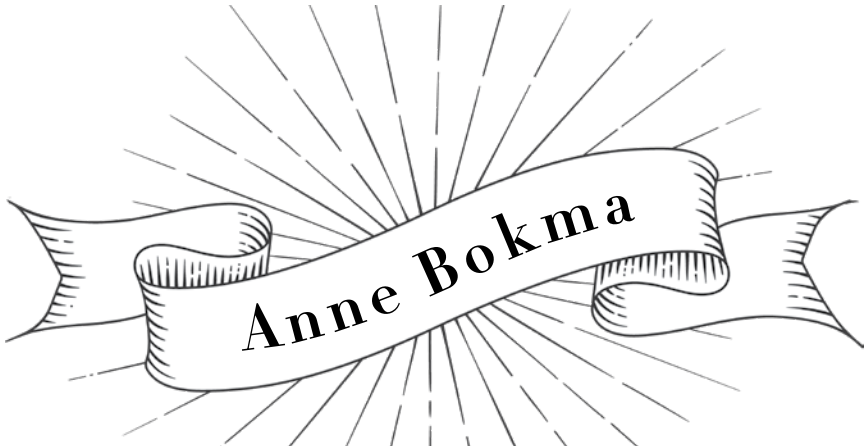

My Year

From Woo-Woo to Wonderful

# of Living

One Woman's Secular Quest for a More Soulful Life

Spiritually

Douglas & McIntyre

1 2 3 4 5 — 23 22 21 20 19

Douglas and McIntyre (2013) Ltd.
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All photos courtesy of the author
Edited by Barbara Pulling
Cover design by Anna Comfort O'Keeffe and Carleton Wilson
Text design by Brianna Cerkiewicz
Printed and bound in Canada
Recycled paper content if applicable

Douglas and McIntyre (2013) Ltd. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested $153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country.

Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.

We also gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Government of Canada and from the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: My year of living spiritually : from woo-woo to wonderful--one woman's secular quest for a more soulful life / Anne Bokma.
Names: Bokma, Anne, 1962- author.
Description: Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190157887 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190157925 | ISBN 9781771622332 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771622349 (HTML)
Subjects: LCSH: Bokma, Anne, 1962- | LCSH: Bokma, Anne, 1962-—Religion. | LCSH: Spiritual biography—Canada. | LCSH: Spirituality. | LCSH: Self-realization.
Classification: LCC BL73 .B65 2019 | DDC 204.092—dc23

To my daughters, Ruby and Lucy—precious gems

And my women friends—pure gold

"And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home."

—*Wendell Berry*

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Note to readers: For narrative reasons, the timeline of some events has been slightly rearranged or compressed.

Introduction

WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD, CHML RADIO IN HAMILTON, ONTARIO, aired a show asking kids to call in with their ideas about what heaven looked like. My mother encouraged me to dial the station and proudly stood by as I spoke to the host about the celestial kingdom I was certain awaited me. I was raised to believe I was one of God's chosen people. Religion was the core of my life—church twice on Sunday, private Christian schools, weekly catechism classes, prayer before meals and Bible readings after. Simply being baptized as an infant in the One True Chu[illegible]specifically the Dutch Calvinist Canadian Reformed Church, w[illegible] numbers about ten thousand people in a few dozen mostly rural communities across the country, meant I'd won the religious sweepstakes. At the end of my life I'd reap my reward: eternal life in heaven.

I had a very specific, albeit limited, idea of heaven. I told the host that it had streets of gold, of course. And angels, trumpets, harps and halos. There was lots of praise music and hymn singing. And God lived there, along with a very select group of people that would eventually include me and everyone who went to my church. I couldn't think of much else to say. It might be the end goal, but this longed-for promised land didn't have a very detailed property listing.

The personality of God was more complex. He loved you if you were good and believed in him. But he might fling you to Satan and the pit of fire if you lied to your mother or touched yourself *down there*. He was all-powerful but still let bad things happen, like earthquakes and

acne. He listened if you prayed to him, but might not give you what you really wanted, which in my case was for Danny Linde in Grade 4 to like me. God was invisible, but ever present. Loving, but angry. A bipolar deity. Still, I believed in that invisible man with my whole heart.

Until one day I just didn't anymore.

From the time I was little I had been instructed by the authority figures in my life to "have faith like a child." It was the simple answer to any religious question. If God could stop it, why did he let children die of starvation and cancer? "Have faith like a child." Did Moses really part the Red Sea, and did Noah really get all those animals onto the ark? "Have faith like a child." Wasn't it mean of God to send billions of people to hell save for the few thousand people who belonged to our obscure denomination? "Have faith like a child." Infantile acceptance trumped intellectual rigour. True believers did not ask questions.

Even though I was one of God's chosen, I hadn't done anything to earn this birthright. It was generously granted thanks to Unconditional Election, the theological principle of the sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin, who said certain people—the "elect"—were randomly predestined by God to receive salvation while others were left to continue in their sins and wind up in hell. Calvin also promoted the principle of Total Depravity—the idea that, because of original sin, all human beings are fallen people, intrinsically unworthy and inclined to evil. Basically, wretches.

My doubt in these sorts of ideas as a young woman created a problem. Loss of faith meant risking the connection to everything I held dear—a mother I was very close to, three younger siblings, my extended family, my childhood friends and my Dutch culture. Church life was the centre of our existence. I'd lose everything if I left the church, but even at that age I knew I'd lose myself if I stayed. My mother and stepfather perceived their reality through the lens of religion—that was their way of making sense of the world. But it no longer made sense to me. I left the Canadian Reformed Church when I was twenty, and

things would never again be the same with my family. They could not forgive me.

The word *religion* comes from the Latin word *ligare*, meaning "to bind." In my case, religion had the opposite effect. Leaving the church was the right thing to do, but hurting my family was hard.

Dr. Marlene Winell, a trailblazing San Francisco psychologist, has coined the term "religious trauma syndrome" to describe the impact of breaking away from repressive religions. Winell isn't anti-religion so much as anti-dogma. The religious communities that cause trauma, she says, are those that prevent people from thinking for themselves. Mind control and emotional abuse may be most closely associated with cults, she writes in her book *Leaving the Fold*, but "fear-based apocalyptic thinking" is a tactic that's also employed by strict religions where conformity is demanded. Devout and often well-intentioned parents in these communities feel justified in their use of power tactics to brainwash their children into belief. Leaving such a religion can be devastating, says Winell. "It's like the rug gets pulled out from under you in every way, because religion defines everything—it defines who you are, your relationships, your purpose in life, your view of the world, your view of the future, your view of the afterlife. The whole house comes down."

I certainly felt my own foundation crumble when I left the church, especially in regards to my mother, whom I had idolized as a child. Our closeness was forged in part because my biological father left our family when I was three and she raised me and my younger brother as a single mother until she remarried six years later. During that time we lived on welfare and any extra cash my mother earned picking fruit in the summer and cleaning houses. I never noticed any lack. She was a loving mother, and I always wanted to please her. But when I left the church I became the biggest disappointment and shame of her life. It got easier to avoid her than to endure the look of gloom on her face when we were together. She considered me hopelessly lost. We

would not share eternal life in heaven. Looking back, I believe that her concern for me, however misguided, stemmed from love. But control played a role, too. I had stopped having faith like a child. I had stepped out of line. There were times I so longed to be back in her favour, I was tempted to return to the church. But once you see the light, you can't go back to living in the dark.

Over the years, guilt about disappointing my family lingered. Our infrequent visits felt forced. I tried to steer clear of controversy, but I'd become a liberal pro-choice feminist who believed in evolution, gay marriage, climate change, the right to die and the New Democratic Party, all things my parents viewed as abominations. Keeping quiet was the trade-off if I wanted to attend Christmas dinner, if I wanted any sense of familial belonging. It was inevitable that our relationship would suffer.

AS HARD AS IT IS TO LEAVE REPRESSIVE FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGIONS, many people do get out, fleeing denominations that wield their authority in destructive ways. But it's mainline churches that are seeing the biggest drop in membership. Some people leave because church doctrine isn't relevant to their lives. Others question the very idea of organized religion in a contemporary world. Some would simply rather sleep in on the Sabbath, then go to a yoga class or take the kids to soccer practice. The majority of millennials, for their part, refuse to even set foot in a house of worship. Almost three million Americans join the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated every year, and four thousand churches close annually, according to the US Census Bureau. In Canada, almost ten thousand older churches—a third of all faith-owned buildings—are expected to close in the next decade, according to the National Trust. All this means traditional religion in the West is gasping for breath as elderly faithful churchgoers die off.

But while millions abandon religion, many still want a spiritual life. There are so many of us, we have acquired our own designation—"spiritual but not religious," or SBNR for short. Almost eighty million North Americans (39 percent of Canadians, according to Angus Reid, and 27 percent of Americans, according to Pew Research) identify as SBNR, making us the fastest-growing "faith" group in the Western world. The SBNR are sometimes referred to as "nones" (because they typically check the box for "none" on surveys about religious affiliation) and "dones" (because they're done with religion). In 2019, these "nones" became statistically tied with those who identify as Catholic and evangelical in the US. "Spirituality will be the religion of the new millennium," says Siobhan Chandler, one of Canada's leading scholars on this growing demographic.

The SBNR may shun formal religious worship, yet the majority believe in God and feel a deep connection with nature and the earth. Most say they still pray, at least occasionally. They value autonomy over group think and don't follow a prescribed set of beliefs, other than maybe the Golden Rule. Some critics have accused the SBNR of taking a cafeteria-style approach to belief, picking and choosing from various spiritual practices rather than digging deeply into a single religion. "Burger King spirituality" is one derisive term applied to this supposed "have it your way" approach to tending to spiritual life. But I wonder—what's wrong with sampling a wide variety of practices from the spiritual smorgasbord if it leads to a richer life?

For the past four years I've reported on the SBNR demographic as the Spiritual but Secular columnist for the *United Church Observer* (now renamed *Broadview*), the national magazine of Canada's largest liberal Protestant denomination. Increasingly, my research on SBNR practices made me want to experience them first-hand, especially as I felt my spiritual self was flagging. After some deliberation and a bit of financial planning, I decided I'd immerse myself for a full year in spiritual living. I'd engage in a holy host of practices—New Age, pagan,

mystical, transcendental, supernatural, soulful and just plain woo-woo. I would devote myself to being more devotional.

I was inspired in part by journalist A.J. Jacobs and his year-long quest to follow all seven hundred rules in the Bible as closely as possible, chronicled in his book *My Year of Living Biblically*. His commitment included following the Ten Commandments and tithing 10 percent of his salary, but also observing many arcane and obscure laws, such as not shaving his beard or wearing clothes of mixed fibres and being willing to stone adulterers. (To live up to this last admonition, he half-heartedly tossed a pebble at a man who had admitted to cheating on his wife.)

I was interested in following Jacobs' lead, but not in following Biblical rules. I'd had enough of that. I didn't aspire to anything as ambitious as enrolling in theology school, trekking the Camino Trail or dancing like a wild woman at Burning Man. Rather, I made a list of simple, easily doable and ideally enlightening experiences I was eager to try. I wanted to see what I was missing out on. I had been raised in a closed-minded religion, but I was determined to bring a seeker's eagerness, combined with a reporter's skepticism, to my experimental year. When it came to the spiritual smorgasbord, I was ready for the big buffet.

Photo on next page: Frolicking with my fuzzy friend Henry at goat yoga.