

Facing the Unknown

For those of us who have found ourselves on the spiritual path at some point in life, it is interesting to ponder what sent us in that direction. What initiated the seeking? In other words, what caused us to take the first step on the spiritual path?

It seems that some people are born with the desire or inclination to follow their spirituality. This is often through a religion, perhaps their childhood religion or perhaps a religion that they've discovered later in life.

My own search was not within the bounds of a traditional religion. What drove me was a desire to find out what this Life was really about. I didn't imagine that such a search was even spiritual. It was more a curiosity about Life. Questions arose such as: "What is this Life?" "What is my place in it?" "What is my purpose in it?" "What would I need to do in this life to feel fulfilled?" "What would make it all okay?"

That was the type of "non-spiritual" terminology I was using when talking to myself in my twenties. I was then astonished to find out when I turned thirty that the questions that I'd been asking were also the essential questions of spirituality. I was surprised to find that what I'd been looking for was considered to be the core inquiry of spiritual paths as presented by many teachers both historical and current. Thus began my path as a seeker.

For many people the spiritual path is initiated by some tragedy. Life is going along well, and everything is more or less okay. And then, one day something happens of such an impact that we end up taking a different route thereafter. Perhaps the impact is in the form of a sickness or death of a close friend or loved one. It's maybe a difficult divorce, the loss of a career or a serious disease that we have contracted. These types of powerful events can cause us to look at Life differently. We might feel: "I imagined I knew what this life was about and what would give me fulfillment. But it hasn't. It has perhaps given me my share of gifts and some joy along the way, but something remains unsatisfied. Something is still lacking. Life still seems unresolved." And we begin looking for what that may be.

We hear about spirituality, which may or may not be in the form of a religion. We hear that it might give us the answers we seek, and we go down that road in search of something that we might be hard-pressed to define. We call people on that road "seekers." But, as I see it, everyone is a seeker. In their own way, everybody is trying to figure out the answers to similar questions, whether expressed consciously or not: "What's going to make me happy? What's going to make me feel fulfilled? What's going to get me through the day? What's going to make me feel okay about Life?"

Many of us seek resolution to these questions through careers, family, community service, patriotic acts, sex, or perhaps through a hobby. Or maybe we take a more dysfunctional route through drugs and alcohol. In any event, everybody is pursuing happiness in their own way – that sense of contentment, peace, and at ease-ness.

When we hear about a spiritual path that may give us a more direct route to that sense of peace and belongingness, we set off on our spiritual journey. We hope to find something that will allow

us to feel more at home in our own skin in this world – at ease with Life, at peace with our neighbor and at one with the Divine.

What I've seen with spiritual seekers is that some people use spirituality medicinally. In other words, if they're having a bad day, they might decide, "I'd better meditate today, I'd better pray today, I'd better do my practice today and get myself put back together." Using spiritual techniques in this way works to some degree, at least for a while. We might feel a little more at peace. And, after regaining our center, we might feel like, "I'm ready to go back out into the fray and be in the world again, until the next time I feel distressed." That's fine. It can work like that. But, at some point, we might realize that that's not quite enough, that there's something more to be seen and we feel compelled to go further. We may not know why we feel compelled to find out what lies beyond just wanting to feel better, but we do it anyway.

This is a turning point on the spiritual path. When our spiritual intent shifts from just wanting to feel better to being determined to explore Life and our own deepest nature, our journey transitions from the personal to the impersonal. It is a commitment to the spiritual path beyond our self-interest. It no longer feels like we have a choice. There is a sense of, "I just have to know."

A significant part of the journey at this "stage" is being honest with ourselves about what we know, what we don't know, what we want to know, and what's most important to us. It's also about being willing and courageous enough to explore difficult areas and go further down the road, even if we don't know where that road may lead. In fact, we can't know where it leads because the journey will take us beyond any conceptualization that we may still hold.

We have heard stories about spiritual awakening. They are intriguing. Maybe they're true, maybe they're not. We can't really know for sure. But when you are walking down this path, you are walking into the Unknown. And you are alone.

This is a much more profound journey than just using spirituality medicinally. And when you've gone beyond mere curiosity, when you've become fully committed to finding out what's true for you, in your own direct experience, your search becomes foremost in your life. Nothing less will do.

We may find if we go down this road far enough there will come a time when we've seen too much, when it's too late to turn back, and the only way is forward. This is when our total resources are required. They're required because Life demands our willingness to venture into the Unknown. It demands our trust. It demands our willingness to explore parts of ourselves that we may not have previously wanted to see. Life is requiring a willingness to allow our remaining shadow areas to be seen and for us to follow the thread of what is revealed no matter where that leads.

This is where spirituality gets more challenging and things no longer feel hypothetical. They feel very real. What we've read in books may have been helpful up to this point. Now, what becomes indispensable is our own personal integrity, our willingness to be honest with ourselves; our willingness to challenge ourselves, to see what we may not want to see, to take the next step forward when we don't know where that step may lead; and the willingness to trust Life.

Fortunately, at this point, we don't have an alternative. The only way is the way forward. It's too late to turn back. We benefit from not having any alternative. If we did, we would take it. We come into full alignment with Life only as a last resort, only when all other options have been tried and have failed. This is the good news. We find ourselves checkmated. We are surrendered.

Of course, we always were fully held by Life's grace, but now we know it. And we are grateful that it is so.

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