



# Spirituality and Sustainability Education: A Natural Partnership

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## Introduction

When people are allowed the opportunity to explore the mysteries of life, death, birth, and survival, they often find themselves reflecting on the spiritual meanings in their own lives. In this way, sustainability education and spirituality are very natural partners and often go hand in hand. As people continue to explore their connection to the natural world, and in some cases find a sense of their own spirituality in this connection, sustainability education programs have the potential to allow for this expression. People are going to have these experiences when they are ready. We can't create spiritual experiences; we can just set up the conditions for their potential occurrence. As practitioners, we in sustainability education (SE) need to be aware of this limitation and build space into our programs to allow for such experiences. In this opinion essay, we explore the rationale for connecting spirituality and sustainability education (SE) as a natural partnership and not simply a subset of ideas.

## Background

Several years ago during an outdoors educational nature art hike, one of the participants broke down in tears. When asked if she was okay, she responded that she had never felt such a connection with nature before and that she did not even know it was possible. Another similar instance was

during a program about the natural history of black bears; one of the participants stopped engaging with the group, and, with an astonished expression, exclaimed that he had never felt such a sense of awe and humbleness as he did then, thinking about how much he had in common with the black bears living in his community.

Transformational experiences like these are ever-present in the SE practitioners' community, making SE and spirituality very natural partners. However, many SE practitioners are ill-prepared to support, nurture, and enhance the opportunity for people to experience their spirituality through SE programs. In this article, we explore this phenomenon to illustrate a profoundly important point: Even though spirituality and SE are natural partners, the SE academic field has been reluctant to embrace spirituality as an important component.

## Spirituality and Religion

The Western lifestyle has been well described as separate from nature, with the natural world serving only as a resource base for a consumer lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> A large body of psychological research confirms that a direct connection with nature leads to improved mental health of individuals. It is at this pragmatic interface that much research and thinking about spirituality in Western cultures has focused.<sup>2-8</sup> What is lacking is research that develops a concrete understanding of what spirituality means within the realm of SE practice.

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Before exploring this topic further, it is necessary to define spirituality and differentiate it from religion. In a literature review conducted by three nursing scholars, it was identified that one of the challenges to defining spirituality actually lies in its relationship with religion.<sup>9</sup> According to Dyson, Cobb, and Forman:

Thus, in exploring the meaning of spirituality, there needs to be a consideration of the concept outside of the commonly held view that [spirituality] is in some way exclusively related to religion. For some individuals it may be, for others it may not.” (p. 1184)<sup>9</sup>

As described in “The Emerging Meanings of Religiousness and Spirituality: Problems and Prospects,” Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott completed an analysis of numerous studies outlining definitions of religion and spirituality. Several themes emerged regarding definitions of both, including:

Spirituality has to do with the paths people take in their efforts to find, conserve, and transform the sacred in their lives. Whereas religion encompasses the search for many sacred or non-sacred objects of significance, spirituality focuses specifically and directly on the search for the sacred. As with religion, spirituality can take individual and institutional, traditional and nontraditional, and helpful and harmful forms. (p. 909).<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, Lawrence L. Lapierre set out to describe spirituality in his article “A Model for Describing Spirituality.”<sup>11</sup> Convinced that such a model needed a foundational definition of spirituality, but that agreement on the meaning of spirituality was unreachable, he conducted a literature review in which he identified “six clear factors [that] ... appear to be fundamental aspects of spirituality. These are identified ... as those of journey, transcendence, community, religion, ‘the mystery of creation,’ and transformation.” (p.153)<sup>11</sup>

## Integrating Spirituality

Regardless of the definition, spirituality is often ignored and written off as religious or New Age in regard to SE programming. However, spirituality is a universal concept that encompasses culture, gender, religious background, and personal experience. At its core, spirituality is the way in which we all dance with the mystery of life and its meaning, and this dance looks different for everyone. Spirituality often deals with the larger life questions we all face: What is the meaning of life? What happens after death? How and why do we each matter? What is our connection to the rest of the world? Interestingly, SE also grapples with such universal questions. For example, SE for development has come to be seen as a process of connecting people in ways that promote decisions considering not only the long-term future of the human economy, but also how humans connect to ecology and equity of all communities.<sup>12</sup> These ideas align completely with how people explore their spirituality. When we learn about the Earth, all its inhabitants, and how we are all connected, we naturally delve into questions about life, death, birth, and survival, and we often see our own experiences reflected in those of the land and wildlife. Consequently, spirituality and SE are natural partners and can serve to bolster our experience of each.

Even though spirituality and SE are natural partners, the larger SE field and its allied field of environmental education have been reluctant to embrace spirituality as an important component to be considered. A classic example can be seen in the rejection of a proposed strand at the 2008 annual conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE).<sup>13</sup> The strand, Religion, Spirituality and Environmental Education, died as quickly as it was born, presumably due to a perceived lack of interest. However, we have witnessed sessions about spiritu-

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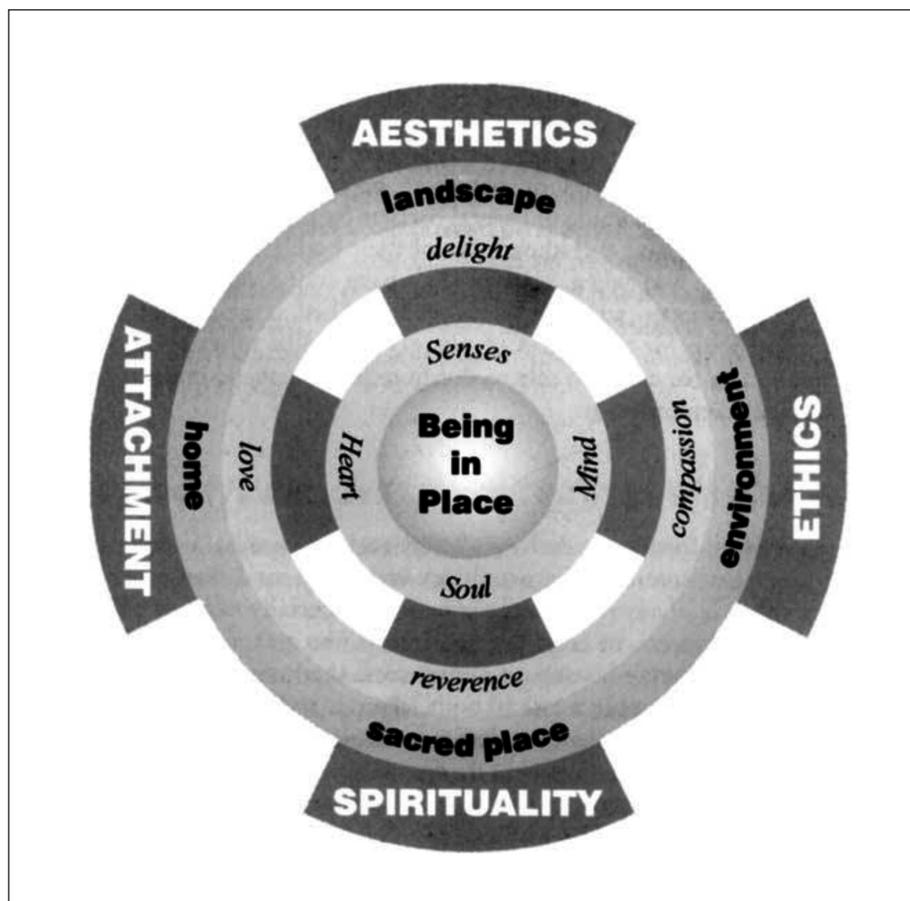


Figure 1. Intangible relationships with environment schema<sup>8</sup> (p. 102)

ality filling to capacity at numerous other conferences, indicating a clear interest among at least an enthusiastic handful of SE professionals. In a YouTube recording from 2015, Edwin Bernbaum gave a talk on the cultural and spiritual values of nature and how they should be included in connecting park visitors with natural parks.<sup>14</sup> This serves as “the inspirational value of wilderness and nature” to connect people to place and generate environmental conservation.<sup>14</sup> Bernbaum and Verschuuren are currently developing best practices for management of culturally and spiritually significant global wild areas.<sup>15</sup> Internationally, outside of western societies, the concept of spirituality and connection to sustainability education is much more readily accepted (e.g., Project GreenHands from the nonprofit Isha Foundation of India). It is this idea that spirituality is an integral part of all we do that has led some western academics to frame SE in a different light.

In Figure 1, much of SE outside of straight knowledge deals with the three main concepts of aesthetics, ethics, and attachment, but academic geographer J. Douglas Porteous links a fourth concept of spirituality to the idea of being in place.<sup>8</sup>

As we began to present on the topic of spirituality at various sustainability and environmental education conferences, college courses, and professional trainings, it rapidly became noticeable in our workshops and activity sessions that people were asking questions beyond the actual academic content. To further explore these aspects, which are of a deeper nature, we first created focus groups of SE practitioners and then later conducted conference group sessions with attendees attracted by the term *spirituality* in the title of the session. The workshops, presentations, and focus groups used guiding questions and semi-structured interactive group discus-

sion. These formats were: 1.) a talk about spirituality and sustainability education (SE) as part of a volunteer naturalist required training with informal interactive group discussion during the talk (usually one day); 2.) an optional advanced training with government agency volunteers self-selecting to attend the workshop that had a primary focus on spirituality and SE involving unstructured interactive group discussion (usually one day); and 3.) during more formalized conference presentations (usually lasting from 50 minutes to two hours) and conference workshops (usually two to four hours) where attendees chose to attend overview presentations of findings that were incorporated with interactive group discussion. For the workshops and focus groups, the participants as a group sat in a circle to facilitate discussion and were originally asked four guiding questions about spirituality, with each question followed by semi-structured discussion before proceeding to the next question. Question number 5 was later added as people frequently mentioned “fulfillment”:

1. What is spirituality?
2. What are the components of spirituality?
3. What kinds of beliefs exist within spirituality?
4. What role does spirituality play in sustainability education?
5. How do you know you are fulfilled?

All qualitative responses to each of the questions were written on flip chart sheets, each with the question as a heading, that were visible as reference material for the duration of the workshop or focus group and overall discussions. These flip chart sheets served as the hard data record of the sessions. Immediately afterward, we used them to create a journal in which we recorded all the comments and discussion points during the poster discussions, capturing the ideas and thoughts related to spirituality. We then compiled the data, and using thematic coding of the quoted materials, revealed the main ideas about various aspects of spirituality and words

used by many people across the various workshop and presentation settings.

### ***What Is Spirituality?***

When asked this question, themes of awe, connection (on a continuum from nature to universe), mystery, and a search for purpose in life emerged consistently. People expressed concern with understanding the place of the human in the larger universe as well as finding inner peace and a sense of their true selves. The specific words quoted in the thematic coding process are:

- Sense of awe
- Connectedness
- Mystery
- Grounding
- Deeper purpose
- Things greater than the human mind
- True self
- Presence
- Creation
- Inner peace
- Purpose
- Compassion
- Life force
- Energy
- Divine
- Sacred Oneness
- Now
- Understanding of our place in the universe
- Part of our nature
- Sense of expectation
- Place
- Spiritual and physical being

### ***What Are the Components of Spirituality?***

The question, What are the components of spirituality? generated one of the most concise lists from presentation participants and remarkably followed the same pattern in all the groups. Concepts of community and faith emerged first and were followed by similar concepts. The specific words that emerged in the thematic coding process are:

- Community
- Faith in the natural system
- Experience–meaning gained from

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- the path traveled
- Worship—can be ritualistic or simply silence in a place
- Recognition
- Gratitude
- Acceptance

***What Kinds of Beliefs Exist within Spirituality?***

The set of phrases that emerged when people were asked about the beliefs that formed the basis of their spirituality are:

- We’re all together in this
- Nature can manage alone—does not need our intervention
- Ruler—something that controls us such as predestination or God
- Control—can be human or beyond human, such as karma—generally a human ego-related need
- God—may be a ruler, or not, but implies a responsibility to nature
- A right vs. a wrong
- Living in the NOW

***What Role Does Spirituality Play in Sustainability Education?***

When asked this question, participants responded that children need sustainability education to help make their own connections, and that the environment is a spiritual place. Additionally, people discussed the idea that leaders have an influence on behavior and that a sense of spirituality helps people to cross barriers in society, create further spiritual experiences, and connect to the whole person.

***How Do You Know You Are Fulfilled?***

When the concept of fulfillment kept coming up, we asked: How do you know you are fulfilled? People reported feeling: happy, content, satisfied, having found meaning or purpose, and feeling in sync with everything. Additionally, people said they felt alive, and felt a continued sensation of personal growth and an ability to cope with problems.

After the generation of these lists, participants were asked to consider elements they thought of as critical to “good” SE (a value judgment by them as to what successful SE entails). These responses were compiled, and the resulting themes looked remarkably similar to the lists already outlined; the conclusion was drawn organically and repeatedly by these groups: that good SE often includes many of the same elements found in discussions of spirituality. Perhaps this explains why SE program participants, when given the chance to reflect, explore, discuss, and experience the natural world, often recognize connections between spirituality and sustainability education. While the power of SE to create opportunities of a spiritual nature for people is quite impressive, the activities needed for this type of exploration are straightforward and often already being done: time to reflect, writing in journals, drawing, seeking out beauty, and exploring nature can all lead people to deep personal transformation. Additionally, group discussions after activities can allow space for people to process their experiences on many levels. It seems that the processing space is essential as it allows for more awareness and deeper contemplative thinking.

**Conclusion**

What implications does this work have for the field of sustainability education? SE necessarily needs to present accurate, factual information, and scientific concepts. However, all too frequently, sustainability and environmental educators focus only on the scientific ideas and do not examine the underlying cultural assumptions they inadvertently and unconsciously keep promoting. While knowledge and study of the science, psychology, sociology, and economic fields of ecological problems are crucial, the cultural commons within which humans live, which includes the human cultural, linguistic, and spiritual aspects, are all but ignored (e.g., multiple publications by Bowers).<sup>16</sup> Gonzalez-Gaudio and Buenfil-Burgos have a further critique:

...it is frequently the case that the majority of environmental educators do not examine the ideological discourses underlying the educational projects they are putting into practice. ... Generally speaking, two non-mutually exclusive approaches still prevail: One focused on conservation education (ecologism/biocentrism) and one on science education (technocentrism/anthropocentrism). (p. 101)<sup>17</sup>

The growing acceptance of place-based education (rooted in the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place) and sense of place education (special meaning or identification to particular people, fauna, flora, or location) exists as a counter to observationally focused scientific approaches, but there is still room for the SE field to grow in the spiritual components of this important work. Assuming people will continue to explore their connection to the natural world, and in some cases find a sense of their own spirituality in this connection, sustainability education programs have the potential to allow for this expression.

People are going to have spiritual experiences when they are ready, whether or not the SE practitioner is prepared or knowledgeable enough to recognize and nurture these experiences. As practitioners, we need to be aware of this and build space into our programs to allow for such experiences and examine how these spiritual connections can be linked to pragmatic sustainable practices. It is crucial that these experiences not be denigrated and dismissed as merely unscientific hodgepodge, for even in the biomedical fields of science and in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) (e.g., Edzard, et al., 2006),<sup>18</sup> these experiences are seen as valuable applications of subtle therapies that are even more enhanced by simply being in natural settings.

Getting into nature is more than simply getting away from stress; such activities add a whole spiritual dimension of social

and health benefits.<sup>19</sup> The scientific worldview that created the dichotomy of science and spirit is now merging together. Some SE work already creates opportunity for spiritual growth. As sustainability practitioners, we need to support sustainability education to include spiritual connections with nature and create opportunities for spiritual growth within the field of sustainability. As Capra and Luisi emphasize, to study life means to study the systemic aspects of everything, and an integrated worldview shows everything is connected beyond in ways we are only now realizing.<sup>20</sup>

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