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On Spirituality and Service

*We are not human beings
having a spiritual experi-
ence, we are spiritual beings
having a human experience.*

By David Saurjer

—Teilhard de Chardin

What does it mean to be a spiritual being? For me it means being someone with an inner life, an inner journey. The inner journey is the movement over time of our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and feelings, our demons and depressions. It is, as my wife Jennifer would say, our "soul weather." In the East, the idea of an inner journey is immediately understood, but here in the West, it is seen as odd, unusual.

In this country, we tend to think almost exclusively in terms of the outer journey—our relationships, our work, our activities, our enemies. Even our religious life is more concerned with "good works" than with deep spiritual understanding. We don't see our inner life as a journey leading us through both painful and pleasurable emotions, ultimately bringing us to a higher level of understanding. We equate spiritual health with acting and feeling "good," and rarely grasp the depth and meaning that a rough period can bring to our lives. Every soul has its "dark night," noted St. John of the Cross, the renowned Sixteenth-century Christian mystic.

I have had my own share of dark nights. Over the past 22 years, I have plunged into every non-Christian tradition I could find. I've been a Hindu celibate, a Taoist wanderer, a Buddhist disciple, a devoted follower, an activist and a rebel. I've experienced sublime and radiant moments, and I've been utterly depressed and bewildered, in the blackest despair.

But there is a strange logic to our inner journeys—some kind of mechanism that seems to steer us through good times and bad, toward greater understanding, integrity, and peace. Ironically, in spite of my exotic religious experiences, I learned the concept of the inner journey from my own Christian tradition. There are riches in Christianity I had never suspected, but

I had to go full circle from bitter agnosticism and long hours in the lotus to find them. Finally, after 37 years, I have found my true vocation: helping people integrate their inner journeys with their outer lives of action.

What happens when spirituality and service—our inner and outer lives—are not connected? Those individuals who serve without an inner dimension, although they may be motivated to help the suffering of the world, can easily burn out or become cynical and jaded. Conversely, those individuals with an inner life who never express their gift through service become what some might call a "hypocrite." Former Secretary General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld hit the nail on the head when he said, "In our era the road to holiness must pass through the world of action." Yes indeed.

If the great circles of our outer and inner lives overlap, if our core values and beliefs and convictions can find expression in our outer work, there spirituality and service are joined. This is the real meaning of the term vocation, which is not simply a career but a calling. For the Buddhists this concept of "right livelihood" means that whatever we do in the world must not only serve others, but also serve ourselves—it must enrich our inner journey. Think of Mother Teresa, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Albert Schweitzer. They are great cultural heroes precisely because they have integrated spirituality and service. Frederick Buechner expressed it beautifully when he said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

As we struggle to bring peace and justice to this world through our service and our advocacy, it is crucial that we find ways to fortify ourselves and keep our inner light burning brightly. Gandhi once said, "We ourselves must be the change we want to see in the world." We can develop our own personal path through means both secular—like exercising or writing in a journal—and religious—like meditating or going to church.

I encourage people in service programs to develop their own service prayer or pledge, or "personal mission statement" as

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management expert Stephen Covey puts it. Call it what you will, a service pledge builds a sturdy bridge between your inner and outer lives. Every morning or evening, or when things get rough, you can say this pledge softly to yourself. I have my own version of this prayer, which has motivated and comforted me for many years.

Perhaps the most beautiful service prayer I've ever heard is that of the Dalai Lama, the remarkable being who won the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize and who has maintained an attitude of service and loving kindness in spite of the slaughter and subjugation of millions of his fellow Tibetans:

*For as long as space endures
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I too abide,
To dispel the misery of the world.*

This is the sentiment of a saint, of a Bodhisattva—someone whose inner and outer lives are unified and who is committed unequivocally to the well-being of others. This is the place where spirituality and service have become woven into a seamless miracle.

I see many Bodhisattvas in service: in Washington offices, at conferences, in campus service programs. And I see an Earth that desperately needs every warrior of the heart to find a road to holiness that passes profoundly through the world of action. 🙏

David Sawyer helps people explore the connection between spirituality and service through workshops. He is the director of Students For Appalachia, a campus service program at Berea College in Kentucky.