

# Spirituality in the Woods

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## Introduction

In our daily living—filled with activities such as community meetings, the latest technology, work, kids' soccer games, and care for aging parents—it can be easy to lose direction. In the rush and ups and downs of life we can sometimes lack focus on an important element, the interior life. Father William Joseph Chaminade's words still ring true today, "The essential is the interior."

This article is a way to stop and reflect on the interior. "Spirituality in the Woods" is a reminder that the interior life is not stagnant; rather, it is a journey. In this article I will draw upon the wisdom of several prominent authors, images from Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's play *Into the Woods*, and sage advice on fallacies in contemporary spirituality and signals pointing toward spiritual growth.

## Contemporary Spirituality and Four Fallacies

Spirituality is an "in" topic today. It is seen almost everywhere in the media and about almost anything. One sign of this is the Internet. A year ago I punched in spirituality and found some 28,000 sites; more recently there were 450,000 sites. Included are areas of Christian, Judaic, Islamic, and Eastern spiritualities that might be expected, along with those of various religious orders. But also included were the areas of New Age, psychology, business, education, and medicine. While in Detroit, I saw a newspaper reference to spirituality in fashion. It was about spiritual-looking coats, and I found out later that they are long, flowing, monk-like robes.

But so much of this is alien to the traditional Christian way of looking at things. There is a surface, faddish, ephemeral spirit about it all. One wonders where the Holy Spirit is lurking. Evelyn Underhill in her wonderful little book, *The Spiritual Life*, written over sixty years ago, reflects,

The spiritual life is a dangerously ambiguous term, indeed, it would be interesting to know what meaning any one reader at the present moment is giving to these three words. Many, I am afraid, would really be found to mean "the life of my own inside" and a further section to mean something very holy, difficult, and peculiar—a sort of honours course in personal religion—to which they did not intend to aspire.<sup>1</sup>

In thinking all this over, I have found four fallacies in much contemporary spirituality—three divorces and one marriage of convenience.

- First, there is the divorce of spirituality from morality or ethics, leading to a schizophrenic spiritual state. We are all aware of course, as was St. Paul, that this is a built-in condition to being human. The Christian response always has been to ask forgiveness and to move on in our brokenness. But today it seems that the built-in

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper, 1963) p. 11.

condition is to remain schizoid; there is no real connection between our moral behavior and our spirituality. For instance, we can look at some famous entertainers who make it publicly known that they have a guru of some type leading them to spiritual heights; yet, without blinking an eye, these same performers continue to lead openly immoral lives.

- Second, there is the divorce of spirituality from organized religion. Even though individuals might be proud of their spiritual endeavors publicly, it is still a private act, unattached to any community of other believers. Here we have a complete absence of the social dimension of spirituality that always has been crucial for an authentic spirituality, even when felt in a very personal way.
- Third, among some religious people, there is a divorce of spirituality from the liturgy. We have our spiritual life on the one hand and our liturgy on the other, and never the twain shall meet. The problem here is that we separate what should be two sides of one coin, all based on our common foundation in Baptism and Eucharist. If it is to be called Christian, these sacraments must be the fountain of every authentic spirituality.
- Last, there is a marriage of convenience between spirituality and piety. For some, feeling and looking pious are equated with being spiritual. We all know “that ain’t so.” We know this from our own experience and from the experiences of others.

Last year at the University of Dayton, Chaim Potok spoke about the importance of storytelling in dealing with spiritual ideals. This, he said, was his own motivation for being a novelist, and through his stories he helps open up new worlds beyond a person’s own experience. I took this to heart and to contemplation, and I asked myself the following question. What is a good story that describes an authentic spirituality, one that brings the outside and inside together, one that is realistic about the hardships as well as the ecstasies?

The one common thread among most of the traditional spiritual writers is that the development of the spirit is a journey. After recalling this, an epiphany occurred. One story stood out because of its emphasis on the journey: *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine. When you think about most children’s stories, come to think of it, they take place in the woods. Sondheim and Lapine use the familiar characters of Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Jack and the Beanstalk, the Baker and His Wife, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. All these characters go into the woods and encounter not only each other but also a host of other intriguing characters, such as giants, witches, wolves, liars, cheaters, and pretenders. In dealing with these situations, the title characters find themselves goofing, quarreling, confused, in the midst of spells, and becoming involved in magic; all of this results in panic and disorientation. Not a pretty sight! But the story does not end there.

All the characters eventually begin to learn something, things like “nice is different than good” and follow the advice that when we’re halfway through the woods, don’t turn back. Does that sound something like John of the Cross and “the dark night of the soul”?

*Though it's fearful,  
Though it's deep, though it's dark,  
And though you may lose the path,  
Though you may encounter wolves,  
You mustn't stop,  
You mustn't swerve,  
You mustn't ponder,  
You have to act?*<sup>2</sup>

On another level, these stories are the personifications of the interior journey, a journey into our own unconscious. It would be interesting to develop this further. The book by Erich Newmann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, develops this concept very well, but this is not the task at hand.

On the deepest level, I believe that these stories contain the story of our spiritual journey. We begin a journey into the unknown with unknown crises and stumbling blocks ahead. But in order not to turn back, we need vision. We can see a symbol of what that vision should be in a cycle of songs about Mary by Robert Fleming and Owen Dodson. Here is Mary's advice in song to the young Jesus before he sets out on a journey: "Don't pay attention to the old men in the temple; they have given up. Tell them what you told me: cast the sinners out, clean the house of God, load the rich with grief, prepare the poor with hope—and Jesus, don't stop to play with Judas and his friends along the way."<sup>3</sup> What advice! Don't stop to play with Judas and his friends along the way, whatever or whomever they might be, enticing us to stop on the journey.

Teresa of Avila reminds us: "This path of self-knowledge must never be abandoned, nor is there on this journey a soul so much a giant that it has no need to return to the stage of an infant. . . . There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it isn't necessary to return often to the beginning."<sup>4</sup>

### **Three Direction Signals**

Finally, we ask ourselves, "How do we begin this journey to an authentic Christian spirituality?" Here are three direction signals pointing toward the right direction.

- First, be who you are. God said to Moses, "I am who am." Like God, we need to be who we are. The first section of John Paul's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is entitled "Know Thyself," the very basis of Socrates' philosophy. After trying every guideline in the book to help a friend in a family crisis, I told him, "Be who you are." It was the only advice I gave that resonated within him.
- Second, start where you are. Start wherever you are now, not where you were as a child, in an earlier stage of education, or even last year. Be honestly aware of

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Into the Woods*, 7th ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Fleming and Owen Dodson, *The Confession Stone* (Canada: Leeds Music Ltd., 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, p. 94.

addictions and prejudices. Do not wait to cast them off before starting, otherwise, we may never begin.

- Third, use what you have. A character in *Into the Woods* muses, “The one thing you want is the only thing beyond your reach.” A humorous look at this same serious subject can be found in the Peanuts cartoon strip. While Snoopy is sated with cookies, Charlie Brown asks his canine friend if he is happy. Snoopy’s response is that he thinks he is one cookie away from happiness.

Sondheim and Lapine have their story end with two fundamental ideas on the journey. First, remember that you are not alone. On our spiritual journey we have Jesus who paved a path before us and who has become our Way. And it is a very Catholic thing to remember that along the way we are companioned by Mary and the saints, dead and living.

*Others may deceive you,  
You decide what’s good.  
You decide alone.  
But no one is alone.*<sup>5</sup>

The other sage advice given is that we have to be ready to begin the journey again if we are to make progress and not get into a rut.

*So  
Into the woods you go again,  
You have to every now and then.  
Into the woods, no telling when,  
Be ready for the journey.*

*Into the woods, each time you go,  
There’s more to learn of what you know.*<sup>6</sup>

And so we have come full circle in this most important of human journeys, with the sure knowledge that we are not alone and with the sure prediction that there will be need for renewal of the journey at key transitional periods during our individual and common lives.

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<sup>5</sup>*Into the Woods*, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.