

An Interview with John Astin

By Kyle S. McJunkin

Dr. Astin, there has been an increasing body of literature that focuses upon the role of religion and spirituality on health. Can you provide a brief background on this emerging relationship? How did it come about? Why the interest?

From a scholarly and academic standpoint, the relationship between religion, spirituality and health is certainly an emergent field, but I think the interest in this relationship is a very ancient one. In much the same way that understanding the intersection between a mind–body connection is not really a novel pursuit, interest in the relationship between spirituality and health is not entirely a new phenomenon, though the scientific interest in it is relatively recent and appears to be growing.

Why this growing interest? I think that in many ways our tendency to divide or separate the world up into these categories of body, mind, emotion, and spirit, though somewhat artificial and arbitrary, is also quite natural. It speaks partly to our lived experience of these things being separate. For example, I can think or believe all sorts of things about myself and the world but it appears that the world and my body go right on as they are, largely untouched. But, I also think that people have a sense that somehow, the way we think and feel about our lives, our perspectives, our beliefs (including spiritual) -- somehow these do have an impact on how our body ultimately feels and functions. I think this intuitive sense runs deep within the human psyche and for good reasons. It's not such a big leap to see how one experiences the world and the relationship to one's life in the spiritual sense.

I think another reason for this enduring and now growing interest in the spirituality/health link probably also has a lot to do with the fact that confronting health issues frequently is a challenging, stressful, and disorienting experience for people whether that means confronting chronic pain or some other illness. The graver the illness, the more people tend to question life's meaning and purpose: Why am I sick? How am I going to get better? What is the meaning of life and death? So, people frequently turn toward their spiritual beliefs and perspectives in an effort to re-orient themselves when faced with any significant stressor including significant health challenges.

There are so many angles to understanding this relationship. As I was just saying, at one very simple level, people who are confronting some kind of health challenge will frequently turn to their spiritual beliefs or faith tradition to try and cope with the situation, get help for it, say in the form of using prayer, for example. People often feel a need to make sense of their situation, particularly in the face of suffering. Oftentimes people will attempt to make sense of these experiences through the filter of their spiritual or religious worldview that is sometimes based on some form of faith tradition. In any event, in terms of health and illness, there are ways in which dealing with something like an illness brings a person right to the brink of "the mystery." What do I mean by this? Well, despite our scientific understanding of medical conditions and what causes certain health problems and how best to treat them, we are frequently up against the reality that we simply do not know – from the common cold to cancer -- about why we get sick or not, what exactly is the nature of what we are confronting, and how best to heal it.

Not only do we face not knowing, but we are often confronted with the stark realization that we are not in control of the situation. Death inevitably is, of course, the ultimate "proof" you could say of the uncontrollability and fragility of this life. So there is this sense that this confrontation with illness takes one right to the brink of the biggest existential questions we face. In the case of dealing with illness, one dimension of that is this feeling that one doesn't have that much control and that things are sort of happening outside of or against our will or personal desire.

This relates to an area of my own research, which has focused on the construct of psychological control and sense of control. We know from research that confrontation with illness frequently leads to a lost sense of control. We also know that one-way people cope with feeling this loss is through spirituality and religion because it can often provide one with a greater sense of coherence, order, and seeming control in an otherwise seemingly out of control world.

What is this analysis of the relationship between the spiritual and health trying to get at? What is being uncovered when this connection is studied?

I think it's important to try and understand the evolution of our thinking about mind, body, and spirit. In the pre-Enlightenment, pre-Scientific era, mind and body were fused. The existing paradigm of these earlier times was what present-day psychologists like to refer to as a kind of "magical" thinking; what we see happening in the material world is the result of something that is out of balance in the spiritual or interior world. For example, "I need to pray for rain. I need to pray for a good crop. I need to pray for my own health," and so on. There was little if any separation between the spiritual and the material worlds. A classic example of this fusion between spirit and body/mind was the belief that mental illness was caused by some kind of demonic possession.

But, with the advent of the Enlightenment and emergence of scientific rationalism in Europe, the previously fused domains of body, mind, spirit became separated and actually that was a good thing from the standpoint of being able to differentiate between the different domains so that we could actually see that they represented domains that had integrity in and of themselves, rather than seeing them as fused and inseparable. So that was the good news, the "dignity" of modernity as the philosopher Ken Wilber puts it. Now we could now begin to see that yes, some physical things are actually caused by physical things (e.g., infections caused by germs) and that they are not simply the result of the whim of some immaterial God or unseen, inexplicable force. But as Wilber also points out, there was also the "disaster" of modernity. That is, when this positive differentiation between the realms of body, mind, and spirit became dissociated. Separation and appropriate differentiation became a kind of severing and splitting off one from the other.

For example, the effort to understand the body at the level of the body (which you could say continues to be the enduring legacy of much of western, scientific medicine) is a positive thing. Biomedical science was freed to discover that, for example, there are actually blood-borne pathogens that cause certain diseases and that we are not simply at the mercy of the gods. This represented a positive evolution as Wilber points out, but what occurred in many areas of life, not just medicine, is that this whole mental, emotional, spiritual "interior," or non-material world split off completely. So, not only did mind and spirit come to be seen as constituting different domains, but they became unimportant. In the case of medicine, what resulted from this dissociation was a kind of reductionism that attempted to understand physical illness solely in terms of physical or physiological causes. Essentially, these other domains of mind, emotions and spirit were left out of the equation and forgotten. This kind of reductionism is particularly evident in areas such as genetics and psychiatry where human behavior is seen to be largely, or in some cases even solely, determined by biological/genetic factors. But when we try to explain complex human behavior or health solely in terms of the biological domain, we unfortunately end up with a medicine that is fragmented, that is not integral, a medicine that is not considering the potential influence of these other (i.e., interior) domains. I think this burgeoning interest in spirituality and mind-body medicine in general is partly a reaction to this sense that medicine has cut away aspects of the human experience that may actually be vital to understanding how people get sick and what will best help them to get better.

I think what we are seeing now is a desire to reclaim the "interiors," which includes our spirituality, the mind, and our emotions. It's a way of acknowledging that human beings are complex organisms that have multiple dimensions. As we are now discovering through very rigorous and carefully controlled studies, these interior dimensions of the human experience are in fact turning out to be quite important with respect to determining or at least influencing physical health.

Can you give us some examples of research that illustrate the kind of relationship between spirituality and health?

One area that has received a lot of attention is what has been termed the "epidemiology of religion" that has looked at the links between spiritual and religious involvement and physical and mental health. The evidence is pretty consistent across studies. A recent meta-analysis concluded that if you look at the bulk of the observational studies that have been done, there appears to be a fairly consistent link between greater involvement with religion and spirituality and better health, both mental and physical. Even though this is a generalization, it tends to be the case that religious people live longer and healthier and have fewer psychological problems. At this point, however, the research has told us very little about why this relationship exists, about how involvement with spirituality might positively influence health.

We can speculate on some of the possible reasons. For example, people's religious/spiritual beliefs may serve as a buffer against stress which in turn exerts a positive influence on physiology and health; spiritual experiences themselves (that is, not merely beliefs) may actually be beneficial to the body and mind; people involved with religion/spirituality may be more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and lifestyle choices such as not smoking or drinking; involvement with religion may provide people with a richer social support networks which research suggests can also act as a buffer against stress and is associated with better health in many studies. For example, in laboratory stress situations, a person will show a diminished stress response when they have a friend in the lab with them. There is something about social connectivity and social support that promotes health, so it may be the case that some people involved in various faith traditions and spiritual practices experience greater support and connectivity that in turn leads to better health.

I have two higher education-related questions that I'd like to pose to you today. The first one focuses upon the college student who is undergoing enormous change, physically, mentally, and emotionally. How might having a spiritual life impact their development? The presumption in the question is, of course, that this change that they're going through has an element of stress.

Well, I think that there are a lot of aspects to that. Many, many of the people that I know who are now interested in various forms of spiritual practice talk about this interest in spirituality really kind of exploding within them in their early college years (19-20). This was certainly true in my own case. From a developmental standpoint, I think that there's obviously a lot of transformation that is occurring in the college years.

When we did the focus groups examining college students' spirituality, it was evident that there was a lot of identity formation and *identity forging* that was occurring for these young people. Students are finding out for themselves who they are apart from their families of

origin. They're navigating through this maze of identity formation and attempting to define themselves and their world through the creation of new types of relationships. It's kind of the classic idea of the college student who stays up into the wee hours of the night talking about philosophy and the meaning of life. It's not surprising that that would actually be going on.

I think that process really starts in many ways in adolescence and the college years are simply a continuation of that normal developmental process into young adulthood. This tends to be the time when people are asking very central questions like: "Who am I?" "Why am I here? Why did I come here? Who made me? Did somebody make me? Is there a meaning to my being here? When you consider that the major task of college is to study, be deliberative, develop certain skills, and use those skills for some kind of meaningful work in the world, it is not surprising that spiritual interests might accompany and even drive this process. Again, this came up in the focus groups where we found students asking questions like: "What does it all really mean?" "What am I doing here?" "Why am I even in college?" "Why am I studying this particular subject?" "Does it have some relevance beyond simply getting me a job that will pay me a salary?" People are asking these kinds of questions and this inquiry frequently dovetails into spiritual existential questions of life, meaning, and purpose. So, I just think it's a natural kind of time in which people begin asking these kinds of questions in earnest. I think they're looking into those kinds of questions because they're sort of right in the middle of this very intense developmental/identity formation process.

Since we're talking about development here, I wanted to share a development of sorts in my own thinking about and experience of spirituality. To be honest, I'm finding myself becoming less and less comfortable with the notion of spirituality as somehow being separate from the rest of life. Spirituality is often conceived as, "I have my spiritual life and then there is the rest of my life" which seems to me an artificial partitioning of the human experience. Another way to think about it is to consider that the "whole thing", the whole human experience, is really what spirituality is all about. It's about how you live life. It's about the experience of being alive. In this way, spirituality is not so much about a set of concepts or beliefs. It's about a much more direct and immediate contact with this mystery that gives rise to, or is the source of, everything including all the beliefs and concepts we may hold dear. You could say that, in some sense, every encounter or experience in life is a spiritual one because whether conscious or not, spirituality is in operation all the time. That is, people are almost always framing their experiences in the context of what they believe to be true, the context of who they think they are, and how they fit or do not fit into some greater universal order or purpose. Particularly as a researcher, I recognize the potential downside of defining spirituality in such a broad way, as simply being life...but it's one way that I increasingly find myself thinking about it. Spirituality, not something split off from the rest of life, but rather what life actually is. As some contemplative/mystical traditions say, everything is ultimately a reflection or manifestation of One Thing, God or

Spirit or whatever term you prefer, and that this creation is none other than That, none other than God or, as the Buddhists say, emptiness appearing as these myriad forms and experiences. So in that sense, everything is actually spiritual, everything's sacred. Imagine if life were lived from such an experiential perspective...it might be a much different world.

What do you see as the role of spirituality in health? How can educators use this knowledge to help college students?

You know, I think more than anything educators need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the fact that many college students are looking at very, very big questions and confronting these questions in meaningful ways. They are staring these existential questions right in the face and inquiring into what this life means to them. Likewise, they're questioning who they are. That they are looking at these questions undoubtedly has some effect on their mental and physical health.

I don't know the specifics, but it is generally understood that there has been a rise in depression among young people in college.^[1] What does that actually reflect? For many of these individuals there are surely biochemical things happening, but many of them are also dealing with very, very big issues related to what this life, their life, means or doesn't mean. These are serious, spiritual existential questions that they're facing and not simply psychological, social, or biochemical issues (though they are that too). You can often treat depression with some sort of pharmaceutical or even herbal agent, an approach that is sometimes a very helpful method of dealing with this condition, yet I think a more integral approach is one that recognizes that this is a complex human being dealing with natural, emotional, and existential challenges. They may be confronting big spiritual questions in their life, all of which may be playing some role in their experience of feeling sad and depressed. I really think it's about looking at the whole of the human being. I think that maybe that will be the enduring contribution of the whole spirituality/religious discussion as it relates to health. This discussion is helping to remind us that human beings are complex and it is in and through this complexity that there is constant interaction between the physical and the spiritual, between the interior and exteriors of our lives, a relationship that is bidirectional, and that flows in both directions.

Interestingly, the word "health" has a very similar root to the words "wholeness" and "holy". It's kind of interesting that there is an etymological connection between what we think of as "holy" and what we think of as "health". I think there's a lot of mystery as to how these two realms actually relate to each another. Yet, it is fascinating to try and understand these interconnections.

I think I have a definition here. "Health: Old English meaning the state of being sound, whole in body, mind or soul; especially being free from physical disease or pain".

I think that one other thing that comes to mind in looking for the linkage points between spirituality and health is the whole issue of human suffering. Medicine and medical science is fundamentally related to understanding the roots of human physical and emotional suffering and being able to identify things that help to alleviate that suffering. And in many ways, the thrust behind a lot of spiritual involvement, spiritual beliefs, and spiritual practices is also an effort to reduce suffering within ourselves and others. It seems to be a kind of universal, human desire to become liberated from suffering whether it is physical, mental, emotional, intra-personal, or existential. I do a lot of research on meditation. Traditionally meditation and other contemplative practices have been employed as a way to free oneself from suffering or offer liberation from the experience of suffering to others. So it's not surprising in some ways to see that meditation is now being employed in various healthcare settings. And low and behold, we are discovering that meditation may actually offer a lot of value as far as helping people, not only cope more effectively with various psychological and physical challenges, but to actually change how the body and brain function and operate. It's just kind of interesting...the coming together of these different ancient and modern approaches to understanding and relieving human suffering that may, in the end, not be all that far apart.

Thank you for speaking with me this morning.

Thank you.

John A. Astin is a health psychologist and researcher at the California Pacific Medical Center. In addition, Dr. Astin serves as a member of the Technical Advisory Panel for HERI's Spirituality in Higher Education project.

[1] Editor's Note: From the National Mental Health Association, "...According to a recent national college health survey, 10% of college students have been diagnosed with depression, including 13% of college women. Anxiety disorders affect over 19 million American adults every year, and anxiety levels among college students have been rising since the 1950s. In 2000, almost seven percent of college students reported experiencing anxiety disorders within the previous year. Women are five times as likely to have anxiety disorders. Eating disorders affect 5-10 million women and 1 million men, with the highest rates occurring in college-aged women. Suicide was the eighth leading cause of death for all Americans, the third leading cause of death for those aged 15-24, and the second leading killer in the college population in 1998. According to the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 7.8% of men and 12.3% of women ages 18-24 report frequent mental distress – a key indicator for depression and other mental disorders. College students are feeling more overwhelmed and stressed than fifteen years ago, according to a recent UCLA survey of college freshman. More than 30% of college freshman report feeling overwhelmed a great deal of the time. About 38% of college women report feeling frequently overwhelmed." Taken from NMHA's website: <http://www.nmha.org/camh/college/index.cfm>.