

# “SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS...”

Challenges for the church in a post-religious culture

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## The Body as Church, the Church as Garden

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{ recent headline: “Traditional Churches, Believers fade” }

Thankyou for inviting and welcoming me.

How many of you here have **not** ever been to Banyen Books? (*about a third of the 200 people present raised their hands*)

Next year marks forty years of Banyen serving the spiritual community. My reflections today emerge from that experience.

In the interests of full disclosure, you should know where I’m coming from. I was born in Vancouver 60 years ago. My mother Susi was a free-thinking occasional Unitarian from a secular Jewish family in Vienna that converted to Catholicism. Fleeing the Holocaust was the spiritual practice of my mother’s youth. My father Fred, of English parents, was also born in Vancouver. A baker by trade and a musician at heart, with no use for church, my dad’s spiritual practice was broad-minded kindness, hard work, and community service.

I went to United Church Sunday schools until I was bold enough to ask my mom, “Do I have to go to church?” “No,” she said, bless her heart. So for the last 50 years, I’ve visited churches only for the magnificent acoustics, sacred architecture or Art, and for concerts, lectures, weddings and funerals. I have not attended a full-strength Christian church service in a long time. So I don’t know what’s really going on in Church. I have a lot to learn, and please forgive me if I go on to suggest what’s already happening!

I **have** prayed for life in Native sweatlodges and on vision quest; meditated in Sikh ashrams, danced and chanted in ecstatic Sufi circles (the heart of Islam); practiced Yoga and chanted kirtan mantras in Hindu traditions; walked & sat in silent Buddhist meditation retreats for weeks at a time; joined and led Earth-honouring neopagan drum & dance circles for full moons, Solstices and Equinoxes; practiced Tai Chi and Qigong, and studied the Tao (the heart of China). In South American shamanic ayahuasca ceremonies I’ve surrendered to the pulsing heart of the green world; and immersed in Jewish Sabbath and high holy days gatherings with friends. I’ve probably taken too many workshops on a wide array of psycho-spiritual and body-oriented healing arts. Some people might say I’ve eaten too many vegetables! My root-meditation practice is inspired by the Buddhist tradition. For 45 minutes each morning I sit and breathe in **Loving-Kindness**, a focusing practice that strengthens the heart’s innate capacity to open, accept and forgive.

I recount these explorations—which are reflected in the range of resources in Banyen Books—not to suggest you should be doing any or all of these, but to show how these ways, all experienced outside of the Church, are **just examples of the rich diversity of spiritual practices** people are *doing* in our world today. And most people doing them feel they are, for them, **the heart of religion—in practice**. So what do we mean, “Spiritual but not Religious?” While so much could be said about this, Rachel Naomi Remen, author of the lovely book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, puts it this way: “The most important thing in defining spirit is the recognition that spirit is an essential need of human nature. There is something in all of us that seeks the spiritual. This yearning varies in strength from person to person, but it is always there in everyone. Spiritual is not the religious. A religion is a dogma, a set of beliefs about the spiritual and a set of practices which arise out of those beliefs. There are many religions and they tend to be mutually exclusive. Every religion tends to think that it has “dibs” on the spiritual - that it’s “The Way”. Yet **the spiritual is inclusive. It is the deepest sense of belonging and participation. We all participate in the spiritual at all times, whether we know it or not. There’s no place to go to be separated from the spiritual, so perhaps one might say that the spiritual is that realm of human experience which religion attempts to connect us to through dogma and practice. Sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it fails. Religion is a bridge to the spiritual—but the spiritual lies beyond religion. Unfortunately in seeking the spiritual we may become attached to the bridge rather than crossing over it.**”

So, what’s been happening in our spiritual lives these last 50 years or so? Well, I will share some of the many ways that have emerged, revived or flourished shortly—but first, I want to ask, how many of you did your homework and saw the online movie “**Home: a Hymn to the Planet and Humanity**”? (*Only 3 or 4 hands went up.*) This very beautiful film brings home the astonishing speed with which our industrial growth society is devastating Creation. Our comfort, convenience and security have come at a crippling cost to the Great Tree upon which we humans bloom. If we look at the living world as a whole, the extinction rate is now 1,000 times faster than we would naturally expect. It’s caused by a single species. Somewhere in our soul, we know we are tearing apart the fabric of Eden which took 4 billion years (about a million and a half generations) to develop flowering plants, trees, and *homo sapiens*, “wise humans.” Let us remember: we have **a depthless ineradicable mutual belonging to the Universe--from the beginning**. *Something* in us knows and feels this increasing pollution and extinction in Creation as a **spiritual** emergency in *our* time. Here we are.

The poet Antonio Machado said, “I wept. I said to my soul, ‘What have you done with the Garden entrusted to you?’”

Our nuclear wastes—which Joanna Macy calls “the poison fire,” will be toxic to life for a million years. The consequences of our short-sighted ways are endangering all life on Earth. **Knowing this** is a powerful call to **a new kind of consciousness** for us humans. It calls forth the mender, the healer, the visionary, the re-builder, the designer, the gardener... While tragically “civilizing” the indigenous cultures who **knew how** to live in sustainable harmony with the local and flowering earth, we industrious moderns have scrambled our bearings, seemingly cut off from Nature and so often from each other. We’ve misplaced our soul somewhere in the mall, consumed by and entangled with “stuff”—and we’re armed with the weapons of fear.

I see **the spiritual renaissance** of recent generations, in part, as a response of our ancient reptilian brain’s hard-earned wisdom. We’re **longing to know and feel we belong again**, to re-connect, to come home in life-sustaining society more consciously in the arms of Great Nature again. Leaving aside a Church they might see (to put it bluntly) as the worn-out “Father knows best” blinkers of colonizing “churchianity” (that has condoned *through its silence* our “using up” of Creation), more

and more people—the “Nones” as we’re calling them—have passionately sought *direct, felt, communion with “The Life Force,”* the current of Loving and Livingness flowing in the heart of our being, **and with each other**—with little need for priestly policing, prescriptions, or institutional blessing. I see this as good news. In the heart of “**being here now,**” **the direct line to God is open,** always has been, and it’s free. Sprouts of new life breaking up through the pavement... “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower...”

So let’s say the Earth herself began a healing or re-balancing with the baby boomers’ instinctive rebellion against the industrial growth culture’s war on Nature and Spirit. A whole generation took a sort of psychedelic baptism, and a thousand spiritual sprouts began to grow, many of them in flower and bearing fruit and new seeds today.

Here are **a few of the colours in the rainbow of spirituality today:**

- wide research into and practice of the spiritual traditions of the world—particularly the mystical, **experiential core** of these traditions, including the shamanic and native traditions
- deep interest in the experiential dynamics of consciousness, emotion, motivation, and well-being
- personal research in the “**being-sciences**”: prayer, meditation, visualization, mindful presence
- psychedelic and altered states in general as healing sacraments and spiritual accelerators
- the esoteric, metaphysical dimensions of human experience: Oracles, Tarot, astrology, anthroposophy, out-of-body and near-death experiences, dreamwork, myth, intuition, psychic abilities, **et cetera.**
- the blending and co-creating of new spiritual forms and practices from the cross-pollination of rich, seasoned traditions and direct personal experience, or “Gnosis” – the increasingly fertile synergies between, for example, neuro-biology, eco-philosophy, and transpersonal psychology
- self-discovery and soul-growth schools such as PRH (Catholic priest meets Carl Rogers, pioneer of humanistic psychology, and goes on to map out a secular methodology for actually cultivating the core of goodness in each human being) and many others
- **We are seeing a New Spirit & New Practices:**
- in the healing arts: body-centered psychotherapies, breathing and movement wisdoms, energy healing arts, new schools of bodywork, integrative medicine, sensory awareness... and more broadly a sensual, embodied, “incarnational” spirituality
- in intimate partnerships and marriage / the erotic arts of communion and co-creation; a greatly expanded repertoire of relationship and conflict resolution skills. (Nonviolent Communication, for example, as a personal and interpersonal spiritual practice)
- in circles nurturing women’s unique spirituality and the soul of men
- in relation to nature: organic agriculture, wildcrafting, herbal wisdom, vegetarianism and whole foods, renewable energies, eco-design, eco-restoration, permaculture. **We could see the flourishing of community gardens as spiritual good news.**
- in how we collaborate, in community and group synergies, “family of choice”, social networks, co-housing, philanthropic entrepreneurship
- in the Arts: visionary, earthy, naturally-inspired. Art and Beauty as spiritual practices.
- **We’re seeing new, integral vision** in architecture and land use, in science and cosmology, and in inter-spiritual studies and inter-species rapport
- in conscious conception, childbirth, parenting, family systems, conscious aging, conscious dying, and conscious grieving

- in business (the triple bottom line of planet, people, *and* profit) and in social systems—the engines of change in our human footprint
- in cultivation of gratitude, acceptance, generosity, compassion, etc. as life-giving practices in themselves
- Practitioners naturally form affinity groups, congregations, circles, faith-and-practice communities—but the emphasis is on personal spiritual direction and the individuation of one’s unique gifts and “original medicine” (the work to be done) rather than on “belonging to the flock” alone.
- In all of these (“**The best form in which to worship God is every form**”), we’re seeing emphasis on experience and shareable understanding more than on academic (or theological) credentials alone—with workshops, healing and ceremonial circles, “Earth dances,” conferences, and study courses of all kinds being a kind of ‘portable church.’

So, how can the Church serve us today? Well, at the risk of seeming even crazier, how about these ideas: If as mystics say **the human body is the living temple of God**, how about churches offering a feast of learnings in body wisdom, healing arts, conscious relationships, gardening, spiritual approaches in the arts, circles of all kinds for meditation/prayer/poetry/study/healing/ or action, vegan cooking classes, not to mention hosting neighborhood food banks, daycares, hospices, and service outreaches, or **thoroughly eco-renovating the place** including establishing gardens, solar rooftops, community composting, and orchards wherever possible.

Churches have some fabulous spaces for gatherings: welcome the young tribes, open the doors to and for the living Spirit of humanity as it will need to express, grow and connect in generations ahead. With stranger times coming, Churches may have significant resources to enliven neighborhoods, to help society re-connect and restore its soul through spiritual re-direction and community celebration... reinventing itself for **The Great Turning** to a life-sustaining society. It’s crucial (from the same root as ‘crucifixion’) – It’s crucial for humankind to look deeper than its divisions and **recognize itself as one global human family**. Perhaps someday when people of the churches are asked, “What religion are you?” they’ll answer, “**We’re human, and our religion is kindness.**” Surely the uniquely beautiful heart of a practical and cosmic Christianity can do some eco-renovation too, in service to the Earth community, in tune with the times.

Looking deeply, we can *know* that God flows and changes, and that **we are made of change**. In this time of **inescapable uncertainty**, we can, together, face the truth of our pain for the world, and we can also harvest and share our love for the world. And here’s the good news: **we can learn to act in accord with exquisite harmony**. Our spiritual communities are diverse and noble attempts to get the job done.

As a friend of mine likes to say, “If you want to change the world, throw a better party!” May churches be resonant with fabulous shared music as well as shared silence, with living stories, palpable blessings and heart-connections. In our hyper-speedy time, may churches be “sanctuaries of slow,” and may there be delight in what eco-theologian Thomas Berry calls “The Great Work” — “the work that re-connects.”

Here’s a question for us to take into our group discussions. Poet Mary Oliver asks us this:

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—the one who has flung  
herself out of the grass, the  
one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

(the word “religion” comes from *re-ligio*, to re-connect)

## RESOURCES AND FURTHER (RE)CONNECTIONS

Banyen Books & Sound, 3608 West 4th Ave., Vancouver, B.C. 604-732-7912. Our website, [www.banyen.com](http://www.banyen.com) offers over 5,000 reviews of books and other media from all spiritual traditions. While there, you can take a moment to sign up to receive *Blossoming*, our monthly e-news. We also publish *Branches of Light*, a free news-and-reviews journal, each spring and fall.

### BOOKS AND MOVIES:

**Home: a Hymn to the Planet and Humanity** A free Youtube full-length film – incredibly beautiful – google “home the movie”

**Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World** by **Joanna Macy**. An incredibly moving handbook of group practices: “the work that re-connects”

**Essential Spirituality: Exercises from the World's Religions to Cultivate Kindness, Love, Joy, Peace, Vision, Wisdom, and Generosity** by **Roger Walsh**

**The Seeker's Guide: Making Your Life a Spiritual Adventure** by **Elizabeth Lesser**. A book for anyone who wants to read their spiritual story more clearly and find the inner compass that can lead them home.

**A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life** by **Jack Kornfield**. A modern classic on meditation, the process of inner transformation, and the integration of spiritual practice into our way of life.

**The Great Work: Our Way into the Future** by **Thomas Berry**. The Earth itself calls out to us to embark upon a re-sacralization of nature, a new ecological beginning. A Passionist priest, Berry is our conscience, our prophet, our guide.

**The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism** by **Andrew Harvey**. If God created a new curriculum for the human race—one that might ensure our continued place on this planet—I think he would make *The Hope* required reading. Brings home the necessary union of spiritual practice and radical action. Makes us want to roll up our sleeves...

Extra synchronicity bonus! Some **recent book titles** that give a flavour for the deeper dialogue of our time:

**Dark Green Religion:** Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future

**The Sacred Universe:** Earth, Spirituality & Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**Good without God:** What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe

**What is God?** (in which Jacob Needleman writes, “Never in recent memory have we been at one and the same time so deeply drawn to faith, and so deeply troubled by it. And never has it seemed that the very survival and quality of our lives depends on *how* we use, or refuse, the idea of God.”)

**Thank God for Evolution**

**The Evolution of God**

**The Absence of God:** Dwelling in the Presence of the Sacred

**The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality**

**Fingerprints of God:** The Search for the Science of Spirituality (“The church is here to be your family... The church is God with skin on.”)

**God on Your Own:** Finding a Spiritual Path outside Religion

**The Case for God** (in which Karen Armstrong writes, “The point of religion was to live intensely and richly here and now. Truly religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance. They have always desired to integrate with their daily lives the moments of rapture and insight that came to them in dreams, in their contemplation of nature, and in their intercourse with one another and with the animal world. Instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow of life, they sought to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain. They yearned for the courage to overcome their terror of mortality; instead of being grasping and mean-spirited, they aspired to live generously, large-heartedly, and justly, and to inhabit every single part of their humanity. Instead of being a mere workaday cup, they wanted, as Confucius suggested, to transform themselves into a beautiful ritual vessel brimful of the sanctity that they were learning to see in life. They tried to honour the ineffable mystery they sensed in each human being and create societies that protected and welcomed the stranger, the alien, the poor, and the oppressed. Of course, they often failed, sometimes abysmally. But overall they found that the disciplines of religion helped them to do all this. Those who applied themselves most assiduously showed that it was possible for mortal men and women to live on a higher, divine, or godlike plane and thus wake up to their true selves.”)

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and we can also harvest and share our love for the world. And here’s the good news:

**We can learn to act in accord with exquisite harmony.**

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*May I be safe and protected.  
May I be peaceful and happy.  
May I be healthy and strong.  
May I take care of myself, happily.*

*May you be safe and protected...  
May we...  
May my benefactors...  
May my difficult people...*

*May all beings be safe and protected.  
**May all beings be peaceful and happy.**  
May all beings be healthy and strong.  
May all beings take care of themselves, happily.*

—Lovingkindness prayer, Buddhist