

Spiritual Bypassing: Avoidance in Holy Drag

By Matt Jongbloet / from Live Learn Evolve blog

Spiritual bypassing, a term first coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984, is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs. It is much more common than we might think and, in fact, is so pervasive as to go largely unnoticed, except in its more obvious extremes.

Part of the reason for this is that we tend not to have very much tolerance, both personally and collectively, for facing, entering, and working through our pain, strongly preferring pain-numbing “solutions,” regardless of how much suffering such “remedies” may catalyze. Because this preference has so deeply and thoroughly infiltrated our culture that it has become all but normalized, spiritual bypassing fits almost seamlessly into our collective habit of turning away from what is painful, as a kind of higher analgesic with seemingly minimal side effects. It is a spiritualized strategy not only for avoiding pain but also for legitimizing such avoidance, in ways ranging from the blatantly obvious to the extremely subtle.

Spiritual bypassing is a very persistent shadow of spirituality, manifesting in many ways, often without being acknowledged as such. Aspects of spiritual bypassing include exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing and repression, overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, blind or overly tolerant compassion, weak or too porous boundaries, lopsided development (cognitive intelligence often being far ahead of emotional and moral intelligence), debilitating judgment about one’s negativity or shadow elements, devaluation of the personal relative to the spiritual, and delusions of having arrived at a higher level of being.

The explosion of interest in spirituality, especially Eastern spirituality, since the mid-1960s has been accompanied by a corresponding interest and immersion in spiritual bypassing—which has, however, not very often been named, let alone viewed, as such. It has been easier to frame spiritual bypassing as a religion-transcending, spiritually advanced practice/perspective, especially in the facile fast-food spirituality epitomized by faddish phenomena like *The Secret*. Some of the more glaringly plastic features of this, such as its drive-through servings of reheated wisdom like “Don’t take it personally” or “Whatever bothers you about someone is really only about you” or “It’s all just an illusion,” are available for consumption and parroting by just about anyone.

Happily, the honeymoon with false or superficial notions of spirituality is starting to wane. Enough bubbles have been burst; enough spiritual teachers, Eastern and Western, have been caught with pants or halo down; enough cults have come and gone; enough time has been spent with spiritual baubles, credentials, energy transmissions, and gurucentrism to sense deeper treasures. But valuable as the desire for a more authentic spirituality is, such change will not occur on any significant scale and really take root until spiritual bypassing is outgrown, and that is not as easy as it might sound, for it asks that we cease turning away from our pain, numbing ourselves, and expecting spirituality to make us feel better.

True spirituality is not a high, not a rush, not an altered state. It has been fine to romance it for a while, but our times call for something far more real, grounded, and responsible; something radically alive and naturally integral; something that shakes us to our very core until we stop treating spiritual deepening as a something to dabble in here and there. Authentic spirituality is not some little flicker or buzz of knowingness, not a psychedelic blast-through or a mellow hanging-out on some exalted plane of consciousness, not a bubble of immunity, but a vast fire of liberation, an exquisitely fitting crucible and sanctuary, providing both heat and light for what must be done.

Most of the time when we're immersed in spiritual bypassing, we like the light but not the heat, doing whatever we can to distance ourselves from the flames.

And when we're caught up in the grosser forms of spiritual bypassing, we'd usually much rather theorize about the frontiers of consciousness than actually go there, sedating the fire rather than breathing it even more alive, espousing the ideal of unconditional love while not permitting love to show up in its more challenging, personal dimensions. To do so would be too hot, too scary, and too out-of-control, bringing things to the surface that we have long disowned or suppressed.

But if we really want the light, we cannot afford to flee the heat. As Victor Frankl said, "What gives light must endure burning." And being with the fire's heat doesn't just mean sitting with the difficult stuff in meditation, but also going into it, trekking to its core, facing and entering and getting intimate with whatever is there, however scary or traumatic or sad or raw.

We have had quite an affair with Eastern spiritual pathways, but now it is time to go deeper. We must do this not only to get more intimate with the essence of these wisdom traditions beyond ritual and belief and dogma but also to make room for the healthy evolution, not just the necessary Westernization, of these traditions so that their presentation ceases encouraging spiritual bypassing (however indirectly) and, in fact, consciously and actively ceases giving it soil to flower. These changes won't happen to any significant degree, however, unless we work in-depth and integratively with our physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions to generate an ever-deeper sense of wholeness, vitality, and basic sanity.

Any spiritual path, Eastern or Western, that does not deal in real depth with psychological issues, and deal with these in more than just spiritual contexts, is setting itself up for an abundance of spiritual bypassing. If there is not sufficient encouragement and support from spiritual teachers and teachings for their students to engage in significant depth in psychoemotional work, and if those students who really need such work don't then do it, they'll be left trying to work out their psychoemotional issues, traumatic and otherwise, only through the spiritual practices they have been given, as if doing so is somehow superior to—or a "higher" activity than—engaging in quality psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is often viewed as an inferior undertaking relative to spiritual practice, perhaps even something we "shouldn't" have to do. When our spiritual bypassing is more subtle, the idea of psychotherapy may be considered more acceptable but we will still shy away from a full-blooded investigation of our core wounds.

Spiritual bypassing is largely occupied, at least in its New Age forms, by the idea of wholeness and the innate unity of Being—"Oneness" being perhaps its favorite bumper sticker—but actually generates and reinforces fragmentation by separating out from and rejecting what is painful, distressed, and unhealed; all the far-from-flattering aspects of being human. By consistently keeping these in the dark, "down below" (when we're locked into our headquarters, our body and feelings seem to be below us), they tend to behave badly when let out, much like animals that have spent too long in cages. Our neglect here of these aspects of ourselves, however gently framed, is akin to that of otherwise caring parents who leave their children without sufficient food, clothing, or care.

The trappings of spiritual bypassing can look good, particularly when they seem to promise freedom from life's fuss and fury, but this supposed serenity and detachment is often little more than metaphysical valium, especially for those who have made too much of a virtue out of being and looking positive.

A common telltale sign of spiritual bypassing is a lack of grounding and in-the-body experience that tends to keep us either spacially afloat in how we relate to the world or too rigidly tethered to a spiritual system that provides the solidity we lack. We also may fall into premature forgiveness and emotional dissociation, and confuse anger with aggression and ill will, which leaves us disempowered, riddled with weak boundaries. The overdone niceness that often characterizes spiritual bypassing strands it from emotional depth and authenticity; and its underlying grief—mostly unspoken, untouched, unacknowledged—keeps it marooned from the very caring that would unwrap and undo it, like a baby being readied for a bath by a loving parent.

Spiritual bypassing distances us not only from our pain and difficult personal issues but also from our own authentic spirituality, stranding us in a metaphysical limbo, a zone of exaggerated gentleness, niceness, and superficiality. Its frequently disconnected nature keeps it adrift, clinging to the weight of its self-conferred spiritual credentials. As such, it maroons us from embodying our full humanity.

But let us not be too hard on spiritual bypassing, for every one of us who has entered into the spiritual has engaged in spiritual bypassing, at least to some degree, having for years used other means to make ourselves feel better or more secure. Why would we not also approach spirituality, particularly at first, with much the same expectation that it make us feel better or more secure?

To truly outgrow spiritual bypassing—which in part means releasing spirituality (and everything else!) from the obligation to make us feel better or more secure or more whole—we must not only see it for what it is and cease engaging in it but also view it with genuine compassion, however fiery that might be or need to be. The spiritual bypasser in us needs not censure nor shaming but rather to be consciously and caringly included in our awareness without being allowed to run the show. Becoming intimate with our own capacity for spiritual bypassing allows us to keep it in healthy perspective.

I have worked with many clients who described themselves as being on a spiritual path, particularly as meditators. Most were preoccupied, at least initially, with being nice, trying to be positive and nonjudgmental, while impaling themselves on various spiritual “shoulds,” such as “I should not show anger” or “I should be more loving” or “I should be more open after all the time I’ve put into my spiritual practice.” Fleeing their darker (or “less spiritual”) emotions, impulses, and intentions, they had, to varying degrees, trapped themselves within the very practices (and beliefs) that they had hoped might liberate them, or at least make them feel better.

Even the most exquisitely designed spiritual methodologies can become traps, leading not to freedom but only to reinforcement, however subtle, of the very “I” that wants to be a somebody who has attained or realized freedom (the very same “I” that doesn’t realize there are no Oscars for awakening). The most obvious potential traps-in-waiting include the belief that we should rise above our difficulties and simply embrace Oneness, even as the tendency to divide everything into positive and negative, higher and lower, spiritual and nonspiritual, runs wild in us. Subtler traps-in-waiting, less densely populated with metaphysical lullabies and ascension metaphors and far more discerning, teach non-aversion through cultivating a capacity for dispassionate witnessing and/or various devotional rituals. Subtler still are those that emphasize meeting everything with acceptance and compassion. Each approach has its own value, if only to eventually propel us into an even deeper direction, and each is far from immune to being possessed by spiritual bypassing, especially when we are still hoping, whatever our depth of spiritual practice, to reach a state of immunity to suffering (both personally and collectively).

As my spiritually inclined clients become more intimate with their pain and difficulties, coming to understand the origins of their troubles with a more open ear and heart, they either abandon their misguided spiritual practices and reenter a more fitting version of them with less submissiveness and more integrity and creativity or find new practices that better suit their needs, coming to recognize more deeply that everything—everything!—can serve their healing and awakening.

In the facing and outgrowing of spiritual bypassing, we enter a deeper life—a life of full-blooded integrity, depth, love, and sanity; a life of authenticity on every level; a life in which the personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal are all honored and lived to the fullest.