

Humanist spirituality

People use the word '**spirituality**' in different ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to a connection with something beyond the natural world. Critics might argue, therefore, that a humanist life lacks this particular dimension. However, some people use the term to describe natural experiences of joy or wonder, and many humanists claim that a non-religious life has just as much capacity for these.

Humanists will disagree over whether to use the word. Some avoid it as they feel it carries 'religious baggage' – they worry that it implies something otherworldly and therefore leads to misconceptions about what they believe. However, others are more comfortable with the term.

Humanists might describe various experiences as forms of spirituality: typically moments of escape from the ordinary, day-to-day matters that might concern us. These might include...



1) Moments of **awe and wonder** at art, architecture, or the natural world.



2) Times when we are powerfully aware of our **connections**, such as the joy that can be found in the company of friends and family, or the feeling of being part of the bigger human story.



3) **Losing oneself** in music, sport, creativity, or meditation (some humanists meditate but they understand this as a process with psychological benefits rather than one which connects with anything transcendental).

Many humanists think some of their experiences are probably similar to what religious people might describe as the 'numinous' or 'religious experiences'. However, they believe that these are simply natural experiences produced by the chemicals in our brains in particular circumstances.

'If anything is to count as 'spiritual' for humanists, it has to be a feature of our worldly experience in the here and now. Of course there are any number of experiences which are 'spiritual' in that sense, things which 'lift the spirits' – the inspiration to be derived from relationships with other people, from the experience of great art, or from the beauty of the natural world.'



Richard Norman, humanist philosopher



'This spiritual experience came one evening as I stood looking over the green ocean towards the red sunset. A great calm came over me. I became lost in the beauty of the scene. My spirit reached out and became one with the spirit of the sea and sky. I was one with the universe beyond. I seemed to become one with all life.'

'This experience had a profound effect on me. It came to me often when I was alone with nature. It swept over me as I looked out to the stars at night. It was a continuous inspiration. I felt that I was more than an individual. The life of all time was within me and about me...

'I have said that this experience is my religion, yet it leaves me an agnostic... I have no sense of a personal God. My philosophy is founded on the experience I described. I cannot be other than a world citizen, identifying with all peoples.'

Fenner Brockway, politician (1888-1988)

'The potential for spiritual development is open to everyone and is not confined to the development of religious beliefs or conversion to a faith... The term needs to be seen as applying to something fundamental in the human condition... it has to do with the unique search for human identity... with the search for meaning and purpose in life and for values by which to live.'

Spiritual and Moral Development,
National Curriculum Council

Question: Do you think a humanist life can have a spiritual dimension?

Humanist Spirituality by Dr. Jacqueline Watson



The word 'spirituality' has religious roots, originally referring to the idea that human beings have a non-material spirit or soul. Since humanists are materialists and don't believe in a spiritual realm, many humanists prefer not to use the word.

However, many humanists argue that spirituality can be understood as referring to a set of natural human characteristics which are as vital to those who are not religious as to those who are. If we use the language of spirituality to refer to a natural dimension of human life, then non-religious people can be included in the discussion.

Spirituality is about meaning. All animals have to make meaning of the environment in which they live: they have to make sense of it to avoid falling into rivers, or to find their way to food or a suitable mate. Human beings, probably because of our special abilities with language, have gone further and developed a need to make meaning of our lives.

You could say that without a god or higher being there is no meaning to life, and it is certainly true that humanists believe there is no predetermined purpose to human life. But all human beings need to feel their life has meaning. Humanists believe that each of us constructs spiritual meaning for ourselves; we are responsible for our own spirituality.

To achieve that sense of spiritual meaningfulness, we feel a deep need to connect with something greater than ourselves. Traditionally expressed as connection to a god or a supreme being, non-religious people might equally connect with nature, the earth, or the universe; or with family, friends, or a political party; or with all of these, or something else. People especially search for spiritual meaning at significant stages in life. When people get married they often want more than just a legal arrangement, and wish to make promises to their partner based on shared beliefs. When we die, we want to tell a meaningful story about our life, to consider how our life fits into a bigger picture, a bigger whole. We sometimes want to transcend our everyday lives.

In a similar way, spirituality has to do with a sense of satisfaction in (temporarily) losing our (sense of) self. And, again, that loss of self doesn't require religious mysticism or meditation. We can achieve loss of self in a place, in a person, or with a group, or through the flow of an absorbing activity like walking, surfing, painting, motorcycle maintenance, or watching a football match. Although the bigger picture may be important, some of the most spiritually fulfilling moments of our lives are those when we escape rational reflection.

Spirituality is also linked to a sense of awe and wonder. A religious person might claim this is achieved through revelation of the power of a god working through the universe. Humanists can achieve a sense of awe and wonder through the observations of science, which offer awe-inspiring insights into the natural world and the universe. When fully realised, scientific 'revelation' can generate a spiritual shock as powerful as mystical insight, though rooted in material reality. As the eminent scientist Carl Sagan said, 'The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.' Brian Cox and David Attenborough generate spiritual responses from scientific facts in their television programmes, often with the help of poetic language and captivating photography; the arts have always been used to stimulate spiritual experience. The spiritual experience that science can generate can also motivate human beings to moral action, perhaps through illustrating our connections with other human beings or our wonder at the natural world.

Today, the word 'spirituality' is used routinely in public services and elsewhere as a broad term, signalling the inclusion of all people in spiritual nurture and care, including those of us who are not religious. As a result, for instance, humanism is taught in schools, and humanists support non-religious people in hospital and prison chaplaincies. This is important, because research suggests that spiritual resilience helps people deal better with life's challenges. Human beings are a wonderful result of natural evolution but, because we are self-aware, being human involves existential challenges. To face such challenges and enjoy life to the full, non-religious people need opportunities and support in developing spiritual meaning and strengthening spiritual resilience.