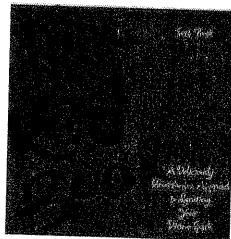


Four authors connect practice to belief

IN Profile

Sera Beak



Spiritual Cowgirl

Sera Beak's spiritual journey began when she was a girl. Feeling limited by her upbringing in the Catholic Church, she began studying different religions and forms of spirituality on her own, then at Skidmore College, Harvard Divinity School and in field studies abroad. While she found much that fascinated her, her girlfriends and sister, eager to glean the wisdom, couldn't find books that interested them. They couldn't relate to the bland, New Agey writing.

Now, in a style that her peers will find familiar—it's intimate, irreverent and sprinkled with pop culture references—the 31-year-old first-time author has written *The Red Book: A Deliciously Unorthodox Approach to Igniting Your Divine Spark* (Jossey-Bass, June). The book empowers and encourages women to establish a relationship with the divine, which to Beak is both the self and a higher power.

The Red Book is infused with Beak's own spiritual experiences, as diverse as dancing with Sufi mystics in Turkey, chatting with the Dalai Lama in India and using Zen, Tibetan and New Age practices for meditation. The title refers to a large red journal her sister gave her shortly after their grandfather died. The prayers and collages she created in it brought a deeper sense of the divine and helped heal her pain.

There are few spirituality books on the market that appeal to young women, "particularly 20- and 30-something women who may not be that drawn to one spiritual tradition," says Julianna Gustafson, editor of religion and spirituality at Jossey-Bass. "You see people saying they are spiritual and not religious," Gustafson says. "That's the kind of audience that will find Sera's book really appealing."

Because Beak's book is nontraditional, the house will follow an unorthodox marketing plan, says Gustafson, who is Beak's editor. The strategy begins with the book's design, which is a 7" x 7" square and has vibrant interior graphics, making it look like a gift book and a "fun" read. The plan will target traditional media and women's magazines as well as Web sites devoted to spirituality and to fashion, and local and national radio and TV.

Just as Beak has found solace in experimenting with different religious and spiritual traditions, she hopes her readers will feel encouraged to try what resonates with them. A self-described "spiritual cowgirl," Beak rides whatever suits her, but does it carefully, staying on only if it helps her grow emotionally and spiritually.

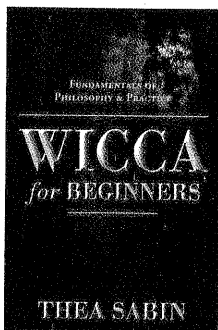
Critics call this sampling of different religious and spiritual practices a cafeteria-style approach to religion, and Beak addresses this criticism in the book. She encourages women to sample different religious and spiritual practices, but to research their roots and have respect for the traditions. She hopes her readers will learn to better trust their intuition, which, she cautions, takes practice. Divinity is a dynamic, evolving energy, she says. "I say in the book, divinity likes to go topless. I'm not going to let

my ego or my fear or my feeling that somebody's going to think I'm watering it down prevent me from having the truest and most authentic experience I can."
—Joanna Corman

Thea Sabin



In the Broom Closet



When a Llewellyn publicist told Thea Sabin that *PW* had chosen her as one of four authors to profile for this issue, she was thrilled that her book, *Wicca for Beginners* (Apr.), would get coveted media attention. But she was anxious about attention being paid to her. This is because debut author Sabin (a pseudonym) is not yet "out of the broom closet," the phrase Wiccans and Neo-Pagans use to describe revealing their spiritual activities to their co-workers and acquaintances.

"I know at least one person who lost his job when it came out that he was Wiccan, which is one reason I've kept quiet," explains Sabin, who lives in the Pacific Northwest.

So why write a book? *PW* asks. Sabin laughs and says that Llewellyn, her former employer, approached her to do an introductory, "nondenominational" primer on Wicca. When Sabin started thinking about it as something she could give to the students who seek her out but aren't deemed a good fit to join her coven, she saw the need. "This is something I can recommend to people as a great place to start, until they find the teacher or group that can carry them further," she says. Sabin herself is trained in a British Traditional path, but the book spans the spectrum of many different lineages and groups. It also covers Wiccan ethics, introductory spell work,

holidays and Sabbats, and deities.

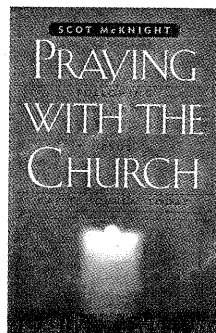
Although Sabin is young—in her late 30s—she has been teaching Wicca for almost 20 years, almost since the time she started practicing it seriously herself in college. She has a master's degree in education and wrote the book almost as a training manual, based on how she has taught her beginning students through the years. She says she also has "an idea percolating" for a possible future book. "There are books out there on how to run a group or a coven, but there aren't many about how to *teach* Wicca," she says.

For now, Sabin will focus on promoting this book, though not locally. "I don't mind going out and promoting this outside of the city in which I live, because I'm not going to run into one of my co-workers there," she says. Llewellyn publicist Steven Pomije says that such concerns are not unusual for pagan and Wiccan authors. Even the most recognizable names in the field—Silver RavenWolf, Grimassi and Dorothy Morrison—use pseudonyms, even if they are less reticent about touring and speaking than Sabin. Pomije says that the promotion plans for Sabin's book involve appearances at smaller, independent pagan bookshops and advertising in publications such as *NewWitch*, *PanGaia*, *SageWoman* and *Prediction* (in the U.K.). —Jana Riess

Scot McKnight



Hitting His Stride



With a score of books under his belt, Scot McKnight can hardly be called a neophyte like many of his younger colleagues in the emerging church movement. The North Park University professor has done academic titles with Eerdmans, Fortress, Westminster John Knox, Baker and Bay-

lor University Press. But it wasn't until 2004, when Paraclete published his general-audience book *The Jesus Creed*, that McKnight found his wider audience and became a highly sought-after voice in the emerging church.

McKnight came to Paraclete through acquisitions editor Lil Copan, the sister of two of his former students who are now biblical scholars. In fact, Paraclete associate publisher Jon Sweeney says that this substantial network of former McKnight students who are now scholars and pastors has been instrumental in getting the word out about both *The Jesus Creed* and McKnight's 2005 follow-up, *Embracing Grace*. "He's been a professor for so many years at Trinity [Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill.] and North Park. His market is the emerging church, and thoughtful pastors among evangelical churches who look for books to use in adult study," says Sweeney.

Sweeney says that Paraclete has built a database of those interested in McKnight's work. "Every time we pick up a new contact or pastor who is enthusiastic about Scot's books or is using them in the church, we add them to the database. We keep those people up to date on the books, Scot's blog and his travel schedule."

McKnight's two books with Paraclete are about to be joined by a third, which will be his 21st in all. *Praying with the Church: Developing a Daily Rhythm for Spiritual Formation*. (May) grew out of a conversation with Copan in a restaurant early in 2005. "We outlined the book on a napkin," McKnight chuckles. He wanted to write *Praying with the Church* because he saw Christians engaging in a "lot of struggle" about prayer—"how often, how long, when to pray, how to pray. The problem in most of these struggles is the intensity that is required to create all of your own prayers. People hear wonderful stories about other people who pray for two hours at a time, and then they feel guilty because they don't measure up."

McKnight wanted to introduce evangelicals, who tend to be more familiar with spontaneous prayer, to the concept

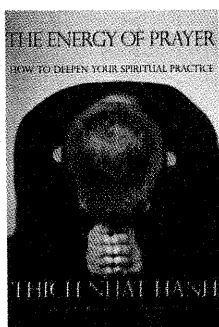
of fixed-hour prayer. Rather than confining Christians, he says, the practice is actually very liberating. "There is tremendous freedom from guilt gained by just establishing sacred rhythms of prayer for morning, midday and evening," he says. "It gives people the freedom to say things that are deep within their own heart, when sometimes they don't even know it."

—Jana Riess

Thich Nhat Hanh



'You don't need to talk to teach'



Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh turns 80 this year, and continues his lifetime of work. The Zen Buddhist monk, who speaks Vietnamese, French, English and some Chinese, answered *PW*'s questions via e-mail from Plum Village, France, the monastic community he founded in 1982.

Nhat Hanh's newest book, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice* (Parallax Press, May), adds to a library of more than 100 titles he has authored, 60 of them in English. The small, prayer book-size volume contains Buddhist meditations and prayers, and continues his exploration of the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. Prayer is a practice that reaches across religious traditions and, although Buddhism is not a theistic religion, Buddhists do pray.

"Praying is asking for help, and in the Buddhist tradition, we ask the Buddha to help us," he explains. "If our friends in Christianity see that God is the Spirit—the collective mind from which everything manifests—then the distance separating Buddhism and Christianity would not be much at all."

In Nhat Hanh's teaching and practice, prayer is an action of both body and mind. For that reason, prayer without concentration is ineffective. Walking with mindfulness—or anything done without having the attention wander, from dishwashing to peeling an orange—can be prayer.

For Nhat Hanh, prayer is intimately related to peacemaking. In 1969 he represented the Buddhist peace delegation at the Paris Peace Accords convened to end the war in Vietnam. A lifelong peace activist, he has worked with Israeli and Palestinian groups and offered peacemaking retreats to civil servants.

Nhat Hanh teaches that outer peace is impossible without inner peace. "There are so many of us who are very eager to work for peace, but we don't have peace within," he says.

In 2005, Nhat Hanh returned to his native Vietnam after a 39-year exile, where 35 million people had been born during his absence. "The most outstanding fact is that there is no war anymore in Vietnam, and this is a most wonderful thing," says the monk, who during the conflict was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr.

During the 2005 visit, he and his party were watched by secret police, but over time this surveillance was relaxed, and he was able to give public talks. "For many in Communist or government circles, it was the first time they were exposed to the teaching of [socially] engaged Buddhism," he says. Despite a government ban on press coverage of his visit, he says more than 200,000 people somehow got information about him and showed up to hear him speak, or bought CDs of the talks, or contacted Plum Village for more information about his teachings.

Nhat Hanh says he will always be a teacher, even when he longer gets up in front of people to talk. "I'll continue to teach, if not by talks then in my way of sitting, eating, smiling and interacting with the community," the monk says. "You don't need to talk in order to teach. You need to live your life mindfully and deeply."

—Marcia Z. Nelson