



EXPLORATION

Spirituality

Readings



1. *The Spirituality of the Ordinary Is Luminous* by Omid Safi

...It is easy to love the extraordinary. It is easy to pursue a spiritual path that is about the sensory overload of the *extraordinary*. It is easy to fall in love with spiritual practices that lead one to transcendence and ecstasy. It is easy to soar. It is easy to seek the “high.”

And there is something lovely about experiencing the extraordinary, to remember that we have spiritual faculties in us open to the realms beyond.

But what does that say about the ordinary? Where does that leave the everyday? How do we experience the ground? The far less dramatic, the unsexy, the “boring” words like discipline, ritual, community—these are where the ideals of our spiritual path meet the reality of our daily lives.

Let us love the ordinary. ...Let us cherish the everyday, the every breath, the where we are.

...Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel ...said: ... “*Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious ...attitude toward history and nature.*”

Wonder. Awe. Radical Amazement. How I love these qualities.

...This model of spirituality of the ordinary begins by not taking things for granted. We see the patterns in life, in nature, in events, in our own emotions, but we also recognize that each moment, each breath, each guest of the heart is unique. The “ordinary” is al-

ready luminous.

...Let us celebrate the ordinary, and locate the immanence of the sacred here. And now.

Let us seek the beauty in the every-breath moments. ...May we have ...a life filled with awe, in the most ordinary of moments.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-the-spirituality-of-the-ordinary-is-luminous/>

2. *What Does it Mean to be Spiritual?* by Galen Watts

...Spirituality stresses the importance of attuning to our inner life—both as a way of resisting the constant pressure our culture exerts to value what lies outside of us, as well as a means of finding a place of refuge.

...For many, becoming more contemplative or aware of their inner life allows them to interact with others in a way that is less reactive, less harmful and more authentic to who they think themselves to be.

Thus, there are certain virtues which have come to be associated with spirituality: compassion, empathy, and open-heartedness. These virtues naturally flow out of the introspection inherent to spirituality because they ultimately require a high level of self-knowledge. That is, knowledge of why we hold the beliefs we do, knowledge of why we act in certain ways, and most importantly, knowledge of our interdependence.

This knowledge — acquired either through practices like meditation, self-reflection and (in some cases) psychotherapy — leads one to become more sensitive to the emotions of others, and even to one’s surrounding environments, both social and natural.

Thus, the path inward, in its best form, is not rooted in narcissism but ... in ...a willingness to face one’s demons [and gifts] in order to better understand the human condition.

For some, this path inward is ulti-

mately about self-transformation, or transcending one’s early childhood programming and achieving a certain kind of self-mastery. For others, it entails attuning themselves to the immaterial dimensions of life.

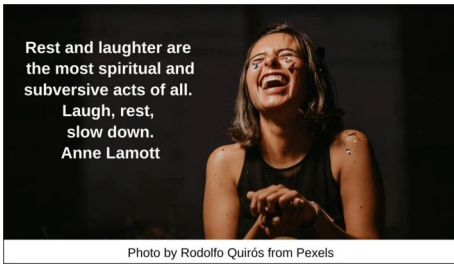
...As the number of people who identify as “spiritual” continues to climb, it is likely that spirituality will come to shape North American societies in important and enduring ways.

Source: <https://theconversation.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-spiritual-87236>

3. *Science and Spirituality* by Carl Sagan

In its encounter with Nature, science invariably elicits a sense of reverence and awe. The very act of understanding is a celebration of joining, merging, even if on a very modest scale, with the magnificence of the Cosmos. And the cumulative worldwide build-up of knowledge over time converts science into something only a little short of a transnational, trans-generational meta-mind.

“Spirit” comes from the Latin word “to breathe.” What we breathe is air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word “spiritual” that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science. On occasion, I will feel free to use the word. Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art or music or literature, or of acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. The



notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.

Source: *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan

4. *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham

The problem with organized religions, Bill Wilson once complained, “is their claim how confoundedly right all of them are.” The spirituality of imperfection ... makes no claim to be “right.” It is a spirituality more interested in questions than in answers, more a journey toward humility than a struggle for perfection.

The spirituality of imperfection begins with the recognition that trying to be perfect is the most tragic human mistake. ...

We are not “everything,” but neither are we “nothing.” Spirituality is discovered in that space between paradox’s extremes, for there we confront our helplessness and powerlessness, our *woundedness*. In seeking to understand our limitations, we seek not only an easing of our pain but an understanding of what it means to hurt *and* what it means to be healed. Spirituality begins with the acceptance that our fractured being, our imperfection, simply *is*: There is no one to “blame” for our errors — neither ourselves nor anyone nor anything else. Spirituality helps us first to *see*, and then to *understand*, and eventually to *accept* the imperfection that lies at the very core of our human be-ing. Spirituality accepts that “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.” ...

This is not a spirituality for the saints or the gods, but for people who suffer from what the philosopher-psychologist William James called “torn-to-pieces-hood” (his trenchant translation of the German *Zerrissenheit*). We have all known that experience, for to be human is to feel at times divided, fractured, pulled in a dozen directions ... and to yearn for serenity, for some healing of

our “torn-to-pieces-hood.”

Source: *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham

5. *Mindlessness and Mindfulness* by Ellen Langer

We have these categories—work, life. And we have ... the different distinctions that we make. We make them mindfully, and then we start to use them mindlessly....

...Whatever you’re doing, you’re doing it either mindfully or mindlessly. And the consequences of being in one state of mind or the other are enormous.

I ... find that mindlessness is pervasive.

Most people are just not there, and they’re not there to know that they’re not there.

...Mindfulness ... is the very simple process of actively noticing new things. When you actively notice new things, that puts you in the present, makes you sensitive to context. As you’re noticing new things, it’s engaging, and it turns out, after a lot of research, that we find that it’s literally, not just figuratively, enlivening.

...You tell people, “Be there, be in the moment” — [yet] when you’re not in the moment, you’re not there to know you’re not there, so it’s really an empty instruction.

...You must have work/life balance. And work/life balance is certainly better than work/life imbalance, but I think that the concept is basically mindless.

...The idea, I think, [is] to replace work/life balance, which treats these categories as independent, [with] work/life integration. And you should get to the point where you’re treating yourself, whether you’re at work or at play, in basically the same way.

...Most of the ills that people experience as individuals, in their relationships, in groups, in cultures, ... are a result of mindlessness, one way or the other, directly or indirectly, and so that as the culture becomes more mindful, I think ... things will naturally change.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/programs/ellen-langer-science-of-mindlessness-and-mindfulness-nov2017/#transcript>

6. *The Beauty of Ordinary Moments* by Kent Nerburn

The birdsong is different here, full of unfamiliar cadences and unfamiliar melodies. These birds are making different music than the birds outside my window in America, and this fills me with wonder.

I do not often stop to realize how different the music of nature is in each place on earth. But something about this birdsong makes me pause and take notice. It fills me, in a way far deeper than intellect, with a humble awareness of the beauty and mystery of the world around me.

...Our lives are filled with moments like these — ordinary moments when the hidden beauty of life breaks into our everyday awareness like an unbidden shaft of light. It is a brush with the sacred, a near occasion of grace.

Too often we are blind to these moments. We are busy with our daily obligations and too occupied with our comings and goings to surround our hearts with the quiet that is necessary to hear life’s softer songs.

There is no shame in this. We are only human, and the demands of life make a raucous noise. But we must not let those demands drown out the quieter voices of the spirit. We must take the time to stop and listen, knowing that the voice of the spirit speaks more often in a whisper than a shout.

For spirituality is far more than religious practice. It is a cast of mind, a leaning of the heart, a willingness to see the shadow of the divine mystery in all people and all things. It is ... seeing the reflection of the divine in the face of every person we meet on the street.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/15894/ordinary-sacred>

7. *Washing the Dishes* by Thích Nhất Hạnh

In the United States, I have a close friend name Jim Forest. When I first met him ... , he was working with the Catholic Peace Fellowship. ... Jim came to visit. I usually wash the dishes after we’ve finished the evening meal, before sitting down and drinking tea with everyone. One night, Jim asked if he might do the dishes. I said, “Go ahead, but if

Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality.
Carl Sagan



Photo by Alexander Andrews on Unsplash

you wash the dishes you must know the way to wash them.” Jim replied, “Come on, you think I don’t know how to wash the dishes?” I answered, “There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes.” Jim was delighted and said, “I choose the second way—to wash the dishes to wash the dishes.” From then on, Jim knew how to wash the dishes. I transferred the “responsibility” to him for an entire week.

If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not “washing the dishes to wash the dishes.” What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact, we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus, we are sucked away into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life.

Source: *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhất Hạnh

Wisdom Story

The Woodcarver from *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand of precious wood. When it was finished, all who saw it were astonished. They said it must be the work of spirits. The Prince of Lu asked the master carver: “What is your secret?”

Khing replied: “I am only a workman: I have no secret. There is only this: When I began to think about the

work you commanded, I guarded my spirit, did not expend it on trifles that were not to the point. I fasted in order to set my heart at rest. After three days of fasting, I had forgotten gain and success. After five days, I had forgotten praise or criticism. After seven days, I had forgotten my body with all its limbs. By this time all thought of your Highness and of the court had faded away, all that might distract me from the work had vanished. I was collected in the single thought of the bell stand. Then I went to the forest to see the trees in their own natural state. When the right tree appeared before my eyes, the bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt, all I had to do was to put forth my hand and begin.”

“If I had not met this particular tree there would have been no bell stand at all. What happened? My own collected thought encountered the hidden potential in the wood. From this live encounter came the work.”

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand of precious wood. When it was finished, all who saw it were astonished. They said it must be the work of spirits.

Source: <https://www7.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop12/168036.shtml>

Snippets

“Although the claim seems to annoy believers and atheists equally, separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is to assert two important truths simultaneously: Our world is dangerously riven by religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn, and yet there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit.” *Sam Harris*

“Spirituality begins not in fear (‘help/save me’) nor in greed (‘give or get for me’) but in the sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude (‘Wow!’ ‘Thanks!’) evoked at a realization of, in the aware presence of, beauty — whether perceived in the grandeur and magnificence of the universe or in the hint of infinity in a newborn infant.”

Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham

“Sometimes the spiritual path is like an ascending spiral. Though you may revisit each place along the way, you are forever pulled higher. This is called understanding. Sometimes the spiritual path is like a descending spiral. Though you may revisit each place along the way, you are pulled ever deeper. This is called wisdom. Forgiveness is a walk up and down the spiral. It is a never-ending path.” *Karyn D. Kedar*

“Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.”

Brené Brown

“We seem to do little more than lurch between wanting and not wanting. Thus, the question naturally arises: Is there more to life than this? Might it be possible to feel much better (in every sense of *better*) than one tends to feel? Is it possible to find lasting fulfillment despite the inevitability of change? Spiritual life begins with a suspicion that the answer to such questions could well be “yes.” And a true spiritual practitioner is someone who has discovered that it is possible to be at ease in the world for no reason, if only for a few moments at a time, and that such ease is synonymous with transcending the apparent boundaries of the self. Those who have never tasted such peace of mind might view these assertions as highly suspect. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a condition of selfless well-being is there to be glimpsed in each moment.” *Sam Harris*

“Describe a small, ordinary activity that you’ve already done today (brushing your teeth, buckling your seat belt, etc.) Imagine that this event appears in your spiritual memoir. Reflect: What does this activity reveal about you? What mystery does it contain? No subject lacks the potential to reveal the spiritual.” *Elizabeth J. Andrew*

Give the Present of Presence: “Be with someone who needs you. Be with a person who gives you hope. Be with those who live in terror and fear. Be with an

The best political, social, and spiritual work we can do is to withdraw the projection of our shadow onto others.
C.G. Jung

Photo by Nadi Lindsay from Pexels

older person. Be with someone who has helped you to grow. Be with the one who is in pain. Be with a war-torn country. Be with yourself. Be with someone who has written to you. Be with a child. Be with a refugee who is fleeing from harm. Be with an enemy or someone you dislike. Be with a farmer losing his or her land. Be with someone who has terminal illness. Be with the homeless. Be with those who suffer from substance abuse. Be with hungry children. Be with a coworker. Be with those whose hope is faint. Be with world leaders. Be with someone in your family. Be with men and women in prison. Be with someone working for justice. Be with those who are abused and neglected. Be with your loved ones.” *Joyce Rupp*

“Deep spirituality ...grants us the capacity to *listen*, but the quality of this listening is much more subtle and comprehensive than ordinary listening; it is a complete inner attention, a *listening with the heart*. Here ...we are listening to the Divine to nature, the earth, to persons, members of other species, and to ourselves. *Wayne Teasdale*

“In terms of eco-spirituality, love leads us to identify ever more with the Earth.... For centuries we have thought *about* the Earth. We were the subject of thought, and the Earth was its object and content. After all that we have learned of the new cosmology, we must think of ourselves as Earth. Earth is the great living subject feeling, loving, thinking, and through us knowing that it thinks, loves and feels. Love leads us to identify with Earth in such a way that we no longer need to become aware of these things, for they have become second nature. Then we can be mountain, sea, air, road, tree, animal....”
Leonardo Boff

“There is great diversity among human beings. Physically we differ from each other in things such as size, body structure, skin color, and facial features. We also differ from one another mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. One of the greatest challenges of a healthy spirituality is learning to tolerate the differences we find in one another and not to view these differences as threats to ourselves. Moreover, a healthy spirituality should lead us to celebrate our differences....”

Questions

Melannie Svoboda

1. In reading #1, Omid Safi asks that we pay attention to the ordinary as being luminous, as a valuable spiritual resource. This can only happen if we pay attention. Why, instead, do we take so much of life for granted? How does this undermine the quality of our experience? How can we practice attending to life in such a way that we experience wonder, awe, and radical amazement? Would doing this enhance the quality of our life? Why or why not? He notes that Heschel suggested that the proper attitude toward nature is wonder or radical amazement. What is your attitude toward nature? How does nature inform/influence/impact your spirituality?
2. The Ancient Greek aphorism “know thyself,” is one of the Delphic maxims and was the first of three maxims inscribed on the portico of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. In reading #2, Galen Watts writes that spirituality is a means of cultivating inner awareness through introspection. Why is this important? For Watts, “knowledge of why we hold the beliefs we do, knowledge of why we act in certain ways, and most importantly, knowledge of our interdependence” are crucial. How does this self-knowledge facilitate how we interact with others and the world?
3. In reading #3, Carl Sagan reminded us that, “Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality.” Do you agree? How can science and spirituality complement each other? How can science enhance spirituality?
4. In reading #4, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham write about “a spirituality more interested in questions than in answers, more a journey toward humility than a struggle for perfection.” How can the drive for perfection undermine spirituality? Where do you find yourself on the continuum of perfection-imperfection? What motivates the drive for perfection, even though it is not possible? They write, “Spirituality helps us first to *see*, and then to *understand*, and eventually to *accept* the imperfection that lies at the very core of our human being? How can our acknowledgement of our imperfection add to our sense of inherent worth & dignity? How can this acknowledgement help us connect with others?
5. In reading #5, Ellen Langer is concerned with the fact that much of the time we suffer from mindlessness. What percentage of our society fall into this category? Why? What promotes this lack of awareness and attention? If we were to practice mindfulness collectively, what changes might we see in ourselves and in society?
6. In reading #6, Kent Nerburn concludes that “spirituality is far more than religious practice. It is a cast of mind, a leaning of the heart, a willingness to see the shadow of the divine mystery in all people and all things.” Head, heart, and vision. How do we need to train our mind, heart, and vision to experience the depth of life? He also writes about the awareness of mystery. How do you regard mystery?
7. In reading #7, Thích Nhất Hạnh suggests that even with something as mundane as washing the dishes, it is important to remain in the present moment. What pulls us out of the present moment? Why are some people preoccupied with the past, and others with the future? What drives addiction to busyness? What

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Photo by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

is the profound insight that “we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

what did you value about that “present” of presence? Do we have to be present physically with the people that she lists? Why or why not? Consider incorporating some of these specific people into the structure of a loving-kindness (aka metta) meditation. (See below)

16. Wayne Teasdale states that deep spirituality requires “a complete inner attention, a *listening with the heart*.” What is involved in this type of listening? Have you ever been listened to in this way? If yes, what was the impact upon you?
17. Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff writes that eco-spirituality requires that “we must think of ourselves as Earth,” rather than Earth as an object from which we are somehow detached. How would your relationship to the earth change if you considered yourself to be “mountain, sea, air, road, tree, animal...?”
18. Melannie Svoboda writes that a healthy spirituality requires “learning to tolerate the differences we find in one another and not to view these differences as threats to ourselves.” What are some of the ways that can help us embrace diversity? What are some of the barriers to doing this?

are you worth when you are doing nothing?

8. In the story, *The Woodcarver*, Khing explains the process of emptying himself of thought of gain or success, of praise or criticism, of his body or the Prince of Lu over a period of a week. Putting these things aside allowed him to become mindful in order to focus and to see as he went into the forest and looked at different trees. What techniques or practices help you to become mindful? What value do you place on mindfulness? Why?

The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.

9. Sam Harris, a proponent of what is called the new atheism, values science and secular culture. While both are significant to him, they are not sufficient. Spirituality becomes part of his trinity to grapple with the human condition. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
10. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum write that spirituality does not begin with fear or greed. It begins with beauty. How does beauty affect you? Do you agree that it is a foundation of spirituality? Why or why not? Rupert Sheldrake asked, “Why is there so much beauty in the world?” What is your answer to his question?
11. Karyn Kedar writes that the spiritual path leads upward to understanding and downward to wisdom. She adds that forgiveness is part of both paths. How does understanding, wisdom, and forgiveness inform your spirituality?
12. Brené Brown writes that spirituality

What blinds people to this insight? How can this lack of vision be addressed?

13. How would you answer these three questions posed by Sam Harris? “Is there more to life than this? Might it be possible to feel much better (in every sense of *better*) than one tends to feel? Is it possible to find lasting fulfillment despite the inevitability of change?” He suggests that spirituality’s answer is yes. Do you agree? Why or why not?
14. Respond to this query by Elizabeth Andrew: “Describe a small, ordinary activity that you’ve already done today (brushing your teeth, buckling your seat belt, etc.) Imagine that this event appears in your spiritual memoir. Reflect: What does this activity reveal about you? What mystery does it contain?”
15. Joyce Rupp offers a litany of ways to use your presence as a vehicle for solidarity, caring, compassion, and, perhaps, healing. Have you benefited from the presence of someone when you were struggling for one reason or another? Looking back



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