

Disorderly, and marvelous, and ours

A potluck conversation between Phoebe Pan and Yeeseon Chae

In this convo, we talk about Easter traditions, memes, types of silence, daily routine, Zoom encounters, and desire over time, among other things. We call this a “potluck conversation” to suggest that the reader can take what they wish or need, given the broad and varied offering of topics presented. We hope you find something nurturing and sustaining here!

phoebe: hi yeeseon! how are you?

yeeseon: this is like an old timey gchat - i feel okie! not very spiritual today but i think that's an interesting place to start

yeah for sure — was just thinking about how it's Easter, and as a holiday, it's supposed to be one of the most spiritual ones of the year, but all i've ever felt is really material on Easter?

maybe because i'm more accustomed to modern traditions of egg hunts and painted bunnies and elaborate potluck meals...

yea i do remember Easter mass - they go all out. i'm trying to remember if Easter mass is one of the ones where the priest throws the holy water at the crowds - that makes everyone go stupid crazy

but actually i did like the ritual. i usually like material things on holidays, but i do get what you mean about the material aspect being the only tie to a holiday or a supposed spiritual event

i think we talked about this before, how catholicism especially is so entrenched in ritual — and not just any ritual, but rituals of performance, of spectacle, and how events like deacons swinging censers through the streets or parading down the abbey really just elevate the whole feeling of, “this is a thing to behold”

maybe that’s all you need to experience something in a spiritual way, or to at least enter it — you just need to behold it first?

~~yea the priests know that people will look when they get water flicked in their eyes!~~ attention is holy and even though Catholic mass is kind of the same every time, the part where you’re supposed to hold the most attention is when the priest is preparing the body of the christ and it’s very quiet and everyone bows and looks up and the priest is holding the wafer and all you think about is that one abba pope meme¹ because you’re sacrilegious

attention is holy! yes!

there’s a mary oliver quote that goes, “attention is the beginning of devotion”... & i think jenny odell would have something to say about attention in that respect, or how attention’s spiritual roots have been lost in translation amidst the reign of late capitalism

but yes, you talking about memes just reminded me of that galaxy brain one² and how internet memes are supposed to be these really lowbrow cultural artifacts, but in fact are kind of spiritual?

especially in the way they circulate and make their way into people’s lives in the most unexpected corners — one moment you’re scrolling through instagram and the next you’re facing some meme about high school

that unlocks a once-forgotten memory about how you were secretly queer all along, and it's like - holy shit! wow! revelation!

the question of the hour - are memes holy? maybe so,,,

but i've never thought about the way that it circulates and how that has to do with spirituality, i guess in the most basic sense, spirituality is something unspoken that you can share

hmm does it have to do with a prerequisite or a set of texts/memes/part of culture that you're already familiar to? or i guess i'm trying to ask you how you define spirituality, and whether it has to do with something already existing, man-made or not

(wait can i open this bag o wafers)³

(yes please i'm hungry too)

ohh that's a great question! lately i've been thinking about spirituality in terms of silence - spirituality as shared silence

i like using silence as a commons because it's a medium in which you become — or, it's a medium in which you can just *be*. for me, spirituality is everything that happens in silence - whether that's a parting glance, or tending to a plant, or holding someone's hand 🌱

and it doesn't have to be literal silence - there can be background noise, you know - but it's more of an interior silence, a stillness, like the surface of a pond after the ripples settle

i like what you're saying about interior silence!

i think that has to do with presence? or a feeling of known presence or felt presence even in silence

i'm trying to think of the ways that i define spirituality and so much of it still has to do with presence and especially connection, i don't know if i would define literal silence into how i experience spiritual things because the moments when i've felt the most connected and then the most spiritual is when there's song or more like singing along

the experience i most equate with spirituality is collective effervescence but that might be going more into herd mentality, but also i don't want to be an econ bro about spirituality!

i love feeling connected and crying at weddings for no reason except that when the priest or whoever officiates the wedding 🏡💕 the two are so firmly in it and they believe in it whole heartedly even if it's just for that moment. it feels like a union: not about the marriage, but a union of intent and action, when intent seems almost more important and more powerful than the immediate, countable steps taken after

i don't discount actions or anything but it does seem like there is something bigger in step with an action

that's so true, about music - so perhaps it's not really about silence, but about clarity? when everything falls away and only the necessary things remain

i love how you put it - "a union of intent and action" - and i almost wonder if presence has to do with the action of *holding* intent, or holding space for intent

which leads me to think about the internet, again, and digital spaces, and how so much of online interactions is about making intent clear... i mean, when you talk with folks online, whether friends or strangers, how do you reconcile the fact of them not being there, physically, with the fact of them very clearly *communicating* with you (via text, chat, audio, video, etc)?

ooh holding intent - i think that has a lot to do with what we're trying to do. i'm not sure i reconcile with it very much - if anything it seems like i don't feel that the other person is so separate

i feel like our internet and tech experiences have so much to do with (un)intended design elements, like there's not a felt added feature of *they are there* except for maybe the "..." text bubbles before the full text to show they're writing

so much of interacting with people online is like i am sitting in my chair, looking at a screen, and the other person IS that screen?

i don't think my brain instinctively knows the difference or maybe thinks of it as a part of only my experience. it's hard to distinguish them sometimes,, how do you reconcile that fact? 🧠

i don't think i've reconciled these things, either - but i spend a lot of time on the theory side of presence and absence, in derridean terms and all the way back to aristotle and plato⁴

& i think we've always been grappling with the presence/absence dilemma via text and mimesis - like,

if i read a book, are the things that i read *actually* there? or are they just figments of imagination? can imagination have presence? and so on

take photography, too: barthes makes the case in *camera lucida* that a photograph is a type of absented presence, which holds subjective significance but not absolute truth. in other words, the photograph might be a copy or representation, but that doesn't mean it can't hold significance... it's not as simple as the binary of presence/absence = better/worse

for example, one interesting nuance about digital presence is that, for me, when i'm in a text chat with someone, i get into this *zone*. it's like i don't really register my surroundings or my physical sensations, i just fall into a very focused mental volleyball game between the other person's thoughts and my own

and i think it's because, deep down, things like digital chats are about collaboration, and collaboration demands presence in a very different way than other forms of presence. it's as if i am less attuned with my own desires and thoughts, and more attuned with that in-between space - the possibility of what i can make with the other person/side, without physical boundaries to hold me back

sorry that was a big ramble... did that make any sense?

that makes sense! i think that zone is a part of this big question of spirituality, an in-between where ego is supposed to fall away but presence is demanded

is collaboration a part of spirituality for you / how does that fit in?

definitely!

even the most explicitly “individual” forms of spirituality (for example, reaching enlightenment, or meditating) are about collaborating or communing with something else, whether that be God, or your physical surroundings, or “source energy”

i don't think you can be spiritual without owing that spirituality to something else to aid you. growing up, i always thought that spirituality had to be something you reach/find *on your own*, but the more i've moved through the world, the more i've realized that yes, maybe you undertake that journey through interior means, but that doesn't mean you do it alone

definitely yea,, what are some moments of spirituality that have been the most important 4 uuu?

well, every year when spring comes around... that's always a very spiritual event, regardless of what i believe in at the time

just seeing everything yawn and stretch and crack open is its own type of transcendence - a reminder that things have been alive this entire time, right under our noses!

but in terms of a specific moment... i remember when i was around fourteen years old, at a music festival in germany. i was the youngest person, staying at a hostel with a bunch of other musicians well into their careers - and one night, after we performed at the local cloisters, we all went back to the hostel and started singing folk songs

i didn't know any german so i just kind of mumbled along, drunk on that fervor - but i think that was the first time i felt a sort of clarity in what i wanted. i was a teen, on the cusp of realizing how big and disorienting the world was. i wanted to be able to *share* something with people, at the most basic level - to be able to connect with others, regardless of how much i had in common with them

yeah... that was a spiritual moment, for sure

& what about you? what are your moments of note?

i'm trying to remember specific moments, if i had a moment in church that felt closer to god or a higher being, but mostly they're feelings or very fleeting moments where it seems like i can feel energy all around? ⚡

it's hard to pinpoint because i don't think i quite know what spirituality means to me yet, but it is closer to the feeling of energetic hearing (i sound so new agey) but just *being* very deeply

haha honestly, sometimes that new age stuff rings true

(though i've never been able to fully trust the weirdly cultish & authoritative vibe that new age teachings call "self-help", that's another thing to unpack: must we feel guilty in helping ourselves? the simplicity of new age stuff makes itself so enticing, like a mask: anyone can wear it...)

but yeah, i think 'feeling energy all around' is exactly it. trying to pinpoint a specific moment is like trying to catch an angel's foot as they're taking off into the air, or

like viewing the tip of an iceberg while knowing that the bulk of it rests beneath the water

that “moment” of spirituality is really just the small part that we can grasp, but it really is much larger and broader than that single moment

do you consider yourself a spiritual person? 🌍

to tell the truth, i don't know if i consider myself a spiritual person. at least, i don't actively practice spirituality

i'm lucky enough to stumble across moments of transcendence, but a part of that is because of the ecology of work and people that i surround myself with. then again, this question goes back to what it means to be spiritual - do i have to practice it, actively, to know it?

i don't know... what are some of the ways that you practice spirituality, or reach towards it?

i think the only way i know how right now is to observe, and i guess practicing means a lot of meditation, going back to the breath

i laughed at how new agey i sounded earlier but i think i mean it and also believe in most of it. i felt pretty disconnected from my christian upbringing and what did resonate were mostly the people, not the text or sanctity of the ritual

but i guess i've always had a natural curiosity and leaning towards otherworldly or spiritual reachings. it

does seem like i believe that there's something always there

right, observing and practicing - not to psychoanalyze, but i wonder if the texts and rituals didn't resonate as much because they were dictated?

i think observation and practice have to be done on your own terms in order for any type of understanding to emerge from the process

i mean, we just finished a little project called ordinary corner,⁵ where we took turns sharing photographs every day during march, & broadcasted them to friends through an email newsletter. even though it was through digital mediums (email, phone cameras), i think there was something very present about the work, because it was born out of our own will

for me at least, it demanded that i believe in both of us, to trust that we would be able to see this project through for the simple promise of completing it

right ! no i think you're absolutely right - so much of the spiritual teaching that i received was dictated or expected to be repeated back

as much as i liked sunday school culture, in terms of learning about anything holistically with the texts that we got - not so much

i do think it has so much to do with observation, which is hard to do sometimes, especially in a city. a lot of our project that i enjoyed so much was about wandering outside, kind of loitering in a way, sometimes a little nervous that we might get looked at if we were taking a photo. but it really had to do with holding things that

we saw, holding the places where we were, maybe
holding ourselves a little bit too

looking at things can be a very active movement

i think we were trying to reach somewhere with being
able to look at things, ordinary, normal life, very
differently

yes, you put it beautifully! i loved being able to
wander, especially with the anticipation of not
knowing what my daily photo was going to be

i think it made me much more open to the world... it
reminded me of the early days, when we were getting
to know each other, we'd send daily photos from our
evening walks or of the sky where we lived

i also love how you put it - "holding things that we saw,
holding the places that we were, maybe holding
ourselves a little bit too"

all i've been trying to learn this past year is how to hold
someone who is hundreds of miles away during a
pandemic

& i find it extraordinary how we've transformed digital
spaces from cold, sterile environments to warm,
necessary abodes - as much as i am tired of zoom life
and staring at a screen all day, i still think there's magic
in the way people gather despite the medium

like, imagine the zoom waiting room as a type of
existential limbo, with people gathering to be let in.
there's so much potential energy and presence. or how
folks are holding healing sessions and meditation
guides over zoom - does it matter that those are not in
person?

i guess i'm trying to ask: how has technology changed our experiences of spirituality? how have you held others when they remain so far away?

i don't think there's ever going to be a replacement for being there, physically, with someone else, but since everyone had their whole year on Zoom and virtual spaces, there *is* more substance there

i think it's the way people react to using it now, there's less resistance and more of a real burning need for company in any shape

i think people want to be heard as much as possible, maybe sometimes more than seen

i feel like the Zoom healing circles and events we've been to are all about that. the main event doesn't seem hierarchical (or at least the events we're going to), but the comments section really comes alive!

everyone's sharing about how they're in Texas or Singapore and how they're so happy to be there and really appreciative of the work being done on Zoom

i remember in-person events similar to those and there's not as many people saying thank you's, or they're shy about it more because you have to walk up and tell them. that comments section really makes me happy in Zoom when they get to share "uh-huhs" and "wow i feel the same" without being embarrassed but just heard. it still feels communal

for holding people when they're far away, i'm not sure i'm quite good at that yet

i tend to be bad about checking in with friends who have different routines, different zip codes now, but i want to be better about it

it's hard, to find that common ground again, but holding people right now has so much to do with thinking about them, sometimes sending a text that i hope they're having a good day or something cheesy

i can't believe my answer to "how have you held others" is "i just think about them..." i guess that's the first step ;)

it's so true though... even just 'thinking about them' is an act of intent, right? so it *is* a specific type of holding, even if not complete

and what you said about the comments section at zoom events reminded me of how precarious our sense of "space" is within digital realms

for example, when i sent out my ordinary corner dispatch every other day, i thought about the time between hitting the send button for the newsletter and the moment it arrived in someone's inbox (approx. 1 minute)

imagine all those emails going out to servers, touching all those seemingly invisible places before landing in a digital space "of one's own" 📧❤️

it's crazy how we share so much in digital realms yet so little of that emerges on the surface

i guess it's a bit like spiritual encounters, when you don't realize how much you have in common with, say, a wild mushroom, until you start to think about fungi and decomposition and rebirth and the whole

shebang unfolding over decades beyond your own
lifespan, in circumstances unseen by you

i love the spaces in between!

it's true, i wonder if people who know how to code feel
a little bit tingly when they think about what the
average person doesn't know about each screen. all
these hidden worlds...

sort of related but how do you experience time? was
the project of taking a photo every other day different
for you in how you experienced time?

ohh that's a good question

it definitely sped up my perception of time - i always
felt like it was my turn too soon, or that before i knew
it, i had to go out and take a photo

i think it was because that entire month, i had the
project as a framework, and so the daily photos almost
acted as strokes of hour on a clock, catching me off
guard and reminding me that the day was at its end

cognitively, i don't know what it is about attention that
makes time pass by so quickly... something to do with
the way my brain focuses and hones in on a subject

how about for you? did you experience time differently
during the project?

it kind of slowed things down for me! 🕒

the end of the day was like a deadline so my days felt
much more clearer. i think it just goes to show that i

actually like routine haha but more than that, it reminds me of how slowly time moves when you're a kid and a 30 minute car ride feels like hours

especially taking a photo of my surroundings, in an effort to get an appropriate photo i paid more attention to when the sun set and what the weather would be like

it helped me begin and close my day 🌅

oh that's interesting!

i guess that goes to show how we approach and experience work in different ways. but i totally resonate with enjoying routine and having that scaffold to begin and close the day

i wonder if that experience of time moving slowly has to do with waiting, and how waiting stretches the hours into a desert of interminable minutes

maybe spirituality is all about patience and learning how to observe time while moving through it, kind of like the way heraclitus describes time as a river, i.e. being aware of the mutable environment or essence through which you exist⁶

though, i wonder too: maybe during that waiting, we're cultivating a sense of desire? maybe desire is what makes time feel slow?

ooh time does increase the yearning

wanting to sit with time makes it go by slower for me, especially in spring. sometimes, it feels like the day

wants you to move slower or quicker depending on the speed of the wind

i'm not quite sure how want or desire fits into my spirituality, because they sometimes feel so opposite even when both are strong

the way i currently think about desire is more of material things, which feel so opposite from spirituality

i know when i'm wanting something based on a more shallow desire, versus needing something that is more whole? i don't know though, i feel like a lot of people pray for things out of a need or a desire

mmm yes, there are so many teachings that say, "you have to relinquish your earthly desires in order to attain spiritual purity," blah blah

but we don't give credit for how closely the material is bound to the immaterial! i just remembered this one passage from italo calvino's *invisible cities*, about a city where the inhabitants can't decide if their gods live in a subterranean well or in the buckets that draw water from the well... it seems oddly fitting as a metaphor. i'll find the page and send it to you⁷

and you're right, people do pray for things out of a need or desire. i really like the distinction you make between shallow desire and holistic desire

perhaps the former is always leading to the latter?

i'm thinking of the opening verse from bjork's "pagan poetry," and it goes: "pedaling through / the dark currents / i find / an accurate copy / a blueprint / of the pleasure / in me"

i wonder if the way we desire things - you know, happiness, or love, or understanding - is also about being able to find the blueprint within ourselves

and i think spirituality helps uncover those interior maps, because connecting with others means knowing where your desire fits in relation to the rest of the world's. the hard part is trusting those blueprints, though. often, when i find myself desiring something, the last person i trust is myself... anyway, i'm getting too introspective

have you ever desired something out of spirituality, or wanted it to lead you somewhere particular?

i think i've asked for it to give me meaning, leading me somewhere outside of my very human self

i think the part of spirituality that is most visible to me is the part where there's transcendence, not as a way of avoidance but as a way of connection

connecting so deeply with your surroundings and the people around you that you feel almost lifted or taken out of just yourself...

i think i've mostly asked for connection 

i admire that answer a lot!

connection and meaning - they seem so simple when asked for, yet they're often so elusive

maybe we make it harder for ourselves without knowing

i still don't have a very good answer to what my life means, or where it's headed. but - not to fall back on cliché - i do believe that these things are connected, that spirituality rests with connection, and that connection brings meaning

so far, the most meaningful type of connection i've experienced has always come from friendship and love. though, you already know that



FOOTNOTES

We borrow our title from the last line of Ada Limón's poem, "[What It Looks Like To Us and the Words We Use](#)." Our avatars were customized in Stardew Valley's character creator.

¹ [ABBA pope meme](#)

² [Galaxy brain meme](#)

³ Referring to [these biscuits](#), which we snacked on throughout the convo

⁴ Referring to Aristotle's *Poetics* & Derrida's [trace theory](#)

⁵ [Ordinary Corner archive](#)

⁶ Heraclitus's [theory of flux](#)

⁷ *Invisible Cities*, [p.20](#)

Other references:

- > Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays*, 2016.
- > Jenny Odell, *How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, 2019.
- > Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1980, tr. Richard Howard.
- > Björk, "[Pagan Poetry](#)" from *Vespertine*, 2001.

Additional things to check out:

- > Shūsaku Endō, [Silence](#), 1966.
- > Christian Wiman, "[Elsewhere](#)"
- > [Apophatic / negative theology](#)
- > Moomin wisdom [on uncertainty](#)
- > [A New Nothing](#): image-based conversations

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