

Smorgasbord: A new Great Awakening

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

"Great Awakening 2007" is the headline of Cathleen Falsani's two-page column in the July 6 *Chicago Sun-Times*. Falsani asks readers, "Have you ever had a spiritual experience? Would you like to?" and then responds by offering "suggestions" that "just might lead to a spiritual experience."

Hold on to your spiritual seekers' seat for Falsani's recommendations for the summer months: see Morgan Freeman as "the grinning laid-back God of love and lessons" in the one-star-rated *Evan Almighty*, or Robin Williams as "a maniacal minister" in *License to Wed*. "What's not to love?" asks Falsani. The answer, according to critics, is one-starred movies.

Or, says Falsani, read guitarist Brian "Head" Welch's *Save Me from Myself: How I Found God, Quit Korn* [the rock group], *Kicked Drugs*, and *Lived to Tell My Story*—a title that shows that his self is only partially saved from himself.

Go interfaith with Live Earth and noted Muslim convert Yusuf Islam (aka Cat Stevens), or get a hug at a ballroom from Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, "the Hindu Hugging saint." Watch a Lion Dance Procession in Chinatown. Link up with the Rastafarians and contemplate the idea that "God is in all of us, and we are all one." This one is spiritually scary or potentially banal: "Walk up to someone you've never met and have a conversation." I'd prefer the advertised silence at a Benedictine B & B in Bridgeport.

What is significant on such calendars is the absence of any spiritual search in a sanctuary. Yes, you get close at Old St. Pat's World's Largest Block Party or on the outdoor labyrinths at St. James Episcopal Cathedral or by golfing with a nun for Catholic Charities. But while the spiritual-experience seekers are flitting around our metropolitan area, 2 to 3 million Jews on Friday, Adventists on Saturday and other Christians on Sunday are experiencing awe, communion, community, grace, awakening and singing. Even when served up in mediocre fashion, all of the above

are bent on motivating people to follow through with works of love and justice. For all their current travails, they will likely be offering spiritual sustenance when most of this moment's spiritual options have been forgotten. Do new generations know of these options? See Sunday bulletins for opportunities.

Many of the advertised spiritual gurus speak of love in dreamlike ways and of justice not at all. Dorothy Day liked to quote Staretz Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." Dag Hammarskjöld noted that "in our era the road to holiness necessarily passes through the path of action." The offerings on the smorgasbord of most spiritualities today register scarcely a trace of concern for practical love or justice. Among the profound spiritual leaders it was once assumed that one spent a life pondering and probing texts of a tradition, be it Buddhist, Hindu, Hasidic, Jesuit, Pietist or other, and putting the results to work.

Today, visually and spiritually, early postmodernism is often described as made up of random jarring bits and snatches of objects, colors and ideas. Most of the results are signaled by French terms ending with the syllable *-age* (pronounced "äzh"). Thus: *assemblage*, *collage*, *decoupage*, *bricollage*, *montage* and—a whispered addendum by an irreverent colleague—*garbage*. We may have become a nation of decoupeurs or garbage collecteurs. Late postmodernistically, who knows the difference? And who cares?