

Paths to Spiritual Depth

Insights from Leaders of Our Age

Andrew M. Davis

Journeys are essential to life. Along their challenging and often meandering paths we find that our perspectives change regarding ourselves and the world. Whether we know it or not, this is one of the principal reasons we take journeys: they bestow depth of experience, wisdom and personal discovery. But the value of a journey does not exist only for the one who takes it. After all, what good are journeys if they cannot be shared? If you have ever returned from a series of travels you know you will be met with an array of questions: “Where have you been?” “How did you get there?” “What did you experience?” “What did you learn?” We often look forward to these questions and to sharing the nature of our journeys with others.

Valuable journeys vary widely, but **perhaps no other journey is worthy of sharing quite like that of the spiritual journey—those interior windings of the heart, mind and spirit.** There is a deep sense in which the spiritual journey includes all others in a unique and formative way for each individual. The spiritual journey involves tangled personal paths that form our deepest convictions about existence, meaning and purpose. **It is on this journey that we ask and endeavor to answer the ultimate questions of life concerning God, the universe, and our own mysterious nature. In this way, the insights of the spiritual quest are unique and all-encompassing; they are interior to each person, but they are not meant to be walked alone.**

For the CST Toolbox, I’ll focus briefly on a few personal insights that are scattered throughout the book I edited with Dr. Clayton. In doing so, I wish to offer a kind of map of possibilities for the spiritual quest. I would like to do this in terms of five key insights:

1. *The Wisdom of Experience*
2. *The Sacramental Significance of Nature*
3. *Dark Nights of the Soul and Spiritual Transitions*
4. *The Value of Intellectual Curiosity*
5. *The God of Inclusion and Immanence*

Each of these insights is uniquely expressed by the contributors to our book. For fellow travelers, they serve as paths for deepening the spiritual journey. **To conclude, I will bring these paths together and state them simply as *lessons for the road ahead.***¹

¹ All quotes and page references are derived from Andrew M. Davis and Philip Clayton, *How I Found God in Everyone and Everywhere: An Anthology of Spiritual Memoirs* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2018).

The Wisdom of Experience

“*With spirituality, experience precedes concepts; then the concepts assist in adding meat (and history and a lineage) to the experience...*”² It was this insight that activist and spiritual theologian, Matthew Fox, learned from the great swami-priest Bede Griffiths. **Experience, in other words, is primary for the spiritual and religious journey, and attention to its many faces is a disciplined and worthwhile endeavor.** This not only applies to everyday experience, but also to the depth of mystical experience, recorded for example, by major religious founders and common people alike. The authors in our book communicate both, and the influence these experiences have had on their spiritual journeys are of deep and lasting significance.

Contrary to the anti-mystical trends of modern thought, personal experience should not be simply dismissed as inconsequential; it is rather the formative backdrop to any and all spiritual quests. Deepak Chopra is right in this regard, “Unless you have respect for subject-reported facts, religion is nearly impossible to credit.”³ For many of the authors, however, institutionalized religion will always be an inadequate solidification of what is *fundamentally experiential*. Words, doctrines and categories may be necessary attempts to preserve the heart of religious or mystical experience, but this experiential core also risks being domesticated and even petrified into doctrinal structures.

This was in fact the “danger of religion” that Father Griffiths warned his many students about. Religion he insisted “begins with a mystical experience, the experience of the seers of the Upanishads, of the Buddha under the bo tree, of the Hebrew prophets and the apostles at Pentecost, of Mohomet receiving the message of the Koran. But this experience has to be put into words; it has to descend into the outer world and take the forms of human speech. Already at this state it is open to misinterpretation; the conflict between the letter and the spirit begins.”⁴

This was something that biologist Rupert Sheldrake learned directly from Griffiths while staying in his ashram in South India. Father Griffiths introduced Sheldrake to the experiential depths of mysticism found in both Christianity and Hinduism. These insights remain with Sheldrake today in his creative integrations of science, religion and spiritual practice. Indeed, the primacy of experience found in the mystical core of religious traditions is also central to the spiritual journeys and work of both Cynthia Bourgeault and Richard Rohr at the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. Bourgeault’s discovery and practice of Centering Prayer, for example, was integral to her coming to *see* and experience the world differently. She stresses that **the spiritual journey is “not so much about what we see, as *how* we see.”**⁵ For Rohr, to speak

² Matthew Fox, “My Journey Living and Teaching Panentheism,” 153.

³ Deepak Chopra, “Making God Necessary,” 115.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, “I Am Not a Space that God Does Not Occupy...,” 107.

of “mystics” is to speak of “experiential knowers” as opposed to “textbook knowers.”⁶ Put differently, **the experiential basis of spirituality and religion cannot simply be a matter of words one reads on a page, but of attention to the depth of experience as evocative of a knowledge that words cannot fully capture.** As Deepak Chopra’s journey progressed, he found he entered deeper stages in this kind of way. He communicates the necessity of moving from *belief*, to *faith*, to an experiential *knowledge and awareness* of existence as such. **Experience then is an essential starting point for these authors.** We will see that this fundamental insight threads together those that follow.

The Sacramental Significance of Nature

*“These icons served me well; when my prayer was simply silence, I gazed at them; they were a kind of visible presence of a power I knew but could not see.”*⁷ What were these “icons” for young theologian-to-be, Marjorie Suchocki? They were the suggestive elements of nature, the shining stars and the “lady in the tree.” A “great oak tree” she describes, “was not far from my bedroom window, and two large branches intertwined such that at their beginning they formed the outline of a head, and then they made a long flowing gown: my lady in the tree.”⁸ In her youthful wonder, Suchocki struggled to imagine and pray to the mystery of God. Through these icons, however, she sensed a divine power that seemed to shine through them.

The notion that a divine reality is experienced and mediated through the beauty of the natural world is a longstanding conviction among religious and spiritual leaders. This conviction is present among several authors of our book, whose journeys poetically testify to the sacramental experience of nature. To say that nature is *sacramental* is to say that it is something *under, in and through* which the infinite reality of the divine is made known. This does not mean that nature is *identical* with divinity, but rather, that which mediates the boundless reality of God. **For Professor Clayton, “It’s not that Nature is the ultimate goal, itself God. Nature, so immanent around us...is also the portal to something that transcends us, something we can never fully grasp.”**⁹ Nature we can say, is the visible and communicative presence of a divine reality that is *more than* but nevertheless *expressed through* the world itself.

Cynthia Bourgeault experienced this conviction powerfully through a radiant pumpkin patch at sunset in late October, when everything was “brilliantly ablaze in orange.” She realized “then and there that the holy, intimate radiance suffusing the picture was in me and in *everything*, if for no other reason than because it was from the *inside* that all of this seemed to be emerging.”¹⁰ In a similar way, Matthew Fox recounts a childhood trip to Niagara Falls where he encountered “a

⁶ Richard Rohr, “Confusions about Pantheism,” 189.

⁷ Marjorie H. Suchocki, “God: Autobiographical,” 169.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Philip Clayton, “That of God in Every One,” 13.

¹⁰ Bourgeault, “I am Not a Space that God Does Not Occupy...,” 96.

power and presence” that spoke to him of what he would later comprehend as mysticism.¹¹ **The sacramental significance of nature expressed by these authors reminds us that the *terrain* of the spiritual journey is not just interior, but often quite literally the grass beneath our feet, the brilliance of a sunset, the mist on our face and the “lady in the tree.”** There is something revelatory in our experience of the natural world. Nevertheless, it would be false to paint the spiritual journey with overly bright colors. Spiritual journeys also include darkness, difficulty and disenchantment.

Dark Nights of the Soul and Spiritual Transitions

*“The dual diagnosis of Histiocytosis X and Diabetes Insipidus led to a series of medical interventions. I was subjected to rigorous radiotherapy and chemotherapy at the cancer ward of one of the local hospitals...”*¹² Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson’s adolescent years were full of uncertainty, pain and humiliation. He was raised an atheist in San Francisco, and while his journey to God and the religious life is fascinating, it was also incredibly difficult. The spiritual journey by its very nature includes experiences of disenchantment and even defeat. These various difficulties are “dark nights of the soul.” **They are times of struggle, transition and doubt.** For Rabbi Artson, however, it was not only his medical condition that continually weighed upon him into his young adulthood, but also the diagnosis of his beloved son Jacob with autism. As a result, he spent two years “largely not talking to God.” **“It’s not that I stopped believing in God’s reality,” he states, “it’s just that I knew that it would be better for both of us if we didn’t speak.”**¹³ Rabbi Artson would later realize that these struggles paved the way for his discovery of an entirely new way of understanding God, the world and the spiritual life.

For many authors in *How I Found God in Everyone and Everywhere*, the personal spiritual journey may or may not include medical diagnosis like that of Rabbi Artson and his son, but they certainly do include existential struggles with doubt, uncertainty and even meaninglessness. This is an important and necessary part of the spiritual journey too. **John B. Cobb Jr.**, philosopher, environmentalist, and co-founder of CST’s Center for Process Studies for example, struggled through the implications of the modern worldview for his formative religious rearing. In graduate school, he found himself “sucked into atheism.” As a result, he states, “there was no point in continuing the three-year MA program I had begun. **I still wanted to believe in God. I just didn’t...I had entered Divinity School in hopes that I would find a way out of the meaninglessness with which my death-of-God experience had left me.**”¹⁴ Keith Ward, philosopher and former Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, describes his own stage of atheism as a result of his rejection of fundamentalism: “At first my reaction against fundamentalism led me to say that I was an atheist—I certainly knew all the philosophical

¹¹ Fox, “My Journey Living and Teaching Panentheism,” 152.

¹² Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, “The Seas Do Split: Dancing God’s Liberation,” 208.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁴ John B. Cobb Jr., “God is Compassion and Agape,” 83.

arguments against God.”¹⁵ Although atheism for Cobb, Ward and others was not a final *destination*, it was nevertheless an important *transitional phase* in their journeys.

In a different way, difficult spiritual transitions will not necessarily include either a medical diagnosis or atheistic rejection of God. Instead, it may be a frustrating call, sense or need one feels to completely change the direction of their life without having clear explanations. For theologian Ilia Delio, it was a stubborn call away from a lucrative career as a scientist to that of a shoeless Carmelite nun. This is no modest transition. To the dismay of her family and friends, she insists she could offer no “logical explanation” for this decision. **“I really could not find words to adequately explain why I decided to decline a postdoc at Hopkins in order to enclose myself in a monastery devoted to prayer and physical labor...I was impelled to leave everything I had worked for and enter the uncharted territories of the spiritual life.”**¹⁶ These three examples offer a glimpse of the difficulties or dark nights that may be inherent in spiritual journeys.

The Value of Intellectual Curiosity

*“My healing entered through the work of the mind...”*¹⁷ If the spiritual journey inevitably includes uncertain transitions, disenchantment and dark nights of the soul, how is it that people find their way forward? What path leads to reenchantment? Certainly, there is not one answer to this question. What stimulates a way through difficult times for individuals will vary. For many of the authors, however, it was novel intellectual discoveries: the “work of the mind” functioned as a mode of healing. Their desire to continue reading and exploring different ways of thinking about the world opened completely new horizons of understanding. It is important to realize that the “spiritual” journey is often just as much an “intellectual” journey. For John Cobb this was a process of essentially “trying on different worldviews.”¹⁸ Suchocki too insists that she would “try philosophies on, like a garment...”¹⁹ This metaphor is a helpful way of stating the value of intellectual curiosity. **Each author discovered new figures and writings that would clothe their journeys anew.**

For Matthew Fox and Rupert Sheldrake, Bede Griffiths and the Christian mystical writings were essential. For Ilia Delio, it was the mystical thought of Bonaventure and the evolutionary vision of the Jesuit scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. For Richard Rohr it was the traditions of the “Desert Fathers and Mothers,” as well as such figures as Julian of Norwich, Nicholas von der Flue, and Meister Eckhart. For Cynthia Bourgeault, it was the brilliance of Raimon Panikkar. For Loriliai Biernacki, it was Indian philosopher Abhinavagupta and the writings of the Tantric

¹⁵ Keith Ward, “From Yemen to Oxford: My Journey to the God of Personal Idealism,” 69.

¹⁶ Ilia Delio, “The Entagled God of My Heart,” 45.

¹⁷ Artson, “The Seas Do Split: Dancing God’s Liberation,” 216.

¹⁸ Cobb, “God is Compassion and Agape,” 86;

¹⁹ Suchocki, “God: Autobiographical,” 175.

Buddhist traditions. For Suchocki, Cobb, and Artson, it was the explosive relational vision of Alfred North Whitehead. **In telling their own spiritual narratives, these authors continually cite seminal figures, books, and intellectual breakthroughs that helped reenchant their spiritual journeys in ways they could have never predicted.** These intellectual findings actually paved the way for their rediscoveries of God.

The God of Inclusion and Immanence

*“...I discovered a God who is hidden and humble; a God of overflowing love in whom I live and move and who lives and moves in me.”*²⁰ Ilia Delio beautifully names the *kind* of God that emerges from the insights above and the journeys found in our book. These journeys are diverse, but a fascinating spiritual tapestry emerges, one that is woven together by a burgeoning theological vision.

This vision is often expressed by the rather odd term “panentheism.” From the Greek meaning “All-in-God,” panentheism is the view that the universe is *interior* to God, although God exceeds and is more than the universe. The divine reality is *inclusive of* and *immanent within* the universe, but can never be reduced to the universe itself. God is thus the *immanent-transcendent* reality in which we live and move and apart from which there is nothing. Rather than being exterior to the world, God is *in, among and through* the world as the intimate foundation of its being and the dynamic source of its becoming. This relationship is often described in mutually immanent ways: not only is God immanent in the becoming of the world, the world is also immanent in the becoming of God.

The authors echo this vision in beautiful ways. For Rabbi Artson, “...panentheism articulates the insight that the very universe sings with the breath of God, that God is...the very life of the cosmos.”²¹ For Ilia Delio, this is an “entangled” God, one who is “quite at home in a world of evolution, chaos, complexity, and emergence.”²² Matthew Fox insists that panentheism is an “ecological theology” precisely because it “restates the sacredness of all things, the Divine in-ness in all things...”²³ Keith Ward describes this God as the “all-enveloping spiritual reality which is the deepest nature of the cosmos itself.”²⁴ **God is not unrelated and static, but dynamic and participatory, inclusive of the experience of the world. In Deepak Chopra’s words, “God is a verb, not a noun,” a participant, as Cobb insists, “in every moment of...life.”**²⁵ These are only a few of the beautiful expressions of this theological vision. For those who wonder whether it is possible to return to “God” today, the fascinating journeys of these

²⁰ Delio, “The Entagled God of My Heart,” 60-61.

²¹ Artson, “The Seas Do Split: Dancing God’s Liberation,” 220.

²² Delio, “The Entagled God of My Heart,” 52.

²³ Fox, “My Journey Living and Teaching Panentheism,” 154.

²⁴ Ward, “My Journey to the God of Personal Idealism,” 74.

²⁵ Chopra, “Making God Necessary,” 126; Cobb, “God is Compassion and Agape,” 94.

authors answer affirmatively. **This God is not found in some people and some places, but in everyone and everywhere.**

Conclusion: Lessons for the Road Ahead

Spiritual journeys remain interior to individuals, but they are not meant to be walked alone. We gain much from trailing the personal paths of those leaders who have gone ahead of us. The terrain they have navigated offers insight into our own winding paths. I've focused briefly on five key insights from several personal narratives in *How I Found God in Everyone and Everywhere*. **These insights are aids for fellow travelers; they are different, but interconnected paths to spiritual depth. And when seen together they form five simply stated lessons for the road ahead:**

- 1. Pay attention to the wisdom of your experience.**
- 2. Spend more time in the natural world.**
- 3. Recognize dark nights, disenchantment and uncertainty as authentic to your journey.**
- 4. Be intellectually curious.**
- 5. You are within God and God is within you.**