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The Search for Spirituality Amidst the Artificial Realities of Global Materialism

Chapter 2 - What is Materialism?

ma·te·ri·al·ism *n.*

1. Philosophy. The theory that physical matter is the only reality and that everything, including thought, feeling, mind, and will, can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena.
2. The theory or attitude that physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life.
3. A great or excessive regard for worldly concerns.¹

I contrast materialism with spirituality for the purpose of communication and as a stimulus to clarity of thought. The reason for our human inclination to focus on the socially created value of things is not, and can never be, solely an issue of matter, energy and scientific laws in its origin or empowerment. My discussion of materialism does not intend, nor do I promote the rejection of the natural world of matter, although artificial things made of matter are the focus of a materialistic mind as are various mental constructs or imagined realities.

The material world is real. It is not an illusion except where the dimension of time becomes illusory in the face of eternity. Our natural lives are materially real, yet their consequences are profound with potential eternal impact. Human beings are fleshly, biological beings born in a materially physical universe and animated by a natural spiritual force we recognize as life. This life force is the fifth dimension (after length, breadth, depth and time) from our mortal perspective but only the lowest or first level of "heaven." The life force probably vibrates at the speed of light, which gives it the quality of eternity without losing contact with the natural universe thus being also a part of it. The life force animates and sustains the physical universe as a permeable border between it and the eternal metaphysical reality.

Because we are composed of matter, people interact with the material realities of the physical universe but are also dependant upon and connected to the fifth dimension of the life force. I believe that this is also the zone of mortal human consciousness. In other words, our minds leave creative memory impressions in the force fields of the life force. The fifth dimensional life force is generically recognized as the spiritual plane of life. The level of consciousness varies from person to person, and animals, which are also animated by this same natural spiritual force, may also be aware of spiritual phenomena – sometimes even more readily so than humans. The truth of these observations is self evident when one is confronted with the immediate and dramatic difference between a living person and a dead body. One may weigh them both and get the same answer, but life is intangibly absent. It is more than an electrically charged nervous system: it involves the presence of spiritual energy – the *prana* or *chi* of Eastern religions and philosophies.

Human beings and their relationships complex themselves beyond material satisfaction. A materialistic worldview always generates spiritual issues and spiritual issues mandate consequences requiring spiritual solutions - despite the observable and measurable positive impact it may have on one's quality of life or on the health of a society. Spiritual issues arise because human nature intrinsically possesses a spiritual dimension that cannot be successfully managed or satisfied by materialism. Elaborate exchange mechanisms exist to meet psychosocial and biological needs, but they cannot grow a person towards a level of unconditional love often associated with spirituality. This is the crux of the phenomenon and explains why a society consumed by materialism evidences such a profound thirst for spirituality.

A rejection of materialism does not equate to a rejection of wealth or prosperity, but the materialistic attitudes of people do create illusions of wealth where a few benefit at the expense of many. While poverty is ever present in the experience of humanity, one of the chief indicators of a materialistic society is a gross imbalance in the distribution of its wealth. Excessive imbalances in the distribution of

¹ **The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.** Retrieved November 04, 2006, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/materialism>.

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wealth will, in time, demand a return towards equilibrium. Excessive imbalance is intuitively different from the natural differentiation of life circumstances. Inequality in its exterior measurement will always be with us. Life is indeed neither fair nor equal in its serendipitous situations, challenges and endowments. It owes us nothing but blesses us with everything within a world of disabilities and opportunities.

Gross imbalances in the distribution of wealth exist because a society led or governed by those with a materialistic worldview is blind to the source of its poverty; therefore, it cannot prevent materialism's fatally infectious spread even though its leaders may treat the symptoms of poverty with welfare relief. (Please note: I am consciously using the term "excessive" from a subjective perspective. Also, "social leaders" may mean religious, governmental, sports or entertainment personalities, etc.)

An enduring liberty requires some measure of independent wealth in the form of private property and worth in the value of being a person. Liberty always evidences the practice of sound spiritual principles by a people; therefore, a wealth that endures and blesses is materialistic in its tangibility but spiritual in functional purpose. It is the kind of honest and healthy spirituality that consistently and always promotes the great liberties of seeking truth and love, which are pillars of good, healthy spirituality.

To understand the deceit of materialism, one must learn how to find its core - the heart of the matter so to speak. Any search for understanding, regardless of topic, is essentially no different in method or madness than that which seeks to understand spirituality and materialism. The materialistic core is most readily revealed in how the inanimate nature of the things desired are associated and/or combined with their socially constructed value or worth in the eyes of a culture's children. Every culture has children, regardless of age. In today's world of global communications and interaction, we are often the children of several overlapping and intersecting cultures. Discerning the areas of their impact provides an effective competitive edge in the formulation of marketing strategy.

The Birth Default

Some choices are made for us by default at birth. We are born members of our family, community and nation from which we inherit a particular subset of these factors' socio-economic structures and status. These defaults greatly impact where we materially start off in life as well as determining the spiritual context of our childhood. We do not choose them, but we do choose how we interact with our birth defaults. As we grow, we select our own personal preferences within these larger entities. We form our lives from subsets of sets and subcultures of over-cultures in order to align and integrate our personal identity in a synthesis that both conforms with and opposes what is typical of the whole culture.

Sometimes an individual will jump out of the pot of his or her own culture and into the frying pan of another one. Such a radical change commonly occurs on a temporary basis as a person explores his or her identity. Although some individuals get stuck in the process of self-exploration, truly permanent changes in cultural allegiance are difficult and rarely successful enough to provide lasting personal satisfaction; however, significant shifts in cultural identity do occur in the lives of singularly remarkable people.

Regardless of our conscious choices, every person still ends up with competing, interacting and interlocking memberships in multiple human cultural complexes or systems. We are constantly pulled in different directions by these competing cultures. Mostly we deal with these divergent pressures without taking the time to make objectively detached decisions. We do not thoughtfully analyze these competing sociocultural influences because we are rarely aware of what is going on underneath the surface of our lives in the subconscious reserves of our brains - much less our souls.

This subliminal confusion erodes liberty and prosperity because such can only be actively guarded and protected by conscious exercise of spiritual principles seemingly in opposition to materialistic advantage. Many wise men and women have written on the necessity for a vigilant, educated and spiritually oriented citizenry in order that a people retain liberty and prosperity. Such conscious living by nature puts materialistic values at risk once they are sacrificed to sacred principles that value the non-materially defined worth of life over the comfortable pleasantries proffered by materialism's false

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promise.

Spiritually living a life of creative liberty and prosperity means embracing the risks thereof. It requires accepting a potential to certain loss of that which is valued by materialistic living, such as the accumulation of ego extending and sustaining power and wealth. Other risks might include rejecting the temptation to surrender a measure of liberty for the temporary security of some government guarantee. Today's trend in society also favors a life that is socially insured against physical hardship. Although it might provide a medically extended biological existence, there is a price for coddling a consciousness caught in the alluring offer of illusory protection against a society's or a person's real or imagined fears.

Selected Consumerism as Purchased Identity

Materialism panders to irrational fears and perceived needs. One such personal need of universal nature is to know who we are. Materialism has answered this question through consumerism. In today's consumer culture, one's personal identity is established through a purchased or acquired set of external, behavior-based patterns reflected in the ownership and display of things from homes and cars to tattoos and torn clothes. This external assemblage of accessories is purchased to mask perceived natural imperfections by conveying an image that reflects the self-selected illusion of one's true nature.

A materialistic personal identity is found in the pattern of choices purchased. The culture of consumerism merchandises the indirect purchase of a personal identity based on behavior and accessorized appearance. Thus, materialism substitutes a spiritually hollow identity defined by stuff possessed and consumed for an identity uniquely created through and expressed in the richness of and depth of one's character as may be expressed in an unselfish concern for others that cherishes life in its uniquely particular expression.

The materialist identity is not innovatively creative in the formation of who he or she is as a person because the externals purchased are designed, produced and marketed by others. A healthy spiritual identity is created by the spiritual potential latent within each person to love. The materialist approach of externals hides a bankrupt inner being that contrasts with the spiritual definition of personal identity as a richly complex, uniquely created internal state of being that is traditionally referred to as character.

A person's eternal spiritual identity may be creatively forged only in the fires of the trials suffered in the practice of truly honest love. Honest or unconditional love seeks the spiritual health and growth of another or others. Unconditional love may mature out of the natural balance of conditional love. It does not exhibit the false humility of self-suffocation or inflict any sociopathic abuse upon others, which among other evils, are the fruits of deviant or unbalanced conditional love.

Conditional love is a purely exchange-based relationship that values others only in how another person is functionally (materially) useful to him or her. In balance, conditional love forms the pragmatic basis for most social systems. When conditional love becomes unbalanced, social problems arise. Consequently, sociopaths practice a particularly distorted form of conditional love to the point of obviously treating other people as commodities valued only from the perspective of the sociopath's benefit or harm. While sociopaths obviously abuse human relationships, many societies indirectly do the same.

A materialist cultural system integrates people as if they were replaceable parts based on perceived functional benefits or outputs to society instead of recognizing the immense spiritual value of each individual. By this definition, our modern globalized culture of secular materialism produces social outcomes skewed in a sociopathic direction.

The Social Problems of Materialism

Materialism is a progressive disease that hollows out the creative worth and vitality of life.

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Its gradualism is one of materialism's primary deceptions.

American materialism began over two hundred years ago growing as the grassy weeds do among the early shoots of wheat. Just as months must pass before one can clearly see the fruitful difference between the two, so many decades of US history separate that nation's causes of wealth from its enjoyment of it. The cultural consequences of living by secular materialist values are not obvious enough yet to stimulate a broad national shift to the spiritual. For those with eyes to see, the evidence is plain. Although there are some exceptions, most folks will not change how they live their lives until forced to do so by some emergency.

Just as the majority does not pay attention to their diet until they have a heart attack, the American superculture will not shift directions until she suffers her inevitable comedown. America's inexorable and inevitable hour of trial will come. It will brutally thresh the once green field to separate the good, fat kernels of grain from the wasted blades of inedible cover crop hay, which will be chewed up and spat out of the combine of divine judgment that has been the natural life cycle of nations and cultures from before history began.

Let me give you one example of how US public policy fails recognize that materialist solutions do not solve social problems. Evidence for the truth of this observation is found in the fact that increased levels of funding for public education do not produce increased quality of results. American students today know less about the wholeness of life and the society that they live in. They are less motivated to do the hard work of necessity and creativity than ever before. Instead, they have absorbed the materialistic desire to be rich over the character values of how one becomes successful. The attainment of wealth is more important than how it was come by as proved by the growth in illegal scams, legalized fraud, lotteries and gambling. The latter have become socially acceptable entertainment pursuits as well as enormously popular drivers of local economic growth. In response, institutions of higher learning have increasingly emphasized ethics in their business classes with questionable results.

From a systems level evaluation of society, public education serves secular purposes resulting in the destruction of our social fabric. Its primary functional purpose is to provide an inefficient day prison for youth with the potential by-product of education. It makes it possible for both parents to earn salaries subjected to our governments' oppressive tax burdens. The politicians demand their pound of flesh before working citizens can even meet their reasonable requirements for housing, food and clothing. By design our present education system separates children and parents from each other for most of the day – every workday!

This chosen separation, preferred because of apparent and real economic necessity, stunts the spiritual growth and character development of our children. A child's engagement in substantial and daily family interaction is one of the most important agents for enabling liberty and stimulating positive spiritual growth. Because of the multi-generational absence of familial health, we have reached an era where parents view themselves as incapable of educating their own children practically, morally or spiritually. They cannot themselves pass on what they did not receive. Instead, family life has become increasingly irresponsible and violently fractious.

Parents set abominable examples to their children. First, more than half the children do not live with both of their birth parents. Many never married to begin with. Other parents are addicted to drugs or wasting their little free time on selfishly empty material pursuits or immoral entertainment instead of engaging their parental opportunities and duties. Their hypocrisy has dovetailed with the trends of mass society to create an avalanche of addictions that could probably fill an early education alphabet book, "A is for Alcoholic, B is for..." Unfortunately, no, "B" is not for "Bucolic."

The Plague of Addiction

Only about 70% of high school students graduate in the United States. Most drop out either because school is boring, abusive and dangerous, or because the student experiences a personal crisis ranging from an unplanned pregnancy to criminal arrest and/or drug addiction. Any and all of these factors are strong symptoms of a spiritually starved society. Solutions to these kinds of problems will never be

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found in an exclusively secular set of materialistic programs and policies. Publicly financed and administered programs will only deliver minimal levels of success more dependant on individual initiative than on the psychological and social guidance provided by various kinds of social welfare programs.

This is why the federal government has shifted to "faith-based" providers. Strong arguments have been made that this kind of government policy potentially compromises religious freedom, which I would tend to agree with. Even more obvious is that the secular humanist political system is using religious institutions to cover up its own poor results without admission of its empty, yet politically correct, philosophy of materialism's failure. When will the public wake up to the fact that a materialistic approach to solving social and psychological problems has nearly bankrupted US and state treasuries?

The spiritually desiccating winds of materialism have dried the souls of western civilization and driven its deceived denizens into the deserts of addicting thirsts. Without souls at peace, people seek satisfaction through sensual excess. Drug trafficking will never end until the demand dries up. The demand will never dry up until society changes and embraces a spiritually based lifestyle. Addictions of any kind are poor substitutes for healthy spirituality. They satisfy only temporarily and come at great physical and social costs. Addiction is even more destructive to the formation of creative individual identities expressive of the liberty of love. The falsely energizing highs of cocaine and meth will never satisfy the spiritual fulfillment that human consciousness craves.

Addictions come in many different forms. Anything that excites or accelerates natural hormones and pheromones that make humans feel good, really alive, happy, sensually perceptive or mentally extended to superior awareness can become addictive. Adrenalin stimulation is a primary addiction in extreme sports. Sexual promiscuity combines psychological as well as biological stimulation that can quickly become selfishly focused and damaging to others' lives with huge consequences from sterility to death. The huge rise in the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases within the general population should give some clue that our modern practices fly in the face of natural spirituality and the biological laws built into human beings. Moreover, the millions of aborted babies testify of the public's devaluation of human life and respect for its precious potential.

Besides being a vital sign measuring a culture's health, human sexual mores and practices are windows into a person's true spiritual self. All addiction and obsessively stimulated highs are sensual substitutes for spiritual experience. They source some of the material forms of spirituality. One of the key insights I will explore in these pages is what natural science reveals about spiritual reality. I will share how natural forces, laws and environmental settings reveal spiritual insights because the physical and metaphysical realities are one interwoven fabric. Through the natural consequences of our attitudes and actions, the physical universe is designed to encourage humans to do the right thing spiritually.

The Corporate Education Trap

Returning to my example of public educational failure, successful young people are herded into college programs to learn at high cost what high school didn't teach them (but used to less than 40 years ago). Instead of graduating from high school and entering community life with all of its relational lessons and opportunities to mature as unique persons, the explicit curriculum of the post secondary educational system tells parents and students that going to college is the road to success in life. Public education's implicit curriculum enslaves its participants with philosophies that are intellectually narrow to bankrupt.

Furthermore, today's high cost of higher education encumbers young adults with burdensome debts that obligate them upon graduation to take any available job at the expense of choice. (Only a minority seem to end up working in the areas of their majors.) College is often the first link in the ever-lengthening gold-plated chain of economic bondage that plagues our modern materialistic society. Instead of being paid off, student loans are replaced by consumer debt so that the younger generations will never fully get out from under the original debt burden. These educational catch-up

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debts just become transformed into financial obligations of a different name.

This economic addiction to rollover refinance defers reality on both an individual and societal level. Whenever any problem is removed by time and context from its cause, it becomes more difficult to recognize and solve. This is true both for a person and for a society. While individuals and families often face obvious financial challenges and can get some credit management help, it takes a longer time and more extreme circumstances for a society to recognize and address the fact that it is bankrupt. But a day of reckoning does eventually come to societies even as it does for its members. What is true for our society in regards to economics and finance is even more true when it comes to spirituality.

The modern western education system also enslaves us to a reduced level of consciousness. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" rings hollow. It is not much more than an ancient quote from an iconic document once spiritually potent that does not describe our evolving secular materialist society. The competitive drivers of survival in global society demand high performance with 24/7 attention. Higher education may prepare students to be suitable employees capable of highly specialized task execution for a number of years, but it usually does so at the expense of spiritual growth and its liberation of a uniquely personal creative identity.

Corporate survival commits employees to a constant devotion to task duties until they break from mental and/or physical exhaustion. Winners in this professional marathon can get robbed of lifestyle rewards by the demands of more responsibility, opportunity and reward in greater power, wealth and/or status. At best the average employee may get to enjoy some years of retirement before being confined to an expensive eldercare commercial system, which inexorably eats up whatever savings there may be. It also takes away any inheritance from the family, although some of that financial penalty comes about because of their non-involvement in each other's lives.

To meet global competition, citizens are herded into focused educational programs designed to channel students' time into intense specialized training without the liberating context of the big picture of life's purpose, responsibilities and creative potential. Exhausted by our busy-ness, whatever free time we have becomes quickly absorbed in a costly maze of entertainment options that dull the intellectual consciousness in favor of sensual exploration and satisfaction for a cumulative price so high that only the addicted will pay it. Those millions who fail to handle these sensual lures effectively end up in and out of prison for various crimes committed in the pursuit of providing for their sensual and emotional addictions.

Thus, the freedom inherent to a life too precious to price has been lost or stolen in the chaos of commodified global materialism. Most people's lives have become mere commodities worth only what a devaluing currency can buy in exchange for specified hours of their biological lives, usually in some form of labor. The surplus capital necessary for economic freedom is only accumulated by the few. A small minority of wise individuals design and implement personally unique, counter-balancing strategies vis-à-vis the system. This approach provides them with the potentially liberating opportunity to pursue and enjoy the spiritual fullness of life. Sadly, most people who achieve such surpluses in time and money eagerly plunge further into the deadly trap of excess, which only intensifies their enslavement to global materialism's temporal illusion.

I do not believe in the strategic compartmentalization of life. Pre-occupation with a particular area of focus can be a useful tactic to attain short-term goals, but it does not qualify as successful life philosophy. An examined and broadly integrated consciousness of multiple interests and activities is the healthiest and happiest approach to our appointed days. If your personal scope of interests is too limited, you will lack the innovative flexibility to survive in our rapidly changing world in a way that preserves the liberty of person and freedom of choice. Liberty requires that a philosophic and material balance govern our interactions with this world system of globalized politics and economics.

The key management concept here is balance, and the point and make-up of that balance differs from person to person. Great prosperity or success always comes with the increased challenge to retain balance. There is a hidden price to those who "make it big," and the challenges of imbalance come in different ways. Corruption creeps in through three primary doors: wealth, fame and

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power. Those who fail in any one of these areas will experience an even more intensely complex form of slavery that requires them to sell out their fellow humans to secure and protect their temporary perks of power, property and prestige. Those who successfully avoid corruption may experience positive spiritual life.

I hope that you are beginning to see just how critical balanced spiritual health is to a society's beneficial operation. While world history gives example after example of these principles of materialism and spirituality, at this point in time these lessons particularly apply to the United States of America because it is the dominant national culture that shapes Globalism around the world. The American ways of business, entertainment and material lifestyle is desired and imitated around the world.

American Cultural Materialism

The culture of the United States possesses a foundation of spiritual gold and silver. Subsequent generations have worked diligently to move the mansion of our republic off of its solid foundation. In fact, modern America is almost completely separated from its constitutional grounding and now precariously rests over a deep abyss of vain philosophies with her superstructure supported by collapsing walls of sand. In other words, the mansion of America has become the most pretentious outhouse on the planet. It is only a matter of time and occasion before she falls into the smelly mess waiting for her at the bottom of the sand pit.

Why? Because American society has made materialism its central value. This is what the world sees and what the world imitates.

Indeed, for those who will study our society we have valuable lessons of both triumph and embarrassment for everyone enamored with her power, her economic vitality and seeming liberty. But America's liberties have been, and continue to be, mortgaged away bit by bit in order to protect the material benefits, wealth and social security of her citizens' immediate mortal comfort. Temporal, prosperity is favored over spiritual health and wealth, and the youth of the United States will pay a very heavy material price for her abandoned spiritual heritage.

An over-culture of governmentally acceptable, all embracing, shallow and controllable *faux* multiculturalism is favored over the religious and constitutional values that engendered the present power and economic position of the United States in the world. This progressive degeneration continues, and most are oblivious to it because they do not see with spiritual eyes. Neither does the world at large. Our blindness is due to the mass abandonment of what were once commonly held spiritual values. (Ten Commandments anyone?) Even our material economy is rotten at the core due to a massive indebtedness incurred by the consumptive and impatient acquisition of questionable luxuries and ephemeral military power.

To return to the parable introduced above, the population of the United States is like vast acreage of mixed wheat and tares/grass. The only way to protect or favor the wheat over the unfruitful grasses before harvest is to pull the grass by hand carefully in small quantities. This presumes the proper identified and discernment between the two by the workers. But harvesting in love and grace by hand is impossible due to the immensity of the harvest. A harvest of national scope requires the use of mass scale mechanical harvesters or of chemical treatments applied by airborne crop dusters. In history, such harvests are equated with the decline and fall of nations. In the Bible, it is the judgment detailed in the ancient prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Zechariah as well as the AD 90s prophecies against Roman Babylon in the Apocalypse of Jesus given to the apostle John.

In practical application, this means that we may not be able to change the world or our nation by personally embracing a life founded on good spiritual values and principles. It does mean that we can change the circumstances and experiences of our personal lives and perhaps those around us. Honestly practiced spirituality is guaranteed to positively impact at least some of those around you. Just don't worry about precisely who or how much. That is God's work through you, and it is a work about which one can only possess partial knowledge.

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The Importance of Knowing Ourselves

A materialistic perspective precludes an awareness of what is going on underneath the surface of our lives. We may be theoretically unaware that subconscious reservoirs exist within a person's brain, mind or what is sometimes called a soul, but most of us do not have a clue about the specifics of our own spiritual health. This subliminal ignorance and confusion erodes love, liberty and prosperity because such can only be actively guarded and protected by conscious exercise of spiritual principle seemingly in opposition to materialistic advantage.

This necessity places your individual responsibility at the heart of the matter. I do not suggest that each of us is responsible for a whole society's pre-occupation with material goals and values, but each of us is indeed responsible for how we participate in or interact with our social context. We must take responsibility for our decisions, whether they be active or passive in nature. Our powerful capacity to make decisions is a primary characteristic of our humanness and the key to better management of our personal "worlds" as well as the public planet. By birth we inherit a necessary responsibility for the natural world with all of its plants, animals and resources of energy and minerals.

Thus, materialism is also a system of social choices wherein the underlying philosophic principle places value on the things tangible (a spacious mansion) and intangible (the status and identity messages of that mansion's style) of this world, as delimited by space-time. Other examples of things tangible and intangible of this world could be gold and fame. The first comes from and returns to the earth, and the second comes and passes with the wind.

Regardless of the specifics, materialism is a system of processing life participated in by persons, families, communities, regions and nations. Its practice is evidenced in the laws, customs, norms and motivation of the subject(s). Where dominant, materialistic themes direct the general topics or focus of attention in all the social media, it affects every kind of art and literature, consumption behavior, the chosen or desired entertainment and the focus of gossip spread or shared.

Materialism is an everyday valuation of the things gained from life as opposed to cherishing life for intrinsically being as it is lived. Materialism pursues the evidences of life, the good or successful life, the yes-this-is-me-alive kind of life, instead of the satisfaction of being alive, of discovering one's core purpose, holiness and/or joys of one life given but meant to be shared in love.

Materialism at its core is a way of life that is driven by fear instead of one drawn by love. It is the anxious turmoil of insatiability versus the knowing peace of fullness becoming perfected. Materialism is the idolization of life instead of its veneration. It is the empty grasp for the Creator that latches on to piece after piece of the Creation. Each piece obtained represents a temporally satisfying, self-delusional substitute for the real thing - simply and exactly because it can be caught, controlled and experienced, at least for a time. The spiritual life is free from this forced bondage and rests in the eternal reality of becoming a creator.

Materialism is also where we value our personal convenience and objectives over the life of another or lives of others. It could be the obvious pursuit to attain an advantage of wealth, status or position, which would seem to provide the security of personal survival in a state of comfortable prosperity and "success." It could be a less obvious and more complex issue such as a seemingly inconvenient pregnancy and a decision to sacrifice a new life barely begun so that the present one might continue unencumbered in its pursuit of some set of personal desires or objectives valued more highly. In both decisions life is commodified and devalued.

This is not to say that the seekers of the spiritual should always sacrifice themselves under every situation of choice. Yes, spirituality does require the sacrifice of material values or selfish objectives in favor of life, and no, spirituality is more difficult than that. It is a sensitive balancing act because life itself is a dynamic and not a static.

For example, under certain situations, abortion may be a spiritually balanced decision, but a more spiritually balanced decision would have been to prevent conception in the first place. Perhaps the

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most spiritual decision would be to only engage in sexual relations where committed love is evident and where the potential or unplanned fruit of coitus would be a creation both desired and welcomed - if perhaps not at first, certainly later upon reflection and adjustment to such a change of life. However, the fact is that we live in a very imperfect world in which sexual intercourse may take place under less than ideal circumstances, a fact that initiates various moral dilemmas - particularly for women.

These observations are neither new nor unique to me. An awareness of human nature's predilection to materialism in one's self and/or in others has been noted by many wise men and women down through the ages. They have written on the necessity for a vigilant, educated, and spiritually oriented citizenry as a prerequisite for the preservation of liberty and prosperity. Such responsibly conscious living by nature puts materialism at risk when balanced against a set of sacred principles that value the non-materially defined essence of life over the pleasant promises proffered by the potential satisfaction of physical sensations possible in the material world.

Artificial Reality

To a certain extent, each of us lives in a material world of our own creation; therefore, to a varying degree we each perceive and experience the physical universe through the lens of an artificial reality of human design and acceptance. The creation of any artificial reality is a joint effort between the observer and those who are responsible for the context of interaction, or even the totality of the culture.

Every human construct of reality is more or less truly real, and that is what makes the search for spirituality so difficult. Our misperceptions of what is real are not internally distinguishable from what is truly real. This quality of mental imagination works on physical matters as well on metaphysical ones, and its expression naturally varies from person to person. What is cold to one is hot to another. What tastes yummy to one is too spicy for another, etc.

While this human proclivity to imagination is problematic at times, it also provides reasons to rejoice and celebrate. From human imagination has come all of the good things of life as well as the most terrible. Creativity is the essence of humanity. We create environments; we do not just modify them! This is the huge divide between the most intelligent animals and humans.

Yes indeed, animals have drawn pictures. They have signed and communicated with us in simple language. They learn from and teach each other, too, but in their natural setting without overt human contact, any environmental modification by animals is derived from some aspect connected to survival enhancement within their native biomes. Animals do not create artificial environments or realities. The more exceptional capabilities of the most intelligent species have been observed in cultural environments constructed by humans to encourage such learned and artistic behaviors.

I have concluded that this capacity for creativity, to imagine from nothing and build our own environments according to such creative vision is part of the spiritual make-up of the human mind. Within the realm of human creativity, I include the capacity for government and administration as well as artificial symbol creation and manipulation such as language as part of what I consider the natural creative capacity of human beings. Thus, civilization's inherently indivisible production of good and evil artistic creativity and political government systems may be intrinsically attributed to human nature.

For our topic, this natural capacity of the mind complicates the search for spirituality because we can imagine spiritual experiences so realistically that our brains have trouble distinguishing a true spiritual experience from that we might wish for, imagine, desire or dream. If a person lives in an imagined world too estranged from reality as perceived by the rest of his culture, then he or she may be considered mentally afflicted instead of spiritual.

Other presumed realities are more easily confirmed or proven wrong. Someone who believes that he is the world's greatest quarterback has a real world setting, a real football game with two teams of real people, in which his boasts can be tested under real conditions. By the fact of limited life expectancy, any person's artificial reality has limited impact and usually has an excellent chance of being challenged at sometime, or even often, within the course of real world social interaction.

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The Search for Spirituality Amidst the Artificial Realities of Global Materialism

When a whole society or culture embraces an artificial reality, you must deal with mass delusion on a scale that does not always lend itself to a gentle wake-up call. Just look at the experience of Nazi Germany, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the past experience of anyone who has escaped from a communal religious cult. In each case individual persons were held captive by a distorted ideology promulgated by a large number of people who controlled the power of government and/or with a near monopoly in theology.

An example of a material artificial reality jointly shared by individuals and large groups comes from the worlds of finance and trade. Different brand names, product categories and currencies are traded according to different perceptions of worth. A number of financial tools are utilized to measure and express those perceptions from interest and exchange rates to the price of gold and other essential commodities. When it comes to finished products, some people will only pay \$15.00 or less for a pair of jeans while others are looking for fashion statements at \$200.00 or more. These original prices reflect an artificial reality. Functionally, both pairs may wear and cover with the same performance but their perceived value differs significantly. At a thrift shop these two brands of jeans may each sell for \$2.99, an example of bottom line reality. The same lesson applies to most anything bought and sold in our modern world including labor, which means peoples' lives.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," goes the old saying. Mass delusion is self-sustaining until it implodes. Data acceptance and processing is distorted by group agreement on "the facts and analytical methods." Variant ideas and opinions are shunned and silenced. Contrary evidence and contrarians both disappear without discussion. And so it goes and often grows until it collapses on its own lies or is crushed by reality's wake-up call. The demise of a nation suffering from a mass-created artificial reality might only happen after immeasurable sacrifice and suffering. Its downfall could also result in the deaths of millions, including innocent victims, complicit members and responsible participants or leaders.

While the imaginary projection of artificial reality is physical in essence or make-up, it always generates spiritual consequences. Massed human beings fall under what is termed mob psychology or mass hysteria. In both cases emotional energy runs high and deep to the point that reason is swamped by external suggestion or events, which themselves may be manipulated to purposes contrary to what individual members of the group might actually desire or execute on their own. While much of this phenomenon can be psychologically explained, I also believe that it attracts spirit beings who feed off of the massed life force and emotional energy. This is how they do their work of parasitic destruction.

For the individual seeker of spirituality, our innate human capacity for self-generated spirituality (another form of artificial reality) complicates the search. It is difficult enough to encounter documentable spiritual phenomena. When we add the potential for imagined spirituality to our search parameters, it becomes even harder to differentiate between the physical and spiritual. You might think you are experiencing a spiritual encounter when you are not. Christians might think they are "born again" when they only had an emotionally theological experience and not a spiritual rebirth or transformation. So what are we to do?

Welcome to the eternally re-occurring life-long problem of humanity! We must embrace this so very human characteristic at face value. I will discuss some parameters that can provide practical, functional guidelines towards an objective evaluation of our own spiritual health. It is important to understand that each person's spiritual journey is one in which the dissonance between the temporal artificial constructs are resolved with the eternal ultimate reality. It is a process of re-harmonizing mortal creators with the divine Creator - without the elimination of creative individuality. This is what each day is about and what our journey in search of spirituality will produce. Onward!