SPIRITUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose

NEWSLETTER

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Finding Meaning in College

By Rev. William (Scotty) McLennan

I grew up as a conservative Presbyterian Christian in the Midwest. By the time I went to college, however, I identified myself as an atheist, largely because I couldn't understand how a just and loving God could allow all the horrible things that seem to go on in the world, especially innocent newborns and children being killed in natural disasters. They were even called "acts of God." So that was it for me. When I arrived at Yale as an undergraduate in the mid-1960's, however, there was a very dynamic university chaplain holding forth there by the name of the Rev. William Sloane Coffin. It turned out he was also a Presbyterian. He was offering something he called a "Seminar for Friendly Disbelievers." That seemed to describe me pretty well – I was a disbeliever, but I wasn't really angry about it. A friendly, pleasant atheist, I was. But at the same time, I couldn't help being utterly obsessed by the great existential questions about the meaning of life. Why are we here? Why do bad things happen to good people? What happens after we die? What happened before we were born? (That sort of thing) And so I took the seminar.

The chaplain opened me up to a much more liberal view of Christianity and also to other world religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. By the end of my freshman year I'd signed up for a summer theology program in India, where I lived with a Hindu Brahmin priest and his family. Every morning I woke up to the sound of the names of 108 deities being chanted through the wall that connected my room to the puja room, or chapel, within his home. Incense wafted around me and filled my lungs, and I felt spiritually transported even before I climbed out of my mosquito netting to start the day. I spent a lot of time reading and talking in India. I learned how to meditate with the priest. We traveled to various Hindu temples and shrines. And I heard a lot about the Hindu saint, Mahatma Gandhi, because the priest I lived with was a non-violent activist who'd been involved in India's struggle for national liberation from the British.

One of my greatest surprises was that this priest knew the Bible better than I did. Even though he was Hindu, he kept a copy of these Jewish and Christian scriptures next to his bed. He'd also read the Islamic Koran from cover to cover, and recited passages from its

suras (chapters). He seemed as familiar with the Buddhist scriptures as the rest. He spoke of many avatars throughout history -- incarnations of divinity -- including Krishna, Buddha and Jesus. As I sat cross legged each day in my white cotton dhoti and kurta, I began to think, "Maybe this is the way to spiritual maturity. Be open to all religious traditions. Pick and choose what rings true for me in each." Yet the priest kept emphasizing getting on a path, following a discipline, becoming committed to a teacher and a set of teachings. "There are many well-marked paths up the spiritual mountain," he would say, "and they all reach the top, but you need to follow a path, and you can't be on more than one at a time."

At the end of the summer I'd decided that I wanted to become a Hindu. The morning I told the priest, I was stunned by his response. "No, no!" he chided. "You've missed the point of everything I've taught you. You've grown up as a Christian and you know a lot about that path. It's the religion of your family and your culture. It's your ethics and your worldview. You know almost nothing of Hinduism. Go back and be the best Christian you can be."

I was upset. "But I don't believe Jesus was any more divine than Krishna or the Buddha," I pleaded. "And the Christians I grew up with would condemn you for knowing about Jesus and not accepting him uniquely as your Lord and Savior." His response was simple: "Then go back and find a way to be an open, non-exclusive Christian, following in Jesus' footsteps yourself, but appreciating others' journeys on their own paths." The more I could learn about others' paths, he explained, the more it would help me to progress along my own, and deepen my understanding of it. Those words have remained my marching orders for life.

The central organizing metaphor that I've used ever since my college summer with the Hindu priest is that of the spiritual mountain. These days as a university chaplain I emphasize both the importance of finding a path by which to climb the mountain, and also the importance of recognizing that there are different altitudes on the mountain where the flora and fauna change radically and everything looks quite different.

On the first point, there are a lot of students – and faculty and staff – I've known in my two decades as a chaplain at Stanford and Tufts universities who say "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." By "being spiritual" they seem to mean that they can access a personal vitality and energy that lies deep within them that centers them and gives meaning to their lives. Religion differs from spirituality for them in being external and institutional – marked by dogma and doctrine, clergy, denominations, and (they often add) a lot of hypocritical people – who mouth one thing sanctimoniously on the weekend in their places of worship and then do exactly the opposite all week long at work or in other parts of their everyday lives. One of my challenges to them, though, is the notion that spirituality can be effective without religion – that is, that the internal life of the spirit can go very far or very deep without traditions, structures and disciplines to support it.

Put in mountaineering language, it's possible to make progress up the slopes without following a trail – by striking out on one's own and bushwhacking through the brambles and undergrowth. That may also seem a lot more exhilarating and much more fun as an experience. For a while anyway. Yet, it's also a lot easier that way to get lost, exhausted and burnt out. This can be lonely and frightening if you're by yourself. If you're hiking with others, arguments tend to develop about what to do and where to go next. Frustrations build, nerves fray, and tempers rise. Too often the journey is abandoned entirely.

What I call spiritual bushwhacking is a pick-and-choose, potpourri, grocery-store, do-it-yourself approach: say, putting together meditation from one tradition with nature-appreciation from another, philosophy or psychology from a third tradition with social activism or community service from a fourth. Bushwhackers tend to think that their own experience is utterly unique and that they're involved in a search for self that admits of no limits and no boundaries.

It's my experience, though, that the spiritual mountain is best climbed along marked trails and paths. There are major world religions, which have been around for millennia and have had billions of followers. The great religions are wide paths, which have accommodated the individual needs of radically different people. I'm thinking in particular of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. There are other traditions, of course, like the kind of humanism that goes back through the Enlightenment to the Greek philosophers, speaking of capital T Truth and capital B Beauty. Each of these paths have included mystics and intellectuals, artists and professional people, social activists and common laborers. They've spoken in a wide variety of ways to people of all ages and all stages of spiritual development. None of these religions from my perspective, none of these trails up the mountain is inherently any more "right" than any other. There are no locks that any have on "salvation," insight, community, creativity, or meaning. On the other hand, it's through established religious traditions that we encounter much of what is called "spirituality," and spirituality can best be developed along one of their paths.

All of this is not to say that in mountain climbing one might not want to try different paths at different times. Certainly on one route, it's helpful to talk to pilgrims on other paths at trail crossings about what they've encountered and seen. I've also found that traveling companions on the same path may also have very different personal experiences, depending on who they are and what they're looking for. Nonetheless, it's my experience that there are good reasons that trails have been worn on a mountainside: they help the hiker progress without unnecessary obstacles and injury, they lead to points of interest, they facilitate camaraderie among fellow travelers, and the many feet that have gone before have kept the trails maintained for the next generation of venturers.

The second major point of the spiritual mountain metaphor is that there are different altitudes with different flora and fauna as you climb. There are a number of different stages of spiritual development that we all go through – or at least potentially can go through – regardless of our religious tradition. The stages I name and talk about are based on my counseling experience over almost thirty years of ordained ministry. I originally learned about stage theory from Professor James Fowler, who taught me at the Harvard Divinity School. He subsequently wrote a book entitled *Stages of Faith*, which was re-issued a few years ago in paperback by HarperSanFrancisco. Actually there's been quite a bit of research in developmental psychology about stages of faith over the last twenty to thirty years, and I've also been quite influenced by the work of Fritz Oser, George Scarlett, and Sharon Parks, among others.

Many have heard of the "identity crisis" and the other inner crises, largely emotional, that psychologist Erik Erikson wrote about. He described eight stages during the human life cycle, from childhood through adolescence and adulthood into old age. Likewise, many know about the work of another psychologist, Jean Piaget, who explained that there are standard stages of cognitive development for all human beings. Some have learned about the research of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg on stages of moral development. Yet, for reasons I don't fully understand, the stages of spiritual development aren't common knowledge along with the stages of emotional, intellectual, and moral development.

I also run into students who say their college education has convinced them of the folly of spirituality and religion. It's all superstitious nonsense, they explain – illogical, senseless, and useless. But, often a closer analysis reveals that these individuals' spiritual understanding hasn't kept pace with their emotional, intellectual and moral development. Some ask how any mature, educated adult could possibly think that there's an old man with a beard looking down at us from the sky. Well, I don't, I explain, at least since I was about 8 or 9 years old. And that's not the way most religious adults understand God. Many critics still look at God through the lenses of childhood, when they were last involved with religion. This isn't to say that there aren't mature, conscientious atheists who live fulfilling lives without a belief in God. Of course there are. However, there are also some deeply conflicted adults, whose spiritual side has been freeze-dried in childhood or early adolescence, often after their Jewish bar or bat-mitzvah or their Christian confirmation or other coming of age ritual. Some of them, otherwise intelligent and capable, when they become religiously involved as adults, can then be drawn to the rigidities of authoritarian religious leaders and unequivocal teachings. Involvement in a "cult" – a psychologically destructive group – becomes a significant risk for them. Others reject religion entirely, without realizing that a spiritually mature person can fit what he or she knows logically, scientifically and practically into a rich life of faith.

I find it useful to speak of six stages of faith development, which I name Magic and Reality during childhood, Dependence and Independence during adolescence and early adulthood, and Interdependence and Unity during late adulthood. Very few of us ever reach Unity – the realm of the mystics – and many of us stay happily at an earlier stage like Dependence throughout our lives. No judgment should be implied of what's better or worse.

Children between the ages of 2 and 12 generally move from a magical perception of the world to a reality-based one. That is, a world full of fairies and demons, superheroes and villains gives way to one where the child's primary question becomes "Is it real?" "Is there really a Santa Claus or a tooth fairy or an Easter bunny?" One's experience of God also tends to shift from an all-powerful God, who directs everything, to a cause-and-effect God, who can be influenced by good deeds, promises and vows.

In adolescence, one becomes deeply affected by peer pressure and can be easily influenced by the leadership of respected older people. At this Dependence time in the life cycle, God is usually imaged as an idealized parental figure, unconditionally loving, although sometimes deeply judgmental. In the Independence Stage, for many occurring during college or in young adulthood, one begins to find spiritual authority within, instead of relying on peers, social conventions and respected elders. At this time it's very common, natural, and understandable for the individual to say "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious," not wanting to be part of any institution or under anyone's control. If one doesn't become a conscientious atheist or agnostic at this stage, God usually becomes distant and impersonal, described as Spirit, or Natural Law, or Life Force, or Energy in the universe, but not as a person who answers prayers.

In the Interdependent Stage reached considerably later in adult life, if at all, there's an expressed need for community again, within which to place one's fully-evolved sense of self. God or Ultimate Reality is experienced paradoxically, so that many people at this stage during crisis or celebration can pray to God the person, even though they intellectually understand the divine to be an impersonal force in the universe. One can live with ambiguity and paradox at the Interdependence stage, while also looking for religious community, seeing the short-comings of trying to go it completely alone.

The sixth stage, reached only by the very few of us who are mystics, is that of Unity. They tend to see God in all things, and all things in God. They speak of having a direct experience of God, or of becoming fully enlightened, and ironically they can usually talk more easily with mystics of other religious traditions than with non-mystics within their own tradition.

I want to note, though, that when using a mountain-climbing metaphor for the spiritual life, it's very important not to imply that it's better to be higher up on the mountainside than lower down. It's not. There's beauty and there's truth at all stages, just as there is on all paths. Spiritual development is a process, just like the rest of human growth during the life cycle. Would you give up your twenties because someone claims its better to act as if you're forty? It can work the other way, too. Would you condemn someone in their sixties for not acting as if they're forty? Maybe certain people would in the youth culture of America, where it seems best to be forever young. Ideally, though, one should savor each era in one's life fully. How unfortunate it would be not to appreciate the distinctive gifts of each age and the particular perspective each offers. And how unfair and disrespectful it is to judge one period from the viewpoint of another.

For some reason, religion is often perceived through non-developmental lenses as something you either have or you don't. It's like an on or off button. Then, once you have it, it's never supposed to change. Looked at developmentally, though, religion is a process, not a product. It's a journey, not a destination. What happened to me in a month of chugging across Russia on the Trans-Siberian railroad, visiting towns along the way, was much more valuable than the fact that I made it from the Pacific coast to be able look out across the Baltic Sea.

So, the metaphor of the spiritual mountain, which I first learned at the feet of a Hindu priest, is very useful in 2 ways, I think. First, it reminds us that the best way to progress spiritually is along a well-trodden path. Second, it reminds us that there are different levels of spiritual experience, which cut across different religious traditions or paths, just as different bands of vegetation cut across a mountainside. In any case, development or progress is only possible if one gets up, gets moving, and gets actively involved in spiritual pursuits.

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McLennan is also the author of Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning *(HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) and co-author with Laura Nash of* Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values With Business Life *(Jossey-Bass, 2001).*