

Spiritual Literacy Month is one couple's legacy of right intention

by [Fiona André](#)

December 17, 2024



Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat (Portrait courtesy of Spirituality & Practice)

Whether it's knitting, dancing, or chopping onions, any activity is a spiritual one, as long as it's done with the divine in mind. Over their 30-year careers as co-editors of their internet magazine, [Spirituality & Practice](#), Mary Ann and Frederic Brussat, 78 and 82 respectively, have taken this as a guiding principle.

"It's important for people to recognize that pretty much anything they do can be spiritual with the right intention," said Mary Ann. "People are a lot more spiritual

than they think they are.”

But people don’t always know how to connect with their spiritual selves, Mary Ann explained. In 1996, the couple founded “Spiritual Literacy Month” to encourage people to interpret the spiritual signs life throws at them.

The Brussats’ definition of spirituality is broad, transcending religious divides to appeal to people from different faiths, as well as people who identify as “spiritual but not religious,” which Mary Ann calls “freelance spirituality.”

“It’s like a bridge between all religions, spiritual movements, and even a lot of psychological movements,” Brussat said. “It’s pretty universal, and we found that it’s a bridge between religions.”

The couple initially registered Spiritual Literacy Month with [Chase’s Calendar of Events](#), a printed compendium of happenings, in December, but four years ago, the couple switched it to May. On the *Spirituality & Practice* website, they offer “spiritual tools” for making the most of the month, including video explainers and e-courses. In 1998, the couple also published *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, a book that presents the concept and addresses how people can “live a spiritual life every day.”

Today, most people still celebrate Spiritual Literacy Month in December, mostly as a time to read at least one book on spirituality or religion.

Many libraries use the month to promote their spiritual and religious selections, challenging readers to read up to five books on spirituality during December. Participants find each other on TikTok, Instagram, and X by tagging their posts on books they are enjoying with [#SpiritualLiteracyMonth](#) and #SpiritualLiteracy.

Abi Avery, assistant library director at the Fennville District Library in Michigan, recently learned about Spiritual Literacy Month and curated a [list](#) of 15 spirituality-related books, including classics such as the Dalai Lama’s 1998 bestseller *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, and *A Religion of One’s Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World* by Thomas Moore, as well as the more recent *Trans+: Love, Sex, Romance, and Being You*, a guide for gender-fluid, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming teens.

Noting that these books do well most any time of year, Avery said they “reach different people who might be at different phases or on different kinds of spiritual journeys.”

Mary Ann said the goal of Spiritual Literacy Month is less to learn about any one religion or religious belief in general than to learn how to see spirituality wherever it appears. “Our approach is really not about reading books or reading text. It’s about reading your own experiences,” she said.

In this sense, being “spiritually literate”—an expression the couple have trademarked—differs from being religiously literate; it doesn’t require delving into scripture or memorizing footnotes in study Bibles.

Mary Ann cited as foundational influences on the creation of Spiritual Literacy Month the Indigenous practice of reading signs in the forest and the Islamic proverb that every experience is a direct letter from God. They became convinced that anything was a “sample of the divine.”

The idea for the month was also inspired by the Brussats’ own spiritual journeys. Frederic, a United Church of Christ minister, started using rock music songs as prompts to discuss spirituality with teens when he was in youth ministry. He then turned to culture writing. After marrying in 1969, the couple started working as culture critics and launched their first publication, *Culture, Information, Service*.

In the 1990s, the couple noticed the popularity of books about spirituality and pivoted to spiritual writing, launching another magazine dedicated to exploring new spiritual practices, *Values & Visions: A Resource Companion for Spiritual Journeys*. Around the same time, the couple discovered Sufi Islam, a mystical branch of Islam.

Mary Ann and Frederic now identify as Christian Sufis and belong to the Sufi Mevlevi order, which doesn’t require conversion to Islam. In the 40 years they lived in New York City, the Brussats were members of Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, a progressive congregation jointly affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, the American Baptist Churches USA, and the United Church of Christ.

Donna Schaper, who served as senior minister at Judson Memorial for 15 years, said the Brussats’ work helped the congregation recast their social justice work. “They really pulled us into being more spiritual about our activism. They highlighted the historical, psychological, spiritual, and experiential reason for the social justice work

done by Judson,” she said.

The congregation started watching a wide range of movies with the intent of finding a spiritual meaning. “It showed us that even a quote from a secular movie could be very moving,” said Schaper.

Now retired, the couple has left New York for Claremont, California, where they live in Pilgrim Place, an intentional retirement community engaged in social and environmental justice.

The Brussats believe Spiritual Literacy Month can benefit those dealing with burnout, desperation or loss of hope, which they say indicate a lack of spiritual grounding, for which practicing “being present” can be an antidote. Spiritual literacy can also help strengthen relationships with friends and family.

“When people don’t have that perspective, they can easily be knocked off balance,” she said. “They don’t feel grounded. They may not feel connected to a larger community,” she said.

In their “[Alphabet of Spiritual Literacy](#),” the couple presents 37 spiritual practices taken from different faiths and spiritual traditions. Mary Ann’s favorite spiritual practice is repeating “Just like me” whenever she comments on someone else, negative or positive. Repeating the statement, she noted, helps her realize how close we are to others.

“It’s saying, ‘I’m not any different than anyone else. I have these qualities. I have these attributes. I’ve got these defaults,’” she said.

When faced with conflict, especially political disagreements, Mary Ann suggested practicing “reverence” or “radical respect,” which allows people to show respect by acknowledging differences. One way to achieve this is to practice being a compassionate listener. “These practices are our bridges. No matter where you are on the political spectrum, you want to be respected. You want people to listen to you and to at least admit that you have an opinion, you have thoughts.”

The best way to observe Spiritual Literacy Month, Mary Ann said, is to approach one’s daily actions with renewed intention. Moments like caring for a pet, family time or dancing can help us understand something about life and ourselves when we focus on it.

“These are areas where we deepen our spirituality,” she said, “without really realizing it.” —Religion News Service