

The Breath of Rebinding

By Craig S. Pesti-Strobel, © 2019

In the movie *Secondhand Lions*, the character Hub, played by Robert Duvall, gives his speech about “what every boy needs to know about being a man” to young Walter, played by Haley Joel Osment. He says,

"Sometimes the things that may or may not be true are the things a man needs to believe in the most. That people are basically good. That honor, courage and virtue mean everything; that power and money ... money and power mean nothing. That good always triumphs over evil. And I want you to remember this.... that love....true love, never dies! Remember that boy ... remember that. Doesn't matter if it is true or not, a man should believe in those things, because those are the things worth believing in..... got that?"

Religion and Spirituality are all about how we live according to the things that are most important to us. These things are spiritual in that they form us at the deepest places in our lives, and they provide for us a way of life steeped in meaning and significance. Spirituality and Religion are about “the things worth believing in,” and then seeing how those beliefs play out in our lives.

It has become commonplace and even fashionable to separate out spirituality from religion, as if they were foreign substances to each other like oil and vinegar, that had over time accidentally found their way to each other and had gotten shook up together. Essentially a salad dressing for the soul, but now times and tastes have

changed and a defatted dressing is the way to go, so let's just pour on the vinegar: spirituality without the superfluities and inconveniences of religion.

But the better analogy is to think of religion and spirituality as the sodium and chloride that are closely bound to each other as salt. In practice and principle, they can be separated, but not easily, and in fact, salt is not a simple combining of the atoms of sodium and chlorine. Each undergoes a change in order to become bonded to the other, and the new product of their joining – table salt – does not bear any resemblance to the individual elements that make it up.

Another way to think about the relationship between religion and spirituality is to consider religion to be the container or carrier of spirituality, like a chalice holding wine. The chalice carries and contains the wine, and without the chalice, the wine would spill out on the floor. The wine needs the chalice in order to be available for drinking. The purpose of the chalice is to contain the wine. Each are dependent upon the other. Religion is an essential part of spirituality as its carrier.

So, let's be clear about this – religion and spirituality have grown up together, and like all siblings, have at times fought with each other, played with each other, confided in each other and tattled on each other. But forever related they remain.

Let's begin with the word that some people want to get rid of or at least ignore, "religion." It is actually an interesting word with a long history, but its Latin roots will suffice. It is made up of two smaller words, *re-*, which means to restore or go back to an earlier condition, and *ligiô*, from *ligâre*, which means to bind. *Ligâre* is related to words such as *ligament*, which binds muscles to bones, and *lignin*, the substance in plants that binds cells together. Thus, religion has to do with binding

back together what has come unraveled. As the fabric of our world becomes more and more frayed, surely something is needed to repair its tears and mend its breaches (or breeches if you will.) That is the proper place for religion.

“Spirit” comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which is the noun form of the verb *spirâre*, “to breathe.” *Spiritus* originally meant “breath,” but came to refer to that force that animated or gave life to living things. Thus, it was more than simply taking in air – it referred to the unseen forces that made life possible – forces that were under the control of the gods or God. In Christian teaching, the Holy Spirit was that aspect of the Divine that had direct contact with human beings, and which animated the physical body, taught the mind and conversed with individuals as person-to-person.

For example, in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the Spirit is with God at creation, and hovers over the primordial waters. Later in the Bible, the psalmist says, “When you hide your face (all creatures) are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:29-30). Jesus tells his disciples that he will send the Comforter and Advocate, the Holy Spirit to be with them and to lead them in all truth (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13-15). Paul speaks of the Spirit bearing witness to our spirits (Romans 8:16) and interceding for us when we don’t know how to pray (Romans 8:26-27).

Spirituality, then, has to do with how we live our lives in relation to that which is both beyond us and within us, which empowers life, and which teaches us about that life and how to live it.

When Jesus refers to himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6), he is speaking directly about how he embodied this deeper purpose-filled and significance-drenched aspect of life. Simply put, a Christian spirituality means to enter into the heart of Jesus, to explore his Way, his Life and his Truth, and to live it out in daily life. It is more than thinking correctly about doctrine or agreeing with religious ideas or statements. It is all about *how* we live our lives in the world, how we treat the members of our families, our co-workers, with what sort of integrity we go about living out our values and beliefs. Putting it another way, the integrity of our lives is reflected in how congruent our everyday actions are with what we believe.

Spirituality has to do with how congruent one's life is with one's professed beliefs – how one's behavior, thoughts, actions, speech, and even politics align with what one professes to be ultimately true and significant about life as a human creature in this universe. Spirituality is not so concerned with the content of one's faith – *what* one believes – as much as it is concerned with *how* those beliefs form and shape the character and life-expression of the believer.

The spirituality of Jesus is concerned with aligning one's heart with God's heart, and with living the life that arises out of that alignment. Jesus taught that if one had seen him, they had also seen the Father. So in order to understand the heart of God one must study and follow closely how Jesus lived *his* life, and to look to its congruity and integrity.

What this all boils down to is this: *Christian Spirituality involves the transformation of human persons through the experiential presence of the love of God as taught and lived by Jesus and mediated by the Holy Spirit.*

However, it does not take much life experience to realize that people do not lead totally congruous lives. Far too often, people espouse one set of values but live by another set. Or people have suffered traumas or abuse that leaves psychological scars that affect how they relate to others, or how they move through the world. A quick scan of the headlines of the newspaper or evening news reveals a world that is not in congruity with its deepest values or highest principles. The best way to describe it is a world that is broken and badly in need of fixing.

Part of what is unraveled in life is our own integrity as humans. Not moral integrity necessarily, but our wholeness as persons. We need to be rewoven ourselves. We need to be made whole again. The religion of Jesus is designed to restore us to wholeness. One way it does this is by being holistic.

“Holistic” refers to the wholeness of a thing, or a thing in its completeness. Holistic religion addresses the human person in their wholeness. Holistic religion and spirituality will address the human thirst for knowledge and understanding, as well as deeply felt commitments and sense of connectedness to ultimate concerns and purposes in the world. It will also provide embodied practices that work at the physical level of the body and brain. Contemporary research in neurophysiology demonstrates that neurological circuits in the brain can be altered by changes in behavior. Spiritual disciplines work precisely because they alter the brain’s neurological connections.

A holistic religion will also address our embeddedness in social networks and communities. Humans are formed by virtue of their interaction with other humans, and spiritual transformation best occurs in the context of spiritually-engaged religious

communities. In addition, humans, like all other living creatures, are embedded in natural systems, and a true human spirituality takes this environmental and ecological embeddedness seriously. It is noted here because it is an integral part of a holistic religion and spirituality.

In Judaism, one of the central professions of belief that acts as a cornerstone of spiritual practice is the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The *Shema* expresses well the holistic and integral nature of the religious-spiritual journey that we are looking at in this sermon series. In the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament, the verse reads “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” These four aspects describe a spirituality that encompasses the fullness of human life and being. Let’s look at each briefly:

- “Heart”: the heart denotes that central – or better yet, *centered* - place within human life that directs our actions according to that which we hold to be of ultimate concern and commitment. In Hebrew, the word translated “heart” is *lebab*. There is an old rabbinical tradition that begins with a student’s question: “Why is it that the *beyt* (the “b” sound) doubled in *lebab*?” The rabbi responds, “To remind us that in every human heart good and evil dwell side by side. It is our choice which shall be manifested in the world.” The heart as being the center of moral choice. Morality, of course, is concerned with how our values and commitments in life shape our actions. If we think of the idea that Christ is reweaving and rebinding our lives and the world through how we live our lives in the world, then morality is like the pattern of the reweaving. We reweave the

world through how we live our lives in the world and act upon that world. Just like our fleshly hearts beat out a patterned rhythmic beat, so our moral hearts Chapter to the beat of a pattern of behavior.

- “Soul”: The Greek for this is *psyche*, which can also refer to one’s being. Soul is very much connected to who we are individually. It expresses that point of our being that serves to unify our experiences, decisions, learnings and uniqueness. It is not the same thing as our personality, but is the connective cord that ties together the various personal facets that constitutes us as human beings. In Greek, it is called *psyche*, in Latin it is called *anima*, in Hebrew it is the *nephesh*. Each refers to the principle that gives life to living beings. We often talk about how a singer really has “soul.” That usually refers to how fully they inhabit the song they sing. Soul is how we inhabit our lives, it’s how the life force moves through us and out into the world.
- “Mind”: Trying precisely to define mind has proven to be a source of great vexation in modern discussions of the brain, mind and body. It involves our processes of thinking logically, making decisions, reflecting upon our experiences, responding to sensory input, communicating, imagining, creating and so on. Perhaps it is most helpful to consider mind as that function moves towards purposeful action based upon our circumstances and what we determine to be in keeping with our deepest values and commitments.
- “Strength”: This refers to the process of embodying and enacting our decisions and commitments. It is not enough simply to have an idea in mind or espouse an ideal, we have to put it on the ground, as it were. It has to go from heart to mind to feet.

The world, and our lives need to be rewoven. It is the purpose of religious spirituality to reweave and rebind the torn places, and it does this with a four-stranded thread: heart, soul, mind and strength. We have to use this thread completely and fully. All our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. No halfway measures. The journey to the heart of God requires each of us to give it our all. We don't have to be super athletes, we can do it at any stage in life. It just means to be fully present, and to say to God, "Here I am God. I'm ready. Ready for duty. All of me."

The spirituality that Jesus lived and taught was a process of life-integration that brought together all the scattered fragments of a person's inner world into a coherent whole and aligned them with a pattern of life rooted in the very order and organization of the universe itself. Since persons develop as persons through their relationships and connection with other persons, this alignment with the order of the universe is also personal in nature. The power and principle of order and coherence in the universe provides the context, potentiality and possibility for all things to be, and is Being itself.

This is how religion and spirituality are woven together in the spiritual teachings and practices of Jesus. Religion serves as the chalice and spirituality as the elixir. Both are necessary, but the goal is a life of wholeness and fullness. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). In the final analysis, it is this fullness of life for which both religion and spirituality strive. This is the breath that rebinds.