

## Spiritual development, surrender and sacred ground

KU LEUVEN



Leijssen Mia. (Manuscript MOOC, [Mia.leijssen@kuleuven.be](mailto:Mia.leijssen@kuleuven.be) )

Spiritual development can be seen as a purging process in which you gradually root out the obstacles that keep you from your essence. In this sense, treading the spiritual path is not usually the easiest road to follow. In doing so you might be confronted with your darkest corners and your not so attractive traits, but in this process of growing awareness you also strengthen your life foundations. If you skip steps in your growth process, or if previous phases in your development have received inadequate attention, you are vulnerable to achieve a *drifting* spirituality that is not sufficiently anchored in your human existence, or a spirituality that has *gone overboard* and does not take into account a nuanced reality and the sensitivities of others.

We have described this vital stage of human development in relation to the different dimensions of existence as: maintaining good contact with your physical reality, being strongly connected to other people, and thorough self-knowledge. One element worthy of note in this respect is that when you make **loving connections** with the physical, social and personal aspects of your existence, you end up, in a completely natural way, perhaps without realising it or expressing it as such, in the spiritual dimension. In a loving connection you are part of nature, you are part of humanity, you arrive at your very core that knows itself to be nourished through a loving awareness. In this sense the spiritual dimension is not a *separate* dimension of existence; it is rather an experience of your reason for being. Or an awareness of the oxygen that makes your life on earth possible.

In the physical, social and personal dimension “I am, have, can, expect, want...” etc. take centre stage. In the spiritual dimension your focus shifts to “Who am I meant to be? What can my existence contribute to life?”. “Not my will, but THY will be done”. The power of your will makes room for the development of **surrender**. In this way you can come to experience an increasing awareness of your life’s destination, an inner clarity regarding the path that lies ahead.

Surrender is not easy to sum up in familiar concepts such as active or passive. As a little child, one lives in a state of total surrender. You trust in being unquestionably part of your environment without reflecting on it and react according to your natural state of being. When you observe a sleeping child, you can often see the physical expression of surrender: a child often lies on his/her back with arms and hands spread wide open.

In life, adults are sometimes forced to surrender when they are confronted with a crisis that they can no longer control. They are then ‘brought to their knees’. In this way, being confronted with a ‘greater power’ can herald the beginnings of spiritual development. The element referred to here as a greater power could also be described as the *natural laws* to which you are subjected, your *fate*, something you cannot escape because it is greater than what lies within your power. It then appears as though you have to fight or at least do your utmost to increase your control. However surrender does not involve struggling to resist. Surrender is part of the life flow, which can also sometimes mean fighting extremely hard *for* something. But this is a fight that comes from your natural being and your inherent tendency to move forward. Like a prematurely born baby is able to overcome

his/her difficult start in life thanks to an immense resilience and devoted care of parents and medical staff. In the trust and commitment with which everything is set in motion to allow the wondrous power of life to flourish unreservedly. The dynamic of surrender combines surfing on the waves of life with using your strongest powers as well as harnessing those of your environment. In the humble realisation that you are but a drop of water in the vast ocean that is also the sea on which you sail the course of your life.

“Life is what happens to you” is one of the wise sayings John Lennon bequeathed to us. But fortunately, in the meantime, he actively shaped his talents and gave us timeless music and poetry. He was a master of surrender, and at the same time made his own idiosyncratic choices, drawing on them his traces of love, in the face of all convention.

When entering sacred ground we can only call on metaphors in an attempt to grasp and put into words that which transcends us. The terms we choose are used to refer to an experience with a mystical dimension. Furthermore, when we choose the word ‘nature’ to express the greater whole of which we are a part, we cannot form a picture of the time and space that it encompasses, nor of the beginning or the end of the dynamic process of nature. Though we can broaden our field of experience and our understanding of the prevailing natural laws little by little. Thus spiritual development is accompanied by an **increasing awareness** of the potential that we possess and how we might interact with what surrounds us, whether it be close to us or infinitely far away.

We can also refer to the concept of the **soul** here: the immaterial essence that is part of the person, but transcends physical boundaries, like the breath that moves in and out of the body. We also use ‘inspiration’ to indicate that how the best of a person is expressed through their actions or words. This means that objects can also express the soul. We may be moved by an artwork in which the artist has expressed not his ego but his soul. Great art endures over time because it contains something that is more universal than a theme that simply relates to a particular individual. We are moved to the depths of our soul when essential life themes are triggered and pure qualities are expressed. Our soul is nourished by physical elements or human contact in this subtle dimension that cannot be easily explained, but which you nevertheless experience unequivocally, feel in every fibre of your body.

We also experience a sense of affinity with people who are on the same spiritual wavelength. These people do not even have to be physically present in our environment; they may be long dead or be distant strangers with whom we only experience contact through what they once sent into the world, in the form of music, literature or science etc. We experience beauty (physical dimension), goodness (social dimension) and truth (personal dimension) as intensely nourishing and meaningful experiences when our sensitivity is developed in such a way that we notice or receive these inexpressible pure qualities of the soul in something or someone else.

In response to the question: “What is, for you, the secret to a happy life?” Willem Vermandere gave the following answer: *“Let me tell you using a parable from the Gospel. Just like the merchant who finds a pearl of great price, man must discover during the course of his life, why he was created and then fervently pursue it. The Kingdom of Heaven, which is knowing the fullness of life in the here and*

*now, throwing the ballast overboard and bringing to fruition the one thing that has convinced you. This also means that you cannot have it all.”<sup>1</sup>*

Spiritual living can be experienced on so many different paths. **Existence becomes sacred** by devoting loving attention to what is. In this way you can elevate any moment and any deed you perform in your daily life to something that is inspired and that radiates sacredness. You can observe the dynamic process of life as it is expressed in the simplest of things as well as in the greatest extraordinary events. You stand on sacred ground when you make contact with the soul, the immaterial essence, that which is fundamental that can be experienced in the physical, social or personal dimension. You cannot reduce this kind of reality to a purely physical, social or psychological event that you can understand with your human intellect and steer with your will. Your perception of yourself extends beyond the limitation of your ego and opens up to broader self-transcending qualities. You live with your heart and soul in the flow of life, whose unfathomable depths you may begin to imagine, but which you cannot grasp. You might refer to it as you would refer to the sun that irradiates your life, as something which can also withdraw completely from your sight, leaving you groping around in the dark. Impassioned life, an existence illuminated by the light of life, possesses – just like everything in nature – countless forms of expression.

A spiritual life does not have to be complicated. The talent of surrender needed for spiritual development and breakthroughs of sacred experiences, often announces itself spontaneously. At least that is how it happened to me. I don't feel compelled to proclaim many 'truths' about it. I feel invited, from a sort of existential gratitude, to explore and share what I have gradually discovered about it, using all the talents that have been bestowed on me.

Where I have ended up in this life, it appears that I act as a bridge between many different socio-cultural realities and perceptions. My trust in many events that are difficult to understand is nourished more and more and has gradually developed from my life experiences as well as those of others who share my journey. I experience this as a life full of love, the abundance of which I gladly share. I do not consider the word 'faith' to be what I experience, but rather the word '**trust**'. I also find it more important to bear witness to it through my actions – “my life is my message” – than explain what it's about in so many words. Hence the old saying: “Actions speak louder than words.” This is why stories related to people's experiences can often inspire more than pages of theory and explanation.

In addition to 'trust', '**courage**' is also a key attitude to life for standing on sacred ground. The courage to accept that what awaits you on your journey can be an opportunity to extend your boundaries, to expand or deepen your learning process, to refine and nuance your knowledge and to ground you in everyday reality. It also involves the courage to scrutinise what you do not like, your less attractive traits, the trying situations you would rather avoid. In the realisation or acceptance that you are not 'just' confronted with the things with which you are confronted you often end up performing a balancing act of openness to receive so that you can extend yourself to make the best of things as they are.

Nature provides us with metaphors for this subtle development process: sometimes a great deal of groundwork is required to produce a fertile soil; once it has been sown you need patience before you

---

<sup>1</sup> Willem Vermandere Interview Kerk & Leven, 26 augustus 2010.

see the results of your work; you have to weed it, without pulling up the flowers that grow in between the weeds; you sometimes have to protect the vulnerable young plants and supply the necessary water, while from the beginning to the end of this process, nature does her work, and then it is a question of being receptive to so much beauty. The cycle of nature typifies the spiritual process: it involves ups and downs, light and darkness and the changing of the seasons.

The words that I use to describe my self-transcending experiences are **embedded in the culture** in which I was raised. However, I increasingly feel that there are natural laws of which we are barely aware behind all of this. For example, I can explain from my past how the Catholic veneration of the culture of Mother Mary in my family of origin has been decisive in my life journey. But my past cannot explain the way in which this 'Mother Goddess' repeatedly manifested herself later in my life. I can only recognise that it simply happened despite me. It is a reality that I have learned to embrace because I could not ignore it.

Life continues to amaze me. Sometimes with things that still appear positively wondrous today. However, I suspect that one day we will be able to understand what we now sometimes still experience as 'supernatural'. Our perspective of reality is shifting with increasing awareness and scientific discoveries. But before we have the confirmation of empirically founded knowledge, we have to make do with experiential knowledge. The development of experiential knowledge goes hand in hand with increasing awareness and as we let each other know what life teaches us and share the resources we can use in the process. In this spirit, I will share this remarkable story.

In 2008, our granddaughter Annelien was born; she is our son's second child. At first her parents were delighted that this baby was so calm, completely different to their first child. They found it easy that, for example, she didn't wake up when they emptied the dishwasher or received a visit from some noisy friends. It was a great luxury to have a child who slept calmly through everything, wherever she was. This was a relief after a first child who reacted hyper-sensitively to everything. However, this positive story suddenly deteriorated into a drama. During tests carried out by the Child and Family Agency, it became apparent that the baby was deaf. She was around two months old at the time. The joy that came from having an 'easy child' turned into concern for a 'deaf child'. The medical system was immediately set in motion. Annelien was subjected to extensive tests, and the best medical specialists were called on to identify the problem. An electrode had to be implanted in her brain as soon as possible as this would increase the chances of her picking up sounds at an early stage.

One forenoon I was at work and received a phone call from my daughter-in-law asking if I could accompany her to an appointment for the electrode implant. Her husband couldn't accompany her as he had been held up at work. I knew that she was afraid to go to the hospital alone with the baby. I had a meeting that particular afternoon. However at half past eleven, I received a phone call to say that the meeting had been cancelled. And a high sensitive spiritual friend advised me to trust the meaningfulness of these events. So I was happy to join my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter to the hospital.

The synchronicity is often quite remarkable at such moments. I have learned to receive things that come together in an unusual way as signs of a greater connection than we first

realize. Due to an unmistakable synchronization of events, I became aware that something important was about to happen.

While we were sitting in the waiting room of the hospital, two members of staff approached us unexpectedly. They were supposed to perform a test on another baby, but the parents had cancelled because they were stuck in traffic. The specialized test equipment was all ready for use, so they suggested performing the test now, with Annelien. It was a test, just like the various other tests that had all confirmed her deafness. To me this unexpected examination was once more a sign of synchronicity. So we followed the medical staff.

Annelien, however, protested fiercely. She didn't want the electrodes, which were necessary for the test, to be attached to her little head. I asked the medical examiner whether I could hold the electrodes on Annelien's little head instead of having them stuck on. When I placed my finger on her tiny forehead to hold the electrodes in place, suddenly I had the idea that Annelien had invoked her deafness as protection. With my finger on her forehead, I communicated with my three-month-old granddaughter in my thoughts: "Annelien, if you want, you can let Mother Mary be the one who protects you." In critical situations I always call on this same spiritual source.

After having communicated through the soul with Annelien, she instantly quietened down. She allowed the test to be performed without any more fuss. Afterwards we went back to the waiting room. The results would be discussed with the doctor a little later. Annelien gave me a big smile.

First the doctor discussed the case history with the mother. Suddenly the doctor fell silent. "I don't understand it at all", she said. "This last test revealed that Annelien can hear perfectly normally." At that moment the doctor's telephone rang. Annelien almost jumped out of her skin.

To me this is an example of a series of events that are incomprehensible unless you accept that energy was exchanged on a level that we know nothing about. I can only say that: "This is something we cannot explain with contemporary scientific knowledge." When a three-month-old child is involved there is no question of suggestion or a hysterical reaction. I have started to find these kinds of events less extraordinary, because I am increasingly faced with these kinds of examples. In the past, I did not talk about such things, because I know that many people would regard such matters with scepticism. Standing on sacred ground means that I am no longer hurt by what other people think about it. I regard it as experiential knowledge that is asking to be shared so that others can be nourished in their own emerging trust and can take courage from it to deepen their spiritual path.