

"My Spiritual Journey"
Robert McDermott

July 19, 2013

This essay is intended to serve two purposes: a talk I am to deliver at the Interspiritual Conference, Cascadian Center, Washington, September 29-October 4, and a course I will teach in fall 2013, *Karma and Biography*. Both assignments call for an entirely personal and spiritual rather than scholarly and intellectual (for which see my "Lineage and Legacy: An Intellectual Memoir").

One of the concerns that I have carried through my career is the relationship between religion and spirituality. I was a practicing Roman Catholic until approximately age 21 and an Episcopalian during the past ten years or so, but my primary, life-defining spiritual—and religious—commitment has been to anthroposophy. One of the threads in this essay is the relation between my religious commitment (Christian) and spiritual commitment (anthroposophy inclusive of Indian and Buddhist texts and teachers). More pointedly, despite Rudolf Steiner's insistence that anthroposophy is not a religion and is compatible with all religious traditions, in my spiritual biography anthroposophy serves as a religious as well as a spiritual commitment. I also hold that the spiritual is the core of each religious tradition, and the religious traditions are necessary expressions of spiritual experience. I came to this conclusion with the help of the third chapter of Henri Bergson's *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932).

Thirty years later I wrote a masters thesis essentially on this book, and especially on the relationship of mysticism and religion. My dissertation, on the comparative philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a Hindu and idealist philosopher. He wrote a masterful scholarly history of Indian thought and his three original texts are *The Hindu Way of Life*, *The Idealist Way of Life*, and *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*. But note that Radhakrishnan was also Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union and the United Nations, and president of India. Again: spirituality and institutional life.

Almost immediately on completing my doctorate with a dissertation on Radhakrishnan I plunged into the spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, a radical patriot and freedom fighter on behalf of Indian independence who became India's most profound spiritual philosopher, poet, and mystic.

After seven years of studying I found Sri Aurobindo, visiting the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, slowly and nervously coming to terms with the Mother, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator, and perhaps co-avatar, I found the writings of Rudolf Steiner—or Steiner and anthroposophy found me.

In response to, and in service to, these spiritual thinkers I was devoted to the three jewels:
to three *foundational figures* Krishna, Buddha, and Christ, and contemporary teachers, Rudolf Steiner, Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton, Sophianic and feminist teachers;
to the *dharmas*, teachings and practice, primarily in terms of the four yogas of the Bhagavad Gita: spiritual knowledge/thinking; spiritual action; spiritual love;
to the *sangha*, to the community, to institutions, to humanity and Earth.

May 29, 2013

Will Keepin, a close friend of twenty-five years, asked me to speak on my spiritual journey at a conference he is directing on Interspirituality. Coming from a person who obviously has been on a spiritual journey that has been an inspiration to me and to all who know him, this request sets a high bar. I wonder whether it will be possible to speak about "my spiritual journey" so as to avoid the almost inevitable ego-focus of autobiographical writing? "Journey" seems to me to connote a successful story, an arrival, not at all what I am trying to convey. I see myself as a recipient and an implementer. Karmically, I have received the grace of Christianity, first as a Roman Catholic, then, beginning age 35, in relation to the Christ-centered esoteric research and teaching of Rudolf Steiner. For nearly forty years, my center, from which I reach rather widely and diversely, has been my commitment to anthroposophy. My consciousness of higher beings and the working of spirit in the world sustains and deepens my commitment to family, teaching, writing, and a wide net of friends.

My journey seems to me to consist primarily in my attempt to grow spiritually deeper and wider by means of this commitment, path, practice. I have been trying to advance along the lines of Steiner's characterization of anthroposophy, namely, that it is "a path of (warm, will-filled, imaginative) thinking to relate the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe." By individual I mean, following Steiner, all four parts of myself: my physical, etheric or subtle self, my soul, and my I, or eternal Spirit. By universe I mean, again with the help of Steiner (but scarcely ever exclusively Steiner),

the world of spiritual beings (the Trinity, the nine levels of the divine hierarchy, avatars and bodhisattvas, the human dead),

the Cosmos, billions of stars, inner and outer planets, the Earth (every atom, every mineral and chemical, mountains and stones, rivers and oceans),

the plant world (a blade of grass to a giant redwood),

and animal world (from the amoeba to the elephant),

and the human (from our most ancient ancestors to the Neolithic and Paleolithic, to hunters and gatherers, to archaic societies to city states, to the Axial civilizations, to the modern world, alas, more powerful than wise).

More specifically, in my life task, my vocation, or in Hindu and Buddhist terminology, my *dharma*, I am called to relate myself as a spiritual being to the Universe in its spiritual dimension by the three paths recommended by Steiner—thinking, feeling, and willing—which very appropriately are almost identical yogas as were first developed in the Bhagavad Gita: *jnana-yoga* (knowledge), *karma-yoga* (selfless action), *bhakti-yoga* (devotion or love).

All this and more falls within the ideal and path of relating spiritually to the spirituality of the Universe. All this awaits and rewards human relationship, human inquiry, and human affection. This is my spiritual work.

Within this context, or vocation, I wish to speak of my journey in a way that combines my effort to serve certain ideals and to practice certain disciplines available to anyone who would take seriously essential spiritual documents: the dharma of the Bhagavad Gita, of the Buddha, of the New Testaments, and of the writings of several twentieth century spiritual teachers, primarily Rudolf Steiner, and secondarily, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Teilhard de Chardin, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and a variety of feminist thinkers who teach the reality of Sophia.

My attention to the ideas and ideals, as well as the practices, recommended by these texts and teachers, has not evolved in a vacuum but rather in community with friends, colleagues, and students. I learn to teach and write, just as I strive in order to model. I am an intellectual and spiritual midwife, more attentive to useful, edifying ideals and practices than to my progress. I tend to transform the question, "How am I doing?" to "Am I being helpful?" I also translate Gandhi's "Be the change you want to be" to "I am becoming by the help I am offering." Despite his quotation, I think this was true of Gandhi as well. He became the Mahatma not by tracking himself but by practicing *karma-yoga*. He did not announce success, nor even progress, but only experiments. Meliorism, aspiring for the best at the expense of the best, would seem to a safeguard against triumphalism and grandiosity.

Countless expressions of sinfulness in his *Confessions* did not diminish Augustine's self-focus. We learn deep insights from that ancient-modern text, the first autobiography, but although Augustine proved to be amazingly modern for a fourth to fifth century convert to Christianity, we also learn the dangers of self-concern. With the help of Shakespeare and Freud we have learned that "my," as in "my spiritual journey," is a double-edged sword: we cannot help but be self-conscious, we are on a journey after all, but the center and parameters of "me" and "my" provide exquisite opportunities for both self-deception and self-aggrandizement. How do Rudolf Steiner, Teilhard de Chardin, and the Dalai Lama repeatedly lay bare their spiritual lives without making themselves the all-important (and self-contradictory) subject of their disclosures concerning their spiritual journey?

In what follows I want to try to emulate these teachers while trying to minimize the "my" as modifier of spiritual journey. I hope the image of center, which is not me but in which I am, might be helpful in this regard, more helpful, I hope, than the image of "journey" with its strong emphasis on me as subject, and the subtle implication of progress. Augustine tries to put the emphasis on himself as object, as the recipient of undeserved guidance, that is, grace, but the project is as hopeless as it is brilliant: the entire focus is on Augustine as subject, as the one on the journey.

Although I am a student of biography, and especially of the mystery of karma, I want to be a reluctant autobiographer. Instead of speaking on my spiritual journey I want to try to say something worthwhile concerning the resources and obstacles for the spiritually striving person at this time in our cultural history. I want to say something about our shared situation and some of the insights that might help anyone who is seeking a glimpse of spirit in a global consciousness overrun by, or in the grip of, egoism and materialism.

To begin, I want to speak of a central core, what Christians call "soul," and Steiner calls Spirit or "I." (Steiner thinks that until the 9th century the concept soul included two distinct principles, soul at the level of personality, and a unique eternal spirit that incarnates many times.) Cultivation of both are necessary—along with cultivation of the

physical and etheric (subtle) principles. I could say that my spiritual discipline consists in the integral cultivation of these four principles. All four are related to the world as well as to Christ. To the extent to which I pay attention to them (and I do), Krishna and Buddha, as well as angels and bodhisattvas, guide all human beings both directly and indirectly. All higher, beings, exalted and ordinary, issue from and strive to return to the Trinity—to the Ground of Being, the Logos Being/Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

The whole of creation continues to be transformed by the saving power of Christ, a divine person in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life on Earth constitutes the single most profound transformation of the whole of creation, and through the Holy Spirit, in collaboration with high beings such as Krishna and Buddha, continues this work on Earth and in the inner lives of human beings. Rudolf Steiner had a relationship to Christ that reveals the many meanings of incarnation and resurrection of Christ. It was his mission to reveal Christ in time, in the evolution of consciousness, in union with myriad beings, including the whole of struggling, failing and striving, humanity. While he revealed a deep and meaningful account of the evolution of creation and history, his primary focus was on the task of the present time, the battle being waged for an against the spiritual evolution of modern Western humanity. Anthroposophy was and is his recommended way to countering the deleterious effects of the Western paradigm.

At the end of his life in 1925, Rudolf Steiner characterized anthroposophy, of which he was the teacher and exemplar, as a path of warm, will-filled thinking that aid the individual relate the spiritual in the universe. Such thinking, which by definition includes both affect and will, begins with a focus on the spiritual of the individual. Indeed, anthroposophy is a discipline most particularly for the discovery (uncovering) of the "I," the eternal self that lives in and through Christ. Anthroposophy is a life-long attempt to connect the two spiritual centers, the self (or "I") and universe or world. It is a way of cultivating these two centers, each of which evolves. Unlike their relationship in centuries past, they have both grown harder, less amenable to a loving relationship.

The vastness of the Universe and the uniqueness of the individual militate against an I-Thou relationship. The universe is more difficult to love and the individual is less able to love. My journey, then, is to understand and even embrace this unhappy, intensely challenging and entirely appropriate relationship. The purpose of my life is to advance the relationship of self and world against the current. In loving my family, friends, work, language, music, light, I am joining self and world. To the extent that I handle money, sex, and power consciously and selflessly I am activating spirit in myself in relation to spirit in the Universe—including importantly in money, sex, and power, all three of which issue from and must be transformed into returning to the Ground, to Christ, and to the Spirit.

Anthroposophy, as I try to live it, is consciousness and action. It helps me to focus on the mysterious and fruitful ways to experience Christ as as that the spiritual center of both self and world. Nothing was made, no world and no selves, that was not made by the Logos, but the darkness that is our default consciousness increasingly overwhelms His presence in His creation, and particularly in each of us.

Understanding Steiner's characterization of anthroposophy is a task for a life time, or longer. There are parts of the world and the self, and the relationship between them, that seem not at all to reveal Christ, the Logos. Such objects and experiences reveal the opposite of Christ: they reveal what Buddha referred to as hatred, fear and delusion. They reveal the delusion created and sustained by Lucifer, the tempter in charge of

presumption; and complementarily, they reveal the denial created and sustained by Ahriman, the tempter in charge of materialism.

Because I am a product and representative of this influence and culture, I have had a life-long love affair with both Lucifer and Ahriman, i. e., with both delusion (I am the center, important to the world) and materialism (if I could just get a little more in the way of resources, security, delights). Heir to a consciousness which split off world and self from spirit (from what Owen Barfield calls Original Participation), and specifically from Christ, the source of all spirit in the world and in the self, my life task is to transform the modern Western consciousness which has brought and continues to bring ever more effectively, alienation along with comfort and power.