platonism. The Sufi insight of *wahdat al-wujud*. The Tao of Taoism...and so on. Each of these is unique, and not merely a divergent definition of the same idea, but they do share the fundamental quality of a unifying pattern, consciousness or energy – an essential *something* that underlies or connects All That Is. We see this same sentiment echoed in the nondual musings of mystics throughout history across every culture; in their experience of a shared ground of being, perceiving the Divine in everyone, encountering a true reality or essence that underlies all things, relinquishing a distinct identity of self into a unitive whole, and so on. From the sermons of Meister Eckhart, to Master Gutei's single finger, to the poems of Rumi, unitive interrelatedness has found infinite mystical expression.

In a separate but related thread of insight, the world's thinkers have also sought to create bridges between intuited interrelatedness and empirically observable phenomena. Early expressions of this idea could be broadly grouped as sacred geometry, from Pythagorean attributions of healing within the mathematical relationships of music, to the veneration of phi (the golden ratio, Fibonacci sequence, Divine Proportion, etc.) among many cultures, to the use of the vesica piscus in medieval Christian art, to the nature and significance of Platonic solids. We might also group the esoteric use of mathematics, such as numerology, into this arena. And of course there are the many iterations of teleology, from Plato to Kant to current proponents of *intelligent design*. The idea that the macrocosm and microcosm are intimately related, and in fact correspond to each other in direct ways, is also the foundation for practices such as astrology, alchemy and Hermetic Magick. Once again, all of these approaches are quite different from each other, but they sound out a similar theme: that observable, measurable patterns throughout all of existence somehow demonstrate the unitive interrelatedness of that existence.

More recently, across fields as varied as biology, physics, mathematics, philosophy and psychology, there have been countless efforts to understand the interconnectedness of everything. This has resulted in ideas like quantum entanglement, unified field theory, systems theory, deep ecology, transpersonal psychology and integral theory. The list of contributors is long, but thinkers across a plethora of disciplines include Norbert Wiener, Edward Lorenz, Benoît Mandelbrot, David Bohm, Ervin László, Rupert Sheldrake, Arne Næss, Carl Jung, Stanislov Grof and Ken Wilber. Each of these approaches presents a separate and distinct way of examining how observable aspects of our world are interconnected – and, once again, each arrives at very different conclusions about what unitive interrelatedness represents. But the principle of intrinsic interdependency is evident throughout, and we can conceivably lump all of them together under a single conceptual umbrella – as long as that umbrella is big enough.

Of course, we also find the theme of unitive interrelatedness in many different functional disciplines as well. In the practice of holistic medicine, which attempts to treat the whole person rather than specific symptoms or illnesses. In the process of consensus-building when making complex decisions in large organizations. In attempts at egalitarian communities and collaborative learning environments. In religious ecumenism. In the relationship between statistically significant samples and broader societal

trends. Even at an interpersonal level, when we collaborate with others to solve problems or emphasize mutual appreciation and respect as the foundation of friendship, we are really expressing a facet of unitive interrelatedness. Rather than interpreting something or someone as an assemblage of distinct components within a hierarchy, these approaches value an integral whole as an ongoing, dynamic process where each contributing factor has influence and value.

I would contend that all of these efforts, woven into so many fields and practices, and evident across so many cultures and civilizations, is inspired by a shared impulse within all of us. And that is *the impulse to perceive, understand, actualize and expand a fundamental cohesiveness of being*. When we pull back from the differing details and focus of each discipline, examining all of them together from a distance, we catch glimpses of a broadly shared pattern; a pattern of unitive interrelatedness. This doesn't mean that all of these unique paths must of necessity be integralized – that is, made to conform to an overarching integral formula. And we also need not create a competitive meme that somehow incorporates and or dominates all others. On the contrary, we can appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of human thought and experience, and the value and benefits of each perspective, without pressuring them neatly into a syncretist, hierarchal or totalitarian model; in the pragmatic spirit of William James, we can appreciate the validity of all competing perspectives for the people who hold them, without needing to reconcile those perspectives with each other. At the same time, is it so preposterous that your being and my being share a fundamental sameness? Or that disparate phenomena share the same primary cause? Or that an intuitive, felt experience of a unitive state might in fact be accurate rather than illusory? Or, at a minimum, that our desire for cohesive patterns is a natural and healthy response to a mysterious universe?

Like all being, however, the principle of interrelatedness I am attempting to define here is really a moving target. It is not static, but creative, interactive, dynamic and evolving, just as we are. It is more of a perpetual process than an immovable endpoint. As thinkers as diverse as Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, Arthur M. Young, Jean Gebser, Ken Wilber and Don Beck have suggested, there is either a Divine imperative, a natural inevitability or a co-creative invitation to progressively amplify what I have defined as unitive interrelatedness in our consciousness and in the world around us. Among these writers, we find both the personal responsibility and innate capacity to participate in such a process. Through increasingly cohesive and holistic modes of thought, expression and interaction, we actively contribute to an evolutionary progress – with All That Is becoming evermore integrated and aware. Many spiritual traditions, perhaps all of them at some point in their development, declare that interior transformation should be accompanied an outpouring of compassionate action. And that action is unitive in nature: it unites us with our innermost selves, with each other, with the miracle of our planet, and with the source and substance of existence itself. Within this worldview, all that is truly transformative – all that expresses transcendent becoming – emanates from our deliberate immersion in *a felt experience of unitive interrelatedness*; that is, in our active connection with a shared ground of being.

We could now posit a definition of *spirituality* within this sweeping context. That is, on the one hand the impulse toward comprehending and integrating unitive interrelatedness can become a spiritual impulse, and on the other the evolution occurring in concert with expression and realization of this unity is spiritual in nature. Our exploration of interrelatedness could then be described as an avenue to appreciate all things spiritual, and spiritual disciplines a means of exploring and actualizing unitive insights and energies. Invigorating an intimate relationship with the All – that is, falling in love with

the mysterious cohesion of interdependent being – is to inspire spiritual unfolding within and without. To participate actively in propagating unitive memes is to participate in spiritual evolution itself. And so on. These assumptions do not mandate adherence to any particular religious doctrine, and it is important not to shoe-horn our individual journey into someone else’s idea of what spirituality must look like. They are merely a placeholder, a convenient way to organize our nourishing efforts. In my experience, the progression of spiritual understanding has infinite variability, with constantly shifting horizons. Perhaps a beneficial orientation would therefore be to remain open to the next grand vista of esoterically and experientially informed being and becoming...whatever that may be.

### *How Different Spiritual Models Converge in Integral Lifework*

Pouring the essential nature – the ultimate ground – underlying diverse spiritual aspirations into the same virtual container for all of humanity has of course been a common theme in twentieth century writings, especially in the West. Thinkers from René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon to Thomas Campbell and Aldus Huxley have expounded upon this idea at length in their descriptions of a *perennial philosophy*. These writers don’t dismiss differences between religious ideas as insignificant, they merely place more emphasis what they perceive unifies and underlies all faiths. I think Huston Smith summarizes it concisely in his essay *Is There A Perennial Philosophy?* He writes: “Red is not green, but the difference pales before the fact that both are light. No two waves are identical, but their differences are inconsequential when measured against the water that informs them all.” It is with a similar sentiment that I offer unitive interrelatedness as launching point for personal spiritual exploration. I tend to agree that all distinct rivers of exoteric tradition flow from the same esoteric spring within. However, I also believe that all those rivers are necessary to support the diverse landscapes of human experience, aptitude, learning style, enculturation, understanding and perception. In addition, our individual and collective spiritual journey is also a constantly evolving event; that is, the course and character of each river changes over time, and flows ever-onward into new territory. However, it is not necessary to adopt any of these views to manifest spiritual nourishment in our lives.

Take for example a contrasting perspective that avoids the presumption of a shared experiential ground for spiritual realities. The writings of John Heron and Jorge Ferrar on *participatory spirituality* offer an approach that, on the surface at least, departs from perennialist thinking altogether. Here the emphasis shifts towards a peer-to-peer model that collaboratively synthesizes spirituality and the supporting context of spirit. This synthesis occurs through non-hierarchical relating between different aspects of self, between self and the Divine, between self and others, between others and their environment, and so on. From this dynamic, relational process, transformative synergies are generated that co-create spirit in an ever-evolving way. That is, in a participatory model, spirituality invites our ongoing participation in exchanges that enact new, dynamic spiritual realities, rather than revealing static or preexisting ones. In this way, all spiritual paths coexist without agreeing on a common root; instead, they agree to share a common ongoing process. This process is intended to be all-inclusive, but it approaches that inclusion via dialectic pluralism rather than unitive or universalist thinking.

Interestingly, the participatory approach also echoes many important characteristics of a healthy nourishment process as defined by *Integral Lifework*. For example, fulfillment of our spiritual nourishment center does not operate independently from other nourishment centers, but depends on relational synthesis with them. To facilitate the most holistic nurturing possible, we foster

compassionate, interdependent connections between heart and mind, body and spirit, legacy and history, interiority and community, and so on. At the same time, all of these dimensions are part of a unified whole trying to understand and actuate itself. Borrowing a metaphor from Alan Watts, each nourishment center is playing a game of hide-and-seek with every other, as well as with our current self-concept. So we create loving relationships between all of them, we introduce dialectic tension, we appreciate adventure and perpetuate change. Thus the dimension of Authentic Spirit cannot be nourished in isolation from interior or exterior interrelatedness. In terms of interpersonal relationships, a community of spiritual practice is extremely beneficial. As many students in my mysticism classes have reported, group practice amplifies personal efforts, broadening and deepening our contact with mystery. It also provides a supportive environment for us to begin our practice, as well as creating unexpected and enriching synergies. And, perhaps most importantly, engaging others in a spiritual context helps us translate our involution into loving and skillful action that benefits the good of All. That said, all of this intra- and interpersonal connection ultimately results in a sense of belonging, integration, deep sharing and unified purpose; that is, it contributes to a felt experience very much in the spectrum of unitive interrelatedness.

Let's also not forget what the many established faith traditions have to offer. Benefits like an established community, structured learning and support systems for spiritual practice, rich histories, extensive literatures, and living examples of personal faith. If we find ourselves gravitating towards a particular spiritual tradition, there is really no reason to reinvent the wheel. In *Integral Lifework*, the emphasis is less about subscribing to a particular metaphysical model, and more about committing to high quality spiritual nourishment. Whether universalist, participatory, traditional or some entirely new approach, all spiritual paths have inherent value, especially if they are approached consciously and with certain vital nourishment characteristics in mind. I do believe that a direct, felt experience of unitive interrelatedness is compatible with all paths, and so I tend to promote mystically oriented disciplines. However, I also believe that a truly inclusive framework for spirituality relies on the coexistence of seemingly contradictory memes to spur us ever onward toward new levels of insight and understanding. Once again, there is no reason to negate one approach while promoting another – there is adequate space for all. In *Integral Lifework*, there is ample room for unity and differentiation, for tradition and invention, for doubt and conviction, for pluralism and nonduality, for a shared ground of being and a synthesis of becoming. We simply need to expand our hearts, minds and lives to accommodate whatever we encounter along our journey.

Many questions arise from this sort of discussion, but one in particular invites special consideration: Is there an intended conclusion to this spiritual adventure? Many religious belief systems offer us different versions of liberation – liberation from suffering, from illusion, from sin, from the perceived distance between our earthly existence and the Divine, etc. Such transcendent freedoms are the hallmark of spiritual progress, even where interpretations differ. However, our experience of liberation will always be intensely personal, and will of necessity change over time. If we are defining spirituality as dynamic, interactive, evolving and liberating...how could our journey ever end? It seems much more likely that there is a continuous progression or, as some traditions suggest, an endlessly repeating cycle. But this is where we depart from pragmatic nourishment considerations and enter a realm of personal faith. Is it necessary to have such faith? I think it can often be helpful, but only if we are willing to continually question and revise our understanding. As Diogenes Laertius quoted of Pythagoras: "So deep is its cause, even if you journey along every path, you will never find

the limits of the soul.” With this assertion in mind, perhaps it is not necessary to embrace metaphysical models or personal convictions that confidently enclose the infinite.

Regardless of approach, all of these different conceptions of spirit are really about generating a context for taking care of an essential part of ourselves and the world around us. Returning to the other two guiding themes that compliment interrelatedness, nourishment requires us to seek openness above dogmatic rigidity, and a felt experience of spirit beyond the discourse of reason alone, and so hashing out refined conceptual differences avails us little. Although debates over ontology, epistemology and the advantages and disadvantages of different systems are fascinating and titillating, they do not provide the fertile soil for spiritual growth, or sew the seeds of transformative practice. Infinitely more profitable is beginning a spiritual journey of our own with courage and joy, and cradling what we find along the way as gently as possible in our hearts and minds. Whatever framework we choose to adopt, the supportive beliefs that underlie a spiritual nourishment placeholder may be subject to change, but the process of nurturing remains. Once I was a disinterested agnostic, then I was a fundamentalist Christian, now I am an integral mystic. I have always felt gratitude, but the object and scope of that gratitude has shifted over time. Now my intention is to feel gratitude in the fullest way possible, and direct it toward the greatest, most inclusive understanding of the Whole I can imagine. In time, this will likely morph into something else. Yet throughout all of these phases, I have tried to maintain the nourishing activity of gratitude, even though the context has shifted. In this way, spirituality can become an exercise in connecting with All That Is within and without, while at the same time allowing every aspect of our inner and outer lives more room to breathe, adapt and flourish – regardless of the specific belief system with which we choose to support our experiences.

Revisiting a skeptical perspective, the deliberate spiritualization of this particular nourishment center could also be viewed as entirely arbitrary and artificial. Perhaps all of this defining is just an uncritical, self-referential, or even apophenic means of categorizing otherwise ineffable perceptions and consciousness. Perhaps the borrowing of spiritual language is just a lazy shortcut used to rationalize an inchoate interior process. Perhaps perceiving unifying patterns in anything is nothing more than gestalt constructivism, an isomorphic projection of our interior cognitive, affective or intuitive structures into perceived exterior structures. But so what? The placeholder of spirituality has proven itself a useful tool in understanding and integrating things like unconditional love, courageous action, intuitive knowing, a sense of purpose, skillful compassion and many other beneficial trajectories. In turn, spiritualized practice has facilitated what might otherwise be abstract or inaccessible forms of essential nourishment. It generates a learnable system around an otherwise incomprehensible category of interaction, so exchanges in that realm can become more constructive. Once again, we need not promote the idea that all spiritual paths converge upon identical conclusions, or even that science must of necessity support an integral spiritual system or universal spiritual experience, but rather that the impulse to know our innermost self, and to understand how that self relates to the Universe, is a natural and necessary voyage for us all.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF NOURISHING EVERY DIMENSION**

*Integral Lifework* proposes there are at least twelve dimensions of essential nourishment, and perhaps more that aren't yet fully understood. Most of these can be defined in practical, precise, even scientific language. But a few of them resist easy definition. Early on in my practice, I recall trying to explain

some of the more abstract nourishment centers to a friend, and struggling to find adequate language. “Of course you’re having trouble,” my friend commented, “because you’re trying to describe an entirely new idea, an entirely new way of looking at things.” And that’s exactly it. Consider how the concepts and language of spirituality likely evolved. People had experiences they couldn’t describe within the vocabulary and ideosphere they inhabited, so they came up with new concepts and terms. So, rather than reinventing the wheel, I have borrowed what I could from the spiritual lexicon to define certain nourishment practices, and invented new terms only when I couldn’t find words with the precise meaning required. But regardless of the language used, regardless of how theoretical, foreign or confusing any dimension may be to us, we still require balanced nourishment in all dimensions, so we must find a palatable way to understand each of them.

An unfortunate consequence of neglecting any dimension of being for long is that real suffering ensues. After an extended period of malnourishment in any nourishment center, barriers to well-being become denser, more calcified and more problematic. Injury can become more severe. Pathologies can become chronic and even life-threatening. Happiness and contentment can seem perpetually beyond our reach. This is easily observed: in the paralyzing loneliness of people who resist genuine intimacy; in the debilitating grief and anger of someone who cannot forgive; in the chronic illness of people with crippled self-worth; in the perpetual confusion and emotional disarray of someone who does not exercise their mind or listen to their heart; in the depressive maelstrom of folks who continually neglect their physical well-being. And the more intensely we try to substitute whatever is missing from our lives with exciting novelties or comforting distractions, the more imbalanced, frustrating and injurious our existence becomes. And yet, because – in the U.S. at least – we often have an abundance of resources and opportunities to continually escape from ourselves, we can end up inured to our own suffering, grief, sickness and pain. We can avoid realizing how crazy things have become for us. Like an alcoholic who can’t seem to free themselves from the bottle’s comfort, we may just keep reaching for something to balm our conscience and numb our self-awareness. We may keep trying to consume our way to freedom only to discover we have enslaved ourselves further.

In my own life and through my work with *Integral Lifework* clients, I have witnessed the natural progression and consequences of this behavior many times. So a large part of my role as an *Integral Lifework* coach is not only to help people recognize what patterns of thought and behavior are impeding their well-being, but also help them find motivations within themselves to embrace what they have spent a lifetime rejecting. If avoidance or resistance is rooted in associations with childhood trauma, we’ll work through that together. If it is the result of ignorance or lack of self-awareness in some area, we’ll explore that together. If it stems from unhelpful assumptions or beliefs, we’ll find ways to challenge those together. If it reflects a natural developmental stage, we can encourage continual development until that particular dimension has matured enough to move into new territory. But until someone finds adequate motivation within themselves to address what is lacking, they will perpetuate the same patterns, with the same consequences.

Which is why I decided to write this article. Holistic nourishment can’t be forced, but when we begin to understand what it looks like and how important it is – for ourselves, our loved ones, society, the Earth, etc. – a window into healing and wholeness is revealed. When we discover the joy and contentment of celebrating every aspect of our being and overcoming barriers to self-care, the contributions of every nourishment center to individual and collective harmony and flourishing become both obvious and imperative. Spiritual practice is just one of these, but is not something we

should entertain as optional, or delay in favor of what seems more flavorful, exciting or convenient. Some sort of interior, spiritually-oriented discipline is essential to our ongoing wholeness – and, like all other essential nourishment, it requires careful attention, intention and follow-through. As with any aspect of evolving self-care, a key to spiritual growth is finding the acquiescent compassion within ourselves to courageously embrace what we don't yet fully understand or appreciate. Once we have entered the palace, our reasons for remaining there will become self-evident.

Is there room for individuality in all this? Of course. Exploring what nourishes us fully in each dimension is a highly personal endeavor. There is infinite flexibility in our approach to integral well-being, and that applies to spirit as well. In my book, *True Love*, I offer several suggested baselines for each of the twelve dimensions as starting points for designing a customized integral practice. For Authentic Spirit, daily connection with the ground of being is yoked to regular expression of that connection in compassionate action. The ultimate focus of integral practice is synthesizing a new way of processing each moment, a renewed commitment to nourishing ourselves and others, and a means of improving the quality of all interactions and exchanges. The first steps in that process are evaluating how we care for ourselves in each of the twelve dimensions, identifying which nourishment centers have been neglected, and deciding what we can do to remedy imbalances. These are not steps we can delay or skip – for the spiritual dimension of self or any other. No matter how initially challenging or hard to swallow, such caring and balanced effort is a dish we should heap on our plate and gradually learn to enjoy. Eventually, as we experience liberating, strengthening and even transformative outcomes, we will come to relish the subtle and complex flavors of our new habits, and thereby develop a healthy appetite for each new horizon of being.

