

The song Turn the World Around, asks: Do you know who I am? Do I know who you are? See we one another clearly? Do we know who we are? Sage questions; questions that must have been asked since time immemorial. Today, I want to suggest the answer to these questions is yes. We do know each other and we do know who we are.

The real question I think is not do we know who we are? But rather, are we willing to see each other and ourselves? Are we willing to let ourselves know that we know?

There is much we know, I believe, but won't let ourselves recognize what we know. There is much that we know, but act like we don't know. There is much that we know, but conveniently, forget or fail to take note of the fact.

One of my favorite pieces of information is that infants are unable to distinguish themselves from their surroundings. We're told, they can't distinguish self from other, self from thing. They can't distinguish themselves from their blanket, or from their mother or whoever is holding them. If this is true, then infants are fully connected, at least with their most immediate environment, perhaps with the All.

I like the idea that infants are that connected. I like the idea that humans, in some form, can be that connected. It gives me hope to think that humans can be that connected to a non-self. It gives me hope that if we can do it at some stage of our development, then maybe, just maybe, we can re-learn how we did it.

At some point in our human development, we develop a sense of self, an awareness of difference. We learn to disconnect at some point. I suspect that's the point at which we begin to develop egos, a sense of separate self. From then on, it seems, we start to act like separateness is the only reality, we act as if it's always been thus.

Our rational minds can conclude nothing other than we are separate beings. All the data points in that direction. We can see each other and know that you are not me and I am not you. Your body is not mine, it is separate from me. That's the logical conclusion of the rational mind.

For better or worst, the rational world, the world of rigorous, logical analysis is not the only world that exists. We all know there is something other than our eyes and scientific analysis can reveal. We know there is something ethereal and that it is real. We know there is something we call inspiration, yet we can't see it or measure it. We know there is love, but we don't know exactly what it is and can only recognize its bi-product.

We know there is something that can be called transcendent; something that is profoundly fundamental; something that drives an orientation for life and renewal. We talk of that something in philosophical terms, in religious terms. Largely since the on-set of the New Age mentality and increased secularism, we've called that something Spirit or Spiritual.

That which is Spiritual is supernatural, ethereal. We can't grab it or get our arms around it. It's an inner-essence, a source of inspiration, a connection with a larger reality. Spirituality has a connotation that everything is connected, mutually dependent. It's that which is ultimate, an immaterial reality, which we recognize as something very real. But something we can't really define, like God, love or nature.

We tend to separate the notion of spiritual from the idea of religion. Studies suggest that increasingly, Americans are defining themselves as Spiritual but not Religious. One study says there are more people who define themselves as Spiritual than the number of Methodist, Lutherans and Episcopalians combined.

For many, religion or being religious feels too confining. Many connect religion with a requirement to believe in something outside of themselves. They think of it as a requirement to follow something or someone other than themselves.

The concept of Spirituality feels freer, less constraining. Who knows what the term Spiritual means? It can mean so many different things, different things to different people. We can never be sure any two people have the same meaning of the term, the concept. Spirituality is very individualistic. No wonder it has such appeal to so many Americans.

Spirituality can be a very individualistic endeavor. I can be spiritual all by myself. Spirituality can be of, by and for myself, even though it's connotation is one of connectedness. We can think of or experience a connection with the cosmos, entirely for our own benefit. Sitting quietly in the woods or by a stream or even meditating, we can feel spiritual. This sense of spirituality can serve no other purpose than to make one feel good.

I don't think the same can be said of the notion of shared spirituality or a spiritual community. I don't believe a sense of shared spirituality can be of, by and for the self. Shared spirituality, at a minimum, requires allowing. If you don't let yourself experience someone else's spirit, you'll pull away or put up a barrier.

A spiritual community requires more than not putting up barriers, more than merely allowing a connection to occur. Spiritual community requires intentionality, a shared intention to come together, to be together. It requires active engagement. It requires the primary focus to be on that which is spiritual, to be on community.

We don't come together in a spiritual community because we like this person or that one. We don't stay in community because of other's personal characteristics or personalities. A spiritual community has to exist, as much as possible, in the realm in which it is made.

It has to exist as much as possible in the realm of the spirit, the realm of inner essence, a connection to something larger. It has to exist within a context that is larger than personalities; something larger than the task at hand. A spiritual community has to regularly pull us back into the realm of the spiritual, something very different from our work-a-day lives.

When we lose sight of ourselves as being part of a spiritual community we are adrift. We lose our bearings, we are buffeted by the winds of time and place. We are held hostage to personal whims and personalities.. We get caught up in day to day issues and forget that we have a mission, a calling to something greater. We lose our way.

Its intentionality that allows us to stay on track, to discover what's next for us as a community. Intentionality allows us to fulfill the role that is ours alone; a role no other organization or institution can accomplish. Intentionality allows us to discern what is uniquely ours to do. Its intentionality that allows us to discover what the larger community would miss if we were blown away in a storm.

Some people think a spiritual community exists to satisfy their personal needs. Some people believe a spiritual community exists to help them grow as individuals. Some people believe a spiritual community is there to keep them safe, and provide a place of friendships. And it does exist to meet all those needs.

But if that is all a spiritual community does, it becomes a social club. If that is all a spiritual community does, it becomes just another group designed to cater to our ego needs of self-aggrandizement. It becomes a group whose primary mode of operating is of, by and for me, as an individual.

Such a group loses its sense of inner-essence. It loses its sense of the ethereal, its sense of a larger reality, its sense of the ultimate, immaterial reality. It loses a sense of interconnectedness with what is eternal, what is foundational in our lives. It loses its inspiration, drive and effectiveness in the grand search for truth and meaning in life.

A spiritual community must be uplifting. It must call us to a higher calling. It must inspire us to become more than we are. It must ask more of us than what is expected of us in our work-a-day world of money and prestige.

A spiritual community calls us to truly recognize the other, to see and honor the holy or sacred in the other; to love the stranger as thy self. A spiritual community repeatedly teaches us that to truly care for our most fundamental needs of connectedness, is to simultaneously care for and feed the fundamental need of connection in others.

Seeing and honoring the fundamental need of connectedness in ourselves is no mean feat. There are so many distractions, so many ways to get lost in our ego needs. Seeing and honoring the fundamental need of connectedness in others is even harder. Our culture teaches us to judge, to evaluate, to assess others based on superficial criteria, such as age, gender, physical attractiveness. But more-over, we are largely trained to assess others based on whether or not they meet our own ego needs.

A spiritual community calls us to something more important than whether or not someone likes us. A spiritual community calls us to see the humanity in each other rather than their personal characteristics. A spiritual community asks of us, in fact calls us, to always, treat the other with the dignity and respect they deserve simply because they are human; because they are an extension of ourselves in this interconnected, interdependent immaterial world in which we are all a part.

A spiritual community holds each other to a higher standard of behavior. It holds us to a higher set of expectations than we are held in order to obtain a raise or a promotion. It holds each of us to a standard where the greater good is more important than our own ego needs. A spiritual community holds us accountable for how we treat each other. Because it matters.

It matters that we seek to connect with the deep inner reality of each other. It matters that we hold ourselves to a standard of acceptance and loving care for the other, whoever they may be, however they may act, whatever they may say. It matters how we treat each other, for when we do harm to others, we do harm to the community, we do harm to the aspirations of the community. As a result, we do harm to ourselves, even when we can't see the harm that is done.

A spiritual community is a teaching community, it is a helping community, it is a place where we are called to pay attention to what is fundamentally important in our lives; what is fundamentally important in other peoples' lives.

A spiritual community will hold you when you are strong, it will hold you when you are in need, it will guide you when you've lost your way. Not because you have earned it, not because of your worldly status, but because you are connected with what is important. Because the immaterial world is a world of connectedness, it is a larger reality. The spiritual world recognizes kindredness, it knows relatedness, it understands that we need each other. It knows we are not alone.

Guard this spiritual community of ours. Care for this community and it will feed you lavishly, and you in return, will feed others. Let us rejoice in our shared spirituality. Let us rejoice in our spiritual community. Because a spiritual community makes a difference in our lives and the lives of others. It truly matters.

Amen