

CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

KEY TO LIFE AND LIVING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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I have had the good fortune to get deeply immersed in culture over the course of my life.

This has enriched my life in countless ways. It has made it possible for me to experience a great deal of joy and happiness in life, learn an enormous amount about the different cultures of the world, and achieve my basic goals and objectives. It has also enhanced my understanding what is most valuable in life, as well as why I believe a cultural age is so essential for the future. However, the most interesting thing of all is the fact that the more I have become immersed in culture, the more my life has become spiritual in nature.

Of course, there is no single path to spirituality. There are many paths to spirituality, just as there are many paths to happiness, contentment, and fulfillment in life.

For many people, spirituality is achieved through religion and involvement in a specific religion and religious group. Not only is this the key to living a full, upright, and moral life, but also it is the key to experiencing higher and higher levels of spirituality and possibly even encounters with the divine. Virtually all the diverse religions of the world - Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and so forth - believe that spirituality is achieved by making a strong commitment to the values, teachings, and beliefs of the faith and adhering to these values, teachings, and beliefs as fully as possible.

Others have a different view of this subject. They believe spirituality is best achieved through meditation, yoga, the teachings of individuals like Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, and Wayne Dyer, or the preaching of countless mystics, evangelists, and others who possess strong convictions about spirituality and how it can be realized. This is also possible through involvement in other activities, such as the arts, sciences, humanities, education, recreation, and appreciation of the natural environment.

To date, little consideration has been given to the role that culture is capable of playing in opening the doors to spirituality. This is probably because culture can be perceived in many different ways - such as the arts, the finer things

in life, the legacy from the past, a complex whole, a total way of life, the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, and the organizational forms and structures of different species¹ - and this causes confusion and misunderstanding for many people.

While many people see the different ways culture can be perceived as a distinct liability, I see it as a powerful asset. This is because each of the ‘*perceptions of culture*’ referred to above possesses the potential to open the doors to spirituality in one form or another, as will become apparent from the personal experiences I have had with each of these perceptions over the years and what many cultural scholars have had to say about this subject. This makes culture an ideal vehicle for achieving spirituality in my view.

My first real encounter with spirituality was in the arts. This is not surprising in view of the fact that many people treat ‘the arts’ and ‘culture’ as synonymous and it is a well-known fact that the arts possess a remarkable potential to lift people to lofty heights and transport them to ethereal places and spaces. As George Bernard Shaw said in *Back to Methuselah*, “you use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul.”

When I was young, my parents enrolled me in art classes at the Art Gallery of Toronto, now the Art Gallery of Ontario, arranged piano lessons for me, and put me in a choir at Grace Church-on-the-Hill. It wasn’t long before I was aware of the intimate connection between the arts, culture, and spirituality, since many of these activities lifted me out of the commonplace and propelled me to very high heights.

Whether it was painting pictures, playing pieces on the piano, or singing hymns and anthems in the choir, I felt a certain awe come over me whenever I was engaged in any of these activities. This was especially true for singing in the choir, since a great deal of beautiful music was combined with exquisite architecture and an enormous amount of sacred liturgy and pageantry. I soon realized that spirituality is not confined to adults or people in their twilight years. It can be experienced at any age and in any walk of life, and often in profound, moving, and very powerful ways.

Awareness of the intimate bond between the arts, culture, and spirituality has broadened and deepened substantially in me over the years. Many musical compositions, plays, paintings, poems, architectural masterpieces, and the like produce spiritual feelings in me that border on the sublime and occasionally on the divine. While there are too many to list here, I can’t resist the temptation of providing a few examples of this in order to give you an idea of what moves me the most and produces strong spiritual sensations in me.

Undoubtedly, music heads the list. There is something about music - all music but especially certain pieces of music - that puts me in a spiritual state. While music affects people in different ways and each person has his or her personal favourites, I am transported into a spiritual state whenever I hear Handel's *Ombra mai fú, Lascia ch'io pianga*, *Zadok the Priest*, or *Minuet from Berenice*, Striggio's *Mass in Forty Parts*, Tallis's *Spem In Alium*, Rachmaninoff's *Second Piano Concerto*, Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*, and Brahms', Beethoven's, and Tchaikovsky's violin concertos. I am also in a spiritual state whenever I hear Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, Mendelssohn's *Song Without Words*, Opus 38, No. 6 (Duet), Chopin's *Etude Opus 25, No. 1* (Aeolian Harp), Schubert's *Impromptu Opus 90, No. 3*, Liszt's transcription of Schumann's *Widmung (Dedication)*, Mascagni's *Intermezzo* from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Fauré's *Cantique de Jean Racine*, the last movement of Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony*, or the second movement of Albinoni's *Concerto Opus 9, No 2 in D Minor*. Speaking candidly, I am 'half way to heaven' whenever I hear the first few bars of any of these pieces.

One night, I even went all the way to heaven, or at least so it seemed at the time. Here is how it came about.

For many years, I have been in the habit of turning my radio to a particular radio station before falling asleep. The station plays soft and soothing music - a rare commodity these days - to help people end their day on a pleasant and peaceful note.

One evening in the fall, I turned my radio to the usual station and fell fast asleep. I don't know how long I was sleeping, but I slowly became aware of the fact that I was hearing one of the most exquisite pieces of music I have ever heard in my life. As I lay there in a semi-conscious state, I remember thinking I had died and gone to heaven. *The music was just that beautiful!* Then I heard an announcer say, "You have been listening to Mendelssohn's *Grant Us Peace*. It was sung by the Corydon Singers."

Talk about a spiritual experience! As soon as I heard the announcer say the music was written by Mendelssohn, I knew that I had not actually died and gone to heaven although it certainly seemed like it that night. This piece of music has a wonderful melody, which is sung first by one section of the choir, then another, and finally by the full choir. I have often thought this piece should be adopted as humanity's '*universal anthem*.' Not only is it exceedingly beautiful, but also it would serve a useful purpose at this time, much as Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* does as the official anthem of the European Union and Council of Europe.

I hope you don't get the impression that it is only classical music that puts me in a spiritual state because this is not the case. Musicals do this too, especially specific songs in musicals. Most prominent in this regard are: *If I Loved You* and *You'll Never Walk Alone* from *Carousel*; *Climb Every Mountain* from *The Sound of Music*; and *I Dreamed a Dream*, *On My Own*, and *Take My Hand* from *Les Misérables*.

What I find spiritually uplifting about these songs is not only the music, but also the lyrics. A good example of this is when Richard Rogers' captivating music is combined with Oscar Hammerstein II's inspirational lyrics in songs like *You'll Never Walk Alone* - "When you walk through a storm/Keep your head up high/And don't be afraid of the dark/At the end of the storm is a golden sky/And the sweet silver song of a lark" - from *Carousel*, and "Climb every mountain/Ford every stream/Follow every rainbow/Till you find your dream!" from *The Sound of Music*. Similar feelings swell up in me when I listen to certain pieces of film music - such as Ennio Morricone's *Gabriel's Oboe* from *The Mission* and *Dinner* from his *Lady Caliph Suite* - as well as popular songs like *Moon River*, *Unchained Melody*, *I Believe*, *Stranger in Paradise*, and many others.

This is equally true for certain paintings, poems, architectural edifices, and the like. Paintings like Monet's *Water Lilies* and Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, poems like Keats's *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*, Byron's *She Walks in Beauty*, and Rumi's *Divan-e Shams* - as well as numerous mosques, pagodas, gothic cathedrals, and architectural wonders like the Taj Mahal - lift me to incredible heights because they are sublime and perhaps even border on the divine. As John Keats said, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever."

What is it about the arts in general - and certain artistic works in particular - that makes the artistic perception of culture one of the most effective vehicles for opening the doors to spirituality of all? Surely this. Not only are the arts capable of lifting people out of the doldrums and propelling them to incredible heights - largely through the sounds and images they exude and the feelings and emotions they convey - but also they enhance our awareness of virtually everything that exists in the world and in nature. In the case of nature, this is perhaps best realized by much of the piano music of Schumann and particularly his song *Der Nussbaum* (*The Nut Tree*). I can smell the sweet fragrance of this tree and picture its leaves gently rustling in the breeze whenever I hear this song. Perhaps this is why Beethoven was always so anxious to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and get out in nature to enjoy its babbling brooks and serene calm after the summer storm, as expressed so movingly in his *Pastoral Symphony* (*Symphony No. 6*).

If the arts provide one example of the rich potential culture possesses to open the doors to spirituality, the finer things in life provide another. Many of

these things are inherent in the humanities - ethics, education, philosophy, and the like - and include the quest for peace, order, equality, and justice, the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, beauty, and truth, and the importance of caring, sharing, cooperation, and compassion.

I often think of Albert Schweitzer when I reflect on these matters. Not only did Schweitzer give up a highly successful career in Europe as a medical doctor and outstanding musician to go to Africa to work and live with lepers - risking his life and his health in the process - but also he was a great proponent of reverential thinking and reverential action as one of the principal keys to spirituality. For Schweitzer, all living things were precious, and therefore deserved to be treated with dignity, awe, and respect.

I also think of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when I reflect on these matters, largely because they led exemplary lives in numerous respects. Whenever I think of all the painful experiences they were forced to endure - and how the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were snuffed out instantly and so brutally - I recall Dr. King's comment towards the end of his life that he wanted nothing more than to leave behind him a life totally devoted to a cause, or words to this effect.

If the arts and finer things in life have a great deal to do with spirituality, so does the legacy from the past. This is probably why many people think the legacy from the past is one of culture's greatest gifts of all.

If I was able to travel backwards or forwards in time, I would definitely choose travelling backwards in time. This is partly because I am not too excited about certain present and prospective developments - a gothic cathedral does much more for me than a colossal office tower - but it is largely because I am fascinated with the past and the magnificent legacy we have inherited from the past.

In addition to countless other things, this legacy includes: the cultural accomplishments of the Incas, Mayans, Asians, and all the other diverse peoples of the world; all the world's greatest cities and historical sights - Venice with its enticing architecture and enchanting canals, Isfahan and Istanbul with their exquisite mosques, Kyoto with its ancient temples and Buenos Aires, Marrakech and Savannah with their captivating streets and sumptuous squares; all the world's greatest accomplishments in the arts, sciences, religion, education, economics, medicine, philosophy, and the like; all the most powerful ideas, theories, and writings that have been created in the world; and especially all the myriad cultures of the world, each with its own unique character and characteristics. Little wonder Jacob Burckhardt - the great Swiss cultural scholar who did so much to shed light on the Italian Renaissance and Greek and Roman culture in classical times - called

this precious gift ‘the silent promise’ that possesses the potential to transform the entire past into a ‘spiritual possession.’²

The great English cultural scholar Matthew Arnold had similar thoughts on this matter, although he confined them more to knowledge, ideas, and education. Here is what he said about this in his popular book *Culture and Anarchy*:

The great men (and women) of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanize it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.³

One institution that has taken Arnold’s and especially Burckhardt’s beliefs in this area to heart is UNESCO. This remarkable organization has been steadily and systematically translating lofty ideals like this into concrete realities for more than half a century. Not only does it place an extremely high priority on the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of humankind and all the world heritage sites located throughout the globe, but also it places an exceedingly high priority on preserving and protecting this priceless legacy and making it accessible to present and future generations.

We are the beneficiaries of this profuse legacy of artefacts and accomplishments. This is becoming increasingly apparent through developments in contemporary communications that make it possible for people and countries in all parts of the world to enjoy all the incredible cultural achievements from the past. I get elated whenever I think that virtually every individual, institution, country, and culture in the world today possesses the means - or has access to them through new technologies and devices - to tap into these achievements regardless of where they are situated in the world.

In many ways, this is where things stood for me with respect to culture and spirituality until I was in my late forties. My experiences in this area were limited largely to ‘*specific moments of spirituality*’ that tended to occur when I was exposed to certain works related to the arts, finer things in life, and legacy from the past. What I was not experiencing, however, was anything that might be called a ‘*permanent state of spirituality*.’

Things started to change in this regard when I had a fortuitous experience one day in Bladen Library at the University of Toronto. I was in the library doing some research on culture - which had become my main passion and principal preoccupation in life by this time - when I happened to come across a book by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor - one of the world's first anthropologists if not *the* first - called *The Origins of Culture*. No sooner had I opened the book to the first page than the following definition of culture was staring me in the face:

Culture... taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that ***complex whole*** which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.⁴

This definition struck me like a thunderbolt. I had long believed that there was far more to culture than the arts, finer things in life, and legacy from the past - essential and fundamental as these are - because I had come across numerous references to many other activities that cultural scholars thought should be included in culture. Here, at long last, was official confirmation of this.

What stood out with respect to Tylor's definition was the fact that culture was defined in terms of '*the whole*,' and not just a part or parts of the whole. This elevated culture to a much higher plane in my view because it is a well-known fact that the whole is greater than the parts and the sum of the parts because new properties are brought into existence when the whole is created that are not in the parts taken separately.

The origins of this 'holistic definition of culture' can be traced back to the late nineteenth century when Tylor and other anthropologists began to study culture and cultures in depth and in the field in many different parts of the world. What they discovered was that people had all sorts of words for the specific activities in which they were engaged as they went about the process of meeting their individual and collective needs. What they did not have was a word that described how all these activities were woven together to form a whole.

Culture was the word they used to designate this phenomenon. It resulted from the fact that all the various activities in which people were engaged - economics, education, religion, politics, technology, the arts, the sciences, recreation, and so forth - were tied together in specific combinations and arrangements to create a whole that was greater than the parts.

While culture is not the only field to be concerned with 'the whole' - it is also of concern to philosophy, religion, science, medicine, and other fields - Tylor's definition of culture struck a responsive chord with me because it

confirmed my belief that culture is concerned with the whole and not just a part or the parts of the whole. It also struck a responsive chord with me because I felt the world - and virtually everything in the world including people, communities, countries, cultures, civilizations, plants, animals, and so forth - are wholes made up of many parts, not parts taken in isolation or by themselves.

Ever since that fortuitous day in the Bladen Library, I have been strongly committed to - and extremely interested in - the whole in all its diverse aspects and manifestations. Most prominent in this regard are holism in general and the holistic understanding of culture and cultures in particular. Indeed, it would not be far off the mark to say that the whole, holism, and the holistic perception of culture and cultures have been the guiding features and principal preoccupations of my life ever since.

Some may call what occurred in the Bladen Library that day an ‘epiphany,’ since it caused me to see the world in a new and different way. However, I would call it a ‘cultural transformation,’ since it helped me to see the world - and the vast majority of things that exist in the world - as they really are, rather than how they are presented to us as a result of specialization and our penchant for dividing the whole up into parts in order to study the parts in detail.

The implications of this for spirituality were clear and unequivocal. Focusing attention on the whole, holism, and the holistic understanding of culture and cultures provided me with a far more all-encompassing and inclusive way of seeing and understanding reality and the world around me. It also provided a gateway to living life on a higher plane of existence.

From that point on, I began to focus on the whole in everything I did and thought. When I walked in the neighbourhood, I walked in it as a whole, soaked it up as a whole, cherished it as a whole, and experienced it as a whole. When I thought about my community - Markham - or my country and its culture - Canada and Canadian culture - I thought about them as wholes made up of countless parts. When I thought about other countries, other cultures, and the world at large, I thought about them as wholes and not merely smorgasbords of disconnected and unrelated pieces. My focus was always on the whole, and with it, what brought things together rather than split them apart.

This was especially true for people. I was fascinated with this because years earlier I had come across several cultural scholars who had written about ‘*the whole person.*’ While I tucked this information away in my mind at the time, it took on far greater significance and meaning when I became aware of the whole and holism as it relates to people and made a strong commitment to this.

One of the scholars who wrote about the whole person was Matthew Arnold referred to earlier. He believed that the central challenge in the evolution and education of the whole person is to attend to the harmonious development of all the faculties and factors that constitute human nature. John Cowper Powys had similar thoughts in mind, although he expressed them more eloquently when he said:

The whole purpose and end of culture is a thrilling happiness of a particular sort - of the sort, in fact, that is caused by a response to life made by a harmony of the intellect, the imagination, and the senses.⁵

These insights were very helpful to me because I was struggling to become a whole person and they emphasized how essential it is to achieve balance and harmony among all the diverse faculties and factors that constitute human beings and human nature: material and non-material; mind and body; work and leisure; egoism and altruism; the self and the other; and all the other dichotomous divisions that are often associated with people and used to describe them.

It was about this time that I had another fortuitous experience that had a profound effect on me. It happened when I accidentally came across a quotation by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the great German playwright and cultural scholar. The quotation was '*live in the whole, in the good, in the beautiful.*'⁶

This quotation had a profound effect on me for several reasons. In the first place, it summed up better than anything I had ever seen what the four perceptions of culture we have considered thus far - the arts, the finer things in life, the legacy from the past, and a complex whole - are really all about. In the second place, it stated in a few, simple words what I was desperately struggling to achieve in my own life. In the third place, and perhaps most importantly, it gave me an ideal that I could work towards in the years and decades ahead. In so doing, it produced not only another cultural transformation in my life, but also a transcendental experience in my life. Quite frankly, my life has never been the same since.

It was also very helpful in enabling me to understand that culture, like life, is not just a whole made up of many parts, but also a '*total way of life.*' Here was yet another perception of culture that had strong implications for spirituality. Interestingly, it seemed to apply not just to me and my life, but to many of my friends, colleagues, and people I have known over the years and their lives. They all seemed to be struggling to achieve what Goethe had advised in his short, sage, and insightful statement.

I began to refer to this as ‘*the cultural way of life*’ because it was concerned not only with the need to live in the whole, in the good, and in the beautiful, but also to achieve balance and harmony among all facets and components of life. I started to realize that my own life was filled with much more creative exuberance and exhilaration - and over substantially longer periods of time - when I made a commitment to the cultural way of life. Not only did it make it possible for me to live life on a higher plane of existence - what some spiritual leaders call elevated forms of consciousness - but also it helped me to soar to greater heights, much as eagles do in many popular songs. With this came the hope that the cultural way of life would be transformed into a spiritual way of life that was not confined to specific moments of spirituality but became a permanent state of spirituality.

This hope was reinforced when I came across another quotation that had a profound effect on me. It was ‘*follow your bliss*’ by Joseph Campbell. While Campbell is best known for his profuse writings on the great cultures and religions of the world and especially myths, myth-making, and mythology, he had many valuable things to say about life, living, spirituality, and how they can be achieved most effectively.

Many people think Campbell was talking about happiness when he said “follow your bliss.” However, what he actually meant was that people should do the thing that is right for them and what they were intended to do with their lives, which can produce a great deal of happiness but be very painful at times. To struggle to achieve this in Campbell’s opinion was to find real meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life. This had a great deal of relevance to my own life because I felt I was following my bliss when I was engaged in the quest to broaden and deepen knowledge and understanding of culture and cultures and the central role they are capable of playing in the world.

Thus far, I have said little about the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, yet another perception of culture with profound implications for spirituality. The time has come to address this requirement, since there is an intimate connection between human beings, the natural environment, culture, and spirituality that must likewise be taken into account.

Interestingly, culture’s association with these matters can be traced back to classical times. This is because culture as a word and as an idea derives originally from the Latin verb ‘*colere*’ meaning ‘to grow,’ ‘to till,’ or ‘to cultivate.’ At least this is the way Cicero, the great Roman orator and statesman, used the word and the idea for the first time in history when he said “*cultura animi philosophia est*,” which is usually translated as “*culture is the philosophy or cultivation of the soul*.” Interestingly, Herder expressed something similar many centuries later when he said, “The cultivation of a people is the flower of its existence.”⁷

The connection to the natural environment and spirituality is clear and unequivocal here. Despite the fact that this connection has been largely ignored in the modern era, it explains why we have words in our vocabulary like agriculture, horticulture, silvaculture, viticulture, the wolf culture, and many others that confirm the fact that there has been an intimate relationship between human beings and the natural environment dating back more than two thousand years.

Many cultural and ecological scholars have written at length and very passionately about this relationship in recent years, including Arne Naess, Fritjof Capra, David Suzuki, George Sessions, James Lovelock, and many others. However, no scholars have written more compellingly about this relationship - and the dire need to transform it - than Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry. In books like *The Universe Story*, *Dream of the Earth*, and others, Swimme and Berry have made a convincing case for 'deep ecology,' as well as treating the natural environment as a 'spiritual gift' in much the same way that Jacob Burckhardt made a powerful case for treating the legacy from the past as a 'spiritual possession.'

The arts have a great deal to contribute here in terms of enhancing our respect and reverence for the natural environment in all its diverse forms, manifestations, elements, and seasons. Think, for example, of Van Gogh's many landscape paintings, Claude Monet's splendid depictions of his gardens at Giverny, France, Respighi's *The Birds (Gli Uccelli)*, Schubert's *Trout Quartet*, Alan Hovhaness's *Mysterious Mountain (Second Symphony)*, Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, Saint Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, Smetana's *Moldau*, John Williams' *Five Sacred Trees*, and Toru Takemitsu's *Tree Line*. These works, and countless others, are designed to enhance our awareness and appreciation of the natural environment and the need to preserve, protect, and revere it. In a spiritual sense, this is perhaps best epitomized in the last movement of Sibelius's superb *Symphony No. 5*, where he expresses the awe, rapture, and sense of communion he experienced with nature and the sublime when he witnessed a flock of swans flying high over his farm in Finland late one afternoon. He is reputed to have exclaimed "God, how incredibly beautiful" after experiencing this memorable event.

My own experience with the natural environment dates back several decades to a time when I was experiencing some difficult health problems. I first went to doctors to get some help with these problems, much as most people do. When this didn't work, I sought the advice of family and friends and read many books and articles on the specific health problems I was experiencing. While this helped a little, it didn't provide the lasting solution I was looking for. Finally, in a fit of desperation, I turned to nature. I started taking long walks in the countryside near our home. There seemed to be nothing quite like 'getting out in nature' and

experiencing everything nature had to offer - much like Beethoven! - that slowly but surely provided a lasting solution to these problems. The process of enjoying the flowers, trees, birds, streams, sunsets, and especially the leaves turning many shades of green in the spring and gold, orange, yellow, and red in the fall provided the tonic that was required to restore my health to normal.

Since that time, I have been actively engaged in nature and the natural environment in many ways. I take long walks in the forest near our home as often as possible, especially the Durham forest that is divided into an oak trail, a maple trail, a birch trail, and a pine trail. I also walk regularly in the many parks and conservation areas that exist in Markham and the York Region, as well as enjoy many of the paintings of Canada's Group of Seven artists that are concerned with the country's magnificent landscapes and wilderness areas. And perhaps most importantly, I do exercises five mornings a week with a group that does what are called *Yuanji Dances*. Most of these exercises - which involve a combination of tai chi and qi gong set to the most beautiful music imaginable - are based on nature's flows, rhythms, and elements. This is not surprising in view of the fact that nature figures prominently in Chinese, Indian, and most other eastern cultures.

All this activity has helped me to sustain a good state of health and bring me one step closer to experiencing a permanent state of spirituality rather than just specific moments of spirituality. It has also helped to open the doors to the final perception of culture we are considering here, namely the organizational forms and structures of different species, both human and non-human.

I have long been interested in the organizational forms and structures of human beings and all the various cultures they create because they are so diverse, complex, and sophisticated. This is largely because they are based on different worldviews, values, customs, beliefs, traditions, and ways of life. In consequence, some cultures are best known for their architectural achievements and culinary accomplishments - Chinese, Indian, French, Thai, and Turkish cultures for example - whereas others are best known for their religious, political, and athletic capabilities, such as Buddhist, British, and American cultures. There is no single pattern or characteristic that fits all the diverse cultures of the world. They are all different and unique in one way or another.

Lately, I have become fascinated with the organizational forms and structures of other species and the cultures they create. This is because their cultures are also wholes made up of many parts. The cultures of bees, ants, trees, and other species in the natural realm confirm the fact that animals and plants have cultures just as people do, and create them in much the same way that human beings create their cultures.

Take the bee culture for instance. The bee culture is a whole composed of many parts. This whole, with its well-defined system of queen, drone, and workers bees, its rigid hierarchy and division of labour, its finely-tuned communications networks and sensory abilities, and its impressive productive capabilities, acts to ensure the survival of bees as a species and guarantee a continuous flow of products. These products, such as honey, wax, the bee hive, and the honeycomb, are much in demand in the human realm and have both a functional and aesthetic significance. The beehive and the honeycomb, for example, are intricately-designed and highly-sophisticated cultural creations, comparable in their way, style, functions, and complexity to many of the cultural creations created by human beings, even if they are far smaller in scale and more elementary in character.

An even better example of this - and an example that is much closer to the experience of human beings - is the cultures and cultural creations of elephants. It is a well-known fact that elephants have phenomenal memories - memories that may even be greater than the memories of human beings. However, what is becoming increasingly apparent as a result of contemporary research is the fact that elephants have highly complex and very sophisticated cultures - cultures that are predicated on a great deal of caring, sharing, intimacy, and compassion. Not only do elephants bond with each other in much the same way that human beings bond, but also they are each other's keepers in the sense that they look after each other very attentively when they are sick, elderly, in distress, or threatened in some way. Moreover, they look after their young in much the same way that human beings do, doting over them in countless ways and actively participating in their evolution, upbringing, and development.

What is true for elephants and bees is true for all other animal and plant species, even if this is less intense and not to the same degree as human beings. Every species has its own cultures and forms of cultural creation, including its distinctive methods of procreation, habitat, social bonding, community organization, networking, and consumption and production activity. This is not surprising in view of the fact that animals and plants, like human beings, are living organisms, and, as such, obey the laws governing all living things.

What does all this have to do to spirituality? Surely this. Culture and cultures are without doubt the highest forms of creation when they are looked at in holistic terms, regardless of whether they are created by human beings or other species. This is because they are highly complex wholes made up of many parts and there is little else in the world that can compare with this. As Jin Li points out in her book *Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West* when talking about the quintessential importance of culture for human beings, "Culture, as the largest human created system (as opposed to our biology), penetrates so profoundly into

all spheres of human life that it alters human cognition, emotion, and behaviour ... Culture is like the air we breathe; we are completely dependent on it.”⁸ And what is true for human beings is equally true for other species.

Like the incredible breakthroughs that are now being realized in science - which are also part of culture and are designed to broaden knowledge of the smallest molecules and particles and deepen understanding of the universe and the cosmos - this most expansive perception of culture of all possesses the potential to produce higher and higher levels of awareness and states of consciousness with respect to virtually everything that exists in the human and natural domains. Whether these levels and states have to do with the divine may only be revealed in the fullness of time, if at all. However, this does not alter the fact that the organizational forms and structures of all the various species in the world has a great deal to do with spirituality and the sublime in countless ways.

And this brings us to the remarkable potential culture possesses to open the doors to spirituality when it is considered in comprehensive terms. It possesses this potential because culture can be perceived in many different ways and each of these ways has a great deal to do with spirituality in one form or another.

From the most beautiful works of art and the artistic perception of culture to all the diverse cultures in the world and the organizational forms and structures of different species, there is no doubt that culture possesses a remarkable capacity to act as a gateway to spirituality because everything is there in the final analysis when it is added up and considered in totality. This is because culture makes it possible to move horizontally as well as vertically - in breadth as well as in depth - across virtually every domain and activity that exists in the world, from the human to the non-human, the simple to the complex, the individual to the collective, the local to the global, and the mundane to the profound. As Barbara Ward asked many years ago when she observed that the chief environmental insight is that all things are linked, “Where is the thread that will lead us through the maze?” It is now clear that culture is this thread.

And this is not all. While an important part of spirituality involves going ‘outside the self’ in order to expand awareness of the external world, a much greater part involves going ‘inside the self’ in order to become much more conscious of the internal world. In the final analysis, this is what is required to become a whole person, live in the whole, in the good, and in the beautiful, follow one’s bliss, and achieve balance and harmony among all the diverse factors and faculties that constitute life. To do so is not only to experience more and more and higher and higher moments of spirituality, but also to move closer and closer to a permanent state of spirituality.

Why is this so essential? It is essential because this will not only bring people a great deal more fulfillment and happiness in life, it will also reduce the huge demands we are making on the natural environment and make it possible for us to tread more lightly on the land. This is because a much better balance will be realized between people's material and non-material requirements. This is imperative if humanity is to come to grips with the difficult and demanding problems that have loomed up on the global horizon in recent years.

No challenge is greater in this respect than the need to come to grips with the relentless march of human numbers compared to the finite carrying capacity of the earth. In recent years, it has become crystal clear that the world's population of six billion is exerting tremendous pressure on the natural environment and the globe's scarce resources. Given this fact, and the fact that world population is expected to increase significantly in the years and decades ahead in absolute if not relative terms, there is no doubt that major environmental catastrophes are inevitable if humanity does not bring its material appetites under control and reduce the colossal ecological footprint it is making on mother earth. Already, climate change and the increased frequency of floods, hurricanes, droughts, forest fires, and the devastation of coastal areas are revealing that severe consequences lie in store for humanity if it persists in this practice.

Clearly much more emphasis will have to be placed on humanity's internal and non-material - rather than external and material - requirements if this problem is to be dealt with effectively in the future. Hence the need for a quantum leap in the spiritual and qualitative side of life compared to the material and quantitative side. In global terms, a leap of this magnitude would bring about a great deal more environmental conservation while simultaneously making it possible for people to live on a much higher plane of existence and experience a great deal more spirituality in life. It would also bring about much more caring, sharing, cooperation, and compassion in the world, thereby reducing the major income inequalities and social inequities that exist throughout the world.

And this brings me back to my own situation and the personal experiences I have had with spirituality over the years. Each of the experiences I have had with the principal perceptions of culture - from the arts to the organizational forms and structures of different species - has enriched my life in countless ways and made it possible for me to move progressively from specific moments of spirituality to something much closer to a permanent state of spirituality.

I am not there yet, but feel I am moving in the right direction in this regard. I have the sense that the cultural way of life I am living at present is slowly but surely being transformed into a spiritual way of life. I hope this is the case, since

culture is without doubt one of the best vehicles of all for opening the doors to spirituality and unlocking the secrets of the sublime and perhaps even the divine.

ENDNOTES

¹These are usually referred to as the artistic, humanistic, historical, anthropological, ecological and biological perceptions of culture. Detailed information on this is contained in the first four chapters of *Culture - Beacon of the Future* which was published by Adamantine Press in England and Praeger/Greenwood in the United States in their Twenty-first Century series in 1998.

² Karl J. Weintraub. *Visions of Culture: Voltaire, Guizot, Burckhardt, Lamprecht, Huizinga, Ortega y Gasset* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 117-118.

³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). p. 70. (italics Arnold's; gender insert mine).

⁴ Edward Burnett Tylor, *The Origins of Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 1 (italics mine).

⁵ John Cowper Powys, *The Meaning of Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1929), p. 77.

⁶ John Cowper Powys, *ibid.* p. 251.

⁷ Patrick Gardiner, *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), p. 40.

⁸ Jin Li, *Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 8.