



Spirituality: What Is It?

In This Chapter

- ✧ What spirituality is
- ✧ What spirituality is not
- ✧ Why it is hard for teens to work on spirituality
- ✧ How you can begin to work on spirituality

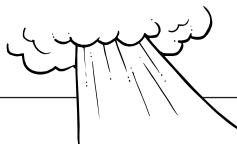
Spirituality is impossible to define. I can't explain to you exactly what it is, how it works, or why it works. I can't give you 10 simple steps to becoming spiritual. I wish it were that easy.

Have you ever watched fireflies on a summer evening? The first firefly sighting of the season always feels like a miracle. When I was a boy, my grandmother and I would often sit on the front porch and hold a contest to see who could spot the most. I always won (I had a gracious grandmother). She had only one rule: I was not allowed to catch a firefly. She explained to me that a firefly was only beautiful when free to fly and light up the sky. She was right.

Spirituality is like that contest and its solitary rule. It is important to spot the fireflies of spiritual truth, but never to try to capture them. Fireflies in a fruit jar lose all their magic. Spirituality in the hands of someone who thinks he or she then owns the truth is dangerous.

I can only point *at* spirituality. I cannot hand it to you.

I can only help you to spot it. I can teach you how to get smarter in the “firefly hunt.”



Seeing the Light

Spirituality is different for each individual. Think of a lantern of a rainbow of colors, with each side being a bold Crayola color. Blue, green, red, yellow, orange, purple—each side is distinct. Still, it is the candle inside that illuminates the many colors of the lantern. The candle gives off the light, enabling the sides to glow brightly and beautifully. Spirituality is that candle.

What Spirituality Is

I'm a compulsive list-maker. I wish I weren't. Most often, my lists are a complete waste of time. They always have too much on them. They are too demanding of time and energy, and too brutal in their lack of acceptance of flaw or failing. The problem with most lists is that they set up the expectation of perfection, which is always demoralizing. They are doomed to failure. Like most New Year's resolutions, these lists are quickly ripped to shreds by the sharp teeth of reality and humanity.

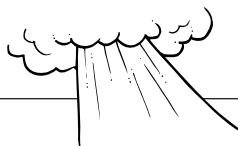
Lately, I have been trying to learn how to compose lists that are genuinely helpful. Lists that are not about *doing* but that are all about *being*. Lists that are not about the foolish pursuit

of perfection, but about the goal of excellence. Lists that help me celebrate being human rather than feeling guilty about being one.

This book will be loaded with such lists. Because spirituality has much more to do with *being* than with *doing*, it is an ideal catalyst for a new kind of list, a new kind of challenge, and a new set of goals. It is my hope that you learn how to compose such spiritual lists—lists that help you to feel good about yourself and your life, and lists that don't make demands, but extend invitations.

So, with all this said, let me share a very important list, this one being what I think spirituality is:

- ❖ Spirituality is a way of experiencing life.
- ❖ Spirituality is all about awareness.
- ❖ Spirituality is about being fully awake to Life.
- ❖ Spirituality is mainly noticing.
- ❖ Spirituality will free you to see deep into the universe that exists outside, and, yes, inside as well.
- ❖ Spirituality is a way of looking deep inside yourself, others, the world, the earth, and even God.
- ❖ Spirituality is seeing and chasing beauty.
- ❖ Spirituality is a vision of the best you can be, the best we can be, and the best the world can be—heaven on earth.



Seeing the Light

Spirituality is an attitude and a perspective. It is being positive and looking for the beauty and the best in everyone and everything.

Recently, I went for a short walk. I heard something. I stopped and noticed that it was a bird singing. I stood there for a moment and was delighted to hear a six-pack of birds singing in a nearby tree. I stood perfectly still and listened. There was a symphony of birds. To be honest, it was pretty much an unorchestrated racket, and I laughed at all the bird noise.

Now, those birds were singing all the time. They did not just start to toot and peep for my benefit. It was just that I finally noticed their singing.

Spirituality is like that. It is always there, like the beating of your own heart, but you seldom bother to notice it. You seldom stop long enough to hear it sing.



Bill's Bible

"Life is what happens while we are making other plans."

—John Lennon

At times you might feel like you are a spectator to your own life. It is as if you are trapped orbiting a planet called Now. Sometimes you might actually see yourself as if at a distance and wonder a lot of why's: Why am I saying that? Why am I acting this way? Why can't I show the *real* me?

I think that spirituality is stepping out of the audience and getting on center stage. It is about landing in the Now, and not orbiting. It is about knowing why.

What Spirituality Is Not

Usually, it is quite easy to come up with negatives. It can be far easier to say what something is *not* like than what it *is* like. In the case of spirituality, however, both are tricky and tough.

What is it that makes it so difficult to describe what spirituality isn't? Let me give you a concrete example as to why this is not an easy task. Although the Bible is an obvious spiritual tool, it can be used as a weapon to prove religious superiority, a detriment to spirituality. On the flip side, the Bible can be used as a vast resource of inspiration, not indoctrination—a very real spiritual asset. There is the crux of the problem. It all depends on the motivation of the user.

I think this is why many of you think many of the so-called religious kids appear to be the least spiritual. These teens often use their religion to protect and defend themselves, not to spiritually expand or mature. Frequently, religion can be constructed totally out of fear. A fear-based religion is one that talks incessantly about what *not* to do, the evils of others, the evils of the world, the myriad ways to gain entrance to hell, and the one way—of course, their way—to get into heaven.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is all about faith, which is expecting the best. It is not about fear, which is expecting the worst. Spirituality points out what you can be, the goodness in others and our world, and the many pathways to Heaven.



Seeing the Light

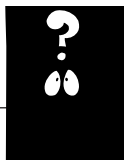
Fear is expecting the worst. Faith is expecting the best.

Fear-based religion is closed and unwilling to bend.

It refuses to change or adapt. It can become viciously defensive. It often cowers in a corner in fear, or must gather only with those folks who totally agree. Fear-based religion is dead certain. There are no doubts. There are no questions. There are no mysteries. There is only black and white.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is wide open. It is flexible and ceaselessly changing. It feels no need to defend itself, and it is always open to new ideas. It has great courage to explore differences of opinion and belief, and it truly celebrates such diversity. Spirituality is comfortable with mystery, embraces uncertainty, and seeks no warranties or guarantees. For spirituality, there are only many shades of gray.

Spirituality is definitely *not* based on fear.



In the Dark

Spirituality is not a contest or a competition.

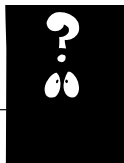
Spirituality is all about expanding our capacity to live, love, and learn. Like the universe itself, you are created to keep changing, adapting, and seeking out the balance of compromise. Spirituality does not build up walls and barriers between people; it tears them down. Where there are locked doors, it replaces them with open windows. Spirituality has no fear of difference, or even conflict, but rather sees this as the context for great creativity and maturation.

Suffice it to say that spirituality is *not* ...

- ✧ Becoming less loving and more indifferent or hostile
- ✧ Becoming less forgiving and more judgmental
- ✧ Becoming less tolerant and more intolerant

- ✧ Becoming less open-minded and more rigid in your thinking
- ✧ Becoming less willing to change or compromise, and more inclined to be fixed in one position
- ✧ Becoming less willing to admit a mistake and more inclined to have to be perfect
- ✧ Becoming less compassionate and more hard-hearted, especially toward those in crisis or need, the outcast, or those who are genuinely vulnerable
- ✧ Becoming less humble and more self-righteous
- ✧ Becoming less fascinated by life's many mysteries and more certain that you have it all figured out

Spirituality is *not* about anything that makes us less likely to love, learn, or live life to the fullest.



In the Dark

Beware of those who ask you to close your mind or grow calluses on your heart.

Why Is Spirituality Tough for Teens?

I have worked with teenagers for the past 25 years. I like adolescents. I don't enjoy adolescents who act like children, and I have a tough time with adolescents who try to act like sophisticated adults. I simply appreciate an adolescent who behaves like an adolescent.

Adolescence is a turbulent time—some might say it's even traumatic.

This is a short span jammed full of important emotional and spiritual tasks: resolving the identity crisis, learning the skills of intimacy, and declaring your physical and psychological independence.

I have found that certain qualities are characteristic of most adolescents. Although there are indeed exceptions to the rule—and you might be one of them—I have come to believe that most teenagers have the following in common:

- ❖ The need to be busy and on the go—or at least out of the house a good deal of the time
- ❖ The love of noise: talking on the phone, listening to music, going to concerts, and wearing headphones
- ❖ The need to hang out with friends—doing nothing, talking about nothing, and just hanging out
- ❖ The need to be part of the group, to belong and to fit in
- ❖ The tendency to talk before thinking
- ❖ The tendency to avoid showing feelings
- ❖ The tendency to avoid expressing convictions or beliefs, due to fear of either embarrassment or rejection
- ❖ A genuine fear of being truly alone
- ❖ A pervasive feeling of being phony
- ❖ A constant need to construct an image that makes you feel safe and secure



Bill's Bible

"Faith is much better than belief. Belief is when someone *else* does the thinking."

—R. Buckminster Fuller

With that said, let me share with you what I consider some basic features of spirituality, or being a spiritual person:

- ❖ Spirituality begins with *stop!*
- ❖ Spirituality requires slowing the mind way down.
- ❖ Spirituality often requires stillness and silence.
- ❖ Spirituality often requires you to risk not only being alone, but also being removed and separate.
- ❖ Spirituality asks you to think long and hard, to feel deeply, and to believe passionately.
- ❖ Spirituality invites you to get to know the *real you*.
- ❖ Spirituality is all about breaking down the image, taking off the masks, and learning to be rigorously honest with yourself.

As you can see, spirituality isn't going to be easy for you. That does not mean it's impossible, though. It just means that it will take some focused energy and effort to choose to work on your spirituality.

Sit Down and Shut Up!

If you recall from the introduction, when I first asked my youth group to sit down and be quiet for 15 minutes, I was met with looks of consternation. The idea of being still and quiet initially seemed too much to bear. I could almost hear their thoughts: "Why? Why bother? What is the point? I feel silly! This is stupid! What if somebody sees us?"

The resistance to stillness and solitude is often so strong that you might actually feel your body and soul squirming for release. The idea of choosing to sit down and shut up will feel like putting a plastic bag over your face.

Why is that? I really don't know. I do know that it doesn't improve as you become an adult. I still have to do battle with my need to be busy and on the go, the anxiety I feel about being alone, and the incessant flapping of my lips.

I still have to work to carve out time and space for my spiritual life.

What I do know is that spirituality requires solitude and silence. It just does. Without it, spirituality will wither as fast as a plucked flower.

Stop! ... Look! ... Listen!

Once you have let yourself physically slow down, stop. You need to let your mind and body calm down. Take deep breaths. Relax. Sometimes it helps to pray. Sometimes it helps to read something. All kinds of daily devotional books are available; if you ask, you will find some that are ideally suited to adolescence. You might give the Bible a whirl, but first ask your pastor or rabbi for some recommended selections. You might just simply choose to sit there and soak in the quiet. This is called listening to your heart.



Bill's Bible

"I feel closer to what language can't reach."

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Somehow when you shut off the world, eternity is free to enter. Once you are quiet and calm, it is as if a whole new world opens up. You begin to notice all kinds of things: the way your body feels today, the smell of the air or the earth, the touch of sunlight or shadow, the vividness of colors. Your mind begins to clear. You become aware of your feelings and thoughts. You are in touch with your true self, with your soul, and with your God.

Spirituality is all about *looking* as if you were seeing something for the very first time. That means looking with reverence and awe. Look not for the flaw, but for the hidden beauty; and look with God's eyes, which means to look with love.

Spirituality is all about *listening* to your life. Listen to your heart, your mind, and your spirit. Listen to your losses. Listen to your heart saying a painful goodbye or mustering the courage to say hello. Listen to what you are dying to do and say and be.

My favorite teacher of all time was Miss Semington. She was a magical woman who filled her classroom with wonder and joy. She read to us every day, and that was my favorite part of each and every afternoon. I would lay my head on my folded arms atop my desk and let myself wander inside whatever yarn she was weaving.

Her voice was full and firm, and she animated characters with delight. Her old people sounded really ancient, and she could make you feel the wind or see the hidden valley. When she wanted you to listen, though, she would always say a very long "Shhhhhhhhhh. Pay attention ... plant this bit in your heart."

Spirituality is learning to be your own Miss Semington, to know when to say "Shhhhh" to yourself and to identify what needs to be planted in your heart. It means learning how to train your eyes and ears to pay attention to what matters and to what gives life value and worth.



Bill's Bible

"If you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself."

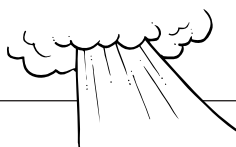
—Rollo May

A Spot to Stop

I have a place where I go to be spiritual. Sound crazy?

Maybe it is, but it works—and that's what matters. My place is a small pond, with a narrow path that winds its way along the shore. It takes 24 minutes to circle the whole pond; 30 in snow or spring mud.

I feel like I know every bush, tree, plant, flower, and animal that resides in the woods surrounding this pond. I know what colors the trees turn in autumn. I know where the lilacs secretly grow in spring. I know exactly the spot where the water stays warm enough in winter so that the ducks and geese can come.



Seeing the Light

A sanctuary is a place where you are free and safe. You need to find a sanctuary for conducting the “business” of spirituality.

As an adolescent, you will tend to enjoy change. You will get bored easily and will dislike routine. So, it is probably hard for you to understand what the big deal is about going to this puny pond. The big deal isn't the pond; it is what happens to me there. When I go there, I feel at peace. I go there to calm down, to get a grip, to lighten up. I go there to get my life back.

Spirituality needs a place to live, a home. You need to find a place that makes you feel relaxed and at ease, a place that just naturally calms you down. Maybe for you that is a hill somewhere, or a pier, or a clearing in a woods. Maybe it is your

own room with the lights and the stereo and the computer off. How about the beach? A favorite tree or rock? A cozy chair or quilt?

Whatever the case, it must be a spot that invites you to stop, and that shuts out all the worries and fears of the world for a time. This should be a place that is old and familiar, but that enables you to feel fresh and new when you depart. This also should be a sacred spot where you find your self and locate your frazzled mind and harried heart. And it should be a place where you rediscover God.

Spiritual Mentors

Spirituality requires tutors, teachers, and guides. They can be young or old—black, white, yellow, red, brown. It does not matter whether they are Catholic or Protestant or Jewish or Buddhist. No degrees are required, nor even offered.

A spiritual mentor, however, must be someone you find to have these characteristics:

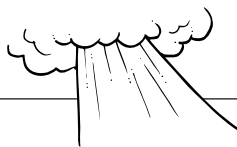
- ✧ Genuine and honest
- ✧ Accepting and affirming of you, but willing to correct or critique
- ✧ Worthy of trust and respect
- ✧ Insightful and wise
- ✧ Patient and kind
- ✧ Inspiring
- ✧ True to his or her own convictions, and who expects the same from you
- ✧ Comfortable talking about life's vital topics, such as love, forgiveness, and joy
- ✧ Capable of claiming his or her own failings
- ✧ Ready to change and grow
- ✧ Ready to forgive and to be forgiven
- ✧ Able to make the day better just by being in it

Are spiritual mentors hard to find? Not as hard as you might think. The key is to look in the obvious places: home, family, school, church or synagogue, the neighborhood. The best spiritual mentors are usually close at hand, but you may overlook them due to familiarity.

Look again. Listen again. I cannot tell you how many adults I know now recognize that the great spiritual mentors of their lives were their own parents or grandparents, a favorite aunt or uncle or neighbor, or a teacher who made learning fun.

Spiritual mentors are not necessarily extraordinary folks. They are usually ordinary folks leading ordinary lives. What qualifies them is not their fame or fortune, nor any degree or social rank. What distinguishes good spiritual mentors is simply their willingness to honestly and openly share their lives with you. The best spiritual guides offer a place where you are free to be exactly who you are, and in return, give back the exact same authenticity. Spiritual mentors don't lecture or scold, and do not advise or preach—they simply share their life's journey.

In my life, I have found spiritual mentors to be those few folks who have helped me uncover the truth: the truth about myself and my behavior; the truth about my relationships; the truth about my world and my place in it; the truth as I see it, hear it, and believe it; And the truth that is at the heart of my own personal God.



Seeing the Light

Although spirituality is an art often practiced alone, it must be shared with those who are willing to help protect and promote both the art and the aloneness.

But What Is It?

I am sure that at this point you are still confused. You may still be looking for a clearer, more precise definition of spirituality, or still wanting the 10 quick and easy steps to being spiritual.

That's okay—it is human nature. It is also a major aspect of our “quick and easy” American culture. Spirituality will never conform to those cultural expectations, though. Being a spiritual person is a lifelong process, and it requires some pretty demanding work.



Bill's Bible

"The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind."

—Emily Dickinson

Spirituality is a process. It is a journey. It is an ever-unraveling mystery that is never fully solved. Spirituality seeks to clarify your thoughts, address your feelings, and claim your beliefs. Ultimately, spirituality is about locating the truth that I believe is planted deep inside you. A divine seed was planted within you at birth. Spirituality is all about bringing that seed to the point of blossoming and bearing fruit.

The Least You Need to Know

- ✧ Spirituality is something you already possess—it is a pure gift from God: grace.
- ✧ Spirituality is all about being aware—it is about listening to your heart.
- ✧ Spirituality is a lifelong journey of discovery. It is not about having all the answers, but it is about asking the right questions.
- ✧ Spirituality requires silence, solitude, and stillness. Try to find a sacred place that is all your own where you can tune out the noise and tune in to your own self.
- ✧ Spirituality needs carefully chosen mentors and guides. Often, these mentors are people you already know.