

SPIRITUAL STRIVINGS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY

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In every generation there are persons who ask spiritual questions because of a profound realization of their human vulnerability and transitory nature. Human cruelty and human kindness can awaken a longing to connect to a sense of unity and wholeness in life. Some of us call the search for this wholeness and unity "the practice of the presence of God" and others call it "self realization". To be "spiritual" these days is so popular that dating service forms include it as a characteristic you can check off along with "assertive, sensual, and imaginative" etc. Its popularity in the 90's may be due to the profound changes in social roles and the faltering of those structures of religion, psychology, humanism and science that have been carriers of our hopes and fears. Its perennially recurring popularity may also be due to the important function it serves in lifting us out of our narrow everyday "getting and spending" perspective and into a wider questioning and appreciation of our humanity in this huge cosmos which is our home. William James, author of the seminal exploration of spiritual search entitled. *Varieties of Religious Experience* says,

.. However particular questions connected with our individual destinies may be answered, it is only by acknowledging them as genuine questions, and living in the sphere of thought [and feeling] which they open up, that we become profound. But to live thus is to be religious, (p.388)

I propose to consider some of the criticisms of religious strivings by some followers of Freud. I want to look at the psychological vulnerabilities that can be inherent in these strivings and the openness to life that spirituality can engender.

Spirituality is a complex phenomenon that encompasses the hopes and dreads of human beings in complex forms. My thesis is that

personal and institutional religious strivings are deeply embedded in human frailties and psychological vulnerabilities *and* they offer important and remarkable attempts to open us to life. I want to contend that Freud and Reich and Baker were not wrong in their criticisms of religious strivings *and* we are right in rejecting their out and out negativity about religious perspectives. In this discussion, I will always be exploring these issues under the influence of my personal psychological and religious history as an Orthodox Jew, a Zen Buddhist and Core Energetics practitioner. My struggles and pleasures in religious practice are deeply embedded in the journeys I have taken through my questions, disappointments, and realizations in the context of these traditions.

Historical View of Religion in Psychology

In most cases religious people have felt that their understanding came from beyond the limits of normal human capability and were thus called "revelation". This is a part of human life and culture that the scientists of Freud's generation, his direct forbears and disciples, decried and derided as a throwback to authoritarianism rooted in human fears and needs. Freud felt that and his science and its discoveries promised unlimited human progress and the hope for unlimited improvements in living without religion, without a need for illusion and dependency, as he saw it.

One of the ways humans have dealt with deep anxiety in the chaotic experience of not knowing is to attempt an exploration of origins. Theology does this and so do Freud and his students, our Core Energetic progenitors. They engage in a discussion of spiritual activity as originating in the vulnerabilities of our childhoods. While Freud and Reich's intent is most times to discredit religious and spiritual impulses, their discussion of its regressive features as well as each person's exploration in therapy of spiritual drives and goals can be useful in clarifying and purifying spiritual intentions of defensive activity. In its most productive manifestations, their denigrating view of the origins of religious activity is a call to realize aliveness in basic body reality. It is a call to be in the now of life which is time honored spiritual guidance, in the Zen tradition.

Reich had a no-nonsense negative approach toward the religious and mystical. His view was that only the neurotic character would convert "his orgasmic longing...into cultural or religious ideals

which are neither very useful nor very detrimental to the community" (Reich, 1990). He went on to say that "Compulsive moralism tolerates only mystical ecstasy; it has no patience with genuine enthusiasm...." His view seems to be that religious feeling is a regrettable development of blocked sexual energy that manifests in sadistic superego tendencies. Reich's student, Ellsworth Baker, is similarly negative about religion and mysticism but seems to retain some place for religious feeling as a sense of belonging in our natural world. In a section on "Problems of Contact" in his book *Man in The Trap*, Baker draws on Reich's work in *Ether, God and Devil* and says,

With the Cosmos: This is the ultimate contact of the organism in reaching back to his origin and feeling a part of it; that is, contact with nature, with the universe. This is attained in the full genital orgasm and undoubtedly in babies during the oral orgasm. But beyond this one becomes intimately concerned with nature, its beauty, its marvels and its wonder. ..One reaches out to the heavens and feels oneself a part of the throbbing, whirling universe, the cosmic ocean from which one came. One belongs. Cosmic feeling (core contact) is the basis for all religions. This perception compels one to reach out to something beyond man, an unknown from which he sprang and to which he wishes to return.

Where contact is not blocked or distorted, but ignorance is present, animism results. Distorted contact gives rise to mysticism and the various religions. Full contact with sufficient information results in functionalism [thinking as natural functioning], (Baker. 1967, pp.68-9).

Baker's attitude leaves an opening for a connection to the world beyond ordinary, integrated human functioning. This opening to the natural world beyond may be a reflection of our oneness with our own biology. Our oneness with the natural world may be self-centered; it may be a realization of unity; it is probably both. While Baker is expressing what many would call religious feelings, he is emphatic about assuring us that these feelings are healthy only insofar as they result in "works" or functionalism. He is a follower of the Biblical injunction; "by their fruits shall ye know them". He separates his feelings from religion. His conviction that all religion is distortion seems to me to be a part of the *Zeitgeist* of his time and a recognition of the abuses and neurotic seductions of religion. William James, an eager and positive supporter of religious experience which "exists not as dull habit, but as an acute

fever," concurs with the anti-religious Baker on the centrality of "fruitfulness" as a test for religious experience.

Mysticism and religion are denigrated but not discussed at length in the works of Reich and Baker. In my perusal of their works, I was unable to find more than cursory references. Chasseguet-Smirgel gives an in depth view of the considerations of most followers of Freudian thinking. She calls mysticism a longing to return to the primal union with the mother. She ignores the union of an integrated life lived in the present and discusses union as an illusion of perfect fusion embodied in some art and in mystical religious experience, as a replacement for a lost and longed for experience with the mother. In her view, the artistic or religious experience is valuable psychologically because it recaptures the euphoria and sense of perfect belonging and omnipotence of a baby's original experience. When approached in this way, mysticism is viewed as regressive in that it fails to acknowledge (without rage) the "imperfections" and otherness of objects (people) in the relative world. In the classical Freudian view, a mystic is caught with the mother in pre-oedipal longing and is unable to acknowledge the conflict with the father and the father's rights, the rights of objective reality.

I have spent most of my adult life in a search for spiritual meaning. I agree with the Freudians that much that was problematic in my formative years has contributed to this. In addition, as a spiritual leader in 3 different Zen communities, I noticed many similar and different vulnerabilities in teachers as well as students. Given the fact that I believe that a particular construct creates a reality and can create facts to fit. I prefer to use myself and not others as an example. In my own young life, I feel I was aroused to an incomplete symbiotic enmeshment with my mother who alternately was able to hold and sustain me (most probably for her own needs) and also needed to reject, criticize, and push me away. Her use of me for her own comfort and her inability to sustain contact with me in my earliest infancy and childhood left me with fears of human contact and a deep longing for it. This is a schizoid and oral vulnerability, as well as a psychopathic/narcissistic fear of being used and needing to be in control.

The experience of my childhood left me with a deep vulnerability and longing for holding, containment, and union as well as a strong resistance and fear of surrender. Freud says (quoted in Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985, p.98): "The [male] child's parents, and

especially his father, were perceived as the obstacle to a realization of his Oedipal wishes; so his infantile ego fortified itself for the carrying out of the repression by erecting this same obstacle within itself. It borrowed strength to do this, so to speak, from the father, and this loan was an extraordinarily momentous act. The superego retains the character of the father. .." In defending against my longing for my father and a need for clarity and objectivity, I adopted my mother's processes and inadequate ways of salvaging self. She depended on my father to contain and sustain her emotionally as well as physically while she railed against his imperfections.

From this messy parental matrix, I developed some powerful, even destructive, and now useless defenses. I have been caught in a need to identify and idealize and to self-denigrate in order to try to recreate a sustaining matrix. This is the work of the symbiotic character (Johnson, 1985). I have needed to undercut and debunk the powers of father as a collusion and identification with my mother and as a defense against my longing to love and be loved and accepted in a whole and total way by father and mother. One could say that I was drawn to Zen practice and Core Energetics as a continuation of my longing and defense against my longing, by my neurotic conflict. And one could say that I was drawn to these practices out of a healthy need to experience a deep surrender to my vulnerabilities and to life. This is the kind of surrender that a child who has Winnicott's "good-enough" mother is able to initiate in fantasy.

Freudian thinkers view objective religious traditions as a developmental advance over the regression of mysticism. These traditions are seen as an expression of oedipal struggle. To wit, Christ takes the central stage in Catholic and most Protestant forms of Christianity, and God, the father, is relegated to the background or as Chasseguet-Smirgel says, he becomes a "brilliant second". She says that "the attempt to recapture ...oceanic feeling through drugs, mysticism and ideologies, has replaced the much longer route offered by religions in which paradise had to be earned through expensive sacrifices, if it was promised at all...." (1985, p.97).

In the earlier decades of our century, Reich and Baker were among the great believers in the hope that science would deliver a release from functional misconceptions of the human mind. Ellsworth Baker's desire for "sufficient information" (see the complete quote above) is a consummation devoutly to be wished for. While the legacy of Freud and his students has offered deep understanding and even healing to many,

it has fallen short of the magic promise to clean up the human mess. It cannot offer a reality with "sufficient information" we can all subscribe to. Human beings continue to falter in their endeavors to live well with themselves and others. Science, just like magic and the *deus ex machina* that humans have wanted God to be, has not rescued us from ourselves. We live in an age when science has demonstrated its limits and vulnerabilities in such things as nuclear waste and our ecological embeddedness. Science has also become the magic of illusion to the masses who watch moon landings on TV or scan the internet. On TV, we can identify with the "accomplishment" and avoid any of the hard developmental work involved in the moon missions (Chasseguet-Smirgel).

The new frontier of science, quantum physics, is struggling with the fact that all science, all human knowledge, is deeply embedded in human perspective and understanding. So it seems that even science cannot offer Baker's "sufficient information" and cannot rescue us from the terror of living in the chaos of not knowing. There may be no rescue for us from the grip of the life forces of a constant becoming that seems unpredictable. Scientists like Erwin Schrodinger and his co-workers in the field of quantum mechanics are arguing about all of this. Some say, "...nothing is real and we cannot say anything about what things are doing when we are not looking at them." (Gribbon, 1984). In the world of quantum mechanics, it seems that all events may be governed by probabilities and perspectives.

To denigrate the new reality of not knowing without probabilities and perspective, Schrodinger conjured up the image of a live cat in a closed box that also contains a lump of radioactive material that will decay in a certain amount of time, breaking a phial of poison. The situation is set up so that there is a precise fifty-fifty chance that the cat will live or die. Shrodinger and Einstein did not believe in a "god who throws dice". However other Quantum theorists have adopted Shrodinger's cat to support their idea that neither possibility will be "real" unless it is observed and that it is the quality of our observation, our view, that creates the "reality". Schrodinger's cat will be alive if we believe it will be. It will be dead if we believe it will be. In other words, according to many Quantum theorists, all phenomena and the truth of all of our experience is inextricably intertwined with our point of view. Even Schroedinger, a realist to the end, said: "Every man's world picture is and always remains a construct of his mind and cannot be proved to have

any other existence.” (Quoted in Watzlawick, 1978. P. 44).

To be in concert with today's science, Reich and Baker would have been called upon to give up the concept of "full contact" with "sufficient information" resulting in "functionalism". They would have to settle for what can be seen as nasty neuroticism. Truth and the power to alter the world seems to be in the armoured eyes of the beholders. In fact, Reich and Baker did believe that our various armored crazinesses did control the world. They, however, were hoping for something that they and their colleagues would have called the ego ideal.

Many years ago William James said:

Thus the divorce between scientist [sic] facts and religious facts may not necessarily be as eternal as it at first sight seems, nor the personalism and romanticism of the world, as they appeared to primitive thinking, be matters so irrevocably outgrown. The final human opinion may, in short, in some manner now impossible to foresee, revert to the more personal style, just as any path of progress may follow a spiral rather than a straight line. If this were so, the rigorously impersonal view of science might one day appear as having been a temporarily useful eccentricity rather than the definitively triumphant position which the sectarian scientist at present so confidently announces it to be. (p.388)

Hope and Dread in Self Exploration

Having summarily discussed the criticisms of spirituality by the founders of our psychological tradition, it seems important to explore in more depth several psychological aspects of human beings that impact spiritual aspirations profoundly. This is important, in my view, because in giving up a father God and dependency and illusion, human beings are striving to retain the important aims of religious practice.

The Biblical prophet, Micah, laid out the basics of old time religion: "Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." (Micah 6:8) Here we have the explicit injunctions implicit in which are the issues of transference, countertransference, integrity (false and actual self), the good and bad self, and submission and surrender. The biblical prophet doesn't question his notion of self and other, but does accept the need to overcome the egotistical self in surrender to the

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Other: God. And the prophet doesn't question the fact that we should be hopeful of living a good life if we follow God's injunctions as he delineates them.

Even if we, along with our psychological forbears, are to question, relegate to the sidelines, or reject God, the father/mother, spiritual practice still requires the realization of our hope and dread. Attitude has a deep impact on a person's sense of integrity and completeness, aloneness and integration with others. Karen Homey pulls Soren Kierkegaard into her discussion of hope and hopelessness.

This man, who has been called the original psychologist of religion, said that the deepest human despair is the despair of not being oneself. Homey says, "Hopelessness is an ultimate product of unresolved conflicts, with its deepest root in the despair of ever being wholehearted and undivided" (1945, p. 183). Hope or the longing to be at home in this human life and to be in spiritual union with the cosmos is discounted by Freudian style psychologists as a regressive longing for the mother. This hope and longing can be regressive and, in my life, my spiritual strivings have partaken of this illusive and regressive drive. But in its most basic manifestation this spiritual drive is, I believe, a manifestation of the life force, a longing to be at one with who and what one is and what life is. This is the professed goal of Zen Buddhist practice and a goal Freudians might heartily embrace. This perspective on hope and the longing for union opens the door to spiritual practice as the exploration of idealized self images and false fronts of self, to a basic exploration of defensive armoring and splitting.

The Pathwork and Core Energetics require just such an exploration of division in self and self-and-other misconceptions. Eva Pierrakos in her Guide Lectures explains the spiritual nature of splitting and of hope and longing. She and her guide say that all of human yearning for freedom and mastery in life is a product of our deep divisions of self.

Finding God really means finding the real self. If you find yourself to some degree, you are in comparative harmony. You understand and perceive the laws of the universe. You are capable of loving, and relating, and experiencing joy. You are truly self-responsible. You have the integrity and courage to be yourself, even at the expense of giving up approval. All of that signifies your having found God by whatever name this process may be designated. It might also be called coming home from self-alienation. (E. Pierrakos, Tecture 97, p. 1).

On the unified plane of consciousness there are no opposites. There is no good or bad, no right or wrong, no life or death. There is only good, only right, only life. Yet it is not the kind of good, or right, or life that comprises only one pole of the dualistic opposites. It transcends them both and is completely different from either one. The good, the right, the life that exist on the unified plane of consciousness combine both dualistic poles, so no conflict exists.

This is why living in a unified state, in absolute reality, creates bliss, unlimited freedom, fulfillment, and that unlimited realization of potentials which religion calls heaven. Heaven is usually thought to be a place in time and space. This is not so. Heaven is a state of consciousness that can be realized at any time by any entity..." (The Pathwork of Self Transformation. 1990, p. 58)

While I have never experienced life as bliss and unlimited freedom, I have felt completion and satisfaction in the wholeness of my life each time that I have been able to accept the polarities of my conflicts in an inclusive and appreciative acceptance. This is an attitude that originally drew me into Zen Practice. For me, Zen became a vehicle for the acceptance of duality and the reality of separations and differences in a profound way. I wanted to experience my aliveness and completeness in life just as I was. I longed for self acceptance and to find myself as a part and contributor to the whole of being, to an ongoing giving and receiving of life. Meditation became my vehicle and it helped to ground and focus my striving and my body-being. It opened my heart and mind to the vastness of possibility in life in its network of interpenetrating realities. Having realized in some small measure the identity of the relative nature of life as the Absolute manifesting in each and every moment, I also became clear that I was struggling with an internal personality division, a schizoid split in my personal view of everyday reality that made it impossible for me to relax into this identity.

I grew up with a father who was deeply divided against himself. All day he was preoccupied with the development of his business and his drive to be an American success. And in the evening, he sat in his chair, reading and taking notes on what looked like important philosophical and spiritual matters. Years later, when my father was desperate to extricate me from my interest in Buddhism, he sent his old Rabbinical School buddy, the Chief Rabbi of the Hillel Foundation, a Jewish support system for college students, to see and talk to me. Instead of engaging me in an intellectual discussion, he helped me to understand my father's struggle.

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He told me that he had seen my father go through a deep crisis of faith and doubt in Rabbinical school. He reported that my father had made a commitment to himself to pursue a Jewish life and to maintain its core values and its structure because of his doubts. On my next trip home, I was unable to engage my father in a discussion of spiritual issues but he said I could look at his journal notes of his ongoing "studies". On the first page I opened to were the words: "Why is man always divided against himself? Why can't he be wholehearted?" His notes were full of his thoughts on Thoreau, and a longing to return to a more self regulating life. And his notes were on John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, a book which accepts a profound sense of guilt for human foibles and being.

I feel that my spiritual strivings are a gift and an "inheritance" of my father's struggle with his conflicts in being human. My adaptation of my father's struggle and his intellectual method of struggle have opened my ears and eyes to important and new human ways of knowing and understanding. I also believe my commitment to intellectual understanding is an identification with my father's fear of life and a false self-defensive posture. I believe that it is about a schizoid disconnection from my basic body connection to life and a psychopathic/narcissistic fear of being out of control, of not knowing, of standing in my smallness and vulnerability in a vast universe. I remember my sense, at age 17, that I was naive and unknowledgeable. I saw "knowing" as a powerful tool for being strong in my felt weaknesses. I always carried some philosophical, existential, or religious tome around with me. Some were to impress myself and others, but most of them I devoured in a desperate attempt to gain the coveted understanding and self assurance I thought I saw in others.

I also think that my desire to know and my belief that thinking would get me there partakes of a longing to live beyond the longings and vulnerabilities of my body being. Many people recognize that there is a deep split between body and mind, enmeshed in a bad-good split, in the Jewish Orthodoxy in which I was raised and in many Christian and Buddhist orthodoxies. Mary Oliver, the Pulitzer prize winning poet expressed the depression this split engenders in her poem "Wild Geese":

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees for a
hundred miles through the desert, repenting You
only have to let the soft animal of your body love
what it loves. ...

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Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on. . . and offers itself to your
imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
exciting - over and over announcing your place in the
family of things. (Dreamwork, 1986)

My involvement in Zen Practice had the positive effect of reducing my attachment to thinking as a defense, and of bringing me down to a basic body mode of being, of breathing as the most important way of realizing my true nature.

My attachment to my defense was deep and the Core Energetic work has made breathing and grounding in the body a more penetrating experience. John Pierrakos says. "Because of the particular capacity for conceptualization, the oral person needs continual help to activate the full realm of consciousness" (1987. p. 217).

Very moving was a recent teaching experience with John Pierrakos. He was talking about the intrinsic nature of lower self energy and about transforming the negative energies of life through a complete integration of all levels and functions of the personality and body. I could feel my resentment rising over the sense of original sin I was experiencing in his explanation. I asked a question about the pain that people who struggle with self hate, the split between the good and bad self, feel when lower self or the shadow is explained as intrinsic to being human. Instead of engaging me intellectually, John invited me to work.

The process became an opportunity to regress and experience my longing and the reality of connecting to and being held by the father/mother. It was a high water mark in my long struggle to be accepted in my goodness and badness by the archetypal father whom I had to placate in my childhood by giving up my demands, my anger, and my desire to be seen as I truly was. By tolerating and encouraging the longing and the connection, John helped me more completely to open my body being to experiencing the vibrancy and vitality of breath and my essential potency and union with life.

Recently, I was struck by a quotation from the writings of Joseph Campbell whom I've always thought of as an exponent of the so-called "natural religion":

People say what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I

don't think that is what we're seeking. I think what we're really seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experience on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive in our bodies. (Quoted in *The Sun*. A Journal of Ideas, date unknown)

Because of the increased integration of my energy, my basic negativity toward myself and others and the misconceptions supporting it became conscious and I was able to work toward a deeper self awareness. John Pierrakos talks about the need for the release of lower self energy as a requirement for the movement toward wholeness:

"A masochistic woman, for example, will need to work a long time on the hatred congealed in her blocks before she can recognize and identify with the constructive movements from the core. She will long perceive positive incoming energy as a threat to her independence and positive outgoing energy as an invitation to that threat (p. 218).

In his book, John Pierrakos describes the process of human development toward union not as illusion but as a fact of life: "...according to the principle of reciprocity, the individual's development evolves from within toward outer reality that includes others. As people open up toward others, they cooperate and create a new unity, a flow of rhythmic feeling, a new expression." This, to my way of thinking, is an important part of what many call mystical experiences.

T.S. Eliot, a deeply religious poet, also points to the role of a passionate commitment to life and love that goes beyond thinking, experiencing and knowing.

There is it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsities.
For the pattern is new' in every moment And every
moment is a new and shocking Valuation of all we have
been....
In the middle, not only in the middle of the way But all
the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights.

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Risking enchantment. Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly.
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of
possession.

Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire Is the
wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

*(The Complete Poems and Plays,
"Four Quartets," pp. 125-6)*

For me humility is endemic to the human condition of not knowing. In my vulnerability, I have longed for it and struggled against it. I believe in the legitimacy of the life of the mind and the value of experiential, intellectual, and philosophical ideas of life and meaning. Our experience is all we have and is a constantly changing understanding, rooted in our mental and physical equipment which itself is in a constant state of flux. I believe in the value of theology and treatises on the non-existence and existence of God and other realms of being. I believe all of our books and all of our papers and discussions are part of a heuristic human process that leads toward simplicity, a basic spiritual quality. This paper is an expression of my explorations in a "thinking" mode of my understanding of spiritual strivings and the nature of life. And my experience in Zen and in Core Energetics confirms my deepest sense that religious experience is about going beyond knowing and understanding.

John Pierrakos says, "A...person faces a double job: unlearning misconceptions and learning reality. Both call on the will to let the mind lay aside established notions and move out into the unknown" (1987, p.207).

Healing and realization of the nature of life requires going beyond the splits and conflicts of our dualistic nature, beyond our hopes and dreads to the most profound connection to life that humans are capable of: a passionate aliveness in the now of life. This requires a commitment to the practice of being present that is willing to abjure origins and teleology, beginnings and endings, past and future. This is an aliveness and an ability to be present that can only be engendered by a deep sense of at-home-ness and at-one-ness in this breathing and vibrating body-being. I believe this is what Christians are talking about when they say "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" and when one writer called his book. *The Practice of the Presence of God*. I believe that this

is what Meister Eckhart, the medieval Christian mystic meant when he said: "When I return to the source, the core, the fountain of the Godhead, no one will ask what I've been doing. No one will have missed me...." (source of this quote unknown). My sense is that for Eckhart, religious experience is Just Being, without any ideas or stories about what is going on; it is just being profoundly, intimately present.

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