

Civil Spirituality for everyone

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Civil Spirituality - Personal reflections by Rona Goold Civil Celebrations Network Inc - CCN Inc. Founder

Dally Messenger's address to the students of Rutgers University's Humanist Society highlighted for me an issue that is crucial for us as civil celebrants to address.

How do civil celebrants address those big questions that have been pondered over the millennia?

- *What is the meaning of life?*
- *Is there life after death?*
- *Is there some supreme architect of the universe and universes beyond this one?*
- *If there is a God, what is the nature of that entity?*
- *If there is no God and no purpose for my life, how do I live my life?*

When we are designing our ceremonies and writing the script, what 'messages' are we going to give those present – as words of inspiration, hope, comfort, support – that do not rely on our personal or other's religious beliefs?

For as civil celebrants, like religious celebrants, our role is to 'hold the sacred (special) space'; to be the "bridge" between the time before and the time after the ceremony; to create a space where the guest/s of honour and all the guests can take time out to acknowledge and honour the past; be conscious of what the change brings in the way of loss and continuity in the present; and to offer some wisdom for the roles to be embraced, willing or otherwise; and to inspire those present to move forward creatively, living fully with hope for the future.

The ceremony acknowledges the previous physical, emotional, psychological and social roles or states of being, that have been, that are lost as part of the natural life cycle, as in a death. Or that are being left behind by choice such as making a commitment to be married, that come as a part of the life cycle such as coming of age or milestone birthdays, or that sometimes thrust upon one by



circumstances beyond one's control, as in the loss of life and property in natural or un-natural acts of nature or of mankind's social and economic systems.

Likewise the ceremony acknowledges the future physical, emotional, psychological and social roles or states of being that are being gained.

And most importantly the ceremony focuses on the present with its often confusing mix of emotion and desires – the pain of those things lost – the fear of the unknown – the excitement of new adventures.

As civil celebrants, our role is to insure that this special time out in ceremony is an 'inclusive' space for all those present. Thus we need to be cautious not assume a common religious or non-religious belief, nor to use our own, for the effect of such assumptions is divisive. As civil celebrants, our role is to enhance the participants sense of belonging and community, to focus on the good and the beautiful things in life, without denying the not-so-good and ugly, and to strengthen relationships and support for those present.

So what frame of reference do civil celebrants use to address these 'big' questions?

The last century or so has seen huge changes in mankind's understanding of the nature of the material and non-material world. The advances in technology and communication have meant increased research in the biological, physiological, education, social, political, economic, religious and cultural sciences.

The results have either reinforced traditional beliefs and ways of living or challenged them.

The advances in technology and communication have also meant increased globalisation and the need to live peacefully with diversity increasingly dominating the world's attention.

How could one define 'civil' spirituality?

The following comments are my thoughts and conclusions on this subject at this point in my life. They are naturally shaped and limited by my life experiences growing up and continuing to grow towards maturity in primarily western Christian based cultural traditions.



Spirituality is a component of being a living organism, not a system of belief.

Everyday language reinforces this concept - person being "in high spirits", "breaking someone's spirit", that was a 'spirited' discussion. Enthusiasm – "the god within".

The origins of words also give other clues. There is a tendency to think psychology is just the study of the 'mind'. However its derivation would seem to say it is the study of 'psyche' where 'psyche' meaning 'spirit' or 'soul'.

To me, spirituality is not our man-made or god-inspired beliefs or concepts of a God or god/s and the resultant answer to those 'big' questions outlined above. For such beliefs and concepts are in essence conscious thoughts that may inform and motivate, but of themselves are outside the realm of rational scientific explanation and investigation.

This does not mean that non-material things don't exist because they cannot be seen or measured with the instruments we currently use. We cannot go to the super-market and buy a kilogram of love, loyalty, trust, respect, compassion, or the like, and yet that does not mean they don't exist. They are spiritual capacities, gifted with birth for most of us, to be developed and/ or values to be acquired, that will be challenged by life and need to be practiced for a lifetime.

For me using more modern terms, our spirituality is the non-material aspects of our being-ness as a human person – our psychological make-up / “soul” (our attitudes and values, drives, feelings and emotions, dreams) and our energy / “spirit” for life and relationship with ourselves, with others and the universe within which we exist.

Being with my mother at the moment of her death I was moved, as I imagine were the ancients, by the sudden quiet of the body in death. All the molecules that made her body one minute alive and present were still there, and yet in the course of an instant, the energy or ‘spirit’ that was created by those molecules working in a particular way evaporated, or as some may say, the energy (spirit) that held those molecules in working order ‘departed’ the body.

Do we know which explanation is the truth? Or is there is another explanation altogether?

What we do know is that there is a defined relationship ($E=mc^2$) between matter and energy linked by the ‘speed of light’.

The great scientist Albert Einstein, who discovered this relationship, cautioned that “we should take care not to make intellect our God”. In other words, not to let the rational aspects of our brain, dominate our being-ness.

Since then science, with all its investigations of the nature of matter, has continued to find an intimate and mysterious relationship between energy and matter.

The other thing we know, is that there is so much more we do not know - that remains unexplained or unknown – so much still in the area of ‘mystery’.

Thus in our ceremonies, civil celebrants need to acknowledge the limits of our knowledge – yet also that we can still live usefully, lovingly, creatively and peacefully with one another – without all the ‘big’ questions answered.

Spirituality as an in-built mechanism to observe ‘spiritual’ laws of relationship between living beings



I have also heard ‘spirituality’ as a an ethical/ moral code to live by. My observation is that, like there are physical laws that govern the relationships between physical objects (eg gravitation) at the everyday level, there are ‘spiritual’ laws that ‘govern’ relationships between living things. These ‘laws’ appears to be partly genetically determined, partly learnt behaviour, reinforced by group behaviour.

Examples of ‘codes of behaviour’ can be observed in all sorts of animals. Territory and mating rights, ways food and other resources are distributed seem to be subject to such ‘laws’ for they are important for the overall survival of the species.

Likewise it seems to me that religions have attempted to encapsulate and teach these principles of

how to relate to our fellow humans and the world around us in sets of 'Dos and Don'ts' such as the Ten Commandments, that Jesus Christ updated with his one commandment – "to love your neighbour as yourself". And to explore in myths and stories (parables), like that of the 'Good Samaritan'.

Such 'teachings' have evolved over the centuries. Originally the 10 Commandments were codes of values and behaviours meant for how Jews treated fellow Jews, not the peoples around them.

These have been updated by injunctions such as Christ's 'love your enemies. And many Christian churches these days, defining God as love or good(ness).

For me, the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights is the most evolved statement we have to date that is widely recognised, of principles by which to treat our fellow human beings, including women and children (who were once considered the property of men – and still are in some cultures).

And yet, in essence it is based upon the Golden Rule – "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" which in turn is based upon Christ's one commandment.

This means civil celebrants support those values all nations agreed to be good and reinforcing such ethical principles of courtesy and respect for diversity, co-operation and harmony between peoples, and support for all via our community

Instant Adulthood

Another related aspect that seems to have been lost in more recent times is the concept that our personalities develop and mature as we relate to other people and encounter new experiences in our journey through life and the different stages through which we grow.



Like young Luke Skywalker, there are battles to be fought – mostly within ourselves – to grow into kind, loving and wise people.

Maturity comes as a result of personal growth, guided by our attitudes and values.

Honouring our elders is an area that we as civil celebrants need to consider as high a priority in ceremony as is considering ceremonies for young people, especially those turning 18. For there is a difference between Coming of Age and Coming of Wisdom Age.

By differentiating in this way, civil celebrant can inspire young people with goals that take time to achieve over a lifetime, and affirm older people for their wisdom and contribute to their own development and to the world around them. And hopefully bring both closer together.

So finally then, I set out below how I, as a civil celebrant, would address these issues

Is there some supreme architect of the universe and universes beyond this one?



This question has been pondered by mankind since recorded history and probably before.

Many scientific discoveries have certainly challenged ideas of God as a man with a grey beard sitting

on a cloud above the earth. Such materialistic concepts have had to be replaced with more non-physical 'spiritual' concepts of God is Love, God is Good(ness), God is life.

We do know there is considerable basic order in the universe, but whether this means a creator in terms mankind can define and understand, is beyond our ability to assess at this time.

As a science trained person, I wonder how an ant could conceive and measure the world it is embedded within. Likewise how can we have an independent wholistic understanding of the universe/ within which we live?

However, not knowing what and why, does not mean that such concepts are not useful. Many religions have provided moral and ethical guidance and psychological, spiritual and social structure and support for people.

In mankind's current stage of evolution of religious development, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a measure against which specific religions can question how much their doctrine has been influenced by their God/s and how much by man's lack of understanding of biology (eg women are viewed as inferior to men, disability is viewed as divine punishment for previous 'sins') psychological and sociological development (wealth rationalised as a sign of God's favour, thus poverty as God's disapproval need not be addressed) and the historical development of social structures.

There are many things in life we use, such as electricity, that does not require an in-depth understanding of how it works at a molecular level, to be able to use them.

Whatever our personal beliefs, as civil celebrants, we need to look for the hidden meanings in the beliefs and teachings of all the world's religions. Not with the purpose of challenging whether there is literal truth there or not, rather with the purpose of looking for what is there for the common good.

In my time working in alcohol and other drug education and counselling, I found many people gained support and guidance from concepts of a '*power greater than themselves*'.

The modern 12th Step programs describe God as one understands God. The growth of the '12th step anonymous' movement does not depend on a specific definition of God, rather on the willingness to live a particular way of life. The key components of this are the need to recognise one's limits as human being, but also one's potential for creativity and growth; one's dependence on / interdependence with fellow human beings yet in parallel with the need to be autonomous; the need for self-examination of one's ethical/ moral code and to take responsibility for how closely one lives up to that; the willingness to make amends for one's own mistakes or part in difficult relationships; and the willingness to grow and mature into a more loving and wise human being, and to be of service to one's community.

A 'power greater than one self' may be the 'supreme architect' or an 'ethical code' to which an individual is willing to give allegiance.

The issue for civil celebrants is whether such a code promotes 'an advanced stage of social development' and upholds civil and human rights.

If there is a God, what is the nature of that entity?

It all depends upon the definition of God. If one has a definition of 'some supreme architect of the

universe and universes beyond this one' then logically it is extremely difficult for a small part of the whole to grasp the nature of the whole entity. Mystical traditions honour this sense of profound mystery.

If one views God as a drive to live a full and healthy life and to do 'Good' – as a music director at the recent NZ Celebrants Conference said, "*if one takes nothing from Good, one has God or add nothing to God, one has Good*" – then acts of kindness, cooperation and respect for other people and the environment that sustains and support them can be seen in the day to day actions of people.

And it is interesting to note that the word '*evil*' is the word '*live*' back to front. The challenge in life is to strengthen that drive to live fully and healthily in all aspects of one's potential.

Is there life after death?

Whatever one's belief systems, there has been no conclusive evidence that is universally supported for the premise that one's individual consciousness lives on after death.



We do know that having the awareness of our own mortality is both a gift and a burden. A gift because limited time forces choices that one might "put off forever" and a burden because its fact means the loss not just of our lives, but of every one and every thing in our lives.

Psychologists know that humans use denial, minimisation, rationalisation, intellectualism and even hostility as defence mechanisms to cope with events that are too enormous for us to bear, and especially to bear alone. Thus the need for community and ritual in various facets of our lives.

For civil celebrants, we do not use religious beliefs to minimise or rationalise the fact of our mortality, nor inconclusive theories about 'after-life' to deny its existence. Rather as civil celebrants we stay with the mystery – "*the not-knowingness*". Our focus is *the here and now* – the fact that life does go on and there is still value in our relationships and the world around in the present

Our primary concern needs to be 'Is there life after birth, not death?'

In what ways can my role as a civil celebrant promote and support attitudes and values that will promote health and well-being for all citizens ?

Values that will support all people to grow to their full potential physically, psychologically (spiritually) and socially whilst accepting the responsibility to respect the rights of others to do likewise.

In what ways can my role promote social harmony and good will, cooperation between neighbours and the care of more vulnerable members of our communities, especially children and young people?

For example, what 'messages' do we give in naming ceremonies about the raising of children, about marriage at weddings, the value of each and every life at funerals?

If there is no God and no purpose for my life, how do I live my life?

The assumption here is that one needs an external God to have a purpose in life. Every person can find purpose for their lives, whether they use a religious framework or not.



Developing a personal ethical/ moral code and a way of living that honours all life is a task for all people in this modern ever-shrinking world, whether that is based on a religious framework or not.

What we do know is that life

- is a *gift* (as far as we know we did not choose to be born)
- a *precious gift* for there are no guarantees there is anything beyond, and for which there is an end, and no fore-knowledge as to the importance of a particular life (genetics traces mankind back to a handful of people – what if one of those had been killed before they were parents?)
- a *hard won gift* that needs thousands of hours of nurturance (157,680 hours of parental guidance and support to age 18 by one parent)
- a *fragile gift* that can be taken away in a instant of carelessness or violence
- a *valuable gift* for its potential for creativity, productivity and enjoyment for the individual and for society as a whole
- the *gift of a life journey* "to go where no man's gone before" (or woman). What an exciting adventure for our young people – for every person? Each person has the opportunity to develop their own potential, and explore the breadth and depths of their own physical, social and psychological/ spiritual nature.

What is the meaning of life?

What we do know is that those who ask that question need to discover their own answer. And perhaps the question is better posed as "*what is the meaning of my life?*"

What do I see as valuable ? How can I contribute to my own development and that of those around me?



As civil celebrants we do know that 'money cannot buy happiness' though it can buy opportunities; that meaningful supportive relationships with one-self and others are critical to people's health and well being; and that civil rites of passage that inspire and support all people at various times of change, are important for the health and well-being of our society overall.

To see our roles in that light is to acknowledge our potential as 'community developers and educators' (*in sociological terminology*), and the placement of the Certificate IV in Celebrancy within the Community Services and Health sector of the VET system a very appropriate place to be. For within that context, our training will be able to draw upon associated educational opportunities.

My trust is that as civil celebrants, we can grasp a vision of the importance of our celebrancy practices, for the health of all our communities, not just the individuals that engage our services. My hope is that we will rise to that challenge.

Note: Letters to the Editor welcome to admin@celebrants.org.au (<mailto:admin@celebrants.org.au>)

Some associated references:

Oxford Dictionary helps us focus on the meaning of being a CIVIL celebrant [*my emphasis ; -]*

Civilisation = an advanced stage or system of human social development

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civilization?view=uk

(http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civilization?view=uk)

Civilise = enlighten, refine, bring out of barbarism

bring to an advanced stage of social development.

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civilize?view=uk

(http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civilize?view=uk)

Civilian = not in acts of war

a person not in the armed services or the police force.

— ORIGIN Old French *civilien*, in the phrase *droit civilien* 'civil law'.

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civilian?view=uk

(http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civilian?view=uk)

Civil = citizen community

• adjective

1 relating to ordinary citizens, as distinct from military or ecclesiastical matters.

2 Law non-criminal: a civil court. 3 courteous and polite.

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civil?view=uk ([http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civil?](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civil?view=uk)

[view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/civil?view=uk))

Civility = readiness to oblige arts of courtesy

Courtesy = acts of justice

Court = place where justice is administered space enclosed by wall or building

Ceremonial space - psychological or sacred space. Sacred dedicated or appropriated to some person or purpose, inviolable

Civil Celebrants = agents of social development, community development workers, facilitators of peace & justice at a personal, family and community level

Little Oxford Dictionary

community

• noun (pl. communities) 1 a group of people living together in one place. 2 (the community) the people of an area or country considered collectively; society. 3 a group of people with a common religion, race, or profession: the scientific community. 4 the holding of certain attitudes and interests in common. 5 a group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together or occupying a specified habitat.

— ORIGIN Old French *comunete*, from Latin *communis* 'common'.

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/community?view=uk

(http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/community?view=uk)

chivalry

• noun 1 the medieval knightly system with its religious, moral, and social code. 2 the combination of qualities expected of an ideal knight, especially courage, honour, courtesy, justice, and a readiness to help the weak. 3 courteous behaviour, especially that of a man towards women.

- DERIVATIVES chivalric adjective.
- ORIGIN Old French *chevalerie*, from Latin *caballarius* ‘horseman’.

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/chivalry?view=uk
 (http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/chivalry?view=uk)

psyche

- **noun** the human soul, mind, or spirit.
- ORIGIN Greek *psukhe* ‘breath, life, soul’.

http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/psyche?view=uk
 (http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/psyche?view=uk)

Psy·che

1. Classical Mythology. a personification of the soul, which in the form of a beautiful girl was loved by Eros.
2. (lowercase) the human soul, spirit, or mind.
3. (lowercase) Psychology, Psychoanalysis. the mental or psychological structure of a person, esp. as a motive force.
4. Neoplatonism. the second emanation of the One, regarded as a universal consciousness and as the animating principle of the world.
5. a female given name.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/psyche> (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/psyche>)

PSYKHE (or Psyche) was the goddess of the soul, wife of Eros the god of love.

She was once a mortal princess whose astounding beauty earned the ire of Aphrodite when men turned their worship from goddess to girl. Aphrodite commanded Eros make Psykhe fall in love with the most hideous of men, but the god himself fell in love with her and carried her away to his secret palace. Eventually tricked by her jealous sisters into gazing upon the face of god, and he abandoned her. In her despair, she searched throughout the world for her lost love, and eventually came into the service of Aphrodite. The goddess commanded her perform a series of difficult labours which culminated in a journey to the Underworld. In the end Psykhe was reunited with Eros and the couple wed in a ceremony attended by the gods.

Psykhe was depicted in ancient mosaics as a butterfly winged goddess in the company of her husband Eros. Sometimes a pair of Pyskhai are portrayed, the second perhaps being their daughter Hedone (Pleasure).

<http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Psykhe.html> (<http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Psykhe.html>)

Things of the spirit ?

1 If I make use of the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am like sounding brass, or a loud-tongued bell. 2 And if I have a prophet's power, and have knowledge of all secret things; and if I have all faith, by which mountains may be moved from their place, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give all my goods to the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it is of no

profit to me.

4 Love is never tired of waiting; love is kind; love has no envy; love has no high opinion of itself, love has no pride; 5 Love's ways are ever fair, it takes no thought for itself; it is not quickly made angry, it takes no account of evil; 6 It takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but has joy in what is true; 7 Love has the power of undergoing all things, having faith in all things, hoping all things.

8 Though the prophet's word may come to an end, tongues come to nothing, and knowledge have no more value, love has no end. 9 For our knowledge is only in part, and the prophet's word gives only a part of what is true: 10 But when that which is complete is come, then that which is in part will be no longer necessary. 11 When I was a child, I made use of a child's language, I had a child's feelings and a child's thoughts: now that I am a man, I have put away the things of a child. 12 For now we see things in a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now my knowledge is in part; then it will be complete, even as God's knowledge of me. 13 But now we still have faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Bible in Basic English

http://basicenglishbible.com/1_corinthians/13.htm
(http://basicenglishbible.com/1_corinthians/13.htm)

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