

The next reading explores spirituality, our spiritual challenges in the 21st century and why we may experience spiritual confusion. Here we explore how humanity uses spiritualisation.



ON BECOMING

SPIRITUALISE — REVITALISING SPIRITUALITY TO ADDRESS 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES

This is my summary of a quite brilliant Report by the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) published in December 2014 and written by Dr Jonathan Rowson entitled, '*Spiritualise - Revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges*'. It's 94 pages. I have put it into 9.

PART 1. FACING UP TO OUR SPIRITUAL CONFUSION

- Human beings are much less self-determined, conscious and cognitive and much more social, unconscious and embodied than we typically assume
- Leaving aside for the moment any precise definition of 'spiritual' the research suggests that the world's major problems have spiritual elements that need to be recognized and addressed
- For example, scratch climate change confusion long enough and perhaps denial of death lies underneath; we are terrified of an unconscious threat and climate change may go unheeded until we deal with it in these terms
- Or look at unfettered capitalism and you see a deluded self, scrambling to make itself real; buying itself into existence until it finds it is fading again, until we buy some more. But we give little thought to the inherent fragility and virtuality of this self, and speak little of how to work towards its integration and transcendence
- Or pay attention to the myriad addictions of apparently normal behaviour and what passes for everyday consciousness starts to look like a low-level psychopathology; we are literally caught up in our smart phones, our social medicines, our curated identities, but none bring deep satisfaction (as understood by the spiritual traditions)
- Or reflect on the epidemic of loneliness in big cities and you sense that love has lost its way. We are all surrounded by strangers who could so easily be friends, but we appear to lack cultural permission not merely to 'connect' – the opium of cyberspace – but deeply to empathise and care
- And this spiritual perspective matters more now because of the challenge of the weakening of public institutions, acute ecological crises, widespread political alienation and democratic stress. Spirituality risks being private; our collective understanding of it is oblique, nebulous and fissiparous when we need it to be fundamental, robust and centripetal.
- The heart of spirituality is the fact that we are alive at all, rather than our personality of status (or our job!). In Buddhist terms it's about our '**ground**' in the world (being human) rather than our '**place**' in the world (our identity and personality). Its primary injunction is to know what you are as fully and deeply as possible.
- Spirituality is not religion, wellbeing, ethics or aesthetics and goes beyond emotions. Four features of human existence help point to what it means to say the spiritual is about our

'ground' not our 'place: Love – the promise of belonging: Death – the awareness of being; Self – the path of becoming; Soul – the sense of beyondness

- The Report selects 6 insights from recent research in the cognitive and neural sciences that show the value of spiritual perspectives, experiences and practices
- We need the spiritual to play a greater role in the public realm, because it highlights the importance of connecting personal and social and political transformation. Spirituality already informs various spheres of public life, for instance, addiction, psychiatry, nursing, education, and social and environmental activism.
- The overarching societal role of spirituality is to serve as a counterweight to the hegemony of instrumental and utilitarian thinking. At an economic level that means intelligently critiquing the fetishisation of economic growth and global competition. At a political level, it means that citizens need to be the subjects of social change, not just its objects, with spiritual perspectives playing a key role in shaping and expressing the roots and value of democratic culture. Within organisations of all kinds, the spiritual deepens our vision of intrinsic motivation and gives structure and texture to human development and maturation.
- As Marilynne Robinson has put it, 'I want to overhear passionate arguments about what we are and what we are doing and what we ought to do... I miss civilization and I want it back'.
- More about our 'ground': being here at all, that we have this body that somehow breathes, that we exist through and for others, that we're a highly improbable part of a rather mysterious whole, and that we will one day die. Spirituality [one might say systems leadership] is really about reconnecting and tapping into the universal human importance of this shared ground.
- If 'sin' is now too religious a word today we might exchange it for HPTFTU: the Human Propensity to F*** Things Up; the dark side of human nature that no amount of wealth, health or Apple products can fix. Admitting this is liberating; its truth is no longer denied and this realistic self-acceptance is a precondition for growth. Classic Carl Rogers: 'The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.'
- The spiritual is not an element in human existence, it is the integrating factor – life as a whole – it is the aspiration for the human spirit to achieve its full potential
- We can't simply replace religion with spirituality a) because they are different and b) institutional support and guidance, shared myths, rituals and practices, historical perspectives and cultural influence are based in human need (think about it: compare the common claim 'spiritual, but not religious' with the phrase 'educated, but not due to schooling').
- The spiritual approach, contrasted here with, say the quest for happiness or psychological wellbeing, is of *particular* importance to those in health and social care since the evidence is overwhelming that crisis, humiliation, and suffering not only fuel our capacity for discernment, but enable the 'wounded healer' to allay suffering in others. ¹ It is out of shared weakness and vulnerability that the healer reaches out to heal. Being able to value rather than avoid their own pain enables the healer to connect and communicate with the sick person.
- [I feel the following point forcibly just now in the aftermath of my sister's dying and death] – Anyone who has faced a life threatening illness knows, *reflecting on our ground heightens the importance of not postponing our lives, of using the time we have for what really matters to us*. Sadly research into dying regrets suggests most people *do* postpone their lives.
- Why postpone? – Ah, the world attaches us to our *place*, identity, fragile reputation, insatiable desires. We get lost in it and its cultural signifiers of status: our dwellings, our salaries, our clothes, our Twitter followers – T.S. Eliot, 'We are distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty meaning.' It's the social logic of consumption; British urban adults are exposed to around 300 adverts a day. The antidote is to

¹ See especially Holloway, Margaret. (Professor) (2007) *Negotiating Death in Contemporary Health and Social Care*. Bristol: Policy Press

experience our ground to gain some immunity to the idea that we need to consume to validate ourselves. Meanwhile the public are increasingly described as consumers rather than citizens, at our ecological peril. We fear that our place is all we have.

- It's scary: the Buddha relinquished his place (*alaya*) and arrived at ground (*tthana*). But this is the contingent, transient, ambiguous, unpredictable, fascinating and terrifying ground called 'life'; it is groundless ground.
- So we're not talking about comfort, lighting candles in the bath; we're talking about an existential readjustment, a seismic shift in the core of the self and relations to others and the world – a different way of living. **This isn't about giving up a material way of living but it is about embracing a truly systems way of living – focus on our social reputation in the material world misses the radical but essential *inclusiveness* of the systems approach – the contingency of any of us being here at all. The insight is to experience and know what it is not to be a particular person at a particular place in time, but to be human as such.**

PART 2. IN SEARCH OF OUR SPIRITUAL 'GROUND' – WHAT ARE WE?

- There are six areas to think about in connecting spirituality to human nature: the social brain and belief; cultural cognition and the sacred; automatic behaviour and the need to 'wake up'; embodied cognition and the experience of meaning; hemispheric lateralization and the need for balance; neuroplasticity and the role of spiritual practice.
- This science suggests that the spiritual is fundamental to human experience, inalienably linked to basics of our physiology, psychology and sociology.
- This next point is my adaptation for leadership purposes of what the report goes on to say. Given how science now understands human nature, deep reflexivity in leaders is fundamental since its status is not the prelude to social change but the act of social change; the leader connects their knowledge of human nature to how their 'first-person' nature impacts in 'second-person' contexts. I, we and it belong together. This is close to what has been called 'relational consciousness'. We are not 'individuals', we are 'individuals in relation' (Hegel or Macmurray). The large human brain size relates to the complexity of our social networks. From social neuroscience we learn that our nervous systems do not end at our skins but are in constant communication and interchange with other nervous systems. From molecular neuroscience we learn we have so many spindle neurons to resolve social ambiguity. From studying monkeys we learn empathy is based in mirror neurons, corroborated by social psychology. From neuropsychology we learn consciousness is purpose-built for facilitating social interaction. In sum, our brains are functionally social.
- So what we find ourselves believing is no outcome of rational thought. It relates to identity, belonging and shared rituals we may be far from conscious of; it is an emergent property of social interaction
- Cultural studies show that the sacred is (still) a fundamental and potent part of how humans make meaning and form bonds. It is the unacknowledged undercurrent in political debates: politicians who capture what is sacred for people win – the stories they tell tap in to root metaphors and so win out. (people are not satisfied though because the underlying morality/sacredness is not acknowledged and at the level of rational debate people see it's a kind of lie)
- So much of our social construction is unconscious...but it is also automatic! (Kahneman et al or Thaler and Sunstein's *Nudge*). For example, we may *think* we're consciously thinking after a failure or an insult but actually we have 'mental butlers' that *automatically* rally round to restore our sense of self-worth.
- Hence Heifetz (and Linsky (2002) *Leadership on the Line*. Boston. Harvard) saying that the most common source of leadership failure is when adaptive challenges are tackled as if they were technical ones. (e.g. blood pressure medication rather than changed life-style). Adaptive challenges require us to problematize our own role in the problem and re-imagine and reshape our world.

- The Milgram and Zimbardo experiments are also best understood as unquestioned automatic responses
- The spiritual is important because it's a route to 'waking us up' to automatic responses by leading us towards openness. [A leadership programme needs to take this very seriously as it's the only way out from unconscious automatic and habitual processes]
- At breakdowns and crises we have an opportunity to refashion our world for better action. Spiritual training prepares us for such moments both helping us be present to what is happening and to draw on the better aspects of ourselves. Mindfulness endows 'an adaptability and pliancy of mind with quickness of apt response in changing situations'.
- But we're still largely in thrall to our habits. It's hard to change them. To do so we need social reinforcement, support and inspiration.
- Our bodies can help here (seeing as we all have one!) because the body is always present, though the mind is mostly elsewhere...hence the normal spiritual starting place is reconnection through the breath.
- Heightened vitality, connectedness, compassion, depth, calm, harmony, acceptance and peace – common fruits of spiritual experience – are of course experienced viscerally, through the body.
- But the body also represents a trigger for existential threat and anxiety (aches, blood, weakness, death/ disgust at bodily functions/ elaborate attempts to conceal and enhance bodily appearance)
- Science, philosophy and cultural analysis suggest the need to connect left and right brain hemispheres is critical to the future. This is because the lack of balance has led us astray. What Iain McGilchrist calls 'left-hemisphere overreach', in which it is obsessed with reducing reality to minute mechanistic detail, robs modern society of understanding and appreciating deeper human values. It leads to social breakdown and rising rates of certain illness. This links to Mahatma Gandhi's published 7 social sins (25 October 1925) that could destroy us if unchecked: 'wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principle'.
- A key problem in public discourse to illustrate this is excessive over-concern with measurement – this contrasts with spirituality's core, which is *not* knowing, modesty, narrative, implicit meaning. In ritual, the embodied metaphor transcends the explicit and this is precious. 'Life is a superfluous gift calling for gratitude and tenderness'. [This has strong personal meaning for me right now as I've been coming back again and again since my sister died to the sense that it is only my thankfulness that I can take with me to the end].
- Neuroplasticity means the brain's capacity to change itself. It is an **open system** that survives in a changing world by changing itself. This capacity significantly declines with age (!) and the effort to change is big. You become what you repeat. So to get spiritual fruit you need spiritual practice, habit and consistency – whatever you're trying to develop – compassion or patience for example – you'll need to keep at it

PART 3. LIVING FROM OUR GROUND, NOT OUR PLACE

- Love and will belong together (Psychosynthesis). Maternal love is fierce. How can we let our poignant experience of love (which can move us to tears and reveal to us our 'ground') link to powerful action in the world?
- Martin Luther King understood this challenge: 'Power properly understood is...the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change... On of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites ... so that love is identified with the resignation of power and power with the denial of love. Now we've got to get this thing right... Power without love is feckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic... It is precisely this collision of immoral power and powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.'

- Though we live mostly on auto-pilot to avoid the anxiety of death, close encounters with death are commonly spiritual catalysts (greater appreciation of life, concern for others, acceptance of mortality, concern for meaning, heightened senses, lack of concern for materialism and impressing others).
- Research suggests appeal to fame, money, status (extrinsic) may enable short term change but will undermine long term change. This requires aligning love, craft (intrinsic) with the desired change. So if death-acceptance promotes intrinsic values and its denial promotes the opposite, how culture treats death has strong political and economic implications.
- But cognitive reminders of death are terrifying and tend to promote many defenses including a kind of toxic tribal entrenchment. This is why spiritual practice is important because actual lived encounters with death do *not* trigger such defenses and can increase concern for others.
- Deep inside we know who we are meant to be and when we are becoming it ... or not. The 5 commonest dying regrets are: not being true to myself (lived what others expected), worked too hard (compared to attention to relationships), didn't express feelings, lost touch with friends, didn't let myself be happy.
- The Buddha called meditation *bhavana*, which literally means 'development'. We need to keep development (to fold out) from being hijacked by 'increase' and keep it close to envelop (fold in) which emphasizes talking less, unlearning, simplicity, stillness, removing the social mask, staying spontaneous - what unites these is both are a process of becoming
- The Soul: our experience. The Self: the commentary we give to experience. Be careful – we can't and mustn't try to define soul (any more than nature or God or energy or time). ... Don't let the left hemisphere collapse things too quickly to make them familiar... keep it intuited and implicit through which all great ideas in art and life are communicated.
- We need the word soul to remind us that we transcend the conditions of our material existence – we are more than the sum of our chemicals and electrons.
- Soul land is where humans live, as trout in rivers, gorillas in forests and bedbugs in beds. Soul land is where we give of our best. It is placing creative expression at the centre of people's lives. It is the authentic language of the arts in a way that cost-benefit social return on investment can never be.
- When Sting sings, 'let your souls be your pilot' we know what he means.
- What are the injunctions here? Concerning love, it is: 'know me, and belong'; concerning death: 'know me, and live a deeper life'; with self: 'know me, and transform'; with soul, 'know me and create'.

PART 4. SPIRITUAL PATHWAYS TO PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

- The spiritual is needed to overcome climate change 'stealth denial', knowing while acting as if one didn't know. This point and many like it, above, speak to the utilitarian case for the spiritual. But the value is deeper:
- As we don't ask of people 'what's she *for?*' so we shouldn't ask what is the *use* of spirituality. Yet Evelyn Underhill's distinction is useful: spirituality is both mystical (an end in itself) and instrumental (a means to attain other goals); cf. art and design.
- So in the end it's helpful to bring back a balance of ground and place, spiritual and material, extrinsic and intrinsic – the need is for integration.
- What's important is to acknowledge that most issues in the public realm have spiritual roots and we need to bring engagement with this to the table when there is professional (or personal) pressure to be instrumental - in Martin Luther King's terms, we need to connect love and power to the enrichment of all.

- Financial power is far too concentrated ('we are the 99%') and the technology is entrenched (money, information and power work together e.g. in advertising or Amazon). Traditional forms of power lack credibility. They are failing. We need personal and collective power to deal with wicked issues (climate, public health, rapid technological change, global wealth inequality) - Bill Clinton cited Ken Wilber at Davos (2006), 'we need a higher level of consciousness' to solve interrelated planetary problems.
- Spiritual practice and commitment is now a cultural imperative, essential in enabling this if we are to survive the 21st century.
- This needs others: Andrew Samuels – 'Being actively engaged in a social, political, cultural or ethical issue, together with others, initiates the spiritual'. Similarly the perspective shifts when we see citizens not as passive recipients of policy but as active shapers who mobilise for social renewal. From this basis, policy develops as, for example, mindfulness practice changes attitudes and behaviours.
- Michael Sandel: loss of intrinsic value (meaning, community, transcendence, the sacred) leads us from being a social democracy (a society with a market) to being a market society (neoliberalism). Spirituality is about rebalancing this corrosive loss of perspective.
- At least religion had passion, idealism and sacrifice – spirituality is needed to represent this as nothing less can hold citizens together when they must make sacrifices of self-interest for the common good. To realize the prosocial qualities of compassion and altruism, spiritual practices are essential.
- Utility is valuable of course but not as the default mode in too narrow a perspective. We need the larger perspective of ultimate ends.
- We need to see climate change as an existential threat (and face the fear!) rather than a technocratic challenge. Only thus will we turn our lives round as required. We need to love our habitat as a cherished home, *then*, seeing the threat, we may face up to the task. It's the kind of changed perspective that occurs with a terminal illness; how do I now want to live?
- Problem here is capitalism with its objective of economic growth. We may not deal with this. We certainly won't without deeper spiritual practices.
- Our social media culture of status updates etc. lives superficially. Public language needs more depth more often. Reminder: spirituality isn't about personal escape, it's about transformation in service of others.
- We need to see death as an aspect of life; a spiritual truism. How might this work out in the public realm? E.g. Given the possibility of unexpected death at any time, what's most worth learning? How does not acknowledging death increase the risk of climate change catastrophe?
- Brand image (social media profiles, cv updates, how we are at parties and meetings) is all the rage but wow what strenuous ongoing identity maintenance is required! Oh, the performative stress on the self! The antidote is more emphasis on the soul. Creativity, play, a shorter working week..... we should take ideas like a significantly shorter working week seriously as a shared human goal. Ask the question, how do I cultivate my soul?
- 'Freedom' is plentiful in political debate. In existential practice it is underdeveloped, often experienced as dizzying loss of direction. It is about perspective. We don't need to change our role (I have family responsibilities), I may need to change my perspective (I am not defined by them, I can define what this means to me).²
- We live too much on the hedonic treadmill (pleasure, satisfaction, renewed desire – often linked to consumption). OK, but a problem without eudaemonic balance: pursuing meaning over happiness leads to increased wellbeing and better health outcomes. Cf. the New

² see Laloux, Frederic. (2014) *Reinventing organizations*. Brussels: Nelson Parker. He seeks to place human development and levels of consciousness at the heart of organizational vision and mission.

Economic Foundation's 'five a day for your mind' – paying attention, relationships, giving, learning, being active ... none are hedonic (pleasure seeking) as such.

- The role of spirituality is to reframe the societal objective of increased wellbeing as more than a utilitarian calculus of pleasures entertained divided by pleasures satisfied.
- We need the spiritual because the public realm (political economy and its educational, commercial, civic and media institutions) faces challenges that cannot be met by instrumental, utilitarian thinking. The context is 200 years of unparalleled material progress, abundance and development based on extrinsic values (self-interest, materialism, economic growth, keeping up, social mobility). Intrinsic values have lost their institutional hold and centrality to the stories that make sense of our lives. But this 'progress' is doomed: scarcities, ecology, social fragmentation, economic dysfunction, inequality.
- We have largely ditched our (religious) institutions but still crave the community and solidarity that emerge from shared values and enduring commitments ... (organized religion still offers this, despite our distaste for institutions). We still need the old religions for their stories, history, mistakes over the millennia and their insights into the potent dangers of untamed spirituality. So we need to reimagine and renew our relationship with the old religions, not abandon them.
- Going forward here is more about practice than theory: Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest, 'We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.'

FROM THE AFTERWORD BY PHILIP SHELDRAKE

- Properly understood spirituality can lead us into uncomfortable and demanding areas of life. Why? Because it confronts us with what is incomplete and dysfunctional in our lives. So it's about how we practise life-as-a-whole and what we need to change (it's not about just doing meditation exercises!). It's about working on the destructive habits, unbalanced dependencies and self-serving attractions and desires that imprison us. The method is to examine our desires, interpret them, then seek to educate them as a basis for choosing well. (There's a lot in the Christian spiritual traditions about the art of discernment, e.g. as per Ignatius Loyola in 16th century)
- Spirituality is now used in healthcare, social work, education, the arts and business leadership. What this report highlights is the urgent need for a civic vision including the common good and a disinterested sense of service.
- Aristotle: how to know the good and choose wisely? Answer: it's connected to what's shared. If truly good for me, then for you too, indeed for us all. This isn't pragmatics, it's basic to human life.
- The report usefully reminds us how easily something fashionable, like Mindfulness Meditation, can get cut off from its foundational philosophy and ethic.
- The next report should look at spirituality and the Internet.