

Spiritual
— *not* —
RELIGIOUS

JOY SLOAN JINKS

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ISBN: 9798351113173

Web: www.joyjinks.com

Email: dynamicaging5@gmail.com

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Dedication

I dedicate *Spiritual not Religious* to all the seekers in the world who embrace the adventure we call life, discovering the sacred in everyday wonder.

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Introduction

Joy Jinks

As my friends with the Institute of Cultural Affairs say, “It is a terrible thing to fall into the Hands of the Living God,” terrible and wonderful because you never know where you will be led. I look at my life with wonder at where the time has gone and amazement at the mythic journey that I have traversed.

I have heard so many people say that they are spiritual, not religious. I have always wondered what they mean when they say these words. What is the spiritual journey that brought them to this point? What are the disappointments,

joys in their spiritual walk? What are their spiritual practices? What is their relationship to organized religion?

In *Spiritual not Religious* you will have an opportunity to journey through the various ways each writer expresses their relationship with *Spirit*, and the many ways this is expressed through their spiritual practices and inspiring moments of awe!

CHAPTER 1

The Camino De Santiago

Teresa Miskell

*And into the forest I go, to lose my mind
and find my soul. —Mariah Dani*

The Camino de Santiago is a series of walkable paths that culminate in the city of Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where it's believed the remains of the apostle James are resting. Hundreds of thousands of people undertake the Camino each year coming from just about every country in the world.

At its most fundamental level, the Camino de Santiago is basically a long walk. At deeper levels, it becomes a spiritual journey. It's wandering through a 1200 year long cultural spiritual and religious history. It is a coming wing

of kindred souls in a vast community of Pilgrims, a strange community that is not fixed in space but flows ever westward toward Santiago de Compostela Northwestern Spain. Perhaps ultimately it is an analogy for life itself.

Millions of pilgrims have walked the Camino including many Catholic kings and queens, Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint Francis Xavier, Lorenzo de Medici, and St. Francis Assisi.

I understood at a very early age that in nature, I felt everything I should feel in church but never did. Walking in the woods, I felt in touch with the universe and with the spirit of the universe. —Alice Walker

The year we walked, 2014, was the anniversary of Saint Francis journey.

You can imagine that walking days and weeks provides for many adventures, introspection, mulling over the past, thinking about the future, making friends from all over the world and for some, serious reevaluation of their lives. Many lessons are experienced on this spiritual pilgrimage, and we would like to share several most significant observations.

- 1. Everyone has a story. It is solved by walking.
St. Augustine*

On the Camino, one encounters so many people and depending on how open you are to talk to them, you discover that everyone has a story. Everyone has had challenges in life, everyone has had heart aches, everyone has dreams, aspirations, and regrets. As well as everyone has a personal reason for doing the Camino. It is not as if one wakes up one morning and thinks I am going to walk across Spain. Often people stated that they were called to walk the Camino. Part of what we so enjoyed was sharing stories and ideas with other pilgrims. As we listen deeply to those we may not quite understand or agree with, we would realize that we all have a story.

2. Planning is good, but flexibility is necessary.

Travel as much as you can, as far as you can, long as you can. life is not meant to be lived in one place.

One never can really plan for the Camino. One can train, one can read everything available, one can map things out, but the reality is that unpredictable things will happen. Perhaps the Albergues, (where pilgrims sleep at night) are full, and one needs to walk further or get a hotel room. One might plan to walk a certain distance, but rain and heavy mud might cut that distance in half. Flexibility on the Camino, and in life, is the key to managing unexpected things. The more flexible one can be, the easier the unexpected will be managed.

3. *Less is more.*

Simplicity! What do you really need?

When one is walking with a backpack, less is always more...more ability to walk with less weight; and more ease of finding what is needed in said backpack. When planning our walk, daily we would read the American Pilgrims on the Camino Facebook page. A pilgrim posted that most important and significant life message, “the weight of your backpack is equal to your fears.”

4. *Communication is multi-faceted.*

Sleeping in an albergue is a lot like living in the Tower of Babel. With so many pilgrims coming from so many different locations, often we found ourselves having dinner with pilgrims who spoke many different languages. We quickly found that a napkin and a pin went a long way to communicate. One particular evening, we drew lots of funny pictures depicting our day. One drew a toe with a Band-Aid, another drew a few dogs, and someone else drew a church pew with about 12 squeezed in Pilgrims. Even if the spoken word is not helping, there are always ways to communicate. Note to self — I need to play charades more often.

5. *You alone control how you feel about things. An agreeable companion on a journey is as good as a carriage.* —Publilius Syrus

Early on we realized that things didn't always go as planned. Expect the unexpected. Flexibility was necessary. At times, when things didn't go as planned, we quickly recognized we had a choice in our reaction. The more we took notice of our impatience, or frustration at a situation, the more we realized we could change how we felt about things.

6. *The simplest gesture can mean so much.*

The Camino community is a unique community. We are all on the path doing the same thing - walking to Santiago (or closer to Santiago for those who walk. Their Camino in stages). One of the unique aspects is the openness to support each other in any way. We often looked for opportunities to share with others, especially when buying food. There were so many times when we only needed part of a purchase and sought to share it with others.

7. *Listen to your body...*

*These mountains you are carrying,
you were only supposed to climb.* —Nagware Zebian

We realized early on in our first journey that we had developed over the years the ability to totally ignore our body. Working at a high stress job required more than often to push through fatigue and to ignore body signs. Since we had set expectations in terms of distances covered each day of our Camino, we were set to ignore any tiredness and fatigue and stick to the goals. Quickly we found out that this was a recipe for trouble. We recognize that once we truly listen to our bodies and rested when we needed, and ate when we were hungry, and continued on when we felt strong, our days were much more pleasant. It meant taking rest days when none were planned. It meant getting strapping for my knee when I had long distance. It meant letting interesting pilgrims walk ahead because keeping up with their walking pace would have taxed my body (even though I really wanted to continue to chat with them).

8. *Camino journeys are life changing.*

*If you think adventure is dangerous,
try routine, it is lethal.* —Paulo Coelho

Dutch anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, speaks of the universal rite of passage in three stages: separation, ordeal, and reintegration. It suggests that movement from one Life stage to another demands a break from the past, the

enduring of an ordeal and then a return to ordinary life. Joseph Campbell's model of the hero's journey or monomyth goes separation, initiation, return.

The Camino provided the separation from daily life needed for the soul's journey. After returning home, the real impact of the lessons learned on the Camino continues. Some lessons have come to the forefront, others we anticipate will evolve.

We are all just walking each other home. —Ram Dass

Walking the Camino was a daily experience of heightened sense of awareness of the natural world. It was a spiritual experience of emptying the self and letting it be refilled by the senses, whether it's the sound of the crunch of boots on gravel, the feel of the morning mist on your skin, the visual of the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean, the smell of the eucalyptus forest, or the taste of a midday snack seated on the ground by a stream.

The Camino provides the opportunity for a profoundly spiritual unification of the senses and the self that enables us to feel our place in the natural world, in the cosmos, in the greater whole.

JOY SLOAN JINKS

Ultimately, the Camino is “the journey.”

The shifts and changes continue.

We will never be the same.

Of all the paths you take in life,

make sure a few of them are dirt.

CHAPTER 2

In The Beginning Was The One

Rev. Emeritus Glenda Davis

In the beginning was the One. It has been named many things: God, Divine Spirit, Life, Love, Energy, Jesus, Buddha -to name a few. Ernest Holmes also referred to it as The Thing Itself. By any name, it is known to all as that invisible essence that we experience in times of awe and wonder and yearn for in times of pain and grief.

We are sparks or emanations of the Divine. As we awaken to and acknowledge this Truth of who we are, the spark grows into a flame that becomes the Light Of The World. This light awakens the Light in other beings. The Light is fed by love, peace and good-will and it grows and expands.

Jesus, having already awakened to this Truth about himself, had the passion and commitment to help others awaken to this same Truth about themselves. This was his message, but unfortunately it was misunderstood, and Jesus was put on a pedestal as an exception, rather than as the example he actually was.

We are at a time in our evolution where many people are awakening to this Truth of who they really are. Those not yet awakened to this often feel that their reality is under attack and are fighting hard to hold on to an old paradigm that is in its death throes.

Our responsibility as Awakening Beings is to shine our light brightly and feed the light in others with love, peace and good-will. The most unawakened beings — the most fearful, angry and threatened need that Light the most.

By gathering in Spiritual Community, we can strengthen our light and commitment to shining and loving and being the Lighthouse for others.

CHAPTER 3

VALENTINE'S DAY
2017

Freddie Odom

As of this writing, I have recently returned from India, where I took part in the “All Religions Prayer” on Mohandas Gandhi’s birthday as part of a delegation from the United States. During my trip, I visited several religious sites including the Lotus Temple (of the Baha’i faith) and Akshardham in Delhi, witnessed the Hindu festival of Navratri, and dialogued with people of many different faiths, including politicians, meditation teachers, Gandhian activists, and Muslim cab drivers.

Before I continue, then, I should clarify that my understanding of the term “Spiritual but Not Religious”

differs substantially from what it might be taken to mean in Eastern thought. In India, for example, there was a temple on every block. I was treated with the utmost hospitality, in part due to an Indian folk saying that “your guest is your god” (and to my dismay, our delegation was once even worshiped by street children who took this saying to its extreme.) While Eastern religion is often referred to as “spiritual,” it is also true at times that India is a deeply religious place. Visitors are required to declare a religion upon entering the country, in fact, and gods are honored all over the place, though they are sometimes all said to be simply a reflection of a single God.

My understanding of the word “spiritual,” on the other hand, is closer to that of the Indians I met who were distributing Bibles outside of Gandhi’s old homestead: for them, the best window into God’s true nature is Jesus Christ, and the word “spiritual” in this sense refers especially to the presence or work of God’s Holy Spirit.

The story of my own spiritual journey began in rural, Gulf-coast Alabama on July 4th, 1979. On that evening, after a day of Independence Day celebrations, my grandfather, Fred Eli Odom, got out of bed and collapsed in the hallway due to a massive heart attack. My father, a teenager at the time, tried to resuscitate him and did briefly, but there was nothing that he could have done. He would spend the next

decade angry with God; meanwhile, due to his own father's ailing health he had already dropped out of school and found a job at a power plant to help support his family, which included four brothers and four sisters.

My mother, raised as an "army brat" in Germany and Italy, was also a high school dropout due to family hardship. She met my father on a blind date; a hard drinking nightclubber named Bill Boseman swapped shifts at the power plant so they could go. They were soon married, and I came along a year later when my mom was only seventeen.

I only remember going to worship services twice as a small child, when we were invited by neighbors, and I got into trouble both times. I didn't understand, for example, why a baby named Jesus was getting presents for Christmas and I was being left out, and I didn't understand why I couldn't just leave and run around outside whenever I wanted to — playing was fun! By the time I was six years old, my exposure to religious stories came mostly from a single, red book.

I liked the color red, fluorescent as it seemed to me, and it just so happened that the only books that my parents ever kept permanently in the house were red: a set of 1960s-era Columbia Encyclopedias and The New Illustrated

Children's Bible, both sitting in a mostly unused room of the house. As an adult, I found out that the Bible had been a gift to my father from a minister in his neighborhood that he talked to in the years before his father died— that must have been why he kept the book, but he didn't read it and at one point told me that I didn't "need to be reading that mess" either. (While he was physically abusive at times and would sometimes get into fights, "mess" was one of the strongest curse words that my father ever used around me.)

My mother was sympathetic and let me read the Children's Bible, but her knowledge of spiritual matters was extremely limited: once when I was sick and asked her to pray for me, she cried and said, "I don't know how."

I read the Bible anyway. My mom, after two miscarriages, became pregnant for a fourth time and was invited to attend First Pentecostal Church in Jackson, Alabama. Inspired by the Biblical story of Samuel and worried about a third miscarriage, she committed to "dedicate [this unborn child] to the Lord," and became a regular there after my sister Hannah was born. My father visited the Pentecostal church once, and our only family photo from that time period was taken there, but he remained skeptical at best and hostile at worst. Sometimes he tried to discourage her from going; other times he kept me at

home, where I would go into my room and pull out the red Bible.

When I was in the third grade, Mama nearly died of pneumonia. She was hospitalized across the street from my school, and I visited her there in the afternoons, but she eventually became very weak and almost unresponsive. Daddy, at the end of his rope, finally decided to try praying for her. When he came to the hospital the next morning and saw her sitting on the bed brushing her hair, he was spooked! He agreed to go to church with her again, provided that it was a safe, country church near our house (where there wouldn't be people running around speaking in tongues, of course)

We went as a family, on a Sunday morning in early 1991 as I remember it and were greeted by our neighbors in the tiny building of Good Springs Baptist Church. The pastor spoke for a while; when he was finished, he reached for a rolled-up piece of paper and began talking about a revival that would be taking place at the church that week.

For any readers not familiar with the concept of revival meetings, they are a series of worship services geared toward spiritual renewal. A hundred years ago or more, before television and radio, they were large community events lasting for weeks throughout rural America. With

the dawn of radio, they were expanded by former major league baseball player Billy Sunday, and they reached the height of their popularity when they were televised by Billy Graham beginning in the 1950s. By the early 1990s, they were less popular but still typically lasted for a week, and that was the case the day that our family went to Good Springs.

As the pastor talked about the upcoming revival meetings, he unrolled a poster to show the image of the person who would be preaching, revealing...Bill Boseman, the beer-drinking, nightclubbing, power plant worker who had swapped shifts with my father ten years earlier so that he could go on a blind date!

From what I can gather now, on the night that Bill Boseman worked Daddy's shift, he got into a conversation with some church leaders who worked there about Jesus, and the conversation got him thinking. Later, on the way to or from a nightclub in Mobile, Alabama (I don't remember which) he saw a theater banner advertising a movie about the life of Jesus Christ and went inside. On the way home, he got a drink and some Cheetos, and when he arrived, he sat at the kitchen table with a Bible. Several hours into the morning, captivated by what he was reading, he had never touched the snack. He never returned to work and his crew never knew what had happened to him.

Ten years later, Daddy decided to come back to the church to see what had become of his old friend, now an evangelist. He kept coming back to the revival meetings and kept inviting Bill over for meals beforehand. At some point during that week, he committed his life to Christ.

Nearly immediately afterwards, Daddy knew that he wanted to be a pastor, but there were several hurdles- some household debt, obligations at the power plant, and especially a lack of formal education. Neither of my parents graduated from high school, but they committed to study and take the GED (high school equivalency) test together. I rode with them to Thomasville, Alabama to pick up their test results, and will never forget the look of joy on their faces when they read that they had passed the test!

From there, my parents sold everything to pay off the debts and we moved to Florida so that Daddy could attend Bible college, surviving for several years on Mama's hourly wages at a Dollar General store. We relocated to Georgia around the time that he graduated and became a pastor full-time.

I encountered several challenges along the way. I was late learning to tie my shoes. I was also late learning to ride a bicycle, and once I did, I was hit by a car and hospitalized for days. My motor skills generally weren't very good until I was in high school, and I was always the last one picked

for sporting events. In the sixth grade, I watched the movie Gandhi and as a result took Jesus' Sermon on the Mount so literally that I swore never to hit anyone back again, which was all well and good until the other boys found out about it and decided to test my new philosophy one at a time.

I increasingly became fixated on one interest at a time (wrestling, comics, skateboards, aliens) until my interests alienated nearly everyone else, and became fixated on one girl to the point that I became depressed and even suicidal when the dream didn't match the reality. I excelled in some areas of school (music, which I learned to play in only nine weeks, was a lifesaver) but failed in others.

In short, I never really adapted to life in Georgia. My family was in Alabama, and my friends were in Florida. My relationship with my father had been better since he changed, and some of my favorite moments of peace and quiet were in the fields picking peas with him, talking about God. But as daily life became increasingly stressful and I withdrew more and more into myself, that relationship became very strained. I tried to adapt by changing my behavior in a lot of ways, trying to be more like my classmates so that I wouldn't stick out as much.

I now know, as an adult, that the characteristics of fixated interests, of poor motor skills and social difficulties, of a

literal mindset, withdrawal from the outside world, and the symptoms of burnout were all part of the life of a teenage autistic person, but I wouldn't figure that out and be identified as autistic for another fifteen years. In the meantime, I turned to the only thing that I could blame for my unidentified source of burnout: my religion was just too hard.

You see, in my religion, based on a hyper-literal reading of Christian fundamentalism, everything was a sin against God. I read the Bible whenever I felt bad about my perceived loss of innocence, but I read it as a set of rules, each verse containing instructions on how to not be a sinner, each sin an ultimate failure. When I found the rules too hard to follow, I blamed my religion and rejected it.

I started to get into fights since I was no longer a Gandhian, but I also gradually started to be accepted by my peers a little more. I'd heard various church leaders talk about how rock music was evil (a favorite topic during that time) and that irked me, because I was both a fan and a performer of it. Ultimately, I decided that it would be easier to have no religion at all than to try to live up to everybody's expectations, including my own.

In a way, it was easier, and in a way it wasn't. I had tremendous "Baptist guilt" about the whole thing, and I

tried too hard to prove to myself (and others) that I was “bad” to cleanse myself of it. I claimed to be an atheist, or sometimes even a Satanist if it would make people leave me alone, because that would be easier than trying to learn every rule in *The Book* and get myself together, and it would also be easier than trying to explain myself to adults.

I was “the preacher’s son” though, and I walked up the hill to church whenever I couldn’t get out of it. At some point, the church planned a “youth trip” for the teenagers to do some kind of service work in central Florida, and I went, staying in a converted old hotel. It was there, with all of my previous religion having been stripped away, that I finally saw God as real for the first time in years. During that trip, we served people who were in need, and we sang songs about closeness to God, not rules, with words like “Draw Me Close to You.”

How was my newfound spirituality different from my old religion? In reality, the Bible only really has two commandments in it, which were summarized by Jesus as “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” As for the word “religion” itself, it only appears in the Bible about fifteen times, mostly in negative contexts. But there is at least one positive mention of it: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after

orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27, NIV)

When I wrote in a previous book that I was “spiritual but not religious” as a young adult, the “religion” that I spoke of was not a religion of orphans and widows. Instead, what I called “religion” is sometimes more commonly called “legalism,” or a dependence on a set of moral laws instead of personal experience. I was now on the path to personal experience with God, although my relationship with the institutional church continued to be strained throughout my teenage and young-adult years, partly because I continued to be burned by it.

One church locked the doors to their gymnasium because we were playing basketball with a black child, one banned a friend from entering the building and speaking because she was a woman, and one person even kicked out two young men that I'd invited to hear a message at a Christian student center once he found out that they were Mormons.

This harsh, judgmental legalism took its toll. At the same time, I befriended pastors and read more books by people that I wanted to learn from and learn what I could by going to a quiet farm run by Quakers. After going to over a hundred churches, a synagogue, and a monastery in my lifetime, I gradually found that it was neither the structure

nor the procedures of any of them that had really mattered. What really mattered was whether I could accept the grace and forgiveness of God, because there was no way that I could ever live up to any predetermined set of rules.

The term “spiritual but not religious” has only grown in popularity since that time in my life. One reason is certainly the perceived negatives of the term “religion,” but another is a desire not to be associated with stereotypes. The stereotypical Christian is judgmental, privileged, authoritarian, and legalistic. According to the Bible, on the other hand, the visible results of a truly spiritual life include “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” While we can never fully live up to the rules or goals of any religion on earth, we can still walk spiritually in the same way that Jesus did, as a free gift from God.

That is the message that I, as a formerly abused, suicidal, poor, disabled country boy from the American South, needed to hear. And it is the message that I, as the first autistic elected official in North America, carried to the top leaders of the Indian government last fall.

Good Springs Baptist Church, where the course of my life was changed forever, is now closed. The bodies of the elders of the church that I knew, members of the American

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

“Greatest Generation,” are all buried in a cemetery down the road. But the Spirit that propelled them is very much alive today. If you would like to be “spiritual, but not religious,” there is no better, no more fulfilling, no more joyful way to do so than by walking in the path of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 4

CONNECTING THROUGH TIME & SPACE

A Short Story About the Intimacy of Being

Jan Sanders

Last Friday, I was at our “end of the week” gratitude circle with friends. We do this out at Moonlight Bay overlooking Lake Couchiching.

Each gratitude circle is different and follows Ojibway teachings. Prayers begin the session with each of us holding a few dried leaves of tobacco as a way of communicating with the Creator. So, I had several small pieces of natural tobacco that I was stroking in my hands. Just stroking.

As I held my fragments of tobacco and listened to the prayers of the others in the circle, my own thoughts went to Richard. As I gently touched each leaf, I was remembering that Richard used to regale us with stories about his childhood memories. The family grew a small plot of tobacco that had an abundance of ugly green bugs. It was the children's job to cut the green Horn worms off the tobacco and then to cut the leaves in a very particular fashion for harvesting.

Later in life, when Richard came up to Ontario, he started to grow his own tobacco plants on our small front porch. He took the leaves from our little plot, dried them in the sun and then cut them up to use for our prayers. As he lovingly tended them, the plants seemed to be a touchstone back to his childhood.

It was incredibly beautiful just to stroke these little tobacco leaves. I asked the Creator to take my tender holding of these leaves to Richard as he sat in his wheelchair in the Leacock Care Center during the virus lockdown. Recently, he has been disappearing ever more deeply into his own world. I've thought, "I hope, in whatever way the universe operates, that Richard feels this stroke and knows that I am loving him."

He wants to be around until the last drop of consciousness leaves him, however subtle that might be. When he talked about the end of life—like a Do Not Resuscitate order—he'd insist, "No! Resuscitate me!" Richard sleeps a lot and I'm never certain he recognizes me when he's awake. And yet I know that in the moment of stroking that tobacco—my communication with the Creator—I was remembering yes, this is where he wants to be. He didn't necessarily ask that I be there with him; this is his solitary journey now.

So, I have a little tobacco growing this year. Be it... — Jan Sanders

A week later I was reading the following poem of Mary Oliver that holds my understanding of the vibrancy of the universe.

Do Stones Feel?

Do stones feel?

Do they love their life?

Or does their patience drown out everything else?

When I walk on the beach, I gather a few

white ones, dark ones, the multiple colors.

Don't worry, I say, I'll bring you back, and I do.

Is the tree as it rises delighted with its many

branches, each one like a poem?

Are the clouds glad to unburden their bundles of rain?

Most of the world says no, no, it's not possible.

I refuse to think to such a conclusion.

Too terrible it would be, to be wrong.

— Mary Oliver, *Blue Horses*

I asked David Dunn to reflect on “Connecting Through Time and Space.” He wrote, “I read quickly the first time and more slowly the second time. By the sixth time, I was in tears. It’s one thing to read about a visit to the Leacock Care Center, it’s quite another to participate in these events. This poem is the result.”

Creators of Creation

*Feel the heartbeat and the pain,
see the night light and the hope,
sense the guidance of tobacco.*

*See Richard in his wheelchair,
groping through the fog
for a glimmer of connection.*

*See you with your iPad,
the colors, the brush, and the pen
searching for an honest image.*

*Imagine Creator
carefully choosing the words
that light the way into your heart.*

*Feel the longing
and the insistent grasp*

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*drawing Richard to your side,
to walk together
in the quiet twilight
of ending and beginning.
Maker of Tobacco,
twilight, stars, and dawn,
and beings who live and die,
heartache lights the way to joy.
You invite us to walk with you,
We who are of the tobacco,
the work of seeds and harvests,
Creators of Creation.*

— David Mansel Dunn

CHAPTER 5

On Religion
And The Spiritual
Atoms Within Us

Rick Soskis

It is interesting to contemplate the meaning of spiritual. The definition has broadened over time, and now includes “the deepest values and meanings by which people live” (Wikipedia.org: Sheldrake, Phillip, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, Wiley-Blackwell and Griffin, David Ray, *Spirituality and Society*, SUNY).

It is in that context that I share with you my thinking about spirituality and how Americans need to get in touch with our deepest values and meanings...our “better angels”, which of course is a reference to religion, to which I do not

subscribe since it leads to so much hate and killing in the world. *The Golden Rule* works just fine for me.

Anyone who is inclined to disbelieve that every human is spiritual at some level may wish to think about the fact that every atom in us came from the stars...from our mysterious universe...our ultimate home. Each of us is as *old* as the stars, and we are as spiritual as the atoms within us. How so many atoms come together to form us humans cannot yet be understood, and that is fine with me. I am OK with not “knowing”, having no use for a supernatural explanation of why we exist or how we came to be.

It seems that thinking stops and certitude reigns when we put our faith in a supernatural entity to explain these things. We benefit the most when we *think* for ourselves and *feel*. Isn't it amazing that we possess the ability to feel? I believe that spirituality depends on our deepest feelings...*that it is within the sense of feeling that spirituality resides.*

I was raised in a family where religion was essentially not in the vocabulary. It only came up in the context of family history. My great grandfather was a rabbi, but once my grandfather migrated to America religion played no part in the family. I *do* remember the only joke my mother ever told, though, which was about a fellow who had the

misfortune of facing his impending death. His best friend asked him to write when he got to heaven and tell him what God was like. The fellow died and wrote back to his friend saying, “John, I don’t know how to tell you this except to just come out and say it...she’s black” (a compliment, indeed). My family, I am profoundly grateful to say, held no prejudice of any kind or spoke an unkind word about another...ever. Though my mother struggled with expressing love physically, both she and my father were full of spirituality as it directs one’s soul to do right by all people. I believe that spirituality expresses itself through feeling and caring.

Practically speaking, by “feeling” I refer to the powerful, emotional strings that bind people together and result in caring. Have you ever thought about how we grieve when a loved one dies? There is no way to consciously control how grief comes out, or *when*, or *where*. The atoms that make up our lost loved one and all living things, including those that constitute our own being, do not untangle easily. The spirit...the bond...between us does not weaken or break without struggle and pain.

One way in which spirituality directs many, but not enough of us, is fighting for quality education, particularly education in those public-school districts whose pipelines are filled with children not prepared to learn...kids who do

not hear enough words spoken in the home, who do not have books read to them, whose parents are overwhelmed with life and lash out in anger (which is more damaging to kids than being physically attacked). It is all about life's circumstance and about emotion that's led by our spirituality, "the deepest values and meanings by which we live".

It is known that there is about a quarter second delay between when a word leaves our mouth and when we process what we just said. That assumes normal conversation that is not preceded by "counting to ten". Have you ever, pretty immediately, regretted saying something to someone in the heat of the moment...the words just kind of came out before you had an opportunity to think about consequences?

Oh, to understand the atoms within us and how their interactions direct the words that flow from our mouths! Our design is not perfect when it comes to keeping the peace, but it is nonetheless pretty amazing.

I always told my kids that, "It's what's between your ears and how you treat other people that counts". The brain directs everything we do...it is who we *are*. Someone may still be breathing and have a normal blood pressure and be nice and pink, but if they have been determined to be

brain-dead then they *are* no longer. The brain is everything, which is why we should love it by watching our sugar, avoiding alcohol, continuing to learn, avoiding marijuana (which, in spite of what you may have heard, decreases activity in every area of the brain while shrinking it), staying hydrated, likely taking omega-3 and vitamin D, walking outside and maintaining a healthy weight, thinking for oneself, taking time to reflect, and by limiting total screen time to under two hours a day (or as close to that as our work allows). Keep those atoms happy! From the brain flows our spirituality, which is best measured by how we care for and thus love others...love *it* and appreciate the spirit that flows from it.

Have you experienced the tingling feeling when you make a huge difference in how someone feels or how they look anew at a circumstance that has been bothering them...when they realize that someone actually took the time to see inside them and *feel* what they feel? In a *Swamp Gravy* production years ago one of the stories being portrayed ended with a previously incarcerated woman explaining that, as she put it, "...and I had to go to prison to get *somebody* to listen to me!" It is true that we improve and thrive only in a spiritual environment where we feel that others genuinely care about us. How many of our incarcerated people would not be incarcerated if they only had that special someone to listen to them...to really *care*

about them? Everyone who is incarcerated needs someone on the “outside” to stick with them, to talk with them through thick and thin, to visit them and to support their emotional state...their hope...their spirit. Spirituality and caring are inextricably linked.

The spoken word is truly the most powerful drug available. If you don't believe that, just think of how one reacts upon hearing that a loved one has died...Sound waves leave the speaker's mouth and travel to our ears and ultimately into the brain to be interpreted. Powerful reactions to hearing of death speak to the power of those sound waves. Sound waves are the messengers that spread our spirituality. How the waves are interpreted depends on how skilled we are in sharing feelings of all kinds with others...how the atoms interrelate. Aren't we something?

We are all connected, together on this “little blue dot” called “Earth” and, while we may come from different places, we really are all the same. We all want to be loved, and for better or worse are led by the quest for love throughout our lives. We laugh at similar things. We cry about similar things. We all want justice and fair play. We want to be free. We may enjoy more or less melanin, but we all bleed red blood. We are the same because our atoms all come from the same place...our universe.

So, if our atoms are all the same and come from the same universe, why do some of us possess a loving spirit and others seem to lack any level of spirituality that smooths their passage around the sun? Well, it's back to the brain and the fact that it is by no means fully formed at birth...far from it. The brain's nerve fibers innately grow in certain directions depending on the function to which they are assigned, but as they grow, they are "pruned" depending on external influences, pushing them a bit this way or that on the road to their destination within the brain.

Environment counts, which is why it is so important to proactively help kids who suffer from less-than-robust parenting. Only through early childhood education, and the healthy early start in life which that provides, can that population of children stand a chance of healthy brain development and a shot at lifelong well-being...and a shot at enjoying a spiritual life of deep values, meaning, and caring that lead to well-being and maybe even happiness.

Lately our country's spirituality has been severely suffering, I believe in large part due to the advent of texting and emailing. Many are truly addicted to the keypad, sending out tons of communiques, but not communicating. You cannot look into one's eyes and see tears, hear inflection in the voice, see body language, or hope to correctly interpret

emotion through a keypad. Those are critical components of quality communication, and we have practically eliminated them from use.

This has led not only to horribly misinterpreted messaging but to loneliness and depression across the country...and not just in our country, but worldwide as we have allowed technology to infect our brains and our hearts. As this has happened, people who no longer feel adequately connected to others seek to connect wherever they can, with too many becoming tribal members of political groups. This is sad, not just because it damages our country, but because by seeking respite in an impersonal tribe many will never enjoy “deep value and meaning” in their lives. We simply *have* to do better if we are to regain our well-being and our typical robust American spirit.

Create disconnected illusions by texting and emailing if we must but head the pendulum back towards actual communication and mental well-being by also liberally initiating and enjoying *in-person conversation* and, secondly, by using the *telephone*. Until we care enough about others to make this happen, we will remain tribal and miss out on the best of all things...Love for ALL and the spirituality embodied in that.

CHAPTER 6

Beyond Religious

Bill Chisholm

I grew up a Catholic kid in a predominantly Mormon town in south central Idaho. My friends and classmates came from across the local religious landscape, of course Mormon being the larger number. The differences in religious dogma didn't play a big part in our interactions, but of course we were aware that in the arena of religion, we were somehow different.

That supposed difference always confused me, one religion or the other claiming to be the "true religion" and that everyone else was going to hell. There seemed to me to be good people across the board.

My parents were strong Catholics and we spent early weekday mornings on our knees saying the rosary at home and attending the majority of services at the church. As an altar boy, I had extra duty quite often serving weekday mass as well as Sunday, funerals, weddings, and benediction.

Along with all the church going, I did get from my mother a near daily admonition to expand my horizons. That admonition at times ran counter to the hell fire brimstone sermons of our Irish priest and sometimes to my mother's chagrin. I would often tune out the sermon or even the prayers and go my own way. I got hooked on the ending of a prayer that says, "world without end, Amen." I tried following that notion out and out and out... I went rather beyond and suddenly found myself back there in the church. My first notion of what I now call the Cosmic Möbius Strip, the realization that outside and inside are connected.

After high school and slowly through college I went to church less and less, but I really never felt that I quit, per se, just moved beyond. The word "catholic" means universal and though I would still go to church with family when I was home, I actually began to get more out of it the less I went. The messages became a bit more coherent. One Sunday in church I had this incredible spiritual experience,

a sense of universal knowing. Not long after that I had the same feeling while sitting in my car in line at a drive-in restaurant off a busy street in Boise, Idaho.

I was a wild lands firefighter over a seventeen-year period traveling from southern Arizona to the Arctic in Alaska and throughout much of the West even as far as Arkansas. It was on a fire in Washington State, during the mop up stage that alone along a stretch of fire line, I had that same incredible sense of universal knowing. Wow, I thought...it is not tied to a place, a church, it can be found anywhere.

Eight years into my firefighting days, I had a rather serious knee operation, which resulted in the removal of one of my patellae. Kneeling had always been a bit painful after a knee injury at Boy Scout camp at thirteen. Being a Catholic and a much-used altar boy along with family rosaries resulted in many painful moments on my knees. It was not the praying that necessitated the operation but overwork on the fire line in mountainous country.

I wanted to get back to fighting fires and so I went through an intense and lonely recuperative process. It was during this alone time that I discovered a lot about myself. Things that I use to lay on other people, I discovered I owned. I also became incredibly self-disciplined, something I had had no real need to be before. I had to get in phenomenal

physical shape, and in the process, I also became mentally disciplined.

By spring of 1972, I was a new person. I got back on the fire crew and two nights before I was to head a detail of highly trained firefighters on an assignment to Alaska, I was introduced to *Be Here Now* by a total stranger, who sat down at my table in a bar and said, "I want to talk to you." There is more to that story, but at the end he went out to his car, came in with Ram Dass's *Be Here Now*. I flipped through the book, became intrigued and he then took it and left. The next morning, I purchased my own copy of *Be Here Now* and the following morning shipped out for Alaska.

That summer in Alaska as the leader of the overall detail, and the leader of my own team, I had many challenges that tested my character and pushed me to new limits of personal integrity. Along with those experiences I was reading *Be Here Now* and blowing not only my mind, but those of my closest hippie buddies.

The detail was made up of Vietnam Vets and men with college degrees in almost any subject you could imagine, we had horizon expanding conversations. We had all had it with incompetence in high places. Watergate was just unfolding, the War winding down. We had been out in the

field in intense situations calling the shots and when we got back to the fire center in Boise, we were a bit surly. In an attempt to bring us under control, without having debriefed us and found out what we had gone through, we were ordered to cut our hair. I and two other team leaders refused, the others did. I was fired from a job I really loved but felt there was a principal at stake. I wasn't fired for long, but it changed my life.

The next winter I spent a lot of time alone by choice. I started, thanks to Ram Dass and *Be Here Now*, studying Eastern Philosophy and paying more attention to Native American spiritual practices. I kept expanding my horizons and found myself opening up to new ways of being. I began to study yoga. In that pursuit, I was exposed to an even broader range of religious and spiritual expression.

I had been active to some extent in the anti-war movement and was awakened by the other movements that were a part of my coming of age in the mid to late 60s and into the 70s. Some friends and I purchased an 80-acre farm down river about sixty miles from the town where I grew up in. There was insane urban development going on everywhere and of course I'd seen a lot of ripping and raping of Mother Earth in my travels as a fire fighter. We had originally planned to "drop out", but soon found that if we wanted to

protect the land we had just purchased from the impact of the developer, we had to stand up and fight for it.

It was during a hearing before the local land use planning board that people saying the words “sub-divide, sub-divide, sub-divide, over and over” drove me crazy. I jumped up and left the meeting in tears. On the way home about thirty miles, I cried and tried to put a name to what it was I was feeling. I called it my “Indian Feeling”, my connection to Earth.

During this same period of time, I became more connected with Native American elders and spiritual leaders. The first was via a friend acquainted with Hopi Elder Thomas Banyaca. Thomas had given my friend some blue corn seed, which he passed along to us. We planted it and after the harvest, our friend was going to visit Thomas. He took five ears of the blue corn in husks.

When they were given to Thomas, the corn was husked and all five ears of corn were what is called Mother Corn, all the kernels are full, with four at the top representing the four directions. I found that story fascinating and it made me begin to look at the connection the Native Americans felt with Nature. You didn't find that in Christian dogma, though saints like Francis of Assisi, one of my patron saints, certainly felt a deep connection.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

After the experience with the blue corn, on the farm we took gardening to a new level, much more connected to soil and seeds. The spiritual relationship to seeds, soil, water, and sunlight has continued to grow over the years. I have a particularly special relationship with the planting and harvesting of garlic, a keener connection to cycles.

I was and have been involved in many social and environmental issues. While certainly there were religious people involved in those issues and in those actions, there seemed such major dis-connect with what particularly Christian denominations were doing and saying about these issues. There were good people of all faiths and no faiths connected with these issues

As part of my expanding horizons, I attended the World Symposium on Humanity in Vancouver, British Columbia. An incredible range of spiritual leaders speaking to some core that went beyond dogma, to something more universal. We heard the Hopi Prophecy, danced with Sufi Pir Vilayat Khan, were told the story of The Farm in Tennessee by Stephen and Ina Mae Gaskin, listened to Swami Kriyananda, one of Paramahansa Yogananda's disciples and were mesmerized by the energy of Buckminster Fuller.

Rolling Thunder, one of the speakers, challenged us to not just talk, but to take action and led many of us to a demonstration at the Ministry of Justice demanding that Leonard Peltier not be extradited to the United States, where we knew he would not get a fair trial. So much for dropping out, if I was to make a difference it was going to take action as well as words. That action took me numerous times to the Nevada Test Site.

It is interesting that several of my most intense spiritual experiences as an activist took place on Good Friday doing the Stations of the Cross on the road to Mercury at the Nevada Test Site. It was led by an amazing Franciscan priest. It seemed to have nothing to do with Catholicism and everything to do with Spiritual Connection to the Earth. Drumming up the Sun during demonstrations at the Test Site with Western Shoshone elder Corbin Harney was equally spiritually profound.

Corbin took me further down the path. We were both witnesses at a trial in federal court in Las Vegas for our friend and fellow activist, Rick Springer. As witnesses, we couldn't be in the courtroom until it was our turn to testify, so Corbin and I were out in the hall, sitting a little way from each other on a long bench. Corbin said, "I heard the water speak." I turned to look at him. He went on, "Anyone can hear the water speak if they will just listen." That was for me

a very deep and fundamental lesson. We are constantly being spoken to by the Great Mystery. When we listen, there are some great lessons to be learned. When I hear, but don't listen, I usually pay a price.

What I really learned not only from Corbin, but from a great many other teachers and experiences, was that I didn't need a middleman to connect to the Great Mystery, the Great One Mind, it has many names including God, Great Spirit. There is not just one way.

I was jailed once for contempt of court dealing with an action in Idaho in protest to the shipment of nuclear waste into the state. I was held in semi-isolation in a low-level felon cell block. That was supposed to be an incentive for me to conform to the wishes of the court, but I found it an incredible place for spiritual growth. I called it the Jailhouse Monastery for Outlaw Monks.

I've worn many hats, done quite a variety of work including firefighting, disaster management, an instructor in a wilderness survival school, a ranch lands manager. In those settings, I learned a great deal of respect for Nature and the power of Nature. It all speaks to the connection of all things, persons, all places, all species, and all tribes.

Somewhere along the way I was taught that the word Spirit in some cultures was the same as the word Breath. We

breathe the same air; thus, we share the same spirit. Religions tend to separate, to divide, which to me is the antithesis of Spirituality.

My mother shortly before she died said to me, "William, I would just like to thank you, you took me to places I would never have gone on my own." I answered her, "Hey you are the one that told me to expand my horizons, and I was just following your instructions."

CHAPTER 7

Openings

Gerald Grow

Music: The Opening

For fifteen years, one of my greatest teachers was a clarinet.

Before beginning to practice — and I sometimes practiced hours a day — I usually warmed up by playing “long tones” — a single note held steadily in order to get the breath working with the instrument, but more, to feel your way into that place where you can make music.

During those warmups, I closed my eyes and imagined that I was facing a roughly textured, dark, floor-to-ceiling wall. As I played the long tones, I imagined running my hands

slowly, lightly over the wall, looking for a pinhole, a hidden opening too tiny to see.

When I found the tone that led me to the pinhole, I touched it gently, it opened a finger's width, a hand's breadth, and then I imagined spreading the wall wide and stepped through into another dimension — a world unlike the one I lived in: A world of music.

Then I could begin practice.

On the rare occasions that I played as a soloist, I would feel my way, while playing to a similar opening — a kind of tunnel like a quantum wormhole.

When I found the tunnel, it connected me to the emotions of every person in the audience. What they felt, I felt. Every change in me went into the music, through the wormhole, straight into them, as if the music came to the audience from inside them and took them by surprise.

If I felt someone objecting or drifting away, I would find them (all this time with my eyes closed), play to them, and bring them back into the music we all shared.

When I played in the college orchestra, I learned to listen to the sound coming back from the auditorium, rather than the sounds around me. I blended my part so that it

disappeared, dissolved, so that I was there and not there. I was myself; I was not myself: I was the music. The music was everything.

Dying Again

The first time I died, I was an infant, so I remember only what my mother told me about it, years later. (I survived.)

The second time I died — or at least stepped past the edge of life — came after a summer visit to Mexico as a college sophomore. A month or two after returning, I got an abrupt fever with chills and violent shakes. It passed, and I went through the next day, till, about 12 hours later, it came back just as suddenly, like falling into burning ice water.

I dragged myself to the clinic, but the fever had passed, and they could find nothing wrong. With some difficulty, I persuaded the skeptical staff to keep me overnight for observation.

That night the fever spiked to more than 106°, and the clinic went into emergency mode, swarming around with ice and alcohol rubs to bring down the fever. I never felt anything so hot or so cold.

The next day I had two more high fevers, but still no one could diagnose what it was. Experts came and went. They did not know what to do.

The fever began to burn away everything. I was in no pain, and, between the racking seizure of fevers, I felt clarity and a simple peace.

That evening, as the fever arrived again on schedule, a nurse sounded the alarm, and, one by one, nurses and doctors rushed into the room to try to bring the fever down.

As each person burst through the door, I watched them with a childlike sense of detachment. I saw how kind they were, how very sweet, how they were such good and decent human beings, and, more remarkable, I saw that they were beautiful: They actually glowed. They were surrounded by a kind of light that must have always been there, only now I could see it.

By the way each person responded, I guessed that I must be close to dying. As they rushed into the room, full of purpose and urgency, each one glanced up, saw me looking at them, and stopped in their tracks. They looked back at me with something like awe — as if they were in the presence of something sacred and terrifying that urgently

required tending, but with reverence, without hurry, and without fuss.

They never did find what the problem was. But the fever passed, and I lived.

And hide as they might behind their ideas of themselves, I saw these doctors and nurses, every one of them. I saw those beautiful people, right into their beautiful souls. Seeing them showed me that most people go through life as creatures of clumsily concealed radiance.

But the light is there. In them.

I know it. I saw.

Open Without Boundaries

I lived in San Francisco and Berkeley for a decade starting in 1968. It was a turbulent, vital period. Every kind of problem found its way there, and every kind of solution. So many people passed through giving lectures and workshops that I developed the hobby of collecting worldviews.

I once counted three dozen different kinds of religious organizations I had visited. Every block downtown had a different kind of therapist. There was a metaphysical bookstore. You didn't even have to go anywhere to find a

variety of viewpoints: Just stand on a street corner, and they would come to you — Adventists, Hari Krishnas, young Marxists, astrologers, benign followers of Ram Dass, recruiters for Rajneesh, the Taoists with tai chi, austere cheerful Zen practitioners, chatty Tibetan Buddhists, Christian Science practitioners, encounter group leaders, holistic breath workers, myofascial masseuses, every kind of yogi, Sufi mystics, Amazonian healers, Native American shamans — you name it. I listened to them all, visited many, took workshops with some, went off on a weekend with a few. One after another sought to collect me; I added their worldviews to my collection.

I took classes at the Berkeley Psychic Center to find out whether an ordinary person could be trained to be a psychic. (The likely answer is yes, but it's about as difficult as becoming a concert violinist.) I took a course in acupuncture when it was barely known, to learn the Chinese five elements theory of change. I went for a weekend on ortho-bionomy (don't ask), another on filming living nerve cells that changed how I visualize the human body. While so much of the world was caught up in the student riots that swept the world, I joined a holistic health center. My gift the next New Year's was a relaxation tape that I narrated.

Open to the Sufferings of the World

I found a therapist who understood why, after honing cognitive skills to the level of a PhD, I would seek help in overcoming the advantages I had suffered, help getting out of my head, someone who would not laugh when I announced in awkward amazement one day that I had discovered my abdomen.

It was while learning to and unsee and unlearn that I went through a period when I felt that I had no skin. It came on slowly, a byproduct of meditations, workshops, therapy, solitary hikes, and exercises to get past over-analyzing everything and dissolve an ego I barely had in the first place.

For days, I could hardly go outside. Walking down the street put me in acute distress because every person's pain was now my pain. Every person's struggle, suffering, worry, slid inside me like a sharpened blade, and stayed there. I didn't just see where they suffered, I felt it inside me. If someone had a pain in the lower back, I felt a pain in the lower back. When someone limped, I limped out of organic sympathy. Someone's tight shoulder muscle was as contagious to me as a cold. I could not quite read people's thoughts, but I could feel what those thoughts did to them. If I heard someone's voice, I could read their personality,

hear how worried they were. I was incapable of shutting out anything — it all came straight into me. After walking a few blocks in this flayed state, I had to go home. It hurts just to breathe.

One night soon after, I had a waking vision of how much suffering there is, everywhere, person by person throughout the world. There, as if beside me in the room, millions of people hungered for food or safety, suffered from a lack of water, warmth, a shelter from war, or a Gucci bag, lost their life savings, won a lottery without winning joy, grieved for the death of a loved one, dented a new car or found that they had pancreatic cancer, crumbled slowly from age, or kept imagining that somewhere there was something better, and they were not there. I hurt for every one of them.

I reeled for days from this vision, but I no longer felt pierced by the sufferings of people on the street. They now seemed to be one part of a vast suffering multitude toward whom I felt not just raw, but tender.

One night soon, I slept deeply again, and, when I woke in the darkness, it was as if the same vision played out before me, except this time it showed a different face. It was as if a guitar string plucked, and with each vibration came the delighted laughter of a child, resonating through the night.

Another string, and everywhere a mother smiled at an infant. Instruments struck up, and everywhere people were singing. Millions of people all over the world, for no reason, shook bells and strummed instruments and danced for joy. A cheerful man hummed while he worked for the joy of doing something well, and his song echoed through millions of men through eons of time. Music rose with the sunrise, played crops into ripening, soothed birds in their nests, shined light through the leaves. And, to the sweet, sad, loving, inexhaustible riffs of a Dixieland clarinet, I heard how many couples — human, animal, insect, plant — all over the world, that very instant, were just now making love and making life. Everyone and everything pulsed with the energy of life throbbing and throbbing and throbbing through them.

As the almost unbearable vitality of the world poured through me, I lay alone, shaking uncontrollably with tears and laughter, as the two sides of the vision rose and spiraled into one vast symphony of dying and being born, suffering and joy, pain and pleasure, darkness and light, cruelty and kindness, hatred and love, the vast lonely togetherness of shared isolation and unending connection in the whirling fragments of the human whole.

It was like being torn to pieces, then put back together again, by the music of life.

I don't think anyone dwells for long in such a state. Over time, this vision settled into the quieter hum of ordinary life — nothing special. Nothing special at all. It's almost embarrassing to mention such nocturnal music now, when everyone is surrounded by the amazing beauty and mystery and challenge of everyday life.

This was the 1970s, so naturally someone will think I was on drugs. But I wasn't. My sense of self was so permeable, my boundaries so thin, that, in an age dedicated to dissolving the ego, I yearned to have one. While others talked about thinking "outside the box," I wandered around wondering where that box was and thinking how comforting it might be to climb inside it.

Along the way, I heard this Zen story that I like:

An adept rushed to the master one-day bursting with excitement. He exclaimed, "Master, I have broken through! I can read people's thoughts, foresee the future, heal the sick, and move objects at a distance!"

The master listened patiently, then replied, "Do not let these things worry you, my son. Just keep meditating, and they will go away."

A Church Open to Uncertainty

Sometimes I miss church. I miss that community of sharing where we honor one another as flawed and wonderful beings stumbling through confusion on the way to mystery but singing hymns as we do. I gave myself to church as a child, but when the hormones of questioning rose up in adolescence, I began to think that the literal message of the faith wasn't true. But as I drifted away from the church, I kept thinking that the Bible and religious doctrine were, nevertheless, a way of talking about something real. Afterward, I kept finding that reality in places like nature and the music of Bach.

It could be good to have a religious home that honors searching more than it demands belief. Such a church would have a place for those who need certainty because it frees them to think of other things besides religion. And it would have a place for those of us who are as helpless as nails near the magnet of a mystery.

As you can see, the spiritual experiences of my adult life took place outside the church, outside of Christianity, outside of any religion. No doubt there are wise people who understand everything that happened to me, but I did not; I made it up as I went along. And still do.

I have not written about these experiences before, and most of them I have not mentioned to anyone. Sometimes I wonder if the next liberation might be to lift the taboo around mystical experience.

I have thought that, if someone moved into the neighborhood who knew the answers to every question that ever haunted me, I would not take the trouble to walk next door to hear those answers. It is too important to me to live the questions, to live in a state of wonder.

Even if the answers I cobble together are things everybody already knows (and they usually are), things some saint or philosopher wrote down a thousand years ago — or a saying someone sells on a greeting card — if I blunder upon answers myself, they become my answers, and I can believe in them, even when they are wrong — and they usually are.

CHAPTER 8

My Religion

Laura Bauer McConatha

I admit that I've had a love/hate relationship with organized religion through the years. As a child, I obediently attended Sunday School and church whenever my parents took us. I was raised Lutheran, but there was not a Lutheran Church where we lived, so we often went to the Methodist church right across the street from our house. I loved learning the stories of the Bible and singing songs like "Jesus Loves Me" and my favorite, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world!" Stories of love and forgiveness are what I remember from childhood.

I fell away from church during college, and in the dozen or so years afterwards, I attended many different churches with friends. Some of the churches I visited were so blatantly money-oriented that I was appalled. I heard a lot of judgmental and fiery sermons, some given by ministers who later were fired for having affairs with married parishioners or for embezzling money. A lot of mixed messages, to be sure.

I was in my 30's before I met my first husband. He, his 5 brothers and their families, and his mother all attended the Lutheran Church, having their own pew at the front where they'd sat for years. It didn't actually have their name on it, but there was no mistaking that it had been permanently claimed. I was happy to become involved in my church of origin and became a 2nd grade Sunday School teacher and later, Youth Minister there. Soon after marrying, my husband's 4 children, from 2 ex-wives, came to live with us and I became a full-time mom to 2 preschoolers and 2 preteens.

I had a stressful full-time job conducting child abuse investigations and was also back in school working on a Master's degree. Believing in total honesty with my new husband, I told him about my past addiction issues during the 1980's. I realized over the course of the next few years that I had married an alcoholic when he became abusive

and began disappearing for days at a time. I stayed because of the children, and only when I had put safeguards into place for them as best I could, did I successfully extricate myself.

The very next week after leaving him, I went to church and was shocked to see that my husband had another woman sitting with him and the children in the family pew. We were still married, but no one said a word. The children waved at me, sitting alone on a back pew, and were slapped for doing so. Shortly after that, my husband and his mother launched a hateful smear campaign against me in an attempt to get me to come back to the marriage. His mother told me that he'd only married me to have a mother for his children, and I had to come back and raise them for him. I did not.

Then came the surprise visit to my new apartment by the church deacon I admired most. He shamed me by saying that someone who had a previous drug problem, despite being clean for over a decade, simply could not be trusted with the youth of the church. I was handed a terse letter relieving me of my Sunday School and Youth Minister duties. I was told not to talk to any of the teens I'd been working with for the past few years. No one stood up for me or reached out to help. I felt utterly abandoned by my

church family and wouldn't see the inside of a church again for years.

After much soul-searching and personal reflection, I began a new career in a new town, helping those who care for others at the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving (RCI). I soaked up the research and helped launch new programming with no notion that what I was learning professionally would soon become important personally when my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. I became one of the millions to slowly watch a loved one lose their mind and memories, an inch at a time.

I remarried after meeting a much younger man who swept me off my feet. It would take a few years before I would realize that my first husband had been a saint compared to my second one. Moving me away from my friends to a wretch of a small town where I knew no one was simply part 1 of his carefully crafted plan. The insidious way that he began gaslighting me was so far out of the realm of what I ever thought would happen to me that I began thinking I was going insane. As psychological abuse morphed into physical abuse, I began drinking heavily and put on 50 pounds. I continued to put on a happy face at work. My life was on the verge of collapse, feeling as if I were being assaulted on all fronts.

One night after my husband had passed out, I switched on the tv and saw a young boy in a wheelchair on *Larry King Live*, talking about angels. His face was serene, and I immediately felt that I was listening to an ancient philosopher who was in this child's body. Over the next several months, I saw Mattie Stepanek many times on *Good Morning America* and *Oprah*. I learned that he and his 3 siblings, a sister and 2 brothers, all had a rare form of muscular dystrophy. His mother Jeni had given birth to all 4 before learning that she was a carrier. Shortly afterwards, she also became wheelchair-bound when stricken with the adult version of the same disease. I happened to be watching the morning that Chris Cuomo introduced Mattie to his hero, President Jimmy Carter. Mattie looked as if he would jump out of his wheelchair with joy. I bought Mattie's books of poetry and read them all, as well as anything else I could find online about this child. I gave his books to everyone in my family, and they all loved Mattie and his messages of hope and peace as much as I did.

Knowing his love for the Carters, when RCI began planning for an Intergenerational Caregiving Expert Panel, I asked my boss if I might ask Mattie to co-host it with Mrs. Carter. I felt compelled to meet this child, and this was my opportunity! She said that if I could locate him, I could invite him. I'll never forget the day I found him, and his mother Jeni put him on the phone. He eagerly accepted the

invitation and asked if I would like for him to provide me with a quote that would capture the work of the panel.

I was delighted when he called me back 15 minutes later with this: “If all generations of people freely and abundantly give care to others and to our world, we will have an eternal source of love and hope that fulfills the needs of all ages...for all future.” What profound insight, from a terminally ill child.

Meeting Mattie and his mother Jeni in person at the panel meeting was life changing. Mattie gave an amazing talk, and it was clear that he was living each moment he had left with dignity and purpose. Neither he nor Jeni showed an ounce of self-pity for their lives. I drew much-needed strength and courage from them both.

A couple of years later, I received an email at work from a nurse at the Indian Hospital in Window Rock, Arizona, the Navajo Nation capital. She was putting together a cancer conference and needed someone to come talk about the needs of those caring for a loved one with cancer. Due to nuclear testing done on the reservation decades earlier, the incidence of cancer on the reservation was astronomical compared to the rest of the United States.

Many children were being diagnosed, and it was difficult for poor families to travel several hours to take them to

their life-saving treatments. I agreed to go, and took my sister Fran, a registered nurse, with me. What we witnessed there had a powerful impact. In the middle of this vast and beautiful landscape, people were living in abject poverty, with run-down dwellings miles and miles apart. Many lacked indoor plumbing and electricity.

Cows, horses, and sheep roamed the streets. Despite all the challenges, the Native Americans we met were not self-pitying or hopeless. I felt an energy in my body and soul that I'd never felt before, and soon the nurse who'd invited me to speak became a sister to me, and her family became my family.

Meanwhile, my marriage was crumbling, and I was emotionally and physically depleted. The highlights of my day were the one-hour work commute each morning and evening, when I could fantasize about a future life where I might be safe and happy. I isolated myself in an attempt to keep anyone from knowing just how bad things really were. My imminent demise seemed practically assured as my husband began putting parts 2, 3 and 4 of his plan in motion, which appeared to include my "accidental" death and his getting my life insurance money.

A series of seemingly random events enabled me to escape once again. People I had never met before appeared out of

nowhere, and each offered gifts that were integral to my survival. I never once questioned these things, but humbly accepted that a force outside of my control was working to keep me safe. These incidents were supernatural and served as a complete validation of the existence of a higher power.

Unconditional love, non-judgmental attitudes, compassion, and kindness were right there, all I had to do was open my eyes and see it. And see it I did! I didn't just let the door shut on my previous life, I let it slam. I was not looking for love again after 2 failed marriages, but by being open to living a full and happy life, I met a man who was as caring and compassionate as I, and who had suffered as I had from loving someone incapable of returning that love. We marveled at how happy life can be when it is shared with someone who likes, loves, respects and values you as a person.

Just as I was adjusting to this new-found happiness, information surfaced related to my 1980's drug abuse, and the old guilt and shame around my past reared their ugly heads again. I felt myself starting to slip emotionally, and I was afraid. My friend Mechelle from the Navajo Nation had begun hosting an annual Gathering of Healers. She had invited me to come several times before, and when she again reached out, I decided to travel there alone, with a

heavy heart but an open mind. I was again enraptured by the beauty and energy of the land and the people. I met healers from around the world; some traditional healers such as nurses; others were energy workers, lightworkers, stargazers, Reiki practitioners, drummers, and medicine men. Each of them emitted a radiance and aura that was just beautiful to behold. I soaked it all in, feeling a spiritual connectivity with people who I'd only just met. I returned home whole again, reenergized, and positive about my life.

I have met many other teachers these past few years, from unexpected places. Soon after I began working on a caregiving project with Margaret, a colleague from another university, she asked me to attend the Building Creative Communities Conference in Colquitt, Georgia. The agenda looked interesting, but I didn't see how it intersected with my life in the least, so I declined. In 2018, I relented and again, just by saying "yes", I had another life-changing experience. I told my story publicly for the first time and was able to release its hold on me completely. The atmosphere was so non-judgmental and healing, that I brought two friends with me in 2019. They both felt comfortable enough to step outside of their comfort zones and tell their own stories as well.

I have found peace and spiritual connectivity not within the walls of a church, but by being open to new experiences

and meeting new people that were not in my immediate sphere of influence. I believe these people are spiritual guides (angels) who have been working behind the scenes for years to help bring me to peace. I believe that each of us has a purpose, and that we are called on by our Creator to improve the lives of others through our words and actions.

I did find my way back to a church too, one just a few steps from my home. I'm not sure what initially drew me there, but after 20 years outside of the church, I felt welcomed the first time I ambled in. Most importantly to me, I have never been pressured to become an Episcopalian or to join the church. I go sporadically, but when I do, I always hear a message that seems to be crafted personally for me; one that addresses whatever is going on at that moment in my life. I have made extraordinary connections there and enjoy the love and fellowship offered me.

Professional and personal doors have opened that I could never have imagined just a few short years ago. After retiring from a very rewarding 20-year career with the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving, I was humbled and honored to be asked by Jeni Stepanek to serve as Executive Director of the Mattie J.T. Stepanek Foundation. After 10 glorious years together, I married my best friend and soulmate Barry on November 20, 2021, and retired from Mattie's Foundation in April of 2022 so we can spend

the remainder of our lives together, cultivating kindness and creating precious memories. I am filled with gratitude every day for having volunteer opportunities that allow me to continue to meet and work with people of all backgrounds and abilities, in rural southwest Georgia and across the globe. In the words of another of my spiritual guides, Rob, I am dreaming my life story. I see each day as an opportunity to learn, to connect, to offer solace to those in need, and to become a better version of myself.

I'll end by sharing a Frederick Buechner quote that sums up my ideas around religion vs. spirituality. "Needless to say, church isn't the only place where the holy happens. Sacramental moments can occur at any moment, at any place, and to anybody: Watching something get born; Making love; A walk on the beach; Somebody coming to see you when you're sick; A meal with people you love; Looking into a stranger's eyes and finding out they are not a stranger. If we weren't blind as bats, we might see that life itself is sacramental."

CHAPTER 9

ON SPIRITUALITY

John West

I realized that in one way or another I've been writing about spirituality, about a relationship with God, and about religion, especially Christianity, for many of my 67 years, almost as long as I have been thinking about these subjects. My attendance at a Christian church began when I was christened in one, following that, off to Sunday School, and then, eventually attending church service. I remember Saturdays when my sisters and I would go to our church to watch movies with other children who we would see the next day in Sunday School.

This is my definition of church — the gathering of like-minded people holding important and specific views about life, their place within it, and an expectation of what

follows after the body dies. Another way to put this is that a church is a certain type of community.

My first crisis of faith came about when I was 9, and the why of it would repeat several times over the course of my life, forcing me to confront what I later considered a paradox.

When I was 9, my father died from a heart attack at 39, and that most troubling of questions came to me as I lay in bed frightened about what the future held. Why had this happened? What had I done? Why were we being punished? In other words, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

I certainly thought of myself and my family as good people. And I was confused when well-meaning people told me it all was part of God’s plan, and that my father’s death was not something we could figure out, we needed to accept it, as part of that plan. Others hinted that there must have been something wrong, else why would God take my father away, that we were all being punished for some reason?

For several baffling years after his death, I didn’t attend Sunday School or participate in a church community. Four years after my father’s death, after my mother had struggled to provide enough income, we, my mother and sisters and I, moved from Crawford Park, a suburb on the

island of Montreal in Canada to St. Petersburg, Florida, where my maternal grandparents had retired. The dislocation was not only loss of place, but loss of friends, and after my mother remarried a man my grandparents and her family deemed unworthy, we were expelled from that larger family.

Subsequently, after a year of a failing business, we moved where my stepfather had the promise of a job driving a truck — Colquitt, Georgia. Throughout all these moves, that same question returned to me, why was this happening, what had we done, why was God punishing me and my family?

When I went off to college, the Methodist-affiliated liberal arts college I attended for four years from 1969 to 1973 had two introductory courses available to me which examined the Bible. One covered the Old Testament and the other, the New Testament. But these weren't courses of Bible study, as is taught in most Protestant churches I've observed. Both courses concerned the critical studies of the texts and of the forms of criticism developed in examining the texts over the last two hundred years. Both classes were taught by ordained ministers who also were PhDs. Men of faith whose faith was not shaken by academic study.

But I still found no answer to that haunting question of why. After graduation, and several years after I returned to Colquitt, the next blow fell. My nephew, barely two years old, died from anaphylactic shock from a penicillin injection. Why would such an innocent be taken? The chaos that ensued within my family was overwhelming. My sister punished herself for two years.

Not long after, during an operation, my mother was found to have cancer. The surgeon did what surgeons do and cut away as much as he could. Radiation and chemo, loss of hair, of appetite, then, loss of job (terminated because her employer thought she'd do better with unemployment benefits!), and finally, after five years, her loss of life. Why? Why?

The platitudes I'd heard before of a greater plan, a better reward, and also, the darker comments — that my mother must have done something wrong, that my sister must have done something wrong, something to provoke God! Though we were not members, the Methodist Church in Colquitt permitted us to hold a memorial service for my mother. It was a great kindness and one that made me aware again of the comfort and support a church community can provide.

Prior to my mother's struggle with cancer, I had moved to Athens, Georgia, where I found work in the university library and subsequently met my wife to be. After my mother's death, we moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and then to Texas, where with a master's in library science, I went to work at a small church affiliated (Presbyterian) liberal arts college. All during that time, and after we had our daughter and were in our home, not a rental property, and after my wife and I participated in founding a Unitarian Universalist church, I still had that haunting question, why, why do bad things happen to good people? And during all of that time, I read books about religion and faith.

Finally, I found an answer and it informs my view to this day. It is this: God does not intervene in our lives, cannot intervene for God is not separate from us, God is everything, everything. There is no supernatural, there is nothing which intervenes in our lives. The sky, the air, me, you, the computer I am typing this on, the bullet and the wound made by the bullet.

I believe that there is no sin, not original sin, nor anything subsequent. There is no Satan, Lucifer, or Devil. There is no opposition to God, only God. God is not good, nor evil. There is evil in the world and the evil comes as the result of our actions, the actions of human beings. Genocide is the

clearest example of the evil we inflict upon one another. We create an “us and them”, we eventually de-humanize “them” and assign blame or react from fear and so decide we must exterminate “them”. One can point to the Holocaust, but there are so many other examples, where fear and its derivative, anger, are harnessed together and is joined with envy, and jealousy to produce cruelty.

Religion, a set of rules that say who is to be listened to, who we must follow, and what we are to believe, can be, has been perverted for purposes of control — the Inquisition is only one example.

But religion can create a closed system which doesn't permit questioning. Questioning leads to heterodoxy, or in the minds of the orthodox, heresy, and heretics are to be expelled or ex-communicated. It is another paradox that those who wish to separate themselves from others holding different views have so little faith in the God they profess to believe in but are afraid that other views will tempt themselves and others away from what they profess.

A good friend of mine brings up the miracles Jesus performed and are reported in the New Testament as reasons to believe that Jesus must be the son of God, and also part of God, as is the Holy Ghost, in Trinitarian formulation. But I believe that miracles are happening

everywhere, all the time. A baby's birth, flowers opening after a hard winter, our ceaseless curiosity, and our ability to learn. That our hearts and minds can be changed. That worms aerate the soil, that birds eat the worms, and that we hear those birds sing.

Yes, science may show us how the world functions, but it is as miraculous to me that I have evolved to hear birds singing through natural processes, as it seems to be for others to wish for an intelligent designer.

Evil is what we humans do separately and collectively when we harm our own species, or any other species.

Shooting an elephant to have a trophy, polluting the oceans because we dump our trash in it, becoming rich from selling cigarettes all the while knowing their harm, denying that we are changing our climate, killing all these miracles around us, that is evil. Not some supernatural force and call it Satan. The grim reality though is that should we exterminate ourselves and all that is on this planet, nothing will be lost, though it will be transformed to something else, something we may not have understood, if we were alive to comprehend it.

All the energy will transform to matter, the matter to energy, nothing will be lost, God will still exist. As for the eternal place we've termed Heaven, where all who

professed acceptance to a religion's rules will exist, in some "form" with a consciousness that distinguishes one "being" from another. Where one will "see" one's deceased parents, grandparents, cousins, children, etc. Because no one knows, and the metaphors are based on what we know, perhaps we transform, though we are still and always will be part of God. How is consciousness carried forward? How would my 39-year-old father relate to his 58-year-old wife and how would they relate to my 2-year-old nephew? To me there are too many convolutions. Far simpler that we are part of God, as a drop is to the ocean.

Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people and good things to happen to bad people — because there is no supernatural being intervening, because God is all, because things happen that aren't good or bad, but may be awe-inspiring or awful, like volcanoes and hurricanes, like mountains with the sun shining on their peaks.

We have many examples of how to live an ethical life, a life of kindness, and one such example was expressed by Jesus. When asked by the religious authorities of his day what was the great commandment, Jesus said to love God with all one's heart and all one's might and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The first is true spirituality, encompassing, as it does, in my humble opinion, everything, while the second part teaches us how to live life in such a miraculous world.

This is what I believe. It answers that why question and provides me a path to follow. I have found that what I believe has a name, though it has taken me years to find it, naturalism, and more particularly, religious naturalism.

Jesus doesn't claim to be supernatural. Paul, the great proselytizer, never mentioned the resurrection, which came later with the writings attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, men who were apostles, but the writers were not the apostles, but people who came later. Scholarship dates the earliest of these to thirty or so years after Jesus' death, and that none have the same story.

But these texts have been mixed together, as one might make a fruitcake, filled with differing bits, but baked up and served to all. Theology and literature get mixed together, too, and so we have Milton's Paradise Lost, with Lucifer as a powerful figure, and Lucifer is linked up with Satan, though the word Satan just means "other". Hebrew histories, wisdom stories, chastisements, and more are either added or used as some kind of frosting to the Christian "narrative". The great hereafter, the streets of gold, the imperishable "life" are added bits. But only if you accept it all. And of course, we are told that the Bible is not to be picked apart. The Bible is inerrant. And so, we are to believe that no one ever made a mistake in transcription or translation that wasn't reconciled by God.

Science tells us our world is millions of years old, but there are those who believe it can't be, because that's not what their Bible tells them. Maybe six thousand years.

Tolstoy wrote an edited version of the Gospels removing all supernatural elements. Thomas Jefferson had done the same. There is truth and there is belief. When you demand that your belief be factually true, for instance, that the world is only 6000 years old when by various measures it is much, much older, other problems surface.

Something may be true and believed; something may be false and believed (for instance, that the world is flat). Belief doesn't require truth; truth does require belief. Perhaps, if we could transfer our focus from a transactional relationship with a supernatural being, one of being rewarded for good behavior, to that of a caring relationship with other humans, i.e., the Golden Rule, life would be better, all lives would be better.

During the month or so that my friend Joe Sloan struggled with death, this time to succumb, too weakened to throw off that crushing weight, we exchanged text messages. Once I learned how sick he was, I went to visit him in Colquitt. I spent several hours with him over a couple of days. He had limited mobility and required supplemental oxygen to help his tired lungs.

Speaking was difficult for him. Here was the man who had befriended me when we were both high school students. His family was prominent in the community, while I was a stranger from a strange land. Throughout our lives, we would get in touch and were able to see one another at the Florida panhandle beach where my family and I vacationed in the summer. He was a friend whose kindness I will always remember.

When I returned from that last visit, I started sending him a text each morning, in the form of a haiku. Most times, he acknowledged what I'd written to him with a thanks, or a good morning. But one, the one that follows below was different. Joe and I talked about our different views of faith, God, and religion. We agreed to disagree. What follows, though in few words, is his testament of faith. He didn't need many words. It is profound.

Haiku 16

Moon hidden behind clouds

is still there

unseen

not forgotten

Joe's reply:

That is the basis of my faith.

Good morning.

His statement of faith, as well as some other texts are incorporated into the poem below, a version of which was published in the Miller County Liberal, February 2015. Joe's faith deepened until he and his faith were not two things, but one.

What It Was

a song of Arthur Joe Sloan

I.

In winter born and so there dwelt

where cold and hope joined as breath.

Soon spring began the season's melt

from whispers moist with life and death.

When summer's sun burns and bakes

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

little's left but the thirst for rains.

*Yet come the fall, what it was aches,
not with loss, but from what remains.*

*As evening fades away to night,
the stars and moon lift up our sight.*

*Soon today overtakes tomorrow,
as is joy, newborn from sorrow.*

*Obscured by clouds, is there a moon?
With faith a blind man knows when it's noon.*

II.

*In winter died, yet never dies,
for hope and cold, their promise kept.
Then soon the spring will slowly rise
blessed by prayers of tears and sweat.*

*When summer's sun bakes and burns,
and nothing's left to us but pain.*

*So comes the fall, what it was yearns
for what's lost and with all who remain.*

*Bone-cold fog hides stars from sight,
Tree-shaped cutouts float on veils of light.*

*Silhouettes, a flock, rise from the lake
And bare trees sway; suddenly, daybreak.*

*A green force drives up through a snow
And what it was, reborn, begins anew to grow.*

III.

*In winter now, and for always now,
When hope and cold become as one,
Soon the spring will swear a vow
of warmth and wet, gently, and gently done.*

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

The summer's drought dries crops to dust

All are parched, faint shadows of grain,

But come the fall, what it was, we trust

will ease the loss, for us who remain.

Our dreams recall a deathless flight

then dawn arrives to bring us light.

He died today; he lives tomorrow.

Faith abides to comfort sorrow.

At the end, what it was, is, again.

There's nothing lost, we're all and remain.

Anti — Christ

No more, I say, no more.

Superman like supernatural

Just ain't.

All in all,

JOY SLOAN JINKS

*We are
Part of all.
To play our part
In this part of
a passion play full of passionate com-
passion and earnest
self-loathing
requiring a stand in,
a standup guy
who tried,
like Micah and Amos,
like Jeremiah and Ezekiel,
a prophet
misunderstood,
misquoted,
mistaken and misused by others.*

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

And where has it got us?

*No closer to what we want,
the simplest answer to a simple question,
why do bad things happen to good people?*

*And say it without
blame or shame, or splitting hairs
like splitting atoms.*

*Born of a virgin,
raised the dead,
healed the sick,
died and returned
without the zombie's curse.*

*A lie that ruled nations,
controlled destinies, provided
for beautiful music*

JOY SLOAN JINKS

*and fanatical behavior,
but hardly to the exclusion
of so many other
dogmas, dialectics, and drugs.*

God is all.

*What we call good
Is our good and what we call bad,
may be bad for all,
or bad for we few.*

*Jesus is the Antichrist,
Not monster, not god,
No savior of souls,
For souls don't need saving,
But fulfillment.
Bad things happen*

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

*like good things happen, and
the good and the bad in people
can just as easily be
just who is saying what about whom
and when.*

*Things happen. For every cause,
an effect. And that effect
Predicts a cause to come.*

*The message is treat your neighbor
as you would wish that neighbor
would treat you, and love God
who is all and everything
(and for whom you are a part
with all your heart
and mind)*

JOY SLOAN JINKS

for that marriage of heart

and mind

is soul.

There is a man

called out in pain

“Why have you forsaken me?”

And why would god

say that

unless that part

of god

was not here to save

but be saved

from all who would keep him

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

pinned upon a cross,

a specimen,

useful, because

now there need not be

any more of his talk

of loving each other.

It is so much more easy

to divide and conquer, every day,

in every way

and to control

by fear

of difference

me from you.

An Alternative Beatitudes

Blessed are the humble; blessed, the meek,

Blessed the boastful whenever they speak.

Blessed are those who look before leaping,

Blessed those who bail with a sieve.

Blessed are those safe in bed, sleeping,

Blessed those from mortal danger fled

Blessed are those who unabashedly grieve,

Blessed those whose compassion is dead.

Blessed are those who are foolish,

Blessed those who won't suffer the fools.

Blessed are those so certain they shout.

Blessed those who quietly doubt.

Blessed are those with whom God seems apart,

Blessed be all, for of God, each is a part.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

Cause and Effect

That is the way it is

This is the way we are

The sun falls into the sea,

Drowns, and is reborn the next day.

And in a glorious chariot races

Races to another demise.

When rains don't fall on us

And wheat burns away to dust,

Another innocent's throat is cut

And stains our altar black.

When night lasts forever -

Bite by bite, Moon

JOY SLOAN JINKS

Is eaten by Bear.

Moon returns.

How is it we explain

This is the truth, that lies.

It is what they say,

We believe our gods are right

Who punishes us when we delay.

That is the way it is

This is the way we are.

The Infinite Faces of God

I.

Looking up from Bow River's edge

Above the black spruce, jack pine, tamarack,

*Where snow shod peaks crowded our blue heaven's
ledge,*

Three Sisters — Charity, Hope and Faith — refract

The Sun's brilliance from what Time has etched.

II.

On Mountain View's lake, a rower lost, new to oars,

spies a glimmer towards dark, distant shores,

leans to aft, pulls steady, oars stroke together,

though wake-tossed and beginnings of rough weather.

Left oar only turns right, right only, left,

and back faces forward, an act of faith by one bereft.

III.

Hunched over a grocery cart

Her frame twisted by time -

From waist to shoulders, its horizontal line.

Husband slides a foot forward

Then, the other, in baby step time,

A walker clutched by his broad liver-spotted hands,

eyebrows arched; face carved to querulous marks.

She turns to speak up to him,

who was even a foot taller before her body,

played its penultimate parlor trick.

IV.

Mockingbird chases Squirrel,

Squirrel 's running fast,

Mockingbird swoops,

Squirrel's prone,

desperate one

suspects.

Mockingbird banks, attacks,

Yet Squirrel stops, just far enough

From all that Mockingbird protects, so

Mockingbird, the vigilant, turns away

Towards that slyboots, slouching Cat.

V.

*That face you study in the mirror,
That face you wear down the street,
That face of one for you that's dear, or
That face of one that makes you weep,
That face you promise to cherish, honor,
Or that face beside you, fast asleep -
A few of the infinite faces of God
Each and every day we greet.
That each and every day we meet.
Everything is a Surprise

Everything is a surprise.
We fake ourselves into believing*

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

*Some things that happen
Happen because of a plan
Some ordained path
Through the tricks and turns
Of life which at every
Moment is miraculous,
Surprising, unpredictable
Except, of course, to those,
Who search for order, pray for order
Demand order, impose order.
But life sabotages order,
growing through cracks in the concrete.
And living, the flower.*

*When asked for an answer to the mystery of the
universe, God, and humankind by someone eager to tell
me of the one sure way, I replied*

I don't know,

though,

I live with what works

for me.

What works for you

works

for you

and as I am not you

I'll stick with what works

for me.

Hell Is

Hell is,

Not as imagined,

Neither pit of fire, nor lake of ice,

But a bedsore

You can't reach

On your own.

On your back,

On your bum,

A blister

Left too long and festered,

Gone through to bone.

Hell is

Not a child of regret

JOY SLOAN JINKS

*But a child of neglect,
Unsure, vigilant, anxious,
Prepared for a kick,
Confused by a kiss.*

Hell is

*Not wanting to die
But dying from want.
Not clutching at cause,
Nor grasping for effect,
Not a simple catchphrase,
Nor a quote from a play.*

Hell is

*Being with nothingness,
With no one,
Nor god.*

CHAPTER 10

A GRATEFUL EARTHLING:
MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

(31 March 2019, Swannanoa, North Carolina)

Robertson Work

From the book of essays, Society, Self: Essays on the One Dance (pages 339-343)

I was born a WASP — white, Anglo-Saxon, and protestant. My father had been a Baptist but at marriage joined my mother in the Christian Church, a Protestant denomination in the US in the Reformed tradition with historical ties to the Restoration Movement. We lived in Oklahoma most of my childhood, and I attended Sunday School and worship service including communion every

Sunday. For many years I had perfect attendance in Sunday School and wore little colored enamel medals pinned and dangling from my jacket on my chest. After the ritual of my baptism by immersion, my family told me that my feet stuck up out of the water when the pastor dunked me under.

We passed the communion trays down the aisles, and each ate a tiny hard wafer and drank grape juice from a little glass which we returned empty to its hole in the round metal tray. When I was old enough, I joined in serving the communion trays or the collection plates to the congregation. Our sanctuary had stained glass windows with pictures of Jesus. I listened to many sermons and learned that if I would be a good person and believed that Jesus was my savior, I would go to heaven when I died.

The year I went off to university, my dad sold his accounting business and left for theological seminary along with my mother and younger brother. Dad had felt called to be a pastor after his mother, my grandmother, passed away. Her death was also a crisis for me, the first death in our family. I wept loudly during her service and missed her so much. On campus I often attended the Wesley Foundation (Methodist) for discussion and music in the coffee house.

When I was a junior in college, a group of us students drove to Chicago and attended a weekend seminar at the Ecumenical Institute (EI) on the Theological Revolution of the 20th Century (RS-1). This was my first profound awakening.

In the seminar, we held group conversations, heard lectures, and studied papers by 20th century theologians including Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Richard Niebuhr. We learned that Christian symbols needed to be demythologized to be encountered and understood as life realities not just religious ideas. The universe had no second story. I realized that the verbal symbol “G-O-D” pointed to that mysterious power (“upagainstness”) that drives us into life and cuts us off from life.

I learned that “Christ” was the word of possibility that enables one to live one’s given life. The Word rang out: “All is Good. You are Accepted. The Past is Approved. The Future is Open.” I learned that “Holy Spirit” was the freedom and obedience experienced in responsibility in the midst of that; and that “Church” was the group of social pioneers who lived between the no-longer and the not-yet laying down their lives to create a better world on behalf of all people.

I had a profound experience of being accepted just as I am and realized that I wanted to live my life on behalf of all people. When I returned to my college, I was so charged with energy and happiness that I sensed that I was levitating as I walked across campus. I became a campus activist for women's rights, civil rights, and peace. I wrote poetry and studied the existentialist philosophers and theologians. I felt that I was called to help create a world in which everyone could realize her or his full potential. When I would return home to visit my family, I would sometimes argue with my dad who had become a pastor in a local church. I realized that I did not always agree with his views of Christianity and about life.

After graduating from Oklahoma State University, I attended graduate school at Indiana University and then Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS). I did not want to become a minister but to study the journey of the Ultimate in history. While at CTS, I became a sojourner at the Ecumenical Institute (EI) in the westside African American ghetto. Early every morning we participated in our liturgical service, the Daily Office, followed by collegium (group discussion) and breakfast. At the core of the EI was an ecumenical, secular-religious, experimental family order, the Order Ecumenical (OE.) As Order members, we made three vows: poverty, living on a small stipend; obedience, being assignable anywhere in the

world; and chastity, willing one's life to be about one thing, service on behalf of all.

After marrying my sweetheart from CTS who was also sojourning at EI, we traveled around the world in a one-month Global Odyssey with a group of EI colleagues to experience an intensification of global humanness. Thus, I fell in love with planet Earth and her people. After this we began a twenty-two-year journey of serving the least, the lost, and the last, in Malaysia, South Korea, USA, Jamaica, and Venezuela. During that time, the EI evolved into a secular organization, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA.)

We lived in urban slums and poor rural villages and helped the local people improve their lives and create models that other communities could follow. In Malaysia, I encountered Islam and experienced other ways of being human that were sustaining. In South Korea, we had two sons, one by adoption, one by birth, and were changed by the deep collective wisdom of a Confucian-Buddhist-Christian culture. In Jamaica, I met Rastafarianism, learned to dance reggae, and trekked in the Blue Mountains. In Venezuela, I learned Spanish and encountered a Catholic culture and the vitality of Latin America. Around the world were many deep wells of meaning, symbols, and traditions, but they all seemed to

connect to one vast reservoir of mystery, truth, and love. Being a self-conscious Earthling in a 13.7-billion-year-old universe was mysterious enough.

Over these many years as our staff came from different religious traditions, the ICA developed secular forms of spirituality — Profound Humanness, and the Other World amidst This World — experiences of mystery, consciousness, care, and tranquility.

In between our Jamaican and Venezuelan assignments, I woke up to Buddhist wisdom and meditation through Ken Wilber's book , and in an ICA summer global research assembly that began to change my spiritual orientation. Soon I started to meditate daily and to read Buddhist literature.

When we returned to the US, I worked with UNDP as a global policy adviser in local governance and later taught innovative leadership to graduate students at NYU Wagner. We joined the Episcopal Church (oh, how I loved the mass, processions, incense, and all), participated in Jean Houston's transformative Mystery Schools (filled with sensory, psychological, mythic, and unitive processes), and attended Buddhist retreats in the Zen and Tibetan traditions. I so appreciated that Buddhism was a philosophy and a practice for living rather than a religion.

In one Buddhist retreat in my native Oklahoma, I received the dharma name “Ancient Treasure of the Heart.” I was grateful for the helpful practices of Buddhist precepts, mantras, and sitting meditation. I took vows to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. When I experienced the death of my wife of thirty-five years after a long battle with cancer at only sixty, I was devastated, grieved hard, and did not plan to remarry; but life had other plans, and I fell deeply in love with an amazing woman who was a Zen teacher and writer, and happily did just that.

Two years ago, I published *A Compassionate Civilization* providing vision, actions, leadership methods, and self care practices for creating a sustainable, just, compassionate society that enables each person to realize her/his full potential. In that book, I wrote that ours is the most critical time in human history. We are facing multiple crises of climate chaos and ecosystem degradation, patriarchy and misogyny, systemic poverty and social deprivation, plutocracy and corporatocracy, racism and xenophobia, and perpetual warfare. If we are to survive and thrive, we must pivot to environmental sustainability, gender equality, socioeconomic justice, participatory governance, cultural tolerance, and peace and nonviolence. We must become mindful activists for sustainable development as members of a movement of movements (MOM.) This is our great calling today on planet Earth.

These days to nurture and make manifest my mind and heart, I meditate and say mantras, keep a journal, attend periodic Buddhist retreats, speak at conferences, do some consulting, engage in social and political activism, care for my family, walk in nature, and prepare for the completion of this brief incarnation.

My spiritual journey began in a traditional protestant denomination, evolved into demythologized ecumenical Christianity, to secular spirituality and global profound humanness, to the recovery of the ancient mystery schools, to Episcopalian liturgy, to Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practice, to my unique blend of spirituality of consciousness, mystery, gratitude, compassion, and wisdom.

I am so deeply grateful for life itself and for my life and am in the process of writing my autobiography — *Serving People & Planet* — which I hope to publish later this year for my seventy-fifth birthday. May it serve to inspire and guide others on their journey.

What for you is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of your life? What is your unique path? How are you being guided by love and truth?

May you realize peace, happiness, understanding, and compassion!

CHAPTER 11

Accessing Your Superpower

Audri Scott Williams

People often ask me, how we, the *Trail of Dreams World Peace Walkers*, made it around the world in nearly 4 years, without funding from some source (a grant, a sponsor, etc.). My response is always, *Faith was our currency*.

Today when people ask me, “*How are we going to make it through these perilous times of Earth changes, climate changes, wars, pandemics, racism, sexism, and hatred... or will we make it through?*”

My response is, “*Of course we will!*”

“*How?*” they ask.

I simply say, "*With faith as our currency!*"

Beyond belief, beyond what we think, faith is what we come to know when the mind yields to the heart, a deep surrender to a power greater than ourselves, and yet it resides in our "holy of holies", our hearts, and is available to us always.

When we realize this truth, we remember that the solution to every problem is within us. But seldom will we get there without a journey. Jesus went to the desert. Buddha sat under the Bodhi Tree. Native Americans and many Indigenous cultures did vision quests. All to access a personal revelation of the Spirit within — the awakened potential, the awareness that the greatest good is available to those who seek it.

Faith and love are powerful means for transforming appearances of hatred, anger, disease, lack and limitation into infinite potential, beauty, and Grace. With love as the energy that amplifies the circulation of our faith, we send clear heart penetrating messages of Divine Love filled with infinite possibilities to create a path out of the "darkness and into the light."

On our walks we learned that when we create the opportunity for a revealing truth to work through us, suddenly we begin engaging our imaginations, abilities,

skills, and Divine wisdom in creating pathways to healing the Earth and all living beings — including ourselves.

We discover that when we are ready, transformation happens! Accessing the “revealing truth” does require us to engage in spiritual practices that quiet the chatter and aligns our mind, body, and spirit — One Love!

My favorite spiritual practice is walking. I love to put on my walking shoes, fill my small backpack with water and a protein bar, a small tablet and pen, and of course my cell phone in case of an emergency, and take off. I love this practice so much that I spent nearly 17 years of my life walking for peace. Across the USA twice, around the world with my mother in a wheelchair in the final stages of Alzheimer’s, my partner and 4 other precious souls.

When I am walking the trails, there is a point at which I enter “the zone”. Everything is silent, my mind is still, my breathing slows down and before I realize it, time and distance give way to now. The thing is this, I remember every bird, every cloud, every tree, everything! I feel at one with everything and I know that what was called forth in Spirit is already done. All needs are already provided.

It is done unto me as I believe, and I do believe!

We had the appearance of very little money, but we knew that faith was our currency! With that knowing, we walked for nearly 4 years, on 6 continents, meeting each moment one step at a time. Yielding to the call of a dream, opened the way for our epic journey of four years. Every day was extraordinary — *we experienced no ordinary moment!*

Every moment was extraordinary: Sunrise over the Grand Canyon; Monkeys howling in the jungle in Palenque, Mexico; A herd of elephants in the wild in India; Riding camels across the Sahara to come upon the Sphinx in Egypt; Children who wanted Mama Nat at their birthday parties in Morocco, Grown men carrying Mama Nat in their arms to make sure she was safe and honored; Royal blue starfish on the bottom of the sea off the coast of Fiji... Experiencing love and support — finding beloved communities everywhere — often where we least expected it. *Indeed, no ordinary moment!*

How did we do it? By taking pause to breathe, to listen to that still small voice within, to be in the moment with Divine flow.

Everyone you meet is trying to make peace with historical trauma; personal trauma; fear of the present conditions that makes so many feel powerless. Amid “message overload” from social media and various media outlets

regarding the condition of our world, loving kindness honors the struggle and gives us the opportunity to see our way through the fear and into a field of possibilities for something better. That is a great beginning. Spiritual growth is a process.

Faith is knowing and takes you beyond the chatter and into sacred action, not by your own judgment about what is needed, but by an opening that allows you to hear from your heart, to know, to be. We never walked to tell people what they needed, or to “fix” people or communities. We walked to be available, to hold the intention for loving kindness.

We learned to trust the Divine within and to allow our Faith to inspire us. This we discovered was the real source of our collective superpower! It is what made us come alive, what made us continue — one step at a time.

If we ran out of food, it presented an opportunity for us to be met with loving kindness and be fed. If we were lost, it was an opportunity to be found and cared for. If we were broke, it was an opportunity for someone to give. If we were sick, it presented an opportunity to be healed.

Faith freed us!

My question to you is, “What messages are you tuning into?” Change the channels, if necessary, so you can tune into a match to your frequency! Change may come one step at a time and sometimes in leaps and bounds. I guess it comes down to, “How strong is your currency — your faith? How powerful your love? How willing are you to allow your consciousness, your heart, to guide your genius? We are all geniuses in Divine Mind. Access your superpowers! Remember, loving kindness goes a long way.

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive!” —Howard Thurman

CHAPTER 12

My Life's Path

Karen Hunter Watson

The path I chose for my life's journey is one that has brought me to my knees time and time again. I am very grateful for the challenges I faced, knowing that every challenge was essential to become the spiritual being that I am today.

As a young girl of 12 years old I experienced 2 things that had a profound effect on my life. One of which a child should never have to experience in this lifetime or any other, and that is ...rape. This led me down a path that was filled with pain and heartache.

Trauma has a way of molding itself around an individual in strange ways shaping them into whatever the horrific

experience could unleash. Sometimes it takes years for that person to heal and become more of what Divine Spirit intended for them to become.

Such was it in my case. Many nights I found myself walking the streets of Chicago looking for a way to calm the anger and hurt that was raging inside of me. Neither drugs nor alcohol was the answer.

Many times, I would walk up to a storefront church where I could hear the tambourines, and shouts of Hallelujah, as the songs of praise filled the air, only to be silenced in my heart of hearts and not be able to cross the threshold, wanting to find refuge in the comfort of the sounds but not quite ready to surrender. Though I never really felt I deserved salvation, all I wanted was to stop hurting.

Then one day the pain stopped, and I realized Divine Creator was not concerned with what I was doing, but with who I was becoming. With this understanding, the day came when I could walk into a church and say, "I want to be saved".

Let me share something with you. Salvation was not something I was used to. I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness and they do not teach Salvation. But there was something in me that needed healing and the only way I knew was to ask to get saved.

Some of my fondest memories were of my Aunts taking me to church, unknown to my father who did not want us going into any other church or place of worship that was not a Kingdom Hall. I remember hearing the songs of Zion being sung and I would sit hours just listening to the music that sometimes sounded like angelic beings releasing their love on the saints of God. Please understand I have no hard feelings toward the Jehovah's Witnesses because without that foundation I would never have had the thought to be saved. And it was also the Kingdom hall where I had my first memorable experience with Divine Source.

Then one day the day finally came, and I came to the place where I could go into the church, and there I would tarry for the Holy Ghost. This was a Sanctified Holiness Church which believed that to be saved and sanctified you had to be filled with the Holy Ghost and speak in tongues as they did on the day of Pentecost. As much as I tarried and stayed on my knees and called on Jesus, I never felt what they were trying to bring forth from me until one day I went home and said to my house mates "please don't disturb me."

I went into my room, and I said to myself "I am not coming out until God fills me with the Holy Ghost." Well, I locked myself in my room and I cried out to God until suddenly I had this feeling that I had only experienced once before in

my life and that was the second thing that happened to me when I was 12 years old when I was being baptized. When I went down in the water, I knew beyond anything that I wanted to serve God for the rest of my life.

Well, here I was again having this experience adding to it that I had all knowledge, and you could have asked me anything and I could have told you. It was the most magnificent feeling that I have ever felt. It lasted for only a moment. And I will never forget it. Twice I knew that I was connected to The Oneness of Divine.

Salvation was very valuable for my well being. I learned that God was not a respecter of person and was always there through my many trials and tribulations.

One of the things I learned from my search for God was that I had many questions that the church could not answer. An example of this was the morning I went to Church and asked my pastor why there were only some of the books of the Bible in our King James version.

I saw a bible that was dated in the 1400's that had many books that were missing in our Bible. His answer to me was "Well daughter, if God had wanted us to have those books, then we would have them."

That was enough for me to know that man alone could not answer my questions. I had to find my truth. So, I left the organized church and went on a search that took me 7 years to complete and when I returned to the Church, I entered a Unity and Science of Mind Church which holds many of the things I believe in.

Through this search, I became an ordained minister and 13 years later in the year 2000 I began yet another journey which led me to walk around the world for peace, environment, and social justice, which took us almost 4 years to complete and I have spent the last 17 years living my truth.

My spiritual journey led me to seek the God within myself and to this day I believe that God and I are one. That there is no separation in me and the God of my understanding. This is my truth. I spent many years coming to this truth and my heart rejoices in knowing that we are all connected in this oneness. That we are all co-creators with the Divine Presence. And as we continue to love one another the very Essence of Divine One, that we will create a better world. A World that works for all.

I am excited to be a part of this great and mighty work and I am grateful to Creator for the opportunity to know my

Divine Self more and more through my association with humanity.

This is my story, and it continues. I have only just begun. It is my prayer that something I have said will touch the hearts of many and inspire someone as I continue to use my gifts of music, writing, and art to further inspire and encourage.

I am grateful to God who gives us the wisdom and knowledge to fulfill our goals. In so doing, we assist humanity to grow into its highest and best expression of good, by following the path of peace, love, joy and compassion. This is my path, and together we can, *“turn this world right side up again!”*

Life is a great journey! There is much work to do. In the words of June Jordan, *“We are the ones we have been waiting for...”*

CHAPTER 13

Kind Heart. Peaceful Silence.

David Matthew Olatunji Bey

A Muslim traveler, fulfilling a dream to see the world, found himself visiting a small village in Thailand. The people were very kind and accepting of this traveler which filled each day with joy. For this reason, he decided to extend his stay due to the kind hearts and warmth of the village.

One day the traveler became very ill and many feared that death was near. He did not look well. A young villager ran to the nearby temple and asked the senior monk to come right away. It is customary for a monk to be present when a person is about to make transition.

Many concerned villagers stood outside the guest house thinking of what to do. There was a sheer fabric of sadness gently flowing as each person sighed.

The monk entered the room and recognized the Muslim traveler. For in the past, they would enjoy having reflective conversations together.

The monk thought, “He is Muslim, and it may be offensive for me to chant the sutras.”

The wise monk decided to sit in silence with the ailing traveler for several hours. In an instance the monk leaned over to the man and whispered in his ears. The traveler’s eyes filled with tears as he took his last breath with a smile on his face.

The monk left the room and returned to the Temple. The other monks heard of what just happened and asked the monk what he said to the man.

The monk smiled and shared, “Even in death we must extend compassion to everyone no matter what they may believe.”

The monks nodded in agreement. The youngest monk said, “Master you are very wise but please excuse me for asking,

What did you actually say to the man? People witnessed him weeping and smiling as he took his last breath.”

The monk said, “Aah. Yes, I simply said in his language, Allah is Great.”

All the monks look bewildered and concerned. “How could you say that!?! You aren’t Muslim. You are Buddhist.”

The wise monk sat for a few minutes smiling. Then tears appeared in his eyes. He said, “Would it have been better to let him suffer or be at peace?”

CHAPTER 14

Living Water

Charles Gibbs

*Where is the well
to draw the Beloved's
living water when all
stories of God seem closed
doors, not open windows,
fingers pointing at the wounding
past, not the luminous moon?*

* * *

*Once a wise one shining
an inner light shared with me
this wisdom — Pure Love
desires only that all that is
return to the Beloved for love —
then asked me to laugh more
and, though it wasn't said,
to love more, to love all.*

*Then this wise one
who asked me to laugh
(and to love) more continued —
So vast is the Beloved's love
that if in an instant all*

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

*returned and received all
the love each and all could
ever want or need it would be
as if a tiny bird took a sip
from the fathomless ocean.*

* * *

*Laugh (and love) more,
the wise one luminous
with inner light once told
me and, though it wasn't
said, it seemed clear
that over the millennia many*

JOY SLOAN JINKS

*have dipped a cup of pure love
from the fathomless ocean,
claimed it as their own, gripped
it tightly until it held waters
of wounding more than waters
of life — far too brackish
to birth laughter or love.*

* * *

*Whoever you are,
no matter how wounded,
know this — you have never
deserved your wounding.*

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

*Like all that is, you, too,
come from the fathomless
Ocean of Love. In each instant,
you are invited to return and,
beyond all wounding words,
doorless walls, fingers pointing
at the brackish cup, bathe in its
buoyant waters of life, receive all
the love you can ever want or need.*

*The Beloved welcomes you anew
to these living waters. You are home.*

*Drink freely, deeply. Remember,
Love asks only for you to shine*

JOY SLOAN JINKS

with an inner light. To laugh more.

To love more. To love all.

To be loved. By all.

CHAPTER 15

DAYBREAK

Lisa Nelson

Lisa Nelson has written powerful poetry inspired by the pilgrim's travels, using Joseph Campbell's map in, The Hero's Journey.

Let's say a spiritual journey is like a pilgrimage, and The Hero's Journey, by Joseph Campbell, is the classic model. Bear with me as I share *where I've been* and *what I "think" I've been doing*. And then, let's factor in what it means, that I am a woman, and see how that affects the journey. Oh, since one of the boons (benefits or blessings) of the journey has been poetry, poems will be strewn about this offering.

Daybreak

This morning many birds are busy in the oak tree

Joyfully fluffing up its fresh damp green leaves.

The sun coming through the window uncovers

My craving for heat.

Light sparkles off the shiny young leaves

And a few tenacious raindrops.

This is daybreak.

Stepping out of past devastation

Bleary-eyed, ears ringing,

Drawing strength from the same ground

That sometimes bucks us into flight.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

Catastrophes are un-happenings.

They blast away our accumulations

Of markers, clocks, and maps.

We sift and examine the new un-reality

Of facts turned to memories.

Some of us ripen quickly, others slowly

To the wondering and the asking

For the fire in the mirror that will show us

What is important.

The first stage of pilgrimage is the longing or the call.

JOY SLOAN JINKS

THE CALL

Forever Never The Same

You called me!

In neutral tones, just a message —

But my heart listened,

and the knowledge flooded me

Like the butterflies in the flowers outside,

That behind your voice,

Coming from behind your kind face,

From beyond your glorious mind,

It is the deepest love calling to me

Like a subvocal growling chant

Shaking me loose from standing too

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

long in one place

Softening me like wax

Whispering, "It's time, follow me."

And I fall, oh, inward,

Diving into sweet mist.

I have been blessed with a number of personal teachers. They have often shown up after a period of study, perhaps you could call it preparation. "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear" is for me one of the great promises of life.

REFUSING THE CALL

What is it, fear of change, a lack of faith, or plain old orneriness? I have often turned my back on the call to the spiritual path, on the recommended practices. I find, sooner or later, that when I do that, my world turns into a gray wasteland of petty grievances and addictions to pointless activities.

JOY SLOAN JINKS

WHAT VOICES ARE YOU HEARING TODAY?

What should I

I need to

I ought to call

Where should I invest my

Who am I supposed to

Could I

How would it work if I

Remember!

Come into the back room —

I have something to show you.

Recording devices, all set on different periodic timers,

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

Modeled on the available technology at point of setting,

Some upgraded over and over again,

Playing for your agitation.

These send you hurrying out the door,

Deaf to your own true voice.

Oh, nonsense! Impossible!

Why would I do that to myself?

Better off listening to the hum of household appliances

Than arguing.

What visions are playing in your head today?

Faces of authority, of advice, of expectations.

Frowns from clutter and grim looks

From unread mail and magazines.

On the other side of the planet and up the road,

Scenes of prayer in some houses,

Violence and cruelty in others.

Horses grazing, wingbeat of birds,

Twitch of a dreaming dog,

Treetops and horizons

Line after line.

Wait for all these to pass.

Wait for the voice of the one listening,

The deeper vision of the one looking.

PREPARATION AND DEPARTURE

Well, really, you physically don't have to go anywhere on the spiritual journey. Sometimes it's easier, though, the motion and ground covered providing the sense of progress. The thing is, it's an inward journey, which means it's not in three dimensions. It's about shifting your perception and your understanding to make that possible.

WORKING THE POINT OF VIEW

At first, a huge expansion of possibility

A marvelous display,

Abundance, pouring beyond

What any ready capacity could hold.

Fantastic joy.

A path appeared, wonders multiplied,

And then

With stuttering reluctance, I stepped off and I fell,

I fell,

Flailing arms and legs

At strange winds and fogs

Bumping into objects I couldn't see,

A loss of proportion that seemed Biblical.

Innocence so self-justifying,

So painfully inadequate,

Decaying into impatience, blame and anger,

*Nurturing a stench both loathed and celebrated by
Puritans.*

Here came Hell.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

I'm still falling, but the panic

Has started to wear off

And I'm nearly wise to the ineffectiveness of struggle.

I've even begun to curl into a ball, falling ever faster,

Hoping for wings.

The air itself seems to be burning,

And tightly, tightly

Inside this hurtling stillness,

I am waiting,

More and more certain,

That I will hear the voice

That I was born to speak.

GUARDIANS AND GATEKEEPERS

In the great spiritual stories, there is often a threshold to be crossed, guarded by strange and powerful monsters that would gladly kill you rather than let you through. This is a moment of soul-searching, because forward progress seems impossible, but by now you are committed to the journey and will not give up. To get through, you need to discover within something that you may not be aware that you have. Perhaps it is a word of power.

COME OUT INTO THE MIST

Come out into the mist and listen

Because there is more than seeing shape and color.

Here, without shadows,

Feel the chill on your skin,

And how your body turns to itself for warmth.

Do not grudge the cold air entering your nostrils,

But take it as evidence of life, and of life's promises.

Let your joy be fierce in this cloud!

Risk a shout —

But wait!

Not yet!

Draw it ALL to the fire of your belly:

The feeling, the unmet need of unmet power.

And breathe deep for this full-voiced call.

The word is NOW.

Let it ring against the unseen surfaces!

Make yourself known!

The invisible world, the jays, your own body,

Will gratefully respond.

They've been waiting for this juice to flow.

ON YOUR WAY: ADVENTURES, LABYRINTHS, AND THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

For Odysseus, the adventures lasted for years. Sound familiar? Like the river, life has its rapids, its still places, its meanders, and swamps. There is great beauty, as well as unexpected twists, and yes, even apparent horrors. Sometimes you stay, but eventually you pick up your pack and keep going.

KEEP LOOKING

Today's a day to seek answers,

*Because the wind is BLOWING, my sisters and
brothers!*

I barely settled in to stare down my questions

When a hawk burst up out of a tree

In a wild, wind-tossed effort

To get traction for flying through the air.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

My own breath caught

And tears filled my eyes

At the force of the answering gale inside.

Now it feels right to give thanks for my helplessness

And sheer ignorance.

Today is a day to toss out the old meanings.

If you look, their tissues are rotting and mold-covered.

Reject any new explanation that sprouts today,

Especially if it makes promises.

It is a lie.

Fly past the ache in your wings.

THE ALLIES

Hawks, blue jays, squirrels — common and uncommon companions to your thoughts and feelings. Teachers who show up at the right moment. Friends to laugh and eat and drink with, and to help boost you over the steep and rocky places or watch over you when you need rest. Not all can be seen with our physical eyes. Poets and musicians, mystics, gods, and goddesses. Many show up and travel with you for a time.

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE (EXCERPT)

What has brought you to your knees?

Only a good friend should ask this.

It is a gentle question, asking that burdens be examined.

Do you ever read your own words?

Only another good friend should ask this.

There is pain and laughter here, as well as kindness.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

There will be signs along the way

(At least that's what one of the signs said).

Some on your back, where you can't see,

*Some on your forehead, that you can only read
indirectly,*

In the responses of others.

At the bottom of the cauldron

After the ash in the crucible is brushed away,

And the windows are really clean,

I need You, good friend,

To tell me softly what you see.

ARRIVAL

Suddenly you see. After the long journey, you come to the crest of a hill, you turn a corner, the light dawns, the music begins to play. Everything you have ever experienced, and all the effort pays off. You are there.

SO MUCH CONFETTI

When you reach the knowingness,

The need to ask questions is left behind.

When you leave the knowingness,

The questions return.

Tough luck for the questioner.

Best of luck for the seeker.

Demanding proof? An outsider's need.

Living proof? An insider's gift.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

All choices deliver beauty.

Eventually the questions refine and relax,

And the answer, stalking you since you were born,

Seizes the moment

And you are transformed by the realization

That you know.

Spiritual awakening is a paradox that changes nothing and changes everything at the same time. It's not an experience you can grasp and tuck away with your belongings. Living with it is like living with a creature that changes shape unexpectedly, at once a hummingbird and an elephant. It is a presence that sometimes you can't detect and other times you realize it is always and has always been "as close as your breath." It's time to laugh and cry, everything necessary, and everything unnecessary.

BRINGING BACK THE BOON

Why did I go on this journey? Was it for my own salvation? My fascination with achievement? In the great stories, the hero often embarks with the goal to bring some crucial knowledge or power back to his or her afflicted community, to restore it, to green it, to relieve suffering, to have the bargaining power or weapon that will restore or achieve some sort of goodness.

Sooner or later, the thought arises that perhaps there is something I have gained from this journey that might be helpful for my people, my home, my planet. Maybe it's not the Holy Grail, (or is it?), maybe it's not tangible, but the realization arrives that it is time to go home, to return, to be of some use. And the paradox continues because the journey has always been to go home.

OFFERING

These two hands

Palms up

Cupped together

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

Receive smoke and water,

Dried beans and seeds.

I walk around,

Seeing if anyone wants any.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

Home is where your heart is.

Really.

The exclusive real estate

Is that place inside that knows.

When you suddenly realize

That your mind can't help with a decision,

Or that your thoughts are sending you places

You don't need to go,

That moment.

JOY SLOAN JINKS

THAT MOMENT

Gives you the keys to your real estate.

Leave the confusion at your welcome mat,

And go inside.

GOING AGAIN

Many journeys comprise The Journey. As we change, our world appears to change, and we set out seeking, to renew our vision, perhaps to discover how to be the change we have been looking for. There's always more.

SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

**RETURN OF THE THIRD GLANCE:
ONE FOR EACH EYE**

Do I like to play with words?

I do. It's a marriage then.

I said Eye Deux.

Look again, travelers.

That second glance might be worthwhile.

But a THIRD glance!

Tends to reward with amazing grace.

Glancing shafts of light loop inward,

And the tourists return home

With a smile

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Joy Sloan Jinks, M.S.W., credits her upbringing in the Methodist Church for setting her on a spiritual path. She has been an entrepreneur, an international volunteer, and a community arts consultant.

She is the author of *“Dynamic Aging, I Intend to Live Forever – So Far, So Good”*.

Joy is a native Georgian, widely known for her leadership skills; her deeply inquisitive mind and open heart; and her dynamic speaking ability. She is a community consultant, author, and an entrepreneur. Her mission is to be of service. Fueled by her love of lifelong learning, to inspire innovative approaches to current problems, she has traveled to every continent except Antarctica.

She has studied under renowned teachers, such as Jean Houston, and has trained with the Institute of Cultural Affairs to volunteer in Peru, Brazil, India, Kenya, and Jamaica.

