

Excerpt from the Introduction of *The Red Book*

Losing My Religion

I was a weird kid. Besides believing I could talk with inanimate objects (rocks, cars, light switches, apples—you name it, I talked to it) and besides making all my friends and family members refer to me as a different fairy-tale heroine each day of the week (my kindergarten diploma states, “Sarah [Snow White] Beak”), I was slightly obsessed with, well, God. In fact, I desperately wanted to be a nun, drive a pink Trans Am, and own a parrot—all at the same time. I looked at priests and nuns like other kids looked at sports heroes or movie stars, and even though I was bored out of my mind at mass and Sunday school, I loved the dramatic stories and colorful characters in my children’s Bible. Religion was magical and utterly mysterious to me. It hosted miracles and bizarre rituals, angels and demons, saints who levitated and mystics who healed the sick, and fantastical otherworldly places like heaven and hell. For me, at that time, religion offered limitless possibility. It was better than any fairy tale, because it was real (well, sort of).

But then a shift occurred. When I was in sixth grade, I read a book about a psychiatrist who regressed his patients back to their childhood using hypnosis, to help them heal their childhood wounds (yep, I skipped right over Judy Blume in favor of stuff like this). One day, much to his (and his patient’s) surprise, the psychiatrist ended up regressing his patient back a bit further than childhood, into what he finally recognized was a past life. And in the process, the patient was healed of the ailment she had come to see him about. How odd. He soon began to regress most of his willing patients into their past lives and to places in between their lives where they could converse with spirit guides and dead relatives and receive what was often quite profound and healing spiritual information. Whether this doctor was for real concerned me not at all. What intrigued me was the possibility that organic spiritual information and wisdom could be available to anyone, not just priests or holy people or sketchy corner-store psychics. I liked this. It made me wonder, what if God was still speaking? What if an ordinary (OK, slightly eccentric) Jane like me could receive her own spiritual insights, her own wisdom, her own adventure? Reading about the psychiatrist and his regression technique reminded me that the universe is huge, bigger than I thought, and that I have the freedom to explore it. Not only the freedom, but the responsibility.

Wildly excited about all this new spiritual possibility, I marched straight into confession the following Saturday and immediately started babbling to the priest about reincarnation and spirit guides and other dimensions, thinking he’d be equally excited. He wasn’t. He tried very quickly to shut me down. The poor, overwhelmed priest explained that when we die, we simply go to heaven or hell (and he really emphasized the hell part), not into other lives. But then I asked him

why reincarnation was a big part of Christian belief until the third century (I had found that out after doing a little research), at which the priest got flustered and sent me out of the confessional. I know many priests today who would be more open to this subject, but for some reason, this guy was in the booth that day, and frankly, I'm glad he was. I left the confessional for the last time. I realized, quite suddenly, that Catholicism was not big enough for me anymore.

Walking out of the church that day, I heard an inner applause (in fact, I think I actually bowed), not due to some cocky bravado or because I knew I was leaving Catholicism per se, but because I sensed I was opening myself up to even more wonder, even more divine possibility. I believe you can experience this sort of openness while remaining within a traditional religion, but a huge part of my particular path was about leaving "my father's house" so I could start building my own.

When I went home that day, I informed my wonderfully open-minded Catholic parents that I would not be attending mass anymore. Much to their credit, they (reluctantly) said that was fine but that I must still explore and find out what I did believe in. Fair enough. I sometimes wonder whether they ever wish they could retract that directive, because explore I did, and still do, and will, I imagine, for a long time to come. You could say I've taken my explorations pretty seriously. I've studied world religions in intellectually rigorous universities, performed extensive anthropological field research all over this spinning globe, and conducted interviews with several mystics and ordinary religious people.

I've trekked in Tibet and whirled with dervishes in Turkey. I've volunteered at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying in Calcutta and run from rabid dogs outside Buddhist temples in Kathmandu. I've attended intensive spiritual healing workshops in Sedona and psychic fairs in Chicago, fire rituals in the Black Rock Desert and yoga retreats in Mexico. I've had my past lives read, my aura tuned, my chakras aligned, my spirit guides channeled, my palms interpreted, and my kundalini awakened. I've prayed in churches, temples, mosques, studio apartments, Wiccan festivals, and always, always on rickety buses in India.

I've washed Hindu gurus' feet, eaten dinner with living saints, argued with Zen masters, and had life-altering visions with shamans. I've taught a Tantric Tibetan Buddhist monk how to use his new digital camera, taken the host from a Croatian Catholic mystic who had the stigmata, and had an engaging private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama on my twenty-first birthday.

I've studied the Bible, the Koran, the Upanishads, and Buddhist sutras, as well as all the popular spiritual self-help teachers, from Deepak Chopra to Caroline Myss, Marianne Williamson to Andrew Weil, Wayne Dyer to Oriah Mountain Dreamer, and many of the more esoteric alternative authors like Alice Bailey and Edgar Cayce, David Icke and Jane Roberts. I've watched the fads and trends of America's spiritual

culture with rapt attention and have talked with countless people my age about their own spiritual experiences, issues, and ideas. Through my years of exploring, I've come to realize that like most people in my generation, I am anti-authoritarian and a little individualistic. I want to find God in my own way, in my own time, and, essentially, by my own self. And I have. She beats deep inside my chest. I see her reflected everywhere. She grows with me.

Yep, I'm a true modern devotee. I love the mystics and *The Matrix*, yoga and the White Stripes, meditation and designer jeans. In terms of cultural dialects, I am multilingual. I speak New Age and Aveda skin care, Eastern philosophy and *Elle* magazine, metaphysics and Hitachi vibrators. I love modern art and dinner parties, lavender chocolate and dirty martinis, dancing and random road trips and hanging out with my girlfriends. My spirituality is real, alive and active, funky and fresh. It's not separate from my daily life; rather, it's so integrated and infused I can no longer separate the two.

So what, you may be wondering after all this, actually is my spirituality? What, exactly, do I believe in? Excellent question; no easy answer.

A Path with Heart

My spirituality is not traditional, although I have learned and continue to learn from the mystical hearts of the world's religious traditions. It is not New Age, although I have learned and continue to learn from many aspects of this dizzying movement. I do not have a guru or one teacher I follow, although I am deeply grateful for the wise teachings of many. I follow my own red heart. I listen to those who speak from their own. And I am wide open, but extremely discerning. I question, doubt, and dare to know there's always more. I sift and dig and only digest the spiritual ideas, tools, and practices that intuitively resonate with me, that challenge me to grow, that allow me to unfold organically. I do not worship these spiritual tools or believe them to be infallible or only touch them with kid gloves. I am deeply respectful, but I also like to rough 'em up a little, tattoo them with my initials, open them up for some fresh air, and fold them into my personal experiences. I get creative with my spirituality. I get physical. I laugh my ass off. I am, as many are, a sort of spiritual cowgirl. And I believe this honest, heart-driven approach has allowed me to have a juicier and more tangible, messy, and free relationship to the divine and to my self (which, as we now know, are ultimately one in the same). As the writer D. H. Lawrence put it, "It is a fine thing to establish one's own religion in one's heart, not to be dependent on tradition and second-hand ideals. Life will seem to you, later, not a lesser, but a greater thing."

My approach is not new. It echoes the experiences and insights of seekers on many different spiritual paths. But my particular expression of this approach is a bit more modern, a bit more female, and, I'm guessing, a bit more like you.

I wrote this book because I didn't find all of myself reflected within the spirituality books I studied over the years. Although packed with wisdom, they were, more often than not, too bland, too serious, too academic, or too woo woo, and mostly aimed at an older audience. I wrote this book because I know that our culture's lack of youthful, modern feminine perspective is part of the reason why many young women are not strongly drawn to spirituality in the first place. I wrote this book because whenever I ask my friends and colleagues about spirituality, it invariably reminds them of their traditionally religious grandmother or their hemp-covered ex-roommate or a sweaty go-get-'em Jesus-is-your-only-savior TV evangelist, and that's just not gonna cut it. We need some new touchstones, new reference points; *The Red Book* aims to be one

Truth is, most of us have become pretty jaded when it comes to spirituality and religion, due to some combination of personal history, family, schooling, friends and, of course, all the chaos we see erupting all over this confused spinning planet. On one hand, we see cultures engaging in bloody wars and violence over religious beliefs. We see repression and orthodoxy and conservative Bible-thumping, power-craving agendas. We see the negation of females and their sexuality; we see burqas and genital mutilation; we see fear of the new, fear of the other, fear of God and hell and dildos. On the other hand, we see spiritual traditions like Kabbalah (thanks, Madonna), yoga (again, thanks, Madonna), Buddhism (thanks, Richard Gere and Beastie Boys), meditation, and astrology become ever more mainstream (Gucci incense holders, anyone?) along with the slightly narcissistic New Age and hugely popular self-help movements that want to help us "find ourselves" or "our soulmate" in one weekend for only \$599. (Oh yeah, don't get me started on the severe lack of a cool spiritual parlance. Words like spirit, divine, prayer, soul, universe, God and phrases like higher self, inner power, love yourself, find yourself make some of us cringe, but you'll have to bear with me because it's all we've got for the moment, and as overused and cheesed out as these words may be, they still can, with the right intention and tone, inspire us to reach further and grow stronger). All of these associations can make the term spirituality seem more than a little confusing, a little trendy, a little bloody, a little too touchy-feely.

So what's a smart, gutsy, spiritually curious young woman to do nowadays? Well, how 'bout taking spirituality back into your own hands? How about finding out what it means for you, through your own explorations and experiences and expressions? You know, all this spiritual stuff doesn't have to be so esoteric or traditional or weird or dorky or intimidating or holier-than-thou. Spirituality is not separate and distinct from you and your everyday life. Igniting your divine spark is a simple perspective shift. An internal nod. An expanded relaxation into All That Is. It's about tuning up your senses, cranking up your antennae, generating conscious living. It's about becoming your own spiritual authority.

I have no interest in trying to convince you to start creating a more conscious and intimate one-on-one relationship with the universe swirling around you and, (more

important), the universe flaming bright inside you. But I can speak from my own experience and admit that when I dare to wink back at the divine, when I open my life to what deliciously includes but also is somewhat beyond my five senses, life becomes much more flavorful. Profound meaning illuminates even the most mundane of events. My relationships deepen. My voice becomes clearer. My work excels. My personal issues become less draining and dramatic. I am less affected. I require less outside approval. My self-confidence beams. I laugh more. I judge less. My sexuality roars. Random acts of kindness become a necessity, not just a whim. (When you start to recognize your own divine spark, you start to recognize it in everyone and everything.) My perspectives are amplified. I see the world around me at much more than face value, and as a result, I make clearer choices across the board, from my career to my relationships to my material desires, from politics to the environment to pop culture. I realize I'm not just some well-dressed biped trudging through life but actually an incredibly powerful and integral piece of the divine pie. I am In Love. Until, that is, someone cuts me off in traffic. Then I swear like a sailor and my body tenses and I rain down Tibetan curses upon their heads. I'm no saint or guru, no absolute authority. I'm far from perfect at touching tongues with the divine. But I have tasted enough to know that it's the only way I want to move through this world. Yep, it's that good.

But.

Know this: Igniting my divine spark has also kicked my ass five ways from Sunday. My ordinary perceptions are constantly challenged. My limits are made clear, and then broken open. I cannot play safe or dumb or keep myself cocooned or judgmental. My unhealthy patterns, issues, and parts of me that are not in alignment with my divine spark come up for confrontations all the time. In order to learn who I really am, I have to learn who I really am not. It's not always pretty. It's definitely not always fun. Truth sets me free, but it can sometimes hurt like a thousand bee stings and a bad colonic. I have ended what felt like good relationships, moved across the country, made risky career moves, gotten pretty ill, changed my lifestyle, and experienced extended periods in which I've been lonely as hell and sexually disinterested, all in response to my spiritual path. My sense of self has expanded and contracted like a schizophrenic accordion. I have questioned everything, and I have felt nothing. I have told the universe to fuck off, and I have fallen down weeping at its compassionate response.

But despite the occasional existential tantrums and internal scrubblings, I can still wholeheartedly say that igniting my divine spark is worth it. Learning how to live my truth, out loud and on purpose and with inner authority, is worth it. Merging my humanity with my divinity is worth it. Becoming responsible for my self, for the vibe I give off, feels, well, downright heroic. Just being here, open and ready, is worth all the dirty laundry you can throw at me. And I would rather be alive, be real, be increasingly conscious of all that I am, than move around this planet all mechanical and unconscious.

You know those people you meet whose eyes are sort of vacant and dull, lifeless? Those who are just slumping along life's crowded highways, not ever really reaching deeper into their soul's pockets? What about the opposite type, those whose eyes dance and beam and cry and flash? The ones who seem to glow, despite their imperfections, who tend to attract good friends and good happenings like a magnet, who seem to beam out a calm and fearless sense of self? Well, which would you rather be? How clearly do you want to see? I thought so. Here's looking at you, kid.

The Red Book: A Deliciously Unorthodox Approach to Igniting Your Divine Spark