

# *Devoting:* Meetings with the Force That Impels Faith

Trebbe Johnson

*Traveling many roads to the  
“Great Mystery”*

**M**Y FRIEND THE LATE ANAK AGUNG DETRA RANGKI, Balinese Hindu, scholar of his religion and culture, told me once, when I had not seen him for a while and asked what he'd been doing, that he had been “how would you say—*devoting*.” He meant that he had been spending time with his spiritual devotions. In Bali this means making offerings, praying to the gods, participating in the ceremonies in his village. The word struck me. My deepest longing, since I was a small child, had been to be in the presence of the potent, conscious force that I was convinced animated the cosmos. Agung's poetic description of his own practice made me realize that I, too, had been “devoting” for many years. And what I have devoted myself to is the search for the force that impels faith. This is my spiritual practice and ongoing query.

Yet, here's a confession: my devoting follows not one path, but many. I've never lived in an ashram or considered entering a convent. I never looked into the gaze of a teacher and knew I was being called to be that one's disciple. I have joined in the prayers of many faiths and felt them to be moving, genuine, and indisputably aimed right toward—and quite conceivably heard by—God, yet I have never been tempted to convert. I've had no interest in finding the one spiritual home I would never have to leave. What I've longed for instead is to experience the divine as it manifests in the world. And since every faith defines a path to God, and many secular actions crisscross those spiritual paths, I've chosen to partake of a variety of

practices and, most important of all, to stay on the lookout for evidence of the Great Mystery moving through life.

This approach to spiritual practice is not recommended, I know. Often I have come across stern pronouncements directed at people like me: One cannot dabble, say the priests and scholars. Spirituality is not a tasting menu. “New Agers” who borrow a bit of this religion and a bit of that, while discarding the parts they don't like, will never have anything but a shallow and delusional relationship with the sacred. Respectfully, I disagree. Seeking itself can be a practice. And what I have discovered, over and over again, is that the more open I am to finding the holy in any place, time, or circumstance, the more



likely I am to be invited into a brief encounter with it.

*Accompanying a dozen African-American ministers from around the U.S., I take a “toxic tour” of four communities along the Mississippi River near New Orleans. Two towns are squeezed up against petrochemical industries so gargantuan, noisy, fiercely lit, and foul-smelling that garden flowers die and children can’t play outside. Another has a landfill for its next-door neighbor. The fourth place has the cruelest story of all. After friends and families received land and low-interest mortgages with which to build a new community, they discovered that their dream village sat on top of a toxic landfill. The people are fighting for justice, but they often feel no one is paying attention. The visit from the ministers renews their hope. At every stop they tell their stories, and then the church women welcome the delegation with a feast of fried chicken, greens, mashed potatoes, rolls, and pie. Before*

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*eating, we bow our heads as the ministers call the attention of the Lord to the predicament at hand. “The gates of Shell are the gates of hell,” bellows one reverend. “Ay-men,” choruses the group. The prayers are powerful, but the true act of grace is the outpouring of hospitality and generosity offered by people facing such calamities.*

*Night has long since fallen over the mosque in this residential section of Istanbul when the rustle of settling-in fades and a dozen men in long robes step into the round, wood-paneled room. One by one they bow to the sheik, remove their robes, unfurl their arms like petals, and begin to spin. In the ceremony of sema, members of the Order of*

*the Whirling Dervishes mirror with their bodies the movement of the universe, from the spinning of planets around the sun to electrons circling their nucleus. Left arm angled down to the earth, right arm up toward God, each man spins in his own circle, while all orbit together around the space. The heavy hems of their white robes undulate like waves. Part human, part divine, part cosmic force, they spiral straight to God. Witnessing, yet separate from, the vast realms they pass through, I ache to be a passenger on their journey.*

And why should we not partake of the wisdom of other paths, not just as observers, but, to the extent that we’re able, as participants? Ever since the late nineteenth century, when spiritual leaders like Japanese Zen Buddhist monk Soyen Shaku and Hindu Swami Vivekananda of India came to the United States to offer their teachings to Westerners, opportunities to learn

spiritual practices from around the world have increased. Countless books, articles, and now the internet offer a wide, clear, sparkling stream of insight and information for those longing to be schooled in unfamiliar yet alluring paths to the divine. Of course there are cautions. Some Native Americans have objected strenuously to non-Natives borrowing traditions like the sweat lodge ceremony, especially since such actions seem a perpetuation of the centuries-old habit of colonizers helping themselves to that which belongs to indigenous people. But I would say that

most of the “devoting” of eclectic mystics like me is less about absconding with the ceremonies of others than imbibing vital wisdom that can guide us in shaping our lives. And of course whenever I do receive an invitation into the spiritual heart of another tradition, I cannot but say, wholeheartedly, yes.

*The medicine man from this western tribe and his assistants are dressed in full ceremonial regalia: buffalo headdress, feathers, beaded deerskin boots. Slowly they turn to face the night in each of the four directions, blow on their eagle-bone whistles, shake their rattles, and call in the spirits. We, the participants, turn too, hushed, anticipating this ceremony that is said to be more than a thousand years old. And as those ancient calls go out, I feel presences sweeping in like banners of silk. I feel their curiosity. I can tell, without quite seeing them directly, that women are here, and men, and even several children. They have returned. Awe puckers the flesh on my arms. The world beyond the world is real, there are those who know how to open the door and call it over to the place where we normally live, and when the beings of that world are called, they may just come.*

I could say I learned certain lessons from such moments of grace, moments of witness, moments of the parting of the veil, but that isn’t quite right. These

experiences were like benign electrocution; they flashed through me, body and soul, and seared my nerve endings, permanently altering how I perceived and received the world. Each experience remains an image bathed in a truth. As William James points out, one of the most significant aspects of the mystical experience is its “noetic quality”: Mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all



Medicine Man, Charles Marion Russell, 1916.  
Blanton Museum of Art



inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.<sup>1</sup> I'm not saying that experiences like praying before a meal offered by generous people in dire straits count as "mystical states." Still, they are openings of the way, moments of weighty truth. They are epiphanies, and they often arise in times and places outside the bounds of spiritual tradition.

*In a subway station in New York City I watch as a disheveled, dirty man, who has been leaning against the wall, sinks slowly to the floor. I notice, but I do not move from my spot on the platform, where I am positioned to push quickly into the train. What do I assume about this man? That he is drunk? Homeless? Exhausted? That the condition he's now in, while not exactly normal, could not possibly be a real emergency? One young woman in the crowd of commuters, perhaps on her way to college or her first job, walks briskly over to the man.*

*She bends over him, touches his shoulder, asks if he's all right and if he needs help. There is nothing—not sickness, fear, filth, embarrassment, or a time schedule—that she will permit to separate her from what she is called to do right now. Around these two souls radiates the glow of mercy.*

*For eight years I led a contemplative journey and camel caravan in the Sahara desert. My Swiss co-guide, our participants, and I are in turn guided by a band of Tuareg, a nomadic, musical, matriarchal culture and the indigenous people of the region. For several days we ride camels through the desert, stopping at night to sleep under the stars. We then settle for a week in one spot, where the participants go on a three-day solo. This year we're camped in a sandy valley, on either side of which escarpments of black, tumbled rock lead up to a stony plateau. On the third day of the solo my co-guide, our assistant, and I are sitting and talking on the rocks about a hundred feet above the valley. Down below, our Tuareg hosts sprawl on mats talking and laughing as the cook stirs a pot on a small fire. Then the camel master waves his arms up to us to indicate that lunch is ready, and we start heading down, each picking our own way among the boulders. Behind me I hear the thwack-thwack of heavy wings and look up to see a raven. And then—there is no other way to say this—my consciousness ceases to belong to me and I am seeing the valley from the bird's perspective. I see my friends far below, moving among rocks; the Tuareg in their colorful robes like miniature action figures left outside by a child; the camel saddles, like charms on a bracelet, spread out on the sand. I am flying high over the valley, and then, suddenly, I reach the plateau and land with a jolt back in my own body, negotiating the rocks as the*

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*bird flies on. Stunned, I tell no one, though I wonder over this flight every day.*

That which stretches beyond and beneath the known, that which moves the world, from consciousness to quarks, that which impelled the universe into being and drives it still, that Great Mystery that seduces humans to seek it out, though they are permitted to find it only in the tiniest of glimpses—that wondrousness goes by many names. It also possesses many qualities, even when it is the Tao and its attributes include having no attributes at all. It is loving, it is vengeful and demanding, it is billions of years of nature becoming increasingly conscious. It is the unified field that holds the universe together. It wants you to be good, so your life after death will be paradisaal, and it has no interest in you at all. Even those who don't believe in it occasionally experience it.<sup>2</sup> It is the Unknown we yearn to know more of.

In an article in *PARABOLA*'s issue on the soul (Summer 1996), Eliezer Shore writes that, according to Hasidic texts, although the soul is focused in the body, it doesn't end there. It can be found in our belongings, in places and even things that have not yet found their way into our lives. Thus, "all of life is a gathering up of soul."<sup>3</sup> My own spiritual practice has been a quest to gather up the parts of my soul in order to gain a closer relationship with the Great Unknown. I have found pieces of my soul in places where I deliberately went looking and in utterly unexpected places. What has drawn many of them

forth, I believe, is simply that I am always on the lookout for them.

**I**N DECEMBER 2009 I attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>4</sup> The theme was "Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth," and the focus was the imperative for the spiritual traditions of the world to devote more of their liturgy, teaching, and outreach to addressing ecological challenges. Throughout the week, in hundreds of panel discussions, talks, workshops, and offerings of music and dance, leaders in many spiritual traditions created a living mandala around this theme, as complex and colorful as the sand mandala slowly blossoming under the tools and attention of Tibetan Buddhist monks. On the last day of the parliament His Holiness the Dalai Lama was scheduled to speak. That morning everyone had to pass through metal detectors to enter the Convention Center. Then we had a lengthy wait in the lobby outside the auditorium, thousands of people ranging in long messy lines that kept diverging and merging as conversations arose. Finally the doors were opened.

And we were rushing in. Christians, Aboriginals, Muslim women in *djilbabs*, Sikhs in white turbans, Yoruba in colorful robes, Tibetan Buddhists in saffron, Jews, Samis, Buddhists, Navajos, Pagans, Hindus, Ainu, Jains: we were all surging through the doors and dashing toward the front of the auditorium. I had not been in such a fervent charge for the



Mevlevi Whirling Dervish, Istanbul, 2007





Tuareg in the Sahara

stage since I saw the Beatles perform live. Here, though, there was no pushing, no shoving, no shouting. However, we all knew we were about to be in the presence of exceptional enlightenment, and we wanted to snag the best seat possible. I had the sense that this great tide we were creating together mirrored both the general impulse for attendance at the parliament and the course our individual lives had taken. For although there are many names for God, many paths for seeking and practicing union with the divine, and, all too often, many injurious ways of asserting the supremacy

of one's own faith—when it comes right down to it, we are all dashing exuberantly towards the holy. **I**

#### ENDNOTES

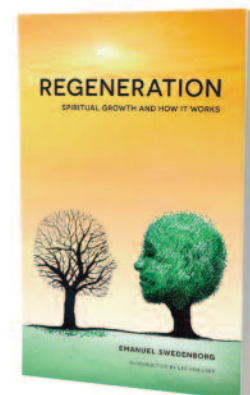
- <sup>1</sup> William James, *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 293.
- <sup>2</sup> See Barbara Ehrenreich, *LIVING WITH A WILD GOD: A NONBELIEVER'S SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH ABOUT EVERYTHING* (New York: Twelve, 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> Eliezer Shore, "Through a Dark Passage," *PARABOLA*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 1996, 54.
- <sup>4</sup> See Trebbe Johnson, "World Religions Get Down to Earth: A Report from the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions," *PARABOLA*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Summer 2010, 98–105.

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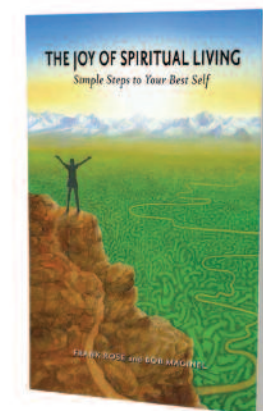
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