

Chapter I

Spirituality

By Neville Grieger



What do we understand by the term spirituality?

How do we define spirituality?

This resource written by Neville Grieger was originally published as an interactive ebook. This current version provides online links to view the material via YouTube.

SECTION I

The Mystery

If you were God, where would you start in trying to let the people know who you are?

You have just finished rattling together the universe and your jewel in the crown of the creation, the human race is ticking along nicely. You decide that you need to let the people know who's in charge here. How do you go about that?

The people sense a mysterious presence. But who/ what is this presence?

Can we give this mysterious presence a name?

Naming the Mystery

Read Exodus 3

What do you make of this account of Moses and the burning bush?

It seems that there is a sense in which God has decided that He will only progressively reveal who He is, in His own good time.

For an interesting sequel to this, read

Exodus 33: 12-23.

SECTION 2

Image of God

The Gentle Water Bird

A poem by John Shaw Neilson

[on next page]

It seems that people just starting out on their faith journey, generally have quite a poor and unhealthy image of God. A common view is of a God who is isolated, remote, judgemental, sitting on his throne up there, looking down on us ready to zap us if we step out of line.

Take some time to reflect on this poem by John Shaw Neilson.

A little bit about the poet...

- John Shaw Neilson was born in Penola, Australia, in 1872, to an impoverished bush family.
- Because he had a speech impediment, his family kept him out of school, but he received some education at home.
- His father, a farmer, and his uncle wrote poetry and encouraged him to read and write.
- Because he did not go to school, Neilson had plenty of time to experience the freedom and beauty of the Australian bush country. The green pastures, trees, swamps, animals and birds were his schoolmates.
- However, Neilson's enjoyment of nature was blunted by his family's strict religious beliefs. From his mother, a Presbyterian who emphasised sin, guilt, and damnation, Nelson gained an acutely religious sensibility, as well as a lifelong religious conflict.
- Though the bush tormented his family with droughts, floods, plagues, and fires, Neilson was fascinated with its beauty, wildlife, and freedom.
- His mother, who was generally warm-hearted and loving, told him that the bush was a place of the devil, innately corrupt, and that loving nature too much would lead him to hell. In addition, her religious beliefs stressed suffering and divine punishment, and anything that was pleasurable was suspect.
- Divine vengeance hung over the house like a thundercloud.
- Neilson was disturbed by these ideas and in his late teens became obsessed with the nature of God, and how God, as a perfect being, could be so separate from imperfect nature and humanity.
- These questions inspired his poetry;

The Gentle Water Bird

In the far days, when every day was long,
Fear was upon me and the fear was strong,
Ere I had learned the recompense of song.

In the dim days I trembled, for I knew
God was above me, always frowning through,
And God was terrible and thunder-blue.

Creeds the discoloured awed my opening mind,
Perils, perplexities - what could I find? -
All the old terror waiting on mankind.

Even the gentle flowers of white and cream,
The rainbow with its treasury of dream,
Trembled because of God's ungracious scheme.

And in the night the many stars would say
Dark things unaltered in the light of day:
Fear was upon me even in my play.

There was a lake I loved in gentle rain:
One day there fell a bird, a courtly crane:
Wisely he walked, as one who knows of pain.

Gracious he was and lofty as a king:
Silent he was, and yet he seemed to sing
Always of little children and the Spring.

God? Did he know him? It was far he flew?
God was not terrible and thunder-blue:
- It was a gentle water bird I knew.

Pity was in him for the weak and strong,
All who have suffered when the days were long
And he was deep and gentle as a song.

As a calm soldier in a cloak of grey
He did commune with me for many a day
Till the dark fear was lifted far away.

Sober-apparelled, yet he caught the glow:
Always of Heaven would he speak, and low,
And he did tell me where the wishes go.

Kinsfolk of his it was who long before
Came from the mist (and no one knows the shore)
Came with the little children to the door.

Was he less wise than those birds long ago
Who flew from God (He surely willed it so)
Bearing great happiness to all below?

Long have I learned that all his speech was true;
I cannot reason it - how far he flew -
God is not terrible nor thunder-blue.

Sometimes, when watching in the white sunshine,
Someone approaches - I can half define
All the calm beauty of that friend of mine.

Nothing of hatred will about him cling:
Silent - how silent - but his heart will sing
Always of little children and the Spring.

John Shaw Neilson

A recent project of the LSA has been the publication of a small book titled *Seeking Authenticity*. In this publication 6 propositions are put forward which describe what it means to be a Lutheran School in the 21st Century. The final proposition is about spirituality and includes a discussion on the parable of the hidden treasure. That section of the book has been reproduced here in the pages that follow.

You are invited to reflect on this parable and in particular the insight that it gives us with regard to building a healthy and positive image of God.

A Lutheran School is a place that models authentic spirituality.

Matthew 13:44-46

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl
⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Are Lutheran schools spiritually at the cross-roads? How much longer can we as staff in Lutheran schools be expected to go on promoting a product that the world at least, says has a limited shelf-life? The wheels are falling off the traditional church as we know it in every country throughout the Western world, where statistics confirm a massive on going decline in regular worship attendance. Do we continue to follow the pathway that traditional spirituality, church and religion have taken us, or can we become modern-day reformers and agents

of change to bring on a "new" spirituality? Is there an opportunity before us right now to redefine, reshape, and reclaim the spiritual marsh land? (The word "new" has been placed in quotation marks to indicate that there really is nothing new in this spiritual direction.) The great irony is perhaps that the contemporary spirituality that is emerging in the last century is much closer to the spirituality that Jesus is trying to teach us about throughout the Gospels, than it is to the traditional model of spirituality that most of us have grown up with. This "new" spirituality is the authentic spirituality that we must strive to model.

One of the issues affecting society's acceptance of the institutional church is that many people operate under a very out-moded and flawed image of God. How often today do we perceive images of God as being remote; the old man in the sky; the guy upstairs; the supreme authority sitting on His throne looking down on the world often in harsh judgment? The God of authentic spirituality is far more personal, intimate and localised, with the world itself revealing God's presence. It is possible

that much of this out-moded image comes from a mis-understanding or 'under-understanding' of the incarnation, without recognising the ongoing nature of the incarnation after the ascension. We need to reinforce an image of God in us, with us, in and through the world around us.

That brings us to a reflection on the parable of the hidden treasure. It's a one-liner, just one verse, Matthew 13:44 (although to get the full picture most commentators would argue that it is not possible to study The parable of the hidden treasure, without also taking in its twin, The parable of the pearl in the next two verses.)

Most of us have probably come across the usual interpretations of this passage. For me, one of the most profound insights on this verse comes from Gerard Hughes in his little book God of surprises, which is essentially his commentary on The parable of the hidden treasure.

But first some "rattling around" with some observations and cultural perspectives ...

1. It was common practice at that time to bury things of value as a protection from thieves. Often this would be done in earthenware pots. So, there was nothing extra-ordinary about the scenario of uncovering a valuable treasure in the field.
2. It is probable that the person referred to in the parable was a day worker, a labourer and not the owner of the field.
3. Is there a hint of deceit here? While he could have "shoved the treasure up his jumper" and made off with it, this action would not have been within the law. The treasure legally belonged to the owner of the property. However by hiding it again, then arranging to purchase the land, the treasure would legally become his.

There are possibly at least THREE levels of interpretation here ...

At face value the message Jesus was trying to get across in His teaching about the kingdom perhaps was ... The kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing everything to gain it.

Or as Blomberg suggests:

"How precious is a place in God's kingdom! Is not such blessedness worth any sacrifice?"

At the second level, the parable needs to be considered in conjunction with its twin, The pearl which occurs in the two verses that immediately follow:

It is only when these two parables are considered together that the most likely real intention of Jesus is uncovered here.

Q. What is the key difference between the two parables?

A In The hidden treasure we get the impression that the man STUMBLES across his find whereas in The pearl, the person is INTENTIONALLY seeking what he is looking for.

Hunter asks the question ... *"Is this Jesus' way of suggesting that it is often by very different roads that we come into God's kingdom?"*

Blomberg further suggests that Jesus may therefore be calling both the individual who is diligently searching for spiritual riches as well as the person who is entirely apathetic toward God to give up whatever stands between them and the kingdom.

BUT the real clincher at a deeper third level of understanding, from Gerard Hughes is this ...

*Christ is the treasure.
The treasure is hidden.
It is hidden in the most unlikely of fields.
That field is us.
Christ the treasure is hidden within us!*

Hughes concludes ... *"It takes most of us a long time and we have many obstacles to overcome before we begin to recognise the field where our treasure is hidden, that is, before we learn to find*

and accept ourselves, where God is The danger is that He remains apart."

This idea that God is within us has been further reinforced by Rob Bell. He notes that breath and spirit are the same word. When God gives us life (breath) His spirit is present within us, in fact present within every single human being ever created!

The God of authentic spirituality is within us!

A Lutheran school is a place that models authentic spirituality.

Rob Bell in the Nooma series of DVDs explores spirituality in profound and sometimes controversial ways. The clip of video opposite is taken from the Breathe DVD. It further reinforces the idea that God is present in every single human being ever created. For some people this is very radical thinking and it certainly has massive implications in the context of world religions.

What do you make of this?

NOOMA – Breathe

Rob Bell

[Via YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EFLRDNAx-Y>]

As a final reflection on the image of God, take some time to listen to this song by Bette Midler.

In the light of what we have already explored in relation to image of God, what is your reaction to this song?



From a Distance

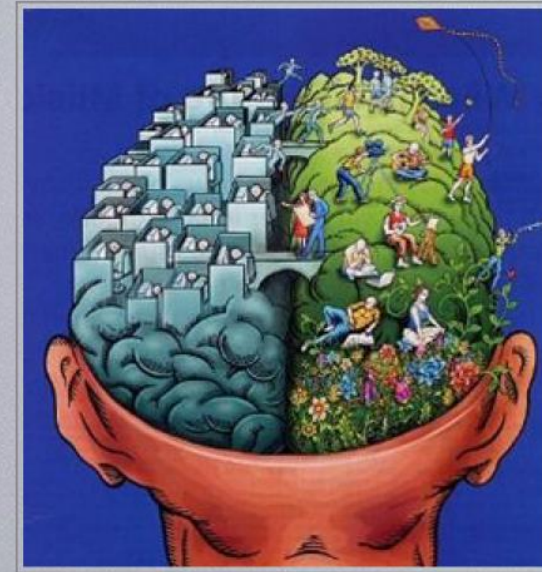
Bette Midler

[Via YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC3FW_RU-GI]

SECTION 3

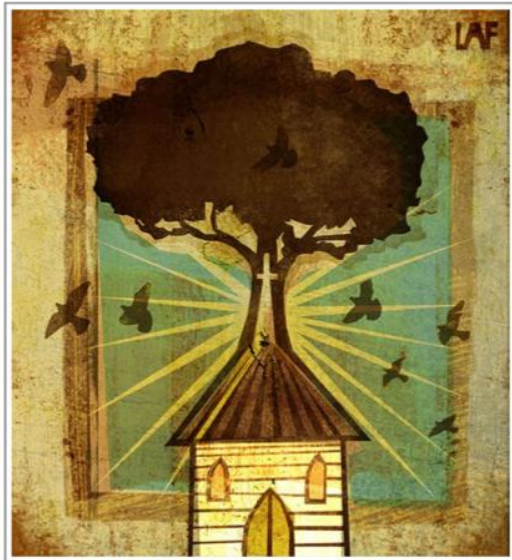
Left and Right Brain



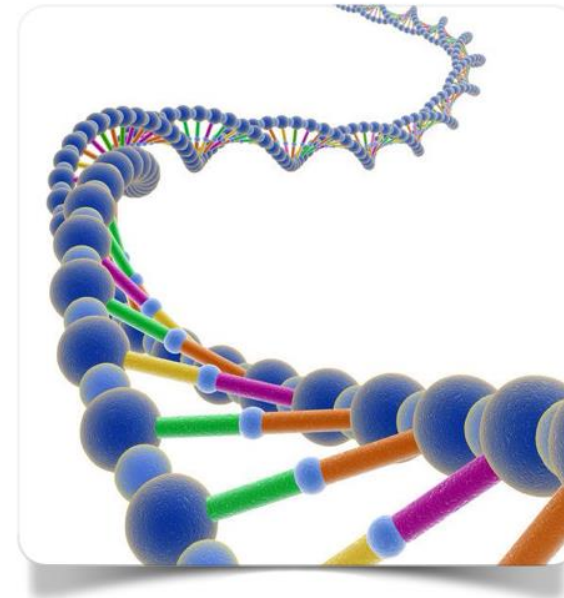
Historically left brain approaches have dominated when it comes to communicating the Christian faith. Contemporary spirituality engages strongly with right brain methodologies. For interest take a look at the ballerina brain test [online](#)

Reflect on the image above. Consider your spiritual journey to date. What elements of left and right brain influence have there been in your past spiritual experiences? Compare and contrast any positive and negative experiences that you may have had. Is there any correlation between these experiences and left/right brain thinking?

An authentic spirituality for the 21st century must be built around a balanced left and right brain approach. The image opposite reminds us of the intricate relationship between the left and right oriented strands of the double helix DNA molecule. Our faith journey needs to be structured in a similar way. Ideally there should be left and right components to our journey. Opposite is a list of left and right brain components/words/ideas that maybe typically associated with a faith journey.



Consider the image above. Does/how does/when does/where does religion meet spirituality?



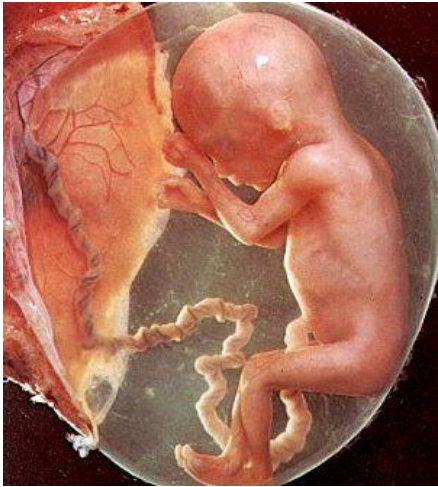
LEFT BRAIN	RIGHT BRAIN
Head	Heart
Religion	Spirituality
Theology	Practical
Doctrine	Experimental
Church Building	God in All Things
Knowing About	Knowing God

SECTION 4

Our Story Through Images

From the image gallery on the right, choose one or two images that trigger for you some thread of spiritual thinking. Try to find something in one of the pictures that reminds you of some part of your spiritual journey to date. Perhaps there is something that arouses an awareness of God. Share your thoughts with a trusted friend or colleague.

See image gallery on the next page



Introduction to Christian Spirituality

What makes spirituality a Christian Spirituality?

Spirituality is a very slippery term. There are a huge variety of definitions in the literature, ranging from quite secular descriptions through to very strongly flavoured expressions. A few sample definitions have been included below.

“Regardless of how you define spirituality, it is that still silent voice deep within. It is your spirit and it is your constant companion on life’s journey.”

“I define spirituality as becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God.”

“Spirituality is the spirit in which we live our lives. Spirituality is the particular emphasis we give the Gospel of Jesus which is the source of all Christian spirituality.”

“Put simply, Christian spirituality is living the Christian life by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

A range of scripture texts have been included on the next page as a starting point for your further exploration of **Christian** spirituality.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
Romans 5:1 (NIV)

'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.'

John 14:6 (GNB)

Let the Spirit change your way of thinking and make you into a new person.

Ephesians 4:23, 24a (CEV)

'I have told you this while I am still with you. The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.'

John 14:25-26 (GNB)

For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love and self-control.

2 Timothy 1:7 (GNB)

Since you have accepted Christ Jesus as Lord, live in union with him. Keep your roots deep in him, build your lives on him, and become stronger in your faith, as you were taught. And be filled with thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6,7 (GNB)

This [God] did so that [people] would look for him, and perhaps find him as they felt around for him. Yet God is actually not far from any one of us.

Acts 17:27 (TEV)

Do not conform outwardly to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good, and pleasing to him, and is perfect.

Romans 12:2 (TEV)

Exploring Christian Spirituality

Bible readings to explore Christian spirituality

And you also became God's people when you heard the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation. You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership on you by giving you the Holy Spirit he had promised. The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God has promised his people, and this assures us that God will give complete freedom to those who are his. Let us praise his glory!

Ephesians 1:13,14 (GNB)

Connect to [Bible Gateway](#) to read these scriptures in different translations

You are invited to listen to ***Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)*** this song as a conclusion to the Pathways Spirituality unit

[Via YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-4NFvI5U9w>