

CHARTING YOUR OWN PATH TO GRACE WITHOUT GOD

You've read about Ozment's journey, and the journeys of many others, to find grace without God. Now it's your turn. Below are the tools you'll need to set out on your own path to create a more meaningful, connected, and reflective life. All the project requires is your own openness as you examine where you've come from, look at where you are, and commit to where you want to be.

You may even consider forming your own Grace Without God group to clarify your values, create new rituals, and come together in community. Twentysomethings, at the outset of their careers, could gather to talk about how to find meaningful work and make a difference in the world. Grandparents might discuss what it means to watch their children and grandchildren step away from long-held religious traditions. And soon-to-be married couples or new parents may explore how to blend different traditions and create new ones as they transition into new chapters of their lives.

The journey includes four phases: Reflection, Declaration of Values, Action, and Commitment. Some stages may take less time than others, and some may become sweet spots where you'll want to dwell a bit longer. These phases are not a rigid set of rules to follow but rather a framework for exploration and discovery that can be personalized to meet your unique needs.

PHASE ONE: REFLECTION

Take time to reflect on your own spiritual autobiography. Consider how you were raised, what your family's belief system meant to you growing up, and how your connection to religious and family traditions has changed over time. Keep a journal, start a blog, or share ideas with friends through a private Facebook group. Writing down your reflections on past and current practices will help you clarify your story, which serves as the foundation for jumping off. Here are more questions, arranged by theme, to guide both your own personal reflections or a group discussion.

Community and Belonging

- What does it mean to belong to a people? Where does true belonging come from?
- What groups have you belonged to in the past, and where do you feel the greatest sense of belonging now?
- What binds you to others? What do you and the people you're closest to hold sacred? How might you deepen and expand your connections within and among your groups?

Rituals

- What have been the most meaningful rituals, religious or secular, in your life? What made them so meaningful? Do you continue to practice them? Why or why not?
- If you grew up religiously, what were the pros and cons of the religious rituals you practiced? If you didn't grow up religiously, what secular rituals did your family or community practice and what did you like or dislike about them?
- Do you think ritual is important in the modern day? Why or why not? What are the most important transitions or milestones you mark with ritual? How do they alter your experience of those moments?

Meaning and Purpose

- When and where have you felt the most alive? What experiences in your life have been the most meaningful to you? Why?
- How do you differentiate meaning from purpose? What gives your life a sense of purpose?
- Where and when do you feel the greatest sense of wonder about the world? How would you describe awe, and under what circumstances have you felt it most powerfully?

Identity

- What are the most important components of your identity? How many of these were passed down to you and how many have you created yourself?
- If someone asked you who you are, what would you say? How is the story of who you are part of a larger story?
- What labels, if any, do you use to describe yourself? In what ways do you find using labels useful? When are they a hindrance?

Morality and Values

- What was the most important lesson you were taught about being a good person when you were growing up? How has your understanding of morality shifted as you've gotten older?
- How do you outwardly express your moral values? When and where do you put them into action?
- Who are your "saints" or heroes, the people who live in a way you'd like to emulate? What values do they express through their actions and what small things can you do to try to live up to their examples?

PHASE TWO: DECLARATION OF VALUES

Once you've reflected on your own spiritual autobiography, take time to create a declaration of values. You may think of your declaration of values as a secular Ten Commandments or Eight-Fold Path, a framework by which to live. These may take the form of a letter to your children (as in the Epilogue of *Grace Without God*), a simple Word document you read each week, or colorfully drawn note cards you choose to review in the morning before work. Whichever form you choose, consider the following questions:

- What are your own absolutes (one may be that you have no absolutes)?
- What are the values that you hold most sacred?
- Where do you find inspiration? Who are your spiritual guides? What concepts, works of art, or stories give you hope?
- What do you think is the most meaningful way to spend time?
- When have you felt a powerful sense of purpose?
- What grounds you in difficult times?

PHASE THREE: ACTION

The next step is to formalize the values you've drawn up so they become a conscious part of your everyday life. This is the stage where all your reflecting becomes concrete. Research shows that when we write down our intentions, we're more likely to follow through on them. Pair actions, big and small, with the values you've declared. Here are some examples of the types of commitments you might make:

Connection. To improve your sense of connection to others, practice gratitude. People who practice gratitude have stronger relationships, are quicker to forgive, and are more compassionate and altruistic. Keep a gratitude journal. Before getting out of bed, consider five things you're thankful for. Ask your partner or children to share what they're thankful for each night at dinner or just before bed.

Meaning. To create more meaning in your life, practice giving to others. Research shows we reap a wealth of benefits, physical and mental, when we give, and charitable acts also contribute to the common good. Find a volunteer activity or cause in your area that you can devote even a small amount of time and energy to each month. Make that activity sacred, something you won't cancel unless it's an absolute emergency.

Ritual. To celebrate meaningful family moments (a child's transition into adolescence, a wedding, or birth), create a secular ritual, invite your friends, and ask them to participate. For a coming-of-age ceremony, ask people to share the most important lessons they've learned in life and make those lessons into a book for your child to keep. For a wedding, ask guests to send scraps of fabrics to be woven into a canopy. At a babynaming ceremony, have each guest state a hope for the child and ritualize those hopes by asking each to place a stone in a jar, which then becomes a keepsake.

PHASE FOUR: COMMITMENT

Once you've come up with a list of concrete actions, fully commit to them by joining up with others. You might form a group that meets once a month to take on a volunteer activity in your community. Or you might create a book group for kids focused on the theme of doing good in the world. Whatever you choose, consider how you can draw others into your project, so you can hold one another accountable, offer guidance and support, and share the joys of this process. And, whatever you choose to do, may your path be filled with grace.

If you or your group would like guidance as you chart a new spiritual-secular path, please contact Katherine Ozment at gracewithoutgod@gmail.com for information on hosting a group discussion via Skype or in person.