

**Finding the  
On-Ramp to Your  
Spiritual Path**



# **Finding the On-Ramp to Your Spiritual Path**

A ROAD MAP TO JOY AND REJUVENATION

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# Introduction

My own journey has led me around the world, into the homes and lives of hundreds of people on the path to whom I feel profoundly connected. We come from all backgrounds, with roots in any number of religious traditions, but it is not these traditions that unify us. It is the commonness of our spiritual quest that brings us together—our steadfast, daily, joyful commitment to peace,



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enlightenment, compassion, and contact with the Divine that fuels and sustains us.

Each of us acknowledges that we are on a spiritual path, but none of us are on the same path. Some of us attend church; most of us celebrate our faith in our own sacred spaces—some with others, some alone. We are committed to deepening our relationships with people, making time for solitude and prayer, doing work that is consistent with our nature, contributing time and energy to community organizations, participating in events and rituals that foster self-awareness and self-expression. There is no mystique to the spiritual path. No initiation to undergo nor dues to pay. It is simply a journey of awareness through the landscape of one's life.

To be on a spiritual path means to live mindfully, paying attention to the signs along the road and being conscious of our body—the vehicle we are traveling in—and of the needs and safety of others on the journey.



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To be on a spiritual path means to look inward as often as outward, knowing that the externals of our lives are reflections of our thoughts and words, manifestations of that which we are imagining and energizing into being with the fuel of our passion.

To be on a spiritual path means to use the rearview mirror to be sure that the path behind is clear of debris and that we do not obstruct another's journey with clutter of our own. It means making peace with our past, knowing our future contains it, and summoning the courage it takes to acknowledge, forgive, and release whatever we have clung to that impedes our movement.

To be on a spiritual path is to take responsibility for creating our own creed, based on our commitments, and to respect the rights of others to do the same. It also means to reflect anew on what beliefs we've inherited to be sure they are compatible with our wisdom and compassion.



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To be on a spiritual path is to embrace the mystical paradox that while we are singular, physical beings on this journey, we are also profoundly connected to one another, animated and sustained by the same vast Spirit that abides in the star, the petal of an iris, the howl of the wolf.

To be on a spiritual path is to live with the awareness that your terror is mine, my hunger is yours, our longings are common. It is to remember that every breathing creature and plant is being breathed by the Cosmos at Large.

To be on a spiritual path, it is necessary to forgive yourself for wrong turns, for failing to yield, for driving under the influence of others. These are minor and forgivable infractions. The more important rules of this road are to be attentive, to notice when you stray, and to get back on the path as soon as possible.



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We could all use a roadmap for the journey inward, a guide away from the crowded thoroughfare to the quiet path of our own true calling; a reminder that it is not the destination, but the journey, that is important. St. Catherine of Siena once wrote, “All the way to heaven is heaven.” Perhaps this is roadmap enough—this one stark line enough to keep us walking, reminding us that the wind we feel on the back of our necks is nothing less than the breath of God.

### **Preparing for the Journey**

If you’re new to the concept of a spiritual path, you probably have some questions, like, What is it, anyway? Who else is on it? Where does it lead? Can I get lost? How much time does it take? Shall I wait until the kids are grown before I get on it? How much does it cost?

For starters, you are already on a path, just like everyone else. We are born. We have a journey called our life. Then we

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die. Those people who decide to focus on the inner journey, the path of the heart, are those who are on the spiritual path. They are people attempting to live fully in the present moment, aware that it's there and only there that one finds joy, peace, and communion.

They are not forfeiting today for some future bliss, but living every moment as consciously as possible. They are artists who wake up every day to a fresh canvas of time, creating their days from their deepest desires. They are not the ones with all the answers, but the ones with all the questions, reveling in the unraveling of life's unfolding mysteries.

As to where the path leads, it leads us to our bliss, and that is something that's unique to each of us. Bliss, to me, may be living in the woods or farming the land; to another, it may be creating a business, working for justice, making music, writing poetry, or raising children. Living in a culture bent on profit, it's hard to keep our ground and remember what we are here for, but we're all here for a purpose, and to

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live in bliss is to be true to that calling, that inner voice that guides us as we make our way home.

And yes, you can get lost if you don't stay tuned to your inner voice. You can get lost if you look to others to tell you the way, if you follow the crowd for its safety of numbers, if you defer to another's authority without trusting your instincts. On the path of the heart, it is you who must choose when to turn and where, what to do and how. And those directions are always accessible when you pause and ponder, ask and listen. You will always know the next step when you let love and joy be your guide.

As for time, this is a journey that takes a lifetime. But remember, the spiritual path is the path of bliss. Why would you want it to be over soon? Every step is a step toward the light, taking you deeper and deeper into the radiance of the divine, which belongs to you intimately and infinitely. A perpetual state of enlightenment is unattainable. It's moments of enlightenment we're after, and they're strewn like jewels on



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the spiritual path. They shine into the darkest night, lighting our way through each unknown passage—a memory here, a tender touch there, a glimpse into the heartbreaking beauty of a child’s face, a moment with another that illumines our oneness. These do not go unnoticed by spiritual pilgrims. These experiences fuel them, fortify them, anchor them to the real, and give them wings.

Shall you embark now on this path of the heart? Now, when your life is so full, when your children are tugging at your clothes, your loved ones calling from afar, the demands on your time more weighty than ever? Only if the voice within calls you to the path. Only if you are ready to choose freedom, to commit to living passionately and compassionately, to create with your own hands the circumstances of your life. Only if you are ready to abandon mediocrity and negativity, old voices, old certainties, old doubts. Only if you are brave enough to let go of the known and enter into the grandest of mysteries—the mystery of your Oneness with All Creation.



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Do not set foot on this path if you are not prepared to pay the toll—the daily, demanding surrender of your fear. Do not come along if you are not willing to let go of your illusions, to give up your concepts for an experience of the Real. This journey goes deep into the darkness toward the Light beneath it. There are trails to places you have never been, sights along the way you have never seen—and unimaginable excursions into bliss, intimacy, communion with others and the Divine within. Is the spiritual path for you? That’s something only you can decide. If you are ready for the trip of a lifetime, come along.



## CHAPTER ONE

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# Stop



Since the spiritual path is a path of mindfulness, the first step requires that you come to a complete stop, catch your breath, and be aware that wherever you are right now is the perfect place for you to be. All the choices you have made in your life have brought you here and they deserve to be honored. Or as the Sufi mystic Hafiz would say, “The place where you are right now, God circled on a map for you.”

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So give yourself credit. Stop judging yourself. Stop being critical. Stop thinking negative thoughts. You have chosen the path of enlightenment and that path is illumined from the inside out—*as we believe, so it becomes*.

The journey on which you are about to embark is a pilgrimage inward and the destination is awareness. This is a guidebook for the joyful adventure of finding yourself; for once we know who we are, where we are, where we want to go, all heaven breaks loose with the possibility of fulfillment. Once you become mindful of your thoughts, your words, and your desires, you tune in also to the great power they hold and to your own potential to use them to create the kind of life you came here to experience. The more mindful you become, the more you will experience your creativity, and the more you will understand how it works. You will begin to feel in your flesh and bones the very inflow of the Creative Force that is collaborating with you at every moment.

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The difference between people who are on the spiritual path and those who are not is a matter of consciousness. To be on the path means that you are living in the state of awareness. You are conscious of what you are doing and why you are doing it. You are conscious that you may not always have a choice about what happens to you, but you do have a choice about how you respond to it. And this is where you begin to experience your own life as something you are actually creating, because every move you make along the way is your own choice, your own creation.

A few years ago, I veered off the path and found myself in a stressful frenzy. I had begun graduate school thinking it would provide a scintillating, engaging environment. I imagined myself in Socrates's circle and found myself instead surrounded by students half my age concerned more with spring breaks in Cancun than anything else. I was disenchanted with the whole experience, found fault with everything and everyone, and worked my way into a mental and spiritual morass.

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Totally out of balance, I called up my spiritual mentor, Paula, and informed her I was quitting school.

She listened to my outburst of negativity, then asked three questions: Are you eating and drinking moderately? Do you have a physical regimen for your body? Do you have a spiritual practice? I couldn't answer yes to any of them and she said, "Jan, no wonder your life's a mess. You don't have any balance in it. Nothing can possibly work out for you if you don't take care of those three areas." She suggested I make some changes in my life, work on balance, and wait a few weeks to see how I felt about quitting school. "Call me before you do anything drastic," she said.

That morning I made a commitment to beginning each day with twenty minutes of silence before I got out of bed. That would be my spiritual practice. No newspapers. No books or TV or phone calls. I lit a candle and focused on my breath for twenty minutes. I bought a bicycle and started riding it to school instead of driving. I threw out the junk food I

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had all over the house and started eating and drinking mindfully. They were not big changes, but they did require attention and vigilance. I shifted from automatic pilot to manual control for twenty-one days.

After three weeks I called Paula. “You are *not* going to believe what happened. Everyone on campus has changed dramatically!” I announced, full of joy and hopefulness. And she laughed right along with me, knowing that all the change I referred to had happened deep down inside me. I had stopped blaming people for not living up to my expectations, because I was no longer disgruntled. I was feeling good about myself and didn’t have to blame anyone for my life being all wrong. I was eating well, drinking moderately, exercising daily, and staying true to my twenty minutes of silence a day. I had started down a spiritual path, and the journey felt adventurous and liberating.

You don’t need to subscribe to religious dogma to be spiritual. Spirituality is not about creeds, saintly behavior,

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martyrdom, or selflessness. It is not about aspiring to be what we are not. It is about being everything we *are* with the greatest courage we can muster. It is about realizing—making real—our very selves. Meister Eckhart, a German mystic, writes that “when the soul wants to have an experience of something, she throws an image of that experience ahead of her and then enters into her own image.” Being on the spiritual path is doing just that: envisioning what we want, then setting out with intention, desire and diligence to get there. Whether or not we’re “religious” or belong to a church has very little to do with it.

My uncle once said to me, “I’m not spiritual. I can’t pray anymore.” When I asked why, he said, “I forgot the words.” He had confused spirituality with religion, thinking it had something to do with what he had once learned and had now forgotten. And come hunting season every fall, he would go to the hunting camp with his brothers, strike out on his own with his gun in hand, find a tree to sit under, and be alone

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with his thoughts. “I never fire a shot,” he said. “I’m just waiting for a deer to come so that I can enjoy its wildness. It’s the place I go to feel connected with nature. That’s really my religion, but don’t you dare tell anyone.”

My uncle never thought of himself as being on a spiritual path. He didn’t come to it with that kind of consciousness, and yet he knew where to go when he wanted to connect with the inner world. Hunting season was his stop sign in life. It was his chance to turn his back on the chaos of life and trudge into the woods, where he found his balance and bliss in communion with the wild.

Each of us must determine for ourselves what it takes to keep us balanced. This is the greatest gift we can give to ourselves, and therefore to our loved ones, for if we do not love ourselves lavishly, we cannot love others lavishly. And that is really what we are here for—to be a great light for others, to heal them with our touch and our deep listening, to mirror back to them their own majesty and magnitude.

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So when you come to a stop sign on the road, let it be a reminder. Stop judging yourself. Start loving yourself. Think *balance* as you come to your complete stop, and after you look to the right and the left, look inward as well, to be sure you have what you need to stay steady on the path.

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# Lane Ends



I came to the end of a lane once and it was terrifying. It was my first month in the convent and our first day of Theology 101. The tall, bulky Jesuit priest burst through the doorway, heaved his books on the desk, and turned to the thirty postulants before him saying, “All right, so you’re going to dedicate your lives to God. Let’s hear something about your relationship with this great love of your life.”

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This was easy, I thought. We had all been educated in Catholic schools and had memorized the Baltimore catechism. One by one, my classmates raised their hands, stood up, and repeated the answers we had been repeating all our lives.

“God made me to show his goodness and to share his life in everlasting happiness,” said the first sister.

“That’s the best you can do?” the priest replied.

“Yes, Father.”

“Sit down!”

The next postulant took a shot. “God is the Father and the first person of the Holy Trinity.”

“That’s it?” he said.

“Yes, Father.”

“Sit down!”

A third postulant met with the same disdain; then the room was quiet. What was he doing? I couldn’t imagine what was wrong. The answers everyone was giving were perfect, and still he dismissed them and asked for more.

“This is the best you can do?” he shouted, his arms flailing heavenward. “You call this God of yours believable? None of you have said one thing I can believe in. This is nonsense you’re uttering. What about your *relationship* with this God of yours?” A wave of anxiety rushed through me. I wanted to cry. Who was this terrible man and why was he doing this? Here we had offered up all we knew of God and he was taking a hammer to our cherished beliefs, shattering what we had clung to all our lives. It was devastating.

None of our beliefs stood up to his questions. Not one of us could defend our faith, for we had never learned the answers to the questions he was asking. We had learned *what* to think, but not *how* to think, and his questions ran deeper than any of our thoughts.

I sat frozen, full of shame and anger, staring down at my hands folded on the desk. As if my gaze were a testimony of respect, I withheld it from him. Finally the priest broke the silence. “You must find out what is true about God for

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yourselves. Arrive at a faith that is deeper than your learning, a faith that rises up from your own depths.” He said that we needed to let go of what everyone told us and come up with our own faith, a faith of commitment, a faith based on relationship and experience, a faith that was alive and rooted in our ultimate concerns.

It took a while to understand what he was talking about, but eventually the distinction between faith and religion surfaced. Religion was something that I had inherited, that I was born into and taught. It came to me from the outside. Faith was something that I was being challenged to create from the inside out, something profoundly personal that would stand up to any test because it evolved from my own compassion and commitments.

The lane that ended for me that day was the lane of dependence—dependence on the church, on external authority, on others’ concepts and opinions about what is true. The biblical paradox that claims you must lose your life in

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order to find it started to make sense. I had to give up the known—my programming—which was handed down to me and accepted without challenge, for the unknown, which is the continually unfolding mystery and expression of who I am and what I believe.

Religion is up to others. Faith is up to us. If there were no religions in the world, it wouldn't keep any of us from having an intimate, vital relationship with the Divine, for that relationship is something we create personally, every day. It doesn't take religion to make a person of faith. It takes awareness, compassionate practice, mindful behavior.

Lanes are coming to an end for all of us all the time. Just when we think we're sailing smoothly down the path of life, along comes an upset—we lose a job, a loved one dies, our marriage dissolves, we find out that we have cancer or that our child is on drugs. When the structures around us collapse, our first response is often shock, as the walls of our well-constructed lives come tumbling down. But shock is

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often the first step in the creation of something new and more beautiful than the old. Shock may be what the caterpillar feels when its safe cocoon breaks open to reveal a remarkable transformation into butterfly nature. Shock may be what the acorn experiences when its shell bursts apart to let loose the unfolding oak within.

Imaginative changes are brought about by shock, experiences that unsettle our whole notion of reality and require that we reconstruct our universe in some new way. In *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf writes,

I suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into

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words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed pieces together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me.

When the lane we're on comes to an end, it's time to give up an illusion for the truth that lies beneath it. And this is not a matter of effort. As Deepak Chopra says, "Effort is the problem, not the solution." The only thing we need to do is let go. Our self-understanding is about to undergo a revolution, and we need to stop clinging to the past and let the revolution happen. Instead of asking, "Why is this happening to me?" ask, "Why is this happening *for* me?"

Your own cocoon is splitting open so that your wings can emerge. Just breathe deeply, stay calm, and know that you are evolving every day, just like the rest of the natural world of which you are a part. This is a growth spurt, a step forward.

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Every breakthrough is preceded by a breakdown. Every dawn starts at midnight.

*Some real thing is behind these appearances:* awareness of that reality we are seeking on the spiritual path. We are in search of the Real, and the suffering we experience is tied to our illusions. The only means of transformation in our lives is awareness—awareness of who we are and what is real.

When I was a novice in that theology class, I had no idea who I was or what was real. I knew only what I had been taught, and I could barely stand to question the concepts that supported my life. Mentoring from that priest taught me how to create my own faith, to *put the severed pieces together* and come up with something real and powerful enough not to die for, but to live for.

The hard thing about inherited beliefs is that we think we should defend them. It doesn't occur to us that as we evolve, our thoughts evolve; as we mature, our spirituality matures. We develop our own worldview. We see how others have

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shaped our thinking and begin to drop what no longer rings true. We ask ourselves, would I think this way if I was born in China, in Africa? Then we begin to develop, from the inside out, a faith of our own making, based on what it is we believe is true and right and worthy of our commitment.

The Buddha, on his deathbed, said, “Do not accept what you hear by report; do not accept tradition; do not accept a statement because it is found in our books, nor because it is in accord with your belief, nor because it is the saying of your teacher. Be lamps unto yourselves.” To be lamps unto ourselves we must claim who we are and create our own creeds from our own depths. No guru, no priest, no mystic can give us truth. They can give us formulas, offer concepts, interpret sacred writings, but these are not truth. They are the menu, not the meal. They are the map, not the journey.

True sages admit that we cannot say anything about the awakened state, but can speak only of the sleeping state. St. Thomas Aquinas said about God that “we cannot say what

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He is”; we can say only “what He is not.” The highest form of knowledge is to know that one does not know. Like the Zen master who was asked by a student what happens when you die.

He answered, “I don’t know.”

“But aren’t you a Zen master?” asked the student.

“Yes, but not a dead one.”

It is only our *experience* that is real. No one can say what is true for anyone else, for our truth rises up from who we are and what we experience. The Indian poet Kabir writes, “If you have not experienced it, it isn’t true.” Spirituality is a matter of who we are, of becoming what we are. The spiritual path, then, is a journey into ourselves, into our own divine nature, our own knowing. In the words of Marcel Proust, “We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness, which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to view the world.”

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So when a lane you are on comes to an end and you feel the world caving in because what you thought was true no longer appears to be, go into yourself and remember who you are. Remember that you are not your thoughts, not what anyone ever said you were, not what you have tried to construct from your concepts of right and wrong.

You are Infinite Mind. When you look up and see only clouds, remember that above the clouds is infinite sky and this, too, is you. These shocks you experience are openings into your infinite nature. We get brief glimpses of this so that we do not forget, moments of enlightenment so that we know to hang on to the wheel and keep moving forward. There's nothing ahead but the Light.



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# Yield



The word *yield* has a variety of meanings. On the road, it means to surrender, to give way. In nature, it means to give rise to, to bear fruit. On the spiritual path, one leads to the other. Once we give up our notion of how life “should be,” we free ourselves to experience the abundance of the lives we *do* have.

What keeps many of us from experiencing joy is the illusion that the circumstances of our lives are not right. *If only*

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*this thing changed, I could have the life I want, write the book I want to write, have the kind of marriage I desire.* We think if only something changed on the outside, our lives would improve. But that's like being sick and asking the doctor to prescribe something for your neighbor.

Nobody but us is responsible for our happiness. It is our natural state. If we are not happy, it's not because somebody has taken something away from us. It is because we have added something to reality—some illusion, some desire, some attachment to “how it should be.” And this is what we have to surrender, this notion that someone else is to blame for what our lives look like.

I know a recovering alcoholic who wakes up every morning, gets on her knees, and waves a white handkerchief in the air. She is surrendering to the reality of who she is, acknowledging what is true for her, and summoning help for her journey. This is what's up for her in this lifetime. She is not going to turn into a nonalcoholic. She's not blaming any-

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one for who she is. She's not wishing for something that is not, but embracing what *is* in her life, and she's a successful, creative, joyful person because of it.

As true as it is that we create our lives, that our thoughts, words and feelings actually generate the reality we find ourselves in, it is also true that we are in a never-ending dance with its unpredictable particularities—dipping, swaying, bumping, and grinding to the beat of it. Fiction writers and playwrights often talk about the characters they have created taking on lives of their own. While the writers think they know where the characters are headed, the characters themselves often go off in their own independent direction and the writers' role is to surrender and give way. The creator begins the work and sets the stage, then a door opens in the imagination and surprising things come to life. This is the creative process, not unlike our own lives.

In our lives, we are the playwrights who set the stage. We choose certain careers, relationships, and lifestyles as the

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backdrop for our creation, and that is the set until we choose something else. What happens on that stage, though, is not always up to us, since it is peopled with individuals who have lives and imaginations of their own. What *is* up to us is how we respond to the action and interact with the other characters and our own inner thoughts. This is the dance we're in and we get to choose whether we lead or follow.

When we think of yielding or surrendering, it feels more like following than leading, but in a way, the reverse is true. Whenever we come up against a challenging person or situation, we're often inclined to judge or blame. This happens constantly, on the highway, in the workplace, in the grocery store, in our living rooms and bedrooms. If we feel edgy, we look for someone to blame. *It can't be me that's wrong; it must be them. I would be fine if they would just do this or that. I feel terrible because this situation is all wrong.*

If we follow our instincts, then, we walk right into the illusion that someone or something else is responsible for our

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feelings. If we surrender that illusion and take control of our thoughts, we take the lead in the dance. Instead of following our feelings, we learn to direct them.

The next time you find yourself disgruntled, check inside to see if there's a voice saying, "it should be *this* way, not that way." If that's the case, give it up. It *is* the way it *is*. Our happiness comes from contact with reality. The more we learn to accept it and flow with it, the happier we become. Trying to change reality, trying to control the behaviors of other people—this is what causes unhappiness. We can create our circumstances, in most cases, and we can control our thoughts and behavior in the context of those circumstances, but as far the great River of Reality we're swimming in, the only choice we have is upstream or down.

The other day I tripped over a book on the floor of a library. It was an old book, called *Children of the Gods*, written by a retired editor whose life was changed by an experience in the Mayan ruins. He had gone to work on an archeological dig

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and had a preternatural vision telling him that the earth was created in an experiment in altered consciousness by children of higher beings, who then forgot their original awareness.

The book is a record of his experiences, including the voices of several “rememberers,” who were trying to retrieve and piece together the truths they once knew. The first rememberer says:

The truth you seek is hidden by your wish to find it. You are chained to every pain and sorrow by your desire that it shouldn't be happening the way it is. *It is the wanting something else that nearly kills you.* Seek what is at hand. When you give up all your hopes you also give up all your fears. Save yourself, heal yourself, rest yourself in the unexpected. (emphasis mine)

Resting ourselves in the unexpected is not something we're naturally inclined to do. It takes practice, vigilance,

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awareness of the power of our inner voices to sabotage our calm. Being on the spiritual path means listening intently to these voices, knowing when they're serving us and when they're not, discerning when to yield and when not to.

A friend of mine was planning to build a stone wall in front of her townhouse in Virginia. She drove a Jeep and on Thursday filled the whole back end of it with rocks in preparation for her weekend project. Thursday night, as she drove into the parking lot at 11 p.m., she had a horrifying recollection. She was supposed to pick up three people at the airport on Friday morning. What was she going to do with all the rocks?

She had a moment of choice here, to surrender and make peace with reality or to resist and struggle. She was agitated at first, but finally gave in, opened the tailgate, and in the quiet darkness, unloaded each rock and began to build her stone wall by feel. As she held each rock in her arms, carrying it to its proper place, she felt a kind of calm come over her. "It was just me, the rocks, and the moonlight," she said. "It took

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three hours to get it done, but once I let go of my anger, the whole process was beautiful.”

When she went out the next morning and saw in the light of day what she had built, she was astonished. “It was perfect. A stone mason couldn’t have done a better job. I was so proud and amazed—it was almost effortless once I gave up the struggle.”

Yielding, while it is not usually our first instinct, is often the best. It is a gracious movement, so much lovelier and softer than steely resistance. It is an act of awareness, a creative gesture that bears fruit, deflects anger, awakens the tenderness within and without. So when you come to that sign in the road, don’t try to race ahead, cutting someone off—take your time, remember that woman kneeling with the handkerchief, that stone fence being built in the night: remember the calm, the joy, the grace of surrendering.