

Chapter 1

Questions

It starts with a single question. It's a deceptively simple question: Do you want to live a meaningful life? The answer seems ridiculously obvious. You probably think "Yes. Of course." It doesn't require reflection and most people stop their line of thinking right there. But if you ponder the question in much depth then you'll find yourself in a maze of prickly issues. What's the meaning of meaning? How do you evaluate whether your life is meaningful or not? If your life is meaningful then how can you make it even more meaningful? The answers to these questions are not obvious at all.

Meaning is a spiritual creation

The truth is that if we want to live a meaningful life then we're already on the slippery slope of spirituality. Meaning is a spiritual creation. It pertains to our relationship with our most deeply held values by which we live. Those values don't exist in the physical world. We can't touch them, weigh them or pick them up on a radio-telescope. They have that other worldly quality that transcends the physical plane. Yet those meaningful values are so important to us that they can make the literal difference between our living and dying. They can be the driving force behind much of what we do and feel. They help us to sustain our physical health and their absence can lead us to despair, depression, physical illness or suicide. Existential meaning in the form of spirituality really matters!

Many people assume that spirituality and religion are the same. Although they are related, a close examination reveals a subtle difference in their definitions. Religion has more emphasis on a shared societal belief in a deity, the purpose of life and the origin of the world. It's heavy on belief. The definition of spirituality is more personal. It has to do with one's inner path toward one's most deeply held values. It may encompass beliefs but that's not the emphasis. One may even be spiritual without believing in a deity. It's also possible that a person can be religious without much spirituality. In fact, we've been killing each other off through the millennia in the name of religion. Why is that? What's going on?

One thing that's going on is that we're afraid. We're afraid because someone else's beliefs threaten our own. We'd like to think that we're right and they're wrong. Because if they're right in their religious beliefs then that means that we're wrong. We hate to think that our grasp on the ultimate reality can be so off base. On some level many of us counteract that uncertainty by becoming arrogant. It's a rigid defense. Consequently, many religions have historically been aggressive in asserting their hold on truth. Christians killed Pagans. Muslims killed Christians. Christians killed Muslims. It

seems that at one time or other everyone has killed the Jews. Now Sunni and Shiite Muslims kill each other. The list goes on but it begs the question: If so many religious movements are claiming to have the ultimate grasp on truth then what are the chances that ANY of them have it right?

In picking up this book you might have felt a little apprehensive that I want to convert you to yet another version of religious dogma. Was this to be just another book about the one true religion? If so then your skepticism would be realistic. It seems that most books about spirituality want to sell you a doctrine of religious belief: what you SHOULD believe about God and how he/she/it works. Open up wide and be prepared to swallow! Assume the position! Many of us don't want dogma and we're tired of this kind of assault. But that's not what we're about here. I'm not going to address that level of belief other than to say I'd really like for you to keep your current beliefs about God and how all that's configured. That's not my concern. Good for you! I'm glad if you do have some religious beliefs that you cherish. This book isn't focused on religious belief. It's not about the WHAT. It's about the HOW. How do we weave spirituality into our everyday lives? How do we make it a joyful force that enriches our experience and guides our actions? How do we strengthen it? I'm most concerned with these questions because I know that there's a huge difference between religious belief and spirituality.

There's a major tenet that I'm going to propose that's central to our discussion. It's that religious beliefs occur in our consciousness while spirituality mostly involves our unconscious. This isn't just psychobabble even though the rest of the world doesn't make this distinction. If you think that the unconscious is just some esoteric Freudian term think again. Do you know how to stick shift a car? Do you wonder how all those muscles coordinate when you walk? Do you ever wonder why you feel so anxious approaching certain kinds of situations? Do you ever wonder why you don't even think to approach some situations that you should? Let's have some respect for the unconscious because that's the source of most emotion. And when we're talking about how to FEEL more spiritual meaning in our lives we'd best know how those feelings work.

Your unconscious is powerful, more powerful than you'll ever know. It can even steer your conscious thinking. There's a strong link but the link works in both directions. The unconscious can steer consciousness but consciousness also influences the unconscious. Future chapters will discuss how we can consciously cultivate our unconscious to yield a bumper crop of spiritual feelings. Notice that I've used the words "influence" and "cultivate" instead of "control." It's a crucial distinction. In the realm of spirituality as in the realms of treating sexual impotence or observing quantum physics how you choose to approach the issue greatly influences the outcome. If you want to grow spirituality then you don't want to try to control it directly because it won't work.

When you decide to live a meaningful life then you're really deciding that you want the "felt sense" of meaning from your everyday experience. "Felt sense" is an expression used by many therapists when they refer to an emotion that originates in the unconscious. The unconscious has an intuitive understanding of the situation and yields a

subliminal experience that isn't conceptual like conscious thought. It's more like a musical score that plays in the background of our life stories. Spirituality is critically important because it influences how the story unfolds and it exerts its effect from below the surface. In fact it's so powerful that it helps steer the direction of conscious awareness.

**Spirituality is like a musical score
that plays in the background of our life stories.**

The world doesn't perceive that there's much of a difference between religious belief and spirituality. The reason is because we maximize our conscious control and we hate to think that we're so affected by our unconscious. Our consciousness is what we can see. We like to equate the self as being where we make our conscious choices. We don't like to think that anything beyond our consciousness might have our behavior under its thumb. It hurts our pride and deflates our ego.....even if it is true. But our pride doesn't determine what's true. It only determines how much truth we're allowed to see.

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Which would you rather have: a positive sense of spirituality that you have to think up with an effortful thought every time you want to feel good.....or ... a continuous "felt sense" of meaning behind all of your actions that nudges you toward being consistent with your beliefs? With the first, you have a burst of joy that quickly fades when your attention shifts to other matters. With the latter, you have a continuous "slow burn" sense of fulfillment on an intuitive level. I'm sure that you know of some people who espouse high religious zeal but demonstrate real low life behavior. How many times do we hear of clergy being disloyal to their code? Yet there are many people who consistently tell the truth, keep obligations and make sacrifices to provide service to others....all without a strong belief in a deity or an affiliation to organized religion. I'm not saying that organized religion is bad. It performs a great service in meeting the needs of many people. What I'm saying is that spirituality requires some extra steps beyond religious belief. That's our topic. That's our focus.