

Spiritual things: Gratitude is where the spiritual life begins

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

Somehow I managed to get a theological education and practice several decades of parish ministry without encountering the idea of spirituality. In fact, I don't recall even hearing the word until about ten years ago.

I did read Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, an introduction to a new and strange world of mystery and transcendence, which I did not entirely trust as authentic. Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* forced me to think outside the boundaries of my own theological family. But I was never very comfortable with this material and retreated as quickly as I could to the safety of Pauline, northern European, university-refined intellectualism. I was better at thinking about Otto's *numen* than at experiencing it.

Now we are awash in spirituality. The spirituality section of the bookstore is one of the most active and profitable these days. As part of my premarital conference with couples, I ask them to rank their own spirituality on a scale of one to ten, one being an atheist, and ten a monk or nun. Everybody, without exception, ranks himself or herself between five and nine—even the ones who haven't been inside a church for years. "I'm very spiritual, I just don't go to church," they tell me.

[Eugene Peterson's article](#) clarifies some of my own discomfort with aspects of contemporary spirituality. He suggests that "spirituality without Jesus degenerates into sloppy sentimentalism." Sara Miller's interview with [Bernard McGinn](#) is very helpful to people like me who never learned much about spirituality in the first place. And [Garrison Keillor](#) sets me to thinking and remembering with his observation that "Gratitude is where spiritual life begins."

I think of lines by e e cummings—"i thank You God for most this amazing day" and Anne Lamott— "The two best prayers I know are, 'Help me. Help me. Help me' in the morning and at bedtime 'Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.'"

I remember a trip my wife and I took with a group of high school students to Iona, a “thin place” where the boundary between heaven and earth is particularly porous. It was not an easy trip, and on the ferry from Oban and the long bus ride across Mull through a driving rain, I wasn’t at all sure it was a good idea in the first place. The kids were far more interested in buying posters of British rock groups in Edinburgh than visiting Iona. But then, at the welcoming worship service in the abbey, restored during the last century but feeling very much like it had been welcoming pilgrims for a thousand years, we sang “Be Thou My Vision” and prayed ancient Celtic prayers. I was overcome with a deep gratitude for life, my dearest ones, the church, these occasionally exasperating adolescents, and that deepest mystery of all that was the reason we were there and in which each of us lives, moves and has our being. Keillor is correct: Gratitude is where the spiritual life begins.