Spirituality for the Skeptic

THE THOUGHTFUL LOVE OF LIFE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began as a condensation and revision of another Oxford book of mine, The Joy of Philosophy. (In fact, my playful working title was "Little Joy," but once I got into it, my thinking and soon my aim quickly shifted. In Joy of Philosophy, I launched what I saw as an overdue attack on the mind-numbing "thinness" of too much of contemporary philosophy. I tried to balance the attack with illustrations of how philosophy could once again become richer and more full of life, more relevant to life. But by the time I finished Joy and had written the conclusion ("Has Analytic Philosophy Ruined Philosophy?") I had moved beyond the attack mode. When I began to write this book, I saw very quickly that though the outline and structure would remain pretty much the same, the tone, and temperament and, in fact, the basic subject matter would be in stark contrast to Joy. (I thought of a series of Picasso's Minotaur lithographs I had just seen in Madrid, in which the same picture took on strikingly different and even opposite meanings depending on a few extra lines, textures, and variations in the inking and coloring. So I do not apologize if some of this seems familiar to readers of my earlier book.) Here, I allowed myself to enter what I had previously considered forbidden, or in any case inhospitable territory, the realm of spirituality.

I characterize my efforts here as a "search" and certainly intend to be open-minded. Nevertheless, three presumptions I knew I would not give up were (1) the idea that spirituality has a lot to do with thoughtfulness, (2) that spirituality is not at odds with, but rather in cahoots with science, (3) that spirituality is by no means limited to religion much less sectarian, authoritarian religion. These presumptions in turn prompted my affirmation of what I call naturalized spirituality and my summary Hallmark-card phrase, "spirituality as the thoughtful love of life."
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Confucius says, “Learning without reflection is a waste, reflection without learning is dangerous.” I realized that I had a lot to read—much of which, I must say, I found silly and simple-minded. But I had already steeped myself for 30 years in some of the richest philosophical literature in the West, and bits and pieces from the East as well, so the lion’s share of the work fell to reflection. But that still left me wrestling with spirituality pretty much on my own, which is probably as it should be. While steeped in some of the philosophers I have always loved, I will not pretend to have mastered even a small part of the vast literature on spirituality, and I will no doubt only repeat in a clumsy and impoverished way the insights and wisdom of many more profound and spiritually enlightened thinkers. But that is the way the cookie crumbles, according to an old and wise Buddhist proverb. I only hope that some of my readers are guided and edified by these meditations as I was as I wrote them.

I was never alone. I owe special thanks to my good friends Betty Sue Flower, who has spoken with me often on these issues, Paul Woodruff, who was exploring the kindred concept of reverence just as my own interest in spirituality was perking. Sam Keen has been gently prodding me along this path for years. Jacquie Thomas often talked to me about matters I did not understand but kept my curiosity alive. Frithjof Bergmann moved me, spurred my love of philosophy, and earned not only my lifelong gratitude, but taught me indelibly that precious sense of teacher that many traditions have identified at the very heart of spirituality. Roger Ames and Stephen Phillips continue to make me more conscientious about Chinese and South Asian philosophy. A few of my colleagues at Texas have continued to remind me how vicious and intolerant self-righteous, sectarian religion can be, especially when combined with hypocrisy and paranoia. My wonderful editor (as well as part-time spiritual gadfly) at Oxford University Press, Cynthia Read, encouraged the project from the first.

But most of all, my most profound thanks to Kathy Higgins, my spiritual partner in life. (Until a year or so ago, I never thought that I would utter such a phrase.)
It is in our wild nature that we best recover from our un-nature, our spirituality.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

This being a book on spirituality, let me begin with a confession of sorts. I have never understood spirituality. Or rather, I never paid much attention to it. When the subject was introduced, I made a convenient excuse to leave, perhaps expressing myself inwardly with a muted groan, expecting what followed to be platitudinous if not nonsense. Even when I was an aspiring young philosopher with poetic inclinations, I found most of what passed as spirituality something of a sham, fueled by pretension and dominated by hypocrisy. Moreover, I was not brought up to be religious. I was brought up to be "moral" along the lines of what evangelical polemicists have taken to calling secular humanism. Growing up as one of the very few kids with a (albeit nominal) Jewish affiliation in an overwhelmingly Protestant community meant that religion always appeared as a threat to me. Hitler and the Holocaust were always in the background. So religion seemed to me to be something dangerous, an impersonal source of suspicion and sometimes outright hatred based on nothing other than what seemed to me to be a set of abstract and arbitrary categories.

In retrospect, I realize that I was missing out on something important, throwing the baby out with the bath toys, so to speak. I was conflating spirituality and religion, and the very worst of religion at that, and I was denying both of them in accordance with fears and prejudices I had carried with me since childhood. Of course, I still have to confront the uncritically self-righteous and often sectarian attitudes of those who pride themselves on being
religious, who look down with contempt on anyone who does not accept the same beliefs and affiliations that they do. (Today this intolerance goes by any number of more respectable-sounding names, for instance “exclusivism.”) I am still surrounded by the soft-spoken, sometimes brain-dead but benign “new consciousness” pap that passes itself off as nonsectarian spirituality—from pyramid power and feng shui to channeling and the latest Celestine Prophecy. (I would not want to paint all New Age thinking with that brush, however—there are many important and promising ideas to be found there.) But between my disgust for self-righteous hypocrisy and my disdain for mindless New Age platitudes, I mistakenly rejected what I now see as an essential dimension of life. Spirituality can be severed from both vicious sectarianism and thoughtless banalities. Spirituality, I have come to see, is nothing less than the thoughtful love of life.

Let me say once and for all at the start of this book, spirituality does not mean and is not restricted to belief in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God, and belief in God does not constitute spirituality. To be sure, for most Jews, Christians, and Muslims, belief in God is an essential component of spirituality. But even so, it is not necessary to be religious—much less to belong to an organized religion—to be spiritual. We all know people who claim and believe themselves to be devout, but are as devoid of spirituality as an empty Styrofoam cup. There are many millions of people, ten million Buddhists for example, who are exquisitely spiritual without the aid of a Judeo-Christian Jehovah, or Islamic Allah, or for that matter even a church or a political action committee or lobbying group. I reject neither the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition nor the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God, of course, but I am skeptical and must wonder if having been brought up with a certain set of institutionally sanctioned ideas is proof of their absolute truth. This is no argument against them either. But I would think such mere contingency ought to carry with it both humility and tolerance of other perspectives.

This is not to say that spirituality is not at home in organized religion. Of course it is. For billions of people one is unimaginable without the other. But I am sure that I am not alone in thinking there is also a home for spirituality outside the walls of the world’s established religions, in the individual soul, some might say. But it is just such concepts as individual and soul (plus spirituality, of course) that I want to scrutinize here. Nevertheless, my search in this book is for a nonreligious, noninstitutional, nontheological, nontextual, nonexclusive sense of spirituality, one which is not self-righteous, which is not based on Belief, which is not dogmatic, which is not antiscience, which is not other-worldly, which is not uncritical or cultist or kinky. I might be unkindly compared to the proverbial drunk looking for lost car keys under a streetlight, because that is the only place he can see. So be it. It is a good first place to look.
I have a dear colleague named Paul Woodruff with whom I often team-teach undergraduate courses. Over the past few years, we have jointly expressed growing frustration at the extent to which the notion of spirituality (or, Paul’s case, what he calls reverence) has been hijacked by organized religion, New Age eccentrics, and divisive sectarianism, and the extent to which so much of current day religion is mindlessly ahistorical, focussed on eternal truths, and therefore oblivious to the rich and violent history—and the current day faddishness—of much of what they believe. Indeed, I share with Bertrand Russell the conviction that the history of western religion is a history of intolerance, persecutions, and massacres, what the philosopher Hegel called “the slaughter bench of history.” This is not, I now believe, the efficient reason to reject religion, but it is a very good reason to reject those fictions on faith that would render irrelevant such vile remembrances. T. S. Eliot famously said, “Those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it.” Hence those who share my anxiety about current trends in American religiosity will agree that the Inquisition and the Holocaust and other such events are real in the larger history of religion, and must become “mere history.”

For most of my life, I have been dismissive of both spirituality and religion. This is to clarify the perspective and the starting point of this book. Not many of my readers may think me simple-minded, trying to recover what I should have learned had I been rightly raised in the conventional manner of religion, ritual, and belief. Others, my science and most of my political ideas, will think me benighted, or perhaps something of a sellout, for giving my lifelong down-to-earth scientific and admittedly hyper-rational way of thinking about things. But if the very idea of spirituality seemed to me to be a threat to sectarian religion and by uncritical and antiscientific thinking of my view of life, which manifested in my becoming a philosopher (it did come from philosophy) pointed to something else. Spirituality is not just a substitute for a disenchanted religion. Nor is it antiscience, un- or super-natural. There is a natural spirituality that I have always had a glimpse of, and this is what I want to discuss in this book.

A dozen years ago, my life began to change. For one thing, I was increasingly disillusioned with what I loved, philosophy, or at least the way philosophy was being defined and taught at our leading universities (including my own). What had originally been conceived as the love of wisdom had become a tedious technical enterprise, appealing more to study with affective disorders than to those who were seeking the meaning of philosophy utterly ignored the emotional side of being human, and I began to think that as professionally practiced, it had betrayed the very spiritual aspirations that had defined it since its beginnings in the Indian Vedas and the philosophy of the Greeks. As professional philosophy has gotten even narrower and exclusive, I began studying and appreciating the more var-
ied philosophies from around the world, including Chinese Taoism, South Asian Buddhism, and the tribal religions of the South Pacific. It became more
and more obvious to me that philosophy could not be severed from questions
about spirituality and that what has come to be called the philosophy of reli-
gion could not long survive in the rarified air of abstract proofs and proposi-
tions in which it had been defined. “Worldly” religion came to mean two things
to me. It represents the many religions of the world (and thus religious plu-
ralism) and also religion that really matters, not just as an intellectual exercise
but as a concrete way of coming to grips with life and the world.

I had long insisted that philosophy be sharply separated from religion, but
now I began to feel that I had overemphasized this point and once again had
confused religion and spirituality with sectarian proselytizing. Reading the
works of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, I started to appreciate
just how excessive the emphasis on belief had become in contemporary phi-
losophy and theology. I also realized that the philosophical overemphasis on
critical thinking had taken a devastating toll on the emotional engagement,
personal devotion, and commitment that lies at the heart of every religion
and in the heart of almost every beginning philosophy student. What I started
to feel, at first very uncomfortably, was that “spirituality” was a good way of
talking about the broader more inclusive conception of philosophy I was seek-
ing. Spirituality, as I conceived of it, embraced both emotion and rationality,
both philosophy and religion. But while religions seemed (and still seem) to
me to be overly parochial and exclusive (whether or not they have gone global
and enjoy worldwide success), spirituality, while admitting of any number of
local variations, remains truly nonsectarian and international. I now think
that it is what philosophy, the love of wisdom, is all about.

What happened then was most important. After many experiments, expe-
riences, missteps, foolishness, and the long hard process of maturing (imma-
turity being the dominant trait of philosophers), I met and slowly married
my wife, Kathleen Higgins. I say “slowly married,” an odd phrase to be sure,
because I did indeed wade, wriggle, and writhe into the beautiful life we now
share. Some of this may have had to do with the usual male fear of commit-
ment or more accurately, twice burned thrice shy, but much more importantly,
it took me quite some time to begin to appreciate and to understand Kathy’s
profound sense of spirituality.

By way of tantalizing my readers (and perhaps provoking them to look at
her books too) I note that Kathy was raised a pious Catholic, and like many
pious young Catholic girls, she intended at one time to become a nun. She is
now one of the better-known Nietzsche scholars in the world, and as anyone
who knows even a smidgen of philosophy knows, Nietzsche is the most veh-
emently anti-religious, anti-Christian philosopher in the Western canon. Kathy
retains and “religiously” practices her Catholicism, but she nevertheless de-
fends the great "God is dead" philosopher. How she manages this is a secret we save for those students who successfully complete their Ph.D.s with us, but the point, simply put, is that her Catholicism—and her love of Nietzsche—consists of a deep spirituality. It has taken me a long time to even begin to understand what this is, and it is my attempt to understand it, perhaps more than anything else, that drives me to write this book. In that sense, it is a work of love, although love is but one of the passions that will be expressed and discussed in these pages.

I have said that spirituality is not confined to religion, but I have not yet said much of anything about what a naturalized spirituality would be. Perhaps a good place to start would be to use an experience that most of us have had, perhaps often, and that is the experience of spirituality in music. I refer particularly to music that we say sweeps us away. Needless to say, some sorts of music are more conducive to such experience than others. But I would not too quickly dismiss the experiences evoked by even the most street-wise forms of rock-'n'-roll, grunge music, and gangsta-rap, much less the often profound responses we have to jazz and folk music. What is essential, as the philosopher Schopenhauer suggested many years ago, is that music takes us out of ourselves. It allows us to escape from our worries and desires (though here the lyrics of the music must surely be taken into account). It transports us to a larger universe and forges a community with our fellow listeners. Indeed, the most neglected cross-cultural universal in philosophy would seem to be the human need for music, however varied the modes and styles may be.

A different example of naturalized spirituality can be found, not surprisingly, in nature, if only we would look for it. Whether one sees the world as God's creation or as a secular mystery that science is on the way to figuring out, there is no denying the beauty and majesty of everything from mountain ranges, deserts, and rain forests to the exquisite details in the design of an ordinary mosquito. Whether or not we pay attention, Nature, uninvited, inflicts itself upon us, through the staggering force of a hurricane or an earthquake, curiously designated by Godless lawyers and insurance adjusters as "acts of God." When I was young, before philosophy, I was a gung-ho biology student (back in the days when the genome project was still science fiction). What I discovered, even then, was that what I loved about science was nature, not so much the quest for ultimate truth much less the Frankensteinian drive for power, but the very wonder of it all. Through my fascination with bugs and critters and microbes and plants of all sorts I found, as Schopenhauer found in music, a way to get out of myself, a way to escape from my insecurities and my often painful self-consciousness. Science—or rather, my fascination with nature—transported me into a larger universe and forged a global community with my fellow naturalists. But the important point is that this larger universe was this universe, this world, this nature, not supernature. The
place to look for spirituality, in other words, is right here, in our lives and in our world, not elsewhere.

Closer to the heart, spirituality is to be found in our grandest passions, love in particular. Petty and jealous love do not qualify, of course. But no one who has experienced expansive, romantic love would deny that the feeling is deeply spiritual. There is also spirituality in our sense of humanity and camaraderie, in our sense of family (which is not for a moment to deny that family life can be complicated and difficult), and it can be found in the best of friendships. There is awe and spirituality in the sense that we are not in complete control of our lives, that there are forces that determine our course that we do not understand that nevertheless seem to have some purpose. (I am no longer loathe to call this “fate.”) In a recent interview, scholar Ann Douglas described her recovery from alcoholism in terms of the feeling that “something intervened in my life.” She said, “I choose to call that God. I really don’t know any other way to describe it” (New York Times, Oct. 17, 1998). I don’t know what to call it either, but I do not want to invoke monotheism by calling it “God.” Even “Spirit” is too suggestive of a singular and supreme being. So I will stick with spirituality, or what I call naturalized spirituality, and try on my own to rediscover it through philosophy.