

## ***Spiritual Journeys in a Material World: Some Thoughts on Spirituality for Divorce Professionals***

Spirituality is a reverence for the complexity, beauty and wonder of life. It exists in our ongoing search for meaning in our lives, for peace, and for fulfillment in our relationships. It also touches on our ability to balance our sense of morality with a spirit of tolerance.

**Each of us is on a spiritual journey.** We live in a materialistic world, but we also have a spiritual side that travels with each of us on our journeys through life. Our search for *meaning* makes our journeys spiritual as we ask ourselves basic questions: “Why am I here?” “What is the purpose of my life?” At some level each of us wants our life to be deeply fulfilled, in harmony with some greater goal.

**Religion distinguished.** Spirituality and religion are related, and at times intertwined, but they are often quite different. Religions are based on writings that are deemed to be authoritative, and upon established traditions. They are administered by a fixed hierarchy whose role is to interpret, and at times to enforce, the doctrines of the faith. Each religion has defined answers to questions about the creation of the universe and the origins of life.

The existence of denominations is an issue for every major religion. In Islam, for example, there are the historic and very present divisions between Shiites and Sunnis. The spectrum of differences between Sufis and Wahabis is considerably wider. Such a range of denominational divisions also exists in the Christian, Judaic, Buddhist, and Hindu faiths.

**The role of science.** Science, and especially in its disciplines of cosmology and evolutionary biology, offers quite different explanations as to how the universe came into being and how life was created. From Copernicus and Darwin to the infinitely more comprehensive discoveries of the present time, such as in astrophysics, science has challenged religion. Many persons on both sides consider science to be an alternative to religion, while differing as to what follows from that conclusion. Theories such as “intelligent design” have been offered to bridge the gap, and these have in turn been challenged as unscientific.

**The reality of “no final answers.”** There is no overall consensus in either science or religion as to the final answers to the basic questions about the origin and meaning of human life. Science does not claim to have all the final answers. Many spiritual individuals believe that they have found sufficient answers within the framework of their own religious tradition. The complexity and mystery of human life has multiple dimensions. Spirituality is transcendental in that it exists at a level beyond every religious tradition, beyond religious scholarship, and beyond denominations. It does not require us to surrender our religious faith, even as it may encourage us not to stop asking basic questions.

For our personal purposes, spirituality may also function at a level beyond the varied and extensive scope of modern science. Very few individuals understand fully the scientific answers to any of our basic questions about the universe and human life. For our personal spirituality to transcend all this swirl of tradition and discovery, we must

draw meaning from wherever we find it. This is so even when our journey may finally leave us with some basic questions rather than fixed answers.

**Finding our spirituality.** We all know persons whose spirituality incorporates and highlights the most spiritual elements of their religious tradition. I remember a client from several decades ago who had serious problems with his wife's decision to divorce him. He decided to go on the *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), and he returned glowing with a gentle spirituality. Apparently, he was able to find peace within himself and was thus able to wish his wife well on her journey. Malcolm X was reported to have made the same pilgrimage in 1964, and to have found a new level of peace with himself.

Since spirituality is found in different ways and in different places, it doesn't have to be based upon a fixed religion. There are persons who are deeply immersed in the doctrines of their faith but lack any real spirituality. Conversely, there are persons who do not belong to any religious tradition but live spiritual lives.

**The transcendence of spirituality.** Spirituality may transcend religious traditions and doctrines. It includes peace and tolerance. Thus, it may function at a more unifying level, and differences based on doctrinal issues may seem far less important. Three of the most spiritual religious traditions are Zen Buddhism, Sufi Islam, and Bahá'í. All three have traditions of tolerance, mysticism, poetry, and humor as basic elements of their faith. The twisted adherents of pseudo-Islam, such as members of Isis and Al-Qaeda, hate the Sufis for those very attributes. The common features of Zen, Sufi and Bahá'í derive from their inherent spirituality, despite quite different starting points.

**One key to spirituality.** According to the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Christ sums up his message in two basic principles. The first is loving God. The second is: *Love thy neighbor as thyself*. The key to making that principle work is *as thyself*. If we can't love ourselves, how can we love our neighbor? Thus, the importance of a healthy self-esteem. It's far, far different from narcissism, which is based on a fragile and insecure sense of self that leaves little ability to love others.

There is no room in these principles for negative corollaries. There is no *unless* – not any “we shall love our neighbor *unless*” our race is different, or our gender, or where we come from, or what religious tradition or doctrines we hold. This is where we break the bonds that free us to rise to the level of spirituality in our own lives. Matthew quotes Christ as saying that all the law and all the prophets depend on these two principles. God is not defined in a restrictive way, but rather in a boundless one, beyond our mortal comprehension.

**Spirituality in a material world.** We live in a world and a society where there is far more focus on the material than on the spiritual. Almost none of us could carry on our lives without constant reference to our material world—even if we tried—and very few of us want to try. But many of us still yearn to live a more spiritual life.

**A fork in life's journey.** Marital separation and divorce are major life events that can (and should) bring the spiritual and material sides of our lives into sharp focus. These roads take our clients on a path away from their existing life plans. They may have chosen that fork in the road, or it may have been chosen for them, or they may

just have found themselves there. No matter which, both their spiritual path and their focus on the material environment are now open to changes, often major changes.

**The professional's role.** When a client comes to one of us in our role as a divorce professional, he or she is unlikely to visualize the task as finding new directions in a spiritual journey. The immediate concern is to sort out existing and anticipated changes within the material world. Where will the money come from? How do the bills get paid? Where to live? The focus is usually on the immediate financial decisions, and only then, later, on longer-term planning for future relationships and security. Even at the outset, however, we can approach their situation with a kind of spirituality that produces calm and allows them to look beyond their immediate material concerns.

**The goblins are waiting.** The spiritual journey can become sidelined. When somebody is going through a marital separation leading to divorce, it isn't easy to focus on harmony with his or her life goals. There are emotional goblins to deal with—frustration, fear, confusion, mistrust, anger, and at times even obsession, hate and revenge. These are the enemies of healthy spirituality. All of these are heavy burdens for the individuals who hold onto them, often even more so than to the persons against whom they are directed.

**Finding sources of strength.** One spiritual task of the professional is to help clients get back in touch with their better selves. A key to that goal is to assist the clients in reconnecting with their basic sources of strength. Everyone has sources of strength, although they differ from person to person and can be material as well as spiritual. The list of possibilities goes on and on—children, parents, siblings, extended family, close friends, co-workers, teachers, role models, counselors, ministers, work, one's profession, one's home, a denominational church, a sacred text, an Alcoholics Anonymous group, a reading group, prayer, a prayer circle, music, art, a hobby, reading, poetry, yoga, family history, humor, travel, a pilgrimage, bicycling, walking or jogging, cooking, drama, writing, and at times, the separated spouse. Properly considered, these are some of the ways in which we also may search for our own spirituality.

**"The better angels of our nature."** Everyone's sources of spiritual strengths are different. We also need to be aware that some of these seeming sources of strength may instead generate "bad vibes," such as anger and hate. People of various faiths around the world profess to believe in angels. Abraham Lincoln spoke in 1861 of "the better angels of our nature." We can use this term as a metaphor for the spirits that lift us up when we need to escape the power of those elements that pull us down in times of transition.

Forgiveness can be a powerful source of strength, but often it must start with one's own need for forgiveness. How can someone truly forgive another if they can't also seek forgiveness for themselves? Forgiveness can be hard work. It's often counter-intuitive and requires a determined decision, followed by repeated remembrance of and recommitment to that decision. For people in pain to "let go" of the other and the pain may take time and help. It's worth the trouble when forgiveness heals the way forward. Nurturing anger by continuing to hold a grudge keeps one negatively bound and subject to the pain, the offending party and the past.

**When the material world deteriorates.** The problem as couples separate is that their financial situation is likely to be worse, not better, regarding material matters of their income and expenses. Options for the present (the short-run) are often limited in ways that present problems. The future (the longer-run) may also appear to be less bright. It may be difficult to hold to or resume the path to one's spiritual journey when worried about finances, child care, jobs, and the other many transitions of divorce. The professional can understand these concerns, and respond with empathy as well as helpful assistance.

**Can reframing help?** Some reframing may help if done cautiously. We can recall the lyrics of the old depression era song by the Carter Family, "There's a dark and a weary side of life. There's a bright and a sunny side, too." We don't need to invite our clients into the world of Pollyanna, where every disappointment also has a bright side. We can, however, frame the transitions of divorce as an opportunity to help our clients use their fortunate and unfortunate past experiences to make wiser, more practical, choices for the future.

**Never forget the material world.** Often the professional's primary job is to help clients find the most practical ways to preserve and extend their material situation for both the present and the future. This is best accomplished when it can be done in a way that is consistent with their own self-determination. These goals are important touchstones, though they can't always be achieved.

**Spiritual journeys refocused.** A refocused spiritual journey still takes place post-divorce in the context of the material world. At core, the hope is that the journey may be a spiritual journey as well as a material one. This would not be a search for a vision of an all-encompassing celestial light, such as Dante describes in *Paradiso*, or the mystical union with God that Sufi dervishes seek. It's more than those, and not the same.

**The stories of our lives.** Our lives have so many stories that transcend abstractions. As professionals we are each on our own spiritual journey. Perhaps our spiritual journey can be, in part, a search for stories that teach us and have a spiritual point. Some people find these in the four Gospels, the Jewish Midrashim, the humor of Zen Buddhism, the mystical poetry of Mevlana, or in quotes from Albert Einstein. There are so many places to find relevant stories, depending upon whatever religious and secular backgrounds that each of us might explore and embrace.

**Thinking about relationships.** The stuff of stories is relationships. We may base our experience with a creator on what we have learned in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, or we may try to conceptualize a supreme force that drives the universe, or simply to acknowledge the unknowable. In any of life's circumstances, we may find that the most important paths during our lifetimes involve our relationships with other people. That's another reason why addressing relationships at the outset may be helpful.

**Relationships in our journeys.** If we decide that our spiritual journeys may best be carried out in human interactions, rather than in abstract concepts, we can let our journeys take us to the spiritual side of those relationships. We may seek a broader definition of "family". We may find more things to respect in other people. We may be

more fully in touch with our own spirituality and sources of strength as we encounter these in others. We may learn more ways to avoid being judgmental. We may look for the stories that have meaning for our own lives, better to appreciate the stories that other people bring to us. As a result, we may look for ways to help our clients refocus their spiritual journeys more realistically in an evolving material world.

**Spirituality is quiet, and mystical.** Genuine spirituality comes from deep within each of us. It's a mystical sense of our being. It's not for show. When it exists, there's little need to talk about it. It simply pervades much of what we do, and how we do it. In relationships, it's not about ourselves, but rather how we relate to other people. Spirituality is humility, respect, empathy, and compassion. It's more about listening than talking. It's our responsibility to understand, and to seek to broaden our understanding by asking others and ourselves ever better questions.

**It's always a journey.** Spirituality isn't a place, it's a journey. It's traveling to somewhere we have never fully visited. It's being aware how much there is to discover. It's being mindful of every stage along the way yet knowing that each stop is not the destination. It's always letting ourselves grow and search for what makes each of us a real person. As we travel on, we can always nurture our sense of the complexity, beauty and wonder of being alive.

As professionals, we observe the failures of other people's marriages. Spirituality helps us to avoid the temptation to condescend, to lecture, to be judgmental, to see only the negative. Those would be the enemies of our own spirituality. Our challenge instead is to respect, to find ways to understand, above all to be compassionate, and to do so without abandoning our own sense of balance and morality.

The more each of us is in touch with "the better angels of our nature," the easier it is for us to recognize the positives and the potential in the lives of our clients. To the extent that our own spirituality comes from within, it can also teach us how to react to those clients we encounter whose better angels may seem to have taken leave.