

SPIRITUALITY AND CREATIVE AWARENESS – WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

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Spirituality and Creativity. Look around you at our community, our nation, our world, at buildings and bridges, galleries and restaurants, museums and music halls. We humans are a creative lot. And in our creativity, we've brought into existence hundreds of distinct religions. So far as we can tell, we are the only species that both discusses matters spiritual, and perceives beauty.

This should not be surprising since spirituality and creativity are two sides of the same coin. They both arise from an ability to think and communicate symbolically, and to imagine things not yet present. How is it that we came to possess these traits?

It turns out that, like all human characteristics, our creative and spiritual sides have their origins deep in our biological ancestry – our behaviors are different in magnitude and degree from other species, but not in kind.

Consider those animal species that share an awareness of self with us. Dolphins have brain to body mass ratios on par with modern humans and are known to exhibit inter-species altruism. However, dolphins don't make art. Whale song can be heard over vast distances, but the meanings of these ever changing vocalizations are beyond current human understanding. Elephants have been observed to display apparent grief over the death of a family member, a precursor of moral thought. Some zoo elephants also apparently enjoy brushing bright colors onto large canvases. Chimp groups in the wild use up to 20 types of tools for various functions of daily life, including sociality, subsistence, self maintenance, and sex. Chimpanzees create in a social context and have been shown to have a sense of humor, and to transfer cultural knowledge. Further, chimps in the wild will respond to a thunderstorm the way they would to an animal predator, such as a leopard. In other words, they assign an animate “purpose” to the storm – different from their reaction to, say, a wildfire. This is the beginning of religious thought.

Still, to the extent that we can put ourselves into the minds of other species through observation of physical behaviors, no other animals appear to ponder their origins, the meaning of life, or the existence of the divine.

It is very difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when human beings began to express imagination and to reason symbolically. Prior to the development of writing, our knowledge of the earliest humans is largely limited to durable materials such as stone and bone. The physical evidences for the existence of a symbolic, and thus a potentially spiritual culture include: cave paintings, rock

engravings, personal ornamentation, decorated tools, the use of natural pigments, engraved bones and stones, burials with grave goods, systems of notation, musical instruments, and complex bone and wood technologies. There are hints that species ancestral to modern humans may have had the capacity for complex communication, and imagination. Brain size appears to be key.

At a 400,000 year old site in Zambia associated with the large-brained human ancestor, *homo heidelbergensis*, archeologists discovered 300 lumps of ochre and other pigments - yellow, pink, red, purple, brown, and blue-black - some gathered far from the site. Ochre can be used as a binding agent for attaching stone points to wooden shafts; but for this use one color is sufficient. Why collect a range of colors? *Homo heidelbergensis* also has been associated with an 8-step manufacturing process for wooden spears, and with a change in the quality of craftsmanship of stone tools – moving from the simply utilitarian forms used by earlier human ancestors to ones of striking symmetry, suggesting an aesthetic sense.

From Neanderthal sites in Europe, dated to between 30,000 and 40,000 years ago (a time when our own species was present), comes evidence of body ornamentation (shell and bone beads), complex tool making, ritual burials, and the creation of musical instruments. These were people capable of symbolic reasoning and practice, of making music, and of questions about the meaning of death. Yet, evidence about how their habitation sites were configured suggest that Neanderthals had thought processes very different from those of modern humans.

Our immediate ancestors, anatomically modern humans, arose in Africa somewhere between 160,000 and 200,000 years ago, and their remains have been found in the Levant, dated to around 100,000 years ago. However, the Levant *homo sapiens* sites do not show cultural remains any more sophisticated than nearby Neanderthal sites. It's in sites in southern Africa dating to around 75,000 years ago that we start seeing objects associated with *homo sapiens* remains which strongly suggest a new way of thinking about themselves and the world around them. From the Blombos Cave on the Cape Coast of South Africa comes a set of worn shell beads indicating an interest in bodily adornment. From this site also comes the first known human artwork, a piece of ochre engraved with a geometric linear pattern.

In a time span covering the next 40,000 years and from sites throughout Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and Europe archaeologists have uncovered an increasing treasure trove of artifacts demonstrating that early *homo sapiens* possessed self-awareness, imagination, abstract thinking, and the ability to communicate symbolically. By 35,000 years ago, art and spiritual expression were in full

swing in Europe, Africa, and Australia. Cave paintings and rock engravings of both realistic images, and fantastical creatures, part animal, part human, are evidence of fully modern imaginative abilities and of religious expression. This is what separates humans from all other species on the planet today. Our ancestors created art, music, bodily adornments, stone tools with aesthetics rather than simple utility in mind, and also complex social structures. They buried their dead with care and placed in these graves food, jewelry, and weapons, strongly suggesting a belief in an afterlife.

As anthropologist Ian Tattersall points out, only modern humans have the demonstrated ability to divide up the world around them into a huge number of discrete elements - and then to name those elements. This allows us to rearrange those elements in our minds and imagine a variety of different realities. How did this ability come about? Tattersall believes that it arose as *homo sapiens* began to express an understanding of the world in ever more complex language. Language - words and syntax - is the mechanism of our conscious thoughts. Try thinking deeply about something without thinking in words.

Spirituality and creativity, symbolic thought and the ability to ask the “Great Questions” – we are the species that not only thinks about ourselves and our relation to the universe around us but expresses our understandings and imaginings in myriad ways.

Embrace your humanity - go forth, ask questions, seek answers, and create beauty.