

UNAFFILIATED SPIRITUAL EXPLORERS

by Rev. SeiFu Anil Singh-Molares

As the father of six, ranging in age from 38 down to 18, I am well versed with the generational shift occurring worldwide away from most established religions, and towards the variously named “spiritual but not religious,” “spiritual independents,” or the title I now tentatively proffer, “unaffiliated spiritual explorers.” Five of my six identify with this category, with only one fitting in an affiliated group.

The Pew Research Center now identifies this consort as the third largest in the world overall, and the fastest growing. Not much surprise here, given the avalanche of scandals, predatory behaviour, power imbalances, corruption and hypocrisy plaguing all of our religious institutions. I say this as a committed Zen Buddhist priest, well aware of the too many sordid

abuses in my own root tradition. We could of course say that this type of bad behaviour is simply reflective of human nature, and pervasive in our various institutions throughout time, but simply far more visible now, with the rise of social media, and the ubiquitousness of “smart” phones. And, moreover, it is worth noting that these institutions, for all of their failings, also have had much success in spiritually comforting and orienting many of us.

But it is not my purpose today to launch a defense along the lines of “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater,” much as that is something worth pondering. Rather, I want to briefly explore the motivations that lie behind these unaffiliated spiritual explorations, as relayed to me by numerous individuals, and backed up

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UNAFFILIATED SPIRITUAL EXPLORERS (CONT'D)

by the Pew data I just mentioned. The larger context is that SDI is going to start offering significantly more offerings to reflect the needs and predilections of this consort of spiritual director and companion guides and explorers.

The most important refrain that I hear from the unaffiliated is that they are seeking spiritual authenticity. The essence of spirituality that is, that longing for transcendence, for understanding of what remains when these temporary vessels that we occupy dissipate and vanish, a deeper meaning and purpose, variously referred to as God/Brahman/Tao/Allah/The Universe, or "The Ground of all Being," among others. Needless to say, it comes by so many names, and manifests in everything we do.

Embedded in this, at least for some of us, are the paradoxes and seeming contradictions of looking for the freedom to commune purely with ultimate essence, and the rigor and discipline that is required to get there for most of us. Traditional religions, whatever their flaws, provide well worn and established paths for getting

there: prayer, meditation, hermitages, retreats, monasteries, synagogues, churches, mosques and temples of all kinds, socially engaged efforts, Caminos, et al. By contrast, the path of spiritual independents can be far more lonely, one in which you can end up with nothing to rely on, and no one to depend on.

Of course, among the ranks of the unaffiliated are also the "formerly affiliated," a large and growing segment of people who previously followed a particular faith tradition, and for a wide variety of reasons have abandoned that tradition to make their own way. A lonely as well, to be sure, for different reasons.

There is also a third category that we can label "multi-faith" or "multi-spiritual," for those individuals integrating key components from various traditions, finding the points of commonality, and deeply immersing with them, and beyond them.

Among many others, another unaffiliated grouping comprises those who literally, and liberally, follow the beat of their own drums, and commune with the Beyond, or however they might name it, through dance, music, poetry, swimming, singing, among many other possible entry points.

In all of these endeavours, and whatever the entry point, community remains paramount, as we need each other to make our way through. And, along these lines, the modality of spiritual companionship plays a very special role.

One on one relationships create a particular kind of deep intimacy that is especially conducive to mirroring and connecting with the eternal. There is a unique symmetry and architecture in these relationships. And their beauty is that no assumptions about starting or ending points need to be made, as it's all about the journeys each of us are undertaking. And because we recognize that each journey is unique, we can be faithful mirrors as companions, without making any assumptions about faith traditions, or spiritual orientations, or lack thereof. Unless those companions want to! But that choice is entirely in the hands of each individual.

In this way, all of us, wherever we begin and end, can unite in our spiritual pursuits.

A photograph of two women sitting and talking. The woman on the left is wearing a black hijab and a black long-sleeved top. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a white ribbed sweater. They are both gesturing with their hands as they speak. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

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“Within each of us is a divine treasure, and if we hope to discover it, we need to go deep into the heart of who we are.”

“To find that treasure requires that we work like a wood carver who does not work by adding but by cutting away, removing what is rough to reveal what shimmers from within.”

-Meister Eckhart
(as translated by Mark Burrows)

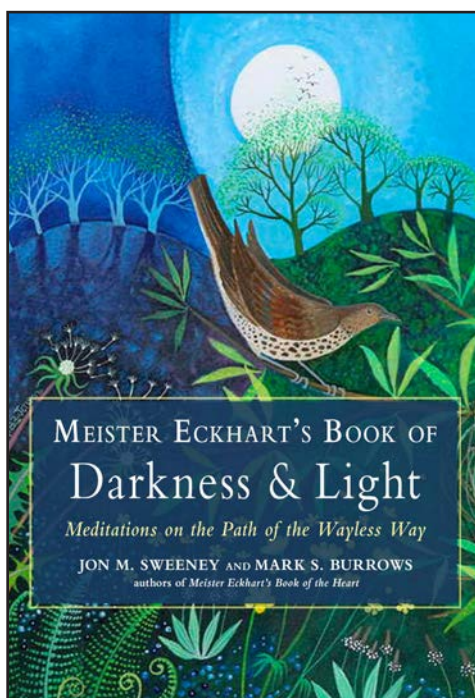
MEISTER ECKHART’S BOOK OF DARKNESS & LIGHT: MEDITATIONS ON THE PATH OF THE WAYLESS WAY

by Jon M. Sweeney and Mark S. Burrows / Reviewed by Greg Richardson

Note: This book review was originally published in Presence Journal, Volume 29 Issue 2, June 2023. We are sharing it here as we have launched registrations for a [special 4-part webinar series with the authors on spiritual companionship and Meister Eckhart’s wisdom](#).

This collection of theological reflections in poetic form is drawn from the writings and sermons of fourteenth-century priest and mystic Eckhart von Hochheim, better known as Meister Eckhart. Meister Eckhart’s Book of Darkness & Light: Meditations on the Path of the Wayless Way is a collaboration between Jon M. Sweeney, an independent scholar and writer, and Mark S. Burrows, a poet, translator, and professor of religion and literature. It follows on their earlier books, Meister Eckhart’s Book of the Heart and Meister Eckhart’s Book of Secrets, which also distill the teachings of Meister Eckhart into short meditations.

In “Room Enough,” we are reminded that: We talk and talk and talk, and all this brings us no closer to wisdom.



If you wish to understand the deep truth that is in God and in yourself,

keep still and listen; become poor in yourself, desiring nothing and

knowing nothing and possessing nothing. Only when you are empty

of all your chatter will there be room enough in you to receive

the gift of wisdom you long for. (65)

Meister Eckhart himself did not write poetry, as far as we know. In these books, Burrows and Sweeney transform Meister Eckhart’s theological teaching into poetry, which sparks reflection in us. Many of us want to follow a spiritual path that is

clearly marked and has measurable steps. We are not comfortable with the “wayless way” Meister Eckhart describes. This book is a poetic manual for spiritual life for those who are open to it. In Meister Eckhart’s Book of Darkness & Light, the reader receives starting points to fuel contemplation, such as in “The Power of Practice”:

continued on next page

To live a life grounded in God,
you don't need information;
you need to be informed by
the spark of divine presence
you always carry within you.
But you'll have to practice
this, with concentration,
like you would if you were
learning a skill or an art. (102)

Though Meister Eckhart's background was in the Christian and European traditions, the poetic meditations in Meister Eckhart's *Book of Darkness & Light* are accessible to people from a variety of spiritual experiences. All three books can be valuable tools for anyone who accompanies others on their spiritual journeys. They translate what can be intimidating theological treatises into more contemplative forms. The passion Burrows and Sweeney have for Meister Eckhart guides them to explore insights and questions without losing the threads of his original thinking.

This book will be a significant resource as you work with others as a spiritual director or companion, and in your own reading and reflection. It is an excellent introduction to Meister Eckhart and to contemplative mystic reflection.

Newburyport, MA:

Hampton Roads Publishing, 2023

230 Pages

CAD \$23.38

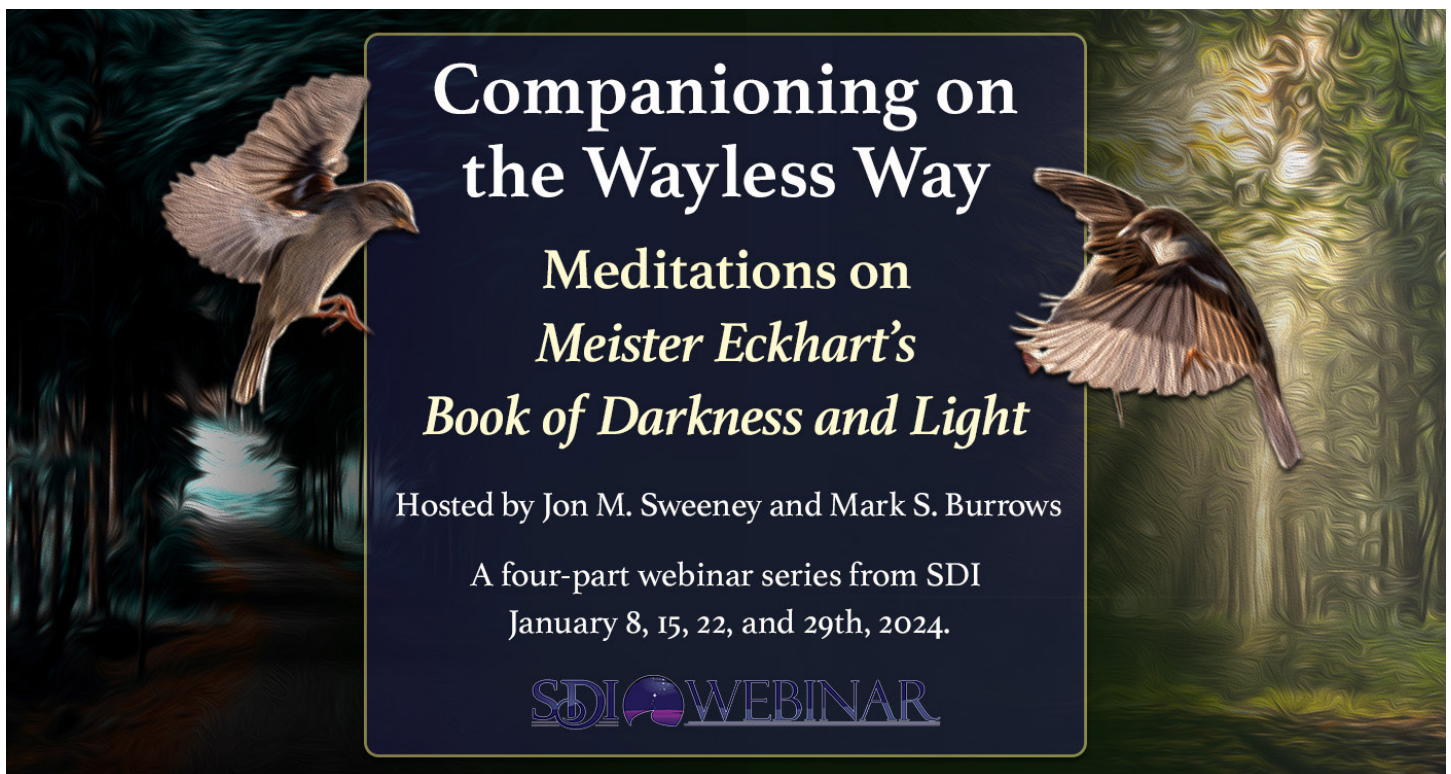
GBP £13.45

USD \$16.95

Original review linked here: <https://www.sdicompanions.org/media/presence/presence-29-2-june-2023/meister-eckharts-book/>

We invite you to us on a transformative journey through the mystical teachings of Meister Eckhart in an accessible, experiential collaboration with the authors of Meister Eckhart's Book of Darkness and Light – Meditations on the Path of the Wayless Way.

In this upcoming four-part webinar, authors Jon M. Sweeney and Mark S. Burrows will guide and facilitate our community in a spiritual adventure of poetry, dialogue, and reflection on the mystical teachings of Eckhart.





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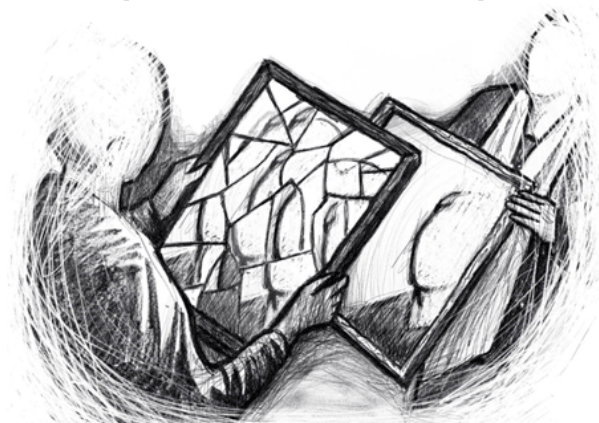
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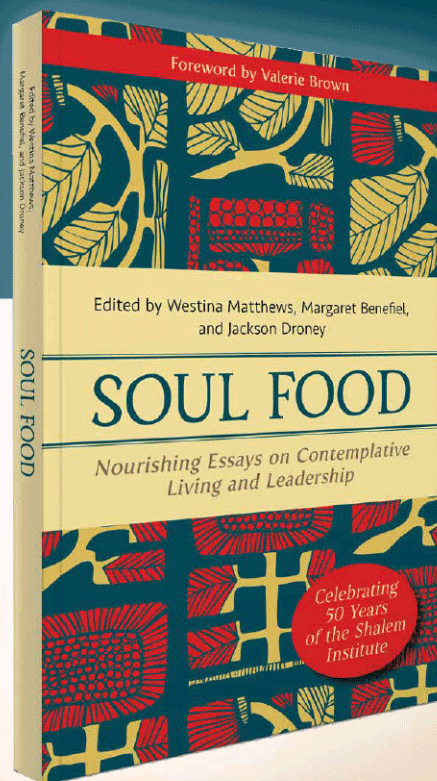
—Fr. Richard Rohr, author of *Falling Upward* and founder of the
Center for Action and Contemplation

**“If you have any affinity for the contemplative life, you’ll
find this book a compelling companion as we work and
pray for the Beloved Community.”** —Parker J. Palmer, author
of *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, and *On the Brink of Everything*



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A BURNING BUSH BEFORE BED

Love runs deep in the evening when a day
is done,
like two streams racing to greet each other
at the end of a forest.

Two lives flowing,
 forming,
as eyes closed witness the shifting
shadows of
 two flames flickering
in between.

Two hearts wondering,
 whispering,
 “What incredible things
have you done today?”

Two ears upright curious,
 cascading to ask,
 “How can I hold the
struggle with you this night?”

Two souls savoring a day,
sitting across from a love lasting,
 enduring,
 meeting in
between a doorway that has opened into
a burning bush.

Sandals removed for the night
as holy ground has been found.

Lungs breathe deep.
Candle smoke rises.
Lights go dim.
And the call to rest summons a
circadian farewell to the dreams of day.



Chad Abbott is an ordained clergy in the United Church of Christ and a spiritual director. Co-author of *Incline Your Ear: Cultivating Spiritual Awakening in Congregations*, Chad lives in Indianapolis with his wife Shannon, two kids Solomon and Isabel, and dogs Zoe and Finn. chad.abbottSD@gmail.com



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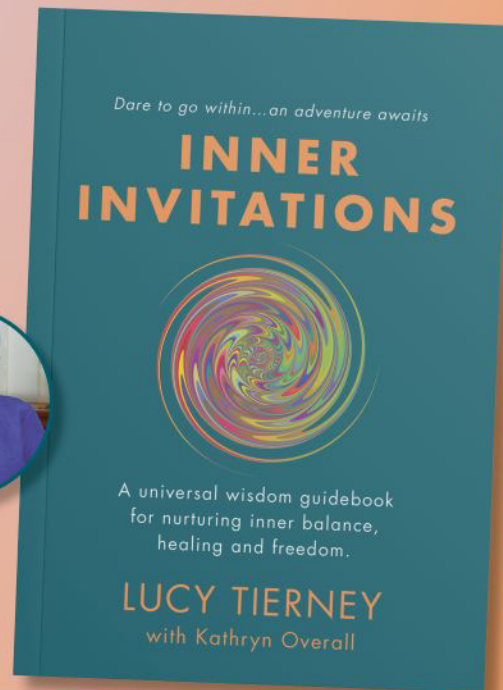


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A LIFETIME OF DAYS

O God of endless song,
you sang the world into being in six
days
and took time to rest on the seventh,
survey your work,
and say,
Look at that.
That was good.

So we figure
six days should just about do it
for any large project.
We forget that to you,
a day is an eon, and an eon is a day.
We forget that big jobs—
a life's work, generational healing—
are done step by small step,
over a very long time.

Forty years of wandering to reach a
promised land.
Seventy years of exile in Babylon.
Centuries to embrace the glorious
diversity
of all of us,
made in your image.

And a lifetime of days,
joyful and sad and ordinary days,
given to each person.
A lifetime of Sundays,
showing up in our places of worship
to find community,

to find each other,
and in each other,
to find you.

God of endless song,
of mornings that dawn and dawn:
Help us keep singing through Earth's
laughter and tears.
Help us keep marching when the road
seems long.

Help us keep showing up.
Help us keep finding each other.

Help us mark our milestones—
the baptisms, graduations,
weddings, anniversaries, deaths.

Help us recognize
all we have done
and all those we've done it with.
Help us take the time to rest sometimes,
survey our work,
and say,
Look at that.
That was good.

Christa Gainor, an editor for more than thirty years, is a proofreader for Presence and copyeditor of GIA Quarterly, among many other roles. She lives near Detroit, Michigan, USA, with her husband and son and is a ruling elder at Northminster Presbyterian Church of Troy, Michigan.
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PUBLISHER: Spiritual Directors International

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND EDITOR:

Rev. Seifu Anil Singh-Molares, MTS

PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR: Matt Whitney

SUBMISSIONS: listen@sdiworld.org

ADVERTISING: ads@sdiworld.org

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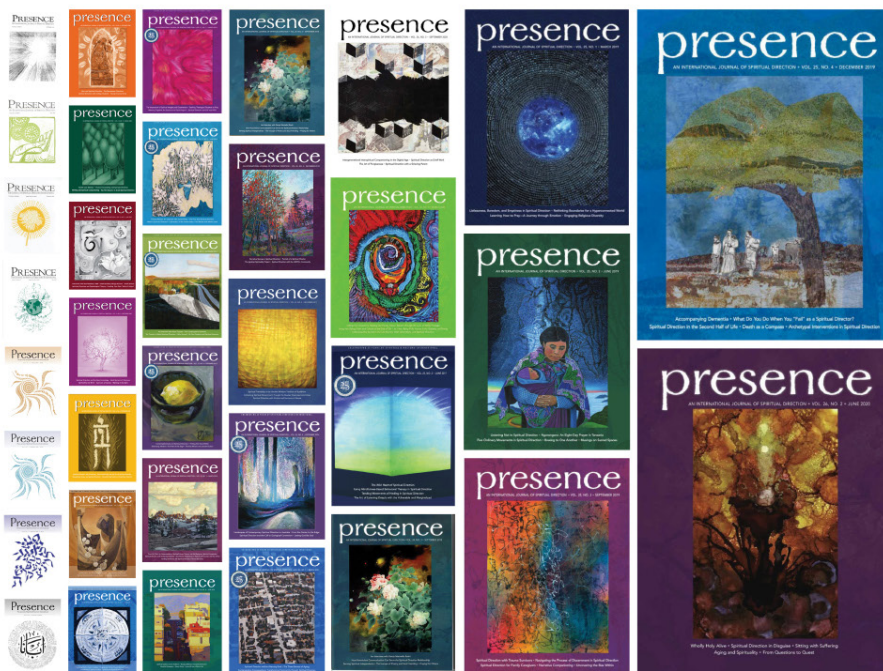
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“To bear and not to own;
to act and not lay claim;
to do the work and let it go:
for just letting it go is what makes it stay.”

— Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching



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