

# **What is Spirituality?**

Harvey Gillman



**Quaker Universalist Fellowship**

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## **Editor's Introduction**

We are grateful to Harvey Gillman for sending us a copy of this essay, which originated as a talk given to Forest Hill Meeting at High Leigh in the U.K. It first appeared in print as a two-part piece in the November and December, 2008, issues of *Quaker Monthly*, a publication of Britain Yearly Meeting, and it is reprinted here with permission.

Harvey Gillman served for many years as outreach secretary for Britain Yearly Meeting. He has published a number of books, and he is much revered on both sides of the Atlantic as a spokesperson for liberal Quakerism. His most recent work, *Consider the Blackbird*, was reviewed in *Universalist Friends* Number 48 (summer, 2008).

Rhoda R. Gilman



## WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

By Harvey Gillman

I was delighted to be asked to define and explore with you the theme of spirituality. If you think about it, there is a contradiction here. To define means to put a border around, to close in, to show the limitations of; to explore a territory on the other hand may assume the territory has a border, but it is more about opening up, visiting the unknown regions, making discoveries. In fact I'd like to do both. I am not really offering a map to the territory of spirituality, more a lantern and a compass — some tools to help you on the path. If you don't accept what I am saying, then I hope at least you will find some of the tools I am offering useful for your own journey. Do with them as you will.

So thanks for the challenge of the invitation. It has been a real privilege for me to have travelled around Friends and other groups in this country and abroad for over twenty-five years. With them I have reflected on their own understanding of the life of the Spirit and my own. I am an extravert, which means I learn as I go along, I get my energy from conversations with others. In fact I only know where I am and what I believe when I have to talk with others and explain things. Otherwise I sit there intuitively thinking in blissful, and sometimes, not so blissful, uncertainty. So I am learning all the time and am discovering as I speak.

Let's make a journey together.

I would like to begin by quoting a poem I found in a magazine many years ago and which I used to keep on a board in my office in Friends House — I called it my wisdom board. The poem is called *Mysticism*, by Wallace E. Chappell:

I am passing on  
into another era of my life:  
I am looking again  
at mysticism,  
but not as once  
I gazed a score  
of years ago.

I look today as one  
who has travelled through  
the awe of youth,  
the search for earned perfection,  
the times of secularity  
and scientific humanism,  
the drying up of prayer,  
the death of “death of god”,  
the days of world-defined  
agendas  
for the church.

I am coming now  
to wrestle once again  
with the same mystery  
who has followed me  
persistently  
along my journey.

But not as in the past.  
My expectations  
all are altered.  
My goal is redefined.

I simply want  
to hear and heed,  
to know and follow.  
I seek no superpower.  
This hour  
God has purged  
my immature direction.

I journey inward  
just because  
I am created with capacity  
for that quest,  
expecting more,  
not less, of world and church  
and life.

As I was preparing this talk, I had a sense that this poem was right as an introduction. When I read it aloud as I was writing this, I was still as deeply moved as I was the first time I saw it. It speaks totally to my condition. OK, I am a linguist obsessed by theology; I have written a lot on this theme, but I speak to you as someone who is daily, hourly challenged by Spirit. I have called it being haunted by God. But I am not defining Spirit or God. Interestingly the poem is called *Mysticism*; and I guess nowadays I would call myself a mystic, an everyday sort of mystic. But the insights of the poem strike to the heart of the spiritual life. I journey because I am created with that capacity for quest — as indeed we all are. I am speaking from the awareness that I also am passing on to a new era of my life, one that makes me realise that I must put away many of the preoccupations of my younger days.

The story of Jacob struggling with the angel in the Book of Genesis is the image which speaks most to me. We struggle with the mystery on the bank of a river, at the crossing of a threshold. We struggle all night; we demand to be blessed by the angel at the threshold of a new territory; we will not let go even when we are rendered lame by the angel; but at the end we are transformed; we change from Jacob to Israel; we find in the dignity of the search for meaning a new deeper self. To hear and heed, to know and to follow the truth which reality discloses to us — that is the quest. Not with certainty, not a truth better than that of other people, but the truth which is revealed to us in our life and which we try to come to terms with in the community of seekers in which we find ourselves.

This movement of self to deeper self and of self moving out towards the other is to me at the heart of the spiritual life. I shall explore this further in a few moments. I am well aware however that the word *spirituality* does not please everyone. In my own meeting at Brighton one older Friend says she does not understand what the word means. Even when the word is explained she still points out that she cannot, or even will not, understand it. Possibly that is because she declares herself to be an agnostic, albeit one who often quotes Jesus. She is after all a Quaker agnostic.

For many other people the word *spirituality* refers spookily to spirits, things that go through walls, shadowy creatures found in many a children's film or even horror movie. For others it overlaps with spiritualism and is about getting in contact with the spirits of the dead. And then there is the open-ended use of the word referring to anything which gives you a glow. A whole book called *Selling Spirituality* has been written on how the word has been used in an effort to give spurious psychological depth to the capitalist enterprise. It notes how in a world of individualistic consumerism, the word *spirituality* confers a new selling advantage. In a market devoted to personal enhancement and personal well-being, it actually helps selling things. The authors of the book declare that *spiritual* is the new *mystical*, with the advantage that spiritual can be used without any reference to the divine. Though again Brighton is a planet of its own. I saw a health shop offering a mystical tan. I found the advertisement quite mind-boggling. Alas. I never pursued the offer!

Many years ago I was giving a talk about the Quaker way and I used the word *spirituality*. Someone in the audience challenged me on this, saying that it was a word used too often without a definition and would I give him one. I mumbled something, but on the train going home I wrote a paragraph which now forms the core for me of how I use the word. I see reality as a series of relationships: the self as it grows through its interaction with the world around, through family, friends,



community, through the whole cosmos. The self grows as it were outwardly and inwardly. At one level there is only being, so that we are all part of each other; the self is not an isolated atom. I happen to believe also that there is a universal energy which animates and encourages these relationships. For want of a better word, I shall call this energy *Spirit*. *Spirituality* is thus about deepening relationships in a reality that is essentially sacred, in the sense of inspiring awe and wonder and reverence. Since all humans are part of this reality, and are on the quest for meaning and relationship, I would say that we are all on a spiritual journey, though the path is not necessarily linear. There are many windings and turnings, seeming dead-ends. We spiral through experiences and events. To be alive is to be on a pilgrimage. Each moment of the pilgrimage is itself a discovery; we seek as we find; we find as we seek. A mystic would say that a deepening understanding of our role within the world is a growing ability to see the world through the eyes of love.

In my book, *Consider the Blackbird*, I spent a large amount of space giving other definitions of *spirituality*. I should like to offer a few of them here:

*Spirituality* is what we do with our solitude, it is the reflection on ultimate things, it can be expressed by the Aztec “finding one’s face, finding one’s heart.” *Spirituality* is what we do with the flame within. Are these definitions or exploration? I leave that to you. I would add that spirituality may be seen as the call to the deep places where the one is joined to the many. But that is why I call myself a mystic.

If we consider the origins of the word, we shall see how the word has changed its meaning, and how the world in which it is used has changed also. One of the earliest usages is in the phrase “the estates spiritual.” This refers to the possessions of the priestly caste. Spiritual direction was advice given by spiritual directors, who were also priests, members of monastic communities, religious hermits and so on. Eventually the word spirituality came to refer to religious practice which led to a closeness to God — thus we find expressions such as Franciscan spirituality, Quaker spirituality

etc. In a shop I visited recently all the books under the title of spirituality referred to ways of prayer.

So *spiritual* referred to the priestly and the monastic; then to practices related to them. But there is another wider dimension. “Spirit” is the English translation given to the Greek “pneuma.” According to Paul of Tarsus we are all filled with spirit, if we follow Christ, not just the clergy — if indeed Paul believed in a priestly caste at all — but all of us. This was also translated by the word *ghostly* as is found in the translation of Holy Ghost, for an original Hebrew or Aramaic phrase meaning Holy Wind. So, the wind blows where it wills in and out and through religious establishments. Now *spiritual* and *spirituality* have been liberated from the religious elite and refer to something much more universal.

The word was used first to refer to Christian life but it is now used in other religions. I have a book at home on Jewish spirituality, a sort of title which would not have been found many years ago. As the word has lost its mooring from a set-aside priesthood, it has gained a sort of independence from religion itself. To some people this is anathema. I remember a panel of a Muslim, a Jew, and a liberal Anglican discussing the word. For the Muslim, who was very orthodox, spirituality could not exist outside of religious practice; the Jew, who was on the liberal side of his faith, was somewhat suspicious that spirituality could be found outside of religion, though admitting it might take place there also; the liberal Anglican took it for granted that spirituality could be found outside of religion. For my part I see spirituality as a universal given; a call to which we may or may not respond, but which somehow we cannot completely ignore. We may use religious vocabulary to heed it; we may not. It is not whether we use the religious language or not, rather what we say in the language we use. Words are sacred not because the dictionary says so, but their sacredness depends on how we use them. We create sacredness as we encounter Spirit. We open ourselves to what is already there and establish, or re-establish relationship.

In that sense the whole of life is sacred as we act with sacredness and this, as I have said, depends on our ability to learn to see with our eyes, with our minds, with our hearts, and with our souls. But the Spirit is always there. We are not.

Let us explore further the tension between the realm of religion and that of spirituality.

I found a useful passage written by the Dalai Lama in *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World* (1999) which I should like to share with you:

I believe there is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or nirvana. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, rituals, prayer and so on. Spirituality, I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit — such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony — which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of nirvana and salvation, are directly connected with religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however. There is thus no reason why the individual should not develop them, even to a high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic spiritual qualities.

So much for the Dalai Lama.

Some Friends may well agree with this quotation, though I would add that religion is a useful historical construct. At its best it is how we communally explore and work out our spirituality at a given time, through myth, story, ritual, worship, and the way we live together. It is a language which may enable us — or not — to develop relationship and provide sources of meaning. In fact, in a new book by Keith Ward, called

significantly *Is Religion Dangerous?* he talks of religion whose basic presumption is that “there exists a supreme objective reality and value in conscious relation to which humans can find fulfilment.” This for some people may seem to be a very spiritual definition of religious conviction. I guess this is close to my own position.

As you can see then, there is an overlap between religion and spirituality. As many people come to be suspicious of religion they may turn to *spirituality*. The use of these words may be generational as well — younger people may be reacting against the word *religion* more than older people, in whose childhood religion played a larger role than today as a source of an ethical way of living.

Another problem for anyone exploring the nature of spirituality is based on the old contradiction between spirit and matter. This goes back to the Platonic idea that there is a world of ideal forms which is perfect and eternal. This was taken over by Christians who saw it as the realm of the Spirit. Thus, in contrast, the world of matter is fallen, imperfect, a place of temptation, hence one to be escaped from as soon as possible. My emphasis on spirituality through relationship takes me to the opposite view: that of matter permeated, suffused by Spirit. In a beautiful sentence from a fascinating book called *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, Belden C. Lane wrote:

The interior truth. . . is that human beings do not long for another world, far beyond the ordinariness of this one. We long for our own world, perceived in all its hidden grandeur. We sense it to be filled with a glory we could see if only we had the gifts of attention and the proper rituals of entry.

So I would wish that spirituality be no longer seen as a superior form over and against the world in which we find ourselves. Rather I see spirituality as a deep attending to and communion with Spirit, fleshed out, embodied, incarnate even, in this beautiful, sacred, scarred and polluted reality of which we ourselves are a part. Spirituality is beholding with love this world in which we find ourselves.

Another part of the equation which I have not yet mentioned is that of the scientific enterprise. Michael Hallar, a Polish scientist and theologian, talks of the difference between scientific enquiry and the religious quest as being the difference between knowledge and meaning. This points up a problem in much so-called religious-scientific debate. The scientific method seeks to understand the how and what of things. The religious may try to give a picture of the why of things. For literalists in both camps, these may seem to be exclusive questions. If you take the Bible, for example, as a source of historical fact then you may have a real incompatibility between the two sources of information. If you see the scientific method as the only way of understanding the universe and how to live within it, then you will see religious truth as invalid because it is not tested by quantifiable experiment. If on the other hand you assert that truth is not just fact, but is about authenticity of relationship; is about how you treat others; if you accept that the spiritual life is about deepening and seeing connections, then you may find, as I do, the old nineteenth-century debates tedious and time consuming. The fundamental questions of spirituality are: How do we live truthfully? How do we share the planet with others? How, as the mystics declare, do we give birth to the divine in the everyday relationships, in the details of our lives?

To talk of the spiritual life without an ethical dimension and in contradiction to scientific exploration seems to me to be a futile enterprise. I see religion at its best as the way we explore together our spiritual insights, give form to the search in worship, and live out our findings, experimentally, in testimony. It is not science as such that contradicts spirituality, but science in its fundamentalist guise as a totalitarian world-view, denying that which cannot be quantified. It is not religion in its sense of corporate exploration that is the enemy of spirituality, but in its demand for hierarchy; power, conformity, and imposition of one way of being over the diversity of human experience. Indeed any totalitarian system is the enemy of the spiritual search. How

can you catch the fierce wind of the Spirit in the net of any given system?

Belden Lane wrote: “if only we had the gifts of attention and the proper rituals of entry.” As I have stated, for me the first challenge of the spiritual life is that of seeing, of attending, of witnessing. The great Quaker insight and challenge is that “we answer that of God in everyone.” In a recent correspondence in the weekly, *The Friend*, there was a discussion as to what was meant by “answering.” Someone pointed out that George Fox’s basic idea was that there was a seed or a light from God in each of us. But actually that seed often lay dormant; the light was dim. The role of one human being for another was that we help the seed in each other to grow; we help the light to shine. In Eckhart’s famous phrase, we help each other to give birth to God. We evoke, call out the divine in each other. This is in fact the basis of our testimonies. But before we can do that we must actually see each other. We must give each other attention as each is, as it says in *Advices & Queries*, unique, precious, a child of God. (I am not mad on the idea of our remaining children — but that is another theme.)

We cannot build relationships unless we recognise that uniqueness, that preciousness in ourselves. So we need to attend to ourselves, see ourselves, warts and all, darkness and light. This is a real challenge. It does not need hierarchies or elaborate rituals or books or gurus or creeds. It needs eyes to see, and hearts to attend. The light shows us our darkness, but it gives us energy to overcome the ocean of darkness and leads us into community with those who also seek, and then perhaps with those who cannot seek, or who can no longer seek, or who are too afraid to seek.

In a sense, our worship is our exercise of seeing, of listening, of beholding. It is where faithfulness is practised. But the path is not linear. There are times when God is there, but we are not. There are times that we see the light in others but not in ourselves. There are times when we are too busy saving the planet to behold

the details of the world around, its small beauties and its troubles. I know one Quaker who tells me that the more dust in a house, the greater the commitment to Quaker work outside it. Of course there are priorities; of course we all have different talents. I am often told by my partner that I am so clumsy in the physical world because my head is usually in the clouds. But the challenge is precisely to notice, to give time to the small links in the great chain of things. So the spiritual path is not a race to a certain goal. Perhaps it is more like a spiral which turns back on itself at a greater depth. It is not a matter of success or of a comparison with anyone else; it is what it is and we walk it with whatever feet we have, even though we may feel our feet have the heaviness of clay.

I was once asked by a group of nuns whether Quakers believe in the communion of saints. I pointed out that we do not have creeds or dogmas, but yes, we do have an awareness of the communion of saints. Go any week to meeting for worship and there they are, the saints in all their glory. We are always quoting Fox and Woolman and Penn, Jesus and the Buddha, Margaret Fell and Elizabeth Fry — even members of our own meetings are our saints. When I come into meeting, I watch other members come into the room; these are my companions; if I read from *Quaker Faith and Practice*, the authors there are my companions also. And when I close my eyes I hold in the light those of my friends (with a capital and a small f) who are ill or are in trouble.

Thus worship and prayer (or holding in the light if you prefer) are my ways of making firm the links, of building relationships. In worship I am also aware of the dead ends and blind alleys of my own life. I ask. I pray for light.

In all of this there is another essential element of spiritual awareness. That is of transcending the ego. Because I do not buy into the old myth of the sinfulness of humanity or of matter, I do not see the ego as the enemy. But it strikes me that we build up

the ego, the sense of self which is at the core of our identity, in order to survive, to enable us to manipulate the world around us. There is a danger however that we assume we are our egos. There is a time when we may realise that life is not all about survival, that we do not have to defend ourselves against others, that perhaps our greatest fulfilment is when we take the ego and go beyond it. I do not find the concept of “sin” useful, but if I had to give it a definition I would say that it is the partial self which tries to separate itself from the rest of creation. The beholding of the other, the respecting the sacredness of the other, leads us to see that whatever redemption is to be found is to be found with others, in community. Thus we need to know each other, as Quakers say, “in the things which are eternal” — but this does not exclude the things that are temporal also.

A deepening of the spiritual life of the group arises from the sharing of story. In many traditions there is a common story, a given theology which we are born into, and to which we have to assent to find whatever salvation is offered. I would want to start the other way round. Part of our recognition of our self — and we cannot recognise others, without some recognition of the self — is the ability to delve into our own experience and to try to hear what our lives are saying to us. Paradoxically we can only do this when we have others to listen to us. Over the last few years I have been developing a series of propositions which I should now like to share with you. I use them also in the *Blackbird* book. I call this:

Each story is important.

All people have their stories.

Each story is important.

We need others to hear our stories and care.

This will help us listen to the stories of others. This will help us reflect upon our own story. From the particular details of these stories we can begin to understand the human story. This leads us to understand the divine story.



I wonder how much we live this out in our meetings. To do this we need to overcome fears about ourselves and suspicions about others; we need to have time and patience; we need to be able to deal with difference as there will be elements in each other's stories that are alien to our own experience. Even the language of the other story may be very different from what we might use.

But a danger lies with the limited stories of our own communities. There are other stories in this world; there are stories which are so painful they may not be articulated, cannot be articulated. There is story even in the silence. One gift we can offer the other is the gift of the voice. The prophet is the one who voices the story of the unheard and of the overlooked.

Eckhart, whom I quoted before, said that the spiritual life was one of subtraction rather than of addition. Many of us have come to Friends leaving behind what we may have thought of as being an inauthentic way, as an incomplete or even false story. In my own case, however much I love Jewish culture, music, food, warmth, and mysticism, I found that I needed to go back from the promised land into the desert to strip myself bare of the burdens of ritual, orthodox legalism, exclusivity. The desert teaches you the value of vulnerability and creativity; you can only carry the minimum; you must listen to each sound and watch where you are going. You value the company of other desert life.

So I think what I am trying to convey here is quite simple, though I apologise if I have made it sound complicated. We live in Spirit; it is the glue of the universe; it suffuses all life; it gives whatever meaning there is to our fragile existences; it gives us the connection with all life, if we attend to its promptings. It leads us beyond the individualism of the separated ego to the oasis where we can meet together before the next part of our journey. But most of us are called out of the desert into the bustling market place among the traders, the shakers and the movers; among the beggars and the broken. And it is there that we are called to answer that of God in everyone.

I have always loved poetry and music. Sometimes when I need to put aside words I listen to Schubert and late Beethoven. I find the arts a rich source of spiritual insight. I would love to play for you part of Schubert's great Quintet in C — the second movement. That to me says it all. It has both hesitancy and great daring, contemplation and dance. But instead I am going to end with a poem by Walt Whitman, another over-the-top artist:

Why, who makes much of a miracle?  
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,  
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,  
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,  
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of water,  
Or stand under trees in the woods,  
Or talk by day with anyone I love, or sleep in bed at night with  
anyone I love,  
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,  
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,  
Or watch honey-bees busy round the hive of a summer forenoon,  
Or animals feeding in the fields,  
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of the stars  
shining so quiet and bright,  
Or the exquisite delicate curve of the new moon in spring;  
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place  
To me every hour of light and dark is a miracle,  
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,  
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,  
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the  
same,  
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same,  
To me the sea is a continual miracle,  
The fishes that swim — the rocks — the motion of the waves —  
the ships with men in them,  
What stranger miracles are there?

The word “miracle” comes from a Latin root meaning to wonder at. In Spanish the idea of beholding has survived — “mirar” means to look at. It seems to me that the very core of

the spiritual journey is that we look, we behold, we wonder at, we respect, we affirm; we do this as individuals, in communities, in our daily work, and in our worship. Our attempts to establish a vision of peace, justice, equality, respect for the environment, are all aspects of this spiritual vision. Indeed our testimony in the world is the proof of the depths of the vision we have been granted. When I am overwhelmed yet again by the sheer negativity of the news, by the almost unrelieved darkness of so much in national and international politics, it is this amazement that gives me hope. When confronted by the fact of my own mortality and that of all I love, it is this that gives me the confidence to cherish the fragility of things.



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