

Life Beyond Belief, Everyday Living as Spiritual Practice by Alice Gardner

Excerpts

[Foreword](#) by M.B. Handspicker, Christian Theologian and Professor Emeritus at Andover Newton Theological School, making the point that the various traditions come together in the mystical approach where we are bringing our spiritual lives deeply into our everyday experiences. Handspicker quotes the Bible to illustrate his points, and refers to Frithjof Schuan and Huston Smith to substantiate his vision even more broadly, leaving us with an invitation to use our everyday experience in the midst of any religion or tradition.

From the Introduction (p.1-3):

"Past generations of people seeking to penetrate the secrets of spiritual identity and the source of human suffering have isolated themselves from the world in order to pursue this work, creating an environment of peace within which to uncover the spiritual treasure of their inner beings. We also see many modern people relating to religion and spirituality in superficial ways by simply paying tribute to the divine once a week, on special occasions or when problems occur, not knowing how to connect with this source of divine nourishment more fully in the midst of their frenetically busy modern lives. In either solution, people can often find themselves tightly held within strict systems of beliefs that allow them to feel that their way is right and that the results are good enough or are all that is possible.

"This book is asking: is it really possible to live a life that isn't constrained by tightly held beliefs about who we think we are and what is possible for us? Is it really possible to speak and act with freedom and integrity in all that we do, becoming clear channels of expression for authentic selves rooted in our essential core of divine Love? The main offering of this book is the suggestion that yes, a way is becoming open for us to live our deepest spiritual truths right in the middle of whatever circumstances we have been given in our down-to-earth lives. The invitation is that we may become explorers together in this territory. While you are reading, please use your own personal experience and perspectives alongside mine in order to see how best to embody this possibility in your own life.

"Inspired spiritual teachers have been telling us in so many different ways that we are not who we thought we were. We are not the bundle of ideas and beliefs that we hold in relation to ourselves. We are being told that we are something quite else, something wonderfully beyond our old beliefs, something free and vital and awake. Perhaps we may know this first hand in our personal experience or maybe we simply hear it and can feel its truth resonate within us. In either case, we often find ourselves inexplicably wanting the full experience of this more than anything. We want so much to connect with this deeper source of nourishment in life. The real possibility of awakening seems to be available to normal everyday people now, and in greater numbers than ever before. I am an example of that. A door is open now that has before been closed. Perhaps we owe a debt to the work of all of the previous generations for this happy circumstance. For

whatever reason, we seem to now have a double opportunity available to us that has not been as accessible to people in the past: to simultaneously be accessing our deeply spiritual nature and also be living active lives in the world.

"Not only is spiritual enlightenment, as Eckhart Tolle would call it, now a possibility for people involved in worldly life but it actually seems that now it is advantageous to our spiritual lives to be active in the world. To retreat to a mountain-top, either real or proverbial, would be to avoid our deepest and most critical work: that of becoming a clean, clear vehicle for the divine energy to use as a portal through which to enter into the world in a new way. Our worldly circumstances now are supporting us in allowing ourselves to be used by life in a way that retreating to a mountaintop would prevent. This book uses my own experience as an entryway into the subject, because of course it was my entryway, but then goes on to inquire into what the implications of this might be for all of our lives. The full answer to that inquiry lies entirely with you and your willingness to also explore."

From Chapter 1 (p.12-14):

"A common viewpoint among spiritually oriented people holds that our life stories are either illusory dreams or are problematic distractions keeping us from fully living a spiritual life. This view may come from books that we have read or from what we have been told. It also may very likely come from the way we experience our lives. There is often a striking difference between how we feel in the midst of our spiritual practice (whatever form that may take) and how we feel at work, in the midst of our families or in the morning traffic. We conclude that the comfort of a quiet period of prayer or meditation is a spiritual experience and shows us that we are on the right track, while the discomfort of our responses to a stressful day at the office, or a child's tantrum, is a sign that we are not the spiritual person that we had hoped to be.

"An alternate view will be offered here that has grown out of what seems obvious to me as I look at the world and at myself. I see that accepting our down-to-earth human aspects as part of the overall divine perfection is a vital part of being able to live in integrity with our authentic spiritual selves. This is not to argue with the viewpoint that our humanity has seemed to consist of illusory elements: ideas, stories, and mental interpretations of reality. I propose however that the human aspects of who we are encompass those illusory elements but also include important and sacred pieces of our wholeness that need to be embraced rather than excluded. I am seeing that it is a vital developmental stage for us to accept our humanity fully and to no longer resist it as if it were in our way. It seems that we are being now called upon to accept the human aspects of ourselves into the perfection of life as it is. The wholeness of being human is not just about the absolute truth of our spiritual identity, but also includes the activities of our physical, mental, and emotional bodies. It is only our previous resistance to being human in those ways that has made them seem to be blocking our development as spiritually awake beings. This book is an invitation to a way of living where our spiritual life is actually to be found within both the comforts *and* the discomforts of living all aspects of our daily lives in the midst of the world.

"Even though they are not true in the absolute sense, our stories offer us the opportunity of bringing us into alignment with what is absolute and true by cycling us through the world of experience in ways that are set-ups to unlock and awaken whatever is not yet awake in us. It is

not just a matter of whether the stories are true or not, it is a matter of whether we are willing to see what they are offering us, which takes great humility."

From Chapter 4 (p.51-52):

"Do we actually need to live in rarified spiritual environments in order to be good spiritual people? Do we need to only work in certain kinds of jobs, or have certain kinds of spouses or families? Look into it for yourself but, for me, the answer that has come out of this investigation is no. The essential breakthrough that is the culmination of what we call the spiritual life is to realize that what we are is already 100% with us and available, no matter what the circumstances that we are living in. From that knowing, personality still has its preferences, but it lightens up about having to get things entirely its way all the time. The mind-made self is finding its place in a very different configuration about how life works. As it finds that place, it finds that its job is much easier and much more doable than it ever was when it was trying to control things all the time. Now mind can just rest when it is not being useful doing the kinds of things that it really is good at.

"As our awakening process unfolds, we find ourselves able to stay aware of the opportunities that come to us through our uncomfortable moments, and to welcome with honesty and openness all that life sends our way. The dualities of good and bad, spiritual and non-spiritual, black and white, high and low, open or shut, all are still visible. They keep giving richness and texture to the world we experience, but we are less affected by their changeable nature because our attention is more and more on that which does not change. In seeing the world in this way and letting what we see penetrate us fully, the opposites are found to contain each other, and then even the preferences soften. We find ourselves to be the one that contains both sides of all of the dualities, the one where they meet and find peace with each other."

Chapter 19: (p. 148-150):

Ending and Beginning, All at Once

"It seems like a logical question to ask if there is an end point to this whole process, where you finally arrive at total peace and are completely finished with conditioning and reactivity and all that unpleasantness. The question, however, is itself coming from the mind-made identity. The reality is that both sides of the duality which the question assumes are true.

"We were done before we started. Even in the state where the mind-made self was totally dominating our awareness, our Self was actually untouched by that. The reality of our already awake nature was present all along. What we thought about it was not what was really happening. What was really going on was that we already were at the goal that our separate self set itself up to achieve, while thinking that we were far from it. Right now we are all totally and fully enlightened, and totally living in the kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom of Love. The thought that this is not so, is just another interference.

"At the same time it is also true that we always retain these human-being suits during our lives in the world of form. These human-being suits always retain an aspect of fallibility and incompleteness, at least in my experience. It seems quite dangerous to assume otherwise. This danger is illustrated by the corruption that seems to befall people who take (or are given) a lot of

power, particularly noting those individuals who are in guru type roles. There seems to be something inherent in being put on a pedestal above the life of common humanity that tends to bring on an abuse of that power, be it through unethical sexual exploits, money, Rolls-Royces, or whatever. It is therefore important not to allow others (or our own thoughts) to convince us that we are somehow above anyone in any way. We have found the reality of our unity with everyone; we have not become better or more enlightened than others.

"Indeed it is our completeness that allows us to contain that human frailty and fallibility and not to hold ourselves separate from anything. This is not to say that we will choose to behave unethically just because we know we contain that which is unethical. This does not follow at all, strange as it may sound. To embrace and include the dark, incomplete and fallible aspects of what it is to be human somehow allows us to contain them without having to act them out. It is only through resisting or disowning these aspects of being human that they can find a foothold within us and demand that we compulsively act on them as a way of their finding resolution."

