



IN SEARCH OF A SECULAR SPIRITUALITY

Coach, supervisor and interfaith minister **Jackee Holder** charts the development of her personal relationship with spirituality, and says her clients are becoming increasingly open to spiritual journeys – whether secular or religious.

Sometimes coaching clients surprise me in a really good way with what they are thinking and feeling. Often what is revealed when I am caught off-guard is deeply meaningful and beyond my wildest expectations. The richness of a client's 'lightbulb moment' can happen in an instant which, when explored, speaks volumes.

'Katherine' often arrived at our sessions weary and tired. She worked in a demanding role which required her full attention and an enormous amount of day-to-day skill. It was the sort of job where you had to keep your eye on the ball and manage a web of complex expectations from a client list as well as colleagues. Katherine was also raising a young family, holding everything together at work and at home.

During our first conversation she came across as tentative and unsure of the value of the coaching space. I wasn't convinced she was ready for coaching but, as I leaned in and listened to the preciseness of her language, her carefully chosen words filled the space between us with thoughtful conversation accompanied by long pauses. It wasn't long before we found ourselves falling into

more relaxed conversation as she shared her career journey.

Our sessions were conducted via telephone and I think that really made a difference to the warmth that opened up between us. I imagined her on the other end of the phone finding her voice, spilling thoughtful words into the air space between us, unearthing longings and dreams she'd not given voice to for some time. I could feel the weight of her finding its sound, its echo, its resonance through the softer and lighter tones of her voice, as our conversation expanded into her talking more about the aspects of her work she enjoyed and the areas of her role that felt flat. She took her time and did not rush to respond to the questions I posed. Slowing down became the norm; simply seeing what was there between us. I took all of this as a sign that this was becoming a space Katherine truly valued.

By the middle of our time working together, Katherine would open the conversation by asking me how I was doing. I felt this was part of an unspoken communication embedded in some cultures, a way of saying 'I see you' and 'I hear you'. I always felt touched by this

moment, moved by the care she used to inquire after my wellbeing. To see – really see – a person is a way of seeing the person's essence or spirit in many traditional cultures.

Katherine began to talk about how she craves quiet in the morning and what she does to savour this time in her day. I get to know many of the more intimate and spiritual aspects of my clients when they share the rituals, customs and ceremonies that are part of the landscape of their everyday lives. In Katherine, here was a busy mum working full-time who carved out a spiritual space at the start of her day, a day otherwise crammed full of meeting other people's needs.

When she finished, she turned to me and said: 'Thank you for giving me the space and permission to talk about the spiritual. I am religious and faith is a good word for me. Our conversations have put a lot in perspective and I am really connecting that I am not on my own and there is a bigger purpose.'

Such was the power embedded in a daily ritual of lighting candles followed by repeating aloud a prayer or blessing. She was not wedded to either, but instead found the simple act of showing up in this way intensified the calmness of this early morning moment.

A sacred moment for Katherine, personal and quiet, without fanfare – as spiritual moments that occur in our homes, in our lived environments, often are. Katherine did not need a church, a mosque or a temple. Her cathedral was inside her home, readily available and open whenever she wanted to enter.

I was raised in the black Pentecostal church in the 1960s and 1970s. My parents' Christian faith helped them navigate the racial injustices of London life as immigrants to the UK as part of the Windrush era. But even as a young child my faith wavered. I could not feel the rush of joy and peace the adults around me seemed to absorb as we sat every Sunday on the wooden pews of Fentiman Road church in Vauxhall.

I grew up in an area of south London that was once home to the Great North Wood. This part of London is bulging with parks and green spaces that my siblings and I had open access to growing up. But even closer to home, behind a high brick wall in our garden, was a tiny gap through which we could access acres of green space, where we would spend countless hours playing. Nature was never far away growing up and I took it for granted.

University life and the passage of teenage years and young adulthood sent my relationship with nature underground. I became obsessed with grades, essays, boyfriends and partying. It was during my late thirties, when I experienced my own existential crisis, that I experienced a resurgence in my connection with nature, the land and most vividly with trees.

When I started paying attention to trees in my local area I found myself so much more at ease than I ever felt in church. The African-American writer Alice Walker captures this experience best: 'I understood at a very early age that in nature I felt everything I should feel in church but never did. Walking in the woods, I felt in touch with the universe and with the spirit of the universe.'¹

For many individuals, the definition of spirituality can be as diverse as the different species of trees that populate the UK.

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FINDING MY FEET

Personally, spirituality was not alive and engaged in my earlier experiences of religion and the Christian church. As a young adult I set out on a mission to achieve more of a spiritual life, explored through a number of transformational personal development processes, including a period spent in the global Re-evaluation of Co-Counselling Community founded by Harvey Jackins from the USA, and the black liberation work of Barbara Love. Back here in the UK there was my personal engagement as a liberal black activist working in youth and community work and women's empowerment.

This grounding in appreciation of my culture and blackness had a deep and lasting impact on my evolving spirituality. I felt a kinship to the ancestral rituals and customs of many of the African cultural traditions, from the Yoruba people from Nigeria to the Akan people from Ghana. I was drawn to the ancestral Earth rituals rooted in the pouring libation, a gratitude practice of honouring Mother Earth by pouring water onto the Earth and thanking those who have gone before us, our ancestors. Carnivals, from the Caribbean to London's Notting Hill, are all descendants of the ancient Earth and festivals that celebrated the crops and harvests of the land.

Like trees my spirituality found its roots, both through a conscious appreciation of my own history and culture and even more importantly through my feet. Walking is my medicine. I can set out to walk with a knotty problem on my mind and by the end of my walk I find myself asking myself what the problem all about. London is a very green city; roughly 47% of Greater London is 'green'. I see nature everywhere I walk. From the plant life bulging in front gardens to the cherry blossom trees which herald spring, to the diverse forest of street trees: I do not need to leave the city and head to the countryside to feel a sense of wonder and awe. The city street trees I saunter past weekly bring the forest and the woods to me. I have found over the years a great comfort in nature.

My own story with nature picks up pace in my mid-30s. I had by default begun making a daily pilgrimage to a mature oak tree residing in my local park in south London. There, under the labyrinth of stout branches, flush with jade green leaves that did not fall I experienced daily a screen of intense quiet, pockets of peace and moments of calm. At the time I had just started seminary training and would find myself performing an Earth-based body prayer under the tree's magnificent canopy. This wasn't a church but it felt like a cathedral. I imagined myself feeling similar to what pilgrims from around the world are seeking on route to sites like Mecca, Chartres or the Camino de Santiago.

When I was in the company of the evergreen holm oak tree I began to realise how much I craved silence, a longing not only to hear my own thoughts but to know them. In the Celtic tradition, known for its reverence of trees and nature, the oak tree holds a spiritual essence. It is believed that the oak’s root system expands as widely as the tree’s presence above ground. This speaks metaphorically to the oak’s spiritual inner life. Back then I felt that the oak invoked mine.

My tree pilgrimage was a life-force like no other. I was well on the way into a clinical depression but those daily tree visits showed me that there was a bigger universe at play for which I had a deep reverence and gratitude.

During this time, the oak tree’s steadfastness helped me to anchor myself, take root in the turbulence. The tree’s sturdiness reminded me to steady myself, and in that steadiness I remembered strengths I had long forgotten. I was drawn to the wildness of the tree’s presence, which enabled me to make connections with the wilder, more primal elements of myself. I didn’t have to travel far to find a holy place on my doorstep. The nature writer Chelsea Steinauer-Schudder confirms this in her description of what makes a place holy: ‘A holy place is simply that which brings you in relationship with what is greater, more expansive than yourself.’ⁱⁱ

Many writers before me have understood the importance and value of a lone pilgrimage to a tree. The writer and naturalist Henry David Thoreau is well-known for a similar practice of walking six or eight miles through deep snow to keep an appointment with a beech tree, or a yellow birch or an old acquaintance among the pines.ⁱⁱⁱ

What I came to recognise and value was that when I am in the company of the oak tree I named Sanctuary, I knew parts of myself in ways that I do not know of in other spaces. In the outside air, elements of my higher self seemed naturally to come out of hiding. The tree’s presence evoked a feeling of both largeness and smallness. In its presence I was reminded of how small I was in a universe so large. This was in essence signs of the presence of the transpersonal at play.

Nature has certainly had more attention off the back of the triple pandemic: the Covid-19 health crisis, the global consciousness raising of the Black Lives Matter movement and finally a greater awareness of the impact of the worldwide environmental climate crisis. The triple pandemic has been devastating, yet at the same time many people have been forced to turn inwards as the outside world caved in around them.

Even where people have tended to be cautious about the use of the word spirituality, I have found so many of my conversations over the last eighteen months have gone right to the topic, rather than sidestep it.

In one coaching session I listened as the client recounted intricate details about a friend’s funeral service. I could smell the waft of smoke from the incense surging out of the holes lining the gold-plated coffers as the priests waved them up and down the aisle of the church. Suddenly the whole scene took on a bigger presence as the client described how bittersweet it was to listen to the scriptures and the service read in a different mother tongue, which brought a searing comfort to the sadness they were feeling in every bone.

The client’s connection with the senses, though simple, was transformative in the moment. We both knew as we sat in reverence

of the words and silence that occupied the space between us that something deep and profound was being witnessed. Leaning forward, the client quietly whispered: ‘Can I share with you what faith means to me?’

Personally I found nature to be as easy an accessor to the spiritual dimensions of my life 20 years ago as I do today. Eco-psychotherapist Theodore Rozak describes how ‘nature is the matrix through which we experience our most natural and alive self.’^{iv} I began noticing how, whenever coachees brought up the topic of nature in the conversation, it led to a deeper, more alive engagement with the self. Eventually this reverence for the spirit of nature led to me curating a collection of nature-based coaching questions.

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IN COACHING

The nature writer Robert Macfarlane suggests a connection between nature and spirituality: ‘I have long been fascinated by how people understand themselves using landscape, by the topographies of the self we carry within us and by the maps we make with which to navigate these interior terrains... For some time now it has seemed to me that the two questions we should ask of any strong landscape are these: firstly, what do I know when I’m in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?’^v

Take these questions into your own reflective practice. Then share them when you feel ready with clients.

I have introduced Macfarlane’s inquiry into CPD training for coaches and supervisors, and it is now included in the collection of 49 nature-inspired questions in the Inner and Outer Nature self-discovery card deck. Ronen Berger argues on the subject of nature: ‘It can connect clients to a feeling of inner power and authenticity by enabling them to develop and express important personal qualities. It can help people strengthen the mind-body connection, reach higher levels of consciousness, and widen their spiritual connections and guidance.’^{vi}

I have found that coaches and supervisors can transform in front of my eyes when speaking of past and present relationships with nature. An experienced practitioner arrived at the coaching session distraught. The presenting issues included a series of family health problems which were the cause of enormous stress. For several minutes the coachee was verbally entangled with the sheer weight of the strain she was under. I enquired about the one place in her life she believed she had control over, where she could give herself

a moment of peace and quiet. Her eyes lit up, she lifted her head and slowly began to tell me about her love for her garden. We were unable to resolve her life-threatening issues that day but she was able to reclaim a piece of her world where she knew she could access the calm she needed to slow down her racing thoughts and mind.

In many texts I have located passages where the writer has used their relationships with trees and nature to punctuate spiritual moments of transformation in their lives. Reading a recent memoir by the writer and activist Eve Ensler, I discover how a tree outside her hospital window becomes a spiritual symbol for her journey with cancer. She recounts how, aged 22, as she escaped from her childhood home in Vermont towards Manhattan she had declared: ‘I never want to see another tree.’ Back then Ensler hated trees as they reminded her too much of the small town where she grew up. She had turned her back on anything associated with nature.^{viii}

Her cancer diagnosis caused her to confront a traumatic childhood but also her relationship with the Earth. Now with the view of the tree from her hospital window she begins to really see the tree and remembers a forest of specific trees that mark pivotal moments from her past. ‘The weeping willow at the bottom of her driveway in Scarsdale, madly shedding in the fall, making a shimmering bed of soft white lime leaves, the majestic pines in Croatia by the sea... the single tree in the middle of the Mara in Kenya. The lonely solitary tree that I first sat under with a beaded Masai mother who had stopped the practice of female genital mutilation on her daughter.’ In time she describes the tree as becoming her friend, a vital connection, a life-affirming meditation and her new reason to live.

I hope this essay helps you give voice to your own definition of what spirituality means to you, so that more coaches feel confident to open up conversations with clients about what the word ‘spirituality’ means to them.

For me, the best definition of a secular spirituality comes from Rue Mapp, the African-American founder of OutdoorAfro, who captures the essence of how I feel when I am connected to trees and nature. I step away from the prejudice, discrimination, the stress, the busyness and the weight of identities when in nature. In Rue’s words: ‘The trees don’t know what colour I am. The birds don’t know what gender I am. The flowers don’t know how much money I have in my bank account. I can rely on nature to be the equaliser for us so that we can shed that weight.’^{xiii}

This is an environmental geography I can relate to.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jackee is the author of four non-fiction titles, *49 Ways To Write Yourself Well*, *Be Your Own Best Life Coach*, *Soul Purpose* and a unique illustrated writing map, *Writing With Fabulous Trees: A Writing Map For Parks, Gardens and Other Green Spaces* (2016) – along with a new *Writing Map: ReWilding The Page* due out in July 2021. Jackee works as a leadership coach and facilitator and was ordained as an interfaith minister in 2001. Her first and second loves are daily city walks and journaling.

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