

# **CULTIVATING SPIRITUALITY**

## **A NECESSITY FOR PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS**

**D. PAUL SCHAFFER**

We are going through a very difficult period in history. Not only are conditions changing rapidly in all parts of the world, but also we are confronted with many dangerous and life threatening problems.

Take the COVID-19 pandemic as the most obvious example of this. Few people have managed to escape the consequences of this disastrous disease. It has affected everybody and everything in one way or another, regardless of where we live in the world, how young or old we are, what jobs, professions, and lifestyles we have, our relations with families and friends, how we live our lives, and the way we deal with this deadly illness.

While humanity has been confronted with many devastating pandemics over the course of history such as the Black Death, the Spanish Flu, HIV/AIDS, SARS, Ebola, and others, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dire effect on many more people and countries. It has been especially hard on older people, health care workers and providers, people who have lost their jobs, marginalized groups, people living in countries with large populations and inadequate medical and health facilities, and children and young people.

Many elderly people have been forced to live in isolation for long periods of time and then die without being able to see or spend time with their family members and loved ones. Health care workers and providers have been compelled to spend countless hours dealing with very sick patients and risking their lives on a daily basis. Millions of people have lost their jobs and sources of income and are experiencing numerous difficulties making ends meet. Marginalized groups have been especially susceptible to the corona virus and have experienced a great deal of difficulty getting the vaccines that are required to prevent it. Countries with large populations and inadequate medical and health facilities have been unable to control the spread of this deadly disease and its many variants and have often died on city streets with little notice or help.

But the biggest toll of all has undoubtedly been experienced by children and young people. While they have been less vulnerable to this virus than other age groups, the evidence indicates that they have been very hard hit by the pandemic in other ways and are less able to deal with them. On the one hand, they have been forced to come to grips with instant cancellations of their classes, courses, and semesters, closing their schools with little or no advance warning, the need to develop online learning abilities with little

guidance or training, and ordered to stay at home by educational institutions or governments for long period of time without being able to go outside very often to play with their classmates and friends. On the other hand, they have been confronted with rapidly expanding mental health difficulties, most notably eating disorders, panic attacks, suicide attempts, feeling despondent and depressed, and dietary upheavals. According to a recent study conducted by the internationally famous Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto between July 2020 and March 2021, psychiatric appointments in this age group were up 30%, mental health visits up 25%, and medical emergencies up 20%. Moreover, millions of children and young people around the world are suffering from loneliness, isolation, despair, and a feeling of wanting to injure themselves or others. These problems have been compounded by all the instabilities and uncertainties that exist in the world today, as well as the unpredictability of what may be in store for them in the future.

Confronted with circumstances as difficult as these, is it any wonder that many young people around the world are experiencing severe mental issues that are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially physical and social distancing, anxiety, depression, and alienation? With this has come an astounding increase in the use of many different types of drugs, and what some are calling “the other pandemic” or “the opioid crisis.” During the last few years, there has been a rapid escalation in the number of people in general – and young people in particular – who are and have been experimenting with many different types of drugs or are suffering from substance abuse that can have adverse long-term effects or are dying from drug overdoses.

While the most immediate problem in the world at the present time is coming to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic and bringing it totally under control, this is not the only dangerous and life threatening problem that exists in the world today and going forward into the future.

Standing behind this pandemic are many other problems that are waiting in the wings that are much more dangerous if they are not dealt with effectively. Most obvious in this regard are climate change, global warming, and the larger environmental crisis, colossal disparities in the distribution of income and wealth, systematic racism, and the numerous conflicts, tensions, and wars going on between different tribes, races, ethnic groups, regions, and countries. Unlike the COVID-19 pandemic and the other pandemics, these problems cannot be alleviated or overcome by receiving one or two doses of a certified and high-quality vaccine, but will require years if not decades to deal with and overcome. These problems have added a whole new dimension to the state of the world today and prospects for the future, thereby compounding the apprehension, anxiety, and sense of futility many people and countries are experiencing today.

What has become increasingly apparent over the last few years is that things cannot go on the way they have gone on in the past or are going on at present. Fundamental

transformations are required in people's behaviour, lifestyles, values, ideals, and ways of life if these problems are to be addressed and overcome in the years and decades ahead.

As Mary Catherine Bateson, a well-known American anthropologist and the daughter and collaborator with her illustrious father Gregory Bateson, said some time ago in her book *Composing a Life*:

Today, the materials and skills from which a life is composed are no longer clear. It is no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations... Our lives not only take new directions; they are subject to repeated redirection ... Just as the design of a building or of a vase must be rethought when the scale of life has changed, so must the design of lives. Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings. (Bateson, 1989)

Why is it so necessary to make fundamental transformations in our lives at this crucial juncture in history and not just a few minor changes in them? It is necessary because we are living in a world filled with numerous imbalances and disharmonies, and therefore countless conflicts, confrontations, and contradictions. While this is most apparent in the imbalances and disharmonies that exist between human beings and the natural environment as well as the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of development and life, this is also true for many others, such as those between different genders, diverse races, the public sector and the private sector, technology and society, the arts and the sciences, people's rights and responsibilities, and many others.

There is a reason for this. The distinguished cultural scholar and historian, Johann Huizinga, put his finger on the crux of this problem many years ago when he concluded after examining numerous cultures and civilizations throughout the world that:

The realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man's (people's) well-being, must be *balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values*. (Weintraub, 1966).

When this balance is achieved, Huizinga concluded that "each of the various cultural activities enjoys as vital a function as is possible *in the context of the whole*. If such harmony of cultural functions is present, it will reveal itself as order, strong structure, style, and rhythmic life of the society in question." (Weintraub, 1966).

However, when this balance is not achieved, the opposite is true, which is the case today in the world. In fact, the **more** "the realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man's (people's) well-being" are pursued,

promoted, and promulgated throughout the world, the **less** they are balanced by “strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values.” This explains why there are so many dangerous and life threatening problems in the world today, as well as why we are having such a devastating effect on the natural environment, the world’s scarce resources, the lives of other species, and the carrying capacity of the earth.

What is true at the global level is also true at the individual level. It could hardly be otherwise. When such a high priority and so much attention is accorded to economics, technology, and the acquisition and use of power, is it any wonder that we have failed to achieve the requisite balance and harmony that are required in the world and in our lives?

Whether it is at the global level, the individual level, or any other level, what is most required in the world at present and going forward into the future is to achieve that evocative but elusive balance and harmony that are imperative between materialism and spiritualism in general - and the material and spiritual dimensions of development and life in particular - when this matter is reduced to its essence and fundamentals (Schafer, 1998, 2008, 2019). This problem is far more dangerous and life threatening today than it has been in the past because the state of the natural environment and the survival of people in all parts of the world depend vitally on coming to grips with this problem without delay.

In order to do this, it is necessary to make changes that are *transcendental* in nature and not just *transformational*. This is best realized by cultivating spirituality broadly defined to include intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values and activities, which is usually the case whenever spirituality is discussed. Not only is this the key to coming to grips with the environmental crisis and the other complex, debilitating, and life threatening problems that exist in the world, but also it is the key to designing and developing new lifestyles, values, worldviews, and ways of life for humanity and the world as a whole. Here, as well, Huizinga had something very meaningful, insightful, and timely to say:

A community is in the state of culture when the domination of nature in the material, moral, and spiritual (*geestelijk*) realms permits a state of existence which is **higher** and **better** than the given natural conditions; and when this state of existence is furthermore characterized by a harmonious balance of material and spiritual values and is guided by an ideal ... toward which the different activities of the community are directed. (Weintraub, 1966).

This is not an easy matter to deal with in view of all the confusion, misunderstanding, and controversy that exists throughout the world over the nature and meaning of spirituality. Over the centuries, spirituality has been seen and treated by most people and scholars primarily in terms of religion and all the different religions in the world. Whether it is Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, or any other religion, spirituality is deemed to flow from belief in a single god or many gods, as well as

the personification and confirmation of this belief on earth through the existence of Moses, Muhammad, Gautama Buddha, Christ, the Brahman principle of “cosmic unity” as the highest sacred symbol in Hinduism, and others.

To achieve spirituality is to live a religious life in the fullest and most complete sense of this term. It is important to emphasize that spiritually in this sense has a “vaulted quality and presence” about it that is seen, felt, or experienced in all the religions of the world. This is because spirituality is believed to emanate from a divine source and therefore has a significance that transcends or exists beyond all life and living on planet earth. A good example of this are all the masterpieces in religious architecture, paintings, music, dance, and so forth that have been created over the centuries, such as the great gothic cathedrals in Europe, the exquisite mosques in the Middle East, the beautiful Buddhist and Hindu temples in Asia, the “ascension paintings” produced by myriad artists such as Giotto and Tintoretto, the sacred musical works created by Palestrina and Monteverdi in the Christian tradition, and the dances of the Whirling Dervishes in the Sufi tradition. These works, and millions of others like them, are designed to give people a sense that there is something much more powerful and profound than themselves, humanity, the world, the planets, and the universe.

Over the last century, and especially over the last fifty years, the idea and reality of spirituality has been broadened substantially to include many other types of activities and not just religious activities that are capable of producing transcendental, mystical, and spiritual effects and states as well. Initially, this resulted from the writings of existential scholars such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, H. Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and others during and after the Second World War. More recently, it has been expanded even more to include the thoughts, insights, and ideas of Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, and countless others.

This expansion has continued over the last few decades to the point where it now includes many other activities and areas of life that are associated with spirituality and capable of producing spiritual feelings, experiences, effects, and states, such as the sciences, recreation, and most notably nature and the natural world. Moreover, spiritually not only includes thoughts, ideas, and intellectual activities today, but also feelings, emotions, the senses, sensations, and so forth. As a result, it can result in many different ways and not just from religion and religious beliefs and experiences, and therefore from a much broader array of activities, institutions, areas, and individuals.

Something else is happening in this domain as well. Thoughts about the idea and place of God in our lives and in the world as a divine creator or source set apart from ourselves and the world and situated in some ethereal place such as heaven is also undergoing change. It is becoming more commonplace in the world today to think about God as existing everywhere and in everything, and consequently being all around us and perhaps also within us. According to Diane Butler Bass, author of the best-selling book

*Grounded: Finding God in the World*, a spiritual revolution is going on in the world at the present time that “rests on a simple insight: God is the ground, the grounding, that which grounds us. We experience this when we understand that soil is holy, water gives life, the sky opens the imagination, our roots matter, home is a divine place, and our lives are linked with our neighbors’ and with those around the globe. This world, not heaven, is the sacred stage of our times.” (Bass, 2015)

One person who is contributing a great deal to expanding our understanding of the nature and meaning of spirituality at present is Dr. Maya Spencer. She expressed her views on this subject in an article entitled ‘What is Spirituality: A Personal Exploration’ that was posted on the Internet in 2016. In this article, Spencer had this to say:

... spirituality is the indefinable urge to reach beyond the limits of ordinary human existence that is bounded by unconscious forces and self-interest, and to discover higher values in ourselves and to live them consistently in our relationships and roles. It involves developing practices that aid us in rising and expanding, perhaps beyond the merely good to the transcendent, in the process of looking inwards rather than outwards for our own morality and guidance. Above all, it means becoming a more loving and compassionate human being, in thought, word, and deed. (Spencer, 2016)

With this statement in mind, let’s delve more deeply into what is meant by spirituality and living a spiritual life, since this is so essential at present and going forward for both present and future generations.

Reaching above and beyond ourselves is undoubtedly one of the most important requirements for cultivating spirituality and living a spiritual life, much as it is for most if not all religions. In order to realize this, it is necessary to go “inside ourselves” and work out for ourselves why it is so important to transcend “the self,” as well as to discover that vaulted quality and presence as well as the realization that there are many things in life that are much greater and more significant than the self. This is also necessary to break out of the “me generation mentality” that is so conspicuous, commonplace, and deeply entrenched in the world and our lives today, as well as to embrace “the other” as one of the most pertinent developments in the cultivation of spirituality and living a spiritual life.

Whenever I reflect on this matter, which is often, I immediately think of Martin Luther King Jr.. Not only did King identify far more with the other and the needs of others than the self, but also he conveyed this in the incredible speech - “I Have a Dream” - that he delivered to a colossal mass of people on Capitol Hill following the March on Washington on August 8, 1963. While this speech was designed to deal with systemic racism and eliminate segregation, it demonstrated that King had a powerful commitment to causes in general - and one cause in particular - that went far beyond himself.

Obviously, there is an enormous amount of spiritual fulfillment to be derived from commitments to causes that are greater than ourselves, as has been the case not only for Martin Luther King Jr. but also for millions of others over the centuries. Countless people throughout history have experienced an incredible amount of spirituality in their lives by devoting themselves to a single cause or several specific causes, regardless of whether this is concerned with helping other people or improving the health, welfare, and well-being of neighbourhoods, towns, cities, countries, and the world at large.

It is difficult to see how the world will become a better and safer place and humanity will overcome the huge disparities that exist in income, wealth, resources, living standards, and employment opportunities in the world without commitment to causes like this that are greater than the self, as well as manifesting a great deal more caring, sharing, compassion, and devotion to causes of one type or another in the process. Interestingly, more and more people around the world seem to be doing precisely this, regardless of whether it means joining protest groups such as Black Lives Matter and the Indigenous peoples movement that are committed to bringing an end to systemic racism and racial violence and abuse, marches to curb climate change, global warming, and the larger environmental crisis, women's groups committed to eliminating gender inequalities and achieving more peace, harmony, justice, and equality in the world and in life, and many others.

While commitment to a single cause or many causes can help immensely in cultivating spirituality and living a spiritual life, this is not the only way to achieve this end. There are many other ways as well.

Over the years, I have discovered that one of the best ways to do this is to take control of our lives and determine what jobs and career paths are the right ones for us. While this varies greatly from person to person, I must say that the thoughts of many well-known philosophical and cultural scholars on this matter have proven extremely helpful, uplifting, and motivational in this regard. One such scholar is Mark Twain, who said, "find a job you enjoy doing and you will never have to work a day in your life." Another is Joseph Campbell who advised us to "follow your bliss and the universe will open doors where there are only walls," as well as Carl Jung who stated, "the privilege of a lifetime is to become who you really are." Then there is Herman Hesse, who observed, "within you there is a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat and become yourself."

To this list should be added Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who believed it is necessary to "live in the whole, in the good, in the beautiful," and also claimed, "who wills the highest wills the whole," as well as Swami Vivekananda who stated that "there is no other teacher than your own soul." I found this fascinating and reassuring because it confirmed what Marcus Cicero felt about this matter more than two thousand years ago when he said, "culture is the philosophy or cultivation of the soul."

And this is not all. In addition to this, there are countless artistic achievements and cultural accomplishments that have been created in all parts of the world over the centuries that are equally capable of creating spiritual states and ethereal experiences. Whether it is music, paintings, plays, architectural edifices, or the creation of different cultures and civilizations, there is a rich cornucopia of treasures of this type just waiting to be tapped that possess the potential bring an immense amount of spirituality into our lives. Fortunately, access to this priceless treasure trove has been expanded exponentially in recent years through the creation of numerous digital devices as well as virtual reality. It is now possible for virtually every person in the world to access the greatest masterpieces in these areas in all parts of the world and period in history. Thanks to platforms, networks, the Internet, and myriad other mechanisms and means, it is possible to enjoy millions of musical works created by superb musicians and outstanding composers everywhere in the world, see the finest paintings and plays ever produced, watch performances by the finest dance companies in the world, walk through every major museum and art gallery around the world, and experience what it is like to visit all the most exquisite and cherished towns, cities, and historical and heritage sites on every continent and in every country.

And what is true for the arts, cultures, and civilizations is also true for nature, the natural realm, and the globe's most enticing natural sites and ecological splendors. If, as John Muir, the naturalist who is largely responsible for the creation of the national parks movement in the United States and ultimately the entire world remarked many years ago, 'it's into the forest I go to lose my mind and find my soul,' then it only makes sense to spend a great deal of time in nature doing what the Japanese call "forest bathing" or "*shinrin-yoku*." On one level, this is about achieving and maintaining good health, fitness, and happiness in life. However, on another level, it goes much farther and deeper than this. It can create an incredible amount of spirituality in our lives, as well as living life on a much higher and more profound plane of existence and possibly even encountering the divine. This may be one of the greatest sources of spirituality of all. There is simply no substitute for this, which is why we need to savour, revere, and cherish nature and the natural environment and not just preserve, protect, and conserve them.

Interestingly, sources and sanctuaries such as these, and many others, are capable of creating feelings, emotions, and states of consciousness, exultation, exuberance, and ecstasy that are beyond comparison and border on the ultimate and the sublime. As such, they don't require taking drugs or using other devices to create or simulate "highs" because they do this naturally. They are all there in nature, the arts, culture, cultures, civilizations, and becoming who we were really intended to be in life.

And this is not all. If we think carefully about this, it is apparent that most of these activities are "human and spiritual intensive" rather than "material and capital intensive," and therefore make far fewer demands on the natural environment and resources of nature than most economic, industrial, commercial, and technological activities. As a result, they have a prominent role to play in coming to grips with the environment crisis as well as all

the other complex, debilitating, and dangerous problems that exist in the world today. We will pay a severe price in the future if we do not realize this and act on it accordingly and without delay.

Fortunately, Huizinga provided us a way out of this predicament and not just an objective assessment of it. Here is what he had to say about how imperative this is, as well as what a necessity it will be in the months, years, and decades ahead:

A culture which no longer can integrate the diverse pursuits of men (people) into a whole, which cannot restrain men (people) through a guiding set of norms, has lost its center and has lost its style. It is threatened by the exuberant overgrowth of its separate components. It then need a pruning knife, *a human decision to focus once again on the essentials of culture and cut back the luxuriant but dispensable.* (Weintraub, 1966)

The best way to do this is to recall the wonderful words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” To do this is not only to focus on the essentials of culture and life and cut back on the luxuriant but dispensable, but also to cultivate spirituality to the fullest possible extent and experience a great deal more harmony, happiness, equality, and compassion in our lives as well as in the world.

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