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A
SPIRITUALITY
of
RESISTANCE

*Finding a Peaceful Heart and
Protecting the Earth*

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What is "spirituality"?

When we thought our sleepless Ethicist might relax his tortured grip on responsibility and allow himself to merge with the nature he so loves, we might have said, "Ahh . . . he has found a spiritual resolution to his psychological and ethical dilemmas." We would mean, I think, that the Ethicist had a vision of his fundamental connection to the cosmos, a vision that replaced or soothed his limited view of himself as a separate

individual. This vision removed the despondency and insomnia. He had found a peaceful heart at last.

To take a more mundane example: when my disabled daughter broke her arm during summer camp, she not only experienced a lot of pain but also was kept from swimming. Initially saddened, she then brightened and said: "Oh, this is great. It means I can hang out at the barn and not miss snack!" She took, we might say, a spiritual attitude toward her disappointment. By that we would mean that she oriented herself toward finding the good in her situation rather than holding on to what she had wanted, had expected, but could no longer have.

"Take a spiritual view," we say, and mean:

- Look on the bright side.
- Appreciate what you have.
- Give love in a dark time, when everything seems hopeless.
- Open your heart to the pain of the world, without fear or judgment.
- Stand for what you believe in, and respond to injustice without hatred (and here we might think of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.).
- Do not expect that power, money, or sensual enjoyment will give any more than a fleeting pleasure. Only a deep acceptance, a fundamental gratitude, will give lasting happiness.
- Learn to trust in God, who oversees and protects.
- Follow God's will for your life, and not your own.

These pathways to peace carry centuries of wisdom about how to deal with the human condition. Yet I get apprehensive when they are interpreted as suggesting that we might achieve equanimity at the cost of forgetting, even for a moment, just how much pain there is. For me, a spiritual view will be authentic only if it can celebrate its peacefulness not only despite personal disappointment, but also as it faces the full range of the world's moral horrors.



When I want a fat book contract and get something much less grand instead, making myself miserable over my "failure" is a folly that only

leads to self-generated depression. When I am away for my month-long summer vacation in Vermont and my daughter gets sick for a week and needs my care, I had better treasure the brief walks that don't measure up to the six-hour bike rides I'd planned. It's far better to accept what life has offered me, take joy in what I have, and leave the rest to God.

At times this approach has worked well for me. After my first child died at the age of two months, I went through a period of shrinking from the sight of children. Yet I liked kids and didn't want to go through life feeling envious whenever I encountered them. I asked myself what I could do. "It's simple," I realized. "When I see a child and start to feel that gnawing bitterness, I will thank God that I have eyesight to see them. Some people, after all, are blind." This was a spiritual approach: it made me a better person and made me happier. It took nothing away from anyone else, but instead increased the world's positive resources. And all it required was that I change my attitude. Two leading contemporary American Buddhist teachers put it this way:

Wisdom replaces ignorance in our minds when we realize that happiness does not lie in the accumulation of more and more pleasant feelings, that gratifying craving does not bring us a feeling of wholeness or completion. It simply leads to more craving and more aversion. When we realize in our own experience that happiness comes not from reaching out but from letting go, not from seeking pleasurable experience but from opening in the moment to what is true, this transformation of understanding then frees the energy of compassion within us. Our minds are no longer bound up in pushing away pain or holding on to pleasure. Compassion becomes the natural response of an open heart.

The question is: what am I letting in and what am I keeping out? I believe there is a difference between letting go of my own desires and letting go of my concern for others. And I fear that too often in spiritual literature these may get confused. Give up my own desires — for fame, higher salary, some free time, more sex — this I understand. But what would it mean to "let go" of my hope that poor people might have a better life? Or to "open my heart" to the realities of abused children or the dolphins suffocating in the two-mile-long fishing nets? What might we have to screen out — and what might we have to add in on top — to let go of them?