



THE SEEKER'S JOURNEY

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What may be needed, and perhaps now it is a possibility, is a new initiative from some seekers in which they take responsibility for finding and responding to the contemporary prophet who will help them find their ways out of their individual and collective wildernesses so that they will become more effective servants of society. . . . How would Seekers Anonymous do for a name? . . . For those who participate, healing, the sense of being made whole will come from deep involvement with creative work on the structural flaws in our society, work that has both ameliorative and society building consequences. Seekers Anonymous will be religious in the root meaning of that word, re ligio, to rebind: to bridge the separation between persons and the cosmos, to heal the widespread alienation, and to reestablish men and women in the role of servants—healers—of society.

—Robert Greenleaf, “On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Seeker and Servant*

What does it mean to be a spiritual person? Is there a difference between spirituality and religion? Are those who are spiritual always those who find answers, or is the spiritual journey essentially one of grappling with questions?

The traditional view is that “spiritual” people are those who have a firm set of answers about the nature of the world. We even say things like, “That person has such strong faith,” by which we usually mean that they



have strong convictions about a given set of answers. We say someone has the “faith of a child,” meaning that they have a wonderfully simple faith, uncontaminated by the complexities of critical thinking. In short, we tend to think of spiritual people as those who have lots of answers and few questions. People who have a great many questions, on the other hand, are dubbed “doubters” or “skeptics.”

This essay seeks to explore the idea that the spiritual life is a commitment to an honest grappling with the deepest questions about life, more than it is the acceptance of a set of beliefs. It suggests that there is a very different spiritual journey, one we call the “seeker’s journey,” that defines what it means to be a spiritual person not by how many answers you find, but by the questions you are willing to explore. It notices an old saying that claims that “there is more faith in an ounce of honest doubt than in all the creeds ever written.”

BELIEFS OF OUR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

Interestingly, few of us chose our initial religious or spiritual beliefs. What we believe is most often an artifact of where we were raised and by whom we were raised. For example, I [John] became a Presbyterian and a Christian for one compelling reason: My mother was a Presbyterian and I grew up in a Christian family. To say that I chose Christianity would be a gross misreading of the facts. When I was confirmed in the church and vowed to live the life of faith, I had not even been exposed to the other great spiritual traditions. I did not know the Buddha, Krishna, the Tao, Mohammad, or the great philosophical choices such as existentialism. This is true for most “religious” people, and though we cling to these beliefs fervently, we may be aware at some level that these faiths chose us as much as we chose them.

Likewise, I [Larry] grew up in a Pentecostal church in Detroit, where the warmth and caring of its members intersected with the fire-and-brimstone preaching and glossolalia (talking in tongues) that I rejected at the age of thirteen to become a seeker. As a teenager, I read widely on world reli-



gions, spirituality, and existentialism. At the age of 21, I moved to Philadelphia, where I began what has become a thirty-year long association as a seeker within the traditions of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

While many people embrace the faiths of their mothers, fathers, and grandparents, many also react to it, and their chosen beliefs represent a reaction to what they were taught rather than an honest embracing of alternative views. These people might describe themselves as “recovering Catholics” or “lapsed Jews” or some other term meant to distance themselves from their early upbringing.

It is for this precise reason that many of us, at some point in our lives, distance ourselves from the faith we inherited and try to discover our own spiritual path. This choice is compounded by the fact that as children we are often taught a simple mythology about the world, one that does not resonate with the harsh reality we experience as adults. In a desire to simplify the world, our parents often hand us a watered-down version of the faith story, one that sounds a bit too much like the baby-bringing stork and jolly old Santa Claus.

MORE FAITH IN AN OUNCE OF HONEST DOUBT

This essay does not disparage those who find certain answers to their quest for answers to the deepest spiritual questions. As Woody Allen once said: “I envy the truly religious people who have not been manipulated, because when they wake up in the morning they never doubt that life is about something.” Rather, this essay seeks to affirm the act of seeking meaning and providing service to others as a legitimate and complete expression of spirituality, and further to suggest that being a spiritual person can be defined as being one who seeks answers to ultimate questions of meaning and truth. To be a spiritual person is earnestly to seek, throughout one’s life, to answer the fundamental human questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What is the purpose of our lives? What is the meaning of death and suffering? Are we alone? Are our spirits eternal in some way? Is the universe friendly (or at least neutral)?



By defining “spiritual” as a set of answers, we cast a large shadow of anxiety on those who explore the questions without finding certainty. With “certainty” as the ideal, we are discouraged from being honest with each other about our spiritual journey, since to act without certainty is to be seen as a doubter—a person of little faith. Rather than authentically exploring these questions together, we become isolated, with each one of us feeling we must feign certainty. The other consequence of defining spirituality as the finding of answers is that we create false communities. In these communities of “faith,” people pretend to believe the same things, when in fact spiritual belief is essentially a very personal experience. Within almost any given denominational body or single church, you will find varying degrees of agreement among congregants on any number of their own church teachings.

PARALLEL EXPERIENCES

John: When I served as a minister in a Presbyterian church in Northern Ohio, I had over 500 members in the congregation. Each person had become a member of that church by reciting the same precise creed, an assent to certain “beliefs.” Yet as I got to know these members as individual people, I discovered that they each had their own unique set of beliefs. When you scratched the surface, individual conversations often revealed that not only did people choose which beliefs they held to be true, but often had significant doubts about particular tenets of the church. One elder told me he did not “believe in communion,” did not “believe that the juice and chunks of bread become Christ.” He told me, “During communion I just kind of daydream during that part of the church service.” At first I was aghast, but over time found that most of the church members were like this man. Each of them had their own “religion,” a complex set of beliefs. Some believed Jesus was the only way to God; some believed that “good” Hindus would get a good reception from God as well. Some believed in an afterlife where you would meet your deceased loved ones, while others



believed in a less personal afterlife. Some believed in God but not the creation story; they found evolution a more compelling belief.

Larry: While different in many ways, I have also found some parallels to John's experiences. Quaker beliefs include a prohibition on the consumption of alcohol—something that many contemporary Friends consider quaint and ignore. Friends also have a long tradition as pacifists, yet there are some who have answered their country's call to military service. This point is not meant to be critical of anyone; rather, it is to reinforce our contention that even within strong religious traditions and long-held tenets of any faith, the reality is that many seekers ask questions that sometimes lead them to a different understanding on points thought to be held in common. Moreover, oftentimes these beliefs are ones that we keep to ourselves out of fear or concern that to share them might lead others to pass judgment upon us. We believe it is difficult to be a whole person when we feel unable to share our thoughts and beliefs with others.

There are two consequences of this kind of secrecy for the individual and for the community. For the community, it means that rather than "authentic" spiritual community there is a kind of pseudo-community. Because there is a strong norm to have "common beliefs," individuals will often not express these beliefs to other members for fear of being dubbed a doubter or "heretical." Rather than the congregation becoming a vibrant place of spiritual questioning, it becomes constrained. People cannot or will not explore authentically, worried as they are about being labeled. This also means that it is not truly a place for one to live the spiritual journey. Questions remain inside the person and create a kind of isolation that diminishes the spirit. Rather than experiencing a sense of connection with other seekers, many people feel isolated. Clergy experience this isolation as well, as do many servant-leaders.

When spirituality is defined as assent to answers as opposed to the exploring of questions, there is little room left for mystery and for the unfolding of spiritual truth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "Each of us is a congregation of



one.” That is, each one of us has our own unique take on the deepest questions about life, no two of us the same. Each one of us is a congregation of one even if it is rarely recognized or discussed. Each one of us will ultimately write a creed, one upon which we will base our life.

None of this disparages those who find answers, even with certainty. There is nothing inherently spiritual about being uncertain. However, the opposite may also be said: There is nothing inherently spiritual about having answers which are believed with absolute certainty.

Today, we find that our own personal understanding of the word “religious” is the same as Robert Greenleaf’s—it is founded in the root meaning of that word, *re ligio*, meaning to rebind: “to bridge the separation between persons and the cosmos, to heal the widespread alienation, and to reestablish men and women in the role of servants—healers—of society.”

SPIRITUAL CERTAINTY AS A SHIELD AGAINST EXPLORATION: JOHN’S STORY

It is even possible to suggest further that certainty can be antithetical to the spiritual journey. If the spiritual journey is essentially about seeking, holding on to our beliefs even when they are challenged can stunt our spiritual growth.

When I arrived at seminary to study for the ministry in 1979, a great debate was raging among Protestant theologians and scholars. An area of Biblical scholarship had emerged, called literary criticism, which dissected the Bible from a literary and linguistic perspective to determine what parts of it were historical facts and what parts were not. Rhetorical critics were tearing apart the New Testament to separate the “true” sayings of Jesus from those that were added later by the early Christian community. These new critics dared to suggest that, through literary analysis, one could distinguish which things Jesus had actually said from those embellishments added by the early followers.

Many of my classmates had come from conservative religious backgrounds, and this new way of examining the Bible came as a great chal-



lenge to their faith and as an affront to their spirituality. One of my fellow students fought incessantly with one of the New Testament professors. Jack's face would turn red as he debated with Professor Collins during class sessions about the Bible being the "word of God." Dr. Collins was a firm believer in the new literary criticism and would routinely identify those parts of the New Testament that might have little historical basis in the life of Jesus (things such as the virgin birth). Week after week of sitting in her classes grated on Jack's spirit and psyche.

"What do we have to stand on?" he pleaded one day in class. "Your view of the Bible leaves each one of us standing on our own, sinking in the quicksand of doubt, trying to figure out what is true and what is not!" At the time, it did not occur to me, but in retrospect, I saw that Jack was struggling with that with which all thinking people must ultimately wrestle: Am I willing to be an adult and choose the faith I live, or merely accept what I have inherited? As children, we may merely accept what is given to us, but adults cannot. Whatever faith we own, we must ultimately make it ours.

Although I could see both sides, Jack was a good friend and we spent many nights discussing his feelings. One late night I asked him: "Jack, why are you so angry at Professor Collins? Why do you let her get to you? It's just one class."

With tears in his eyes, he said to me: "John, what if she's right?"

My heart was heavy for his fading innocence, but I also had a sense of hope for the faith that might replace the one he had inherited. Jack was in the process of losing his innocence; he was surely about to be tested. However, on the other side of his trials, he might find a deeper faith, an adult faith, one that he had discovered for himself.

This seems to be the crux of the matter when it comes to faith: We may have to give up the gods of our childhood in order to find the true God of our adult lives. In the end, Jack might still have come back to believing every word to be literal truth, he may have become an agnostic or even an atheist, and he may have found a new innocence that incorporated what he



had learned in seminary. Nevertheless, whatever the final resolution, his faith would not have been simply something he was given—it would truly be *his* faith: a faith chosen of the will, not inherited from his surroundings.

Jack's belief in certain principles was more a shield against genuine spirituality than an expression of it. His "certain" world was seismically rocked by his class on Biblical scholarship. The answers he had passively accepted all of his life were now in question. For the first time in his life he was genuinely taking the seeker's journey, not merely accepting the truths he had been given. From one vantage point, he was less "spiritual" than he had ever been, with his answers now dangling around him. But from another vantage point he was more "spiritual" than he had ever been in his life, asking now the deepest question of belief with no limits on his exploration. With everything up for grabs, he was taking the authentic journey each of us must take. To say that there is more "faith in an ounce of honest doubt than in all the creeds ever written" fits in this case. Jack had more faith now, more honest spiritual questioning, than he had ever had in all his assent to the creeds he had inherited.

RECREATED MEANING: LARRY'S STORY

Following Robert Greenleaf's death in September 1990, his children sent me boxes of his papers. As I began to read them, I found that among these boxes were writings by Greenleaf done over a fifty-year period. I discovered that Bob Greenleaf had a habit of writing as a means of better understanding and developing his own thinking on many subjects. This unexpected discovery eventually resulted in the publication of two new books of writings by Robert Greenleaf: *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, a collection of Greenleaf's writings on organizational ethics and values; and *Seeker and Servant*, a collection of Greenleaf's writings on matters of faith and spirit, both published by Jossey-Bass in 1996.

Over the years, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* has found a very robust readership and continues to outsell its companion volume, *Seeker and Servant*, by a ratio of 10 to 1. Yet, with each passing year, it has been



Seeker and Servant to which I return repeatedly. This lesser-known work by Robert Greenleaf captures better than anything else the essential understanding of seeking and serving which has come to represent the deepest core of my own beliefs about spirituality. Chief among them are these three, which appear in “Religious Leaders as Seekers and Servants,” in *Seeker and Servant*:

- *Spirit* is the animating force that disposes persons to be servants of others.
- *Religious* is used in the root meaning of *re ligio*, to rebind.
- *Religious leadership* describes actions taken to heal, or to build immunity from, two serious contemporary maladies: (1) widespread alienation in all sectors of the population, and (2) the inability or unwillingness of far too many of our institutions to serve.

My own understanding of spiritual meaning has been influenced by Greenleaf’s recreation of these terms. Spirituality is inextricably linked to the understanding of being a servant to others. Religion is understood at its deepest core of rebinding. A religious leader is someone who builds a shared sense of community and encourages institutions to serve the common good.

Each of these definitions may be seen as non-traditional understandings of these frequently used words, yet they ring true in deep and powerful ways.

A SEEKER’S PERSONAL CREED

If indeed the spiritual journey is about exploration and seeking, not about finding answers, upon what basis does the seeker live her life? Some people might argue that the seeker is cast adrift to live a life of asking questions and never finding answers. We would suggest that this need not be the case. While the seeker recognizes that ultimate truth is always beyond our grasp as humans (and that spiritual truth continues to evolve



over time), the seeker also recognizes that at each moment of our lives it is useful to affirm what we have discovered to be true.

A creed is a statement of belief, principles, or faith. We suggest that the act of writing a creed for yourself, a statement of what you believe to be true, can be an important step for all seekers. Yes, the creed may have within it the recognition of uncertainty, but it expresses our unique conclusions upon which we base our lives. Our creed may not conform to a neat and tidy label, but it can be claimed as belonging to us.

What do we each believe? That really doesn't matter, even though these pages are filled with hints and signs about it. In adulthood, we have each lost the need to be labeled and categorized—Christian, New Age, Buddhist, Quaker, Hindu, agnostic, existentialist. In fact, labels are a convenient way to separate people, often artificially. Each of us has had the experience of speaking to groups and of being asked about religious beliefs. We human beings like labels, and we all have our own tendencies toward judging both people and ideas based upon our labeling of them by all sorts of things: religion, gender, ethnicity, age, country, etc.

Churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques are filled with people, all of whom have their own very personal faith that may or may not align with the label put on them. Back to Emerson: "Each person is a congregation of one." Ultimately, faith is a deeply personal experience for every individual human being.

To create your own creed, not simply something you have been given but something you have discovered for yourself, is a profound act of courage. To create such a creed is not to deny the value of our spiritual traditions, but rather to do what all adult people must do: to finally wrestle with the great spiritual questions of life and reach our own conclusions, convictions that give life to our experience. To create your own creed is properly to distance yourself from the society and milieu that shaped you, to be willing to stand on your own as a spiritual entity. In addition, being a spiritual person is, above all things, to be one who grapples with the questions of meaning and has the courage to claim answers.



If I [John] were to write a catechism or creed for myself, at this point in my life, it would go something like this:

I believe we are here for a purpose and that life is not an accident. I believe that the chief end of human life is to create life and nurture goodness, to be wise stewards of the planet we have been given, and to discover ways to unite with the one true spirit that guides the universe. I believe that happiness and joy are available to each one of us, if we are only wise enough to step in the direction of grace. I believe that freedom of choice is at the heart of the cosmos and that we are free to use our will, individually and corporately, for good or evil. I believe there is only one life-giving choice we can make: to believe in the sacred significance of life and of our work. I believe there are many paths to the truths that make life purposeful. I trust that there is an unseen power influencing the universe and that happiness is found when we align with that power.

There are other things that I believe—about Jesus, about Gandhi, about Buddha, about peace, about ecology, about politics, and on it goes. The creed above, however, is a simple description of the principles upon which I try to live my life. Ironically, if I am intellectually honest, I have spent a lifetime just to end up pretty close to my original home. My creed resonates with the tenets of my early upbringing: Love your neighbor, have the faith of a mustard seed, the kingdom of God is within you, lose yourself if you want to find yourself.

My [Larry's] own creed now would go something like this:

I believe that we are here to care for and to love one another. I believe that my spirit is inextricably linked to the act of serving others. How I choose to serve others is expressed in a myriad of conventional and unconventional forms. I define religion as the act of rebinding ourselves, ourselves to others, and ourselves to the universe. I strive to live my life as a religious servant-leader, by which I mean that I seek to be someone who helps to build a shared sense of community and encourages institutions to serve the common good. I have a deep commitment to honesty, fair treatment, and justice. I believe in the importance of asking questions of others,



and especially of myself. I am hopeful of finding meaningful answers to some of my remaining questions, but I am increasingly at peace with the belief that there are some answers that I may simply never find. I am a seeker.

Yet we are aware that faith is not now about a creed; it is much more intuitive than that. It resides deep within us and is deeply integrated into who each of us is becoming. It is, in the end, an experience more than a thought, a choice to live a certain way more than a set of truths to be memorized.

It is our suggestion that a valuable exercise for any seeker is to write a creed of one's own. The value of this creed is not to cast it in stone, but for the seeker to affirm the beliefs upon which one bases one's existence. One of the dangers of the "seeker's journey" is to be forever lost in the questions. The creed becomes a guide to our life.

THE SEEKER'S JOURNEY: A PATH TO UNITY

The affirmation of a "seeker's journey," of defining spirituality as the choice to explore ultimate truth, has also the promise of uniting humans across boundaries of culture and creed. Surely, one of the great issues of our time is the divisions between us, not only between different religious beliefs, but also between those who think of themselves as "religious" and those who are essentially non-religious. Robert Greenleaf wrote about the need for a "community of seekers." Perhaps this is what is needed to bring humanity together: a recognition of our nature as seekers of many truths—not one truth.

Religion, the spiritual journey, has always been about making sense of the world around us. In this way, many scientists are surely spiritual (some overtly and some unconsciously so), because seeking answers to ultimate questions is the nature of what it means to be human. If there were one thing that truly separates us, as far as we know, from all the other living creatures, it would be our nature as seekers. As far as we know at least, only we look up at the sky at night and wonder: Why are we here? What



are we connected to? What happens to us when we die? What is our purpose? Are we alone? It is this common desire to seek which binds us, and if we can allow ourselves to recognize the mystery that surrounds us, we can come together as those who seek together, trying to find our own ultimate truths.

We must challenge the assumption that innocent faith, untested faith, a creed mouthed but never questioned, is the definition of being “religious.” Rather, the spiritual journey is about a life of asking the important questions about life, at each stage of our lives—questions that concern purpose, meaning, sacrifice, stewardship, legacy, goodness, love, and the search for happiness. Being spiritual is about the courage to challenge critically the answers we have been given—by our parents, by our society, by our traditions—so that we can discover the answers that are most true for each of us. Moreover, this expanding, emerging willingness to question is at the heart of what it means to live a conscious life and what it means for human beings to be spiritual. In this sense, our willingness to grapple with deeply spiritual questions is what is distinctive about humans.

Think, for example, of all the truths that were once commonly held among humans: that some people were subhuman and could be owned as slaves; that women were less valuable than men and therefore should not vote and could be treated as chattel; that the world was flat and the universe revolved around us; that we were given the earth to subdue, as opposed to being stewards of it; that only kings and royalty had the wisdom to govern well. The list seems endless, yet in each case our beliefs have evolved and grown, our understanding of truth deepened.

The world is a much poorer place when we are unwilling to examine the beliefs we inherit. It is this fear of the ground shaking around us that makes us blind to other possibilities. It is the equating of spirituality with certainty that creates the tension between Jew and Muslim, between conservative and liberal Christians. Only when we are willing to challenge the paradigms of our inheritance is true spiritual growth possible.

To that end, we believe that the idea of servant-leadership has far



greater implications for the world than realized to date. The greatest contribution of servant-leadership may yet be found in its ability to build bridges between people of different faiths and philosophies. People of many different beliefs increasingly find themselves united by their shared desire to act as servant-leaders. It is our belief that each and every servant-leader is a seeker in his or her own unique way. Our journey then, as seekers, is one that we ought to view as a celebration of our differences, and of looking for the joy to be found in our travels together.

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