

Relational Intelligence: Exploring Children's Spirituality and the Pattern Language of Beauty, Flow and Love

Wendy Ellyatt, Oct 2022

Abstract

What I would like to suggest through this paper is the understanding there is a relational intelligence that underpins our ability to flourish and that this suggests a participatory and evolutionary vision of reality and human existence in which individuality and generative creativity can be understood as essential elements of an evolutionary process. When unfolding naturally they manifest as the pattern language of beauty, flow and love, with dynamic relationship and mutualism as the defining quality of human existence. In other words, if we support children and young people's innate relational capacities and potentials, these will tend towards beauty and wholeness, rather than fulfilling someone else's version of what they should achieve or who they should be. If we treat their family and cultural contexts, backgrounds and stories with reverence and respect, we can allow them to explore 'why they are the way they are' and to be encouraged to develop loving kindness towards Self, Others and the Natural World. If we respond to the latest scientific evidence from the evolutionary sciences, we can accept that, just as we are cognitive, physical, and emotional beings, we are also spiritual beings, and that spirituality is increasingly understood to be fundamental, not only for our own wellbeing, but for the regenerative sustainability of the planet. To achieve this, we need to redefine spirituality in ways that have real context and meaning for children and young people; to recognise periods of mental and emotional struggle as potential phases of transformation and integration/awakening rather than conditions to be pathologized; to create accessible spaces and forms of language that encourage trust and authentic forms of expression; and to support schools and teachers in being able to adopt approaches that actively nurture prosocial thinking and behaviours.

Keywords: flourishing, wellbeing, ecology, education, mutuality, unity, spirituality, relational intelligence, authenticity, consciousness, generative creativity, compassion, prosociality, playfulness, flow, beauty, love, wholeness

The Language of Spirituality

"We are at the dawn of a new consciousness, a radically fresh approach to our life as the human family in a fragile world. This birth into a new awareness, into a new set of historical circumstances, appears in a number of shifts in our understanding...The awakening of our ecological interconnectedness, with its concomitant sense of the preciousness of all other species, raises the earth to where it becomes the center of our moral, aesthetic, economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual activities...Interdependence is an inescapable fact of our contemporary world. Not only is it a prevailing condition that dominates international commerce, cultural exchange and scientific collaboration, it is a value that promotes stable global peace"¹

Wayne Teasdale (1999), *Mystic Heart – Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*

The term spirit is derived from the Old French word 'esprit', which itself comes from the Latin word 'spiritus' (soul, courage, vigor) and is related to spirare (to breathe). In many ancient and indigenous belief systems it meant the animating energy or vital principle in living systems, which was also related to the 'breath' or 'wind' of various air phenomena. The in-breath of the child represents the first step to becoming a fully functioning adult, whereas plants and trees give out carbon dioxide and absorb oxygen from the air that surrounds them.

*"The essential quality of the infinite is its subtlety, its intangibility. This quality is conveyed in the word spirit, whose root meaning is wind or breath. That which is truly alive is the energy of spirit, and this is never born and never dies."*²- David Bohm- Infinite Potential (2020)

Spiritual development has now been recognised as a core element of children's lives within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991),³ and there is increasing global interest in understanding and exploring spiritual development in child and youth care research and practice, that respects the cultural and social diversity of both religious and nonreligious settings along with the lifespan developmental processes of children. There is global agreement, however, that the modern world, with its focus on scientific knowledge and facts, has substantially eroded our ability to share authentic lived experience and that this lack of 'spiritual literacy' is inhibiting both children and adults' ability to share what is true and emergent for them. We know that the individual process of making sense of our worlds and making meaning of experience is essential to human wellbeing and involves the balanced integration of our inner and outer lives – and yet, all too often, this process is shut down.

Historically, spirituality has a strong association with religion. However, there has been increasing recognition that a wider view is now appropriate, and that spirituality is related to the big, existential questions related to identity, meaning and purpose, which can be explored within or outside a framework of religious faith⁴. Increasingly, therefore, 'spiritual development' is being recognised as a dynamic unfolding process, rather than a set of defined practices related to a specific belief system. During the 21st century, the opening of dialogue and sharing of wisdom among leaders and practitioners of different religions has expanded to show that, beneath the diversity of theological beliefs, rites, and observances, lies a deeper unity of experience that is our shared spiritual heritage. The Parliament of the World's Religions, now the world's leading interfaith convening organisation, was created to promote this form of unity thinking, to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and to foster their engagement with leading global institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

The Catholic lay priest Brother Wayne Teasdale is best known for the creation of the 'interspiritual' worldview that embraces all the spiritual narratives of the world as one collective heritage, arising historically from the consciousness experience of our species and seeking to draw from these resources the tools to encourage altruistic behaviours.⁵ From his perspective, every authentic spiritual path offers unique perspectives and rich insights into this deeper, direct experience of truth and all spiritual paths, at their mystical core, are committed to the common values of peace, compassionate service, and love for all creation. An inner life awakened to responsibility and love naturally expresses itself through engaged spirituality:

*"In acts of compassion..., contributing to the transformation of the world and the building of a nonviolent, peace-loving culture that includes everyone....The real religion of humankind can be said to be spirituality itself, because mystical spirituality is the origin of all the world's religions."*⁶-Br Wayne Teasdale (1999) p 63

Teasdale was a close personal friend and student of Bede Griffiths, the Benedictine monk who developed his own interspiritual model of community at his Shantivanam ashram in India. Griffiths weaved together strands of

Christian and Hindu thought and practice without slighting either tradition. He hoped that the meeting in depth of the great religions would lead, *“towards ... that unity in truth, which is the ultimate goal of humankind.”* In his introduction to *Universal Wisdom* (1994) he says *“This is the destiny of all humanity, to realize its essential unity in the Godhead, by whatever name it is known, to be one with the absolute Reality, the absolute Truth, the infinite, the eternal Life and Light.”*⁷ His integral vision sought to unite East and West; world religions and indigenous wisdom; modern science, mysticism and faith.

Both believed that modern science was beginning to endorse what ancient theological teachings and indigenous peoples around the world had been saying for thousands of years. And this is that human beings have innate perceptual capacities through which we experience love and connection, unity, and a sense of guidance from and dialogue with life.⁸ Not only this, but such capacities appear to underpin our other physical, cognitive and emotional capacities in order that they can be fully developed and integrated. In this respect, spirituality can be understood to be our human birthright and that which is always calling us towards balance and wholeness. There appears to be a capacity hardwired into our species to seek and recognise a transcendent relationship with life, where we know in our deepest selves that we are loved, held and never alone. It shows that the cultivation of our Inner Life is an essential element of the human journey, and that we all have an inner guidance system that needs to be both honoured and protected for fully integrated human functioning. It also shows us that, if undermined or dismissed, the negation of this essential aspect of ourselves can lead to profound states of loneliness, disconnection and languishing.

*“All human beings are born with a natural sense of spirituality, which is the integral dimension of full human development. Spirituality fosters a way of being that provides a foundation for a young person’s physical, emotional, intellectual and moral development. There is mounting empirical evidence that nurturing the spirituality of children supports their health and happiness and helps them be more engaged, higher achievers, and better citizens.”*⁹ - Collaborative for Spirituality in Education (2022)

Traditionally, scientists and spiritual teachers have held different areas of focus, in that scientists have tried to explain physical phenomena, whereas religious and spiritual teachers have tried to explain experiences that can change a person’s life, values and sense of self. Mystics and spiritual teachers are however, often led to make statements about the reality of the world and states of consciousness, that have allowed us to start comparing their own explanations with those of scientists. In recent years it has become more and more evident that we are seeing an alignment between ancient and indigenous ways of knowing and that of modern science. The potential of human learning unfolds through our life cycle, just as our journey towards wholeness evolves through our meaning-making. As Gregory Cajete says in his book *‘Look to the Mountain, “Learning and becoming whole are, at every level of expression, intimately intertwined.”*¹⁰

Spiritual experiences, known as direct and non-intellectual experiences of reality in moments of ‘heightened aliveness’, often involve a sense of humbleness, awe and wonder as we sense into the larger system within which we are embedded. In this way they are unbounded by cultural and historical context. Many of the world’s greatest scientists, such as Albert Einstein¹¹ and David Bohm¹², have expressed such feelings, as their work has led them to explore a deeper, unified, informational reality - and many belief-systems and religions recognise this overwhelming sense of wonder as connected to God and the divine.

*“A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feeling as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us... Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The true value of a human being is determined by the measure and the sense in which they have obtained liberation from the self. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive”*¹³. – Albert Einstein (1950)

Such understanding suggests that there is more to reality than that experienced through the five simple human physical senses and the disciplines of many of the world's great spiritual traditions are dedicated to providing people with such non-ordinary states of expanded awareness. Modern spirituality tends to centre on the core values and meanings by which people live. For many this embraces the idea of an ultimate or immaterial reality and envisions an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being. Such experiences enable people to transcend the limitations of their adopted personalities and conditioning and often facilitate deep shifts in previously predictable life courses, towards more meaningful, compassionate and purposeful forms of existence. It appears that connecting with the deeper nature of our reality enables the release of those areas of condensed, blocked and repressed emotion that have been inhibiting our growth.¹⁴

These types of experiences are often accessed and initiated through bodily feelings and sensations, so the body and the mind both play important roles in giving access to the energetic dynamic of the soul or spirit. It is the successful integration of body, mind and soul/spirit that facilitates the greatest expansion and growth. To this end we can understand spirit as the creative, animating force or principle that underlies the entire universe and soul as an eternal, self-regulating, life-essence that seeks to maintain a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic forces while constantly striving for wholeness and growth. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness have always been associated with spiritual traditions and are now becoming increasingly popular as people seek meaning and purpose beyond the confines of everyday modern life. Throughout time, people have sought non-ordinary states of consciousness and there is an extensive history of spiritual and indigenous practices that have been developed to support this process. The danger in the modern world is that the lack of appropriate rites, narratives and structures is driving children and young people to seek these deeper experiences outside of the system, with all the attendant risks. And we know that substance-abusing youth are at significantly higher risk for ongoing physical and mental health problems, including sleep disorders, depression, personality disorders, suicidal thoughts, attempted suicide, and suicide.

So what is spirituality?

Hay and Nye's 1998 relational model of children's spirituality talked of a 'relational consciousness': an intentional and natural process of relating to the world, to all things animate and inanimate, including a Divine Other and to the Self (pp 119-124).¹⁵ In her 2009 book 'Children's Spirituality'¹⁶, Nye providing her own definition of children's spirituality:

"Children's spirituality is an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences. This awareness can be conscious or unconscious, and sometimes fluctuates between both, but in both cases can affect actions feelings and thoughts. In childhood, spirituality is especially about being attracted towards being in relation, responding to a call to relate to more than 'just me' - i.e. to others, to God to creation and to a deeper in a sense of Self. This encounter with transcendence can happen in specific experiences or moments, as well as through imaginative or reflective activity (thoughts and meaning-making)." (2009) p6

David Hay talked of spirituality as "a universal human trait which transcends both language and religion. Although it may be expressed through religious faith by some, it is not the property of religion and could be signified 'in secular or even anti-religious language.'" ¹⁷ (1998) p48-49. His research showed that, despite the decline of institutional religion, a global interest in spirituality, often expressed as the awareness of 'something there', is rising right across the developed world. His interviews with hundreds of 'ordinary' people, with no formal religious affiliation, revealed that spirituality might be 'hard-wired' into our biological make-up, with the cosmological, biological, psychological and social sciences all aligning to suggest that spiritual awareness is a genuine and deep seated aspect of what it is to be human and cuts across divisions such as those traditionally seen between science and religion.

And for Sally Burns and George Lamont, *“Spirituality is a thread which runs through our life, bringing hope, compassion, thankfulness, courage, peace and a sense of purpose and meaning to everyday, while reaching beyond the immediate world of the visible and tangible. It drives us to seek and stay true to values not ruled by material success.”*¹⁸

Dr Lisa Miller’s recent body of work research suggests that there is ‘ a robust protective benefit of ‘relational spirituality’ – *“a personal spirituality that emphasizes both our commitment to other humans and an awareness of a transcendent or higher power – and how divine and human love are linked”* ¹⁹ (2021) p 222.

Miller sees spirituality as our innate capacity for transcendent awareness and how that might be shared with others. Her research suggest that this is hardwired, not merely a gift of our environment and she goes further to say that spirituality is not only innate, but heritable, and that there are states of spontaneous awareness and ‘direct knowing’ that transcend normal cognition and that are about our ‘inner wisdom’.

“Each of us is endowed with a natural capacity to perceive a greater reality and consciously connect to the life force that moves in, through and around us. Whether or not we participate in a spiritual practice or adhere to a faith tradition, whether or not we identify as religious or spiritual, our brain has a natural inclination toward and docking station for spiritual awareness. The awakened brain is the neural circuitry that allows us to see the world more fully and thus enhance our individual, societal, and global wellbeing...The awakened brain includes a set of innate perceptual capacities that exist in every person through which we experience love and connection, unity, and a sense of guidance from and dialogue with life. And when we engage these perceptual capacities - when we make full use of how we’re built - our brains become structurally healthier and better connected, and we access unsurpassed psychological benefits: less depression, anxiety, and substance abuse; and more positive psychological traits such as grit, resilience, optimism, tenacity, and creativity.” Ibid pp 7,8

Miller’s work suggests that spirituality is therefore, *“to live in a state of heightened and loving awareness of God - in whatever way this has meaning for you”* - i.e. through nature, your family, your sense of a higher power, the interconnected nature of the world around you and with yourself as a centre of creative possibility.

Just as we are cognitive, physical, and emotional beings, it seems that we are also spiritual beings and that this is a critical aspect for our wellbeing. There is a perceptual reciprocity between our sensing bodies and the animate expressive landscape that enfolds us ²⁰ and we are continually trying to express our inner lives through our outer relationships with the world. Such expressions are not only limited to linguistic forms only though, but instead refer to the multiple creative ways in which children and young people are always seeking to communicate both their understanding of the external world and the dynamic processes that are always taking place within. These means of exploration can include talking, writing, acting, drawing, singing, laughing, dancing and the use of natural materials, but they are always about unique expressions of meaning-making. Generative creativity is, therefore, fundamental to our wellbeing and to the evolutionary unfolding of the universe.

“By acknowledging such links between the inner, psychological world and the perceptual terrain that surrounds us, we begin to turn inside out, loosening the psyche from its confinement within a strictly humans fear, freeing sentence to return to the sensible world that contains us. Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; We are in it, of it, immersed in its depths. And indeed, each terrain, each ecology, seems to have its own particular intelligence, it’s unique vernacular of soil and leaf and sky.” - David Abrams (1996) p 262

As the Italian pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi says in his 1996 poem ‘The Hundred Languages of Children’²¹

“The child is made of one hundred. The child has a hundred languages - a hundred hands, a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking of playing, of speaking. A hundred, always a hundred ways of listening, of marvelling, of loving, a hundred joys for singing and understanding, a hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent, a hundred worlds to dream. The child has a hundred languages (and a hundred hundred more) but they steal ninety-nine. The schools and the culture separate the head from the body”

Relational Intelligence – what it is and why it matters

*Humanity is an infant species, newly evolved from life's word. And what a magnificent species we are; We can look out and feel spiritually uplifted by the beauty of a forested valley or an ice coated Arctic mountain, we are overwhelmed with awe at the site of the starfield heavens, and we are filled with reverence when we enter a sacred space. In the beauty, mystery and wonder that our brain perceives and expresses, we add a special gift to the planet... But our brush exuberance over our incredible inventiveness and productivity in this century has made us forget where we belong. If we are to balance and direct our remarkable technological muscle power, we need to regain some ancient virtues: the humility to acknowledge how much we have yet to learn, the respect that will allow us to protect and restore nature, and the love that can lift our eyes to distant horizons, far beyond the next election, paycheck or stock dividend. Above all we need to reclaim our faith in ourselves as creatures of the earth, living in harmony with all other forms of life."*²² - David Suzuki (1997) *The Sacred Balance*, p 207

One of the main themes explored by the 'I-Thou' thinking of Michael Buber, in the early part of the 21st century, was that all human life finds its meaning in relationships – and that ultimately all relationships bring us into communion with the divine/God who is the eternal 'Thou'. It is the ultimate letting go of the boundaries that disconnect us and the ultimate understanding that existence, in whatever form it takes, has inherent meaning and an evolutionary purpose. In this respect, the 'other', whether this is a human other or part of the natural world, is not seen as a separate object to be observed and evaluated, but to be celebrated as an individuated aspect of divine unity and expression.

This way of looking at things is very much in accord with the later thinking of the English biologist Alan Rayner²³:

"To understand the evolution of life as an expression of natural energy flow calls us to change the way in which we in modern culture have mostly been led to think about matter, energy, space and time as if they are separately definable and measurable aspects of reality. Most especially we need to change the way we have been led to think of space and boundaries as definable sources of separation between isolated objects and begin to think of these instead as sources of natural continuity and dynamic distinction" – Rayner (2022)

It also accords with the reciprocity of indigenous human communities, who, for thousands of years, experienced themselves as part of nature and carried on active relationships not only with other people, but with animals, plants, and other objects in the environment, such as stones, rivers, mountains, rivers and weather patterns. As David Abrams says in his book *'The Spell of the Sensuous'* *How, then, did humans come to sever their ancient reciprocity with the natural world? What will it take for us to recover a sustaining relation with the breathing earth?*²⁴

Evolutionary science suggests that the human spirit is part of a generative creative field, with every element materializing the form that best suits its nature, together with the circumstances that enable it to grow and perfect itself. Everything, through this perspective, has a unique evolutionary place and purpose, with each element impacting on the whole. The wings of the butterfly metaphor reveals that seemingly very small things, such as the day-to-day decisions of an individual, can have non-linear impacts on a complex system, so, even if we feel insignificant, we actually all matter in terms of the choices that we make.

*"Fundamentally, it is about stabilizing and harmonizing the relationship between earth's two most complex systems: human culture and the living world."*²⁵ - Peter Hawken (2007)

Dynamic relationship can therefore be understood as the defining quality of human existence, with relational intelligence prioritising a living relationship with nature, centred around reciprocity, grounded in place and kinship, and infused with reverence for the unfolding story. When, in 1973, Arne Naess introduced the term Deep ecology he was seeking to embrace both ecological concepts i.e. the need for sustainable systems and environmental ethics, including how humans should relate to nature.²⁶ But he also explored the concept of eco-

philosophy, or what he termed 'Ecosophy', which he described as the philosophy of equilibrium harmony or equilibrium.²⁷ In other words, his belief that human beings had the relational capacity to connect with a much larger sense of self, that transcended the ego and that allowed us to feel a sense of connection to all other beings and the natural world itself.

"Deep ecology does not separate humans - nor anything else - from the natural environment. It does not see the world not as a collection of isolated objects, but as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep ecology recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life. Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual awareness...When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence."- Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi *The Systems View of Life* (2019) p12

For thousands of years, such thinking has been common to indigenous communities and, although it has taken our near extinction to respond to the ways in which humanity has strayed from the path of reciprocity, we are now starting to see both political and economic systems acknowledging the need for change. '

Ayni', the Quechua term for reciprocity, refers to a society existing in a constant state of flux, perpetually reordering and correcting for the dynamic imbalance of every living moment in pursuit of collective well-being.²⁸ Andean and Amazonian perspectives on 'Sumak Kawsay' were recognised in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, which incorporated the concept of the rights of nature, and the 2009 Constitution of Bolivia. In the original Quechua phrase, *sumak* refers to the ideal and beautiful fulfillment of the planet, and *kawsay* means "life," a life of dignity, plenitude, balance, and harmony.

*"The proposed economy should foster the harmonic coexistence of persons and peoples among themselves and with nature. Biodiversity and nature are not another commodity that is bought and sold and that is exploited irrationally, nature is the Pachamama, we're part of the same, therefore relationships with the natural environment should be respectful."*²⁹

Quantum theory stresses the link between the observer and the observed and the basic holism of all phenomena. Indigenous science also maintains that there is no separation between the individual and society, between matter and spirit, or between each one of us and the whole of nature. Our individual wellbeing is therefore intimately tied up with the wellbeing of the whole and derives from us being in resonant and harmonious relationship with the natural world. There are biological, cognitive, social and ecological dimension of life that show us that no living thing can exist in isolation and that plants, animals and micro-organisms regulate the entire biosphere within which human beings are a part.

*"Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence. Hence the emerging new vision of reality, based on deep ecological awareness, is consistent with the so-called perennial philosophy of spiritual traditions."*³⁰Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi - *The Systems View of Life* (2019) p13

The word 'Pleroma' (Koinē Greek: πλήρωμα) is used in Christian theological contexts and refers to 'fulness' or the totality of divine powers, through which there is a unified consciousness of purpose and meaning that reflects our interrelatedness with all aspects of life. Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine monk and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation talks of the 'wondrous beauty' of this process:

*"The embodied self that each of us manifests is a microcosm of the cosmos and of an eternal reality that extends through all its time zones. Microscopic pictures of the interior organs look amazingly like photos of galaxies and star clusters. The body is a 'nano cosmos' (a nano is one billionth of a metre) and a wondrous beauty unites the cosmic and microcosmic."*³¹

'Ubuntu' is an African concept and philosophy that emphasizes the dynamic relationship between Self and Other. It is often translated as "I am because we are" (also "I am because you are") and a further translation of the Ubuntu principle is 'humanity towards others'. Another translation could be 'the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity'.³²

"A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed." --Archbishop Desmond Tutu

And one of the central tenets of Buddhism is that the grasping onto one's own views, or vision of the world, as being uniquely true and superior to others is a fundamental delusion.³³

The SDG Thought Leaders Circle (SDGTLC) has recently published a unitive narrative that endorses just such an understanding and that seeks to catalyse cross-disciplinary dialogue:

"A new paradigm, based on scientific breakthroughs, with evidence at all scales of existence and across numerous fields of research, is revealing a radically expanded perception of the world. It is converging with universal wisdom and spirituality-based teachings. In realizing the unified nature of reality, it calls for a collective evolutionary shift of consciousness and the emergence of an inclusive interspirituality which provides essential practices for awakening to this unitive consciousness. Central to its unitive narrative is the recognition of our interbeing; our interconnectedness, interdependence and belonging with the whole community of our planetary home, Gaia, and with the entire Universe."³⁴ - SDG Thought Leaders Circle (2022) Unitive Narrative

It is also collaborating with others, such as the Inner Development Goals (IDGS) initiative, in saying that the external goals will never be met unless there is an equal transformation in human worldviews and behaviours.³⁵

Exploring the Story of the Selfish Gene

"We are faced with overwhelming empirical evidence that moral consciousness - and the values of cooperation, love, compassion, kindness and so on it encompasses - reflect collaborative, synchronistic patterns of behaviour which entail a paradigm of human unity and stewardship towards the earth that is in direct contradiction to the prevailing paradigm."³⁶ - Nafeez Ahmed (2019)

The "selfish gene" interpretation of evolution, as popularized in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins³⁷, suggests that all evolution can be explained by the 'selfish' drive of our genes to replicate themselves and that societies were simply collections of individuals all seeking to serve their own self-interest. However, it is now becoming increasingly accepted that human evolution is a much more interesting series of complex, interrelated networks, where genes, organisms, social groups, species and cultures are all constantly interacting with each other, and where co-operation and co-creativity are a defining characteristic.³⁸

The human species is the only one on the planet capable of consciously adopting entirely different modes and patterns of behaviour based on our understanding of ourselves and the natural world.³⁹ Just as in every other living system, human beings are born with the life tendency to grow and flourish and rely on achieving a resonance and balance between their internal needs and the demands of their external environments, that, for human beings, includes a sense of belonging within the family group and culture. We are predominantly social beings and adapt our behaviours accordingly.

The science of early human development has now confirmed that, if given adequate nurturing, children have the

natural life tendency to take care of themselves (i.e. to fulfil their needs), to be happy and healthy, to get along with one another and to respect other forms of life. In other words, a natural instinct for harmony, beauty and goodness that is grounded in love. If, instead, however, they experience negative or limiting early environments they may ignore their innate needs, fail to establish loving and trusting relationships and seek to use and abuse others and the natural world. Such an understanding was fundamental to the work of the early pedagogue Maria Montessori, who proposed that the physical embryo contained hereditary potentials (genes); whereas the spiritual embryo contained adaptive potentialities (nebulae) that would spontaneously adapt and develop in response to the cultural environments in which children are born. Through this adaptive process, accrued out through the absorbent mind, the potentialities would develop into the behavioural characteristics of that culture.

“Just as hormones act as inner influences on physical growth, so the nebulae, the absorbent mind and the sensitive periods direct the growth and development of the spiritual embryo.”⁴⁰ Maria Montessori (1949) p 31

The Harvard Centre on the developing Child has now shown that early experiences profoundly affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health. Just as a weak foundation compromises the quality and strength of a house, adverse experiences early in life can impair brain architecture, with negative effects lasting into adulthood.⁴¹ But this lack of nurturing in the early years may also be eroding our ability to tap into the states of spontaneous awareness that transcend cognition and connect us into the larger field.

According to Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs theory, self-actualization represents the highest level of psychological development where the "actualization" of full personal potential is achieved. Towards the end of his life, he added the further step self-transcendence which aligns with the need to go beyond the confines of the self:

“Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.”⁴² Maslow (1971) p 269

Such understanding suggests that there is more to reality than that experienced through the five simple human physical senses and the disciplines of many of the world's great spiritual traditions are dedicated to providing people with such non-ordinary states of expanded awareness. Modern spirituality tends to centre on the core values and meanings by which people live. For many this embraces the idea of an ultimate or immaterial reality and envisions an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being. This often follows from a profound experience of such a reality beyond normal everyday experience i.e. a direct and non-intellectual experience of reality that is not bounded by cultural and historical context. Such experiences enable people to transcend the limitations of their adopted personalities and conditioning and often facilitate deep shifts in previously predictable life courses, towards more meaningful, compassionate and purposeful forms of existence. Interestingly, such experiences are often accessed and initiated through bodily feelings and sensations, so the body and the mind both play important roles in giving access to the energetic dynamic of the soul or spirit. Adaptive responses require a transcending and transformation of egoism, where the ego is not abolished, but transformed into a vehicle to birth a higher and better self, more attuned to that which is beyond it, and in which it is embedded.

“Continuing learning, adaptation and development are key characteristics of the behaviour of all living systems, as we try to optimise our own development within the context of the larger system...This spontaneous emergence of new order at critical points of instability, which is nowadays often referred to just as “emergence,” is the key characteristic of dynamic self-organization, and is in fact one of the hallmarks of life. It has been recognized as the underlying dynamic of development, of learning, and of evolution. In other words, creativity — the generation of new forms of order — is a key property of all

living systems. Nature always reaches out into new territory to create novelty."⁴³ Fritof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi (2014) p 255

What is hopeful about this is that we are fundamentally an adaptive species and is it this ability to adapt that gives us the possibility to choose different – and better. However, this capacity relies on us constantly challenging the value and belief systems that we refer to as our personal ‘truth’ and that underpin our mindsets and worldviews. The person that you think of as ‘I’ is actually more than just the sum of your thoughts and feelings but is a complex combination of inputs that include your genetic and cultural background, your social and environmental experiences both before and after your physical birth, the degree to which you were nurtured in early childhood, the messages that you received from your family and peers and the day to day interactions that you have had. Understanding this, and stepping back from our own conditioning, creates a sacred space of transformation and we are currently seeing increasing incidences of people trying to do just this. For example, following the work of the evolutionary scientist Dr Elinor Ostrom, Prosocial Schools highlights that ‘How we learn and adapt together determines the course of everything’ and promotes set of design principles needed to achieve social, economic and environmental wellbeing on a planetary scale. It’s website states that *“Prosociality in behavioral science means the ability and motivation to behave in a way that benefits others. Prosociality, cooperation, group identity, communication, and learning from and with each other, are foundational skills and traits for our species – homo sapiens.”*⁴⁴

Ostrom won the Nobel Prize for her work in understanding the things people did to protect their common pooled resources: their forests, pastures, fisheries, and irrigation systems. *For hundreds if not thousands of years, some groups have succeeded and prospered in doing so; some have failed. They did not succeed because they filed a successful development grant with the World Bank – they succeeded because they worked together to balance group interests while managing the human tendency toward selfishness.*⁴⁵

So, we all carry the human tendency towards selfishness, but can overcome this when we connect with others in pursuit of something that serves the whole. In fact, this search for personal meaning, together with our capacity for contribution and growth, is essential for our wellbeing.⁴⁶

Human Languishing

Currently 13% of the world’s adult population are estimated to be clinically overweight or obese, along with 38.2 million children under the age of 5 years. In 2016 one in six Americans was taking psychiatric medications and in the UK 1 in 6 adults experiences a common mental health problem, with 1 in 5 considering taking their own life at some point.^{47/48/49} According to the UK’s Young Minds, even before COVID one in six children aged five to 16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021, a huge increase from one in nine in 2017. That’s five children in every classroom . And In 2018-19, *an astonishing 24% of 17-year-olds* reported having self-harmed in the previous year, and seven per cent reported having self-harmed with suicidal intent at some point in their lives.⁵⁰

If human flourishing is recognised as a state of balanced integration between our Self, Others and the Natural World, that incorporates the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental aspects of what it means to be human, it follows that human languishing must be a state where such integration has, in some way, been compromised. And that this, as Willen, Walsh and Williamson discussed in their 2021 paper, is a multi-systemic issue.

“Given the vast structural inequities in health and, arguably, flourishing that have only deepened during the pandemic, it is now clearer than ever that the problems with “traditional concepts of health” are not primarily in our minds. While simple “do-it-yourself” flourishing exercises may help some people in a limited way, as a society-wide strategy for promoting human flourishing, they clearly will not do. If flourishing is fundamentally a matter of being able to realize one’s potential, as Aristotle among others have argued (Garland-Thomson, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989; Willen, 2022), then we

cannot ignore the fact that people are—and inevitably will be—hard-pressed to reach their potential in environments of scarcity or risk, oppression, misrecognition, or violence. Without confronting these critical insights head-on, efforts to promote flourishing will inevitably miss the mark.”⁵¹ – Willen et al (2021)

The current global interest in human flourishing is very encouraging, but, until the recent launch of the Harvard Flourishing Programme, that seeks to integrate knowledge across disciplines,⁵² it has predominantly focused on mental health, rather than the more interesting analysis of what best supports systemic functioning. Whereas the presence of mental health has been, quite rightly associated with flourishing, the absence of mental health has been characterized as languishing. Van Schalkwyk and Wissing (2010) explored the psychosocial well-being of adolescents using interviews and surveys. They found that adolescents’ understanding of flourishing included the following themes: purposeful living and meaning; positive relationships; role-models; self-confidence and self-regard; constructive life-style; constructive coping; and positive emotions. Conversely, adolescents’ understandings of languishing included broken relationships, unsupportive family, conflict, and negative relations. The study also revealed that 58% of adolescents were ‘not flourishing’.

“This finding coincides with that of Keyes (2002) which suggests that flourishing decreases in adulthood. Further, this echoes the assertion by Huppert and So (2009) that flourishing is more than merely the absence of mental disorders. van Schalkwyk and Wissing (2010) identified that themes taken from qualitative data, corresponded to themes found in quantitative data such as: relationships, ego-resiliency and autonomy, zest for life and the importance of positive affect. Important to note is that adolescents who are continually exposed to negative conditions (poverty, crime, high-risk behaviour) may result in higher levels of languishing (van Schalkwyk & Wissing, 2010).”⁵³

What is so interesting about the psychologist Amy Miller’s recent research, published in her book ‘The Awakened Brain’⁵⁴ was that it revealed that maternal spirituality impacted twice as much towards our mental health as maternal mental health and that the intergenerational transmission of spirituality produced a remarkable 80% protective benefit. She also highlighted the work of Kendler that showed that a person’s degree of spirituality is determined 29% by heredity, and 71% by environment.

“The new research raised the possibility that just as we are cognitive, physical, and emotional beings, we are also spiritual beings. In other words, it’s possible that we are built to be spiritual, and that spirituality might be a fundamental and necessary part of our human inheritance that contributes to our mental health. Kendler’s ground-breaking study suggested that spirituality isn’t just a belief, but something each of us is born with the capacity to experience. Like any innate capacity—the ability to learn a language or sing a tune, for example—there is variability in its strength. Some people are more genetically inclined to play an instrument or do calculus. But ultimately, the ability to be spiritual is our birthright” – Amy Miller (2021) p 58

Miller found that adolescents with a strong personal spirituality were 35 to 75% less likely to experience clinical depression and adolescents with a strong personal spirituality were 40 to 80% less likely to develop substance abuse or dependence. More interestingly, her research showed that those who had strong personal spirituality at age 22 were 2 1/2 times more likely to have been depressed in the past. **In other words, spiritual formation doesn't seem to be an alternative to depression so much as a way of being that that emerges alongside or through struggle (my bolding).** Second, those who had strong spirituality by age 26 were 75% protected against a recurrence of major depression for the next 10 years. And for those who are highly spiritual and had gone through major depression in the past, the protective benefit of spirituality against recurrence of depression was even higher: a striking 90% of these were people at high familial risk for depression, had grown up in household shrouded in a rain cloud of depression. When they experienced painful losses, disappointments, or unwanted experiences in their late adolescence and early adulthood, They seemed conditioned for a spiritual response. *“ It was as though their sensitivity to and familiarity with mental suffering enhance their capacity to marshal a deeper spiritual response to life challenges”.*

Miller's research is among the first to show that periods of human languishing and depression are not always detrimental to our long-term wellbeing, but may, instead, be indications of the individual's move towards spiritual development and integration. She also showed that moments of intense spiritual awareness were biologically identical whether or not they were explicitly religious, physiologically the same whether the experience occurred in a House of worship or on a forest hike in the 'cathedral of nature'. They had the same level of felt intensity and the same pathways of fMRI activation- the same functioning neural correlates. And that his engagement appeared to be a matter of *choice*.

"The same healthy young adult brain could be used for stress - for isolation, helplessness, worry, addiction, and craving- or for spiritual engagement. The same person, with the same outward life, IQ, socio economic status, friends, genes, family, and environment, could see a world that looked abundant bright, or empty and insufficient. What participants saw and experienced was determined by how they marshalled their own inner life. But making a choice in perception, the same person could be either awake or strung out." p 163

What she calls 'Quest orientation' is characterised by a tendency to journey in life: to search for answers to meaningful personal decisions and big existential questions; to perceive doubt as positive; and to be open to change, or more accurately, open to receiving with fresh eyes, and then using new experience to fuel change. *"In quest, we open ourselves to the messages from life, take seriously this discovery, and then actively use learning to shape our decisions and actions- our personal operating manual."* p 170

She makes the distinction between achieving and awakened forms of awareness and suggest that the power of the awakened brain is that it offers a pathway through a certain type of depressive experience by encouraging us to open the door towards spiritual growth and emergence. In other words, some forms of languishing and depression are actually a 'call of the soul', or spiritual invitation to live more fully, love more deeply, and opening to dialogue with a sacred universe.

Healing the Relational Patterns of the Past

So what is this 'Call of the Soul' that opens us up to periods of intense challenge and difficulty?

For thousands of years, spiritual teachers have told us that we are much more than the physical bodies that we occupy, that there is a unifying energy that underpins all of existence, and that we don't have a soul, but rather that we 'are' a soul that is having an individuated human experience. Within this understanding, what we call 'spirit' is the animating principle within all living systems, that initiates from a deeper, unified, informational reality and 'soul' is the immortal, individuated, informational essence of the self as an integrated aspect of humanity – that part of our essence that is always calling us towards wholeness and unity. The 'Self can then be understood a self-generating and self-organising system, that is a reflection of an evolutionary lifeforce, that is always trying to achieve homeostasis between its personal sense of boundary and that of the external environment.

Simply put, we are always trying to balance our inner and outer worlds:

The Inner: that which is experienced as inside us (what I love and am drawn to) is our spiritual essence and manifests as generative creativity (what is uniquely mine to create and express)

The Outer: that which is experienced as outside us (how can I thrive within a social world of others) and manifests as the need to connect, belong and contribute (how can I serve the whole)

with energetic flow occurring when the two are successfully integrated.

Adults with integrated levels of health exhibit flourishing in life, with high levels of vitality and wellbeing. Flourishing, then, is when our inner needs are in a state of cohesive balance with the demands of the external world, allowing us to tune in to what most interests and delights us, to hone, express and share our unique skills and capacities and to functionally optimise our lives – physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually. It creates lives of meaning and purpose where our own activities make sense in the context of the whole.

Adults with fragmented levels of health instead exhibit languishing in life with low vitality and wellbeing. Some of their needs may be being met, but often at the expense of others. Human languishing is frequently experienced as emptiness and stagnation, often constituting lives of quiet despair. There is no sense of cohesion and an eroded and compromised sense of meaning and purpose, where our lives seem pointless and of little or no value to the whole.

Human flourishing, therefore, is a complex and dynamic systemic state that is constantly being influenced by whether or not our physical, relational, emotional and spiritual needs have been, and are being, met through both our physical and social environments and our personal lived experiences. It is about the fact that normal human life is chaotic and messy, that if things are going well one day, they might well be compromised and difficult the next and that is the ability to bounce back from adversity and to see the bigger picture that enables us to fully honour our bodies, minds and spirits. Physical health is about how well we manage the needs of our bodies; mental health is about how well our minds interpret and process the information and experiences that are constantly shaping who we are; emotional health involves the ability to manage and regulate the feelings that are constantly associated with what we have learned and experienced; and spiritual health is about honouring that we are actually more than our bodies, minds and emotions and that we are, instead participants in an evolutionary journey that is calling on each one of us to transcend the restrictive patterns of the past, that include the family and cultural patterns that have shaped who we are in the world, and to fulfil our unique purpose and potential, as aspects of the undivided whole.

As Parker Palmer noted during a particularly challenging stage of his own life journey *“The life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me.”* Thirty years later he then cautioned *“ Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”*⁵⁵

In other words, life itself is always guiding us to become the highest expression of ourselves, but ultimately, we realise that there is no inner or outer, and that, instead, we are part of a dynamic evolutionary process.

Relational Intelligence and Compassionate Practice

An essential characteristic of relational intelligence is the integration and sharing of authentic lived experience. We are beginning to restore an understanding that human consciousness transcends many of the barriers that we thought existed and that we are more deeply connected, to both others and the larger world, than we have been led to believe. In championing a rational and separatist worldview it seems that we may have lost something vital about the meaning of our existence.

*“The scientific quest for knowledge and understanding, the technological quest for solutions to practical problems, are but aspects of the central and fundamental quest: to see, to experience, to enjoy what is of supreme value in existence, whatever this may be. Impersonal, academic inquiry, properly organized and constituted, is there to aid what really matters, the searching, the explorations, that we individuals engage in as we live, in seeking to apprehend, to experience, to participate in, what is of value, potentially and actually, in existence. The philosophy of wisdom is not just a conception of inquiry; it is also a way of life.”*⁵⁶Nicholas Maxwell (2007) *From Knowledge to Wisdom* p267

Human beings, therefore, do not exist in isolation, but in dynamic interconnection, with human flourishing only existing only within a deeper ecology of wellbeing. Within the understanding of such an integrated approach, spirituality is recognised as an innate human quality, that pre-exists cultural or religious differences, that stems from a unified reality and that is grounded in connection and love^{57 58} As such, it exists throughout the lifespan, both coming from and returning to, an essential unity, and is an essential element for human flourishing.

In the twenty-first century and beyond, the wellbeing, and even the survival of humanity, will depend upon such relational intelligence, or 'ecological literacy'. Literacy, therefore, encompasses not just reading and writing, but the knowledge, skills and values needed to interpret and express meaning and to be able to participate fully within a given community or culture in order to ensure its future. There is increasing recognition that many of the educational models that we have become used to now need revisiting. With vast amounts of knowledge accessible to so many people education is no longer primarily about the retention of knowledge, but rather its relevance and application to human and planetary health and wellbeing. Nature shows us that every element of a system is as important as every other. Nothing in nature actually has permanently sealed and rigid boundaries, but everything is, instead, variably open and fluid depending on its dynamic situation. Nature also shows us that a system only works at maximum efficiency when every part is fulfilling its unique purpose. Every child therefore comes into the world as a unique being with extraordinary learning potential. That potential is shaped by the culture within which the child lives, but each child has unique capacities that lead him or her to be particularly interested in certain aspects of the environment. We are not clones, but instead each one of us excels at some things and struggles with others as a result of the wonderful diversity that nature intended. That way each person both fulfils his or her purpose, but also serves the needs of the larger system.

The common quality of spirituality is that it is related to 'lived experience' and has life-enhancing and life-promoting qualities. It affirms and nourishes life as something precious that goes beyond the limitations of our everyday experiences. There appears to be a deep relational wisdom at play within us that is both intensely personal and yet totally immersed within life itself. We explore and express it through being open and authentic and by having the courage to confront the boundaries that have shaped who we think we are. Modern cultures have compromised this ability to voice the truth about our spiritual experiences and yet the evidence is overwhelming that this is a crucial part of what gives us meaning and purpose. Compassionate practice honours the fact that schools are living relational systems and that the health and wellbeing of everyone in the system matters to the whole. It has the humility to acknowledge that knowledge needs to be understood and shared in an interdisciplinary way where the ecological and spiritual dimensions of education are explicitly emphasized⁵⁹ and where the inner lives of teachers are fundamental to the process.

*"We need to open a new frontier in our exploration of good teaching: the inner landscape of a teacher's life. To chart that landscape fully, three important paths must be taken—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and we need to interweave them in our pedagogical discourse as well."*⁶⁰Parker Palmer (1997)

*"Education, in its truest expression, is about drawing out the deepest potentials of the human heart...Each of us can hear a deep call to be a force of goodness in our lives. We can understand this call as our vocation; an education at its best enables this call of the heart to be expressed in one's professional life. This requires that the capabilities associated with the heart be joined with the struggles of the everyday world. With our educated hearts, we are able to offer the embrace of recognition to the otherness of others. Such dialogic capability enables mutual understanding through which we can both share worlds, and go beyond, to making possible worlds."*⁶¹ Attab Omer

About the author



Wendy Ellyatt is currently working with a number of organisations worldwide who are committed to the creation of a more caring and regenerative world. She is the founder of the Flourish Project, a member of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Thought Leaders Circle and co-author of the Unitive Narrative, a member of the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) Catalyst Group, a member of the Harvard Human Flourishing Programme's Educational Futures and Spirituality and Flourishing Working Groups, a board director of Kinship Earth and leads the development of the UK Spirituality in Education Alliance (SIEUK).

www.wendyellyatt.com

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The Flourish Project works with its partners to promote community involvement and whole-systems thinking. Currently moving into its pilot period, it offers parents, teachers, schools, care-homes, businesses, city-leaders and national policymakers the ability to better understand and promote the health and wellbeing of both themselves and their own local communities and populations. In each case, it provides a quick and easy way to map and evaluate existing wellbeing scales and indicators that promotes eco-systemic thinking and the need to 'measure what matters'. Above all, it underpins the call for a more caring, sustainable and compassionate world.

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