

Introduction

What women really want

There is a fascinating interchange in the first episode of *Desperate Housewives* – a dark comedy about the lives of a group of women living on Wisteria Lane, somewhere in upmarket suburbia. Gabrielle is the attractive ex-model housewife, and in one scene she has a conversation with John, the gardener, with whom she is having an affair.

He asks her why she married her husband, and she replies, “Because he promised to give me everything I’ve ever wanted.”

He: “Well, did he?”

She: “Yes.”

He: “Then why aren’t you happy?”

She: “It turns out I wanted all the wrong things.”

Maybe someone has given you this book, or perhaps you have picked it up, intrigued by the title.

What *do* women want? What do *you* want? Will the things you want make you happy? Can they provide deep-down happiness and contentment? I hope they do, but what if they turn out to be the wrong things?

The women who have written this book have the same longings and desires as you. They have struggled with unsatisfying relationships, out-of-control diaries, a famine of forgiveness, poor self-esteem, uncertainty and guilt. They have searched for that elusive ‘something’ that will be the

answer to those great longings. But in the end they have all come to see that there is more than ‘something’: there is a person.

This book, like any other, may be read in its entirety in one or a few reading sessions. If that is the way you like to read, then please do, and enjoy! However, you may prefer to dip in and out. Each chapter stands alone, although they do build to a climax at the end. I hope that you will eventually read all of it.

There are references to the Bible throughout the book. These have been printed in the text for you. However, this may whet your appetite to read more of the Bible, so some suggestions as to where to begin have been provided in the concluding chapter.

I have included four personal stories in the book. Here, four ordinary women (and one brave man!) share how they discovered what they really wanted. And needed.

I hope they lead you to the person who is at the centre of this book: Jesus.

Lesley Ramsay

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Spirituality

Gillian Davis



My days of rushing into the local off-licence flustered and overwhelmed are over.

In the past, when guests were almost at the door, I would frantically run to the counter and immediately show my ignorance by asking for a “really, *really* good bottle of white wine... for under £5.00”. I would come home with a nice bottle, strangely-named, that my kind publican knew would do for the occasion.

But embarrassing moments like these are now a thing of the past, thanks to my late-in-life experience of a wine-tasting.

After a day of sipping, I discovered two things. First, one should never taste wine on an empty stomach. Second, I am a ‘Semillon Blanc’ kind of girl. Proud and informed, I now walk confidently into my local off licence and calmly ask for “a really, *really* good Semillon Blanc... for under £10.00!”

Many could argue the merits of a good Merlot over a Pinot Noir, but at the end of the day it is just a matter of taste and opinion. I like Semillon Blanc. That’s the choice for me. My son loves Coke – that’s his choice.

Seeking God in an age of spiritual choices

What has this to do with spirituality, you may well ask?

Too many of us make the mistake of treating our spiritual-

ity in the same way as a wine-tasting, or the search for a great restaurant, or an insurance policy. The consumerism that dominates here in the Western world leads us to think that, just like selecting the right wine, I can choose the right spirituality for me. All the choices are equally good – the best one simply a matter of opinion. And there are a lot of choices out there!

Our culture considers spirituality merely a matter of taste and suitability, as if we were browsing in a supermarket of spiritual choices. A bit of Hindu, a bit of tarot, a bit of superstition, a bit of Christian morality, a bit of what feels right... and there you have it! “My spiritual life is what will help *me* live with *myself* and the decisions *I* make, what helps *me* achieve inner contentment, what helps *me* discover *my* place in the cosmos...”

As a result, we become our own authority on interpreting life and determining truth. Yet surely there is a certain foolishness in making *ourselves* – our own needs and desires – the criteria for discovering ‘God’. Are we really cut out to tackle the eternal alone? Because our needs and perceptions change, does this mean our ‘god’ changes with them? Have we really discovered God, or is he/she really just fashioned in our image, packaged in a ‘me-sized box’ that suits us? Is a spirituality like this really able to help in this life or beyond?

If we are truly honest, this is not seeking God. It is *being* God. Those of you who just want to play in the market place and seek only that which serves ‘*me*’ would be well-advised to skip the rest of this chapter. But if you want to discover the *real* God – to find *true* spirituality in the bustling marketplace of choices – then I urge you to read on.

Here is the vital question that begs to be answered: *how do we seek the real God* – be there one, or many, or none – *in an age of spiritual choices?*

Will the real God please stand up?

Those seeking God in an age of spiritual choices must clearly understand that most of these choices actually say many conflicting things. We are often lulled into believing that all religions are basically the same and lead to the same end. However, this is far from the truth, even by their own definitions!

Our first problem in finding the real God is our current politically correct climate. Our society persists in upholding tolerance as our highest value. Dare anyone call one belief more valid or true than another? By seeking the real God, we risk the awkward and 'intolerable' situation where we have to declare one more superior than another.

I think we desire to accept all beliefs as equal and valid for two reasons.

We do so, firstly, *because we want peace*.

In an age of terrorism, we fear that religious conviction will lead to religious intolerance, discrimination or violence. The number of wars in the world ostensibly fuelled by religion – to say nothing of the wars over the family table and in the pub – are enough for people to demand that all beliefs are good and valid in the hope that this will promote peace.

This is a fair and noble creed, but is unworkable in practical terms. Even on the family level, let alone a community and world level, we want to affirm the health of a place that allows room for disagreement, differing opinions and strong convictions to which not all need hold. This is a place that treats individuals with acceptance without insisting on agreement; a place that encourages understanding and debate rather than ignorant tolerance; a place where unity does not mean uniformity. A home which does not allow for disagreement or varying points of view is a dangerous place to be. How much more so a community.

We are pressured to accept 'pub wisdom' – never talk politics

and religion! We think that by accepting all religions as true and correct we are being tolerant and this will promote peace. This is not true tolerance at all, and will not produce lasting peace.

True tolerance and the ‘peace’ which results is not my naïve willingness to accept the position of another as right and true. On the contrary, it is the more admirable ability to treat with respect a person with whom I have dialogue but deeply disagree. A tolerant Muslim is not someone who accepts the Buddhist doctrine of birth and rebirth – an intolerable belief for a Muslim. Rather, it is someone who rejects such a teaching while remaining respectful and compassionate towards Buddhists themselves.

A truly tolerant person can strongly disagree with another and argue her position, but will defend wholeheartedly that person’s right to her different opinion and belief without fear of persecution, suppression or ridicule. This has been the basis of the more enduring ‘peace’ in mixed religious communities over the centuries.

Ironically, the danger with the kind of ‘tolerance’ that accepts all beliefs as equal and true is that it so easily leads to prejudice, violence and suspicion because we haven’t bothered to find out what people really believe. We are prone to assume they are ‘all the same’. When we observe something like the horror of July 11, suddenly the world thinks ‘all Muslims are terrorists’ because in our ignorance and ‘acceptance’ we haven’t bothered to find out what true Islamic belief is.

We must understand true tolerance. We must be free to contradict, but never to disrespect; free to persuade, but never to coerce; free to engage and discuss rather than be fearful, hostile or ignorant.

If we all operated on that level, then the pub would have room for politics and religion, and we would be far more enlightened as a result.

This leads us to the second reason we desire to see all beliefs as equal and valid. *It is easier that way.*

Our generation is prone to seeking the easiest path for many and varied reasons. “*The road less travelled is less travelled for a reason*” says comedian Jerry Seinfeld. We have become a culture that doesn’t think: where discussion and debate are not valued; where we want answers handed to us on a plate; where we desire instant gratification and instant solutions. We are often too lazy, too busy or too stressed to do the hard work of entering into the world of someone who thinks and believes differently from us and finding out what they are on about. It is far easier to say “Good on you”, or “Whatever, it’s all the same anyway...” and remain ignorant.

To seek God in an age of spiritual choices, we must come to terms with just how contradictory those choices are. We need to make it very clear that most of these choices say many conflicting things.

Will the real God please stand up and be counted?

An excerpt from a poem by Steve Turner describes our current religious/political climate well:

*We believe in Marxfreudanddarwin
We believe everything is OK
as long as you don't hurt anyone,
to the best of your definition of hurt,
and to the best of your knowledge.*

*We believe that all religions are basically the same—
at least the one that we read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of
creation, sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation.¹*

Many religions and spiritual practices are similar in that they seek to answer the same big questions of life. Is there an after-life? What is the purpose of my life? Will I be held accountable for my life? How can I make up for my mistakes? Is there forgiveness? Does what I do, and who I am, really matter anyway?

Yet most spiritualities and religions on offer have incredibly different answers to such questions.

Take, for example, what followers of the Eastern religions of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism believe regarding the question of what is God like:

- Classical Hinduism – a vast array of gods.
- Classical Sikhism – just one deity who alone is worthy of worship.
- Classical Buddhism – no gods at all.

Contradictions? Plenty! If there are many gods there cannot possibly be just one. If there is only one god there cannot possibly be many. If there are no gods at all, then there cannot be many or just one.

All three should respect each other's humanity and freedom of expression, but we cannot ask them (unless they throw their brains out!) to regard each other's understanding of god as all equally true.

Likewise, to say to a Muslim that she is to accept Hinduism as equally true and correct would be deeply offensive. The fundamental Muslim belief that God is One and there are no other gods is in complete conflict to the Hindu belief that God is many. One cannot accept such opposing beliefs as being both true! God cannot be only one but also many at the same time.

I have criticised our Western culture for not thinking too hard. Yet to decide on our own who represents the true God would involve more lifetimes than we have. There is a need for a lifetime of research to determine what is on offer, and

then a lifetime of experience to give each religion a go and see how it delivers. I don't have the time or the lifetimes! So where does one start?

Will the real God please stand up and give us some clues?

We do have clues.

Any impartial observer of our world recognises that it screams of a Designer – from the subatomic to the miraculous complexity of our own bodies, to the vast expanses of the universe. However, we may conclude that this Being is, at the same time, both wonderful (seen in the birth of a child, a beautiful sunset, or an unfolding flower) and terrible (seen in the devastation of a tsunami, the suffering of a cancer victim or the horror of war). If the question, “Is there a God?” is partly answered, another more vital question is raised: “Is this God knowable?”

Another clue is our own humanity. We have the unique human attribute of conscience, all cultures having a deep sense of knowing right from wrong. We have the ability to love, to be artistic, to yearn for meaning – all God-given characteristics. Yet that still doesn't fill in the blanks. I would suggest that we could never find God unless he chose to *reveal* himself to us first. Let me explain why.

I have been enamoured since my teenage years with the singer/songwriter James Taylor. My family – non-worshippers of James – are long-suffering. My running commentary on every song, its meaning and its timing in James' life accompanies his music whenever it is played. As *Carolina In My Mind* begins, I wax lyrical that the song was about his misery in boarding school and desire to come home. When he croons out *That's Why I'm Here*, I remind those present that he wrote it after two decades of booze and drug addiction had been finally kicked. I reminisce like we are old friends. What are my sources?

My clues? Collected interviews with his ex-wife, newspaper reports, DVD's and TV documentaries. I had the man summed up.

So I was nothing short of elated when I was given two tickets to see him in concert, which I attended with my hesitant husband. After a wonderful concert, numerous commentaries by myself and a suitably impressed hubby, I walked to the stage door to meet the man himself. You see, the tickets came with the condition that I had to come home with a photo of James! After 20 minutes, out he came. I walked confidently to the man I knew so well, ready for a photo together. As he smiled politely for the many cameras and autograph hunters, he then turned and asked for my name!

The reality hit. I was a stranger to him. Our worlds had never really touched. Despite my incredible amount of information *about him* – some true, much not – it was not the same as *knowing him*. . . I realised I would only know the true James Taylor if I asked him out for coffee and he chose to reveal all of himself to me in a true and honest way. He declined. So, despite my reliable sources, he would continue to be a stranger, and I remain a distant admirer, not a personal friend.

The point is that if we are to know the true God, He has to make himself known. Apart from Him coming to us and revealing himself, it will always be guesswork.

Will the real God please stand up and make a personal appointment?

The unique claim of the Christian faith lies in this very issue. The founder, Jesus of Nazareth, claimed to be God visiting this planet.

Jesus is often portrayed as a man running down blossoming meadows in a flowing kaftan with flowers around his

neck, bringing love and goodwill to all mankind. No-one has a problem with such an image, surely? Yet at 33 years of age he was executed. Not so much for anything he did, but for who he claimed to be.

The truth is, though historians and people of the day (followers and opponents alike) would say he was an exemplary human being of amazing love and compassion, he was also radically controversial. The religious establishment often called him demon-possessed. His own family members thought him mad at times. His closest followers were sometimes confused.

Consider this claim:

“Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.²

His accusers were frothing at the mouth about this incredible claim of his own divinity.

Anyone can make an outrageous claim. It is only those who produce proof that we listen to. I have had many occasions to meet people who claimed they were God. Most end up institutionalised! But what if one made that claim and then pulled off the miraculous – did the impossible? What if they healed the sick, made the lame walk and the blind see? What if they spoke tenderly to deep pain no-one else knew about, and offered forgiveness to the burdened and hope to the down-cast? These are things only God can do. This is what Jesus did.

If you want to know what God is like, Jesus says, then listen to my words. Then, if that isn't enough, look at what I do. He stands in a league of his own as a spiritual leader. All other spiritual leaders point the way to God, enlighten the path to God, suggest the practices that will draw you closer to God. Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed himself as God's visual

expression! God's personal visit! No wonder they killed him – it was an outrageous claim!

Jesus' life and his death make any other conclusions impossible. He worked miracles, he calmed storms, he delivered the demon-possessed with the authority of a more powerful being. Jesus had inexplicable knowledge of life and the afterlife, saying he would allow his life to be taken and then rise from the dead (as if he had the power to determine life and death, and to overcome death). He then backed this up with the original Easter experience.

Will the real God please find me?

Where do I start seeking?

Start first with the one who said:

*“I and the Father are one. If you know me, you will know the Father”.*³

Start with the one who declared:

*“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”.*⁴

Jesus revealed God's mind and heart to us and called people to respond with all their heart, mind, soul and strength:

*“If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”.*⁵

If seeking God in an age of spiritual choices, start with Jesus.

ENDNOTES

1. Steve Turner (English Journalist), *Creed*, his satirical poem on the modern mind
2. John 10:37 3. John 10:30 4. John 8:12 5. John 14:23

Contentment

Wendy Potts



What is it with us and those lifestyle shows? We can't seem to get enough of them.

We're a generation enlightened by the ideals of *Ground Force*, *House Doctor* and *Ready, Steady, Cook*. We are culturally savvy. We know that roasted meat should be 'rested', that 'texture is the new colour' and (my personal favourite) that the lives of ordinary families can be transformed in just one weekend when an entire house and garden is renovated, bringing real unity and untold joy.

But just stop and imagine for a moment how the circulation would plummet if *Better Homes* became a rather shorter magazine called *Perfectly Adequate Homes*...

Or if on a new five minute version of *House Doctor* Anne Maurice says:

"As you can see, the Potts family home has plenty of potential.

We could do loads with this one.

However, it does the job pretty well.

It's warm and dry and comfortable.

No obvious structural problems.

We're going to encourage the Potts to be content and leave it as it is." (Cut to closing credits)¹

We're not good at contentment are we?