

1. Each of us knows someone who exemplifies spirituality in action. My sister Lani struggled with lupus and died at age 56. Despite being chronically ill, being a single mom, holding down a stressful management job, and being gay in a homophobic community, she still found the time and energy to help others. For years she volunteered at the Sheridan Women's Center (now the Advocacy and Resource Center) and ultimately served on its board of directors. She took crisis calls in the middle of the night, often from battered women. Early on, the Center's services were frowned upon by many community leaders. Ironically, they saw intervention in domestic violence as a threat to the family unit. Gradually though, women like Lani helped change some of those attitudes.

Lani accepted her often controversial lot in life with grace and courage, just as she accepted her own suffering and ultimately, her death sentence. Through it all, she developed a heightened compassion for other sufferers while maintaining an inexplicable optimism. She was as adept at restoring her spiritual reserves as she was at drawing upon them in times of need. She got energy from her family and many close friendships, as well as from humor, music, and communion with nature. What's more, she got better with practice. The last time we saw Lani she was in a hospital bed, surrounded by several friends, family members and hospital staff. Someone had given her a stuffed bird from the hospital gift shop which she was manipulating like a puppet, expressing both frustration and solace through the comic voice of this bird. She saw her dire condition quite clearly. In that vision her spirit was neither deluded nor defeated. At one point she insisted that every person in the room hug every other person. Even in dying, she had enough left in her battery to recharge the rest of us.

2. It is this progressive cycle of depleting and replenishing the human spirit that I will explore today. My presentation will center on three main ideas:
 - A mature spirituality can be equated to wholeness, not so much an endpoint as a process linked in circular fashion to a high-definition picture of oneself and one's surroundings.
 - The foundation for wholeness is freedom; the individual can rise above biology and culture by making choices that gradually enhance freedom.
 - Spiritual practice is dynamic; it is an ebb and flow with widening amplitude, not a straight-line ascent into bliss.

I will conclude by suggesting a few voluntary practices that may initiate or perpetuate this process.

3. Tantamount to spiritual practice is the concept of wholeness, which is embedded in the sacred. Wholeness isn't the same as happiness – an ideal condition of euphoria, harmony, or security. Surely it embraces these qualities, but it is large enough to encompass their opposites as well. Here's how I would characterize wholeness:
 - Grace – you have an abiding conviction that life is worthwhile despite the inevitability of suffering and death; you accept your place in the universe with gratitude.

- Integrity – you are authentic and indivisible; your actions mirror your values and do not depend on the day of the week, the company you keep or the role you play.
- Vision – you are alert and fully aware; you see the aesthetic and the absurd with equal clarity.
- Self-transcendence – you merge yourself with the external world and commit to causes larger than yourself.
- Breadth – you are stirred by inward experiences ranging from anxiety to joy in the same way that natural motion is only induced by opposite poles.
- Autonomy – you freely create your own purpose; you no longer rely on external authority to impose meaning on your life.

I've offered a few synonyms, but the idea of wholeness is better felt than described. The American writer Scott Russell Sanders wrote, "How can one speak or even think about the whole of things? Language is of only modest help. Every sentence is a wispy net, capturing a few flecks of meaning. The sun shines without vocabulary. The salmon has no name for the urge that drives it upstream. The newborn groping for the nipple knows hunger long before it knows a single word. Even with an entire dictionary in one's head, one eventually comes to the end of words. Then what? Then drink deep like the baby, swim like the salmon, burn like any brief star." These images get to the heart of my message: feed your spirit and put it to work (especially when you must go against the current); pour your passion into the present task and don't fret the final outcome. Wholeness comes in the clash, not in the conquest. Dostoyevsky wrote, "It's life that matters, nothing but life – the process of discovering ... not the discovery itself."

If humans are inherently flawed, how can they be whole? UU Reverend Joshua Pawelek said, "If we look at our mistakes as opportunities for growth, we will grow." A positive attitude is essential to wholeness, yet we shouldn't confuse growth with the pursuit of perfection. Popular culture offers countless prescriptions for material and spiritual salvation. But Ecclesiastes tells us, "All is vanity." To correct one fault is to neglect another. For every talent cultivated, another lies fallow. Obsession with self-improvement can blind us to a larger reality. Ecclesiastes goes on to warn, "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all."

The more I accept my own limitations, the more readily I appreciate the strengths and successes of others. As individuals we cannot and need not excel at everything; we can only achieve that goal collectively. Far from mastering every virtue, wholeness means understanding your place in the bigger picture and pursuing your potential within that humble context.

4. Wholeness implies autonomy, calling us to embrace freedom and the responsibility that comes with it, to live by design rather than by default. Henri Nouwen, a Dutch-born Catholic Priest confessed,

"My life is mostly a struggle for survival: not a holy struggle, but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me." We can choose to escape this predicament. James Park, a UU and professor of philosophy advised, "Our human spirits show themselves most dramatically in moments of freedom, when we consciously resist enculturation and make free choices... [particularly] when it dictates the essential content of our lives." At its deepest level, meaning requires independence.

But are freedom and autonomy merely illusions, as the determinists would argue? If so, the human spirit is no more worthy of admiration than the opposable thumb. One cannot overstate the evolutionary importance of being able to grasp a tool, but to grasp meaning from mystery – to me that is a sublime choice, not an instinct.

Of course, the determinists make a valid point. We are largely products of genetics and upbringing. But chaos theory suggests that miniscule, random incidents can have inordinate impacts on history. Freedom begins almost imperceptibly at the margins of human existence. As we choose to exercise it by resisting conformity in small ways, we begin to develop our spiritual "muscle" and our freedom grows. Eventually, it fills our core and we evolve from living reflexively to living deliberately. I believe we do have a choice to create our own meaning, to define what we stand for whatever the cost. Or we can allow biology and public opinion and the advertising industry to do that for us. Abraham Maslow asked, "Are we making the safe choices or the growth choices?"

Enlightenment facilitates freedom. The better we understand the social processes that created us, the greater our capacity to rise above them and take responsibility for our own lives. Critical evaluation of one's religious background can be a first step. Most religious institutions inspire their members with compelling principles, personalities or myths. But by demanding conformity, many of them suppress the very spirit they seek to exalt.

5. Spiritual principles like honesty and compassion are the seeds of enlightenment and fulfillment. But if we put them on display they remain lifeless. We must hide them in the ground of our daily existence before they will take root, blossom, and bear fruit. As long as the seeds are viable – that is, life-affirming, where they come from matters less than what we do with them. Victor Frankl was inspired by his Jewish faith to endure the brutalities of a concentration camp. But as an authority on human behavior he made it clear that many valid sources of inspiration exist. Whatever the source, one must rediscover these principles and adopt them before they will take on transformative power.
6. The benefits of deeper spiritual practice can be joy, meaning, hope and peace. But the risk is a deeper awareness of pain, anxiety and meaninglessness. Is it worth the tradeoff? I think so. Theologian Matthew Fox said, "Births happen from that encounter with emptiness." Indeed, humans rarely change without provocation or crisis. Another theologian, Frederick Buechner admonished, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness."

The forces of everyday experience might be likened to a trampoline. Imagine standing on it while bearing the weight of loss, failure, and fear. That very weight can work in your favor, if only you dare to take the first, small, downward jump. With each bounce your weight stretches the trampoline a little lower and you fly that much higher until you attain full and exhilarating motion. On this figurative trampoline, your spirit soars and sinks but never succumbs. The alternative is a flat or static existence, analogous to lying down on the trampoline. Reverend Kenneth Sawyer described this condition as “surrender to apathy and a numbed skitter across the surface of life, carried on drugs or busyness or superficiality over life’s depths of pain and meaning and joy.”

Even a healthy spirit will falter without sustenance. The best-trained athlete is only a few thirsty days from death. The fittest body will rapidly deteriorate without nutrition. Why should we believe the human spirit can stay strong without continual nourishment? Didn’t Mother Teresa, with a spirit worthy of sainthood, confess to feelings of darkness and despair? Didn’t Jesus grieve at Gethsemane and cry from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

The capacity to suffer is no less a measure of spirituality than are goodness and wisdom. But confronting pain and injustice depletes the spirit, just as strenuous exercise exhausts the body. Both conditions call for replenishment. We know that a proper diet and regular exercise will improve physical fitness and raise the body’s capacity to withstand stress. It seems plausible that exercising and feeding the spirit would increase its aptitude for pain as well as joy.

7. Jacob Needleman, a social philosopher and expert on religion said, "What is most necessary for man and what is given him in great abundance, are experiences, especially experiences of the forces within him. This is his most essential food, his most essential wealth." How can we create the kind of experiences that feed and enrich the spirit? Here are a few ideas:

- Frequent those places in the world and in your own consciousness that arouse awe and gratitude. Abraham Heschel wrote, "Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal." Annie Dillard developed a keen vision and a power to relish the moment, as manifest in her book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. "I’ve been thinking about seeing," she wrote. "There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand." We can all witness the sacred – in the sanctuaries of nature, art, church, and human relationships.

Gratitude is magnified by its mere expression. When you’re feeling grateful, write it down or share it with someone before it evaporates. Give thanks to God or to Fortune – to anyone. Elton Trueblood, Quaker author and theologian, views life as an “unearned blessing.” He resolves, “The one thing that I want to put into practice in my own life is the conscious and deliberate habit of finding somebody to thank.”

- Strive for occasional solitude. Rabbi David Cooper says, “A spiritual retreat is medicine for soul starvation. Through silence, solitary practice, and simple living, we begin to fill the empty reservoir.” Spending time apart from the busy world prepares us to re-enter it with renewed enthusiasm. Nature offers an ideal retreat and a source of inspiration. Wendell Berry wrote, “I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief... For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and I am free.”

Strangely, the natural world can make us feel alone and connected at the same time, provided we are fully present to witness it. Last Spring while bicycling down a quiet country road, I encountered a man on horseback. To my surprise, only the horse looked back at me. The rider was preoccupied with something in the palm of his hand. Maybe it’s just nostalgia for a bygone era, but I must agree with the poet who, when surrounded by a horde of shouting cell phone users wrote, “The world is too grand to reshape with babble.”

- Read something inspirational or thought provoking on a daily basis. Bill Moyers said, “When I learn something new – and it happens every day – I feel a little more at home in the universe.” In the written word we find prophets, prodigies, and soul mates. History keeps them alive to comfort, to challenge, and to lift the tired spirit. They invite us to reach across continents, cultures and centuries, far beyond our own petty concerns. Author Linda Weltner writes, “Books, with their secret knowledge, free me from myself... I reach out and they are there, waiting to transport me to another realm.”
- Do something selfless, like yielding the road to an inconsiderate motorist even though you have the right-of-way. Congratulate a competitor, or pay a genuine compliment to someone who normally annoys you. Give a creditor the benefit of the doubt. Volunteer for an unpopular but worthy cause. Small, unselfish acts stretch the spirit, making it more elastic.

In [The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#), Stephen Covey contrasts what he calls the “scarcity mindset”, wherein we perceive someone else’s gain as our loss, with the “abundance mindset”, which assures us there can be enough for everyone. In choosing the latter perspective you not only recognize abundance, you expand it. Acts of generosity are contagious. They also give back a more enduring satisfaction, as the New Testament implies. “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.”

These practices, even if employed faithfully, may not produce a radical transformation. The point is to never give up. Keep feeding the spirit so it can respond to unforeseen troubles. If it cannot or will not respond to adversity, the spirit languishes and the demons loom larger. Screenwriter Stephanie Ericsson portrayed this choice: “To battle a demon is to embrace it, to face it with clarity of vision and humility of the heart. To run from a demon is as effective as running from a rabid dog, for surely this only beckons the chase.”

8. I will admit to moments when I feel empty or unworthy, periods when I ache for a loved one with a heavy burden, and times when I sense the entire human race in peril. Occasionally I respond in my own puny way, but mostly I just hurt. Then I have these incredible moments of clarity and completeness, of love and gratitude. The wider the fluctuations the more alive I feel. I refuse to numb the pain, for I might miss the joy. Shakespeare understood that to live fully means “to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles...to grunt and sweat under a weary life.” Still, he saw redemption in the struggles of ordinary existence.

“Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.”

To combat misery, it is possible to find wisdom and enchantment in the simple pieces of everyday life – the trees, the brooks, the stones, even the stuffed birds. The eye of the spirit, once sharpened by suffering, unmask the mundane to reveal its fundamental truth and beauty. We have only to open that eye and see. This is harder than it sounds. John Ruskin observed, “Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, all in one.” And, I would add, it is the springboard to becoming whole.