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Hi Grandchildren.....

This "letter" at this point is only about half or 3/4 finished.

However, I thought it would be fun to let you have it at this stage on the occasion of my birthday party.

Naturally I hope you find it of interest and if you want to write me a note about how it feels to you, that would be great.

Love



Grandpa Abe

P.S. Part 2 (starting on p. 11) was written many months ago, but I didn't get round to typing it up until one of you expressed strong interest in seeing it. Do write me about your reactions.

## A LETTER FROM GRANDPA ABE

I am writing this for my granddaughters Kathryn and Lorna; for my grandson Chad, who I hope will be interested in this material in some four or five years; for my granddaughters Jenne and Zoe; for the brand new arrivals Amiya and Kenzi; and even – and this is a most exciting thought – grandchildren yet unborn.

I must admit this is pretty serious stuff and I even feel slightly apologetic. But only slightly. Because I have a strong desire to share with you some interests which are so strong that they really color my life. Perhaps you'll appreciate this as I go further along.

I want to talk to you about RELIGIOUS questions and what are commonly called spiritual questions. As you will see, the difference between these two terms is close to the heart of the points I want to make.

I must emphasize over and over again that to talk to you about this is very different from a talk about mathematics or chemistry or what are known as the “hard” sciences. In those fields we are dealing with matters about which there is a lot of common agreement. If there is a disagreement, then someone will try to make an experiment or discover a new fact, which will settle the disagreement.

But in the field I am talking about, we are dealing with matters of opinion, what we call “subjective”. Different scholars represent different schools of thought, so each can only express his own opinion, his own point of view. Others will agree or disagree.

So what you are hearing from me is my opinion –nothing more. . And my opinion has itself changed a number of times in my life.

It happens that when I was your age, I had already thought a lot about these things and I had opinions. Since then they have changed a number of times.

It's about time I spoke more plainly: opinions about what? Well, to get right down to it, it has to do with God! Matters pertaining to God are called theological questions.

Such questions as:

1. Is there a God?
2. What is the nature of God?
3. Have people always been interested in God?
4. Why is the idea of God so important?
5. How do we go about knowing whether or not there is a God?
6. Should we refer to God as "He"? Obviously many people feel that would be unfair to women, etc.

By the way, while writing this I've started to wonder: Have you yourself thought about these things? Have you talked about it with your friends? Have you asked your parents about it? Do you feel free to ask? Is it ever referred to in school?

I know that Kathryn has a strong interest in history, and if you pick up any history book, you'll find that a great deal of history is involved with arguments and wars between various groups about matters pertaining to God. Strangely more people have been killed in these kinds of wars than for any other reason.

For instance, you know a few things about the Pilgrims and why they came to this country in the first place. They were looking for something called "religious freedom", that is, the right to think whatever they wanted to think about God. In England, they

obviously did not have that right; in fact, they could be put in jail, or fined, or even put to death for having their own opinions about God.

This shows plainly that we're not just playing around here. We're dealing with matters of life and death. In England in the 1600's, if I were to talk this way to my own granddaughters, I would be taking a serious risk of going to jail or worse. Imagine! This sort of freedom, which you and I take for granted, did not always exist. And even TODAY, THIS VERY DAY, my encouraging you to think about these questions and to come to your own conclusions would be regarded by many people as not quite right, as planting dangerous ideas in your heads. Does it feel that way to you? Let's talk about it one of these days.

### My Background

It might help a little if I tell you some things about my own background. It is totally different from yours in so many, many ways.

I was raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., a largely Jewish community. My parents emigrated from Russia because life there was terribly difficult for Jews. So much so that it was actually a struggle to stay alive. When they arrived in the U.S. in 1922, they already had three children. I was born at that time, the youngest of four, the "baby of the family".

As a youngster, almost everything about my life revolved around religion, since my father was an official in the synagogue. That's how he made his living, singing every Saturday and also on different Jewish holidays.

By the way, my father was a fine singer. My great love and passion for music was certainly inherited from him. I sang in his choir, and that was a thrill for me. Seventy years later, I still remember the melodies. And I have two recordings of his singing.

But – a large but – there was a very sorrowful side to the story. You might think that in a place of worship where people were constantly praying, where there was a concern for justice, mercy, doing good and kindly deeds, that the people in such an organization would themselves be fine, honorable, thoughtful, good people.

Yes, that's what you might think.

But over and over even as a young boy I was shocked, disappointed, disgusted and ashamed of their stupidity, their dishonesty, their pettiness and their selfishness.

One of the most basic and noble ideas by which they were supposed to guide their lives was, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." I'm sure you can see what a beautiful idea this is. And you have probably already observed, even as young as you are, that it is not so easy to always live up to this idea.

The big trouble was that as I looked around at the behavior of the men in my dad's congregation, they didn't even come close. My own father was very different. He actually believed what he had been taught and tried hard to live that way. In that sense, he was a good model for me.

But it was like being an honest man among thieves. I am exaggerating a little in order to get this point across, but I think by now you get my drift. If so many of these men said they believed in God and yet acted in what one might call ungodly ways, how might that affect a young, thoughtful boy?

The result was that I thoroughly doubted the very existence of God, became rebellious and skeptical and called myself, for many years, an atheist, i.e. a person who insists there is no such thing as God.

I didn't say this openly to my father; it would have hurt him. I think he suspected.

And yet at the same time, the so-called ethical principles which are common to all religions very much remained important in my outlook and life: to have a concern for honesty, justice, thoughtfulness, etc.; to be affected by suffering, wherever it appeared; to want to contribute to helping others live well.

Thus many years went by during which I felt that these questions about God, which we call theological questions, were settled as far as I was concerned. I had a real interest in matters of social and political justice, but that was it.

Then about 35 years ago I came across some reading that touched a place within me that we can call spiritual interests. And that very term, "spiritual", now becomes the central idea that I hope to get you interested in and about which I hope to give you some information.

It feels important to contrast the words "religious" and "spiritual". At least it does to me. And there is wide agreement about this.

"Religion" almost always revolves around a god or God-like figure. It is organized, having priests or rabbis or some such individuals who are considered representatives of the religious beliefs. And who are commonly given great power in regulating how people are supposed to believe. It is common in religious organizations to make sharp distinctions in the rights and privileges of men and women. It is rare for women to be religious leaders and in fact, historically, just as in politics, women have to fight very hard to have equal religious rights with men. My own opinion is that this is pathetic nonsense, but nevertheless it is largely the history of mankind and we are only now *slowly* emerging from it.

Now turning to the term "spiritual", so do we mean by that? It is an important question and you might be surprised by how many people argue and discuss what it means. If you are at all like me, you'll be thinking about it for much of your life.

For me, I just happen to favor the outlook and the words used by the American Indians. They use the term, "Great Spirit" to refer to the mysterious power that created Heaven and Earth and that was the source of everything, both the seen and the unseen. By the way, this idea of the importance of "things unseen" is also an idea you might crack your teeth on as you continue to give thought to these matters. In fact, I'll confess openly that one of the primary purposes of this stuff I'm writing to you about is to get you so fascinated by these questions that you will actually *want* to lie awake wondering about them, argue with friends and teachers about them, and try very hard to work out your own answers about them. That is almost the opposite of the so-called "religious" outlook, which usually tells people what they are supposed to believe and think.

Now back to the term "spiritual" and what it means. The root of the word itself, "spir", refers to "air", as in "respiration". We breathe in air. Air is light and rises up, up into the sky, into the heavens.

So the term spiritual has come to refer to that in man which is considered his highest attributes, such as thoughtfulness, creativity, courage, concern for others, These would contrast with the "lower" features such as selfishness, uncaring, dishonesty, etc. I'm sure you've noticed that all of us contain both higher and lower characteristics.

Now, for one of my crucial points: what is the difference between religious and spiritual? Here we are on uneasy ground and it is very rare for an adult to raise this question with children. (Which is why I am going to all this trouble.)

Many people, me included, would say that spiritual questions and attitudes represent in essence the deepest parts of all religions. They say such things as:

1. You can be spiritual without going to church
2. You can be spiritual and still question whether God exists or what is His nature.

By the way, close family members, for example, may not agree with this. As I said earlier, there are different points of view, and feelings can get pretty strong. You will see more of this as you move around the world.

The war in which the U.S. is now engaged touches on these issues. It is not simple a matter of "fighting terrorism". Factors of economic and political power on the one hand and on the other, various religious loyalties have become very interwoven. At the moment I am writing this (3/2/02) Hindus and Muslims in India are killing each other by the thousands. This is a very old and unspeakable cruel and tragic story in the history of mankind.

I want to come now to the second and more difficult part of my letter to you.

In a way, what I've written up to now is introductory. What follows is the heart of the matter and I just hope I can do it justice. You know by now that people have been thinking, speculating and arguing about these questions for literally THOUSANDS of years.

What I have to say is by no means original. But I do believe it has this virtue: because I have been discussing it very carefully with two of my friends and colleagues – it is several years now – I like to think that we have boiled it down to its bare bones. It is even possible – and obviously this would give me huge pleasure – that in trying to explain this to my grandchildren, I might even succeed in clarifying some points for people who have been studying these things for a long time.

A big reason why I say this is that, believe it or not, I could not have written this a few years ago. Though I have studied and read and traveled and fussed and fumed a long time, it is only in recent years that I have felt some confidence in my understanding. (By the way, the term "understanding" is one of the things that I mean to deal with."



There are two key terms in this second part, Spirituality and Identity. I suggest you have the following attitude. I'll try to impart to you my understandings of these terms. (Let's call them concepts.) But the true purpose of my explanations will be to get you so involved with these ideas that you will continue to turn them over in your own minds thousands of times and over a period of many years, A most valuable way of using not only your mental energies but, and this is a large part of my point –your vital, life-affirming energies.. Until you have wrestled with it and chewed it over and really made it your own, it'll be just clever words. And this stuff is too important for mere cleverness. Hopefully, it will have the kind of juice in it that will be important in how you live.

OK. Spirituality. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you already have a (You may already have a hunch as to...) hunch as to its meaning. The root of the word "Spir" or "Spirit", as in respiration, is related to the substance, air. Air is everywhere, though not visible. It is light in weight and rises up, suggesting that we are dealing with man's higher or nobler characteristics. The great religious leaders in history, Christ, Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, are called great spiritual leaders. They are obviously different from generals who conduct wars, kill people, conquer lands. And they are obviously different from clever business men who focus on getting very rich and commonly are not too worried that their neighbors are too poor to eat well.

There are also certain very capable political leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., about whom people say, "They are not only smart politicians; they are guided by spiritual values."

Let's try to list the characteristics of spiritual people:

- a) They are unselfish and try to teach others to be unselfish.
- b) They tend to believe in equality and democracy
- c) They believe in just, honesty and fair play.

- d) They are kind and loving and feel bad when they observe all the cruelty around them.
- e) Although they are not interested in having power over others, their passionate dedication to their beliefs and ideals gives them an obvious air of power and strength. Even to the point of sacrificing their very lives for the ideals they stand for.
- f) Most people look up to them with great respect and speak of them as having "nobility of spirit".
- g) Such men almost always but now always believe in some power higher than they are. Here, both the words and the ideas become tricky or elusive. Some refer to God. Some speak of a higher power. Some speak of a divine essence, etc.

Even as great a spiritual leader as Buddha who live 2500 years ago and now has hundreds of millions of followers, did not speak of a God. And the American Indians, as I mentioned earlier, worshipped the Great Spirit.

The way I think about it is that the term "spiritual" might at first seem terribly abstract or, as some people like to wisecrack, "airy fairy". Nevertheless, I do hope I can pin it down as I go along,. This is why I said earlier, "I do hope I can do it justice".

The words that come naturally to me are, "To be spiritual is to feel related to the infinite." This will become more clear when I start to talk about Identity.

You may well wonder what I mean by "related to the Infinite". The word infinite is of course related to the opposite, finite or limited or something that has boundaries. Infinite refers to things that are unlimited. For our present purpose it is fair enough to say that the grains of sand on the ocean shore are infinite in number.

What I believe is essentially that the human spirit is infinite but only some people are lucky or wise enough to appreciate this. And when you appreciate this, obviously your life is profoundly affected.

Here is a way of thinking about the infinite aspect of the human spirit. In church, people commonly sing a hymn entitled "Nearer my God to Thee". Usually they sing it so frequently and mechanically that they don't pay serious attention to the meanings.

But what if we take the words seriously? We know that the very nature of God is that Godliness if indeed infinite, cannot be measured, has no limits. And in this hymn we are yearning to be closer to this "entity" or "force" or "spirit" which is beyond measure or measuring.

I say, if we express such a yearning, it is because we recognize, perhaps even dimly, that there resides somewhere within ourselves what has been referred to as Something More.

This begins to give you a hint as to the presence of something infinite within us. Just having a little hint or taste of this idea can perhaps give you a basis or springboard for developing your own thinking.

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~~At this point, I need to introduce a long parenthetical and personal remark. I mentioned earlier that I would elaborate on the term "understanding". So now I have to say that I have only a partial understanding of the things I am telling you about. This may be a strange admission – that I don't totally understand something that is so important to me AND something I want to get across to you.~~

~~But there it is! That's the fact.~~

I am in a position to say that I have good friends who do understand this thoroughly and they demonstrate their understanding by how they live. More about this later.

Now I want to go into the matter of "identity".

When I give talks to adult audiences about identity they are often puzzled because the matter seems on the surface to be so simple and self-evident. Not so. It turns out that the problem of ~~THE~~ ~~OF~~ identity is one of the most complex fascinating and IMPORTANT problems in human behavior.

We all have birth certificates and that establishes a part of our identity. Where and when we were born, etc. You kids can't go into a store to buy cigarettes because you have to have an identity card that proves you're old enough. In cashing a check at the bank you need some proof of your identity, namely, that you are truly the person to whom the check is made out.

All that is simple enough and straightforward. No problem as yet.

But let me tell you a story - we might call it a fable - which gets at the way in which identity is not an open and closed question. I have told this story so many times that it comes out of my ears, but it makes the point very well.

A little lion cub got separated from its family and was picked up by a flock of sheep. It lived with the sheep for several years and behaved like a sheep; in all ways, even bleating like a sheep.

One day in the forest it met a full-grown lion. The cub made its sheep-like sound. The adult lion was taken aback and felt sad for the young lion, saying, "Why you poor thing; you don't even know who you are!" It then gave out a full-throated roar to show what true lion-like behavior is like.

Now essentially the great spiritual leaders of all time:

Buddha, Jesus Christ, Moses, Mohammed have been saying to us for centuries, "You poor little people; you don't even know who you really are."

"You think you are simply Kathryn or Lorna or Jenne or Todd or Abe with all your familiar features and characteristics."

But, amazingly, according to this spiritual point of view which I have been talking about, your very identity, your basic true nature is both different than you know and far, far grander than you can imagine.

Now isn't that terribly strange; isn't that almost impossible to believe; isn't it sort of whacky?

You thought that if anything was certain and obvious and plain to see.....it was your identity, just exactly who you are. You thought, "I live in Los Osos, California, or in Sebastopol, CA and I go to school and play soccer or basketball and THAT'S THAT!

Well, of course all that is true but it's only a part of the truth, only a part. The rest of the truth is that we have actually a two-fold nature. One part is ordinary identity or self with which we conduct our daily lives. The other part is - as one writer has said - we all have within us a "divine spark", a certain extraordinary quality of "Something More" which connects us to the infinite that I was referring to earlier. And it does more than connect us to; it IS our very identity.

Now don't get the idea that this makes you some kind of big shot. The point is that all of humanity is potentially some kind of bigshot, but like the little lion cub in the story, most people don't have a clue.

I feel fortunate that I personally know some people who have this understanding and I can see how their understanding gives their lives a quality of richness, of peace, of connectedness that is deeply satisfying. Through them my own understanding has been enriched and my understanding grows.

Now arises a very intriguing and frustrating question. It is like a big tease but it seems that here our knowledge reaches its limits.

The question: If it is so fine to have this broad identity how do you achieve this? Oddly enough, we are not sure. It is very different than achieving skills in other areas. If you want to be a good pianist you can study and practice hard. If you want to be a good athlete, likewise. Of course natural talent plays a large role and many people can practice with great dedication but only some people will have the natural touch that makes them outstanding.

In the matter of spiritual development, of touching this broad identity I've been talking about -- which has come to be known as "enlightenment", the matter is more subtle. It is not something you can "achieve". It is something that can happen to you. It is certainly helpful to read, to study, to meditate, to have good teachers, to earnestly discuss it with friends, but then it might or might not happen.

After all my studies I don't feel I can say anything further than that. At the same time, don't get the idea that it is an all-or-none thing. We all have moments when we have this "Something More" in us; a thrilling sense of being larger than our everyday self, of a combination of peace and excitement,

of seeing beauty in surprising places, of understanding the "what" and the "why" of life. Thruout history men have agreed that this is a gem beyond price, that life has no greater prize. Unfortunately most people don't pay attention to it, or are embarassed by it, or may feel they are a little crazy. Therefore it is a great blessing to have friends around you who are sympathetic and understanding and definitely do not make fun of you.

Finally I want to express a belief of mine. Let's call it "an article of faith". I'm not in a mood to prove it; I just want to say it.

I believe that giving serious thought to to the ideas I've been talking about can contribute great riches to your life. I also believe that~~x~~ these notions have a huge role to play in solving the the complex and menacing problems that we see around us and that stare usin the face every time we pick up a newspaper: problems of war, poverty, injustice of all kinds, and --perhaps most importantly -- peoples' indifference to the pain of others~~s~~.

An image that I like to carry in my head is that if you feel the broad identity, if you feel the "divine spark", then you can be like a deeply rooted tree with a high IQ. H<sub>a</sub>ving high intelligence you can reflect on yourself and communicate with other beings around you. Being deeply rooted, you feel a kinship with the earth, other animals and even - mysteriously - with the sun and the stars.

But even tho the treeis deeply rooted, life is not entirely

a bowl of cherries. There is much to endure such as insects, infections, severe weather. But if a strong wind blows off one of your favorite branches, you are not devastated. You're sad and you miss it but you're not afraid that you are no longer presentable and wont get invited to Saturday's party. Certainly uou dont feel that you're and must rush to see psychotherapist Abe with the lament, "I am disfigured; I am confused; I've done something bad and must be forgiven for my sins."

No, you simply endure the sorrow. Then when circumstances permit, you can celebrate life's blessings again.

Finally, I have mentioned my faith that a deep understanding of spiritual issues has alot to contribute to the solution of our social and political problems.

I want to refer to a statement of one of our prominent contemporary social scientists, Margaret Mead. (I dont quote her exactly.) Mead has said, "Never underestimate what can be accomplished by a few determind and well-organize d individuals."

Personally I get alot of comfort out of that. Why is that?

Man's history has always, in part, been a story of cruelty and bloodshed. The present time (March 2,003, the lunatic war in Iraq) is probably the worst of all. True, millions of people around the world have organized themselves in protest but it seems that many more people have been subject to profound depression and resignation at the mindlessness and cowardice of our political leaders.

What is to be done?

The proportion of individuals who become "enlightened" or "awakened" is obviously small and is likely to remain small for some time. But perhaps those few might constitute that



"disciplined few" that Mead refers to.

Certainly it seems outrageously idealistic. But from what I know of Mead, she was not given to childish fairy tales. She was a hard-headed scientist.

So might this "disciplined few" provide the courage and vision to be our contemporary Moses leading mankind out of the torments of "Egypt"?

A dream worth dreaming -- and acting on.

May your generation play a role in helping the dream to unfold.

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