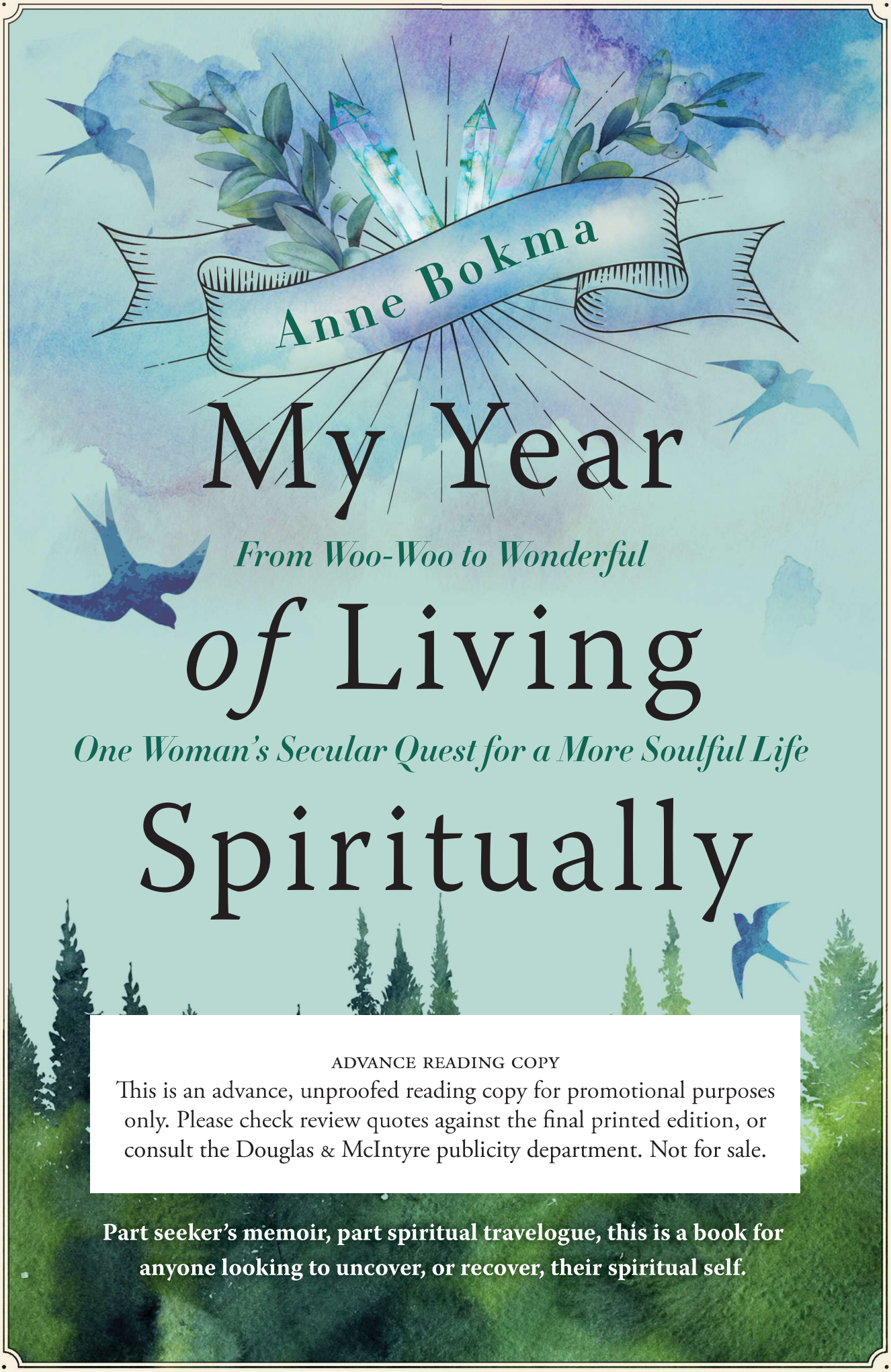

Part seeker's memoir, part spiritual travelogue, this is a book for anyone looking to uncover, or recover, their spiritual self.

MY YEAR OF LIVING SPIRITUALLY

MY YEAR OF LIVING SPIRITUALLY

From Woo-Woo to Wonderful—One Woman's Secular Quest for a More Soulful Life

ANNE BOKMA

Douglas & McIntyre

PRINTED MAY 24, 2019

DOUGLAS & MCINTYRE (2013) LTD.
PO BOX 219, Madeira Park, BC, VON 2HO
www.douglas-mcintyre.com

Douglas & McIntyre (2013) Ltd. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested $153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. We also gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and from the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication information pending.

CONTENTS

Note to readers: For narrative reasons, the timeline of some events has been slightly rearranged or compressed.

To my daughters, Ruby and Lucy — precious gems
And my women friends — pure gold

"And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home."

—Wendell Berry

INTRODUCTION

"Religion is for those who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there."

—*Vine Deloria Jr.*

WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD, CHML RADIO IN HAMILTON, ONTARIO, aired a show asking kids to call in with their ideas about what heaven looked like. My mother encouraged me to dial the station and proudly stood by as I spoke to the host about the celestial kingdom I was certain awaited me. I was raised to believe I was one of God's chosen people. Religion was the core of my life—church twice on Sunday, private Christian schools, weekly catechism classes, prayer before meals and Bible readings after. Simply being baptized as an infant in the One True Church, specifically the Dutch Calvinist Canadian Reformed Church, which numbered about 10,000 people in a few dozen mostly rural communities across the country, meant I'd won the religious sweepstakes. At the end of my life I'd reap my reward: eternal life in heaven.

I had a very specific, albeit limited, idea of heaven. I told the host that it had streets of gold, of course. And angels, trumpets, harps and halos. There was lots of praise music and hymn singing. And God lived there, along with a very select group of people that would eventually include me and everyone who went to my church. I couldn't think of much else to say. It might be the end goal, but the property listing for this longed-for promised land didn't come with a whole lot of description.

The personality of God was more complex. He loved you if you were good and believed in him. But he might fling you to Satan and the pit of fire if you lied to your mother or touched yourself *down there*. He was all-powerful but still let bad things happen, like earthquakes and

acne. He listened if you prayed to him, but might not give you what you really wanted, which in my case was for Danny Linde in 4th grade to like me. God was invisible, but ever present. Loving, but angry. A bipolar deity. Still, I believed in that invisible man with my whole heart.

Until one day I just didn't anymore.

From the time I was little I had been instructed by the authority figures in my life to "have faith like a child." It was the simple answer to any religious question. If God could stop it, why did he let children die of starvation and cancer? "Have faith like a child." Did Moses really part the Red Sea, and did Noah really get all those animals onto the ark? "Have faith like a child." Wasn't it mean of God to send billions of people to hell save for the few thousand people who belonged to our obscure denomination? "Have faith like a child." Infantile acceptance trumped intellectual rigor. True believers did not ask questions.

Even though I was one of God's chosen, I hadn't done anything to earn this birthright. It was generously granted thanks to Unconditional Election, the theological principle of the 16th-century theologian John Calvin, who said certain people were randomly predestined by God to receive salvation while others were left to continue in their sins and wind up in hell. Calvin also promoted the principle of Total Depravity, the idea that because of original sin, all human beings are fallen people, intrinsically unworthy and inclined to evil. Basically, wretches.

My doubt in these sorts of ideas as a young woman created a problem. Loss of faith meant risking the connection to everything I held dear—a mother I was very close to, three younger siblings, my extended family, my childhood friends, and my Dutch culture. Church life was the centre of our existence. I'd lose everything if I left the church, but even at that age I knew I'd lose myself if I stayed. My mother and stepfather perceived their reality through the lens of religion—that was their way to make sense of the world. But it no longer make sense to me. I left the Canadian Reformed Church

when I was 20, and things would never again be the same with my family. They could not forgive me.

The word "religion" comes from the Latin word "ligare," meaning to bind. In my case, religion had the opposite effect. Leaving the church was the right thing to do, but hurting my family was hard.

Dr. Marlene Winell, a trailblazing San Francisco psychologist, has coined the term "religious trauma syndrome" to describe the impact of breaking away from repressive religions. Winell isn't anti-religion so much as anti-dogma. The religious communities that cause trauma, she says, are those that prevent people from thinking for themselves. Mind control and emotional abuse may be most closely associated with cults, she writes in her book *Leaving the Fold*, but "fear-based apocalyptic thinking" is a tactic that's also employed by strict religions where conformity is a must. Devout and often well-intentioned parents in these communities feel justified in their use of power tactics to brainwash their children into belief. Leaving such a religion can be devastating, says Winell. "It's like the rug gets pulled out from under you in every way, because religion defines everything—it defines who you are, your relationships, your purpose in life, your view of the world, your view of the future, your view of the afterlife. The whole house comes down."

I certainly felt my own foundation crumble when I left the church, especially in regards to my mother, whom I had idolized as a child. Our closeness was forged in part because my biological father left our family when I was three and she raised me and my younger brother as a single mother until she remarried six years later. During that time we lived on welfare and any extra cash my mother earned picking fruit in the summer and cleaning houses. I never noticed any lack. She was a loving mother, and I always wanted to please her. But when I left the church I became the biggest disappointment and shame of her life. It got easier to avoid her than endure the look of gloom on her face when we were together. She considered me hopelessly lost. We would not share eternal life in heaven. Looking back, I believe that her concern

for me, however misguided, stemmed from love. But control played a role, too. I had stopped having faith like a child. I had stepped out of line. There were times I so longed to be back in her favor, I was tempted to return to the church. But once you see the light, you can't go back to living in the dark.

Over the years, guilt about disappointing my family lingered. Our infrequent visits felt forced. I tried to steer clear of controversy, but I'd become a liberal pro-choice feminist who believed in evolution, gay marriage, climate change, the right-to-die and the New Democratic Party, all things my parents viewed as an abomination. Keeping quiet was the trade-off if I wanted to attend Christmas dinner, if I wanted any sense of familial belonging. It was inevitable that our relationship would suffer.

* * *

As hard as it is to leave repressive religions, many people do get out, fleeing denominations that wield their authority in destructive ways. But it isn't only fundamentalist churches that have seen a drop in membership. Some people leave because church doctrine isn't relative to their lives. Others question the very idea of organized religion in a contemporary world. Some would simply rather sleep in on the Sabbath, go to a yoga class or take the kids to soccer practice. The majority of millennials, for their part, refuse to even set foot in a house of worship. Almost three million Americans join the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated every year, and 4,000 churches close annually, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In Canada, almost 10,000 churches—a third of all faith-owned buildings—are expected to close in the next decade, according to the National Trust. All this means traditional religion in the West is gasping for breath as elderly faithful churchgoers die off.

But while these millions abandon religion, many still want a spiritual life. There are enough of us to have acquired our own designation—spiritual-but-not-religious, or SBNR for short. Almost 80 million North Americans (27 percent of Americans and 39% of Canadians) identify as SBNR, making us the fastest-growing "faith" group in the western world. SBNRS are sometimes referred to as "Nones" (because they typically check the box for "none" on surveys about religious affiliation) and "Dones" (because they're done with religion). In 2019, the number of "nones" tied statistically with the number of those who identify as evangelical Catholics in the U.S. "Spirituality will be the religion of the new millennium," says Siobhan Chandler, one of Canada's leading scholars on this growing demographic.

SBNRS may shun formal religious worship, yet the majority believe in God and feel a deep connection with nature and the earth. Most SBNRS say they still pray, at least occasionally. They value autonomy over group think and don't follow a prescribed set of beliefs, other than maybe the Golden Rule. SBNRS are in sync with the thinking of the Indian Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda, who wrote: "You have to grow from the inside out. None can teach you, none can make you spiritual. There is no other teacher but your own soul."

Some critics have accused SBNRS of taking a cafeteria-style approach to belief, picking and choosing from various spiritual practices rather than digging deeply into a single religion. "Burger King Spirituality" is one derisive term applied to this supposed "have it your way" approach to tending to spiritual life. But I wonder—what's wrong with sampling a wide variety of practices from the spiritual smorgasbord if it leads to a richer life?

For the past four years I've reported on the SBNR demographic as the "Spiritual but Secular" columnist for the *United Church Observer (*now renamed *Broadview)*, the national magazine of Canada's largest liberal Protestant denomination. Increasingly, my research on SBNR practices made me want to experience them first-hand, especially as

I felt my spiritual self was flagging. After some deliberation and a bit of financial planning, I decided I'd immerse myself for a full year in spiritual living. I'd engage in a holy host of practices, including some that could be described as new age, pagan, mystical, transcendental, supernatural, soulful and just plain woo-woo. For 12 months I would devote myself to being more devotional. I would also devote the year to reading books with an exclusively spiritual theme.

I was inspired in part by journalist A.J. Jacobs and his year-long quest to follow all 700 rules in the Bible as closely as possible, chronicled in his book *My Year of Living Biblically*. His commitment included following the 10 commandments and tithing 10 percent of his salary, but also observing many arcane and obscure laws, such as not shaving his beard or wearing clothes of mixed fibers and being willing to stone adulterers. (To live up to this last admonition, he half-heartedly tossed a pebble at a man who had admitted to cheating on his wife.)

I was interested in following Jacobs' lead, but not in following Biblical rules. I'd had enough of that. It was spiritual practices I was keen on. I didn't aspire to anything as ambitious as enrolling in theology school, trekking the Camino Trail or dancing like a wild woman at Burning Man. Rather, I made a list of simple, easily doable and ideally enlightening experiences I was eager to try.

I wanted to see what I was missing out on. I had been raised in a closed-minded religion, but I was determined to bring a seeker's eagerness, combined with a reporter's skepticism, to documenting the soulful benefits of experimenting. When it came to the spiritual smorgasbord, I was ready for the big buffet.

Photo on next page: Frolicking with my fuzzy friend Henry at goat yoga.

CHAPTER 1

January

WAKING UP

A new morning routine, reducing screen time,
meditating with Andy and channeling Clarice

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."
—Annie Dillard

RELIGIOUS PILGRIMS TRAVEL TO THE HOLY LAND, LOURDES OR MECCA. Secular seekers might choose Stonehenge, Sedona, the Ganges, Ground Zero, Woodstock or even Graceland. Sometimes when we discover new places we discover new things about ourselves. But we don't need to

travel far to find enlightenment. We can live more deeply right where we're planted. Henry David Thoreau, who famously moved to a tiny cabin where he lived for two years in solitude and contemplation, proved you can be a pilgrim in your own backyard. The same will be true for me this year. Most of my spiritual experiments will happen close to home.

Things begin promisingly enough on January 1st, when I open my eyes to the realization that I don't have a hangover. It's been years since I faced a New Year's Day so clearheaded. I'd stayed up late the night before at a neighborhood party, toasted friends with a solitary glass of champagne—and stopped there. This was so out of character, some people noticed. "You're not drinking?" asked Audrey, as though I were renouncing a citizenship of some kind.

Alcohol has always figured prominently in my idea of what constitutes a good time, and New Year's is the booziest of holidays. (It's also the deadliest day on the calendar, thanks to drunk driving, aimless celebratory gunfire, injuries from fireworks and alcohol poisoning.) Sipping too much champagne might seem tame in comparison to waving a pistol around at midnight, but I don't want this year of more soulful living to begin with a throbbing headache.

One driving reason for embarking on this spiritual experiment is a conventional one. At 55, I am exactly middle-aged (if I live to be 110) and what I experience too often seems predictable, from the grey hair on my head to the plantar fasciitis in my feet. In the past year I've attended four funerals. There are now more days behind me than ahead. I want these days to count. I am among legions of baby boomers, almost 100 million North Americans, who are in this particular stage of life.

My kids Ruby, 20, and Lucy, 17, are almost launched and ready to let loose on life. The house will be quiet without them. I'm married to a fellow journalist, and after more than 30 years, it seems like some sort of miracle we're still together, given our vastly different temperaments and the challenges of living with any one person, day in and day out, for decades. I still struggle from time to time with the estrangement from

my family. The sadness has eased as the years have passed, but there are still moments when a spiritual emptiness creeps in, and I haven't been sure how to fill it.

The psychotherapist and former monk Thomas Moore, perhaps the best-known spiritual writer of our time, believes that the great problem of the 20th century is the loss of soul. There's evidence of this misery of the spirit all around us. At least one in four American women takes a psychiatric medication. In 1980, 20% of Americans reported feeling lonely; today it's 40%—and 35% of people over 45 say they are chronically lonely. Clearly our souls are starved for something. We are spiritually bereft, living insular lives in houses that seem to get bigger and bigger while our sense of community becomes smaller.

I begin the new year the way I always have, with a bunch of earnest resolutions. For decades they've been pretty much the same: get in better shape, save more money, get organized. It's the trinity of trials we feel we must endure. But these goals are superficial, spiritually bankrupt even. This year I'm trying something new.

I've got a long spiritual to-do list, but first up is changing my morning routine. There's got to be a better way to begin the day than spending the first half hour repeatedly hitting the snooze button or scrolling through Facebook on my phone. "Each morning we are born again. What we do today matters most," said the Buddha. I don't think he was talking about scanning other people's carefully cropped, flatteringly filtered vacation photos on Instagram.

I've never been a morning person. I get what the American author Glen Cook means when he says, "Morning is wonderful—its only drawback is that it comes at such an inconvenient time of day." That hasn't stopped me from wondering what it would feel like to be one of those people who bounces out of bed, bends gracefully into sun salutations, writes morning pages, whips up a green smoothie fortified with ground flaxseed, and meditates for half an hour—all before the sun comes up. I imagine such a person would be in tune with the synchronicities of

the universe and exceedingly efficient, a cross between spiritual guru Marianne Williamson and happiness expert Gretchen Rubin.

Caught up in the giddy enthusiasm that predictably accompanies new year's resolutions, I craft a new approach to my weekday mornings, committing to a few new habits: stretching for five minutes, meditating for 10 and journalling for 15. I'm going to avoid my phone when I wake up, find other ways to reduce screen time and also work some yoga into my days. All this, I'm convinced, will lay the groundwork for a balanced, calm start to the day, instead of my usual fuzzy-headed dread.

My secret wish is to become more like my much-loved mother-in-law, Clarice, a woman I long admired and tried, mostly without success, to emulate. To her last breath, when she died at 94 with all six of her children at the edge of her hospital bed, Clarice was perpetually positive. She rose at 5:30 a.m. for her form of meditation, the cryptic crossword puzzle in that day's *Montreal Gazette*. Clarice lived in the moment. To my knowledge she never once cracked open a self-help book or watched an instructive TED Talk. I never heard her fret about the past or stew about the future. She always had the same cheery words when she woke in the morning: "It's another beautiful day!" She faced difficulties in life to be sure. A son died at nine months from pneumonia, and she watched her husband fade into the fog of Parkinson's over a 10-year period. But Clarice was stoic, and, most of all, *happy*, effortlessly so by the looks of it. Her son, my husband, Jeff, has some of her qualities. Whenever a conversation gets too serious or I'm drawn into introspective gloominess, he's apt to say something like, "Thinking too much always gets you into trouble," and go back to his Sudoko puzzle.

* * *

January 1 is my day to get started. I set my alarm for 6:30 a.m., an hour earlier than usual, and fling my sober self out of bed with the determina-

tion of the newly resolute. I throw on yoga pants and a T-shirt and head downstairs to the living room. As I light a scented candle, my fingers twitch, anticipating the usual reach for my giant-sized mug of medium roast coffee. This morning I knock back a glass of warm water with lemon slices instead. Apparently this will flush my digestive system and rehydrate my body, which practically sounds like a religious rite in itself. I embark on a series of eight simple stretches—including an upper back release, seated spinal twist and standing forward bend—that I found on the internet. I keep a print-out of the stretches in front of me, because these days I can't remember any list with more than three things on it.

When I finally reach for my phone, it's to log onto Headspace, a popular meditation app that's been downloaded more than 30 million times and promises to teach me how to meditate in just 10 minutes a day. The app with the orange dot has turned its founder, Andy Puddicombe, a former Buddhist monk with a degree in circus arts, into the modern voice of digital meditation—and an immensely rich man. *The New York Times* credits Puddicombe with doing for meditation "what Jamie Oliver has done for food." I've dabbled in meditation before. Once, I even signed up for an all-day silent meditation retreat that had me counting down the minutes until I could be released.

Meditation ranks as one of the most popular habits of the SBNR, ideally offering a few minutes of stillness in a noisy and frenetic world. Meditation has been proven to decrease anxiety, improve sleep, enhance relationships, reduce aging and make you smarter, more empathetic and boost concentration. And apparently all it requires is a few minutes a day with Andy, about the same amount of time as it takes to blow-dry my hair.

But as much as I try to concentrate on the steady in-and-out rise-and-fall of my breath, my mind keeps drifting. I attempt to follow Andy's gentle suggestion, communicated in his plummy British accent, to observe distracting thoughts as if they are mere bubbles that can be gently pricked so they'll disappear. I've always been an over thinker,

though, and clearly it's going to take some practice to stop the errant ping pong ball currently ricocheting around my brain.

Meditation is meant to guide us out of our heads and into the here and now. "How we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the character of our experience and, therefore, the quality of our lives," writes Sam Harris in "Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion." According to its promoters, journalling serves the same purpose, helping to quell our incessant mental chatter. I've kept a diary twice before, once as an angsty teen and then, in my mid-30s, as an anxious new mom. I eventually ripped them both up because I didn't want anyone to find them after I died and see what a negative bore I could be. This year, however, I'm determined to give it another shot.

I set the timer on my phone and write for 15 minutes without pausing my pen or thinking too much about the words that tumble out. I've never had trouble accessing my interior life, but when I actually pay attention to what's crowding my mind, the volume is overwhelming: nagging worries, repetitive musings, unresolved conflicts, ideas for creative projects, my damned never-ending to do list, and all my up and down moods. In my work as a journalist, digging out the right words sometimes requires painful excavation; with journalling the words are right there, like loose gravel on the surface. It's a relief to tame the tornado of my thoughts, and I'll find that when I set them down in deep blue ink on lined paper, they become orderly, evidence of where my head and heart are really at.

As I make journalling a daily practice, I find my mother sometimes comes up when I write. We haven't spoken in years, ever since a Christmas gathering at my brother's home. We avoided each other for most of the evening, but as I was about to leave my mother walked over. We stood facing each other, at a loss for what to say. This was the woman I adored so much as a child that I would race home to make sure she wasn't hurt if I accidentally stepped on a sidewalk crack, the woman I would call from the payphone in my high school cafeteria if we'd had

an argument that morning, because I couldn't get on with my day if I thought she was upset. The two of us are only 18 years apart—when I was a teenager people would say we looked like sisters. We'd do sisterly things, too, like shop at the mall and smoke duMaurier cigarettes at the dining room table, watching *The Young and the Restless* when I came home from school. But a chill had set in after I left the church.

It looked as if it might thaw that Christmas, until my mother broke the silence: "I pray for you every day." A wave of shame passed over me, my face heating up. My adult self wanted to tell her I didn't need her prayers and I didn't need saving from a God I didn't believe in. My younger self, the one who felt like a bad girl, won out and I kept quiet.

Getting the words out of my head and onto the page through journalling is an exorcism of sorts. It helps quiet the constant push-pull, back-and-forth arguments I have with myself over whether I should risk reaching to my mother again. No clear answer arises, but I do feel less burdened.

My daily five minutes of yoga are another story. I want to like yoga, I really do. In fact, I want to love yoga. I want to love it as much as my friend Monica does. She gets up at 5:30 a.m. every weekday to do a 90-minute ashtanga yoga class, during which she runs through a strenuous sequence of vinyasa poses. Monica says the practice has been "life changing" since she began it three years ago. She says she's less judgmental, calmer about conflict and more open-hearted. She doesn't feel the need to read self-help books anymore—"because, ultimately, the answer comes from within."

Monica can also stand on her head.

I've been to a few yoga classes in the past. I found it was a lot like married sex: you may still feel the glow afterward, but you just don't feel compelled to do it very often.Along with meditation, however, yoga is among the most popular practices of spiritual agnostics like myself. Its benefits include cultivating awareness, quieting the mind

and building fetching glutes. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says this about the ancient bendy practice: "Free from anger and selfish desire, unified in mind, those who follow the path of yoga and realize the Self are established forever in that supreme state."

I'd like to have what he's having. Maybe I just haven't tried hard enough.

A couple of weeks into the new year, I tag along with Monica to her ashtanga class. I begin with a respectful sun salutation, assert myself in the warrior pose, flail at the extended, hand-to-big-toe pose and surrender in a passive heap in the child's pose. I can't keep up with the advanced practitioners who huff through their nostrils as they seamlessly move through jump-throughs, back bends, the plank, the splits, and headstands. I spend much of the class anticipating the sweet relief of the corpse pose, where all I have to do is lie down and play dead. When I roll up my mat at the end of the class, I think about the pain I'll probably be in the next day. Monica, meanwhile, is positively glowing. Sure enough, the next morning I hobble out of bed.

I decide to investigate other types of yoga that might be less fierce and a little more fun. I pass on naked yoga (don't care to expose myself during downward dog) and pot yoga (don't smoke the stuff) but give aerial yoga a whirl. My first class is a bust when I commit a yoga no-no by scarfing down an egg salad sandwich minutes before climbing into the anti-gravity hammock made from yards of stretchy silk fabric and suspended from high-grade hardware secured in the ceiling. As it begins to sway, so do the contents of my stomach, and I realize that I'm about to toss my lunch. I make it to the bathroom just in time and hope that the other participants can't hear my hurls on the other side of the wall. I spend the rest of the class as motionless as a caterpillar while wrapped in my silk cocoon.

My return visit goes better. I manage the Superman-style swoosh—my body parallel to the floor, supported by a band of fabric across my hips, and my arms outstretched in a rescue stance. And I'm giddy with a

sense of accomplishment when I actually flip upside down, my hair grazing the floor and my feet moving up in the air while wrapped around the fabric. Despite several attempts, I can't quite manage the backward cape flip, the skirted star or the swan dive. Aerial yoga inversions are said to boost circulation and ease joint pain, and some believe that its spine-lengthening benefits can temporarily increase body height by up to an inch. I'm not quite ready for the big top, but I do leave the class walking a little taller.

Later this year, when the weather warms up, I'll give goat yoga a try when I head out to Brantford's Holly Hill Hobby Farm on a Saturday morning and unfurl my mat on an expansive green pasture, along with a few dozen other folks. I'll meet Henry, the smallest of seven miniature goats, who prances over my mat, tries to nibble at my straw bag and lets out an adorable "meeeh" in place of the requisite yoga "ooom." Goats are remarkably social creatures. They wag their tails like puppies and might mistake your raised backside for a mountain ridge, clattering up and over you. They might also poop a small mound of pebbles onto your mat, which is what happensto the man next to me. He just laughs, shakes out the mat and resumes his sun salutation.

I'm too distracted by the sheer cuteness of the goats to focus on my poses. At one point, I wander off to give Henry a handful of corn and stroke the soft felt of his fuzzy white ears, which feels incredibly calming. A bunch of small children also tear around the property squealing after the goats, who seem delighted by the frisky chase. Kids, both the human and the animal variety, spread a joy that's contagious. Goat yoga doesn't provide me with much of a physical workout, but there's no beating the inner lift I get.

* * *

Uninspiring mornings haven't been the only thing holding me back from living a more spiritual life. There is another problem: my addiction to busyness.

The truth is, if I'm not engaged in work, filling up my social calendar, relentlessly tidying my home, doing errands and generally keeping on top of everything, I'm not sure what to do with myself. It's as if my life only has meaning if I'm occupied every minute of the day. I have almost zilch in common with Marie Curie, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist and chemist, but I know exactly what she meant when she said, "One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done." For Curie, what needed doing was isolating radioactive isotopes and discovering polonium and radium; for me it's meeting writing deadlines and getting dinner on the table. Still, the work never seems finished.

Busyness has always been a badge of honor for me. My version of the 10 commandments is my To Do list, and I follow it faithfully. I tell myself I will get to all the things I really want to do—read more, spend more time with friends, volunteer, write poetry, take a cooking class, nap on the couch—when I complete my list. Of course, this never happens, because I keep adding things to my list. In a perverse way, this list is a comfort; it makes me feel good, the way addictions usually do. At least in the moment, when I experience the mood boost of crossing off another item; maybe not so much at night as I fall into bed exhausted and wonder why there weren't more moments of grace or simplicity or wonder in my day. Being busy makes me think I'm living life large, at full tilt. This, I know, is a problem.

My Calvinist upbringing is likely partly to blame. In 1904 Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology, advanced the idea of the Protestant work ethic, inspired in part by John Calvin, who argued that hard work was a calling from God and success a sign of salvation. This much-vaunted work ethic, which helped propel the development of capitalism, is especially vital to believers—a study of 150,000 people

conducted by Groningen University in The Netherlands reveals that unemployed Protestants are far less happy than their secular counterparts who don't have a job.

My Dutch immigrant parents planted the seed in us that busyness is next to godliness by encouraging hard work at an early age. I landed my first job when I was 11, picking Bing cherries during the summer at Pratten's Farm a few miles from home. I rode my bike there in the early morning, gathered cherries in six-quart baskets in the midsummer heat and gorged on so much of the candy-like fruit that my lips were stained purple and I got the runs. (I stopped when I realized repeat trips to the outhouse were affecting my productivity.) Two summers later, I was promoted to the cherry belt, donned a hairnet over my feathered bangs and worked the 3-11 night shift alongside women three times my age, picking out the rotten cherries that chugged by on a loud conveyor belt. At 15, I got my teen dream job, working every day after school and on Saturdays at The Green Lantern, the sole variety store/restaurant in my small hometown of Fenwick in southern Ontario. I stacked magazines and displayed greeting cards, scooped ice cream, washed floors, worked the cash and saved enough money to put myself through journalism school after giving my parents half my earnings for room and board. With each new job my parents heaped on the praise. Protestant work ethic? You bet. After attending his first Dutch funeral, a friend recently reported back with astonishment, "The thing they kept saying about him over and over was 'he worked so hard,' as if that was the highest praise you could give a person." In my world, it was.

Self-sacrifice often goes hand in hand with overwork. Women in particular are raised on the notion that good people take care of others first. We wait until everyone else has a full plate, and then we take the leftovers. It is challenging to tend to our spiritual selves when our lives are full of multitasking, duties and obligations. We can put ourselves on the back burner and become people who simply do things instead of people who experience them. And when we do put ourselves first,

we often feel guilty. "Women are their own worst enemies," says the writer Erica Jong. "And guilt is our main weapon of self-torture. Show me a woman who doesn't feel guilty and I'll show you a man."

The trouble with believing your life has value only if you're productive is that you can never sit still. My husband can spend an entire Saturday afternoon on the couch, napping, playing guitar and doing puzzles. I admire this ability of his. I do. But I have to admit sometimes it makes me angry. Doesn't he see everything that needs to get *done*?

What my daughters have witnessed is a mother in constant motion. What kind of example have I set for them? Will they grow into women who do too much? Women who take care of everyone else and neglect themselves? Will they think their lives don't have meaning unless they are accomplishing some task or another? I didn't pass religion on to my kids, but I exemplify a go-go gospel. There's a very good chance they've inherited the Calvinist notion of salvation through productivity.

There are a lot of people like me who complain about how busy we are. The idea of adding spiritual practices to already jam-packed days can seem oppressive. Who's got time to meditate or read, join a singing group or go for a midday walk in the woods, no matter how enriching it might be? The average woman spends five years of her life shopping and 30 hours a week doing housework. Maybe we owe ourselves a break. Maybe we need to lower our standards. Better yet, we can insist our partners and kids do their fair share. Until recently I did all the laundry for everyone in our house. Washing, drying, folding, sorting and hauling were pretty much a daily occurrence. No one made me do it. I'd just taken it on as I task I should do. Then one frustrating day while trying to sort socks whose matches seemed to have been swallowed up by the dryer, I did some calculations and figured I had spent almost a year of my adult life preoccupied with this stuff. Then and there I stopped doing everyone else's laundry. There was barely a squawk of protest from anyone in my family; they stepped up and did their own. What had taken me so long?

Now I'm looking for more ways to claim back precious hours. By far the biggest time drain for North Americans is how we entertain ourselves. On average, we spend eight and a half hours, the majority of our waking time, "consuming" media on our tablets, smartphones, personal computers, video games, DVRs and TVs. Do the math, and you'll see where all our free time is going. More than 70% of Americans sleep with or next to their phones.

I've been as guilty as anyone. My phone had become my Bible, the thing I clasped in my hands as if it held all the wisdom of the universe. Similarly, Netflix had become my church; I regularly worshipped from the comfortable pew of my couch. I easily gave in to the lure of a new TV series, a cliffhanger podcast, the perennial ping of text notifications. I didn't daydream anymore, not in the waiting room at the doctor's office or standing in line at the grocery store or idling at a red light. I wasn't leaving any openings for spacious boredom.

All this digital consumption, I'd come to see, put me in danger of never being fully present in my life. It also put me at risk of losing one of life's greatest pleasures: reading books. That formerly steadfast attachment had been replaced by more superficial attractions. Books could no longer compete with the slender and alluring piece of technology I cupped in my hand as tenderly as a lover's face.

I'm about to discover that it takes a truckload of willpower to release our grip on our phones. Ditto for our addiction to apps, which promise to make our lives easier in all sorts of ways, from calling a cab to creating a budget, streaming music, organizing photos, finding a parking space and even predicting the best time to rush out to the bathroom without missing a key plot line at the movies (Run and Pee).

I toy at first with the idea of turning my cellphone into a more soulful piece of technology, a sort of digital deity. Apple's App Store is extraordinarily ecumenical, with 6,000 religious and spiritual apps, including Confession, to help Catholics keep track of their sins; Virtual Hindu Worship, for praying to a variety of deities; myMasjid, to find

prayer times at the nearest mosque; and KosherMe, to assist Jews in finding the perfect blessing. The Bible app has been downloaded 180 million times, which seems impressive until you learn the Angry Birds app has had more than two billion downloads.

Over the course of a week, I experiment with everything from Mindful Bite, which flashes a signal every 30 seconds to alert you to eat more slowly, to Prayer Beads, which rewards you with the ting of a bell after you tap your finger on a round of 100 beads. It's an amusing exercise, but I discover all these apps keep me even more tied to my phone. So I get rid of them all except the Spirit Junkie Alarm Clock, which wakes me at 6:30 a.m. with a gentle-sounding chime and a positive affirmation ("When I focus on what is joyful I bring my joy into my life"), and a gratitude journal app, which I use to tap out a quick list of several things I'm thankful for each day.

The screen time tracker I've downloaded indicates I spend about two hours a day on my phone. I resolve to cut this in half. I stop using Twitter, the rolodex of mind-boggling news I can never keep up with. Ditto Instagram. "Comparison is the thief of joy," warned Theodore Roosevelt, more than 100 years before anyone ever snapped a selfie. I'm reluctant to part ways with Facebook, because I truly enjoy most of the things my friends post and it alerts me to events in the community. Instead, I decide to reduce my Facebook fix to 20-minute sessions twice a day. I also move my phone from my bedside table to a bookcase at the other end of our bedroom, take my work email off the device and silence the notifications. This simple act soon means I'm drifting off to sleep with my hands wrapped around a hardcover instead.

Netflix is next to go. Jeff and I have fallen into the habit of binge watching our favorite shows a couple of nights a week. Once we plunk ourselves in the den we tend to stay there for the night, often drinking several glasses of wine and staying up far later than we'd intended. This does not contribute to blissful mornings, and I want to stop wasting

my time watching the lives of make-believe people unfold instead of living out mine.

Jennifer, one of my most culturally current friends, has never watched a single episode of *Seinfeld*, *Breaking Bad* or *Game of Thrones*. "I'll have lots of time to catch up when I'm in the nursing home," she says. "Until then, I want to live my life." I make that my new mantra. I'm in no hurry to get to the nursing home, but when I do, one consolation is that I'll be able to stream all six seasons of *Orange Is the New Black*. My husband misses our shared Netflix time. "Wanna watch something?" he suggests on a few occasions. But I've lost interest. Maybe this makes me a bad wife. There are other ways we can cultivate couple time, though, and watching TV together doesn't feel like a true connection.

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By the end of January, I've reduced my screen time significantly, and it feels like there's more breathing room in my life. I don't miss Twitter or Instagram at all. Once I start scrolling on Facebook, I sometimes lose track of time and go over my prescribed allotment, but I make sure to clock in at under 60 minutes a day. Some days I don't even open it, something that would have once seemed impossible. To avoid the temptation of Netflix, I reserve lots of books at the library, so there's always a stack on my bedside table.

My new morning routine is a different story. I don't like getting up earlier. I desperately miss starting my day with coffee—the warm lemon water tastes awful. Fifteen minutes of journalling feels like an eternity, and my thoughts have begun to bore me. Even the few minutes of stretching seems tedious.

I'm disappointed about my lack of sticktoitiveness. We humans are hardwired for failure, though, and it can take multiple attempts before a new habit becomes a way of life. The good news is that we're are also wired to adapt. So that's what I do. I acknowledge to myself that I'll never

be a morning person. But for the half hour to 45 minutes after waking to the gentle chime of the Spirit Junkie Alarm Clock (now set for the more humane hour of 7:30 a.m.), I stay right where I am, in bed, and meditate to Headspace. I know this is cheating and I should be sitting erect in a chair. I hope Andy will forgive me. Morning after morning, in ten-minute segments, he gently urges me to let go of thinking, to let my mind rest on the breath. Cultivating greater awareness, he says, results in cultivating more love. I truly believe Andy has my best interests at heart, so it becomes easier to stick with him.

My husband puts on the coffee most mornings and carries two cups upstairs as he gets ready for work. I bring the roasted brew to my lips as if in hallowed communion. We talk about what we've got going on that day, and then I open a book and read for half an hour. It's taken me a lifetime to figure out that morning is the best time of day to read. There's no chance of dozing off, plus this is the time when the brain stores information with maximum efficiency, so there's a better chance of actually retaining what you've read.

"The secret of change is to focus all your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new" writes Dan Millman in *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. In only a month, I've managed to make changes to how I kick-start the day. It's not a perfect start, but it's good enough. My mornings now glow a little more brightly. When I swing my feet to the floor and launch into action, I'm in a better frame of mind, ready for whatever comes. I channel Clarice, my mother-in-law. I really do believe it's going to be a beautiful day.

Photo on next page: The 1866 Dutch print The Broad and Narrow Way *that hung in my grandparents' home. Designed by Charlotte Reihlen and painted by Herr Schacher.*