

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY? A DIVE INTO A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPT AS RELATED TO COACHING

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Not long ago, I was visiting an art exhibit called “*Longing, Grief, and Spirituality*.” As I was contemplating works of art such as Zarina’s *Veil*, Michael Tracy’s *Cross of the Sacred Peace*, Mel Chin’s *Our Strange Flower of Democracy*, Andy Warhol’s *Camouflage Last Supper*, or James Lee Byars’ *Halo*, among others, I realized that I was, in a nutshell, contemplating a visual equivalent of my research on spirituality. There, for everybody to admire, be moved, or question, was a sampling of the many meanings of spirituality. Here was the grief of the cross, the awe of the angels, the making of the community, the mystery of the beyond, the devotional and the iconoclastic, the beauty and the ugly, and so much more.

And that begs the question: If spirituality is all of that, what is it really? As the title of the exhibit suggests, spirituality might have to do with, or might be activated by, longing and grief, lack and pain. Or maybe spirituality is what happens when we feel big emotions, like falling in love, giving birth, experiencing music, nature. Maybe spirituality is what happens in the secret of our heart, the silent prayer, the candle we light, the meditation.

1. DEFINITION(S)

In fact, according to many researchers, “there is no single, widely agreed-upon definition of spirituality. Surveys of the definition of the term, as used in scholarly research, show a broad range of definitions with limited overlap” (McCarroll, O’Connor, and Meakes 2005, 44).

In a famous study from 1997 called *Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy* (Zinnbauer et al. 1997, p. 550), the authors cite an array of definitions like “a human response to God’s gracious call to a relationship with himself,” “a subjective experience of the sacred,” or “the vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, with higher entities.” In a recent interview, Michael Pollan (nd) defined spirituality through his psychedelic experimentations as “having a profound connection with something larger than you...it’s a kind of love.” Others define spirituality from a faith perspective, for some it has to do with the beyond; yet others emphasize the emotional and private aspects, and many connect spirituality with a sense of personal development.

The most recent academic definition given by the French sociologist Lionel Obadia states: “(Spirituality is) an ethereal and fluid space of resources of meaning and actions for humans, likely to nourish their aspirations, sacred or not, on earth and beyond, which unfold below or beyond established religious traditions” (Obadia 2023). This definition aims at rendering the many aspects of spirituality, its multidimensionality and fluidity, its relationship to the self and to the whole, to the human and to the divine. It also places spirituality in relationship to ‘religious tradition’ as ‘below or beyond’ but not mingled together. This reflects the biggest evolution of the concept of spirituality since its origin.

2. ORIGIN OF THE TERM

For many scholars, the use of the term ‘spirituality’ originates in the Latin translation of the Christian bible and other early Latin Christian texts. The Latin word ‘spiritualitas’ (spirituality) is derived from the noun ‘spiritus’, meaning breath. It was used to translate Hebrew ‘רוח’ (*ruach* - wind) and the Greek ‘πνεύμα’ (*pneuma* – wind). Boas Huss writes that

“in the Old Testament, the term ‘רוח’ (wind) denotes a divine element (Genesis 1:2) and the human life principle, received from (and returned to) God (12:7). The word ‘πνεύμα’ has a similar semantic field. Therefore, it is frequently juxtaposed to ‘σάρξ’ (flesh), as in ‘the spirit (πνεύμα) is willing, but the flesh (σάρξ) is weak’” (Matthew 26:41)(Huss 2014, p. 48). This distinction between ‘breath’ and ‘flesh’ is manifest in the separation between ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical/material.’

Today, most people would not link spirituality to religion. Many even see a contradiction between spirituality and religion or religious affiliation. In 1997, Zinnauer and his academic team coined an acronym for this phenomenon, the ‘SBNR’ for ‘Spiritual, But Not Religious.’ The SBNR demographic closely resembles the baby boomer “seekers,” studied by Wade Clark Roof (Roof 1993). According to Zinnbauer, both groups were “less likely to evaluate religiousness positively, less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and prayer, less likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, and more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterize religiousness and spirituality as different and nonoverlapping concepts, more likely to hold nontraditional ‘new age’ beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences” (Zinnbauer et al. 1997, 561 in Fuller 2001, p. 6).

But the understanding of spirituality apart from religion has a surprisingly short history. Zinnauer says that “historically, spirituality was not distinguished from religiousness until the rise of secularism in this century, and a popular disillusionment with religious institutions as a hindrance to personal experiences of the sacred. Since the seventies, interest in spirituality has greatly increased, and American religious life has shifted to include more elements defined as ‘Spiritual.’ At the same time, there has been a drop in public confidence in religion and religious leadership. Consequently, spirituality has begun to acquire distinct meanings and connotations” (Zinnbauer et al. 1997, p. 550).

This declining influence of the major traditional religions, also called “secularization,” meant that places where questions of spiritual or religious nature could be asked were shifting. The United States saw the multiplication of non-traditional churches, the import of practices and beliefs from all over the worlds, the multiplication of esoteric and philosophical societies, etc. This is also where coaching was developing before taking off in the first decade of the 21st century. Vikki Brock credits the birth of modern coaching to the societal transformation brought by the postmodern revolution and its consequence on people’s environment. “In short, as the world's business and social environments changed, the needs of human beings changed, and coaching sprang up to meet them”(Brock 2012, p. 2). As a place where speech is released, where trust and rapport are built, coaching has also become a place where spiritual questions are being addressed.

3. SPIRITUALITY: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL REALITY

We saw earlier that defining spirituality was not an easy task. Everyone has their own definition, usually prompted by personal experience, which can lead to incomprehension and conflicts. This can be particularly problematic in the medical field, where spirituality is considered an important part of the care. The definition of spirituality is also problematic in the secular world at large. It is thus not surprising that this field of research has attracted a large number of psychologists of religion/spirituality as well as sociologists of religion/spirituality. They saw in the last quarter of the 20th century an urgent need to define and paint a comprehensive view of this new para-religious phenomenon that spirituality had

become. Several major research projects in the form of interviews, field work, and questionnaires were being conducted to elucidate the precise meaning of spirituality. Researchers parsed through troves of terms, concepts, intuitions gathered from these interventions, as well as previous literature, and their own experience to extract major themes.

Lawrence LaPierre, a United Methodist Church chaplain at a Veteran Affairs Hospital, knew that he was expected to deal with all matters of spirituality – but he, as most seminarians, had not been educated in this topic, and he had no idea what it would look like on the ground. It took him decades of practice to write: “experience confirms the conviction that spirituality is multidimensional. Six clear factors turn up in the literature, however, with enough frequency to make them appear to be fundamental aspects of spirituality. These are identified as those of the journey, transcendence, community, religion, ‘the mystery of creation,’ and transformation” (LaPierre 1994, p. 154).

For Jane Dyson, head of nursing at Derby, the main categories are the “divine”, the “self”, the “world”, the “sacred” and “mankind” (Dyson, Cobb, et Forman 1997).

Bernard Spilka, in a paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association in August 1993, details three categories of spiritualities:

- 1) A God-oriented spirituality where thought and practice are premised in theologies, either broadly or narrowly conceived.
 - 2) A world-oriented spirituality stressing one’s relationship with ecology or nature.
 - 3) A humanistic (or people-oriented) spirituality stressing human achievement or potential.
- (Hill et al. 2000, p. 5)

Based on a series of wide-ranging research initiatives, Nancy Ammerman (2014) puts her findings regarding spirituality in what she calls four cultural packages:

- 1) The Theistic Package or the Transcendent: In this package, spirituality is about a God/Goddess, and/or practices intended to develop the relationship with the deity, and/or the mysterious encounter and the experience of these encounters.
 - 2) The Extra-Theistic Package or the Immanent: This package addresses what is bigger than the person, beyond the ordinary. It is the awe, the core self, the connection to the community...
 - 3) Ethical Spirituality: This package stands for a common denominator. It encompasses things like living a virtuous life, helping other, or transcending one’s life.
 - 4) Belief and belonging Spirituality: This is a contested category. This package measures religiosity while questioning whether it is a good or a bad thing. The same belief or practice can describe a devout spirituality or a superstition. Belonging can represent a positive identity or a symbol of being trapped in an authoritarian tradition.
- (Ammerman 2013)

Those attempts at ‘packaging’ or categorizing spirituality convey the multidimensionality of this concept and show the many ways in which it can be approached. Some of those categorizations focus on the spatiality, meaning spirituality would exist in the self, in the other, in the world, in the creation beyond. Another approach takes a conceptual perspective,

as in ‘transcendent,’ ‘Immanent,’ ‘Belonging.’ A third approach is seeing spirituality as dynamic, as liaison, as ‘oriented toward.’

Each model aims to present the complexity, elusiveness, the multidimensionality from a different perspective. And each model brings something specific to its field. Thus, a medical perspective may raise the notion of ‘hope’ or giving meaning to pain and suffering; a pastoral approach may mention rituals and practices, and a sociological approach may include a warning toward the ambivalence of the concepts. My question is “what is the relationship between coaching and spirituality, and is there anything particular about this relationship?” I propose a first step in this direction—and relate it specifically to the field of professional coaching.

4. DIVING DEEPER: COACHING APPLICATION

I will gather the different categories into 5 principles. Using the language of participants in various research projects (including my own), I will define the scope of each dimension of spirituality and explore some options regarding how it could apply to coaching.

4.1 Meaning and purpose

Words from this spiritual dimension include a search for meaning in life, purpose, meaning through transcendence and immanence, relevance to existence...

This dimension is a central aspect of spirituality. Often, “spirituality as meaning and purpose is seen to manifest itself in a quest toward self-actualization and the search for human integrity” (McCarroll, O’Connor, and Meakes 2005, p. 45). It is the journey; it touches the sacred of life, the extra-theistic “bigger than self” question.

For coaching, as a goal- and result-oriented process, ‘purpose’ is a key word. Ultimately, this dimension touches upon the ‘why’ question: what is your purpose, and why? It is what keeps people motivated, it is what keeps people wanting to grow.

4.2 The Transcendent Other

Words from this spiritual dimension include transcendence, Divinity, God/Goddess/gods, an encounter with transcendence, belief in God, the divine.

This God-oriented spirituality, or theist package is somewhat of an exception among all aspects of modern spirituality in that it crosses over into the field of religion and encompasses it. It represents in essence what used to be the main, even the sole, focus of spirituality but has recently become a somewhat marginalized aspect. Even though, for the majority of people adhering to this aspect of spirituality, “a relationship with God/god(s)/Transcendent Other is not only the primary manifestation of spirituality but is also the origin of spirituality” (McCarroll, O’Connor, and Meakes 2005, p. 45).

This dimension is not foreign to coaching either. Many Christian churches, especially evangelical and nondenominational ones, engage in full blown coaching practices whether from the pulpit or through weekly programs. Lakewood Church in Houston, one of the biggest US megachurches, offers a recurring business coaching program to their members as part of its prosperity gospel message. In his article in this issue of *The Future of Coaching*, William Bergquist (2023) identifies the visions and values of effective leadership that are offered by Jeannine Sandstrom and Lee Smith (2017). Their vision of effective (legacy-

based) leadership is based on five best practices. They also offer a Faith-oriented version of their Legacy Leadership model (Sandstrom and Smith, 2005). This is the version on which Bergquist based his presentation. Sandstrom and Smith's version of coaching is God/Christ-centered. This coaching model provides basic life values and purpose. Sandstrom and Smith help clients who share these values to activate them in their life and work—as a way to find their purpose (Sandstrom and Smith, nd)

But the question of an encounter with transcendence can also show up in very different terms during coaching, as was the case with coach Kelli during a conversation with a client:

I'm thinking of one woman that thought God was angry at her, and so I made the judgment call in the moment that I have, I want to, help facilitate that healing because if God is an important force in her life, if she thinks he's angry at her, that's gonna hold her back in some way. And so we explore that more... it might be a process of forgiveness, or reconciliation, or letting go or whatever.

Here, we see how coaching can facilitate a spiritual anguish that would have traditionally been disclosed to a clergyperson of some sort, while staying purely in the coaching process.

4.3 Connections and Relationships

Words from this spiritual dimension include a sense of community, connections, relationships, sense of commonality, ecology, morality, ethics, religious traditions, practices, rituals...

Connection and relationships form a multidimensional concept: One can be in relationship with oneself, with others, with the world, the universe, as well as the Transcendent Other. "In most cases, the connections and relationships identified are understood to be the means whereby spirituality is manifested in life. An individual's relationships with self, others, the cosmos, and god/God are understood to be reflective of and shaped by one's spirituality" (McCarroll, O'Connor, and Meakes 2005, p. 46).

Coach Chris says he is not religious at all, and not even particularly spiritual. And yet, he draws enormous comfort and coaching wisdom from being part of nature and from a unified ecosystem. In his latest book entitled *Easier*, he writes about a coach/client relationship:

"Who are you, the Coach asked him again, when you aren't on your mind?" asked the coach. "When I'm not on my mind, I'm just... I guess I'm just part of the world. Just a guy in the universe." (The coach) "See, if we are part of something larger than ourselves, part of the universe that has our backs, a lot of things get easier. In contrast, if anything is up to me, I'll never be done with my work. But it's not up to me." (Westfall 2021, p. 41)

The power of the community, connection and relationships can also be found in many group coaching events, retreats and motivational/coaching conferences (Tony Robbins comes to mind).

4.4 Mystery and vital principle

Words from this spiritual dimension include respect and appreciation for the mystery of creation, life force, emotion, the intelligence of life force, vital principle, unifying force, integrative energy, awe, emotion, openness to the marvelous, hope.

This dimension emphasizes the sacred and gives a central place to the emotional aspect and creativity. “The vital principle is understood as the creative, animating force in self and/or world and/or universe. In these definitions, vital principle transcends or integrates subject-object dichotomies. It is a non-personified, incorporeal, common element that ‘vitalizes’ the whole person and/or the cosmos” (McCarroll, O’Connor, and Meakes 2005, p. 47). This vital principle works in mysterious and awesome ways.

In coaching, this dimension is echoed in the use of the laws of the universe, and particularly the law of attraction. It resonates, among others, with many creative and shamanic approaches.

4.5 Transcending the Self and personal development

Words from this spiritual dimension include a search for ultimate truth or highest value, a personal transformation, personal and private, self, transcendent self, personal life direction, accent on interiority, quest for fulfillment, personal development.

Here, spirituality is a tool to transcend the self. In medical settings, spirituality can be what helps to transcend or give meaning to emotional and/or physical pain. It is the quality of empathy, of feeling other people’s emotions. It is an anthropocentric transcendence that also leads to personal development.

We’ve arrived at the core of coaching. If coaching is about supporting people in creating real, lasting changes, then all coaching is transformational in nature, whether this is achieved through continued behavioral reinforcement with Marshal Goldsmith (Goldsmith et Reiter 2008), through shadow work with Deepak Chopra (Chopra, Ford, and Williamson 2010), through the power of intention with Wayne Dyer (Dyer 2004), or any of the coaching tools found in the many books and training available. Can we then assume that coaching is spiritual by nature?

As you go through this list of concepts and words, you might think about times when coaching was so fulfilling that you felt a quasi-spiritual emotion. Likewise, other personal experiences such as holding a baby, creating artwork, or simply being deeply happy in a given situation can bring up deep emotions. But is it spiritual? Hill and his associates disagree with too broad a view of spirituality and warn about “the danger of losing the sacred.” They contend that words like “fulfilling,” “moving,” “important,” or “worthwhile” are not substitutes for “spiritual” insofar as they refer to “ideologies, activities and lifestyle.”

Those can be fulfilling, moving, and important, but they don’t have to be spiritual. They only become spiritual when they are in resonance with something sacred. The authors define the sacred as “a person, an object, a principle, or a concept that transcends the self. Though the sacred may be found within the self, it has perceived value independent of the self” (Hill, and al. 2000, p. 66). Thus, one can be profoundly happy without linking it to an experience of the sacred; and a coaching session can be moving and worthwhile, but, according to this definition, it would not be in the realm of the spiritual unless it brings, uses, or calls for a concept that transcends the self.

5. IT’S ALL GOOD!

In attempts to define spirituality, a recurring theme is the negation of what is perceived as negative. Expressions like ‘no dogma or obligation,’ ‘a low degree of organization,’ and ‘a

sense of authenticity beyond churches' suggest a clear rejection of organized religion. This is a split from the traditional understanding of spirituality, once found exclusively in religion. It stems from a distrust in traditional religions. Church scandals after church scandals have convinced people that organized religion is 'bad,' and that, by opposition 'unorganized' spirituality is good. But is it so?

Hill and his associates warn of the danger of polarization. They write that "1) virtually all religions are interested in matters spiritual and, 2) every form of religious and spiritual expression occurs in some social context. Second, to argue that spirituality is good and religion is bad (or vice-versa) is to deny a substantial body of research demonstrating that both religion and spirituality can be manifested in healthy as well as unhealthy ways" (Hill et al. 2000, p. 64; see also Nancy Ammerman, 2013). Akin to any religion, spirituality is based on beliefs that can also be labeled as superstition. It can come along with a set of communal behaviors that inform the level of belonging. When does 'belonging' become being trapped? Where is the limit between religion or spirituality and a cult?

In fact, the dangers that are lurking behind mainstream religions are also lurking behind spirituality. The main difference is that much of the field of spirituality is individual and consists of finding one's own way by picking and choosing what appeals to the individual. These semi-solitary practices lower the perceived social danger, but they do not prevent it. They can also have negative personal consequences. One of the most common findings within the coaching community is "spiritual bypassing." This expression coined by John Welwood describes "a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks" (Fossella 2011). The consequences are 1) avoidance of the deep-seated issues often through exaggerated positivism, 2) a dismissive attitude toward regular, down to earth, needs, and 3) a risk to blame victims for not being 'spiritual enough' to rise above issues, traumas, or even abuses.

The last issue we want to raise concerns the method of research, which is also reflected in how people view spirituality. When researching people's beliefs and conceptualizing spirituality, there is an intellectual incentive, duty even, to value plurality and to strive for wide-ranging tolerance. This posture allows researchers to engage in authentic dialogues and build an understanding of the field of research. But spiritual deviations stem from a well-meaning understanding that spirituality can only be good, and that spiritual tolerance must prevail. Doing so can equalize everything, and unhealthy or destructive ways of manifesting spirituality can linger and develop unchecked.

Pam McCarroll states plainly that "tolerance, as the conceptualization of the whole within which plurality exists, is dangerous because it assumes that humans are beyond good and evil. (...) the ideal of toleration is premised upon a belief that humans are good and that we know the Good and do it. We need only look around us and see how untrue this presupposition is" (McCarroll, O'Connor, and Meakes 2005, p. 54).

Building on the philosophy of Simone Weil, a French philosopher, mystic and political activist (1909-1943), and of George Grant, a Canadian philosopher and political commentator (1918-1988), McCarroll argues that the idea of Good has been "emptied of its content" and lost its universal moral power. But then, "the content of Good is love," and if 'Good' can't be the measure of ethical choices, including choosing ethical and good/healthy spirituality, then the higher measure that is love must be chosen. "Instead of accepting tolerance as the content

of the whole and the highest Good in which we think and act, we propose that love, as the content of the whole (the Good) and as that to which humans are fitted, be reconsidered to shape our thoughts and actions—our research and practice” (ibid, p. 55).

This intriguing paradigm opens a new way to investigate different dimensions of spirituality, and to assess this field of research. C.S. Lewis writes about four loves as the empathy bond, the friendship/sibling bond, the romantic love, and the unconditional “God” love (Lewis 2017). This last love, known as ‘Agape,’ love, is best known by the New Testament letter written by the apostle Paul to the community of Corinth (1 Corinthians 13). There, in a poem exhorting ‘Agape’, love is described as the Good beyond all other goods: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1Co 13, p. 4-7).

The new paradigm of ‘love’ could provide some interesting tools over ‘tolerance.’ First, the ‘agape love’ is not blind – it possesses discernment for what is toxic and abusive. It is also not ‘neutral’ or disengaged. It stands for what is good. It implies active engagement and interest of a person toward others, while tolerance evokes a rather passive attitude, can profit from ignorance, and can hide a lack of genuine interest for others. A healthy spirituality is recognized by the presence of a loving connection to “otherness.”

With this in mind, we would like to offer our own working definition of spirituality: Spirituality is a multidimensional reality that gives meaning, increases reliance, fosters resilience and facilitates transcendence. Each dimension flows freely between the self, the world, the universe, and the transcendent beyond, enlightened by love.

6- CONCLUSION

In this article, I offered an overview of 30 years of academic research on spirituality. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of this concept, we applied different categorizations that are guided by parameters such as meaning, purpose, the Transcendent Other, connections and relationships, mystery, vital principle, transcending the Self, and personal development. I then started the process of applying the findings to coaching. Finally, I dealt with the often-neglected reality that spirituality, like religion, can be unhealthy. A way was offered to gauge whether a specific definition of spirituality adequately discern between healthy and unhealthy spiritual expressions. While the scope of this article doesn’t allow for an in-depth analysis, it does reinforce the need to pour more research on the topic of spirituality in coaching.

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