

What Color is your Religion? by Patti D. Thomas, LCSW

In the movie “Sophie’s Choice” a mother is forced by the Nazis to choose between her two children. Meryl Streep poignantly portrays the heartbreak of struggling with this impossible decision. This film has risen to the level of a classic because of the empathy it evokes in viewers. Who cannot be moved by the pain this woman is experiencing?

One of the few relationships we have that is as intimate and powerful as that between a parent and child is what we share with a Higher Power. Those of us raised in a particular faith may feel their belief is as natural as breathing. They cannot imagine a day passing without connecting with that Being in prayer.

Over the course of our lives, there exist countless challenges to our religious views. Marriage to a person outside of our faith may pull us away from our childhood beliefs. Or we experience a betrayal that threatens that bond. A client of mine was severely beaten as a young child for failure to memorize her Bible verse assignment. Others I’ve worked with were molested or otherwise abused by clergy or members of their “church family.”

One reaction to the above scenarios is to simply reject all organized religions. For some, this is the choice that releases them from feelings of oppression. Since the experience called “religion” was a source of pain, this choice feels right for them.

Be aware that deception by someone claiming to be guided by God creates pain that requires attention to heal. It can wound a person at his/her very center and is unlikely to simply fade over time. Consider speaking with a therapist or other practitioner who has experience with this issue. Remember: avoidance of pain is not synonymous with resolving it.

Despite these terrible offences committed against them, some people come to long for a spiritual path of some sort. They feel a need to reclaim the peace they once felt while worshipping. They hunger for a connection with something much larger than they are.

If this sounds like you, consider beginning a quest to deepen your inner life. You may choose to re-connect with your childhood religion or one similar (but on your own terms now that you are an adult). Or you may wish to explore completely different spiritual paths. Here are some possibilities for finding or creating a spiritual/philosophical path:

- 1) If you still own a Bible or other texts from your childhood religion, read through some passages. Does it resonate with you? Does it stimulate you to read more? Be honest about how it makes you feel. (It might be helpful to write down your thoughts, put them aside for several days, then read them.)

2) If you've ever been curious about "New Thought" fellowships [such as Religious Science, Unity, or Universalist Unitarian], find a local gathering online or in your phone book. Attend a minimum of two times each to get a sense of their philosophy and focus.

3) Receive teachings from an eastern teacher [such as in Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism.]

4) Gather with a group of friends once a week for a spiritually based "book club." Take turns recommending thought-provoking books such as *Eve's Bible: A Woman's Guide to the Old Testament* by Sarah S. Forth, PhD.

5) If you are an agnostic or an atheist, research essays and books by such authors as Joseph Lewis (1889 - 1968). Develop groups with like-minded people for support and discussion.

6) Twice a week, pack your journal and a sandwich and take your dog to the beach. After a walk, find a quiet place to think, breathe, and write. Review the last few entries, and then write about what you are feeling.

These are just a few ideas to get you started. Less important than what you choose is that it is of interest to you. It may start as an intellectual pursuit and eventually lead to a deeper connection. Be aware that if you go "church shopping" with a friend, a given belief system may speak to one of you and not to the other. Allow space for this.

The idea is for you to find a space that permits you to feel safe, respected, and serene. And there is only one person who knows what you need to nurture your soul: you.