

Identity Through Spirituality

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“Identity,” as defined by James Youniss, “is a social and collective process, which brings order to an individual's life as well as enables them to experience themselves as a part of something bigger.” (Stanford, 2002, p3) It is a notion introduced by us people to describe the parts of our brain we are aware of or how we view ourselves as single members in relation with the world community . Kile Matsuba from the University of Northern British Columbia describes identity as “an evolving story, with settings, scenes, characters, and themes, all woven together to form plots and narrative frames. These narratives enable us to establish and redefine goals, and give us direction and telos. Their purpose is to give meaning.” (Stanford, 2002, p3,4) “Contemporary sociological and psychological research on men (...) often neglects to explore the influence of religious traditions and spirituality in shaping men’s understanding of themselves as men.” (Boyd, 1996, p33) Spirituality is one ingredient that significantly helps individuals develop a strong identity by giving them a better sense of self and a more organized community.

Spirituality is a very vague word. It is often associated with or misinterpreted as religion. Although it is the number one ingredient in almost all religions, its meaning is much more different. In fact, Spirituality is ever present everywhere, but in different levels. Abdu’l-Baha, a famous old Arab philosopher once stated: “A man who has not had spiritual education is a brute.” (Hatcher, 1987, p59) In order to understand the influence that spirituality has on the formation of identity, one must have a clear view of what is meant by spirituality. To define the world is possible, but to give it a precise meaning is nearly impossible given the depth of the concept. According to the Merriam and Webster Dictionary, spirituality or spiritualism is “the view that the spirit is the prime element of reality.” This definition by itself does not give a clear comprehension of the

term. What is meant is that spirituality consists of believing in a metaphysical world greater and much more powerful than the attainable physical world. The ultimate truth, or the key to happiness, is only reachable at the metaphysical level, so there must be a link between the two worlds in order to find that truth. That link is the human spirit. People who are spiritual try to stay in contact with their spirit at all times so that they keep getting closer to that higher power, so called truth, and gain pleasure from that closeness. That's why they view the spirit as the prime element of reality. "The first step in understanding how to use physical reality is to comprehend in more detail an idea (...), that the two sorts of experiences –the physical and the spiritual- and the two realms in which they operate –the physical world and the spiritual world- are but aspects of one coherent and unified experience." (Hatcher, 1987, p75)

Now the main reason why spirituality helps raising a better sense of self is that it gives a meaning to life. This meaning is the belief that people are only small elements in a gigantic and complex world. It is the belief that people have as a common goal to approach that higher power -usually referred to as God- controlling that world, in order to create a harmony within the whole system and within themselves. "The search for an identity involves the establishment of a meaningful self-concept in which past, present and future are brought together to form a unified whole." (Muuss, 1996, p51) In order to understand how having a meaning affects a person we must first understand "meaning" itself. "Meaning can be understood as a set of beliefs, attitudes, and commitments that act as a guiding source to bring about life satisfaction. Meaning acts as both an organizational construct by enabling an individual to make sense out of the world and one's experience, to assist in decision making, and to facilitate personal growth as well as

serve a motivational function, giving inspiration and hope in life and providing impetus and incentive for action,” points out Pamela Ebstyne King from the center on adolescence in Stanford University. (Stanford, 2002, p2) By closely analyzing the way Ebstyne King described meaning, not only do I find it a perfect description for what spirituality is, but it also sounds to me very descriptive of the way one’s identity is formed. The point here is that the separation between spirituality and identity is much less obvious than one would imagine. In fact, the world meaning here is used almost as if it were spirituality, this is how much the goal of spirituality is to find a meaning for our lives. Of course this is not an easy task. And even if we decide on one, it is usually too vague to be considered as a real meaning. But the purpose of spirituality is to dig deep within one’s self to get a better understanding of whom one is and thus be able to get closer to a real meaning. During the process of doing so, not only the person gets a better notion of their inner self, but also sets a path (beliefs, attitudes, and commitments) or rules of how that person should be acting and thinking in the future. Now this of course will play a huge role in the process of building an identity. It would highly decrease the chances of the person going into self diffusion. Since one has already logically come up with rules and regulations to follow, one is not very likely to have doubts about his / her actions to the point of putting all there beliefs into question.

Besides giving a meaning to people’s life, spirituality is the main mean to develop self-esteem or self-love. Self-love is a very important aspect of which the presence is necessary in order to build a strong identity. Scott Peck, a famous psychiatrist and best-selling author claims that “it is terribly important that we love ourselves.” (peck, 1993, p96) peck was interested in figuring out “what made successful people click,”

“and so a dozen such people from different branches of the services (in the military) were gathered together for a study. They were men and women in their late thirties or early forties who had all been marked successfully. They had been promoted ahead of their contemporaries, yet they also seemed to be popular. Those who had families seemed to be enjoying a happy family life; their children were doing well in school and were well adjusted. These people seemed to have a golden touch. (...) As part of the study, they were asked to write down on a piece of paper the three most important things in their life, in order of priority. (...) What was remarkable was that, while the second and third items on their lists ranged all over the map, all twelve had written exactly the same answer to number one: ‘Myself.’ Not ‘Love.’ Not ‘God.’ Not ‘Family.’ But ‘Myself.’ And that, I suggest, was an expression of self-love.” (Peck, 1993, p88)

This study clearly shows that self-love is one important ingredient in the process of shaping identity. “Self-love implies the care, respect and responsibility for and the knowledge of self. Without loving one’s self one cannot love others.” (Peck, 1993, p88) Spirituality is the best tool known to men which helps them develop a high sense of self-love. By spiritual practices, people learn to approach their divinity and this raises their self-love as well as their love of the rest of the people, beings and the nature of the world itself.

Spiritual practices not only help people raise the love of themselves, it also gives them other tools for developing their sense of self such as self satisfaction or what some

people would qualify as well being. In fact, one would probably say that well being is a result of an identity which is well shaped, but in reality it is a relation that goes both ways. It is true that when a person has developed a good sense of identity, a well being rises along. But the opposite is also true. Well being and self-satisfaction are feelings that are affected by many external as well as internal factors. Spirituality is one of those internal factors along with identity. Well being also derives directly from the person's self-love. When a person loves himself / herself, that person is most likely to build a high sense of well being, to be gay and enjoy the moments of his \ her existence. The difference between non-spiritual people and very spiritual ones is that the latter have something in which they strongly believe. When a person is strongly attached to something, be it physical or metaphysical, that person does all in its possible to have it. But usually when the goal is reached, the attachment is almost immediately dissolved. The strength of Spirituality is that what you're seeking is something that you know is out of reach, but the more you get into it the more you like it and try to dig even deeper. So the goal is always there so as spiritual people can have something for which to look up. As the spiritual person knows what to seek and does so, he \ she has a sort of permanent self satisfaction which results in a well being.

Another aspect of spirituality which works in the development of one's sense of self is the belief in destiny. Spiritual people think that they are here in this world for a reason, and this reason is usually to make it a better place. They believe that the higher controlling power knows what it is doing and thus they are happy with what they are no matter how they are. If they are true believers then they have the certainty that their

future will be luminous and they don't worry too much about their present. This adds up their self satisfaction and thus helps them identify themselves better.

“Since an identity can be found only in interaction with significant others, a process Erikson refers to as psychosocial reciprocity, the adolescent often goes through a period of great need for peer group recognition and almost compulsive peer group involvement.” (Muuss, 1996, p52) So another important result of spirituality involved in the process of growth is the community aspect. Albert Einstein once said: “the goal (of human existence) being a community of free and happy human beings who by constant inward endeavor strive to liberate themselves from the inheritance of anti-social and destructive instincts.” (Naylor, 1994, p129) But community life has rules and regulations in order for it to function efficiently. “Twelve Axioms of Community” were developed in the book *The Search for Meaning*, some of which are: “1. If you don't know where you're going, no road will take there,” “10. Cooperate and communicate if you want to survive,” and “12. Grow spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally or die.” (Naylor, 1994, 144) Unfortunately, in most communities, such ideas are not respected or practiced which results in the uprising of many conflicts. Conflicts then do not help individuals forming the community with their identity formation in any way. Spiritual communities are mainly manifested as religious people groups, but exist in different forms as well. The difference within spiritual groups is the fact that their belief is based on peace and true love. “Every major religion of the world has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting humanity through spiritual practice, and the same effect of making their followers into better human beings.” (Peck, 1993, p154) While in most other types of communities conflicts are usually a common problem, this sense of community in

spiritual communities takes up another form mainly consisting of helping and supporting each others and work as a unity to help get every individual closer to their goal. As the sense of community grows within the members, a sense of personality and belonging to a unity rises up making each person in good shape for integrity. “Spirituality and spiritual development can be thought of as a transcendent commitment to beliefs and experiences that extend beyond self, time, place, and matter; and that lead young people to contribute positively to society,” says Richard Lerner from the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University. (Stanford, 2002, p4)

“It is critical for us to be realistic, to have a true knowledge of ourselves as we are, and to recognize both the good parts and the bad parts of ourselves.” (Peck, 1993, p87) Spirituality helps in that process of getting to know the true self. It also creates a base for being able to enjoy a peaceful and harmonious community life. Both these reasons make it a key to successful identity establishment. There are many ways to practice spirituality. Gandhi once said: “Religions are different roads converging upon the same point .What does it matter if that we take different roads as long as we reach the same goal?” (Peck, 1993, p155) Religion is the most common way to practice spirituality, but there are certainly many others that proved themselves at least as beneficial. The simple fact of thinking is an example of them. Then everybody is spiritual in a way, but there are different degrees of spirituality. When a person realizes that the importance of admiring the beauty around and the importance of having to do good in this world, that’s when he / she reached a degree of spirituality important enough to change the perception of life and strongly affect the way the person is going to build his / her identity.

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