

How to Get Closer to God ---Without Going to Church

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Introduction

This article chronicles my personal journey from a practicing Catholic to someone engaged in a self-styled spirituality. This spiritual framework took me over a decade to formulate, and it has no particular name; it consists of bits and pieces from many different sources. I hope in sharing my spiritual journey, I can help other people who are feeling a sense of dissatisfaction with traditional religions feel empowered to explore alternative views of God and the universe. I firmly believe that having a spiritual philosophy/practice that feels "right" is an essential ingredient to happiness and is what brings a person a profound sense of peace and feeling of belongingness in the universe. Here then is my journey; I hope it helps you find a path to a spirituality that works for you.

My Early Religious History

I guess you could say I had a connection to Catholicism before I was born into this world because I emerged into this world from a Catholic womb. My mother was raised Catholic and graduated from a Catholic high school. However, by the time she married my agnostic father at age twenty-three, she had drifted away from her Catholicism. She did not talk about how or why she drifted away from her Catholic roots. However, I ended up involved in Catholicism without any direct assistance from my mother. We lived in a Catholic neighborhood, so most of my friends were Catholic. My mother did not protest in any way (nor did my father) when I decided, at about age thirteen, to begin attending Catholic mass regularly at the small Catholic church in our neighborhood. This was the

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mid-sixties and the mass was still delivered in Latin. I loved going to mass. I loved the stained glass windows, the candles, and the altar. I loved the sense of belongingness and the feeling of being connected to God as I sat quietly in the pew listening to the organ.

I read the entire new testament several times by the age of fifteen and a good chunk of the old testament. I pretty much soaked up the view of God, Jesus, and the universe that was presented on the pages of the Bible. I believed in Heaven and Hell; I believed The Bible to be the word of God; and that Jesus was God's son sent to teach us about God's expectations. However, by the age of sixteen I began to have some doubts about a lot of these concepts. At first, I wasn't sure exactly what about them didn't feel right, but I began to feel more and more uncomfortable. I read, re-read, and re-read various chapters of The Bible. Whenever I read Jesus' teachings about forgiveness, unconditional love, or helping the poor, I would feel a deep conviction that these were truths of the universe which I, if I was going to find any peace and harmony, needed to live by. Yet there were other teachings that just did not feel quite right. I found it very difficult to sort out what made sense to me and what didn't.

It took me awhile to clarify my disagreements with Christianity because I was afraid that I would incur the wrath of Almighty God and burn in hellfire forever. How dare I even consider that some of the ideas in The Bible could be right and others not? Did I not understand that every word was divinely inspired straight from the all-knowing God the Father? By the time I had turned eighteen,

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birth-control pills were becoming popular (early 1970's) and my questioning mind began to ask: "If there is no chance of pregnancy, is it possible that sex outside of marriage would be okay?" No fault divorces laws were likewise being implemented, and it made sense to me that a person should be able to leave an unhappy marriage, particularly an abusive marriage without jeopardizing their spiritual salvation. As I began to question various lifestyle dictums of the Catholic Church, menacing voices turned on in my head. "Who do you think you are, Susan Mumm, questioning and negotiating right and wrong with God!!!" I agonized—perhaps the reason I was disagreeing with some of The Bible's teachings was that I was a weak sinner with no will power, clearly under the influence of Satan. Hopefully, I would come to my senses before God returned to this planet to gather up His obedient followers who had the good sense to follow His divine directives about how to live. I had better stop thinking about sinning; otherwise I would be gathered along with the rest of the sinning questioners and sent to my deserved Hell. So, I battled with my confusion. Was The Bible the divine word of God, or was it not? Somehow, after a lot of agonizing, I decided it was not. I sought other answers to my spiritual questions.

Re-conceptualizing God

One of the first things I desired was a different way of conceptualizing God. Feminism was in full tilt at this point in my life

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and feminist thought also prompted me to reconsider my ideas of God. I remember Helen Reddy winning the Grammy Award for her song "I Am Woman" in 1972 and wryly joking in her thank you speech, "...and lastly, I would like to thank God. She's been a great help all along the way." Having someone refer to God as someone other than a paternal, fatherly being was a real eye-opener for me. As I read more about feminism, patriarchy, and radical politics, I began to understand how and why God had come to be depicted as a powerful, omnipotent male figure.

As a budding feminist, I no longer felt comfortable with the idea of God being portrayed as a male. Therefore I did some exploring into what is known as "Feminist Spirituality." I began exploring Goddess-centered religions. I began reading books like The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of The Great Goddess by Starhawk (Harper-Collins,1979), The First Sex by Elizabeth Gould Davis (Viking Press,1972), and The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets by Barbara G. Walker (Harper-Collins,1983). It was a mind-boggling experience to learn that before the advent of patriarchy, there had been matriarchal societies. How startling to read that before Christianity, with its central theme of a male/father ruler/creator of the universe, there had been religions which depicted the universe as being created and maintained by a female Goddess! Moreover, these Goddess-centered religions were common throughout the world for many, many centuries. Some of my more radical feminist friends were exploring Witchcraft, there having been a

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resurgence in this Goddess-centered religion. Some of my friends became witches with their own covens, rituals, etc.

However, after doing a great deal of reading in feminist spirituality, I found I had some major disagreements with many of the basic concepts. As I read the creation myths and religious concepts of Goddess-centered religions, I observed a lot of reverse sexism. I had become very sensitized to the subtleties of sexism from learning to recognize anti-female sexism, and thus I was very aware of the anti-male bias that I continually found in the Goddess-centered religions. Exploring these ancient religions made me aware of whole segments of history where women had dominated religion and politics. I was shocked, however, to discover again and again that women had treated men with the same disregard, disrespect, and inequality of which men in this age are guilty. It appeared to me that throughout history there had been a spiral of dominance/oppression, with the role of oppressor and oppressed flipping back and forth between men and women. I felt deep in my soul that the time at last was here when the potential existed for men and women to break out of this destructive cycle of sexism and power struggle and come to peace. Sonja Johnson expressed this sentiment well in her book From Housewife to Heretic:

"But personally I am not willing to replace the patriarchal Old Testament God with the matriarchal one that preceded him....What is the use of exchanging one brand of sexism for another? Many women who are sensitive

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to the phenomenon of god-discovery going on are also concerned lest we women, in our turn, exclude men from deity as men have so devastatingly excluded us.

Now that we are undertaking the long overdue reorganization of heaven, we must make sure there is a model there, and a representative there, for every human being. Everyone must be empowered, because we have sons and husbands and brothers and fathers as well as sisters, mothers, and daughters. Surely we must hate disenfranchisement so much that we will never inflict it upon anyone else. None of us is free so long as anyone is oppressed."

Sonja Johnson, (1983) From Housewife to Heretic. New York, NY: Doubleday, pp.378-79.

I thus had to reject both Christianity because of its sexism against women, and Goddess-centered religions because of their sexism against men. I was interested in a religion/spirituality that was free of sexism. In order to view God in non-sexist terms I evolved away from the idea of God being a personality at all. Rather I began to see God as more of an energy. I was finding it difficult to define for myself what exactly God was, yet I sensed there was something out there that created and kept the universe in harmony. Finally, I happened upon a definition of God that put into words what I was struggling to conceptualize in a book entitled Seth Speaks: The Eternal Validity of the Soul by Jane Roberts. Jane Roberts was (she died in 1984)

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a psychic from Elmira, New York, who, with her husband Robert Butts, wrote a substantial number of books. Jane believed herself to be a channel for an entity from another dimension named "Seth". If the idea of communicating with entities from other dimensions sounds unbelievable to you, I understand--it did to me too. However, a friend finally convinced me to read one of the Seth books. I found the ideas presented by Jane Roberts in regard to God, death, afterlife, reincarnation, right and wrong, etc., to make more sense to me than anything else I'd ever read. I really liked the concepts portrayed; that each person is responsible for his/her life on this planet with no intervention from God. I'm not convinced one way or the other as to whether entities from other dimensions exist and/or contact us. However, the overall philosophy expressed by Jane Roberts makes a lot of inherent sense to me whether or not she really was channeling an entity named "Seth". *[I figure the books have got to have a certain level of merit because Harvard University procured all of Jane Robert's works for their library when she died.]*

If you have an interest; check out the following books: Seth Speaks: The Eternal Validity of the Soul, The Nature of Personal Reality, and The Individual and the Nature of Mass Events (Prentice-Hall 1972,1974,1981). Here is Jane Robert's (as Seth) definition of God:

[Please disregard the sexist language, e.g., "man" for humanity, "he" for she/he. Seth repeatedly makes references to the fact that

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he uses these sexist terms to speed dictation. He states several times that God is neither male nor female.]

..When you consider the question of a supreme being, you imagine a male personality with those abilities that you yourself possess, with great emphasis upon qualities you admire. This imagined god has therefore changed throughout your centuries mirroring man's shifting ideas of himself.

God was seen as cruel and powerful when man believed that these were desirable characteristics, needed particularly in his battle for physical survival. He projected these upon his idea of a god because he envied them and feared them. You have cast your idea of God, therefore, in your own image.

In a reality that is inconceivably multidimensional, the old concepts of God are relatively meaningless. Even the term, a supreme being, is in itself distortive, for you naturally project the qualities of human nature upon it. If I told you that God was an idea, you would not understand what I meant, for you do not understand the dimensions in which an idea has its reality, or the energy that it can originate and propel. You do not believe in ideas in the same way that you believe in physical objects, so if I tell you that God is an idea, you will misinterpret this to mean that God is less than real--nebulous, without reality, without purpose, and without motive action.

Now your own physical image is the materialization of your idea of yourself

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within the properties of matter. Without the idea of yourself, your physical image would not be; yet often it is all you are aware of. The initial power and energy of that idea of yourself keeps your image alive. Ideas, then, are far more important than you realize. If you will try to accept the idea that your own existence is multidimensional, that you dwell within the medium of infinite probabilities, then you may catch a slight glimpse of the reality that is behind the word "god", and you may understand why it is almost impossible to capture a true understanding of that concept in words.

God, therefore, is first of all a creator, not of one physical universe, but of an infinite variety of probable existences, far more vast than those aspects of the physical universe with which your scientists are familiar. He did not simply then send a son to live and die on one small planet. He is a part of all probabilities

...God is more than the sum of all the probable systems of reality He has created, and yet He is within each one of these, without exception. He is therefore within each man and woman. He is also within each spider, shadow, and frog, and that is what man does not like to admit.

God can only be experienced, and you experience Him whether or not you realize it, through your own existence. He is not male or female, however, and I use the term only for convenience's sake. In the most inescapable truth, He is not human in your terms at all, nor in your terms is He a personality. Your ideas of

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personality are too limited to contain the multitudinous facets of His multi-dimensional existence.

On the other hand, He is human, in that He is a portion of each individual; and within the vastness of His experience

He holds an "idea-shape" of Himself as human, to which you can relate. He literally was made flesh to dwell among you, for He forms your flesh in that He is responsible for the energy that gives vitality and validity to your private multidimensional self....

...All That Is [this is Seth's word for God] is not done and finished. All That Is simultaneously and unendingly creates Itself. ...There is no "perfect ending," no completed perfection beyond which further experience is impossible or meaningless. All That Is is a source of infinite and unending simultaneous action. Everything happens at once, and yet there is no beginning and end to it in your terms, so it is not completed in your terms at any given point.

Your idea of development and growth, again, implies a one-line march towards perfection, so it would be difficult for you to imagine the kind of order that pervades. Ultimately a completed or finished God, or All That Is, would end up smothering His creation. For perfection presupposes that point beyond which development is impossible, and creativity at an end.

There would be an order in which only predestination could rule, each part fitting in with a particular order without freedom to change the pattern given it. There is

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order, but within this order there is freedom--the freedom of creativity, that characteristic of All That Is, that guarantees Its infinite becoming.

Now in that infinite becoming, there are states that you would call perfected, but had creativity rested within them, all of experience would be destined to grind to a halt. Yet this great complexity is not unwieldy; it is as simple, in fact, as a seed."

Jane Roberts (1972) Seth Speaks; The Eternal Validity of the Soul. pp. 240-2, 245, 356.

Reading the Seth books was an important catalyst in helping me to redefine God in a way that made sense to me. Seth's ideas of God being a creative energy, or idea, was a much more workable concept to me than the Father personality type God of Christianity. Being prompted by Seth to reconceptualize God as an energy, as opposed to a personified deity, also impelled me to reconsider all of the characteristics of God I had learned from Christianity.

The first characteristic of God that I began reconsidering, after letting go of the concept of God as a male father figure, was the idea of a wrathful God who demanded blind obedience. That concept permeates The Bible from Adam and Eve throughout the chapters. The very idea of a God who sends a messenger to tell us how to live is a God who expects obedience. Over and over again I wondered why God would have given me this questioning mind, a mind that longs to come to my own conclusions as a result of my own

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experiences, and then expect and want me not to use it. How could God expect human beings not to follow that unquenchable desire to learn for themselves, to continue to interpret reality? Why would God damn me to Hell for thinking for myself? How could the purpose of this existence be to overcome all my desires to think and question and to become an obedient follower of every word of The Bible, in order to someday go to Heaven? And what would I do in Heaven anyway--play harps all day, having finally acquired "bliss", like Winston Smith in George Orwell's famous novel Nineteen Eighty-Four after he had given up thinking and fighting? Somehow I didn't buy it. I wanted to move away from the idea of a wrathful, obedience-demanding God. Around this time, a friend gave me a poetry book by James Kavanaugh. I found this poem, in which the poet expresses so beautifully his sense of freedom upon letting go of the God of his Christian upbringing, very helpful and inspiring.

My Easy God Is Gone

*I have lost my easy God--the one whose name
I knew since childhood.
I knew his temper, his sullen outrage, his
ritual forgiveness.
I knew the strength of his arm, the sound
of his insistent voice.
His beard bristling, his lips full and red
with moisture at the moustache,
His eyes clear and piercing, too blue
to understand all,
His face too unwrinkled to feel my
child's pain.*

My Easy God is Gone
James Kavanaugh
(Continued)

*He was a good God--so he told me--
a long suffering and manageable one.
I knelt at his feet and kissed them,
I felt the smooth countenance of his
forgiveness.
I never told him how he frightened me,
How he followed me as a child
When I played with friends or begged
for candy on Halloween.*

*He was a predictable God, I was the
unpredictable one.
He was unchanging, omnipotent, all-seeing,
I was volatile and helpless.
He taught me to thank him for the concern
which gave me no chance to breathe,
For the love which demanded only love in
return--and obedience.*

*He made pain sensible and patience possible
and the future foreseeable.
He, the mysterious, took all mystery away,
corroded my imagination,
Controlled the stars and would not let
them speak for themselves.*

*Now he haunts me seldom: some fierce
umbilical is broken,
I live with my own fragile hopes and
sudden rising despair.
Now I do not weep for my sins; I have
learned to love them
And to know that they are the wounds that
make love real.*

My Easy God is Gone
James Kavanaugh
(Continued)

*His face eludes me; his voice, with all
its pity, does not ring in my ear.
His maxims memorized in boyhood do not
make fruitless and pointless my experience.
I walk alone, but not so terrified as when
he held my hand.
I do not splash in the blood of his son
nor hear the crunch of nails or thorns
piercing protesting flesh.*

*I am a boy again--I whose boyhood was
turned to manhood in a brutal myth.
Now wine is only wine with drops that do
not taste of blood.
The bread I eat has too much pride for
transubstantiation,
I, too--and together the bread and I embrace,
Each grateful to be what we are, each loving
from our own reality.
Now the bread is warm in my mouth and
I am warm in its mouth as well.*

*Now my easy God is gone--he knew too
much to be real,
He talked too much to listen, he knew
my words before I spoke.
But I knew his answers as well--computerized
and turned to dogma
His stamp was on my soul, his law locked
cross-like on my heart.
His imperatives tattooed on my breast, his
aloofness canonized in ritual.*

*Now he is gone--my easy, stuffy God--God,
the father-master, the mother-whiner, the
Dull, whoring God who offered love bought
by an infant's fear.*

My Easy God is Gone
James Kavanaugh
(Continued)

*Now the world is mine with all its pain and
warmth, with its every color and sound;
The setting sun is my priest with the ocean
for its altar.
The rising sun redeems me with the rolling
waves warmed in its arms.*

*A dog barks and I weep to be alive, a
cat studies me and my joy is boundless.
I lie on the grass and boy-like, search the sky.
The clouds do not turn to angels, the winds do not
whisper of heaven or hell.
Perhaps I have no God--what does it matter?
I have beauty and joy and transcending loneliness,*

*I have the beginning of love--as beautiful as it
is feeble--as free as it is human.
I have the mountains that whisper secrets
held before men could speak,
I have the ocean that belches life on
the beach and caresses it in the sand.
I have a friend who smiles when he sees
me, who weeps when he hears my pain,
I have a future full of surprises,
a present full of wonder.*

*I have no past--the steps have disappeared
the wind has blown them away.
I stand in the Heavens and on earth, I
feel the breeze in my hair.
I can drink to the North Star and shout
on a bar stool,
I can feel the teeth of a hangover, the
joy of laziness,
The flush of my own rudeness, the surge of
my own ineptitude.*

My Easy God is Gone
James Kavanaugh
(Continued)

*And I can know my own gentleness as well,
my wonder, my nobility.
I sense the call of creation, I feel its
swelling in my hands.
I can lust and love, eat and drink, sleep
and rise,
But my easy God is gone--and in his stead
The mystery of loneliness and love!*

*James Kavanaugh, There Are Men Too Gentle
to Live Among Wolves. Copyright (1970) by
James Kavanaugh. Reprinted by permission
of James Kavanaugh.*

Like James Kavanaugh so eloquently expresses, I found that, as I became free of my obedience-demanding Christian God, my view of the entire universe, and my role within it, became transformed. I was ready to replace my old "easy God" with a new God. This new God I was learning about wasn't interested in dictating my feelings, thoughts or life. This new God of mine hadn't dictated all of life's answers into a "Holy Book" and wasn't going to be awaiting me at death to judge whether or not I had followed the directives to His satisfaction. Rather, this new God of mine had blessed me with the freedom to experience life in my unique way and find my own answers and path. What an awesome responsibility to suddenly be confronted with. This new God was wonderful and exciting yet also mind-boggling as Jane Roberts describes in the Seth books:

Re-Conceptualizing God (Continued)

"I do not tell you that a God is waiting for you on the other side of a golden door. I do not reassure you by telling you that when you are dead, God will be waiting for you in all His majestic mercy, and that that will be the end of your responsibility. And so as I said last evening, in my latest chapter, I offer no hope for the lazy, for they will not find eternal rest.

However, through traveling within yourselves, you will discover the unity of your consciousness with other consciousnesses. You will discover the multi-dimensional love and energy that gives consciousness to all things. This will not lead you to want to rest upon the proverbial blessed bosom. It will instead inspire you to take a better hand in the job of creation; and that feeling of divine presence you will find indeed, and feel indeed, for you will sense it behind the dance of the molecules, and in yourselves and in your neighbors.

What so many want is a God who walks down the street and says, "Happy Sunday! I am I, follow me." But God is hidden craftily in His creations, so that He is what they are and they are what He is; and in knowing them, you know him.

...You are the power of God manifested. You are not powerless. To the contrary. Through your being the power of God is strengthened, for you are a portion of what He is. You are not simply an insignificant, innocuous clump of clay through which He decided to show Himself. You are He manifesting as you. You are as legitimate as He is. If you are

Re-Conceptualizing God (Continued)

a part of God then He is also a part of you, and in denying your own worth you end up denying His as well. I do not like to use the term "He", meaning God, since All That Is [This is Seth's word for God.] is the origin of not only all sexes but of all realities, in some of which sex as you think of it does not exist.

...You do not have to die to find God. All That Is, is now, and you are a part of All That Is now. As I have told you often, you are a spirit now. The avenues for development are open now.

...You are a multidimensional personality. Trust the miracle of your own being. Make no divisions between the physical and the spiritual in your lifetimes, for the spiritual speaks with a physical voice and the corporeal body is the creation of the spirit.

Do not place the words of gurus, ministers, priests, scientists, psychologists, friends -- or my words-- higher than the feelings of your own being. You can learn much from others, but the deepest knowledge must come from within yourself.

...Trust no person who tells you that you are evil or guilty by reason of your nature or your physical existence, or any such dogma. Trust no one who leads you away from the reality of yourself. Do not follow those who tell you that you must do penance, in whatever form. Trust instead the spontaneity of your own being and the life that is your own.

...Your own consciousness is embarked upon a reality that basically can be experienced by no other, that is unique

Re-Conceptualizing God (Continued)

and untranslatable, with its own meaning, following its own paths of becoming.

You share an existence with others who are experiencing their own journeys, in their own ways, and you have journeying in common, then. Be kind to yourself and to your companions.

...I close by saying, as I have said before: You are given the gift of the gods; you create your reality according to your beliefs; yours is the creative energy that makes your world; there are no limitations to the self except those you believe in.

...You create your life through the inner power of your being, whose source is within you and yet beyond the selves that you know. Use those creative abilities with understanding abandon. Honor yourselves and move through the godliness of your being."

Jane Roberts, Seth Speaks; The Eternal Validity of the Soul, (1972), pp. 480, 482. The Nature of Personality, (1974), pp. 482 506, 508, 509

At this point in time I of course stopped believing in Jesus as "the Christ" in the way portrayed in Christianity. I came to think of Jesus as a human being who was able to assimilate more God energy that 95% of humanity is able to do. I also came to believe that there have been other human beings who also manifested the God energy to the level Jesus did i.e. the Buddha. Likewise, I think of people like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela (to name a few) as people who manifested the God energy in

Re-Conceptualizing God (Continued)

much the same way as Jesus. As I mentioned earlier, I now conceptualize God as an energy and I believe that we can all be transmitters of the God energy; obviously most of us do not manifest the God energy to the degree Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi or Mandela did in their lifetimes. Hopefully though, through dedicated spiritual practice, we all can learn to open ourselves up more fully to God energy.

After I stopped attending Catholic religious services, I did some exploring in other religions. I briefly explored Judaism. I was attracted to Judaism because of its assertion that Jesus was not "the Christ." However, I realized I had major differences with Judaism, too. I had come to disagree with the concept of a Christ at all. Though Jews do not believe Jesus to be the Christ, they believe that there will someday be a messiah who will come to us. I disagreed with the concept of a messiah. I also found I had a lot of the same disagreements with Judaism that I had with Christianity. I was turned off by the sexism, hierarchical structure, and rigidity of Judaism.

Around this time, I was introduced to the Universalist Unitarian Church. This church was much more compatible with my evolving spiritual beliefs. There is little dogma; the spiritual beliefs of Unitarians are varied, ranging from atheism to semi-Christian, to individualized, religious theories. Furthermore, there is no pressure put on anyone to conform to a particular set of beliefs. Universalist Unitarian churches are each set up as a member-owned and operated democracy--one person, one vote. They elect their board of directors and hire and fire their own ministers.

Alternatives To Church

U.U. churches hold many interesting discussion groups about a variety of subjects in addition to the regular Sunday services. Instead of celebrating traditional Christian holidays, e.g. Christmas and Easter, Unitarians tend to celebrate the solstices and equinoxes. I liked lots and lots of things about Universalist Unitarian Church. I highly recommend the Unitarian Church to anybody looking for an alternative to Christianity. However, I eventually decided that a formal church of any kind was not quite the right fit for me. I wanted something a little more informal, and something that felt more like a peer group.

My last attempt to participate in an organized religious group was with the Quaker Society of Friends. Several of my friends were familiar with the structure of the Quaker Society of Friends and suggested I explore the Friends Society in Ann Arbor where I live. I was extremely impressed with the structure of their worship services. Their meetings are held in circles, and all members participate. There is no minister, and facilitation of the meeting is rotated. However, I found that the Quaker Society of Friends was still too tied to Christianity for me. Their structure is very different from typical Christian churches, but far too many of their ideas still revolve around the concept of Jesus being the one and only Christ. I found, therefore, that I was not satisfied attending Friends' meetings either. It felt like the Quaker Society of Friends were trying to re-package and upgrade Christianity, yet they were still inside the box. I wanted out of the confining box of Christianity.

After exploring the various churches

Alternatives To Church (Continued)

described above, I concluded that I couldn't be satisfied with any of them because my religious beliefs were too incompatible. I was therefore challenged to develop a replacement for the ritual of Sunday church service in my life. Initially, I even wondered whether the whole concept of coming together as a group made sense. Would I rather just go out in the woods every Sunday morning by myself and tune into God, or perhaps read a spiritual book every week? I eventually concluded that both spending time by myself meditating and reading, and coming together with a group of people to discuss spiritual/religious issues, were important to have as part of my life. I could learn a lot from turning inward, but I could also benefit greatly from exchanging ideas with other people. I became interested in setting up a spiritual study group in which we, as a group, could explore an infinite variety of spiritual teachings and get in touch with the divinity in ourselves.

I therefore organized a potluck dinner & discussion group. I jokingly told all my friends that if they had grown tired and bored with blasé and superficial dinner party conversation, I had just the thing for them. I sent out an invitation which said something like this:

You are invited to a dinner/discussion group. Bring a dish to share. Topic for the evening will be:

— *Do you believe in an after-life? Why or why not?*

Alternatives To Church (Continued)

- *Describe what you think existence is like after death.*
- *How you think this life affects what happens to you after you die?*

The night was a smashing success and I continued having the dinner/discussion groups for quite a while. I introduced a variety of topics and 6-10 people showed up for Sue Mumm's "kookie" dinner parties twice a month. It was amazing how eagerly people responded to the opportunity to share their innermost feelings and philosophical introspections. Here are some other questions I used:

- *Do you believe in a God? Share your definition of God.*
- *Do you believe God intervenes in human affairs? Do you feel you have ever communicated with God? Describe.*
- *Do you believe God sends messengers Or spiritual teachers, i.e., Jesus, or others?*
- *You were informed this week that you are terminally ill and have only a month to live. You have been asked to speak for a half-hour on what you consider the most important spiritual insights you have reached in your life.*
- *Do you believe in reincarnation? Do you have any memory of former lives?*
- *Have you ever had an "out of body" experience?*

Alternatives To Church (Continued)

As it turned out, other people were forming similar groups all around the country. A significant number of people were reaching the same conclusions that I had; they were interested in discovering and formulating their own spiritual answers based on their life experiences.

I have participated in many groups through the years. Participating in these groups has greatly enhanced my growth on a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual level. I have found that coming together with a group of other people to share insights provides me with the opportunity to glimpse reality in constantly new and exciting ways. By exchanging perceptions with other people, I am continually reaching a new understanding of myself and how I fit into the universe. An Attunement Group is a wonderfully supportive and stimulating atmosphere in which participants can discover the "Godself" within.

Summary

In closing, I need to throw out one confession about my spiritual beliefs: My spiritual philosophies are not written in stone, and I actually have periods when I get into an "all bets are off" state of mind and rehash my spiritual premises. There are times I wonder "What if the Atheists are right, and there really is no God and no life after this one? Other times I ask myself "What if the people who believe in reincarnation are right and this is but one lifetime of many?" And I even still ask sometimes "What if the Christians are right and I meet God the Father at the pearly gates and he asks me why I

Summary (Continued)

doubted Christianity?" Strangely enough when I have these periods of wondering which of all the faiths will prove to be the correct one, it is actually not all that troubling to me to not know for certain which one is correct. I guess I have ended up with an "all roads lead to Rome" religious philosophy, meaning I really would not live my life on this earth much differently whether I live life as an atheist, a reincarnationist, or a Christian.

As an atheist, I would want to spend my life helping humanity evolve to its fullest heights because I think there is a great peace and happiness to be found in doing so. I would want to make a contribution to humanity so that the spirit of who I was would live on in future generations. I would want to lead a moral life, even if I knew there was no God to punish me if I didn't, because it gives me a sense of dignity and self respect to be the best person I can.

If I felt certain that this incarnation was but one of many I will have, I would not spend this life any differently. If there are more lives to come, I assume that the more I progress in this lifetime, the more capable I will become of creating an even greater reality for myself the next time around. Even if I have two thousand more lifetimes coming, it does not diminish my sense of wonder about this one. If I will meet the people I share this planet with in future lifetimes, that just reinforces my commitment to try and assist others in their efforts to become the best they can be. If we help one another evolve into better people, perhaps in another lifetime we will be able to create a more Utopian society, a society free of war, poverty, and all the negative things we

Summary (Continued)

create in our ignorance and greed.

However many lifetimes I am given I must use each one to grow and evolve day by day, year by year, and help my fellow human beings to do the same.

If the Christians turn out to be right, God might be mad at me for having sex outside of marriage, divorcing, lying occasionally, and perhaps diverging a bit from a few other of Jesus' teachings. But I also think God would be pleased with much of my life. He would see that I lived many of the teachings of Christianity. I limited my material consumption so I could give to the poor and less fortunate. I was forgiving and loving and nurturing to my fellow human beings. I was basically honest, honored my parents, I respected my body by eating healthy food, I turned the other cheek when people lashed out at me in anger and tried to help humanity learn to find peaceful solutions to conflict.

So, I have discovered that spiritual questioning is a lifelong endeavor! As I discussed above, I believe that a great first step to developing your own spiritual philosophy is to participate in a group with other people who are also looking for answers and insights. On the following pages, I have put together information to help you get a spiritual attunement group started. There is a list of the various formats for attunement groups, and a list of recommended topics you may want to use to get the group started. I think you will be amazed at how eagerly your friends and acquaintances will respond to an invitation to join a group.

Let me add that deciding not to participate in the ritual of going to church every Sunday was just a first step. I also

Summary (Continued)

became discontent with rituals of our culture such as weddings and funerals, and many holiday celebrations, as they are of course Christian in nature. Along with my break with Christianity, I also experienced a lot of changes in my political beliefs. The political climate of the 1960's and 1970's prompted me to re-examine many of my political beliefs. Feminism, the anti-war/world peace movement, Watergate, world hunger awareness, nuclear threat, the "Black Power" movement, the sexual revolution, Bucky Fuller's idea of "Spaceship Earth", the ecology and "Back to the Earth" movements--these revolutionary ideas and events radically altered my political views. All this deep soul searching led me to self-publish a book originally entitled: The Rituals Resource Book—Alternative Weddings, Funerals, Holidays & Other Rites of Passage. All the chapters of that book are available on this website.

On the following pages are guidelines for setting up a spiritual attunement group. With resources like craigslist.org and Meet-Up.org, it should be very easy to set up a group and find lots of interested participants!

Guidelines For Putting Together A Spiritual Attunement Group

Introduction

As I outlined above, as I continued to find that I had more and more disagreements with Christianity I grew discontent with attending traditional churches. The ways I perceived God and the relationship that I believed existed between God and humanity was

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

fundamentally different from the concepts Christianity taught. I also no longer perceived Jesus to have been a Christ, that is, a special messenger from God. In addition, my views about after-life, ethics, the purpose of life, male/female relationships etc., were in direct opposition to Christianity.

I also came to disagree with the whole concept of a clergy. I no longer believed that clergy people had some special channel to God. I thus found the hierarchical structure of the churches unnecessary, and stifling. Finding myself so completely at odds with Christianity, I made a decision to find a replacement for Christian church services in my life.

Step 1: Deciding on the Format of the Group Meetings

There are many different formats that groups can use. Let me discuss a few of the most common.

Discussion Format

Groups that use the discussion format come together to explore a particular topic(s) in which they are mutually interested. Often affinity groups focus on religious or spiritual topics similar to the ones I used in my potluck discussion groups described above. Groups might discuss questions such as the following:

Religious/Philosophical Topics

– Do you believe in a God? Share your perceptions of God.

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

- *Do you believe in an after-life? What do you envision it to be like?*
- *Do you believe in the concept of Heaven and Hell? Explain.*
- *Do you believe in reincarnation?*
- *Do you believe in the concept of sin? Give five examples of what you would consider sins.*
- *Do you believe there are two diametric forces--Good and Evil--operating in the universe? Explain.*
- *Reincarnation theories teach that in each lifetime the soul is incarnated to work through particular issues. What spiritual issues and challenges do you feel you are working on in this incarnation?*
- *Most of the religions throughout history have spoken of the need to live a non-materialistic, "voluntary simplicity" lifestyle in order to find spiritual enlightenment. What are your thoughts on this?*

Many spirituality groups also branch out into lifestyle questions as well, because most people who participate in these kinds of groups do not believe that God has handed down particular lifestyle directives. Thus, group members are interested in using the group as a vehicle for sharing theories and insights to form their own conclusions about a variety of lifestyle issues. Examples of questions groups may address are:

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

Relationship Topics

- *How do you think extended families can remain close with one another despite differences in lifestyles and religious or political beliefs?*
- *What ideas do you have about how to maintain a vibrant and satisfying long-term love relationship or marriage?*
- *What criteria do you use in deciding to add the dimension of sexuality to a relationship?*
- *Do you feel yourself to be part of a community? What activities do you engage in that help build a strong sense of community?*
- *Under what circumstances would you consider divorce?*

Questions that generally help people get more in touch with who they are and where they are going with their lives are also excellent topics for groups. I have concluded, from my various group experiences, that the line between religion and psychology is often blurry, and thus, spirituality groups often borrow self-awareness exercises from the personal growth movement. One of the most popular is called "Values Clarification." Values Clarification was developed by Louis Rath. The method was popularized in the book Values Clarification; A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students (Simon,

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1978). The concept is amazingly simple yet unbelievably effective. Here are some examples:

Values Clarification questions:

- *If you had a million dollars to spend, how would you spend it?*
- *What are twenty things you love to do?*
- *If you had five years to live, how would you spend it? A week? A year?*
- *List three goals you would like to accomplish in the next year. The next five. The next ten. The next twenty.*
- *What do you consider the five greatest accomplishments of your life so far?*

Another popular "personal growth" exercise is called "sentence completion." This concept was invented and popularized by Dr. Nathaniel Branden in his books *If You Could Hear What I Cannot Say* (Bantam Books, 1983), and *To See What I See and Know What I Know: A Guide to Self-Discovery* (Bantam Books, 1985). In sentence completion, group members share their answers to uncompleted sentences. Here are a few examples from the latter book.

- *As I learn to listen to my own inner signals...*
- *As I look back over my life...*

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

— *I see life as...*

— *One of the things I want in a relationship and have never found is...*

— *It's not easy for me to admit that...*

— *If the child in me could speak he/she might say...*

— *If I were willing to express my love more fully...*

— *If I were fully comfortable with my sexuality...*

— *The hard thing about being a man (or woman) is...*

— *If I were to take full responsibility for my own existence...*

— *If I were to allow myself to become more in touch with my own power...*

Most groups rotate the task of thinking up an inspiring topic for the week among members. It's amazing to see all the interesting things people can find to talk to one another about!

Group Study Format

Groups that use this format are similar to a college seminar, except that there is no professor or leader. The group decides on a given list of books or articles to read and discuss together. I have participated in several such groups and found them very stimulating.

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

Guest Speaker Format

In this kind of group, the group members invite guest speakers to come and address the group. The group then uses the information generated from the lectures for further discussion and exploration among themselves. Usually the group members share the cost of paying the guest speaker, i.e. \$10.00 each. Examples of speakers a group might invite include therapists, political activists, poets, philosophy professors, psychic mediums, and alternative health practitioners.

Action Format

Groups working together on projects that are a manifestation of shared spiritual faith fall into this category. Some common examples would be groups that work to alleviate world hunger, peace activist groups, and groups which protest the building of nuclear plants, or destruction of the environment. Many of these groups meet together on a regular basis for support and spiritual attunement. The political activism of the group is thus an outgrowth of weekly group meetings. To give you a better sense of this type of group I have included a statement of purpose drafted by a group of peace activists. Calling themselves "Covenant For Peace", they are very politically active regarding peace issues in the Detroit area.

Covenant for Peace Mission Statement

*We are unique human beings linked
with all of creation,
And gathered from diverse places,
to share a ministry of peace,
to challenge hopefully
to work for harmony and freedom.*

*We believe in an internal Source,
an ever moving one.
Who creates and is creating
Who keeps covenant with humankind
Whose will for us is to choose life.*

*We believe in this creator's sustaining Presence
and transforming Power,
Who dwells among us in clarity and mystery
Who inspires us individually and corporately,
Who challenges, prods and emboldens.*

*We believe our believing affects
Our daily working and talking
Our decisions and choice making
Our responses to persons and systems.
We are people in the process of change.
We are moving; we are on our way.*

*We are seeking the promise of life and hope
amid the symbols of our past
and the experience of our present.
We seek wholeness--in our lives,
in our relationships, in our community.
We seek--the sisterhood of man, the
brotherhood of womanhood.*

*We want no part of power that is
death-dealing,
that dominates, oppresses and kills.*

Covenant for Peace Mission Statement (Continued)

*We want to participate in the power that is
life supporting,
that is grounded
in the sense of human solidarity.
We are moving, we are on our way, we
celebrate our struggle.*

*So in the midst of exploitation and oppression,
We dare this day to celebrate the Power.
In the midst of despair and indifference,
We dare this day to celebrate the Hope.
In the midst of pain and violence,
We dare this day to celebrate the Words.
In the midst of a machine-made society
We dare this day to celebrate the People.
In the midst of fear, "national security,"
and the reality of death,
We dare this day to celebrate the Life.
And we intend in these days
to raise questions hopefully,
and to work for justice,
peace, and freedom lovingly.*

*Covenant For Peace
Reprinted with permission.*

Your group may find after meeting together regularly for some time that you want to work on some projects together.

STEP 2: Dealing With Group Facilitation Issues

Some groups operate with no person designated as the facilitator. However, most groups rotate the facilitation role within the group. If some members have more

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

experience directing groups, then it is useful to have experienced group members facilitate the first few meetings so that the inexperienced members can observe the process before attempting it themselves.

Since the function of the group leader in these kinds of groups is very low key, with a little training and effort, all participants can do a competent job of leading the group. The main functions of the group facilitator are ensuring that all group members get an opportunity to express themselves; assisting the group in coming to agreement about how they want to use their time together; and helping the group to stay focused on their agreed-upon goals and purposes.

Step 3: Deciding On The Logistics Of The Group Meetings

The last important step in forming a group is to decide on the logistics of how often you will meet, and where, and how many members to have in the group. Where a group meets is a very important consideration, particularly if you want group members to feel comfortable exploring deep feelings. Children, spouses or roommates coming and going can be extremely disruptive to the group discussion/interaction.

How often the group will meet is very important to decide at the outset. To some people, it is important that the group meet frequently, i.e. once a week. For other people whose lives are jammed with time commitments, monthly meetings work much better. Some groups choose to limit their size to 8-10 people in order to provide a small group setting. Other groups have open

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

membership and break into small sub-groups as necessary. I knew of a spirituality group that had a membership which ranged from 30-100 people. This group broke up into subgroups when they met twice monthly.

I want to comment briefly upon the subject of personal growth/spirituality groups with professional facilitators. Some therapists, counselors, or spiritual teachers offer "self-exploration" or "spiritual enhancement" types of groups, in which the participants are charged a weekly fee, and the counselor facilitates the group for a designated length of time, i.e. ten weeks. These groups are also sometimes done as "weekend intensives." These kinds of groups can be a positive experience. I still look back on my experiences with the "Human Potential Seminars" in my college years quite fondly. However, I also have seen examples of structured group seminars/workshops or weekend marathons which I don't think are ultimately helpful to the participants.

There are a good number of structured group experiences in which the group leaders become elevated to the position of "expert." In the way that members of the clergy are held in esteem as having some special "in" with God and knowing more about spiritual matters than the rest of us, I have seen personal growth facilitators viewed as having a monopoly on the answers to happiness. Thus, group members can become dependent upon the group leader rather than being encouraged to find their own answers through a discovery of the God within.

I've seen the phenomenon of people becoming "addicted" to attending personal

Spiritual Attunement Groups (Continued)

growth groups or lectures by "spiritual gurus", and this seems as inappropriate as the hierarchical structure of the Christian churches. Thus, if you decide to participate in a "spiritual growth" group experience with a designated leader, make sure the purpose of the group experience is defined as providing a temporary step in the process of spiritual self-discovery, and that participants will be encouraged to explore autonomous avenues for growth in the future. **You do not need to spend thousands of dollars to become spiritually enlightened!** You can form a group of other interested people and together create a supportive environment for growth and enlightenment with minimal expense.

I firmly believe, from my own experiences in groups, that participating in groups is one of the best opportunities that exists for enhancing one's spiritual development. As I said earlier, if God resides within each of us, the more we come to know ourselves and one another, the more we come to know God. Meeting with other people in a group setting by whatever name is one of the best ways to better know and love both yourself and one another. Groups are the microcosm in which to practice manifesting all the ideals necessary to create the egalitarian, peaceful, and loving society which we all envision. Let me end this discussion of groups with a quote by Bhagwan Rajneesh, in which he captures so beautifully the value of group interaction for spiritual development:

Excerpt From The Path of Love

Bhagwan Rajneesh

"Life is in community. Life is a communion, so don't try to escape from the world, and don't try to remain in a solitary life. Because the richness is in the community; you are enriched by the community, by your relationships. The more you are related to people, the more you are rich. A solitary person living in a Himalayan cave is very poor, impoverished--because rivers of relationships don't flow inside him [or her]. He [she] becomes a desert.

...Each time somebody looks into you, a river flows in. Each time somebody shakes a hand with you, an energy moves in you. When you drop out of all contacts, out of all relationship, and you become a solitary monk in a Himalayan cave, you have almost committed suicide. You are only one percent alive.

When you don't want to relate with anybody, your contact with God is diminished, terribly diminished. When you come into relationship with another person, or with a tree, or with an animal, you are coming into contact with God in different forms. To be in community is the only way to be really alive. Relationship is life, and relationship is beautiful.

Just a few days ago a young man said to me, "I am meditating and great love is arising in me for humanity." I said, "For humanity"? How are you going to love humanity? Where will you find humanity? Humanity, you say? Human beings will be enough. Love a human being, not

**Excerpt from:
The Path of Love
Bhagwan Rajneesh
(Continued)**

humanity. "Humanity" is a trick of the head. Humanity? How will you love humanity? Where will you hug humanity? Where will you hold hands with humanity? You will always find a human being wherever you go; nowhere any humanity. Humanity is an ideology, a concept, an abstraction in the head. Life is always particular, the head is always conceptual. You will always find a certain human being, a man, a woman.

And when I said to the young man, "Love a human being," he was shocked. In fact, he was trying to escape into the "love humanity" to avoid human beings. No, he was not very happy when I said that. I could see in his eyes that he was not very happy--as if I had brought him down; he was flying very high. He was not flying at all; he was simply playing a verbal game.

If you love humanity, you can kill human beings to save humanity. If you love peace, you can go to war. Never love peace and never love democracy and never love Communism --all ideologies.

Love concrete human beings, love concrete trees, love concrete rocks, particulars... only then will you know what love is.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1978) The Path Of Love. Rajneesh Publications, Reprinted with permission.

Author's Note: I remember seeing news reports that Bhagwan Shree

**Excerpt from:
The Path of Love
Bhagwan Rajneesh
(Continued)**

Rajneesh was having sexual relations with many of his young female followers, and that he had collected a fleet of 30 Rolls Royces. I was saddened to see another brilliant mind become so corrupted by power. However, despite this, I still think Rajneesh's earlier writings contain tremendous wisdom.