

Climbing the Third Stair

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Karen Armstrong. 2004. *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*. New York: Knopf. 306 pp.+ xxii.

SINCE the attack on the World Trade Center, British writer Karen Armstrong—author of numerous books, including the best-selling *A History of God* (1993)—has frequently been asked to apply her insights as a religious scholar to our post-9/11 world. In an undated piece addressing the planet’s ideological differences titled “Have We All Been Hijacked?” Armstrong asserts that since three of the world’s major religions have Abraham as their common father, Jews, Christians, and Muslims would do well to consider themselves part of the same religious family. Defining the term *jihad* according to its primary meaning as “struggle” or “effort,” she enjoins persons of all faiths to expend effort to reach out to others with empathy, to “use this trauma [of 9/11] creatively to reaffirm the values that we all hold in common. The religions of Abraham all worship the same God; all three have a deep commitment to compassion, justice, and peace.”

If we were to take these pronouncements as the naive affirmations of an inveterate optimist, we would be mistaken. Armstrong’s spiritual

understanding is hard-won, the result of decades-long wrestling with religious belief that has been always, at heart, profoundly personal. In her memoir, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (2004), she uses the image of a staircase to describe an ascent replete with repeated stallings and unwelcome impassés. The image of the spiral climb, taken from T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash-Wednesday" and in turn inspired by Dante's *Purgatorio*, describes a journey of spiritual purification, each stage of which requires the sometimes inadvertent sacrifice of the comforts most of us depend on to define and sustain us. Here are Armstrong's reflections in the memoir upon hearing, in 1981 that she has just been fired from her teaching job after repeated absences due to illness:

As I left the school grounds to wait for the bus that had been the bane of my life during the last six years, I felt as though I were beginning a new journey. Other people seemed to progress much more smoothly through life, I reflected wryly [...]. They went through college, chose a career and a partner without all this drama. But that didn't seem to happen to me. I kept getting derailed, ejected from one job, one lifestyle after another. Doors kept slamming in my face [...]. And now, here I was again, heading into the unknown, and yet I felt in some strange way as though I were back on track. The bus was taking me away from my nice safe job, but it seemed to be going in the right direction. (2004, 222-23; all subsequent references are from *The Spiral Staircase*)

The lack of self-pity evident in this passage suggests a narrative voice willing to relate its story with candor and a kind of charming, intelligent self-effacement. But perhaps not so evident in this summary passage is the fact that Armstrong also has a flair for the telling detail. In addition to the provocative nature of the book's subject matter, it is largely her balanced mix of commentary and vivid scene-making that keeps the reader thoroughly engaged in her life story. The final chapter, in which Armstrong describes her writing projects as well as the principles she has earned through her experience, is missing the verve of the earlier sections and requires a deeper, willed attention. But for readers who appreciate the memoir form, especially those with an additional critical interest in theology and psychology, this book will fascinate and ultimately satisfy.

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In 1962, at the age of seventeen, Armstrong entered a Jesuit convent, determined to become a nun. Rather than offering her the “epic adventure” (viii) or the “radical freedom” (x) she had envisioned, convent life—whose patterns had been established in the nineteenth century and followed rigidly for generations—seemed bent instead on breaking her will. During her postulanship, for example, she was instructed to improve her sewing skills by practicing for half an hour a day on a machine without a needle. When she tried to protest, she was given a lecture on the perils of disobedience and intellectual pride and told that resisting a superior’s mandate because it seemed irrational was a sign of spiritual immaturity. The religious training Armstrong was undergoing, she was reminded, required complete submission to the rules of the order, which were designed to facilitate death of the secular self. One would lose one’s life in order to find it.

Four years into her training, Armstrong won a place at Oxford University and entered her order’s Oxford convent to begin advanced study in English literature. Here she began to experience, in an immediate and painful way, the implications of her religious conditioning. While encouraged to think critically at college, on returning to the convent she was expected to submit uncritically and without protest to rules and customs she was finding increasingly oppressive. She attempted for several years to reconcile these disparities, but eventually finding the two systems essentially incompatible, she requested dispensation from her vows and left the convent in 1969. *The Spiral Staircase* chronicles the years following this decision.

Armstrong’s major challenge, one that stayed with her over the next several decades, was to find meaning in her new secular life. One of the most striking sections of the book occurs in an early chapter as she describes her transition from convent life to “the carnival of sixties Oxford” (72). Attending a party soon after leaving the convent, she suddenly found herself in a room alive with bodies leaping and gyrating to the music of the Beatles, a dramatic contrast to pre-convent social events, when “[u]nder the benign but hawklike gaze of our elders, we had lurched around the room in pairs, trying to match our faltering steps to the polite strains of waltzes and quicksteps [....]” (20). She quickly realized that “[t]hese new acquaintances of mine had never heard of the quickstep.” Instead, they “shot into the air, waved their arms, swung out legs at odd angles, doing what came naturally”

(22). Having for years been required by the convent to inhibit both physical and emotional expression, Armstrong comments,

I tried to look nonchalant and at ease, but felt miserably that I must look as out of place as the queen, in her suburban, matronly clothes, carrying her ubiquitous handbag like a shield, as she stares with a glazed smile at the ritual dances performed in her honor during a tour of the Commonwealth. I had found, to my considerable sorrow, that even though I no longer belonged in the convent, I didn't belong out here either. (23)

Armstrong concludes that, in spite of her attempts to resist the worst of her convent training, it had in fact been successful: she had indeed lost her old life—but without being granted a new life in return. The repercussions of that training, which began to reveal themselves soon after her departure—social ineptness; an inability to produce ideas of her own; and the belief that her heart had turned to stone, rendering her unable to reach out to others or to God—were all devastating enough. But soon fainting spells, which in the convent had been written off as hysterical bids for attention, began to recur, accompanied now by a disturbing sulfuric smell, episodes of panic, loss of consciousness, and hallucinatory visitations that seemed to arise from a demonic heart of darkness. Seemingly unable to trust either her body or her mind, Armstrong became even more distant and isolated. “These frightening incidents were changing me. I now knew that at any second, the pleasant, innocent-seeming surface of normality could split apart, and this knowledge infected everything” (58).

The medical community was no help. The college nurse told her she was under too much stress; the GP she consulted mentioned anxiety attacks and referred her to a psychiatrist; the psychiatrist instituted a prolonged period of therapy in which she was expected to focus only on the details of her uneventful childhood and was told that her problems stemmed from being “just another brainy girl who is having problems accepting her femininity” (123). Exhausted by her efforts to seek help, none of which had proved effective, and convinced that her only future “was a locked ward or a padded cell” (100), she took an overdose of sleeping pills during a dissociative episode, was labeled dangerously suicidal, and was committed to a psychiatric hospital—from which, after only a few hours' stay, she was rescued by a friend.

By the early seventies, Armstrong, clearly a highly intelligent woman whose circumstances had pitted her against the gender assumptions of her times, was gradually able to turn a corner. Though her religious and

academic choices had isolated her from current events, she was nevertheless able, at important junctures, to place herself objectively in an historical context, an ability that gave her a perspective beyond that of the present moment. Thus by 1973 and the third year of her graduate studies, encouraged by civil rights and women's liberation activists who were calling into question "laws that had hitherto seemed to be part of the very nature of things" (138), she began understanding that it might be possible to take charge of her own life.

In this climate of renewed possibility, she was given the gift of "Ash-Wednesday." Sitting in a lecture hall listening to the recitation and explication of Eliot's lines, she was delighted not only to feel spontaneously moved by the poetry but also to understand how perfectly the struggles described by the poem mirrored her own. Like Eliot's persona, she too was having to abandon hope, specifically the desire to be "normal." Her convent training, she now realized, had been a life-changing initiation; it had succeeded in putting her almost intolerably at odds with the rest of the world, and she could not undo the experience. And like the setting of the poem, whose air was described as "thoroughly small and dry," her own world, which no longer included God and continued to balance on the edge of a terrifying unreality, had narrowed to become a world without illusion. But here the poem makes a sudden turn, declaring the acceptance of limitation a cause for rejoicing. As she listened, Armstrong was suddenly convinced that she was hearing not a religious mandate but a simple truth of the human condition: that joy arises only when we surrender hope and accept things exactly as they are. Making this truth a reality for herself would, she knew, be a lifelong enterprise, but she felt it could be done:

My confidence sprang from the fact that the process had already started. I had resolved to stop fighting my malady, to accept what my life had become, and—"consequently"—for the first time in years I had responded spontaneously and with my whole being to a poem, just as I had before I had incurred this damage. It was a sign of life, a shoot that had suddenly broken through the frozen earth. (142)

At this point in the book it is as though, behind the clatter of daily life, a profoundly moving music begins sounding that traces the inner workings, "the deeper imperative" (190), of Armstrong's life.

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The remainder of the book chronicles Armstrong's continuing recovery, as well as her efforts to understand and embrace what she was coming to know through her own experience as the human condition. In 1976 she was finally given a long-overdue diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy and told it had resulted from a birth accident, not from emotional weakness or from a character flaw, as she had been led for so many years to believe. Along with the diagnosis came the knowledge that her condition could be controlled and, thus, that a viable future was possible. And although she continued to encounter a series of setbacks, now that she could measure these disappointments against the template of Eliot's poem, she was able to understand them as necessary steps in her spiritual journey.

Due to the workings of academic politics, for instance, her thesis—on which she had worked for years—was declared in the end unfit for a doctorate, making her ineligible for a professorship. But she was able to comment: “[I]n the spirit of ‘Ash-Wednesday,’ I found that relinquishing hope had released something within me” (176). No longer concerned that she must come up with brilliant textual insights to impress her superiors, she was now able to read a text for its own sake. As she practiced suspending the ego, she discovered that immersing herself in the written word gave her the sense of ecstasy, the going beyond self that she had been seeking for so long. As the conventional avenues continued to close, with a series of failed love affairs and dismissal from her teaching job at a private girls' school in London, unexpected resources began to appear. Her mother gave her an old typewriter, her friend Sally encouraged her to begin a book about her experiences in the convent, and when the book, titled *Through the Narrow Gate*, was published, the notoriety it engendered led to a position as a writer for a documentary film series that eventually permitted her to come back to religion, but this time in her own way.

Though convinced at first that the purpose of this series would be to “unmask the dogmatic intolerance of the churches” (233), as she continued working on the scripts and traveling through the Holy Land, she began coming to a greater, more profound appreciation of both Judaism and Islam. Out of this appreciation of what she was now calling the Abrahamic faiths, she decided, as a second film series ended in disaster (for reasons that were never entirely clear to her), to write a history of God. None of her friends approved, and it was doubtful, given the British lack of interest in religion, that the book would even find a publisher. Armstrong knew she was setting

off on a solitary path. But as she settled into the quiet of her study, the writing of the book became a spiritual quest. All that it required of her—leaving the conventional world behind and setting off into the unknown, opening to compassionate understanding, relinquishing the ego, forgoing distraction, and embracing the silence—had supposedly constituted the essentials of convent life. In her study of theology, however, Armstrong was finally able to experience the devotional intensity she had been seeking when she originally chose the religious life:

Occasionally [. . .] I would experience miniseconds of transcendence, awe, and wonder that gave me some sense of what had been going on in the mind of the theologian or mystic I was studying. At such a time I would feel stirred deeply within, and taken beyond myself in much the same way as I was in a concert hall or a theater. I was finding in study the ecstasy that I had hoped to find in those long hours of prayer as a young nun. (287)

Able now to move beyond the frustration and sense of failure she had felt at not being able to experience God in the convent through traditional prayer, Armstrong understood that one can achieve self-transcendence through acts of compassion and social justice. The goal of all the major religions, she now believed, is not to get to heaven but instead to live a fully human life in the present moment. This, she decided, is what it means to enter the divine presence. Through writing *The History of God*, Armstrong found herself at another level of the spiral staircase, returning to and at the same time fulfilling the quest she had first undertaken as a young woman.

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At the end of her book, Armstrong addresses the realities of 9/11. In these final pages, we see a woman made sorrowful by the events of the last several years, able to offer not unfounded hope but a kind of sacred uncertainty. Those of us living in the First World, she suggests, must see ourselves as members of the global community, a world in which it is no longer possible to isolate ourselves to protect our wealth and privilege. What happens today at home will have repercussions tomorrow across the globe. “Our task now is to mend our broken world; if religion cannot do that, it is worthless. And what our world needs now is not belief, not certainty, but compassionate action and practically expressed respect for the sacred value of all human beings, even our enemies” (304). To this end, Armstrong has made it her job to educate those in the West about Islam, believing that the

“study of other people’s religious beliefs is now not merely desirable, but necessary for our very survival” (304).

Armstrong’s book, both an adult coming-of-age story and an unconventional spiritual autobiography, comes highly recommended by this reviewer. It chronicles the story of a woman who begins as an outsider and misfit, someone whose experience seems entirely idiosyncratic, but who is able finally to claim a place as an enlightened witness to the most significant events of our time. The reader will come away from *The Spiral Staircase* with great respect for the author’s perseverance, humanity, and wisdom, which—knowing the journey she took to arrive at this place—seem especially compelling because they have been so thoroughly earned.

Works Cited

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