NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Book Review: The Best Spiritual Writing, 2011, edited by Philip Zaleski, published by Penguin Books, $16

Rich Heffern | Jan. 12, 2011 Eco Catholic

This anthology appears every year, and I always look forward to it. The introductory essay is a wonderful reflection on the oft-heard quip, ?I?m spiritual but not religious,? by former American Poet Laureate Billy Collins. He chronicles his own move out of his childhood Catholicism, his ?nest of religious beliefs,? to his middle years when he was ?pulled in opposite directions by my almost congenital faith and the multiplying, sirenlike voices of the secular world.?

He describes how the iconography and vocabulary of the Catholic church persists, even as the doctrinal faith melts away. ?As one lapsed Catholic paradoxically put it: ?I don?t? believe in God, but I believe Mary was his mother.??

Writers like Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, Albert Camus, James Purdy, and Vladimir Nabokov became his new priests. ?Like most wayward and curious adolescents, I was trying on different literary voices and philosophical stances like a row of sports jackets in a men?s store.? Gradually, through a number of influences both literary and natural, ?I came to sense that a spiritual realm could be accessed, not via the recommended roads of religion leading to portals guarded by priests, rabbis, imams, and religious leaders of other stripes, but instead directly through actual daily experience.?

Collins arrives at a healthy respect for genuine religious experience, which is available to everyone. ?For the majority of its followers, religion is less of an experience than it is a set of beliefs, a moral code, and a picture of the hereafter. But spiritual experience ? at least the kind I am discussing ? is indeed an experience, usually marked by a sense of sudden entry into another dimension. This spiritual life is one of surprising glimpses, which often resist verbal description, as distinct from a sustained set of theological beliefs and doctrines, which can be explained to anyone, as any proselytizer knows. Wordsworth?s phrase

?spots of time? nearly captures the size of such intense moments of insight in which time is pierced and eternity is revealed.?

This annual anthology, edited by Philip Zaleski, is a regular visit to the experiences of spirituality, recorded by a wide variety of voices. As is usual with this series, it presents viewpoints that are both conservative and progressive. It?s always illuminating to get a good dose of both sides of the spectrum.

--Nature writer Barry Lopez is represented by a piece titled ?An Intimate Geography.? He contrasts the views of a landscape you get from a high-flying aircraft to the intimate immersion in a place provided by living there or by seeing with deeply contemplative eyes. ?What?s missing ... is the sensual immediacy of a place. The sound and the smell of it, the press of tempered air on the skin that accompanies what one sees. It?s the full reach of the landscape that?s not apparent, what you could call the authority of the land.? He describes his own home base in an Oregon forest. ?In my conversations with it, I know, once more, who I am. It inundates me continually with mystery, because its nature is too complex to be fully known.?

-- An intriguing essay by Anita Sullivan, ?Scordatura: Upon Listening to Biber?s Rosary Sonatas,? discusses the abnormal tuning of a stringed instrument in order to obtain unusual chords, facilitate difficult passages, or change the tone color. This is called scordatura. Sullivan is writing about more than music though. The simple tightening and loosening of strings brings to our ears, which are a direct pathway to the self, simple manifestations of infinity, she writes.

?With so much infinity expressly, if fleetingly available, might this not suggest more than one essential way through the world? Perhaps if beauty arises out of the Is-ness of things, spontaneously, irrevocably, and this Is-ness exists hugely, obviously, but all around at all times, we need only a tiny shift in the magnification of our seeing and hearing, a miniscule twitch of angle, and it will explode into us: a series of caverns inside the veins of each leaf, the lavish turquoise bleedings from the under-surface of the sea. If this is so, then how can suffering be merely what it seems?

There are essays and reminiscences, poetry and thoughtful analysis on such subjects as the Holocaust, Islam, Zen meditation, Jewish spirituality, contemplation. This anthology, as always, is a rich feast, bringing together some of our best writers ? Edward Hoagland, Philip Yancey, Bruce Lawrie, Melissa Range, and many more.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/01/2016 - 00:06*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/book-review-best-spiritual-writing-2011-edited-philip-zaleski-published-penguin