

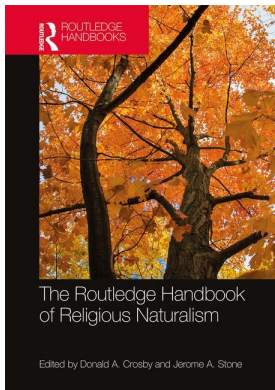
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 28 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism**

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### **Naturalistic Spirituality as a Practice**

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315228907-31>

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**Published online on: 01 Feb 2018**

**How to cite :-** Daniel T. Strain. 01 Feb 2018, *Naturalistic Spirituality as a Practice from: The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism* Routledge

Accessed on: 28 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315228907-31>

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## 30

# NATURALISTIC SPIRITUALITY AS A PRACTICE

*Daniel T. Strain*

I wake up in the morning and go downstairs. There is a small closet beneath the staircase. I open it and enter. Inside, a string of white Christmas lights illuminates. There are tapestries and decorative sheets on the walls and the low sloped ceiling. One is from Tibet, given to me by a friend. The other I found at a local shop. It has the image of a tree with branches in a complex interlaced design.

I sit down on a cushion on the floor. In front of me is a small wooden box, about nine or ten inches tall. Upon the box is a red cloth, and on top of that are several items, creating an altar. One of the items is a statuette of the Buddha I obtained from a curiosity shop near my home. Another is a small bust of Socrates I purchased on a trip to Athens, but was probably made in China. Other items include a glass sculpture of the Bodhisattva Quan Yin,<sup>1</sup> a glass candle holder with pagan artwork, a rosary I got in the Vatican gift shop, a brass bowl with a wooden striking stick, and a small box of sand with St. Francis of Assisi with a bird engraved upon it. There is also a tiny, smooth oval-shaped stone.

I place my hands together, finger tips pointing up. I bow toward the altar and say, “The way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”<sup>2</sup> Then I open a case and take out some matches and a stick of incense. I strike the match and use it to light the candle. As I light the candle, I say, “This world, no one of gods or men has made, is an ever-living fire. It’s kindling exchanges, judging and convicting all things.”<sup>3</sup>

Then I hold the stick of incense over the candle flame. Once it catches I gently blow out the flame on the incense so it still glows and smokes. It smells of sandalwood. I then place the stick in the box of sand upright so it continues to burn.

Next, I activate a timer and pick up the striking stick. As I gently tap the bowl, it releases a smooth gong. I return the stick and close my eyes as the gong oscillates and slowly fades. Then I sit without motion in silence for 20 minutes. When I am finished, I blow out the candle and say, “As the death of fire is the birth of air, so too is wantonness extinguished.”<sup>4</sup>

I am an atheist.

I am also a skeptic, a Humanist, a Buddhist, a Stoic, and a few other things. I have been an active founder, organizer, and leader in several secular and humanist organizations. I have no supernatural or paranormal beliefs. I am neither confused, discontent, indecisive, wishy-washy, nor a believer wanna-be. Although I fit the definition of *atheist*, I would almost never consider it

a fitting term for what's important for who I am. If asked, my first response would be that I am a Spiritual Naturalist.

I have been meditating for over ten years now, along with various other practices. Over that time, I have seen my mental disposition change radically. My very personality has shifted and my life experience has been altered (I would say improved). I am by no means any kind of master or guru, and still have much to learn and explore. But I have seen enough to have become a true believer in something that it took me a long time to really *get*.

Back when I was *only* a secular humanist, I remember seeing some examples of secular people engaging in ritual. There is a close and historical relationship between the Humanist movement and the Unitarians (Wilson 1995: 5). Occasionally attending UU services, I would see people engaged in singing, lighting candles, and so on. The experience always felt hollow to me; like *empty theater*. It seemed to be a kind of “me too-ism,” like an extraneous “show” being put on for appearances. I think it likely that some readers who have read about my morning in this essay would find it similarly hollow to perform the same actions.

Yet, for me, everything I have done on the morning described above had a concrete purpose and a specific function particular to the aims and efforts of my practice. Hopefully, I will be able to convey some of how this can work for a naturalist.

### About *spirituality*

*Religion* is a tricky word. Surely, Religious Naturalists mean *religion* in its best sense. That is, a tradition, body of knowledge, community, and practices—those things that promote our current understanding of the world and our place in it, as well as our values, wisdom, meaning, and inspiration. *Spirituality* is another matter. Though spiritual community and communal practices are a healthy part, spirituality is mainly about our *inner* experience and development and practices. Religion cannot manifest in its finest form unless its people have spirituality. Without that, religion becomes an institutional, bureaucratic, or even dogmatic endeavor—even when it is a naturalistic religion. Thus, it is possible for one to be spiritual without being religious. But, if we mean *religion* in its proper sense, it is impossible to be truly religious without being spiritual.

For naturalists, the *spirit* of a thing refers to the *essence* of that thing—its essential nature. For example, “the spirit of the law” is the essential aspect of that law: its central intent. Likewise, spirituality is about focusing intentionally on the essential things of life rather than an unexamined life engrossed in the mundane. The essential aspect of human beings is our consciousness and our experience. Thus, focusing on the essential things of a human life includes our consciousness, wisdom, and awareness.

This meaning of *spirituality*, by the way, is no less true for supernaturalists. It is simply that their worldview leads them to believe supernatural things are of the essence, and so their majority number has created an overly particular popular understanding of what *spirituality* means.

### Why practice?

Many Religious Naturalists are inspired and moved by things like the eloquent words of Carl Sagan. He was a true treasure to humanity in many ways (scientifically, educationally, popularly, etc.). Sagan was especially gifted in giving people a glimpse of what it is like to have a religious experience in response to the wonders of the natural universe, perhaps even helping them toward such experiences. There are many other gifted communicators like this whose work is to be respected and admired.

Unfortunately, many of us may not be aware of the adventure of a lifetime to which such inspiring works call us. Many of us stop at the doorstep of awe. But appreciation and awe before the majesty of nature is just the invitation—the beginning, not the end. If we frame the invitation and place it on our wall without responding to it, we miss the chance to move from being “an enthusiast of spiritual and religious naturalism” to becoming “a practitioner of it.”

Ultimately, the purpose of a spiritual *practice* is a more flourishing and fulfilled life. This is a life of greater equanimity, peace, contentment, joy, and thriving. The ancient Greeks called it *eudaimonia*—or “healthy soul” (Thomson 2016: 161). Today we are too quick to run to surgery, drugs, consumerism, and entertainment to cure what troubles us. But this kind of flourishing is the *natural* result of a character that is compatible with its own nature and the nature of its world.

Practice is about conditioning the character to that end. This is why it is so often described as a *path*. But such a journey cannot be made by the intellectual subset of the human mind alone. All of it must step together. As rational naturalists we cannot abide the *irrational*, but as religious and spiritual naturalists, we must embrace the *a-rational*.

### The trap of belief

One of the things I had to learn early on was the very limited usefulness of beliefs as the definer of a tradition or approach to life. In the conservative Christianity of my upbringing, primary importance was placed on whether or not one *believed* a certain set of things. Merely the sincerely held belief and acceptance of these claims were enough to save one’s soul. Accepting on faith the supernatural nature of Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior would activate one’s ticket to heaven. All of the good deeds or ethics of Jesus were seen as something that would become manifest later, as a result of the Holy Spirit entering one’s heart when saved.<sup>5</sup>

Years later I would leave that faith and come to Humanism. But as a fish is blind to water, I did not realize that we were all stuck in the same paradigm. We approached Humanism as a list of beliefs. In the Humanist Manifestos we could hold up a list of opinions about things and say, “because I agree with and believe these things, I am a Humanist.” Sure, the list was rational, evidence-based, and in every way more reasonable than the list of positions that the Christians I grew up with believed made them Christians. And, to be fair, one does have to live in compatibility with the principles in order that the proclamation of agreement be honest. But both Christians and Humanists identify themselves, like taking up a team flag, by the list of opinions with which they agreed. This approach was so ubiquitous that it never occurred to me to question it.

It was only when my interest in philosophy led me to Marcus Aurelius, and then to the rest of the Stoics, that I begin to see another approach. Especially after my study led me on to Buddhism and Taoism, I came to see the alternative of *starting with practice*. We call both Buddhism and Christianity *religions*, and that they are. But far more importantly, Buddhism and Stoicism are firstly *pragmatic practices one employs for a purpose*.<sup>6</sup> They are not so much about allegiances to a set of opinions or beliefs. The Stoics value skeptical inquiry, and the Buddhists have a specific teaching (*sutra*) on not accepting claims on the basis of authority or scripture (Batchelor 2010: 98).

Certainly, we want our beliefs to be rational and true. They inform our path, and irrational beliefs in spiritual traditions have led to countless evils and tragedies. But if we focus on good practice, then wise and true beliefs will tend to flourish from them.

One of those practices is humility, historically associated with the spiritual person for good reason. Humility can let us focus on how we treat others first. It can allow us to stay mindful that none of us in the world has the exclusive keys to Truth. The reality is that we small organisms

crawling around this speck of cosmic dust have very little chance of conceiving of the ultimate cause and nature of reality at its root—or even to know if we ever stumbled upon it. What matters first is *how we live* and *how we love* one another. What a fine thing it would be, to have the privilege of quibbling over our little cosmological speculations (and our little rejections of them) endlessly while enjoying tea together in loving friendship and respectful peace. We can get there by beginning first with our own personal practice.

### Transformation and subjective experience

Once I was listening to a religious (conservative American Catholic) talk-radio program. There was plenty on this program that I found objectionable, but I try to stay informed about other points of view. There were also some admirable things at times. At one point, an elderly Catholic woman called into the program. She spoke of her nightly routine. She said that every night she knelt beside her bed and prayed. In her prayer, she went through the people in her life and prayed to God for their well-being, happiness, and relief from the problems facing them. She then moved to others in the world and prayed for peace and relief from suffering. The younger Humanist in me would have admired the woman's good intentions but found this an unfortunate waste of time coming from baseless superstition. I might have snipped that she should focus more on helping them directly.

It is true that superstition can be harmful—for example, praying for healing while neglecting rational courses of action. It is also true that I still today have no belief that her messages were reaching any other entity or affecting the realities of the world directly. But now a new kind of thought entered my mind about this.

Her methodical movement from her family, to friends, acquaintances, and others reminded me of the Buddhist practice of loving-kindness meditation, which follows the same process. In these meditations, however, the goal is transforming ourselves to be more compassionate.

So I wondered to myself what profound effect must these kinds of nightly prayers have on this woman's sense of empathy, her kindness, and compassion? As she moves throughout her day and interacts with others, or makes decisions about what kinds of things she spends time on, how must such a regular practice shape her natural reactions and responses? And, in the life of the typical atheist or secular humanist, what could possibly compare to such an intense and regular practice?

Spiritual practice is a process of *spiritual transformation*. That is, the transformation of our essential nature. If you wonder whether such deep transformation is possible, consider that you are already the product of it. No doubt, if you think back to yourself as a child, or other ages between, you will notice something. While you may have many memories of events in your childhood, it is almost as if that was some other person whose memories have been injected into your mind. You are a different person than you were as a child. Your knowledge was different to be sure. But more importantly, *how* you thought, how you weighed things up, how you responded to various stimuli, what kind of things you loved or hated, and how you reacted to those things, were all different. This kind of transformation takes more than mere knowledge. It takes visceral experiences that make certain truths stingingly real to us on a deeper, more intuitive level over time. This is why an older person cannot simply sit a younger one down and tell them what they need to know to be wise.

The natural course of life provides experiences that mold us and shape our character over time. If we are lucky, some of those experiences have led us to wisdom or insight (through no

virtue of our own, my wife calls these gifts of the cosmos *grace*). When we undertake a spiritual practice, this is grabbing the reins of our experiences to mold ourselves in a conscious and deliberative way. If life's experiences are the "natural selection" of our character traits, then our spiritual practice is the selective breeding of them. In a practice, we are engineering subjective experiences designed to cultivate certain perspectives and habits of thought.

We have all had the experience of being distressed about something, only to be soothed by a wise passage or bit of advice that reminds us of something we already knew. But if we knew it, why did we not react to it as such in the moment? This is because intellectual assent to a concept is not enough. True knowledge is not simple absorption and assent to data—it is a deep knowing that becomes intuitive. When we are wise, we do not need to be reminded of how we should have felt or reacted to a situation after the fact, by seeking out philosophy, advice, and teachings. Rather, our character has been transformed so that it is consistent with the wise teachings, and our natural, effortless response is in accord with that wisdom.

Because the aim of practice (flourishing/well-being/deep happiness) is a subjective experience, we must accept the importance of subjective experience in building a practice. Spiritual practice, then, involves the engineering of subjective experiences that stimulate many parts of our mind in different ways. If they are appropriately designed and executed, they get us involved and caught up in them emotionally, intellectually, creatively, and so on. This is how the intellectual becomes intuitive and begins to shape who we are and what we can be.

### Exploring naturalistic spiritual practice

So where to begin? What constitutes an individual exercise in our practice? From what sources do we pull? Spiritual and Religious Naturalists today are facing a still-new world of access to the histories and teachings of cultures everywhere throughout history. We also have access to more scientific knowledge about human well-being, behavior, psychology, and more. All of this creates wonderful opportunities. Further, we naturalists stand at the beginning of a new movement to rediscover the sacred in the natural. This movement is just starting to make its way in building its own traditions. For practitioners such as us, *the primary spiritual practice is the very building of our personal practice itself*. A big part of what I've learned in my exploration has been how and why I got that initial feeling of empty theater regarding ritual, and how to avoid wasting my time with it. I eventually learned how to build a practice that really did connect with me, engross and move me, and thus have a significant transformative effect.

Many people faced with considering their practice will mention things like how they already enjoy taking a walk on the beach or listening to music. They consider that to be their practice. These things are wonderful and make excellent components to a practice. However, I would invite you to push yourself beyond your comfort level; not for its own sake, but in ways that might be more productive. A spiritual practice is not merely "what we do to blow off steam" or relieve stress. Some parts of our practice should be challenging or even difficult. When we go to the gym to sculpt our bodies, we cannot spend all our time in the hot tub. Likewise, if we want to sculpt our character, we should expect some practices to require great effort.

Some may seek to get very deeply into one tradition, and others may prefer their own personal "cocktail" of features and interpretations. After founding the Spiritual Naturalist Society, I have been fortunate to have met naturalists within many different schools and traditions, including naturalistic pagans, Jews, Buddhists, Stoics, and even Christians.

In order to discover helpful teachings and practices, it is necessary to have a confidence in yourself. Some act as if, were they to be too open-minded, they might forget the principles they already recognize as naturalists (reason, logic, the value of evidence for forming positions, and so on). But your intellect and memory are more resilient than you think. It is possible to be open, refrain from judgment for a time, and have a tolerance for phrasings or interpretations that don't jive with your worldview, without falling off the deep end. As such, you will begin to spot profound ideas about how to think about the world that are compatible with and useful to a naturalist. You can place yourself in other shoes and roles, and return back to your hard empiricism to begin thinking about how to reconcile them in meaningful ways with your beliefs and practices. You will find this kind of exploration to be more rich, interesting, and insightful than trying to reinvent the wheel. While there are many new discoveries in science that should be incorporated into our practice or checked against it, you will find that thousands of years of deep thinking have produced some immensely powerful practices.

### The practices

The most prominent practice you are likely to hear about is meditation. There are many kinds of meditation, not all of them compatible with naturalism. The most basic, and yet perhaps the most crucial and foundational, is mindfulness meditation, or breathing meditation. I and others at the Spiritual Naturalist Society have written some helpful guides on this (see "Further reading"). The important point here is that mindfulness meditation is a practice that can help you develop your ability to still the mind, to direct your attention at will with a more concentrated focus, and to stay aware of your inner mental activities as they arise. These skills you will find essential to keeping and maintaining many other spiritual practices. Without them, you will say you want to incorporate certain thinking habits or reactions into your daily life, but will find yourself forgetting or veering. Mindfulness meditation is not closing your eyes and relaxing, however. Meditation is work and requires diligence and effort to build mental discipline, but eventually you will come to see how it plays a role throughout your life.

If you just want to engage in meditation for a while, that is perfectly fine; yet it would be a mistake to settle for "atheism + meditation." There are *many* other practices naturalists will find important and helpful. Another practice I often include is daily journaling about how I am doing in my intended development so as to stay mindful of where I am and the good wisdom I am seeking to habituate. Other practices might include occasional kinds of dance, music, drumming, and the kinds of ritual I described at the beginning of this essay.

If you want to design a ritual, begin with considering what kind of wise concepts you want to incorporate more into your character. Then look for writing, poetry, music, art, or other content that *moves you* and centers on these ideas. Think about what it is in that work that moves you and why it moves you so. Really try to dissect yourself here. Then you can begin to see how you might create a ritual that incorporates moving and meaningful imagery, sounds, readings, or other experiences to make you fully appreciate the truth of these ideas.

If you find yourself going through the motions of a ritual and you aren't *grabbed* by it or fully and un-self-consciously lost in that moment, then stop and think about why that is. It is being moved that deeply instills concepts. This is why artists can sometimes help move society in ways that simple explanations cannot. They can help people to *get* an idea deep down. This is what ritual is about. Of course, you won't be able to maintain the same level of emotional involvement every time, especially if the ritual is performed as part of your daily or regular practice. But

if it connects with you personally, then the repeated practice of it serves as a daily reminder to keep you in the mindset you desire as you go about your day.

Remember that not all practices take place in sectioned off time periods and places. Some practices are a commitment to do certain things in your life a different way. Trying to smile more, trying to open up more to people, having a more compassionate demeanor, remembering to be patient, not getting angry—all of these things and more are a part of your practice, and call for the kind of mindfulness developed by meditation.

I mentioned my altar and described the things on it. You do not have to have an altar. But I use it to visually remind myself of the teachings and sources of my practice. It also helps to create a psychological sense of *sacred space*, which helps to put me into a certain mindset conducive to a focused experience (no thinking about laundry while meditating).

There are many ways to create a sense of the sacred in your practice, and this sense is extremely helpful. *Sacred* means “set apart.” It is important for conditioning the mind to have times in our practice where our attention is focused and not full of distraction. We set aside certain principles, values, ethics, philosophies, and other teachings as being especially important to us. We also set aside physical space for these. We set aside time to engage in ritual, practice, experience, and so on. All of this setting aside is the act of creating a sense of the sacred in our practice. If you wonder whether this is relevant to you, think about the last time you read a book or saw a film and were moved deeply by something profound. That may give you a clue as to what you find sacred. These are the formative experiences with the potential to mold our mental habits.

### Signs of good spirituality

Due to limitations of space, I have not really discussed the content of many of the sources of wisdom themselves that have been so powerful in improving my life and dealing with fear, anxiety, anger, and more. Instead, my focus here is on the approach of building a practice. But the content of one’s practice is essential and you will find that the wisdom you encounter in your reading and exploration will also provide a wealth of ideas on building a practice. See the “Further reading” section at the end of this essay for my personal recommendations.

There are certain hallmarks of what I called “good spirituality” in previous writings.<sup>7</sup> Some of the most important of these are:

- The aim of the practice is an inner flourishing apart from circumstance, not a promise of wealth or outward rewards.
- An approach to knowledge that refrains from making unfounded claims and encourages the practitioner to be humble.
- Philosophies that help us to accept impermanence with peace, rather than promising some kind of escape from impermanence.
- Approaches that focus on mastering and changing ourselves before others.
- Ideas that help us to transcend our small egotistical concerns toward a larger view.
- Philosophies that encourage and are founded upon the importance of compassion.

### Imperatives for progress

Despite being an extremely good and valuable employee, my wife was laid off recently from a job she had held for many years. She had been in somewhat of a rut, but perhaps not quite



enough to move her out of her comfort zone. The layoff now has her looking forward to new opportunities. She was talking to me just today about how she would have handled the news very differently just a few years ago, and feels that she has been making progress. She seems to have incorporated many wise perspectives into her natural reactions over time, and this has been specifically because of her practices, conversations, readings, and so on.

Our practice should have a sense of progress to it (again, it is a *path*). Because of the highly subjective nature of spiritual practice, there are certain attitudes, dispositions, and approaches that will be a hindrance to an effective and transformative practice. We naturalists are adverse to claims that our thoughts, intentions, and hopes can cause changes in the world directly (by prayer, laws of attraction, spells, and so on). But in the case of our own spiritual practice, what we think really does matter because the object of our practice is the very thing doing the thinking.

For the naturalists (Humanists, atheists, freethinkers, skeptics) in particular, there are some things we will need to “get over” if we are going to seriously move forward in Religious Naturalism. Some of these are things individuals will need to take on, and others also need to happen on a group level. I call these our *Imperatives for Progress* in spiritual practice.

**1. We must discard disdain or bias against anything with the taint of traditional religion.**

This recoil has prevented us from fruitful exploration of the many wisdom streams within the religious and spiritual traditions of our species. Many justify this attitude by thinking themselves to be concerned with confronting the evils of religion. They may also be concerned that others may think they are religious in the supernatural sense. Progress in development of our individual and collective spiritual practices is severely hampered by this attitude. I don't just mean in technical terms of not being willing to approach certain readings; I also mean that the attitude itself is a distraction from the engrossing kind of experience required for ritual and practice to be individually transformative.

**2. We must drop the quotation marks.**

I never say that I engage in “spiritual” practices or that my “religion” is naturalistic. We do not practice “something like” spirituality or some pseudo-spirituality. This thinking places the supernaturalists as the default or norm, and relegates us to the fringe. The definition of spiritual I gave earlier *is the* definition within our tradition. Christians do not speak of “salvation” (in quotation marks) because other traditions have different approaches or definitions for the word.

**3. Discard our concerns over being misunderstood.**

It is a common concern that, if we use terminology that most people may think otherwise about or may be ignorant of, then we may miscommunicate or be misunderstood. That may seem like a reasonable concern, but it is not. It results in us using over-clinical, dry, bizarre, or formal language when something far more emotional, metaphorical, and moving is required. Metaphorical language that has a moving effect is essential to the kinds of attitudes, dispositions, and experiences necessary for transformative practice. The most important thing in choosing our terms is that they communicate to us, in our own lexicon, what is important and intuitive. Every tradition has its own lexicon, set of definitions, and terms. Even within Christianity, a Catholic and a Baptist have different definitions for *communion*, for example. In Stoicism, the Sage experiences *Joy* but does not experience *Delight*. It is not reasonable to expect to understand exactly what a tradition means by various terms without taking the time to learn about them, and the same should go for our tradition. Will we be misunderstood? Yes, but Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims have

adherents that misunderstand even their own faith. To build religious naturalism and our own spiritual practices, we must push forward boldly and without apology or reservation.

**4. Do not get hung up on semantics.**

The flip side of the imperative above is that, when we study the many various traditions of the world, we do not get hung up on *their* semantics. One translation of a Taoist text may refer to *heaven*, and yet the passage holds something very valuable for us. Terms such as *heaven, soul, God*, and so on are not as simplistic as they may seem in the mainstream Christian culture many of us emerged from and exist alongside today. As one studies the ancient philosophies, it becomes apparent that these words often had more subtle pre-Christian meanings, some of which approach meanings similar to Spinoza's philosophy. Even within Christian history there can be found innumerable subtle variations of meaning. They may often be more compatible with our views that seems apparent, and even when they are not there may be important wisdom that can be gleaned from a gracious reinterpretation. We must remember that words are only placeholders for concepts and to seek comprehension of the concepts behind the words first and foremost.

**5. Less talking, more doing.**

Spiritual practice is not the same as intellectual analysis or discourse *about* spirituality, spiritual people, or spiritual practices or history. Being one who studies human spirituality like an anthropologist, or who likes to talk about it as an amateur enthusiast is perfectly fine. I find it an entertaining and informative activity. But we cannot let ourselves think that we are moving along the path or engaging in spiritual practice merely by doing this. I have sometimes presented talks on meditation to rationalists, who listen to the talk then seem to think, "That was interesting! Now I understand that better. What's the next topic?" but never actually meditate. If that is their choice that is fine, but such a community will *never* be able to provide what traditional religion provides the human heart, mind, and society. This is why the Spiritual Naturalist Society has a prohibition in its published articles of essays that make arguments for *why we should be naturalists* or how *naturalistic spirituality is possible*. Instead, we publish on ways and means of proceeding with our spirituality and ritual. We assume our audience are already naturalists and do not need to be convinced of the importance of rationality or evidence. We proceed with being a community of practicing spiritual and religious naturalists. In our eyes, the time for "making the general case" for whether naturalistic spirituality can exist is over. As individuals, the time for practice, and development of the thought behind it, has commenced.

**6. Self-assess our need to de-sacralize.**

This is an odd behavior I've noticed in popular culture at large, and in many friends and acquaintances. There seems to be a constant urge in our society to de-sacralize all situations, topics, talk, and events. The urge is likely unconscious and goes without notice. By de-sacralize I mean "to make profane" or un-sacred in tone. If someone mentions something that traditionally might have been given some pause or reverence or sincere reflection, there is an overriding kind of effort that is very often made to "lighten the mood" or supposedly "get real." It often takes the form of flippant or obtuse commentary, or perhaps an irreverent joke. The speakers often see themselves as hard-nosed "realists" who are not taken in by nonsense. Or, it may be that our culture has gotten so far away from sacred approaches that many simply have no idea of what these are about. This outlook has likely developed in our culture as a backlash against the many charlatans and disgraced so-called holy men, televangelists, and other authority figures who have let us down. Everything from the U.S. government's handling of the Vietnamese War up to the pedophile cases of Catholic priests

has seemingly played a role. In any case, this cultural trend can cause a hindrance in our spiritual practice. We have been conditioned to think any serious display of spirituality is “taking ourselves too seriously.” There is most certainly good cause to have caution about that. But to get back on track, we need to understand that hucksters have no say or power over our own approach to the sacred. We need to reclaim our ability to engage in sacred activity, our tongues fully *out* of our cheeks.

**7. Reconcile inner peace and outward action.**

One of the most common misunderstandings I see in discussing and writing on these topics is the notion that inner acceptance and peace somehow means passivity in the face of injustice or the need to act to do good in the world. We imagine that personal distress is somehow the only incentive to vigorous action. Yet, as Stoicism teaches, virtue can be the imperative and requires no inner distress. We must get past the idea that spiritual equanimity is about sitting in isolated meditation while the world burns, as some kind of escapism. Rather, it is the spiritually nurtured individual who is calm, at peace, and resilient, and who is more suited to effective action in the world over the long haul. Spiritual Practice is not only compatible with action, it is essential to it.

**8. Abandon religious criticism.**

This precept will be hard to swallow and very easily misunderstood. When I say we need to abandon religious criticism, I do not mean for all people in all contexts. People who are abusing others, stunting the growth of knowledge, misleading others, or harming others need to be criticized and exposed. What I mean is that, individually, we need to have a very clear idea of when we are engaged in spiritual activity in a sacred moment or space. In these moments, it is not helpful to get into judging modes of thought or bringing up our grievances, especially given that this often takes place among those who would agree with us anyway. Even when the time comes for working or speaking against others, we carry our spirituality with us in being mindful of compassion for all beings as our motivation—not hatred or a sense of superiority. As members of religious and spiritual naturalist institutions, we need to decide what our purposes are.

There are already skeptical organizations, political organizations fighting for separation of church and state, educational organizations working against religious oppression and persecution. But at some point there must be a spiritual home, a spiritual community, and a safe haven where spiritual and religious naturalists can fellowship in energizing and inspiring practice together. Institutions that take on this mission will find that allowing “a little criticism of other religions on the side” will be very destructive to their intent. It will paint the atmosphere of their events and the *feel* of their very identity. As I have said, the subjective experience is essential in practice and the right *feel* is monumental in its role in cultivating helpful dispositions to transformative practice. When one goes into a Buddhist temple, one does not expect the dharma discussion to be dominated with criticism of Christianity. Buddhists will be too busy talking about Buddhism. Likewise, in Religious and Spiritual Naturalist gatherings, there is a vast body of wisdom we can be talking about that we *do* agree with and believe.

**9. Make rationality about *humility*.**

Coming from a background that cherishes reason, evidence, science, and logic, we naturalists interested in spiritual practice must take on rationality as a *spiritual practice*. We will not have been the first people to have done so. From the Pythagorean Brotherhood, to the Pyrrhonists, to the Socratic schools, and beyond, there have been many such schools who approached logic and reason with a sacred and spiritual tone. As such, rationality should

take on a much different flavor than we have seen in skeptic, Humanist, and atheist organizations. In this context, the rules of reason take on the form of a character virtue; namely, humility. This is the sympathetic, respected, and adored trait of all people who seek wisdom, compassion, and goodness. Humility already has within it a refraining from making statements we cannot substantiate, drawing unsupported conclusions, and thinking ourselves infallible. This is the foundation of reason, and our motive behind it is essentially one of humility. Also, this means that *humility in our approach to knowledge and claims* is a practice we have chosen to take on as a *personal* commitment. It is not to be used as a weapon against others or a means to admonish them. This kind of approach will allow us to progress in our spiritual progress as rational naturalists, thus reuniting the natural and the sacred.

#### 10. Put compassion first.

In all of our endeavors—philosophically, spiritually, institutionally, individually—we must commit to putting compassion first. Our entire practice should be predicated on this most foundational of values. Even rationality itself is secondary to compassion. The reason we value rationality is *because* of the good it can do for people, in their lives, and the world. This suggests a more primal and foundational principle. This is the nexus of knowledge, wisdom, and compassion. If this is our continuous motivation, then we will be off to a good start in our practice.

### Notes

- 1 In Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is someone motivated by great compassion to help others attain enlightenment.
- 2 This is a quote from Confucius as written by the Taoist philosopher, Chuang-Tzu (“In the World of Men”). The words refer to unifying your attention by purifying the mind of the distractions mentioned above—concerns of the ego.
- 3 This is a paraphrase of the words of Heraclitus, taken from fragments: “This world-order [the same of all] did none of gods or men make, but it always was and shall be: an everlasting fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures” (Fr. 30); “All things are an equal exchange for fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold for goods” (Fr. 90); and “Fire in its advance will judge and convict all things” (Fr. 66). It helps us to remember what the flame symbolizes: the impermanence and ever-changing and transforming nature of the universe (Kirk et al. 1957: 186, 199).
- 4 This is the remainder of Heraclitus’ statement on the Divine Fire. My phrase comes from a combination of two fragments: 76 and 43 (Kirk et al. 1957: 206, 213). It refers to how everything in the universe is forever transforming, which the Buddhists call impermanence.
- 5 This is a far cry from the more contemplative Christianity of Thomas Merton I would discover later in life, and certainly the naturalistic Christianity of Michael Dowd after that.
- 6 To be sure, there are many other traditions that follow this practice format. Buddhism and Stoicism are primary in my experience and liking, however.
- 7 For my complete article on this, see “Top 10 Signs of Good Spirituality” at: <http://spiritualnaturalist-society.org/top-10-signs-of-good-spirituality/>.

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### **Further reading**

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