

PART ONE

beginning

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CHAPTER ONE

a larger picture

*Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.*
—ROBERT BROWNING, “PARACELUS”

A FEW YEARS AGO, I took a meditation class with a small group of instructors at the college where I was teaching. The class, designed to reduce stress, met once a week for two hours. I was familiar with meditation from my earlier monastic experience, so generally I knew what to expect. For the first two weeks, everything I encountered was straightforward and somewhat predictable. Then, toward the end of the third class, something extraordinary happened.

As I sat on the floor cross-legged with my eyes closed, concentrating on my breathing, I felt myself pulling apart from my

body and starting to float upward. My first feeling was a rush of anxiety, but then I worked through my fear of being separated from my body and the possibility that I might not be able to come back. Gradually, I relaxed into a pleasant feeling of weightlessness. I drifted up to the ceiling and slipped through the roof and into the night sky.

I was aware of myself as a large transparent ball, like a perfectly spherical soap bubble. There I was, flying through space. I found that I could fly fast and that I could maneuver myself in any direction. Right now, I decided to fly with tremendous speed toward a distant cool white light.

As I was flying, I looked to one side and saw another big bubble like myself. I flew to it and, to my surprise, merged with it—two bubbles in one. During this merging, I told a story to the other bubble. The story I told was the lifetime I was experiencing on earth. When I finished telling my story, the other bubble told me its story.

After I pulled away, I noticed there were other bubbles—millions of them—all flying at various speeds toward the far-off light. I flew over to one of those other bubbles, merged, and told my story again, this time remembering more of it and grasping more of its meaning.

At that point, the meditation class ended. With one long, deep breath, I was back in the room and back in my body. My colleagues ambled out of the room quietly and the instructor started closing up. Slowly, I moved out of my cross-legged position and stood up. My hand went to my face and wiped away a tear I did not remember shedding.

“We may be storytellers, then,” I said to myself.

As I began writing this book, I remembered that fleeting vision, which could have been just a whimsical flight of my imagination or something more profound and more revealing, a window into eternity opening a crack during an otherwise perfectly ordinary exercise in stress reduction. Who we are may be storytellers. Why we are here may be to collect stories and share them with one another. These stories are the content of our lifetime.

From this vantage point in time, I am beginning to see the story I have been creating, with varying degrees of awareness, since I was born. Like your own story, probably, it has had its twists and turns, with more time than I would have liked spent in subplots and departures from the narrative. But those digressions aside, the theme of my story at least is beginning to emerge for me. I appear to have spent most of my life on a search for my spiritual self.

In this way as well, my story may be much the same as yours. I believe all of us are called to explore the world of spirit. When the call comes and how we go about our quest differs for each of us. But the impulse to venture beyond the narrow confines of our bodies into parts of us we cannot see or touch, yet know are there, appears to be an inherent human trait. You and I are seekers after spirit. We came into this world that way and we live our human lives, whether entirely conscious of it or not, deeply involved in a spiritual search.

Who are we, really? What are we doing here? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Are we more than our bodies? Did we live before we were born? Will we live again after we die? Why will we die? What happens to us after we die? These questions occur to all of us at one time or another during our lives.

In asking them, we begin to push the physical envelope that we know well and move into spiritual territory, about which we still know little but to which we are irresistibly drawn.

Traditionally, many of us have sought answers to these and perhaps a hundred more spiritual questions in organized religion. We went to churches, synagogues, mosque, temples, and ashrams to try to learn something about our purpose here on earth and about a grander plan in the world, if any, and how one might relate to the other. Beyond our questions, we were looking to satisfy that deep, passionate yearning we all feel for a connection to a world beyond the limitations of the physical.

For some of us, the answers we received from religion were inadequate or not answers at all. Instead, religion offered us a set of beliefs about spirituality to which we should subscribe “on faith.” Even though we felt spiritually undernourished by organized religion, we might have stayed with it and tried to make it work for ourselves. Or we might simply have given up on the possibility of having a meaningful spiritual life, resigning ourselves to wander forever in a spiritless twilight zone.

However, you and I do have other choices, and that is what this book is about. You absolutely can have a satisfying and meaningful spiritual life outside religion. Seeking for your personal spiritual identity is your birthright. You can move out of the confines of a religious system if it is not furthering your spiritual life; you can free yourself to explore the great human questions, and you can be successful in that sacred endeavor.

This is a fascinating time of transition and transformation. One of the many areas of our life experiencing fundamental change is how we approach our relationship to our divine

Source. Willingness to experiment with spiritual searching has come into the cultural mainstream, giving rise to the term “cafeteria religions,” where people choose their religious beliefs and practices according to what inspires and nourishes them.

Our religious landscape at this exciting time in human evolution is vast and varied. You may be a member in good standing of an organized religion and regularly attend church or temple. Or you may consider yourself to have a religious affiliation—Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Baptist, and so on—but do not practice your religion often. Maybe you attend services more or less regularly at quasi-religious organizations such as Unity or Religious Science but regard traditional religions as too limiting for your taste. You might have a cultural connection with a religion, but little else.

On the other hand, you may never have been associated with a religion. In the 1960s, when all the established religions in the United States (and in many other parts of the world) experienced a sudden hemorrhage of membership, the people who left the religion of their parents and grandparents typically reared their children outside religion. You may be a member of that generation of the religionless, just now navigating your way along a personal spiritual path with few guideposts to help.

If you are like millions of us at this moment in history, you may have more than one of these scenarios running inside you. You could be culturally devoted to Judaism, for instance, enjoying certain music, dances, foods, and traditions but at the same time finding that its core beliefs and rituals have little or no meaning to your day-to-day life. You may appreciate Islamic customs and manners, with their elaborate emphasis on hospitality

and respect, but stay away from a mosque because the religious beliefs behind those customs do not inspire you. Or you might feel drawn to the philosophy of a Catholic saint such as Francis of Assisi, but not to practice Catholicism because you are not interested in following the doctrines and proscriptions of the Catholic Church.

When Pope John Paul II died in 2005, hundreds of thousands descended upon Rome to pay their last respects. At Saint Peter's Basilica, they waited in long lines night and day through all kinds of weather to view his body and say good-bye. But when the mourners were interviewed about why they had made such a heroic effort to be there, many said they were not Catholic. Others who were Catholic said they did not agree with the church's doctrines on birth control, abortion, gay rights, and a range of other social issues. They had come to Rome to honor John Paul's moral courage and humanitarianism. They admired his dedication to his own personal spiritual path.

Like those sincere pilgrims to Rome, you may feel that you have one foot in and one foot out of organized religion. No matter where you are on this spectrum of possibilities, however, religion is an issue for you. It is not a concern for you alone, since where you stand on religion influences your relationships with the people in your life in essential ways. You may be troubled to think that in the absence of religion your children, or the children of others, would receive no moral guidance; that is enough for many dedicated parents to stay uncomfortably, even intolerably, in a religion. You may fear that if you sever your religious affiliation you will destroy a precious bond with your parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—your family support structure.

Sometimes, the prospect of being on your own spiritually appears daunting, or worse, risky, or downright dangerous. If you are contemplating leaving your religion or have done so, you may be experiencing anxiety, anger, grief, or shame over it. These emotions are common to everyone who has left a religion. I have felt all of them at times in my own process, but even if they are typical and expected while we are feeling them, they can be enormously disturbing.

I have traveled in the sometimes-hard terrain between organized religion and personal spirituality. I know what it is like to wander in a spiritual no-man's-land. I also know what peace of mind, joy, and sense of connection lies at the destination of spiritual striving. In these pages, I offer you the story of that journey, as told by one big bubble to another.

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My experience with the realm of spirit began long before I entered a monastery. It happened out of nowhere when I was seven or eight years old. I was playing a game of tag with the other children in the neighborhood, running around on the lawn of my grandparents' house. Suddenly, the other children were gone and I was alone, or so it seemed to me. Something welled up from deep within me. Even now, after all these years of remembering that moment and reflecting on it, I find it difficult to describe the feeling. A wave of joy rose from my solar plexus and filled my body completely. Time stopped. I felt sheer bliss. I was utterly filled and finished.

In that ecstatic moment, my consciousness seemed to take a wild leap upward. I knew there was another world I had never

imagined existed, and I felt perfectly at home in it. For days after my blissful moment, I tried to recreate the feeling, but without success. Instead of getting the feeling back, I began to sense a vague tug at my heart to venture forth and explore. My business-as-usual childhood was over.

“There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in,” Deepak Chopra has written. You may remember something like that happening to you during your childhood or at another stage in your life. These experiences might have come on spontaneously, as mine did, or some outside event could have triggered them. We all respond differently to these brief openings into another reality, but I believe we all have experienced them at one time or another. My response was to consider it a kind of call. Little did I know at the time that a momentary break while playing a children’s game of tag would lead me, a decade later, to the gates of a monastery.

Our family was Catholic, but not unusually so. We observed the ordinary daily lives of Catholics: meatless Fridays, Confession on Saturdays, Mass on Sundays. By the time I got to Catholic high school, I was familiar with the concept of a religious vocation—how it meant “a calling from God,” and how this is what priests and nuns experienced that directed them into their profession. If a vocation is a feeling deep within that cannot be denied or avoided, then sometime in the middle of the twelfth grade I knew had a vocation.

I applied for entrance to the Congregation of Holy Cross, an order of teaching brothers or monks, and was accepted. Our parish priest volunteered to drive me from my home in Ohio to the congregation’s postulancy in Wisconsin. Early one muggy

June morning, a week after high school graduation, his black Buick pulled up into our driveway. Inside the house, my sleep-deprived mother sniffed back her tears. She had spent much of the night packing my footlocker, and folding in love notes for me to find when I unpacked. I walked out of the house and into the car—the shortest imaginable distance that was also the unfathomable space between two worlds.

When I entered monastic life, I embarked on a path to becoming a professional religious man. Like others before me who had chosen that profession in a tradition stretching back centuries, I wore the contemporary garb of a “religious,” black with a Roman collar, which identified me in public and set me apart.

Along with my brothers, I practiced the Catholic religion to the letter: attendance at Mass every morning, recitation of daily prayers, litanies, devotions, the rosary, the sacraments, and so on. In fact, being a professional religious meant I was living what our master of novices would say was “the fullness of religion.” Catholics outside the cloister did as much as they could to live the faith, he explained, but there were always the distractions of lay life—relationships, children, jobs, and all the obligations that went with them. We who were professional religious were kind of prototype Catholics, models of what it meant to live our religion truly and completely.

Within the walls of the monastery, my life was not much different from the life of a monk in Europe during the Middle Ages. I was part of a community of about sixty monks, ranging in age from eighteen, like me, to eighty. The monastery was self-sufficient. We grew our own food in the fields around the

monastery, which was in a remote farming area in the Midwest. Our life was exceedingly simple. We wore plain clothing, ate humble meals, and at night retired to small individual rooms furnished only with a bed, a sink, and a desk and chair for reading and for study. We rose before dawn to chant prayers and went to sleep in the early evening, after meditation. Except for rare occasions, we observed the rule of silence.

All the monks living in my monastery took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Under the vow of poverty, we gave up personal ownership of all material things; everyone owned everything in common. The intent of the vow was to foster detachment from possessions. The vow of chastity meant we abstained from sensual pleasure and remained celibate and outside of relationship with another person.

Obedience was the surrender of our personal will to the needs of the community, articulated by the monastery's chief administrator, the abbot. The vow of obedience dictated where we would live—at this monastery or another affiliated one—and what tasks we would perform. We might be assigned to work in the kitchen or the garden, or given the job of porter (taking care of visitors), regulator (supervising the daily schedule), apothecary (looking after the physical health of the other monks), or extern (going outside the monastery to obtain special items or services). One of my favorite “obediences,” as they were called, was reader—reading aloud from inspirational books in the monastery refectory during our silent meals.

The practice of obedience became a somewhat larger issue as the years went on. At a moment's notice, we might be sent to another of the order's monastic houses to carry out an assign-

ment there. We would pack one small bag and hurry to the next religious house to become part of that established community of monks. The process of being uprooted and replanted served several purposes. One was to fill the needs of the greater community, of course, but the more spiritual aspect had to do with detachment—giving us still another opportunity to surrender the comforts of familiarity.

Poverty, chastity, and obedience formed the foundation of our monastic way of life. The objective was to be free to concentrate completely on the life of the spirit without allowing anything to interfere. The three vows were sacred promises we made to God, not to the Catholic Church or to the monastery. So serious was the commitment to the vows, monks new to monastic life took them only for a year at a time for three years. After those three years, monks could opt to extend their trial period for another three consecutive years before pronouncing “perpetual vows.” Taking the vows was a grave matter.

Being a monk was not easy. We lived apart from the world not only geographically but also emotionally and mentally. In our monastery, there were no radios, televisions, newspapers, magazines—anything that might distract us from our focus on the inner life. A telephone, in the abbot’s office, connected us marginally with the outside world. Although we lived in community, the rule of silence and the restriction on forming “particular friendships” distanced us from one another, leaving us with an aching loneliness even amid a large group of men.

Many of the brothers, craving more intimate human connections or fewer constraints on their freedom, left monastic life and returned home during the first or second year. It was just too

much. But I stayed behind the walls, looking for answers to spiritual questions I seemed to have been asking since that remarkable afternoon of my childhood. Spirituality was what I aspired to; for me, the fullness of religion was the means to that end.

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Historically, the methods we humans have followed to explore our spiritual dimension are varied almost beyond belief, from murmuring prayers on a string of beads to ritually murdering each other on an altar of sacrifice. We have starved and mutilated ourselves, or stuffed and drugged ourselves, trying to connect to the realm of spirit. We have investigated our spiritual nature within groups—in tribes with unique identity, such as “the chosen people” or “the elect”—and individually, as mystics, mediums, saints, and shamans.

Through it all, we have become attached to a few interesting notions. One is that the spiritual world exists far outside the earthly world we can see and experience. Another is that the world of spirit, ruled by an all-powerful divinity, is separate and apart from us, making any kind of association extremely difficult. Still another is that access to the spiritual realm depends on a middle-person whose job it is to take us to the other world, usually through a process that involves making us worthy to enter it.

We invented religion to house these notions and many more. With its rituals, ceremonies, and other formal procedures, religion was the way we thought we could get a glimpse into our own spiritual nature. Of course, owing to our fundamentally unworthy condition (or so went our core mind-set), we would have to submit to the rules of religion, administered by

a priest caste, and commit to its system of beliefs, which we would have to take on faith as truth.

“Religion starts with the perception that something is wrong,” writes Karen Armstrong in *The History of God*. We believe we came into this world flawed, and we must spend the rest of our lives making up for that original imperfection. Only religion, with its elaborate formulas and stipulations, can lift us out of our faulty nature and reform us to the point where we can have access to the spiritual realm.

Eventually, we institutionalized religion and made it one of the pillars of civilization, alongside education, government, medicine, commerce, and so on. Religion was, and is now, organized much like a corporation, with a hierarchy of command, a structure for getting things done more or less efficiently, employees, a body of beliefs and ideological viewpoints, a “product” (connection to the divine and the world of spirit), and a recognizable character and “culture.”

For a long time—eons, really—we had the idea that religion was the only way to explore our spiritual selves. For us, religion provided the path that would lead us to fulfill the burning desire within to engage the great human questions, which are spiritual questions.

We found organized religion tremendously useful as an answerer of questions. Without skipping a beat, it gives us definitive responses to thorny, enigmatic questions. “Why did God make you?” asks the Catholic catechism. “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven . . .” comes the instant reply. Never mind that the answer to one question leads to other

questions, and then more questions, until we understand that the spiral of questions and answers stops only when we accept the whole package with a leap of faith. Still, any answer is more of a comfort than no answer at all.

In time, many kinds of religion arose that were based on local languages, customs, traditions, and worldviews. All of them were organized similarly, with hierarchies, priesthoods, sacred scriptures, rituals, and the other characteristics of religion. However, each of them also rested on the principle that it and it alone was the authentic religion: my God was the true God.

Because religion was one of the mainstays of society, along with government, education, the military, and the rest, religious animosities most often expressed themselves in political terms, ending with wars. This was cruelly ironic, since every religion's fundamental belief was that the individual person was a reflection of the divine creator, and therefore sacred; in all the religions, killing another human being was strictly forbidden. Still, over the centuries we slaughtered one another by the millions upon millions in the name of "God" and the sacredness of life.

This alone should have made us suspicious of organized religion. Far from furnishing spiritual sustenance for their believers, the various religions actually seemed to be undermining personal spirituality by coercing us into peculiarly unspiritual behaviors. Instead of bringing us together with our divine Source, religion was separating us from it and from each other by ever-widening chasms.

Many people stayed in a religion even when they knew in their heart that the system they were in was not fostering their spiritual potential. Try as they might, sincerely following all the

rules, they sensed there was much more to spiritual exploration than religion offered them.

In the past, it was dangerous to harbor these thoughts. If you told someone about your religious misgivings you could be ostracized—or worse, tortured and even put to death. Better to stay put, make peace with religion, and hope for the best. No inquisitor could see into your heart to find your true feelings.

We believed religion was the only way to approach the world of spirit; if we were left unsatisfied at the table of organized religion, feeling that it did not answer our questions and even discouraged or prevented further inquiry, we had no choice but to go into a kind of religious self-exile. We thought it was a choice between sticking with religion, which did not nourish our spiritual strivings, or leaving it and denying ourselves the possibility of pursuing a spiritual life altogether.

Now we know there are other ways. We have another set of choices. We certainly can leave the religion of our parents and grandparents to create a personal spirituality on our own. We can follow that path to seek our highest human potential. Our search for spirituality may start in religion, but it may be just the prologue of our spiritual story.

My own spiritual seeking began in religion, from perhaps an extreme expression of it—eight years living a monastic life as a professional religious man. At the beginning of my monastic journey, I was convinced there was no other way to pursue my compelling call to seek my spiritual self. In fact, by the conventions of that time there were few alternatives if any. I expected to be a monk forever; I had taken perpetual vows. But things turned out differently. Paradoxically, perhaps, my spiritual search, which

I had assumed would be fulfilled in monastic life, led me out of the monastery and eventually out of religion entirely.

If you are sensing that organized religion is not a workable spiritual path, you are not alone. I believe you and I are part a planetary movement, a fraternity of seekers around the world who, by the millions, are awakening to a new way of connecting to their spiritual Source.

We are being encouraged to do this by the nature of the times. Many modern thinkers are saying we are in the midst of a great transformation in how we envision ourselves and the world around us. Think of it as a turning point for our planet. Taking responsibility for the health of our selves—our whole being, body, mind, emotions, and soul—by creating a personal spiritual life is part of this larger picture.

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* popularized the concept of "paradigm shift," in which "one conceptual world-view is replaced by another." Kuhn was speaking about fundamental patterns of ideas in science, but recently the paradigm-shift approach to human evolution has been extended by many to include how we regard everything in our human experience. We go along for a time with a certain set of inner pictures of who and where we are, and then suddenly there is a change as the familiar set of pictures is replaced by another.

The tricky thing about a paradigm shift is that we can perceive it only through our rearview mirror. Once a shift has occurred, we can see how we are now and how we were then and compare the two. While the shift is in progress, though, we may feel we are on slippery ground. Nevertheless, living through a paradigm shift can be tremendously exhilarating.

Whenever we try to imagine what could be waiting for us at the other end of the impending paradigm shift, we invariably come up blank. People of the fifteenth century could not imagine a world that was not flat. Like them, we find it difficult to picture a human existence with ten dimensions, a physical body that can be redesigned moment to moment by our thinking or feeling, or a material world we are collectively creating from light.

It is as impossible for us to entertain the concept that time may not exist, for instance, as it was for a person in the Middle Ages to grasp the “absurdity,” as Robert Cardinal Bellarmine called it in 1615 during the trial of Galileo, of the earth flying through space. To counter the assertion, the cardinal offered the logical observation that if the earth were moving the tops of all the trees in the world would be bent from the force of the unremitting wind.

None of the possible scenarios we can dream up may have anything to do with the shift that is upon us. In spite of the difficulty of picturing something that has not happened yet, we are receiving some inkling of what a new worldview would look like.

In the realm of spirituality, the shift may have several aspects. One is a turning away from owning the spiritual truth of another or of a tradition, and going toward discovering spiritual truth on our own, by personal experience. The old paradigm would have us believe the “inspired revelations” contained in a sacred book, for instance, are the truth about spirit, and if we live according to its precepts and proscriptions we will have connection with our Source. The new paradigm suggests that we can have direct experience of and connection with our Source, without holy texts, dogmas, or priestly transactions. In fact,

because these things assert final truth, they may actually inhibit or prevent our personal seeking.

Another feature of the shift is related to this. We will be asked to take personal responsibility for our actions, thoughts, and beliefs. In the past, we might act on an article of our religious faith that went against our conscience. Under the new paradigm, such a thing would be unthinkable. Our inner guidance will be the arbiter of our values and the deeds springing from them.

A new way of seeing ourselves and one another awaits us at the other side of the approaching shift. The spiritual principle of oneness will dominate, giving all areas of the spiritual realm a humanitarian character.

Your spiritual life, like the spiritual lives of many millions of us, may have begun in organized religion, but it does not have to end there. In the future, we may well look back to see that religion has been our spiritual nursery. Now that we are maturing as a species, a dazzling new spiritual world awaits us.