

Writing The Spiritual Essay

by Dinty W. Moore

"I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?" —Anne Lamott

If the essayist's primary charge is to dive headlong into the uncertainty, it is no wonder that writing about spiritual matters has always been front and center in the personal essay tradition.

The Confessions of St. Augustine, written in the fifth century by a Christian bishop and theologian, may indeed be the world's first memoir, and the truth is that all of these centuries later, the book remains powerful and startling.

Why?

Because Augustine was honest. He didn't claim that his Christian beliefs were uncomplicated or that he fully understood every difficult aspect of his faith. He went straight to the doubt and contradictions.

The spiritual memoir may exist within a specific religious tradition—Judaic, Islamic, Sufic, Hindu, Christian, Zoroastrian—or it may be rooted entirely outside of organized religion. There are, in fact, spiritual writings from atheists and agnostics, from those who embrace New Age philosophies, and from those so uncertain of their basic beliefs that they have no idea where to place themselves.

What unites the spiritual essay, however, is the quest to explore life's basic mysteries: Is there a God (or Higher Power, or unexplained force that knits the universe together)? How do we know? What should we do with our doubt or certainty about what this God or power expects of us? If we are to live our beliefs, what is the proper way to act?

Philip Zaleski, editor of the annual Best American Spiritual Writing anthology, has defined the genre in a similar fashion, saying that spiritual writing "deals with the bedrock of human existence—why we are here, where we are going, and how we can comport ourselves with dignity along the way."

All that is needed to write a spiritual essay is honest curiosity about the questions that surround us. Speaking for myself, I can't imagine how anyone could not have that curiosity and some measure of uncertainty. Faith, by definition, means we don't know for sure.

But perhaps there are those people who feel one hundred percent certain.

Well, then, let me say this:

If you feel altogether sure that every question and mystery can be answered by following the teachings of a particular religious tradition, or, alternately, if you are steadfast and entirely secure in your atheism, then enjoy the benefits of your certainty, sleep well at night, use your confidence to do good in the world, and don't bother tackling the spiritual essay.

If you are conflicted, however ...

Ah, that essay is just waiting to be written.

A Note on Spiritual Conflict

Understand that the spiritual essay is not meant to be a forum to attack the beliefs of others. The conflict within a spiritual essay is not between different religious traditions, alternate interpretations of scripture, or competing opinions on which faith is the one true faith. The conflict of the spiritual essay is internal. Most often, it has to do with our inability to be sure of what our spiritual convictions demand of us or with our failure to live up to those expectations given our clearly imperfect human nature.

I was raised Catholic, and attended Catholic schools straight through to the end of high school, back in the old days when nuns wore exotic black habits and the parish priest ran not only the school but the neighborhood as well. My second book, *The Accidental Buddhist: Mindfulness, Enlightenment, and Sitting Still*, was an extended spiritual essay examining how I eventually fell away from the teachings of the Catholic Church and found myself more attracted to Zen meditation and Buddhist mindfulness.

Buddhism—more philosophy than religion—is 2,500-years-old, and much of what we know as Buddhism today is deeply intertwined with Asian cultures, so a good portion of the book explored the awkward fit between this different way of thinking and twentieth-century America in the age of the cell phone, the Internet, and instant gratification. The book focused as well, however, on my own efforts and failures attempting to live a mindful lifestyle and embrace the basic teachings.

I didn't have to disprove the tradition of Catholicism to make my point. In fact, many portions of the book explore my journey back into my Catholic past, including time spent with a Jesuit priest who was also a Zen teacher. I ended up finding a great deal in common between the roots of my Catholic tradition and the basic tenets of Buddhism, and hope that I succeeded in treating both belief systems with respect.

Writing that book taught me much—about writing, of course, be-

cause every new piece of writing attempted, even if it doesn't work out, teaches us something about writing—but also about myself and how I want to act in the world. That's the true power of spiritual writing. It is not just about reaching others, though giving comfort and inspiration to others can certainly be counted among the blessings. Writing the spiritual essay is about discovering parts of your own self.

Three Quick Tips

- Start small. Don't attempt to answer all of the great religious mysteries your first time out. How did we get here? What happens after we die? There are one-thousand-page books that explore those questions without ever reaching firm resolution. Look for a smaller piece of the puzzle of life, and start exploring there.
- As with every essay genre we've discussed so far in this book, specific stories from your past or examples from the lives of those you know well help to illustrate either your confusion or the tentative realizations you are assaying. These scenes and stories can be far more convincing than abstract explanations and are much more compelling on the page.
- Read some contemporary spiritual essays to see how the genre has changed since St. Augustine wrote his weighty tomes. Great essays from a myriad of traditions can be found at Beliefnet (www.beliefnet.com).

YOUR SPIRITUAL ESSAY

These prompts, remember, are here merely to get you started. They are not strict guidelines or rigid maps. If one of these prompts seems to be directing you down a certain path, but your instincts suggest a different path branching off to the left a bit or to the right, follow your instincts.

The goal is to discover your spiritual questions, not mine:

1. How do you pray? Do you kneel down beside the bed the way a child is taught to do it? Do you fold your hands? Do you even use words? Can action be prayer? How about meditation?
2. If you knew for sure that there was no Heaven or Hell, would you act differently in your life?
3. What does "sacred" mean to you?
4. Write a brief essay entitled "My First Sin." You needn't define sin the way a priest or rabbi might define it. The definition is up to you.
5. Author Tobias Wolff suggests that writing the personal essay calls

on us to “surrender for a time our pose of unshakable rectitude, and to admit that we are, despite our best intentions, subject to all manner of doubt and weakness and foolish wanting.” Where are you guilty of acting righteous and sure in your life when in truth you are probably less certain than you seem to others?

6. Do cats and dogs have souls?

7. Rainer Maria Rilke offers this advice: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.” What is unsolved in your heart? What questions have you locked away?

8. Have you had a spiritually significant moment, a moment of transformation, in church or perhaps during a time that you were very ill or during a long walk along the beach in winter? If so, write about that moment, but don’t tell us what you realized or decided in that moment, instead tell us how it felt: Was there a sensation in your nervous system, a tingling on your skin, a chill, or a fever? Did your vision change? Did you hear something? Where were you, what objects surrounded you, what was the weather like that day? Describe only the physical manifestations of your spiritual epiphany.

9. Write about your parents’ faith. Were they devout, or did it sometimes seem as if they were just going through the motions? Did their faith or strongest beliefs change as they grew older?

10. You’ve heard the expression “charity begins at home.” What does that mean to you? Is being charitable to others part of your spiritual beliefs?

11. Perhaps, with respect, explore a holiday or ritual that is not part of your tradition. What is the Mexican ritual of Dia de los Muertos all about? Is it just alien to you, or do you wish your church had something so colorful? Would you rather be baptized in a river or in the back of the church with just a splash of water? If you are not Jewish, which of the various Jewish holidays would you like to learn more about? If you are Jewish, what don’t you understand about Christmas?

12. Many religions have a tradition of sacred dance, but why stop there? Do you believe there is such a thing as sacred gardening? Sacred walking? Sacred child rearing?

13. My good friend Diana lives in an old Methodist church. The cross has been taken down from the roof, and the various religious artifacts were claimed by other parishes, but there are still pews, still a platform where the altar once stood, and still a churchlike feel in the interior. Could you ever live in a reconditioned church? Do you think people should be encouraged to recycle buildings in this way, or does it some-

how seem wrong to you?

14. Other than your parents, who has influenced your beliefs the most?

