

# SPIRITUALITY FOR NATURALISTS

by Jerome A. Stone

*Abstract.* The views of eleven writers who develop a naturalized spirituality, from Baruch Spinoza and George Santayana to Sam Harris, André Comte-Sponville, Ursula Goodenough, and Sharon Welch and others are presented. Then the writer's own theory is developed. This is a pluralistic notion of *sacredness*, an adjective referring to unmanipulable events of overriding importance. The difficulties in using traditional religious words, such as *God* and *spiritual* are addressed.

*Keywords:* God; naturalism; religion; religious naturalism; reverence; sacred; spirituality

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*Naturalism*, as I use the term, involves the assertion that there seems to be no superior realm, no God, soul or heaven, to explain or give meaning to this world. Like the spatial terms left and right, naturalism is a term that derives its meaning in part from its opposite, *supernaturalism* (Stone 2008, 1). A number of people discussing naturalism have emphasized that proponents of naturalism need to stress what naturalism stands *for*, rather than *against*. In line with that idea, I add, more positively, that naturalism “affirms that attention should be focused on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life” (Stone 2008, 1).

Recently Mario De Caro and David Macarthur published two collections of technical philosophical essays, *Naturalism in Question* and *Naturalism and Normativity* (De Caro and Macarthur, 2004, 2010). These are philosophically dense writings. In the “Introduction” to the former, the editors state that what they call “scientific naturalism” is the current orthodoxy in Anglo-American philosophy. They characterize this orthodoxy as having two themes: one ontological, a commitment to an exclusively scientific conception of nature, and the other methodological, which conceives of philosophical inquiry as continuous with science (De Caro and Macarthur 2004, 1–6).

Jerome A. Stone is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at William Rainey Harper College, Palatine, IL; affiliated community minister with the Unitarian Church of Evanston, IL; and on the adjunct faculty of Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. He may be contacted at 2323 McDaniel, #4116, Evanston, IL 60201, USA; e-mail: Jersustone@aol.com.

De Caro and Macarthur, through these two collections, are nurturing an emergent “liberal” or “pluralistic” naturalism that challenges this orthodoxy. Liberal naturalism challenges scientific naturalism in part by questioning the latter’s consistency (asserting that the claims of scientific naturalism extend beyond the limited scope of scientific assertions). Liberal naturalism also challenges scientific naturalism by exploring its weaknesses in dealing with the topics of mind, agency, and normativity, especially ethical and aesthetic. According to De Caro and Macarthur, liberal or pluralistic naturalists share four features: a shift in focus from nonhuman to human nature, conceived as a historically conditioned product of contingent forces; a nonreductive attitude to normativity; a view of philosophy as in some respects autonomous from scientific method; and a pluralistic conception of the sciences, rejecting the ideal of the unity of the sciences as unrealizable and conceding that there is no clear demarcation around science.

A discussion of naturalized spirituality clearly is in sympathy with the liberal or pluralistic naturalism depicted by these authors. I suggest that a naturalized spirituality sidesteps the concerns of “scientific naturalism” as described above, since spirituality is a different way of engaging the world (or being engaged by it) than science.

This article has two parts. The first presents some important, mostly recent, writers who are developing naturalist spirituality. The second elaborates on my own proposal for naturalized spirituality.

I must warn the reader that I am not an expert guide through the territory of spirituality. Some of these writers are. They have spent years undergoing the discipline of spiritual practice. They could be thought of as experts who have a firsthand acquaintance with what they write about. I do not have the experience that some of these people do, but this may help me to achieve a critical distance that is also useful in this inquiry.

#### A SURVEY OF SOME THEORIES OF NATURALIZED SPIRITUALITY

*Spinoza.* I could start with Confucius, with the Hindu Carvaka, or with Epicurus, but I shall start with Grandfather Spinoza (the following is adapted from Stone 2008, 18). Interpreters of Spinoza disagree, but surely his phrase “God or nature” indicates that he is a forerunner of contemporary naturalist spirituality. Now perhaps his use of the term *God* disqualifies him as a naturalist, but I suggest that he is at least an important pioneer explorer in this territory.

I would like to mention one important theme in Spinoza. His intellectual love of God is a third level of knowledge above sense perception and rational knowledge. I suggest that rather than a form of pseudo-cognition, Spinoza was driving at a form of insight or appreciation of the whole system of nature. (See the British philosopher Samuel Alexander’s comments on Spinoza (Alexander 1939, 346, 373–6; also Stone 2008, 43).

*George Santayana.* For Santayana in *Reason in Religion*, religion is an imaginative symbol for the Life of Reason (Santayana 1905; the following is adapted from Stone 2008, 21–37). Part of his treatment of religion involves a discussion of religions sentiments. These sentiments are piety, spirituality, and charity.

Spirituality is the higher side of religion that imposes a direction and ideal on the forces of human life—in short, an aspiration. *We are spiritual when we live in the presence of an ideal.*

However, spirituality has a pathology. It is subject to corruption. So pedantry often displaces wisdom, tyranny replaces government, and superstition substitutes for piety and rhetoric for reason. Further difficulties come with fanaticism or mysticism. Fanaticism aggressively narrows down concern to only one interest. The mystic passively either accepts all passions or rejects them all. Both represent arrested development of common sense.

The rational person goes a step beyond spirituality and subjects it to the scrutiny of reason. So the rational is a step beyond the spiritual.

*Roy Wood Sellars.* I will discuss Sellars later, but I wanted to mention him here because chronologically he comes after Santayana.

*Sam Harris.* Harris, one of the so-called New Atheists, is a practitioner of various techniques of meditation and teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and the Advaita Vedanta. His extended discussion of spirituality is found in the last chapter of *The End of Faith*.

A range of human experiences can be called “spiritual/mystical”—namely, “experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identities as ‘selves’” (Harris 2004, 39). “Ordinary people can divest themselves of the feeling that they call ‘I’ and thereby relinquish the sense that they are separate from the rest of the universe” (Harris 2004, 40).

Another description of spiritual practice is “investigating the nature of consciousness directly, through sustained introspection” (Harris 2004, 209). If we can recognize that we are “the mere witness of appearances, we will realize that we stand perpetually free of the vicissitudes of experience” (Harris 2004, 206). Almost all our problems are due to our feelings of *separateness*. A spirituality that undermined such dualism through the contemplation of consciousness would improve our situation (Harris 2004, 214).

Introspection shows us that there is no subject of experience, no separation of knower and known. Spiritual life is a freeing of attention so that the selflessness of consciousness can be recognized (Harris 2004, 219).

Here is another definition. Meditation is paying close attention to the moment-by-moment experience of the world. This is not irrational. It is the only rational basis for making claims about subjectivity (Harris 2004,

235). The goal of meditation is not to eliminate thought. It is not to get rid of thoughts but to break our identification with these thoughts (Harris 2004, 217).

One insight to be achieved by meditation is “that the feeling we call ‘I’—the sense that we are the thinker of our thoughts, the experiencer of our experiences—can disappear when looked at in a rigorous way” (Harris 2004, 235). Negative social emotions (hatred, envy, spite) proceed from this common dualistic perspective.

These experiences in which we divest ourselves of the feeling we call “I” are “spiritual” or “mystical” for want of better words. “‘Spirituality’ and ‘mysticism’ have unfortunate connotations and neither word captures the reasonableness and profundity of the possibility . . . that there is a form of well-being that supersedes all others, indeed, that transcends the vagaries of experience itself” (Harris 2004, 205). Harris uses the two terms *spirituality* and *mysticism* interchangeably, but in a cautious sense. After all, we are not dealing with “the healing powers of crystals and colonic irrigation” or “the ardors of alien abduction” (Harris 2004, 205).

*Owen Flanagan.* Flanagan’s discussion of spirituality appears in his book *The Really Hard Problem*, particularly Chapter 6, “Spirituality Naturalized.” Spirituality is “seeking to understand and develop a sense of connection to that which is greater than and more comprehensive than [one’s] self” (Flanagan 2007, 199).

Spirituality is “having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort” (Flanagan 2007, 201).

The healthy forms of spirituality involve “the degree to which they result in unselfish love of others.” [Flanagan quotes this approvingly from Stephen Post (Flanagan 2007, 207; Post 2004).] There are three major spiritual traditions that endorse such an unselfish love: Buddhism, “Jesusism” or the ethical teachings of Jesus, and utilitarianism or consequentialism. These three can all be lived naturalistically. Buddhism and Jesusism do not need to be conceived supernaturalistically, while consequentialism is overtly secular.

The reason why one would want to live in such an ethically expansive manner is that it is one reliable way to human flourishing (Flanagan 2007, 209). The path of universal love and compassion is the best strategy to find happiness; in addition, this strategy can be conceived naturalistically, which is the best philosophical view. Happiness, flourishing, and meaning come from having a goal beyond my own personal desires that is inclusive of all actual and potential persons (possibly of all sentient beings) as well as to Earth and the larger cosmos (Flanagan 2007, 219).

The next question is how to be motivated to live in such an ethically expansive way. Perhaps we can encourage the relevant human impulses

through rational and emotional support and a method of moral education and socialization. Meditation is a very helpful strategy, for it transforms the mind-brain by “reconfiguring neural circuits” (Flanagan 2007, 212).

Instead of merely wishing for no suffering for others, through meditation on such scenarios as the Dalai Lama suggests, we can have more of the love that one usually has for one’s loved ones for other people. The three traditions ask us to consider this. Such universal love takes lots of work and practice: meditation, concentration, rational arguments and charismatic exemplars can do much. They are promising strategies. Supernatural foundation is not required (Flanagan 2007, 218).

*Robert C. Solomon.* In *Spirituality for the Skeptic*, Solomon characterizes spirituality as the thoughtful love of life (Solomon 2002). Along with most of these current writers he sees spirituality as involving the transformation of the self in terms of an expansion of the self beyond selfishness. Spirituality takes us out of ourselves into community with a larger whole. As a naturalized spirituality it is nonreligious, nonexclusive, nondogmatic, not based on belief, not anti-science, and not otherworldly. It embraces science because it seeks to know more about the world that it loves.

Interestingly, as a love of this life, naturalized spirituality embraces appetites, sex and sensuality, possibly even fast cars, money and luxury, all in their proper place. What counts is living well. But Solomon is a little uneasy about this, because he admits that spirituality can be vulgarized into living luxuriously and simply enjoying oneself. As he phrases it, spirituality involves a *larger* sense of life. However, not any larger sense of life will do. Patriotism, for example, while it can have a spiritual dimension, can also be narrow and confining. So although there are dangers of vulgarity and narrowness, love of this life, or better, thoughtful love of this life, is what a naturalized spirituality is about. Being in love, losing oneself in music, feeling at one with nature, are all ways of being spiritual.

Solomon is clear that spirituality involves thinking, feeling and acting. It is rational, emotional and active. Indeed, spirituality is a passion, and this involves Solomon’s elaborate notion of a passion. Passions are investments of the self with life in a way that emotions are not. The erotic love in spirituality involves choice, engagement with life, including uncertainty about the future. Passions can be cultivated and, be it noted, are not out of control.

Solomon has analyzed spirituality in terms of three emotions: erotic love, reverence and trust. The objects of these emotions are ultimately the world or life itself. And when the world or life is specified as the object of love, reverence and trust, the distinction between emotions and moods is dissolved.

Love of a lover, humanity, or the world is exemplary of spirituality as an expansion of the self, a fusion or merger with the larger world. Now, of course, we cannot be passionately intimate with everyone, but we can expand our erotic world.

In spirituality one *chooses* to see the world as beautiful, as an object of love or fascination, not just as a resource or challenge. So spirituality is not disinterested, but involves appreciation as well as comprehension. But this choice is steadfast, not fickle. Spirituality is resistant to change.

Now eroticism can be dangerous, as in the eroticism of fascism. Erotic love needs *reverence* to be spiritual. [Solomon owes a great deal to Paul Woodruff here (Woodruff 2001).] Being spiritual means being reverential before the world, before other people, the law and other social institutions worthy of reverence. Reverence has nothing to do with God or religion. Reverence means recognizing one's limits, even with regard to the feeblest creatures. It implies responsibility, not just humility.

Reverence does not mean politeness, hyperseriousness or a lack of humor. Nor is reverence to be equated with awe. Awe is too passive. Reverence is active and responsible.

Solomon can also describe spirituality as cosmic trust. Trust is a determined stance toward the world that implies dependence and vulnerability. Trust entails risk and also responsibility for our engagements in the world. Trust includes being prepared to accept life's many possibilities.

Authentic trust is not given but "earned, and cultivated, and worked at" (Solomon 2002, 46). It is something we do and therefore is something for which we take responsibility. In a nutshell the problem is "How do we get past the cynical (aka "realist") position that sees the utter contingency of life without falling into the naivete of philosophical optimism?" (Solomon 2002, 47).

Thus it seems that "spirituality is a synthesis of uncertainty and confidence, a sense of powerlessness combined with resoluteness and responsibility" (Solomon 2002, 47). The trust in spirituality presupposes that matters are not wholly in one's hands but also not totally out of one's hands.

Now there are emotional poisons that hinder such trust: paranoia, envy and resentment. Envy, for example, "closes off any possibility of appreciating ourselves *for ourselves* or getting along with those we envy. . . . [Envy] closes off that larger view that allows us to be thankful for what we've got, accepting of what we do not have, and grateful for the very chance to be so alive at all" (Solomon 2002, 54–55, emphasis in original). (At this point Solomon confesses that the struggle against envy and resentment are why spirituality is such a challenge for him.)

Now the spiritual life is sometimes wrongly defined as life without the distractions of affections. On the contrary, for Solomon, the spiritual life is defined by the most passionate caring, and in fact this *defines* its rationality.

Reason and the passions are ultimately one and the same. “Spirituality is and must be both rational and passionate at once,” although there are both irrational and dangerous forms of spirituality (Solomon 2002, 61).

Rationality is “not just our ability to criticize and argue, but also the perspicacity and vision to appreciate complexity, to find (or make) meaning in disorder and confusion” (Solomon 2002, 62). But this is what passions do, too. The right passions bring perspicacity and vision that are characteristics of rationality. Science is not the *only* kind of rationality.

Solomon turns now to the problem of suffering. Life is not fair. Bad things happen. Spirituality accepts that fact. But that is not to say that life is meaningless, nor does it justify dwelling on tragedies or overlooking the blessings and benefits of life. We need not opt for feeling victimized or for cynicism. Feeling victimized and cynicism are sometimes the products of our eagerness for blame and our extravagant sense of entitlement. We need a combination of gratitude and humor. We need to confront tragedy and engage passionately with the people and details of our life.

Life is a gift none of us deserves. The odds are that one would have been born impoverished, malnourished and ignorant, in the midst of famine, war or dictatorship. Thus gratitude is the best approach to life. It implies an admission of limitation as well as appreciation.

Spirituality is the enlargement, not the negation of the self. It is not just an awareness of suffering, but also a sense of the joy of the world. Spirituality involves a compassionate ordinary self that has become enlarged and enhanced. To get locked into petty tasks and competitions is a distortion of ourselves. Selfishness turns out to be a constriction of our humanity. In fact, one can speak of “soul” as the full realization of our ordinary self. Thus soul is both something natural and something to be striven for. Perhaps soul is our better self.

The naturalized notion of spirituality is an arduous process but well worth striving for. It is awareness not only of suffering but of cosmic joy and humor as well.

*Ursula Goodenough.* Professor of biology at Washington University and past president of the American Society of Cell Biology, Ursula Goodenough is the author of a best-selling textbook on genetics. Her major writing as a religious naturalist is *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, which made the *New York Times* best-seller list (Goodenough 1998). She adopts a completely naturalistic, explicitly nontheist outlook. [This and the next two sections are adapted from Stone 2008.]

Goodenough has two starting points: first, the existence of the universe as a whole and the fact of our existence within it and second the major steps in the evolution of life and of humans.

As for the first point, the existence of the universe, she affirms that the opportunity to develop personal beliefs in response to ultimate questions, such as “Why is there anything at all?,” is important for

humans. Even though her beliefs are naturalistic, she does not dismiss these questions as meaningless or treat them as simply scientific questions. Her own response is “to articulate a covenant with Mystery.” She speaks of responses of gratitude that our planet is “perfect for human habitation” and “astonishingly beautiful” and of reverence in the face of the vast lengths of time, the enormous improbability and the splendid diversity of it all (Goodenough 1998, 167–8). Her naturalism is explicit in her profession that “this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty” plus her ability to apprehend it serve as the source of ultimate meaning and value, requiring no further justification, no Creator (Goodenough 1998, 171). These attitudes she sees as giving rise to action to further the continuance of life, including human life.

As for the second point, the steps in evolution, each chapter of *The Sacred Depths of Nature* starts with a description of a step in evolution. (And may I note here parenthetically that if you haven’t studied biology recently, her book is a good way to catch up. I recommend it as a gift for young people struggling with biology. It has a lot of detail but is clearly written.) After explaining the biology briefly, she has a rich set of “Reflections” at the end of each chapter in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. These reflections include meditations on the development of enzyme cascades, on speciation, on the regulation of gene expression, reflections on “assent,” on deference toward diversity of species, on the nature of human distinctiveness amidst other species, and on the difference between cosmic mystery and a sense of immanence. For example, to choose the reflections at the end of only one chapter, “it was the invention of death, the invention of the germ/soma dichotomy, that made possible the existence of our brains” that can face the prospect of our own death (Goodenough 1998, 149).

These reflections are combined with carefully chosen selections from poems, hymns, and meditations from a variety of cultures and religious traditions. Thus she moves from *scientific inquiry* through *disciplined deliberation* on her deeply felt responses to it, culminating in an *artistically crafted expression* incorporating gems from the world’s cultures all wrought in her own poesis, to use her term.

She conceives of her task as exploring the religious potential of the scientific understanding of Nature. This task of exploration is made easier by the emergence in recent decades of a coherent scientific cosmology and account of evolution. Such a task is a poesis, a religiopoiesis, a making or crafting of religious material. No one person, of course, constructs a religion. But unless individuals “offer contributions, there will be no ‘stuff’ available to cohere into new religious orientations in future times” (Goodenough 2000, 562). Thus she conceives of her task as contributing to the making of religious material for those in the future with a naturalistic outlook.



A viable religious orientation, she claims, comes from the integration of spirituality and beliefs. When the scientific accounts of cosmology evoke what could be called our beliefs, we find ourselves walking humbly and with gratitude in the presence of the scientific accounts. Religioipoiesis, in the end, is engaged in finding how to tell the scientific story of evolution in ways that convey meaning and motivation (Goodenough 2000, 565).

From her perspective our scientific account of Nature, the Epic of Evolution, is the one story that has the potential to unite us all, because it seems to be the most adequate account we currently have. A cosmology works as a religious cosmology only if it resonates, if it makes the listener feel religious. The scientific account of how things are and came to be is likely, at first encounter, to elicit alienation, anomie, and nihilism. A naturalistic religioipoiesis needs to overcome such alienation. She suggests that the scientific account, rightly grasped, can elicit gratitude and reverence and help us acknowledge an “imperative that life continue” (Goodenough 1998, xvii).

*Goodenough and Woodruff.* Since *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Goodenough has been exploring several innovative lines of thought. One of these is the concept of *mindful reverence*. In collaboration with philosopher Paul Woodruff, she explores reverence and other virtues (Goodenough and Woodruff 2001; see Woodruff 2001). To be mindful as developed here is more than awareness in the classic Buddhist sense: it is scientifically informed consideration. But it is also more than learning scientific facts. It is living in consideration of them. It is to be mindful of our place in the scheme of things. Reverence is a capacity, developed in the process of evolution, a capacity that can be cultivated.

Goodenough also has come to distinguish between horizontal and vertical transcendence. The spirituality of horizontal transcendence requires identification not merely with the nonhuman living, but also with the inanimate, “the massive mysticism of stone,” to use Robinson Jeffers’s phrase (Kalton 2000, 199). The reward of vertical transcendence is unification with a purposeful Creator. *The reward of horizontal transcendence is homecoming.* The ethics of vertical transcendence is fitting into an ideal scheme. *The ethics of horizontal transcendence is responding appropriately to our situation.* “An ethical approach to nature must be anchored both in deep attunement and deep knowledge” (Goodenough 2001, 29). Our children must have a chance to play in the woods and to be taught, with wonder, gratitude and respect, at their mother’s knees, that the trees are genetically scripted.

*Goodenough and Deacon.* Recently Ursula Goodenough and Terrence Deacon, professor of biological anthropology and linguistics at Berkeley,

have been attempting to specify the concept of evolutionary *emergence* in detail and to articulate its significance for spirituality (Goodenough and Deacon 2006). In their formula, emergence refers to the generation of “something else from nothing but.”

While recognizing that some physicists suggest that emergence starts at the subatomic level, Goodenough and Deacon begin their story at the molecular level.

To condense the whole epic of evolution in a few sentences: with life genes encode proteins that fold into shapes that give rise to cell organization and behavior, metabolism and energy transduction, and communication between cells. These are emergent properties.

With the development of nervous systems, humans have new traits—symbolic languages, cultural transmission, and an autobiographical self—that are “something else” emergent from “nothing but” ancient protein families displayed in novel patterns and sequences. “Biologically we are just another ape; mentally we are a whole new phylum” (Deacon 1998).

Goodenough and Deacon go on to suggest religious *responses* to this evolutionary perspective. Both are “religious nontheists,” which makes them of interest to our topic.

Now for spirituality. Goodenough and Deacon suggest that one *spiritual response* to emergentism will be a re-enchantment of the universe whenever we take its continuous coming into being into awareness and a re-enchantment of our lives when we realize that we also are continually transcending ourselves. Another spiritual response will be reverence, a deconstruction of hubris and a recognition that our context is vastly larger and more important than our selves. Further, the emergentist outlook can inspire our stammering gratitude for the creative universe, this astonishing whole to which we owe our lives.

Deacon centers his notion of spirituality, much like Goodenough’s notion of “horizontal transcendence,” on a sense of connectedness with the world. He also refers to an extended self beyond the space and time of our bodies, for the consequences of our lives ramify in all directions through all time. He suggests this as an improvement over the usual self-centered spirituality focusing on saving an immortal soul.

*Sharon Welch.* Sharon Welch, provost at Meadville Lombard Theological School and writer in the field of social ethics, has been reflecting on how to work for social justice under conditions of finitude with limited knowledge about the consequences of our actions and no assurance about their success. In particular, how do people of relative privilege work with people of less privilege and different ideas? [This section is adapted from my *Religious Naturalism Today*, where I have given a fuller analysis of her key concepts (Stone 2008, 146–8, 206–7).]

Her thinking about the spiritual dimension of social action falls into two periods. In both periods the divine is not a separate entity. In her earlier period the divine is a characteristic of relationships or of the capacity to enter into right relationships with other people, with nature and with ourselves. Hers is a theology of radical immanence. There is no separate divine entity. Rather than God-language, she uses “divine” as an adjective to refer to grace or the power of relations (Welch 2000).

In her later writing Welch is even more reticent to use traditional religious language. She is acutely aware that our actions are morally ambiguous. She is keenly aware of how religious people can be cruel and destructive. For her the power of religion is in “the collective support of meaning and commitment.” This communal solace, joy and challenge is not unambiguously good.

Religious experience . . . is fundamentally amoral. Belonging to a religious group . . . can as easily fuel campaigns of genocide and coercion as movements of compassion and social transformation. Slave owners and abolitionists, participants in the Civil Rights movement and members of the Ku Klux Klan, alike drew comfort and challenge from their religious beliefs and their participation in religious communities. (Welch 1999, 127)

She now speaks of the wellspring of moral action as arising from such things as gratitude, joy, mourning and rage. Acts of persistence, resistance, and transformation spring from a reservoir of vitality and joy in life. They come from gratitude and the affirmation of this life in which there is suffering and moral failure, where we make mistakes and where we love people who will die. Welch no longer uses religious language, even tenuously.

Spirituality has power and value, and yet is fraught with danger. What is needed is an ironic spirituality that recognizes our limits and failures and finds joy in our successes. We need to be ironic *and* committed, suspicious *and* celebrative simultaneously (Welch 1999, 128 and 156 n. 25).

*André Comte-Sponville.* For Comte-Sponville, author of *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, there are certain moments of experience or awareness of the All, the entire universe of being, when the Ego vanishes (Comte-Sponville 2007). These are moments of affirmation and of acceptance. These moments are rare but powerful enough to be unforgettable, moments that can be characterized by such words as mystery, self-evidence, plenitude, eternity, serenity, and acceptance.

*William R. Murry.* Unitarian Universalist minister and former president of Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary, William R. Murry has been showing how religious humanism is an adequate approach to life in the twenty-first century. In *Becoming More Fully Human* develops a

theory of virtues, including reverence and awareness (Murry 2011, 87–9 and 119–21). Both of these are often considered aspects of spirituality.

Drawing on Paul Woodruff, Murry articulates a nontheist approach to reverence. It involves awe and respect for what transcends humanity, particularly justice and nature. Surely nature is transcendent to humans and, as an unrealized ideal, justice is also beyond us. Reverence thus can save us from the hubris that can destroy the good we have accomplished.

Awareness is paying attention. It is similar to Buddhist mindfulness; indeed Murry uses the terms interchangeably. Awareness involves attention in the present moment both to the world around us and to the total complex we call our minds and bodies.

This survey of the literature indicates that there is a great deal of current interest in spirituality without God or a metaphysical transcendent. These recent advocates of natural spirituality are saying three things about spirituality: We are spiritual, first, when our sense of connection is enlarged. Second, we are spiritual when we aspire to greater things, when we attempt to realize our ideals. Finally, we are spiritual when we ask the big questions. Note that these three—connection, aspiration, and reflection on profound questions—are all forms of enlarging our selves, of breaking through the narrow walls of the ego.

#### A NATURALISTIC THEORY OF SPIRITUALITY

In this part of the essay I propose a theory of “natural spirituality.” By *natural spirituality* I mean a spirituality that is open to the treasures of this world, to its joys and even its heartaches. If spirituality is supposed to be leaving this world behind, if spirituality means climbing up Jacob’s ladder to the heavenly realm of Plato’s ideas, that’s not for me. It may be fine for some people, but I will take a pass. Spirituality in the past has often meant just that, withdrawing from this world and ascending by degrees to a heavenly vision. But if spirituality means being more open to this world and its riches, then I’m interested. Being open to the world and its riches is a way of enlarging ourselves, of breaking through the narrow walls of the ego.

Thoreau, in his *Journals*, wrote about turning over a slab of ice that formed on the grass in winter to examine the bits and pieces and crawlies on the underside. I take this to be a very significant action. Ever since Plato we have been urged to climb up to the higher realms. Thoreau advocates digging down into the details, digging down both literally and metaphorically, to turn the whole Western tradition upside down. We need to develop what Ursula Goodenough calls “horizontal transcendence” (Goodenough 2001).

*I shall define spirituality in the primary sense as experiencing the extraordinary or the sacred, which I define as "that which is of overriding significance." In the secondary sense I shall define spirituality as the attempt to cultivate an awareness of the sacredness of at least some things and an attempt to live out the sense of the importance of things that sacredness brings.*

So spirituality is first of all an experiencing of the sacredness of some things (or possibly all things) and second it is the cultivation of this experiencing and the living out of its implications. In the first sense spirituality is the experiencing of the extraordinary or what is of overriding importance. In the second sense it is the cultivation of this experiencing and the living in its light.

This requires a theory of the sacred, which I shall discuss shortly. But first, since I am a skeptic, although an appreciative skeptic, I must talk about the perversions of spirituality. Like organized religion, spirituality has its perversions, including self-importance, lukewarmness and lack of discipline. Now I want to say that these perversions of spirituality may be corrected through organized religion at its best. I also wish to say that organized religion may worsen these perversions.

In agreement with the other writers, my notion of spirituality includes both cognitive and affective dimensions and can become motivation for action. More than the other writers I stress that these experiences of the sacred come with varying degrees of intensity from the ordinary to the ecstatic. With Harris and Flanagan I note that spirituality can be an intentional practice requiring methodical discipline. However, with Comte-Sponville I recognize that sometimes the experiences of the extraordinary can come unbidden. In other words, spirituality can vary from the spontaneous to the routine. And routine is not always a bad thing. Routine can be related to method and discipline. Unlike the other writers I stress that a healthy spirituality can and perhaps should involve a both an imaginative grasp of the totality of the universe, a sense of the Big Picture, and appreciative attention to the concrete particularities of life. In other words, I balance Spinoza and Comte-Sponville with Thoreau.

It must be stressed that a healthy spirituality provides a motivation to pursue responsibility beyond the self. Spirituality is not a matter of navel gazing. There can and should be a sense of connection, an enlargement of concern. To be sure, zeal can harden into fanaticism. A strong spirituality, however, will provide enough flexibility and openness to prevent such excess. In short, a spiritual life without social concern is truncated and pathological. Indeed a spiritual life can provide the motivation and psychological resources to persevere in the arduous tasks of social responsibility.

At this point I would like ask, can you combine spirituality and skepticism? I'm not sure that you can. What may occur is that you alternate

between skepticism and engaged experiencing. It is something like kissing. If someone approaches with lips, you either are skeptical or you enjoy the kiss. Now here is a dichotomy, skepticism or engagement. These two are distinct attitudes in what is probably a whole cluster of possible attitudes. Think of the difference between a kiss of greeting, a passionate kiss, a kiss on stage, and having to kiss Aunt Matilda. The philosopher William Hocking suggested an alternation between the mystical attitude and the ordinary attitude. I am following up on this by secularizing the spiritual. But I am not sure that skepticism and spirituality are incompatible at one point in time. So I am not certain that we have to alternate. Humans are capable of rather complex feelings.

Howard Radest, a leader of the Ethical Culture Society and first dean of the Humanist Institute, reminded me that sacredness has connotations of unapproachability. (The following is adapted from Stone 2000.) He is correct. I would like to make a distinction between behavioral and methodological restraint. When we speak of the sacredness of human beings we hold up behavioral restraint as part of a proper attitude of respect. To call something sacred implies that we will not destroy or damage it—but indeed that we will protect it. However, when we speak of the sacredness of scripture or prelates, we usually mean that we will not question their dicta. We mean methodological restraint. Now I very much wish to shout from the housetops that the word “sacred,” as it should be used, implies behavioral, not methodological restraint. Let us never put a bar to inquiry.

So far my notion of spirituality may sound rather tasteless. Have you ever eaten tofu? Now I like tofu—but only if it has been marinated. So let me take this “spirituality lite,” which I have been describing, this generic, tasteless tofu, and put it in some marinade.

I wish to select five events from my experience that I have learned to think of as sacred. I will briefly depict them. *What I wish to emphasize is their overriding importance in my life.*

*First*—I remember the day my father died. I was sitting in my apartment feeling rather sad when my daughter, at that time about eight years old, came home from school. When I told her what had happened, she said, “Oh, Dad” and put her arm around me. It was one of the most comforting and supportive moments of my life.

*Second*—After Martin Luther King was murdered, some citizens, both black and white, of the city of Evanston, Illinois, organized marches to put pressure on the city council to pass an open housing ordinance. At that time it was perfectly legal in that place to refuse to rent or sell a house to anyone, including blacks and Jews, because of their race or ethnic origin. Now I was quite busy as a father, breadwinner and graduate student. Yet I felt that this was the right moment to pressure the city council. Also my wife and I felt that this was a way to educate our two children by direct participation in values we held dear. So we joined the marches.

*Third*—One summer evening, walking in a park after dinner, my wife and I heard a presence just over our heads and looked up just in time to see a kestrel catch a junco in midair and carry it in its bloody claws to eat on a nearby telephone pole. It gave us both a thrill at the excellence of the hunter and a vivid realization that this struggle so close to us was yet quite other than our concerns.

*Fourth*—For every son or daughter there comes a time when independence from parents must be asserted. The event I remember for my son and I happened after his first year away at college. I came to help him empty his dorm room for the summer. When we had packed the car, he invited me to the local hangout and bought me a beer. A simple gesture, but one that clearly affirmed his status as a co-equal adult.

*Fifth*—For 48 years my life has been entwined with that of my wife. Through shared joys and struggles I have always felt that my life has been made real by her companionship. I have not deserved her, but I am very grateful for her. We both say that we have learned what “we” means.

These five events have been paradigms of sacred events for me. Reflection on them has helped shape my philosophy of life. An early religious training provided a set of ideas about the sacred that helped me reflect upon some very personal experiences, ideas that were transformed in the process of interaction with these events. Inherited language and lived experience have always been in transaction. I have described these events also to call forth analogous events for you, events that will be quite different and yet perhaps may share some features with my experience.

Gradually I have developed a technical theory of sacredness. It goes something like this. *The word **sacred** is a word we use to describe events, things, processes that are of overriding importance and yet are not under our control or within our power to manipulate.* In this sense these five events and others are sacred.

To acknowledge anything as sacred is to move beyond the narrow boundaries of the self. This sense of overriding importance is similar to Goodenough’s notion of “horizontal transcendence.”

To be sure, spirituality can become pathological. Narrow chauvinism, racism, indeed any uncritical devotion, can move us beyond narrow ego boundaries, which is why prophetic strand in religion at its best has always spoken against the danger of idolatry. The severest critics of religion have often been religious.

The stance for living that flows from this emphasis on the sacred is that of openness, of readiness for the appearance of sacred events. Disciplined preparation and loyal commitment to the sacred are called for but must be balanced by a recognition that the sacred is essentially unmanipulable. Thus Confucian focusing of heart and mind should be balanced by a Daoist openness to the spontaneous play of the sacred.

There are further implications of this notion of the sacred:

- (1) Given my commitment to a philosophy of naturalism, sacred events are not understood as manifestations of something deeper, such as a god. Rather the overriding importance *is* the “depth” or “height.” All of the world religions, as I understand them, speak of going beyond the surface understanding of life. My naturalistic outlook suggests to me that the deeper vision we seek to attain is not of another realm or of invisible spirits, but rather a revised insight into importance of things. There is a “depth,” not apart from, but right in the midst of things. I am indebted to Paul Tillich’s notion of the “depth” dimension and even more to John Dewey’s adjectival “religious quality of experience” in *A Common Faith*. As Ursula Goodenough likes to say, rather than “Hosanna in the highest!” it’s “Hosanna, right here, right now, this.”
- (2) There are no clear boundaries around the sacred. Some events are clearly sacred. Others are perhaps boundary line cases. It is not always possible to know whether some events or places are sacred. Perhaps this means that all things are sacred, although I am not sure that we are capable of sustaining such a sense or even that we should.
- (3) The sacred is not a separate sphere of life. It is not to be found separate from the pursuits of truth, justice, beauty and selfhood, and so on.
- (4) Religion could be thought of as a self-conscious acknowledgment of the sacred. In that case there is no clear separation of the sacred and the secular, yet there is still a role for the deliberate recognition of the presence of sacred things. Religious communities and their traditions, what we sometimes disparagingly call “organized religions,” are attempts to nurture and pass on the sense of the sacred. That is what they are at their best. All of these communities are in danger of being at their worst, for in representing the sacred they are in continual danger of claiming to be sacred, to be of overriding importance themselves.  
I sometimes say that religion is the self-conscious acknowledgement of the sacred. Sometimes I have another way of speaking about religion. “*One way of getting at what we mean by religion is that it is our attempt to make sense of our lives and behave appropriately within the total scheme of things*” (Stone 2008, 226 emphasis in original). In other words, it is our attempt to live in the light of the Big Picture.
- (5) It seems that almost always sacred things have a dual aspect. They both challenge and support the people who acknowledge their sacredness.



- (6) My own vision is that the sacred is plural in nature. As I sense it, sacred events and processes are just that—plural. I am among the most radically pluralistic of religious naturalists.
- (7) This version of religious naturalism, like all versions, must speak to issues of social justice, environmental care, and repudiation of idolatry. It can speak to them and it can speak as well or better than traditional theism. The sacred is found in the human and the nonhuman others, and its overriding importance undermines all the idols that our minds create.
- (8) Sacred things are plural, but they have enough similarity that we can apply the same adjective, “sacred,” to them. There are no trees that exist apart from particular trees. There is enough similarity between the cypress and the sycamore that we may apply the abstract term “tree” to them. Thus all trees are analogous. Likewise there is enough analogy to all instances of the sacred that we may call them all, in English, “sacred.” This, of course, indicates that the term “sacred” will have boundary-line examples, gradations, and all the vagaries, vagueness, ambiguity and historical contingency of human terms.

It may be that at times of devotion we may imaginatively unify the sacred, just as we may think about “trees” in general or “snow” or “water.” But these general terms, useful as they are, are abstract and are never instantiated apart from the particularities and contingencies of very specific trees. Joyce Kilmer may have written that he “may never see a poem lovely as a tree,” but it would be a very specific maple or pinyon pine or other tree that he would see when he saw a tree.

Now it is possible that there is an interconnectedness among sacred things that is not captured in my pluralistic language. It may be that there is a web or matrix nature to the sacred. I am agnostic about this possibility, although I feel sympathetic toward the notion as conveying something of the plurality of the sacred. Indeed the sacred may be a patchwork or mosaic.

This recognition of the possible plurality of the divine opens the door to a new appreciation of polytheistic sensitivities. Although there are both monotheistic and Enlightenment sensibilities that would discourage this, I find that this opens up exciting new possibilities. It may turn out that religious naturalism has very old roots and is indeed quite conservative after all! In fact, I’ve become a polytheist at heart, although this overthrows the two roots of my religious heritage: the Enlightenment and biblical monotheism.

Here we need to raise the following question: Can we still use traditional language? Can we still use words like “spirituality” or “sacred,” not to

mention “religious” as in “religious humanism” or “religious naturalism”? At the simplest form of the discussion, there are two opposed views. One view says that traditional words like *spirituality* or *sacred* are hopelessly outdated. The other view says that at least some of these words can be modified, revised and updated. Some proponents of this view claim that many traditional words have emotive power to motivate us, while the other side is *worried* about this power.

For purposes of illustration, Roy Wood Sellars, a drafter of the first *Humanist Manifesto*, may be taken as one approach to these issues. He was opposed to liberal Protestant theology’s reinterpretation of the term *God*. However, he allowed the term *religious humanism* conceived of as “religion adjusted to an intelligent naturalism,” while “the spiritual is man at his best . . . loving, daring, creating fighting loyally and courageously for causes dear to him” (Sellars 1933, 10; 1947, 158). Also John Dewey could speak in derogatory fashion of “a religion” and yet seek to revise the concept of “religious” as an adjective applied to certain human attitudes (“a unification of ideal values that is essentially imaginative in origin” and “the *active* relation between ideal and actual”), and Dewey even tried to revise the concept of God (Dewey 1934, 43, 51).

The choice of which words to keep, if any, I suggest depends on at least two factors. One is a judgment call as to which words are still viable or else are hopelessly encumbered by too much baggage. The other factor is how much a person has been wounded, especially in childhood, by the oppressive use of these words.

It should be clear that I myself am willing to use the words *spirituality*, *sacred* and *religious*. I would prefer not to use the term *God*, even in Spinoza’s naturalistic sense as identical with nature conceived in a certain way. Occasionally I will reluctantly use the word *God*, for example, when taking an oath in court to indicate the seriousness of my commitment. Perhaps I should challenge this practice, but you cannot win all battles.

Some people challenge the honesty of using traditional vocabulary, even in a revised sense. I wish to claim that there is no a priori reason to reject these old words. The decision needs to be made for each term and sometimes on a contextual basis. Scientists are allowed to modify the meanings of words such as *atom*. I see no automatic reason not to allow traditional terms to be used with new meanings, although these meanings should be spelled out. Some skeptics don’t like this modification of old terms. They prefer a stationary target. But why should the privilege be accorded in the scientific domain and not in the area of personal philosophies of life?

In the space of this article I have not been able to develop details of a spirituality that can nurture an appreciation for the sacredness of the nonhuman world. Persons are sacred, but we are not alone in our importance. That is why I prefer to call myself a religious naturalist rather

than a humanist. Developing a spirituality oriented to the nonhuman environment is an important part of addressing our ecological vulnerability. When we hold something sacred we will protect it. Such a spiritual practice will require us to shut off our phones, train our senses, be scientifically informed, and learn to appreciate our bioregions and local ecosystems. It is important to my personal spirituality to realize that all of us dwellers on Earth are made of stardust, that this is an experimental universe and that we are on the growing edge of the universe.

In conclusion, the survey of recent writers on naturalistic spirituality in the first part of this article found three modes of spirituality. Spirituality is a breaking of the ordinary bounds of the ego through a sense of connectedness, aspiration, or reflection on profound questions. I propose my conception of sacredness as a designation for uncontrollable events of overriding significance as one way of understanding and of fostering such an expansion of the self.

Why bother about spirituality? Well, why bother about love or beauty? It is part of the richest flavor of life. Indeed, spirituality *can* come with an overriding insistence. But you had better go into it with your eyes wide open—somehow combine or alternate between the engaged and the skeptical attitudes.

As I said at the beginning of this section, a naturalized spirituality is one that is open to the treasures of this world, to its joys and heartaches. Echoing Goodenough, we are a piece of evolved pre-Cambrian mud that every day has a chance to sit up and look around and shout—“Hosanna, right here and now!”

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#### NOTE

Let me say a few words about drawing on Hindu or Buddhist resources of spirituality. Some people say you need a guru. Well, maybe. A coach or a teacher, sure. But do not surrender your hard-won intellectual and emotional maturity. Hinduism and Buddhism can take us beyond egotism. But that can be carried too far. Whenever I teach about Buddhism to my Unitarian Universalist pre-ministerial graduate students, I always ask them if the Buddhist notion of “no self” is what you want to tell a battered woman or an abused altar boy. I think the Buddhist idea of no self means, in part, that you are not trapped in your present self—and that can indeed be a liberating word. I also want to ask, who is taking care of the children while you are meditating? Who is cleaning the latrine? Now the answer may be that the monks are taking turns with housework in between meditation—and that’s fine. Finally, let’s remember the great variety of Asian forms of philosophy and spirituality: Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta is not same as Ramanuja’s bhakti-oriented Vedanta, and Zen no-mind seems rather different—at least at one

level—from Tibetan projecting of various gods and goddesses into phenomenal existence. But that's another article.

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