Spirituality

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



Just like “love”, “consciousness”, and so many other words, the term “spirituality” means different things to different people. For some it is synonymous with religion. For others it evokes incense and meditation cushions. Personally, the word often gives me the creeps. It makes me think of new-age bliss ninnies with “healing

crystals”, or of solemn Catholic types. It can even feel elitist: a label that separates people into the spiritual and the non-spiritual.

But perhaps it can mean something else. Something simple. Something shared by all sentient beings. For me, spirituality is nothing more (and nothing less) than my relationship with reality, and anything that clarifies or deepens that relationship.

Of course this definition immediately raises questions. What is “reality”? Who is the “me” in this relationship? What does it mean to relate to reality? Spirituality, as I use the word here, is not a domain alongside others. It is not about special experiences, beliefs, or elevated states. It points to a sensitivity for how reality shows up at all, and for how quickly what is immediate hardens into ideas, identities, and explanations.

Rather than trying to answer the questions directly, let me say what spirituality, for me, is **not**. It is not everything we have learned or been told about what is real or true. It is not the layers of beliefs, concepts, or dogmas, even (or especially) the ones we call “spiritual”. Those layers often get in the way. They cloud our sense of what is immediate and alive.

So spirituality becomes a kind of unlearning. A stripping away of assumptions. A return into what is, before we name it. That return does not need a long path. It can happen at any moment. Certain places or experiences

can make the learned responses loosen. Silence can do that. So can beauty. The vastness of a starry night. The horizon of the sea. The stillness of an empty chapel.

> “When we recognize our place in the immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility joined, is surely spiritual.”

Carl Sagan

In this light, spirituality is not a program. It is not a badge. It is not a performance. And it is not primarily about becoming better or wiser. It is an openness that is not aimed at anything. More like play than like progress.

We know this space. We miss it. But it is not lost. It is simply covered over by everything we think we have figured out. Some knowledge is useful, of course. But when it comes to who we are, what life is, or what anything means, what we think we know can blind us to the simplicity of being here at all.

> “In the end, spirituality is really about sobering up. Developing the courage to see life as it is, without having to inflate it with escapist love-and-light

> rhetoric, nor retreat into nihilistic resignation by declaring that everything is merely illusion and therefore meaningless.”

Joan Tollifson

So maybe spirituality is not a special domain. Maybe it is simply the willingness to let reality be more intimate than our explanations. And to notice, again and again, how quickly we trade contact for certainty.