

IS: Your Authentic Spirituality Unleashed

by Faith Freed

BOOK REVIEW BY KATHY LABRIOLA

This is exactly the kind of book I would normally avoid like the plague, so I was very pleasantly surprised to find it exciting, funny, smart, and actually useful in real life. Because I was raised in a very repressive Christian family that preached about Satan, sin, and eternal damnation, I became a life-long atheist and remain very skeptical about spirituality or religion. As a feminist and anarchist, I find most religions overtly misogynist and covertly fascistic, as they usually require unquestioning allegiance to some dogma written by some man. And even the most benign books on spirituality are full of meaningless platitudes and nonsensical ideas that have little practical use beyond telling us to "trust the universe," "recite ten Hail Mary's," or "God has a plan for you."

The good news is that Freed's book is short on the "woo woo" and long on sound ideas about ways to connect with what she calls "IS," your Infinite Source. This infinite source is what some people might call your spiritual center, a higher power, or a god, and the goal of the book is to help you get or stay connected to that rich source of wisdom, personal growth, and comfort. Luckily she is not selling any particular god, goddess, or pantheon of deities, nor is she prescribing any brand of religion to tell you what to eat or how to dress, how to pray, or who you can have sex with. Nor is there any heaven or hell being promised or threatened in the afterlife.

Instead, this book is an invitation to develop and nurture that part of yourself that could loosely be called "spiritual." She playfully uses the image of a disco ball divided into four quadrants to represent what she sees as the most important aspects of any spiritual path. One quadrant is you Infinite Source, or your connection to some divine force greater than yourself, a specific deity or a vague god or goddess, or what recovering alcoholics call their higher power. The second quadrant she calls the Inspired Self, that inner space which some people might call your higher self, or your soul or spirit. The third quadrant she identifies as the Incarnate Self, which is your body and mind. The fourth quadrant of the disco ball of spirituality is the Incarnate Source, which is nature, the earth, the oceans, animals, plants, the universe of planets and stars.

For the spiritually unenlightened such as myself, these four core concepts are refreshingly sensible and, unlike most religious hogwash, seem grounded in reality. I don't believe in a god, but even atheists like me can attest that there is a powerful mystery in our lives that cannot wholly be explained, and I'm fine with calling that Infinite Source. For most of us, there is some yearning inside ourselves to understand the meaning of life and how we are connected to other people and to the universe, and that's probably what Freed means by Inspired Self. And most people have had transcendent and ecstatic experiences while having sex, taking psychedelic drugs, or listening to music, so that's probably the Incarnate Self. And anyone can find joy and connection with the universe by hiking in the woods, looking at the ocean, watching a hawk

soaring through the sky, or seeing an apple growing on a tree, so that's Incarnate Source at work in our lives.

Each section of the book describes simple ways to tune into each of these four aspects of your spirituality, starting with trying to spend more time in the present moment and experiencing whatever you are doing more fully, rather than obsessing about the past or worrying about the future. This in itself is certainly not a brilliant new idea, as the focus of many spiritual practices is this same concept of mindfulness: meditation or prayer, being still, quieting your thoughts, and trying to stay in the present and stay relaxed. However, it is a necessary prerequisite for many of other simple but useful practices Freed recommends, such as "listen, feel, and follow." She describes this as being receptive and trying to listen to that small inner voice that may get drowned out by all the other internal and external noise. Then notice your innermost feelings and try to trust what you feel. Third, be more open to following that inner guide, to see where these thoughts and feelings lead you.

She recommends something called Immediate State Immersion, which is just a fancy way of saying: experience life through your five senses. Pay close attention to all the sights and sounds in your environment, to all the physical sensations you are having, and all the smells and tastes as you experience them. As a hypnotherapist, this is exactly how I hypnotize a client into a deeply relaxed and altered state: talk them through some guided imagery focused on intensely experiencing each of their five senses. I can attest that many clients describe this as a very joyous and transcendent experience which creates inner calm and well-being.

She calls some practices "spiritual exercise," developing spiritual muscles by working out at the cosmic gym. These include making a "vision board" by clipping pictures from magazines or off the Internet that represent your goals and dreams for the future, and attach them to a bulletin board hung up in your home. Seeing those pictures every day can reinforce your intentions and help you work towards reaching those goals and enjoying that happy future.

Giving to others is also high on Freed's list of spiritual practices. While many religions encourage selfless giving, it is usually done as a public display of piety, or "being good" in order to be rewarded with heaven after you die, or to appease whatever god you believe in and avoid their wrath. This book recommends giving to others because it feels good, feeds your soul, and generates happiness for both the giver and the receiver. The gift of listening, being present with someone in distress, donating your time and talents to a good cause, or just giving a hug or a smile create some good vibes and can make someone's day.

If all this sounds dreadfully heartwarming and granola crunchy, it's actually not! It is a straightforward and very practical guide, and she writes with some tongue in cheek humor that keeps it from getting too earnest. Even the most tragically hip reader will stumble across some good ideas to enhance their quality of life and encourage their connection to their mysterious inner self.