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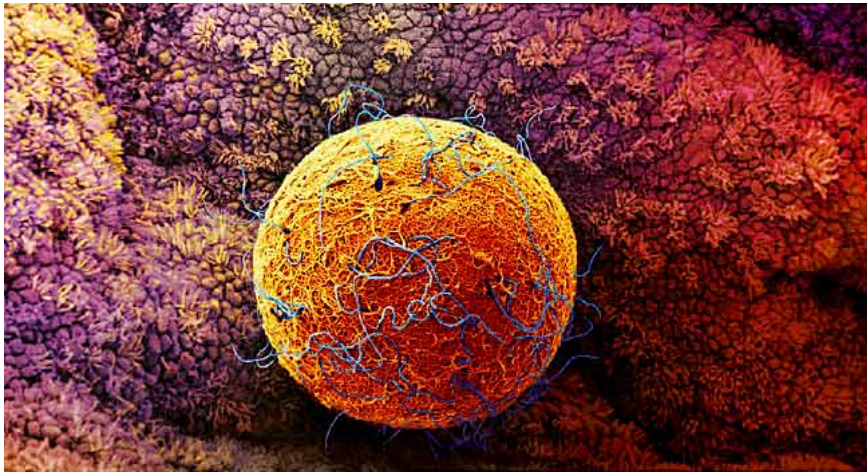
## The Spiritual Essence of Childhood

By Wendy Ellyatt



Wendy Ellyatt has spent thirty years championing the importance of early human development and the need for us to better understand what underpins meaningful and flourishing lives. She is the Founder and Chief Executive of the Flourish Project and co-chair of the Global Council for the Wellbeing Economy Alliance.

The global focus on wellbeing has the potential to radically change how we understand the nature of success. In this first of our series of wellbeing articles we look at where it all starts.



***“We are part of a grand symphony of Life – every molecule of our body was once part of a different body and will become part of a new body in the future – so in this way our body will not die, but will live on. We share both our molecules and our basic patterns of organisation with the whole world. We belong to the universe and this experience of belonging can make our lives immensely meaningful”***

**Fritjof Capra**

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

Scientists and spiritual teachers have different areas of focus, in that scientists try to explain physical phenomena, whereas religious and spiritual teachers try to explain experiences that can change a person’s life, values and sense of self. Mystics and spiritual teachers are however, often led to make statements about the reality of the world and states of consciousness, that have allowed us to start comparing their own explanations with those of scientists. In recent years it has become more and more evident that we are seeing an alignment between ancient and indigenous ways of knowing and that of modern science. The potential of human learning unfolds through our life cycle, just as our journey towards wholeness evolves through our meaning-making. Learning and becoming whole are, at every level of expression, intimately intertwined.<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual experiences, known as direct and non-intellectual experiences of reality in moments of ‘heightened aliveness’, often involve a sense of humbleness, awe and wonder as we sense into the larger system within which we are embedded. In this way they are unbounded by cultural and historical context. Many of the world’s greatest scientists, such as Albert Einstein<sup>2</sup> and David Bohm<sup>3</sup>, have expressed such feelings, as their work has led them to explore a deeper, unified, informational reality - and many belief-systems and religions recognise this overwhelming sense of wonder as connected to God and the divine.

*“A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.*

*Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The true value of a human being is determined by the measure and the sense in which they have obtained liberation from the self. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.”*

**Albert Einstein, 1954**



Such understanding suggests that there is more to reality than that experienced through the five simple human physical senses and the disciplines of many of the world's great spiritual traditions are dedicated to providing people with such non-ordinary states of expanded awareness. Modern spirituality tends to centre on the core values and meanings by which people live. For many this embraces the idea of an ultimate or immaterial reality and envisions an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being. Such experiences enable people to transcend the limitations of their adopted personalities and conditioning and often facilitate deep shifts in previously predictable life courses, towards more meaningful, compassionate and purposeful forms of existence. It appears that connecting with the deeper nature of our reality enables the release of those areas of condensed, blocked and repressed emotion that may have been inhibiting our growth.<sup>4</sup>

These types of experiences are often accessed and initiated through bodily feelings and sensations, so the body and the mind both play important roles in giving access to the energetic dynamic of the soul or spirit. It is the successful integration of body, mind and soul/spirit that facilitates the greatest expansion and growth. To this end we can understand spirit as the creative, animating force or principle that underlies the entire universe and soul as an eternal, self-regulating, life-essence that seeks to maintain a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic forces while constantly striving for wholeness and growth. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness have always been associated with spiritual traditions and are now becoming increasingly popular as people seek meaning and purpose beyond the confines of everyday modern life.

*“The essential quality of the infinite is its subtlety, its intangibility. This quality is conveyed in the word spirit, whose root meaning is 'wind or breath.' That which is truly alive is the energy of spirit, and this is never born and never dies.”*

**David Bohm.**

Quantum theory stresses the link between the observer and the observed and the basic holism of all phenomena. Indigenous science also maintains that there is no separation between the individual and society, between matter and spirit, or between each one of us and the whole of nature. Our individual wellbeing is therefore intimately tied up with the wellbeing of the whole and derives from us being in resonant and harmonious relationship with the natural world. There are biological, cognitive, social and ecological dimension of life that show us that no living thing can exist in isolation and that Plants, animals and micro-organisms regulate the entire biosphere within which human beings are a part.<sup>5</sup>

## Uniting Inner and Outer Worlds



### **The characteristics of all living systems**

- They derive from a natural unity, beauty and harmony
- They are materially and energetically open
- They are self-generating and self-organising
- There is the potential for novelty, growth and emergence
- They actively interact with their environments

*“Deep ecology does not separate humans - nor anything else - from the natural environment. It does not see the world not as a collection of isolated objects, but as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep ecology recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life. Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual awareness.*”

*“When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence.”*

**Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi**  
**The Systems View of Life, 2019**

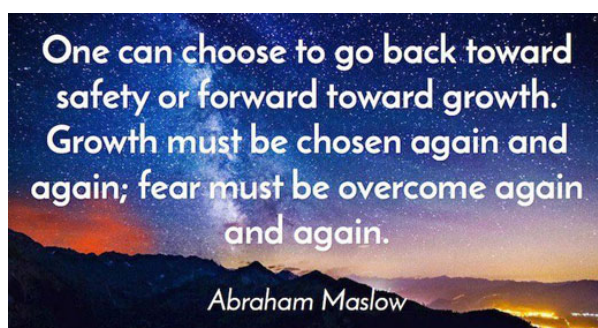
Just as in every other living system, human beings are born with the life tendency to grow and flourish and rely on achieving a resonance and balance between their internal needs and the demands of their external environments. If given adequate nurturing, people have the natural life tendency to take care of themselves (i.e. to fulfil their needs), to be happy and healthy, to get along with one another and to respect other forms of life. In other words, a natural instinct for harmony, beauty and goodness that is grounded in love. If, instead they experience negative or limiting early environments they may ignore their innate needs, fail to establish loving and trusting relationships and seek to use and abuse others and the natural world.

Children are always testing the boundaries between their inner and outer lives. Curiosity, playfulness and risk-taking are therefore the predominant qualities of healthy early development, as each child seeks to explore and test out his or her core competencies in line with their innate predispositions and biological tendencies. The call to ongoing expansion and development is always there, and manifests as concentration, energetic ‘flow and the joy of self-mastery and achievement, but this process can be disrupted by external pressures leading to adopted fears and limitations.

There is, therefore, a constant dynamic between the needs of the self as an individual – the ego, and the need of the self as an integrated member of humanity as a whole – the soul. The human journey reflects the journey of the soul from being an incorporeal essence at conception/ incarnation to becoming uniquely identified as a separate member of humanity and then needing to return to and interconnected sense of wholeness. As the author Richard Barrett says, *“it takes the individual from being co-dependent – to independent, and from being independent to then being interdependent – from differentiation to integration.”*<sup>6</sup>

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

*“Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.”*<sup>7</sup>



## The formation of worldviews

*“A ‘worldview’ is an overarching conceptual structure, a philosophy of life or an approach to life which structures how a person understands the nature of the world and their place in it. Worldviews encompass many, and sometimes all, aspects of human life – they influence how people understand what is real and what is not, how they decide what is good and what to do, how they relate to others, and how they express themselves, to name but a few examples. Worldviews should not be understood merely as sets of propositional beliefs. They also have emotional, affiliative (belonging) and behavioural dimensions.”*

### Religion and Worldviews – the Way Forward Final Report of the Independent Commission on Religious Education, 2018

The most critical phase of human development takes place within the first 8 years of human life i.e. from conception to full association with the ego/social personality and the steady diminishment of the more interconnected soul connection. This is because it is during this first early period of life that the ego mediates between the conscious and the unconscious and is responsible for reality testing and forming/protecting a sense of personal identity. During this period, the young child is steadily building up understanding and capacities through his or her unique genetic dispositions and environmental experiences in the world.

Early environmental experiences are therefore key to the shaping of values and mindsets or worldviews – and to the building up of fears that then become the limiting factors in later adult life. At conception children are not blank slates, instead we now know that that we all enter with world with unique biological and genetic predispositions and that, for everyone, the soul’s journey is about overcoming fears and limitations in order to become unique and vibrant expressions of a greater, interconnected whole. Lived experience is the single most important factor for early meaning-making and the forming of worldviews - and the primary needs for security

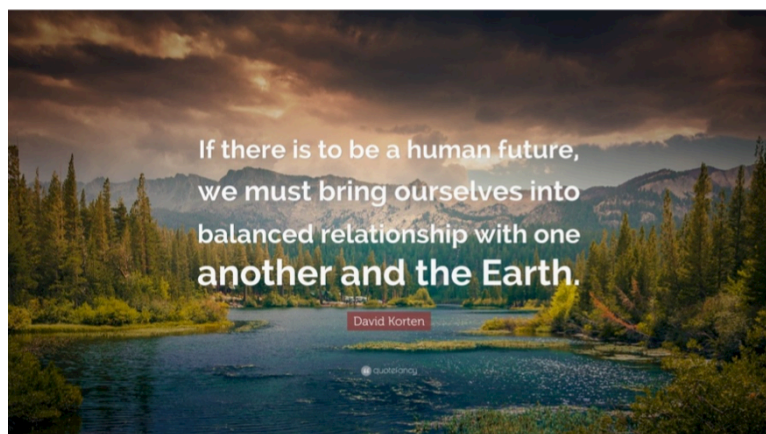
and relationship /belonging mean that children will seek to adopt to the values and mindsets of the adults that they most spend time with. Institutional systems of meaning-making and structuring how one sees the world come later, although many will be expounded by the adults that have adopted them.

Religion is the primary social-cultural system of sharing designated values, beliefs, behaviours and worldviews that enable people to relate to the deeper aspects of life. According to Wikipedia, there are an estimated 10,000 distinct religions worldwide, but about 84% of the world's population is affiliated with one of the five largest religion groups, - namely Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and the various forms of folk religion. According to the MacMillan Encyclopedia of Religions<sup>8</sup>, there is an experiential aspect to religion which can be found in almost every culture:

*“Almost every known culture [has] a depth dimension in cultural experiences... toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life. When more or less distinct patterns of behavior are built around this depth dimension in a culture, this structure constitutes religion in its historically recognizable form. Religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture.”*

From the age of eight years until adulthood the needs of the ego assume increasingly greater prominence and find expression in the need for independence and self-expression as a unique individual, but always within the context of belonging to a wider social group – that will invariably mean that the child will, at first, adopt the religious background and worldviews of his or her family and community. The strengths, fears and limitations that were shaped in the earliest years of life will underlie the values, mindsets and belief systems that each person takes out into the world, with our core needs (Maslow’s deficiency needs) normally needing to be met before we can allocate energy to our spiritual or growth needs. For example, if you are suffering from an illness, or living in poverty you will have to prioritise your physical and security needs before you can follow your higher growth needs. Religious systems aim to support people in overcoming personal challenges through a sense of shared cultural meaning and belonging, but, if applied too rigidly, they can also inhibit an openness to understand the thinking and worldviews of others. That is why education systems around the world play such a vital role in ensuring that children understand the rich diversity of human culture and experience.

A core characteristic in later life is the increasingly strong need to let go of previously built up restrictions, limitations and fears, and to reconnect with the full expression and unifying nature of the higher self or soul - that is constantly calling us back to wholeness. Unfortunately, for most people living in modern civilisations, this process has now been complicated by the demands of the digital world, a lack of contact with nature, over-busy lives, delayed parenthood and the increasing demands of the workplace. We have also been exposed to the creation of increasingly materialistic and dehumanising systems that have focused only on the needs of the ego and have forgotten those of the higher self or soul. In such systems you can have all the external wealth and material goods that you want, but still feel empty and that something important in life is lacking.



**At essence, Spirituality is therefore about:**

- 1) Recognising that we are all unique, self-generating energetic centres within one unbounded whole**
- 2) Understanding the human quest for meaning, growth and connection**
- 3) Understanding the need to balance our inner and outer lives**
- 4) Being prepared for life in a rich and diverse social world**
- 5) Having the time and space to reflect on one's own values and worldviews and how and why these might differ from those of others**
- 6) Honouring the importance of lived experience of personal reality**
- 7) Developing and nurturing a sense of love and compassion for self, others and the planet**

## **Summary Points**

No matter where they are born in the world, all human beings share the same core needs and their subsequent values, beliefs and behaviours are then a reflection of these needs, and whether or not they have been met.

These needs manifest as the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects that give human lives meaning and purpose. They consist of security, relationship, independence, engagement, fulfilment, contribution and growth.

As they develop and grow young children need to experience and build on each of these aspects, whereas healthy adults are able to integrate them all.

All human beings need to feel whole. Feeling whole means being able to balance both our internal and external energies and needs

The spiritual aspect of our development constantly calls us to ongoing learning, creative growth and contribution to something larger than our selves.

Our self-energy calls on us to fulfil our needs as individuals - and to become unique expressions of human capacity, potential and creativity in the world.

Compassion comes from understanding why we are the way we are, and that others see and understand the world differently. The most important first form of compassion is self-kindness.

The Path to health and wellbeing lies in 1) minimizing the negative and limiting aspects of the ego's early shaping and development 2) letting go of the fears and limitations that we have brought forward into adult life and 3) recognising the essential beauty and unity of all life.

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<sup>1</sup> Cajete, Gregory, *Look to the Mountain*, Kivaki Press, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Einstein, Albert, 1954 'God' Letter

<sup>3</sup> Bohm, David, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Routledge, 1980

<sup>4</sup> Grof, Stanislav, *The Adventure of Self-Discovery, Dimensions of Consciousness and New Perspectives in Psychotherapy and Inner Exploration*, State University of New York, 1988

<sup>5</sup> Capra, Fritjof and Luisi, Pier Luigi, *The Systems View of Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2014

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, Richard, *A New Psychology of Human Wellbeing*, Lulu Publishing, 2016

<sup>7</sup> Maslow, Abraham *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Penguin, New York, 1971, p. 269

<sup>8</sup> Macmillan, Encyclopedia of Religions, p. 7695