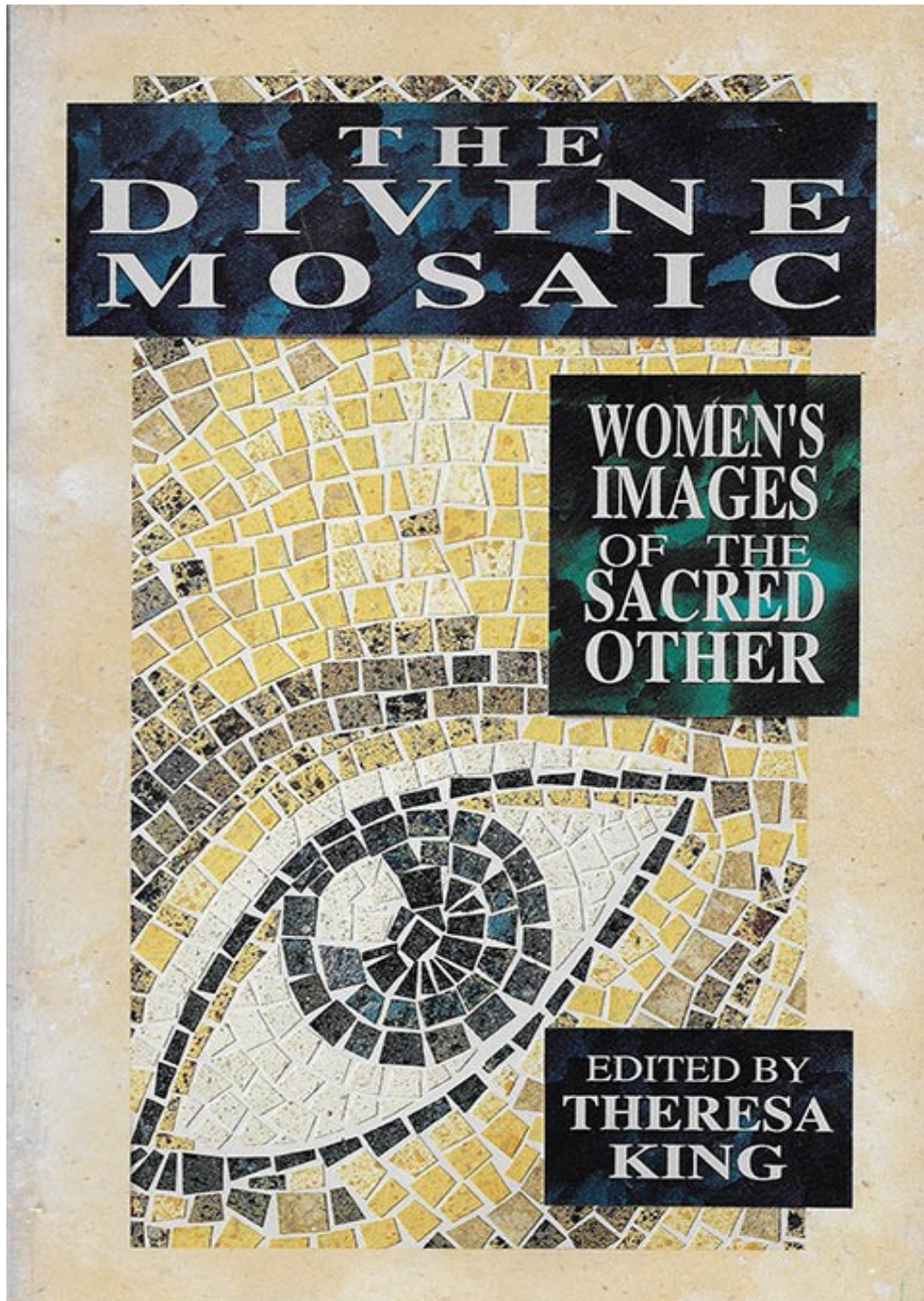


"From Nothing to Everything Just as It Is" by Nancy Ann James

This is an article by Nancy James from a book entitled "*The Divine Mosaic. Women's Images of the Sacred Other*" edited by Theresa King, Yes International Publishers, St. Paul Minnesota, 1994, pages 31 to 40.



"God is great and God is good and we thank him for this food. Amen."

We are sitting around the dinner table, hands folded in our laps, eyes downcast, my sisters, 10 and 3, myself, 6, and our parents. We say "Gawd," not "Gahd," and "Ay-men." We say this verse at dinner time only.

Lest this 10-second ceremony become too solemn, daddy may be grinning. He might poke the nearest girl in the ribs while her eyes are supposed to be downcast, causing her to squeal or giggle. If you peek over at him during the verse, he might wink at you. Mother might say, "Tom!" in her chastising voice, at which he acts like he's been a bad boy and now he'll behave. But it never lasts. He lets you know this God stuff is not to be taken too seriously.

By the time we moved from Chicago to Janesville, Wisconsin, when I was 12, we were no longer saying this verse. I don't know when we stopped, but I'm surprised to remember saying it at all, given my parents' beliefs about God. We were not believers, to put it mildly. We were agnostics. We were Unitarians.

Mother and daddy had met and married in a Methodist church. They remained friends with the minister and his wife throughout our childhood. But before I had a memory, they decided they couldn't go along with traditional Christianity, and they sought a church more compatible with their beliefs and their intelligence. Someone then pointed them to the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago.

We attended every Sunday, which entailed a long half-hour drive from home. My sisters and I went to Sunday School downstairs, the adults to church in the main hall. Kids never entered the main hall, to my recollection, except once or twice a year to take part in a special program. In Sunday School, we learned about the natural world and other religions, and took field trips to visit a synagogue and different churches. We had no rituals unless potluck suppers are a ritual. We learned above all, tolerance for different people's points of view. What we learned subtly was that other people were entitled to their beliefs even if they weren't quite as smart as we were. "Smart" meant intellectual and rational, and nothing else mattered.

During my childhood, to be a Unitarian meant:

- Always being embarrassed when asked what church I went to. No one had ever heard of Unitarianism, so they would say "What?" in a loud voice and ask what the heck *that* was. I had trouble telling them.
- Knowing there was no God, as surely as there was no Santa Claus. From earliest Christmases, when we got a present labeled "From Santa Claus," we knew it came from mother and daddy. Santa was just a little joke some people played on their younger children. God seemed to be hoodwinking a lot of adults.
- Recognizing that Jesus was a great man but not holy or supernatural. Kind of like Abraham Lincoln. He did a lot of good works, but was still just a human being. We didn't capitalize "he" when referring to Jesus.
- Enjoying certain hymns and Christmas carols that mentioned God or "our Father" while realizing that what we liked was the music, which didn't commit us to the sentiments expressed by the words. My big sister taught me that.

One summer I came into possession of a pamphlet advertising a Bible study class for children my age. I took it home and begged my mother to let me attend. She argued against it but finally gave in. I was highly excited, having heard much about the Bible and knowing virtually nothing about it. When I got to the class the teacher asked everyone to take out their Bible and turn to Psalms such-and-such. "Does everyone have a Bible?" I raised my hand: No. Someone loaned me theirs. The teacher repeated the instructions but I was lost. Why didn't she just say what page to turn to? She had to come over and find the right section for me, embarrassing me further. It went like that all morning; every time we went to a new book, someone had to find it for me. At the end of the class, the teacher asked if I had a Bible at home that I could bring next time, and I said no. When my mother heard that, she exploded. I had said what? "Of course we have a Bible, it's right here"—and she went and found it. I'd never seen it before. I never went back to Bible class.

I knew that all my friends and acquaintances believed in the all-seeing, all-knowing God who had created the universe. When they tried to pin me down on how I thought the whole thing got started, if not for God, I talked about stars and evolution and the natural order of things. Who did we pray to? We didn't pray. If further challenged, I fell back on my trusty agnostic statement: "We're not saying there is no God, just that there's no way of knowing if there is or isn't." I didn't really believe that (I knew there wasn't), but it usually got the questioner off my back.

My first year in college, I worked on the student newspaper at the university, and fell in with the wise, strident, older, left-wing journalism students. When one of them loudly castigated Unitarians as cowardly agnostics who didn't have the courage to say they were atheists, I knew I didn't want to be lumped in with that group, and immediately became an atheist. That was a relief since it meant I didn't have to look for a Unitarian church to go to. I'd hardly been to church since moving away from Chicago at age 12, since no Unitarian church existed in Janesville. Gradually I came to think that Unitarianism was, as someone put it, a fine debating society but didn't really qualify as a religion.

For many years, I was "nothing." I led a full life—married (Bob, my husband, was also "nothing"), lived in several different places, worked a year, raised two sons, went through an extremely rough period when my husband had a nervous breakdown and I had to go back to work. When our first-born was about a year old, we thought it would be nice and neighborly to attend a little nondenominational church near the town we were living in. I kept having to carry Christopher, restless and noisy, out into the vestibule. Besides, the sermon was so full of sin and salvation, we never returned.

Bob (from whom I'm now divorced) had used the G.I. Bill to live and study for a year in India, before I knew him. He had read extensively about Eastern philosophies and religions, and encouraged me to learn something about the subject. I finally read a book by Alan Watts called *The Way of Zen*. It was a huge eye-opener, filling in a lot of gaps in what I'd heard Bob talk about for years. I was especially impressed that Buddhism was the world's only great religion that didn't worship a supreme being, and that it contained no dogma, no set of fixed beliefs you had to subscribe to. Everything was open to question and to testing in one's own life. Anyone could become enlightened, not just a few people at the top of some hierarchy. Now that was my kind of philosophy!

A few years later, a small group of people convinced an authentic Japanese Zen master to move his family from San Francisco to the Twin Cities and become first abbot of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. By then, Bob and I had been sitting *zazen* (the Zen form of meditation) weekly with a small group in one man's suburban basement—sometimes no more than four of us. But several other small

groups had also been forming around the Twin Cities, and we all came together to found the Zen Center. We formed a board of directors, raised funds to rent an apartment for the Zen master and the zendo (a place to practice meditation), and did all the things needed to start a formal organization and keep it running.

I'll never forget the first time I sat zazen in the suburban basement . . .

With about one minute of instruction in the meditation posture, and considerable qualms about being able to sit still for one 40-minute period, let alone the standard two, I find myself breathing slowly in the prescribed cross-legged position and thinking, "Now what?" I berate myself for talking to myself—but can't stop. Every time I am thinking thoughts, as if to tell someone later, I silently yell at myself "Who cares?" I know that all my life I have been carrying on a lively internal monologue that absolutely no one is interested in. And now is the time to shut up. So I tell myself, "Shut up!" along with "So what?" and "Who cares?" Over and over.

Suddenly tears are forming and beginning to slide down my cheeks. I realize this is the first time in my whole life that I have stopped to just plain be with myself. The first time I have given myself permission to simply be. I've spent my life running and doing and trying to live up to other people's expectations, and suddenly here I am, alone with myself. Just sitting. Just being. No expectations. Listening to nothing at all.

The two 40-minute periods, separated by a 10-minute slow walk, have passed faster than I dreamed possible. Instead of experiencing agonizing impatience for the time to go by, I am startled when the bell rings announcing the end of each sitting period. I am sorry to have it end. As soon as I can get out of the room, I hurry to the bathroom, close the door, and sit sobbing for about ten minutes. I have never been so in touch with myself. I am full of pity and feeling for this poor person who has never stopped long enough to feel her body or her breath, to know her true self. I am hooked on zazen.

A year later, when the Minnesota Zen Center was formed, I got heavily involved. When it organized its first *sesshin*—three days of meditation starting at 5 a.m., with meals and work periods thrown in—I was there sitting and helping cook and having *dokusan*, a private interview with the Zen master. I didn't ask a lot of questions; I was learning too much too fast to think of any. I was absorbing everything I could about Zen, about strange new ways of doing things at the zendo, and new ways of thinking about life.

Gradually, things began changing in my head. From the beginning I had primarily thought of Zen as a meditation practice and, secondly, as a philosophy. It took several years before I began to think of it as a religion. I had started out ignoring or downplaying the Buddhism half of Zen Buddhism, but that part kept creeping in—into the Saturday lectures, the books I was reading, and finally into my consciousness. In my private definition, a religion was a world view and set of beliefs that influenced people in all their activities and thoughts and choices, in all realms of their life: it was all-pervading. Only gradually did it dawn on me: what I've got here is a religion, something I never thought I missed or wanted. And now here I was, thoroughly immersed in one.

One way in which Zen was totally different from Unitarianism, and from school, and from academia, and from my jobs, was that it dealt with the whole person: feelings, body, mind, spirit. I was not just a mind, a head! In fact, Zen stories let us know that the mind has been so overemphasized in our Western culture that we need to learn to forget about it for a while, to let other ways of knowing sink in.

In *zazen*, the main thing I had to focus on was not-thinking, letting ideas and thoughts go out whenever they came into my head. All those thoughts that had so plagued me during my very first try at *zazen* were still the useless clutter of my mind years later—aptly described in Zen as "monkey mind." My focus was and still is on breathing, and on being aware of where I am and what I'm doing.

To live with awareness, with full consciousness, became a goal. Awareness of what? Of reality, of what is. Seeing; opening my eyes.

I was reminded of *Our Town*, a play I acted in as a high school Junior. I was moved by the graveyard scene, but didn't really understand it at the time. That's where Emily, who has died in childbirth, is sitting with the other dead townspeople on chairs representing graves, and suddenly becomes aware that she can "go back," relive a day of her life. The other dead folk try to talk her out of it, saying it won't be what she thinks, it'll be too sad, but she won't be deterred; she'll choose a happy day, her tenth birthday. So the scene of her tenth birthday begins. But very soon, as her mother is talking to her, Emily calls out to her: "Look at me, mama—really look!" But mama doesn't, of course. And before long, Emily gives it up and goes back to her grave. Nobody was seeing what was right in front of them. They didn't know how precious everything was. They were wasting their wonderful lives in trivia and blindness, without really looking at anything.

Initially, I found my awareness would heighten whenever I was able to get quiet within. This happened most often when I sat a *sesshin*, particularly a seven-day *sesshin*. Toward the end of that time of stillness, I was super-alert to whatever came my way: the feel of water on my face, the sound of a power lawnmower next door, the taste of rice with sesame salt. What I knew was known not with my mind but with direct experience. My mind chooses a nutritious diet; my senses directly experience the food.

At the end of one *sesshin*, as participants were sitting around preparing to leave and joking about the agonizing three days we had just gone through, someone asked what each of us had learned. My mouth immediately opened and said, "I learned how to listen with my stomach." People laughed, but it felt totally true. No longer was my realm of consciousness limited to my brain, my intellect. To get to my truest feelings, I had to let them come into my awareness through my *hara*, the area of the abdomen that is one's center of gravity and equilibrium. One reason it was so important to become still and quiet was to allow myself to "hear" the messages that emanated from my *hara*.

Very gradually, I felt I was incorporating that direct experiencing into all aspects of my life; it was no longer just a temporary response to the unnatural situation of sitting *zazen*. When I ignored the *hara*, didn't slow down to get centered, my thoughts were shaky; I was nervous and unsure of myself. As time went on, I experienced the closing of a perceived gap between body and mind. I felt an equilibrium, wholeness and tranquility never known before.

A noted Zen master is often quoted: "To study Buddhism is to study the self; to learn the self is to forget the self." Although I had always been somewhat shy and self-conscious, finally, little by little that self-consciousness was falling away. I was finding the solid me that had been here all along, underneath the doubter and the actor, the performer—the conditioned good girl. And one day, I went beyond even the solid me.

It happens during a seven-day sesshin, on the fourth day. A lot of things have led up to it, but shortly after seating myself at 5 a.m. in the dimly lit zendo, facing the wall, it hits me that I have no problems

whatsoever. "Only the small self has problems" are the words that float into my consciousness. Whereas I, or this collection of cells known as Nancy, have somehow entered the realm of the big Self.

The feeling is of complete joy and appreciation. When another sitter comes in late and sits down next to me, I gaze at his bare foot sitting on his left thigh and almost bend down to kiss it, it is so beautiful. It is a foot just being a foot. In the chanting during a service after several sittings, the words I'm chanting and have chanted many times before, suddenly make total sense. Particularly clear is the line, accompanied by a gentle ring of the bell, "And the mind is no hindrance." My mind suddenly is no hindrance whatsoever—not getting in the way as it usually does. It is as clear as the bell. Walking outside after breakfast, I wonder how I am going to be able to explain to anyone how, walking around the block at 7:30 in the morning on a June day in southeast Minneapolis, I am the happiest I have ever been.

Seeing an old lady out sweeping her front steps, I want to go hug her, she is so completely—what? Just being herself. I restrain myself and call out to her something about the beautiful morning. Seeing lots of students and teachers walking fast and bicycling toward the university, their heads down, I want to shout something startling that will wake them up. Hearing the distant sound of a fire engine I can only think "That poor person (with a fire) thinks they have a problem. But only the small self has problems." If only everyone could live in the big Self.

So, what was this big Self I found myself in? It was a state of being in which everything in the whole world was intimately interconnected, and everything was just fine—whatever happened. everyone just was whatever they were, and that was perfect. It was a state in which my total being felt love, joy and compassion toward everyone I encountered. I had never expected to use the phrase 'blissed out' to describe myself, but that sounded about right. I felt truly one with the universe.

Two analogies occurred to me, as I kept struggling with how to explain what I was experiencing. In the first analogy my existence felt like that of a bean on a vine—each bean thinking itself alone and independent and isolated, whereas if it would just open its eyes and become more conscious, it would see that it was part of a vine connecting it to every other bean in the garden. Everything in the universe was subject to this vast interconnection. If people could only see it, realize it, what a difference that would make in the way they approached the world and their lives.

The second analogy was more personal. The clarity of my vision, as I meditated or ate meals or circled the blocks around the Zen Center, was as if I had spent my entire life under water and had just then surfaced, seeing sunlight in all its brilliance for the very first time. The contrast was at least that great.

Sad to say, the realization and the direct impact of that experience didn't last long. Within a week it had all faded, although it remains strong in my memory. A major shift in my thinking, however, had occurred.

What was I—the small self, this little person who had thought herself so important, who was so self-centered, so independent? By myself, absolutely nothing at all. Nothing except in relation to other people, and animals, and things, and events. A physical form, a collection of cells, with no fixed ego or identity. A being changing thousand of times a day, responding to "my" mind or spirit and what ever situations came my way.

And how had this insight come about? Obviously, it was not something I had thought or done by myself, or controlled in any way. It had happened to me—or had been given to me. Some force I could not explain had changed my life, my understanding, my viewpoint, my world. I could no longer afford the luxury of believing I was the center of existence, and when I died that was the end of everything.

Since the great shift in my thinking, my understanding, almost two decades ago, I have felt compelled to open up to all kinds of possibilities that didn't seem sensible or rational before. Some of these are:

- We are here in the life to grow, to become more and more open, more conscious, more fully aware and awake, to strive toward becoming the most fully conscious human being we can, to really see what is all around us.
- When we're born, we don't all start out at the same place. What we do with our lives depends partly on what we did with them the last time around, and what we're here to learn this time. It may take most of our life to discover what that is, and how to go about it. We may miss it altogether.
- The energy we put into growing and learning isn't gone when we die, but changes our soul, our spirit, or life force, whatever it is that lives on after our body dies. This growth changes our next life in human form.
- Everyone in the world is making a spiritual journey whether they realize it or not; and they're doing the best they can. My job is not to compare myself with others—leading to discouragement about myself or criticism of someone else—but simply to work on me.

I have never been comfortable with the word God because of its simplistic image as a being, an entity, usually an old man in the sky. I do now believe in a higher power, but as a force, not an entity. It's the divine life force, beyond comprehension, that makes everything possible. That gives us free will, cause and effect, creativity, consciousness, life and death. That exists inside everyone and everything—clouds, birds, trees, people, animals, insects. When it refers to people, I also call it the big Self—the divine life force that animates me (and everyone else) and makes me what I am, who I am.

The fact that I'm on a spiritual journey doesn't mean I'm trying to act holy or something, or be serious all the time. It doesn't mean I can't do stupid things or silly ones, or laugh a lot, or get mad, or eat junk food, or lift weights, or make love. It does mean that whatever I'm doing, I try to pay attention; to concentrate on what I'm involved in. It means I try to be as open and honest and compassionate as I can, with whoever I'm with. It means I try to tap consciously into my big Self.

It means I have a million questions, far more questions than answers—about what a truly spiritual life entails; whether animals and humans are equal or if there's a hierarchy; how to reconcile my desire to be honest with my desire not to hurt people, and on and on. It means trying to start each day from a still, centered place. I have recently begun sitting *zazen* daily again, after years of sporadic sitting. I am forever working on monkey mind, anger, hypocrisy, envy, ego.

It also means every day is a new chance to experience something miraculous and wonderful just as it is: the pounding surf, a neighbor who stops to chat, vegetables that magically turn into soup, my cherished companion, Martin (as loving after fifteen years as after six months). Everything just being itself, without any expectations or preconceptions—mine or theirs. Everything just as it is. If only I can

remember to see it, to be aware. Emily from Our Town is right there with me: "Look at me, mama." See how precious life is!

One unforgettable piece of advice about how to live came many hears ago from Dainin Katagiri Roshi, the Zen master. In November 1979 the worst fear of any parent had just happened: my son had been killed, at the age of not quite 23. I was hit hard and unable to function well for a long, long time. But about a month after Chris's death I sat a long *sesshin* and had a private interview with Roshi. After I had poured out my sorrow, my anger, my questions, I said I couldn't find any reason for me to be alive when Chris was dead. As was so often the case, his answer was not at all what I had expected. It came out of left field, and amazed me with its simplicity and wisdom. "Don't you see?" he said. "because Chris died, you have to live *more*."

It's hard to life fully alive and awake, spontaneous and resonating to the divine spirit inside. I know I come nowhere close to doing it. But I also know that it's possible, and I've had marvelous teachers. The attempt to realize the divine in myself and everything else, and my connectedness with the whole world, I expect to occupy the rest of my life. Every day—every moment—is an opportunity for greater aliveness.

Nancy Ann James retired in 1991 as an editor and manager and now lives in northwest Florida. She worked for 11 years at a regional government agency and a previous 11 a the University of Minnesota. She's also been a free-lance writer and owner of a vegetarian restaurant.

In 1972 Ms. James was a founding member of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, and took part in the center's development and ongoing work until her retirement. In the 60's and 70's she was active in the civil rights movement and in furthering alternatives in education. She was part of a group that brought about a K-12 open school as part of the St. Paul public school system.

Nancy lives with her companion of 15 years, Martin Duffy. She can often be found walking on the white-sand beach of the Gulf of Mexico near their home. She enjoys creative cooking and bakes their own breads, including sourdough whole-wheat onion-herb bagels. She also lifts weights, does yoga, hits tennis balls, and reads as much as she wants, a lifelong dream. She also enjoys visiting her son, daughter-in-law, and grandson, age 3, who live in Hawaii.

(Note from Caroling Geary, who transcribed this article from the book Nancy had given her. Update, Martin Duffy died in 2008 and her grandson is married and living in Japan. Her son Ted, who usually lives in Hawaii, is caring for her during her recovery from a fall in February, 2017.)

