Spirituality Sans Theism

This very short essay was originally written as an online forum reply to a theist who had posted a variant of their observably incorrect assertion: "We humans need religion for our spiritual development." I offered what I believe to be a better alternative.

First: **learn science.** Drink as deeply as you can from the lake of all that we now know about how ancient, enormous, complex and beautiful physical reality can be seen - rather than merely imagined - to be.

Now go out alone into nature. Ideally to a deserted beach, or the high desert, or a mountaintop. Think about where all of that more-beautiful-than-you-could-ever-have-dreamt-up reality stops, and 'you' start.

Think about your defining skin, the top layer of which is dead and continually sloughing off cells. At what point do these cease to be you?

Think about your blood, which was water yesterday and will be urine tomorrow. Try to find the clear points of those transitions.

Think about the oxygen that you are now absorbing from your inhaled air, and the CO2 that you are exhaling. At what point does the former become you, and the latter cease to be you? As it passes through your nostrils, or into your lungs? As it diffuses into solution across your alveolar membranes? Or perhaps as it enters, in your cells, into the chemical reactions of respiration?

Think about your own experience of who you are. Are the thoughts, dreams and ideas that define you merely your own? How many of them did you create, and how many will die with you?

Now think about your deepest division. The one that directly sustains your experience of self-consciousness. Who maintains that, and for what purpose? Is it reality rejecting you? Is it really, in any coherent sense, external? Or is it merely your own adaptively powerful assumption of a position from which knowledge can be held?

And as you see the only right answer to this; just relax. Go ahead and let it and all of the rest of your self-maintained divisions fall away. Let your consciousness flow out in all directions. Down into your soil, and the teaming life therein. Out into all of your winds and waters, and rocks and ice, and creatures and processes of joy and pain. And if you're in the high desert at night, then on out across your billions of light years, and back through eons of time. Through other life on other worlds, and the births and deaths of solar systems and galaxies. Feel it all. Remember at last, and in your bones, who and what you really are. You won't be able to function in this state. You won't be able to do a damn thing, because with all divisions dismissed, the limited little entity that can make decisions, and so 'do things', will no longer exist.

But eventually, prosaic biology will supervene. You'll need to pee or you'll get thirsty or cold. Through one path or another the familiar little understanding of normal consciousness will reassert itself. But you can carry back into this your memory of the deeper understanding. You can maintain an awareness of it just beneath and all around you, as you resume your exciting role

of being a vulnerable little spark of consciousness in a vast and indifferent universe. You can know both that return to the deeper understanding is possible, as/when you really need it, and that you will return to it for sure as/when your divisions collapse again in death.

Having even once experienced this you will be able to see clearly its contrast to all of our parochial little theisms. How inadequate they are to the magnificent thing that they presume to represent. And also how irrelevant they are to all that we understand as morality. Compassion, altruism, and reverence for life will now be intrinsic to who you are, rather than needing to be mandated from without by an imaginary deity. They are, most simply, inseparable from the deeper and stronger understanding.