

## Engaged Spirituality

Everybody knows Siri now. And, in fact, there are a whole lot of Siri successors out there in the world with voice controlled digital intelligence in products from Google and Android and Amazon. But I believe Siri was first. At least, she was my first introduction to digital voice services. And I can remember exactly the first time I met her.

Two of my closest friends are a couple from Trenton, New Jersey. For some time, the husband and I served together when I lived and worked in New Jersey. Every once and while, they will get down to visit my wife and me. Let me share a little story about something that happened years ago. How long ago? Not long by human standards. But very long by current technology standards. My children, for example, measure time by the unveiling of Apple products. Where as some of us talk about Spring time and Summer time and Fall time, they talk about iPod time, or iPad time, or iPhone time. And within those larger Apple centuries are smaller Apple years, particularly where the iPhone is concerned. For example, just last year, we entered the age of iPhone 7. This episode I'm remembering happened in the era of iPhone 4S. S, I used to think, incorrectly, even stood for "Siri." My friend was so excited because he was one of the first people to get the iPhone 4S, right after it was made available to the public. And, at that point, the phone had some cutting edge technology that he was keen to show off. So, he pulled out his toy and gave me a demonstration of what was, at the time, a cell phone revolution. "Siri," the automated voice that takes questions and responds with eerily accurate responses or not, but Siri certainly was one of the more prized features of the phone. Today on the iPhone 7, as then on the iPhone 4S, you can ask Siri for directions, to play back text messages, to give you information about hotels, planes, trains, and automobiles, all kinds of stuff. Very impressive. My wife hadn't yet seen the wonderful display of technological wizardry he had been showing me, so, when she walked in the room, wanting to astound her right from the start, instead of asking Siri to read his latest email, he asked Siri a question: "Siri," he said, chuckling proudly, "what is the meaning of life?"

Just then, the phone rang, and while my wife went over to answer the phone, Siri answered the question: “The meaning of life is a concept that provides an answer to the philosophical question concerning the purpose and significance of life or existence in general.” I was flat out amazed. My friend, his wife, and I were laughing because we were so impressed, but my wife had missed the show, so when she hung up the phone, she asked, “did she really give you an answer? What did she say?” I later found out that the answer she gave was the answer you find to this question in Wikipedia. Still, it was amazing that Siri had retrieved it. So, then, my wife said, “do it again, let me hear it.” But this time, machines being machines, Siri wouldn’t work right. At first, she couldn’t hear what my friend was asking. He kept saying, “what is the meaning of life,” and she kept hearing him say things like, “what is the night?” or “where can I buy light bulbs,” or some such nonsense. Finally, exasperated after asking Siri five or six times without getting any better recognition from her, with us protesting to my wife that she really had answered the question, Siri picked up what my friend asked. He all but shouted, enunciating VERY clearly, “Siri, what is the meaning of life?” And Siri responded, “I find it odd that you would ask this question of an inanimate object.” I guess she told us! Siri 2017 has an even more developed sense of humor. While I was working on this talk, just for fun, I asked her again. “Siri, what is the meaning of life.” Her answer this time: “All evidence to date suggests it’s chocolate.” Smart phone with a smart mouth.

Siri, the inanimate object, seems to understand that you ought not ask spiritual questions, or try to find answers about spiritual leadership from machines, no matter how sophisticated those machines are. We have all these spiritual questions and I don’t think it’s surprising that we often look to the tools we’ve created to make our lives easier to answer difficult questions for us. After all, we’ve created computers that think faster and more broadly and sometimes, where math and physics and other areas are concerned, even more deeply than many of us. But solving equations is easier than solving matters of the spirit. Spiritual questions can only be explored fruitfully by spiritual beings. By us. It is incredibly difficult to get answers to ultimate questions by appealing to penultimate resources, particularly resources we’ve created from our own hands.

We can't expect our creations to explain the meaning of our created-ness, the essence of who we are. To find ultimate answers we must seek a connection with the ultimate source and ground of our being. And no matter how smart she gets, that connecting point will never be Siri.

Given what I've just said, even though I do now carry an iPhone, I wouldn't ask Siri to define spirituality or ask her what are the ways to prepare oneself for a spiritual form of leadership or membership in the life of a faith community. I suspect if I did and she didn't chide me for seeking such an answer from an inanimate object, she'd turn again to Wikipedia. The definition there is this:

Spirituality can refer to an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality; an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his/her being, or the "deepest values and meanings by which people live." Spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer and contemplation, are intended to develop an individual's inner life, spiritual experience includes that of connectedness with a larger reality, yielding a more comprehensive self, with other individuals or the human community; with nature or the cosmos, or with the divine realm. Spirituality is often experienced as a source of inspiration or orientation in life. It can encompass belief in immaterial realities or experiences of the transcendent nature of the world.

That's a mouthful. And perhaps a little more complex than the answer needs to be. Because in the end, I don't think you can define spirituality as much as you can "live" and then "show" spirituality. When I think, for example, of the most spiritual moments in my life, I don't come up with definitions, I come up with stories. When I think of the meaning of spirituality, I don't think of words, I think of people, and the way they live their lives. When I wonder about spiritual practices, I don't just read a book, I listen and watch when people talk about prayer and worship and contemplative living and stewardship. Spirituality is the nurture and living out of one's faith: by praying; by worshipping; by contemplating the presence of God in our world and lives; by giving of ourselves and our resources in response to God's sharing of God's own Son. That's why, when I think about spirituality, I don't think of definitions, I think of people, spiritual people, and, since I am a biblical scholar, biblical people. Faith people.

How are spirituality and faith related? Well, that's complicated too. It's almost like that classic conundrum: the chicken and the egg. Which came first? Philosophically, it's hard to say which came first. Faith or spirituality. As a leader or a follower, does one need to be spiritual to have faith? Or does faith enable one to be spiritual? They are so integrally related, I don't think it's worth debating.

Whichever comes first, I do believe that spirituality, a lived spirituality, enlivens, strengthens, nurtures, and sustains faithfulness in just the same way that exercising enlivens, strengthens, nurtures, and sustains the human body. Spirituality is the exercising of faith. I can see, feel, and emulate such spirituality not by reading and studying definitions, and not only by practicing spiritual disciplines, but by watching spiritual people and listening to and learning from--and then emulating--their stories. I have my own spiritual stories. Stories about those moments when I felt that in my life there was something more than just the physical me, that I was connected to someone more vast than me. Scholars call these vertical spiritual moments. These are the times when one feels a connection with the transcendent, the divine, with the movement of God in one's life and one's world. These are the vertical moments of spirituality, the moments where you feel God's presence and hopefully, find a way to respond to God's presence in your life.

Let me use John of Patmos as an example here. His life was a mess, exiled on the island of Patmos. The lives of his church people were messes, enduring the possibility of persecution if they stood up for their faith in a world that wanted people to proclaim and show faith for Rome and the Roman emperor. John, in the midst of all this, sought continually God's presence. No doubt he had his own skills and abilities. He was a wonderful writer. Given all his great imagery and rhetorical flair, I assume he was also a great preacher. Clearly, he knew how to build alliances. He had done so well as an organizer for the followers of Christ that the Romans felt they had to intervene to put all that organizing to a stop. And he was clearly a powerful evangelist, having created and sustained churches in areas where faith in Christ made a person a social outcast. He had skills. But he didn't turn to his abilities first. He turned to God. On the

Lord's day, he says at 1:9, at the very opening of his work. He was continually at worship, at the work of prayer and contemplative connection with God. The poetic presentation of his dreams and visions and the way he then connects those dreams and visions to the social circumstance of his people using poetry and hymn, indicates that he appealed often to liturgy and used liturgy to build a worshipful relationship between himself and God. And, clearly, prayer and meditation were important to him, as he was able to turn his island exile into a powerful place of connecting with God's spirit, so much so that the Spirit was able to transport him in ways that enabled a connection with God that few have been able to mirror before or since.

In John's discussion of his work, we get the picture of a spiritual leader, and in his preparation for his own leadership of his churches we see someone practicing the disciplines necessary to encourage strong spiritual leadership. I think you know what they are: prayer; study, particularly biblical study, knowing the stories and traditions so that you can emulate the people, particularly Jesus of Nazareth, chronicled in those stories and traditions; worship; meditation; confession, stewardship or the practice of lived generosity. You have, as a church, just been engaged in a season of stewardship. As I understand it, you have a time of consecrating your gifts and pledges at worship tomorrow. This practice of discerning how you give in response to what God has given to your church and your family and your individual lives, this discipline of stewardship, thinking how you steward your resources in service to God's presence and work in the world, is a key spiritual discipline. I think everyone knows what the spiritual disciplines are, taking the time to focus on those disciplines, to actually practice them. That's where it's difficult isn't it. Finding the space and initiative to practice the spiritual disciplines we know are important.

When I was growing up in church worship there were times that this feeling of God's presence was so powerful that I felt physical sensations, goose bumps exploding all over the skin on my arms and shoulders and back. I could feel like I was in the presence of God as the people of God worshipped God. It is that powerful feeling that draws me to worship even today, to be in

a place with a people who can feel connected in the spirit with the movement of God's Holy Spirit. That is worship is all about. That is why we come. Is it not?

And yet, spirituality is not just about what we feel. Spirituality is also about commitment. Relationship with God, a vertical spiritual relationship with God, demands a recognition of God's Lordship, and that recognition creates a pull on one's life. Certainly stewardship comes into play just here! A religious community is a gathering of folk who have come together in their understanding of God's Lordship and what it demands and have committed themselves to nurture their spiritual lives in ways that enable them to have the power and vitality to represent that Lordship in the way they steward their very lives. And they steward their lives out of a sense of generosity, living generosity for God's mission and God's people and God's world.

There are some who argue that this vertical connection with God that can be nurtured through the disciplines like prayer, worship, meditation, stewardship and other such practices, is different from and better than membership in an organized religious tradition or community. And so we hear what has become almost a mantra for the generations of the early 21st century: "I'm spiritual, but not religious." In other words, I connect with the divine, I have a vertical relationship with the transcendent, but I don't need to join or attend a church.

In her article, "Faith Unbound: Why Spirituality is sexy but Religion is not," Millie Ziegler Hemingway observes:

The number of people who self-identify using the long-popular phrase "spiritual but not religious" is still growing. In 1998, 9 percent of American adults told the General Social Survey they were spiritual but not religious. By 2008, it had risen to 14 percent. Among those ages 18 to 39, the increase was even more dramatic, and 18 percent now say they are spiritual but not religious.

According to a 2008 Newsweek, beliefnet poll, the numbers are even more dramatic. This poll concluded that "24% of the United States population identifies itself as spiritual but not religious."

How this distinction developed and gained such traction is difficult to say. Appealing to a Duke sociologist, Hemingway theorizes that the growth occurs not because people are less likely to identify as religious, but because nonreligious people are more likely to say that they are spiritual. She even argues that part of the popularity of the phrase “spiritual not religious” is that it sounds and feels sexy. She even has data to back this claim up. A British social psychologist at Britain’s Southampton University looked at 57 studies covering 15,000 experiment subjects and reported in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Review* that North Americans find “intrinsically religious” people--the spiritual people--desirable, but that the desirability decreases when people portray themselves as extrinsically religious.

Psychologist Jan Sinnott attempts to help by distinguishing between spirituality and religion. She argues that spirituality is our personal relationship to the sacred or the transcendent, that vertical relationship that informs all other relationships and gives meaning to our lives. Religion, she says, refers to the practices and beliefs of a particular faith system.

This definition might give us a clue as to why spirituality seems “sexier” than religion. For the opposite of spiritual is not, as one would think, material. Hemingway makes the case that the word “religion” comes from the Latin *religare*. *Re*: back. *Ligare*: to bind. So, religion is associated with being bound. She goes on to argue: In that sense, defining oneself as ‘spiritual, not religious’ couldn’t be more apt, reflecting a desire to not be bound by any rules, community, or belief. So, on the surface it appears that to be spiritual is to be free of the rules of any particular faith tradition, and that, apparently, for many Americans feels right.

But this distinction is a false one. Spirituality, too, is about commitment. This truth is why I insist on remembering that the commitment to stewardship is a spiritual practice. Relationship with God, a vertical relationship with God, demands a recognition of God’s Lordship, and that recognition creates a pull on one’s life. A religious community is a gathering of folk who have come together in their understanding of God’s Lordship and what it demands and have committed themselves to nurture their spiritual lives in ways that enable them to have the power and vitality to represent that Lordship in the way they live their lives. Their religious,

faith lives together are a visible representation, then, of their spiritual connection with God. In this way, religious traditions and practices, like the practice of stewardship, are the corporate living out of the spiritual connection we have with God. Quoting a seminary professor, Hemingway notes that unfortunately, “Spiritual has, in some sense, come to mean ‘my own personal religion with my own individual creed.’” But that is a misreading of the vertical connection with God. Personal relationship with God has always been about relationship lived out in, with, and for community. And this brings us back to story, in this case, the biblical stories, whether in the Old Testament or the New. The most powerful and inspiring spiritual stories are drawn out within the context of community: Moses, Joshua, the prophets, the Psalmist, Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, John of Patmos, they, all of them, and all like them, have a deep spiritual connection with God that is undeniable, and yet, their lives are not lived in solitary with a freedom directed only at themselves. Their lives are lived in and for community, so much so that the most spiritual figure of all time, Jesus, God incarnate, lived out his spirituality in such a way that he was bound to God’s people just as surely as he was bound to that Roman cross. Jesus’ life was a life of lived stewardship. He gave everything to the movement of God’s kingdom in this world. Look again at John of Patmos. He lives out his vertical connection with God in so horizontal a fashion that he demands that his spiritual people engage the Roman world in very political, economic, and social ways. He sets the example. He stewards his very freedom to the profession of Christ’s Lordship in our world.

This “horizontal” part of spirituality is the piece that is often missing when people think of spirituality, it seems to me. Too often, to think of spirituality is to think exclusively of myself and my relationship with God, without acknowledging, as in the case of biblical spirituality, that relationship with God implies connection with God’s people. Clearly, this is what the author of 1 John means to say at 1:20-21: <sup>20</sup> Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God *must* love their brothers and sisters also.”

Vertical spirituality *must* flow into horizontal spirituality. In other words, a spiritual leader is also a prophetic leader. Author Joseph Nangle calls this horizontal experience of spirituality engaged spirituality. Nangle writes on American spirituality after spending some time in Latin American and looking at spirituality from the perspective of the impoverished and disempowered. He concludes that from this Latin American perspective, American spirituality today seems too often to be spirituality “all about me.” And while one need not agree with all of his conclusions, and some of his political ones are sure to cause heartburn for many readers, I think his primary point is very important. As one reviewer of his book correctly observes:

Nangle recognizes that the vast majority of spiritual writers and practitioners focus on the individual. While if reminded most people would perhaps recognize this fact, it feels like a proverbial slap in the face when returning from a culture with a much greater emphasis on community and one’s spiritual journey within that community. What Nangle seeks to recover or discover, in the case of American spirituality, is a spirituality that emphasizes the action of the Holy Spirit in “this messy, disorganized state of our world.” In a word, he wants a spirituality that bridges one’s private journey, on the one hand, and the suffering that determines the existence of so many, on the other.

He goes on to say that for Nangle,

The great misunderstanding of the Incarnation occurs when believers only consider Jesus to be active as a personal and interpersonal agent, and ignore the social and political dimension of his ministry.

And then he concludes that what is refreshing about Nangle’s book

...is the effort to connect the “world” with that personal relationship to God that is often referred to as “spirituality.”...[Nangle’s book] would be ideal for students in Christian spirituality programs who often need reminders that a suffering world exists to which our spirituality must (necessarily) respond.

In being good stewards, we are being good spiritual responders to the needs in the world around us. We give not just to give, we give in response to God’s giving, our generosity is a

response to God's generosity, and we give with the intent of God's giving: transformation of our world so that our world more and more approximates God's kingdom. Look at Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Here is spirituality at its highest point: the dove descending on him, the communion with God on the mount of transfiguration. This is my son. Deeply, fiercely connected in that vertical sense. Then 2:1-3:6, all about the spiritual leadership having definitive social and political ramifications: touching lepers, forgiving sinners, eating with tax collectors and sinners, breaking Sabbath laws when those laws get in the way of feeding and healing God's people.

In my own life story, I have been driven to this kind of connection between the vertical and the horizontal. I have seen how important prayer, study, worship, contemplation, stewardship and other spiritual disciplines are so important for one's life. I have also seen how important it is to connect that gift of being in close relationship to God with the power that comes from that relationship to make changes in our world.

My parents are, for me, the model of spirituality that is both personal and religious, that is intimate and institutional. Their deeply personal faith lived itself out in church, as they pressed our religious community to live into its spiritual, faith commitments. For them, there was no divide between what God did in their personal lives and what God called them and our church to do in our social and communal lives. The religious institution of Hill Street Baptist church was a vessel to help all of us spiritual believers and followers of Christ make faith come alive not just in our hearts and spirits but in the structures and systems of the town in which we lived.

I grew up in a segregated community until I went to the 8th grade. Though white kids lived all around me, I knew not a single white child by name until the morning I stepped onto the campus of Smithfield High School for that first integrated school year. I remember how odd it felt not to be in a world any longer where my parents knew most of the teachers and my teachers had great knowledge of and respect for my parents. We were, teachers, students, and parents, all a part of the same church network. We had Sunday School Unions that connected us, there were joint worships that connected us, there was social activism that connected us. Our pastors moved

from church to church preaching and teaching and because we followed them, we ended up sitting in pews beside people from other churches in our sanctuary and in theirs often. My spiritual world and my social/school world intersected all the time. But in that new integrated reality, things were different. For the first time, I was in a world for which I had no prior connection. And I remember getting off the bus and feeling almost completely lost.

Almost. What gave me a sense of courage in that context was the image I remember most still to this day of my parents. There are two that will always be with me. This is the earliest, when I was very young, and walked into their bedroom without knocking and found myself utterly shocked to see what they were doing. My father was on his knees on his side of the bed, and my mom was on her knees on her side of the bed. Praying. I had seen them pray at the breakfast, lunch, and dinner table. I had seen them pray in church. I had never seen them pray in this personal way, surrendering themselves before God. They tell me often that the reason my dad, who never made more than around \$14,000 a year and my mom, who was a wonderful teacher's aide, but did not get rich doing that, were able to put three children through college and encourage them that they could encounter and conquer any situation that came before them was prayer. Through all their struggles and ours in growing up, they prayed. I don't know because I never walked in on them again, but I suspect they still pray every night the same way. Sometimes, still, I will call them and ask them to pray particularly for something, because I believe that God hears their prayers in a particularly powerful way. I don't have any statistical evidence to back that up. All I have is that image of them on their knees, and the calm and assurance it gave me to see them there. I took that vertical relationship they had with God with me when I walked to my first integrated class that morning. Because I knew that even then as I walked, my dad, working in the meat packing plant, and my mom, at home, whatever else they were doing, they were praying for my brothers and me.

Their prayers led them to organize with our church and the other churches in our town, led them to work with the school board, led them to involve themselves in critical ways in every level of county government. They stewarded their time and resources so as to transform our

community for the better. Their goal was to insure that the integrated world my brothers and me and the other children of Main Street Baptist church found themselves in would be as supportive and nurturing as my segregated elementary school had been. Their prayers materialized into social, civic, and even political action. Their secure life with God pushed them to secure life for as many of God's children as they could. I have seen vertical faith lived out horizontally. I have seen spirituality be religious. I have seen spirituality as lived stewardship. And I am here standing before you today the person that I am because of how my mom and dad understood and lived an engaged form of spirituality.