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Spirit Matters: Global Healing and the Wisdom of the Soul

by Michael Lerner

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Michael Lerner is rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in San Francisco and Editor of *Tikkun* magazine. He has a Ph. D. in philosophy, a Ph. D. in clinical psychology, and is the author of several well-received books including *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism*. His latest book, *Spirit Matters: Global Healing and the Wisdom of the Soul*, deserves a prominent place in a growing genre of integrative works — books that link the inner and outer, the personal and the societal, to give us a clearer sense of how we can heal and transform ourselves, our institutions, and the global society.

In *Spirit Matters*, Lerner identifies the central problem of our time as the globalization of selfishness, and maintains that the only serious alternative to that unhappy state is the globalization of spiritual consciousness and the development of an “Emancipatory Spirituality.” Through a variety of spiritual practices he would have us develop a deeper understanding of the role of Spirit in the universe and a resonance with Spirit’s agenda in our personal lives. “The world and other people are not here to be used and manipulated by us for our own narrow purposes,” says Lerner, “but to be responded to with awe and wonder and radical amazement. The world is permeated with love and goodness, and the meaning of our lives is to embody that love and goodness and heal the world, so that it is a deeper reflection of this underlying goodness and love.”

Lerner sees Spirit as the “energizing Force” behind the Big Bang and the ongoing evolutionary process — “the undergirding of all that there is, the ultimate substance of the universe in which all else is grounded.” As Lerner sees it, the active thrust of Spirit is a cooperation-fostering “playful, joyful, loving energy that pulsates through All Being, immanent in all, and yet fully transcendent of any given state of being and any manifestation.”

Lerner usually uses the term *Spirit* to refer to this immanent/transcendent reality, but at times he also uses the terms *God* and *Highest Reality*. He notes that the Hebrew YHVH, the “four letters that Jews never pronounce precisely because they do not signify a specific being,” refers instead to a verb-like world process, to a “transformation of the present into that which can and should be in the future. In this sense, God is the Power of Healing and Transformation in the Universe — and the Voice of the Future calling us to become who we need to become.”

Our primal longing for meaning

As a psychotherapist, Lerner and his colleagues at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health interviewed and worked in therapy groups with thousands of working people. This research revealed that socially

meaningless work was a major cause of stress, and that “most people have a real need for meaning and purpose in their lives, a meaning and purpose that could transcend the selfishness and materialism of the competitive marketplace and root them in something with transcendent significance.” Lerner suggests that Abraham Maslow was off the mark in suggesting “that we must first satisfy our material needs and only then address our ‘higher’ needs.” For Lerner, the spiritual is also basic: “Rather than thinking of material needs as the foundation and the spiritual dimension as a kind of accessory, we should understand that spiritual needs are equally real and equally essential to our being.”

Through his work at the Institute it also became clear to Lerner that the distress of meaninglessness has societal origins, and that the much-needed fix is societal, not just personal. “The fundamental thing I learned in my work is how very deeply distorted we all get by living in a society whose very definitions of rationality and productivity are fundamentally Spirit denying. More and more people are moving beyond individual solutions, and beginning to ask how to build a society on a different foundation precisely because Spirit Matters so deeply, and because individual repair can only go part of the way in rectifying the damage caused by internalizing the ways of thinking and being generated in a materialist, individualist, and narcissistic social world.”

Social change — past and future

So how do we change the world? And why have previous well-intentioned attempts failed? Lerner makes several points. One is that “in our spiritually deadened society, people don’t allow themselves to hope for change.” Another is that historically, change agents have not been sensitive to people’s longing for meaning and for a valid, satisfying, spiritual connection: “Thinking about the world as sacred makes it possible to stand up to the underlying logic of the globalization of capital, a logic that the Left can’t really counter, because it shares the notion that what people want is more material goods, and that the only challenge is to make sure that everyone has equal opportunity and that decisions are made democratically.” Lerner also speaks of the tendency of change agents, upon being faced with disappointment after disappointment, to back away from the larger vision and settle for short-run compromises and lesser victories. Lerner sees maintaining the larger vision as the only way to bring about the larger changes — even when such changes might not be attained in the change agent’s lifetime.

Lerner’s alternative to 20th-century-style social change is an “Emancipatory Spirituality,” and he devotes seven pages to defining what he means by that phrase. Key elements include

- celebrating the wonder of the universe;
- recognizing the Unity of All Being;
- cultivating our capacity to see each other as ends, not means to some end;
- affirming the equal worth of every human being;
- seeking the healing and transformation of the world in ways that enhance peace, tolerance, cooperation, mutual respect, ecological sanity, social justice, and celebration of the grandeur of the universe;
- cultivating the capacity to transcend our individual egos so that we can experience connection to the Oneness of all Being;
- developing mindfulness, a form of alert attention to each act and experience;
- developing an ability to sustain a connection to Spirit even through periods of adversity and pain;
- enhancing our ability to play, to experience joy and pleasure, to honor our emotions and the emotions of others, to educate the next generation in love and compassion, and to experience solitude and silence;
- engaging in non-goal-directed aesthetic creativity in all forms of human artistic expression;
- affirming pleasure and sexuality while rejecting all attempts to separate Spirit from its

embeddedness in body;

- encouraging an overwhelming feeling of love toward others and a respectful caring for their needs, without forgetting our own needs;
- a desire to live ecologically sustainable lives and to create human societies that are environmentally sustainable and embody respect for all life forms;
- deepening our intellectual capacities so they can be directed toward ensuring the survival and spiritual flourishing of the human race;
- seeking the integration of our many capacities and strengths, both on the individual and global levels, without abandoning uniqueness;
- supporting a change in society's bottom-line ethos from selfishness and materialism to love and caring; and
- encouraging the spiritual evolution of the human race toward higher forms of knowing, loving, sharing, and rejoicing.

"Once they are armed with a spiritual consciousness," says Lerner, "social change movements will be able to sustain themselves and resist the internal tendencies toward self-destruction that have almost always undermined social change in the past."

Central to the power of Lerner's approach is the tight integration of inner development and outer activity: "The globalization of Spirit requires that we overcome the false dichotomy between changing ourselves and changing societal structures. At times we may be inclined to say, 'I need to work on my own head first, then later I'll try to change society.' But this strategy can be the beginning of a slippery slope toward narcissistic self-absorption, just as the 'I'll change society first and then worry about inner life' strategy can be a slippery slope to the insensitivity and spiritual obtuseness of most contemporary political movements. Emancipatory Spirituality encourages a living synthesis of individual and social transformation."

Some goals

Lerner feels that large-scale adoption of Emancipatory Spirituality could take as little as 20 or 30 years or as long as several generations. And he suggests a number of transformational goals:

- bring about new measurements of the quality of life;
- create mechanisms of accountability for multinational corporations including a "Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would require corporations to obtain a new corporate charter every twenty years, a charter that would be granted only if the corporation in question demonstrated a history of social responsibility; and the Social Responsibility Initiative, which would make a priority of awarding public contracts to corporations with the best history of social responsibility;"
- build civic society institutions that "operate as counterforces to the market and to global capital's international power base in media, governments, and globalized economic institutions;"
- "develop programs to ensure that the earth's resources are shared equitably;"
- "create incentives for nations to reduce military spending and to direct resources toward building global economic well-being, adequate housing, education, health care, and ecologically sustainable production;"
- "move from highly concentrated absentee ownership to stakeholder ownership of society's productive assets;" and
- "make the funding of international and local media independent from global capital."

I have attempted here to present some of Lerner's main points, but within the book's 350 pages of text lie a wealth of additional insights and useful detail, including

- suggestions for specific spiritual practices aimed at teaching us “to attend to the world with a loving yet fully honest awareness of what is;”
- a discussion of Lerner’s resonance with Ken Wilber’s developmental thinking;
- a model for transforming the educational system; and
- discussions of religious fundamentalism, the distortion and misuse of true spirituality by Jewish and Christian religious leaders over the centuries, and the good and bad that has accompanied the rise of empiricism.

While Lerner presents a host of specific ideas for changing society, he is also open to other approaches. As he puts it, “There are many other ways to build a society that encourages rather than represses Spirit.”

In the book’s Conclusion, Lerner sums up his position:

The central truth is this: we are embodiments of the Spirit of the universe and have the freedom and consciousness to make significant choices. The pace of change will depend in large part on the choices you and I make in the coming years and on how soon we are ready to act together toward achieving the kind of spiritual world described here.

I have no doubt that those interested in both personal spirituality and global transformation will find *Spirit Matters* an inspiring and thought-provoking read.