

Spirituality: Opening to Meaning and Hope[©]

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Interest in spirituality continues growing. More than ever, the spiritual is the focus of books, magazines, movies, and television talk shows. A deep hunger for meaning and a hope for personal and universal peace are what most people express as important in their lives. The entire world has been collectively affected by the events of September 11. Seemingly, every individual has responded in a unique and personal way, whether loud and demonstrative or quiet and reflective. What is evident and what includes and surpasses all that is physical, mental, and emotional is a spiritual awareness. Spirituality is the common experience. Spirituality is about searching - about asking questions. It is the willingness to be vulnerable when challenged with loss and grief. Even in suffering, spirituality is the purposeful guide for meaning and hope.

To perfectly define spirituality is very difficult. Language limits the meaning of the term because it is a concept that is not fully described in words. Any definition or description is only a starting point on the path to fully understand spirituality. Your interest in reading this could mean that you are presently on this path or considering taking your first steps. Possibly, you are expanding your interest in spirituality to include that which will bring more meaning to your life and hope in the midst of constant change.

Spirituality is rooted in the Latin word "spiritus", meaning "breath of life." Where there is breath, there is movement, and there is spirit. Ann Coombs writes that the spirit inspires the soul, the non-physical part of a person. The spirit is always changing and moving within as the essence of what it means to be human. Spirit is the fundamental life-force giving drive and direction to human existence.

The spiritual dimension is a creative source of energy and as humans connect with this energy, a sense of wholeness is present. The spiritual experience includes a feeling of connectedness where there is an appreciation for the oneness of reality. Spirituality includes the human capacity for creativity, growth, love, compassion, and the development of a value system. Spirituality is often considered as the source of identity and of personal power and freedom. Dr. Erik Mansager writes that how an individual responds to the tasks of life becomes an avenue for understanding spirituality as "part and parcel of a person's self-styled becoming."

Although spirituality and religion are linked, they are not the same. Spirituality can be experienced through religious practice yet religion is not essential to the spontaneous and personal experience of spirituality. Religion is a prescribed set of beliefs, doctrines, and ritual activities associated to an organized institution. Religion can be considered as the traditional, conventional expression of the spiritual. Spirituality is also expressed through nature, art, and music and in the practices of meditation and prayer. Caring for others, mastering knowledge, believing in psychic

phenomena and activity in politics and social justice are also ways that spirituality can be experienced.

Spirit, God, Source, Universal Consciousness, Higher Power - these are some, although definitely not all the terms used to describe the spiritual energy that is present within everyone, in everyday life, in work, in leisure activities, in relationships with friends and intimate partners. Timothy Schmalz writes that God is present in the work of charity and justice, in business and politics. Spiritual energy is connected to form the larger community of the universe. The hunger for spirituality deepens the search for authentic leaders to build community.

Even when feeling powerless and vulnerable in the face of suffering and tragedy, you have the freedom of spirituality. This was the experience for Victor Frankl, who was interned in the concentration camps in World War II. In spite of very limiting physical and mental conditions, he was able to retreat from the horrible surroundings to what he describes as "a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom". Hope is present when meaning is found in the struggles that life presents. Spirituality is both the pain and the healing of what caused it. Spirituality is the sharing of love, peace and joy. Tim Schmalz writes that spirituality won't fix all the bad things in the world. It can, however, be the place where you can live in some light when you are challenged by the darkness.