

# Defining Moments

How flashes of insight may lend new meaning to your life.

Yet another manuscript had come back rejected—on Madeleine's 40th birthday, no less. One moment she was bawling her head off, so dejected that she threw a cover over her typewriter in a gesture of renunciation. The next, she was seized by the realization that her mind was already at work on a new novel. As Madeleine L'Engle, who went on to author many books, recorded that day in her journal: "I had to write. I had no choice in the matter."

Such flashes of insight are what Jamie Keshet, Ed.D., a psychologist at Riverside Counseling Center in Newton, Massachusetts, refers to as experiences of "personal knowing" or "defining moments." After analyzing more than 100 excerpts from women's memoirs, journals and autobiographies, Keshet concluded that these revelations often mark critical turning points, possibly leading to a career switch or simply a deeply intuitive affirmation of the "rightness" of an important choice—such as a move or a job or a romance. "These experiences tell us how closely we're living to the blueprint of who we are, as defined by our most cherished values and passions," says Keshet. "Heeding their messages may bring a sense of renewed purpose in life."

Although highly individual, defining moments are usually characterized by the following:

- An acute awareness of your surroundings, coupled with intense feelings, such as elation or a sudden surge of energy. One woman, explaining an impulsive decision to move to Vermont, tells of waking

up at dawn on a visit there and charging into a field. "I had this huge grin on my face," she recalls.

- Seeing something in a radically different way. In the excerpts she studied, Keshet found that travel or seeking new natural sur-

roundings often precipitates the shift in perspective—possibly, she says, "because you're literally changing your view of the world."

- A suddenness of thought. The women Keshet studied said things such as "The truth burst upon my mind"; "It struck me"; or "At one stroke, I realized..."

Of course, these experiences can't be forced. If we take time to reflect, though, Keshet believes they may come more often—and offer solutions to challenges that evade our analytical minds. As the woman who acted on her intu-

ition to relocate to Vermont puts it, "I didn't know why I was making the decision, but since then, my life has fallen beautifully into place." —Kathleen McAuliffe



It may strike at any time, but a bolt of life-altering inspiration can be a powerful wake-up call

## The GOD SQUAD

Can a person be spiritual without believing in God?



Rabbi Marc Gellman Father Tom Hartman

With *spirituality* the buzzword of the moment, many people have been inspired to look inward—and are questioning what they find there. For some, spirituality is tied to religion. Others consider it a connection to something larger than themselves. The God Squad concedes that a belief in God isn't required for a spiritual life, but they're certain that it enriches the experience.

In one premarital counseling session, Father Tom Hartman met a man who didn't believe in God, which troubled his fiancée. "Then he started talking about surfing in the most mystical, spiritual terms," recalls Hartman. "I told him 'You're fine.' He was pointed in the right direction. He was connected to Earth and something beyond."

People like the young groom-to-be are more creative about expressing their inner

life, explains Hartman. Others are comfortable with the structure an organized religion affords, drawing strength and support from the rituals of the community.

"There are many paths up the mountain," says Rabbi Marc Gellman. "To me, though, spirituality is a life lived in the presence of God. It's the realization that you're not an individual organism in a chaotic universe."

Even those who practice an organized religion may find their quest hampered by unanswered questions. Not to worry, assures Hartman: "Doubt can be a healthy part of your religious life."

There is also room for choice. "In his introduction to our book, *How Do You Spell God?*, the Dalai Lama said that the reason there are many religions is the same reason there are many foods," recounts Gellman. "If there were only bread, the people who ate rice would feel left out. And the reason those people eat rice is because it grows best where they live. Follow what grows best where you live."

Whether that's the framework of organized religion or the free-form embrace of nature, spirituality is about "the energy of love," says Gellman. He cautions, though, against the assumption that loving others is all that's needed for a spiritual life. "Love needs context. Just as a plant can't take root in the air, love can't take root without soil."

"Organized religions provide the soil for love to grow," Gellman adds. "They have thousands of years of evidence of creating a path to the mountaintop." —Elizabeth O'Brien