

A Spiritual Focus Can Strengthen Wellness

By Molly Dean



ver the past several months, my intention to write a wellness article for the *Michigan Bar Journal* slowed to a halt.

My outline got lost among the papers stacked on my desk at home; I recently uncovered it while looking for something else. I admit that misplacing the outline was probably a convenient avoidance tactic. In my defense, though, I think my reluctance to write the piece stemmed in part from trying to capture a concept that could be described in literally thousands of disparate ways. A question from my 40-year-old son, Ben—"Is this [current life] all there is?"—finally tipped the scales in favor of attempting to tackle the important but elusive topic.

What might come to mind for some at the mention of spirituality is fostering an appreciative sense and enjoyment of nature or extending oneself to help another. To me, spirituality seems far more complex than experiencing a transitory feeling, having one's ego stroked, or enjoying a peak experience. From my review of various cultural, religious, medical, and psychological resources, I found commonalities among these disciplines that have attempted to describe the importance of spirituality as our ability to derive meaning from our experiences, see the bigger picture, forge quality and harmonious connections with ourselves and others, seek integration, or enlarge life perspectives.

French paleontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."¹ I contend we ignore this particular insight at our peril. Pinning down spirituality is not my intent. I can, however, make a case for including some sort of spiritual focus (as might loosely fit the above

descriptions) as part of creating and fostering a balanced or wholesome existence. Taking into consideration your own varied belief systems, I am speaking of spirituality outside of any formal, organized religion's attempts to institutionalize values or create rituals that try to capture or intensify spirituality's perceived qualities.

I would describe the dimensions of wellness as physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual in nature and argue that of these five, the spiritual dimension is the most subjective and fleeting but holds value equal to the other four. Humans have made many strides in describing or measuring physical functions, intelligence, brain activity, emotionality, and social connections. Many visible signs and studies confirm that these are accepted and integral parts of humanity and that well-being is better accounted for when these dimensions are attended to in healthy ways through diet, exercise, strong social ties, and easily accessible community support and resources. Spirituality is not so easily named, understood, or quantified. In fact, until the past decade, even though plenty of religions and world-renowned figures have touted its merits for inclusion in the puzzle of life, it has been largely dismissed or ignored as arbitrary or nonessential to human functioning.

Why entertain the possibility that being attuned to our spirituality matters? Simply

because by acknowledging and attempting to include and balance all human dimensions, we strive for enhancement of human life and give ourselves permission to enter into its mystery, to look more deeply at elemental questions: Who am I? What is my purpose at this time in history? What is my legacy, knowing that my existence is impermanent?

Many legal professionals are taught to operate primarily from the ego's realm; to exercise control and willpower, strive, stay closely attached to outcomes, and win. Navigating life from the ego's realm can definitely assist us in doing good work, but what happens when we fail to open to the components of life that cannot be fully measured or explained or when logic eludes us? What problems may be solved or horizons broadened by shifting to a more spiritual focus? I think when we invite our wisdom to help reconfigure our tendencies towards pragmatism or dualistic thinking, we learn to help ourselves and others to not just survive, but thrive. Perhaps what emerges from life's ordinary stressors and conundrums when our spiritual windows and doors are propped open are myriad opportunities that otherwise might pass us by or diminish our abilities to make meaning or lean into hope. But how do we shift our habitual gaze and ultimately focus with more clarity on wholeness?

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Brian Luke Seward is a clinical practitioner whose interests include helping people connect to their spiritual selves to better manage their wellness quotients. He does not make claims or promises guaranteeing a trouble-free existence, but aims to provide practical directions for life management. I find them clear and simple in their ability to help me learn the elemental language of that part of myself that invites me to tend to my wellness. Let me share them with you:

- Be quiet
- Be open
- Be curious
- Be patient
- Be playful

Sitting alone in silence each morning for 15 minutes with my coffee in a quiet corner, before the daily hubbub gets rolling, gives me a chance to breathe, listen, muse, dream, and tune into my feelings, thoughts, and needs. The days in which I engage in this short ritual are the days I notice I am more anchored and open to possibilities. When I begin my day in quietude, though I may not like how the day plays out, I am less apt to close down or try to exert control over the realities before me. Instead of taking things personally, I am able to problem solve with a patient and curious mind, relinquishing the reckless and closed mind that is quite apt at ruling the roost. It usually follows that, with a lighter load, I can more easily laugh at the foibles I've created and behave in more playful, generous, and compassionate ways. This is not a perfect spiritual formula, but from years of using this ritual, my life has grown more balanced and I can better connect to myself and others.

What form of spirituality do you have available to help balance your wellness quotients? What is it that widens your path, smooths your rough edges, and helps you include a bit of meaning-making and connectivity into your otherwise hectic life? Whatever it is, encourage it and celebrate its place in your life. ■



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RESOURCES

- Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992)
- Borysenko, *Pocketful of Miracles: Prayer, Meditations, and Affirmations to Nurture Your Spirit Every Day of the Year* (New York: Warner Books, 1994)
- Seward, *Managing Stress: Principles and Strategies for Health and Well-being* (Ontario: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2011)
- Brian Luke Seward, Stress Management Expert, *Stress Management and Human Spirituality*, Presentation at the Crestmoor Park TEDxTalks (2012), available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRm38lm7xc>> (accessed January 19, 2014)
- Dossey, *One Mind: How Our Individual Mind is Part of a Greater Consciousness and Why it Matters* (Carlsbad: Hay House, 2013)

ENDNOTE

1. Brainy Quotes <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/p/pierreteil160888.html>> (accessed January 19, 2014).