

# Spirituality and Consciousness

Sermonette delivered on 2012.06.24 at First Parish of Sudbury, Unitarian Universalist [following guided meditation and Spirit of Life hymn (see below)]

“let your mind rest in the phrases”.

A mind at rest is needed for most spiritual experiences. I'll use the term quiescent, which means “quiet, still, or inactive”. Does the quiescent mind have any more or less consciousness than a purposeful mind or when our thoughts are racing?

In Christof Koch's book: *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist*, he offers four ad hoc definitions: behavioral, philosophical, common sense, which is “our inner mental life while awake” and lastly a neuronal definition “the functioning of the cortico-thalamic complex and the brain stem”. Cortico - meaning the neocortex (gray matter) is the wrapped around the thalamus (Greek Inner chamber) sitting on top of the brain stem. Between these is the white matter, which is made of nerve fibers projecting from one bundle of nerves another, - interconnects a massive network. Essentially, he is saying that consciousness is what the brain does.

In 2004 he was not even willing offer an ad hoc definition. In the book, *The Quest for Consciousness*, he claimed it was premature to do so in any meaningful way. Christof Koch worked with Francis Crick, who shared the Nobel prize for discovering the structure of DNA in 1962. Crick and Koch developed the idea of the NCC - Neuronal Correlates of Consciousness in 1995. The NCC is the smallest chunk of thought according to them. It is a coalition of different regions of the brain. The neocortex has dozens of different little dedicated engines. The visual cortex alone has about 40 regions, of which three are for 1) sensing color, 2) object recognition and 3) integrating motion. When we see a red corvette drive by, those 3 regions need to have their wires interconnected to know it's Michael's car. In Christof Koch's model, there are many competing coalitions forming and un-forming between the different regions the brain all of the time. Only one coalition is dominant at a time. This series of dominant coalitions is our stream of consciousness.

The germ of this talk came to me as questions while reading his new book. What can influence our quiescent mind? Can spirit energy influence our brains? Can other conscious beings influence our consciousness? Can we influence our own thoughts?

That last question may seem absurd, but, many serious scientists think that we cannot. They think that we do not have free will. The theory is that if the brain is a physical chemical system that is basically deterministic. Even if we account for randomness or chaotic effects, that still does not allow our thoughts to influence the process. There have been a slew of books written about free will in the past couple of years and the

WikiPedia page on the Neuroscience of Free Will is 16 dense pages including 2 pages of references.

The science starts with an experiment by Benjamin Libet in the 1980's. He asked people to flick their wrist and notice what time they decided to flick it. Measuring the "readiness potential" which precedes actual motor movement, he found that it also preceded the conscious decision to flick the wrist. This and dozens of follow on studies are not without controversy. However, what does seem clear is that the actual forebrain that makes decisions does not participate in consciousness. For example, when you say, "I'll sleep on it" does the answer ever just pop into your mind? Or is the answer on the tip of your tongue? but you can't quite say what it is for a second?

For the most part, our problem solving brain comes up with solutions that our conscious mind approves of. And we are masters at filling in gaps and making sense of things that don't always make sense. So, it's possible we are just passengers riding atop our animal brains while confabulating wonderful stories in which we the hero take credit for our great thoughts.

But what about the quiescent or contemplative mind? Do we need much to steer the coalition of connections, just a little nudge to change our thoughts would give us free will. I take it for granted that we have free will, altho, sometimes we need tremendous will power to use it.

"Spirit of life to come unto me" - Could spirit energy influence our neural coalitions? What is spirit energy?

I do not have an answer for that and it might be farfetched, but bear with me for a bit and then decide. We know about photons. They carry light energy from the sun to our skin. We know a lot less about gravity, which was only "discovered" 400 years ago. In theory there are gravitons, but, they have never been observed. Is it possible there are spiritons and spiritual energy that we have not "discovered". Keep in mind, "dark matter", which according current theory is that it makes up 84% of the universe. That's 84% of the universe we only really known about for 20 years. So, I would ask for a bit of humility about how much we really know about Reality.

Those last three sentences paraphrase Christof Koch. Koch started his career studying the physics of nerve cells and claims he "was quarantined" at his first academic conference. After 4 years of post-doc work at MIT's AI and Cognitive Science labs, he became a Cal-Tech professor in 1986 and after 26 years he is probably the foremost researcher of consciousness in the world. A heavy weight scientist. When he asked for humility, it was not for spiritons, but rather about Pierre Tay-yahr (pronunciation of Teilhard) de Chardin's "Noah-Sphere" (pronunciation of noosphere). Teilhard was a Jesuit priest, a paleontologist and geologist.

His idea is that there is a geosphere and a biosphere and the Noah-Sphere is the third layer. First comes the geosphere - which takes its name from Gaia, the Greek goddess,

Mother Earth, Mother of time and grandmother of Zeus. Given time, chemicals and perhaps some pixie dust from space, the geosphere brought forth the biosphere, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, aka, our 7th UU principle. And as the organisms became conscious, those consciousnesses started to interact to form the Noah-Sphere. The Noah-Sphere is the sphere of consciousness surrounding the globe. I have loved that idea since I first heard about it close to 20 years ago and it has always had a lot of meaning for me. Writing this has forced me to think about whether this is true of me or just a neat idea. It definitely resonates with me and I can say that I do believe it.

So, when the meditation urges us to “Feel the energy extending infinitely to all beings everywhere, without distinction, without separation”, I’m going to let myself feel it. And if that’s a little kooky, at least I have some good company.

=====

<http://www.jch.com/jch/notes/kochConfessions.html>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_regions\\_in\\_the\\_human\\_brain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_regions_in_the_human_brain)

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? is a painting by French artist Paul Gauguin. Gauguin inscribed the original French title in the upper left corner: D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giulio\\_Tononi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giulio_Tononi)  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noosphere>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Teilhard\\_de\\_Chardin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Teilhard_de_Chardin) - [pjɛʁ tejaʁ - tay-yahr  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuroscience\\_of\\_free\\_will](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuroscience_of_free_will)

-----

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;  
 we are spiritual beings having a human experience.\*

-Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

*Spirit of Life, come unto me.  
 Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
 Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;  
 Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
 Roots hold me close; wings set me free;  
 Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.*

Carolyn McDade - <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/35893.shtml>

sent to jch by Beth Rust 2012.06.17

### **Guided Meditation**

### **Metta Loving Kindness Meditation**

The Buddhist Metta meditation practice is devoted to cultivating lovingkindness, opening our heart to benefit all whose lives we touch. When we connect into the phrases we will say together, think of it as aiming our heart. We open ourselves to the possibility of including, rather than excluding, of connecting, rather than overlooking, of caring, rather than being indifferent.

Get comfortable. Feel your energy settle into yourself and into the moment.

I will speak the metta phrases aloud one at a time with space in between and I invite you to repeat them silently to yourselves, letting your mind rest in the phrases. Don't worry if you find your attention has wandered; see if you can gently let it go and come back here.

We start with ourselves. We meditate with phrases from our heart to express what we wish most deeply for ourselves not just for today, but in an enduring way.

**May I be safe and protected** from inner and outer harm

**May I be peaceful** in body, in mind, and in heart

**May I live with ease** in the midst of things as they are

Now call to mind somebody that you care about--a good friend, or someone who's helped you in your life; it could be someone you know who's having a difficult time right now, who has experienced a loss, painful feeling, a difficult situation. Visualize them, say their name to yourself. Get a feeling for their presence, and then direct the phrases of lovingkindness to them.

**May you be safe and protected** from inner and outer harm

**May you be peaceful** in body, in mind, and in heart

**May you live with ease** in the midst of things as they are

Think of someone who plays some role in your life, some function that you don't know very well, that you don't have a particular feeling for, or against. Maybe the checkout person at the supermarket where you shop, the gas-station attendant, somebody that you see periodically. Visualize them, imagine them sitting in front of you, and offer these same phrases of lovingkindness to them.

**May you be safe and protected** from inner and outer harm

**May you be peaceful** in body, in mind, and in heart

**May you live with ease** in the midst of things as they are

We now reach out to each person in our beloved community here at First Parish and to the larger community where we live in loving kindness.

**May we all be safe and protected** from inner and outer harm  
**May we all be peaceful** in body, in mind, and in heart  
**May we all live with ease** in the midst of things as they are

And ultimately, we open in this way to all beings everywhere, without distinction, without separation. All people, all animals, all creatures, all those in existence, near and far, known to us and unknown to us. All beings on the earth, in the air, in the water. Those being born, those dying. Feel the energy of this aspiration extending infinitely in front of you, to either side, behind you, above and below as your heart extends in a boundless way, leaving no one out.

**May all things be safe and protected** from inner and outer harm  
**May all things be peaceful** in body, in mind, and in heart  
**May all things live with ease** in the midst of things as they are

And when you feel ready, you can open your [eyes](#) and see if you can bring this energy with you throughout the day.