

## Chapter 10: What Spirituality is All About

by Rabbi Michael Lerner

The first few decades of the 21st century may see the deniers of Spirit retaining cultural hegemony—they will continue to deny and ridicule those who champion Spirit, to define them as the enemy, even as the harbingers of a new Dark Age.

The forces of cynicism will continue to insist that spirituality is fine “in its place,” but that it has no relevance to “the real world,” that it is not a fit subject for the evening news, for the world of public policy, for the corporate boardrooms, or for the shaping of our culture. But all that can change.

In fact, it has already begun to change. There are growing signs of a spiritual renaissance in western societies as more and more people seek some way to understand their world and find moorings that are not provided by the one-dimensional media, the technocratic politicians, or the frenetic religion of marketplace competition and the consumption of material goods. No matter how often people hear that salvation is at hand if only they get a better car, a newer computer, faster access to the World Wide Web, a more splendid cell phone that can read their e-mail and even put them into television contact with people around the world—the emptiness at the center of being and the nagging questions about what all this frantic life is really about push more and more people to seek some form of spiritual life.

One reason this spiritual turn is taking place right now is the growing awareness of impending ecological catastrophe in the 21st century. By viewing the planet as a resource to be exploited, by denying that we could possibly have a collective responsibility to treat the earth as sacred ground, the champions of ever-expanding growth have created a worldwide ecological crisis. The facts of this crisis have been available to us for at least the past fifty

years. Yet the economic, political and media forces that control basic decision making have been unable to come to grips with the way their thinking has contributed to this massive danger to our planet.

The very people who claim to be the embodiment of rationality are unable to provide us with the intellectual categories we need to reorganize the way we misuse the planet's resources or to stop the way we are destroying its air and water. The logic of narrow self-



interest mitigates against ecological consciousness. For the person who has learned the logic of the marketplace, why not maximize one's own pleasures without regard to the consequences for the future? After all, we will be dead before the worst of the ecological crisis

hits, and when it does, it will hit poor people in the Third World countries far more than it will the American elites. If you don't have categories that encourage a spiritual as opposed to a narrow utilitarian attitude toward the earth, if you don't have an intellectual framework that can justify social responsibility, how in the world do you imagine you are ever going to convince people growing up in a society that proclaims “he who dies with the most toys wins” to change their patterns of consumption?

You won't... Which is one major reason lots of people who care about ecology are also opening to spirituality.

What you won't hear on the evening news is that people are increasingly turning to spirituality at least in part because they suspect that in the spiritual world there is a different way of orienting to reality, a way that is based on awe, reverence, and a deep appreciation of

the Unity of All Being—and that these spiritual categories are necessary if we wish to produce a society that behaves in ecologically sustainable ways.

All around you, people are beginning to reject the old societal notions that were most spiritually deadening: that there isn't enough, that we are all separate from each other, that to get ahead we have to leave others behind, and that some of us are superior to others. Instead, millions of people are recognizing that there is enough, that we are not separate, that we are all One.

Spirit Matters—and more and more people are noticing.

So, what exactly is Spirituality?

Spirituality is a lived experience, a set of practices and a consciousness that aligns us with a sense of sanctity of All Being. It usually involves:

- an experience of love and connection to the world and others,
- a recognition of the ultimate Unity of All Being, and through that, of the preciousness of the earth and the sanctity of every human being on the planet,
- a conviction that the universe is not negative or neutral but tilts toward goodness and love,
- a joyous and compassionate attitude toward oneself and others,
- a deep trust that there is enough for all and that every human being deserves to share equally in the planet's abundance and is equally responsible for shaping our future,
- a sense that the world is filled with a conscious spiritual energy that transcends the categories and concepts that govern reality and inclines the world toward freedom, creativity, goodness, connectedness, love, and generosity,
- a deep inner knowing that our lives have meaning through our innermost being as manifestations of ultimate goodness of the

universe (or, in theistic terms, through our connection to and service of God).

This is what spirituality is about.

Religions on the other hand, are the various historical attempts to organize a set of doctrines, rituals, and specific behaviors that are supposed to be “the right way to live.”

Some religions may embody spiritual-ity. Many have encompassed spiritual moments or spiritual practices at one time or another. But many religions have little to offer today in the way of spirituality, except in isolated corners of their traditions.

Religion may exist without spirituality. Spirituality may emerge without or divorced from religious communities. Many people who have been persecuted by religious institutions have been those who embodied a spiritual world view. Many religious leaders speak the language of spirituality but feel threatened by those who have a genuinely spiritual outlook. Embedded in systems of power and control, they have no use for those who talk about sharing and who embody generosity toward other human beings, not just those who are part of “our” group.

Some people reject religion entirely because of this hypocrisy. But another option is to think of spirituality as a higher developmental stage—a stage in which fears and hurts of the past are overcome and we open ourselves up to the goodness of the universe and respond to it with awe and wonder and love.

This article was printed in *New Renaissance*, Volume 10, No. 2 and was excerpted, with permission, from *Spirit Matters* by Michael Lerner. The editor of *Tikkun* magazine, and author of the acclaimed book *The Politics of Meaning*, Michael Lerner has been described by some as America's preeminent Jewish intellectual, and by others as one of the most significant spiritual innovators of our time.