



CHAPTER

## Spirituality Is the Experience, Noticing Is the Practice

*“Every day I listen to the dirt. What are you telling me? What do you need? What do you want to give?”*

*—Dirk Gianinni, fourth-generation farmer in Salinas, California*



## Maybe I Really Am the Center of the Universe

Spirituality is a commonly used word these days, and it has many different meanings and perspectives. If you google “spirituality” without any further definition, you will get nearly 100 million references. Christian spirituality brings 5.6 million results; Sufi spirituality, 4 million; Buddhist spirituality, 8 million; Hindu spirituality, 12 million; and so on. It is a topic of some interest.

While definition and use vary, we can safely say that spirituality is something about having an experience beyond ourselves, within ourselves. It is a connection with an entity beyond our personal reality of heart, body, and mind. Whether we call this other reality God, or this “other” is some aspect of the creation or even solitude, we seem to yearn for connection outside ourselves.

As we noted in the introduction, spirituality has not always been the purview of the individual. All cultures throughout time have valued some sort of spiritual experience as part of the framework for their common life. Historically, organized religion has been the place for integrating the development of an inner life, community, and service to humankind. Most cultures would have understood these as part and parcel of one another. But they are now increasingly segregated. Harvey Cox shares these thoughts on the increased interest in spirituality apart from religion:

“Spirituality” can mean a host of things, but there are three reasons why the term is in such wide use. First, it is still a form of tacit protest. It reflects a widespread discontent with the

preshrinking of “religion,” Christianity in particular, into a package of theological propositions by the religious corporations that box and distribute such packages. Second, it represents an attempt to voice the awe and wonder before the intricacy of nature that many feel is essential to human life without stuffing them into ready-to-wear ecclesiastical patterns. Third, it recognizes the increasingly porous borders between the different traditions and, like the early Christian movement, it looks more to the future than to the past.<sup>8</sup>

As a spiritual and religious leader, I would add to Cox’s comments. Deep in the American cultural DNA is the inalienable right to pursue happiness. This is a founding principle, one of our non-negotiables. I wonder if this conviction has evolved over time to mean that if we are not happy and personally pleased with life, then we are being denied the right to be fully who we determine ourselves to be. More communally minded cultures do not place the same value on personal happiness and satisfaction that we do. Ancient spiritual practices originated in these kinds of highly communal contexts, but the American quest seems to have disconnected spirituality from its roots and reframed it as part of our individual pursuit of happiness. The conflict comes when we want a community’s spiritual offering, but do not want the accountability that being in community usually involves.

As I write, Arianna Huffington (whose online news outlet The Huffington Post hosts some of the most important religious and social conversations in America) is working with app wonks on creating “GPS for the Soul,” so that with a brush of the finger, a person can come back to his or her inner center after having veered away. On the current website there are many ideas, personal stories, and encouraging words, not necessarily religious or connected to a divine energy beyond ourselves. They

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8 Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2009), 13.

are intended to reconnect a person to “that place” within where we find peace and a clear sense of self. Huffington notes her original hope: “That one day someone would create an app that would gauge the state of your mind, body, and spirit, then automatically offer the exact steps you would need to take to realign all three aspects of your being.”<sup>9</sup> I will leave the reader to ponder this next electronic solution to all of life’s challenges. But if it were just a matter of reading an idea perfectly tailored for one’s spiritual make-up to regroup the grounding of the soul, why are we still searching?

Our American mindset pursues happiness and we think we can buy it. Yet the most grounded and wise spiritual teachers and practitioners usually have the least amount of stuff and are not typically looking up spiritual wellness on their smartphones. But for the average American, the practice of spirituality, in its most primal form, has come to mean the individual pursuit of happiness, of feeling better through various self-selected mental and physical practices, not necessarily connected to other people, a religious tradition, or even a divine power.

Spirituality has come to include any and all self-stylized options for a pleasurable inner experience, stress-reduction, or mental clarity. It is sometimes a means to an end, rather than a way of being in touch with eternal things. More deeply, though, perhaps it is a yearning for the reintegration of self, others, and service to humankind, or the discovery of one’s purpose in life. While extreme individualism seems philosophically ideal, it does not always work out practically.

It is helpful to be aware of why spirituality personally interests us. What do we hope to gain by developing the inner life? If we are not clear on this question, we run the risk of perpetuating our dissatisfaction by not committing deeply, at least for a time, to a single spiritual way or practice. Commitment in and of itself bears the fruit of spiritual depth and inner peace. The pursuit

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9 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gps-for-the-soul>

of spirituality can, however, become like any other addiction: something we pursue for the high it delivers in a given moment.

## **The Spiritual Practice of Noticing**

A meaningful spiritual experience that can become a spiritual practice is “noticing.” It is a simple concept, I know. Yet how often do we move through life not noticing much at all? If we wish to move beyond a temporary good feeling that leads to ultimate joy despite life circumstances, we must begin with where we find ourselves. And so the first step is to simply notice yourself.

If you are unhappy, acknowledge it. Often in our efforts to feel better, we run to the next thing, trying to get away from the experience of feeling bad. If you are content, pay attention to that too. Noticing, elevated to the level of spiritual practice, helps us hold still and take stock of where we are. The earliest experiences of this practice only need to be momentary. When you are ready, you can begin to sit for longer periods, noticing thoughts and feelings. Practice noticing your thoughts and feelings each morning and evening. Move from there to noticing your surroundings and how they affect you. Both our inner and outer environment make a difference to our experience of life.

If we have previously been running away from ourselves, wanting to be anywhere but in our own lives, the first fruit of the practice of noticing is awareness that whatever we have been doing to find satisfaction is not working. This is a very important harvest, even if it feels small. Such an acknowledgment precedes any future change we might make. We cannot discover where we are going if we do not first know where we are. We cannot grow something new in our lives if we are not first willing to acknowledge the condition in which we find ourselves.

If we are blaming conditions or people for our unhappiness, until we notice ourselves we will not release them from culpability. Others are not responsible for our inner peace. If our choice is to “feel better,” to pursue joy through spirituality,

such transformation begins inside our own soul, not outside with blame of another person or life circumstance.

## Soul and Spirit

There is a vast array of philosophical writing on matters of the self, the spirit, and the soul. Our view of them is culturally influenced. In the West, we tend to use these words interchangeably in our everyday cultural language. I would like to differentiate them even if only briefly and simplistically.

When I speak of the soul, I mean the very heart of who we are, that which may extend beyond our corporeal selves. The soul connects our deepest self to the self of all else. It is our essence. Some would say our soul is connected to eternity. When we speak of “soul mates,” for instance, we are communicating that a particular relationship touches and shapes us at the deepest level of who we are. When we speak of soulful language or music, we are speaking of genuine and heartfelt expressions from the core of someone’s being, artfully made known through the disciplined engagement of that person’s spirit.

Our spirit is expressed as the synchronistic engagement of mind, heart, and will, through which we become more conscious of and strengthen our connection to the soul. Think of the spirit as a muscle. We can experience greater well-being and grounding that brings deeper contentment and self-understanding when we exercise our spirit. Spiritual practices mobilize the spirit for its proper use of knowing the unseen realities of life. It can be either strong and healthy or underutilized and inefficient, contributing little to the strength of our being. When we use the word “self” with “spirit” and “soul,” we are referring to intertwined intangible realities that are part of who we are, and which make up a healthy spiritual system (like any important physiological system) that keeps us living well in the world.

Some religions understand the soul as eternal, or at least connected to the eternal, which has no beginning or end. In this understanding of soul and spirit, one assumes the presence

of another entity, God, an energy or a ground that connects all being. It is a distinct reality, with which we can be united, and which has the power to transform us. This understanding of the spiritual quest beckons our engagement of something other than ourselves. We experience that it really isn't just about us, and that synergy with the other makes us fully alive.

## **The Dream of a Common Language**

With the decline of Christianity as the primary faith in America, we have also lost a common language with which to convey spiritual truths in the wider culture. Remembering Cox's quote, perhaps if Christianity had focused less on the "packaging of theological propositions," we might be more of a resource to people seeking spiritual conversation today. Religions do hold valuable truths, grounded in ancient faith tradition that would prove helpful to the spiritual quest of Americans. Without those roots, many of us lack spiritual language that could be helpful to develop our inner spiritual lives.

Consider the story of the birth of Jesus. Americans celebrate this event at Christmas as a secular expression of gratitude, family, and gift-giving. More deeply, Christians celebrate in awe and wonder that God is not separate from people's lives, but in Christ, God dwells and lives fully with us. We use the word "incarnation" to express that in Jesus, God is made known, "enfleshed," so that humanity can have something tangible through which we might experience the fullness of God.

Whether the story of the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem is historically accurate is less relevant to our spiritual growth than the knowledge that as we seek to draw closer to God, God has already drawn close to us. The story behind the holiday of Christmas celebrates a spiritual truth that opens the heart and mind to the idea that a divine entity outside of ourselves may be interested in a relationship with us.

That is one way a religion helps to deepen spiritual awareness. Jesus himself is another. He was a first-century Palestinian

rabbi, a spiritual teacher. He spoke often in stories, parables, and metaphors, using everyday things to convey spiritual truths that would enrich people's understanding of God. He empowered the synergism between human and divine.

The life of Jesus was very specifically and intentionally about revealing God and helping people draw close to God. This was his human purpose. While Christian doctrine understands Jesus's identity in a particular way (savior, messiah, son of God), he could also be viewed as a metaphor for God: a story who in his person conveys God. In *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan defines the relationship between parable and metaphor in this way:

A parable . . . is a metaphor expanded into a story, or, more simply, *a parable is a metaphorical story*. But what is a metaphor, what is a story, and how does their combination as metaphorical story differ from any other type of story—from, say, the novel you have just read or the film you have just seen? The term “metaphor” comes from two Greek roots; one is *meta*, “over” or “across,” and the other *pherein*, “to bear” or “to carry.” Metaphor means “carrying something over” from one thing to another and thereby “seeing something as another” or “speaking of something as another.” . . . [A] parable, that is, a metaphorical story, always points externally beyond itself, points to some different and much wider referent.<sup>10</sup>

To see meaning beyond the simple details of parables or metaphors, you must be willing to be “carried across” to something deeper than what at first might appear. If you remain only

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10 John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 7-8.



at the level of story, or the details of historical accuracy, then you miss, or worse, avoid deeper spiritual truth. Every word Jesus spoke was meant to facilitate the connection between God and humanity and to create community around that union.

Returning to our spiritual practice of “noticing,” a parable that might be useful is the Parable of the Sower (found in the Gospel of Luke 8:4–15, also in the Gospels of Matthew 13:1–23 and Mark 4:2–20, all three slightly different from one another).

***Jesus spoke these words. Sit with them for awhile.***

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’

**The Parable of the Sower Explained**

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe

only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.” (Luke 8:4–15)

I am not a farmer, but I admire and appreciate them. They possess skill, knowledge, wisdom, and intuition honed over many seasons. In both small and large enterprises, I am always impressed that farmers are so mindful of the constant play between weather, viruses, mold, bugs, weeds, economy, labor force, market demand, and soil.

I often drive the 101 freeway, the major artery running north and south the length of California. In the region where I live, it runs for miles through fields where all sorts of fruits and vegetables are grown. I am now accustomed to watching the growth, development, and harvest of various crops at different times of the year. When driving with others at seventy miles per hour, we play “Name That Crop!” The rhythm of a regular growing cycle is clearer to me now, and I notice when weather or other circumstances force humans to adjust accordingly, speeding up or delaying a harvest. Everyone is paying attention and making daily shifts to their lives. Farmers elevate the practice of noticing to an art form. Noticing farmers and thinking of them as metaphor has helped my own spiritual practice and made me more conscious of the subtle shifts in my inner life and surrounding environment.

In my early observations, I sometimes would see a lone person standing in a dirt field, not yet planted (as far as I could tell), just staring down at the ground. I was intrigued by these sightings, wondering what in the world they were looking at. I decided one day to take a walk along a road next to a dirt

field, with no plant yet emerging. I stood and stared at the dirt as farmers do. I wanted to see what they see, but I just saw dirt. Untrained as I was, I imagined there must be all sorts of life in the soil and I was curious to know more. I knew it was capable of producing food, of sustaining life, even though like most Americans I interacted primarily with food via the grocery store. I could not assess the soil by its color, nor did I know if the nutrients, moisture, time of year, and other variables were right for growing a particular kind of food. While I could see it was dark and rich looking, it was in the end for me indiscernible from any other plot of dirt.

When farmers look at soil, they see a detailed future, a strategic plan, the economy, politics, immigration laws, and the cultural preferences of various groups. I know now that when they are staring at the soil, they see a whole universe and how the tiny seeds they cast will be part of it. Their persistent study and experienced practice of noticing the soil and all related factors makes the difference in the harvest.

Unlike America today, most people in first-century Palestine—Jesus’s audience—were farmers. Everyone understood what happened when seed fell on rock, was not watered, or was choked by thorns. Certain conditions produced certain results. It only makes sense. Jesus spoke in parables, metaphorical stories, and common everyday language to help people consider their capacity and level of receptivity to the presence of the spiritual seeds that God was scattering in their soul. The story is not only about ground conditions, but “carries over” to the listeners’ inner life. It invites us to ask: Are the seeds God is casting on our spiritual soil taking root? What kinds of seeds are they? What is the condition of your inner soil? Is there spiritual receptivity within you? Will holy seeds develop? What does harvest look like? Do you care?

These were questions people might have thought about sitting and listening to Jesus then and now. They are timeless queries.

## Parables and Spiritual Practice

If we thought of our soul as soil, we might notice a few things about how we personally activate spiritual growth. We might notice that at different seasons in our lives or in certain environments, we are more or less receptive to the fertile presence of God. A spiritual seed may fall on resistance, or a failure to notice what God is giving us. We might be vulnerable or fragile, open to everything. We may not be able to discern what should be avoided, resisted, or nurtured. Notice the condition of your soul and the capacity of your spirit to engage your present inner reality.

Growing deep spiritual roots requires a commitment to noticing ourselves and making subtle yet intentional daily shifts in our engagement between spirit and soul. This requires patience—not a common human trait. Many people who came to hear Jesus probably wanted a quick fix as we do: a motivational speech or perhaps a spirituality website with the exact combination of resources to cure what ails us. Everyone wants to feel better. As with most things in life that result in real transformation, we have to invest more commitment and attention to bear good fruit. A spiritual experience can be hard, and not always pleasurable, work. Our greatest transformations can involve deep pain. Hopefully the pain deters our need to learn that particular life lesson again, but we are impatient and stubborn, so sometimes the painful lessons come around more than once.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant by seeds falling on rock, amidst thorns, or “the devil snatching the seeds away.” In such conditions, the “tender shoot will wither and die.” Jesus’s explanation of the parable suggests that these conditions are real. He is not shaming the listener but acknowledging that spiritual receptivity and growth require careful attention and discipline, and sometimes even making changes in the soil of our soul.

Parables are Jesus’s way of noticing humanity. He is honest and realistic about God and about people. Spiritual seeds, which the story implies God casts with abandon (no farmer would cast seed without first preparing the soil for the greatest receptivity

and the least waste), only take root and come to fullness in good soil where they “hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.”

The conscious discipline of noticing and nurturing our good soil allows God’s seed to take root. Developing our resistant areas to make them more receptive also increases the zones where God’s seeds may flourish. Metaphorically, we might clear rocks and thorns, discovering more usable soil fit for spiritual harvest. We could develop wisdom to resist forces that would snatch away good seed. We could learn to persevere through life’s ups and downs, having let seeds of patience and forbearance take root.

We can also learn our optimal growing conditions. Grapevines, for example, thrive in slightly rocky and sandy soil, planted on hillsides. The pebbly terrain that resisted producing broccoli is perfect for grapes. The spiritual practice of noticing will help us understand our spiritual landscape and teach us discernment about what can grow when, or not at all.

Like the weather, life conditions are often beyond our control. Farmers always have a contingency plan, and when that fails, they know how to let go because the forces of nature have overwhelmed their hard-fought efforts. This is farming knowledge, but it is also spiritual wisdom. Knowing our souls is like farmers knowing their fields and the environment in which they planted. Discovering and exercising our spiritual system is like a farmer who, year in year out, studies his dirt and its interaction with the world around it. Because of that attention, the farmer can bring forth a harvest. So can we.

## **Return to the Spiritual Practice of Noticing**

The first step toward a deeper spiritual life is to simply notice yourself. In our efforts to feel better, we sometimes run to the next thing, trying to get away from the experience of feeling bad without examining where we are. Where you are miserable, pay attention. Where you are content, pay attention to that

too. Noticing, elevated to the level of spiritual practice, helps us hold still and take stock of where we are. Practice noticing your thoughts and feelings each morning and evening. Move from there to noticing your surroundings and how they impact you. This need only take a few minutes each day.

## Wondering Questions

Wondering is an essential spiritual skill. It opens and relaxes the mind to more possibilities than we can ever imagine. Remember wondering as a child? Once upon a time we wondered about everything. The world was a fascinating place. I remember wondering about anything and everything when I would lie in the grass, gazing up at the sky, watching the clouds. What is your favorite wondering memory?

Spend some wondering time about your soul and what you think spirituality is. What do you notice about your inner landscape?

Imagine God casting seeds in your soul with ridiculous abandon. Where are they landing? Where are they living? Where are they dying? Where are they growing with deep roots and becoming fruitful? In other words, what parts of your spiritual life are flourishing? What parts are struggling?

Where is there potentially more good soil for future planting? In other words, what are the conditions where you find you are able to spiritually come alive? How can you create those conditions more widely? What would the fruits be? How will you celebrate that harvest? Who can you share it with?