

Some Surprises on the Spiritual Path

Surprise is the rule rather than the exception on the spiritual path.

This is so because our spirituality is largely unknown to us. We know our personality and we know our body because we use them all the time. We use our spirituality a lot less and don't have much of a relationship with it. Deciding to go on a spiritual "path" is deciding to have a relationship with our innate spirituality.

As with any relationship, we start out as strangers and don't understand each other. When Dante's spiritual pilgrim finally finds his spiritual guide at the top of a mountain, he has no idea what to ask her, and she has no idea why he is silent.

To help our relationship with our spirituality, it is useful to know some of the "predictable" surprises that may happen to us. We can categorize the spiritual surprises this way:

- Surprises before a spiritual experience
- Surprises caused by a spiritual experience
- The surprises of transformation

Surprises Before a Spiritual Experience

The first surprise is a crisis that can sneak up on an ordinary person. It has been made into a joke - the midlife crisis - but it is a very real and potentially debilitating stage of life. What follows is a profile of that crisis.

Our ordinary person takes life as it comes and does not spend much time worrying about its meaning or purpose. He devotes himself to the satisfaction of his personal desires and ambitions. If he is reasonably mature, he diverts some of his personal impulses toward the needs of others.

Possibly he regards himself as vaguely religious or spiritual and more or less believes in God, but his religion is outward and conventional. Once he has participated in its obligatory rituals, he doesn't think much more about it.

His true belief is in the reality of the physical and social world which he can see with his own eyes. He is therefore strongly attached to material things. In short, he considers the reality he can see to be the only reality there is. His belief in a future "heaven" or afterlife, if he conceives of one, is at best hypothetical, proven by the fact that he postpones as long as possible his departure for its joys.

But then something begins to happen. Our ordinary person becomes both surprised and disturbed by a change—sudden or slow—in his emotional life. This may take place after a series of disappointments, not infrequently after some emotional shock, such as the loss of a very dear friend or important job. But it happens just as often while in the full enjoyment of health and prosperity and without any apparent cause.

The change begins with a sense of restlessness, of dissatisfaction, of “lack,” but not the lack of anything material or specific. It is something vague and elusive that he is unable to describe. To this is added, by degrees, a growing sense of the emptiness of everyday routines. Personal and professional interests, which formerly absorbed most of his attention, seem to retreat, psychologically, into the background: they lose their importance and value.

New questions come up that he never would have asked before:

- What is the point of living the way I do?
- Why should I keep on repeating my life the way it is now?
- Am I settling for a life that's too safe?
- Am I wasting my life?
- Is this it?
- What's the point?
- Isn't there more?

Sometimes, the questioning extends beyond personal concerns:

- Why is there so much suffering?
- What's the reason for all the injustices and insanity in so many people's lives?
- Why is the world the way it is?

When someone has reached this point, he is apt to misunderstand his condition. Many who do not grasp the significance of these changes look upon them as unwelcome. Alarmed at the possibility of something unknown happening to him, he tries to fight it in various ways, making frantic efforts to re-attach himself to the “reality” of ordinary life that seems to be losing its point. Often he throws himself with increased effort into more external activities, seeking new challenges at work, greater levels of status, and new, even extreme, experiences of physical and emotional novelty. By these and other means, he may succeed for a while in alleviating his unexplainable changes, but he is unable to get rid of the feelings entirely. They continue to grow in the dark of his being, undermining the old assumptions about how to live.

What is going on? This crisis is produced by the fact that his innate spiritual nature, before revealing itself in its positive form of wisdom, makes itself felt in its negative sense. It shows how every individual thing, even a good thing, is of transient value and non-enduring. It shows us that nothing limited has value on its own, and that any resistant stance made by the personal “I” about what it wants life to be like is false and destined to fail because it is at variance with the very nature of reality. But we resist this new perspective. We do not want to give up on the things that make us feel good about ourselves, even though realistically they are all changing and passing away in the natural flux of life.

This stand-off, this state of resistance, becomes more and more obvious. He feels increasingly distracted. Most of what he lived for now seems to have vanished like a dream, while nothing new has come to take its place. He is still ignorant of what the “new” might be.

At this point it is not unusual for him to entertain a dramatic change in his life. He may want to divorce his wife, change his profession, move to another part of the country or have an entirely different lifestyle. (Fantasies of having a different life are common even without the midlife crisis.) In more difficult situations, he may start using drugs and/or alcohol excessively. In extreme cases, the idea of a painless illness or even suicide as an escape from the "trap" of his current life comes to him seriously for the very first time.

People, of course, vary widely in this form of crisis. There are many who never reach an acute stage, while others arrive at it almost overnight. There are also the simmering lifelong crises, in which the person has always felt that there is more to life than surviving and functioning but they don't know how to experience it.

For some, manifestations of their crisis are primarily mental - an inner harassment of doubts and indecision. In others, emotional indifference to what they used to care about is the most clear-cut feature. In some cases, the internal stress and strain of the crisis produces physical symptoms, such as nervous tension, insomnia and various other troubles (digestive, circulatory, glandular), and the first person they seek out for help is their medical doctor. The doctor will hopefully be successful in alleviating the physical symptoms, but their root cause will often remain unexplored.

Surprises Caused by a Spiritual Experience

The emergence of our spiritual nature can take many forms. Experiences include:

- becoming a field of energy
- becoming conscious of being conscious
- feeling enormous and yet not out of your body
- expanding in all directions
- just pure awareness, endless, boundless
- sensing yourself as another person or being
- feeling solid and heavy like a rock
- feeling you could float
- falling without hitting bottom
- a sense of spaciousness
- serenity and contentment
- emotional expansiveness, laughing in a very deep way
- joy bubbling up and pervading all things
- grasping some hidden truth about the universe
- feeling unity with all beings
- having an instantly understood inner vision, an illumination
- feeling an extraordinary inner silence
- inflows of inspiration
- a sudden and important creative breakthrough

- liberation from fear
- a "psychic" experience that causes awe
- a deep feeling of gratefulness
- a clear sense of inner guidance
- an exhilarating sense of dance
- loving all persons in one person
- feeling oneself to be the channel for a stronger force to flow through
- ecstasy
- merging with a work of art
- the delight of beauty
- transcendence of normal time and space

If a pill could give us any of these experiences, it would sell in the billions. The fact that a natural part our self can give us these experiences is intriguing and a source of great promise for everyone.

With such experiences, the midlife crisis will often vanish with suddenness, thus confirming the fact that it was the direct result of spiritual deprivation. In such cases, the spiritual experience amounts to a real cure.

But, unfortunately, our conflicts are resilient and will reassert themselves. The first crisis then becomes whether to believe, or not, that the spiritual experience had any reality to it.

As the experience itself recedes with time, it may remain unintegrated, unassimilated, and no further benefit will be derived from it. It becomes a story the person tells about a "strange" experience, rather than the opening of a new chapter in life.

A different kind of crisis that comes with a spiritual experience is an interpretive distortion of the experience. Unmet emotional needs will often interfere with gaining a proper perspective on what has happened to us. For example, if a person has a need for being special, their spiritual experience may give them an inflated sense of self-importance. In the religious traditions, there are many such claims, some of them expressed in extraordinary terms.

- In the Bible there is the explicit sentence: "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High."
- St. Augustine declares: "When the soul loves something it becomes like unto it; if it should love terrestrial things it becomes terrestrial, but if it should love God (we may ask) does it not become God?"
- The most extreme expression of the identity of the human spirit in its pure and real essence with the Supreme Spirit is contained in the central teaching of the Vedanta philosophy: "*Tat Twam Asi*" (Thou art That) and "*Aham evam param Brahman*" (In truth I am the Supreme Brahman).

In whatever way we may conceive the relationship between our individual self and universal reality, it is more accurate to interpret our experience as a natural and overdue development, not an extraordinary event. It is extraordinary only in

that we had no relationship to our innate spirituality prior to the experience. Now that we have been introduced to this aspect of ourselves, it is a signal to keep studying, practicing and learning. Immediate leaps into God-like status are absurd and lead to dangerous consequences, as we can see in cases of the manipulative spiritual leaders and cults that harm people and their families and communities. In philosophical terms, this misinterpretation is a case of confusion between an absolute and a relative truth; in religious terms, between God and the personal self.

If a delusion of self-importance does develop, it is a waste of time to antagonize the person. The better way is to sympathize and, while honoring the essential truth of his experience, to suggest that wrestling with its meaning may be more spiritually rewarding than declaring its certainty. Of course, if the person has been overly-energized by the experience in a kind of manic way, he may be already on a campaign of enthusiastic proselytizing and won't be able to sit down for thoughtful talk.

In a different form of crisis, some sensitive individuals may experience an increase in "psychic" perceptions. They may have visions or sense impressions which they believe to be prophetic, and they may now have access to an inner voice that wasn't there before. The quality of such visions and voices is very varied. We do have a wisdom mind, and we may very well have had our first contact with this higher function in our nature. And we are also able to sense something "in the air," i.e., in the collective consciousness of other people, and in that sense we can be prophetic. Equally so, however, we may have had our first clear experience of an extremely destructive inner voice, which is also, like it or not, an aspect of our nature.

All such "psychic" perceptions, e.g., envisioning a future car accident, should be examined with much discernment. In particular, no validity should be attributed to visions and voices containing definite orders or commanding obedience or to those exalting the person over others. Such examples are why modern psychology must be included in spiritual study, so that a map of our negative, life-destroying impulses can inform us on our spiritual path.

The next type of crisis caused by a spiritual experience is *the dark night of the soul*. A spiritual experience is often characterized by a sense of new learning and new possibility. It can shift the meaning and purpose of our life. We may even attain the realization that life is one, and an outpouring of love can be felt flowing through us towards our fellow beings and the whole of creation. Our former personality, with its conflicts and unappealing traits, seems to have receded into the background, and a new lovable self smiles out from us, eager to please and to serve. Spiritual retreats away from society can exaggerate such a reaction.

Such an exalted state lasts for varying periods, but it is bound to end. Our personal self was only temporarily overpowered but not permanently transformed. The inflow of light and love is as rhythmical as everything else in the universe. After a while it diminishes or ceases: the flood is followed by the

ebb. This can unfortunately be a painful experience and is apt in some cases to produce strong reactions and cause serious troubles.

The personal ego re-awakens and asserts itself with renewed force. All the rocks, which had been covered and concealed at high tide, emerge again. With a new vision of how life can be, we now judge our current life with unnecessary severity. Sometimes it even happens that our negative impulses are re-vitalized by the inrush of higher energy. At times the reaction becomes intensified to the extent of causing us to denigrate the value of our recent experience. Self-criticism increases, and we are tempted to regard the whole thing as an illusion, a grandiose fantasy. (In our experience, people who worry about being grandiose aren't grandiose; the truly grandiose never worry about it.)

Yet, try as we might, we cannot return fully to our old self. We have seen a vision of "more," and it continues to attract us. We cannot accept everyday life as before, or be satisfied with it. A "homesickness" haunts us. We are in the dark night.

Sometimes the reaction presents a more pathological aspect and can bear a close resemblance to significant clinical depression. But in the case of those who are having these reactions following an emergence of their spirituality, the dark night symptoms should not be seen as clinical depression: they have a spiritual cause.

St. John of the Cross, who gave the name to *the dark night of the soul*, described it this way: "The self is in the dark because it is blinded by a light greater than it can bear. As eyes weakened and clouded suffer pain when the clear light beats upon them, so the soul suffers exceedingly when the Divine Light really shines upon it. And when the rays of this pure Light shine upon the soul and expel impurities, the soul perceives itself to be so unclean and miserable that it seems as if God has set Himself against it and itself were set against God."

There is a comparison to this experience in the creative ebb and flow of an artist. Artists often complain of periods of aridity, frustration, inability to work. At such times they feel depressed and restless and may be affected by many of the symptoms of the dark night. They are apt to make attempts at escape or evasion of their frustration through alcohol or drugs. But when they have reached the depth of despondency or desperation, there may come a sudden flow of inspiration which energizes a new period of productive activity. The flow often produces a work of art that emerges as a virtually finished product accomplished without much effort. Similar breakthroughs can also be seen in the careers of scientific researchers.

We should realize that while the spiritual crises such as the dark night may look similar to crises which affect anxious and/or depressed people, our life situation is, in a sense, opposite. This has been described in very dramatic terms by Jung: "...just as there are people who are neurotic because they cannot become normal, there are many people who become neurotic because they are only normal."

The symptoms of purely anxious and/or depressed people have generally a *regressive* character. They want to withdraw from the normal challenges that

constitute life in the everyday world. The difficulties produced by wanting to go beyond normal, on the other hand, have a specifically *progressive* character. We may be restless and frustrated about how to go further, but our motivation is positive - we want to explore, experience, discover, contribute.

The Surprises of Transformation

We now deal with the stage in which our personality has to accept our experiences and open to a spiritual view of life. The very first surprise is the balancing act of trying to transform ourselves while at the same time being our old self so we can deal with the practical demands of daily life. Life doesn't stop and wait for us while we evolve our spiritual identity. The caterpillar transforms into a winged butterfly through the stage of the chrysalis - a condition of disintegration and helplessness. But we don't have the protection of a cocoon in which we can undergo our transformation in seclusion and peace. We must remain where we are in life and continue to perform our family, professional and social duties as well as he can, as though nothing new is going on inside us.

This isn't easy, and yet this balancing act actually serves us. We must be able to ground our transformation into the form it will take in everyday life. We cannot accomplish this by going off to some remote location and living an unreal lifestyle. Also, the need to ground our transformation in daily reality helps us to shed any spiritual ideas that are really ethereal, "spiritual" escapism. Some spiritual views are obviously childish wish fulfillment (which was Freud's criticism of religion) and have no practical value.

Integrating our spiritual experiences mean that they become part of who we are and part of the way we feel and think in daily life. The second surprise in transformation is discovering the obstacles to this integration. These obstacles can include:

- negative childhood religious training
- negative experiences with organized religion
- negative feelings toward God as a male father figure
- no experiences of religion, no sense of the universal
- traumas that destroyed trust in others and in ourselves
- fears of social disapproval
- fear of "going out there" and never coming back
- fear of going crazy
- fear of getting too "high" through spirituality
- fear of being changed in some unknown way
- fear of becoming indifferent to everyday life
- fear of becoming God-like and grandiose
- irrational thoughts regarding spirituality, e.g., it is fantasy, it has nothing to do with this world, it is not scientific, it is strange to be interested in such things, only special people know about it, you're never angry if you're spiritual, nothing bothers you if you're spiritual.

If we see ourselves on this list, our transformation will need patience and reason to resolve these obstacles. It's well worth the effort. With the emergence of our innate spirituality, we are onto something of fundamental importance. Many others of all times and cultures have been on this path before us, and they have noted that what we are doing is the very destiny of our life - to discover and express the innate spiritual potentials that we brought with us when we came into this world.

(This article, by Richard Schaub, Ph.D., is a revision of an essay, *Self Realization and Psychological Disturbances* by Roberto Assagioli, M.D. Dr. Schaub is the co-author of *The End of Fear*, *Dante's Path*, and *Healing Addictions* and directs The Huntington Meditation and Imagery Center, Inc., a center for personal development and professional training in Huntington, N.Y. He can be reached at brschaub@optonline.net).