

# Pilgrimage of Companionship: Walking with the Spiritual but Not Religious

*by Catherine and Gil Stafford*

Max's text read, "A mutual friend recommended you. I don't have any religious background, but I've had an experience I can't make sense of. Could we chat over text?"

I wrote, "Sure. Tell me about your experience."

"Paranormal, maybe? My mom died. Now she's talking to me."

"In your dreams? Or while you're awake?"

"Awake."

"What'd she say?"

"Be careful."

"What'd you think she meant?"

"Not sure."

"Is there something you should be wary of?"

"You mean like everything in the world?"

"Indeed. But more specific. Like your personal life?"

We offer spiritual companionship via text, phone, e-mail, Skype, walking mountainous trails, sitting in coffee shops and pubs, or wherever someone needs to hold safe space. Max's text led to multiple Skype conversations. After a year, Max suggested we meet for coffee, and we still connect regularly. The topics roam the pilgrimage landscape of spiritual companion relationships; we walk foggy paths while trusting the intuitional muse. We did not set out to establish a specific contemplative practice or create a community for the "spiritual but not religious." We have simply lived the pilgrimage life—a long walk of companionship, mutually seeking wisdom, asking questions, soulfully listening, and focused on healing the soul. Still, community and shared practices did emerge.

Max, like many of our spiritual companions, could loosely be described as spiritual but not religious. Max is part of a growing populous that constitutes what American philosophy professor Jeffrey Kripal says is "a quiet, but radical, rejection of religion in all its dogmatic and dangerous forms" (Dick, 626)—not in search of "the" truth but, instead, desiring a reality of lived experiences with the collective divine. (We will use the term "collective divine" as a reference to the neopanthestic concept of a universal divinity, including the collective conscious

and the collective unconscious; seen and unseen; and all that has ever been, is present, and will ever be.) Research continues to produce global evidence of the advancing number of people who self-identify as spiritual but not religious as well as those declaring themselves either as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. The phenomena exist not only in Western culture but also broadly in Abrahamic traditions and in Eastern religious countries. (See particularly Sevinç, Coleman, and Hood as well as Todd and Cohen.)

Categories can be off-putting, particularly for those intentionally choosing to live outside the religious marketplace, or frightening for those unable to leave their religion. From our experience, though, the spiritual but not religious a) like Max, have no religious background, are possibly agnostic, but have interest in spirituality, b) were abandoned by their religion but still seek a spirituality, c) have left their religion for any number of reasons never to return, yet still are spiritually curious, or d) are atheist, with or without a religious background, yet have had an experience, possibly through meditation, that eludes description. There are at least two other groups with which we connect. Such a discussion, however, requires another essay. They are the mentally ill found outside of religion but expressing spiritual experiences and the developmentally disabled who might be spiritual but not religious, but exhibit a definite spirituality. Almost all the spiritual but not religious share a desire to express a spiritual authenticity. Reportedly, Deepak Chopra said, "Religion is belief in someone else's experience; spirituality is having your own experience." As companions, our role is to assist the self-discovery and articulation of their spiritual experience.

Candace Lewis, PhD, self-defines as "non-religious but spiritual." Lewis is a neuroscientist and a Fulbright Scholar who researches dynamic environmental and genetic influences on brain-behavior relationships. She is a graduate of Wisdom's Way Interfaith School and was a 2019 New Contemplative at the Spiritual Directors International (SDI) annual conference. Her reflections on the conference speak for themselves and possibly others who are spiritual but not religious. Courageous words require "brave space" (Ali, 3). With permission, we have shared her comments written to us in an email.

*I did not expect so much "religion" (at the conference) to be in the spotlight. The typical discourse within my communities at home center[s] on nature, politics, tears, beauty, social justice, culture, sex, altered states of consciousness, growth, pain, love and a whole lot of fun. With intention, we steer clear of the language, signs, customs and traditions of world religions. Because quite frankly, these symbols are so heavily associated with war, rape, oppression and greed, not only of the past but of today. The staleness of traditional religion is appalling to many modern spiritual people, who have never, and will never, step foot in a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque. Personally, I love holy spaces and feel a connection to them. However, I long for a world in which we acknowledge the disgraces of the past, burn down the places of horrors, and rebuild in the name of the victims and the future.*

Such a spirituality can appear elusive in the contemporary world, where bits and pieces of the truth can be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere and where religions are dialectic, both true and false at the same time. Though vague in intellectual definition, an experience of the collective divine can be unearthed on the pilgrim's labyrinth. The serpentine path is a ground of indelible authenticity. Walking, the pilgrim becomes an apprenticeship of poetic wisdom; spatial, not temporal; a transmutation of reality.

## Walking Pilgrimage with the Spiritual but Not Religious

We have led seven walking pilgrimages with the spiritual but not religious through Ireland's Wicklow Mountains. The rugged one hundred miles are a strenuous test, potentially opening a fissure in the mind, body, soul, and spirit. We have walked among dozens of pilgrims, some walking alone, others in pairs, laughing, singing, and telling stories. At times, one or two drifted alongside for a chat.

Randi and Julian connected with us through a young adult community we helped establish. They are bisexual and now in a relationship. Randi had been a foster child, bouncing from home to home. During Randi's early high school years, their foster parents were part of a small, extremely conservative church. Randi's family did not celebrate holidays, demanded a strict dress code, and insisted on excluding outsiders. Randi challenged this lifestyle and was subsequently shunned by the foster family and their church. As a teenager, Randi lived homeless for a month until rescued by a compassionate high school teacher. With a brilliant mind and sheer will, Randi made a commitment that they would never rely on another person. By Randi's mid-twenties, they were successfully navigating the path through graduate school.

Julian had grown up in the southern region of the United States. Julian's parents were well educated and supportive. The family was comfortably ensconced in America's evangelicalism. Julian's relationship with their family was "lovely, until I told them I was queer. The same could be said for my relationship with my ex-church, who abandoned me when they heard I was gay."

The conversation with Randi and Julian began a long slow pilgrimage through loss, death, grief, heartache, break-up, loneliness, renewal, marriage, and childbirth. The context was always within the space of the collective divine, while the content was never religious. Such narratives are laden with the potential for simultaneous transmutation of the storyteller and the listener. For to engage in the mutuality of dense conversations demands a risk from everyone sitting in the circle—both those seen and the unseen (those who have influenced our lives but are not sitting in the circle). We "live each other's death and die each other's life" (Heraclitus, quoted in Yeats, 145). Listening demands space and spiritual time, no matter where the conversation manifests.

Chiron appeared as wise as their name might allude. Chiron was a fluid person in both appearance and speech but poignant in presence—maybe it was the wheelchair. Chiron's words were delivered like an axe against an icy wall—intentional, precise, swift, and ironic.

"Have you read Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*?" Chiron challenged us. "Doesn't matter. Nelson uses the term *spiritual cripple*. [See Nelson, 48.] Not in defining her belief or disbelief in God, but her willingness to wrestle with the question of God. I love Nelson's work. In the midst of her own depression, Nelson's mentor suffers a tragic bicycle accident, leaving her a paraplegic. Like me, except mine was a misstep off a rock climb. Anyway, Maggie spends days, weeks, months helping nurse her mentor, her friend, back to life, a new normal. Reading Nelson strikes an obvious chord with me, forces me to revisit my musing about God. I wonder, if there is a God, that God must be sitting in a wheelchair, like me. The Disabled God. [See Eiesland, 23.] I need a God who is embodied in this body. A posthuman body. Have you read Katherine Hayles? It doesn't matter.

"I don't have any use for religion. Not after my accident. The religious said trite and hurtful things. Always the dualistic motif; God equals good. Satan equals bad. But what about bad things happening to good people? Come on, God created the tree of knowledge, of good and bad; both exist on God's behest. There's a balance, a yin and yang. Right? God perfectly disabled; the good suffered bad."

As the spiritual companion, I half said to myself that I would have to wrestle with Chiron's convincing argument of God being both good and bad.

Chiron smirked and went on. "Been wondering a lot about artificial intelligence. There's a ton of research with implications for the disabled. It's one thing to imagine body part replacement, but what about placing my mind in a cyborg? Transformed from crippled life to an infinite life inside a machine. Heavy stuff. Have you read Philip K. Dick? He's your contemporary. Okay, boomer. No offense. Well, maybe. Anyway, have you read the *Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*? It doesn't matter. Well, maybe it does. Have you?"

A thoughtful response is sometimes trapped in space, yet absent of time. Chiron is not asking a yes or no question. Have we read Maggie Nelson, Katherine Hayles, Philip K. Dick, and *The Disabled God* by Nancy Eiesland? Chiron is asking what fuels our spiritual evolution. Are we versed enough in queer theology, disabled studies, and posthumanism? He asks us not to respond but to hear at the level of mutuality.

Chiron invoked a space of mutuality. Our internal work affected by their work. Chiron handed us heavy stones for our pack. "Take nothing literal," George Gurdjieff advised (Gurdjieff, 4); much, if not all, is a metaphor. Literal or metaphoric, permanent or transient, everyone travels life's pilgrimage—walking, climbing a cliff, or rolling a chair.

Max and I were sitting under a tree. "I was reading this book about John Dee," Max said. "Dee was trying to communicate with angels. My mom's an angel now, so I thought I'd check it out. The author suggested an inverse Kabbalistic name for ALLA would be ALLALA, God is not, not (Louv, 112). That took me down the Internet rabbit hole into Plato, Pythagoras, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Hermeticism, alchemy. Crazy stuff."

"It's called spiritual alchemy or negative theology. God is the absence. God is the silence," I said.

"I've never heard God talk. Have you?"

"You've heard your mom talk."

Silence. Max stared into the tea leaves at the bottom of his cup.

After a bit, I continued. "My sister has Prader-Willi syndrome; she's developmentally disabled. When I ask a question, she says, 'I not, not know.' I used to think she didn't have an answer. But maybe she was talking about God? Maybe God is not, not. The absent God is where God is not seen, not heard, not felt, not experienced. God in the absence is maybe presence or God's shadow?"

"I not, not know," quipped Max.

Later that night, I blinked at Max's text. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No. But, I see a therapist for my depression."

"I like what you said this afternoon about depression. What was it?"

"Inspired melancholy—a holy madness both Plato and Aristotle mused could lead to divinity."

"So, you think a therapist could help me become a god? Haha."

"Probably not. But if they do, let me know. I might want to give them a try."

For various reasons, spiritual companions can get thrust into the therapist role. Obviously, unless otherwise trained, spiritual companions must resist. We do not diagnose or prescribe. We can, however, recognize, recommend, and be present. And we do provide a safe space where our companions can fully express themselves free of any judgment. Candace has been vulnerable in sharing her experience of being a New Contemplative. Such an openness is a good example of what being a spiritual companion for the spiritual but not religious can look like. In an email, Candace shared her experience with us.

"As a New Contemplative, I wasn't sure what our role would be. Perhaps I daydreamed of intimate talks of the divine, trading dark poems of pain and longing, speaking with wise women who have paved the way and are still fighting the patriarchy of Abrahamic traditions ... these daydreams did not come to pass. In my 'nonreligious but spiritual' community, we seek to know the cosmos in her infinite mystery through getting to know each other and ourselves in mind, body, and spirit. At the Spiritual Directors International Conference, I felt like a shiny thing being paraded about and applauded; talked about but not listened to; introduced but not held in deep wonder; looked at but not seen."

As spiritual companions, we experience our relationships with the spiritual but not religious as a lifestyle of listening, holding in wonder, and truly seeing, and also a way of being in the world—sometimes a mystery, other times a dream. Like seven spiraled pilgrimages, layers of process: mine, theirs, ours. Always asking, what do we need in our spiritual companion's backpack today?

### **What's in the Spiritual Companion's Backpack?**

When we lead walking pilgrimages, we offer three suggestions: 1) train for the terrain, 2) purchase quality boots and break them in, and 3) pack less than 15 percent of your body weight. We extend those same suggestions to our Wisdom School as they prepare to become spiritual companions: 1) train at the craft, 2) walk hundreds of metaphoric miles before declaring yourself a companion, and 3) carry only the spiritual practices you use.

