

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO...

Wayne Schow

LOOKING FOR GOD



*It was not hard to think that something so beautiful as what
I had seen on Tom's summit was the Lord's.
But the psalmist claimed more than that—all the earth,
and all that dwell therein—everything—it was all the Lord's.
Not just what was scenic, but also what was ordinary.*

If you love everything, you will
perceive the divine mystery in
things.

—DOSTOEVSKY
The Brothers Karamazov

FOR ALL OF my adult life—and even before—I have been seeking to understand what it means to be spiritual. But for me, the concept has proven surprisingly elusive. “Spiritual,” as an adjective, falls from people’s lips so casually and so frequently in daily speech, as if we all knew

WAYNE SCHOW is a professor of English and Chair of English and Philosophy at Idaho State University (e-mail: schowayn@isu.edu). This paper was presented at the 1993 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City.

precisely what the word denotes, when in fact the contexts in which it is invoked and the connotations trailing from it vary considerably from speaker to speaker. For years I assumed, with a simple faith in the absolute referentiality of language, that somewhere behind the surface confusion lay a true meaning, and I hoped someday to find it. In the meantime, this much always seemed clear to me: without spirituality there could be no genuine religious life.

As a youth, I was encouraged by my religious teachers to pursue practices that would enhance the spiritual dimension of my existence, notably personal prayers, Church attendance, scripture study, and fidelity to Church behavioral standards. Such habits, I was promised, would confirm for me the validity of the Church and its divine authority. That seemed to me at the time a sufficient

end for spirituality, its value self-evident and unquestioned. Whether God was to be understood as a gateway to the Church or vice versa did not matter: somehow the two were inseparable. I accepted such teacherly advice uncritically during those early years, and I worked at that vague project after my fashion. But there were no epiphanies. I was too preoccupied with the world, it seemed, riding the roller coaster of teenage emotions. I did not worry overmuch about classifying the subtleties of my spiritual quest.

On my mission, my attempts to incorporate spirituality into my life grew more earnest. Such efforts, we were given to understand, were essential if one was to be successful in spreading the gospel, and I wanted to succeed. If you hoped for the spirit to move your investigators, you had to have the spirit yourself. So we prayed a lot, privately, as companions, and in groups. We concentrated as intensely as we were able on scripture and on our straightforward message. We put in long hours. We followed rules not natural to young adult males. For me, missionary life certainly seemed ascetic, but a necessary discipline that kept us focused.

Well, I think I did experience—within my limits—some spiritual growth while I was missionarying. The trouble was, it was hard to tell the difference between having the spirit and simply being worked up emotionally. When you subject yourself regularly to the power of suggestion that is in prayer, when you keep repeating to yourself every day certain group-encouraged generalizations, while those around you, your closest companions, continually reinforce those sentiments, and when you must daily defend those sentiments in the face of a skeptical world, religious “enthusiasm” follows quite easily. The question is, to what degree are the acquired religious convictions “spiritually” revealed, and to what degree the result of uncritical self-persuasion?

Before I returned home from Denmark, I concluded that spirituality cannot be discovered simply as a function of focusing on religion twenty-four hours a day.

I saw clearly in my mission peers a range of postures. In some, I genuinely admired what I took to be spiritual discipline. In others, what I saw seemed only a veneer of piety that lacked whatever spiritual quality it was meant to represent; I thought such “trappings” would vanish after the mission release as quickly as they had been put on. And then there were a few elders who wore the missionary mantle lightly and whose continued hearty engagement in the world suggested that they remained their normal selves and

How can anyone who sees the world as holy, and himself as a co-creator with God, be satisfied in turning out makeshift, careless work that invites others to be less than their best?

not the slightest bit preoccupied with, or for that matter even aware of, ascetic spirituality. If I found their apparent authenticity somehow appealing, it may have been a reflection of unacknowledged ambivalence about the unnatural dimensions of the enterprise I was engaged in. None of this seems surprising now, in retrospect.

I came home and took up the threads of my normal life again—marriage, college, a job, family, the usual things. My wife and I were active in the Church; we tried diligently to impart religious values to our growing children. As the years passed, I worked mechanically at building a religious life, a personal religious philosophy. I considered the problem analytically. With some measure of consistency, I tried to live according to the things I believed. For example, I believed in a kindly God and in a moral order, in relation to which I had definite obligations; I believed that my life had meaning in a larger perspective, with developmental goals toward which I was working. But the mystery of the spiritual aspect, the quickening transcendent dimension of this, the flame, always seemed a step

beyond me. Eventually, I concluded with some regret that my empirical, analytical temperament was not conducive to the development of such insight. This was consistent with Paul's words that spiritual gifts are not given uniformly to all. (1 Cor. 12:6ff.) I would have to make do, it seemed, with something less.

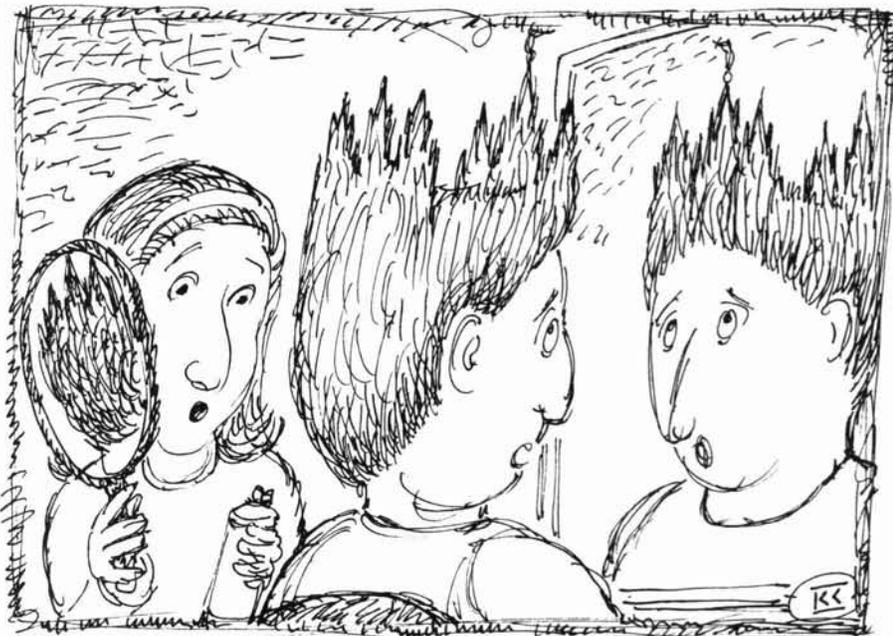
At some point during these years I settled on a provisional definition of spirituality that was to me both sensible and frustrating: to be spiritual was to incorporate the divine into one's daily living. But how could someone like me do that?

The standard answer given was that one needed to develop a vital prayer life. Somehow I failed to achieve that—for reasons that seemed consistent with my experience. In the film *The Ruling Class*, Peter O'Toole plays a character who believes he is Jesus Christ. At one point a visitor asks him, "When did you become aware that that is who you are?" "Well," says O'Toole, "I used to pray to Jesus a great deal, and one day I suddenly realized that I was talking to myself." Earlier on, formal prayer was more habitual for me than it is today. I did not come to

O'Toole's conclusion about the nature of my addressee, but like him I had to admit that my attempts at prayer were not successful as "conversations" with God, much less chummy. There was a separation there, a gulf, an essential difference between the mortal and the infinite, and it was not easily bridged. I could pour out my longing in words, but "God's response" was a matter for interpretation; interpretation that was likely influenced by my premises, my culture, my desires. I acknowledged that informal reflection and meditation worked better for me than ritual approaches, that the notion of a rhetorical occasion somehow got in my way when I wanted to consider my relation to God.

My problems with prayer made some aspects of my life in the institutional Church less rewarding. Too often there was a kind of piety or formalism associated with scheduled group prayers that to me felt neither authentic nor spiritual; group prayers seemed, in fact, more driven by social and institutional imperatives. In this observation I do not mean to judge the participation of others adversely, but simply to say that my needs were different.

Every Hairstylist a Missionary



"Can't you make it so that you can tell that's a trumpet in Moroni's hand?"

SOMETIMES we have to wait a long time for that which we desire, perhaps, like Abraham and Sarah, until it appears no longer even to be possible.

In mid-September 1991 I had a simple experience that profoundly altered my spiritual quest. I had been snowed out of a planned trip to climb Mt. Teewinot in the Tetons. Much disappointed, I decided in early afternoon of the following day to drive to Tom Mountain, a modest peak in the Bannock Range not far from my home. I had never been up it before, and I thought climbing it might afford me a small measure of consolation.

It was a perfect autumn afternoon, with just that slight coolness in the air that makes the sun's warmth feel welcome. On the lower eastern slope I tramped through shady, light dappled aspen groves, left the creek, and began the long haul up the steeper open mountainside. I bushwhacked past the low brush, then came to that wonderful grass that makes the mountain look from a distance like a camel's back. Off and on there was the sensuous pleasure of touching stone as I clambered up over rocky outcroppings. I

picked my route alternately through ravines and along ridges, delighting in the crisp air, the transparent azure above me. My footsteps and my heavy breathing were the only sounds: I did not see another soul or any sign of human activity.

After three hours of fairly steady climbing I reached the summit. Seated on a rock, I contemplated the splendid scene unfolding to the west. Below me lay a heavily wooded drainage, pine forest accented with strands of yellow-leaved aspen. Majestically, it dropped away from Scout Mountain on the north, and gradually, as its degree of descent lessened, it became the bucolic Arbon Valley, whose harvested fields now lay golden in the sun declining above distant Bannock Peak.

And as I sat there, grateful for a prospect that was surprisingly lovely in that light, a verse from the twentieth-fourth Psalm came to my mind with the force of an epiphany: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." The conjunction of this thought and this setting at that moment was to me remarkable, powerful. I savored it quietly for half an hour.

I am not unaware that my narrative has been building up to a clichéd situation, such a "predictable" insight achieved—where else—on the top of a mountain. I can only say that I had contemplated the world from high places on numerous previous occasions, some of those summit views far more spectacularly grand than the Tom Mountain prospect, and at none of those times had I experienced the same kind of beatitude.

Only my awareness that darkness would soon engulf me caused me to stir and begin a hurried descent.

The next day in my office, I sat remembering the pleasure of the climb and the quiet splendor of the view from Tom Mountain. And the words of the psalm came back to me—and hung there, pregnant with meaning. It was not hard to think that something so beautiful as what I had seen on Tom's summit was the Lord's. But the psalmist claimed more than that—*all the earth*, the fulness thereof, and *all that dwell therein*—everything—it was all the Lord's, it was his creation. Not just what was scenic, but also what was ordinary; not just what was rare, but what was commonplace; not just those who were heroic or noble, but the great majority of humankind who were undistinguished. The world and the fullness thereof: all of it was intimately related, intimately connected to the divine. And suddenly I knew subjectively that it was therefore all holy.

That realization changed everything. Like a wave its implications washed over me. It meant that whatever I contemplate, whatever I encounter in the physical world is possessed of a special quality. It meant that whenever I go out in the yard to cultivate my carrots and onions, I am tilling sacred soil. It meant that the highway on which I drive, the lush or barren landscapes through which I pass, all are holy places. Rocks, grass, water, trees—all holy. The dog under my feet, the mole raising ridges in my lawn are more than they seem. Persons I encounter in the streets or in a park or in the aisles of a grocery store—old, young, slender, stout, haggard, harried, slick, slovenly, surly, simple—all are God's creatures, holy, and I must so regard them. All races, all creeds, all the diversity in human beings, in animals and plants, I must henceforth see as imbued with holiness. *And if holy, then spirituality must mean to recognize this fact and respond to all things with reverence and with gratitude for their divine connection.*

Why did that seem so strange, like a startling new revelation? After all, don't we hear in church all the time that we are God's children, and this world his? Yes, we do; it's just that we don't understand it in quite that mystical way, or attach sufficient importance to it—at least I hadn't. The more prevalent interpretation is, I think, that the world in which we live is fallen, cut off from God and holiness, or if not that, then at best it is a neutral world of inert elements.

From these ordinary interpretive viewpoints, the occurrence of holiness is consid-

ered the exception rather than the rule. Chances are if you ask a Latter-day Saint where to find a sacred spot, his or her sense of the possibilities will be limited; probably he or she will recommend a visit to one of the temples. But Mormons aren't alone in holding this narrow view. Catholics will suggest a spot where a saint experienced a miracle. When Muslims think of a holy place, their thoughts turn to Mecca. And the ancient Hebrews, from whom many of our habits of mind derive, believed that holiness was to be found in exceptional places, under exceptional circumstances, or so I read their scriptural texts—Moses in the desert, for example, removing his sandals before the burning bush, for he understood that he stood in immediate proximity to the divine that was not normally present.

This pattern of thought derives from a long standing dominant dualism in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a dualism that divides matter from spirit, corruptibility from incorruptibility; it is the same dualism that shaped my thought as I grew up. It assumes that God—our Heavenly Father—dwells in a distinctly separate and superior realm, above or outside the world of ordinary sense experience. It implies that to find spirituality, one must in some way transcend the material world we live in. One finds God in proportion as one retreats, literally or figuratively, from engagement in the routine surfaces of life.

But after Tom Mountain that dualism became, for me, suddenly invalid. I recognized



it as an impediment to my spiritual quest.

There is a well-known story of a Portuguese explorer who, searching for the coast of Brazil, found himself not only lost at sea but virtually becalmed and about to run out of drinking water. He and his crew faced a desperate situation. After several days, another vessel drifted into view and eventually within hailing distance. "Our drinking water is gone," shouted the Portuguese across the waves; "can you help us?" The call came back: "Lower your bucket where you are. It is all around you." In response to this seemingly mad instruction, they threw a bucket over the side, and drew up—fresh water. And at once the explorer realized that they were situated in the one hundred fifty-mile-wide mouth of the Amazon River.

On Tom Mountain I dropped my bucket inadvertently where I typically expected to find salt water, and I drew up instead living water. The spiritual realm that had always seemed so elusive was in fact all around me, in everything I saw. It always had been.

MY life has been fundamentally altered by this mystical awareness. When you perceive your surroundings as spiritual, even in their ordinary aspect, it is impossible to think and act in the same fashion. This is because you recognize that *your thoughts and your actions are part of the fullness of the earth, and therefore are God's*. We mortals, together with all our works, all that we have created upon this planet, are an expression of the divine possession. Insofar as we alter the natural condition of the earth, raising cities and towns, farms and factories, canals and dams and mines, structures and vehicles and tools, insofar as we extract the resources of the earth for these purposes, altering the appearance and balance and viability of our environments—we are contributing to the fullness of the earth, which is God's. And all that we do to and for one another, all of our efforts to build up or tear down our fellows, this, too, becomes part of the fullness. *In all of this we become, for better or for worse, co-creators with God.*

The responsibility entailed in that partnership is sobering. It means that whatever we engage in, whatever work we perform, product we manufacture, or service we provide, we should evaluate our effort in a spiritual sense: we should ask ourselves if that endeavor and its outcomes are worthy to be part of the fullness which is God's: not just under his purview, but *his*. We should ask whether our effort is suitable in terms of the highest standards, standards that express our relationship to the divine and our recogni-

tion of omnipresent holiness. Does that effort benefit humankind, does it raise the human spirit? Does it respect the integrity and wholeness of creation? In short, does it enhance, esthetically and morally, the earth and the earth's inhabitants?

When Jesus said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40), what were the limits of his meaning? Clearly, he was suggesting that in some sense we encounter God in the form of our fellow humans. Does it stretch interpretation too far

to believe that the same principle extends to all of his created works and that we must find and respond to God all around us?

How can anyone who sees the world as holy, and himself as a co-creator with God, be satisfied in turning out makeshift, careless work, work that invites others to be less than their best? Yet we do it all the time. How can anyone foul the landscape with ugly or ill-maintained structures, with clutter and pollution? And yet we see these all around us. How can anyone who is seeking to find spirituality justify an attitude toward the re-



"Oh, just relaxing and reading the Encyclopedia of Mormonism."

sources of our earth that exploits them without concern for renewal and preservation? Alas, the sad evidence of environmental degradation proliferates. Doesn't this clearly reflect a lack of spirituality?

I DON'T know if my attempts to conceive the spiritual in this way will seem convincing to anyone else. Have I wandered too far from twentieth-century common sense? Perhaps some would say I have just taken two cups of mysticism—Eastern and Western, including some warmed over pantheism—folded in a measure of contemporary environmentalism, seasoned the concoction with a pinch of skepticism, and served it up as a dubious monistic casserole. (Here I protest that I don't personally equate God with nature and am not, therefore, strictly a monist.) Further, doesn't it demean God to look for him primarily in his works? Isn't it a mistake to focus one's spiritual quest too narrowly on this world? Doesn't it raise humans too much to see them as God's limited partners? Am I not pinning too much on my literal interpretation of a single verse from the Bible, and from the Old Testament at that? My definition of spirituality hardly sounds compatible with mainstream Christianity at all, these critics might conclude, much less Mormonism.

I have no unassailable defense against such assertions. But it is worth asking, when we refer to Christianity, to Mormonism, whose we are speaking of? We may as well acknowledge that there is no absolute referentiality of language operating here; there is no possibility of a perfect and timeless meaning for these broad terms—or for a concept like spirituality. They are embedded in history, limited thereby, and each of us will define them from a particular personal standing place.

Every individual must therefore construct his or her edifice of religious belief from available building blocks. Mostly these are gathered nearby, from family background, from formal religious instruction, and more broadly, from contemporary cultural values and conventions. But however far we roam, by whatever means, each of us collects materials that seem useful—insights that resonate with our own experience—and incorporates them into a working religious philosophy. This process, consciously undertaken by some, unconsciously by others, is inescapable and ongoing. Even among fellow believers within the same general faith, there will be differences of understanding and interpretation resulting from nuances of difference in experience of life and language. It

cannot be otherwise.

And so my view of spirituality is an outgrowth of my particular quest, here and there along life's paths, for materials. If it does not represent the universally valid answer to the question, "What is spirituality?", it is—among the possible views—the one that now seems richest to me. Perhaps it will resonate with some few others who, like me, have not found the spiritual along the most well-defined paths.

Although my understanding of the nature of spirituality has greatly changed, I must admit that I lapse more frequently than I

might wish into my former dualistic, materialistic view of the world. Old habits of thought die hard; they are so deeply engraved in consciousness, and they reinsinuate themselves when we aren't paying attention. Still, the Tom Mountain view of a holy world increasingly colors my perception. I feel in it a form of spirituality that is vitally real. It overcomes the disjuncture resulting from compartmentalization of experience; it charges the world with wonder and gives to all things extraordinary value. It brings a dimension of quality to my religious life that wasn't there before. ☐



WHEN A BLACK MAN CRIES OUT

Strong as an ox

He can separate cotton faster than any gin
Big buck, Mandingo warrior, and the minstrel,
singing out signals of the escape

Looking out from a high rise

It's come to this, a black man on top
Had to trade off and fight all the way
Now they know me as "that man" today

I'm family, I'm outlaw, I'm poet

I don't live very long

I'm a medical dilemma

I'm the hero unsung

I'm the stolen African king

My woman loves me

My white lover wants me

My children wonder where I've been

I had to reinvent my game

I am a proud man with no shame,
and I've often mixed tears with bloodstains

I will weather the fires of discontent,
for I am the serpent who will not be spent!

—WALTER THOMPSON III