

MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

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Essential Writings

Selected with an Introduction by

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What Is Spirituality?



We begin this chapter with a passage from The Holy Longing that treats common misconceptions about the spiritual life. Spirituality is not for the few; it's for everyone. It's not so much about how often we go to church as it is about how we channel our eros—the “sacred fire” that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel that energy, defines our spirituality. Ron puts skin on his thesis in a modern parable about three famous women who channeled their erotic energy in different ways: Mother Teresa, Janis Joplin, and Princess Diana.

Ron then considers what it means to be made “in the image and likeness” of God. His own ideas and images of God have evolved over the years, and he traces that journey. Toward the end of the chapter, in a passage drawn from Sacred Fire, he describes the three stages of Christian discipleship: the struggle to get our lives together, the struggle to give our lives away, and the struggle to give our deaths away.

THE FIRE WITHIN

Today there are books on spirituality everywhere. However, despite the virtual explosion of literature in the area, in the Western world today, especially in the secular world, there are still some major misunderstandings about the concept. Chief among these is the idea that spirituality is, somehow, exotic, esoteric, and not something that issues forth from the bread and butter of ordinary life. Thus, for many people, the term spirituality conjures up images of something paranormal, mystical, churchy, holy, pious, otherworldly, New Age, something on the fringes

and something optional. Rarely is spirituality understood as referring to something vital and nonnegotiable lying at the heart of our lives.

This is a tragic misunderstanding. Spirituality is not something on the fringes, an option for those with a particular bent. None of us has a choice. Everyone has to have a spirituality and everyone does have one, either a life-giving one or a destructive one. No one has the luxury of choosing here because all of us are precisely fired into life with a certain madness that comes from the gods and we have to do something with that. We do not wake up in this world calm and serene, having the luxury of choosing to act or not act. We wake up crying, on fire with desire, with madness. What we do with that madness is our spirituality.

Hence, spirituality is not about serenely picking or rationally choosing certain spiritual activities like going to church, praying or meditating, reading spiritual books, or setting off on some explicit spiritual quest. It is far more basic than that. Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality. Thus, we all have a spirituality whether we want one or not, whether we are religious or not. Spirituality is more about whether or not we can sleep at night than about whether or not we go to church. It is about being integrated or falling apart, about being within community or being lonely, about being in harmony with Mother Earth or being alienated from her. Irrespective of whether or not we let ourselves be consciously shaped by any explicit religious idea, we act in ways that leave us either healthy or unhealthy, loving or bitter. What shapes our actions is our spirituality.

And what shapes our actions is basically what shapes our desire. Desire makes us act, and when we act what we do will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our personalities, minds, and bodies—and to the strengthening or deterioration of our relationship to God, others, and the cosmic world. The habits and disciplines we use to shape our desire form the basis for a spirituality, regardless of whether these have

an explicit religious dimension to them or even whether they are consciously expressed at all.

Spirituality concerns what we do with desire. It takes its root in the eros inside of us and it is all about how we shape and discipline that eros. John of the Cross, the great Spanish mystic, begins his famous treatment of the soul's journey with the words: "One dark night, fired by love's urgent longings." For him, it is urgent longings, eros, that are the starting point of the spiritual life and, in his view, spirituality, essentially defined, is how we handle that eros.

Thus, to offer a striking example of how spirituality is about how one handles his or her eros, let us compare the lives of three famous women: Mother Teresa, Janis Joplin, and Princess Diana.

Mother Teresa

We begin with Mother Teresa. Few of us would, I suspect, consider Mother Teresa an erotic woman. We think of her rather as a spiritual woman. Yet she was a very erotic woman, though not necessarily in the narrow Freudian sense of that word. She was erotic because she was a dynamo of energy. She may have looked frail and meek, but just ask anyone who ever stood in her way whether that impression is correct. She was a human bulldozer, an erotically driven woman. She was, however, a very disciplined woman, dedicated to God and the poor. Everyone considered her a saint. Why?

A saint is someone who can, precisely, channel powerful eros in a creative, life-giving way. Søren Kierkegaard once defined a saint as someone who *can will the one thing*. Nobody disputes that Mother Teresa did just that, willed the one thing—God and the poor. She had a powerful energy, but it was a very disciplined one. Her fiery eros was poured out for God and the poor. That—total dedication of everything to God and poor—was her signature, her spirituality. It made her what she was.

Janis Joplin

Looking at Janis Joplin, the rock star who died from an overdose of life at age twenty-seven, few would consider her a very spiritual woman. Yet she was one. People think of her as the opposite of Mother Teresa, erotic, but not spiritual. Yet Janis Joplin was not so different from Mother Teresa, at least not in raw makeup and character. She was also an exceptional woman, a person of fiery eros, a great lover, a person with a rare energy. Unlike Mother Teresa, however, Janis Joplin could not will the one thing. She willed many things. Her great energy went out in all directions and eventually created an excess and a tiredness that led to an early death. But those activities—a total giving over to creativity, performance, drugs, booze, sex, coupled with the neglect of normal rest—were her spirituality. This was her signature. It was how she channeled her eros. In her case, as is tragically often the case in gifted artists, the end result, at least in this life, was not a healthy integration but a dissipation. She, at a point, simply lost the things that normally glue a human person together and broke apart under too much pressure.

Looking at Joplin's life, and at our own lives, there is an interesting reflection to be made on Kierkegaard's definition of being a saint—someone who can will the one thing. Most of us are quite like Mother Teresa in that we want to will God and the poor. We do will them. The problem is we will everything else as well. Thus, we want to be a saint, but we also want to feel every sensation experienced by sinners; we want to be innocent and pure, but we also want to be experienced and taste all of life; we want to serve the poor and have a simple lifestyle, but we also want all the comforts of the rich; we want to have the depth afforded by solitude, but we also do not want to miss anything; we want to pray, but we also want to watch television, read, talk to friends, and go out. Small wonder life is often a trying enterprise and we are often tired and pathologically overextended.

Medieval philosophy had a dictum that said: Every choice is a renunciation. Indeed. Every choice is a thousand renunciations.

To choose one thing is to turn one's back on many others. To marry one person is to not marry all the others, to have a baby means to give up certain other things; and to pray may mean to miss watching television or visiting with friends. This makes choosing hard. No wonder we struggle so much with commitment. It is not that we do not want certain things, it is just that we know that if we choose them we close off so many other things. It is not easy to be a saint, to will the one thing, to have the discipline of a Mother Teresa. The danger is that we end up more like Janis Joplin; good-hearted, highly energized, driven to try to drink in all of life, but in danger of falling apart and dying from lack of rest.

Janis Joplin is perhaps an extreme example. Most of us do not die from lack of rest at age twenty-seven. Most of us, I suspect, are a bit more like Princess Diana—half-Mother Teresa, half Janis Joplin.

Princess Diana

Princess Diana is worth a reflection here, not just because her death stopped the world in a way that, up to now, few others ever have, but because it is interesting to note that in looking at her, unlike either Mother Teresa or Janis Joplin, people do spontaneously put together the two elements of erotic and spiritual. Princess Diana is held up as a person who is both, erotic and spiritual. That is rare, given how spirituality is commonly understood. Usually we see a person as one or the other, but not as both, erotic and spiritual. Moreover, she deserves that designation for she does reflect, fairly clearly, both of these dimensions.

The erotic in her was obvious, though not always in the way many people first understand that term. On the surface, the judgment is easy: She was the most photographed woman in the world, widely admired for her physical beauty, who spent millions of dollars on clothing, and was clearly no celibate nun. She had affairs, vacationed with playboys on yachts in the Mediterranean, ate in the best restaurants in London, Paris and New York, and had a lifestyle that hardly fits the mode of the classic

saint. But that itself is superficial, not necessarily indicative of a person with a powerful eros. Many people do those things and are quite ordinary. More important was her energy. Here she was a Mother Teresa and Janis Joplin, someone who obviously had a great fire, that madness the Greeks spoke of, within her. Partly this was an intangible thing, but partly it could be seen in her every move, in her every decision, and in every line of her face. It is not for nothing, nor simply because of her physical beauty or because of her causes, that people were drawn so powerfully toward her. Her energy, more so than her beauty or her causes, is what made her exceptional.

The spiritual part of her was also obvious, long before she became friends with Mother Teresa and took up seriously trying to help the poor. It was this dimension that her brother spoke of when he eulogized her—her causes, yes, but more important, something else inside of her, a depth, a moral ambiguity that never allowed her to be comfortable simply with being a jetsetter, a habitual effacement, an anxious desire to please, a person under a discipline, albeit often a conscriptive one, a person who, however imperfectly, willed what Kierkegaard spoke of, God and the poor, even if she still willed many other things too.

Spirituality is about how we channel our eros. In Princess Diana's attempts to do this, we see something most of us can identify with, a tremendous complexity, a painful struggle for choice and commitment, and an oh-so-human combination of sins and virtues. Spirituality is what we do with the spirit that is within us. So, for Princess Diana, her spirituality was both the commitment to the poor and the Mediterranean vacations . . . and all the pain and questions in between. Hers, as we can see, was a mixed road. She went neither fully the route of Mother Teresa nor of Janis Joplin. She chose some things that left her more integrated in body and soul and others which tore at her body and soul. Such is spirituality. It is about integration and disintegration, about making the choices that Princess Diana had to make and living with what that does to us.

What Is Spirituality?

Thus, we can define spirituality this way: Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds, and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others, and the cosmic world. We see this lived out one way in Mother Teresa, another in Janis Joplin, and still in a different manner in Princess Diana.

We can see from all of this that spirituality is about what we do with our spirits, our souls. And can we see too from all of this that a healthy spirit or a healthy soul must do dual jobs: It has to give us energy and fire, so that we do not lose our vitality, and all sense of the beauty and joy of living. Thus, the opposite of a spiritual person is not a person who rejects the idea of God and lives as a pagan. The opposite of being spiritual is to have no energy, is to have lost all zest for living—lying on a couch, watching football or sit-coms, taking beer intravenously! Its other task, and a very vital one it is, is to keep us glued together, integrated, so that we do not fall apart and die. Under this aspect, the opposite of a spiritual person would be someone who has lost his or her identity, namely, the person who at a certain point does not know who he or she is anymore. A healthy soul keeps us both energized and glued together. —*The Holy Longing*, 6–12

EROS: THE BASIS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

In the past several years I have been more than a little hurt when, on more than a few occasions, friends of mine would leave the priesthood, the convent or even the church itself because they felt that they were too full of the zest for life, too sensual, too sexual and generally too human and complicated to live the spiritual life. Most often the complaint sounds something like this: “I can never be a real spiritual person. I am just too restless! I want to