



A Life with Room for Wonder

A practical guide to faith, meaning, gratitude, and peace in ordinary days

Make space for what matters.

SHAD EDDIE MONGRUE

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Every statistic, study finding and documented example is numbered and listed in the Sources, with a link to the page it came from. Each was checked word for word against its source in October 2026. Stories marked "composite example" are illustrations drawn from common situations; their names and details are not real people. Stories marked "documented example" come from the cited sources.

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An Invitation

Your day can be full before you have had a chance to ask what it is full of. There are messages to answer, meals to think about, people who need you, and plans that refuse to stay put. In the middle of all that, questions about meaning can seem like luxuries for a quieter life. But an inner life is not a retreat from ordinary responsibilities. It can help you notice what matters as you meet them, and make a little room for wonder, honesty, and choice.

People come to spirituality by many paths, and some do not use that word for themselves at all. In a Pew Research Center survey, 70% of U.S. adults said they think of themselves as spiritual or that spirituality is very important in their lives¹. That does not mean everyone believes the same things, or that a spiritual life must look religious. It does suggest that questions of connection, purpose, and what we hold dear are part of many people's lives, even when they are not easy to fit into a schedule.

For some people, spiritual life is rooted in a faith tradition. For others, it takes shape through reflection, values, relationships, or the feeling of belonging to something larger than the self. Among spiritual Americans, 74% say connection with something bigger than themselves is essential to spirituality². You do not have to arrive at a settled definition before you begin. Curiosity is enough to start: What gives you a sense of depth? What do you trust? What would you like your everyday choices to express?

The word peace can sound like a promise that life will become calm if you follow the right steps. This book makes no such promise. People can have meaningful practices and still face uncertainty, grief, exhaustion, conflict, or doubt. Still, a small pause can give you a place to meet the day as it is. Pew reported that 44% of U.S. adults feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being at least once or twice a month¹. That is a description of people's experience, not proof that any particular practice will produce it for you.

A spiritual practice need not be grand to be real. It might be a few quiet breaths before you open your laptop, a prayer in the car, a line of reflective reading, or a moment of attention while you wash a cup. You might write down what you are grateful for and also admit what hurts. You might ask whether a decision reflects your values, then make one small adjustment.

The point is not to turn every ordinary moment into a lesson. It is to be a little more present to the life you are already living.

That presence can include delight, but it must also make room for difficult truth. Gratitude does not require you to call harm good. Belonging does not require you to surrender your conscience. Faith does not forbid questions, and uncertainty does not make you a failure. A life with room for wonder is not a life without hard seasons. It is a life in which meaning, care, and honest attention may sit beside what remains unresolved. This book invites you to explore that possibility gently, in ways that fit your beliefs and your actual days.

Reasons to fall in love with this subject

- **It gives ordinary life more depth** Spiritual health does not have to wait for a retreat, a perfect morning, or a dramatic turning point. You can explore meaning in the small decisions already in front of you: how you listen, what you protect, and where you offer care. That makes the subject worth loving not as another task to complete, but as a way of noticing that ordinary days carry questions and values worth taking seriously.
- **It welcomes honest questions** You do not need to pretend certainty to belong in these pages. You can name what you believe, what you doubt, what you inherited, and what you are still considering. Questions can clarify what matters rather than cancel it. The goal is not to steer you toward one answer, but to help you become more truthful about your own commitments and more respectful of the questions other people carry.
- **It makes room for wonder** Attention can open a small window in a crowded day. A patch of light, a melody, a tree on your route, or a kind exchange may invite gratitude or delight. You are not required to feel uplifted on command, and noticing beauty does not erase what is painful. Wonder is valuable because it lets you meet some moments with interest instead of hurrying past them.
- **It brings values down to earth** Purpose does not have to arrive as a grand assignment. It can appear in how you do your work, care for someone, make something, or respond when a choice tests your values. This book helps you move from a broad intention, such as being compassionate or fair, toward a small action you can actually take. That

is not a guarantee of easy choices; it is a practical way to make values more visible.

- **It can help you seek connection wisely** Shared practices and communities may offer companionship, support, and a place to explore what matters. They can also involve differences, expectations, and the need for boundaries. Loving belonging does not mean fitting yourself into every group or agreeing with every voice. It means looking for connection where you can participate with care while keeping room for your conscience and your individuality.
- **It can adapt when life changes** A practice that fits one season may not fit the next. Work, family responsibilities, health, loss, or a shift in belief can change what is possible. A flexible spiritual rhythm lets you begin again without treating a missed day as a moral verdict. The invitation is to notice what nourishes you, what no longer fits, and what small form of attention you can make room for now.

BY THE END OF THIS BOOK, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO

- You will be able to describe what spiritual health means to you, whether it is rooted in faith, meaning, values, belonging, or a combination.
- You will be able to notice beauty and moments of wonder without demanding that every day feel positive.
- You will be able to reflect on belief, doubt, tradition, and commitment with honesty and curiosity.
- You will be able to choose a realistic practice of prayer, silence, breath awareness, or reflective reading.
- You will be able to practice gratitude while still naming pain, injustice, and uncertainty.
- You will be able to connect your values to small choices in work, care, creativity, and service.
- You will be able to seek supportive belonging while recognizing the importance of boundaries and appropriate professional care.
- You will be able to build and revise a flexible daily, weekly, or seasonal rhythm without treating setbacks as failure.

How to use this book

You can read this book in order, or begin with the chapter that meets the question you are carrying today. Each chapter offers ideas to consider and practices to try, not rules you must follow. If a suggestion fits your beliefs and circumstances, adapt it. If it does not, set it aside. A short, sincere practice is more useful than an elaborate routine that adds pressure or asks you to pretend.

Try one small practice at a time. You might pause before a familiar transition, read a brief passage slowly, or write a sentence about what mattered in your day. Notice what feels nourishing, what feels awkward, and what you would change. You can return to a practice later, choose a different one, or take a break. The aim is not perfect consistency; it is a more attentive relationship with your own questions, values, and daily life.

HOW THIS BOOK HANDLES EVIDENCE

This book offers education and reflection, not personal professional advice or a substitute for medical or mental health care. It makes no guarantee that a practice will bring peace or change your circumstances; experiences and beliefs differ. Numbered citations mark claims drawn from the supplied sources. Examples described as composite are fictional illustrations of common situations, not accounts of named real people; documented examples are limited to details supported by cited sources. Where evidence is limited or does not establish cause, the book says so.

The Life Beneath the To-Do List

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

At 7:18 on a Wednesday morning, Maya has one sock on, a mug cooling beside the sink, and three messages waiting on her phone. The day is already asking things of her. A child needs a ride. A meeting needs notes. Someone has to remember the groceries. She pauses because the light coming through the kitchen window has turned the steam above her tea gold. For a few seconds, she notices the warmth of the mug, the quiet before the house wakes, and her own breath. Nothing on the list has disappeared. But she has, briefly, stopped being only the person responsible for getting it all done.

That small pause is not a miracle, and Maya is not suddenly serene. She may still forget the groceries. Yet she has made room for a different kind of question: What matters to me as I move through this day? Your answer might involve God, a tradition, love of family, a commitment to fairness, or simply a sense that life holds more than the next task. An inner life begins wherever you give that question honest attention.

The person doing the tasks is still a person

Busy routines are not shallow by definition. Cooking dinner, answering a colleague, paying a bill, helping a relative get to an appointment: these can be meaningful acts. But when every day becomes a relay race between obligations, it is easy to lose contact with the person doing all that running. You may know what needs doing and still feel unsure what you care about, what gives you steadiness, or what you want your choices to express.

That is one reason an inner life matters. It gives you a place to notice what is happening inside you and to consider how you want to meet what is happening outside you. It does not require a silent cabin, a free afternoon, or a perfectly organized planner. Sometimes it begins with recognizing, while

loading the dishwasher, that you are grateful for the people who ate with you. Sometimes it begins with admitting that you are tired and need help.

Spirituality is one name people use for this dimension of life, though they do not all mean the same thing by it. In a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, 70% of U.S. adults said they think of themselves as spiritual or that spirituality is very important in their lives.¹ That broad response does not tell us that everyone shares one definition. It does suggest that many people consider questions of depth and connection part of ordinary human life, not an obscure interest reserved for specialists.

A wide doorway, not one required label

For some people, spiritual health is closely connected to faith and religious practice. For others, it is rooted in meaning, values, awe, or belonging. Some hold several of those at once; some are uncertain, changing their minds, or wary of labels. You do not have to settle the vocabulary before you begin paying attention to what feels significant and trustworthy in your life.

You might ask: What do I turn toward when I feel lost? What do I believe I owe other people? What gives me a sense of connection beyond my own immediate worries? These are not exam questions. You are allowed to answer, “I don’t know,” or to find that your answer changes with experience. Curiosity is not a failure of commitment. It can be a way of taking your commitments seriously enough to look at them honestly.

For spiritual Americans, connection with something bigger than oneself is a common part of the picture: 74% say it is essential to what being spiritual means to them.² That finding may resonate with you, but it does not prescribe what the “something bigger” must be. It might mean God, a community, the natural world, humanity, or a sense of responsibility to life beyond your own convenience. The point is not to borrow someone else’s answer; it is to notice what connection means in your own.

Meaning can live in ordinary places

A meaningful life does not have to look impressive from the outside. It may take shape in how you listen to a friend, how carefully you do work that no one applauds, or how you repair a mistake instead of defending it. Purpose can be less like a single grand assignment and more like a direction you practice: kindness, courage, honesty, care, or service.

The Surgeon General's advisory on social connection describes relationships, particularly with family and close friends, as a leading source of meaning, purpose, and motivation for adults around the world.³ That is a reminder that meaning is often relational. It can be found in showing up, receiving help, or sharing a ritual that says, without a speech, "We belong to one another." Faith-based groups can also provide social contact, support, meaning, purpose, and belonging around shared values and beliefs.³ A community may be one source of connection, though it is not the only one.

None of this means every relationship is nourishing, every family is safe, or every community fits. Belonging is not the same as surrendering your judgment. You can value connection and still need boundaries. You can care for others without taking responsibility for everything. An inner life helps you notice both the pull toward relationship and the limits that protect your dignity.

Make room for wonder without demanding a mood

Wonder is a form of attention: noticing that the rain has made the pavement shine, that a song carries you back to a place you had forgotten, or that a difficult conversation went a little better because you stayed present. These moments do not need to be dramatic. They ask only that, now and then, you let something be more than background.

Attention can make room for gratitude and delight, but it cannot guarantee them. Some days the rain is just one more reason your shoes are wet. Some seasons contain grief, illness, injustice, or uncertainty that should not be polished into a lesson. A spiritual practice is not a demand that you call pain beautiful. It can instead help you tell the truth: this hurts, and I am still willing to notice what is here.

Try treating a pause as a doorway rather than another task to complete. Look out a window while the kettle heats. Name one value you want to bring to the next conversation. Sit quietly for a few breaths before opening your messages. If the moment feels ordinary, that is fine. You are not trying to manufacture a revelation. You are practicing a little more presence in the life you already have.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Research spotlight

A review of studies on spiritual well-being describes it as a many-sided idea that can include meaning or purpose, inner peace and harmony, and strength or comfort drawn from faith.⁴ Across most of the reviewed studies, overall spiritual well-being was positively associated with quality of life, although the association differed across physical, social, emotional, and functional areas.⁴ That is a reason to take the subject seriously, not a promise that a spiritual practice will make you healthier or happier. The review did not establish that spiritual well-being causes quality-of-life outcomes.⁴ It also cautioned that many studies were cross-sectional, so the strength of the associations may change over time.⁴ In plain terms, these findings describe patterns, not guarantees or a prescription. Your circumstances matter, and spiritual reflection can sit alongside practical help, medical care, and honest conversations rather than replacing them.

A life example

A DOCUMENTED EXAMPLE

A value made visible in community

Wangari Maathai started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya in 1977. The movement focused on healing deforested areas and empowering women by teaching them how to plant trees.⁵ Its work also addressed causes of environmental degradation that included injustice and political corruption.⁵ The movement is described as an example of how community organization and empowerment can contribute to change across scales.⁵

This is not a story about a person finding an easy answer to life's hardest questions, and the available account does not tell us what each participant privately believed. It does offer a grounded example of a value becoming an action shared with others. Care for the environment, concern for justice, and community effort can meet in practical work. You may not be called to organize a movement. Your own next step might be smaller: helping a neighbor, supporting a local effort, or choosing work that aligns a little more closely with what you value. The useful question is not whether

your action is large enough to be inspiring. It is whether it gives your values a place to live.

TRY THIS

A two-minute check-in

Use this brief pause to reconnect with what matters, without requiring yourself to feel peaceful or certain.

1. Choose an ordinary transition, such as sitting down for lunch or closing your laptop.
2. Take one comfortable breath and notice what is present in your body and mind.
3. Ask, “What matters to me in the next part of this day?” Let the first honest answer be enough.
4. Choose one small action that expresses that value, such as listening without checking your phone or asking someone for help.
5. At the end of the day, notice what you learned. If you forgot to practice, begin again at another transition.

Myths and honest truths

- **Myth:** Spiritual health has to mean following a religion. **Truth:** Faith and religious practice are important sources of spiritual life for many people, but people also explore meaning, values, connection, and belonging in different ways. You can begin with honest attention, even if your beliefs are unsettled.
- **Myth:** If I am spiritually healthy, I should feel calm and grateful most of the time. **Truth:** A meaningful inner life makes room for joy and gratitude without requiring constant positivity. Anger, grief, doubt, and exhaustion can be real parts of your experience, not evidence that you have failed.
- **Myth:** A spiritual practice should fix my problems. **Truth:** Reflection or ritual may help you find steadiness or direction, but neither promises to remove hardship. Spiritual practice can accompany practical support and professional care; it is not a replacement for them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Your inner life can begin in an ordinary pause, not a perfect routine.
- Spiritual health may involve faith, meaning, values, connection, or belonging.
- Curiosity gives you room to explore beliefs and doubts without rushing to a verdict.
- Wonder can invite gratitude without asking you to deny pain.
- Small choices can give everyday life a visible connection to what you value.

REFLECT

- 1. When do you feel most connected to what matters to you?*
- 2. What value would you like to bring more deliberately into an ordinary day?*
- 3. What kind of pause or practice feels inviting rather than burdensome right now?*

Nine more chapters are waiting

You've read the Introduction and Chapter 1. The full 92-page book continues with:

- CH. 2 Wonder Is a Form of Attention
- CH. 3 Name What You Trust
- CH. 4 Stillness for Real Life
- CH. 5 Gratitude Without Pretending
- CH. 6 Purpose in the Everyday
- CH. 7 When the Season Is Hard
- CH. 8 Belonging Without Losing Yourself
- CH. 9 When Spirituality Goes Sideways
- CH. 10 A Practice That Can Grow

Plus the research analysis "What the Evidence Says", a 30-day practice plan, a glossary, and every source with full research credits.

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Sources for these chapters

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