The background of the book cover is a dense arrangement of smooth, grey, rounded stones. Overlaid on this is a large, semi-transparent red rectangle. Within this red rectangle, there is a pattern of overlapping, semi-transparent red circles of various sizes, creating a textured, organic effect.

THE SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST

*Practices to Transform Your Life,
Your Work, and Your World*

CLAUDIA HORWITZ

The Spiritual Activist

Practices to Transform Your Life,
Your Work, and Your World

Claudia Horwitz

Penguin Compass

PENGUIN COMPASS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand,
London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,
Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany,
Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in Penguin Compass 2002

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Claudia Horwitz, 2002
All rights reserved

Portions of this work appeared in different form in the author's
A Stone Throw, published by Stone Circles.

ISBN 0 14 21.9606 1
CIP data available

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Stone Serif
Designed by Claudia Fulshaw Design
Illustrations by Andrew Boardman

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

acknowledgments

Expressions of gratitude to those who have helped make a book – and a journey:

My brother, Stuart, for living and breathing these words from start to finish, and willing the text into being when I no longer could. My parents, Margot and Ellis; my sister-in-law, Bonnie; my niece, Fifer; and my Uncle Manny have loved me well and often. And to the ancestors who have passed, your presence is still very much with us.

Martha Abbott, Melanie Armstrong, Ann Ehringhaus, David Sawyer, and Nateshvar Ken Scott for opening the doors to the sacred a little wider.

Annice, Arrington, Billie, Brian, Cara, Charles, Daughtry, Ed, Ellen, Emilee, Kelly, Maura, Jason, John, Julia, Scott, Thérèse, and Tony for deep companionship on the journey.

Shawn Bohen, Mirabai Bush, Ed Cohen, Katherine Fulton, George Lakey, Wayne Meisel, Greg Ricks, Ralph Smith, and Marian Urquilla for setting the bar high.

Mitch Snyder, Lisa Sullivan, and Ingrid Washinawatok for bringing so much radical life into too few years.

Jane von Mehren and Sarah Manges, my editors at Penguin, for being true and compassionate allies – to myself, to the reader, to the work.

Amy Rennert, agent extraordinaire, for all the tenacity and faith necessary to turn the dream of publishing into a reality.

Claudia Fulshaw and Andrew Boardman for deft, exquisite work in the book’s design and illustrations, respectively.

Miriam Biber and Tamara Ambar for support and valuable research assistance.

Blessing Way, Echoing Green, North Carolina Public Allies, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Triangle Community Foundation, and the hundreds of individuals for supporting the work that inspired this book.

All those who lent their stories, for your beautiful and powerful lives.

All who attended circles, trainings, and workshops over the years for your wisdom and your patience.

introduction

I didn't set out to write a book. I wanted to write a training manual, a guide for what I thought would be a small group of people who shared my passion for the integration of spirituality and activism. As I began to write, the project grew. When I disseminated the early fruits of my labor, the audience grew as well. And then I saw that this connection between inner journeys and outer commitments was actually quite relevant to many people.

The intention of this book is to share a perspective on an ancient belief, a simple idea that creates a more challenging reality for each of us in the short run and a healthier overall existence for all of us in the long run. The idea is that as we develop spiritual and reflective practices within the context of our personal lives and the pursuit of social change, we create a more solid and secure foundation for a new world. We build lives with greater expressions of love, more authentic relationships, and a deeper articulation of truth. We become less afraid of fear and less afraid of life.

When we turn inward, we find stillness and chaos resting together. We find craving and contraction and the seeds of liberation from both. We can ignore what we find or we can embrace it – all of it. When we turn outward, we see levels of suffering that mirror and exceed our own. We know this world is not what it could or should be for far too many beings, human and non-human alike. It takes courage to face the world with compassionate attention, to be candid about the injustices we understand, and to probe those we do not. We try, stumble, and try again. Consciousness is a daily walk.

And it is not a choice any longer.

We need a national culture of reflection that bends toward justice. We must develop the capacity and infrastructure for deliberate, ongoing, profound reflection, so that we might bring balance to the *other* forms of national culture we seem to be infinitely more comfortable with, the cultures of reaction, of military response, of traditional religion, of avoidance.

Reflection and spiritual practice will help ensure that our actions as human beings yield benefits to a sphere far beyond the horizon we can easily see.

When my scholarly uncle read an earlier version of this book, he congratulated me on my “how-to book.” At first I shuddered. With my love of ideas, the written word and the interplay of theory, had I really written an instruction manual? Yes, perhaps I had. And then I realized that spiritual activists are always interested in the questions that begin with “how.” We

hunger for practicalities. We see how desperately we all need to know *how*: how to find that refuge where we can nurture our core, how to deepen the union we feel with others, and how to embrace life beyond our immediate experience.

The path may not be easy, but it is not rocket science either. (In college I had a friend who majored in astrophysics; the only one in our graduating class. This is not that.) Living a life where values manifest in daily actions – actions that promote the basic health and welfare of all we can possibly imagine – is within reach for each of us. It is not something that will rest only in the hands of a few master teachers, enlightened beings, or revered clergy. It is our birthright, and our responsibility. Spiritual activists move more freely between the inner quest for peace and the outer quest for justice, and we feel some comfort knowing it is a permeable membrane that joins our struggles, our commitments, and our transformations.

We are all seekers. In the midst of an ever-complex, ever-quickening universe, we crave the pause in which we remember what matters most. In the face of suffering, we desire new and better ways to respond. This book is inspired by these convictions. Welcome.

Claudia Horwitz
Durham, North Carolina
April, 2002

table of contents

Acknowledgmentsix

Introductionxi

PART ONE

REFUGE: Turning Inward, Finding Strength3

Practice.....5

Mindfulness23

Words.....51

Healing.....73

PART TWO

UNION: Reaching Out at Home and at Work99

Relationships101

Ritual119

Stories135

Images153

PART THREE

EMBRACE: Turning Outward, Building Connection173

Circles175

Celebration191

Place.....209

APPENDIX: Facilitating Spiritual Work with Groups.....	231
Principles	233
5 Ways to Go Deeper with Groups	239
Retreat Centers	250
stone circles	252
Index	253

Part One

Refuge

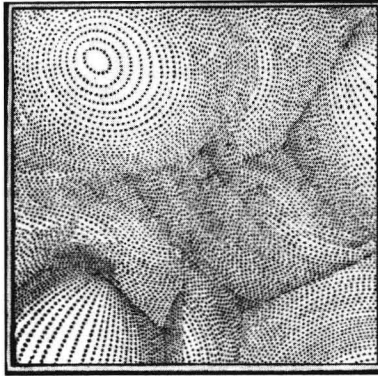
Turning Inward, Finding Strength

Going out in the world every day takes energy, focus, and commitment. Individuals search for wholeness, and search for it everywhere. We want permission to be quiet for a while, each day, in a world that prizes activity. We want to rest and reconnect with what makes us brave. We want to stay present to our deepest truth.

So, what keeps us from this wholeness? Pain in all of its manifestations: anger, fear, insecurity, anxiety, and deep sadness. The first noble truth of Buddhism tells us that life is suffering. That's not all it is, but it is that. We get sick. We develop fears and we cling to them. We are angry. We get anxious. We experience incredible loss, and with this loss comes sadness, sometimes so great that we think it will break us. Stressful things happen and we must choose how to respond. We have been hurt by other people who were hurt themselves. And inevitably, we lose what we love.

How do we acknowledge and respond to this suffering? How do we embrace and transform it? Animals threatened with extinction and in need of protection often find themselves in a refuge, a place of safety and nourishment. To lead a sane and beautiful life, we need a space of quiet and deep rest where we can turn inward and find strength. In this place, we find compassion, tranquility, love, strength, and a sense of ease. The seed of our renewal lies in our ability to develop practices of mindfulness, a language of spirit and a reconnection with the body. If we don't find refuge within ourselves, we will always be asking others to be what they are not meant to be.

Through ongoing, deliberate experiences with our inner life, we cultivate stillness, open our hearts, nurture our personal expressions of faith, and deepen our capacity just to *be*. Rather than an escape, refuge is a return to the real. Turning inward allows us to develop our power from within, the power that makes real change possible.



practice

*Sustained exertion is not something which women and men
of the world naturally love or desire, yet it is the last refuge of all.*

~ Dogen-Zenji, quoted in The Three Pillars of Zen by Philip Kapleau

*Spiritual practice, by uprooting our personal mythologies of isolation, uncovers the radiant,
joyful heart within each of us and manifests this radiance to the world.*

*We find, beneath the wounding concepts of separation, a connection both to ourselves
and to all beings. We find a source of great happiness that is beyond concepts
and beyond convention. Freeing ourselves from the illusion of separation allows us to
live in a natural freedom rather than be driven by preconceptions about
our own boundaries and limitations.*

~ Sharon Salzberg, Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness

*The man or woman truly on the path [to inner peace]
seeks every moment as the one in which to activate life's highest blessing.*

~ Paul Fleischman, Cultivating Inner Peace

what is practice?

A spiritual or reflective practice has three characteristics:

1. It connects us to the presence of the sacred or that which has great meaning in our lives.
2. It is something we do regularly (ideally on a daily basis) and without interruption.
3. It grounds us in the present moment, bringing us into awareness of what is happening right now.

A practice is simply a habit that gives us energy and reminds us of what matters most. Every moment in our lives is a chance to be present and to open our hearts. How do we take advantage of this? How do we live each moment to the fullest? One way is by taking concentrated time each day to notice the peaks and the valleys with a tender awareness and without added drama. We can acknowledge suffering in our lives – doubt, fear, anger, sadness, or anxiety – without having to identify with them completely. This detachment can help us transform the energy of pain into strength. And it provides us with a wellspring of clarity when a difficulty or crisis arises.

There is so much competition for our attention. The television blares, a child tugs at our leg, colleagues make their demands known. There will always be plenty of reasons for our attention to be elsewhere. We spend so much of our mental energy evaluating or rehearsing. We're sure our happiness lies in a memory of the past or what is just around the corner, but contentment lies in our ability to appreciate whatever truth is unfolding in the present. Spiritual practice brings us into the fullness of the here and now. It is a reprieve from the mind's fascination with rehashing the events of the past or preparing for the future. It is a relief to be where life does not need any alteration.

Having a practice helps us pay concentrated attention to the inner voice – a presence that has the power to continually reinform the activities of our daily life. So while spiritual practice can seem like a selfish activity, in fact it helps to dissolve our preoccupation with self. Through practice we cultivate a sense of peace and compassion that pervades the rest of our relationships and activities.

turning point

It was the summer I turned twenty-seven when I first learned what a spiritual practice was and began meditating. I had gotten myself into a work commitment that I didn't believe in, and probably wasn't qualified for, and the results felt disastrous. Shaken by what I could only see as failure, I realized that I had

no idea which values were driving my decisions or how I could find courage when the going got tough. What is my anchor in the world? I wondered.

I made a pilgrimage to see two friends on their farm in Kentucky, and I described my dilemma. I was honest about the degree of pain this incident had caused me and the deeper insecurities that had been sparked in the process. I was at loose ends. My friends looked at me and very matter-of-factly told me that I needed a spiritual practice. “But, I have a therapist,” I responded. They patiently explained that wasn’t what they were talking about. I’d never heard this term “spiritual practice” before. I wanted a definition. Instead, they presented me with three possible routes out of my despair: read, meditate, or pray. (Now I know there are infinitely more types of practice, but this limited range of options was quite useful at the time.) I was already reading more than enough for graduate school, and prayer seemed loaded with the current ambiguity of my relationship to Judaism, my root tradition. I chose meditation. They shared some of the basics with me and I began to explore this seemingly bizarre concept of just sitting with my breath.

Back home later that summer, I set up a corner of my room with two plants, a photograph of the New Mexico mountains, stones, and a clay pot that had been given to me. And I began to practice. Every morning, I sat. Sometimes it was only five minutes, sometimes ten or fifteen. Regardless, within just a few days strange things began to happen. Every night I would get home and think, “Today was a pretty good day.” I didn’t overreact so much. I was nicer to people. I accomplished most of what I hoped to accomplish for the day. Within days, meditation was bringing me a sense of calm detachment that I’d never experienced before. I worried less about what other people thought and what I was missing in the world. My highs and lows weren’t as gut-wrenching.

In the decade since, my practice has had its ups and downs. Some days I can’t sit for ten minutes without looking at my watch. Some days I can sit for half an hour without flinching. Some days I skip it altogether and then pay the price later. When I neglect my practice, I simply feel off. The day begins to unravel and it’s often too difficult for me to piece it back together again. I’m not as focused or patient, with myself or with others. Little things cause a lot of frustration. I’m less hopeful, more easily overwhelmed and distracted. I talk more, but the words seem to mean less. It is almost as if my ego expands into the space that usually fills up with the presence of spirit. I’ve come to realize that it’s really not about being good or bad at meditation; it’s just about doing it. When I meditate, my life feels more authentic and less of a struggle.

Over time, this morning meditation has become an act of remembering who I am and who God is in my life. I have realized that I need a period of solitude in the morning, anywhere from one to three hours, to function as a

spiritual quick hits

These simple actions can bring you to a different place, shift your energy, or give you a new perspective:

- Memorize a poem or prayer that you like and share it with one or many.
- Take one day to help people you know. Work at their organizations or at their homes. You might concentrate some energy on new/young parents with small children who need relief.
- Spend a whole day in silence.
- Spend a full day with children. Let them plan part of it and then take time to do what you loved most as a kid or feel like you didn't get to do often enough.
- Attend someone else's house of worship.
- Lie on the floor and spend thirty minutes listening to your favorite music in the dark.
- Go to a museum and spend at least fifteen minutes with one painting that moves you or that you don't understand.
- Get on your knees and ask for forgiveness.

(continued on next page)

sane and loving human being in the world the rest of the day. So I start my days with a quiet that lets me sink below the surface of my daily routine and my mind's chatter. I begin with yoga because I find it hard to concentrate unless I've awakened my body first. Then, I sit with the breath. After that I find I have emptied out some – there is a slight releasing of anxiety, memory, or negativity. So, that seems like the right time to set the tone for my day with a reading from a work of spiritual philosophy, poetry, or sacred text. Finally, I usually need to write, even if it's just a page in my notebook. This helps me codify what I'm wrestling with, declare my intentions, record the specifics I want to remember, and explore experiences that have been particularly impactful.

Of course, it doesn't always work out this way. There are mornings when I am lucky if I find fifteen minutes to stretch a little and meditate. Because I travel a lot, I am constantly finding creative ways to maintain my practice on the road. The bigger challenge has been to refrain from judging myself when I don't do what I "should" be doing. I've learned that a little is better than none. When my practice is strong, I am more aware of the energy that pervades every living being and more awed by the interaction between these living beings. When I take time to honor myself and my relationship to this life force I notice the extraordinary in the ordinary and beautiful things that happen in my life. I ask more questions and I tend to do only one thing at a time. My relationship with myself and with others deepens. I am more likely to embrace change and even to surrender control. I find I have more energy. I am more joyful. My practice is the foundation. Sometimes it is shaky and sometimes it is strong, but it is always there.

? questions for reflection

- What are your associations with habit? Routine? Discipline?*
- Do you do anything on a regular basis that connects you to the sacred or to your sense of spirit?*
- How do these current activities enhance your life? What impact do they have?*
- If you do have some kind of practice, is it very different from the spiritual or faith activities you were brought up with?*
- What types of spiritual or faith-based activities or practices are you curious about?*

@ developing a spiritual practice

As one matures in spiritual life, one becomes more comfortable with paradox, more appreciative of life's ambiguities, its many levels and inherent conflicts. One develops a sense of life's irony, metaphor, and humor and a capacity to embrace the whole, with its beauty and outrageousness, in the graciousness of the heart.

~ Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*

Imagine carving out twenty minutes every day to renew your relationship to spirit. Is there something you already do sporadically or occasionally that could become a more regular practice? Use the grid below to notice what you already do that you might consider spiritual. This can be anything from a walk in the woods to reading sacred text in the morning to writing in your journal to attending your house of worship to meditation. It might be a work-related activity: a short, daily check-in with a coworker, an action that signals the beginning of your workday, or a regular cleanup of common workspace. Be as specific as you can. You may not remember everything right away, so fill the grid out over the course of a couple of days. Don't worry how many boxes are left blank.

	Alone	With others	At work
Daily			
Weekly			
Monthly			
Yearly			

Once you feel the grid is complete, reflect on what information it is giving you:

Which boxes are full? Which are empty? What does this reflect?

spiritual quick hits (continued)

- Write a letter to an ancestor.
- Meditate on a photo of yourself at a younger age.
- Spend a day answering every question you are asked with, "I don't know."
- Look everyone you meet squarely in the eyes for an entire day.
- Copy something in a foreign language without worrying what it means.
- Take a breath and hold it.
- Take off your watch and cover your clocks.
- Go to the library and wander around. Go to the children's section and check out three books for yourself.