

Introduction

I want to begin by paying my respects to the First Nations people of this community and across Australia as the original caretakers of this land. My respect also comes from my appreciation of their wisdom and knowledge, which has influenced this lecture in many ways: in acknowledging the value of naming my own story and background, in making explicit my own stories, in seeing the connections between the land and spirit and in how to listen to the interconnectedness of all beings—animate and inanimate.

What I want to do here is share my own journey in seeking to live in union with Spirit. Although it was daunting, one of the blessings of being asked to deliver the Backhouse Lecture was that it encouraged me to reflect more deeply on my own journey and what might usefully be shared with others. When I look back over my life and my own spiritual journey, I can see much that I have learnt—often slowly, sometimes painfully, and sometimes joyfully. For me, the start of that journey goes right back to my childhood sense of Spirit, my family's religious practice and many other formative experiences. As most of you will know, I have been privileged to participate in facilitating the Meeting for Learning for over twenty years now: a wonderful source of learning, which infuses this lecture. I live with Drew Lawson—a constant source of spiritual inspiration—in a small intentional community, which has also been a place of spiritual nurture and learning. I have worked as a social worker for many years and now as a university teacher, particularly in fostering critical reflection and spirituality for social workers and critical spirituality for pastoral care workers. A continuing challenge in my spiritual life has been how to integrate my spiritual being into all these aspects of my life.

So, why seek to live life in union with Spirit? Such a life, in both my experience and that of many others, is a fuller, richer, deeper and meaning-filled life, connected to that which is eternal. Living in union with Spirit means moving from what is often called the 'divided life', beyond opposing forces to a place of wholeness, to integrating all of who we are in all that we do. To do this means holding together these opposites. In Celtic spirituality, O'Donohue says:

In order to keep our balance, we need to hold the interior and exterior, visible and invisible, known and unknown, temporal and eternal, ancient and new together. No-one else can undertake this task for you. You are the one and only threshold of an inner world.¹

Crossing this threshold means coming to know yourself ‘in the things that are eternal’—that is, knowing all of yourself, the shadow and the treasure, the egoistic and the altruistic, the strong and the vulnerable, the one who is able to be and to do. Moving beyond and transcending these often-unhelpful opposites means arriving at a new understanding and way of being with doing. Ideally *doing* is fundamentally underpinned by your *being* self, so that all you do is infused with Spirit. This is a lifelong journey. We usually talk of living from or with Spirit, but I have chosen to name this lecture ‘Seeking *union* with spirit’ to make explicit that what we are ultimately seeking is to be increasingly in union with Spirit.

Living life from this place enhances relationships and work of all kinds, encourages living in ways that are life-enhancing rather than life-denying, and fosters the development of an awareness of what matters—that is, the fundamental essence of your being, and the ability to make active choices from that place. This is also the life we are called to. The Quaker elders at Balby in 1656 wrote:

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.²

This also affirms that there isn’t only one way to live life as Spirit. We can learn from the wisdom of others, but, essentially, we each need to learn for ourselves how to live in Spirit. This doesn’t mean that life will be free of struggle but rather that our experiences of darkness can be embraced from a more life-giving place. We may choose whether to live in the Spirit, although there are also times when we are not conscious of making choices or are perhaps even unaware that a choice exists. The overall intention, though, is to live in this way.

What I am aiming to do here then is to make connections between what has fostered my own increased sense of living life in union with Spirit, the wisdom of those who have written about the spiritual journey and the struggles and learning of those I have journeyed with. I am grateful to all those who have agreed for their writings to be used and to those many other people who have contributed to my own learning in ways that they may or may not know about.

First, a comment about language: this is a fraught area. Due to past experiences, many people react negatively to spiritual language. What people are comfortable with varies hugely. I will generally use the term *Spirit* to mean the connection to the essence of our Selves, what Quakers would often name as 'the light within'; some would say 'God', others 'a sense of meaning' or 'transcendence'. For me, Spirit is that sense of something greater than the self, which is both in us and external to us, which transcends our being but of which we are also a part. Please translate how I use Spirit into whatever language you are comfortable with. I should also say that, in the examples given in this lecture, the language preferred by the person quoted is used.

I also like to use the image of a journey. I find it a helpful metaphor. The spiritual journey isn't a neat, linear one. It is more common to have twists and turns along the way, to need to turn back and clarify where you are going, to set off in hope rather than always being sure you will arrive. Sometimes you end up in unexpected places that turn out to be a delight; at other times, you regret not being more purposeful about where you were going.

Lecture outline

This lecture is structured according to two main themes. The first theme is what I see as the central pillars, often experienced as tensions or paradoxes of the spiritual journey—being with and reflecting on spiritual experience, the influence of history and social context, the challenges of darkness and light and of love and truth, and the value of paying attention to both our inner and external worlds. Each of these is a way to further understand who we are and the particular nature of our spiritual journey. The second main theme is around how we can nurture our spiritual selves as we travel through life. Here I will focus on the centrality of silence; the qualities of openness, honesty and humility; the recognition of gifts and discernment; and paying attention to the ways of knowing that deepen your knowledge of self. While I am naming these as though they are neat, discrete categories, how we experience them is more like threads of a tapestry inextricably and beautifully woven together. We rightly see the whole rather than the parts, but sometimes it helps to disentangle the threads to see the parts more clearly.

First, it helps to ask what has influenced us—that is, the values and spiritual expectations we have inherited from our own family history and social context. First Nations people understand this: they always begin by introducing themselves in terms of the community and land they come from. So, for me, I was born in Scotland and my family were Scottish Presbyterians. I grew up going to church every Sunday, including after we migrated to Australia when I was nine. My parents had very different attitudes to religion and to the church community. My mother's father was a minister in that church, an emotionally abusive man, but her mother was a deeply spiritual woman and taught my mother the power of prayer. So, although she was sceptical of the organisational church, my mother believed in the teachings and spirit. My father, on the other hand, enjoyed the community of the church, loved to sing and was a staunch defender of the democratic nature of Presbyterianism. As migrants, we found the church was also a place to go where we had something in common with others, a beginning point for being connected to community and so an influential part of my life.