

## The Psychology of Spiritual Choice

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In a recent series of sermons on “the Four Faiths,” I talked about four faith paths that were distinguished by what each took as the transcendent reference system of meaning. There was Humanism, which finds ultimate meaning within human community. There was Naturalism, which finds it in the interdependent world of all nature. There was Mysticism, with its emphasis on direct experience of transcendent reality. And there was Theism, which finds ultimate meaning through some understanding or conception of God.

When I introduced that series, I pointed out that, just as no one religion holds a monopoly on Truth, so no particular way of systematically describing the varieties of faith paths can lay claim to telling the whole story. To illustrate that point, I mentioned another, similar attempt at explaining a variety of spiritual paths, which is found in the work of the Rev. Peter Richardson, in his book, *Four Spiritualities: Expressions of Self, Expressions of Spirit: A Psychology of Contemporary Spiritual Choice*.

Richardson’s work is based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is in turn based on a Jungian understanding of human psychology. The MBTI describes personality types based on four preference pairs: Extraversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving. This is one more way to assign people to categories based on their similarities and differences. I’ll go into more detail in a few minutes, and help you figure out your own type. But first, a few general remarks.

There are a couple of traps that those who work with the MBTI must be careful to avoid. One is the temptation to place too much meaning on which of sixteen psychological boxes someone falls into. We’re clearly more complicated than that. But as long as we keep that in mind, the classification scheme can provide some insight into the various ways we approach and process life.

Another trap to avoid is placing value judgments on the various preference pairs. That is, introverts are not necessarily better than extraverts; they’re just different. In fact one of the strengths I find in this whole understanding of personality types has to do with interpersonal relationships and interactions. Some of the typical stresses, strains, and aggravations that occur in relationships grow out of differences of style or personality: how you process information, how you make decisions, how structured or spontaneous you are, and so on. You can’t change those elements of style in another person, but by understanding them, you can learn to appreciate and accommodate them, and to work and live with them in relative harmony.

The Myers-Briggs personality inventory typically consists of a large number of either/or choices that get at the various dimensions of your personality. Let’s look at those preference pairs that determine your personality type. Now, for each of these pairs, you may well recognize elements of both choices in yourself. And a well-rounded person can function in either mode when necessary. But for most of us, there is a pretty clear preference in one direction or the other. And you may well be able to place yourself based on the fairly simple descriptions that I’ll provide.

The first pair, Extraversion/Introversion, has to do with where you get your energy. People who prefer extraversion focus on and are energized by events in the outer world. They are broadly focused, gregarious, they like action, talking, groups, and tend to have many friends.

People who prefer Introversion focus on and are energized by the inner world of ideas. They are deeply focused, deliberate, good listeners, and tend to have a few close friends.

The second pair, Sensing/Intuition, has to do with how you perceive the world around you, how you gather information. People who prefer sensing base their perceptions on what is present here and now. They are realistic, practical, observing facts directly, step by step, with common sense. People who prefer intuition base their perception on the possibilities in situations, patterns, hunches, imagination, reading between the lines. I tend to think of this as the distinction between focusing on details versus the big picture. I'll point out that any organization – including a religious congregation – needs both types: the intuitive dreamers who can hold up a vision of what might be, and the detailed sensing people to keep things grounded in reality and figure out how to actually make things happen.

The third pair, Thinking/Feeling, gets at how you make decisions. People who prefer Thinking base their decisions on objective, impersonal, analytical, principled logic. They aim for clarity, fairness, firmness, and truth. People who prefer Feeling base their decisions on more subjective, people-centered values. They aim for harmony, mutual appreciation, trust, and humane sympathy. To some extent, this is a distinction between right-brain and left-brain approaches to decision-making.

The fourth, and final pair, Judging/Perceiving, is essentially about order versus spontaneity. People who prefer Judging tend to live their lives in a planned, orderly way. They want things settled, organized, decisive; they like closure and enjoy finishing things. (Please note that judging, in this context does not mean the same thing as judgmental). People who prefer Perceiving tend to live their lives in a flexible, spontaneous way. Adaptable and tolerant, they keep options open, seeking to understand life rather than control it – going with the flow.

While there are sixteen different types defined by the MBTI, Richardson only defines four different spiritual paths. That's because he focuses on only the middle two pairs, Sensing/Intuition (S/N) and Thinking/Feeling (T/F). His investigation into the relationship between personality type and spiritual life leads to four basic types of spiritual journey, which he calls: the Journey of Unity, the Journey of Devotion, the Journey of Works, and the Journey of Harmony.

Since each of these four “journeys” is associated with a particular combination of preferences on the S/N and T/F scales, you might want to take a moment to name for yourself which of the four possibilities comes closest to describing you. While I think it's worth your while to listen to the description of all four types of spiritual journey, you might want to pay particular attention to the one that Richardson thinks you are likely to be suited for. But keep in mind the title of this sermon: “The Psychology of Spiritual Choice.” If Peter Richardson is correct, then your psychology – your personality type – is likely to influence the choices you make along your spiritual journey. However, they are still choices. They are not hard-wired by your psychological makeup. So please look at this typology not as a definition of which way you must go, but rather as an invitation to do further exploration. The thing to remember is that there is no one way to be spiritual.

The first journey, the Journey of Unity, is associated with the NT personality. That is, Intuitive and Thinking. This journey is described as having four basic aspects: “1) organizing principles operating throughout life and nature; 2) truth that can be global, honest, and clear; 3) social justice as the aim and context for involvement; and 4) clarity as the basis for spiritual enlightenment.”

An example is Albert Schweitzer, and the experience that led to his embracing the concept of “Reverence for Life.” He tells it like this:

Lost in thought I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal conception of the ethical which I had not discovered in any philosophy. Sheet after sheet I covered with disconnected sentences, merely to keep myself concentrated on the problem. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, “Reverence for Life.” The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found ;my way to the idea in which affirmation of the world and ethics are contained side by side. Now I knew that the ethical acceptance of the world and of life, together with the ideals of civilization contained in this concept, has a foundation in thought.

It was important for Schweitzer that thought be the force knitting together both a worldview and an ethic in one unifying principle.

Another mentor for the Journey of Unity is The Buddha. The word “Buddha” comes from a root meaning to awaken or to know. The Buddha is one who is awake. In the words of the Buddhist scripture, the *Dhammapada*: “Clear thinking leads to Nirvana.”

The second journey, the Journey of Devotion, is associated with the SF personality. That is, Sensing and Feeling. Richardson lists eight aspects of this path, but I’ll only mention a few of those: “1) a direct hands-on approach to the spiritual life, 2) the centrality of personal experience, 3) the importance of simple things, and 4) action on the world through direct service.”

Story is also important on this path, often in the form of myth. In the *Power of Myth* TV series, when Bill Moyers asked Joseph Campbell what myth is, his reply was:

Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

Another mentor of this way was St. Francis of Assisi, author of the oft-quoted devotional prayer that includes the words:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.  
Where there is hate, may I bring love.  
Where offense, may I bring pardon . . .  
Hope, for despair;  
Light, where was darkness;  
Joy to replace sadness. . .  
Help me to learn that in giving I may receive;  
In forgetting self, I may find life eternal.

The third journey, the Journey of Works, is associated with the ST personality. That is, Sensing and Thinking. Again I will list only a few of the eight aspects associated with this path: “1) the foundation of law, covenant, and order; 2) the strong sense of right and importance of righteousness; 3) the sense of responsibility and stewardship; and 4) work itself as life’s aim and fulfillment.”

Examples of this spiritual path date back to the Code of Hammurabi, four millennia ago, and of course the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures. And so it should come as no surprise that one of the classic mentors of this path is Moses, the bringer of the Law that formed the basis of Judaism. In Eastern culture, an early example of the Journey of Works was Confucius, who developed a coherent system for the conduct of life.

In modern religious life, ST’s are typically the institutional caretakers, the administrators, those who maintain an orderly way of doing things, with a heavy stress on responsibility. Other types may accuse ST’s of corrupting the spiritual through overemphasis on practical, secular values. “But ST’s believe the spiritual is useless unless it lends structure and coherence to life.” For them spirit is to be found in orderliness.

The final journey, the Journey of Harmony, is associated with the NF personality. That is, Intuitive and Feeling. Some of its typical manifestations are: “1) the quest toward authentic, actualized selfhood; 2) mystical harmony; 3) social idealism; and 4) focus on process in relationships.”

This journey is perhaps best characterized as an endless, ongoing spiritual quest for greater and more nuanced understanding. As Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: “There is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere.” An example of the notion that the journey itself is of more importance than any possible destination, that process is more important than result.

Two mentors of this way are Rabindranath Tagore, and Jesus of Nazareth. Tagore, an Indian poet and mystic, was active in the Brahmo Samaj, which was sort of a Hindu version of Unitarian Universalism. According to Richardson, “Tagore’s spirituality was lived without ecclesiastical rules and dogma, without an ascetic, otherworldly denial, or even a perfected systematic theology. He affirmed the center of the world at the center of life, [his was] a life-affirming spirituality” In his own words, “The progress of our soul is like a perfect poem. My religion is a poet’s religion.”

And then there was Jesus. His was the way of the poet as well. He tried to convey spiritual and mystical wisdom through the use of metaphor and parable. It’s no wonder some of his Sensing and Thinking followers often had trouble grasping his real meaning, unable to get beyond the literal; or as Joseph Campbell once called it, “getting stuck in the metaphor.” Jesus is not a teacher for the literal-minded. It’s unfortunate that so many of his present-day followers seem to fall into that category.

Whew! That was a lot to process, I know. And I’ve only been able to scratch the surface of what can be a rich area of exploration. There is an adult religious education curriculum based on Richardson’s work that goes much deeper into such an exploration. If there is sufficient interest in such spiritual deepening, I will be willing to facilitate a series of classes based on that curriculum, probably during the second half of the next church year. So if you think you might be interested, please let me know, and I will begin planning and preparing for that. Or if you’d like to pursue this quest on your own, I recommend Richardson’s book, *The Four Spiritualities* as a starting point.

I'd like to give Peter Richardson the final word this morning. He closes his book with these words, under the heading "The Goal of Life":

There can be no final destination. Neither time nor space ends. But life always moves toward its goals, not as a perfection but as the attraction of an ideal. The goals of our Four Spiritualities complement one another, for spirituality is perceived through four lenses we can call the absorption ideal (NT), the compassion ideal (SF), the stewardship ideal (ST), and the fulfillment ideal (NF). To know the One (NT), to be devoted to Oneness in others (SF), to guard and guide the integrity of Oneness in the world (ST), to explore potentials for realization of the One (NF) – all form for us an intimate acquaintance with spiritual reality, the goal of life. Possibilities (N) and particulars (S), love (F) and comprehension (T), become as One. Our native journeys, fully explored, bring us all together in fullest human integrity and kinship.

So may it be.