

digital spirituality

The Search for Spirituality Amidst the Artificial Realities of Global Materialism

Introduction - A Lost Sense of Life Balance

Is this what I spend all my time working for?

Is that how you feel at the end of the day, week, or even on the trip home from a vacation spent in "paradise"?

If you didn't need the money, how would you spend your time today? This month? This year? Why would you do that? Perhaps you'd search for that missing someone or something to make your life more fun or meaningful? Which is, after all, only to say "more full of purpose or meaning"?

Welcome to Club Humanity! You are not alone, and what's encouraging is that even many businesses are waking up to the fact that people, all people including the CEO and you, have personal worth and meaning needs beyond corporate vision conferences and mission statements.

The millennium is yet young, so it is certainly permitted to do a little ruminating on your own life and the future of the world. Really almost any time is a good time for a conscious review of one's place in our ever-changing world. Besides being an excuse to party and celebrate, symbols of renewal can inspire us to reach more deeply within ourselves and test the waters of our souls. We allow ourselves the luxury of asking, "What do I really want out of life? Why am I here now, doing what I'm doing? Is this how I want to spend the rest of my life? How will this relate to others?"

As survival goes global, materialism increasingly drives the values of human civilization into one huge profit seeking system of interlocking supply chains expressed in posted and purposed mission statements dedicated to feeding this unleashed maw of international consumer consumption. You get the point. There are many ways to ask the same question, but the important thing is that the start of a new year, a new millennium, or even a new day seems to be an appropriate time to reflect on the meaning and direction of life.

When I write about "life," I am including our individual experiences of reality as well as the lives of others, and so I write for an earth-full of humanity. I write from a systems perspective that attempts to view our endangered globe as an integrated whole encompassing the welfare of an ecologically vibrant environment - as well as the healthy political, economic and social relationships between peoples and nations.

So where's the spirituality? What is spirituality anyway? Vegetarianism with flower scented candles and oiled back-rubs? In other words, "Where's the beef" in being?

Superficiality may sell beyond all records with a pleasant feeling for the moment, but it does not satisfy anyone for long. Unless they're brain dead. I mean really, life should be more than a bigger paycheck or higher profits, right? Money in hand is important, but I think most people will readily agree that there is more to life than the amount of cash available. There is at least how you spend it, for example.

The Role of Family

As I discuss purpose in life, simplifying focus requires me to limit references to the very important but generic joys and responsibilities of family, which should be at the no-brainer level when it comes to matters of importance in any culture. Family is obviously important because we all come from one kind or another. Exactly which kind varies by individual circumstance as well as by culture. How a society defines what a family is and/or how it should be structured and run definitely transitions into spirituality.

Since I cannot engage this question of family structure too deeply in this book, which primarily takes a high level, systems view of societal and individual interactions, I recognize that the personal challenges faced by family life confront us with spiritual issues. I believe the structure of the universe is intentional and so is our birth into families because living in them necessitates decisions about how or even whether, we grow and develop as persons.

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If you do not have a natural family, then you have already experienced part of the Enemy's plan to destroy humanity. People who suffer from a destroyed or absent family look for a new one. They become adopted into some sort of family or family-like structure, such as a gang. It seems to be a social necessity for most. Living in close proximity with familial others plainly, and often painfully, reveals our spiritual inadequacies, capabilities, opportunities and perspectives. (I define "familial others" as those with whom we have dwelt for an extended period of time as measured in multiple years. Obviously, circumstances may also exist in which one's biological or birth family cannot know much about a person due to psychological, social or geographic distance.)

Many people successfully hide from themselves, but one can't hide from his or her family, if there is one in the traditional sense. If we are not blessed with a healthy family context, then we should try to create one out of persons known and lived with because family issues force us to come up with answers, motivations, reasons, or purposes from our spiritual sides. Much of our spiritual experience and growth takes place in a family context because no one knows us for better or for worse. Our family members usually know us as well as one can know another person. Consequently, a healthy family life always forces us to be at least somewhat honest about ourselves.

Self-honesty is the first step in any spiritual or personal growth program. Honest objectivity (as much as possible) about ourselves is very difficult to approximate without the help of others. So it really helps to have the eyes of our family members - from the youngest to the oldest - as an interactive third party mirror to our own reflections. Family is not the only outside-of-self point of reference: other social groups may influence our beliefs and concepts of ethics and morality, too. But family relationships are the ones we can least ignore because they have the most direct bearing on who we are and how we experience our daily lives.

My Purpose

My purpose for this relatively short literary effort is to help you to become spirituality oriented towards understanding the basic principles that impart transcendent meaning to every day life, especially in today's modern, multicultural secular society of global consumer capitalism. As one who has long sought to understand the world into which he was born, I write to you as an individual who hopes that my observations about life will help and/or challenge you to meaningful growth. I certainly do not have all the answers.

As a child, I met a lot of nice people, and I just couldn't understand what all the unhappiness and misery was all about. Where did it come from and when?

Like you, I didn't ask to be born, and I certainly didn't select my parents, community, or nation. I arrived in wonder with a question from the consciousness of my crib, "What am I here for?" And at about eight to ten years of age I would ask myself, "Why is such a beautiful place as the earth so embroiled in such problems between mostly nice people?"

Even as a very young child I was conscious of historical context. Part of the reason is probably because I am that way and partly because I was born shortly after the Second World War. I grew up in the years of General become President Eisenhower with everyone still talking about the war from heroic movies to veterans kibitzing before and after marching in local parades, where I used to tromp along in a Boy Scout uniform carrying one of those flags. The space race took off, and nuclear bomb shelters sprouted up everywhere. The Cold War did not seem "cold" at all.

As a teen, we in the USA had the riotous sixties of race wars, the Vietnam War, idealistic communes and liberation armies, as well as the more universal generational rebellion in rocking psychedelic sexual and social mores. The sixties also saw the beginnings of modern environmentalism, consumerism and the unraveling of traditional religious structures towards a kind of spiritual free-for-all as Eastern philosophies and religions competed with the over-promising Christian evangelists of the fringe.

Specific "ism" didn't matter - all seemed to be on the make for fleecing the ingenuous in exchange for uncertain enlightenment. Science saved humanity by putting men on the moon. High Technology

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discoveries and achievements together with the Great Society redistribution of wealth became the nation's secular materialist answers to all sociocultural problems. In other words the United States embarked on a crash dash of cultural change to survive the perpetual struggle between persons and peoples to see who was "King of the Mountain" on each of the multitudinous heaps of humanity piled up on this globe.

The seventies to early eighties brought the United States to some rather extreme, but understandable, heights of political and economic disillusionment with the Nixon administration. In him all politicians became crooks. Concurrently, there arose an oil-driven inflation crisis concomitant with a massive decline in corporate profitability consequential to the old paradigm of "make more of it and they will buy it." The loss of business profitability propelled a dramatic rise in unemployment as companies took high risks or sought increased efficiencies in order to survive.

Gold-backed currency was given the kiss of death as the dollar went unlinked. Super leverage to capitalize on inflation created ephemeral wealth in hard assets, only to be stolen away by the raging highs of even the most prime of interest rates as the Federal Reserve under Chairman Volker raised them to over 20%. Income tax rates were also very high. In those days it was obvious that everyone in debt worked for the IRS and the bank. The rich got obviously richer, and the poor got obviously poorer.

The electorate rebelled against this "Misery Index" of high interest and tax rates so that the bulk of the eighties to '92 brought the "Feel Good about America" revolution. It also saw, or even caused, the end of the Cold War as the "Evil Empire" of Eurasian communism imploded, bankrupt from overspending in an armed race with the US for global hegemony. The slightly more ethical greed of market capitalism proved itself more efficient than the false communalism of socialist idealism interpreted and distributed by the corrupt greed of a totalitarian oligarchy in a Russian Empire called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union for short).

Global Materialism

The nineties overtly enshrined materialism as the foundational principle of American inspired Globalism. Progressive international civilization has embraced the doctrine that "greed is good" as long as it is acquired by the accepted rules of fair trade. "Fair" is explicitly and implicitly understood to mean increasingly distributed as a result of an expanding economic web of free market consumerism.

As we progress into the twenty-first century, an altruistic humanism has been politically woven into the accelerating economic integration of nations. Mass media propagates promises of a worldwide democratic experience of improved human rights as defined by the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. Furthermore, the leaders of our planet are forging regional (and ultimately international) trade agreements.

Economic cooperation mandates political accommodations; therefore, political and business leaders have willingly sacrificed national freedoms in order to participate in dreams of an ever-expanding wealth derived from ever-enlarging and prospering markets. By expanding prosperity to all nations, the internationalists contend that war will become unthinkable: who would want to kill their customer? In a global economy we are all plugged in as customers of each other in an almost incomprehensibly woven web of interdependencies.

Global commercialism threatens spirituality as actually practiced by humanity. With the spread of global materialism, spirituality has become attenuated, enfeebled and compromised as impractical, sentimental or irrelevant to our modern life of rapidly advancing scientific technology with its "killer" applications to products and services distributed in a highly competitive global market.

To a materialistic philosophy of consumerist self interest, price is king, created demand is the vision, and elasticity is its messiah. Structurally, everything becomes a commodity, including labor, human body parts and soon-to-be-born persons. Each recognized unit or subunit has its price and by its living commodity price we rationalize and adjust the relative values of our ethical and moral principles.

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So where to now? The twenty-first century has barely begun, and I read that some prognosticators predict a return to spirituality. But just what is spirituality? What does the future hold? Will we listen and learn from prophets, or continue to follow profits? And if we find something spiritual, is it truth or lie? Reality or delusion? Personally serving or universal? From the traditional sense of the word, is there anything that can even be defined as truth?

Primarily due to neglect, these ancient questions have languished in a downward spiral towards the impotence of declining relevance by a hi-tech civilization lived at the Internet speed of life. Spirituality has been eaten up by philosophical skepticism, psychiatric practice and by evolutionary social and biological theories. Spiritual complacency becomes common due to the illusion of record-breaking prosperity. These and other factors meld to manifest massive, mind-boggling cultural confusion experienced at a rate and scope of change unprecedented in human experience.

Living in a secular (read pagan) culture as found in the West, the biggest obstacle in searching for true spirituality is the general bias against the spiritual dimensions of life in all of its material manifestations. Society rebels *en masse* against any potential submission of an individual's will or control over one's life – no matter how illusory such control may be. Modern man tries to control the world around him by the acquisition and application of knowledge – specifically scientific knowledge of the materially physical universe. The idea is that if we follow the rules, then we can control the results – even to the attainment of an eternal mortality – by a brain transplant into a new bio-body, if by no other means. But deep within each of us remains a fear of judgment, a fear of death that demands devotion to the internal drives of self-preservation and, usually by practical social extension, to an external authority. Hence we have the urge to express our individuality, but we also accept the limits to that expression in order to remain members of desired or default social groups.

Again, My Purpose

My purpose is to share with you some of my own reflections on spirituality as an encouraging stimulus for you to reflect on life's meaning. I take a systems analysis approach derived from my study of literature, religion, philosophy, history and cultural development around the world as viewed through the lenses of my personal search for spirituality. Even at its best, I admit in advance that this effort must be incomplete by design, but it does contain principles that you can broadly apply in your own search to understand what is going on in the world. Of course, the objective of searching is to integrate valuable discoveries into your personal life with some promise of improvement if not the attainment of peaceful revelation.

I learned some lessons the hard way, and I would spare you some sorrow, if possible. The information in the following pages could potentially revolutionize your daily life and hope for the future. Less optimistically, I can still write with confidence that you will find this book different from anything you have read to date, and I believe your spiritual search will be safer and more rewarding from reading it.

Some of what is marketed as spirituality is bunk; some of it is very dangerous to your happiness and liberated life enjoyment. I will address some of these cautions later. Since materialism is currently ascendant, I believe that our conscious decision to focus on or to exercise the positive life enhancing, but not power for power's sake, spiritual dimension of life helps us to achieve a more equitable balance in the whole experience of transcendent reality now.

Before I get too far into this text, I want extend honest thanks to professors at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I earned an MA in the Archaeology of Israel and Prehistory of the Old World. Studies of a different character towards an MBA degree at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, focused on international/intercultural business. Business and management issues have contributed significantly to the perspectives expressed here.

Perhaps I owe the most to the staff and my students at Cardinal Stritch University and Bethel University, who have given me the opportunity for live interactive discussions on a wide range of topics as structured in the class syllabi. These classroom exchanges and dialogs have helped me to learn how to more simply express some of the complex ideas covered in these pages, though I still

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work to improve on that.

Regardless of the above, I must take full responsibility for what is written here even as I admit to have learned from many. I give credit to others where I remember it. May God bless your own journey towards spiritual meaning and fulfillment!