

Reclaiming Spirituality

John 3:1-8

Diarmuid Ó Murchú, in his book **“Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today’s World”**, tells the story of a young man by the name of Ian, a story which he calls “a parable for our time”.

Ian grew up in England, in a middle class family that was neither “religious” nor “anti-religious”. On entering University, Ian joined the CND - the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. His involvement in this organization was accompanied by some (quote) *“strange internal stirrings of the heart”* which prompted some questions - questions like: **“Why am I so involved in this organization? Why am I so preoccupied with protecting and saving the planet? Why does this matter so much to me?”**

In the same organization, he met a number of interesting people, including a young woman, Alinka, a woman of Indian origin, brought up in the Hindu faith which she no longer practiced. Frequently, she spoke of *“the sacredness of the Earth”*. **“What does she mean by ‘sacred’?”** Ian wondered. **“What makes something ‘sacred’?”** And he joined Alinka, on occasion, for her weekly session of Buddhist meditation.

Soon afterwards, Ian met a young Sikh man, who shared with him what it meant, to him, to be Sikh.

Two years later, at home with his family for a weekend break from college, he listened to the television coverage of the debate in the Church of England on whether or not women should be admitted to the priesthood.

Recognizing that **he knew very little about the Christian faith** (to which he at least nominally belonged) he arranged to meet with the Vicar at the church down the street – [a man in his late 30’s and quite evangelical in his approach and conservative in his theology] - who seemed to find Ian’s religious meanderings something of *a waste of time*. As Ian struggled to articulate his questions about **“spirituality”** and **“religion”**, the Vicar interrupted in a somewhat agitated tone: **“Listen for a moment**

son; just answer me one question: *do you believe in Jesus Christ or do you not?"*

Stunned – [and sensing that he had not been understood - and that he **would** not be understood] - Ian said that he felt very uncomfortable and, perhaps, should leave the conversation until another time.

The Vicar, seemingly **relieved**, agreed. But he offered **neither affirmation nor encouragement** to Ian, **nor** did he suggest another time in which they might continue the conversation.

And so Ian left, retreating to a local park where he sat and thought about **how everything that was precious and sacred to him had been totally devalued and undermined by the priest's dismissive attitude**. He describes that moment as the one and only time in his life when he felt **totally rejected** by another human being. Ironically, the one by whom he felt so rejected claims to be a representative of Jesus Christ on earth.

Ian's story deserves to become a **"parable"** for the **spiritual hunger** that pervades our world today. Millions share this hunger. Some can't find even the **language** to begin naming their reality or telling their story. And some who **do** take the risk of doing so, end up **damaged** and **alienated** because - like Ian - **they seek accompaniment from those who are either unable - or unwilling - to give it**.

I've identified 3 themes that I'd like to share with you today around the topic of "spirituality": 1) the **difference between spirituality and religion**; 2) the universal and innate need to find **meaning in life**; and 3) the importance of **ritual** in our lives.

I'm sure we've all met people who have said something like this: *"I'm not a religious person, but I am a spiritual person". Or....."I don't need to go to church to worship God. I worship God in nature, in the outdoors, in creation". Or, about someone else....."She doesn't go to church, but she's the most Christian person I know". A lot of people are saying exactly that these days!*

And again, if we're going to have a conversation about this that is helpful rather than hurtful, we need to agree on some definitions.

So for our purposes today, let's say that "**religion**" refers to "**formally institutionalized structures, rituals and beliefs**" which belong to one or other of the "official" religious systems - Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on.

"**Spirituality**", on the other hand, concerns "**an ancient and primal search for meaning**" - a much broader notion than "religion". Spirituality is - [and always has been] - **more central** to human experience than religion.

Our spiritual "feelings" and "questions" happen **whether we have a religious upbringing or not**. The "precondition" for this experience of "spirituality" is not membership (or even formation) in a specific religious system, **but simply an openness to the creative Spirit of wisdom and love** - a Spirit that inhabits the **whole** of creation and dwells in our **innermost selves**, informing our every instinct and our desire for meaning.

For those of us who **do** still find support and meaning and encouragement through our connection to a "religious institution" (and I guess that would be us, because here we are!), our "formal faith traditions" help us to **name** our experiences, to put them into words and contexts that assist us in **deepening** our experiences, and enable us to engage with others in **shared spiritual discourse**.

Those are all positive things about religion, but the **danger**, of course, is that "**naming**" (which sounds like a pretty 'innocent' thing) can easily become "**labelling**", and "**labelling**" leads to **building walls and doctrines and dogmas** to which **everyone** must then subscribe or risk being **excluded**.

Sadly, for many "spiritual seekers", formal religion - [with all its trappings and power games] - proves to be **a major obstacle** to spiritual development and growth, rather than a help!

Instead, we need to heed Jesus' words to Nicodemus: *"the wind (the spirit) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not*

know where it comes from or where it goes". In others words, don't try to control the spirit, because you can't!

*"**Spirituality**" is as old as life itself. "**Religion**", on the other hand, is very much a development of the past 5000 years. [*Hinduism, whose origins are traced to the middle of the third millennium, BCE, is considered to be the oldest of formal religions*]. I don't think that God waited for "formal religion" in order to enter into the world. **Religion is much more a human invention than it is a divine invention.***

The **search for meaning** - [the need for meaning] - is a **second** major theme whenever we talk about "spirituality". We human beings **cannot tolerate "meaninglessness"** for very long. Something deep within us compels us to **seek meaning** - and to "invent or create" meaning when it is not readily available.

The urge to find meaning is **primal - pre-logical - subconscious - fundamental** - to the very essence of human experience.

Despite all of the paradoxes and contradictions and ironies of human life - [and we all know that there are plenty!] - deep within us, **we are compelled to search for that "something more", that "meaning" which will help us to "make sense" out of the chaos of human life.**

As Aristotle said over 2300 years ago, "*by nature all human beings desire to know*". We are a **questioning animal** interested in knowing as much as we can about ourselves, others and the world we live in.

We cannot help but ask questions, big and small: **Why are we here? Where did we come from? What is the meaning of life? What does it mean to be human? Why do we suffer? What happens when we die? How can we find happiness? Where did I leave my car keys?**

Ironically, it is often **in the face of total meaninglessness** that the need to **find meaning** takes on its greatest urgency. I think of people like the Austrian psychiatrist and psychotherapist **Viktor Frankl** whose father, mother, brother and wife all died in concentration camps. Frankl, himself, spent 3 years in 4 different camps, including Auschwitz. He not only

survived in this “basement” of wickedness, but he used his experience to devise a therapy that, one way or another, has enabled many people to refashion their lives when they might just as easily have given up.

Frankl’s obituary in the September ‘97 issue of “The Economist” put it this way: *“Even in the camps one freedom remained – the freedom to think. Viktor Frankl observed that prisoners who gave ‘meaning’ to their lives – [perhaps simply by helping others through the day] – were themselves more likely to survive. Those who had lost any faith in the future fell into depression and were doomed”*.

[I don’t know how many of you have read the novel “**The Tattooist of Auschwitz**”, but that’s basically the meaning of that story, that we can “find meaning” by simply caring for other people.]

When Viktor Frankl was freed at the end of the war, he wrote “**Man’s Search for Meaning**”, a book which has sold some 9 million copies.

Ironically, some of the finest insights into **the meaning of life** have emerged from intense engagements with situations of **utter meaninglessness**.

And finally, a **third** theme in any discussion of “spirituality”: **the need for ritual in our lives**.

Many have said that our Western culture suffers from **a conspicuous lack of relevant and meaningful ritual**. As creatures of meaning - [or, as creatures who seek meaning, who need meaning] - we need “**spaces and places**” in our lives - and we also need “**occasions and events**” in our lives - **in which to formalize and ritualize our yearnings and fears and hopes**.

[I’m not sure exactly why, but I’ve taken to reading the obituaries lately, and can’t help but notice the number of people who no longer have a funeral/memorial service/celebration of life of any kind – religious or not. And I can’t help but wonder (as a person who participates in ritual all the time) whether we’ll eventually find that this is a very unhealthy trend...or not.]

For some of us, our faith traditions **have** provided us and **still** provide us with some such ritual outlets - ceremonies, liturgies, and sacraments. But too often, many of these rituals are so overloaded with archaic and outdated symbols, gestures and language - [some of which may be meaningful to some people] - but certainly not to all.

Also, unfortunately, many of these rites and rituals **have been abused by the very people who ought to be most sensitive to their sacred meaning.**

Ó Murchú - [a Roman Catholic himself, a member of the Sacred Heart Missionaries] - writes out of his own experience, so he lifts up - (as examples of ways that well-intentioned rituals have been abused) - examples out of his own context: **the sacrament of penance (confession)**, for example, intended to be **an experience of healing and forgiveness**, used instead **to inculcate guilt, fear and subservience** - sacraments intended to give life, intended to help us grow and be closer to God used, instead, to justify religious patriarchy with its voracious appetite for power and control.

Some people are able to “re-interpret” - to “re-claim”- ancient religious rituals **and still find meaning in them.**

But **others** have been so hurt by the very things that were supposed to be helpful, that they need to **dispose** of them altogether and “start over again” **to develop new, relevant rituals for themselves.**

All cultures, however “primitive”, develop ways to **ritualize** key human and planetary experiences such as birth, death, transitional experiences (like becoming an adult), commitments (like marriage), seasonal changes, the new moon, and other cycles of nature. **We all seem to need ways of “marking time”, ways of celebrating significant accomplishments, of acknowledging important events.**

We also know how important ritual is for **children**. When my sons were small, we always made a big deal of the “little rituals” - like grace at mealtime - and stories and prayers at bedtime. These ‘rituals’ give

structure to the lives of little people, opportunities for short “pauses” – [little “sabbaths”] - in the middle of their full days.

The spiritual landscape we explore is both “ancient” and “new”. For us as human beings, **spirituality is a natural birthright - a gift which requires care and nurture.**

While our world continues to struggle with religious **fanaticism** on the one hand, and religious **indifference** on the other hand, “**spirituality**” **remains constant** - with its potential for **new vision** and **fresh possibilities** for a more integrated world-view - and for a life lived **creatively** and **meaningfully** in mutual relation with one another, with God, and with the sacred planet Earth.

Thanks be to God!

Resources: “Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today’s World” by Diarmuid O Murchu
“God Moments: Why Faith Really Matters to a New Generation” by Jeremy Langford

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