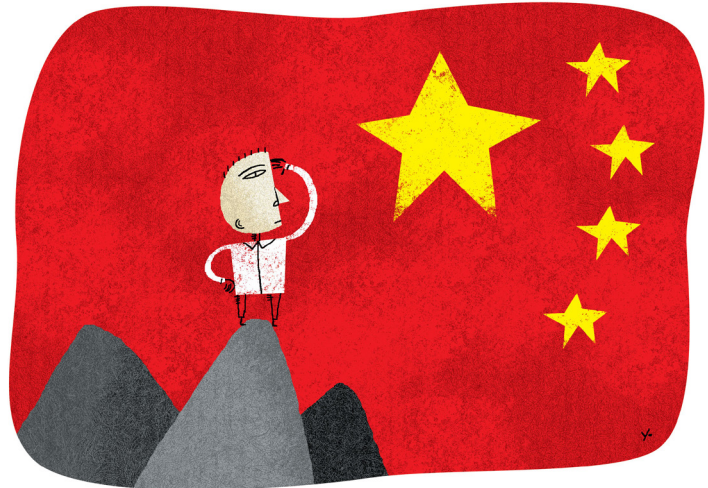




The Vital Dimension of Social Change

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Everything that we experience as material reality is born in an invisible realm beyond space and time, a realm revealed by science to consist of energy and information. This invisible source of all that exists is not an empty void but the womb of creation itself. Something creates and organizes this energy. It turns the chaos of quantum soup into stars, galaxies, rain forests, human beings, and our own thoughts, emotions, memories, and desires.¹

What creates and organizes the energy and information in the universe? What is it that quickens the successful transformations in social change efforts? The answer to both questions is **spirit**. In this article I describe the value of incorporating the spiritual dimension in social change.²

WHAT IS SPIRIT AND SPIRITUALITY?

Spirit is energy alive within all of us, a connection to something greater than ourselves, a connection to each other, to the Earth, to our ancestors, and to our deepest self. Spirituality is about how we orient and live our lives in relation to the spirit.

David Tacey³ says that spirituality seeks a sensitive, contemplative, transformative relationship with the sacred and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount. He contrasts this to fundamentalism which seeks certainty, fixed answers and absolutism as a fearful response to the complexity of the world and to our vulnerability in a mysterious universe.

Awareness of spirit supports a shift in consciousness, fostering new ways of interacting in the world and a greater sense of connectedness. A spirit-filled social action group is able to access the inner resources needed to be the change they wish to see in the world (Gandhi). Inviting spirit can support and inspire activists to live out their highest values and possibilities.

The spirit can be seen and experienced in the “mind-stretching, jaw-dropping, in-your-face wonder of the universe itself, the Heraclitean mystery that hides in every rainbow, every snowflake, every living cell”.⁴ In social change the spirit is seen in campaigns, marches, protests, celebrations, blessings, and singing as people come together for a cause.

A friend described her experiences during the civil rights march on Washington in 1968. As one of the few whites among many black Americans, she experienced a profound peace and love. As she tearfully recounted what happened I was struck by the sense that she experienced a spiritual presence. What happened that created a powerful spiritual experience for my friend and for others in the civil rights movement?

The march on Washington had a clear focus and purpose that had captured the hearts and minds of many Americans. The words, support, and feelings of mutual love created transformative change on many levels – in individual hearts, in the policies of organizations, and in the laws of the society.



Compare the spirit of love and togetherness of those who successfully brought about civil rights with the atmosphere of discord in the current debate about health care in the U.S.A. Rather than seeing a national commitment to health care as a moral cause that arises from a deep sense of compassion for our neighbors, the debate is all about winning and losing. There is a competitive judgmental attitude that justifies spreading fear and winning at any cost.

SPIRIT AND MEANING

Our relation to spirit is a vital part of our identity.⁵ A connection with spirit helps us find deep connections within ourselves – a sense of personal wholeness; connections with others and deepening of connections with the wider world – a feeling of being at home in the universe. Spiritual transformation involves making a change that puts the spirit as an experience of significance in the life of the individual and a fundamental change in one's life pathways.

A sense of the sacred in human life can help to create a "meaning system" to fill a spiritual void.⁶ A better understanding of the spirit can help answer such life questions as "who are we, what is our purpose, what is the right thing to do?" Many who have not found a meaning system are soothing their despair and anxiety through material acquisitions, drugs, exotic vacations, or a focus on their own or others' achievements.⁷

Although spirituality can be an inspiration and unification it has also been a source of division and repression. How can we be inclusive about spirit in a way that is meaningful to persons with different beliefs and practices? Persons whose spirit inspiration grows from values of their culture or a connection with nature are needed along with those with more traditional spiritual religious practices.

We need to understand what is sacred to others. We need to use diverse and inclusive language when talking about spirit. We need to be willing to learn about the spirit practices of others, and be willing to create new activities, rituals, or practices such as singing and celebrating that draw from the multiple spirit perspectives present in the social change initiative.

A NEW VIEW ABOUT SPIRIT FROM SCIENCE

Stuart Kauffman⁸, a pioneer in the field of complexity science and professor of biological sciences, physics, and astronomy argues that there is a ceaseless natural creativity of the world that is a profound source of meaning and wonder. Life came naturally to exist in the universe, along with values, meaning, and consciousness.

Science cannot provide answers to ultimate questions about why things exist and their purpose.

Science cannot explain many aspects of human life such as love, friendship, and sacrifice.

Natural laws do not and can not explain human consciousness that is grasped by truth, unity, being, and beauty. Kauffman regards the mystery of the phenomena of persistent creativity and consciousness as sacred.

In a newly envisioned universe, biosphere, and human culture of unending creativity, where life, agency, meaning, value, doing, and consciousness have emerged, and that we cocreate, we can now see ourselves, meaning-laden, as integral parts of emergent nature. Whether we believe in a Creator God, an Eastern tradition, or are secular humanists, we make the meaning of our lives, to live a good life, in all these ways.⁹

How we orient our lives to what we regard as sacred, what we believe is right to do, and what we do in the world is our spirituality. As we open ourselves to the mystery we become part of something larger and affect others with our spirit.

As a society, conflicting worldviews about the spirit have contributed to the many walls of separation among races, religions, social classes, and regions that are jeopardizing and compromising the future of life on earth. We need a sharable worldview about the spirit to reduce the drive toward fundamentalisms as our diverse civilizations collide.

The broad definition of spirit offered by science can help us work across religious, ethnic, racial, class, gender, sexual orientation and other boundaries to expand our humanity. As individuals, perhaps we can learn to curb the certainty with which we dehumanize those who are different.¹⁰

We cannot control everything; a sense of the spirit gives us the courage and peace of mind to live in a turbulent world. We can deepen our awareness about affecting what is in front of us and accept the reality we cannot transform.

Kauffman says that the natural creativity in the universe gives us a sense of spirit in which we can all share. From this we can reinvent the sacred as the stunning reality of creativity in nature. From that new sacred, a global ethic could be invented to orient our lives to connect to an emerging global civilization.

THE ADJACENT POSSIBLE

Kauffman believes that the idea of the adjacent possible may be one of the general laws of the universe. In the evolutionary process, biological species keep jumping into what is adjacent and what is possible. In so doing they increase the diversity of what can happen next. For example, as



animals moved from the sea to land, to find their niche of food sources, it was imperative to move to spaces that were adjacent and within reach.

Applying this law to our own species, it is a useful metaphor for thinking about the spirit in social change. We are influenced by what we see and experience. We can place ourselves in situations to learn about the need for social change. Where we put ourselves and the actions we take in response to these new experiences affects our thinking and can move us to the adjacent possible.

When we stretch to a new set of adjacent opportunities to learn and develop we can then fold back our experiences to our daily life. The challenge is to recognize the opportunities that are in front of us and stretch to them. In pursuing social change each person needs to determine his or her own adjacent possible.

SPIRIT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The spirit is inevitably involved in social change. When we experience it, the spiritual dimension encourages, strengthens, and stretches those who struggle against injustice, exploitation, violence and disease.

When a social change initiative taps into a spiritual dimension of love and compassion, there is recognition of our inter-connectedness with all living beings and the earth, a recognition of the abundance in the world, of no limitation to the human spirit or a need to compete with one another. A new type of freedom emerges, one that fosters the fullness of creativity. The transformation and shifts we see in social change are the fruit of spirituality. We can give voice to the mysterious aspects below the surface, to the new patterns we see emerging, and connect with others across boundaries that have kept us apart.

Our “Eureka” discoveries or creative insights and the intuitions we have in dreams or while taking a shower are times when the spirit breaks through. Carl Jung¹¹ identified the spirit with the “numinous”, something wholly other that produces an intense feeling that there is something that cannot be seen.

“Thin places”¹² are where the two layers of reality, the world of our ordinary experience and the spirit, meet or intersect. They are the places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, and permeable. The veil momentarily lifts, and we sense the spirit.

APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CHANGE

Zak Sinclair¹³ identifies the gifts that four approaches give to social change. These approaches are often at odds with one another:

1. **Community Organizing** – motivates people to take action in support of their values and beliefs; connects communities to their passion and acknowledges the generative power of anger; brings isolated individuals who struggle with similar conditions into community with each other.

2. **Power Analysis** - sharpens the analytical capacity of individuals and communities so that they better understand the broader forces that impact their lives, and can work effectively to change them; provides a larger context for understanding community divisions, and a rationale for building alliances across difference; is essential to building a broader movement strategy.

3. **Organization Development** – strengthens organization that can provide a foundation for social movements; honors the dignity, worth, and subjectivity of each individual; unravels the mysteries of group life and helps people make sense of group dynamics; aligns vision, values, and purpose with roles, structure, and relationships.

4. **Spirit/Sustainable Practice** – offers a holistic approach to change that includes mind, body, and spirit; provides an opportunity for collective healing and deep connection with self, others, and the natural world; offers methods and tools to support balance, creativity, and cultural recognition in social justice work.

The fourth approach identified by Sinclair - **Spirit** - is the vital but often neglected approach to social change that needs to be integrated with the other three approaches. To illustrate the integration of spirit I will give three examples: spirit in organization leadership, spirit in the environmental movement, and spirit in the work of individuals.

SPIRIT IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The spirit in organization is manifested with true felt actions and care that strengthen connections, enrich relationships and lead the organization as a whole to business success.¹⁴ Engaging people with care engages the spirit at work by actualizing a higher purpose that serves the greater good. When people are fully engaged as human beings in the workplace and allowed to self-organize into productive patterns, the spirit of the organization is generated.

An adjacent possible for leaders is the spiritual dimension of the groups they lead. Being a role model in practicing hospitality, respect, humility, dialogue, and other actions that demonstrate caring relationships is one way. Re-examining policies, procedures, goals and rituals to create more opportunities for meditation, prayer, or mental and physical exercise, is another. Leaders can create



more space for members to speak their fears and uncertainties, surface what they are passionate about, and build a sense of what is spiritual about their work.

SPIRIT IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The story of our emergent universe stretches us to take responsibility for the planet and its ecosystem. The story shows how connected we are to all living things. We were not added to the earth; we came out of the earth, which came out of stardust. The scientists and theologians agree on one point: there is a profound wisdom at work in the universe. Brian Swimme says, "The earth was once molten rock and now sings opera."¹⁵ All creativity and all consciousness arise from the earth itself.

To embrace this new creation story we do not have to reject our traditional stories if they provide comfort and support and connect us to our ancestors. However, we need to examine how these stories can misguide and limit our actions to ensure the future of life on earth. Our sense of the spirit can help us to make moral choices about the environment, especially in the "thin" places.

The environment of the planet is in peril. The issues we are facing in global warming, pollution, extinction of species, destruction of rain forests, etc. are the result of unawareness and disregard of the impact of consumption of fossil fuels and consumption of natural resources on our ecological and human systems. We need to understand the implications of the new creation story to recapture a sense of the sacredness of creation and our responsibility as co-creators.

The Pachamama Alliance¹⁶, an international non-profit effort to demonstrate the connectivity of environmental sustainability, social justice, and spiritual fulfillment, argues that the adjacent possible for the industrial north is to radically change our assumptions about the inherent value of perpetual economic growth. If the industrial north reduced its consumption of natural resources, particularly oil, it would reduce the pressure on the rainforest, the home of native people in Central and South America. If our sense of the spirit includes concern about the well being of the planet, this is the kind of change that is required.

SPIRIT IN THE WORK OF INDIVIDUALS

In my workshops on the convergence of science and spirituality I take a complexity science perspective to illustrate how our sense of the spirit emerges from the myriad interactions of agents that connect in unpredictable ways. The natural processes of self-organizing bring order from chaos and create patterns that sustain us as we go about our daily lives.¹⁷ Several participants made a link between engaging the spiritual dimension and social change.

"Jen" is responsible for the ecological aspect of a major mission in Central America. Over the five years of her work she reported being extremely task oriented and weighed down with the responsibility for the projects. As she developed a greater sense of the spirit over several years she began to see "miracles" in answers to problems. For example, an answer to a systemic water filtration problem emerged from an unexpected source. She said it felt like the hand of God. She now is more trusting in the spirit operating in the creativity and self-organizing forces in the universe to offer hope and solutions.

"Sam", a former school principal, now sees that his volunteer work to develop a charter school is an opportunity to give a gift of the spirit. As he dug deeper within and became excited in giving from his expertise, it touched the sacred in him and in others.

These stories suggest that deep reflection and mindfulness, opening to deeper emotions, and seeing the spirit operating in the processes of creation can sustain a long-term commitment to social change.

IMPLICATIONS OF EVOLVING OUR SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Mature spirituality is the acceptance of one's limitations, groundedness in the ordinary, and willingness to be surprised.¹⁸ Neither divinity nor humanity can save us from ourselves. **We must work with ourselves as we are** – with blind spots and imperfections so that we can hone "integrity, wisdom and transcendence in the service of the question of what it means to be human in the otherness of the universe".

Can the human species evolve from self-centeredness to spirit-centeredness? Can we recognize the spirit in everyone and live in the world on that basis? Can we give voice to the spirit in a way that other people experience the spirit? Can we avoid being complicit with the human systems that cause evil and suffering?

Can we evolve our spiritual consciousness? Carter Phipps¹⁹ provides an example of how the achievement of peace depends on the evolution of consciousness. Can we apply this to our thinking about social change generally?

There was a time when, at the cutting edge of human development, the goal of our highest spiritual, philosophical, and moral endeavors was peace. This exerted a tremendous upward, positive pressure on a civilization still trying to escape the ravages of its more primitive urges. And it still does... But as we understand more about the nature of life on this planet and in this universe, and as we discover more about the psychological and cultural development of individuals and human societies, slowly



our attention is shifting. We are coming to understand that spiritually, socially, and even politically, the interests of our species are best served not just by the noble hope for an end to human conflict or by the understandable desire for a cessation to human suffering, but by participating in the upward surge, development, and evolution of human culture and consciousnesses at all levels. .. As peace activist and nonviolent scholar Michael Nagler once told me, "If people try to put peace ahead of evolution, they won't get either. If they put evolution ahead of peace, they'll get both."

Successful social change requires us to evolve our spiritual awareness, see the connectivity of everything and discern the part of the whole we are in a position to influence. All of these domains are connected. If we make a change in one domain, it will have a ripple effect. We can join the spirit in manifesting the creativity in the universe in our relationships with those we love and our neighbor – and everyone is our neighbor.

BIOGRAPHY

Ed Olson is an applied behavioral and complexity scientist living in Longville, Minnesota and Estero, Florida. He has led organization change, team building, management development, and workforce diversity initiatives. He facilitates human interaction, science and religion, and complex system change workshops. He is a collegiate professor at the University of Maryland, University College Graduate School and an adjunct professor in the Executive Leadership Program, the George Washington University. Ed is the author of *Keep the Bathwater: Emergence of the sacred in science and religion.* (Island Sound Press, 2009) and *Facilitating Organization Change: Lessons from Complexity Science* (Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001). His B.A. magna cum laude (Philosophy) is from St. Olaf College, M.S. (Pastoral Counseling) from Loyola College (Baltimore), and a Ph. D (Government and Public Administration) from the American University. Ed is a member of NTL, an associate of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute, a training leader for the Pachamama Alliance, the C.G. Jung Institute of New York, and Phi Beta Kappa.

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