

# 27 ways to live a spiritual life every day

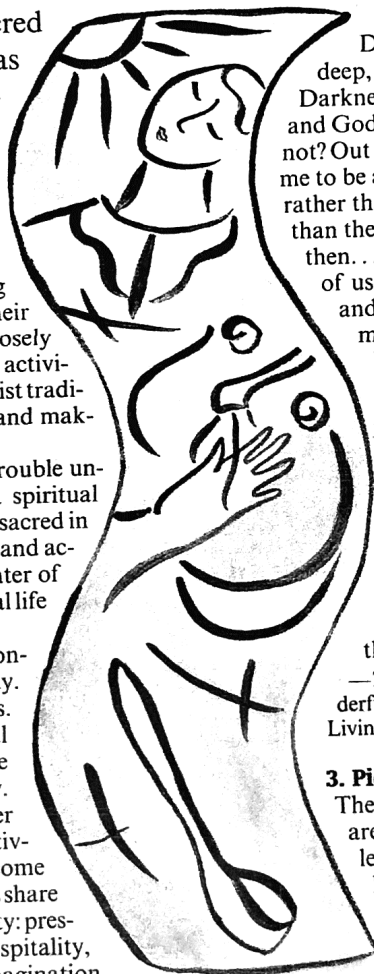
*Who says gossiping and brushing your teeth can't be sacred?*

**T**he search for the sacred within everyday life has an honorable and diverse tradition. Celtic Christians sought the presence of God in household duties, work in the fields, and the lilt of a song. Goddess religions invest nature and the body with spiritual meaning and values. Native Americans find their spiritual direction from watching closely for signs as they go about their daily activities. The Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist traditions emphasize taking the ordinary and making it holy.

Still, many people today have trouble understanding how daily life can be a spiritual practice. How do we connect with the sacred in our regular activities? What attitudes and actions signal a sense of spirit at the center of our lives? Just how do we live a spiritual life every day?

The following quotations are concrete examples of everyday spirituality. They come from a variety of sources. Some are from well-known spiritual teachers, others from authors whose spiritual background we don't know. What is important is that each writer shows us how a specific everyday activity can transcend ordinariness to become a spiritual practice. All these selections share certain elements of everyday spirituality: presence, spiritual literacy, gratitude, hospitality, respect, wonder, connections, and imagination.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JANE MJOLSNES



## 1. Waking up

Darkness was upon the face of the deep, and God said, "Let there be light." Darkness laps at my sleeping face like a tide, and God says, "Let there be Buechner." Why not? Out of the primeval chaos of sleep he calls me to be a life again. . . . He calls me to be this rather than that; he calls me to be here rather than there; he calls me to be now rather than then. . . . Waking into the new day, we are all of us Adam on the morning of creation, and the world is ours to name. Out of many fragments we are called to put back together a self again.

—Frederick Buechner in *The Alphabet of Grace* (Seabury Press, 1970)

## 2. Washing your hands

If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people.

—Thich Nhat Hanh in *Present Moment Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses for Daily Living* (Parallax Press, 1990)

## 3. Picking up a spoon

The simple things around you at home all are laden with wisdom at many different levels. You have a spoon, a wooden kitchen spoon. Every time you pick it up, you could remember where you got it and when, and to fully explain that you would have to give the en-

tire history of your life, and that of all your ancestors, because it was all the world that brought you to that shop, at that particular time, in that particular place. So every commonplace "thing" connects you to the universe. Every thing is a "souvenir," a reminder of import.

—Alice O. Howell in *The Dove in the Stone: Finding the Sacred in the Commonplace* (Quest, 1990)

#### 4. Making breakfast

The woman sets the table. She watches me beat the eggs. I scramble them in a saucepan. . . . I take our plates, spoon eggs on them, we sit and eat. She and I and the kitchen have become extraordinary: we are not simply eating; we are pausing in the march to perform an act together; we are in love; and the meal offered and received is a sacrament which says: I know you will die; I am sharing food with you; it is all I can do, and it is everything.

—Andre Dubus in *Broken Vessels* (David R. Godine, 1991)

#### 5. Reading the newspaper

I've never been very good at feasting on the daily newspaper. It turns bitter in my mouth. And yet, this is my world. This face of suffering I must embrace as a part of my responsibility. Part of the feast is becoming aware of the world that is mine. Part of the feast is owning this broken world as my own brokenness. I clasp the newspaper to my heart and ask once again in the stillness of the night, "What are we doing to the image of God in one another?"

—Macrina Wiederkehr in *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (Harper-San Francisco, 1990)

#### 6. Sending the children to school

When I was a child, a volcano erupted unexpectedly in Iceland, burying a small town at the foot of its cone. All of the children in the town were in school at the time, and they all perished. The parents sent their sons and daughters out the door that morning, same as they always did, and never saw them again.

I remember my mother being profoundly moved by that tragedy. She always made sure that the last words we had in the morning were loving ones. That cannot always have been easy, but my memory is that she usually succeeded.

—Barbara Cawthorne Crafton in *The Sewing Room* (Viking, 1993)



#### 7. Playing with the dog

Everyone needs a spiritual guide: a minister, rabbi, counselor, wise friend, or therapist. My own wise friend is my dog. He has deep knowledge to impart. He makes friends easily and doesn't hold a grudge. He enjoys simple pleasures and takes each day as it comes. Like a true Zen master he eats when he's hungry and sleeps when he's tired. He's not hung up about sex. Best of all, he befriends me with an unconditional love that human beings would do well to imitate.

—Gary Kowalski in *The Souls of Animals* (Stillpoint, 1991)

#### 8. Doing chores

There is no more comforting sound to me than the spinning of that washer or dryer. It is the whole world spinning in there, cleansing itself and me.

As long as the washer and dryer spin, I tell myself, I am safe and those I love may choose to keep living alongside me. For there is laundry to be done and so many chores—chores of the living. There is so much to be remembered under the dust of our old contempt for cleaning up after ourselves, picking up our own socks. There is much to be swept away and shined bright and scrubbed down to its deepest, most illuminating level. Think of all the chores we have yet to do, quietly and on our knees—because home is holy.

—Brenda Peterson in *Nature and Other Mothers: Reflections on the Feminine in Everyday Life* (HarperCollins, 1992)

#### 9. Weeding the backyard

I am a naturalist at heart, with a patio for my classroom. I may not be the only student in attendance, however, for last week, as I was pulling out weeds where the walk goes by the garage, I was scolded by a squirrel who seemed to be overseeing my labors. If I continue with this task, I may get to see the baby blue jays by the compost heap learn to fly, or be around when the first autumn leaf sails onto the bricks.

This I know: There is absolutely no hope of beating the weeds, which are out there growing back this very

moment. I need to reframe this task so that my thinking fits reality and sends me outside with the proper attitude. When I step out on our patio, I'm not fighting the weeds. I'm joining them.

—Linda Weltner in *No Place Like Home: Rooms and Reflections from One Family's Life* (Arbor House/Morrow, 1988)

### 10. Answering the door

Once you commit yourself to a place, you begin to share responsibility for what happens there. When PCBs leak into the water or dioxides into the air, it is your water and your air that is polluted. The parks, the schools, the hospitals, the government, all are yours to fret over. When kids knock at your door, requesting donations for the band or the debate team or the purchase of a limestone rhinoceros, you have to reach for your wallet. Entangle yourself in a place, and you become attached to your neighbors as to kinfolk.

—Scott Russell Sanders in *Secrets of the Universe: Scenes from the Journey Home* (Beacon, 1991)

### 11. Sharing gossip

The tales of small-town gossip are often morally instructive, illustrating the ways ordinary people survive the worst that happens to them: or, conversely, the ways in which self-pity, anger, and despair can overwhelm and destroy them. Gossip is theology translated into experience. In it we hear great stories of conversion, like the drunk who turns his or her life around, as well as stories of failure. We can see that pride really does go before a fall, and that hope is essential. We watch closely those who retire, or who lose a spouse, lest they lose interest in living. When we gossip we are also praying, not only for them but for ourselves.

—Kathleen Norris in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Ticknor & Fields, 1993)

### 12. Taking care of the car

My station wagon is being fixed now and I hope everything comes out OK. It's good to have a car you don't worry about denting. The wagon was always the one that got left out in the rain and snow. If there was a dirty job to be done, I did it in the wagon. I saved my good car because I wanted the good car to last. I've had three good cars since I bought the wagon. The wagon, mistreatment and all, has outlasted the cars I pampered.

When I get it back, the first thing

I'm going to do is give it a nice full tank of high-octane gas, some clean, fresh oil and a warm bath. I want the wagon to know that it's loved.

—Andrew A. Rooney in *Not That You Asked . . .* (Random House, 1989)

### 13. Visiting a friend

Twice in my life I have experienced deep depression. Both times various friends tried to rescue me with well-intended encouragement and advice. . . . In the midst of my depression I had a friend who took a different tack. Every afternoon at around four o'clock he came to me, sat me in a chair, removed my shoes, and massaged my feet. He hardly said a word, but he was there, he was with me. He was a lifeline for me, a link to the human community and thus to my own humanity. He had no need to "fix" me. He knew the meaning of compassion.

—Parker J. Palmer in *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring* (Harper/San Francisco, 1991)

### 14. Wandering around

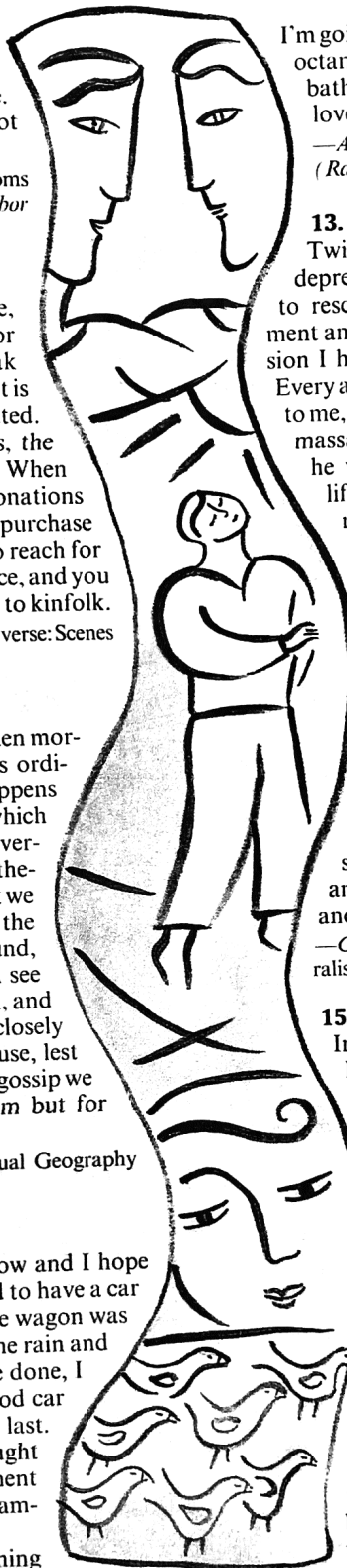
There is an art to wandering. If I have a destination, a plan—an objective—I've lost the ability to find serendipity. I've become too focused, too single-minded. I am on a quest, not a ramble. I search for the Holy Grail of particularity and miss the chalice freely offered, filled and overflowing.

—Cathy Johnson in *On Becoming Lost: A Naturalist's Search for Meaning* (Gibbs Smith, 1990)

### 15. Collecting things

In my suit-jacket pocket are a couple of horse chestnuts, picked up months ago on a back street. The asphalt was littered with spiny husks and the remains of nuts that cars had run over, but in the gutter I found two burrs that were still intact, inside each a pearl of oiled and polished mahogany. . . . In whatever stratosphere of world issues I find myself, the horse chestnuts bring me back to earth.

Horse chestnuts will not work for everyone. But other grown-ups, I notice, have their equivalents: the tail feathers of a red-shouldered hawk, a glass bottle filled with beach sand, a lump of copper ore that doubles as a paperweight. Each reminds someone of a place and time when, whether they knew it or not, they had both feet firmly on the ground, a reminder that is the most subtle, and yet the strongest,



form of encouragement. Horse chestnuts are my talisman. In the rarefied atmosphere of world responsibility, I find that they work a simple magic, reminding me what it is exactly that I have grown up to care for.

—Roger B. Swain in *Saving Graces: Sojourns of a Backyard Biologist* (Little, Brown, 1991)

### 16. Writing a letter

Our correspondences show us where our intimacies lie. There is something very sensual about a letter. The physical contact of pen to paper, the time set aside to focus thoughts, the folding of the paper into the envelope, licking it closed, addressing it, a chosen stamp, and then the release of the letter to the mailbox—are all acts of tenderness.

And it doesn't stop there. Our correspondences have wings—paper birds that fly from my house to yours—flocks of ideas crisscrossing the country. Once [they're] opened, a connection is made. We are not alone in the world.

—Terry Tempest Williams in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (Pantheon, 1991)

### 17. Having dinner

This is the heart of whole body eating. Be there when you eat. Achieve the fullest experience of your food. Taste it. Savor it. Pay attention to it. Rejoice in it. See how it makes your body feel. Take in all the sensations. But don't just eat the food. Eat the ambience. Eat the colors. Eat the aromas. Eat the conversation. Eat the company sitting next to you. Eat the entire experience. . . .

We don't just hunger for food alone. We hunger for the experience of it—the tasting, the chewing, the sensuousness, the enjoyment, the textures, the sounds, and the satisfactions.

—Marc David in *Ordinary Magic: Everyday Life as Spiritual Path* edited by John Welwood (Shambhala, 1992)

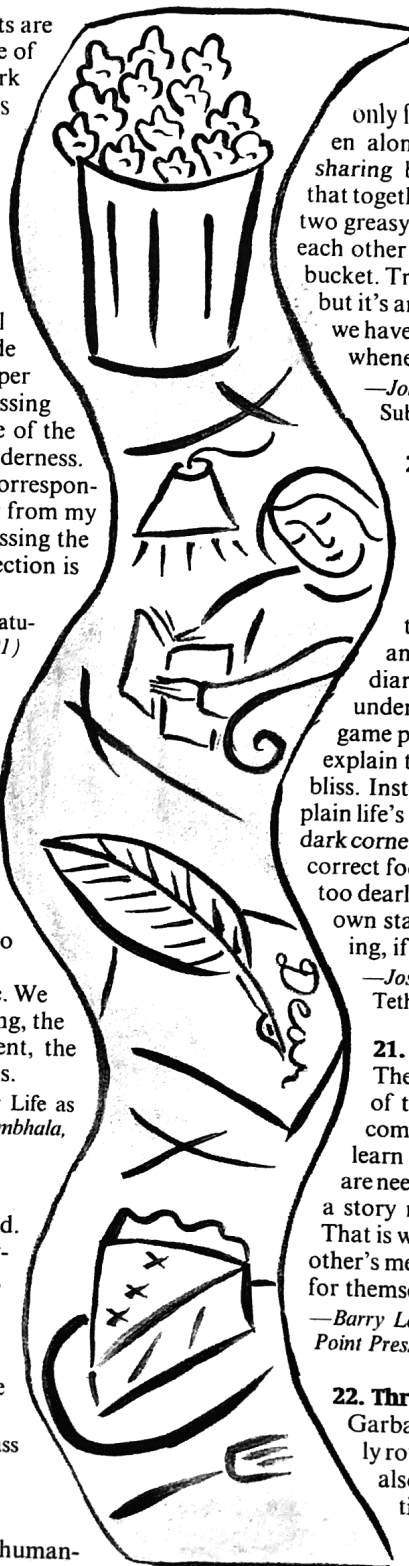
### 18. Eating pie

The pie is religious, something from God. The only part of the meal to be eaten slowly. Huge pieces, a quarter pie per person, and between each bite a drink of coffee and when the pie is done, the fork is held sideways in the hand and swiped around the plate to get the absolute last of the juice and apple and crust.

—Gary Paulsen in *Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992)

### 19. Eating popcorn

Popcorn enjoys a metaphysical bond with human-



ness. Popcorn is also the world's most social food.

Consider that popcorn is the only food more often shared than eaten alone. Since that is so, the act of sharing brings people together, even if that togetherness is no more poignant than two greasy fingers touching and sliding off each other way down in the bottom of the bucket. True, it's not a very deep intimacy, but it's an intimacy nonetheless. Friends, we have to grab our moments of sharing whenever and however we can.

—John V. Chervokas in *God Lives in the Suburbs* (Doubleday, 1987)

### 20. Reading

I read in the hope of discovering the truth, or at least some truths. I look for truth in what some might deem strange places: novels and poems, histories and memoirs, biographies and autobiographies, letters and diaries. . . . In reading for truth, you understand, I am not seeking a full game plan, some large system that will explain the world to me, or a patent for bliss. Instead I seek clues that might explain life's oddities, that might light up the dark corners of existence a little, that might correct foolish ideas I have come to hold too dearly, that might, finally, make my own stay here on earth more interesting, if not necessarily more pleasant.

—Joseph Epstein in *The Middle of My Tether* (Norton, 1983)

### 21. Telling a story

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.

—Barry Lopez in *Crow and Weasel* (North Point Press, 1990)

### 22. Throwing out the garbage

Garbage can smell terrible, especially rotting organic matter. But it can also become rich compost for fertilizing the garden. The fragrant rose and the stinking garbage are two sides of the same ex-

istence. Without one, the other cannot be. Everything is in transformation. The rose that wilts after six days will become a part of the garbage. After six months the garbage is transformed into a rose. When we speak of impermanence, we understand that everything is in transformation. This becomes that, and that becomes this.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh in Present Moment Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses for Daily Living (Parallax Press, 1990)*

### 23. Brushing your teeth

Take teeth, which are so insignificant in God's layout of the human body that they're not even visible until you smile. I am committed to brushing them twice a day, not just back and forth as I was taught as a child, but one tooth at a time, in front and behind, with a vertical motion. This is no quick cleanup because company's coming. This is closer to polishing the silver every night of your life.

I always felt that brushing my teeth twice a day was religion enough, but that was before the periodontist instructed me in the ceremony of the dental floss, baptism by Water Pik, and self-flagellation with the rubber tip at the end of my toothbrush. I'm devoted to the well-being of my teeth as much as anyone. Still, I'm not prepared to take the veil for them.

—*Linda Weltner in No Place Like Home: Rooms and Reflections from One Family's Life (Arbor House/Morrow, 1988)*

### 24. Lighting a candle

To light a candle by myself is one of my favorite prayers. I am not talking about reading prayers by candlelight. The very act of lighting the candle is prayer. There is the sound of striking the match, the whiff of smoke after blowing it out, the way the flame flares up and then sinks, almost goes out until a drop of melted wax gives it strength to grow to its proper size and to steady itself. All this and the darkness beyond my small circle of light is prayer. I enter into it as one enters a room. My being alone is essential to this prayer. The presence of even one other person would completely change it. Something would be lost.

—*Brother David Steindl-Rast in Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer (Paulist Press, 1984)*



### 25. Going to bed

The heart of my house has to be my bed. If relaxation and acceptance are the warp and woof of domestic life, and if home is the place where I am most free to be myself, then my bed is the place where it all comes together. Here is where I think naked thoughts, daydream, make love, worry, plot, argue, get my back scratched, speculate, talk about growing old, and, finally, cut the mooring ties and drift out with the dream tide. The bed, the place where we are born and die, is our primeval place.

—*Laura Green in Reinventing Home: Six Working Women Look at Their Home Lives (Plume, 1991)*

### 26. Making love

We are neither animals nor angels. We are something else—we are humans—part spiritual and part physical, and those two parts are combined into one. A true sexuality acknowledges both these dimensions and tries to embrace them both in the act of love.

You need to accept this in yourself. Having sex is what the animals do. Achieving mystical union is what the angels do. We alone can make love, where the physical and the spiritual commingle in a single, joyous act.

—*Kent Nerburn in Letters to My Son: Reflections on Becoming a Man (New World Library, 1993)*

### 27. Getting a late-night snack

This is not a group activity. It is a private religious experience. In the holy solitude of the midnight hour, you are taking communion with the spirits of bird and fruit and field. The best moments of past feasts come to mind. And it is at times like these you have no doubt that life is good, that your family, all tucked away in their beds, are royal folks, and that grace abounds. Amen.

—*Robert Fulghum in Uh-Oh: Some Observations from Both Sides of the Refrigerator Door (Villard, 1991)*

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*Frederic A. Brussat and his wife, Mary Ann, edited the new book 100 Ways to Keep Your Soul Alive (HarperSanFrancisco).*