

Spiritual Principles in Action: A Story for a Younger Generation

by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, December 2015

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In answer to a question from a 31-year-old person, “What advice do you have for people my age in dealing with a world that tells us we are nothing but material mechanisms, and has almost no concept of the soul?”

CHAPTER ONE

I grew up in an England still dreary in the post-war years. Rationing only ended the year I was born. In my childhood there was religion but no spirituality. I went to church every Sunday, sang hymns and recited prayers. But nowhere was there the suggestion of spiritual states of consciousness. Spiritual bookstores did not exist. Christian mystical writings were present but just as historical texts rather than experiences to be lived. It was a grey world aspiring to middle-class materialism—a TV, a washing machine, even a car! Then in the mid- to late-sixties, another color entered the spectrum of consciousness. The Beatles went to India to meditate with the Maharishi, and orange-robed Hare Krishna devotees could be seen dancing and chanting on Oxford Street in London. Spirituality in all of its flavors and colors began to arrive in the West.

This awakening spirituality was part of my adolescence. When I was sixteen I began to practice Zen meditation, and experienced an inner dimension of emptiness completely different to my schoolboy classrooms. When I was eighteen I met the spiritual teacher Krishnamurti. I remember it was a beautiful English summer morning. I went to hear him talk and he took me into this space of complete and total freedom. He said there is no path, there is no way to get there, it just happens—but suddenly there was another reality present, completely different than anything I had known before.

I practiced hatha yoga (until I damaged my knee from sitting too long in the lotus position) and became macrobiotic, learning to bake my own unleavened bread. I studied sacred geometry and built geodesic domes. I attended one of the first Glastonbury Festivals, where the pyramid stage was supposed to transmit spiritual vibrations. We felt that we were part of a spiritual movement that was going to change the world. Something was alive in a new way, a new spark of consciousness.

When I was nineteen I met my spiritual teacher, a white-haired Russian lady who had just come back from India where she had been trained by a Sufi master. Meditating in her small North London room beside the train tracks, I felt the presence of invisible spiritual masters—it was magical and mysterious. This world into which I had entered could hardly be compared to the bleak world of my childhood, in which only the physical existed and only material prosperity mattered. And many friends at the time followed similar and different paths—exploring Buddhist meditation in the monasteries of South East Asia, reading Tibetan texts, chanting Hindu mantras or whirling with Sufi dervishes.

Looking back over almost half a century, I can see how our journey, the story of my generation, was to help bring these practices and teachings to the West, to help something come alive in our materialistic Western consciousness. Meditation groups formed, ashrams were built, and many of us practiced meditation, accessing different states of consciousness. We were naïve and optimistic, expecting this infusion of spiritual consciousness to change the world. Sadly, or more realistically, while it changed our world, the world around us only became more enamored of materialism, technology, and the toys of triviality. And as the seventies moved into the eighties and then the nineties, many of the gurus became corrupted, mainly by sex or money, and many sincere seekers disillusioned. The innocence of those early years faded into the harsher light of daily life. But something remained. There was a shift in consciousness—this new color in the spectrum remained—along with the different spiritual practices and texts that had come from the East. And those of us who remained true to our practices, who lived our meditation and spiritual values, held this shift in consciousness, integrated it into our daily life. We listened to our dreams and our heart, we were open to inner experiences beyond the physical. We lived the story of our soul.

Then, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, something within me shifted and I was shown how the inner reality of the mystic had a vital part to play in the outer world. Traditionally the mystic turns away from the outer towards the inner, seeking the truth that in Sufism can only be found within the heart. Through meditation and prayer, going deep within we find something beyond the illusions of the outer world—we dip into love’s infinite ocean. We experience the reality of the Self and the oneness that belongs to all that exists—what the Sufis call “unity of being.” But I began to realize that this “consciousness of oneness” was needed in our outer world, that our world was suffering from a misguided consciousness of separation, which is the consciousness of the rational self and ego: we are separate from the Earth and separate from each other.

To this effect I wrote a book, *Working with Oneness*, the first in a series of books about applying spiritual principles and practices to the present reality in the outer world. This gradually changed into my Spiritual Ecology work of recent years, giving a spiritual perspective to our present ecological crisis. When I began this work over a decade ago, “oneness” was still a fringe “spiritual” idea. But I am very happy that in the last few years, oneness, interconnectivity, or what the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing,” have become much more part of the mainstream, and central to understanding the ecological crisis—that we need to respond from an awareness of the Earth as a living organic whole.

Until very recently spirituality and ecology were rarely associated. Environmentalists thought spiritual practitioners were “new age” and not activist enough, while apart from a few “engaged Buddhists” and others, spiritual practices and teachings were focused on self-development and the individual inner journey. But then earlier this year, Pope Francis’s encyclical *On Care for our Common Home*, unequivocally bridged this divide. In it, he stresses how our ecological crisis is both a spiritual and moral problem.

It brought tears to my eyes when I read how we should hear “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” This touched me deeply, as in 2013 I had edited a collection of spiritual teachers responding to our ecological crisis which was titled *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*. Suddenly, what had been a radical idea was proclaimed from one of the world’s most public pulpits. Spirituality and ecology need to be united, and we have to take full responsibility; we need to work together to return to a balanced and sustainable way of life for all of creation—to care for both the soil and the soul.

CHAPTER TWO

As I have mentioned, condensed into these paragraphs is almost half a century's journey of living and also holding a quality of consciousness radically different to that of the environment I was born into. In its broadest terms this consciousness is *the awareness of a spiritual reality very different to the material focus of our present civilization*. The work of the spiritual seeker or wayfarer is to journey into and then through this spiritual inner reality, and experience the deeper truths of our human and divine nature. In Sufism this journey is sometimes described as different valleys of the quest, or different chambers of the heart, leading finally to divine oneness and merging in God—union of lover and Beloved. But there is another dimension of this journey, how to apply the inner experiences of the journey to outer life. In particular how can our awareness and understanding of this foundational, inner spiritual reality help a world that is becoming a soulless and environmental wasteland?

Sadly the materialistic values of the fifties have now morphed into a global monster, exploiting and ravaging the Earth in a way that can only result in mutual self-destruction. And while there are those continuing this nightmare of “business of usual”—the global corporations and politicians who pursue only economic growth or greed—there are others who have real “care for our common home,” who hear the cry of the Earth and the pressing need to live from a place of unity. Maybe we have already passed the “tipping point” of unforeseen ecological consequences: temperatures rising, rivers and oceans polluted, and air made toxic. But spiritual consciousness still has a vital role to play as our world spins out of balance.

Yet I believe it is no longer enough just to hold this awareness—we have to bring it into action. Many people who read my book *Spiritual Ecology* responded, “What should I do?” The next chapter in this story of spirituality must be to bring these values, this quality of consciousness, into action to help heal and restore our dying world. I firmly believe that this is the calling for the next generation, for those who have the energy and passion to act from a place of service and love for the Earth. And especially important, from a place of unity.

Unfortunately, only too often activists constellate dynamics of duality, of us against them. And yet the original instructions given to the First Peoples stressed that we “have to get along together.” We are all part of the same living wholeness, and only from a place of inclusion can we transform what has been desecrated by a sense of separation. There are of course many different ways to work towards ecological wholeness, from forming a community of urban gardeners, to developing new economic models based upon generosity and sharing rather than acquisition, such as “pay it forward.” And I firmly believe that, while some global initiatives are vital, like reducing carbon emissions, most initiatives should be small groups of people coming together in different ways. Governments and politicians are too bound to the idea of continued “economic growth” to commit to real change. Instead the world needs to be regenerated in an organic, cellular way, the way life recreates itself.

This is the challenge facing those of the millennial generation who sense that life is something more than the accumulation of “stuff,” who have heard the cry of the Earth, which is also the cry of their own soul. How can we help the world in this time of transition? How can we participate creatively in our lives and communities? There is much work to be done, a work founded upon the principles of oneness and unity, a work that recognizes that all of life is sacred and whole. Life is calling to us and it desperately needs our attention; around us are what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “bells of mindfulness,” which we need to hear and then respond to—hear with our hearts and respond with our hands.

There are many ways to participate, just as Rumi says “there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” It is for each person to find the community and initiative that speaks most to their nature, their unique offering. And central to this work is that we are here to help each other and to help the Earth—we are here to be of service. These are the spiritual principles that are the foundation of real work that endures, what the engaged Buddhist Joanna Macy calls *The Work that Reconnects*. I also believe that it is important for anyone committing to this work to develop their own spiritual practice—especially helpful is a meditation practice that is done every day. It can be a mindfulness meditation, watching the breath, the Christian practice of centering prayer, or a Sufi heart meditation. It could also be walking in a sacred manner, being aware of our connection to a sacred Earth with every step we take. What matters is that our practice connects us to what is deepest and more enduring within us, a Source beyond the illusions of the ego and the many distractions of the outer world. This practice can support and protect us, and inwardly guide us in our work.

And if I have learned anything from my own journey, I’ve learned what matters most is love. Love is the most powerful force in creation, and it is our love for the Earth that will heal what we have desecrated, that will guide us through this wasteland and help us to bring light back into our darkening world. Love links us all together in the most mysterious ways, and love can guide our hearts and hands. And the central note of love is oneness. Love speaks the language of oneness, of unity rather than separation.

Small things with great love, learning to live and act with love and care, with the true attention of our minds and hearts—these are the signs of the sacred and the truest way to regenerate life, to help life to recreate itself. Yes, we have to relearn many of the sacred principles of life, the patterns of creation, to remember what our ancestors and all indigenous people know (what I have called the principles of Spiritual Ecology). But it is for this younger generation to bring these principles into form, into action, and then the future that is waiting can be born. It will not be easy. The forces of greed and exploitation are more entrenched than we realize, the environmental collapse accelerating. But this is the challenge for those whose hearts are young and energized, who care for the planet and for the souls of future generations. This is the next chapter of the story of our time that is waiting to be lived.

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