

# WOMEN BEGINNING A SPIRITUAL QUEST

*Sue Delaney*

**I**N THE SECULAR WESTERN WORLD, spiritual seekers are often dismissed as people unable to deal with the challenges of everyday life in a highly competitive and consumerist society. If someone has suffered some personal tragedy or illness and now seeks solace in religion, their search is regarded more benignly; but in general, spiritual seekers are seen as little more than dilettantes in the spiritual supermarkets of the New Age: self-indulgent, narcissistic and gullible. While this is a change from being judged to be neurotic and introverted—epithets favoured by the twentieth century—it is not an improvement in the understanding of how someone becomes a spiritual seeker.

The reality of the present day is that the spiritual seekers of the Western world are often those who have become disillusioned by our consumer society, discovering that its goods and services, its careers and life goals, provide no lasting contentment. Unfortunately, many people have also become disillusioned with their inherited religious traditions. Too often their questions have met with pity, suspicion and even hostility. The result is that they have turned their gaze beyond the boundaries of formal religion in their search for meaning.

Over the last century this has led to a slowly accumulating mass of autobiographical writing and reporting about the spiritual quest from all over the world. Such writing has varied from a few brief paragraphs in popular magazines to lengthy autobiographies in book form. Most of this writing, at least in the West, has come from women rather than from men, and particularly from those who have journeyed beyond their inherited faith traditions. A careful perusal of these stories of

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spiritual journeys throws new light on how modern, mostly well-educated women have begun a spiritual quest.<sup>1</sup>

Not every woman becomes a spiritual seeker. Many are fortunate to find in themselves a simple but authentic faith that needs no further assurance of its grounding in reality. Others, for whatever reason, have no interest in religion or spirituality.

So why, and how, have some women set off on a spiritual quest? Childhood doubts and existential anxiety, a casual comment by friend or stranger, a certain book, personal crises, unexpected spiritual experiences, and existential discontent are some of the ways in which women have begun a spiritual quest over the last century. Despite the diversity of religious background and culture, certain common themes emerge. A question or series of questions begins to occupy the mind, while a yearning for 'something' takes up residence in the heart.

### ***Children's Difficulties with Belief***

Who is to say when a spiritual quest begins? There are many triggers. Some of these undoubtedly go back to childhood. Others may be traced to a specific event in adult life. Others may not be so obvious—feelings or questions which seem to mature deep underground for many years before reaching conscious awareness.

Looking at women's stories, it seems that many who have set out on a spiritual journey as mature women have had difficulty accepting religious beliefs in childhood. As one woman said, it was not as if she did not want to believe. She envied the other children who seemed to have no difficulty in accepting what they were taught at her Catholic school. She went to church, said many prayers, even wanted to be a nun, but in the end drifted away from Catholicism because, in her heart, she was not really sure whether God existed or not.

She was not alone in questioning traditional religious beliefs. And this does not only happen to women in the Christian tradition. A number of women from a Jewish background have experienced similar

<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this article draw on a multitude of sources, both published and unpublished. Where possible, references to better-known or more readily available spiritual autobiographies, such as those of Dorothy Day and Rosemary Hamilton, have been used to illustrate particular points. Other sources, less readily available, included the writings of Australian women, Shoshana Keller and Amatullah Armstrong; an Indian woman, Indiri Devi; a Chilean woman, Istimah Week; a French woman, Isabelle Eberhardt; an English woman, Marion Milner; and a New Zealander, Mary Garden.



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struggles. Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher who became a Catholic and then a Carmelite nun, mentioned having lost her faith and deliberately ceasing to pray by the time she was sixteen years old.<sup>2</sup>

The enquiring minds of children are not easily satisfied. They have an innate capacity to ask searching questions. Small children do not hesitate to question the religious beliefs and practices of others, not so much in order to challenge, but out of genuine curiosity. Unfortunately, during much of the last century, many religious traditions more or less subtly discouraged such questions with the implicit threat of divine displeasure and community rejection. Great courage was needed to challenge prevailing religious beliefs. Some girls resolved the problem by suspending difficult questions, only to have them return later in life. Others continued to wrestle with their difficulties, sometimes becoming alienated from their families and their traditions in the process.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account*, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, volume 1, edited by Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, translated by Josephine Koeppel (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1986), 139, 148.

Children born into circumstances where both questioning and the idea of a personal spiritual quest were encouraged did not seem to face the same difficulties. Vimala Thakur, now a revered spiritual teacher in India, was born into a Brahmin family. As a small child she used to see her mother engaged in the worship of God and wondered how God could be in such a tiny statue. She asked her grandmother, who told her that God lived in the forest. So she ran away from home to the forest, searching for God. She did not find him, but her interest in God continued. As she grew older, her father encouraged her to go to ashrams and visit spiritual teachers, but asked her not to accept any of these as the final authority, rather to seek the light of truth in her own heart.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Challenges to Religious Belief***

Perhaps the first serious challenge to belief that arises for young children is the discovery that God rarely answers prayers or provides miracles. For a child hoping to avert some serious personal or family crisis, this can undermine faith. More than one woman has mentioned losing her belief in God in this way. Others speak of the difficulty of believing in a God who could allow terrible things to happen. And then there are those children who, as they begin to understand that one day they too will die (from about the age of seven onwards), develop a growing anxiety about death.

Dorothy Day alludes briefly to this in her autobiography. Day's parents, nominally Episcopalian, were not at all religious. Their children were taught to believe in God and to say bedtime prayers; other than that, God was never mentioned. When she was eight, however, contact with a Methodist family aroused her interest in religion. She began to go to Sunday school and to church with them. In her own family, she was the only one who went to church. As a result,

I was alternately lonely and smug. At the same time I began to be afraid of God, of death, of eternity. As soon as I closed my eyes at night the blackness of death surrounded me. I believed and yet was

<sup>3</sup> Chris Parish, "Set Them on Fire!" A Portrait of a Modern Sage', *What is Enlightenment?*, 5/2 (1996), 36-39.

afraid of nothingness. What would it be like to sink into that immensity?<sup>4</sup>

In that same year, Dorothy's family moved to another city. One day she and her mother watched the retrieval of the bodies of two small children who had drowned in a nearby lake. Dorothy commented:

Here was death in the concrete and yet it did not touch me so nearly as those forebodings of death which came to me at night after I had closed my eyes in the dark room and the universe began to spin around me in space.<sup>5</sup>

Sometime in her high school years, betraying her struggles with religious belief, she wrote,

Life would be utterly unbearable if we thought we were going nowhere, that we had nothing to look forward to. The greatest gift life can offer would be a faith in God and a hereafter. Why don't we have it? Perhaps like all gifts it must be struggled for. 'God, I believe' (or rather, 'I must believe or despair'). 'Help Thou my unbelief.' 'Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh.'<sup>6</sup>

To believe or to despair. This is not so much a fear of death, as a fear of non-being. We come out of non-being into the brightness of life. We live, and then we die, disappearing into non-being. Other women have mentioned struggling with existential anxiety, not only when they were children, but as a hidden undercurrent in their lives even as adults.

### ***Incompatibility with Other World-Views***

After completing high school, Dorothy Day plunged into life at university. There she learnt from Marx that religion was 'the opium of the people'. It was something that brought comfort to people, something which the strong did not need. So she hardened her heart against her religious inclinations and turned instead to communism

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings: Little by Little*, edited by Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992 [1983]), 21.



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and the fight against social injustice. Only when she was a new mother in her early thirties did she turn again to religion, to Catholicism this time, desiring the order and tranquillity it promised.

For many women, going to university has marked the end of any adolescent religiousness. They have put aside religious beliefs under influences such as science, Marxist ideology and Freudian psychology, all of which seem incompatible with a religious view of the world.

This is not something to be regretted. For those women inclined towards religion as children, this setting aside of 'childish things' is part of a deeper allegiance to truth. Such an allegiance requires a fearlessness and openness of mind that can allow the suspension, or even rejection, of all religious beliefs. Despite the longed-for security of belief and the community of believers, the attraction to truth is stronger. Thus the ground is prepared for the later appearance of existential and spiritual questions.

### ***Awakening to the Quest***

There are many things that can trigger a spiritual quest in maturity. Looking at the stories of modern, independent women, one is struck by the diversity of situations in which the quest began. One woman, in despair following the death of her husband, began trying to find out if life continued beyond death. Another, a successful academic and family woman, experienced several bouts of ill health, which brought her to realise that she had less control over her life than she had imagined. She needed a deeper understanding of her Jewish tradition than its practices were giving her, and so she turned to a study of its scriptures. Even reading a novel can be enough to trigger a spiritual quest. Several mid-twentieth-century women, including Dorothy Day, mentioned books by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Kazantzakis as giving impetus to a turning inward. The quest is also stimulated, for some, by the spoken word.

The casual remark of an acquaintance was enough for Frenchwoman Lizelle Reymond as she was working on translating a Sanskrit text in a library in India. A student asked her how long she was going to go on arranging books on library shelves. His words struck her like the reverberations of a great bell.

Under the effect of this shock, I asked myself the question: Do I have the inner stability to face the demands of my life? Do I know my place in life? What is it I know?<sup>7</sup>

At the time, she was living with a Brahmin family in a village near Almora, a town in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. When her work on that particular text was completed, she began looking for further texts suitable for translation and publication in France. A wandering holy man told her of a learned monk who lived in a distant village, translating Sanskrit texts into Bengali. This monk received no one. She decided to write to him.

I doubted whether he would answer. However, a month later a reply came: a refusal. But one sentence in the letter attracted my

<sup>7</sup> Lizelle Reymond, *To Live Within: A Woman's Spiritual Pilgrimage in a Himalayan Hermitage*, foreword by Jacob Needleman, translated by Nancy Pearson and Stanley Spiegelberg (Portland, Or: Rudra Press, 1995), xvii.

attention. I decided to write again. This time, without mentioning texts for translation, I spoke from myself asking a question about spiritual discipline.<sup>8</sup>

From that tentative beginning, her quest gathered momentum. Within months she was accepted as a student of the monk and began the first of many years of spiritual practice and study under his guidance. Perhaps her spiritual quest really began, albeit unconsciously, when she was drawn to the work of translating sacred Sanskrit texts. Yet some small thing—the student’s question, the sentence in the monk’s letter—was needed to bring those existential questions to consciousness and set the quest in motion. It was as if something hidden deep within was ready to come to the surface.

### ***An Unexpected Spiritual Experience***

An unexpected spiritual experience, whether in a dream or in waking consciousness, can trigger doubts and questions. Flora Courtois, a girl of sixteen living in the USA, needed a minor operation. While under the anaesthetic, she observed a whirling spiral of light approaching from a great distance and at great speed. At the same time a voice told her that she would understand all things when the centre of the spiral reached her. Unfortunately, she awoke before this could happen. Yet she was left convinced that what she had seen and heard was inexplicably related to the deepest truth. In the following year she began to doubt all that she had been taught within the Catholic tradition, and began a quest for a primary reality that permeated everything.<sup>9</sup>

Other women have reported less dramatic experiences, but experiences that were nevertheless unexpected and powerful enough to awaken an interest in existential and spiritual questions. Often this meant trying to understand what they had experienced by integrating it into an inherited religious belief system. Failing that, it might mean suspending all religious beliefs to go in search of the deeper truth that they had briefly encountered.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond, *To Live Within*, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Flora Courtois, *An Experience of Enlightenment* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986).



### ***The Search Arising in Mid Life***

Most commonly the spiritual quest begins, if it is to begin at all, between twenty-seven and forty-seven years of age. There are exceptions, of course, when the quest continues without a break from childhood or when a life crisis precipitates the quest in an older woman. However, while personal crises do awaken questions about the meaning of life, such questions are actually more likely to arise just when life is going well. During the middle years of life, women have established a certain way of life, and many of their goals may be within reach. Either they have married and had children, or they have remained single. Some have well-established careers, some do not. Whatever their individual circumstances, those who have become spiritual seekers were reasonably happy and content with life until, unexpectedly, a vague unease began to make itself felt, gradually solidifying into a more substantial discontent that nevertheless still lacked any real focus.

### ***Existential Discontent***

This discontent was not the developmental discontent of adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, eager to establish an adult identity and railing at parental restraints. Nor was it a discontent with an intimate relationship or a particular life situation. Those discontents are focused; they can be named and dealt with. But this discontent was different. It had no focus, it pervaded the whole of life, and it was persistent. It did not seem to be a symptom of an underlying depression. Depression is commonly accompanied by other symptoms, such as changes in weight, sleep patterns and mood. The women did not talk about feeling depressed, but rather about being discontented, and being puzzled as to why.

Rosemary Hamilton, a woman of Christian background, grew up in the wild, mountainous country of Canada's west coast. Her childhood, though materially impoverished, was happy, marred only by the death of her beloved father when she was fourteen. She became a social worker, married and had children. While her children were young she was briefly discontented with the constraints of family life. This discontent disappeared as she realised that she had chosen to marry and have children, and that she was content with that choice even if it meant sacrificing some freedom.

Twenty years later, after a reluctant divorce, she did find the freedom to advance her career and to experiment with new relationships. After several years of this, suddenly everything started to feel empty.

I was 48, at the top of my career, when the role of pampered poobah grew stale. So did my role as a social activist. A vast discontent seized me. ... I'd spent a lifetime achieving the goals society sets: satisfying sex, ecstatic love, marriage and children, an honoured occupation. All had left me feeling hollow, hungry; wanting, needing something more.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the earlier discontent, this discontent persisted and intensified. It also brought with it a yearning for 'something more', but a something more that could not now be easily labelled as freedom. She had had, after all, years of freedom to work towards life goals that seemed to offer satisfaction.

The other difference between this new discontent and the earlier one was that the first represented a desire to escape *from* a sense of entrapment, whereas this discontent was a yearning *towards* something. It emerged in the fullness of a successful life and persisted with an urgency that required a response.

So it is with many women. The first sign of an awakening to a spiritual quest is a vague, unfocused but persistent discontent in lives that are otherwise happy and busy. Just when they should be enjoying the fruits of wise life choices, hard work and good fortune, discontent surfaces. To begin with, it can be mistaken for something else—perhaps the longing for a child, or a new project, or a different lifestyle or career. But after some years of pursuing those alternatives, it becomes clear that the hidden yearning remains unsatisfied. Discontent rears its head again, even stronger and more persistent than before.

### ***The Questions***

Usually this discontent begins to crystallize into a question or a series of questions. Some women want to know how to bring order to a life

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Hamilton, *Hellbent for Enlightenment: Unmasking Sex, Power, and Death with a Notorious Master* (Ashland, Or: White Cloud Press, 1998), 4.

that seems disorganized and without direction. What principles and rules should be adopted in order for life to be more satisfying? Others want to know if there is a deeper meaning and purpose to life. What is the goal of life? How is life to be lived as fully as possible? For others, religious questions come to the fore. Is there a spiritual dimension to life? Is there a God? How can I know? Does the answer to this question make a difference to the way life should be lived? Then there are questions about life after death, and about the possibility of communication with dead family members. Sometimes, too, there are questions about a 'psychic' realm. Other questions focus on the reality to which the word 'God' refers, on the ultimate goal at the core of a religious tradition, however that goal be conceived.

The questions take many forms. There is no 'right' question. The initial question is simply a starting point; tentative answers awaken more profound questions. In this way the spiritual quest takes hold. One woman tells how her search for meaning sometimes became so intense that she would have to tell herself to stop thinking about it or she would go crazy. She would go to the movies, have coffee with friends, and try to forget. She would forget for a time, but it always returned. So the spiritual quest began and gathered momentum. In the process it became a quest of the heart as well as of the intellect, for at its core was that unnamed but powerful yearning.

### ***Yearning***

Women all over the world, in every religious tradition or in none, have spoken of this yearning in various ways. A woman from the USA has described it as a terrible restlessness, and as a longing to find meaning and purpose in her life. One Australian woman called it an ache, a hunger, a yearning that persisted and seemed incurable, while another described it as wanting everything, yet not knowing what that 'everything' was. An Indian woman spoke of how her whole being was crying out for something she could not name. A Chilean woman wanted a deeper religious experience than she found in attending her Catholic church.

In some instances there were strong overtones of an almost erotic attraction—but to what? An English woman wanted to be swept up, swept away by something all-consuming. A woman from New Zealand echoed her words, wanting to be absorbed and annihilated by love—

not a transient, human passion, but 'once and for all and forever'. The French philosopher Simone Weil, who came from a Jewish family background but who regarded herself as closer to Christianity than to Judaism, described this yearning as arising in a period of preparation for a closer relationship with God.

In this period of preparation the soul loves in emptiness. It does not know whether anything real answers its love. It may believe that it knows, but to believe is not to know. Such a belief does not help. The soul only knows for certain that it is hungry. The important thing is that it announces its hunger by crying. A child does not stop crying if we suggest to it that perhaps there is no bread. It goes on crying just the same.

The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty.<sup>11</sup>

This yearning that could not be satisfied was a puzzling reality. It demanded satisfaction, and satisfaction in this life rather than in some dubious paradise beyond death. In women who were ready, only some small thing was needed to awaken that yearning, and to call them to begin a spiritual quest. The call was not the result of an intellectual decision. Nor was it the attraction of an interesting project. It seemed to be something that could not be put aside, despite the profound discomfort and life changes it might bring in its wake. In the end, it was a yearning for truth, for love, for enlightenment, for union with that which ultimately IS.

**Sue Delaney** is a clinical psychologist and former counsellor at the University of Sydney. She has had a long personal and academic interest in mysticism and women's spirituality across different religious traditions.

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, translated by Emma Crauford, (London: HarperCollins, 1951), 132.