3.1 Meditation and Prayer

How Can We Be Spiritual in the Modern World?

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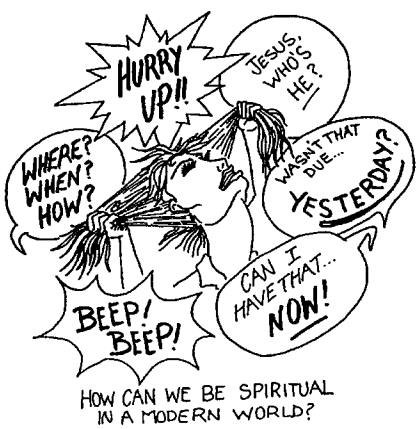
What is spirituality?

This question is very easy to ask but very difficult to answer. Seventh-day Adventists treasure their spiritual classics such as *Steps to Christ* and *Desire of Ages*. We have done quite well when it comes to defining our doctrines and listing our beliefs. But we have not found it nearly so easy to describe our spiritual experience; an experience which is by its very nature intimate, personal, and subjective.

Maybe the reason why we have found spirituality so hard to talk about is that it may be very difficult to know exactly what we are talking about. Some Christians have pointed out that spirituality cannot be defined logically. They are probably right. Can we adequately describe love, joy, and anger on a piece of paper? I do not think so. We only know what these intangible emotions are as we experience them. In the same way I do not think that we can describe spirituality by writing about it. Like all human qualities, emotions, and experiences it can only be understood in the context of what happens to us in our daily lives. Let me illustrate.

The Australian balladist, John Williamson has written a song called "Galleries of Pink Galahs." It is a song about experiencing the struggles of living in the Australian bush. We listened to this song in class one day.[136] It turned out to be a milestone in my understanding of the nature of spirituality; not so much because of the content of the song itself, but because of the reactions of the class members to the song. I had previously experienced an impact when I listened to the song, but I was still surprised when students began to reveal their own reactions to the song. Many (but not all) said that the experience they had while listening to that song was almost mystical. Some went so far as to actually call it a spiritual experience.



Soon afterwards I played the song to a group of Australian Adventist ministers. Their reaction was the same as that of the students. Then I invited a group of people who have worked on the land most of their lives to listen to the song. There was hardly a dry eye in the room.

Interestingly, there were some in each group who did not experience the same reaction as the majority. Questioning revealed that all who were not particularly moved by the song had either grown up outside Australia, or had lived most of their formative years in a city.

It did not take too much intelligence to work out what was happening. For those in the groups who had experienced the struggles of life in the Australian bush—who knew its pain and its frustration and who knew something of the dogged perseverance that it took to survive and thrive in that environment—the song called forth a spiritual response. Those who had little prior experience of the events and scenes described in the song could not respond in the same way.

1. A Spirituality of Everyday Life

As it is with you, my own perspectives on spirituality are continuing to develop. The events I have just described have helped me to clarify my understanding of the nature of spirituality. That incident seemed to indicate that our spirituality is, at least in part, closely tied to our past and present experience. It seems to be particularly associated with the struggles and heartaches of everyday life. Genuine spirituality can only arise as we find the God of the Scripture in the context of our personal journey through the world. Without a knowledge and experience of life, spirituality cannot be born and it cannot mature. Spirituality is closely tied to everyday life.

What do you think?
1. What is wrong with the kind of spirituality that isolates itself from the real world?
2. How can our environment affect the way in which we express our spirituality?
3. Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual?
4. How do you measure spirituality? Who should measure it? Can spirituality be taught?

It is particularly important that we understand that spirituality can only be lived in the context of life and its everyday experiences. What is the point of a spirituality that is unrelated to living in the world? Spirituality has too often been associated with monks, hermits and people who have separated themselves from the cut and thrust of life. For them the idea seems to prevail that in order to be spiritual one had to somehow rise "above the world" and live a life of self-denial and asceticism. There are some prime examples of such devotion recorded in the dusty archives of scores of medieval monasteries. But I am no longer convinced that this is the kind of spirituality that is needed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Authentic spirituality is lived. It is alive, not dead.

2. A Spirituality of the Desert

Now, just in case you are sitting there and saying to yourself that this author is a little off-centre here, let me hasten to add that there certainly is a whole series of very good biblical precedents for nurturing spirituality at times when we remove ourselves temporarily from the bustle of life. The Bible repeatedly refers to the "desert place." Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Paul, and Jesus himself all had significant spiritual encounters in "the desert." The Scriptures make it abundantly plain that there is a need to separate oneself from the world occasionally in order to find a particularly deep and meaningful relationship with God. There is need to revitalise oneself and spend time in individual and intimate communion with the creator.

In the same way that there is no substitute for quantity and quality time in building a secure, functional relationship between parent and child, there can be no substitute for time spent in communion with God in order to maintain a relationship with him. If your spiritual experience is lagging somewhat and you cannot remember a recent "desert experience" with God, then it may well be necessary to take time out. It might be in a forest of gnarled old gum

trees, or in a spring garden; on a mountain top, or in a verdant valley. God may catch up with you as you ride a wave on a beautiful summer's morning, or as you look up at the stars on a cold winter's night. If you want to know what it is to be spiritual then you have to give God a chance to show you what it is all about.

Remember that in addition to his forty days in the wilderness Jesus often spent time with his Father in prayer. He recognised the need to separate himself at times from his family and nearest friends in order to build the spiritual resources that he needed to maintain his ministry among the people who needed him. His spirituality was not accidental or haphazard. He was intentional about it and endeavoured to teach his disciples to be the same. Unfortunately they were slow learners. It was not until they experienced the trauma of his betrayal, scourging and death that they began to understand the depth of his relationship with his Father and with them. Then they realised their own need for that kind of relationship.

3. Spirituality in the Modern World

This brings us to the point. The Scriptures make it clear that spirituality must be ***nurtured*** in the "desert place." They make it equally clear that it must be ***lived*** in the experiences of everyday life if it is to be authentic and meaningful.

Jesus took his message and his person to the people. He ate with the people, walked with the people, cried with the people, and rejoiced with the people. He slept in their homes, fished in their boats, raised their dead and healed their hurts. He was not some wandering ascetic who did not know what it meant to go in to God and out to the people. He did not practice an exclusive monasticism but a genuinely integrative spirituality. His was a spirituality that reflected his relationship with God in the context of the common experiences of his life.



Is spirituality of any earthly use?

The example of Jesus shows that if we are going to have a viable and vibrant spirituality in the modern world we must recognise that our relationship with God cannot be separated from the rest of life. This spirituality:

1. Must inform and be informed by the journey of life and faith that we are walking day by day.
2. Will change and mature as we meet the challenges, frustrations, and joys of life.
3. Will be ours and ours alone. We cannot sit in judgment on the spirituality of another nor can that other sit in judgment on the way in which we each experience and express our spirituality.
4. Will take time out to be disciplined.[137]

What is spirituality? That question is still very difficult to answer. But perhaps if we understand that spirituality for the Christian in the modern world must grow from communion with God in the "desert" **and** in everyday life, we will be well on the way to finding our own answer. Each aspect of your spirituality cannot function without the other. Each will complement and build the other in a spiritual relationship with God that may not necessarily be expressed in words, and may be even more difficult to include in a systematic statement of doctrinal beliefs. But without a viable spirituality the Seventh-day Adventist Christian will have little reason to remain a Christian and very little to offer the modern world.