

Soul Celebrations and Spiritual Snacks: Chapter 1

by Alexandra York, ISPE Mentor

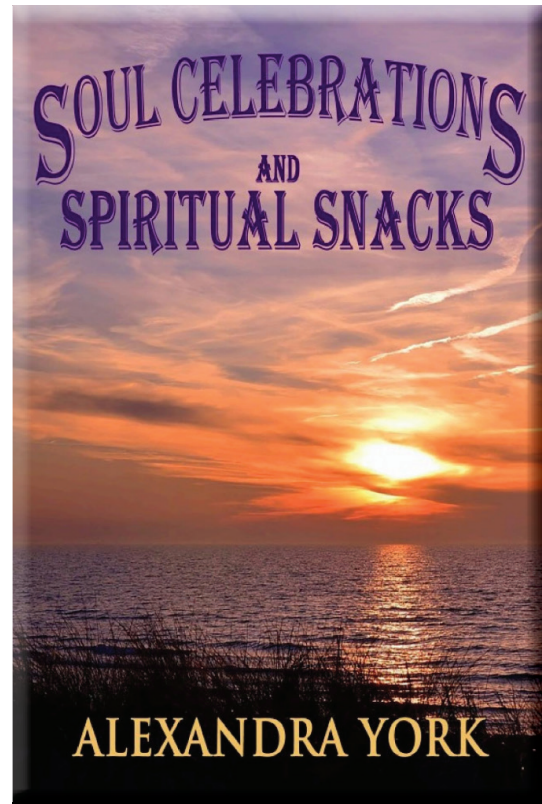
Editor's Note: The following excerpt, which has been lightly adapted for *Telicom*, is chapter one of ISPE Mentor Alexandra York's latest book, *Soul Celebrations and Spiritual Snacks*. The additional chapters specify the various processes that can be used to activate the experiences discussed in chapter one. The full book is available for purchase at amazon.com.



THE STILL POINT

There is a place if we earn it and own it
A Center unique if we each will but know it
Where the mind is cold and honest and true
Yet passions burn strong like fires renewed
It's not the "Still Point" of poets' renown
Where opposites meet or typhoons becalm
It's active and full of growing and glowing
Excellence bound with achievements flowing
My center is I, a Self that is mine
For here is where pleasure and pain combine
To create my days and my soul define

Our Center is all, so let each take heed
What we make of ourselves is who we shall be
It's only in death we meet Still Point of fame
While the world spins on not remembering our name
Time cannot be stopped, nor the cry of the dove
So celebrate life and all that you love
Each moment, each "now," while you dance here on earth
Is eternity's gift, every morning's rebirth
We must decline. Alas! None are divine
Make it fun, make it fine. Make it sweet and sublime
Not to live while alive is the only crime



Preface

All of us—whatever our religious or philosophical persuasion—need spiritual experiences because they provide each of us the necessary inner joys of human existence. As comestibles nourish our bodies and ideas nourish our minds, so spiritual experiences nourish our souls, the vital essence of our Being.

Chapter One: Secular Spirituality

Even in today's scientific world, people tend to think of spirituality in terms of religious or mystical experiences, where one's "spirit" is deemed to connect with an immaterial

omnipotent Force or Supernatural Being. Yet exalted feelings of sanctity, ecstasy, and the sublime can be evoked on a secular level, too, inspired by experiences that make manifest our personal core value system.

How can we experience the latter form of spirituality, one that celebrates our inmost self that constitutes the supreme summation of our deepest values and creates our fundamental identity and the moral fiber that together form our personal character? We can see and celebrate our bodies by looking into a mirror. But our values are mental concepts. How can we “see” them experientially, “out there” in real life?

This is where emotions come into play, because emotions, in effect, physicalize our values. They do so by automatically (neurologically) assessing perceptual stimuli positively or negatively and then sending signals to the body that, in turn, cause a physiological experience of the mental contents of our consciousness. This is the case with all emotional reactions to outside perceptual stimuli, large and small. Internal thoughts *sans* external perceptual stimuli also can cause emotional physiological reactions of pleasure or repulsion.

So how can experiencing our mental values (concepts) emotionally and physiologically become spiritual? What elevates “normal” emotional reactions above the ordinary into the extraordinary realm of magnificent rapture that reaches the highest level of spirituality?

I considered devising a term other than “spirituality” to designate secular experiences of exaltation precisely because of associations with religion or otherworldliness. I chose to retain the terminology, however; because in virtually every religious or mystical system, the word implies some sort of connection to the highest, however that may be perceived. It is in this sense that I use the word, not to compete with religion or mysticism but to describe the highest experiences of earthly connection to one’s Self via primary values.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) recognizes secular spirituality in several ways. Among various definitions, the following are the most explicit and compatible with my own: “Of or pertaining to, emanating from, the intellect or higher faculties of the mind; intellectual. Characterized by or exhibiting a high degree of refinement of thought or feeling.”¹ In another different but pertinent definition way down on its list, the OED also suggests, “Of or pertaining to breathing; respiratory...” labeling this physical aspect of secular spirituality as “obsolete.”² Yet this definition (surprise!) dovetails perfectly with my own definition:

A heightened state of being: a rapturous, exalted, ecstatic, blissful, expansive, or empowering psycho-sensory experience of unity with one’s own fundamental values in response to an “other” physical entity embodying them—specifically nature, art, or a romantically beloved person—which results from a process of mind-body integration.

Notice the “mind-body” inclusion in my definition, echoing OED’s “obsolete” definition regarding the physical act of breathing. Significantly, instead of separating the intellectual and physical as does this venerated dictionary’s definition, I insist on its combination in mine. My argument for mind-body integration as the necessary component for a secular spiritual experience flies in the face of all mind-body dualism wherever it exists as a premise for any thought or behavior. It, in fact, claims the essence of my thesis.

A secular spiritual experience begins with an overwhelmingly positive emotional and physical response to a real, here-on-this-earth “other” material entity, and it is completed by each of us in our own particular way as we mentally absorb ideational content of the entity and integrate it intuitively into our deepest, fundamental value system. It lets us connect and merge with—become an emotionally-physiologically integral part of—an “other” from which we are separate in pure physical reality. The experience

is keenly personalized not only because our own prime values are stimulated but also in light of our specific background, knowledge, associations, preferences, fears, and dreams, all of which are different for each of us. It is, after all, our individualized value system, our mental methodology for processing information, our personal style—very important—and our background, knowledge, and experience that make each of us a unique and unrepeatable human being. Thus, we each bring to every experience in life all that we have become.

The most compelling, all-engrossing, all-empowering or expansive experiences must be called spiritual because they bring the principles essential to our personal identity to the surface of our consciousness via a heightened level of emotions that radiate throughout our entire physical being. This ecstatic immersion feels like a “holy” experience of oneness with something in the outer world that is expressively connected with our most intimate inner Self. Etymologically, one of the origins of the word *holy* is “complete.” This human desire for spiritual completion—a yearning for the sacred often called the “religious impulse”—is natural to all of us as part of our human DNA. In secular spiritual experiences, a sense of the sacred occurs when the core of our value system becomes mentally and physically alive within us. We feel it vibrating and soaring throughout our entire being because we are the living, breathing, thinking, physical manifestation of the values that define our unique identity and constitute the content of our soul: our sacred Self. This is why I call secular spiritual experiences “soul celebrations.” [My formal definition of *soul* appears in Chapter Two.]

At any moment of the day or evening, we can respond with sublime appreciation to those particular aspects of nature’s mysteries that exemplify our personal attraction and relationship to the magnificent workings and wonders of the universe. Regarding art, artists (whether painters, sculptors, writers, or composers) control the

“nature” of a man-made universe which is the work of art, consciously or intuitively imbuing their creation with personal values. If those values coincide with ours, and if the work is aesthetically appealing, we perceive our own values externalized in concrete form. The combination need be exactly right: form, content, and style, the last being most idiosyncratic of all. In romantic love and its sexual concomitant, we respond to another person of like soul physically, stylistically, and on some level philosophically or intellectually. The same process occurs in friendship, although absent the romantic element because, although a friend can be a soul mate, no physical attraction promotes the mind-body connection necessary for a spiritual experience.

All such responses hold potential to generate profound feelings of whole-self celebration. Such heightened psychological/physiological experiences are our greatest reward for the work we have done selecting our self-defining values. Here and only here we celebrate our earthly selves as a whole much greater than the summation of our parts. Here we experience moments of perfect union—complete integration of mind and matter—brought about by our responses to physical stimuli and our one-on-one interaction with both form and content. We have no sense of transcending the real world but of embracing it in all its glorious splendor. Blissful attention engulfs us to the point we are aware only of the ultimate joy in being vitally alive. At times like these, we are unaware of age, race, physical appearance, or any detail of personhood. We feel beautiful—we are beautiful—and after such experiences, we are left with clarity of mind and peace of soul unmatched in any other aspect of life.

Spiritual experiences activated by the natural world, a work of art, or a beloved person are secular because, to unlock mental doors to the event, they rely entirely on external stimulation of each individual’s unique values; hence, these celebratory moments can be enjoyed by all people with or without religious preference.

Religious experiences are usually evoked through predetermined images, prayers, and rituals codified in texts or learned through instruction from authorities such as shamans, priests, rabbis, gurus, et al. In contrast, secular spiritual experiences rely solely on tangible entities to trigger psychosensory responses, and they require active mental processes to integrate the value recognition without preknowledge of methodology. For this reason, secular spiritual experiences are more customized than religious experiences. But it is important to understand that religious inclinations and beliefs do not in any way preclude or conflict with secular spiritual experiences. Individuals of every credo can add secular experiences to life's joys without diminishing their own particular religious devotion.

Equally crucial to understand: people who hold reason as absolute, eschewing faith as an avenue to truth, may falsely conclude that spiritual experiences are invalid or unattainable because they assume one must suspend reason in order to achieve a spiritual state. Even if overwhelmed by such experiences accidentally, which can happen, they shut down because of perceived contradiction to reason. Furthermore, many who permit themselves only behavior consonant with reason resist "letting go" into any emotional experience for fear of "losing control" of their rational mind. Thus, non-religious people may erroneously shy away from spiritual experiences altogether for fear of straying from reason, thus depriving themselves of a cornucopia of pleasures experienced by opening themselves to hidden treasures waiting within. On the other hand, religious people may permit themselves faith-inspired spiritual

experiences yet erroneously shy away from secular spirituality for fear of straying from God, thus depriving themselves of powerfully personal experiences of a different kind.

In truth, all of us, whatever our religious or philosophical persuasion, can enrich our lives via secular spiritual experiences, because they provide each of us the necessary highly individualized inner joys of human existence. If we wish to live fully as a healthily integrated individual, we must nourish our inner world of the spirit for the same reason we nourish our physical bodies, the temple of our soul.

Surround yourself with nature, art, and people who promote celebrations of the beauties and joys of the world and humankind. Soul celebrations will enhance your everyday existence by adding a dimension of inner pleasure and peace unparalleled in any other aspect of life. Enjoy them. Treasure them. You have earned them.

About the Author: Alexandra York is an internationally published author and founding president of the American Renaissance for the Twenty-First Century (ART), a New York City-based nonprofit educational arts and culture foundation. She has written for many publications, including *Reader's Digest* and *The New York Times*. Alexandra is the author of three novels, including *Crosspoints: A Novel of Choice*. Her most recent book is *Soul Celebrations and Spiritual Snacks*. For more on Alexandra York, visit <https://www.newsmax.com/Insiders/AlexandraYork/id-329/>.

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1. Oxford English Dictionary, "spirituality," <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=spirituality>.

2. Ibid. Ω