

An Interview with Margaret Wolff, author of *COMING HOME*

1. Has 2020 ushered in an era of renewed yearning for “something to believe in?” If so, how has it shaped this new sense of spirituality?

For the first time in the history of the modern world, a global social, political, and environmental rupture has made the fundamental yearning for “something to believe in” an operative part of the American conversation. Words such as “meditation” and “spirituality vs. religion” have energized the cultural narrative, and for many, this dialog precedes a moral imperative to live with greater meaning. In a recent study by the Fetzer Institute, 86% of the respondents identify as “being spiritual,” 60% aspire to be more spiritual, and 50% have regular transcendent experiences. (<https://spiritualitystudy.fetzer.org/>)

The clarion call sounded: To thrive, we must live at the hub of the wheel—careening ’round the rim will no longer do. The big question on everyone’s lips these days is “what matters most?” All of us have moments of connection to “Something More,” experiences of grace that we let pass us by. Do we continue to wait for circumstances outside ourselves to change or do we move to the hub of the wheel and harvest the life that is calling us as the storytellers in *COMING HOME* have done?

2. Who is Paramahansa Yogananda? Why are his spiritual teachings relevant in today’s world?

Known as the “Father of Yoga in the West,” Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) came to America to Boston in 1920 as India’s delegate to the International Congress of Religious Liberals. He spent the next 30 years bringing India’s ancient meditation techniques to thousands of seekers of all religions who—then as now—were searching for the true meaning of life and the means to live from one’s highest potential. Regarded as one of the preeminent spiritual figures of our time, his *Autobiography of a Yogi* is hailed as one of the 100 Best Spiritual Books of the Twentieth Century and continues to inspire millions of spiritual seekers around the world 70 years after his passing. Yogananda’s work continues under the auspices of Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF)—the non-profit, non-sectarian spiritual organization he created in 1920 to disseminate his teachings. (www.yogananda.org)

Scientists now speak of “neuroplasticity,” “entrainment,” and “the unified field” to describe some of the effects daily yoga meditation has on the brain. As these markers of human potential are integrated into the conventional wisdom, people of all faiths want firsthand experience of their own highest potential—especially in light of recent events. As a result, SRF is experiencing rapid growth around the world. To date, there are more than 800 SRF temples and meditation centers around the world, and global participation in the many free online group meditations and inspirational services SRF offers through its website. (www.yogananda.org)

3. What does the title of your book, “Coming Home,” mean?

Though I am an Art Therapist by training, I am—on a cellular level—a storyteller. The process and the experience of transformation fascinate me. I am privileged to bear witness to a sea change of the sweeping events in other’s lives, including how people find their spiritual path; listen gratefully to the revelation of intimate details that almost always leads to the moment when the storyteller looks at me—often with tears in their eyes—and says, “it was like coming home.”

No matter what your path is, no matter who you turn to for support, the “coming home experience” confirms that you are part of Something Greater, that you are cherished, that your life has been and can continue to be—come what may—meaningful. The narratives in *COMING HOME* are not just stories, they are actual experiences of Divine Grace. The reawakening and reinstatement of your soul, that familiar Self you always knew was there but could not corroborate, is a profound and sacred validation of who you really are. As Dorothy said in *The Wizard of Oz*, “There’s no place like home.”

4. How does yoga meditation help one live life as a sacred encounter?

Though the accoutrements and popularity of hatha yoga have turned local Target stores, fitness centers, and online workouts into modern day temples of physical fitness, yoga is actually a scientific, time-tested system of universal beliefs and meditation practices that nourish and expand our connection to God.

Every human being, whether we realize it or not, is waiting for the moment when we can finally say a resounding “Yes” to the Beauty inside us—to the Joy, the Peace, the Truth of who we *really* are. Psychotherapist Carl Jung called this part of us “the Hidden Immortal.” We have always known there was something “special” about us—at least, always hoped this was the case—but when we operate from a consensus reality that keeps our thoughts small and limits our awareness of who we choose to be, the quintessential experience of the Sacred remains at bay.

The Sanskrit word *yoga* means “union.” Meditation opens us to the God of our own heart and the interdependence of all life. It facilitates a gradual reparation and restoration of our relationship with our soul, with our “wholeness,” that helps us makes peace with our past, live in the holiness of the present moment and, thus, alter the course of our future. Meditation is the adventure of a lifetime.

5. What suggestions do you have for those interested in embarking on a spiritual path?

Pay attention to what you are noticing within and around you; to what rouses your curiosity; to what “calls” your name.

Take conscious, responsible steps forward. Have your “yes” and have your “no.” Be just a titch bolder than you’ve ever been before. It feels good to stretch yourself! Every worthwhile effort is noble.

Ask questions of others—fellow travelers who are *actually* living a spiritual life you admire. Watch for the light in their eyes, the peace in their hearts. Listen to their stories. Tell them your own.

Visit various churches and temples. Does the sermon move you? Do parishioners seem happy? Does the organization run smoothly? Do they respond to your questions? How do you feel when you are there?

Keep a journal to your Higher Self. Tell it everything. Everyone needs a buddy you can say anything to. Why not your soul?

As you step into your future self, bring your past to what cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrian called “an honorable closure.” Don’t run from your past; make peace with it. Withhold self-judgement, blame and guilt. Make whatever reparation is appropriate. Do your best, say thank you for the lessons and gifts your life has given you, then let go.

Seek until you find what you are looking for. Writer Anais Nin said, “And the time came when the risk it took to remain in a tightly closed bud became infinitely more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

6. How can one begin developing a meaningful partnership with God?

Ask yourself what is sacred to you—what attributes, values, feelings and forms inspire and energize you.

If this is not clear, explore what is *not* sacred to you, what *your* God, the God of *your* heart, is not. This often calls up images of a didactic, distant, authoritarian arbitrator of right and wrong, of heaven and hell. (Obviously not someone you want to have *any* relationship with at all!)

Then, start an internal dialog with the God you are courting. Frequent, honest, warm-hearted conversations are integral to every good partnership.

So is asking for help when you need it. Or just asking the Universe to show you what’s next. If you really believe God is Omnipresent, what’s the problem?

Then, do the legwork. Read spiritual books, such as *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Be in Nature. Mine the Silence. Practice Stillness. Learn to meditate. Listen to your Inner Voice.

Push the edge of your habitual envelope. The God you are courting is also courting you. Open your eyes, your mind, your heart. “If you build it, He/She/It will come.”

7. Is God the same for everyone?

In India, they say every lover of God has an *ishta*, a Sanskrit word that means “cherished divinity,” one’s favorite form or aspect of God—be that Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, Father, Divine Mother, Mary, Quan Yin, and so forth. Yogananda often spoke about God as being “the nearest of the near, the dearest of the dear.” This personal approach keeps God very close, makes Him more accessible to a devotee’s heart.

God is also formless and eternal: Love, Wisdom, Bliss, Truth, Light, Energy, Joy, Beauty, and so on. All forms are equal as they are all aspects of an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient Divinity that is, so to speak, yours for the asking. The everywhere-present God hears our most needs and responds to them in infinite ways.

8. Do women and men seek out, find, and experience a spiritual connection with God differently?

It’s my understanding that the soul—our true nature—is genderless. The soul, the microcosmic image of God within us, embodies all the attributes of the macrocosmic God outside of us. But the body and the body-identified personality are gender-identified. In woman, partnership values—feeling and compassion—generally predominate; in man, autonomy, reason and intellect are more easily expressed. Ultimately, no matter who is seeking and how the seeking is done, the ultimate experience of God—ever-existing, ever-conscious, ever-new joy—is the same for everyone.

One of the many benefits of yoga meditation is that, over time, your sense of yourself becomes less body-identified. As your relationship with God deepens, your soul responds to your life in whatever way the present moment requires regardless of your gender. You don’t ignore the body or its needs, you respect your body—be it male or female—as the temple of your soul.

9. How did you begin your own spiritual path and how did it lead you to Yogananda?

I was raised in a loving Jewish home in Detroit. My parents were good people, but not at all religious or spiritual. Somewhere along the way, I began to carry on long, intimate conversations in the midnight hours of my childhood with an unseen but palpable Presence I called “The Magic” that filled me with uncharacteristic bravado about my ability to master my life—and sometimes, joy. It never occurred to me that The Magic was God because the God I heard about in Sunday school was not at all magical. At 13, my nighttime powwows gave way to the rigors of adolescence and my awareness of The Magic waned.

When my mother died in 1974, I began asking The Big Questions: What happens when we die? What is life all about? Who am I *really*? I’d moved to LA by then, had two children, and had just become a single mother. A children’s book I wrote to untangle my mother’s death for my daughters was picked up by a prominent agent, then dropped out of the blue on the day I delivered the final manuscript. I was stunned.

After I left her office, I had a strong pull to go to the American Bookseller Expo held that year, that week, at a hotel down the street. Though I was not a bookseller, I found myself, to my utter amazement, marching into the exhibit hall like I owned the place! I walked the floor hoping to find a publisher for my book and at the end of the afternoon, found myself standing in SRF's exhibit space starring at Yogananda's face on the cover of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Signs and wonders ensued. I read the *Autobiography* in two days and soon came to understand my childhood covenant with "The Magic" by practicing Paramahansa Yogananda's teachings.

10. What is the mission of the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) and how does it help individuals search for God and find the divine potential that exists within every human being?

The bedrock of the Self-Realization Fellowship Aims and Ideals is "to disseminate among the nations a knowledge of definite scientific techniques for attaining direct personal experience of God." Everything SRF is dedicated to—their wholehearted service to "mankind as one's larger self" and the transformation of individual and global consciousness—evolves from this goal and is sustained by the daily deep meditation of its monastic community and its members and friends around the world.

SRF seeks to establish "temples for God-communion throughout the world and to encourage the establishment of individual temples in the homes and hearts of men." It "advocates cultural and spiritual understanding between East and West" and "to overcome evil by good, sorrow by joy, cruelty by kindness, ignorance by wisdom." It espouses "the unity of science and religion" and seeks to reveal "the complete harmony and basic oneness of original Christianity as taught by Jesus Christ and original Yoga as taught by Bhagavan Krishna; and to show that these principles of truth are the common scientific foundation of all true religions." (<https://yogananda.org/aims-and-ideals>).

Meditation is not just something SRF members do twice a day, it's a way of life, a way of looking at the world that empowers you, that gives you hope. Day by day, step by step, breath by breath members still their minds and open their hearts to God. The deeper you go, the richer the harvest.

11. What is the value of telling our stories?

One of the most important contributions mythologist Joseph Campbell made to the public conversation was to give voice to the encoded longing we all have to "become the hero of our own life." He believed that every story ever told was a version of the hero's journey and that the final stage of this journey—the hero's return to his or her community to tell their story—bears witness to our unlimited human potential. A "hero" trusts unseen forces, faces their fears, claims their inner resources, and resurrects their lives. Telling this story cements the value of their journey and seeds the journey in those who follow in the hero's footsteps.

Stories are richer than explanations. They create order: build bridges of thought (synapses) within us and to new opportunities in the world. They create a joyful detachment that allows us

to mythologize rather than catastrophize our challenges. They give us courage. They prove we are not alone in our sorrow.

We have to let our stories happen to us just as the storytellers in COMING HOME did so we can grow into the “depth, and breadth and height our souls *can* reach.” Grace *can* happen to anyone who sincerely wants to change their drifting into pilgrimage, their fear into confidence and calm, their questioning into the self-realization that finally satisfies the soul.