

LOSING *my religion*

One-quarter of Canadians are turning their backs on traditional worship, looking inward instead of upward for spiritual sustenance. Meet four soul survivors who have found new ways to connect with their spiritual side.

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by ANNE BOKMA
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WHEN LORI LANSENS, A 53-YEAR-OLD screenwriter and bestselling novelist, was a girl, growing up in Chatham, ON, she dreamed of becoming a nun. Inspired by Jennifer Jones, who played a saintly peasant girl turned sister in the movie *The Song of Bernadette*, Lansens asked for a rosary for Christmas, read her Bible before bed and rose early to attend morning mass before school. Jesus, she says, was her “first crush,” because he valued outcasts, forgave sinners and reminded people to treat others the way they wanted to be treated.

But when she was 12, everything changed. A priest she admired invited her and her best friend to the rectory to fold bulletins. He had

whisky on his breath and a leer in his eye. He touched them both inappropriately. She told no one but soon stopped going to mass. She also began to question the concept of God. “I felt betrayed by the God I knew, but I continued to think about a search for connection to some loving force,” says Lansens, who now lives in California.

She may have lost her religion, but she didn’t lose her spirituality. She keeps that alive through her novels: international best-sellers *Rush Home Road*, *The Girls*, *The Wife’s Tale* and her newly released *The Mountain Story*. “When I write, I search for beauty and truth in people, in relationships and in the

world,” she says. “I write to find redemption. I try to make sense of the world through writing fiction, but I also try to make sense of what people call God.”

Lansens is one of millions of North Americans who identify as “religiously unaffiliated” – about 22 percent of the adult population. Disillusioned by mainstream religion, they want nothing to do with pews, pulpits and preaching but are still hungry to feed their souls.

Instead of looking upward to a higher power for guidance, they search within – or reach out to connect with others of like mind – through spiritual practices that encompass drumming circles, meditation, pilgrimages, singing groups, yoga, hiking, reiki, meet-up groups, gratitude exercises, volunteering, retreats and self-help groups.

While church attendance is dwindling, alternative spiritual practices are flourishing, especially among women, who, although traditionally prevented from being spiritual leaders in the wider world, are most often the spiritual guides on the homefront.

“The ‘spiritual but not religious’ [SBNR] want the freedom to include elements from other religions that resonate with their beliefs,” says Siobhan Chandler, an adjunct professor at the University of Victoria who wrote her 2011 dissertation on the SBNR. “They want to develop their spirituality without being told what they must believe. Women, in particular, are drawn to be SBNR because it is “progressive and inclusive” and allows them to “reclaim their voices, their power and their right to choose beliefs and practices that nurture and support them without the patriarchal overlay.”

FINDING SPIRITUALITY THROUGH MOVEMENT

Cathie Green grew up in a strict Catholic family in the West Island area of Quebec. “I knew my saints and I knew my catechism,” says the 60-year-old insurance broker from Greensville, ON. After she left her parents’ house to

get married at 19, she went to church infrequently until her early 30s, when she was newly divorced with three kids. “I asked about a singles dance being held at a local Catholic church and was told it was only for people who had never been married,” recalls Green. “I was giving the church a second chance, but they weren’t giving me one.” For Green, it was a final reminder that her life choices didn’t jive with those of the church and she needed to find fulfillment elsewhere.

She found solace in activities like yoga and meditation, as well as a sense of inner contentment and community by becoming an active member of the Bruce Trail. “Nature and nurture are closely related,” says Green. “Getting outdoors and hiking is a way to experience something greater than yourself. When you walk for long distances and just put one foot ahead of the other, it forces you to slow down and gives you time to think.” It also gives you the opportunity to connect with others – in fact, several years ago Green met her current partner, Art, while hiking the trail.

But Green also loves walking alone because this gives her the opportunity to deepen her relationship with herself. “Sometimes we forget to pay attention to what is important, numinous and creative in our lives, and walking in solitude gives us a chance to do this,” she says, drawing reference to one of her favourite quotes by Henry David Thoreau: “I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude.”

She considers walking in nature an active spiritual practice – one that gives her comfort and makes her feel less alone in the world. “I believe spirituality is something you have to practise every day,” says Green.

MEDITATION PROVES TO BE TRANSFORMATIVE

Christina Rudzinski married young, when she was just 17. Three years later, with two kids in tow, she left her unhappy marriage and faced the disapproval of many in

DEFINE “DIVINE”

Are you spiritual or religious?

How does spirituality differ from religion, and what is it exactly: a feeling, a guiding light or some kind of ritual you engage in?

Merriam-Webster defines “spirit” as “the force within a person that is believed to give the body life, energy and power” and “the inner quality or nature of a person.”

Kimberly Carroll, a Toronto-based

body/mind/spirit coach, views spirituality as the way “we cultivate consciousness and aliveness within ourselves and the world around us.” She says a spiritual path usually involves inward reflection on the nature of self and life – as well as practical actions to live one’s best life – while traditional religions usually have a more rigid structure to

explore these elements.

“Anything that deepens your consciousness or level of connection can be a spiritual practice,” says Carroll. “Even a simple walk could be considered a spiritual practice if, for example, you make a point to be present in the environment around you or focus on feeling the aliveness of your body as you move.”

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the conservative Baptist church she attended in Hamilton, ON. “I was told I was doing the ‘ungodly’ thing by breaking up my family,” says the 32-year-old interior designer. Family members also objected, especially when she left the church and dedicated herself to a daily meditation practice after visiting a local Buddhist centre.

“Some of them were actually worried I was getting involved in a cult,” she says. “They had no understanding of meditation.” She describes the practice as being transformative. “It taught me how to still my mind and the importance of living with an open heart,” says Rudzinski, who meditates several times a week. “It’s the best form of cognitive behavior therapy one can ask for.” The practice of Buddhism as a whole has even allowed her to let go of the resentment she felt toward her disapproving family members. “I realized that if I didn’t forgive them, I was just hurting myself.” While the familial relationships have been somewhat repaired, Rudzinski says being true to herself came at some cost. “It’s still hard at times having them not understand what this practice provides me, and I know they worry about my ‘lost soul,’” she says. “I often wish they could understand just how not lost I am.”

JOURNALLING FOR GRATITUDE

Meditation is also an integral part of 43-year-old Kimberly Carroll’s spiritual life – and it’s just one of the many practices this former CBC arts and entertainment host cultivates to foster a sense of inner peace. Carroll begins each day with a cup of hot lemon water and a five-minute “mind dump,” during which she writes down everything in her head – good, bad or ugly – to clear some space to create her day rather than react to it.

Then Carroll turns to her gratitude journal, where she

jots down 20 things from the previous 24 hours that she’s grateful for. “As soon as you commit to a regular gratitude list, you develop gratitude radar and notice all the amazing things around you,” she says. This is followed by a 15-minute sitting meditation.

Finally, she sets two or three “positive intentions” for the day, which can include things like being completely present and appreciative with a partner at dinner that night. And that’s not all: Carroll does two weekly yoga classes a week and heads out for a five-kilometre “cathartic run” three or four times a week, moving to music on her iPod that matches her mood for the day. “I try to marry physical exercise with spiritual exercise and I find that the music amplifies my mood,” she says. “I run right into the emotions and let my whole body feel them. By the end of the run, I feel more expansive and light.”

Carroll’s spiritual practice is intense, but as a body/mind/spirit coach based in Toronto, it’s important for her to practise what she preaches. Growing up in Brandon, MB, she was an active member of the local Catholic parish – she was the leader of song at the church every week and sometimes directed the church’s children’s choir. But, like others, she became disillusioned with religion in her teenage years. She says she felt lost for a long time and missed having an outlet to express spirituality and explore meaning. When she became a TV host, she says, “Ambition became my new religion.” Promotions and frequent moves to bigger markets across the country were externally rewarding, but inside something was missing. “I was leading a super-driven life without having anything to sustain and feed me,” she says.

Although her biggest shift was practising Buddhism, eventually she turned to Unitarian Universalism as part of her spiritual tapestry. This liberal religious movement with nearly 50 congregations in Canada welcomes agnostics and atheists among its members and draws inspiration from diverse sources, ranging from religious texts to poetry to literature.

“Mine is a spiritual path I forge every day, and there are no set rules to follow, except the ones I establish,” says Carroll. “Spirituality isn’t a one-size-fits-all endeavour. Your spiritual journey is much more alive and powerful if you are choosing it every step of the way, not just doing things by rote.”

It’s a philosophy she shares with the clients who sign up for her seven-week Life Reboot Program and those she works with one on one. “Those I work with have a deep yearning to have more meaning in their lives, and the traditional ways aren’t suiting them,” says Carroll. “One of the things I teach my clients is that they don’t have to sit on a mountaintop or go on a long pilgrimage to find what they’re looking for. Cultivating spirituality can happen in the small things you do each and every day. Everyone can start right where they are right now.” *HR*