

## Variations on Spirituality

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The term *spiritual* is used in a variety of ways, often leaving people a little confused about what is being said by others. *Webster's Dictionary, Encyclopedic Edition*, and the *Enlarged Oxford Dictionary* offer approximately twenty meanings of the word spirituality, at least half of them concerning traditional religious matters. For example, spirituality can mean “the life of the soul,” “something that belongs to the Church or to a priest of the Church,” or to “religious or sacred matters.”

Non-religious or secular meanings are also quite varied. Among these my favorite refers to “a spiritual home” as “a place where a person feels the fullest sympathy with his surroundings.” Feeling the fullest sympathy with one's surroundings can be engendered by what are broadly called the arts, but spirituality can also be experienced through the pursuit of science. Many individuals are attracted to both science and the arts. Scientists involved in the wonder of scientific discoveries in the world of nature may also find spiritual enrichment through involvement in classical music or the opera. Their inclusive outlook allows them to experience discovery and understanding of nature as well as the wonder and awe felt by accomplished artists. For these fortunate individuals, science and the arts provide human discoveries about both the world and their inner selves.

When I refer to the arts I think of a broad area encompassing music, literature, photography and performing arts such as opera, theatre, ballet, and orchestral music. I also include artists who paint and carve and dance and sing and much more.

The other day, I heard someone on the radio say, “There is nothing more important than this day.” The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced of the truth of this statement. Living each day and each moment fully is probably the nearest we humans can come to approaching that state of wonder and awe called “spirituality.” That is, being aware of the moment – not letting springtime pass without noticing the greening of the earth, the blossoming of flowers, the return of singing birds; not letting the day end without noticing the sunset or the moon rise or the glory of the stars; not missing the little graces in the people around us – their kindness and generosity, their courtesy, their smiles, the sharing of their interests and experiences.

Poetry, more than anything, inspires me to savour the moment, to feel more deeply the significance and power of common things. Consider for example, the poem, *Leisure* by W. H. Davies: “What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare...”

Or Edna St. Vincent Millay’s, “Oh World, I cannot get thee close enough...”

Or the camp favourite, *Salutation to the Dawn*: “Look to this day, for it is life, The very Life of life...”

Tennyson’s lines from *Ulysses* ring particularly true for me: “I am a part of all that I have met...”

Or Keats’ “A thing of beauty is a joy forever...” And finally, Sara Teasdale’s *Barter*:

“Life has loveliness to sell,

All beautiful and splendid things...

Blue waves whitened on a cliff,

Soaring fire that sways and swings,

And children’s faces, looking up

Holding wonder like a cup...” *And the closing stanza...*

“Spend all you have for loveliness, Buy it and never count the cost;

For one white singing hour of peace, Count many a year of strife well lost.

And for a breath of ecstasy, Give all you have been or could be.”

But in the quest for knowledge, science too has its moments of awe, wonder and spirituality. It develops the mind and directs human aspirations into a path of expanded consciousness and enlarged perspectives. To quote Webster’s Dictionary once more, it encourages us “to have the fullest sympathy with our surroundings.”

My hope for the future is that science and the arts will be acknowledged as compatible paths rather than competing directions to spiritual enrichment.