

Beyond Spiritual Bypassing

Recognition, Recovery, and Integration

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John R.

Introduction - Why This Matters

John R., alcoholic in recovery since 1981

Openly non-theistic in AA since 1995

Co-founder of Freethinkers Living Sober (2014, Verde Valley, AZ)

Experience: treatment, depression diagnosis, spiritual bypassing discovery

Not an expert — just sharing lived experience

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Previous Presentation

QR: <https://youtu.be/sQ4SaYqg6wU>

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Definitions (Part 1)

Spiritual: A deeply felt sense of connection, inner peace, awe, or meaning, often described as a personal experience of something larger than oneself, whether framed in secular, humanist, or religious terms.

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Definitions (Part 2)

Spirituality/Spiritual Practice (Secular Definition):
Focuses on personal growth, self-awareness, well-being, and a sense of connection beyond the ego, without requiring belief in the supernatural or adherence to religious doctrine.

Examples of practices: mindfulness, contemplation, journaling, reflection, inquiry, rituals (yoga, tai chi, martial arts), values (compassion, gratitude, interconnectedness), and embodied awareness.

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Spiritual Bypassing - Definition

John Welwood (1980s): 'Using spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid unresolved emotional issues, wounds, or needs.'

My reality:

- Used spiritual & intellectual systems to avoid deep inner work
- Looked like 'growth,' but was often avoidance

Hardest part: I wasn't aware I was doing it

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Early Seeking

1960s psychedelics → first sense of 'beyond ego'

Joined radical Christian group (connection/purpose) → realized cult

Sobriety in AA (1981) brought hope, community, meaning

Bypassing also showed up in AA:

- 'Powerlessness' → avoided responsibility
- 'God's will' → avoided decisions
- Service work → avoided personal issues

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Secular Bypassing Patterns

Over-reliance on Rationality: analyzing instead of feeling
Avoidance of Existential Angst: escaping into intellect
Minimization of Transcendence: reducing awe to 'just brain chemistry'
Result: missed deeper integration of emotions, body, spirit

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Embodied Mind Theory

Mind = not just in the head
Brain + gut + heart + body = a full orchestra
Feelings = weather patterns across systems
Practices:

- Meditation with body awareness
- Breathwork & movement
- Feeling emotions in the body, not just thinking them

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The Vagus Nerve

80% body → brain, 20% brain → body

Regulates stress ('thermostat')

Trauma & addiction damage it → recovery recalibrates it

Co-regulation:

- Being with regulated people helps regulate me
- My regulation helps others

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Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB)

Daniel Siegel: 'Mind = embodied + relational process
regulating energy & information'

Nervous systems = tuning forks → emotions contagious

Healing requires relationships, not isolation

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Indigenous Ceremony (Respectful Note)

Adopted into Lakota family (40+ years involvement)

Sundance & Inipi (sweat lodge): presence with difficulty

Lessons:

- Struggle can be sacred
- Helping others shifts self-focus
- Community support is essential

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Integration of Approaches

12 Steps: self-examination & accountability

Embodied Mind Theory: body awareness in recovery

IPNB: healing through relationships

Indigenous Ceremony: embodied, communal spirituality

Thread: Integration > avoidance | Embodiment > dissociation

| Community > isolation

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Current Practices

Morning meditation with body awareness

Regular recovery community check-ins

Physical practices (movement, breath, embodiment)

Honest self-checks: am I bypassing?

In meetings: regulate own system, notice embodied responses

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The Paradox

Real spirituality = embracing humanity, not transcending it

Authentic practice = presence with joy, sorrow, confusion, clarity

Quote: 'Seeing the secret beauty behind the eyes of everyone you meet.' — Thomas Merton

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Ongoing Journey

Haven't 'solved' bypassing → it's a practice

Sometimes short-term bypassing may be necessary

Recovery = not perfection, but authenticity

Quote: 'You are perfect as you are and there is always room for improvement.' — Shunryu Suzuki

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Follow-Up Slides

Follow-Up Reference

Final Points

Recovery isn't about escaping humanity — it's about embracing it

Spirituality is authenticity, not perfection

Beyond bypassing = living fully human, connected, embodied, present

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Reflection Questions

Am I using spirituality to avoid emotions or responsibility?

Do my practices connect me to others, or isolate me?

Am I including my body, or trying to escape it?

Are my relationships deepening, or becoming shallow?

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Follow-Up Reference