

Awakening

Spaceforsoul newsletter

July 2019

The spiritual journey

The spiritual journey is the journey of a lifetime and it is the most important journey we will ever make. It begins very early in life as our sense of who we are first begins to emerge, becomes more pressing in our mid-life years and lasts throughout the whole of our lives and beyond. There are many different ways of speaking about this journey. It has been called the inner journey, the pilgrimage of the heart, the journey of the second half of life, a journey through the stages of the soul or the 'long journey into yourself' as the Sufi mystic, Rumi described it. I have come to think of it as 'the soul journey'.

Whatever words we may use, however, we are essentially talking about the process of spiritual growth and transformation. We are looking at the phenomenon of human spirituality through the lens of a developmental framework in much the same way as we look at our physical and psychological development. We are acknowledging that our spirituality is not fixed or static but is, at least potentially, unfolding and evolving throughout our lives.

The concept of the journey acts as a powerful metaphor for this process of spiritual growth. At its heart, there is always a quest. The word 'quest' comes from the Latin verb 'quaerere' which means to ask for or seek. It implies a long and demanding search for something that is of great worth, but something that is also hard to find.

Mythical tales of such journeys or quests have featured prominently in every culture across the centuries – for example, the Sumerian 'Epic of Gilgamesh', Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece in ancient Greek mythology and the search for the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend. They can be found in modern literature such as Frank Baum's 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz', CS Lewis's 'The Chronicles of Narnia' and JRR Tolkien's 'Lord of the

'The evolution of an individual's spirituality is a mysterious and intimate matter. It originates in the heart, in deep stirrings that may only be beginning to form... We are created for the spiritual journey.'

William Teasdale

King'. Joseph Campbell, a comparative mythology researcher, called this quest 'the hero's journey'. For over two thousand years, moreover, the journey has also been a central metaphor in many of the world's religions.

So what is this 'something of great worth' that we are searching for when we embark on the spiritual journey? The answer may appear to be a simple one. At the heart of the spiritual journey is our pursuit of 'the More'. Whether we are seeking the personal God of mainstream Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, the impersonal Absolute Reality of Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism or the higher spiritual self at the core of our being, the longing that inspires the quest is the same. To be on a spiritual journey is to be continually in search of that which is sacred to us.

To draw on some biblical metaphors, we are sojourners in exile seeking for the land of milk and honey that is our heritage; prodigal sons and daughters searching for the way back home; treasure hunters trying to find 'the pearl of great price' that eludes us. The spiritual journey is our ongoing pilgrimage in search of what David Elkins called 'the sacred stream', the mysterious deeper dimension of reality in which our souls long to be immersed.

There is, however, more to the spiritual journey than our search for the Divine. The further along the

path we travel, the more we become aware that something within us is changing, that a quiet revolution is slowly taking place. The change is radical. It touches every aspect of our being and penetrates to the very core of it. It strips away that which is false to allow that which is real and true to emerge. It makes us aware of that which limits or constricts us so that we might fully embrace our freedom. It invites us to leave the safety of the shallows behind us that we might learn how to dive deeper. It is not without effort, nor without darkness, pain and loss. But if we give ourselves freely and unreservedly to it, this quiet revolution will transform us from the inside out. And it brings with it a deep-rootedness, a strong sense of 'at home-ness' and an inner reservoir of peace, joy and hope. It is a journey of inner transformation.

This 'long journey into yourself' that the Sufi mystic, Rumi, spoke of is, I believe, as important a part of the spiritual journey as is our search for the Divine. In recent times, the inner journey has perhaps become a 'road less travelled' to draw on the words of the poet, Robert Frost. We have forgotten that the spiritual journey is a journey not only into the sacred mystery that is the Divine but also into the sacred mystery of our own inner being. The two journeys are intricately interwoven. Each is as important as the other. Each enhances the other. And neither can be neglected if we are to respond fully to our deepest calling as human beings.

What then is this journey into ourselves of which Rumi spoke? In 1933, the psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, published a book entitled 'Modern Man in Search of a Soul' in which he outlined what he saw as 'the spiritual problem of modern man'. For Jung, the key problem facing modern man is 'a loss of soul'. We are, he claimed, profoundly disconnected from our innermost self, our 'true personality' as he described it. Some eighteen years later, John O'Donohue, once described as 'a man of the soul', made a similar diagnosis. We have, he said, lost '...the habit of soul. We become accustomed to keeping things at surface level. The deeper questions about who we are and what we are here for visit us less and less'. We spend so little time attending to soul, listening for that quiet voice that speaks to us from the very core of our being, heeding its wisdom, responding to its sacred call that we have, he said, 'managed to inflict severe surgery on ourselves'. Similarly, the psychologist, David Elkins believes that many of us are in 'unconscious mass



The labyrinth: A symbol of the inner journey

mourning' for the soul we have lost. We are, he says, 'starving for... a return to the soul'.

When we set out on the spiritual journey, we are in part seeking to 'return to the soul'. We are searching for that which lies at the very core of our being, the essence of who we are, the source of our uniqueness and individuality. And the spiritual journey is not a just a process of discovering the innermost self, of coming to know it as it truly is, but also one of 'realising' this self. The word 'realise' comes from the French verb 'realiser' which means 'to make real' or 'to bring into existence'. In seeking to realise our inner self, we are, therefore, engaging in the process of becoming this self, of coming 'to be that self which we truly are' to draw on the words of the existential philosopher, Kierkegaard. The spiritual journey, then, is a soul journey. It is a journey of descent into the depths of the soul. It is a discovering and reclaiming of all that has been lost along the way. It is a process of rebirth, of resurrection – a coming to life again of soul. It is a homecoming, a coming home not only to soul but also to the Source and Ground of our being.

Kaitlyn Steele

Adapted from Chapter 1 of the CSEA e-course 'Making the spiritual journey'

'If there were a spiritual journey it would only be a ¼ inch long, though many miles deep. It would be a swerve into rhythm with your deeper nature and presence...

John O'Donohue

Progressive voices: Rachel Held Evans

In May 2019, Rachel Held Evans, a New York Times best-selling author and speaker and mother of two young children, died suddenly and tragically at the age of 37 following a short illness.

Dubbed the 'Voice of the Wandering Evangelical', she wrote four popular books in which she told the story of her own transition from a conservative evangelical upbringing to a more progressive Christian faith. In doing so, she sought to challenge various aspects of evangelical Christianity such as biblical literalism and inerrancy, patriarchal authority structures within the church and discrimination against women and LGBT people. She spoke at many churches, conferences, colleges and universities around the country and maintained such a strong and dynamic online presence that the New York Times described her Twitter feed as 'her church, a gathering place for thousands to question, find safety in their doubts and learn to believe in new ways.' She also served on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and was one of the founders of the annual 'Evolving Faith' conference in the USA.

Rachel was born in Dayton, Tennessee in the heart of the Bible Belt - the home of the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 in which high school teacher, John Scopes was found guilty of teaching human evolution in a state-funded school. Eighty years after this world-famous trial which put fundamentalist Christianity in the dock, Rachel was to face her own personal trail when she began to experience doubts about her Christian faith. In 'Faith Unraveled', she told the story of her own journeying from certainty to doubt to faith, of learning to ask questions she never imagined herself asking and of the struggles and challenges we all face in disentangling faith from fundamentalism. In her final book, 'Inspired', she described what she called



quest to explore the mysteries of the Christian Scriptures and to reach a deeper understanding of what the Bible is and is not, and of how it is meant to be read.

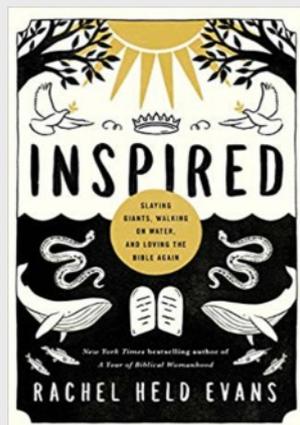
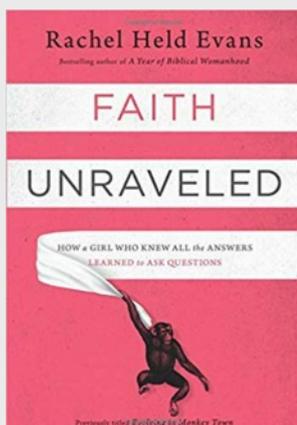
Rachel's quest was a search for a more expansive vision of God's love and a more authentic and inclusive church. She eventually left the evangelical church in 2014 to focus on building a new kind of Christian community for those who feel marginalised, ostracised and excluded by the church, a spiritual home for the church's many refugees. This October, she was due to speak at the 2019 Evolving Faith' conference in Denver, Colorado - a conference that describes itself as 'a gathering for wanderers, wonderers, and spiritual refugees to help you discover... You are not alone.' The conference will go ahead without her but Rachel's absence will be keenly felt, especially by those whose voices and experiences she affirmed and championed.

After her death, Rachel's husband described her presence in the world as 'a gift to us all'. Our challenge is to ensure that her legacy will long survive her and that her voice - and others like hers - will continue to be heard.

'This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more.'

'I am convinced that what drives most people away from Christianity is not the cost of discipleship but rather the cost of false fundamentals.'

Rachel Held Evans



The latest news...



Centre for Spiritual Exploration and Accompaniment

In Search of Soul: Exploring the
spiritual journey
E-course programme

2. Making the Spiritual Journey

Now available

The CSEA has recently launched the second course in its e-course programme. The course is entitled 'Making the Spiritual Journey' and is an in-depth exploration of the nature and experience of the spiritual journey. In this course, we will look at the inner journey through a number of different lenses - for example, as the search for the Sacred and for soul, as a journey towards wholeness, as a process of inner transformation and as a journey of learning 'to live deep' to draw on the words of the philosopher, Henry David Thoreau.

This programme of e-courses is open to anyone with a strong interest in exploring spirituality and the spiritual journey from a broad perspective. You do not have to belong to a particular religious or spiritual tradition in order to do these courses and it is not focused on any one particular spiritual pathway. All that is needed is a desire to discover more of who you are as a spiritual person and to engage in a committed way with your own search for a deeper spiritual life.

You can register for the e-course at any time and there is no deadline for completing it so you will be able to do the course at your own pace. It is also not necessary to have completed the first e-course in the series beforehand.

You can download an introduction to the course directly from the CSEA website at www.csea.org.uk or you can email us at sfs.csea@gmail.com The first e-course in the series - 'The Spiritual Self' - is also still available.

CSEA workshops

What is Love?

Creative writing and reflection

with Bristol-based writer, Fiona Hamilton

Date: Sunday 27th October 2019 9.45 am – 12.45 pm

Cost: £20

Deadline for bookings: Saturday 19th October 2019

Venue: The Old Library, Muller Road, Eastville

Flyers and booking forms are available from:
sfs.csea@gmail.com



Exploring spiritual practice

The practice of caring for our bodies



'The practice of wearing skin is so obvious that almost no one engages it as a spiritual practice.'

Barbara Taylor Brown

We are embodied beings. Our bodies are our physical presence in the world we inhabit and it is through our bodies - and specifically our senses - that we encounter and relate to this world. Sadly, however, for many of us, our relationship with our own bodies is at best an uneasy one. Too often, we feel uncomfortable in our own skin. Too often, we have learnt to see ourselves as physically unattractive or even ugly and to feel ashamed of our bodies. Too often, we have learnt to distrust our bodies or to be suspicious or scared of them. Too often, we feel let down or betrayed by our bodies, become impatient or angry with them and even view them as evil or sinful and seek to beat them into submission. Too often, we become alienated from our bodies, unable to see the mystery and beauty in them, attend to them, care for them, value them or enjoy them. We become profoundly disconnected from our physical selves.

Alternatively, we may become unhealthily obsessed with our bodies and with getting them into 'perfect shape'. In search of 'the body beautiful' as society defines it, we may repeatedly starve them, purge them, over-exercise them, bombard them with chemicals or put them 'under the knife' and even then, it may not be enough. The body becomes an object to be perfected rather than to be nurtured and cherished. For many of us, the shape of our bodies has become the measure of our self-worth. We are defined by the way we look rather than by who we are. The damaging consequences of such a distorted relationship with our bodies for our physical, psychological and spiritual health and well-being are incalculable.

How has this come about? Media attitudes towards the body and body image have often been held responsible for shaping some aspects of our unhealthy relationships with our bodies and there is clearly truth in this. Sadly, however, extreme fundamentalist and conservative religious attitudes have also played their part. Writing from a Christian perspective, O'Donohue (1997) argued that the body has been 'much sinned against' by religion:

'Religion has often presented the body as the source of evil, ambiguity, lust and seduction.... When the Christian tradition incorporated Greek philosophy, it brought this dualism into its thought world. The soul was understood as beautiful, bright and good. The desire to be with God belonged to the nature of the soul. Were it not for the unfortunate gravity of the body, the soul would constantly inhabit the eternal. In this way, a great suspicion of the body entered the Christian tradition... Sex and sexuality were portrayed as potential danger to one's eternal salvation. The Christian tradition has often undervalued and mistreated the sacred presence of the body.'

Learning to mind our bodies

In her book, 'Fully Awake and Truly Alive', the Christian spiritual director and teacher, Jane Vennard argues convincingly that caring for our bodies is in itself a spiritual practice. She points out that, 'Spiritual practice begins with the body and depends on the body' and believes that we often forget the important truth that body and soul are not separate but fully integrated, that the spiritual life does not transcend the physical life but is experienced and expressed through it. John O'Donohue echoed this when he described the body as a sacred threshold that 'deserves to be respected, minded and understood in its spiritual nature.'

What then does it mean to respect and mind our bodies in the way that O'Donohue described? First and foremost, it means, that we need to recover our sense of the sacredness of the human body. O'Donohue (1997) spoke of the body as 'a very sacred temple' and our only 'house of belonging' in the world. It is, he said, 'suffused with wild and vital divinity.' Similarly, the Jewish religious leader, Rabbi Hillel, described it as 'a host' for the soul during its journey on earth and as such, deserving of our respect, care and concern - even our reverence.

Flowing from this recognition of the essential beauty, mystery and sacredness of our bodies, 'minding' the body involves moving into what the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber called an I - thou' relationship with our bodies. It requires us to move away from analysing and objectifying our bodies to communing with them in a loving way. It requires us to treat our bodies with care, attention and reverence, to experience and enjoy them more fully, to meet their fundamental needs and to avoid the damage we so often inflict on them in a multitude of different

ways. It also challenges us to learn to understand and respond to our bodies' natural rhythms and to listen to their innate wisdom. If we are prepared to listen attentively to the voice of the body, it will tell us if our lives are in balance. It will tell us if we are living from our soul.

Vennard tells us that our first challenge is to let go of the distorted images we have of our bodies, images that have been shaped by the constant negative messages we receive about them throughout our lives. We need, she says, to learn to 'befriend' our bodies. We need to change the lenses through which we view them, to hold them in our gaze with awe and wonder at their uniqueness, complexity and incredible resilience. We need to let go of the narrow ideas of physical beauty that have plagued us for so long and that prevent us from noticing the beauty in our bodies. We need to remind ourselves of the gift of life they offer us, of the many things they do for us and give us in every moment of every day, of their extraordinary capacity to recover and heal in the face of illness and injury. And we need to learn to be faithful to our bodies even when they may seem to betray us, to become our enemy.

Vennard, O'Donohue and others suggest a number of simple spiritual practices which are designed to help us cultivate a healthier relationship with our bodies such as...

 naming at least five things that your body is doing for you right now; thinking of an activity that nurtures the soul and renews the spirit and reflecting on the role your body plays in that process

 taking a few moments to listen and attend to your body and to ask what it is telling you and what it needs from you now; spending a few minutes every day cherishing your body

 writing a love letter to your body; offering each part of your body a silent blessing

 having a conversation with you body when it is unwell or injured, thanking it for what it has done and what it has suffered and asking its forgiveness when you have not cared for it as you should

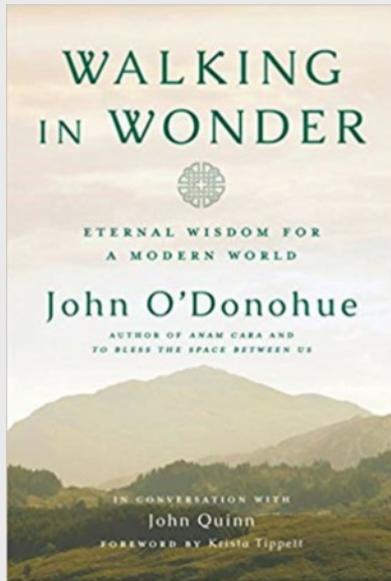
 imagining the light of the soul surrounding your body and then with each breath, drawing that cleansing and healing soul light into every part of it

*'The body is the mirror where the secret world
of the soul comes to expression.'*

John O'Donohue



Resources for the journey...



John O'Donohue and John Quinn (2018)
'Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for a Modern World.' Convergent Books

A beautiful collection of poignant and insightful conversations and presentations of John O'Donohue's work collated and introduced by former radio broadcaster, John Quinn, who was his close friend. Their conversations span a number of years and explore a range of themes such as imagination, landscape, the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, ageing and death.

Almost heretical... A podcast/blog by Nate Hanson and Tim Ritter
www.almostheretical.com

Two former American pastors rethink the orthodox American evangelical theology they used to teach. The podcast includes conversations on faith, the Bible, church, race, gender and more. It is designed in Nate's and Tim's words, 'to undo the more problematic versions of Christian theology' and 'to help people who are disillusioned with the current state of the church find a more beautiful theology'.

**ALMOST
HERETICAL**



Another name for everything: a Richard Rohr podcast

<https://cac.org/richard-rohr/another-name-for-every-thing-a-podcast-with-richard-rohr/>

A twelve part conversation series on the themes of Rohr's latest book, 'The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe.'

'Love is the energy that sustains the universe...'

