

**BIRTHING
A NEW MYSTICISM**

*A Contemplation
in Ten Parts*

BEVERLY LANZETTA



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1

Birthing a New Consciousness

When I first began teaching about contemplation, few people were aware of the term, and even fewer had read about spirituality outside their birth tradition. In fact, many were not familiar with the scriptures of their own religion, nor had they experience of its mystical texts and practices. Spirituality was rarely spoken of in a general sense but rather in the specific: Hindu spirituality, Christian spirituality, Jewish spirituality, Buddhist spirituality, and so forth.

The intervening years have brought great change. Today, it is unlikely you'll encounter a person who does not have knowledge of more than one religion. And access to the accumulated heritage of the world's spiritualities is one of the unique gifts of the twentieth century. The task of retrieving the sacred consciousness of the great yogis, mystics, and saints in a new interfaith or interspiritual focus has been called "the spiritual journey of our time."

The desire to embrace multiple spiritual wisdoms is deeply personal, giving rise to a new type of sacred

journey and contemplative practice. Among the variety of practitioners are those who identify as contemplative, interfaith, interspiritual, spiritual but not religious (“nones”), and new monks.

While signs of creative innovation, these movements disrupt ancient religious tropes that have bound human communities for generations, raising concerns that spirituality is in decline and that the future will be constructed at the expense of authentic faith.

Rather than seeing these changes as a deficit of spirit, I witness the ways that many people today have entered a new dimension of sacred consciousness—they are gestating the next emergence of spirit on Earth. Modern pilgrims are not unreligious or less religious; they are not rejecting the sacred, but more than religious or denominational, they are seeking the mystical roots of an ancestral pilgrimage bound to the very breath of what it means to be human.

For these modern pilgrims, a liberation from religious norms is opening a vista onto an expanse of consciousness that few can navigate alone. For one, the language of our religions is often at odds with the experience of seekers today. Many yearn for another path of truth, a new vision of God that affirms the holiness of life and does not offend the tender interdependence of creation. They are aware of the pain inflicted by religious intolerance, superiority, pride, exclusion, defeat, and violence. Many suffer the insufficiency of their religious heritage or faith tradition to address questions about human agency, inclusion, and acceptance of difference. Others, rejecting outdated

religious norms, form new communities, developing innovative practices, theologies, and rituals that speak more clearly of compassion, love.

These are not superficial quests. They come at the price of deep questioning, for some even a concern about betraying family, religion, or nation. But they come, nonetheless. For the many people who have shared their journeys with me, they can do nothing less than search for a new path to the Divine. They can do nothing less than seek a new language to speak to their souls. They suffer the disjuncture between where the inner light is calling them and what the secular and religious worlds say they should be. This profound struggle between the past and the future can leave deep scars and cause an eruption of pain in the person's life and psychological makeup.

The ancient aspiration to love God and be a person of wisdom, documented in a range of religious texts as the highest achievement of the saint or master, now is breaking into the lives of everyday people—the lives of those who desire to integrate and embody the divinely human, especially the relationship of the physical and the spiritual.

Over many years of teaching, I have gratefully walked alongside these ardent seekers and been humbled by the intensity of their quest. So many aspire to live differently, to cross the border between the secular and the spiritual, between the lay and the vowed religious. They want to orient their lives such that everyday things are the measure of devotion. They seek to engage in spiritual practices that draw them closer to

the sacred. The timeless search to be a student of the light inspires their passion to follow the soul's progression into freedom and peace.

And all around our personal transformation, we find humanity shedding old clothes—the fabric of our collective consciousness that binds us to an unforgiving story. We are dis-robing and de-constructing. We are giving away the inefficient, limiting, burdensome falsehood of our radical insufficiency to be stewards of compassion and love on Earth—not with the perspective of our personal lives or quests, our family or nation, our religious history, or even natural evolution but through imagining the birth of consciousness, as though it were the emergence of a new star or solar system, a constellation of reality taking form within our souls.

In this transforming journey, the word *birthing* is significant: It speaks to human participation in the advent of spiritual wisdom, emerging from the soul's innate, co-creative participation with the Divine.

Spiritual truths do not arrive at our consciousness as disembodied, self-generating realities but come by and through us. In the womb of our souls, we participate in the constant generation of God's new insight for humanity. We—female and male—are mother-souls, gestating a spirituality of the divine-human, a path of embodiment *and* transcendence, of humanity *and* divinity, of earth *and* spirit, without division.

There are times in Earth history when the womb of the soul is highly energized and “pregnant with nothingness,” receptive to the inflow of the divine

wish for humanity. I believe we are in one such historical moment of revelatory openness, where many are drawn toward contemplation and experience the advent of Divine Presence. In these times of receptivity, the intention to live simply, to be more loving, and to commit to a path of devotion intensifies.

When we are open to the Spirit's action in us, the Divine plants seeds of wisdom. These holy seeds, not previously known or expressed, take root in the tender ground (or womb) of the soul, growing into a living garden of newly flowering theologies, practices, and teachings. The soul's capacity for wisdom is expanded, and what flows from it is highly original and creative.

Each person's innate capacity to bring about new religious thought and experience is not the special preserve of the few enlightened or elevated ones. Rather, this birthing is occurring now, in each moment, in our depth. Whether we keep the old gods and traditions or eschew them doesn't matter—because this re-birthing is fundamental. It *is* our being, our self that is stamped with a wisdom that cannot be diluted or oppressed.

In the hearts and souls of people across the globe, a spiritual revolution is erupting. Birthed ever-new is the Divine Presence, never static, never finalized, but always unfolding mystery. It is dynamic; it is generous; it is beyond duality.

Permeated by Divinity

Whether you belong to a religion or not, whether you are interested or uninterested in spiritual things, in order to return to the source, there is a path your soul

follows. If you have the courage to advance into the mystery of your own solitude, you will discover it for yourself. Composed of its eternal nature, you cannot be lost, abandoned, or forgotten. In the secret teachings of love, you will be guided on a spiritual journey that forges a path of holiness in your heart and in the world.

The mystical transformation of the self originates with the premise that each of us, in our depth, is permeated by divinity. It is a method stamped into our beings, drawing us ever closer to the authentic and the Holy. It is a sacred path that guides us up the steep precipices of light and into the valleys of darkness to shed all that is false. It is a method born with our first breath, and before with God's holy creation in the grand cosmic scheme.

The path is interior. It cannot be found in the marketplace, or in temple or church. It is hidden. Silent. Obscure. In the night it intones, breathing into our dreams a thick cloud of unknowing, the Holy One beckoning our souls. The divine dark pierces the mask of conventionality, calling all to freedom. No one crossing the territory of the unfamiliar does so without inner light. And to this memory we awake, often blindly but not without sight.

What is important in this birthing is the journey. The journey is the vehicle through which one's spirituality comes to self-reflective consciousness. Those who cling to fear keep the profound at bay and allow the superficial free reign. But such diversion is only momentary, for the inward path beckons, calling our hearts to intimacy and surrender.

Also among the diversions is the religious emphasis on documenting humanity's many foibles. Yet these foibles are neither primary nor sufficient because they do not, as the core of self-understanding, explicitly emphasize the untouched, mystical nature of our being. For this reason, we carry the burden of believing that we are fundamentally flawed even as we strive for completion. Often, we are unaware of the embedded language of *error* or *sin* that infects spiritual and mystical texts and that reignites the mantra of the fallen or inadequate human who, with great effort, may become truly good. Within the religious language of sin and error we are told to believe God still loves you; yet unsurprisingly, many people do not experience that they are truly lovable.

Together, we need a new language and a new spiritual path to resurrect the fact of our creation in the divine image. More than ever, our lives and the fate of our Earth need us to understand and claim the generative power of divine-human cooperation. The Divine is not the source of judgment, punishment, and wrath but the state of intimacy, communion, and love. "God" is the name applied to an intimacy beyond comprehension, to a divine bearing of creation in all its complexity, messiness, and glory. A god of radical benevolence changes the entire orientation of the spiritual life, opening the heart to the gift of sacred goodness, which also is your goodness, eternally present in your soul.

Across centuries of tradition, humanity has been led directly by Spirit into the sanctum, into the Holy of Holies. Why? The reason, as I understand it, is that

the hope and the promise that we are made in the divine image is real: we are a microcosm of the infinite; *atman* is *brahman*; *samsara* is *nirvana*; mystical union is our destiny. We can directly experience the presence of the Holy, not just as an intellectual thought or a theological idea or an assurance of heaven but as happening now, right now, in our bio-spiritual depth. In the moment of now, amid all we go through and suffer, there is a unitive power that gives birth to a new vision for humanity.

For those on the journey to birth the new, to be truly open, this is the method: Empty yourself. This is not vague advice but fact, concrete, total, un-dilutable. Give yourself away; give everything false away, and then you will be *all*. Then you birth all and will be birthed into all, having the fullness of being that only the Holy provides. We suffer our estrangement and must experience aloneness to be capable of being in union, in community with all others. This emptying makes place for birth.

New Mysticism

Alongside and intertwined with various types of inquiry—philosophical, psychological, rational, scientific, and so forth—is the mystical. It is distinctive from other modes of consciousness, as a state of being that approaches reality from oneness, without subject-object dualism.

Nondualism indicates that we are not dividing reality, we are not seeing opposites or sides, but wholeness without discrimination. Nondualism is how, in

complete attention, we absorb a sunset, a flower, a scent. When you experience Divine Presence, whether in nature or in prayer or in daily activity, you enter the realm of the supernatural. These are moments of openness to what is wholly interconnected; mystical consciousness perceives all things primordially as One.

Definitions of mysticism are rife with variety and contradiction. But as common ground, we might start here: Most consider the *mystical* to refer to direct awareness of the Divine, by whatever name. What this means is that subject-object distinctions are absent, and the recipient is melded or united with the intensity of the holy presence. The mystic labors to approximate the lack of separateness as well as feelings of awe felt in the divine embrace.

The public, often subjected to misinformation about what mysticism is, associates it with the occult, the unholy, paranormal, or dark energies. Or the mystical is a rarified state of consciousness found exclusively in the saint, roshi, or lama. Neither perspective is accurate. In the core of the self, in the soul or transcendent aspect, we are established in a divine consciousness. The mystical is always with us. A dimension that is not subject to or dependent upon our sociological, psychological, philosophical, or emotional theories. We all contain within us the mystical dimension of consciousness and the capacity to see the world through the eyes of the Divine, through love, compassion, and goodness.

The mystical is an intrinsic, native awareness. It is unborn in the sense that it is the animating force within all forms of perception and thinking. It is hidden and

mysterious, revealed primarily through its effects or agencies. Yet mystical consciousness pulsates in our energetic fields of mind, body, and spirit continuously, opening access to Divine Presence and giving form to the formless. It is akin to the forces of gravity, because it is the invisible point of being that reveals our kinship with the entire web of life.

Our deep self is mystical. We would not be conscious if it were not. It is primary. It is fundamental. It is our spiritual breath. We do not exist without it. Even when we lack the education or training to name it, even though we cannot see it, even though we cannot hear or taste or smell it, mystical consciousness is within us in every moment. It's an exploration of inner space, of the miraculous realms of the human heart and soul.

Recorded in religious texts and practiced by adepts and saints and lamas, the mystical mind is rarified and common. It is supernatural and natural. It is transcendent and present. The greatest among us have tapped into its storehouse of wisdom, and the unsung among us have dipped into its solitary hope. It is the fuel of everyday existence without which we would not be human.

First named by the fourth-century Christian monk Pseudo-Dionysius, *mystical theology* accounts for the direct experience of Presence and the method the soul follows to grow in perfection (chapter 3). The mystic or spiritual person devotes their life to the search for God in a seeking that entails three stages of ascent: purifying the self and awareness of sins; repentance and desire to abandon ego and self-will; and the free-

dom and happiness of mystical union. Dionysius's important insight into the threefold process by which we attain greater intimacy with God—purgation, illumination, and union—has served as the template for centuries of Christian spiritual guidance.

In one sense, the above treatment is itself a new way of perceiving what is often a misunderstood dimension of the mystical—that is, I am locating the mystical as an innate, deep dimension of consciousness inherent in every person and *not* as a rarified state of consciousness.

The term “new mysticism” emphasizes the integration of an embodied spirituality (body and spirit, human and divine, earth and cosmos) that is so much a part of contemporary spiritual practice. The new mysticism is a state of consciousness that—even as it finds resonance with classical religious thought—is forging a novel path, a path for our time.

An embodied spiritual orientation contributes to a new mysticism because even classical categories of the soul's journey, like deification or dark night or purgation, are understood, lived, and experienced differently. Most contemporary seekers do not adhere to one religion; many are interspiritual, dual religious, or spiritual and not religious. Their consciousness is different from that of our ancestors. They adapt and appropriate these time-honored archetypes in novel ways. Whether the “different” is the result of a more profound interiority, a pull toward contemplation, or an embodied consciousness that sees reality through a nondual perspective may not be knowable.

Yet, when we consider the birth of a new mysticism,

we understand there are more stages and processes of inner growth that are especially relevant today—and not solely the terrain of the threefold process of Pseudo-Dionysius’s account. In each of the subsequent chapters, we’ll look at a category of soul development and the type of inner changes seekers struggle to understand. This moment in time in which many of us are in tune with the intensification of inner light is leading us to a deep concern for the integrity of the spirit on Earth. When hearts are open to the suffering of others, the soul’s power of repair is activated to be a balm of love.

The advent of a new mysticism means that we are always oriented toward a more perfect knowledge. We are constituted to continually generate a real participation in the Divine, to reach forward to what lies ahead, and to bring the soul into intimate contact with Mystery. We must leave the known in search of the unknown, to give birth to a spiritual practice and method of soul development that honors the gift of the divinely human.

Nine Additional Dimensions

The following chapters are a distillation of the new mystical path impressed into my being, what I’ve witnessed and sifted through over years of reflection, teaching, and prayer. In this book I offer insight into its revelatory landscape. Each of the remaining nine chapters introduces additional categories of soul transformation. These themes of reimagining include the ancient desire to become divinely human, the co-

bearing of new states of consciousness, and the progression of our sacred journey on Earth.

“Unveiling the Holy Face of *Via Feminina*” is the theme of chapter 2. Especially important is the untouched, divine essence of the Holy Mother’s womb-generating force within our souls, and how we bear suffering, at a great depth that is not only personal but communal, earthly, and divine. Throughout the centuries countless humans have been devotees of the Divine Feminine in her various manifestations, and the values she offers of liberation from oppression and compassion for all beings.

In chapter 3, “Bearing Our Divine Humanity,” we’ll trace the roots of the new mystical journey to early Christian literature on deification, or “becoming divine.” The chapter outlines the soul’s transformation through the classical stages of purgation, illumination, and union as described by Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, and others. Then the chapter proposes new categories of soul transformation based on an embodied and expanded view of divine-human co-creation.

These mystical states acknowledge the extent of the soul’s sensitivity to the fate of the Earth, the terror of war, and the violation of the dignity of the person. The chapter explores how our bodies and souls spiritually hold or bear these changes in our selves, society, and the natural world.

In chapter 4, “Polishing the Mirror of the Soul,” I describe how the person grows in virtue and is compelled to live an ethical imperative. In the divine womb, our souls are mystical activists, spreading a balm of healing over whatever is estranged and bear-

ing the energies of suffering that afflict creation. Our activist souls recognize the characteristics that fuel our capacity to be servants of the sacred, including a contemplative method of discerning spiritual progress, of love of the Divine alone, suffering and exaltation, and a passion to act.

“Crossing the Gates of Silence,” chapter 5, focuses on the liminal place between realities, that quickening moment of new insight, open to what the Creator has to say to us today. This chapter explores specific issues that assail the intercontemplative practitioner concerned about the state of the Earth, compassion for others, and living with dignity. It also studies the intercontemplative mystical union and monastic pilgrimages of Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths that moved them beyond religious dialogue to the convergence of two or more religions in the depth of spiritual realization.

Chapter 6, “Passing through the Living Flame,” follows the soul’s journey through the state of *nada*, that is, dying to the old self to be reborn. To situate the soul transformation of the contemporary seeker, the chapter draws from the mystical process of “dark night,” developed by St. John of the Cross. His detailed description of the soul’s obscure movement serves as a guide to the radical deconstruction of self-will, and the quest to abandon all that stands in the way of a beloved reunion with God.

“Embracing the Drops of Night,” chapter 7, introduces the Dark Night of the Feminine, a refining and an expansion of the soul’s movement from spirituality into mysticism. It addresses themes confronting the

contemporary person that are not found in known religious texts, especially issues of gender, race, and spiritual violence. The Dark Night of the Feminine is a distinct, mature phase of spiritual development that, to my knowledge, has not been described in the world's religious literature. We feel in the most tender dimension of our soul the totality of pain inflicted on creation, which includes all sentient and nonsentient beings, and the resultant wars, hunger, homelessness, habitat destruction, and species extinction. Oftentimes we identify our wounds as personal. But in this chapter we begin to understand that they are not only personal. They are social; they are generational; they are divine.

In times such as these, with a global community torn by crises, we often lack a public discourse to address how suffering affects our spirits. Chapter 8, "Weeping the Tears of Fire," recognizes that the deep self is intimately involved in the state of the world, the presence or absence of love, the cruelty of war, the toll of injustice, and despair. We forget that our souls feel compassion for suffering, are tuned to the ebb and flow of divine energies, and long to heal divisions. In this chapter we explore the itinerary of soul suffering, through the lens of an anonymous medieval text, "The Friends of God Suffer," and in the life and writings of St. Catherine of Siena, which reflect an intensity of compassion for the human condition, physical illness, social dislocation, and the fate of the church.

Chapter 9, "Putting on the Garments of Light," offers guidance on how to change one's life to a more

spiritually attuned orientation. The chapter explores inner practices that guide the person into greater stages of love: self-discipline, self-honesty, singleness of heart, solitude of self, and curtailing worldly ambition. This mystical process is occurring in one's depth, which involves awareness of error, letting go of the false self, developing a humble heart, and replacing self-will with divine will. Drawing from various sources, including the conversion of C. S. Lewis, the chapter provides practical insight into the struggle to convert one's worldly existence into a pilgrimage into the heart of God.

“Drinking the Medicine of Life” explores the important role of prayer and inner vulnerability on the road to being divine-like. Chapter 10 liberates prayer from its corporate history and redefines prayer as the soul's first language and as the fuel of transformation and healing. We see how, similarly, humility as a posture of adoration before the unimaginable opens our hearts to awe. An ancient sentiment, found in all religious traditions, humility is the great jewel of the spiritual life. Because what humility really is, is the prayer of *excessive generosity*.



It is in time of doubt and discord that we most often seek the *inner way*—that eternal call to turn toward the Divine within—experiencing in our own souls the wisdom that belongs to the Holy.

When we feel the grief of the troubled but do not succumb or despair, when we bear the inevitable

adversity that assails all humans without losing faith or hope, we fan the fire of the Compassionate One, who inspires and indwells our souls.

Let us, then, as we read the collected chapters, practice surrender to the great unfolding of truth and celebrate the birthing of a spiritual path as ancient and as ever new as life itself.