

Spirituality and Truth: The Search for Order and Understanding

By

Tara DePorte

Prepared for Shamanism, Healing, and Ritual

A Graduate Course of Anthropology, University of Virginia, 2001

“If the human [soul] is anything, it must be of unimaginable complexity and diversity, so that it cannot possibly be approached through a mere psychology of instinct. I can only gaze with wonder and awe at the depths and heights of our psychic nature. Its non-spatial universe conceals and untold abundance of images which have accumulated over millions of years of living development and become fixed in the organism. My consciousness is like an eye that penetrates to the most distant space, yet it is the psychic non-ego that fills them with nonspatial images. And these images are not pale shadows, but tremendously powerful psychic factors.... Beside this picture I would like to place the spectacle of the starry heavens without; and just as I reach this world through the medium of the body, so I reach that world through the medium of the psyche (from Jung, 399. *Freud and Psychoanalysis*, CW 4, pp. 331 f.)

It is my belief that the human soul is a concept or entity within itself, both indefinable through classifications of the spoken language and not decipherable through conscious human thought. Just as trying to describe deep emotions of love, joy and hate (all internal to both the physical and the conscious), describing the soul through concepts of the conscious mind (i.e. with reasoning and words, which culturally defined forms of categorization) lessen the complexity and unfathomable awe associated with the 'unknowns' of the emotional and spiritual worlds. We attempt to make sense of our world and our own existence through the organization, classification and naming of what we think we 'know' and that which we don't understand. This is both a necessary comfort that can give us a sense of place and reason. However, I would argue that these classifications lead to the narrowing of our outlook of the world.

The human animal is a curious one. Throughout history, we have constantly searched for new concepts to explore, new lands to conquer, and justification for the existence of life on this earth. Today, in an age where rational thought has become increasingly stronger through the development of scientific 'truth', we are looking for a new 'book' that allows us to interpret or transcend the mounting contradictions in what we know of this world (I would like to open the idea of 'book' up for interpretation as it may mean a set of ideas, oral histories, a record of events, etc...in all literal senses it is a

text). Some may go to the Bible, the Koran, or other religious texts; others may resort to the natural world, some even attempt to escape daily confusion through perspective-altering drugs. The question of how we can justify our own lives and our very existence on this planet remains. What is truth? It is this exploration in literalism that exemplifies our effort to understand our own cultural 'truths' and may lead some to the exploration of 'unknown' concepts of the soul.

In my paper I would like to touch on my own personal experience of the spiritual element, while attempting to hypothesize why an individual's concept of spirituality and this creation of community not only affects worship, but also affects interactions with others, one's relationship with the environment, and the structure of everyday life. Additionally, I would like to also see how the concept of organized religion has taken this concept to create 'spiritual community' and to question how, through my own perspective, these communities both coexist and overlap through the underlying powers of spirituality, release and healing.

Spirituality

Trees shuddering in the breeze, sunsets that shimmer off of mountain peaks, the look in the eyes of a loved one, songs with the purest of notes, the reflection of paints gently molded onto a canvas, births and deaths; All of these things move us in unfathomable ways. For me, the realm of the spiritual and the 'magical' are all-encompassing in every aspect of life. There is beauty in all life and as humans, who are gifted with the ability to both create and destroy, it is crucial for us to maintain a reverence for this 'gift' we call life. I feel spirituality in almost all aspects of my life, in my relations with others and in my sense of self.

My studies have encompassed understanding cultural interactions within the physical, earthly environment. However, a major aspect of my approach to these studies has been to understand that scientific 'proof' does not always equate to 'truth', and that the concept of truth itself is one that is both paradoxical and dynamic. The human brain is limited in its' capacity to reason and, for that matter, in all capacities. It is therefore necessary to accept that our knowledge as humans extends only so far. In other words, it is often more important to question what we think we know, rather than what we do not

know. I believe that this exploration or ability to question one's own concept of 'truth' (if this is actually something that exists) shows openness to the dynamic nature of life that is so important for relating to both this world and others.

My concepts of spirituality are, as far as I know, external to most cultural definitions of spirituality. For me, there exists something 'mystical' or 'magical' in the world around me. However, I am not ready, nor do I feel that it is necessary, to classify this 'energy' with a name or a particular level of consciousness. Much like the 'faith' associated with religion (often focused towards one or many Gods), I have 'faith' in the existence of beauty and life. I do not believe that culturally exclusive categorizations do justice to these essences of life. In other words, if I were to define the unexplainable as the entity known in the Christian faith, God, then I would no longer be able to marvel at the mysteries of our existence and the beauties of life, I would have an 'answer'; Nor would I be open to negating interpretations from other cultures (for example, Buddhism, Voudouism, Hinduism, Paganism, Shamanism...) This is not to say that my ideas are not heavily influenced by the culture that I have grown up in, quite the opposite. However, I feel that the very nature of spirituality is that it's not to be understood and is, therefore, a form of 'otherness' that cannot be forced into our own conscious and cultural categorizations. For me, spirituality is a truly individual thing, and I neither agree with, nor do I condemn the beliefs of others. It is simply up to me to decide my own place in this world and in others.

I believe that our aversion to the 'safe' world of what we think we know (conscious thought and rationality) rather than exploring 'otherness' (unconscious and what is greatly unknown) limits the human soul. On the other hand, for me it is important to distinguish from the rational and the irrational, conscious and unconscious, and it is, therefore, important when exploring otherness to release from the physical rationality of our cultural organizations. Emotional and spiritual aspects of life are not hierarchical in their intrinsic nature. One cannot say that my sense of joy is better than another's, nor do I think you can say that one form of spirituality or appreciation for 'otherness' is superior to all others. This concept is what has made me realize that organized religion is not necessary for someone to be a highly spiritual being.

Spirituality through organized religion

I was recently invited to participate in a ‘world-wide voodoo ceremony’ for the lwa Erzulie Dantor. This was to be a ritual performed in the home, with or without friends and in honor of Erzulie, the great ‘Black Mary’ of voodoo. The invitation included some interesting descriptions of the lwa, her preferences for offerings (including perfumes, sweet potatoes and pork), and ways to ‘gain Erzulie’ as your protector and your mother. As the time for the ceremony approached, I became more hesitant about the validity of my own involvement in the ceremony and was approached with intrepidity by others I had asked to join me. I realized, while planning for the ritual, the negative connotations that are associated with voodoo culture and literal rather than intellectual ‘sacrifice’. My own participation in the voodoo ceremony and the intrepidations I was forced to overcome, served as a catalyst for my own exploration of the concept of spirituality within the context of organized religion.

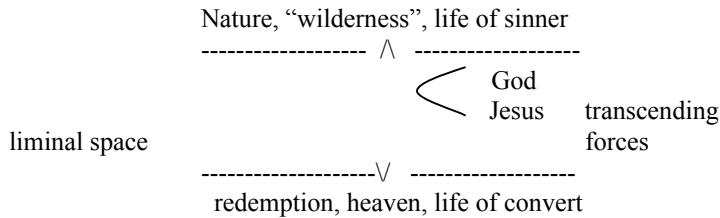
I have always felt that much of the doctrine of the Christian Church (the only ‘organized religion’ to which I have been adequately exposed) focuses more on the homogenization of spirituality through the ‘mission’, rather than the celebration of the diversity of faith. In this sense, much of the ideals of this organized religion have focused on the transformation of spirituality. I would argue that this ‘civilization’ of heathens negate the very principle I have heard reiterated within the Christian Church, that ‘each individual should develop their own personal relationship with God’:

“I learned from him [Biedermann] that religion was “a spiritual act consisting in man’s establishing his own relationship to God.” I disagreed with that, for I understood religion as something that God did to me; it was an act on His part, to which I must simply yield, for He was the stronger. My “religion” recognized no human relationship to God, for how could anyone relate to something so little known as God?...I found that God showed Himself to be a “personality to be conceived after the analogy of the human ego: the unique, utterly supermundane ego who embraces the entire cosmos (Jung, 57).”

Using Jung’s quote, what is this “conceived personality”? For me, this naming of the source of miracles and life is one that constricts the wonderment so associated with the unknown and prescribes culturally biased ideas to a concept that should inherently be defined by the individual. I would like to suggest that it is the intrinsic needs for

humans to both make sense of their environment and to feel as though they ‘belong’ that make the creation of an instant community through organized religion highly appealing. Through devotion to “God”, the individual may ascend from the external world of nature, enter into a liminal zone, and, if aided by God, the individual is lead to the internal world of paradise, Heaven (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Liminality of Christianity



In Christianity, this transformation is a process only accomplished by total faith in God. Likewise, most organized religions maintain a form of spiritual hierarchy where the devotee is superior to the ‘sinners’ of the outer world. It is this exclusionary tendency of these forms of spirituality that somehow do not fit my goals of living with a reverence for all life.

This concept of civilizing ‘otherness’ (which seems to me the point of the mission), however, is not a concept locked within the religious realm. It seems to be a need of the human animal to create safety and a sense of belonging through the formation of community. I believe this same ‘homogenization’ occurs in many realms of human life, throughout all cultures.

The spirits of spirituality

As I have said before, our attempt to create order and make sense of our surrounding world is one of the reasons that we explore the concept of spirituality and religion. Although I feel relatively comfortable in my life and on this earth, I have come across many experiences of ‘otherness’ that have made me both reevaluate and continue to develop my sense of spirituality and the world that that may encompass. Some of these experiences started when I was very young, others have been as recent as a few

weeks ago. However, the experiences have seemed to grow stronger as I grow older. What that means, I do not know:

I remember the first dream I had of that kind. I must have been in second grade, for we had just moved into the new house. I remember it was the day before my ninth birthday. The next night my mother and I had planned to have a party with many of my friends. Somehow, one of my friends showed up on the wrong day, much to our surprise. I distinctively remember, as I turned around at the top of the stairs, I looked back to find my friend crawling up the stairs behind me. I could see, and can still see, the outline of her body behind her as she mounted the stairs. I can hear the thumping of her limbs against the new carpeting. It was this experience that reminded me, not just in a *deja vu* sense, that I had dreamed that exact event, however insignificant it may have been, a few nights before.

Middle school. I had had many of these dreams by now; they usually were of no real significance. But I would remember every time I woke up, that I had had an odd dream with people I didn't know, places I hadn't yet been, or conversations I hadn't yet had. They might be little conversations-in-passing, but they were always distinctive in their nature. One day during my first year in middle school, I was standing in front of my school locker. It was a big deal in those days to have a 'locker'; After all, they have lockers in high schools. I was standing by my locker and a girl came up to me that I had not known before. When she walked up, I had a strange sense that I knew exactly what she was going to say to me; In fact, I knew the entire conversation that needed to take place. It was again, one of those dreams. I knew what I would say to her and how she would respond.

These examples may not sound significant, but it is the concept behind the dreams that is very significant to my sense of how the world is. Indeed, I am afraid in many ways to really understand what dreams like this might mean. In other words, I don't want to, nor do I believe in Calvinistic ideas of determination (which is one obvious answer to seeing things events and people before they happen). What is interesting to me is that as I have gotten older, the dreams have gotten more involved and more predictive in their nature. It makes me wonder what it is in my brain that has accessed this knowledge. Is it

something that I could have perceived from my everyday life or a window into a whole other world that we have chosen to not see?

Another example of actual spiritual encounters happened this past February. This experience, even more than the dreams, had a profound effect on me:

I was visiting my boyfriend in Siena, Italy, and we had decided to stay at a small pensione in the city. The place consisted of three rooms that an older Italian woman (who spoke no English) rented out. Her apartment was across the hall and there was no one boarding besides us for the night. The room was furnished with very old dark-wood furniture (a small table in the corner, a bed, and a wardrobe). As we were checking in and discussing the prices with the woman, she mentioned an odd thing to us. As my friend tried to keep up with her Italian, the innkeeper warned us to not keep the lights on too late at night because they sometimes exploded. Both Matt and I decided that this seemed a bit odd, so it was probably a problem with his understanding. We unpacked our things and began to leave for the evening. As my boyfriend locked the hallway door, I glanced a man standing on the landing below next to a corner door. I thought nothing of it until, as we started down the stairs moments later, there was no one there. I remarked to my boyfriend that it was odd that we had heard no door shut, but we went on with the day.

We returned to the room late at night. We were tired and decided to put on some music and get ready for bed. As Matt stood near the table taking off his shoes, we heard one of the chairs scratch along the floor. I asked Matt why he had moved it and he said he hadn't and looked back at me with an expression of confusion. Again, we decided that was strange, but we were tired enough to just go to bed. We lay down in bed and I began to feel very cold, to the point of shivering. I began to get a weird sense of intense fear running all through me and I just stared at the ceiling. Suddenly Matt said, "What?" I told him that I had not said anything. He looked at me and said that he had just seen me on the other side of the bed leaning over him and I had whispered his name in his ear. We both became even more afraid. I had never felt like this before, I was shivering with cold and was ready to pack our things right away and walk the several miles we needed to find another place to stay.

I could sense, within me, that there was something present in the room that meant us harm. Matt had been startled, but about 30 seconds later he had fallen into a very deep sleep and I could not wake him up. I jumped out of bed and turned on the bathroom light, all I could think of was that the light would make me less afraid. When I lay back down, I still had shivers all throughout and I just stared at the ceiling. None of this made any sense to me. Suddenly all of the previous day's events were coming together and I decided that I had only one option, to talk to whatever I felt there and tell it that we did not want to intrude and that we just wanted to stay for a night and then we would be gone. I said all of this in my head as I shook with fear.

I awoke with the sun and realized that I had fallen asleep immediately after I had spoken in my mind to this 'unknown force' in the room. I stood up to go to the bathroom to find that the light-switch was to 'off'. When I questioned Matt, he said that he had slept through the entire night. I suppose I had left the lights on too late...

Release

An intrinsic part of accessing spirituality is the ability to let go of the rational mind. As I have mentioned before, spirituality, above all, is not based in the physical or in the rational. I have found that unless I am able to completely release the conscious mind, I am not able to access the foundation of those things, which I find to be spiritual.

It is this separation from the inherent physical nature of the human body and the very strong reasoning of the human mind that makes it so very difficult to journey into what I have deemed 'otherness'. I have found that yoga is relaxing to me, but not a physical release from the physicality of the human anatomy. However, when I paint, I experience trance-like release as my body enters into a healing state of creativity.

I have come to realize that people are separated by the strength of their senses. I tend to be very visually motivated in my interpretation of things and how I experience things. When I have a canvas in front of me, I will begin to paint and suddenly I will get a vision inside of my head, I see the piece in its' completion and that is how the painting transforms, from within. As I paint, I enter a sort of trance; much like those of musicians playing their instruments. Someone may try to talk to me or come in a room and I am

likely to neither notice them, nor hear them. This is something I cannot explain, nor do I want to in that painting is a great spiritual and healing experience for me.

To me, trance is an empowerment of the soul. As I enter into this sort of experience, whether this is exploring my own mind or entering into another worldly place, I feel a sense of fullness and distant sensuality. Much like the Shaman's Journey, I wonder if this release is an exploration within the knowledge of the mind, a subconscious that has learned to read into his or her own experiences and exposures, or if it is knowledge transcending from the 'otherness' of a spiritual world or being. Why couldn't both of these sources of knowledge be one in the same? Couldn't spirituality be a direct transition between the physical and that of the metaphysical or 'other'? Is this, then, the human soul of which Freud spoke?

Feeling, the healing of touch

The human animal is one of the only animals that remain completely helpless for over a year after birth. This dependence upon others underlies the importance of touch to both the physical body and to the spiritual. I would argue, however, that all living beings require touch and attention for their respective souls and physical well-being.

I have experienced the Japanese art of Reiki and have both given and received many healing massages. During both of these rituals, it is possible to sense the energy passing through the hands in to the body. I have found that if I concentrate my energy in my stomach, I can begin to feel a ball of heat there within. As I visualize this ball of energy moving throughout my body, I can feel the warmth traveling through my hand and into the body of the other person. The sensation of bodily heat metamorphosing into healing energy is one that cannot be adequately described with words. It is a feeling of total comfort from within that is yet another form of physical release, release from pain or tension. I notice this sense of wholeness when I am embraced by my loved ones, a sense of safety in the arms of my mother, a sense of rejoice in the arms of an old friend.

I believe that the power of touch is the key to the spirituality of this world, one that is intrinsic to life as a human being. This physical sense of touch is the link to the 'kindred spirits' of this world: friends, family, and lovers. Through my belief in all things that are spiritual and beautiful, I have found that an awe-inspiring sense of

otherness coupled with this tie to my own chosen kindred spirits create a sense of wholeness within me. It is when I sense that one of these features, either my appreciation of the important people in my life or my appreciation and reverence for life itself are being neglected, that I am not whole and am not able to find peace within myself. To me, both the physical and the spiritual are to be revered, acknowledged and well developed on an individual level. It is through the devotion of time, understanding and acceptance of these things that we may reach the comfort of 'community' for which we have been longing.

Bibliography

Deren, Maya, Divine Horsemen, The Living Gods of Haiti. McPherson and Company, 1953.

Jung, C.G., Memories, Dreams, Reflections. Random House, 1961.

Levi-Strauss, Claude, 1963. "The Structural Study of Myth" in Structural Anthropology, pp. 202-228.

Niehardt, John, Black Elk Speaks.

SharpH., Stephen, 1994. "Experiencing Meaning" in Anthropology and Humanism.