

Spiritual Courage

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by Riane Eisler



Photo by David Loye

Spirituality has become the word of the hour. But what is spirituality? What does being spiritual mean? For me, as for many others, spirituality means feeling at one with that which we call the divine. But when I think of the divine I do not think of it as separate from our lives, as otherworldly, as "out there" rather than here. I think of our own most evolved qualities: our profound human capacity for empathy, for love, our striving for justice, our hunger for beauty, our yearning to create. I think being spiritual means being ethical and, in the true sense of the word, moral.

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When I think of spirituality I think of love, not in some abstract way but in action. I did not always understand spirituality this way. But now when I think of spirituality I think of love, not in some abstract way but in action. I think of what I have called spiritual courage: trusting our impulse to reach out to others, to help others, to challenge injustice - not out of hate, but out of love.

My mother had this spiritual courage, and it saved our lives. When a party of Austrian Nazis, among them a man my parents had been kind to, came to drag my father away on Crystal Night, my mother had the courage to stand up to them. She could have been killed for angrily demanding that my father be released. I do not know if it was that my mother (who was Jewish) looked Aryan with her blue eyes and blond hair, or whether it was the character of the particular Gestapo officer who headed the pack, or a combination of factors. But by some miracle my father was released and we escaped from the Nazis with our lives.

There were others who had this kind of courage, people who helped Jews hide, even though it meant risking their lives and the lives of their families. Often when they were asked afterwards why they did it, they simply answered that they had to. That to me is true spirituality, listening to that inner voice we all have to be caring rather than cruel.

I believe all of us are born with that voice, that it is part of the essence of what makes us human. Babies, newborns, cry when they hear another baby's cry. They are born with empathy, with the capacity to feel with another.

But unfortunately, much in our culture stifles, and all too often silences, that empathic and caring inner voice. So when I speak of being spiritual, I do not think of it as just a personal matter. It is a cultural and social matter. And all too often it is a matter of standing up against what is presented to us as traditional wisdom.

My Spiritual Journey

I grew up taking God for granted. After my parents and I fled to Cuba, every night, before going to bed, I repeated after my father the Hebrew evening prayer, the Shema. I did not understand the words, and I do not think my father did. All I knew was that this was a special ritual of bonding between us, this reaching out to a greater spiritual power in which we placed our trust.

After that, I always said my own prayer. Always, as children will, I made very sure that I did not to forget anyone, that I did not omit a single name of those who had been left behind in Europe: my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Then World War II ended and I saw the newsreels of the concentration camps: the carelessly thrown piles of skeletal dead bodies, the skeletal bodies of the survivors and their hollow, staring, haunted eyes. I found out what happened to those I had so faithfully prayed for, what had been done to them, the cruel horror of their lives and deaths.

I still cry when I think of it. There are no words to describe what I felt as I grieved not only for the dead of my family and my people, but for the faith I lost. Was God evil? Was God mad? Powerless? Or simply nonexistent?

It was a long time before I ever thought of spirituality again. I went through the motions, to please my parents, of going to synagogue on the high holidays. I never rejected my Jewish identity. I was, and am, a Jew.

But slowly I also began to open my eyes to all that in the Bible is cruel and inhuman, the laws about stoning women to death, the commands to raze cities and kill every living being in them lest God be angry that some were spared, the double standard for men and women not only in sexual morality but in the treatment of girl children and women as mere male chattel -- "thy neighbor's wife,..ox, ...ass...". And for the first time I woke up to what was really communicated about human relations in stories such as that of Lot, who offered his little daughters to a mob of men to rape to protect two male guests in his house -- and gets rewarded rather than punished when, so we are told, the guests turn out to be vengeful angels sent by God.

At the same time, I recognized and found value in those parts of the Bible that teach empathy and caring. This, and the Jewish tradition of helping those who are less fortunate modeled by my parents, was, and continues to be, extremely important to me. But I did not think of that as spiritual -- I thought of it as simply the way to be.

Only many years later, after decades of research in many fields, including the history of religion, did I begin to again use the word spirituality. Only now it had a very different meaning for me. It was not associated with a particular deity, either God or Goddess. Nor was it associated with sitting on a mountain top meditating, or joining a monastery or convent to withdraw from the pains and pleasures of life. I realized that I used to think that way because so much of what has been written about spirituality is esoteric. But now I began to see that idealizing this way of looking at spirituality actually perpetuates injustice and suffering, just as only praying to an otherworldly deity does not change the conditions that cause injustice and suffering.

Gradually I became aware that my most illuminating spiritual experiences have come when I feel myself at one with nature or with others of our kind, when I look into my little granddaughter's sparkling eyes, when I hear the beloved voice of one of my children, when I touch my husband's hand. I also became aware that I was now, so to speak, spiritually self-educating myself.

Unraveling and Reweaving

Many of us are today troubled by the overmaterialism of our culture. We find much in institutionalized religions that we can no longer accept. Yet we want to infuse our lives, and our work, with deeper meaning. We want to be of service, to feel connected to one another and to our Mother Earth. We want deeper relationships and a sense of greater purpose. This, I believe, is one of the major motivations behind the various strands of what is sometimes called the new spirituality.

While some of these strands promote healthier psyches and encourage action to promote social justice and environmental sustainability, others unfortunately are not so different from much that they reject in the old religious traditions. Like just going to synagogue on Friday or church on Sunday, they tend to be abstracted from daily life. Like many earlier mystical traditions, they promote retreating from what is happening around us, away from the suffering of others. This kind of spirituality may help individuals cope with the chronic injustices and miseries of what I have identified as a dominator model of relations -- the force-backed ranking of man over woman, man over man, race over race, and nation over nation that can only be maintained by inflicting or threatening pain. But it does little to change what is happening here on Earth.

By contrast, the kind of spirituality appropriate for what I have called a partnership model of relations is not only transcendent but also immanent. It is a spirituality that informs our day-to-day lives with caring and empathy. It provides basic standards of human rights and responsibilities. It also provides basic teachings about empathy and nonviolence as alternatives to both a lack of standards and the use of morality to incite hate, scapegoating, and violence.

This is very important today. On the one side, as in earlier times when the dominator model -- with its "holy wars," witch burnings, and other barbarities -- was more firmly in place, we still have those who incite hate-mongering, scapegoating, and violence under the guise of traditional values. On the other, we have those who contend that there are no real standards of conduct, that all standards are merely cultural constructs that vary from time to time and place to place -- a view sometimes called post modernism, deconstructionism, or cultural relativism.

This second view reflects a rebellion against "moral" rules that have frequently been unfair, and all too often inhuman -- rules developed in earlier times that were more oriented to a dominator model of society. It also reflects the fact that there are indeed cultural variations in what is considered moral and right. But we humans need standards. Even arguing that all standards are relative is articulating a kind of standard, negative though it may be.

Distinguishing between the kind of standards -- and spirituality -- appropriate for partnership or dominator relations can help us integrate spirituality into our day-to-day lives. It can help us live more fully, while at the same time helping others to do the same. And it can inspire us to passionately work for a world where our most evolved capacities will be socially and economically supported.

In my life, I have found that spiritual work is not only "inner work," but the spiritual courage to persevere in the face of those who either tell us that only what they consider "traditional" is moral or, alternately, that we must not be too judgmental, that we must not polarize, that even the most horrible things in our world somehow are manifestations of the divine. And I have found that this spiritual courage can be the source of enormous satisfaction, indeed, of joy.

Toward Partnership Spirituality

A partnership spirituality, as I emphasize in my book *Sacred Pleasure*, entails a very different view of pain and pleasure than the one most of us have been taught -- one that sacralizes pleasure rather than pain. But here it is important to note, as I emphasize in *Sacred Pleasure*, that this is not pleasure in a purely hedonistic or self-centered form, or as the frantic "fun" or escape from pain that is characteristic of much that is called pleasure in dominator societies. Rather it is a pleasure connected with awe at the miracle of of life and of nature, the ecstatic pleasure of altered states of consciousness, and the

deep pleasure of caring connections, of caretaking, of creativity, of love.

This leads to still another important core element of partnership spirituality: it does not place man and spirituality over woman and nature. We can find remnants of an earlier, more partnership-oriented spirituality in archeological finds and myths from very ancient times when people do not seem to have imaged the powers that govern the universe -- as we have been taught -- as an armed male deity: Jehovah with his thunderbolt, Zeus with his sword (actually Zeus has both a thunderbolt and a sword, to emphasize the point that the highest power is the power to dominate and destroy.) These earlier people appear to have imaged the powers that govern the universe more in terms of the power to give and nurture life, as a Great Mother from whose womb all of life ensues and to whose womb all of life returns at death, like the cycles of vegetation, once again to be reborn. But -- and I want to emphasize this important point -- it is clear from Neolithic imagery that the male principle was also highly valued. Indeed, one of the central stories in this earlier, more nature-based religion that saw all of nature as interconnected and as imbued with what we call the divine, was the sacred marriage of the Goddess with her divine lover.

This is obviously a nature-based spirituality. It is a spirituality in which sex, the human body, matters we have been taught to associate with the obscene, are part of the sacred. It is also a view of the sacred in which images of sex, of the human body, of man's body, of woman's body, and of how two bodies should relate, are primarily life-affirming, pleasure-affirming images.

Today a growing number of theologians such as Carter Heyward, Carol Christ, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Matthew Fox, and Judith Plaskow, are writing about this "new" (but actually very old) spirituality as an embodied spirituality. As Susan G. Carter writes, the term embodied spirituality has yet to be defined in our dictionaries, where body (or embodiment) and spirit (or spirituality) are as separate as they still are in much of our society. But if we are to integrate spirituality into our lives, as Carter also notes, using this term can concretize thoughts and ideas, and thus help bring about changes in both our thinking and our society.

In one way it is easy to imagine an embodied spirituality. After all, many of our images of deity are embodied. Except that, in Western tradition they have been embodied only in male form. One of the key elements of the "new spirituality" is the embodiment of the divine in both female and male form.

As the theologian Sallie McFague writes, the image of God as Mother expands our conception of God. The Father God has been pictured more as redeemer from sins than as giver of life, and his love has been understood as "disinterested," involving no need, no desire, no feeling, for the objects of his love. By contrast, God as Mother is associated also with feeling and nurturing, adding a dimension of caring, as well as with joy for her creation, and with the desire to see it come to fulfillment, with wanting us to flourish. "A theology that sees God as the parent who feeds the young and, by extension, the weak and vulnerable, understands God as caring about the most basic needs of life in its struggle to continue," McFague writes.

Although ancient female representations of divinity symbolized many different stages of life, from young maiden to ancient crone, many of the oldest female representations emphasize the life-giving and nurturing aspects of woman's body -- that is, the aspect we today would call the Mother Goddess. Even in historic times we find records telling of female deities giving their people not only the gift of life but the capacity to feed themselves through the invention of agriculture -- for example, in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Goddess Isis is repeatedly referred to as the inventor of agriculture and in Sumerian cuneiform tablets the Goddess Ninlil is revered for teaching her people to farm. Love is also associated with female deities -- for example, the Greek Goddess Aphrodite still in historic times represented sexual love, and the Goddess Demeter powerfully symbolized maternal love.

The Catholic Virgin Mary is, to this day, the symbol of maternal love, even though she is now presented as the only mortal in a family in which only the father and the son are divine. Like the Chinese Goddess Kuan Yin, today still the most popular of Chinese deities, Mary is revered primarily as the symbol of love and compassion associated with the ideal of motherhood. The Hebrew

"Hochma" and the Greek "Sophia" mean not only wisdom but caring wisdom, so-called feminine wisdom -- which of course can reside in both women and men and can flourish in both if it is socially supported and rewarded, which it is not in dominator societies.

It is not coincidental that during our time of strong partnership resurgence the image of the divine in female form should again come to the fore. Nor is it coincidental that this conception of the divine or spiritual as female again adds to love an erotic or bodily element -- that is, that in this "new" spirituality love is no longer abstract. And it is not judgmental love, but a love that is accepting and inclusive of all.

By sacralizing the erotic -- that is, bodily pleasure, rather than pain to the body -- this new, but actually very old, spirituality also stands in stark contrast to the emphasis in dominator spirituality on the infliction and/or suffering of pain.

Partnership Morality and Spirituality

In my thought, work, and life, I do not distinguish between spirituality and morality. I should emphasize, however, that by morality I do not mean what I have come to think of as the false morality of so-called fundamentalist religious teachings. I believe that at the core of all the major religious traditions -- be they Hindu, Muslim, Hebrew, Christian, or Confucian -- are the partnership values of sensitivity, empathy, caring, and nonviolence. But overlaying this partnership core is what we may call the dominator encrustment: teachings appropriate for the kinds of societies that already prevailed during the time when what are today considered our holy books or scriptures were committed to writing.

We are still generally taught religious morality as a collection of many different kinds of rules, such as the biblical commandments that "thou shalt not steal." (Exodus 21: 15). Sometimes these rules have been presented to us as the infallible word of God, or the equally infallible teachings of a religious prophet or guru, to be unquestioningly obeyed. Sometimes there are in these rules strong partnership elements: for example, the teachings of Isaiah in the Old Testament and of Jesus in the New Testament preaching stereo typically "feminine" values such as compassion, empathy, and nonviolence. However, we also need to recognize the dominator elements in religious teachings: elements that have served to justify and maintain domination and oppression -- for example, the biblical justification of holy wars and the control of men over women.

A morality appropriate for partnership relations can have standards such as the moral imperative of moving through our lives with awareness, with the sensitivity to ourselves and to others that is the prerequisite for empathy and caring. These standards can help us become more aware of our interconnection with others of our kind and with our Mother Earth, fostering that feeling of oneness that is at the core of partnership spirituality.

When we are sensitive, we can feel empathy. When we are insensitive, we can not. Sensitivity is therefore a prerequisite for the basic partnership moral standard of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Obviously this standard cannot be the guide for relations in societies that orient primarily to the dominator model. So dominator morality has to justify the suppression of moral sensitivity -- not only toward "out-groups" but also toward those below one in the rankings of domination backed up by fear and force that characterize this kind of social structure.

The maintenance of any kind of social cohesion, however, requires some attention to nonviolent and mutually responsible relations. Hence this dominator kind of morality has a myriad of rules and regulations, some governing relations between those who dominate, others governing relations between those who dominate and those who are dominated -- and these rules are very different.

This difference is why the kind of morality we have inherited from more rigid dominator times is a mass of contradictory rules and regulations. For example, one of the ten commandments Moses is said to have brought down from Mount Sinai in the Old Testament of the Bible is "thou shalt not kill." But the

Bible is full of instances where this commandment is violated -- from rules prescribing that a young bride be stoned to death by the men of her city if she is found not to be a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:13-21) to numerous "divinely inspired" commands to kill men, women, and children.

Similarly, in the New Testament we often read of God commanding peace and love. But in Chapters 12 to 19 of the book of Revelations we read how the angels are commanded to pour out "the wrath of God upon the earth" and terrible horrors were released upon all -- except the "hundred and forty and four thousand," which, according to Chapter 14:3, "were redeemed from the earth."

I want to emphasize that this problem is by no means unique to Judaeo-Christian scriptures. As in Judaeo-Christian tradition, teachings in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures about honesty and nonviolence are partnership teachings. But there are in all these traditions also many dominator teachings. For instance, in the Hindu Mahabharata, violence and cruelty are attributed to divine commands, and even presented as divine attributes. According to the Koran, if a wife is disobedient, her husband should beat her and banish her from his bed. And in one of the most celebrated Hindu stories, the message that women's lives are worth less than men's, and even that girls and women can be killed with impunity, is reinforced. We are told that the great god Vishnu was almost killed by his own father, who, as in the Greek Oedipus story feared his son would kill and depose him -- but that fortunately his life was saved when a girl baby was put in his place to be killed instead.

Stories provide for us models for our own behavior. When these are religious stories, they carry enormous moral authority. This is why we need to cultivate, in ourselves and others, the spiritual courage to challenge these kinds of stories, be it in our own religious traditions or in those of others. It is also why we need to develop a moral, ethical, and spiritual education that helps us explore the difference between what social psychologist David Loevsky calls partnership moral sensitivity and dominator moral insensitivity.

In the Bible, this difference is reflected by what Michael Lerner calls two voices of God: the voice of the God of love and the voice projecting onto God the accumulated cruelty, violence, and pain inherent in a dominator model of relations. Once we become more aware of this difference, we can more effectively counter those who, be it in the name of tradition or even liberation, have used and unwittingly continue to use the language of the second voice to perpetuate cruelty, violence, and pain, as well as those who would indiscriminately discard all religious teachings or accept anything and everything as the manifestation of a divine will.

In sum, we urgently need to identify, and support, the partnership core of our world's religious traditions, at the same time that we identify, and reject, their dominator overlays. Then we can more effectively work for a future guided by spirituality in the sense of love, caring, and oneness with all that we and our world can be.