

# ***Quantifying the Spiritual: How to Observe and Evaluate Spirituality in a Student***

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## **Abstract**

For an education to be considered truly "holistic" it would seem evident that incorporating and normalizing the concept of Spirituality therein is fundamental, as Spirituality (in whatever form it may be expressed) is a core component of what it means to be human. The very notion, however, presents several complications - not in the least; if a significant aspect of education is evaluating a student's progress in a given arena, how do we possibly evaluate and quantify a student's aptitude in such an ineffable, rather personal, somewhat ethereal and wholly abstract realm like Spirituality? And yet, that was the very quandary proposed to the author by an esteemed colleague. This paper is an attempt to begin the process of deciphering such a riddle. As a bona fide Gen X-er, the author could not help but to include several *Star Wars* references to help navigate the terrain.

**Keywords:** *holistic education, evaluating spirituality, defining spirituality, Animism*

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## **Introduction to Justin Pilla's article, *Quantifying the Spiritual***

By Renee Owen

Message to the reader from HER Editor, Renee Owen. Whether you clicked on this article titled *Quantifying the Spiritual* because you are outraged at the notion of measuring spirituality or because you are intrigued with the potential of quantifying the spiritual and maybe even hoping to learn how to evaluate spirituality in your own setting; Justin Pilla's article has something to offer you. Before reading on, I offer you some context.

I commissioned Justin to write an essay on measuring spiritual development, not in my capacity as HER Editor, but several years prior, when I was the Head of School at Rainbow Community School and Justin was a beloved middle school teacher. Rainbow, as we lovingly call it, is a holistic school located in Asheville, NC that was founded in 1977 by educational leaders in the Western Sufi movement. As a holistic school, Rainbow considered the spiritual development of the child – of all humans – as central to our human nature and essential to our well-being. Evidence of how spirituality is practiced at Rainbow is referenced in the article when Justin

refers to a Rainbow practice called centering. Each day, every class begins with centering – a time for everyone present to gather in a circle and affirm the sacredness of being alive and being together.

Teachers at Rainbow write long narratives about each student, aka “report cards,” describing the child’s development in each of seven domains: physical, natural, creative, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual, with the spiritual domain considered as the domain that enlivens and integrates all the others. Parents, teachers, and students alike would ask, How can we measure spiritual development? New teachers, in particular, found writing a report on students’ spiritual development to be daunting. They wanted to know what they were looking for as evidence of spirituality, and they needed guidance. It was in this context that Justin wrote this essay.

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## PROLOGUE

Before I begin, I must speak to the fundamental quandary when attempting to quantify the ineffable (ie: measure spirituality). To do so I shall offer a personal anecdote entwined with a pop culture reference.

The 1977 sci-fi classic *Star Wars* was a cultural phenomenon that imprinted itself deep into the psyche of a generation. Part of the film’s success was due to its deft melding of novel special effects, memorable characters and a jaunty adventure, all told through the archetypical lens of the hero’s quest.

I would propose another reason for the massive influence of *Star Wars* was that it reintroduced into the contemporary zeitgeist the concept of Animism (or “the Force” as *Star Wars* parlance refers to it). Animism is the belief that all things (person, place, nature, inanimate objects, even ideas) possess an inherent consciousness, spirit or soul. Obi-Wan Kenobi, a devoted practitioner of the Force, defines it as, “...an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.”

Spirituality in Americana, circa the bicentennial, was mostly relegated to the arena of indoctrinated organized religions. Such organized religions, steeped in litany and dogma, often leave little wiggle room for the direct experience of the ineffable, the infinite, the divine. Animism, on the other hand, not only invites us into its fold, it insists that such a state of profound, ecstatic and meaningful connection is our birthright.

In fact, as proposed in the poetic and informative podcast *The Emerald: Currents and Trends Through a Mythic Lens*, by Joshua Shrei, “For 98% of human history, 99.9% of our ancestors lived, breathed, and interacted with a world that they saw and felt to be animate. Imbued with lifeforce. Animism is normative consciousness,” as the title of the episode iterated several times.

This core component of being human seems to have been forgotten and swallowed up by modernity. Paved over by industry. Bullied out by consumption and technological “progress”. Overwhelmed by satellites and screens. Reduced by reductionist materialism.

And yet, spirit is a fundamental component of just who we are as living beings. *Star Wars* was a novel and timely reminder of what it can mean to be a spiritual human. The revelation that there is a

Force and that it “binds the galaxy” resonated for many on a deep, primeval level and we are still in the throes of *Star Wars* mania, some 45 years later.

So when in the *Star Wars* 1998 prequel *The Phantom Menace*, Qui-Gon-Jin (another Force practitioner) explained to a fledgling student that his potency in the Force can be measured with a simple blood test... Well, fans are still griping about that to this day (I know I am).

But why? Why did reducing the Force to a measurable blood test feel so... blasphemous?

Once again, modernity felt the need to quantify the ineffable. To remove the mystery. To tame the magic. The rational, reductionist, materialism of science infiltrated our myth and insisted that spirit is simply a misinterpretation of particulate reality. It felt like a massive regression, a betrayal, even, of a gift that had expanded our consciousness some twenty years earlier. I audibly groaned in the theater when I watched that scene and very nearly walked out (as you can see, I take my *Star Wars* and my animism pretty seriously).

This perpetual tendency of humans to reduce that which is sublime, transcendental and mystical into something that can be readily measured and assessed, gets to the crux of this prologue. However, that is what the task at hand seems to be asking:

*How do we observe and evaluate Spirituality in a student?*

Before we delve into the quandary of quantifying the spiritual, we must understand that, at its core, spirit is transcendent of the human need, or capacity, to fully assess and measure.

The exercise is ultimately a fool’s errand. We are connected to spirit, or we are not. Or, to be more

accurate, we are either aware that we are connected to spirit, or we are not aware. For, as Obi-Wan says, “...the Force surrounds us and penetrates us.” So, from the spiritual or animistic lens, we are never, not spiritual. We are always connected to all things, seen and unseen. We are always a part of that which is sacred. Just how mindful we are of this... that is the journey.

And yet, the riddle persists. If we are to normalize spirituality in education, then we must come up with a means and a language to observe and evaluate it.

### **Religion vs. Spirituality**

What do we mean by spirituality and religion?

For the purposes of this paper, I define “spirituality” as an individual’s connection to spirit, whereas “religion” refers to a culture or community’s shared connection to spirit. When the word religion is used from here on, I am referring to a culture or community’s authentic and healthy way of expressing a shared practice of spirituality and not to the pejorative way it can sometimes be used, which may infer uninspired dogma or a controlling belief system for the masses (of which I am guilty of doing earlier in this essay).

### **Spirit**

There are quite a few definitions of spirit, spiritual and spirituality. These are terms that are attempting to capture the ineffable. This is evident in that most definitions of spirit emphasize that it is the “non-physical” quality of a thing. Other definitions may touch upon ethics or morality. Others may lean more towards the esoteric. For this document, the following list of qualities

seems to serve to encapsulate what we mean when we say spirit or spiritual or spirituality:

### ***The Qualities of Spirit, Spiritual and Spirituality***

the interconnectivity of all things; seen and unseen  
that which Animates All Being  
the Essence of a Thing  
that which is held Sacred  
Purpose and Meaning  
the embodiment, experience and expression of:  
Wonder, Connection, Reverence, Empathy and  
Timelessness.

### **The Spiritual Domains**

For many years, I had the fortune to be employed at a school which utilized a Seven Domain model of Holistic Education. Each Domain represents a facet of the whole learner and warrants its own attention, curriculum and evaluation. The Domains are;

- Physical
- Natural
- Social
- Emotional
- Creative
- Mental
- Spiritual

There is a great deal to explore in this model. It is quite useful in understanding Holistic Education and in understanding the concept of Holism in general.

Though we shall focus upon the Spiritual Domain in this document, as we attempt to decipher ways to observe and evaluate its expressions, the Spiritual Domain often manifests itself through the other Domains.

### **The Four Aspects of the Spiritual Domain**

During my tenure at this Holistic School, I was a part of a subcommittee that sought to further distill each Domain into several key elemental aspects. Gathering data, research and ideas from the faculty and our own studies, we determined four key “Aspects” for each Domain. The four Aspects of the Spiritual Domain are:

- World Traditions
- Celebration and Ceremony
- Mystery and Contemplation
- Spiritual Values

These four Aspects of the Spiritual Domain served as a comprehensive, elemental map to help observe and evaluate spirituality, especially in regards to a Holistic Education.

A student’s interest and aptitude within each Aspect would be a good indicator if the student is expressing Spirituality and to what degree. After a general overview of each Aspect, there are several basic questions that could be reflected upon that may help aid in the observation and evaluation of the student’s connection to spirit and spirituality.

### **World Traditions**

World traditions represent the various cultural expressions of spirituality throughout the world and history. From ancient myths to current religions and spiritual practices, world traditions cover the myriad of ways humans have expressed spirituality throughout the ages.

How interested is a child in different culture’s spiritual or religious traditions? Does exploring spiritual ideas through the lens of cultural

traditions elicit enthusiasm or curiosity in the student? Do they actively practice a spiritual tradition? Perhaps, they are involved in their family's spiritual or religious practices. Do they seek out other spiritual traditions and wish to learn (and even employ) some of those practices? Does engaging in such practices have a positive effect on the student?

### **Celebration and Ceremony**

Spirituality often employs ritual and ceremony to honor and express its presence in the human experience. These ceremonies embody our connections to spirit and therefore, they weave us to the larger story that we are all inherently a part of. Rites of passage, holidays and special moments of observation are all part of the litany of celebrations and ceremonies we use to offer spiritual meaning and context to our lives.

Does the student actively participate in ceremonies, rituals or celebrations that have spiritual significance? Do they find meaning and joy in participating in such celebrations, ceremonies and rituals? Are they curious about the purpose of a particular ceremony and wonder just how it expresses spirit? Do they like to create their own rituals and ceremonies, or works of art that have spiritual significance?

### **Contemplation of Mystery**

Spirituality is often explored in the "big questions" that dwell at the core of mystery. Who am I? Who are we? Why are we here? Why am I "me"? Are we alone in the universe? Why do we die? What happens to us after we die? What is on the other side of Infinity? Is there a Creator? Is there a soul? Is there a God? Gods? No God? What is the meaning of life?

These questions can never truly be answered. They are matters of faith, belief and discovery. They are to be pondered upon. It is in the contemplations of these profound mysteries that we exercise and formulate our ideas and beliefs about spirit and spirituality.

Does the student gravitate towards such "big" questions? Do they contemplate the mysteries of life? Do they take things as they are told they are, or do they ask more and more questions, seeking to unravel these mysteries? When they hear a story or watch a movie, are they attracted to the parts of the story that express such deep, numinous and far-reaching ideas?

### **Spiritual Values**

Spiritual values are the ways or behaviors through which spirituality is most often expressed. Wonder, Connection, Reverence, Empathy and Timelessness can be construed as the core, elemental Spiritual Values that reside within our human experience.

*Wonder* as curiosity, exploration, open-mindedness

*Connection* meaning to bond and relate deeply with others, nature, places and even objects

*Reverence* meaning to show profound respect and awe

*Empathy* as compassion, intuition, the felt experience of the interconnectivity of all things

*Timelessness* as the experience of a flow state, the ability to lose oneself in an activity

How readily does a student feel compassion? For others? For those less fortunate? For those more fortunate? For nature? Do they become enthralled when playing, creating or learning? Do they develop strong bonds with others? With a place? Or even to a special object? A strong bond with a toy may, on the one hand, be a sign of an infantile

co-dependency upon materialism, but to an animist, that toy would be imbued with the energetic residual of all those who have played with that toy before and all of the child's memories and experiences they had with that toy. This special toy may even be considered a relic to that child. Creating and finding meaning in such personal "relics" can indeed be an expression of the spiritual value of connection. As we can see, even subtle or seemingly mundane expressions of these Spiritual Values may be valid indicators that a student is embodying a sense of spirituality.

### **Observing Spiritual Values and Behaviors**

Spiritual values are the actions, behaviors, or "verbs" through which spirituality can be expressed and therefore observed. Whereas the first three Aspects represent arenas of interest, and are more akin to the "noun" of where spirituality can be expressed, the fourth Aspect of spiritual values is how spirituality is expressed.

By observing how these spiritual values express themselves, particularly through the other three Aspects, we can readily observe and evaluate a student's proclivity for the Spiritual Domain. For instance, if a student shows wonder at a particular religious ceremony, or reverence for a world tradition, or experiences timelessness when conversing about the mysteries of life, then these are all valid and strong indicators that the student has a well developed spiritual identity.

### **Spiritual Values and the Other Domains**

As shared earlier, these spiritual values (or behaviors) are often expressed through the other domains. This is a nuanced but significant way to

observe and evaluate a student's connection to spirituality.

For instance, a child may experience awe while wandering deep in the woods. This would be an expression of the spiritual value of reverence within the natural domain. Another individual may lose themselves in a drawing, spending a whole afternoon absorbed in its creation (timelessness in the creative domain). Another student may have a deep bond with their grandparents and spend long periods of time chatting with them (connection in the social domain).

What is of note here is that one does not have to be interested specifically in spiritual things, to express an inherent spirituality. A student may have no interest in religious world traditions, but when they are riding a horse, they may feel a profound sense of reverence and timelessness. Another student may be daunted by the big questions of life but have a deep sense of connection to their family's farm. These students are expressing no less a spirituality than the child who recites grace at family suppertime each night.

### **The Mystical**

There is a final quality of spirituality that should be addressed. To not do so would be to avoid a significant facet of spirituality. I am speaking of the mystical. Spirituality is defined as the connection of all things; seen and unseen. It is the unseen, the metaphysical, the supernatural features of spirituality that tend to render the topic a tad taboo, particularly to the more literal minded.

This is where quantifying spirit becomes truly tricky. Categorizing and measuring such mystical phenomena does indeed feel more suited to the

realms of fantasy and sci-fi. In fact, much of our popular fiction does just that; from a magic-infused hero leveling up their healing powers in a video game, to whatever particular Force abilities certain Jedi can have, to which magical spells a Hufflepuff wizard at Hogwarts may have learned.

Although these exaggerated mystical abilities sit firmly in the realm of fantasy, their inspirations often draw from authentic expressions of spirituality. As said, the Force may belong to *Star Wars*, but animism is very much a real and lived world view. Talking to ghosts through paintings, ala Harry Potter, may be a spell someone can cast at Hogwarts, but communing with ancestor spirits is an integral part of many cultural traditions. Lembas bread and Elvish songs may be used to heal a hobbit in Lord of the Rings, but the singing of the Blessing Way is indeed a spiritual healing tradition of Indigenous tribes of the American Southwest.

And yet, such mystical phenomena and their association with “spiritual”, does present several major obstacles to the normalization of spirituality in secular or universal institutions. To the more fundamental religious traditionalists, mysticism and the metaphysical are often deemed as occult, or even satanic, and are therefore quite taboo. I have personally bumped into this several times in my own career as an educator who sought to incorporate aspects of spirituality into my curriculum. To the rationalist or pragmatist, such mysticism is dismissed as delusion, fantasy or worse... outright New Age woo-woo! And to the secularist, there must continue to be a strict separation of church and state. What falls under the umbrella of spiritual, also falls under the label of “church” and therefore has no place in any public institution.

Yet, for the animist, such mystical phenomena are simply a part of being, and experiencing mystical phenomena falls within the realm of initiation. In other words, to those practitioners who embrace unseen energies (or Spirit, or Animas, or Qi, or Mana, or Prana, or Life-force etc.) they will feel, know, and honor its presence in their daily lives. There is the understanding that such ineffable powers are far more alive and potent than our modern society may acknowledge. To have access to potent spiritual phenomena, one must be trained and initiated properly to earn any further access. The mystical has been incorporated into the practical.

However, once we venture into the mystical features of spirituality, the means of evaluation and categorization for scholastic purposes feels fraught. If a child shared a dream during centering and that dream happened to come to pass in some capacity, are we really looking to give this student a B+ in prophecy?

That said, I would dare not to dismiss prophetic dreams as a source of insight and a genuine expression of spirituality. Most cultures, including the more traditional Abrahamic religions, put a great deal of worth on the power of dreams. So, how do we incorporate, observe, and evaluate (let alone foster) the more mystical aspects of spirituality? I would postulate that a student’s interest in such mystical and metaphysical phenomena may be good indicators of the mystery and contemplation Aspect of the spiritual domain, and a valid expression of the spiritual value of wonder.

One day perhaps, when we have evolved past our current paradigms, when animism has returned to normative consciousness and spirituality has been fully integrated into the lived and learned experiences of being a human, we as educators

may have a far more sophisticated way to evaluate the mystical qualities of our students. Until then, let us, in the least, celebrate the wonder and contemplation such phenomena may invoke.

### **The Lens of the Evaluator**

When evaluating a student's ability at something more concrete and readily measurable (ie: spelling, facts, math, writing an essay, the ability to jump, or paint a bowl of fruit, etc.), the teacher will utilize an answer key or rubric to appraise the student. Though there are certainly areas of subjectivity in this process, most scholastic subjects are readily assessed through basic, objective criteria. The teacher does not need to be a spelling wiz to grade the spelling test. Nor do they need to be a star athlete to judge a race.

However, observing Spiritual Values (which this document postulates as an effective means to evaluate spirituality in a student), can be a far more subtle, nuanced and subjective process. If a teacher has not experienced timelessness, or had a deep connection with nature, or learned what empathy and their intuition feels like, or held the stars in profound wonder, it would be very difficult for them to recognize and observe (let alone evaluate) such a trait in another.

Spirituality, by its nature, is a felt thing. The evaluator must use their own intuition. Their own sense of empathy. They must be able to feel and perceive, even on subtle levels, what the student is feeling and experiencing.

To further illustrate this point, a music teacher can evaluate a student on how well they play the particular notes of a piano piece. Yet, it is far more difficult to evaluate if the student truly felt the emotional resonance of the piece. And yet, a

prime (and primal) component of music is that it is evocative... that it conveys emotion. This emotion doesn't come from just parroting the notes on the music sheet. If the music teacher had, themselves, been moved by this piece of music, it would be all the more apparent to the teacher if the student was also being moved by their rendition. The teacher may be able to even note particularly evocative moments in the song and perceive how the student is responding to those dynamic moments. The teacher, having had the spiritual experience of connection, reverence and timelessness may therefore be able recognize such values in their student.

To summarize this notion, in order for a teacher to truly evaluate the spirituality of a student it is paramount that the teacher has an experiential understanding of just what it means to be spiritual themselves.

Otherwise, they are simply checking boxes on a graph. And that, I would argue, undermines the very essence of that which we are seeking to uphold.

### **Author Bio**

**Justin Pilla** is a youth educator, artist, musician, storyteller and game designer. He has worked in a myriad of capacities with youth for nearly 30 years, with a focus upon integrating creativity, mythology, critical thinking, media studies, spirituality and Rites of Passage. Holistic Education has been a lifelong pursuit and passion of his and he has had the fortune to serve at several Holistic Educational Institutions wherein he could explore and implement a pan-faceted approach to guiding and inspiring youth. He currently resides in Asheville, North Carolina.