

BEYOND SPIRITUAL BYPASS

There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. - Carl Jung

Psychologist and Buddhist John Welwood coined the term "spiritual bypass" for the use of spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences to avoid genuine contact with psychological unfinished business. It is the ego's attempt to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it. In his words,

Involvement in spiritual teachings and practices can become a way to rationalize and reinforce old defenses. . . . Many of the "perils of the path" . . . result from trying to use spirituality to shore up developmental deficiencies.

In this bypass the conditioned self convinces us that we must attempt to exhibit "higher" qualities, and cover up fear, pain, shame, or rage. It is based on the assumption that we must "rise above" difficult feelings and wrap our pretense in spiritual or psychological concepts. So making a virtue of being detached makes us feel better than facing the fact that we have unresolved issues around intimacy. Covering co-dependency by imagining ourselves as "selfless and giving" ennobles manipulative actions.



Perhaps you have experienced someone at a funeral who believes it is helpful to get people to look on the bright side - "she's in a better place now" "don't let this get you down" "don't be upset, everything happens for reasons." This looks like encouragement and support, but it actually is based on a belief that we should not grieve, or be upset, or afraid, no matter what the circumstances. Aside from being unrealistic, it also aborts the natural processes of grieving and mourning that, in their own way, inform us and bring us depth and wisdom. Psychologist Ingrid Mathieu says,

The shorthand for spiritual bypass is when a person wears a mask or presents a false spiritual self that represses aspects of that person's true self. Spiritual bypass involves bolstering our defenses rather than our humility. Bypass involves grasping rather than gratitude, arriving rather than being, avoiding rather than accepting.

It's a useful context, one I encounter often in working with clients, "I know I should be grateful, there are others who are worse off, I shouldn't feel so angry..." And I also notice that it is not limited to spiritual practice - those uninterested in religion or spirituality, or those who are atheists, can use the same bypass - the god that they worship is not a religious one, but the all powerful conditioned mind; i.e, the way we think we are "supposed" to be. Ingrid continues,

Sometimes emotional sobriety is about tolerating what you are feeling. It is about staying sober no matter what you are feeling. It means that you don't have to blame yourself because life can be challenging. It means that you don't necessarily need to do something to make the feeling go away. Many people will take their bad feeling and try to pray it, meditate it, service it, spiritually distract themselves from it, thinking that this means they are working a good program. This experience is actually called spiritual bypass.



I recently watched an interview with Mike Tyson in which he was easily able to discuss many difficult aspects of his life; however, when it came to addressing the accidental death of his young daughter he visibly struggled to contain the pain and guilt he carried. He terminated the interview, saying "I gotta grow up. I gotta be tough. I gotta be a man. I gotta move on". This is a man whose whole life was about being tough and strong, which was useful in the context of a boxing career, but was preventing him from contacting and experiencing the pain he was carrying so it could begin to heal. "I gotta be tough" in this context is a psychological bypass - denying what we are actually experiencing in service to a concept of how we are "supposed" to be.

What we are pointing to is the ability to be with and navigate through our feeling states, neither repressing nor acting them out. In this way we allow emotional intelligence to bring us clarity and understanding. We are able to remain in the present moment - awakened consciousness - and not be run by mental beliefs - conditioned consciousness. Ingrid concludes,

I believe that emotional sobriety is less about the quality of the feeling ("good" or "bad") and more about the general ability to feel one's feelings. Being restored to sanity isn't about getting the brass ring—or cash and prizes—or being "happy, joyous, and free" all the time, but it is about being in the present moment, whatever it happens to look like.

