

## “Spiritual Intelligence”

There are many ways to be intelligent. Some excel musically. Often the very same people show an aptitude for math. Artistic creativity and imagistic thinking flow out of the right hemisphere of the brain, while highly verbal individuals depend more on their left hemisphere. The notion of multiple-intelligences has become part of the cultural and educational mainstream since psychologist Howard Gardner introduced the concept twenty-five years ago. And we're all familiar with characters like “Mr. Data” on Star Trek who may score very high on I.Q. tests but are tone-deaf emotionally or not very savvy when it comes to figuring out other people's motivations. Data might be good at computing coordinates for the warp drive, but Counselor Troy has a good deal more insight into the captain and crew.

The mind is multi-faceted. And so we have different words to describe the various ways of being smart or dumb. A wiseguy isn't necessarily wise, for instance. A person who may be quite slick or sophisticated isn't always deep or profound. The same individual may be gifted in one department but impaired in another, like Olympic champion Michael Phelps who happens to be a genius at swimming but had learning problems as a student in school. Or even more dramatically, consider the case of autistic savants like the character Raymond in the film Rain Man. When Charlie tells his brother that he'll be back to the institution where he lives to visit him in two weeks, Raymond replies, “Course that's 20,160 minutes. 1,290,600 seconds.” Numbers are a snap for Raymond, but ordinary life is just beyond comprehension.

I'm reminded of the stories of “holy fools” that abound in some religious traditions, tales of simple-minded folk who display spiritual powers far beyond the normal range. Leo Tolstoy, for example, wrote a story titled “The Three Hermits,” which he traced back to a legend from the Volga District. There the bishop was sailing one day when a fisherman on the bow of the boat he was aboard pointed toward a small island in the distance. There were holy men living on it, the fisherman said. He'd met them once. Very old, the inhabitants of the island were, and pitifully dressed, one wearing a priest's cassock, another with just a mat tied round his waist, all bearded and looking half wild.

The bishop decides to go ashore to meet these odd fellows, and finds them just as the fisherman said. After greeting them, the bishop demands, “Tell me, what you are doing to save your own souls and how you serve God on this island?” After a few awkward moments silence, the second hermit sighed and looked toward the oldest, the most ancient of the three, who replied, “We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves.”

“But how do you pray to God?” asked the bishop.

“We pray this way,” responded the hermit. “Three are ye, three are we, have mercy on us.” The bishop smiles. Seeing that they at least understand something of the trinity, he takes pity and spends the day teaching the three the proper manner to pray according to the rites of the Russian Orthodox Church. All are slow learners, but with

enough repetition, the three finally master the Lord's Prayer before sundown, and the bishop takes his leave, satisfied that his teaching responsibilities have been fulfilled.

But that night, back aboard the ship, the bishop sees a light far out on the water. It draws closer. What can it be? Finally, the bishop is able to make out the three hermits. "We've forgotten the prayers you taught us," they cry when they draw near. "Please teach us again!" They've run out across the water, as easily as you or I would run across dry land.

Interestingly, the psychologist who fathered the theory of multiple intelligence doubted that such a thing as spiritual intelligence actually existed. Howard Gardner identified seven ways of being smart: logical, musical, linguistic, spatial, bodily, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. He considered spirituality too amorphous and ill-defined to include among these other categories. The author Tolstoy, on the other hand, believed firmly in spiritual enlightenment. Those water-walking hermits, after all, knew something the bishop didn't.

But what exactly did they know? And how did they acquire their learning? Leo Tolstoy himself might be a good illustration or case study of a spiritually intelligent person—as brilliant in his religious insights as in the novels for which he's better known.

He was born into a world of unimaginable wealth and privilege. His family was not just aristocratic, but among the nobility related to the princes and princesses who ruled Russia from Moscow and Petersburg. Tolstoy served in the armies of the tsar early on, but his social position and financial independence enabled him to pursue a literary career, where he quickly achieved both popular and critical acclaim. *War and Peace*, published in his mid thirties, and *Anna Karenina* which followed, vaulted him into the firmament of genius, acknowledged among the great authors of all time.

He savored every success a man might want. He shared his bed with gypsies and courtesans, but also knew the satisfactions of married love and a devoted wife. He tasted the glories and cruelties of war, and experienced the pleasures of drinking and gambling that were a part of military life. Riches and honors were heaped on him. "Very well," he realized by the middle of his life, "you will be more famous than Gogol or Pushkin or Shakespeare or Moliere—and what of it?"

And what of it, indeed? Tolstoy had reached a turning point, a crisis. "I was not fifty," he wrote in his *Confession*. "I loved; I was loved; I had good children, a great estate, fame, health, and moral and physical vigour; I could reap or sow like any peasant; I used to work ten hours at a stretch without fatigue. Suddenly my life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink and sleep. But this was not to live. I had no desires left. I knew there was nothing to desire. I could not even wish to know the truth. The truth was that life is a piece of insanity. I had reached the abyss, and I saw clearly that there was nothing before me but death. I, a fortunate and healthy man, felt that I could not go on living. An irresistible force was urging me to rid myself of life ... I will not say that I wanted to kill myself. The force which was edging me out of life was

something stronger than myself; it was an aspiration, a desire like my old desire for life, but in an inverse sense. I had to humour, to deceive myself, lest I should give way to it too promptly. There I was, a happy man,—and I would hide away a piece of cord lest I should hang myself from the beam that ran between the cupboards of my room, where I was alone every night while I was undressing. I no longer took my gun out for a little shooting, lest I should be tempted.”

Tolstoy had come face to face with his own death. That’s where the spiritual quest often begins. Mortality, the transitory nature of human existence, awareness that the grave swallows name and fame and all the time-bound pleasures of the flesh forces one to grapple with life’s ultimate questions. Other forms of intelligence deal with lesser problems—how to solve an equation, or compose a symphony, or translate a text. Spiritual intelligence, on the other hand, deals with problems that are existential and unavoidable, puzzles that have no logical or technical solutions but that demand answers nonetheless. Like, how should we live? Where do we find hope? Why bother to get up in the morning, knowing that oblivion is the fate that eventually awaits us all?

These were the questions that obsessed Tolstoy in the latter half of his life, and he began his search naturally enough by exploring the teachings of the Church. He was ready enough to receive wisdom and comfort. But he found no solace there. Baptism and communion, the ceremonies and rituals that others took to be the heart and soul of Christianity seemed like empty forms to him. He rejected doctrines like the trinity and rebelled against the miracle stories of the Bible, which seemed foreign to the simple teachings of Jesus. The golden rule was a proposition that didn’t need to be confirmed by wonderworking, Tolstoy asserted, “but the proposition that Christ was God had to be proved by miracles beyond our comprehension,” and the more the original gospel became obscured, the more mystery and mystification the church poured on to maintain its own power and authority.

Tolstoy was eventually excommunicated by the Russian Church. But his criticism of institutional religion was one sign of his penetrating spiritual intellect. Because all of the great reformers and luminaries have been critics of the establishment, from Isaiah and the Buddha to Anne Hutchison and Dorothy Day. They’ve challenged religion that’s become routine or conventional or merely a prop for maintaining business as usual. When Isaiah asked that justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream, he was protesting a temple cult that had reduced religion to a feeble trickle of petty rules and ceremonial observances. He was calling for an opening of the floodgates of the spirit.

When those gates open, when the meager dribble of official sanctimony is inundated by the great ocean of truth, life is transformed, as it was for Tolstoy. His mind-altering insight was the same insight shared by mystics and prophets of all races. It sounds to some like a platitude—it strikes others as incomprehensible, just as Einstein’s theories are incomprehensible to all but a gifted few. Those who lack all sense of pitch and rhythm can never understand the power of music. For those without spatial appreciation, architecture is a closed book. But for those with ears to hear, with the

right kind of intelligence, the message that Jesus taught and Tolstoy, too, is like the key to a complex cipher, the blueprint for an immense cathedral, the score of a beautiful oratorio. The message is that all men are brothers, and all women sisters, and all creatures worthy of our reverence. The message is that interdependence is the reality while separateness is the illusion. The message is compassion. The message is non-violence. Resist not evil. Judge not. If your brother hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink. The message is that one's own life makes sense only when its energy is spent on behalf of all life. The message is love.

Tolstoy devoted the rest of his life to spreading that message, preaching pacifism and vegetarianism, living humbly with the fewest possible luxuries, corresponding with figures like Mohandas Gandhi, who was an unknown barrister in South Africa when he first read the Russian author's advocacy of passive resistance and became a convert to the cause. Tolstoy was the Solzhenitsyn of his day—the conscience of his nation—calling attention to the plight of workers and farmers and the excesses of a few that condemned the many to lives of poverty and desperation. He saw loving kindness as the core of every religion, as he wrote, “preached by all the sages of the world: Krishna, Buddha, Lao-Tse, Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and among the moderns, Rousseau, Pascal, Kant, Emerson, Channing, and many others. Truth, moral and religious,” he proclaimed, “is everywhere and always the same.”

For statements like this, Tolstoy was ridiculed by many who had admired his earlier writing, by the urbane and cosmopolitan. Regarded as a heretic by the orthodox, and as a bore by those who considered his principles tedious, Tolstoy could no more be silenced than a flame could exist without burning.

And what does it mean for us? For our congregation, for each of us as individuals, who try to live good lives, but are sometimes unsure what “the good life” even means?

Our task surely is to acknowledge this kind of inspired intellect, to cultivate it within ourselves and in our own community. Our religious heritage, after all, has always valued education, critical thinking, and the life of the mind. Part of our mission as Unitarian Universalists is to show both that faith can be intelligent and that intelligence can be faithful. To face the facts of life and death forthrightly, to be mindful of life's brevity, to ask the hard questions, not to settle for a religion that's merely convenient or conventional, but to ask for an outpouring of spirit that can change hearts and change the world—this is the reason for our being here together as seekers on the spiritual path. We live but once. Eternity stretches all around. How then should we spend this short interval, this precious opportunity, this never-to-be repeated lifetime? Surely it takes a special kind of intelligence, a heightened condition of realization, to answer that question rightly.