Radical Spirituality

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In our unison opening words, we talk about celebrating diversity, compassion, and love. We also talk about a "quest for spiritual growth." Is there a broad consensus for what that means?

I mean, who wouldn't want to have a satisfied mind – a mind at peace, resting in contentment with things as they are, fulfilled and complete?

And yet how unlikely a thing it is. Almost the instant we conceive the thought, we are set upon by the many issues and demands of daily life, the injustices of the world, which, along with our own resentments and desires, keep us discontented, unsatisfied, off balance – anything but peaceful.

Of course, peacefulness isn't for everybody. Peace of mind isn't universally popular. I once taught a meditation class at a church in North Carolina. One of the members of the church was a retired physician with rheumatoid arthritis which made him somewhat less than fully agreeable at times, and his wife, noticed the meditation class and hearing that meditation could be helpful with his problems, told him he needed to go. Being a wise husband, he came to the class, dutifully, week after week. He practiced meditation, learned, followed instructions. After about six or seven weeks he came up to me, put his hand on my arm and said – very calmly – "Don, I'm going to have to stop coming to the class." I asked why, wondering what had come up in his life that he had to change his schedule that would interfere. He explained, "Don, this is robbing me of my sense of outrage!" He stopped coming.

One of the messages of religious traditions is that the way to achieve peace is through a shift in consciousness, learning to pay attention to different things, focusing on our interdependence with the universe more than our individual aggravations and needs.

This shift is a radical one. It's been called many different things, but today I'd like to call it radical spirituality.

I've referred to spirit "breath." But I'd like to point out one essential thing about breath: it involves inhaling, inspiring, bringing air from the outside into intimate contact with the insides of our lungs, taking part of the air as nourishment, releasing other gasses to return to the air, and exhaling, expiring, air back into the greater world beyond ourselves. This is spirituality in a nutshell. It's bringing the outside inside, expanding our selves to include that which wasn't already a part of us.

The basic turn of spirituality, as I understand it, is the relaxation of the boundaries of one's sense of self to include within those boundaries something that had not been included before. Some examples of what we could include the air we breathe, the food we eat, nature, an idea, a friend in authentic conversation or a lover in intimate relationship.

The challenge of effectively communicating this perspective has been an enduring challenge for millennia. It's so simple, and yet so radically different from how we usually see things.

Have you ever wanted to show someone something that was so wonderful that you just had to share it, but was so foreign to your friend's interests or experience that you found it difficult to get him or her to believe you? If you wanted me to taste a new food, you might get my interest, but if you invited me to share in your joy of playing the video game, "Grand Theft Auto," on your Xbox, it might be a harder sell.

If you're lucky, you can set it up so that your friend discovers it on his or her own. That's what I did some years ago when I my daughter, Cypress, and I visited our nation's capital.

She'd never been to Washington, D.C., and I wanted to show her the monuments and grand spaciousness of the Capital Mall. She found it generally interesting to walk around the area, seeing in person those things she'd seen in photographs and on TV. But I knew from experience that there is nothing that can prepare you for the view from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. How many of you have been there and know what I mean?

You know about the Capitol building and the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument and those things called "reflecting pools," but until you

stand in the right place, they are separate, isolated images. As I led Cypress up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, I kept her focused on what was ahead, the climb, the statue of Lincoln, the history of the place.

When we reached the top step, I asked her to stop and turn around. The weather couldn't have been more perfect for this moment. The sun was bright, the sky was blue, and the air was still and crystal clear. I saw her eyes widen and heard her breath catch as she saw the view come together. The long, narrow reflecting pool stretched out away from us towards the Washington Monument towering above us with its picture-perfect reflection pointing right at us in the water. All this was framed by the Capitol Building at the far end and the wide, steep steps of the Lincoln Memorial in front of us. She stared at the view long and hard, and finally said, "Dad, that's awesome." Later, we felt a completely different effect as we walked down into the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a place of silence and loss. I pointed out my cousin Jimmy's name on the wall. Here, we cried. Again, this place brought about a completely new experience.

It's wonderful to be able to share things like this with our loved ones. More often than not, though, it seems that we fail when we try to lead someone into entirely new experiences, like when Cypress tried to get me to see 3-d holograms. Do you know the kind I mean, they're made of squiggly colorful lines that make no sense at first, but if you can find just the right way to focus your eyes, they jump right off the page as three-dimensional scenes? But no matter how hard I tried, I never could figure out the trick of seeing them.

When you're showing something specific and literal, like landscape and architecture, you can be fairly confident of the outcome. But it can be very difficult to develop an entirely new skill in order to perceive the unseen. Radical spirituality can be like that.

There's a story about a Zen master, Ryokan, who lived alone in a cabin far from civilization. He lived so simply, that when a thief came to rob him, he couldn't find anything to steal. Ryokan returned and caught him frantically ransacking the cabin. Ryokan said, "You may have come a long way to visit me and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. Ryokan sat there

naked, watching the moon through his window. “Poor fellow,” he mused, “I wish I could have given him this beautiful moon.”

In this story, the thief is a little like each of us. We’re so focused on things and events: finding, planning, using, keeping, surviving. The story is about a thief because it emphasizes that this focus on our own urgencies can keep us from appreciating our interconnectedness. The thief was confused when Ryokan treated him with generosity and respect – it didn’t make sense from his point of view. The moon was shining on everything that night, but the thief couldn’t see it because he was so focused on his crime. “Poor fellow. I wish I could have given him the beautiful moon.”

Radical spirituality is like that. It is at once so present in our everyday lives that we take it for granted, and yet so different from our usual concerns that we dismiss it as nice but irrelevant. And yet all the religious teachings of the ages have told us that spirituality is the most important dimension of life.

Picture yourself as the thief ransacking Ryokan’s cabin. Can you imagine how radical it would have been to stop and gaze at the moon in the window, let your mind free of its worries and concerns? What kind of turn of mind would that take? Could you do it and still be a thief?

Buddhist teachers have said that the Buddha is not the goal, just the teacher and example. Likewise, there is a saying that all the religious teachings are only like a finger pointing at the moon. The moon is the goal, but it can’t be touched directly, only seen and experienced. They emphasize that the finger is NOT the moon. Religions can only talk about their object; they can only try to direct your attention at something beyond their capacity to convey in words.

Have you ever tried to direct a dog’s attention by pointing? I’ve tried, and the dog only looks at my finger. The harder I try to point, saying, “Look, look!” The more certain the dog is that I’m trying to get it to pay attention to my finger.

Religions get bogged down in this problem all the time. People tend to take their religion as seriously as the dog takes my finger. They can end up missing the moon altogether because they believe that religion is the object rather than a collection of metaphors constructed in the effort to get them to look up at the moon.

This shift from the finger to the moon is what radical spirituality is about. It always entails stepping into a larger frame of reference than one previously held. Like suddenly seeing the inspiring vision in the reflecting pool that pulls you into a new relationship with your surroundings; like the experience of being overcome by a depth of feeling at the Vietnam Memorial; like suddenly stopping in the midst of our busy activities to be overwhelmed by the timeless beauty and presence of the full moon.

The thing that takes us beyond ourselves in each of these cases is a sense of wonder – wonder as a verb. For a second, you become a living question mark: "I wonder!" The act of asking that kind of existential relational question entails throwing open the doors of our minds and expectations to see new implications that await us within the depths of the present moment.

Despite being a throughgoing secular humanist, the philosopher, Emanuel Kant, hinted at this in his work, *The Critique of Judgment,* referring to something he called "the sublime." It referred to a state of awe and wonder that was radically different from all other activities of the mind. Kant said that we experience the sublime when our minds perceive the limit of their ability to understand.

Once we appreciate that we can never know all we wish to know, our perception of the sublime can become permanent. We become living question marks with our eyes and ears attuned to discovering what greater dimensions lie beyond all those fingers pointing at the moon.

There are a lot of ways of expressing this idea. Differentiating between body and soul is one. Heaven and earth is another. The Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, says that we live simultaneously in two different dimensions: the historical and the ultimate. He represents these dimensions as horizontal and vertical lines. Each is as real as the other.

The historical, horizontal dimension is the dimension of time as we know it, the dimension of life and history, of breathing and eating and arguing and growing and living and dying. Here we plan and organize and remember. Obviously, we must pay attention to the historical dimension.

The ultimate dimension, on the other hand, can be found at right angles to every moment of the historical dimension. This dimension can only be accessed by being completely mindful of the present moment, without being distracted by the past or the future. This is the dimension of radical spirituality. Thich Nhat Hanh says that our true home is in the ultimate dimension.

It can be hard to find our way home because our culture is structured in such a way that the historical dimension is presented as the only true way of experiencing life. This is why religious myths are so often presented as being factually real nowadays. Our current language structure presumes that everything is a finger – it doesn't permit us to talk about the moon.

How can we get around this problem? We can be thankful that there are many elements of religious tradition that can become useful to us once we realize that the finger is not the moon. There are ways to set the stage to make it more likely that we will experience radical spirituality.

I'm just going to give you a brief overview of seven elements common to these traditions that we can use to help us live in the ultimate dimension. I'm drawing here from an excellent book by Roger Walsh, called *Essential Spirituality*.

These elements are called spiritual practices. Basically, if we want to grow in a spiritual direction, we need to learn to water the seeds of spirituality that are already there in our hearts. These basic practices are:

- Transform your motivation: reduce craving and find your soul's desire.
- Cultivate emotional wisdom: heal your heart and learn to love.
- Live ethically: feel good by doing good.
- Concentrate and calm your mind.
- Awaken your spiritual vision: see clearly and recognize the sacred in all things.
- Cultivate spiritual intelligence: develop wisdom and understand life.
- Express spirit in action: embrace generosity and the joy of service.

It's not just one or the other of these; they are all important. The first one, however, is the gateway to all the others: transforming your motivation: reduce

craving and find your soul's desire. The Sufi mystic poet, Rumi, described this, saying,

> Little by little, wean yourself.
> This is the gist of what I have to say.
> From an embryo, whose nourishment comes in the blood,
> move to an infant drinking milk,
> to a child on solid food,
> to a searcher after wisdom,
> to a hunter of more invisible game.

What would this church look like if we were more committed to Radical Spirituality? We would have our eyes on the moon. It's interesting that Unitarian Universalists, having wisely concluded that the finger is not the moon, often have decided that there is no moon and that we should just pay attention to what we do with our hands.

If we had our eyes on the moon, the ultimate dimension as the prize, our focus would be on spiritual growth, weaning ourselves from the literal, learning to calm our minds and replace anger with love. We would expect our worship services to lead us into experiences of radical spirituality, glimpses of the ultimate dimension beyond intellect and ambition. We would work together to create a true community of faith – faith in the reality of the ultimate dimension. All our other activities would take their meaning from that faith.

We would meet one another with open minds unencumbered by prejudice, preconception, animosity or resentment – because we would know that those things only serve to separate us.

We would give freely of our time and our wealth because we believed it was important to create a sacred place where people could learn to grow in spirit, love and wisdom, and that this kind of transformative growth is the vitally important work of each individual and of every religious community. And we would understand that selfless giving is not an obligation; it is important in itself as a practice for spiritual growth.

We would reach out to the greater community, not out of a sense of anxiety or obligation but out of a spirit of generosity and abundance, feeling that

our spiritual life together has given us have more good will, time, and energy than is wholesome to keep to ourselves, that the only wise thing to do is to share our joyful vitality with the greater community for the greater good.

A community that has radical spirituality at its center could be the beloved community it the fullest sense: living together in a spirit of love, reverence, and joy.

What a wonderful community that would be!