

Q & A WITH KATHERINE OZMENT



What has been your most surprising reaction to your book so far?

Honestly, I thought I might get some angry backlash, but, aside from an angry email or tweet here or there, there has been very little of that. In hindsight, I guess I shouldn't have expected anger because I worked really hard to write this book with deep respect for all sides. I'm so thankful that readers have seen that. I've come to realize that most people are hungry for respectful dialogue on the topic of religion. Of course, there are always extremes at either end of the spectrum, but there is a big middle ground of people who are no longer religious but don't hate religion. And there are a lot of religious people who truly understand why people leave even if that's not the choice they've made for themselves. This book is for that big middle, the people who want a deeper understanding of the complexity of these changes without all the judgment.

What has been the best part of the publication process?

Once the book was published and I began giving talks, I realized the book was far more than a physical thing containing printed words. Its true purpose is as a vehicle for connection. For me, this has been the best part of the process—using the book as a means of going out and meeting people I otherwise would never have met and visiting places I wouldn't have normally gone. They say you're not supposed to discuss politics or religion in polite company, but I find myself talking about religion everywhere I go and it is the most surefire way to tap into a person's history, beliefs, and life story. It's now my go-to conversation topic when I meet someone because everyone has a spiritual autobiography that reveals how they think about life's important questions. Publishing this book gave me a kind of calling card to go around the country and strike up deep conversations with people.

What is the meaning of your book's title?

Like a lot of language used for profound human experiences, "grace" is often used in a religious connotation, as in "God's grace." One of my arguments in the book is that religion shouldn't get to hold dominion over all such experiences anymore. Those of us who aren't religious can take back some of these terms and use them as our own. To me, the experience of grace doesn't have to be related to a belief in God. Rather, it's a welling up of awe, wonder, and gratitude for this gift unbidden, our very lives. If we peel back the religious labels, these are essential human experiences we all share. So, with the title, I was trying to reflect all that—to state that these experiences are not owned by religion; we nonreligious people have them too, and we need language to describe them.

More Millennials are “Nones.” Do you think it’s harder for them to have a community?

I think Millennials form community in different ways, and time will tell if these ways are as supportive and nurturing as the old ways. Religious groups have a profound sense of responsibility to their communities, for better or worse. Some people call that tribalism, with all the bad that comes with it, but the flip side is these groups do come together in times of great need, and they participate in volunteer activities and charitable giving at higher rates, even outside their own religious communities. My question for Millennials, and really for all secular people, is whether they can come together in community not just for their own benefit but also for the greater good.

Do you consider yourself spiritual?

I’ve always disliked that word, but if you define spiritual as I now do, which is having the sense that you are part of a larger whole, then yes I would say that I am spiritual. Part of being a writer is having a heightened awareness of everything around you. You see stories, you notice details, you watch and listen more closely when people talk. For years I wrote a parenting blog and I had to write a post about some aspect of life with my children once a week. I was constantly scanning my family life for deeper meaning. If you think about it, that’s what religion does too; it reminds you always of the bigger picture, the unseen connections between things. Writing is the same for me, as is being in nature or reading or being with my children. I’d say my spiritual practice is in cultivating a deep awareness of and connection to everything around me.

What is the next story to be told about a more secular life?

There is still a story to be told about how my kids and others of their generation are going to make sense of their world with less influence from religion. I think part of what secular parents like me are giving their kids is an enormous amount of choice to decide things for themselves. Most parents I know and interviewed don’t want their children to be clones or just mimic their beliefs. But will all that freedom be overwhelming for younger generations? Will our kids end up thinking they are “nothing” because it’s too hard to choose any one path? I’ll be curious to see how they come to articulate their values, define themselves, and connect in community.

During your research, what was the one thing people reported missing the most about religion?

There was no one thing. They were all different—singing in a choir, having a community to fall back on, a consoling belief in the afterlife. But though these are all specific to each person, they have the same root—the desire to be part of some larger, lasting whole. This is why the research on awe that I explored in the book was so important to the final, deeper stages of my journey. Once I understood how awe works in our minds and bodies, I was able to see how spirituality can be entirely secular, and we can feel like part of a larger whole outside the framework of religion. We just have to cultivate an openness to awe and wonder so we can feel connected to something larger in our everyday lives.