

Peggy Heeks

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Would you regard your spiritual awareness as a journey?

I see spiritual awareness and spiritual journeying as two separate things. Spiritual awareness is something that is around us. It's another dimension in which we are living and working. A spiritual journey is not a term I respond to, particularly. I don't see life like this. When John Bunyan wrote Pilgrim's Progress, the pilgrim was going to the celestial city. He'd got a clear destination. For centuries, Christians had a clear destination which was heaven. Some years ago, the Church of England announced that heaven and hell were not geographical locations. To me the concept of a spiritual journey is misleading, because it focuses on a destination. For a lot of people this is fine, it's useful. It isn't helpful for me. In any case, I'm not very keen on separating a spiritual journey from the rest of my life. These days, we look at our lives in holistic terms. We're aware of how much material things shape our spiritual outlook. So what helps me, is to look at my life as a story. I then need to ask what sort of story am I in? What might happen in the next chapter? What am I doing, to make that outcome? So it's a very creative thing. I think it frees us up from the drive of progress on a journey.

When you talk of spirituality, what do you mean?

A lot of my work has been in this field and there's no one satisfactory definition. In 2004, I went to a five day conference on ageing and spirituality. Each speaker began by offering a definition of spirituality, and each came up with something different. We ended with a whole sequence of definitions ranging from the humanist to the mystical. To me, spirituality is essentially about the awareness of 'the other', a desire to come closer to the spirit, the sacred element of life.

Do you see a difference between spirituality and religion?

I do see a difference between the two. It's been fashionable to portray religion as old fashioned, and spirituality as cool. That movement's been growing for a couple of decades, and there's just a hint that people are beginning to reassess it. I've just read a book called 'The Spirituality Revolution' by David Tacey that suggests that we should not divide ourselves into being the fundamentalists who believe in religion and the free spirits who believe in spirituality. I see spirituality as a personal quest for meaning and connection with the transcendent, and religion is an organised system of beliefs and practices. You will know that the word 'religion' means 'to bind'. It's a reminder that in a faith community, we are bound together. We are people journeying together, encouraging, supporting and challenging each other. To be part of a faith community is very important to me.

Does the word God have any meaning for you?

Not just one meaning. In some ways, I see God as unknowable, beyond the limits of my understanding. But also I need a God who is close by my side, guiding me, loving me. There's a hymn about this paradox. "Oh God invisible we see Thee, Oh God intangible, we touch Thee." It relates to that paradox of a God who is far beyond our concepts, yet one whose loving presence we need near us.

I know some people are uncomfortable with the word 'God'

I'm not. I don't need another name for God. It's a very convenient shorthand, but all we need to be aware of is that we shouldn't put God into a box.

There are a lot of people who would avidly deny a sense of other, of transcendence.

When did you first have a sense that there was more than you Peggy?

Probably as a teenager. That of course is a classic time for spiritual awareness. Through school friends who were deeply religious. I don't know whether they were deeply spiritual but certainly deeply religious. I suppose by seeing how they lived.

What, witnessing how people lived through their own faith?

Yes.

This was the Church of England, was it?

No, these people were Catholic.

Were you raised in a Roman Catholic tradition?

I was baptised and confirmed in the Church of England, and went to a Church of England school. That's my core tradition, but I feel I function ecumenically.

There you were, a teenager... what were you witnessing that touched a sense of other? Was it your friends' joy? Was it their good works? Was it simply witnessing how they lived their faith?

I think it was seeing people who lived their life as if there was another dimension other than the material.

What were you seeing?

Harmony, a feeling of belonging. I'm not sure what else. I must have been receptive to that at this key spiritual point.

How did you respond to this awareness of other?

I think by reading, and becoming more aware of the wonders of the natural world.

Was there a book at this time that especially spoke to you?

Alistair Hardy's "Varieties of Religious Experience" was particularly interesting to me.

Did your reading take you in any particular direction?

No, it just showed me that there are many ways to the transcendent. Music has always been important to me, and the natural world, and I could also see the spirit at work in other people through their selflessness, their joy, their sensitivity perhaps. This was a growing awareness over a period of years.

With this awakening of a sense of other, did you begin to attend a faith community?

I was already part of a faith community. The Church of England.

Did this awakening deepen your faith?

Not really. In many ways the Church of England was less aware of people's personal needs, than it is today. That was one reason why my husband Leonard and I left the Church of England. We were married in the C.of E. and continued to go after marriage, but it didn't satisfy us. We would stand up, then kneel down; I'd begin singing a hymn and still be trying to understand the first few lines, when everyone else had got to the end. Then the Vicar would run round the Church and be at the door to shake your hand and say "So nice to see you" The next week the same thing -"So nice to see you"- and we'd never move forward at all.

What was missing in that particular expression of faith?

A sense of life or challenge, It was ritualistic, very dry, Once when we went on holiday we met a family of Quakers. We just knew that they had got something that we hadn't got; perhaps a sense of integrity, a sense of security. It was after that, when we got home, that we began coming to Quaker Meeting.

During this time, what was happening to your sense of other?

I should think I was wrestling with it because I was also dealing with babies and young children. It's a very tiring and exacting time of life.

Have you ever wrestled with your sense of God and found him wanting?

No. God does seem absent sometimes. I'm a great believer that with relationship with God and other people, tides turn. I'm aware that there are two traditions, *via positiva* and *via negativa*. It is the *via positiva* that speaks to me.

John Humphrys is doing a radio series titled, "In search of God" where he interviews Muslim, Jewish and Christian church leaders. The one question that he stumbles over, is why God allows suffering. What are your thoughts on this?

I think we have to consider where the suffering comes from. If it's an earthquake, that's a natural disaster. I don't think God has anything to do with it. Where the suffering is caused by war or broken relationships, that's up to our human nature.

So the way you hold this idea of suffering, is to say that we are responsible? What John Humphrys seems to stagger over is, if God is almighty, all powerful, he can intervene?

As I say, God's beyond our understanding. The traditional view in the Scriptures is that God is all powerful. There are theologians today, however, who see God as an evolving God, and the way we evolve, can help God's evolution.

That's fascinating, can you expand on that?

Well it's a mystery, but it is related to the idea of continuing revelation. We must beware of trying to put human reasons into a divine paradox. Our ideas may be miles wrong. This is just one way of thinking. Certainly concepts of God have changed. From the stern father who punishes you, to the creative spirit, who longs for relationship with you.

In traditional Christianity, there's the idea of original sin. What are your thoughts on this concept?

The Adam and Eve story is a very interesting way of explaining the existence of evil in the world, but we have to consider the context in which it was written and the agenda of the writer. I was once at a story-telling week in Northumbria, where a Scottish story teller told us the Adam and Eve story, but in a completely different way. There wasn't any problem, really, with Eve's disobedience. The participants were uneasy with this version and felt this is a story that's been given to us, so we should engage with it. We may not believe in it, we may not see things that way, but I think we should wrestle with it. A number of us felt cheated, because it's very easy to smooth over the whole Adam and Eve tale. There are many variations that can be taken. I've offered this core story to my students and invited them to rewrite it. I've told it differently myself, with Eve looking back and feeling in her bones that God wanted her to move things on. In the Garden of Eden, the humans were in a state of dependence. They were not going to grow. Eve's relationship with Adam and her relationship with God were static. I tell another story in which Eve feels that disobeying is the right thing to do. Nevertheless, in this version, she has a great sense of loss of that idyllic garden.

I'm more in favour of looking for that of God in people, than in seeing human beings as sinful. When I first came to Oxford, I used to go to seminars at the Faculty of Theology. I went to one led by a Vicar, who said "We are conceived in sin, born in sin and live in sin". Now that's very far from my view. There are some theologians who speak of original guilt rather than original sin. I think there's quite a bit to be thought through, there.

I think a lot of us have this sense of guilt. Perhaps that's been built in for decades. We just need to look at the Bible with all these 'oughts' and 'ought-nots'. It's very easy, almost inbred in us, this feeling of imperfection.

Are you talking about the psychology of guilt, rather than the innateness of guilt?

Yes.

A question that leaps at me is about Eve's feeling of Divine Guidance. Is this something that holds and contains your life?

It's something I'm very interested in. I don't exactly collect stories about people who've felt this divine guidance, but I treasure those that I have been told. I know people who have felt quite clearly divine guidance, sometimes sweeping them up and taking them in quite an unexpected direction. For example a friend was standing in a line, waiting to sign up on a course on science and found herself signing up for theology. That altered completely the course of her life.

What about your life? Has what I would call an inner knowing, fundamentally guided your life?

I haven't had a dramatic history of this, at all. Though there have been situations where one hasn't known what to do. I work by holding a situation up to God. By not pushing, not even asking for one particular outcome, but just waiting in trust, believing that, whatever outcome

there is, it will be the right one. On a very simple level, my husband and I moved to Oxford from the country eight years ago. There was a point where we were not sure if we had sold our cottage or not and we were not sure if we had bought a house in Oxford or not. Everything was in that insecure state. I found I was able to wait in tranquillity in trust. That's happened many times. I don't ask God for this or that at all. I'm not one of these people who ask God "Please find me a parking space." I wouldn't dream of doing that. I wouldn't ask for a particular outcome. I might ask for the strength to deal with a particular situation. It does seem to me that waiting in trust is something that opens you to guidance and I try to live my life like this.

I'm interested in your recipe for joy?

I'm not sure one can have a recipe for joy, like say for rock cakes. C.S. Lewis wrote a book 'Surprised by Joy', and Gerard Hughes wrote a book called 'God of Surprises'. Joy does surprise us, but I suppose some things do encourage it such as living in the present moment, or taking time to be aware of the natural world. Yesterday, I was in the centre of Oxford, and it was what you might call a quiet day. There was a hint of mist in the air and a feeling as if nothing was happening, as if the world was waiting for one season to go, and another to begin. It was incongruous to be in a city and quiet. I loved that; it was something quite unexpected and rare.

Do you have problems stilling your mind? How do you do it, with meditation?

I suppose I still my mind through experiencing Quaker worship over the years. I remember going to the first Quaker Meeting, which lasted an hour. My mind was dodging about all over the place. I found it very, very difficult. So it's partly a matter of experience, and partly focus, or as Quakers say, centring down. I find that in Meeting I don't think or wonder whether I've left the cooker on, or what I should do tomorrow. I'm there, trying to reach out to God and the people around me.

Do you focus on an image, a word?

No, I go beyond that. I seem to get into a different dimension.

Can you describe that different dimension?

No. Somehow it's as if I'm trying to move into a realm where God exists. That's the best I can say. I'm just in a different place.

Does this different place translate out into your daily life?

Well I think it feeds me. I think that's what it does. I try at various times of the day to be aware of the presence of God. Remember the story of Brother Lawrence, who worked in the kitchens and was very aware that God was with him there. I had a relation who worked in one of the communities associated with Taize, which had a discipline of a small bell that would be rung at three hourly periods in the day. They would pause in what they were doing and maybe say a prayer. It's like saying the Angelus at regular intervals. It's a reminder to touch base with something deeper. I think that's helpful.

In Islam, drinking water out of a cup in a certain way is a reminder of the same thing. Within this tradition there are many little reminders, ritualised as reminders. We talk about doing things mindfully, don't we?

You spoke about being in the present. Some people may not know what that really means. How would you define it?

Just by what it said. Last year I was interviewed by an American student, who asked if English people live in the past, the present or the future? I think he believed we lived in the past because of our history and tradition. I think, rather, that a lot of people live in the future; they spend time wondering what will I have for dinner tonight, what shopping do I need, will I make that appointment? It's a big temptation to do that. I had an experience once when we were living in a country cottage. I had the radio on, and a Beethoven piano sonata was being played. I was ironing, and listening to the radio and I was also wondering what I was going to do about a whole range of things. A wonderful voice spoke to me and said. "Take your time". I don't know where that voice came from but I still remember the advice. Try not to get stressed about will I get there, should I do that and so on. Take your time and give your attention to what is before you.

There's a wonderful story by Tolstoy about that, a kind of folk tale about an emperor who wanted to know the three things he should occupy himself with to lead a good life. So he sought out a wise man on a mountain. I won't go into the whole plot, but in the course of the story he has various experiences. When he's leaving, he turns to the wise man and says "Well, it's dark. I'm going and you still haven't answered my questions." "Oh, but what of this, and this." The wise man began explaining the significance of the day's experiences, and then the emperor saw exactly what he needed to learn, to give attention to the need before him.

What part does anger play in your life?

Not a lot, not a lot.

Is this a process of ageing, of temperament? Would you have ever been an angry person?

As a child of three I remember a little boy coming to play with me. He took my tricycle and I bit him. So that was anger, wasn't it? When one looks at one's life as a story, there are recurring patterns, and I can see that seeking harmony in situations is important to me - perhaps compromising, but seeking harmony. I've been very distressed about the situation in the Middle East. I am really sad about that, distressed and sad rather than angry. So anger doesn't feature much

Have you had to make a journey of forgiveness?

Yes, I think we all have that experience. We may be angry that such and such has happened, or someone has betrayed you, but when the anger dies down you realise that resentment diminishes you, while forgiveness opens up the possibility of a new relationship. If there is someone who has done something to me, something bad, I think that the thing to do is pray for that person.

How do you recognise a truly spiritual person?

I think it's very easy. The spirit just shines out of them. You feel blessed just to be in their presence. I've known a few people like that in my life, and it's wonderful.

Can you describe such an individual? What was it about this person?

You just saw the person and you felt better. You are reminded very clearly of this other dimension in life, and yet these people are not on a pedestal, in the cloud, up among the angels. They're living life abundantly. There's a man I'm thinking about. He was a scholar but modest. He was busy, but always had time for you. He had plenty of ideas but was good at listening. But these are almost externals. He worked from a very deep basis in life. He had a very firm Christian faith, not a fundamentalist one, but a very firm one. He had very wide sympathies, so was friends with people from other faiths and denominations. He was a very compassionate man.

How would you define compassion?

Someone who feels with you and for you.

How big a part is laughter in your spiritual story?

I'm more a smiley person, than a laughing one. I think I've got a sense of humour, but it's more at the follies of people. There are occasions, probably with family or friends, when you have laughed and laughed, where you are helpless with laughter. If you try to remember afterwards what you were laughing about, you can't remember. There was just something in the chemistry, the dynamics of the situation that made you helpless with laughter. You can't hold those moments. You can only believe and remember that they happened, and they will happen again.

Recently I hosted a family gathering. There were many, many times when we were laughing and laughing and being foolish. It's like water flowing, you can't grasp these situations and hold them.

Is laughter part of your spiritual expression, or is it more connecting deeply with other human beings?

I think it's the latter.

Isn't that a part of spirituality?

This is interesting. There's a framed text on the Meeting House library door which says "God laughed"

Are you someone who can be irreverent?

If I don't see God as a person, it's rather hard to be irreverent.

Is prayer and reading holy texts part of your daily practice?

Yes, there are recognised spiritual disciplines which many people have written about. I've been reading a book recently, called 'Finding Sanctuary' by the Abbot of Worth Abbey. There was a television series built around his abbey. He describes some of the disciplines one needs to enter the sanctuary, and some of these, like reading, prayer, and quiet times, I practice daily. I pray when I wake up for myself, my family, and for different people, who I feel have a special need. So I pray every day.

Is this a set prayer or a conversation?

I say set prayers when I first wake up. I also use a Buddhist meditation which I learned at Woodbrooke, a Quaker learning centre. It's a sequence I say about myself, my family and other people, so I might say 'May Ellen be well. May she be happy. May she be free from suffering. May she live in the presence of God.' In some ways I don't agree with those words, for example about being free from suffering. Sometimes, suffering may bring something rich with it. To live in the presence of God is very important. But what that sequence does is allow me to focus on specific people. Some people have mantras, "God have mercy on me a sinner", for example. That's not particularly helpful to me. There are other times when I simply hold something up to God, when I seek divine guidance. One doesn't use words.

In Mathew's gospel, Jesus invites us to "Yoke yourself to me...for my yoke is easy and my burden light". Does this resonate with you? Is Jesus's promise of support meaningful to you?

Not as much as it used to be. There was a long period when God seemed beyond me and Jesus was there. I see Jesus as an exemplar, a touchstone to show us how to live. I do use the example of Jesus to challenge myself but I don't pray to Jesus.

So for you, Jesus is not exclusively the Son of God, but more a totally spiritual human being?

I think that's probably true. Of course there's this wonderful concept of the Holy Spirit. When I was interviewed for Quaker membership, I was asked what my view of the Trinity was. I don't think that question would be asked these days. I said I felt quite comfortable with the concept; God the creative spirit, Jesus the human example, and the Holy Spirit as comforter and guide. There's that wonderful image of the tongues of fire coming down to the disciples at Pentecost.

Are you still comfortable with the image of the Trinity?

I do see myself as in the Christian tradition. My kind of Christianity focuses very much on metaphor. These are tangible ways of expressing something deeper. There's a theologian called Sally McFague, who has written on metaphorical Christianity. Her writings make sense to me.

What are your thoughts on the afterlife?

I don't really think much about the afterlife. I don't believe for example, that I will see my mother when I die. She lives with me now, in my memories and the inspiration of her life. So that's a sort of afterlife.

I think that perhaps the spirit in me will join the wider spiritual energies in the world. I've just read a pamphlet called "This I affirm" and it begins with a contribution from Alison Leonard. "I affirm that the spirit is infinite; that it existed before me, exists in me and will continue after this life is over; that I, as part of spirit, have an infinitely longer span than I can imagine." That would sum up about what I would feel. There is a local Quaker group that meets to discuss the afterlife and members have had experiences of it.

Why do you think you came on this earth, Peggy?

The standard answer is to build God's kingdom, isn't it.

"Our father who art in heaven, thy kingdom come"

Putting it another way, to help the people I meet find life more agreeable, or at least more bearable. I think every encounter we have with people can be positive or negative. We should try to make it positive.

For your own spiritual growth, do you have any sense that you came on this earth to learn something about yourself?

No. If I look at my life as a story, I think I'm in a particular type of story. There are four main literary genres, and I think I know which one I'm in, which is like the comedies of Shakespeare's late period. People are betrayed, they're in difficulties, but there is reconciliation in the end. At the moment, my story isn't over. My job is to identify the core themes in my story, and bring them to some sort of resolution.

For those of us who may not know, what are the other three genres of stories?

Tragedy. Irony, where you are in life more as an objective observer of the human scene, seeing all its follies and so on. The fourth one is the hero tale, in which you tangle with giants and monsters and you overcome.

That's my story, I think. Is there a saying you would like on your gravestone?

I don't envisage having a gravestone. I don't even think of that. Both my husband Leonard and I have planned our funeral service. There are readings for both of us and music. One thing that comes to me over and over again is the sequence in 'The Dream of Gerontius', which is the John Newman poem set to music by Elgar. Gerontius is dying and the priest says to him: "Go forth upon thy journey Christian soul."

I think it's wonderful, that idea of going forth. I may not think of an afterlife, but I do think a lot about dying. I wrote an article in the Quaker journal 'The Friend,' called 'A good death?' I got a lot of correspondence from that. Visiting a nursing home regularly makes me very much aware of the people who are biologically alive, but are not biographically alive.

And a good death for you?

Well my article began by telling a story of a Quaker who had coped well with being a widower. He was coming into the Meeting House one day to rehearse with a choir. As he crossed the lobby he collapsed and died. I thought that was a good death. He was in a familiar place. He was going to something he enjoyed and he had no pain. I was telling this story to someone who asked: "Do you think so?"

I've dwelt on that question. I suppose a good death is to glide peacefully out of life waved on your journey by your family or your friends or someone who is saying to you "Go forth upon your journey" -someone who is releasing you from life and wishes you well.

There's a bit in one of the four quartets of T.S. Eliot: "Face forward voyager."

That seems a good attitude. We can't say that's what will happen to us, can we?

Do you have confidence as you move to that phase of your life? That you will have a good death?

I've no idea. That's one of the mysteries.

And that sits comfortably with you?

In my article for The Friend, I raised the Zurich option. This is where assisted suicides are legal. I've had many letters from people who are seriously thinking of this option.

And your thoughts on this?

I'm ambivalent. If we're living a story, is it right to end the story like that? If life is a gift from God, is it really very good to give the life back and say that you don't really want it any more? I don't know. I'm just ambivalent.

Is there anything that would prompt you to seriously consider the Zurich option?

Most of the people who've done it have illnesses which cause great disability, with great distress to them, and they can't receive treatment.

That's most people who select this option. For you Peggy, would that be enough?

I don't know. I do think about it. It would give one control, but is that what life is really about; control?

There's a lot in the spiritual tradition about vulnerability. Then there's the effect on one's children. The doctor who went to Zurich recently was accompanied by her two children. They were inspired by it and are campaigning to have such an option in this country. So they were not traumatised by the experience. But I do think it would be asking a lot from one's family to undergo that. I know at least one person who has talked about this option with her family, and they're supportive of the idea.

How would you like to be remembered?

I don't think I've got any thoughts on that. People will decide themselves how they remember me. I was talking to someone the other day, who was telling me about something that happened with him and his grandchildren. He said that they would remember that happening. In the summer I made jam with one of my granddaughters. She'll remember. I don't know what they'll remember.

Does it matter to you to be remembered?

No, no, I just don't think about it. I think it would be awful to be living life in such a way, to be thinking "I must do something that's going to be remembered"

If you could find one adjective to describe your voyage so far, what would it be?

I'm not sure I could. Perhaps 'rocky!' And yet looking at it in story terms, so many things have just fallen into place by what you may call coincidence, which just seems as if they were meant.

I was in Pendle Hill, a Quaker study centre in Pennsylvania, and I said to a staff member "So many co-incidences have happened since I've been here". She answered "Do you think so? I think God puts little gifts in our way."

In general, would you say your life has been filled with gifts? Have they come with price tags?

It's a great mixture. You can't say that my husband's disabilities are gifts. But on the other hand, you can't say it's been an entirely negative experience. No, I think I've had to tussle. I've had a lot of struggles. My elder son, when he was small, used to make coats of arms. On mine he put 'Strive!' I think that may be pretty well true.