

*Spiritual Rx*, by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

reviewed by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

In this engaging and useful book, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat continue the task begun in their earlier volume, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, to encourage and guide those who want to enrich their spiritual lives. The Brussats provide an Alphabet of 37 practices common to the world's spiritual traditions, from "attention" to "zeal," among which people can choose their own prescriptions for growth.

*Spiritual Rx* begs to be explored experientially, rather than read straight through, browsed or skimmed. And each section is organized to encourage this approach. "Listening" (a practice near the middle of the alphabet) is typical of the Brussats's method. Like all the other entries, the section on listening is about seven pages long and follows a set format. It begins with four short sentences in a box--a cue, a reminder, a vow and a blessing. The cue for practicing listening is the act of putting on headphones; for justice, it is taking money out of one's wallet; for kindness, watering one's houseplants.

This portion is followed by a short description of the basic practice. Here, as in many cases, the description reminds us how closely the practice is associated with some of the other paths explored in the book. The person focusing on listening is referred to the sections on "Attention," "Being Present," "Hospitality," "Devotion," "Nurturing" and "Wonder."

"Catalysts, Contrasts and Companions," the next part, discusses in a few pithy paragraphs the conditions that might make one hunger for or need the particular practice. Disregard for others is the dark side of listening. But the Brussats do not present this as an evil or an opposite. Rather, it is part of a circle and can be transformed into loving concern for others. The practice of listening is a path to this transformation.

A series of quotations comes next--comments from a variety of people and traditions. Here and in the following sections, the Brussats show one of their great strengths: their familiarity with various spiritual traditions and their vast knowledge

of the resources available to those who want to follow a spiritual path. The first quote here, from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, is striking: "You wish to see: listen. Hearing is a step toward vision."

The book then recommends resources, usually books, on the subject. For "listening" they range from a book by a Sufi master to several by Catholic monastics. For "attention" the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who has written extensively about the practice of mindfulness, is the recommended teacher.

In keeping with the emphases of modern culture, the Brussats discuss a number of videos that illustrate something about the practice. In the section on listening they suggest two Jodie Foster movies--an obvious one, *Contact*, and the less well-known *Nell*. They also recommend fiction, poetry, children's books, spoken-word audios, art and music relevant to the practice.

Next, the book describes and recommends a number of spiritual exercises. For listening, these include *lectio divina*, the attentive reading of the Bible. Then come a prayer or mantra, an imagery exercise and journal exercises. Finally, since the spiritual path requires and fosters community, the book suggests household and community projects, such as organizing a community lecture series on improving listening skills, or working to eliminate noise pollution in one's neighborhood.

It's unlikely that anyone will want to follow all the paths included here, or even all of the suggested activities for one practice. But this book's comprehensiveness, accessibility and good sense make it worth keeping nearby and using often.