SPIRITUALITY AND HUMANITARIAN WORK: MAINTAINING YOUR VITALITY

by Lisa McKay

ONLINE TRAINING MODULE SIX
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INTRODUCTION | *Humanitarian work is soul work*

“How could God allow this to happen? No one should have to suffer like this – especially not the children. Where is justice here? Or mercy?”

— *(Humanitarian worker in Gaza)*

You may not be used to thinking of humanitarian work as soul work. After all, people end up in humanitarian work for many reasons. Some of you may have chosen this line of work because you were looking for adventure. You might have wandered into it sort of by accident. Or you may have been looking for any decent job to support your family.

Most humanitarian workers, however, are also at least partly motivated by spiritual ideals. For many, personal spiritual beliefs about meaning, purpose, and what it means to love and care for others, play a big part in their decision to become a humanitarian worker. But what many people don’t fully anticipate is that, over time, humanitarian work will also change the way they think about and experience personal spirituality.

If you have ever had thoughts similar to the quote at the top of this page, you are not alone. Almost every humanitarian worker I know has wondered something like this at one time (or many times!). At its core, humanitarian work is about meeting human need and working to improve people’s lives. When you respond to great human need you are always going to be pushed and changed yourself. No matter what your core values or beliefs, it is difficult to encounter violence and cruelty without sensing that your spirit has brushed up against darkness. And it is virtually impossible to witness suffering without having your beliefs and expectations about how the world “should” work challenged.

If you become a humanitarian worker you will almost certainly grapple with your own beliefs and expectations, and questions of meaning and purpose. During a workshop I gave recently in Kenya, I asked humanitarian workers from many different organizations what question – any question – they would have answered if such a thing were possible. Almost all the questions people raised were linked to spirituality: Why do innocent children suffer? How does the concept of God fit together with the injustice in this world? Why do people turn against each other, and kill each other? I feel like I’ve lost my own faith – how can I reconnect with my spiritual self? What is the essence of love or of hope?

Thinking through what has challenged us and engaging with these sorts of questions is important. It is important because the answers help give our lives and experiences context, meaning, and purpose. It is important because just asking such questions can help grant perspective and remind us that life is bigger than any particular moment or experience. It is important because the process can help us identify “soul food” that connects, anchors, refreshes, orients, and encourages us. In the long run, all of this is essential for helping us cope with the challenges of humanitarian work and maintain positive vitality and energy.

We often pay more attention to our physical health than our spiritual health. However, it’s worth remembering that the root of the word “health” means “whole.” It’s not only the physical, mental, and emotional that are important – our spirituality is important too. And it may be impossible to go into humanitarian work and walk away unchanged on a core spiritual level.

Given this, it’s worth spending some time:
• Exploring how your beliefs and your work are interacting and shaping each other;
• Learning about common spiritual challenges and reactions; and
• Identifying concepts, tools, and practices that can help you thrive in the face of spiritual challenges.

This course is designed to help you do that, but before we start, let’s look at how we’ll approach this topic.

**How to approach this topic**

Most people believe that there’s something more to life than just their immediate physical existence and experiences. Yet it’s curious that something so basic to human nature is so hard to discuss. Perhaps there is nothing more personal than spirituality. The very word “spiritual” (along with many other words often paired with it – such as faith, truth, or religion) can make us uncomfortable and anxious. We can be afraid of being misunderstood or misunderstanding others.

If you’re using this course to help stimulate group discussion, it’s especially important to tread lightly. We will say more about how we define spirituality in the next chapter. For now, remember that spirituality is often a central part of someone’s identity – their core concepts of “who they are” as a person. Spirituality is unique, personal, and often quite private. When talking about this with others, be careful to be respectful and gentle – this topic is sacred ground for many people.

**What should you get out of this course?**

Here at the Institute we believe that spirituality is an important topic to explore. However, we don’t believe that there is any one right way to set about that exploration. This course is not designed to answer your spiritual or religious questions. To the contrary, we hope it will help you consider your answers to questions like:

• What is spirituality?
• Why is personal spirituality important to me as a humanitarian worker?
• How is my work impacting my spirituality, and vice versa?
• What are ways I can nurture my spirituality?

**How can you get the most out of this course?**

Don’t rush through this course. Make time to think carefully about the material and how it might apply to you and your family. In particular, take time to consider the questions in the To think about and discuss boxes (like the one below) before you read on.

**To think and discuss...**

• You will find these questions most helpful if you can either talk to others about your responses or write down your thoughts.
Other Headington Institute training resources

This is one of a series of training modules on stress and humanitarian work produced by the Headington Institute. Additional modules include:

- Understanding and coping with traumatic stress
- Trauma and critical incident care for humanitarian workers
- On the road again: Coping with travel and reentry stress
- Understanding and coping with vicarious trauma

Visit our Online Training Program to find these and other free resources provided by the Headington Institute.
PART ONE | What is spirituality?

“Spirituality is a way of living and a way of seeing life....Because spirituality is about authentic living as well as meaning-making, it is a highly personal reality.”

Speaking or writing about spirituality always scares and excites me at the same time. It scares me because this topic, especially in the context of work, is a minefield. People’s spirituality is closely tied to their core sense of who they are as a person. When you talk about spirituality you run a high risk of being misunderstood, or causing offense without meaning to. At the same time, talking about spirituality is exciting precisely because it is so important, and so powerful.

Humanitarian work is a profession that carries with it huge potential for spiritual disruption on the one hand and spiritual growth on the other. Yet this topic is rarely discussed openly because it’s so complicated and personal. This is a topic that deserves some attention and conversation, and a necessary place to start is by defining what we mean by “spirituality.”

Spirituality is a word that means many different things to different people. When I discuss this in a workshop, I usually ask the participants to help me construct a “concept map.” Using the diagram on the right, participants help us all understand what they mean by the word “spirituality.” Then, and only then, can we move on to discussing how our personal spirituality interacts with our work.

To think and discuss...

- Are you comfortable thinking about your own spirituality? Why or why not?
- What do you think of when you hear “spirituality”? Using the diagram above, sketch out your own concept map for the word “spirituality.”
- How do you define your own spirituality, or explain it to others?

There’s no quicker way to feel humbled than to try to define spirituality – just like “mental health,” it is a dynamic and evolving concept that varies across people and cultures. Here are a couple of definitions:

*Spirituality is a core component of human nature - most people believe that to be fully human involves more than just the physical dimensions of existence and our own individual experiences. Spirituality includes a sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith. This can be related to an explicit belief in God, a sense of connectedness with nature or a life force, or a clear set of values.*

*Spirituality is an individual's understanding of, experience with, and connection to that which transcends the self.*
Let’s look a bit more closely at a couple of points related to these definitions:

- **Spirituality is not religion:** Spirituality is related to a deeply held set of personal values and to meaning that extends beyond us as individuals. Religion is collective and institutional – a set of practices and rituals related to shared spiritual beliefs. For some people the two overlap. Others, however, may describe themselves as spiritual, but not at all religious.

- **Spirituality does not require a belief in God or a higher power:** One way to think about the core of spirituality is as “connection.” For some this involves connection to God. For others it might focus more on connection with friends, family, humankind, or nature.

- **Spirituality is not static:** Personal spirituality may “change and evolve through all life’s experiences, both positive and negative, to become something both meaningful and intensely personal.”

- **Spirituality has thinking, experiencing, and behaving aspects:** The “thinking” aspect of spirituality involves knowing what we believe, what we value, and why. It is related to thinking through tough questions and searching for meaning, purpose, and truth in life. The “experiencing” side of spirituality is related to feeling hope, love, connection, peace, and support (and, yes, sometimes also feelings linked to pain, doubt, and struggle). The “behaving” aspect of spirituality involves how what we do reflects our individual spiritual beliefs and inner spiritual state.

- **Spirituality adds value to life:** We feel our best when our body is healthy and rested and our mind is organized and at peace. But that is not necessarily enough. Most people, maybe all, also want to feel some sense of purpose, meaning, and connection linked to something bigger than themselves. Spirituality “adds value” to physical life. One professor talks about it this way:

  *Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things. This is true even when our questions never give way to specific answers or give rise to specific practices such as prayer or meditation. We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die. We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is “spiritual” when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life.*

To think and discuss...

- Do you agree or disagree with the five points listed above about spirituality? Are there any you feel particularly strongly about?

- Is your spirituality connected to and influenced by religion or belief in God or a higher power? If so, how?

- Which aspect of spirituality do you tend to feel strongest in or “lean towards” – thinking, experiencing, or behaving? How does that manifest in your life?

- What are some things that cause you to reflect on how your life fits into “the greater cosmic scheme of things?”
PART TWO | Spirituality – resource or risk?

Some people speak of feeling “called” to humanitarian work. Others talk about a “sense of mission” or “duty,” or say that they find humanitarian work to be “purposeful” or “meaningful.” All of these different phrases tell us that spiritual beliefs and ideals are important to many humanitarian workers. But they don’t tell us much about whether or how spirituality helps us cope better with the pressures of work and life. This chapter looks at some ways spirituality may be a resource to us, or a risk.

To think and discuss...

- Did spiritual beliefs or ideals influence your choice of career when you started in this line of work?
- If so, how?
- How did you express that to others?

Spirituality as a resource

History and research suggest that having a perspective on meaning and purpose that is larger than just our own wants and needs is good for our physical and mental health. Here are just a couple of findings:

- Many studies suggest that spiritual and/or religious practices (such as attending religious services, praying, and meditating) tend to be linked to lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, and depression. It appears that those who make spiritual and religious practice a regular part of their lives tend to have better immune functioning and live longer.

- One review of 850 studies conducted around the world reported that “higher levels of religious involvement are positively associated with indicators of psychological well-being (life satisfaction, happiness, positive effect, and higher morale) and with less depression, suicidal thoughts and behavior, and drug/alcohol use/abuse.”

Opinions vary widely on why and how spirituality and/or religion act as protective buffers against stress, but some or all of the following may be involved:

- **Beliefs:** What we believe influences how we interpret and deal with stress, suffering, and life’s problems. Some ways that spiritual or religious beliefs can promote health include generating meaning, purpose, peace, gratitude, hope, comfort, self-confidence, self-worth, and acceptance.

- **Spiritual or religious practices:** Practices such as meditation, prayer, and church attendance can help promote health by calming, centering, and connecting us. They can work against fear, frustration, anger, isolation, and despair.

- **Social support and connection:** Having relationships that provide safety, encouragement, belonging, intimacy, and support, is vital to health and well-being. Religious or spiritual groups can help provide these sorts of deep, enduring relationships.
**Healthy behaviors and lifestyle:** Spiritual/religious beliefs and values can prescribe health-promoting behaviors related to how we eat, drink, have sex, use drugs, relate to others, and rest.

**Spirituality as a risk**

However, as with many powerful and important aspects of life, spirituality and religion don’t always protect or promote physical and mental health. Here are just two ways that behavior linked to spirituality or religion may bring risks to health:

- Religious dogma has been used as motivation and justification for everything from “honor killings” to terrorist acts towards those who hold different beliefs.

- Visits to famous churches or holy shrines on specific times can greatly increase the risk of accidents (e.g., people have been crushed to death in crowds completing the Hajj – a pilgrimage to Mecca).

But behavior is not the only risk. More subtle are ways that spiritual or religious beliefs can make us less resilient in the face of challenge. Here are a couple of examples of this dynamic:

- In addition to things like hope, gratitude, and peace, beliefs linked to spirituality or religion may also bring guilt, doubt, anxiety, shame, depression, and self-loathing.

- Research suggests that a view of God as punishing or vindictive tends to be related to worse physical and psychological health. In one particularly relevant study, such a view of God was related to increased post-traumatic distress in short-term humanitarian aid workers.

- How flexible and open to change we are in our beliefs may also be important. Several psychologists who work with humanitarian workers have suggested that those with “rigidly-held beliefs” may be “particularly vulnerable to experiencing a fundamental shattering of their belief structure after traumatic experiences.” This dramatic change in belief structures is usually experienced as negative, at least in the short term. It can lead to loss of self-esteem, meaning, confidence, and hope.

**To think and discuss...**

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Whether spirituality functions more as a resource or a risk in your life is, in many ways, up to you.” Why?

- How is your spirituality a resource for you?

- How might it be a risk?
PART THREE | Is spiritual challenge inevitable?

“As a humanitarian worker I could only understand the dark forces of war as I lived through the fate of those I had come to help....My own inward search has been my relief. I could not have grown as a person without the experiences I encountered on the field. By witnessing the inhumanity of man, I have cultivated a desire to understand it so that I can defy it. We should be inspired to see our darkest experiences as tools that can shed light on our path towards a greater understanding of our ideals, our cause, and our duties... to transcend ourselves for the sake of others.”

— (Yasmin Sherif, on working in Bosnia) 12

If you are a humanitarian worker, experiencing significant spiritual challenge at some point is almost inevitable. Humanitarian workers witness life’s most inspiring and tragic moments, and a lot in between. You’ve probably seen inspiring glimpses of courage, dignity, kindness, perseverance, and generosity. You’ve probably also seen cruelty, greed, fear, and hate. Both extremes raise questions about meaning, purpose, and what inspires people in either direction.

Humanitarian work can test, strengthen, and sometimes shatter, ideals. It can help create a strong sense of camaraderie and shared purpose, or a sense of confusion, disillusionment, and isolation from God and others. It can both replenish and deplete your inner sense of passion and zest for life. But one thing is sure – it will act to change you in a continuous and ongoing process.

John Fawcett, a colleague who has spent decades supporting humanitarian workers, puts it this way: "There will come a time, if you pursue this career for long, when a profound lack of understanding will threaten to sweep away your actions, beliefs, achievements, and even reason for being. Knowing this challenge will come, and ensuring that there are close friends who can hear your questions without harming you, is...essential." 13

There are at least two important parts to John’s last sentence:

• **Knowing this challenge will come:** Your personal spirituality is possibly one of your most important and foundational resources. Having that foundation challenged can cause considerable turmoil and anguish. It is unlikely that we could ever completely escape spiritual challenge in life no matter how well prepared we were. However, expecting that we will be challenged and understanding the process better may help defuse some of the anxiety or despair that it can bring.

• **Ensuring there are close friends:** It is hard to overstate the importance of community. Investing in good relationships and interconnected communities is one of the best things you can do to help yourself cope well with the spiritual challenges of humanitarian work.
To think and discuss...

- What are some of the “extremes of human nature and behavior” (both good and bad) you have seen as a humanitarian worker?
- What helps you when you feel deeply challenged by experiences in work and life?

In the rest of this course we will look first in more detail at the nature of spiritual challenges. What’s involved in being challenged spiritually? What are common reactions to those challenges? What are some of the benefits of this process, and the costs?

Then, in the second half of the course we’ll focus on sources of soul food – spiritual practices and tools that can help you grapple with these challenges and engage your spirituality as a resource.
PART FOUR | Spiritual challenges

“Spiritual beliefs influence ways of coping with adversity, the experience of pain and suffering [and] what is labeled as a problem....Suffering, and often the injustice or senselessness of it, are ultimately spiritual issues.”

Very few people really believe that life is random and that what happens is entirely a product of chance. Believing life is random can lead people toward the conclusion that life is ultimately meaningless, and that what happens to us doesn’t matter to anyone but ourselves. There seems to be something within almost everyone that instinctively rebels against these notions. Human beings are a meaning-making species. We seem hardwired to search for meaning that extends beyond ourselves, to believe that it exists, and to yearn to understand it.

Inner maps of assumptions and beliefs

We all have a personal and internal “map” of assumptions and beliefs that we use to help guide us through life and interpret the landscape we see along the way. For example, here are some assumptions we might hold – consciously or unconsciously – until we are forced to examine whether they “work”:

- Life is comprehensible, predictable, and fair – what goes around, comes around.
- We are invulnerable to real tragedy – it won’t happen to us.
- We are basically good individuals – in tough times we won’t be selfish or cowardly.

Of course, we may only have the luxury of holding these types of assumptions if we grew up fairly privileged. Many people grow up in circumstances that could suggest almost the opposite assumptions.

Our beliefs about a supreme force or being also impact how we view the landscape of life. Here are some areas where beliefs are especially influential with regards to how we react to disaster, cruelty, and suffering:

- **The existence and nature of God or a life force**: Does God exist? Is God good? All-powerful? All-knowing? Trustworthy? Accessible?
- **The role of suffering**: Is suffering inevitable? Does it all have meaning and purpose? Can it be explained? Is it sometimes “caused” or just something that happens?
- **The existence of evil**: Does evil exist? If so, how do we think about it? As an impersonal “anti-life” force? More personally, as “the devil”? Some other way?

Our internal road map is made up of a network of values, assumptions, and beliefs. It helps us to make sense of the journey of life. It can influence everything from our rules for living to our expectations and decisions about the future. So, what happens when we end up in situations where our internal road map of assumptions and beliefs doesn’t match the terrain we see around us?
To think and discuss...

- What assumptions or beliefs have you found challenged since you started working in the humanitarian field? (Hint: Think about what moves you, upsets you, and enrages you. Emotional responses are clues to our assumptions and beliefs.)
- What assumptions or beliefs have you found strengthened?

Curves in the road

More than most careers, humanitarian work puts people in “challenging terrain.” It forces people into close quarters with disasters, violence, suffering, and moral dilemmas. In turn, these experiences can raise challenging questions. They can force us to examine our assumptions and beliefs about God and the way the world works. They can highlight our personal vulnerability and hard truths such as:

- Death and suffering are inevitable – happiness is not always possible;
- Life is not always comprehensible, predictable, or fair – bad things do happen to good people; and
- We do not always do good – right alongside acts of heroism and dignity there can be desperation, selfishness, and cruelty.

When our internal road map doesn’t match the landscape we see around us, it can be very troubling. It forces us to go back to our map, compare it to our experiences, and try to reconcile the two. Many humanitarian workers, even the nonreligious, experience at least one “crisis of faith” during their careers as their experiences raise spiritual questions related to:

- Their personal identity and purpose in life;
- The existence and identity of God or a transcendent power; and
- The existence and nature of meaning and purpose in relation to suffering, disasters, and other traumatic events.

To think and discuss...

Has humanitarian work put you in challenging terrain? How? Consider questions like:

- Have you experienced a “crisis of faith” during your career?
- What people or events were related to this?
- Was it sudden, or gradual?
- What spiritual issues or questions were raised?
- How did you react and change?
A drawing exercise: Sketch your spiritual journey

Sketch out your spiritual journey through life. Think about things like:

- Is the road you’re on right now straight, or curvy?
- What significant people, relationships, and events (positive and negative) have influenced your path?
- What has been related to hills, or curves in your road – or your “crises of faith”?
- What road signs or other landmarks have you found helpful along the way?
PART FIVE | Reactions to spiritual challenges

“My understanding of God has changed so much in the past ten years. Everything was so black and white when I was younger. Evil versus good and all that stuff. It’s a whole lot different for me now. For me, God is all about life, and life is good. It’s possible to see God almost everywhere, even in the camps. Sure they are miserable places, but if you look carefully you can see life and love, people genuinely trying to help each other.”

— (Grace, from Kenya, working in Somalia) 

If you are a humanitarian worker, you have chosen a path that will likely have more than a few curves in it. Among other things, these “curves in the road” might include traumatic events, not being able to live up to your own expectations or ideals, and tough decisions with life-and-death consequences for people.

Curves in the road can spark strong emotions. They can cause you to question your deepest assumptions and beliefs about the way the world works and your identity and place in it. In that sense they are spiritual challenges.

So, what happens when we hit curves in the road of life? Every person and situation is different. Our specific reaction will depend on many things, including:

• What happened;
• What it meant to us;
• Our personal history; and
• What else is going on in our lives.

There are, however, some fairly common types of emotional and spiritual reactions to curves in the road, and it’s important to understand these. Becoming more conscious of our own reactions to challenging situations or events can, over time and if we want to, enable us to choose to respond differently.

Here are three common types of reaction to curves in the road of life:

Resist: Resistance might include denial, a refusal to accept the situation, and avoidance. You might feel disbelief, betrayal, anger, and energy.

Surrender: This can include letting go, not trying to control things, fatalism, total acceptance that can look like passivity to outsiders. You might feel apathy, fatigue, disengagement, helplessness, or freedom.

Transform: This can include seeking to understand and identify purpose and meaning, to “redeem” positively transform the event or situation. You might feel a variety of feelings – from confusion to peace – along the way.
To think and discuss...

Think of a curve in the road that you have experienced as a humanitarian worker.

- What was it?
- What was your initial reaction?
- How did that reaction hurt you?
- Did your reactions change over time? If so, how?

There is no single right reaction to a curve in the road. Each type of reaction can bring both benefits and pitfalls. For example, the anger that can come with resistance may inspire you to mobilize energy to change things. Denial or avoidance can temporarily protect you from feeling overwhelmed or paralyzed. In general, however, while resistance and surrender can be effective short-term coping strategies, they often prove less helpful over time.

To think and discuss...

- What do you see as the benefits and pitfalls of each of the types of reactions discussed above (resist, surrender, and transform)?

When confronted with a curve in the road, most people have an initial tendency toward either resistance or surrender. Transformation comes later, if at all. But these types of reactions are also not entirely separate categories. Many people also cycle in and out of all of these reactions at various times – sometimes in relation to the same event.

For example, in the months after being assaulted, someone may experience all of the following types of reactions at different times, sometimes more than once:

- Surrender (e.g., feeling helpless and vulnerable, or abandoned by God);
- Resistance (e.g., feeling anger at God); and
- Transformation (e.g., identifying some meaning in the event, or unanticipated “silver linings”).

To think and discuss...

- When confronted with curves in the road, which type of reaction do you tend to experience most frequently?
- What can cause (or help) you move from one type of reaction to another?
PART SIX | Benefits and costs of spiritual challenges

“As the body count multiplied, I tried to ignore the physical, emotional and mental toll such work had begun to extract from me….I woke up one morning to discover I had lost my religious faith, as if it was a suitcase left behind in a distant airport..”

— (Neely Tucker, in Zimbabwe) 16

“I really think I didn’t have post-traumatic stress or even burnout because of this, because of my relationships and passion for the work. It was tiring and dangerous, but the feedback of knowing we’d made a difference even in one person’s life was so satisfying.”

— (Maria Blaque-Belair, working in Bosnia) 17

This process of spiritual challenge can bring both benefits and costs.

Benefits

In many spiritual traditions suffering is seen as the doorway to awakening, and awakening is seen as a good thing. Many humanitarian workers feel that what they’ve experienced during their careers has matured and stretched them. Some of the things I’ve heard mentioned as gains from tough times include:

• A broader perspective on the world;
• A clearer sense of what’s important in life;
• Stronger relationships and a closer sense of connection with others and/or God;
• Gratitude for blessings;
• A renewed appreciation for life;
• A new understanding of personal strengths and purpose in life.

Costs

On the other hand, “being stretched” implies being pushed out of your comfort zone. This is a process that is, by definition, uncomfortable! Many humanitarian workers – often the same ones who can identify the positives in their experiences – also speak of times when they have:
• Wrestled deeply with troubling and persistent questions;
• Felt “dulled” in their spirit – that the creative, joyful part of themselves had stopped working;
• Felt completely overwhelmed, hopeless, and despairing;
• Felt cut off from God or others, and that they were having trouble expressing themselves or understanding others;
• Felt as if God was punishing them, or had abandoned them; or
• Felt they had generally lost their sense of meaning, purpose, and faith.

To think and discuss...

What are some of the spiritual benefits and costs of your career?

• What has your work “given” you?
• What has it “cost” you?
PART SEVEN | Soul food

“Sometimes people get the mistaken notion that spirituality is a separate department of life, the penthouse of existence. But rightly understood, it is a vital awareness that pervades all realms of our being...”

— (David Steindl-Rast) 18

We all know that taking care of ourselves physically is important. If we don’t, we eventually end up exhausted, out of shape, and sick. This then impacts other areas of life – how we sleep, how happy we feel, how well we do our work, and whether we even like our jobs (or our friends and family!).

Spirituality is the same way. Just as it’s important to monitor our physical health, it’s important to pay attention to our spiritual well-being. Somewhat to my disappointment, no one has yet found a way to stay physically healthy without eating decent food and doing some exercise. This is also true for spirituality. “Soul food” and an “active spirituality” help us care for our spiritual well-being. They help us better deal with the pressures of the present and strengthen our capacity to deal with the pressures of the future.

This is particularly important for humanitarian workers. If you undertake humanitarian work for long, your spiritual self will be challenged. The way you see the divine, the world, and yourself will change. What grounds and refreshes you might shift. It is important that you pay attention to this process, and identify and connect with soul food that nourishes you.

Soul Food

What counts as soul food varies from person to person. We all think, react, and respond somewhat differently, and will be fed and refreshed by different disciplines and experiences. But, in general: soul food is in line with our deepest sense of meaning and purpose. It tends to connect with us in ways that inspire or move us beyond simple appreciation of the action or the object.

Here are some examples of different sources of soul food:

- Clarifying how your spirituality is related to the values that underpin your ideas and actions regarding morality, personal growth, and service to others;
- Thinking through questions of meaning and purpose and belief;
- Being moved by beauty and other things that stir and inspire you; and
- Seeking out things that make you feel whole, alive, joyful, refreshed, and connected with something beyond yourself.
Thinking and sensing

There are at least two aspects to soul food, thinking and sensing. It’s important for both to be present in our spiritual lives.

Soul food is not just all about thinking, for example. We can intellectualize our spirituality by focusing on how we interpret and understand issues of meaning and purpose. However, the richest experience of spirituality is more than that; it is also sensing and feeling. It is having some heart in your experience of spirituality, not just all head.

Nourishing and demanding

Some soul food can nourish or refresh without demanding too much in return. Examples of this might be the following:

- Spending time outdoors;
- Reading inspirational books or poetry;
- Listening to music;
- Seeing art that moves you; or
- Hearing a great speaker.

Some soul food or spiritual practices, however, can be experienced as renewing and demanding at the same time. Common examples might be:

- Meditating;
- Praying;
- Reflecting on your values;
- Being a part of a small group focused on spiritual study;
- Discussing issues of meaning and purpose with others; and
- Undertaking creative disciplines such as painting, composing, writing, or dancing.

To think and discuss...

- What was soul food for you when you were twenty?
- What about now?
- Is what feeds you spiritually now generally more connected with thinking (e.g., understanding what you value and why) or sensing (e.g., being moved by beauty)?
- What is one type of soul food you find both nourishing and demanding? How?
“Wherever we may come alive, that is the area in which we are spiritual.”

—(David Steindl-Rast) 19

Another way to think about soul food is by asking: How do you generally tend to approach and relate to the divine in your life?

In his book *Sacred Pathways*, Gary Thomas talks about 9 ways that people tend to connect with the sacred. 20 Thomas believes that just as people have different personalities, they have different spiritual temperaments (ways of connecting with the divine that come most naturally). He believes that every person has at least one spiritual temperament, most have several, and that a person’s spiritual temperament can gradually change over time.

Take a look at the nine pathways that Thomas talks about:

1. **Naturalists**: Love the sacred out of doors. Most inspired to experience the presence of the divine outside, in a natural setting.

2. **Sensates**: Love the sacred with the senses. Inspired to experience the divine by the sights, sounds, and smells associated with the ceremonial, majestic, grand, and beautiful.

3. **Traditionalists**: Love the sacred through ritual and symbol. Moved by rituals and structure, symbols, and sacraments. For the religious these are often associated with liturgies, and celebrations such as Easter or Idul Fitri.

4. **Ascetics**: Love the sacred in solitude and simplicity. Can find too much sensation (e.g., pictures, music) distracting. Frequently drawn to the rhythm of spiritual disciplines associated with silence, prayer, and meditation. Often desire to simplify their lives.

5. **Activists**: Love the sacred through confrontation. Tend to adopt and fight for causes they strongly believe in (e.g., church reform, or battling poverty and injustice). More energized by interaction with others, even in conflict, than by being alone.

6. **Caregivers**: Love the sacred by loving others. Feel closest to the sacred when serving others by loving them and meeting their needs.

7. **Enthusiasts**: Love the sacred with mystery and celebration. Inspired by joyful celebration. Don’t want to just know concepts but to be moved by excitement and awe. Often open to supernatural workings and mystery in their lives through things like dreams, visions, and seeming coincidences.

8. **Contemplatives**: Love the sacred through adoration. Value privacy and time alone, and seek a deep, vibrant connection with the sacred. Often describe their relationship with the divine as an intimate connection, a heartfelt friendship, or a love relationship.

9. **Intellectuals**: Connect with the sacred through the mind. These thinkers live in the world of concepts. Love to study and debate tough questions, scriptural texts, and learn new things.
To think and discuss...

Think about the ways you naturally connect to the sacred and rejuvenate that part of you that’s hopeful, energized, and compassionate.

- What are your three main spiritual temperaments?
- What types of soul food are associated with these spiritual temperaments for you?

Looking forward

The first half of this course has looked at some ways to think and talk about spirituality, spiritual challenges, and soul food.

The next half of this course looks first at two topics foundational to personal spirituality – values and purpose. If our values point to how we want to live life, purpose is why we want to live that way. If we clearly understand what we value and where we find purpose, we are better placed to make decisions about many things in life, including how best to care for ourselves spiritually.

Finally, we will look at several issues related to spiritual discipline and practice with which humanitarian workers often struggle – ritual, quiet, balance, and community.

In each chapter we’ll discuss some things to think about and suggest some questions or exercises to try.
PART NINE | Values

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”
— (Socrates 469-399 B.C.)

Whether we are conscious of them or not, all of us have a set of core values. These values are the things that matter most to us. They inform our ideas about what is “best” and “right” and what is worth spending our time and energy on. They strongly influence how we react to things, events, and people – what makes us satisfied or angry.

It is important to know our core values. These values are spiritual touchstones. They can serve as guides in decision making, and as anchors or lighthouses during times of darkness and struggle.

Clarifying our values

Knowing what we value, and living according to that, is one of the most powerful ways to increase our happiness and peace and decrease stress.

Take some time to explore your values by completing the exercises below. The questions in these exercises are not easy ones – they go to the heart of who we are, and who we want to be. Be patient and don’t try to answer them all at once. You may want to make some notes and return to them repeatedly over time.

To think and discuss...

- List ten things that have brought you great joy (e.g., single events, things you do regularly, or things you used to do). What was it about these experiences that helped make them so special? (This can help you understand deep values and desires in life.)
- List ten things that make you annoyed or upset. What is it about these experiences or actions that push your emotional buttons? (Emotional reactions are clues to values.)
- Jump ahead to the end of your life. What are the three most important lessons you have learned and why are they so critical?
- Think of someone you deeply respect. What are three qualities in this person that you most admire?
- Who are you at your best?
- What would you have engraved on your tombstone that would capture who you were in your life?
Core and supporting values

Values can range from the relatively concrete (e.g., belief in hard work) to the more abstract (e.g., responsibility or independence).

Below is a list of some commonly held values. Look at this list and think about your answers to the questions in the last exercise. Add any other values you consider important to this table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accuracy</th>
<th>Efficiency</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Pleasure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
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<td>Authenticity</td>
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<td>Balance</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
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<td>Commitment</td>
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<td>Community</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Service to others</td>
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<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Generosity</td>
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<td>Connection</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Openness</td>
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<td>Courage</td>
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<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Hard work</td>
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To think and discuss...

- Which three to five values are your most important core values – the handful of values that are central to who you are?
- Which five additional values support your core values?
Values in action

“Values are like fingerprints. Nobody's are the same, but you leave ’em all over everything you do.”

— (Elvis Presley) 22

Being able to identify what you value most is just the first step in an important process. A value is just a nice-sounding principle we admire unless we put it into action. Our values must influence our choices about where we are going in life and how we act along the way. If they don’t, they are ultimately meaningless.

To think and discuss...

What does it mean to live according to your values? Think about how your personal values are represented in your choices, actions, or possessions. Now, for each of the values you have listed, write a couple of sentences about what each value means to you.

Keep in mind the following:

• Use positive statements: For example, if health is one of your core values, you might write something like “I eat food that is good for my body, I exercise regularly, and I sleep for at least seven and a half hours a night.” Using positive statements instead of negative ones (e.g., “I don’t eat bad food, I don’t go through the day without exercising . . .”) will help you picture what something looks like in action.

• Use “I” in your statements.

• Use the present tense, as if it is currently happening.

Values in conflict

Figuring out what we value most and how that should guide our behavior is not always simple and easy. Sometimes we value things that can compete with one another. Some classic value conflicts are:

• Excellence at work versus leisure or time spent with family

• Freedom versus responsibility

• Romantic love versus duty to family

Here are some examples of value conflicts that humanitarian workers may experience.

The value of “commitment” or “hard work” versus “health”

Whether these values come into conflict will depend on what commitment and hard work mean to you, of course. However, it is not uncommon for humanitarian workers to find themselves in situations of overwhelming and seemingly endless need. In these situations, if you define commitment as “working until the need is met,” you will risk driving yourself to the point of depleting your personal resources and risking your health.
“Justice” versus “service to others”

Similarly, whether these values come into conflict will depend on how you define them. But sometimes the opportunity to help some people (by providing resources, medical aid, or protection) means giving up the chance to see others punished for terrible crimes. It may even mean providing similar assistance to those who have committed such crimes.

To think and discuss...

Do you have any values that compete for priority with one another? If so:

• Which values?
• How are they in conflict?
• How do you generally resolve this conflict?
• How do you feel about that?

Values and purpose

To be meaningful, a value must inform our sense of purpose and influence our behavior.

Taking the time to connect regularly with our deepest values and holding ourselves accountable to them can be uncomfortable, time consuming, and taxing! But understanding our values and living as best we can in accordance with them is important. It can help create a stable spiritual center in our life and unlock the energy of inspiration that comes with a clear sense of purpose.

“Deeply held values fuel the energy on which purpose is built. They define an enduring code of conduct – the rules of engagement in the journey to bring our vision for ourselves to life.”
“The purpose of life is to live a life of purpose.”

— (Richard Leider) 24

If values are the code of conduct – the how we want to live life – then purpose is the why. Everyone wants their life to count for something, and success in terms of money and status usually isn’t enough to satisfy us. We all seem hardwired to want that other “S” as well – significance. We want the significance of feeling that our life is making a difference in ways that endure and matter.

Everyone is unique, and a clear sense of purpose or mission in life is something everyone must discover for themselves. However our sense of purpose in life tends to be most compelling and life affirming when we are:

- Doing what we love (and loving what we do) for positive reasons;
- Using our talents and abilities;
- Living authentically according to our values; and
- Using all of this to serve a cause beyond our immediate self-interest.

To think and discuss...

- What gives you a sense of purpose in life?
- Is the life you’re living worth what you’re giving up to have it?

Doing what you love for positive reasons

It’s not just enough to be doing something we want to be doing – it’s better if we’re doing it for positive reasons. Motivations do matter!

This issue of motivation – why we do what we do or want what we want – is rarely simple. Mixed motivations are a reality. They are also not necessarily a bad thing. But here are two aspects of motivation that research suggests are generally linked to a healthier sense of purpose.

Positive motivation

It’s better for mood, energy levels, and productivity if our sense of purpose comes from positive motivations rather than negative ones. Positive motivation can be loosely defined as being drawn to move towards, rather than away from, something.

For example, we will probably feel happier and more passionate about work if we’re motivated to work hard primarily because we value excellence for its own sake, rather than because we fear mistakes or failure. Being driven by a constant fear of failure is stressful and exhausting. It discourages creativity and saps joy.
**Internal motivation**

It is also better for us to do things primarily because we want to, rather than because we're trying to get something like approval, love, money, or power, that we don't have. Over time, external reward or demand just doesn't seem to work as a compelling sense of purpose.

This is particularly clear regarding money. Acute need can undoubtedly provide a compelling sense of purpose in life – survival. However, once we have enough money to feed, clothe, and house ourselves, research suggests that there is almost no correlation between income levels and happiness. At this point, money really doesn't buy happiness or a compelling sense of purpose.

**To think and discuss...**

- What would you do for free if money were of no concern?
- Why do you do your job? Do you primarily have positive and internal motivations, or not? If not, what are you motivated by?
- Are you generally better at being more positively motivated, or internally motivated?

**Using your talents and abilities**

"A really great talent finds its happiness in execution."

— (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) 25

We all have some things we’re much better at doing than others. Often, people talk about their talents and abilities as “gifts” and see them as clues to finding their purpose in life. Generally, we feel more purposeful and motivated if we’re using our gifts and doing things we are good at.

**To think and discuss...**

- What are three of your talents, abilities, or gifts?
- How do you get to use these in your work?
- What about outside of work?
Live according to your values

“We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly.”

— (Aristotle) 26

Values have intrinsic worth. They provide a source of inspiration, meaning, and guidance independent of what is happening around you, or to you. They help you make decisions during times of uncertainty. They are a mirror that allows you to check whether you’re on track and heading in the direction you want to be heading.

It is important to know your values and intentionally seek to live by them. This can bring a sense of purpose and assurance even during times of hardship and struggle.

To think and discuss...

Think about the values you identified as important to you in the last chapter:

- How closely does your everyday behavior match your values?
- Where are your values and behavior generally aligned?
- Where are the disconnects?

Serving a cause beyond immediate self-interest

“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

— (Albert Schweitzer) 27

When it comes to staying balanced and healthy, many humanitarian workers need to be encouraged first and foremost to pay some attention to their own needs and wants. But there is another side to that coin. A focus that’s exclusively on us will never yield true joy or peace. Instead it will breed loneliness, and spiritual and emotional poverty.

It is a paradox – we best refill our own cup of contentment and joy when part of the effort goes towards pouring out some for others. Those who give to others set in motion a cycle of blessing that often includes feelings of satisfaction, fulfillment, and a clear sense of purpose.
To think and discuss...

- How does your job enable you to serve or assist others?
- How do you serve a cause beyond immediate self-interest outside of your work?
- How does serving a cause beyond immediate self-interest contribute to your sense of purpose in life?

“It is not necessarily the nature of the job that determines how meaningful and motivating it is. The challenge we all face is to find ways to use the workplace as a forum in which to express and embody our deepest values. We can derive a sense of purpose, for example, from mentoring others, or being a part of a cohesive team, or simply from a commitment to treating others with respect and care and from communicating positive energy. The real measure of our lives may ultimately be in the small choices we make in each and every moment.” 28

To think and discuss...

Think about the aspects of purpose discussed above:

- Doing what you love for positive reasons
- Using your talents and abilities
- Living authentically according to your values
- Using all of this to serve a cause beyond your immediate self-interest
  - Which of these do you think you are strongest in at present?
  - What about weakest?
  - Are there important aspects of purpose we haven’t mentioned?
  - What are some ways you could build a stronger sense of purpose in your life?
Things to do

Looking to develop a clearer sense of purpose? In the next month try one or two of the following:

- Answer the reflection questions in this chapter.
- Discuss some of these questions with someone close to you.
- Think about your spiritual temperament (see chapter 9). Do something twice a week that makes you feel close to the sacred.
- Figure out something that you love doing for its own sake (positive and internal motivation). Set aside some time to do this once or twice a week.
- Where do your important values and your behavior not line up? Identify some things you could do that would bring your behavior more in line with your values. Do these things.
- Figure out an additional way to serve others (from volunteering at a local homeless shelter to washing the dishes for your spouse every day). Practice this service all month.

In the last two chapters we’ve focused on values and purpose. These are issues foundational to how and what you think about your spirituality. In the next couple of chapters we’ll look more closely at a couple of issues relevant to how you practice your spirituality – ritual, quiet, balance, and community.
PART ELEVEN | Ritual and Habit.

Spiritual rituals are things we do regularly that help us remember the sacredness of life. They can help:

- Clear and focus our minds;
- Bring comfort and tranquility;
- Shift our perspective;
- Ground us in the moment and ourselves, while at the same time reminding us that this moment is part of the larger, ongoing story of our lives; and
- Intensify the feeling of connectedness to ourselves, others, nature, the divine, and to the cycles and rhythms of life.

Anything can become a spiritual ritual – it depends on the meaning and significance you attach to it and the attention you bring to it. Sometimes spiritual rituals are connected to religious rituals. Some examples include the Muslim call to prayer, the Buddhist practice of visualization, the Christian practices of communion and mass, or the Native American giveaway ceremonies. But many people also make spiritual rituals out of activities like a morning cup of coffee, driving to work, sharing a meal with family, and reading stories to children.

Why should humanitarian workers care about spiritual rituals? Well, for starters, ritual itself plays a powerful role in our life.

The power of habit

“First we make our habits, then our habits make us.”

— (Charles C. Noble) 29

We all have many habitual rituals in our lives. Think about how you get ready in the mornings, prepare breakfast, and travel to work. You generally won’t forget to brush your teeth, put on clothes, and eat breakfast. You probably don’t have to pay a lot of attention to finding your way to work.

Now, think about how much more time, energy, and attention it takes to accomplish these morning tasks when you are away from home and out of routine.

Habits are things we do automatically, without having to consciously remind ourselves to do them. Research suggests that the more habitual we make certain behaviors, the more likely we are to do them. This is even truer when we’re stressed. The more stressed we get, the more we engage in habitual behavior (whether that is, for example, exercising or sitting on the couch eating chocolate). 30

Habit and humanitarian work

The power of habit plays out in many different areas – including what we eat and how we generally exercise, sleep, and relate to others. But that’s not all. The power of habit is also at play when it comes to our spiritual lives.
Humanitarian workers often have jobs that bring a lot of challenge and change, but not much rhythm and routine. This is particularly true for people on short-term contracts and those who move or change jobs frequently. If this describes you, it’s especially important to be intentional about establishing positive rituals in your life. This is true when it comes to making positive physical health habits, like brushing your teeth, part of your daily routine. It is equally true of positive spiritual habits.

**To think and discuss...**

- What are some spiritual rituals in your life?
- Why are they important to you? What do they give you?
- What do you turn to during times of stress and pressure? Is this the same, or different, from spiritual rituals you value during other times?

**Spiritual rituals and the paradox of habit**

Habit can be a powerful force in our lives – for good or bad. And spiritual rituals or habits can be centering and grounding, particularly during times of pressure and challenge. But there is also a paradox here.

We are more likely to do something if it’s habitual. Think again about that example of brushing our teeth. But here is where the metaphor fails. Brushing our teeth is good for us even if we don’t pay attention to what we’re doing while we’re doing it. The same may not be true for a spiritual ritual. Spiritual rituals tend to be most nourishing if we bring some awareness, focus, and attention to the action or the moment.

Yet habits become habits precisely when the actions become more unconscious and demand less attention from us. Precisely at the point our spiritual rituals become habitual, they may lose some of their power.

Is there a way to strike a balance between having some meaningful spiritual rituals in our lives, and revising them frequently enough to keep them engaging and meaningful?

**To think and discuss...**

- What do you think about the idea that “spiritual rituals tend to be most nourishing if we bring some awareness, focus and attention to the action or the moment”? Is that true for you?
- Do you feel the need to regularly revisit and change your spiritual rituals? Why, or why not?

Like other aspects of self-care, it’s important to build spiritual rituals and practices into our lives when we’re not under extraordinary pressure. The more desperate things are, the more likely we are to enter “survival mode.” When we are in survival mode we get more reactive, and our established rhythms and rituals become even more important.
Things to do

Looking to develop some spiritual rituals? In the next month try one or two of the following:

• Answer the reflection questions in this chapter.

• Discuss some of these questions with someone close to you.

• Imagine an average day and make a list of existing rituals and habits in your life. Is there a way to use one of these existing rituals (e.g., a morning shower) as a springboard to develop an additional ritual (e.g., meditating or praying while in the shower)?

• Identify a practice that you would like see become a spiritual ritual in your life (or think about an existing spiritual ritual you wish to reinforce). Now, set goals. Write down a plan for how you intend to practice that spiritual ritual in the next month.

In the next couple of chapters we will look at two more foundational aspects of spiritual practice – quiet and balance.
PART TWELVE | Quiet

“So long as we skim across the surface of our lives at high speeds, it is impossible to dig down more deeply. People cannot move horizontally and vertically at the same time. . . . It is no coincidence that every enduring spiritual tradition has emphasized practices such as prayer, retreat, contemplation, and meditation – all a means by which to quietly connect with and regularly revisit what matters most.” 31

Humanitarian work is not a profession well known for a slow, stable, measured pace of work. Humanitarian workers focus on meeting human need and relieving suffering. The immediate urgency of this mission brings with it intensity.

This intensity and the dynamic of the humanitarian industry – an industry that often favors short-term contracts over more extended investments – breeds pressure related to time and resources. Humanitarian workers often feel that no matter how hard or long they work, they will never be able to complete their ultimate mission.

This work can seem never ending, precisely because it is never ending. Two thousand years ago Jesus said that the poor would always be with us. Unfortunately, that statement remains true today and for the foreseeable future. Given all of this, humanitarian workers must be intentional about caring for themselves in the face of a need that can seem endless and overwhelming. If they don’t, then over time they are likely to end up feeling hopeless, paralyzed, exhausted, or burned out.

We have already touched on many topics in this course – clarifying assumptions and beliefs, understanding our values and purpose, prayer, meditation, creativity, and other spiritual disciplines and rituals. These all take time – quiet, uninterrupted time.

It can seem grossly self-indulgent to humanitarian workers (particularly those in disaster settings) to carve out personal time in the face of urgent need and the demands of a fast-paced job. Sometimes it’s genuinely impossible to do this. However, if you feel you can never take time to be quiet, to center, to connect spiritually, then that is a choice that you are making about what to prioritize in your life. It is not something that life is doing to you.

Which of your rituals and habits help create quiet space? Take time regularly to cultivate quiet in your life. This is foundational to spiritual self-care and it will pay dividends in the long run – for you and for others.

“Only in quiet waters do things mirror themselves undistorted. Only in a quiet mind is adequate perception of the world.”

— (Hans Margolius) 32
Things to do

Looking to cultivate quiet? In the next month try the following:

• Answer the following questions:
  - How and when do you experience quiet in your life?
  - What choices do you make that help cultivate quiet?
  - What sort of quiet refreshes and restores you?
  - Is that the same or different from a quiet that helps you “dig down” into your life and ask and answer tough questions?

• Ask these questions of someone close to you and discuss your respective answer

• Identify one way to build quiet into your life. This could be related to many different spiritual disciplines – prayer, spending time outdoors, writing, meditating, practicing yoga, etc. (It doesn’t have to be complicated or fancy. One of my friends practices quiet by turning off the radio while driving. Another meditates in the closet of their office for 15 minutes during lunch.) Pick something that may work for you and commit to doing that every day for a month.
Balance is something we instinctively feel we need in many different areas of life. We know we need a balance between activity and rest, for example. Even champion bodybuilders need rest – this is the time when muscles that have been challenged by exercise do their growing so that they’re stronger to meet the next challenge. Like so many other areas, we also need to seek a healthy balance spiritually.

**Breathing in and breathing out**
The process of breathing is a living metaphor for the importance of rhythm and balance. We don’t often stop to think about it, but we all know that within our physical lives we have to both breathe in and breathe out to live. The same is true for our spiritual life. The English word “spirit” even comes from the Latin word *spiritus,* meaning “breath.” Just like breathing, we must take in and give out to stay healthy and vital spiritually.

This metaphor does have its limits, though. It’s not quite as simple as figuring out what counts as spiritual “breathing out” versus spiritual “breathing in,” then making sure we do some of both. Physically, it’s impossible to breathe in and breathe out at the same time. That’s not true when it comes to “spiritual breathing.”

**Spiritual work and spiritual renewal**
Many contemplative traditions talk about spiritual work or spiritual practice. This involves giving out or spending energy in some way, such as serving others. They also talk about spiritual renewal, which involves feeling refreshed, inspired, or reconnected to our deepest sense of purpose and meaning.

We could compare spiritual work to breathing out and spiritual renewal to breathing in. However, unlike physical breathing, these two aspects of spiritual breathing can be deeply intertwined and often occur at the same time.

For example, many different aspects of humanitarian work can involve considerable sacrifice of your time, energy, wants, and even needs, to help others (breathing out). But this very process can also be a rich source of emotional and spiritual renewal – providing a profound sense of meaning and satisfaction (breathing in).

Many humanitarian workers, however, come to depend on this work-related sense of meaning and satisfaction as their main (or only) source of spiritual renewal.

It is ultimately unhealthy to depend solely on work for a sense of personal identity or purpose. Similarly, it’s not a good long-term strategy to depend on the sense of meaning you find in your work as your only source of spiritual renewal. Over time, humanitarian work will demand more from you than it will give to you if you are not also supplementing your spiritual oxygen in other ways.

To think and discuss...

- What is spiritual work or practice for you?
- Where does your sense of spiritual renewal come from?
- How do you balance breathing in and breathing out spiritually?
- Which of these comes least naturally to you?
Spiritual balance

We’ve just touched on the idea that you will experience some activities more as “taking in” and others more as “giving out.” These two areas are often tangled up together. It’s important to check in with yourself regularly regarding the balance between the two.

Here are two other important areas to think about when you’re considering balance:

- **Solitary and communal:** Everyone is different. Some people most enjoy time spent with others. Some really love spending time alone. Whatever your natural preference, you will probably find that your fullest experience of spirituality comes from spending some time alone and some time in community.

- **Being and doing:** Doing tends to come more naturally than being to most humanitarian workers I know. Yet your body and spirit will be healthier if you find ways to spend some time being, as well as doing. This doesn’t have to mean you spend a day each week lying in a hammock. One way to approach this is to find ways to remind yourself to pay more attention to your experience of tasks while you’re doing them – to learn to get better at being and doing simultaneously. This is often referred to as mindfulness.

This notion of balance doesn’t mean that you’ll be most “spiritually healthy” only if you can achieve perfect balance (e.g., spending half your time in community and the other half by yourself). That sort of balance is rarely possible in life (at least not for very long), and a 50/50 split like that might not suit you anyway.

The point is to:

- Know your own tendencies when it comes to getting out of balance;
- Find a range that you know generally works for you; and
- Check in with yourself regularly on this issue.

“Spiritual energy is sustained by balancing a commitment to others with adequate self-care. Put another way, the capacity to live by our deepest values depends on regularly renewing our spirit – seeking ways to rest and rejuvenate and to reconnect with the values that we find most inspiring and meaningful.”

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Things to do

Looking to cultivate quiet? In the next month try one or two of the following:

• Complete the following statement five different ways: “I sometimes find it difficult to balance ________ with ________.”

• Answer the following questions:
  - What is one area that you are generally good at balancing? How important is it to you spiritually to stay balanced in this area?
  - What are the areas of life you find it most easy to get “out of balance”? How does that impact your spiritual life?

• Ask these questions of someone close to you and discuss your respective answers.

• Do you spend more time alone, or with others? Identify a solitary or communal practice you would like to spend more time doing. Commit to doing this twice a week for a month.

• Are you better at being, or doing? Identify something that engages whichever you are less familiar with. Commit to doing this twice a week for a month.
“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

— (Jane Howard) 34

Think about some of your most cherished memories – the ones that leave you smiling and feeling warm. I’d bet most of them involve people important to you. We human beings just aren’t designed to conquer life on our own.

There is no magic cure-all that guarantees we will thrive in life – physically, spiritually, or emotionally. However, having what researchers call “good social support” seems to be about as close as we can come. Some researchers have gone so far as to say “strong relationships afford the best protection in stressful and traumatic environments. . . . It may well be our relationships that save us, rather than our knowledge and skills. Above all other factors, we seem to be dependent upon the strength and nature of our relationships.” 35

The relationships that help us cope most effectively with the challenges of life go beyond “acquaintance,” and perhaps even “friendship.” These sorts of relationships live in the realm of “community.”

What is community?

Communities involve people who you know well, and with whom you remain in regular communication. It is even better if the people in your community know each other. Community goes even further than this, though. Community involves being connected to people with a sense of shared commitment. Families (at their best) are a good example of a community.

In addition to commitment, here are some other important things to look for and promote in healthy communities:

• Sharing of thoughts, experiences, stories, and feelings;

• Relationships that endure and last over time;

• Relationships that involve both give and take in terms of practical and emotional support; and

• Acceptance and support of other members in the community. (Acceptance does not mean that community members never question each other’s behavior or ideas. However, it does mean that people are valued, respected, and supported as individuals.)
To think and discuss...

- Who do you turn to for support when things get difficult in life?
- What communities are you involved in? (You may want to draw a diagram mapping out these communities and the individuals in them.)
- How is your involvement in community connected to your spirituality and spiritual practices?
- Many religious rituals take place in community (e.g., communion, liturgical prayer, and services at churches, mosques, and temples). Which, if any, communal religious activities do you find meaningful?

Community at risk

Many religious traditions emphasize the fundamental importance of community involvement as a spiritual discipline. And many people, from a great variety of spiritual and religious traditions, have concluded that relationships are essentially the main point of life.

At its core, humanitarian work is about working to meet the needs of other people in the global human community. It is a sad irony then that one of the risks for career humanitarian workers is the eroding of their own personal communities.

Maintaining deep friendships and community relationships can be challenging for humanitarian workers for multiple reasons – both external and internal. Some of these reasons include:

- Frequent work-related travel makes it difficult to schedule social outings and stay consistently connected with people “back home.”
- Relocations for work (nationally or internationally) mean starting from the beginning in making new friends and connecting to local communities. After multiple moves this process can eventually get so exhausting it’s tempting not to bother trying to form new relationships.
- High turnover in many humanitarian organizations leads to a constantly changing cast of colleagues. This makes continuity in professional relationship challenging.
- Many humanitarian workers feel unable to fully share things they have seen or experienced with others (particularly non-humanitarian workers). Some reasons for this include feeling:
  - They cannot adequately convey their experiences;
  - Others won’t understand them; and/or
  - They want to shield other people from the pain they have witnessed.
- Along similar lines, humanitarian workers can find it challenging to connect with those who do not work in similar fields. In comparison to the intensity of their own experiences, the things others are interested in can seem mundane or even trivial.
Humanitarian work often brings spiritual challenges, including troubling questions and doubts about the divine or other important assumptions and beliefs. It can be difficult to address such questions and doubts within some communities. As a result, individuals can feel isolated and increasingly distant from communities that previously felt familiar, safe, and nurturing.

To think and discuss...

How have your experiences as a humanitarian worker impacted your involvement in communities that are important to you?

When we have a lot to do, it can be easy to let spending time with other people fall to the bottom of our to-do list. Don’t do it. That’s letting the urgent crowd out the truly important. We need friendship and companionship in life.

The good news is that we can find or form community in many different places. Religious or spiritual communities, such as small groups of people meeting to practice shared beliefs, are only one place to look. We can also find community in groups built around all sorts of activities or issues such as writing, hiking, yoga, walking, and parenting.

Things to do

Looking to cultivate community? In the next month try one or two of the following:

- Answer the following questions:
  - What do you want most in a community?
  - Who are you currently spending time or communicating with in ways that may build community?
- Discuss these questions and the material in this chapter with someone close to you.
- If you aren’t satisfied with your current involvement in community, where might you find additional communities in which to invest? (Think about both religious communities and other sources of community.)
- Set some goals around strengthening or maintaining a good social support network that involves both give and take. Pick up the phone, write an email, or visit someone. Let someone important to you know how you are, and that you care about them.
PART FIFTEEN | Checking the rear view mirror

Looking to cultivate community? In the next month try one or two of the following:

In the next chapter we will end this course by looking at next steps, but before that we’re going to review some common spiritual challenges for humanitarian workers and look at the different topics that we’ve covered. You might also want to take some time to review your answers to some of the reflection questions.

When we pause to check the rearview mirror of life we can often see patterns that we wouldn’t otherwise notice. Reflecting on the challenges and rewards of the past can help us remember lessons we’ve learned and give us insights about where we wish to go in the future.

Common spiritual challenges for humanitarian workers

Every profession is challenging in unique ways, but humanitarian work is more challenging than most. This type of work carries a high potential for spiritual disruption on the one hand, and spiritual growth on the other. Here are a couple of particularly common spiritual challenges for humanitarian workers:

• **The unexpected factor:** Many humanitarian workers enter this field relatively young and idealistic. They do not necessarily expect to have their foundational beliefs and core sense of personal and spiritual identity challenged and shaken. Spiritual challenges can come as a surprise, and the fact that they were unanticipated can make the process much more distressing.

• **Acknowledging spiritual challenges:** Honestly acknowledge spiritual struggles and questions related to issues of forgiveness, trust, guilt, and other spiritual aspects of disasters and suffering. This can be particularly true for those working for faith based organizations.

• **Maintaining the margin:** Finding the right balance between giving to others and personal growth, between sacrifice and self-care.

• **Balanced worldview:** Hanging onto hope, and maintaining a realistic and balanced view of the world as a place of both danger and safety, good and evil.

• **Staying connected:** Maintaining key connections with people and practices in your spiritual network and communities. This can be particularly true for humanitarian workers who travel frequently, or who are working as expatriates.

To think and discuss...

• Are there other spiritual challenges common to humanitarian work not listed here? What are they?

• Have you experienced any of these spiritual challenges?

• How did you (and do you) deal with these challenges?
Course summary

Now, here is a look at the topics we’ve covered. As you read this list think about which of these you found most compelling or confronting:

• Humanitarian work is soul work. Spiritual challenge is inevitable in this line of work, and you will be changed by it.

• Spirituality is a core component of human nature and includes our deepest sense of meaning, purpose, hope, and connection to that “which transcends the self.”

• Research suggests that an active spiritual and/or religious life is good for our mental and physical health.

• We all have an internal road map that helps us make sense of what we see and experience in life. This map is linked to our assumptions, beliefs, and values.

• Whatever your personal road map looks like, you will encounter unexpected “curves in the road” that will challenge your assumptions and beliefs.

• Three common reactions to these spiritual challenges are resistance, surrender, and transformation.

• Spiritual challenges can bring both benefits and costs.

• Active spirituality – exercising and nourishing our souls – helps us deal better with the stress of the present, and strengthens our capacity to deal with future stress.

• People have different spiritual temperaments – ways of connecting with the sacred that come most naturally to them. It is important to experience both thinking and sensing aspects of “soul food.”

• Values inform our ideas about what really matters, and what is best and right. Understanding our values and living in accordance with them helps create a stable spiritual center.

• Our sense of purpose in life tends to be most powerful when we are doing what we love for positive reasons, using talents and abilities, living according to our values, and serving a cause beyond our immediate self-interest.

• Four areas of spiritual discipline that are particularly important for humanitarian workers (yet often neglected) are:

  - Practicing spiritual rituals;
  - Cultivating quiet;
  - Attending to balance; and
  - Nurturing community.
To think and discuss...

- Did you find any of the topics above particularly interesting or confronting? Why?
- Are there any points that you want to explore more deeply? If so, where do you intend to start?

“Your past is important, but it is not nearly as important to your present as the way you see the future.”

— (Tony Campolo)
PART SIXTEEN | Checking the rear view mirror

“What poets do you read? What music moves you? What acts of creation are you involved with? What social issues are your passion? What work do you most love doing? What pain is in your emptiness? When do you feel a connection with the universe? . . . The fulfillment of these answers nurtures the growth of the human spirit.”

— (Matthew Fox) #2

I hope that you’ve gotten as much out of reading this course as I have out of writing it. I particularly hope that the issues and questions have inspired you to invest some time and energy connecting with your spiritual self by:

• Exploring your spiritual history;
• Thinking through how your assumptions and beliefs have been challenged by your experiences;
• Identifying different types of soul food you find nourishing;
• Reviewing your practices around the disciplines of quiet, ritual, balance, and community;
• Trying something new; and
• Setting some goals to help you grow towards greater spiritual health.

What do I mean by spiritual health? Connecting with your deepest sense of meaning and purpose, and engaging your “spiritual muscles” (including courage, faith, humor, gratitude, and patience) on a regular and frequent basis.

Your unique vision of spirituality may mean you resonate much more with some of the topics and discussion questions here than others. One person may feel the need to prioritize understanding what they value in life and how that connects to their sense of purpose. Others might feel the need to spend time alone connecting with their spiritual self. Still others might decide to connect to a larger community of purpose, or seek formal direction from a spiritual mentor. Trust your instincts, and start wherever you most feel the need.

As you consider this last collection of reflection questions, look forward. Identify some ways to connect with what will orient and most inspire you in the weeks and months to come.

All the best,
Lisa
To think and discuss...

Has humanitarian work put you in challenging terrain? How? Consider questions like:

- Is the vitality of your personal spirituality right now on the rise, the decline, or holding steady? Why? How do you feel about that?

- Of the six hopes listed above, which do you most need to spend more time on? What are two ways you could do that?

- What are three spiritual self-care practices you intend to do in the next month? When will you do them?

- Six months from now, what is one spiritual practice of discipline you want to be more a part of your life? How will you start implementing that gradually?
REFERENCES

References cited in this module:


34 As quoted on [http://thinkexist.com](http://thinkexist.com) in May 2010.
36 Ibid., p. 2.
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