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Embodied Spirituality

By Serge Prengel

In my work, I am accustomed to thinking in terms of embodied experience. That is, mind and body are not separate entities. I think of the mind as an emerging property of the human organism. Where does the notion of spirituality fit with this kind of outlook?

The word "spirituality" refers to "spirit". Traditionally, spirit is seen as immaterial, the opposite of flesh and blood. It is what animates the body, gives it life. In many traditions, it is something that leaves the body after death, and continues to live on its own once disembodied. So, essentially, the word "spirit" evokes the very opposite of "embodiment." There is such a chasm between these two notions that it makes it hard to conceive that they could be integrated. Indeed, if you only contemplate these two propositions as logical statements, you simply cannot find a way to reconcile them.

So, I want to draw on something else that I have learned as part of my work. That is, to not just look at statements at face value but as imperfect ways in which one is attempting to convey one's experience. In trying to do so, we use frameworks that shape the perception of these experiences. What I've learned is to be curious about what the underlying experience might be, in such a way that I might be able to relate

to the experience itself, as opposed to the experience framed within a certain theoretical construct.

I stay with the statement that after death, the spirit lives on. I try to set aside the tendency to argue with it as if it were an attempt to accurately describe the physical world. I try to relate to it as an experience. "Is there something in my experience that relates to the sense that the spirit lives on?"

The spirit lives on



I have an experience of it as I think of people who were dear to me and are no longer living. For instance, I very much feel my father's spirit alive, not as something that exists out there in the form of a ghost or some other metaphysical form . . . But very present in my experience, especially at certain moments.

When I am a father to my children, I remember my father. It moves me. I remember moments . . . Like being a little kid standing next to him as he was at the sink in the bathroom, shaving and talking to him, and him listening. At moments such as these, he is very alive, alive in me, and certainly more alive than many things that are conventionally described as alive. You might say, it's a question of semantics. Calling this alive is not the same definition as calling somebody who is conventionally living alive. But if you think about it, what is a spirit? To me, that form of life is very much what I call the survival of the spirit--the impact of my father on me.

Now, one day, I too will die. And at that time does it mean that my father, or my father's spirit, will no longer be there? My children never knew him: they do not have a strong connection to his spirit. So, in that sense, you could say that the day I die, my father and his spirit will die, too. On the other hand, what I am very aware of is that the things I inherited from my father, what I absorbed from him, that very loving quality of his, is not something that appeared out of thin air. The same way that I got it from him, he got it from somebody. I don't know who because I don't know who he grew up with, but I know he got it from somebody, and that somebody got it from somebody else . . . And back and back and back, way back through the centuries, through the millennia, through before human beings formed societies, and maybe through before even human beings were fully evolved into human beings. It's a long, long chain of transmission. That transmission of attachment, of love, of connection that we and other mammals have and that has shaped him to be who he was and in turn shaped me. And that I, in turn, transmitted to the people I connected with, my family as well as others.

Thus the sense that spirit continues to live, which is similar to the spiritual notion that spirits first roam the earth and then, at some point, dissolve into the vast ocean of consciousness. I do not take it literally, but yes, as a metaphor . . . I find it very moving that, once the people who knew you closely and the people who knew you more remotely are dead, you will continue to exist in the universal consciousness as part of having lived and having had an impact, however small, on the world around you.

What I described above are experiences related to being a child and a parent. As I do this, I realize there is a possible commonality with many traditions in which spirituality involves the cult of the ancestors. Of course, I am not making the point here that spirituality is always related to our connection with ancestors. I am just using this as a personal example of what connects me to the notion of the spirit living on after death.

What gives life



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There are, of course, other forms of spirituality. For instance, in many cultures, the notion of spirit has to do with what animates nature. This goes for such things as Mother Earth, or for the sense of the sun being moved by a Sun God. It also goes for all kinds of relatively minor spirits involved in the rivers flowing, and the trees being trees, and essentially making nature come alive. So I ask myself, is there a way that I can relate to the notion that spirits are what makes the world come alive?

Again, if I take this statement at face value as a logical, literal proposition that describes the way the world actually works, I resist it. It offends my sense of how the world works. However, if I think of it as an experience, I can relate to it. As a human being, I tend to view things from an anthropomorphic perspective. This perspective may not correspond to the way the world works according to science, but it can sometimes be very helpful in terms of how I function in the world.



An example that comes to mind for me is how I react to being in a hostile environment. Just take the phrase itself: "hostile environment." "Hostile" is an emotional world. It ascribes an intention to what is, scientifically speaking, just a phenomenon that has no feelings toward anybody, let alone toward me. But experiencing the weather as "hostile" opens a feedback loop that amplifies the purely physical impact of the weather. The sense of being confronted by aggression, and feeling powerless against it, leads me to a spiral: The sense of powerlessness reinforces the debilitating impact that extremely cold and windy and wet weather can have on me as I'm walking outside.

Now, what happens if, instead of being caught in that spiral of powerlessness, I react to the "hostility" through the "fight" mode?

This generates a lot of energy. Instead of slumping, I stand straighter, braving the elements. I walk faster, moving my arms as I walk. The energy of fight generates more warmth as I move, and my blood circulates in my body. Thus I am able to face the environment more effectively.

From this perspective, one could say that I have faced the onslaught of the spirit of bad weather. The spirit of survival fought against the bad spirit. One could say the fight took place outside of me. Some could say that I was inhabited by the good spirit. Personally, I do not think of these "spirits" as having any physical existence or being metaphysical creatures. I conceive of them as Self States. That is, ways in which my whole organism gets reorganized in order to respond to a certain set of circumstances. In this example, I experienced two Self States: one of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming aggression, the other of finding power that I can channel in order to effectively overcome overwhelming attack.

The common point in both cases is that I am organizing and responding to these situations as if they were attacks by people as opposed to attacks by nature. I am being anthropomorphic. This is not stupidity. This is simply the way that we use our mind works. Our brain has evolved to be finely attuned to the many nuances of interacting with other people because we are a social animal. When faced with a problem, we conceptualize it as a relationship problem. In this sense, spirituality is a reflection of our human condition.

One of our characteristics as human beings is that we respond to situations in terms of managing relationships. Not just in a cognitive way— we are wired to respond to situations in terms of relationships. As it is not possible to have relationships with dead stuff, we convert whatever situations we are faced with into the equivalent of situations with people. With the situation being encoded in this way, it is possible for us to process the situation with the processing equipment we have. We process relationships, so we see the world as relationships between animated beings.

The previous few paragraphs are thoughts, concepts, i.e., not embodied experience but a way of processing it. What is embodied experience came earlier in the article: my description of reacting to "hostile" weather. It is easy to dispute the framework I use to refer to experience. But it is quite possible that you may have had similar experiences, even if you don't frame them the same way. It is also possible that your experience of weather might be very different from mine. The point here is not that there is only one way to experience the world. I was simply using an example to describe how I process experience into meaning, and how that meaning can be related to spirituality.

Something larger



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So far, in this article, I have talked about spirituality in the sense of "the spirit lives on" and spirituality in the sense of perceiving the world in terms of relationships. I would like to address another conception of spirituality, which is the sense of being (part of) something larger.

In writing this sentence, I put "part of" between quotes to reflect that, for some people, it is not just being part of something larger, but essentially being something larger. The sense that being something isolated is an illusion. The sense that enlightenment consists in realizing that we're not separate, that we're not just part of something larger, but that we are that something larger. Is this something that I can integrate with my notion of embodied experience?



This notion is a bit intimidating. It connotes an experience that is out of the beaten path: Mystics who, after a long spiritual journey, experience oneness of the world. Not that well-behaved mystics would ostensibly try to make us feel inferior for our crass perceptions . . . Nevertheless, the implicit notion that this is a superior state compared to the ordinary experience of being separate, small egos. So, instead of referring to these heightened mystical experiences, I will stick to more common experiences of being (part of) something larger. For instance, the experience of being in a stadium with people who are cheering for the home team. This is a primal experience, that sense of "us against them." We experience a profound sense of belonging. Of course, this is not always for the better. For instance, it can lead us to the worst of herd mentality, of mob behavior. In a similar vein, religious experience can encompass a sense of the sublime as well as the urge to ruthlessly persecute everybody who does not have the same beliefs. So, my goal here is not to glorify it, but to explore it as an experience.

To me, what is at the root of the experience of being (part of) something larger is our human capacity for resonance. In a crowd, our feelings are reflected and reinforced by feeling how others are in sync with what we feel, at a basic emotional level. As we experience how we are in sync, we enter deeper into the feeling of it. And so, we contribute to amplifying the collective vibration in a feedback loop that keeps amplifying both the individual and the collective vibration.

This capacity for resonance stems from our ability to resonate with another human being. A archetypal example of it is the attunement between mother and infant. The capacity for resonance is something that we have in common with other mammals. The capacity to sense other mammals' emotions, to affect each other, to co-regulate with each other.

In Western spiritual traditions, we tend to own only the positive forms of resonance, those that affirm the sense of connection and love. For instance, the Madonna and child archetypal image. In doing so, we disown the other aspect of resonance, the potential to turn us into a wild mob. My point here is obviously not to celebrate this aspect and foster it, but to recognize it in order to have more conscious control over it.

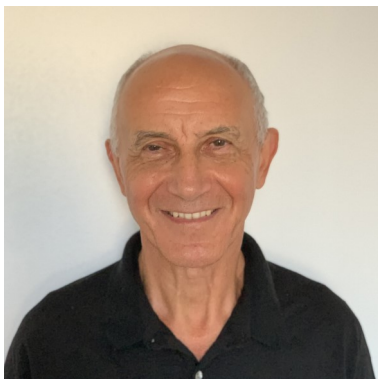
In conclusion

So, what have I been doing in this article?

I started from the observation that it is difficult to integrate the notion of spirituality and the notion of embodied experience, if one stays at a conceptual level as opposed to going down to an experiential level. Then I have reviewed three possible ways in which one often describes spirituality and looked at them from an experiential perspective. In doing so, I noticed how these notions could resonate with my experience as a human being.

What benefit do I see in doing this? One benefit is that it enriches my view of the world and my ability to interact in it. It gives me the satisfying feeling of integrating outlooks that would seem to be mutually exclusive— a sense of unification as opposed to fragmentation.

Another benefit is that talking, thinking in terms of experiences as opposed to theoretical frameworks, makes it possible to explore areas of commonality with people who have different theoretical frameworks. It expands our capacity for connection.



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