

Today, more and more women are turning to alternative paths for their spirituality. But this nontraditional, natural spirituality is not achieved in a moment; it is acquired and refined over a lifetime. by Pythia S. Peay

SINCE EARLIEST CHILDHOOD, MY LIFE HAS BEEN cradled by belief. Along the way, I have called this belief by many names: God, Fate, God the Mother, Nature, my Inner Self. But named or nameless, this belief has always been there, inaudibly coursing through my life. As sweet as this presence has oftentimes felt, it has also been a force to be reckoned with. As a child growing up in the Catholic Church, as a young woman exploring Eastern traditions, and now in midlife passage discovering the symbolic world of the psyche through dreams and therapy, I have been urged by this presence ever deeper into what I can only describe as a lifelong spiritual quest.

At times I have longed for the secure haven of a traditional belief system. I have wanted to consolidate my jumble of prayer, therapy, meditation, and occult interests into one path—be it Christian, agnostic, or Buddhist. Naming my explorations, I felt, might make me feel less isolated, less odd. Over the years, though, as these disparate elements within me wore against one another—the way wind, ocean, and rock wear against one another—I began to see that my spiritual path was taking on its own form, as naturally beautiful as the gracefully shaped driftwood lying on the beach. And this has been comforting and empowering.

I have since encountered many other women who, like me, walk their own spiritual path. Their unique quests reflect the stirring of deep social currents, which some observers, such as William Dinges, Ph.D., associate professor of reli-

gion at The Catholic University of America, see as a movement away from traditional religious structures toward a more inner-directed, privatized religious ethos.

million Americans either didn't belong to a church or a temple or attended only infrequently.

The spread of this new religious consciousness has generated a renaissance of religious thinking vibrant with new voices. Psychologists, priests, theologians, artists, writers, Native American teachers, and feminist scholars have contributed to a revisioning of the spiritual path for the twentieth-century soul.

Today, many individuals discover a connection to the Divine through personal relationships, nature, grief, running, practicing aikido, childhood memories, and professional and artistic development. "I define religion and spirituality in a way that enables women to recognize the spiritual in all areas of their lives," writes Carol Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, "not simply in relation to the institutional church or synagogue." For David Steindl-Rast, Benedictine monk and coauthor with Fritjof Capra of the book *Belonging to the Universe*, "Spirituality is simply superaliveness."

This feeling is the essence of what Borysenko describes as "natural spirituality." It is not something you put on from the outside; it is inherent to who you are. Indeed, write Stanislav and Christina Grof in *The Stormy Search for the Self*, the spiritual process is innate in all human beings, "a movement toward wholeness, the discovery of one's true potential . . . as common and as natural as birth, physical growth, and death."

While these changing perceptions have guided the spiritual lives of some women, others struggle

Spiritual Path

Memberships in mainline religions has declined dramatically in the last several decades, says Dinges. While many people have become "unchurched" as a result of this decline, he says, this does not mean they are any less spiritual. To the contrary, as psychologist Joan Borysenko, Ph.D., writes in her recent book, *Guilt Is the Teacher, Love Is the Lesson*, we have become a nation of closet mystics moving further away from organized religion. She cites a recent Gallup poll showing that 95 percent of Americans reported believing in God or a universal spirit, while yet another poll found that 78

in a spiritual no-man's-land. Feeling alienated from the traditional faith of their childhood, they have emptiness and pain standing in the place of soul and spirit. Paradoxically, it is this very emptiness, pain, and skepticism toward our inherited beliefs that contain the seeds of a spiritual life.

The Eternal Questions

Sarah, a successful businesswoman and close friend of mine, once confessed to me that she did not believe in life after death. Forty years old and facing the inevitability that death might at any time claim those she loved, Sarah felt a sense of loss because of her lack of a belief system. "I wish I did believe—in something," she said poignantly. Her longing to find a larger context for her life

DICK NYSTROM

became the catalyst for an important inner process, one that, a year later, is ongoing.

For Sarah, as for many others, it was a process that began with those timeless questions, "Who am I?" "What is the meaning of life?" and "What happens after death?" These universal questions often provide the key that unlocks the door to our inner world. As we seek their answers, we lay the foundation for our own individual spiritual life.

For M. Scott Peck, author of the modern spiritual classic *The Road Less Traveled*, the process of questioning forms a critical stage in the development of an authentic spiritual life. "There is no such thing as a good hand-me-down religion," he writes. "To be vital, to be the best of which we are capable, our religion must be a wholly personal one, forged entirely through the fire of our questioning and doubting in the crucible of our own experience of reality."

In his most recent book, *The Different Drum*, Peck outlines the four stages of the spiritual path. The first stage is that of undeveloped spirituality, where there is a complete absence of interest in religious matters. The second, more formal stage is that of belonging to an organized religion, usually that of our parents. Here a person is more concerned with the outer forms of religion, such as liturgy, than the essence of religion.

The third stage is what Peck names the "skeptical" or "individual" stage. Here we begin questioning our religious beliefs. One woman named Carol, a computer instructor in her late 30s who sought over many years to find her own spiritual niche, described this stage as a continuous shedding of outer expressions of spirituality. "The God that comes before skepticism may bear little resemblance to the God that comes after," writes Peck in *The Road Less Traveled*.

From Darkness to Light

It is in the transition from the third to the fourth stage, that of the mystic, writes Peck, that people first become conscious that there is such a thing as spiritual growth. For Borysenko, this is the stage when our *concepts* about God become replaced by our actual *experience* of God. Carol Christ poetically writes of this moment as an awakening, "a time when the light begins to dawn, when we begin to see the world in a different way."

This awakening may occur gradually, over time, the consolidation of many small awakenings. Or it may come suddenly—the

lives any easier, they may make us more powerful and capable in dealing with the difficulties in our lives.

But the spiritual path is by no means a path of suffering and difficulty alone. In the spiritual empowerment workshops she leads, Boston psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan guides women through the labyrinth of what she calls the "dark emotions," a process she developed after her infant son died in her arms and she was dramatically catapulted into the spiritual life. Greenspan says that if we stay with the grief, anger, fear, and despair, these emotions will progress naturally into spiritual states. Grief shifts to gratitude; fear to joy; despair to faith; and anger to trust.

This transmutation of darkness into light is the most difficult progression on the spiritual path. Facing the dark emotions is a kind of initiation, and not everyone succeeds at it. Speaking of those who struggle with addictions, Christina Grof says, "Hitting bottom with addiction and coming into recovery is a profound death and rebirth experience. Unfortunately, a lot of people stop at the death part; they kill themselves with their addictions, rather than going through the doorway."

Whatever the crisis that brings them to this point, those who do pass through the doorway to a spiritual life describe their breakthroughs as peak moments of lucidity, like a curtain briefly parting; the meaning of life becomes clear. Such a moment occurred for Greenspan the day of her son's funeral, a day she now describes as "the clearest day of my life."

Greenspan experienced her son's eyes "radiating throughout the sky, his life force intensified a thousandfold." She felt an amplification of faith, the feeling that "there was purpose in life's events, and that the purpose had to do with God. For me this meant learning more and more about how to love the world in a way that you would love your own child." Since then, says Greenspan, she has learned to "treat life as a guru."

The Sacred Dialogue

Many women who have developed a personal credo feel compelled to integrate their spiritual insights into everyday life. Indeed, the desire to find a creative expression for our spiritual life is a natural response to the mystical experience. Fox explains that "the mystical life is about the child inside, full of wonder and delight, who wants to respond to the world. Getting in touch with that creative child, the

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result of a personal crisis, such as the death of a loved one, the onset of a life-threatening illness, or a struggle with an addiction. Spiritual awakenings in the form of such crises inevitably mean a confrontation with the irrational worlds of grief and suffering. Characterized by mourning, emptying, and letting go, this is the mystics' "dark night of the soul," a stage on the spiritual path that, according to Matthew Fox, author of *Original Blessing*, precedes all others. "Salvation," he writes, "... is not a salvation from pain but through pain."

The idea that our spiritual path is shaped by the trials of life, that Divine purpose speaks to us through circumstances and events, is reflected in Peck's famous opening line in *The Road Less Traveled*: "Life is difficult." We are not here to be happy, but "to learn," said Peck in a recent interview, commenting further that life is like a kind of "celestial boot camp." While the lessons we learn here may not make our

artist within, is the deep work of the spiritual process."

This spiritual artistry is totally unique to the individual and often emerges from a private mythology. Take, for example, the lifestyle of artist Meinrad Craighead, author of *The Litany of the Great River*. A former nun, Craighead begins her day with a walk near her home in New Mexico. This allows her to "gather in the energy of nature" so it will be with her as she paints. Moving indoors, she then makes a ritual circumambulation of the altars she has placed around her studio. Cluttered with stones, pots, postcards from friends, Native American animal carvings, and photographs of her family, these "living" altars reflect Craighead's personal mythology, the creative cauldron out of which her work emerges.

It is memory, says Craighead, that is the central, abiding theme of both her spiritual and creative lives. As she paints or prays, she remembers, "because the work of the imagination



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feeds on memory and I have always felt that prayer is very much about memories that we collect along the journey." As she remembers, she feels connected to her mother, her grandmother, and the artists who have gone before her.

My friend Lilly has no altars but worships in her own backyard—where she gardens. "The way I attune myself spiritually is very physical and organic," she says. When she gardens, she enters a meditative state in which she feels rooted in the earth. Her religious inspirations flow from the plants she helps to grow, the soil she fertilizes, the air she breathes.

Many women I spoke with regarded such intimate connections with the earth as an essential part of their worship. Ven. Dhyani Ywahoo, a grandmother, a clan chief of the Etowah Cherokee Nation, and author of *Voices of Our Ancestors*, says that nature can be a spiritual teacher for us. In a thousand intricate ways, like the strands of grass woven together to make

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a basket, says Ywahoo, nature shows us the interrelatedness of life.

One of her ways of connecting to the earth is through her breath, by inhaling and exhaling. The rhythm of her breath is echoed in the rhythmic cycles of nature, the tides coming in and out, the changing of the seasons, the phases of the moon. She sees in these motions the same pattern of her own personal growth.

Some women worship by simply setting aside private time to commune or pray. Nicky, a meditation teacher, turned a small basement room in her home into a meditation room, decorated sparsely with a few candles, cushions, and rugs. Here she meditates every morning, listening to the singing of Indian musician Sri Karunamayee or to sacred choral music such as that of Thomas Tallis. Once a year, she says, she takes a week-long spiritual retreat.

During good weather, Borysenko says she meditates in a sanctuary she created in her garden. When indoors, she meditates inside a large closet filled with personal icons: the rose on her mother's pillow the day she died, a keepsake coin of her father's, and pictures of babies, animals, and saints whose common expressions of joy bring inspiration into her meditation.

Borysenko says she "drops into the silence" by remembering a "holy moment," like the time she looked into the eyes of a child and felt awe. Once there, a spontaneous prayer arises, such as the simple phrase, "I am the spirit; the song of God"—a Hebrew phrase from her childhood.

These uniquely personal forms of worship stand in sharp contrast to the practices of most institutional religions, with their emphasis on hierarchy and a priestly intercessor between ourselves and a fatherly God. In their search for an alternative to these patriarchal religions, many women have sought inspiration in goddess spirituality, which tends to foster the individual's connection to a nature-based, feminine Divine. Among the many contributions made by goddess spirituality, one of the richest has been that of images.

Most American women grew up in a Judeo-Christian culture that visualizes God as a white-bearded old man in the sky, says Connie Zweig, journalist and editor of *To Be a Woman*, a collection of essays on feminine spirituality. "When we tried to find ourselves in this image of God, it was pretty difficult," says Zweig, "because he didn't look like us,

he didn't feel anything like we do, and he didn't act like us."

Goddess spirituality, says Zweig, offers women spiritual concepts and archetypal images of divinity that match our deepest intuitions about our worth as women and our connection to nature.

This immanence of the Divine in life is richly embodied in the endlessly creative, spontaneous forms of worship women practice today. For some, like dancer Jean Erdman, the expression is nonverbal: choreographed movements arise from a sacred place of emptiness within her. Others articulate the litanies in their souls through words; some shape their inner experience into vibrant colors and images they paint or draw. Some nurture their connection to the Divine by watching the messages in their dreams, bringing symbols up to consciousness like stones from the depths of a river. Some snatch moments in their day to read from the mystical texts of the

saints, and some create new rituals for themselves.

One woman I know has found a new place to enjoy her contemplative moments—museums, those gigantic spaces resonating with centuries of art. Yet another woman finds that—whether sitting in her garden or walking down a crowded street—all life is like being inside a "cathedral of holiness." Some have returned to their traditional churches, bringing their own set of beliefs to this experience, while still others meet informally with people from different religious backgrounds, sharing spiritual practices. And some simply sit alone, beneath the stars, staring in awe at the vast spaces containing the wonder of a trillion galaxies.

In whatever form, it is the act of drawing close to our innermost selves that is at the heart of all spiritual quests. It is a sense of self expanded and joined to a greater whole, or as Steindl-Rast says, a feeling of belonging, "to ourselves, to the limitless horizon of life, and to all of humanity." This is the treasure most women say they bring back from their solitary sojourns.

But "owning" this treasure brings its own responsibilities. Walking our own spiritual path means living according to the demands of our own truth. It means living a life that reflects our values, convictions, and goals accurately. It involves a continuous process of testing, questioning, and reevaluating our beliefs.

Following our own path demands not only responsibility, but responsiveness to the mysterious promptings of the hidden forces that shape our destiny. This may mean living in harmony with the circumstances in our life, challenging the old order of things, or undertaking a particularly difficult task.

I HAVE OFTEN FELT THAT THOSE OF US WHO WALK OUR OWN spiritual path live on the frontier of the unknown: ready to face the unexpected turns and frightening obstacles of the strange terrain before us, guided only by our inner compass to an uncertain destination. But to step off our own paths onto that of another, one perhaps more clearly marked than ours, is unthinkable; the road less traveled feels somehow *right*—and that's a good feeling. □

Pythia S. Peay is currently working on a book, *Walking Your Own Spiritual Path, exploring the development of personal spirituality.*