What is Spirituality?

Harvey Gillman
The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our conversation with all who search sincerely. Our mission includes publishing and providing speakers and opportunities for fellowship at regional and national Quaker gatherings.

Universalist Friends and a QUF pamphlet are published twice a year and are available free to on-line subscribers. These publications are available as web pages (HTML) for browsing, ebooks (PDF) for on-line reading, and pamphlets (booked PDF) for printing. Visit our website at http://www.universalistfriends.org to enter a free on-line subscription.

If you wish to receive printed copies of these publications by regular mail, send an annual subscription fee of $25.00 to QUF at our mailing address below. Selected past QUF publications are available free to our on-line subscribers. We will send available printed copies of past publications upon request and on payment of a fee.

We trust that all of our subscribers will support our work by sending a tax-deductible contribution to QUF. You can also contribute by sharing your reflections on our publications and on your own experiences. To make a contribution, subscribe to printed versions of our publications, or ask questions, contact:

Daniel Seeger, Treasurer
Quaker Universalist Fellowship
168 Woodside Drive
Lumberton, NJ 08048
Email: treasurer@universalistfriends.org
Website: www.universalistfriends.org
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

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
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.
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:

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 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.

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
What is Spirituality?

I journey inward just because
I am created with capacity
for that quest,
epecting 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 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,
What is Spirituality?

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