

Spiritual Beings on a Human Journey

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Dear Friends, this talk will be in three parts. First there will be some definitions. What do I mean when I use words like “spiritual” and “life school” and “journey.” Language that is used in many contexts needs to have specific references, don’t you agree? Then I am going draw a little on quantum theory. I do mean a “little.” We are not going into quantum physics but will touch on some of the new theories about energy and matter which lie very close to our intuitive understanding of the spiritual nature of the universe. In the third part, we go from the macrocosm to the microcosm, come back to ourselves and understand how these universal laws apply to us and especially to the times of transition we all experience.

Let’s start with definitions: I believe that we are not human beings on a spiritual journey but rather, spiritual beings on a human journey. It would be correct to say that we are not human beings but human becomings.

This talk is not about religion, although it does not dishonour religious structures. Religion offers signposts for the journey, and those signposts are usually appropriate for our culture. I speak from a Christian Catholic background and although I am trying tonight, to go beyond religious language, you will probably detect my context. Our religious signposts speak in metaphors that we understand, and since metaphor or parable is the only language that is appropriate for spiritual journey, many of us find these signposts very helpful. The danger, of course, is literalism. That happens when people turn religious language into law, and sit on the road worshipping the signposts.

That is not the intended function of signposts. Signs point the way. And what is the way? The journey? We all know that. It is life experience with awareness. Jesuit teacher and retreat director Monty Williams says, “Theology comes out of life experience, not the other way round.” The word “theology” means literally “divine knowledge” and it is the product of a life lived with reflective mindfulness. The older we get, the more we are aware of connection and meaning that lies beyond intellectual deduction. We sense patterns in our lives that are not of our making, synchronicity that we can’t explain. We are haunted by the feeling that we are part of a great tapestry and although we can see only the threads immediately around us, we have a knowledge we can’t put into words, that the whole tapestry is perfect in its design. I would call this “theology.”

A lot of life experience has been packed into my 73 years, and much of that I have not chosen. It has been thrust upon me, But at this stage, instead of seeing my life as complex and random, I realise that in fact, it is quite simple. If you were to ask me to describe in a few words, what I believe, I would probably say; I believe that we come from a greater reality and we return to that reality, and our little time in life school is for growth. Life school is hard work. We are given all the lessons we need and if we try to skip some of the exams, they will keep coming back. I am sure there is no graduation this side of the doorway we call “death” but long before then, we form some kind of understanding that our lives have purpose and that purpose is also connected with personal growth.

I think that we are very fortunate to live in an age when these ideas are not dismissed as delusion but are actually validated by science. The new physics describe reality as mystics have been describing it for centuries.

For a moment, let's look at the historical view of the universe. Do you remember when religion and science sat in opposite corners and only came out to denounce each other? I grew up in that era of reductionist science. The old Newtonian model of physics was very mechanistic. The universe was seen as this huge clock wound up by God. Tick tock Tick tock. It was composed of many parts and these in turn, were composed of smaller parts, down to molecules and atoms. Scientific analysis was not only very mechanical, it also went from large to small. The emphasis was on reduction and separation and that view washed over onto everything – how we saw ourselves and each other, our wider social attitudes, and especially, our theology. The kind of theology I grew up with, emphasized separation: us and them, heaven and hell, sin and holiness, light and dark. We even created a God to fit this way of thinking, a Michelangelo god in the shape of an old Superman who judged and separated and dealt in punishment and reward. We actually felt quite uncomfortable when Christianity brought in the new concept of of a God of unconditional love.

Today, religion and science are tentatively meeting on common ground, although each defines it with different language. Religion sees spirituality and mysticism, while science talks about new physics and quantum theory. Still, there are times when both sides admit they might be talking about the same thing.

In the mystical traditions, the essence of spirituality is love and light. Underneath the struggles that come with incarnation, that is what we are – beings of love and light – and that is the unifying force of the Universe. The ancient mystics have always known a God beyond images, who is directly involved in all creation.

So how does quantum theory describe this?

When Physicists say that the Universe originated from nothing, by “nothing” they don’t mean absence or zilch, they mean No-Thing, the uncreated, the sea of potentiality. They are careful to avoid projecting human images and human theology, on this No-thing and in that caution they probably come closer to the face of the Divine, than we who have to deal with thousands of years of traditional imagery.

For the early mystics who found truth in the silence of the heart, there was an understanding of God that remarkably resembles quantum theory. Here is a quote from the Greek abbot Symeon who lived in the 10th century at a time when much of the known world seemed to be in intellectual and spiritual darkness.

*I know the Immovable comes down
I know the Invisible appears to me;
I know that He who is far outside the whole creation
takes me within Himself and hides me in His arms,
and then I find myself outside the whole world.
I, a frail, small mortal in the world,
behold the Creator of the world, all of Him, within myself.
And I know I shall not die, for I am within Life,
I have the whole of Life springing up as a fountain within me,
He is in my heart, He is in heaven:
Both there and here He shows himself to me with equal glory.*

Meister Eckhart wrote:*whoever speaks of God in any likeness speaks impurely of Him. But to speak of God with No-thing is to speak of Him correctly. When the soul is unified and there enters into total self-abnegation, then she finds God as in No-thing.*

Hadewijch of Antwerp, a 13th C mystic says: *“All things are too small to hold me, I am so vast. In the Infinite I reach for the Uncreated. I have touched it, it undoes me wider than wide. Everything else is too narrow. You know this well, you who are also there.”*

Yes, we do know this well, although we find it impossible to explain except in the language of metaphor or poetry. Catholics often refer to it with that lovely old word “mystery” because it is beyond the limitations of our language and the limitations of our sensate perception.

But now we have this new poetry whose tools are technology and math so complex most of us can’t begin to understand it. Yet the heart leaps with recognition when we read some of the discoveries of quantum physics.

Let us look at these statements, with the eyes of the spirit.

Physicist Alan Guth writes: *The big bang was not a singular act of creation but was more like the biological process of cell division. The universe in other words, is “organic.” The birth of the universe is a natural event. The universe is not an object but an ongoing process.*

We are told that the big bang explanation of the beginning of the universe is no longer in doubt. John Gribben describes how in 1992 The satellite COBE (Cosmic Background Explorer) found ripples in the background radiation that are exactly the right size to conform with the standard big bang model. This gives physicists an approximate age for the universe and the knowledge that it could not have evolved in a random manner. It had to be the product of intelligence.

We know that our universe is expanding and also that it is very stable, a stability which comes from its near symmetry. We are told that if the universe were not symmetrical, it would collapse on itself and cease to exist. But we do have this fine near symmetry.

Energy and matter are interchangeable and in balance. Everything is held by its opposite, its mirror image - matter and anti-matter. We say near symmetry because apparently, if the universe were perfectly symmetrical it would have no matter. The birthing would not have gone past the beginning of Genesis. "Let there be light." That's what our universe would have been. Just light. No one can explain why it isn't just light. KC Cole in her book "The Hole in the Universe" writes, *Why is it that nature is almost perfectly symmetrical – but not quite? Why do so many physical quantities approach zero so closely, only to never quite arrive? What, in other words, is the reason for the pervasive imperfection that makes everything possible? In his "Lecture on Physics" Richard Feynman raises the question, then says: "No one has any idea why."*

The more we know about the nature of the universe, the greater the mystery. It seems that every discovery brings with it more questions than it answers. Yet, how close to our hearts are those discoveries.

We are told that the universe conserves total energy. There is a number, the total electric charge in the world, which, no matter what happens, does not change. If you lose it in one place, you find it in another. Nothing is lost.

Lee Smolin in *The Life of the Cosmos* writes. *"The world is a vast interconnected system of relation, in which the properties of a single elementary particle or the identity of a point are all part of a larger web."*

Particles and light are interchangeable. At the end of 1980, Japanese researchers carry out a version of the two hole experiment in which an electron gun fires off electrons one at a time onto the electron detector. This experiment proves the wave particle duality of electrons. There was also an experiment that showed single photons behaving as both particles and waves at the same time.

Then there is the case of the missing matter. Somewhere out there, something is generating a strong gravitational pulls in ways that are obvious and visible. Stars and galaxies and the expansion of the universe as a whole follow paths in spacetime that show this pull. But visible matter cannot account for it. In fact, the visible matter in the universe can account for only something like 35 per cent of gravitational pull.

What is this invisible matter? Is it another realm of being that exists beyond our human perception - a spiritual realm?

Here is a Judaic view of creation, from the wisdom of the rabbis: *Everything that God creates in this world flows naturally from the essence of God's divine nature. Creation is not a choice but a necessity. It is God's nature to unfold time and space. Creation is the extension of God. Creation is God encountered in time and space.* (Pirke Avot 6:11)

So what is the meaning of this miracle of life?

Let's start with ourselves. Unless my body has pain or need, I don't spend too much time reflecting on the way I'm made. I know there is a miracle of cells, tissue, organs, bone, functioning as a unit. But I don't often think of it as my own universe. But when I look at the sky on a clear night I am reminded that I have more cells in my body than there are stars and planets in the universe. That's what science tells us. I don't know who did the counting but the statement has come from several sources and I think it is reliable. There are trillions of cells in the brain alone. Each of us is an entire universe. The macrocosm is also the microcosm. That thought fills me with awe. Is it a poetic parable? Am I a cell in the body of a great organic process that some people call God?

I've already talked about the way the mystical traditions of all religions sit neatly alongside the new physics. Here is something else to think about. In the Jewish mystical tradition it is said that we live in only 1% of reality. We know only what we perceive through our five senses – what we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch. The other 99%, they say, is the spiritual realm which is all around us. It is invisible to ordinary sensate experience but the more aware we become, the more reflective, the closer we get to that thin wall between us and the 99%. When we live with that awareness, the more we experience that sense of connectedness, and the more we realise that simple sensate living is only on the surface of reality. All the religions describe this in some way: Hindus talk about living with mindfulness; Buddhists talk about awareness; Jesus talked about being awake; people who prefer to avoid religious language, talk poetically about “the sea of cosmic consciousness.” The different ways we try to capture this experience with language, is not important.

You will know what I mean. How do I know that? Because you are here tonight, and most of you have reflected on your life experience. Time and time again you have teetered on the edge of that 99%, recognizing something beyond your senses that you have always known. There are no words for it. But this deeper reality makes itself manifest to you in many ways – extraordinary happenings, amazing synchronicity, a rightness of events, a feelings of being caught up in something greater than yourself. You may think that instead of living your vocation, your vocation is living you. At times you will speak words that seem to come from beyond you. You stand at the open doors of other lives and usher people through them into something new. At times you have all been spiritual midwives for people. At times people are affected by something in your presence. In the embracing the fullness of your human journey, you have

come to know your true nature as spiritual beings. That is how it works. And the movement is one of love.

The word ‘love’ can be seen as a bit of a cliché even in a religious context, but believe me, it is the stuff of journey. Love is the impetus for our journey. Fear is the inhibitor. Love – fear. I know that this is a cliché but it is also a basic truth. Australian writer Michael Leunig says, “There are only two emotions: love and fear; and only two outcomes; love and fear. In understanding ourselves we need to clearly see and name the way love and fear operate in our lives.

Fear is part of the prime instinct for survival and its tool is the ego. It is that self-protective instinct that keeps us safe as children, and it operates in us now, in the useful form of caution. It tells me not to cross a busy street without looking, not to walk on railway tracks, or too close to the edge of a cliff. But fear can also operate in my life in less useful ways. It can be an inhibitor. It can get in the way of growth. I’ve made a list of the effects of love and fear in my own life. You will probably be able to think of other examples.

Love always calls me to a larger place.

Fear always tries to draw me back to a narrow place.

Love urges me to try some new endeavour.

Fear tells me I can’t do it. I’ll make a fool of myself.

Love is compassionate.

Fear is judgmental.

Love is unitive. It works with connection and inclusion.

Fear is divisive. It talks about “us” and “them.”

Love is a slow feeling, a movement of the heart.

Fear comes quickly as strident thought.

Love sees beauty.

Fear tends to see ugliness.

Love opens me up like a flower.

Fear closes me down.

Love is my spiritual truth.

Fear belongs to my animal instinct for survival.

I have a favourite story which comes from the Jewish Hassid tradition. It speaks accurately and powerfully of the way fear can take over a life. It goes like this: There was once holy man who went on a long journey; but he left his house open, and while he was away a large pack of fierce demons moved in. When the man returned and opened his door, the demons rushed at him to devour him. The man slammed his door shut, prayed, took a deep breath and opened it again. This time, as the demons ran toward him, he bowed low and acknowledged their presence. When he did that, half the demons disappeared; but those that were left were the biggest and strongest. With savage cries they surrounded the man who smiled and offered them hospitality, Could he give them food and drink? At that, all but one of the demons vanished. The one left, however, was the chief of the demons, a huge monster with sharp teeth. It was not going to be put off by polite talk. It towered over the man, and as it opened its great jaws, the man put his head into its mouth. That demon too, disappeared, and the man had his house back.

At any time in my life, I need to acknowledge and name my fears. When I do that, many disappear. Then I should offer my fears hospitality, recognize that they are a part of me. That's usually enough to make the rest of them disappear. But there will always be that chief demon, the big fear that is threatening to devour me. I have to put my head in its mouth so that it loses its power over me.

But let us come back to that relationship between spirituality and religion. I used the metaphor of "signpost" to describe what religion means to us. But perhaps for me, a better description would be religion is the map and spirituality is the journey. From my childhood religious teaching, I get a beautiful map for my life journey. I treasure this map. As my pilgrimage advances, I realize that I need to make some notes. On the map there is a well here, which I find dry, but over there, I discover a new spring that isn't on the map. I discover a short cut through a paddock of thistles. Then there is a mountain with a track marked around it but I discover that if I go over the top of the mountain, the way may be harder but the views are much better. Eventually, by mid life, my map has personal notes all over it. It is still the same map, but now I have made it my own. I have also come to a much deeper understanding of Jesus of Nazareth as the profound teacher and map maker. In all of the journey, his guidance touches us with the truth we hold within us.

Have you noticed that when someone speaks truth to us, it is not discovery but recognition? We knew it all along. We just needed someone to unwrap what we already held.

May this be a time of unwrapping of all the gifts of love and truth and light that we have within us, and may we all be doorways to each other.

Questions.