On Defining Spirit

What then is the spiritual? I find it difficult to define directly. It's much easier to say what it isn't than what it is. For example—the spiritual is often confused with the moral, but it's not the moral. Morality is concerned with issues of right and wrong. Although often attributed to the "godhead," it actually has a social basis and reflects a social tradition or consensus. What is considered moral varies from culture to culture and from time to time within the same culture. Furthermore, morality often serves as the basis for judgment, for one group of people separating themselves from other groups, or one individual separating from others. Yet the spiritual is profoundly non-judgmental and non-separative. The spiritual does not vary from time to time because it is not within time. Spirit is unchanging.

The spiritual is also different from the ethical. Ethics is a set of values, a code for translating the moral into daily life. It defines the right way to relate to other people, to carry out business, and to behave in general. If the moral is not the spiritual, then the ethical isn't either.

The spiritual is also not the psychic. The psychic is a capacity we all share, although it is better developed in some than in others. It is a way of perceiving—a sort of direct knowing of conditions in matter or in consciousness. We may use a psychic power to know the spiritual—but that which we know is not the means by which we know. As a way of perception, the psychic is closely related to our other senses. If psychic perception is spiritual—then seeing is spiritual and hearing is spiritual. A sense is simply a way of gaining information about the world around us. How I use what I see or hear, what it means to me, is what makes it a matter of spirit or not.

I can use the psychic as I can use my other senses—to impress others, to accumulate personal power, to dominate or manipulate—in short, to assert my separateness and my personal power. The spiritual, however, is not separative. A deep sense of the spiritual leads one to trust not one's own lonely power but the great flow or pattern manifested in all life, including our own. We become not manipulators but witnesses.

Oddly, the psychic is often used to "prove" the spiritual to the non-believer. Yet the spiritual is the one dimension of human experience which does not require proof—which lies beyond (and includes) the very mind which demands proof.

Lastly, the spiritual is not the religious. A religion is a dogma, a set of beliefs about the spiritual and a set of practices which arise out of those beliefs. There are many religions and they tend to be mutually exclusive. That is, every religion tends to think that it has "dibs" on the spiritual—that it's "The Way." Yet the spiritual is inclusive. It is the deepest sense of belonging and participation. We all participate in the spiritual at all times, whether we know it or not.

There's no place to go to be separated from the spiritual, so perhaps one might say that the spiritual is that realm of human experience which religion attempts to connect us to through dogma and practice. Sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it fails. Religion is a bridge to the spiritual—but the spiritual lies beyond religion. Unfortunately, in seeking the spiritual we may become attached to the bridge rather than crossing over it.

The most important thing in defining spirit is the recognition that spirit is an essential need of human nature. There is something in all of us that seeks the spiritual. This yearning varies in strength from person to person but it is always there in everyone. And so, healing becomes possible. Yet there is a culture-wide tendency to deny the spiritual—to delegate it at best, to ignore it at worst. In trying to point to it with a definition, I hope to initiate a kind of questioning of the role of spirit in health, in healthcare, and in life.

By Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, author of the New York Times best-selling book Kitchen Table Wisdom (Riverhead, 1995), will be a plenary speaker at the IONS Annual Conference, July 8-11, 1999, in Orlando, Florida.
Seven Signs of Spiritual Health

Your are spiritually healthy when:

1. You feel a sense of belonging.
2. You are open to awe and wonder.
3. You live with an attitude of hope.
4. You have the ability to trust.
5. You are able to show appreciation.
6. You have a sense of purpose in your life.
7. You have a sense of humor.

A key to a vital life is an eagerness to learn and a willingness to change.
- M. A. Rademacher

Serenity Prayer for the Workplace

Grant me the serenity to prioritize the things I cannot delegate,
The courage to say no when I need to,
And, the wisdom to know when to go home.
- Anonymous

Waking up this morning, I smile,
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.
I vow to live fully in the moment
And to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.
- Thich Nhat Hahn