"We are all leaves of a tree and the tree is humanity."
—Pablo Casals

Celebrating Global Diversity and Spirituality
Our Global Diversity

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Welcome to our first issue for the year 2000!

While visiting Germany one summer, I went to a public park in Hamburg. There I saw two robots intermingling with people—young and old. Everyone was having a blast talking and playing with these almost human machines. Out of curiosity, I went and said “hello” to one of the robots to begin a conversation. In response it said, “Hello, are you a guru or something?” My accent and my bearded Indian face must have identified me as a guru! But really, who is a true guru?

During the month of November, I attended a spiritual gathering in California. For one week people from many walks of life came to a rural religious center in San Ramon to have her darshan and satsang, to receive her blessings. Ammachi might look like an ordinary person, but she is not. She is a guru, or spiritual teacher, to countless people, from various cultural and religious backgrounds all over the world. On page 35, Ammachi talks about true spiritual teachers.

Soon after returning from this high-energy visit to Ammachi, I had a conversation with a ‘born-again’ Christian on Thanksgiving morning. I told him about an interfaith community service that I had attended at a Christian church the night before. I told him how meaningful it felt to be a part of a large gathering of Christians (Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Quakers, and others) along with followers of Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Bahá’í and Hindu faiths, as well as of Native American spirituality. He challenged not only my Hindu faith but also the interfaith movement! For him, Jesus was the only way to salvation.

I simply could not go along with his notion that the supreme, universal power had given a spiritual monopoly to just one prophet, one religion, one faith. In a world of thousands of languages, and hundreds of nations, universal truth would need to be revealed independently, through many messengers and prophets, saints and sages, in different languages, over the ages.

I have felt touched by divine love and compassion in many different places of worship. While it is natural for people to feel more comfortable in their own religion or faith, there is no reason why one could not experience spirituality in other traditions.

A path of compassion, patience, love, devotion, and understanding will surely bring us much closer to everlasting happiness in life. A guru, saint, pastor, rabbi, minister—any self-realized soul whom we trust—could help us grow spiritually.

Let us find spiritual values to guide all our thoughts and actions—personal, economic, or social.

While I don’t worry about “salvation” or “liberation after death,” I do worry about whether I am happy in life. I am beginning to understand that my happiness will depend on how compassionate I have been in my conduct towards others, how peaceful my thoughts have been, and how much devotion and faith I have in the universal power—whatever we call that power. So I am concerned about doing my work well, and trying my best. But I am learning not to worry about whether I’ll achieve my goals. I am learning to accept any outcomes. For I am just beginning to understand that I am just a tiny part of the world.
Your Letters

Books for Children

I received your box of books with open arms. The children were more than overjoyed. You have no idea how happy you make these children as neither my village nor the schools have books for the children to read just for pleasure. My little library is coming along well.

When I read to the children, they never want me to stop. I can read the same book over and over without them getting tired. My thanks are beyond words. You've made many children happy!

—Marietta Altman, Peace Corps Volunteer, Sekhu Khune, South Africa. (We welcome requests for book donations from teachers, librarians and Peace Corps volunteers in low-income countries. —Editor)

Lifting up the Cultures

I greatly appreciated receiving a copy of Skipping Stones. Lifting up the cultures, stories, and folklore of people is essential to building awareness and understanding.

Please accept my best wishes, and much success in your endeavor. Blessings.

—Yolanda King, Los Angeles, California. Ms. King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is a performing artist and a speaker.

Thoughts on Intercultural Adoption

Vol. 11 #1 has given me a lot to think about, and I appreciate the coverage and focus on adoption as enriching family culture.

I appreciated the well-written discussion on what constitutes a family and what is needed in a parent-child relationship. During my practice as a clinical psychologist, it has become obvious that the more typical view of families as patriarchal fiefdoms consisting of a dominant male money-producer; subservient, non-working female as largely house-bound and trivialized mom; and the biologically resultant offspring—all usually portrayed as stereotypically Aryan—is neither factual nor desirable.

Skipping Stones has bravely and wisely taken a strong stand for parents and children in a more sensitive way. We also celebrate parents who are willing and eager to accept, cherish, guide, and protect their chosen child without regard to the usual values of many cultures.

Still, I would like to draw your attention to a side of some adoption processes that is seldom publicized: the relationship of the birth mother to that process and the possibly destructive aspects of the removal of some children for adoption by people unaware of the process. These conditions can be obscured by the potential adoptive parents’ good feelings and genuine motivation.

If the full facts of any adoption are known, the potential for political power and its misuse may be more easily discerned. Who makes money on the adoption? What are the birth mother’s feelings and understanding of the process? What organizations knowingly participate in what is essentially child kidnapping in some cases? Is it sufficient that persons otherwise deprived of the ability to be parents fulfill their personal need? Is it enough that a child is removed from some “deprived” place and given new and broader opportunities? Does this assume that Western culture is somehow superior, and that the removal of children, one by one, is the best approach to solving world problems? The massive issues of poverty and social inequality can not be solved or mitigated one bit by this charitable act of adoption.

I do not suggest that any of the parents who have been discussed in Skipping Stones are insensitive or knowingly selfish, no do I less than cheer their personal sacrifice for another human being. What I do ask is that we consider the issues carefully. It may be more complex, more potentially dangerous, and more politically potent than is suggested in the Skipping Stones article. And I do realize that your articles were not intended to deal with these issues.

One way to address some of these complexities is an adoption process in which the birth mother is aided toward education, independence, and responsibility by more affluent adoptive parents and by a culture that is willing to look at underlying issues of poverty, sexism, lack of education and, often, religious domination of women. The birth mother is then not excluded as an active participant in her child’s life. Or, she may be granted anonymity, if that is her choice.

Let us not be simplistic in our concern for the children—all the children of the world. We must not feel that love for a child, care for a child, and the fulfillment of the adoptive parents’ emotional needs is enough.

—Dr. Jean Anderson, Portland, Oregon
What's On Your Mind?

This is a forum for expressing views on critical matters in your lives. We know that you have unique and fresh perspectives. We offer this page for your active participation and invite you to share your opinions with others on an issue. Send your art and/or writing under 250 words.

Indifference

Yesterday
she walked down a busy street
both arms hanging loosely
beside her,
wearing a baby blue silk blouse
black linen pants
flat open toed sandals.

Her demeanor was cool
calm
assured.

She passed others without
a glance
a thought.

Today
She walks the same path
fist clenched

hair damp
eyes inert, downcast
lips swollen
forehead bruised.

She limps—slowly, steadily
appearing to have no direction
in mind.

Her composure is lost.
Her eyes begin to water,
and wander in search
of something
anything.

She begins to shake to yell
scream
bark
rage.

I, including others on the
busy street,
evade her gaze,
fearing to see something we
know all too well;
and walk on, misty eyed,
without reaching out a hand
on the path we all wore down.

Tonight
each of us will go home and say:
"why?
should I have...
o,
don’t want to get involved."

—Natasha Turnier, junior,
Clarkstown HS, New City, NY.
Art
by Naomi Ullian, Chas, S. Carolina

Let’s Take Better Care Of...

Black people are being killed every
day. They are being killed in their homes,
bars, streets, and even in public restaur-
ants. We seem not to care about it, just
as long as we are protected.

The President and Congress are trying
to cut off welfare, cut Medicare benefits,
and even Social Security checks, which
will affect a lot of blacks.

We as black people need to come
together and take better care of one
another. We must vote for the person
who can help us the most, and most of all,
we need to stop the violence—especially
black-on-black crime.

No more violence, please!

—Luis J. Buck, age 11,
Port Gibson, Mississippi

Stop Child Abuse

In 1997, over 42,000 children were reportedly abused.
Children want to live without fearing their parents. We
must stop child abuse; it can traumatize children for life.

Abuse is a serious problem, and appears in various
forms. When parents don't provide adequate shelter, food,
or medical treatment for their children, it’s called neglect;
when one or both parents beat their children, it is physical
abuse; when parents use harsh words to hurt children, it is
emotional abuse; when a parent (or other adult) molests
or rapes a child, it is called sexual abuse.

There are simply too many incidents of child abuse
in the world. Stress resulting from economic difficulties
could be one reason some parents abuse their children.
But adults ought to be role models for their children, and
no matter what the parents’ situation is, their children
deserve to grow up in a safe environment. Children must
be educated about this subject to help them avoid and
prevent any kind of abuse.

—Leena P. Toke, 16, Naperville, Illinois
The Trip to Taiwan

It's easy to see the many ways in which people communicate: through Braille and written words, speech, sign language, and even body language. When I had the opportunity to travel to Taiwan, I wondered about communicating in a place where I couldn't speak the language.

No one I knew had ever traveled to Taiwan for a vacation. I wondered if this were actually a good idea, or if I should just stay home in Chicago for the summer. Adventure won out, and I arrived in Taipei in the summer heat. As I exited the plane, my first impression of Taiwan was of the heat and humidity. It remained hot and humid during my entire three-month stay.

Neither I nor my American friend spoke any Chinese. We carried phrase books, but couldn't find appropriate phrases when we suddenly needed to tell something to the bus driver or ticket collector. Looking back now, I think what helped us the most was our optimism. We knew what we wanted to see, and although we weren't sure what routes to take, we approached the people around us with maps and lots of finger pointing.

We visited the beautiful Mt. Alishan area in central Taiwan and got caught in a rainstorm while walking through the forest. We ran to a temple and stood shivering and dripping in the entrance as we waited for the rain to stop. A young girl working in the temple saw us. She didn't say anything, but brought us a small space heater and two cups of hot tea. I could only speak in English, but I believe she understood my appreciation through my tone and gestures.

My friend and I walked into a tourist office in the Sun Moon Lake area. Our guide map indicated that this was a tourist information office, so we asked about the bus schedules back to our hotel. A gentleman rose to help us, and explained that it was a government tourist office for planning and logistics, not a place to get tourist information. He then generously offered to drive us back to our hotel.

On my first bus ride alone, a Chinese friend gave instructions about my stop to the busy driver, and I waved from the windows as the bus drove off, hoping I would recognize something familiar to help me find the right stop. A little while later, the young woman behind me gently tapped me on the shoulder and asked the driver to stop. She had heard the directions given by my friend, and had found my stop for me!

When I think back on my experiences and time in Taiwan, the foods, sights, and weather all come to mind. But the best memories are of the people who broke through the communication barrier without a common language.

—Text and photos of Taipei, Taiwan by Susan Gavin, ESL teacher in Glenview, Illinois.
Red Lanterns

According to the Chinese lunar calendar, the Chinese New Year usually falls in January or February. The first order of business is to clean the house so we can protect it from bad luck. My mother instructs my sister and me to reorder our rooms first. We must throw out any unwanted things so that we can take out the old and bring in the new. My sister and I wager on who can clean his or her room the fastest. When about an hour passes, I say, “I’m done,” but my sister is still cleaning her room because it is about twice as big as mine. After we complete our task, our house is so clean that we feel confident no bad luck would dare to enter our house!

The next Sunday, we go to Chinatown to get what we need to celebrate the New Year. My parents go to various stores and buy fresh food like chicken and fish—things that will definitely be a part of the annual dinner with our relatives. They pick out shark fin (for shark fin soup), sea cucumbers, and other delicacies that we enjoy eating.

But the best part of the New Year has yet to come, and my sister and I know it. While we’re in Chinatown, we go to a store to buy red lanterns to hang in our house. There are so many to choose from, all in different sizes and shapes. One lantern immediately catches my eye, and I pick it up: it has the Chinese character for long life carefully printed on it in shiny gold, and I hope that long life is true for me. My sister says, “I’ve found one, too.” Her lantern is quite large and has the Chinese characters for “Happy New Year” printed on it.

When we come home, we hang our lanterns in the living room, and as soon as Mom joins us, my sister and I ask her to tell us the story of the Dashing King. The story is told to us each year and holds a valuable lesson that my parents expect us to live by. It never becomes boring, and each year there are details added to keep us interested.

The Dashing King went in disguise among the common people to see how his officials treated his subjects firsthand. He discovered how corrupt and mean the rich officials in China had become. He felt sympathy for the people, and told them that their king would help them in times of trouble.

“I will inform the king that the houses with red lanterns hanging from them belong to the common people, and not to the treacherous officials,” he told them. “The king will help those who have red lanterns.”

Then one day a disastrous flood swept over the land, stranding people. The king sent his soldiers to rescue those with red lanterns in their houses.

When we hang the lanterns today, we are reminded of the Dashing King’s goodness and how he helped those who were in need. We are also reminded by our parents that we should do the same.

That Chinese New Year occurred eight years ago, when I was seven and my sister was five. But I have never forgotten the lesson that came from that story: it is always good to help others.

—Brian Ng, 15, CHS, New City, New York.

Celebrations!
15 Jan.: Pongal (SE Asia), Makar Sankranti (India)
17 Jan.: Martin Luther King’s birthday observed
22 Jan.: Tu B’shevat, Jewish Tree Day
February: African-American History Month
  2 Feb.: Groundhog Day
  14 Feb.: Valentine’s Day
  19 Feb.: Chinese New Year
March: Women’s History Month
  3 Mar.: Mahashivrathri (India)
  8 Mar.: International Women’s Day, Ash Wednesday
  17 Mar.: St. Patrick’s Day
  18 Mar.: Holi (India)
  20 Mar.: Purim begins, Spring Equinox
Ah-Ma: My Grandmother

Ah-Ma, my grandmother, was a homely woman who always wore ancient Chinese garments. Looking at a photo of her on my wall, I noticed she didn’t have a smile on her face—that’s how Taiwanese pose for pictures. Memories of Ah-Ma are engraved into my mind.

When I was twelve years old, Ah-Ma was an elderly woman who came to live with my family in the city of T’ainan. She was not quite five feet tall, had a moon-shaped face and sparkling eyes, and her smiles were always radiant with love. Her silky, silvery white hair touched her buttocks; she believed cutting it would bring bad luck. It had grown since her childhood. She never wore makeup or jewelry, except for a jade bracelet, which was supposed to be a good-luck charm. That makes me think that people in her time were superstitious.

Every morning, Ah-Ma washed her hair where the sunlight slanted through the sun roof. She used two basins: one for washing, and the other for rinsing her hair. The sunlight and the foamy bubbles made her look like a goddess. She patted her hair with a towel after cleaning it, and sprinkled a little oil into it to soften the hair. She tilted her head down to let the hair swing in front, and used her right arm for brushing it. With her left arm, she held strands of her hair by her left shoulder. The sunlight crept along her scalp. After her hair was completely dry, she brushed it into a tight ball on the back of her head. When she dressed to go into town, she would pick one little flower from the garden to put in her hair; she said its fragrance was like perfume.

Ah-Ma was different from the rest of my family. She wore sober clothes. She believed that black was the only color to wear in winter, and white was the only color for summer. She made her own garments; she thought the sewing machine was useless.

Winter was always a special season. Our kitchen was filled with the aroma of the holidays. We used sweet red beans, sesame seeds, sugar, cinnamon, cloves, and assorted spices to make sweet rice cakes on Chinese New Year’s Eve. While rolling out the rice cake dough on a round wooden table, we’d laugh and talk. The noises of pots and pans mingled with our laughter.

Ah-Ma was a very religious person, and her spirituality taught me a lot about life. One Sunday during a festival, we gathered the best of our food to give to the temple as an offering. We had a lot to bring: cooked chicken and duck, apples, oranges, tangerines, grapefruits, persimmons, mangoes, rice cakes, and a bottle of rice wine. It made me hungry, and I wished I could eat some of the succulent fruits and tasty rice cakes. When it was time to go, Ah-Ma said, “Hum tom fet ge ses. Don’t forget to take your clothes.” I answered, “Fa-un not fa? What for?” She replied that it would get rid of the bad spirit in you, which could cause you to be hit by a bicycle or car.

The day was beautiful, and the temple was joyful with the laughter of children. A crowd of jubilant people stood in the courtyard. I helped Ah-Ma place the food on a table in front of an altar for Buddha. While she lit my joss sticks, she held three lit joss sticks for herself. Then we knelt down and closed our eyes to pray. I felt peaceful.

When Ah-Ma knew it was time for her to go to her heavenly home, she prepared a set of miniature clothes and a pair of miniature shoes to take with her when she died.

I admire Ah-Ma’s individuality and outlook. Her spirit still lives with me. Her memories will stay with me always.

—Mei-Li Medvar, from Taiwan, Colorado Springs, CO
Hero in My Life

I went to a basketball camp a few hours away from home where I played with my school team. It was my birthday, and there I was, staying in a college dorm room with a friend. Beth Davis coached our junior varsity team, and although we had lost our first two games with scores like 40 to 3, she was an excellent coach.

I played in our third game. I screamed at myself in my head, because I felt like everything I did was wrong, and people kept yelling at me. I asked Beth if I could have a substitute, and when she asked me if I was okay, I said yes and sat down.

We lost that game by over twenty points, and in the meeting afterwards, I nearly cried while taking off my jersey and changing my shoes. People talked, but I didn’t hear them. I just focused on making sure my hand was on Beth’s when we did our cheer. I couldn’t believe I had chosen to spend my birthday like this.

Afterwards, I walked next to Beth. She asked me how I was, and when I answered, “Not so good,” she replied, “Talk to me.” I told her how badly I felt and how badly I had played. But she had a positive attitude. She smiled, and told me about all the good things I had done. She reminded me that we had another game in a few hours and that I needed to get fired up however I could. I noticed that she didn’t say one negative word (but I knew that if she had, I would have started crying).

So I got a ball, went back into the gym, and started shooting. I began right by the basket, and each time I made a shot, I took a step backwards. Again and again, the ball swished through. Two grinning little kids grabbed my rebounds and imitated the way I thanked them. When I finally made two three-pointers, they cheered. I told Beth about it later, and she smiled.

On the way home from camp, my friends and I talked about Beth: how she was so positive, so nice, so real, and such a good coach despite being just eighteen.

Beth Davis is a hero of mine as well as a role model. She inspires me in many ways; seeing her achievements encourages me to look at my own goals. Yes, Beth is a great basketball player, but she is also an incredibly nice person who, even as a senior in high school, will take the time to talk to an eighth grader. I admire her for having an extremely positive attitude, and for almost always smiling. Maybe someday I can be something like her.

—Ariana Jostad-Loswell, 14, Fair Oaks, California

A Childhood Memory

“Daddy, Daddy, can I come with you, please? You let my brothers go; why can’t I?” I sobbed as I begged my father to let me tag along with him on his trip, not knowing that it might be the last time I’d get to see the man I called Dad. That is my earliest memory, and one of the most important memories I have of my childhood. I was four then, living in a small town near the city of Saigon, Vietnam. It was the day my father left Vietnam with my two oldest brothers. I was at the front porch crying and begging to come when my mom told me that he was taking my brothers to the hospital.

“I still want to come,” I cried out, but they just left sadly, carrying a few bags of clothes with them. Years later I realized that my dad had left for a place far from where I lived. He traded his life at home to look for a new life, and risked everything just to escape from a communist country. Six years later, my father’s dream came true when our family was reunited in the United States. The thought of that moment still brings tears to my eyes. It is one of the memories that will never fade away.

—Kim Chi Nguyen, Vietnamese-American, 16, lives in Mobile, Alabama
Women: Yesterday and Today

Women today have much more freedom than women living during the Victorian times did. Jane Adams was a famous woman in America during the 19th century. She founded the Hull House and worked to promote lifestyles for women that were alternatives to marriage or spinsterhood. She won the Nobel Peace Prize for her bravery and work against the norms of society. During her time, marriage or spinsterhood were the only socially acceptable lifestyles for women. If a woman fought against those norms, she was treated horribly and harrassed by men.

Some women who wanted to live differently would begin to think that they were failures and become depressed. Most of these women were wealthy and well-educated. They were sent to a neurologist, a doctor who treats people’s nervous systems. The doctor would treat the depression by sending the women to bed for weeks without letting them read, sew, or even feed themselves. In fact, their typical treatments, consisting of a 35-minute electrical massage and a total rest, made women even weaker.

Women were made to feel like pieces of property whose sole purpose was to look pretty for their husbands and guests. Their activities were severely restricted, making women dependent upon their husbands.

Women have many more rights today than they did in the 19th century. However, are women considered equal to men? Even today, women still are paid less than men for the same job, a type of discrimination. Some men still think of women only as sex symbols, and the media today encourages that. Magazines tell girls that being pretty, having nice clothes, acting older, and being thin are important in their lives, along with “snagging a guy.” Young women are losing their self esteem because of these messages. Some women think they have to act stupid and flirty.

I think that women are discriminated against, and at times treated worse, more now than before. Women today need to be better educated, strong, independent, and able to fight for their rights.

They need to show men that they aren’t just a bunch of pretty faces. Maybe then women will be treated with more respect and as equals.

Did You Know That...

- Women make up the majority population, yet they have little representation in the government.
- Men legislate women’s rights concerning women’s reproductive systems.
- Women earn 40% less than men, so women have less to save for retirement. Three out of four elderly poor people are women.
- Women are responsible for 90% of child care.
- Breast cancer claims more lives than AIDS, yet research money for AIDS is twice that of cancer.
- Women attending a typical physics meeting (of several hundred scientists) make up less than 5%.

What do you think? Is it fair?

—Rachel Hubbard, 15, Illinois. Adapted from SPLASH! Issue #3, July 1999. This six-page monthly zine ($6/yr.) contains thought-provoking articles and poems by teenagers who want to be heard. To get an introductory issue, write to Rachel at 635 Hill Ave., Glen Ellyn, IL 60137. Art: Emily Fox, Belmont, Mich.
African-American Women

Althea Gibson was born in South Carolina in 1927 and grew up in New York City. I chose to write about her because I like tennis.

Many people believed that tennis wasn’t a game that black people could play well. At age 23, however, Althea became the first African-American to play in the U.S. Open Tennis Competition. She was one of the leading women amateur players from 1950 to 1958. She retired in 1958 to pursue a career as a professional golfer. She was important because she showed black children that they could play tennis in tournaments too, and because she showed people that anyone can compete in championships, no matter what color they are. She helped get rid of prejudice.

—Matt Gergen, grade 3, Capitol Hill School, St. Paul, Minnesota

I'm a black woman

Full of pride
My brown skin I'll never hide
I'm a black woman
Full of grace
I'm proud of my people
I'm proud of my race
I'm blessed with good health
And a pretty face
I'm a black woman
Trying to succeed
Always doing my best
To do a good deed
I'm a black woman
Trying to pave my way
I want a good life
Somehow, someday
I'm a black woman
Endowed with faith and hope
Through road blocks and obstacles I can cope
I'm determined to make it up the corporate rope
I'm a black woman
Proud of my universal place
World, open your arms;
Take me—embrace

—Monique Nicole Fox, Silver Spring, Maryland

Sharon Sayles Belton was born in 1954 and grew up in an integrated Minneapolis neighborhood. Her professional career started when she became a parole officer, but this eventually led to local politics. In 1983, she became the first African-American woman to serve on the Minneapolis City Council. At the age of 42, her outstanding performance in the council led voters to put her into the mayor's office.

As mayor, she tried to provide more jobs, reformed the Minneapolis Police Department to provide safer neighborhoods, and strengthened the local schools to educate the next generation. Mayor Belton’s passion for public service has inspired me to try my very best to make a difference. You can contribute to the community no matter what race or gender you are.

—Matthias Chan, grade 3, Capitol Hill School, St. Paul, Minnesota

Hi! I'm Jazmin. I like to read and write, and my favorite sport is swimming. I was born in Miami, Florida. My whole family was born here except for my grandparents, who were born in North and South Carolina. I love my family more than anything in the world. I love them more than gold, and my mom says the same thing to me. My grandpa helps me with my homework, and my auntie helps make clothes for me. My family's full of people I love.

My grandma died last year on Thanksgiving day. Her birthday would have been on the 18th of December, and I wish she could have lived until then. I asked my mom if every year I could have a Grandma Party, a time when we could celebrate and remember things about her. My mother said, “Of course you can. Why not?” That's what I'm going to do. She's very special to me, and I miss a lot of things about her. She would help me with the things I had trouble with, like my homework. I had fun with her.

—Jazmin Campbell (above), 9, Carrollton School, Miami, Florida
The First Sit-In

They were born into slavery, but with quiet dignity, the Stewart sisters of Baltimore, Maryland stood firm against unfair post-Civil War treatment. Over a century ago, they defied a “separate but equal” Jim Crow policy and staged what may have been the first sit-in.

The steamy afternoon of 15 August 1884 did nothing to dampen their excitement. As the sisters walked up Light Street to board the steamship Sue, they chattered merrily. Martha, Mary, Lucy, and Winnie Stewart were taking a trip. With first-class tickets in hand, they would ride overnight from Baltimore to Westmoreland County, Virginia. They loved this yearly trip. Their reunion with family and friends would be filled with love and laughter.

The loading stage swayed as they walked aboard the 175-foot Sue. As they handed their tickets to the purser, the sisters looked forward to relaxing in their stateroom before supper.

An unpleasant odor was the first clue that things were not to be as they imagined. Cattle blocked the stairway to their stateroom. Buzzing flies and the smell of frightened cows headed for the slaughterhouse filled the air. Martha, Mary, Lucy, and Winnie shooed their way past the cows. Animal waste brushed against their swishing skirts as they hurried to the stairs and climbed to the saloon deck.

The girls laughed as they continued to their stateroom. Their “cow” story would amuse their family. But their merriment died when they opened the door of their stateroom. Before them was a place not fit for any respectable person: the beds were unmade and filthy, there were no blankets or pillows, and the tiny room had no furnishings—not even chairs or wash basins. Were they really expected to lie on those soiled mattresses? Was this the $3.00 first-class passage they had scrimped and saved for? The Stewarts stood in stunned silence.

Martha, fueled by pride, was the first to move. Her sisters’ quick movements mirrored Martha’s outraged dignity. Together they marched to the purser and demanded a stateroom that was clean and pleasant. They were not surprised when the stern-faced purser refused their demand. His reply sparked courage and defiance in the sisters that would not be denied.

With heads held high, the women did not return to their assigned stateroom. Instead, they enjoyed supper in the blacks-only saloon. When bedtime arrived, they did not move. The Stewart sisters spent the night sitting up in the hard, wooden chairs of the saloon. The summer night was long and hot; their backs were sore and their muscles were cramped. Many times sleep called to them, but pride kept them strong. They refused to stay in a room that was not as nice as the white, first-class rooms.

When the steamship finally arrived in Virginia the next morning, the Stewarts quietly picked up their bags. They walked with dignity across the landing stage of the Sue and onto Kinsale Landing on the Potomac River. Tired but proud, Martha, Mary, Lucy, and Winnie had taken a stand against the unfair rules of the day. Later, they would continue their fight for justice: the Stewart sisters sued the Sue’s owners, and the U.S. Circuit Court awarded each of the women $100.00.

—Carolyn C. Wentworth, Charlotte Hall, Maryland. Illustration by Brett Forman
I have never given much thought to the color of my skin. It's just there, like a picture you see but never think about. In my school, in the city of Chicago, there are many different people from many diverse races. You see the differences, but don't really think about them, because although you may have a different skin color, you still dress alike and, for the most part, act alike. But...there are some exceptions.

Once in awhile, someone comes along with not only a different skin color, but a different personality. That was the case with Katherine Elizabeth.

Personally, I think her name was all wrong. You see, Katherine Elizabeth was black, and I have never heard of a black girl named Katherine Elizabeth. Maybe if she had shortened it to Kathy or Liz, she would have been okay, but she insisted that people call her Katherine Elizabeth.

That wasn't even the beginning of it. Katherine Elizabeth was smart—very smart. She always made straight A's. Teachers were delighted with her. The kids weren't. In our school, it wasn't cool for a black student to be so smart. I don't know why; maybe we thought that if we were down, everybody should be down. It seems dumb now, but it was the rule everybody followed. When the teacher asked a question, I slumped down in my seat and wrote notes to my friends, while Katherine Elizabeth waved her hand in the air—for every question. I think it was jealousy that got everyone started on Katherine Elizabeth.

We began by talking about her behind her back. Kids called her "oreo" and accused her of "acting white"—and that was on their nicer days. Pretty soon, it was so bad that Katherine Elizabeth couldn't even go to the bathroom for fear that someone would beat her up. All because she was smart and not the "right" color.

I wish I could say that I stood up for Katherine Elizabeth and tried to befriend her, but I can't. After awhile, she left our school to go to a private school; at least, that's what I heard.

But that's not the end of the story. That girl we teased and bullied grew up to be Katherine Elizabeth Dunway, the first African-American president of the United States. All because she had the strength and courage to be herself amongst the horrible stereotype that says if you're black, it's not cool to be smart. Right now, I am sitting in my room, watching her recite the Oath of Office. All I can think of right now is, "You go, Katherine Elizabeth."

—Angela Michelle Banks, 13, African-American, Cincinnati, Ohio. Angela writes, "I was inspired to write this story when I saw how bad some people treat others who are 'different' from them. I also see that a lot of people are afraid of being themselves or reaching their full potential because they don't want to be teased or made fun of. I wanted to celebrate someone who was brave enough to go against the crowd, who could stand up and be proud of herself and her culture. I hope that people will be able to have pride in their diversity and uniqueness."

The American President

This year's election was a merciless war, The stakes reached a dangerous peak. The candidates scrimmaged like never before, All through election week.

This year's election was fought to the death, A game that was rich in foul play. Hopeful Americans held their breath Until election day.

The voters sat anxious as ballots were cast, Some thoughtful, some quick to decide. The seconds dragged lazily on, when at last, The moment of truth had arrived.

The American leader was able and ready, A candidate willing to meet our demands. The four years ahead would be peaceful and steady The country would thrive in her capable hands.

—Katherine Assef, 15, Iranian-American, Rochester, MN
One of the beauties of photography is being able to show other people how I see the world around me. Of all the subjects I photograph, children are the most rewarding. My photographs of African-American children reveal how I see them: as individuals. Each child is special in his or her own way. I love the way they play, the way they laugh, the way they can find enjoyment in the smallest things.

Many of these photographs were shot in preparation for It's Raining Laughter with poems by Nikki Grimes. They constitute a large collection of pictures of African-American children doing what they do best: playing, which, coincidentally, is what all children do best.

—Myles Pinkney, New York, New York.

It's Raining Laughter, featuring photos of African-American children by Myles can be ordered from Dial Books, 1-800-526-0275.
The bell rang as the door opened, and a gust of cold air whipped through Mr. Wong's art shop, blowing scrolls of pagodas and Chinese landscapes off the wall. In walked two women who were looking for a traditional landscape painting.

It had been a long time since Mr. Wong's last sale, and he desperately hoped to make a deal with them. He showed them around, and after trying to decide between "Summer's Glory" and "Morning Sun," they gave in and bought both.

Mr. Wong was very pleased. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so excited over a sale. It reassured him that there was still an appreciation for classic art. The only thing that puzzled Mr. Wong about his customers were their comments on his watercolors. Lately, he had heard things like, "Oh, how interesting," or "These are original," and now the women's comment, "How abstract." This saddened Mr. Wong, because he thought of his art as anything but abstract. He finally decided that the customers were abstract and didn't know what they were talking about.

Mr. Wong decided to close up shop early and bring the good news of the sales home to his wife, Iris. He threw on his green coat, wrapped his orange checkered scarf around his neck, and headed out the door.

Iris congratulated her husband when she heard the news. Mr. Wong talked about his day and his idea for his next piece. Iris, who was also an artist, told her husband about several new colors she had purchased. Mr. Wong told his wife about the women and which pieces they had bought.

When he told Iris about their "abstract" comments, she admitted that his paintings were out of the ordinary. She assured him, however, that that was what made them so original and appealing. This troubled Mr. Wong, but Iris ended the conversation by assuring him that his paintings were not abstract: the black and white ones were quite traditional.

The next day, Mr. Wong returned to his shop to work on his next piece. He had begun painting the background when he heard the bell ring: it was an interior decorator looking for a painting to match the deep red drapes in her living room.

Mr. Wong showed her several paintings that he thought went best with red, but she found that none of Mr. Wong's examples matched her description. However, she did find the images appealing and decided to return later.

Over dinner that night, Mr. Wong discussed this with Iris. Iris agreed that he did have trouble matching colors, and pointed to his outfit: brown pants with a purple shirt and orange vest. Mr. Wong didn't understand what she was talking about, and said that it was she who didn't match.

Then Iris realized his problem: her husband was color blind. That explained why his grasses were brown, and his skies were red. His blindness to color made him an abstract artist!

At first, the news of being color blind bothered Mr. Wong. For days he was too depressed to go to work. He gave up on his aspiration to be a world-famous artist, and was ready to sell his business when Iris pointed out that Beethoven's deafness hadn't stopped him from writing some of the best music in history. This gave Mr. Wong hope.

The very next day, he went back to the shop. With Iris's help, he finished one of his brightest, most beautiful paintings ever. The interior decorator returned, and adored the painting. When she asked what it was called, Mr. Wong answered, "Color Blind."

Hello, my name is Juliet. I hate school because I am not very good at it. I go to a tutor for help with reading and writing. To tell you the truth, I have a problem: I’m dyslexic.

One day, our class was playing a game to test how many words we could write and spell correctly, and I was really nervous about it. I slid down in my chair, hoping that I wouldn’t be called on.

“Let me see,” Ms. Freeman, my teacher, said as her eyes scanned the room. “Who will go first?” Alice waved her hand frantically, and Ms. Freeman called on her. Alice walked down the aisle, swinging her lacy dress and flinging her bright brown hair.

“Boy, she makes me sick!” I thought. Ms. Freeman said, “The word is ‘courageous.’”

“That is so easy,” Alice bragged as she picked up the chalk. She started to write neatly in cursive on the board.

“Thank you, Alice. You’re correct,” Ms. Freeman told her. Although Alice didn’t say it, the look on her face said, “Well, what else did you expect? I’m Alice.”

Ms. Freeman began to erase the blackboard when she said, “Next, we will have...” I pretended to look out the window so she wouldn’t catch my eyes. But then I heard my name. My body froze. Ms. Freeman said again, “Juliet, I have not heard from you yet. Come on, honey.”

“Oh, no,” I thought. I wished I just could disappear. As I slowly walked up to the board, I kept praying that the word I got wouldn’t have any b’s or d’s. Then Ms. Freeman said, “Your word is ‘bread.’”

“Why did this happen to me?” I thought, and quickly scanned the room for one of the alphabet charts that teachers keep above the blackboard. There wasn’t one anywhere in sight, so I reluctantly picked up the chalk and wrote what I thought was the word bread. I looked at Ms. Freeman and she slowly shook her head. In a very polite way, she explained that my b’s and d’s were backwards and that I had left out the letter a. I could hear the laughing of other students, but mostly it was Alice. I quickly excused myself and went to the bathroom.

When I got home that afternoon, I ran straight to my room and slammed the door. I pushed all my pillows and stuffed animals off my bed and plopped down to cry.

At that moment, my mom entered the room. “What happened?” she asked. I told her the whole story. I could sense that she felt upset for me. She held me and said, “Everybody has strengths and weaknesses. Your weakness happens to be writing, and that’s okay. But your strength is creativity. You’re bright, you’re a good friend, you’re funny, vivacious...”

“Okay, Mom, I get the picture.”

My mom patted me on the back. “Good, and don’t you forget it.” Suddenly, I thought of Author’s Day at school tomorrow—I would show everybody that I’m special, too.

The next day, Ms. Freeman’s voice filled the room as she welcomed the parents. When she was done, she gave Alice and me the cue to begin our play. Alice looked very nervous, and I began to feel sorry for her.

I recited the lines I had learned perfectly, and Ms. Freeman gave me the thumbs-up sign. Then it was Alice’s turn. A long pause filled the room: she had totally forgotten her lines. She started to sweat and turn red. Alice was frozen. I fed her her line, and I could tell she was very surprised and relieved.

After the play, I found Alice in the hall, crying. I put my arm around her, and said, “Listen, people have different strengths and weaknesses, and that’s okay. Your weakness is acting, but your strength is spelling.”

That day, I learned something: it is okay to have your weaknesses, because you always will have your strengths.

—Alexandra Ruppel, age 9, Riverside, Connecticut
Cuando Vine a Oregon por Primera Vez

La primera vez que vine a Oregon, a la edad de 3 años, no sabía hablar inglés, solo hablaba español. Mi tío Luis me enseñó a preguntar ¿cómo te llamas? a mis nuevos amigos, diciendo en inglés “What’s your name?”

Cada vez que hablaba con mi amiguita yo le preguntaba “What’s your name?” y ella siempre contestaba “Megan.” Una y otra vez yo le preguntaba lo mismo, “What’s your name?” y ella siempre contestaba, “Megan.” Hasta que un día vino a jugar conmigo y le pregunté otra vez, “What’s your name?” ella me dijo “Megan” y se puso a llorar. Desde ese día jugamos sin hablar. Ahora me doy cuenta de que ella ya estaba cansada de oír “What’s your name?” y de contestar “Megan.”

Una tarde vino Megan a mi casa y le dijo a mi tío y a mi mamá que en la mañana se mudaría muy lejos de aquí y ya no la volvería a ver. Mi mamá, mi papá, mi tío, mi hermano y yo nos acordamos mucho de ella, espero que ella también se acuerde de mí y quisiera que sepa que ahora sé hablar más inglés que cuando le preguntaba, “What’s your name?”

Me siento muy orgullosa de poder hablar español e inglés por que me puedo comunicar con mis amigos de México y de otros países que hablan español con la misma facilidad que con mis amigos de Estados Unidos que hablan inglés.

—Christian Espinoza Alvarez, 5th grade, Mexican-American, Centenial Elem., Springfield, Oregon

Art by Carlos Castillo, Livingston, Texas

My Friend

My sweet friend here
a foreigner, a non-English speaker.
What is she thinking?
I want to know.
Maybe she's bored,
Or just lonely.
I know she wants to speak
To share her thoughts
Even to strangers...
She's staring into space, grasping for little words
But nothing's there.
How difficult is it...I once knew
Not so long ago,

I was the same little girl
Who wouldn't crack a smile.
With wide eyes, I just stared
My own universe
Belonged in my mind
With my imaginary classroom
Where I was embraced
And welcomed with open arms.
I have since changed. Or have I?
Am I lonesome, still?
I don't know.
But my friend...she will be all right.

—Kim Chi Nguyen, Vietnamese-American, 16, Mobile, AL

When I First Came to Oregon

The first time I came to Oregon, I was three years old. I didn't know how to speak English—only Spanish. My uncle, Luis, taught me how to ask friends' names by saying in English, “What’s your name?”

Each time I spoke to my new little friend, I asked her, “What’s your name?” And she always answered, “Megan.” Often I asked her the same question, and she always answered the same way, “Megan.” One day when she came to play with me, I asked her once more, “What’s your name?” She told me, “Megan,” and started to cry. After that day, we played without speaking. Now I realize that she was tired of hearing me ask that question, “What’s your name?” and of answering, “Megan!”

One afternoon Megan came to my home and told my uncle and mother that the next morning, she would be going very far away and wouldn't return. My mother, father, uncle, brother and I remember her well, and I hope she remembers me, too. I'd like her to know that I can speak more English now than when I kept asking her, “What’s your name?”

I am very proud of being able to speak both Spanish and English, because I can communicate with my friends from Mexico and from other Spanish-speaking countries as easily as with my English-speaking friends from the United States.
Dawn broke across the towering pink-walled canyons of the ancient city of Petra, and carved rock sculptures came into my view. Temples, royal buildings, and dark caves appeared everywhere. I had entered the city of Petra, that for centuries had remained hidden away in the country of Jordan, located in the heart of the Middle East.

In 1812, a brave young Swiss explorer named Johann Bruckhardt traveled deep into the Arabian desert and made a startling discovery. He had heard stories about a mysterious city hidden among nearly impassable mountains, so he disguised himself as an Arab nomad and made an expedition in search of this forgotten city. As soon as he entered the Siq Gorge, a narrow and winding threshold inside a canyon, the secret was revealed. Bruckhardt was the first Westerner in 600 years to see Petra, the legendary capital of the Nabataeans, a tribe of Arab nomads who ruled over the Transjordan area before the Roman conquest.

I recently made my second trek to the ruins of Petra (which means rock in Greek), located three hours by car just south of Amman, Jordan's capital city. I rode on horseback to the beginning of the Siq Gorge, down a dusty wadi (a dry riverbed) sandwiched between the steep pink canyon walls. The sandstone rocks change color from shades of rose and red to gray as the sun rises and sets upon them. The route along the Siq is long and not particularly easy, whether by horse or by foot. From the Siq, I began my journey up and down miles of dusty footpaths. Along the paths, young and old Bedouins (Arab nomads) greeted me by saying “MarHaba,” which means hello in Arabic. Wisely, I chose to start my walk at daybreak, because the stifling summer heat easily can reach 110 degrees in the shade!

It was around the 6th century B.C.E. when the Nabataeans chose to settle in Petra because its sheer, rugged canyons protected them from enemies. Petra also was a major junction for caravan routes carrying spices, silk, and frankincense coming from China, India, and Arabia. The Nabataeans became rich by imposing taxes on all the goods that passed.
the Desert

through their city. Precious water, stored in thousands of water tanks throughout the city, was a prime reason for caravans to stop there.

Petra remains a monument to the genius of the Nabataeans. These nomads must have been skilled craftsmen and engineers to have carved such an impressive canyon home from the soft rock of the mountains. Hundreds of caves, tombs, and monuments to the Nabataeans’ gods are carved into the cliffs and walls of Petra, all designed down to the smallest details. The original channels were cut into the walls to bring about erosion by wind, water, and salt from the Dead Sea.

The first and best-preserved monument in Petra is Al-Kazneh, the treasury. It is almost perfectly preserved because it is protected by the deep canyon. The stately columns that adorn its entrance are nearly smooth, a testament to the skill of the best sculptors of their day. While wandering the streets of Petra, I almost could hear and feel echoes of the past. Well-worn chariot and wagon ruts were etched into the remains of the cobblestone pathways. The 8,000 seat theater must have been a spectacular setting for gladiators fighting to the death, or actors singing, dancing, and amazing their audience. Sitting in the open-air theater built in the first century, I imagined hearing the crowd screaming and cheering from the 33 concentric semicircles of the arena.

Petra is believed to have reached a population of almost 3,000 people at the height of its splendor. Around the first century C.E., the Romans decided to annex the area, and the kingdom became part of the Roman province of Arabia. Buildings were enlarged and decorated. The main road was paved and adorned with a triumphal arch. After this period, the Nabataeans lost their power, and the next settlers were the Byzantines, who introduced Christianity. Some buildings were converted into churches. I visited Al-Deir, a monastery, by riding a donkey up 700 worn stone steps. The building still stands two stories tall despite a series of devastating earthquakes centuries ago that caused many people to flee Petra. Over the centuries, caravans stopped frequenting the city; today, only the desert Bedouins still inhabit the area, making a living selling items to tourists.

As I stopped to quench my thirst from a Bedouin vendor selling soft drinks and water, I remembered that not so long ago, getting to Petra was a long and arduous journey. I feel lucky: I did it twice.

Photos and text by Elizabeth Murphy-Melas, Plano, Texas. Below: author, her family and the tour group.
Suddenly the sky changes from blue to a dark green. My father looks up as if he knows it will rain. And it does, a thick rain, like drums beating. I'm dry under a huge building, and my dad's in a suit, dancing in the rain.

"I'm taking a shower," he shouts. "Come join me."

"Why did you do that?" I ask after the storm passes, and my dad tells me how he ran out of money in Missouri.

I was traveling across the country when I realized I needed a job. I walked into a town called Lilbourn, a small town surrounded by cotton. I asked the first person I saw if he knew about any jobs, and he hired me to chop cotton.

At five the next morning, I hopped into the back of a pickup truck, grabbed the hoe offered, and we took off. When we stopped, I was shown a cotton plant and the weed that had to be chopped off. I couldn't tell the cotton from the weed, even after I was shown twice.

Each row was a mile long, and we went up one row and down another. One of the crew leader's kids sat in the shade, and gave us water every two rows. It was very hot.

At noon, the crew jumped into the truck and went to a store for lunch. The prices were really high; even penny candy cost a nickel! No one gave the man selling food any money, and I realized that this was how the boss controlled the crew—by keeping everyone in debt.

Six hours later, we were finished. The boss counted out eleven dollars for me, one dollar for each hour of work. But he took a dollar back as the price of using his hoe. I pushed the money into my pocket, and overheard the boss counting money to the old woman behind me.

"One, two, three, five, seven, eleven." It turned out that she could only count to three, and that the boss had been cheating her for a long time.

"Excuse me," I said, "but you skipped a few numbers." I don't know why I made it my business. He apologized—I had to give him that—and counted the money right. Then he fired me, and told me no other white crew would hire me.

I had ten dollars so I wasn't really worried. I walked about a mile until I saw another brick house. I knocked, and a man answered. He was short, with blue-black, working-in-the-cotton skin. I asked if he knew of any cotton chopping crews, and he hired me. I was the first white person to work in a black crew—I broke the color line. I found out later that other whites were waiting for someone like me.

So what does this have to do with rain? I worked those fields for a week and the sky was always the hottest blue. No one had indoor plumbing. When the clouds finally began to gather and the wind shifted, I stepped outside to soak up the breeze. Then it rained.

I jumped into the rain with a bar of soap, and washed my hair, the clothes on my body, and all of my exposed skin. Everybody thought I was crazy, but I wasn't; I was just plain hot and dirty. I stayed there, spinning in the rain, and all of the people I had worked with, black and white, started coming out. They began dancing with me. I can't remember a time when I heard so much laughter. That's why I love a good rain.

The sky is back to a glaring blue, and the heat comes in waves. It makes me dizzy. I should have joined my dad in his dance. I'm dripping sweat everywhere, but he just looks perfect.

—Michael Brownstein, Chicago, Illinois. Illustration by Brett Forman, Eugene, Oregon
**Angel on Earth**

In my hour of need and despair
There is a person I know will be there.
When it is dark, in the black of night
She will be there to shine her light.
Though I've never seen it there,
She wears a halo upon her hair.
The golden ring is proof to me
She’s ready to spread her charity.
I’m not sure, but I do believe
Her wings are hidden, tucked away in her sleeve.
Without a moment’s hesitation or a second of fear
She’ll spread her wings when no one is near.
From the very second of my birth
My mom has been my angel on earth.

—Jill Brackman, 12, Fort Recovery, Ohio

**Where I’ve Been**

Do you know where I’ve been?
You can’t tell by the color of my skin.
You can’t tell by the food I eat,
or by the weight of my body, so small and petite;
The smell of the air which surrounds me daily,
or the noise so loud and crazy;
The hot sun beaming down on my back,
the salty water rolling down my neck,
My face is salty from the heat of the day,
My legs are ashy from bending and swaying.
Picking all that white stuff weighs me down in back.
Some call it a money making thing;
I call it pure white cotton,
from fields miles long.
Part-time jobs at my age aren’t too real.
working for two weeks spending more than you will.
Babysitting, filing papers in a grown-up’s office,
cleaning the houses of different neighbors.

It’s a job, yes indeed, to be bused on old yellows
to and from school.
I would say that my culture of the deep, deep
South is cool, cool, cool!

—Kametris L. Weddington, 11, Port Gibson, Mississippi

**School at the Edge of the Forest**

There is a school at the edge of the forest
Where black children with polka-dot dresses
And striped shirts walk on a narrow
Sandy path that leads to a secret school

There is a school at the edge of the forest
Where children with books balanced on their heads
Go to learn to read, to write
Opening many more paths of choice

There is a school at the edge of the forest
Hidden behind the sour apple trees
The children bravely go, because they know
Freedom is the school at the edge of the forest

—Alejandro Gonzalez, 12, Aurora, Colorado
African-American Folktales for Young Readers edited by Richard and Judy Dockrey Young (August House). A compilation of over 30 folktales from Africa and America that have been passed down through the generations. Ages 9-15.

The Chinese Book of Animal Powers by Chungliang Al Huang (HarperCollins). According to a 2,500 year-old Chinese legend, people have characteristics of certain animals, depending on which year and month they were born. Describes the traits in detail, as well as the Chinese symbols associated with them. All ages.


The Girls' Book of Wisdom Empowering, Inspirational Quotes from over 400 Fabulous Females collected and edited by Catherine Dee (Little, Brown). A collection of quotes from female entertainers, professionals, athletes, and others. Ages 10 and up.

What About Religion? An Exploratory View by Wanda Cawein (Midnight Oil, Eugene, OR). A concise, impartial explanation and description of more than thirteen religions, including their histories and practices. Ages 13 and up.


Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row by Jarvis Masters (Padma Publishing, CA). Deeply moving, life-affirming stories that show the tenacity of the human spirit. We ss how spiritual practice and meditation changes life. Ages 15 +.

What I Believe A Young Person's Guide to the Religions of the World by Alan Brown and Andrew Langley (Millbrook Press). An illustrated look at eight major religions, as well as several other faiths. Describes the origins, teachings, and customs from a child's point of view. Ages 6-10

Strange Tales from Biblical Times: A compact disc narrated by Robert Rubenstein (90 E. 40th Ave, Eugene, OR 97405). Six stories either directly from the Old Testament or based on Biblical folklore. Recommended for those interested in stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. All ages.

In the Next Three Seconds Predictions for the Millenium compiled by Rowland Morgan, illus. Rod and Kira Josey (Puffin Books). An interesting look at what can happen around the world in different increments of time, from three seconds to three million years. Ages 6 and up.


Extraordinary Girls by Maya Ajmera, Olateju Omolodun and Sarah Strunk (Charlesbridge). Profiles of young women from all around the world, detailing how girls can make and are making differences in the sciences, the arts, religion, society, sports, and other areas. Ages 7-13.

Questions for Your Cosmic Dance by John Coleman (Hazelden). This book has 366 lessons, one for each day, many with a spiritual but non-denominational side. A guide to achieving inner peace. Ages 13 and up.

Buddhist Tales retold by Sherab Chödzin and Alesandra Kohn (Tricycle Press, CA). Thirteen traditional tales touch themes such as generosity, humor, compassion and life after death. All ages.
Around the World With PeaceBike

This fall, Tad Beckwith, a teacher from Oregon, and Frank Pollari, from Ontario, Canada, began rolling their bikes into classrooms and inviting students to go on a bike trip around the world with them. They’ll bicycle through more than forty countries over the next three years. The students will make the trip along with them through the Internet at www.peacebike.org.

Some students actually rode the first mile of the PeaceBike journey that began at Champoeg State Park in Oregon on 25 September 1999. Tad and Frank biked 69 miles that day. Tad wrote that he did the last twenty miles standing up. “It wasn’t just to get a better view,” he explained. “My seat was sore!” But sitting or standing, they will see the world by bike. They also want the kids of the world to see each other, and believe this bike trip can help make that happen. Tad says, “It’s an ‘edu-venture’ around the world for peace. We seek to connect young people around the world to each other so that their friendships build a peaceful world for us all.”

Tad and Frank will interview kids they meet and post those interviews and other experiences of the trip on the Internet. Kids can build great friendships by writing to each other. Skipping Stones and PeaceBike are working together on that part of the trip. Kids who register for a pen pal through PeaceBike’s website will be hooked up to each other (see Pen Pals Wanted, page 24).

Teachers and students can follow PeaceBike’s journeys as a class and share ideas with other schools around the world. They can do research in peacemaking, geography, social studies, biking, and much more.

Where did the idea for this trip come from? Tad was in the eighth grade, living in India, when his social studies teacher, who was from England, shared stories about his family’s bike trip around the world on two tandem bikes. It was then that Tad decided he’d do a world bike trip someday.

You can learn more about PeaceBike and the journey at www.peacebike.org. Happy travels!

—Kathy Beckwith, Tad’s mom, Dayton, Oregon

Discovering A Century Of Change

Thousands of people around the world cheered the historic journey of Miss Columbia, a 19” cloth doll, as she traveled around the globe at the turn of the last century raising funds for children’s charities. Now, after a century, the Wenham Museum in Massachusetts, guardian of the Miss Columbia doll, is sending a new “Miss Columbia 2000” for two-and-a-half years with an educational mission: to increase children’s understanding of local, national, and international history, to foster cultural exchange and awareness, and to link children with each other through correspondence and an interactive Internet site.

Miss Columbia 2000 began her worldwide voyage last September with a pilot trip in several New England states. Students and teachers in 15 schools so far have hosted assemblies, tea parties, and class projects in honor of Miss Columbia 2000, along with their studies of world cultures, geography, languages and history.

Around the World with Miss Columbia will be officially launched in April 2000 to observe the anniversary of the historic 1900–1902 journey, and destinations will include schools worldwide. Contact Jacquie Serafino at (978) 468-2377 to host; FMI: www.wenhammuseum.org.
To be listed on the Pen Pal page, we request US $5. You will also get a copy of the issue in which you are listed. Low-income and subscribers get one free listing. **Priority is given to ages 7-17.** Please do not give the same addresses out to all of your friends. Thanks!

Interested in learning a global language called **Ido?** It's easy to learn and understand. Write for more information to: Tom Todd (adult) 3713 West Main Kalamazoo, MI 49006 USA

Want International Pen Pals? Skipping Stones is collaborating with the PeaceBikes (see page 22) to hook up international pen pals with eachother. Please email Tad Beckwith at—xteam@peacebike.org, or, check out the site: www.peacebike.org for more information.

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**Fun Facts: Did you know that...**

- An iguana is also known as a "chicken of the sea."
- A tree called a Manzanillo, in Costa Rica, drips poison that can eat the skin of a cow standing underneath it.
- Orangutan means “person of the forest.”
- The roots of a ficus tree can grow so strong that they can lift a house off the ground.
- Only female mosquitoes bite.
- The world’s heaviest snake is the anaconda, which is found in Brazil; they can weigh as much as 500 lbs.
- The world’s largest spider, a tarantula found in Brazil, is 11 inches across and eats birds.
- In Africa and South America, army ants’ pincers are used to stitch people’s cuts and wounds together.
- Hummingbirds can fly as fast as airplanes (700 mph).
- The word “kangaroo” means something like “I don’t know” in the aboriginal Australians’ language.
- There is a family of birds in Australia called “goatsuckers”; the tawny frogmouth is one example.

—Carolyn Hill, Annapolis, Maryland
DEAR HANNA

How can all religions believe in different teachings, celebrate different rituals and holidays, and still claim to be true? —Tom

Dear Tom: From my perspective, each religion is true. You see, I do not believe religion is a matter of beliefs, rituals, and holidays. Rather, I believe that religion is a matter of each person’s heart and soul acting, speaking, and thinking from the place of goodness and love within us. The beliefs, rituals and holidays are reminders that assist us in the real work of changing ourselves inwardly from selfish ways to treating others as we want to be treated.

I once lived in a small town. Some of the best people I have ever known owned a store on Main Street. They foremost sold books and plants but also flowers, tapes, toys, candy, crafts, wreaths, and jewelry. Everyone in town frequented the store.

A handy carpenter had built rows and rows of shelves along the outside wall of the building to display crates of bedding starts and hanging plants. People enjoyed the plant display, daytime and evening. Strangers questioned the wisdom of leaving the goods unprotected around the clock—no fence, no locks! Knowing how beloved the store owners were, however, the townspeople never were concerned for the safety of the grand plant display—until one Saturday morning, pots and plants were found broken in heaps on the sidewalk. Disillusionment spread through town.

At three o’clock in the afternoon, a young man walked into the store and told the owners, “I am to blame. I was furious, I got drunk, I had a fight late into the evening, and I demolished your wares. You are too good and you don’t deserve that anyone should do this to you. Let me work off the damage I caused you!”

The inner goodness of the store owners awakened the young man’s potential to act from his highest, better self. This opening to goodness and love is the common truth of all religions.

Each religion serves the role of being a coach for any particular soul. The pieces of any religion, its teachings, rituals, and holidays, evolved over time because they aided in the conversion of the soul from selfishness to spreading healing love into the world.

Send your questions or comments to:
Dear Hanna c/o Skipping Stones
P. O. Box 3939, Eugene, OR 97403

In Peace,

Hanna
Myths and Monsters

Myths are one type of folktale. Myths tell about a people's belief and about their gods. Very often, they also explain how people think things began. People want to know why there is death, disease, and fire, why crops grow and snow falls. Each group of people makes up its own myths to explain how the world works.

A Chinese Creation Myth

When the Chinese described the beginning of the world, they said that a giant egg contained the universe. Panku, which means “the coiled ancestor,” found himself trapped inside this egg. He struggled until he cracked the egg open. Those things inside the egg that were bright and filled with light became the heavens. What was dark became the ground.

Panku stepped out of the egg, and as he grew larger, he pushed the heavens higher and higher away from the earth to give other things room to grow. He died in his sleep. The parts of his body became the world as we know it: his limbs became five sacred mountains and formed an outline around his body, which became the earth. His flesh turned into the soil, his body (hair and skin) turned into trees and plants, and his teeth and bones became rocks and minerals. Panku's blood changed into the rivers, his sweat became rain, and his breath became the wind and clouds. His eyes flew into the heavens, and the right became the sun, while the left became the moon. Finally, the insects crawling over his body transformed into animals and fish; the fleas turned into people.

Folktales can teach us how to behave, whom to admire and follow, and whom not to admire. Through stories, adults pass values and knowledge on to children.

Monsters often appear in myths. Many monster myths are etiological or “why” stories (tales which explain why things are the way they are). Monsters in ancient times were usually created by the gods. These creatures possessed many good qualities, like strength, wisdom, wealth, and special powers. When they used these qualities for evil, they became monstrous. The “monstrous” outside is sometimes a shell that hides the beauty and goodness that is inside.

An Egyptian Creature Myth

Bes, the dwarf, stood next to the great Tawert, the hippopotamus goddess who protected women during childbirth. When the child was being born, Bes watched, guarding against danger.

If babies opened their eyes, they would see a hairy creature with a large bearded face and huge ears. Bes's long arms reached almost to the ground, and when he paced around, his thick tail waved back and forth. Shaggy eyebrows hung down to the base of his nose, and his long tongue rolled out of his wide mouth and swung back and forth in the air, like a tail at the wrong end. Yet this dwarf danced and sang beautiful music to entertain the new baby. He welcomed the child into the world.

People need monsters to define values and to give form to their fears. Monsters teach us about ourselves and our world. Many monsters are part human and part animal: the Minotaur, for example, is half man and half bull. The scariest monsters are the ones we cannot see: those that come out at night, and those that wait in the land of death. Today, we dwell on monsters from space: aliens!

The word “monster” has also been used by some societies to identify any person or group of people who were different from that society. People might be labeled “monsters” because of their skin color, religion, language, or place of birth, or because of a physical or mental disability (See the story, “A Monster Lives on My Street” on page 27. —Editor)

Through myths, people express their fears and figure out how to solve problems, understand life, and know the difference between right and wrong. Instead of running from our mythical monsters, we must learn to deal with them.

—Author Robert Rubinstein tells stories (see page 22 for his CD) and teaches in Eugene, Oregon.
A Monster lives on my street

Everybody says that a monster lives on my street. But it hasn’t always been here; before he became a monster, he was just old Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith used to sit on his porch in the afternoon and tell my friends Roger, David, and me stories about the good old days. He let us play ball on his yard, and didn’t care if we broke a window by accident. He was good old Mr. Smith.

Then one day, Mr. Smith told my dad and the other adults on the street that he had something called AIDS. He had gotten it at the hospital a few years ago during an operation, when the doctors accidentally gave him blood tainted with the HIV virus.

After that, the parents on my street told their kids that they couldn’t visit Mr. Smith anymore (except for my parents, who told me not to be afraid of him). The other parents said Mr. Smith had something that could change them into monsters and kill them—that just being near him could turn them into monsters.

So Roger, David, and I stopped visiting Mr. Smith. No more stories. Somehow, it didn’t really matter since we never saw him anymore; he never left his house.

One day, as Roger, David, and I passed Mr. Smith’s house on our way home from school, we saw him sitting on his porch. He didn’t look like a monster, but he did look sick.

When my friends saw him, they ran to the other side of the street and called for me to follow. But I heard the voices of my parents instead, telling me that I didn’t have to be afraid.

So I went up to Mr. Smith’s porch and said, “Hello. I haven’t seen you in awhile. How have you been?”

There was a moment of silence. Finally he responded in a fragile voice, “Aren’t you afraid, like the rest of them?”

I answered, “No! Mom and Dad say that I have nothing to be afraid of.” Then I asked him if he could tell me one of his stories. He said that he wasn’t feeling well enough; that he had come outside only to smell the flowers, breathe the fresh air, and see the bright sun one last time.

A few moments later, Mrs. Smith came out to offer us some home-baked cookies. She looked sad. Although I was a little scared, I ate the cookie and drank some of the milk she had poured for me.

When I left the Smiths’ house, I walked across the street to where Roger and David had been watching. As I approached them, they ran away, screaming that I was going to change into a monster.

I told Mom what happened when I got home. She said that she was proud of me, but I was worried about whether Roger and David were still my friends, and whether I really was going to change into a monster.

The day after I spoke to Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith came to our house. She told Mom that she was taking Mr. Smith to the hospital, and that she was moving away from our street. She thanked Mom for her kindness and support, then hugged her and left.

I never saw either Mr. or Mrs. Smith again. Mom told me that Mr. Smith died a few days after he went to the hospital. I didn’t see much of Roger and David, either. They said they didn’t want to be friends with someone who could change into a monster.

Mom told me not to worry, because I could make plenty of new friends on the street we were moving to. She said she was happy that we were moving away from the monster on our street, and I didn’t understand her. I thought that Mr. Smith was the monster, and that since he had left, the monster on our street was gone, too.

I don’t know if I will make new friends on my new street. But I do know that I’m not going to change into a monster just because I spoke to Mr. Smith. Mom and Dad were right, and everyone else on my street was wrong. The monster that lived on my street didn’t live in Mr. Smith’s house, but in the other houses on my street. That monster is called FEAR.

—Joseph Chu, Newhall, California
Dancing Devils in the Desert

Photos and text by
Colleen Purcell,
Maipu, Santiago, Chile

Angel dances in the Diablada. He is also the head of the dance group.

It’s a battle between good and evil. To communicate the advance of the devils over the earth, the condor dances as if flying down from the Andes toward an angel that is at the Virgin Mary’s feet. The devils dance in and dominate the world, followed by the chinas supay, or women of the devil, representing temptation. The angel moves forward, sword in hand, battles them, and wins. The defeated devils take off their masks and leave them to one side. This means that they have submitted to the Virgin. This dance, called the Diablada, is one of the many dances to the Virgin performed in small towns in the interior of one of the driest deserts in the world: northern Chile.

Buses, cars, and trucks arrive carrying thousands of people to these sanctuaries. In some cases, it is very difficult to get there; to get to Ayquina from Calama, many people walk across the desert for twelve to eighteen hours. No roads lead to Las Peñas, so people must walk up the mountain for six hours through difficult trails. Usually, this is done at night to avoid the heat of the day. Everyone carries a flashlight, so a group of people looks like glowbugs in the darkness.

Small towns like Tirana and Ayquina have very few inhabitants, and no one lives in Las Peñas. But once or twice a year, the cities fill up with thousands of pilgrims, dancers, and musicians. The desert comes alive with music, dancing, and bright multicolored costumes. There are not enough houses to shelter so many people, so tents in all sizes and shapes surround the towns.

Achachis (elders) dance with the Diablada in La Tirana
When the pilgrims have a problem, a sickness in the family or the loss of a job, for example, they ask the Virgin to help them solve it. In return, they promise to dance for her for a certain number of years.

On the day of their arrival, the dancers greet the Virgin in the church and then take turns dancing outside the church all day and night. Gypsies, Morenos, Diabladas, Tobas, and Chunchos all dress in the beautiful costumes that represent their dance.

The fiestas last from two days to a week. On the day of the Virgin, the Virgin's image is taken out of the church to the church door. The pilgrims, dancers, and musicians wave handkerchiefs and hats. Brass bands, enormous bass drums, cymbals, and matracas (noisemakers) all play at the same time, and everyone yells ¡Viva Maria! They make the most incredible racket imaginable. Fireworks are thrown, flares are lit, and dancing begins again.

Morenos, representing black slaves, waiting to dance

The next day, there is usually a procession of people dancing through the streets of the town, followed by the Virgin's image. The silent, colorless desert contrasts with the loud music and the bright, beautiful colors of the costumes.

There is a sadness when, after people say farewell to the Virgin, everybody starts pouring out of town. Padlocks are put back on the doors and everything is left quiet and solitary, deserted as before.

Chinos (servants of the Virgin) take the Virgin back into the church in Copiapo at the end of the festival.
Each region of Mexico has its own patron Virgin who protects the region’s people and guides them in life until death. Death is everyone’s patron; regardless of where we are, she will always protect us. Giving yourself to the patron saint can be done willingly or not, but she always accepts us in compassion.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron of all Mexicans. She is the first brown virgin that speaks their language, Nahuatl. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the rebirth of the Virgin Mary on the “new” continent. She is Mestiza—a bicultural virgin of the white (from Spain) and indigenous (from Mexico) ancestry.

The Virgin of Guadalupe icon reflects the identity of the Mexican people with historical importance. She first appeared in 1521 during the Spanish Conquest. A flag carrying her image led the Mexicans to independence in 1810. She led her people again in the 1910 revolution, and in the 1994 Zapatista demonstrations.

Mictlanteccuhli is the god of death in the Aztec culture. He accompanies us throughout our life until the moment we become part of his life.

Cuarauperi (left) is the Tarascan goddess, from the state of Michi­can, responsible for birth. She is full of life and death. The cycle of life would never be completed if it weren’t for a sweet death that, at the end, protects us from everything. It is only in this life that there are misfortunes and punishments from the gods. After death, one travels with complete divine protection to arrive in the world of the dead, Micltan, where there is no punishment, but only liberation from the sufferings of life. Life and death are part of each other, forming a cycle without beginning or end. Cuarauperi is considered both mother and father. She is called “the one who unties the womb.”

Rural funeral processions to the cemetery are accompanied by music. The last song is played for the dead person at the cemetery. On 1st and 2nd November, we remember the dead. We play music and dance for their spirits.

Women have taken an important role in struggles. The Zapatista Virgin, the mother of humanity, fights anonymously for her children’s rights. The Virgin of Acteal in Chiapas (see page 31) is my personification of the strength of the community that was attacked by para­military groups on 22 December 1997. She gives me the strength to continue the struggle.
Islam and Media Prejudice

News media regularly mention Muslims in connection with crimes such as terrorism and abuse of women. Islam and Muslims are systematically associated with evil in people’s minds. Hitler’s media propaganda did the exact same thing with Jews in order to desensitize the Germans for the Holocaust. Are we now being desensitized for the bombing of Iraqi and Chechnyan Muslims?

Muslims are pushed to react defensively to the anti-Islamic media campaign. We feel that we need to defend ourselves and prove that we are innocent, that we are not involved in “Islamic terrorism.” But we do not need to do that. We are innocent and uninvolved. Islam is not evil.

Terrorism and abuse of women are equally frequent in other religious groups, but Christians or Jews do not feel responsible for the crimes of other Christians and Jews. Why not? Because the media do not associate crime with any religious group except Muslims. When Christians or Jews commit crimes, the media do not write about crimes by Christians or Jews. If they did so, people would flood the media with protest.

Muslims hope that people will stop tolerating anti-Islamic media propaganda and will start complaining strongly against the daily defamation of Islam, Muslims and Arabs in the media.

What is Islam?

Fourteen centuries ago, God revealed his final scripture for humanity to the prophet Muhammad. The Quran confirms the Bible and Muslims believe in all biblical prophets including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and Muhammad as well as other prophets such as Buddha, Krishna, and Rama. Every nation on earth had a prophet with the same message: worship your Creator, God (Allah in Arabic) and treat each other with love, or at least with fairness. In the Quran (49:13), God says: “Oh mankind, I have created you from one man and one woman and spread you out into races and clans. So when you deal with each other, remember that you are one family. In this world, you all have equal honor and dignity. But in the hereafter, God will honor you differently according to your faith and behavior on earth. And God alone has the knowledge and the insight necessary to judge you.”

—Tammam Adi, Islamic Cultural Center of Eugene.
Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding. (Proverbs 4:7)

Life can be very confusing, and this confusion often leads to suffering. But the spiritual traditions of the world teach that we can move from confusion to the wisdom at the heart of life. Wisdom emerges from the center of all being. This center is really beyond words, but to speak of it we have given it many names—God, Tao, and nirvana are just a few examples. We experience the center through revelation, and revelation guides us to act with wisdom and compassion.

Throughout the ages, teachers have arisen who embody this wisdom and who help light the way for others. These teachers may be human or not, alive or not, apparent or hidden. Their words and deeds are often recorded in texts, like the Bible, the Quran, and the Upanishads. These texts are preserved and expanded over time by religious traditions. The traditions are sustained by communities or tribes. Although we are born into a particular tribe, during our lives we may wander far from our origin and even join other tribes.

The four Ts (tribes, traditions, texts, and teachers) may lead us closer to the center, the source of revelation and wisdom, or they may lead us around in circles of confusion. It is up to each of us to make good use of the four Ts in order to move through the confusion and suffering and toward the center, the source of wisdom and compassion.

—Barry Nobel, who practices Judaism and Buddhism, is a convenor of an interfaith dialogue group in Eugene, Oregon.

Religious Freedom and Tolerance

Several years ago, I began to feel uncomfortable at the church I was attending because I couldn’t honestly believe what I was being taught. I ended up leaving the church to investigate other religions on my own. Through my studying and talking with others, I’ve begun to realize it is more important to me how I live my life and what I believe in, rather than which religion I belong to.

To feel complete in my life, I had to find out what I really believed, both logically and emotionally. Although I am interested in learning about other people’s beliefs and practices, I haven’t had any experience that has pushed me towards wanting to practice a particular religion myself. This is one reason why religious tolerance is so necessary. The reasons a person believes in something are very personal. For example, just as one may have had a very profound experience that made him believe Christianity, another may have have just as profound an experience that made him believe Hinduism. Neither one is wrong, nor can one can judge the other, because neither person has had the other’s life experiences.

I believe that for a society to succeed with any kind of religious diversity, we must practice religious tolerance. We don’t have the right to pass negative judgement on someone else’s religious values. No matter how different others’ religions are from yours, whether they believe in many gods, in one god, or none at all, it is each person’s right to carry out his beliefs as he sees fit. If I point a finger at someone thinking that he is practicing his religion incorrectly or that the religion is wrong, then I would be guilty of a fallacy myself.

It is my hope for the next millenium that we will focus on our own spiritual development and not everyone else’s; that we will find out for ourselves what we believe; and that we will accept and appreciate that there are others with whom we will disagree. Don’t fight for a religion itself, but for religious freedom.

—Erin Leffler, student intern from Univ. of Oregon
The Sabbath

We gather on the Rec Hall porch.
Together we watch
the sun depart
in all the pinks, oranges and yellows
the eye could imagine.

Together we say goodbye
To a week that has just passed:
We light the candles
with a pride seen by the glow in our eyes
that matches the glow of the candlelight
and the Sabbath
starting like the sunset in the calm night sky.

—Samantha Levine, 17, Clarkstown High
School North, New City, New York

My Jewish Heritage

My name is Dara Deshe. My mother was born
in Ohio, but my father was born and grew up in
Israel. My family is Jewish, and it’s important to
us that we attend all services on the holidays (or
"Yom Tovs," as we call them). Another tradition
that my family strongly believes in is keeping the
Sabbath. Every Friday night, my mother prepares
a meal with homemade Challah, and at sundown
she and I light candles. Afterwards, my brothers
and I are permitted to join our friends and go
somewhere, normally to a friend’s house or a
high school game. I am almost fluent in Hebrew;
also, I know the tiniest bit of Spanish.

I hope that in the future, there will be world
peace. In our religion, we believe that the
Mosheach will come. The Mosheach will bring
peace and a new, very holy temple in Israel.
Some believe that the Mosheach will come after
a third world war, but it is unknown. It is very
important to me to stay with my Jewish heritage
and not to do drugs or smoke.

—Dara Deshe, 7th grade, Bexley Middle School,
Columbus, Ohio

Inside Krishna’s Temple

Kneeling, bending, bowing, chanting.
Fragrant burning sticks delight my nose
Lost
Confused like a foreigner

I watch my own mom
Her flowing sari, a mixture of saffron, peach,
and apricot, shames my jeans and t-shirt
Embarrassed
I study the statue of Krishna, adorned
in gold crowns, rope necklaces, bracelets,
and jewels

Suddenly, I look at my mom’s face
to the bindi, red dot, between her eyes
She blinks
Now I comprehend the meaning of
kneeling, bending, bowing, chanting.

—Gazal Taparia, 10th grade, Houston, Texas.
Gazal, who came from Banglore, India in 1989.
writes, “Although I have been raised in america, the
Indian culture is very important to my family, and I
appreciate the opportunity to share this experience…”
Not just for Spirituality

Wherever life is lived fully, where there is wholeness, authenticity, and sincerity, where a fresh breath of new life is breathed into everyday affairs, there is spirituality.

Pursuit of the highest values and ideals, awareness of that which stands in the way of them, and the sanctity of all that is, unbounded appreciation for the gift of life, openness to the miracle of existence, trust in the process of life itself—these are spiritual virtues.

Compassion is the goal of the spiritual journey. Wisdom, translated into action, is our greatest tool. Humility keeps us from going astray.

What is Humility?

Humility is admitting that we are human and not denying our human nature, that there is much we do not know, that we have much to learn from everyone, from every situation, and from every creature, great or small. It is not reducing the great mystery of life to a formula.

Spirituality in Action

Honoring who we are, pursuing what allures us Being ourselves.
Learning from the great souls from the past and among us.
Listening well to what they have to say, but always taking the lessons into our own hearts and testing them in our own lives.
Not repeating the sacred word but becoming it.
Honoring these holy temples we call our bodies with sleep, food, exercise and play. Honoring silence, Centering our activities in prayer and meditation.
Seeing every moment of our lives as prayer Turning toward the source of all beings in a personal relationship and co-creating our life with that eternal wellspring of all life, day by day, moment by moment.
This is spirituality at its finest.

We are led astray. We make mistakes. But we return and start again. We pick up the pieces and learn from our mistakes. Flexibility is an essential part of the spiritual life. Truth is not frozen or written in stone, but it matures as we mature, as humanity matures. We must be willing to reevaluate our beliefs in the light of the new day.

Cornerstone of Spirituality: Faith

The cornerstone of spirituality is faith. Faith is not belief in a creed or doctrine, but trust: Trust that what is needed for our spiritual growth is provided. Trust that if we are living an authentic life, all of the universe rejoices and converges in our eyes. Yes to life, yes to love, yes to destiny. Trust in the seen and the unseen. Trust in ourselves, and trust in that which is greater than ourselves.

A great poet wrote this: “I and mine do not convince with our words; we convince with our presence.” It is easy to write great and inspiring words. It is always in the living them that true spirituality is put to the test.

Spirituality and Art

Trees produce leaves and seeds. Birds sing sweet songs. People produce art. Art is the rightful product of human industry. We are children of the creator. We, too, create. We have been given much: air to breathe, food to eat, water to drink, others to love. We create the gift that we give back to creation. Encourage the creativity in others, and you do a divine service. Stifle their creativity, and you harm the entire universe.

Every human being is an artist, not just those whose paintings hang in galleries or those whose songs are played on the radio. Whatever we create, whatever we shape with our love and care, is art. The gardener is an artist. The builder of homes is an artist. The parents who raise their children well are the greatest artists.

Without art, life sinks into boredom and unreality. Without art, the soul withers and dies. Without art, there is no love. Without art, life decays into mere survival.

The courage to create is the courage to be. Art absorbs the pain and sorrow of life, and revitalizes it. Art breathes life into the lifeless. And, like spring, art always offers a promise for a new beginning.

—Mrs. B. Nirmala Kumari, Hanuman Junction, Andhra Pradesh, India
Spirituality, Self-Realization and Satguru

Known for her boundless love and compassion, Mata Amritanandamayi (or Ammachi, respected mother) blesses one and all alike, regardless of status, age, or religion. An inspiring example of utter humility, compassion, patience, and love, Ammachi’s life is dedicated solely to removing the suffering of humanity.

A real guru (spiritual teacher or Satguru) is one who is endowed with all the divine qualities, such as equal vision, universal love, renunciation, compassion, patience, forbearance, and endurance. He will have complete control over his mind. She will be like a huge ship that can carry thousands of passengers. His mere presence will give a feeling of protection and safety, an assurance to the disciple that he will reach the goal. Like the moon, her presence will be cooling, soothing, and heart-capturing, but at the same time it also will be brilliant, radiant, and shining like the sun. His manner toward his disciple will be soft like a flower and hard like a diamond. She will be simpler than the simplest and more humble than the humblest. Even her silence will be a teaching. A real disciple is one who can imbibe the life and teachings of such a guru and follow his or her footsteps faithfully. Knowing and understanding the real nature of such a teacher, a true disciple’s heart will spontaneously surrender and willingly let the guru discipline him.

It is not possible to proceed very far on the spiritual path without a guru. A guide is necessary to travel in an unfamiliar country. A sadhak (spiritual seeker), through his penances, may succeed in getting rid of his gross vasanas (latent tendencies) without the help of a perfect master, but a Satguru’s help and grace are a must in order to eliminate the subtle vasanas and to give up his individuality (ego).

Once you come under a perfect master, then you simply obey his words and do sadhana (spiritual practice) without fail. If your surrender is complete and if you are determined to attain the goal, he will work with your ego, both gross and subtle, and will take you across the ocean of transmigration (life cycles). The subtle ego is very hard to break through with only your own efforts. The Satguru’s guidance will slowly bring it out and exhaust it. A perfect master always works with the ego of the disciple. But he will not start until the disciple is ready for it.

Thoughts and actions that would feed the ego in any way should not be done. Good actions and good thoughts also will bind if they are performed or thought with an attitude of “I” and “mine.” It is very subtle but strong. Subtle vasanas are more powerful than the gross ones. Things that are subtle are also more pervasive. For example, when ice melts, it becomes water, which is more subtle, powerful, and more pervasive. Water, when heated up or boiled, becomes vapor, which is still more subtle, powerful, and more pervasive. Steam has such power that it is used to run huge machines. Again, water power, when it is converted into electrical energy, becomes much more subtle, powerful, and pervasive. In the same way, our mind and thoughts become stronger and more pervasive when the subtlety increases.

People are so identified with the body that they miss the essential principle. They see only the clouds and miss the vast expansive sky. Duality exists only when you identify with the body. Once this identification is transcended, all dualities disappear. In this state of total non-identification with the body, all differences (man and women, rich and poor, etc.) vanish.

Human efforts alone will not be sufficient to remove our deep-rooted subtle tendencies. God’s or a guru’s grace alone can take the mind to the state where there are no thoughts. In that state of supreme subtlety, the mind transforms into the most powerful source of inexhaustible energy. In that state it becomes all-pervasive energy itself. That is the final death of the ego, which will no longer return.

We should not accept anyone as a guru before we are fully convinced personally that he or she is authentic and truthful. Once we choose someone as a guru, we should surrender completely to him or her. With the exception of very few who have gained higher spiritual tendencies in prior lives, self-realization is not possible for anyone without the blessings of a guru.

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