Soul Searching: The Quest for Spiritual Intelligence

by Frances Sink, Ph.D.

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I guess most of us are average, some with a little more or a little less spiritual intelligence and our "God Spots," for the most part, are not oversized or overactive. So, how do we, of average spiritual inclination, cultivate transcendent, compassionate awareness and gain access to the deep places of the soul?

Understand, I am always trying to figure out
what the soul is,
and where hidden,
and what shape-
...and what the soul is, also
I believe I will never quite know.
Though I play at the edges of knowing,
truly I know
our part is not knowing,
but looking, and touching, and loving,
which is the way I walk on,
softly,
through the pale-pink morning light.
from "Bone," by Mary Oliver[1]

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Within us is the soul of the whole,
the wise silence, the universal beauty,
to which every part and particle is equally related;
the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius;
when it breathes through our will, it is virtue;
when it flows through our affection, it is love.
from" The Oversoul," by Ralph Waldo Emerson[2]

This summer marks my thirtieth year in the practice of psychology. And studying intelligence is one of the *unique* aspects of a psychological practice. While not as sexy as those mysterious Rorschach cards, the intelligence test, even with its many limitations, offers a window into a person's inner life and their style of interacting with the world.

Thinking about intelligence and how it affects an individual's life has always been a part of my work.

So, several years ago when I came upon theories in the area of *spiritual* intelligence I was intrigued, and those readings brought me to a relatively new field which has been named "neurotheology." I plan to offer you some of the theories and findings from studies of spiritual intelligence and neurotheology that should resonate with questions about what it means to have a spiritual life. But as my title indicates, I want also to speak about the Soul, and particularly about my Soul, so that is where I'm going to begin.

Psychology, and certainly neuropsychology, doesn't talk about the Soul- that word with its poetic and religious connotations doesn't really have a place in the scientist-practitioner model in which I was trained. Psychology speaks of the Self (with a capital S), not the Soul—the psychology of the Self, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-actualization.

But in my personal experience, I am quite sure I knew I had a Soul long before I knew I had a Self. Like most Christian children of my generation, my nightly prayers began:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my Soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my Soul to take-

My Soul was in God's keeping for many years. My family was active in our large Presbyterian church in Winston-Salem, NC. My mother sang in the choir, my father was a deacon. I was also at home in the Moravian church down the street, where my best friend Debbie sometimes invited me to sing in her choir and where we all attended traditional Moravian Lovefeasts at Advent. Going to a chicken pie supper at a neighbor or friend's church social hall was a reasonable Saturday night outing for my family.

My grandmother attended an old time country Methodist church in the rural outskirts of our town. Late Saturday afternoons in the summer she and I would go to the church side cemetery with fresh flowers cut from her garden to dress up the graves of our loved ones so they would be "proper" for Sunday morning. I went there for vacation Bible School and Christmas pageants, in addition to my own church, and I felt I belonged there too. When I spent the night with my grandmother she got down and prayed on her knees at bedtime. It was different from how I prayed, but I practiced it when I stayed with her.

In my childhood, religion was about love and family, and communities of belonging. It was woven through the rhythms of my daily life and it was growing my Soul.

My upbringing was Christian, but it wasn't so much about Jesus for me, and I felt bad about that. I loved Jesus and what he taught, but his death scared me, and that fear was far deeper than any glorious resurrection that it promised. The blood of the Lamb, the crown of thorns, and the burden of the cross wore me down after many Easters, and left me feeling never good enough to measure up to Christian righteousness.

I met some Born Again Christians in my teens and I tried really hard to get the Spirit myself, but it never happened. I felt bad about that too. And then I gave up prayer, feeling unworthy of the ear of a God that I could not please.

By the time I left the church and left Christianity, actually within weeks of arriving at college, I had decided I was too smart for it all. My friends were atheists or Jewish or already lapsed Catholics who'd been free of church since the day after their confirmation. I found a new family of peers, a new intellectual community of belonging, and new rhythms to my life.

Even in my more overtly intellectual young adult time of life, my sense of my Soul never failed, but it settled distantly into the background of my being. It responded to the poetry I read, and horrible as it was, the poetry of yearning that I wrote. Edna St. Vincent Millay captured life's essence for me in her poem "Renascence", which finishes-

The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,—
No higher than the soul is high. ...
But East and West will pinch the heart
That can not keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat—the sky
will cave in on him by and by.[3]

For me the Soul was as expansive as all the natural world, and, as inwardly hidden as the answers to my own search. I worried over pinched hearts and flat souls, including my own. But as my academic career moved more and more towards a profession in psychology, I found my Soul going comfortably along for the ride.

Over my years of practice, I came to appreciate the many ways that psychotherapy **is** soul-satisfying work. There is no more sacred space than to be present with individual's honest search for the meaning and truth of their life. That has been my privilege now for many years.

It is no surprise, then, that a religious dropout without a spiritual home, dedicated to the individual's search for meaning and truth, would somehow, someday, find Unitarian Universalism. That story is a different life chapter. Suffice it to say, my Soul found a new home when I found this church. And over the years here, my parallel professional and religious lives have increasingly found opportunities to cross over and inform each other.

So, several years ago when I read developmental psychologist Howard Gardner's speculations about the existence of a *spiritual* intelligence I was intrigued.[4] This was a serious cross over, by a serious Harvard scientist whom I greatly respected. Gardner's work in the area of multiple intelligences has changed the way we look at human intelligence—from something you either have or you don't have- into a complex array of abilities we all have to a greater or lesser extent.

Briefly, the multiple intelligences are:

- *linguistic* and *logical mathematic abilities*, abilities typically valued in school;
- *musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and spatial intelligences*-valued in the arts.

And two *personal intelligences* (which are now popularly called emotional intelligence):

- *interpersonal* denoting a person's capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of others;
- *intrapersonal* intelligence which involves your ability to understand yourself- your own desires, fears, and capacities.

The proposed domain of spiritual intelligence includes three aspects—first, a desire to know about existential issues, the mystery of our existence, the meaning of life, love, tragic loss, and death, the nature of our relationship to the wider world and to existences beyond our comprehension.

Second, skill at achieving certain psychological states or having had certain phenomenal experiences deemed "spiritual" such as meditating, achieving trance states, or envisioning the transcendent.

And third, having a spiritual effect on others either through activities or by just being an actualized spiritual being—the Dalai Lama, Buddha, Jesus, Saint Joan, Confucius, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. are all examples of individuals Gardner would consider to have highly developed spiritual intelligence.

It was not Gardner's brilliant scientific career but his own personal experience of the transcendent that told him the spiritual domain is central to the human experience and deserves further study. He wrote:

> *When I listen to or perform certain kinds of music, I lose track of mundane concerns, alter my perceptions of space and time, and occasionally feel in touch with issues of cosmic import. … I feel enriched, ennobled, and humbled by the encounter. I have similar, though less acute reactions when I come into contact with works of visual art and architecture, with evocative dramatic performances, and with the work of certain very powerful writers. And,… I have some of these experiences when in contact with people I love, particularly at times of unbridled happiness or sadness*[5]

Gardner's writing reminded me of another Harvard psychologist, his predecessor by almost 100 years, William James who also saw the need to study the interior origins of spiritual intellect. William James was the God-son of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the son of a transcendentalist theologian, Henry James, Senior. He is best known for his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which 100 years ago introduced the psychology of religion into formal study. James summed up his thesis this way:

> *The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense. All theologies and all ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed; [from these] experiences … We are… made convincingly aware of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness. The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we… receive—help us to live,*

...[give] assurances of a world beyond the sense, they melt our hearts and communicate significance and value to everything, and make us happy.[6]

William James studied the personal accounts of the mystical experiences of individuals to find evidence of this most basic substrate of experience- the spiritual or religious impulse. All the rest that humans create beyond this original impulse he referred to as our *over-beliefs*[7]—the great pluralism of individual interpretations based a person's intellect, personality, and culture in which they live.

Over the past 10-20 years, the search for the basic human instinct towards religion has grown from James' psychological study into a field now known as neurotheology.[8] Neurotheology looks to identify those basic hardwired neurological mechanisms that correlated with the religious experience. Even though any mental task tends to involve a complicated web of neural connections, advanced brain imaging technologies can capture a snapshot of the brain in action and can confirmed a discrete function, at a specific location, during a particular behavior, by a subject.

For example, our frontal lobes, which are responsible for regulating our attention, have been found to be active in brain imaging studies of Buddhist monks while meditating. They are active during prayers of Franciscan nuns. And they are active when religious students recite religious passages.[9]

The brain's prefrontal cortex has also received considerable attention, as it is related to how we regulate our moods. It is generally more active on the left side for people who are more consistently positive in temperament, than for those who tend to be more negative. In another study of Buddhist monks, a senior Tibetan Lama's prefrontal brain activity was so far to the left that the researchers labeled the "happiest man on earth."[10]

Looking at this same area of brain function, when ordinary people were taught meditation in an eight-week course and then compared to non-meditators, they showed a pronounced shift in the happier direction. When they were also given flu shots in conjunction with meditation training, the meditators had a stronger immune boosting response than non-meditators who also received the flu shots.

So if meditation can change the brain, what is being cultivated? Buddhism, spiritual intelligence, neurological pathways for emotional and physical wellbeing? The Dalai Lama himself, who follows this research closely, said, "You don't have to become a Buddhist. Everyone has the potential to lead a peaceful, meaningful life."[11] For some, meditation may be a doorway to better health and wellbeing, for others it may open the doorway to the transcendent.

A third area of the brain under active discussion in neurotheology is the temporal lobes, an area of the brain which has come to be known as "the God Spot,"[12] because the indicators are that is the area likely associated with intense spiritual, transcendent, or religious experiences in persons with healthy functioning brains.

Working backwards from extreme cases has often helped neurologists to discover the discrete functions of different brain areas. One such case is the finding that patients with Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE) can report intense and explicit religious experiences. These include bright lights, visions of figures, and hearing "the voice of God." Unlike other forms of epilepsy TLE is usually not characterized by muscle spasms or loss of consciousness, but rather patients will report unusual sounds, visions, smells and sensations. They may appear to be in a daze and be unable to speak. Individuals with TLE who have intense religious experiences can also be highly moral or religious people between seizures. There are also reports that researchers have been able to stimulate religious experience in non-patients by electrically stimulating their temporal lobes.

It probably does not surprise you to hear that the existence and meaning of "the God Spot" is intensely debated and may well occupy neurotheology for some time to come. If the experience of the divine can be localized in the human brain, where does that leave God? Has science finally trumped religion?

For me, whether I introduce God into the equation or not, I expect us, as humans, to have our experiences, divine or otherwise, through our human faculties. But for personal reasons, it actually reassures me to know that divine or religious experiences can be related to brain potentials. As a youth I longed for a Godly vision to bolster my faith, like Paul's transforming vision on the road to Damascus, and I could not understand why I would be denied this gift.

It heals an old wound to think that I might have a slight spiritual learning disability that can be localized in my temporal lobe that makes it unlikely that I will experience divine visions or voices, rather than believe that I was passed over by God as an inadequate recipient of Grace.

I guess most of us are average, some with a little more or a little less spiritual intelligence and our "God Spots," for the most part, are not oversized or overactive. So, how do we, of average spiritual inclination, cultivate transcendent, compassionate awareness and gain access to the deep places of the soul?

The work I've been discussing here holds the fundamental belief that spiritual intelligence radiates from within, that the spiritual impulse to connect to the transcendent nature of existence is a natural human experience. It emanates from a basic human instinct, an organic part of us, inseparable from our very being. It is this impulse that infuses our lives with meaning, significance, and a sense of vital connectedness.

Our spiritual intelligence is a capability that is shaped, and grows or is stunted by our life experiences. And, it can be cultivated through practices that also bring increased peace and emotional and physical wellbeing.

Emerson tells us to look inward to find the original revelation from within our individual hearts and minds. For out of personal discovery and growth the human spirit continuously renews. "Trust thyself:" he wrote, " every heart vibrates to that iron string."[13]

And William James reminds us that once we reach beyond our original religious impulse in whatever form it takes, our response, our over-beliefs will take the shape of our talents, our personality and the time and place of our lives. Our Unitarian Universalist ideal of the religious community resonates with this view also: Different people, … different beliefs … one faith.

A religious community of love, belonging, and faithful nurturance was essential to my soul's early life. And even as my beliefs about faith changed, my needed for a community of faith continued.

As Unitarian Universalists we share a commitment to a community that we don't have to leave as our spiritual intelligence evolves. We belong to a denomination that is strong in its life-affirming message that each individual's soul searching strengthens the whole. So let us continue our soul searching together each with the other, aware, as Mary Oliver reminds us, that "*our part is not knowing, but looking, touching, and loving,*"[14] as we walk on together.

Notes

1. Mary Oliver, "Bone," *Why I Wake Early*, Beacon Press, 2004, pp.4-6.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Oversoul," *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, 1993, p. 531

3. Edna St.Vincent Millay, "Renascence," *Collected Lyrics*, Harper & Row, 1967, pp.3-11.

4. Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, Basic Books, 1999, p.53.

5. *Ibid.*, p.65

6. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature*, Centenary Edition reissued by Routledge, 2002, p.xxxiv.

7. Ibid, p.389.

8. Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain*, Dana Press, 2005, p.160.

9. Ibid, p.160.

10. James Shreeve, "Beyond the Brain," *National Geographic,* vol. 207, no.3, March, 2005, p.31**.**

11. Ibid, p. 31.

12. Gazzaniga, *ibid.*, p. 156.

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance", *The Complete Essays and other writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Modern Library, 1940, p.146.

14. Mary Oliver, *ibid.*, p.6.

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