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Youth and Prayer

Unlike most spiritual memoirs, Stephanie Saldaña's is very readable. All the more surprising she hasn't yet hit 30.

By Lisa Miller | Newsweek Web Exclusive
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It is understandable to want to run screaming from a "spiritual memoir"—especially when you discover it's been written by a 27-year-old. Memoirs are bad enough, with their cringe-making confessions, their sordid tale-telling, and their self-important self-examination. Why, the reader too often wonders, should we care about you?

Spiritual memoirs frequently inhabit the lowest tier of this navel-gazing. In a regular memoir, at least, stuff happens: families move because someone's on the lam. Drunkenparents behave horribly. Depressed parents behave worse. There are bad guys and good guys, victims and victimizers. There's a plot, in other words, and, in the best versions, redemption or resolution. In a spiritual memoir, all the action occurs in an internal landscape; often, the narrator has retreated, literally, to a place without people, discourse, or activity. A transformation reshapes the heart and soul of the narrator through—there's no other word for this—revelation. Only the very best writers and thinkers can pull this off. Annie Dillard is one; Karen Armstrong, another. There are dozens, if not hundreds, who cannot: middle-aged women who leave civilization to go digging in the dirt, teenagers who rebel against their strict religious upbringing, and born-again Christians who write rapturously of their conversion.

How surprising, then, to discover a spiritual memoir serendipitously and to be captivated and not at all squeamish. Such was the case with *The Bread of Angels*, the insipidly titled first book—coming out this week—by a young teacher and poet named Stephanie Saldaña. It arrived on my desk, and as I paged through, I found myself inevitably pulled into its world. Saldaña is one of those "yes, we can" young people one meets frequently these days: at home all over the globe, intense, earnest, and curious—a stained-glass-window of ethnicities, yearnings, and interests. She is a Mexican-American Catholic from Texas who went to college in Vermont, worked as a news reporter in war zones, then traveled to Damascus on a Fulbright scholarship to learn Arabic and study the Quran. There, she fell in love with a French monk.

The universe Saldaña occupies is at once ancient and modern. In Damascus, Christians and Muslims live next door to one another and regard each other with more or less friendly suspicion, while in neighboring countries, armies march and terrorists self-immolate. At the heart of the book is the month Saldaña spends in solitude at a monastery in the Syrian desert, undergoing the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. She has broken up with a fellow graduate student back home who is predictably self-absorbed and condescending. She (like so many writers of spiritual memoirs, going back to Augustine) is trying to recover from heartbreak during a period of her life when, as she puts it, "God and I are no longer on speaking terms."

What sets Saldaña's book apart from so many others is the very convincing way in which she writes about prayer—and the difficulty of praying. The best section of Elizabeth Gilbert's best seller *Eat, Pray, Love* was the first—forever etched in my mind as "Eat"—in which the heartbroken narrator wanders around Rome, seeking comfort in pasta. "Pray," though—an account of her tenure at an ashram in India—is a disaster; in a book hailed for its authenticity, Gilbert's attempts at penetrating the spiritual experience are clumsy and too-cute. "I got pulled through the wormhole of the Absolute, and in that rush I suddenly understood the workings of the universe altogether." The wormhole? Dante, poor man, spins.

Some of Christianity's first monks and hermits inhabited the same caves that Saldaña seeks out, in a desert that's as frigid, desolate, and inhospitable as any place on earth. Saldaña knows well this desert's history and its importance to her own tradition. When she wrestles with the demons and angels that are her thoughts—which come to her through close reading of Scripture—she is rooted (unlike Gilbert) in decades of Catholic practice, and in her more recent study of biblical literature. In the monastic tradition, she writes, the desert is "a mirror, where the silence and emptiness become so vast that the only things left to meet here are the self and God...Here is the strange world where the blue line between the interior and the exterior world collapses, where the imagination is given a body. Our thoughts take on flesh in the empty air." Alone in the desert, Saldaña weeps, she sleeps, she gnashes her teeth. One believes in her visions. Better, one believes in them without being embarrassed for her.

At times, Saldaña is grandiose, overearnest—"melodramatic," one reviewer said—the inevitable consequence of youth. Only a 20-something would think that her own spiritual awakening is gripping material for a book, after all—just as only a 20-something would believe, as Saldaña does, that she could persuade a lover to stay with her by writing him the perfect openhearted letter. Annie Dillard was 27, too, when she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,* and though Saldaña doesn't have the exquisite virtuosity of Dillard, the lessons in retrospect are doubtless the same. "I dashed in without any fear of God," wrote Dillard, 25 years after publishing her book. "[At] 27 I had all the license I thought I needed to engage the greatest subjects on earth." With age, Saldaña may learn wisdom and moderation; with youth, she learned to pray—and love.

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