

One of the answers lay in a dusty box in the attic. It contained books and magazines that my mother claimed were "giving me ideas." My father, having given in to her demands, boxed up the proto-New Age epistles, which he often pored over late at night, and carried them into the dark recesses above. One of the works that appeared on my mother's Index of Forbidden Books contained the clairvoyant readings of Edgar Cayce (1877-1945), America's Sleeping Prophet.

I can still remember my father telling me that Jesus, according to Cayce, had first walked the earth as Amilius, "the first begotten of the Father," whose body, lacking the density of our own, could be transmogrified at will. Cayce claimed that this primordial shape-shifter later incarnated as Adam, Enoch, Meichizedek, and Joshua, among others.

I had encountered for the first time a different perspective on Jesus, which subtly called into question the doctrine of the Incarnation. Clandestine missions to the attic yielded more arcane knowledge, and in time, the theological linchpin of Christianity began to loosen. Years later, while at college, it would be removed altogether. Once again, a book, which my mother would have added to her index had she known of its existence, was to play a role.

That book was *Unveiled Mysteries* by Godfre Ray King, a pseudonym for Guy Ballard (1878-1939). The manager of the campus copy center, who shared my interest in esoteric subjects, had given it to me as a "present," telling me that it had changed her life. Its violet-inked pages told the story of the author's encounter with the Ascended Master Saint Germain atop Mount Shasta, in northern California.

Saint Germain, who had escaped the cycle of death and rebirth, had returned to the earth plane to help usher in "the Seventh Golden Age, the permanent I Am Age of eternal perfection." The "Ascended Master Jesus" and other members of the "Great White Brotherhood" were on hand to assist Saint Germain. Ballard, his wife Edna, and their son Donald were St. Germain's "Accredited Messengers." To them fell the awesome task of introducing his "I Am Religious Activity" to the world.

The highly syncretistic I Am Religious Activity took its name from a story in the Hebrew Bible, which also involved a divinely appointed messenger. In the third chapter of Exodus, Moses comes upon a burning yet incombustible bush from which God's voice emanates. God commissions Moses to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and at one point, as you may recall, God tells the uneasy and wavering Moses, "Say to the Israelites 'I Am has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14).

Members of the Activity regard I Am as the "the Great Creative Word of the Universe—God in Action." It is central to understanding the Activity's teachings about

the “Beloved Mighty I Am Presence,” the individualized God-self that dwells above a person’s physical body, animating it, as well as the practice of uttering decrees, spoken prayers for a desired outcome. Decrees have been described by some as “high speed chants.”

The raison d’être of the Activity is to assist individuals in freeing themselves from a succession of incarnations by making their Ascension. Saint Germain’s contribution to this effort is in teaching humankind how to use the “Violet Consuming Flame” to dissolve the accumulative negative karma of their past lives. In its seventy-year history, not a single I Am student has made their Ascension without passing through “the change called death,” including the Ballards. In fact, the rather sudden death of Guy Ballard, whose body, ravaged by cardiac arterial sclerosis, remained on Earth, led some students to bring fraud charges against the Activity.

Before learning of the Activity’s shadowy origins, I became a dedicated I Am student, doing what I could to hasten my Ascension. I swore off meat, alcohol—drugs of any sort—and sex. Even onions and garlic, the smell of which the Ascended Masters find offensive, and the colors red and black, shades of war and death, disappeared out of my life. I decreed in private and in public, at two-hour-long meetings, for the fulfillment of Saint Germain’s “Divine Plan” for my life, which I hoped included law school.

As the rejections to law school, triggered by a low LSAT score, came rolling in, I started to panic. “Don’t be alarmed, the Sinister Force is trying to thwart you. Keep Decreeing!” was the advice of fellow I Am students. They told me that perhaps being a lawyer wasn’t part of my “Divine Plan.”

Then and there I began to develop into a critical thinker. I argued that I should have gotten into law school because I had decreed for it, and “the Light of God Never Fails”—the standard close of many decrees. The decrees that promised eternal youth, limitless wealth, and escape from the karmic wheel had failed. All I had wanted was to be accepted by an accredited law school. Instead, I found myself, a twenty-year old college graduate, working third shift at a plastics factory.

My protestations gave way to visiting the public library, which rounded out my education about the Ballards and the activity they had promoted. The Ballards were crude plagiarists. Gerald Bryan, a once dedicated student of theirs who became a vociferous critic, argues quite convincingly in his book *Psychic Dictatorship in America* that “Beloved Daddy” plagiarized not one but six different esoteric books in the writing of *Unveiled Mysteries*, the first of eleven books in the Saint Germain Series.

Ballard lied from the very beginning. His initial encounter with Saint Germain was based on a story from *A Dweller on Two Planets*, which he sloppily reworked. Just as Phyllos, on a mountain in California, meets Master Quong, who takes him to his secret

retreat deep inside of Mount Shasta, Guy, on a high peak in the Golden State, encounters the Ascended Master Saint Germain, who takes him to his own rock-hewn retreat inside of Grand Teton, in Wyoming.

Bryan also sheds light on the origins of the American nationalism inherent in the Activity. An American flag adorns the platform of every I Am Sanctuary, and both the Pledge of Allegiance and the American Creed are recited at each meeting. In addition, the Ascended Masters dictated countless decrees to the Accredited Messengers to ensure the protection of the "God-Government of the United States" and its "God-Given Constitution."

The Ballards, it seems, were admirers of William Dudley Pelley (1890-1965), the leader of the Silver Legion, which, according to some, was the first fascist organization founded in the United States. Vigorously opposed to war with Germany and Japan as well as the New Deal policies of F.D.R., Pelley sought the presidency in 1940. Two years later, he began serving a fifteen-year sentence for criminal sedition.

Their "Chief" in prison, the Silver Shirts, as they were variously called, were adrift, an opportunity that the Ballards were determined to exploit. Ballard, the reincarnation of George Washington, and his wife were largely successful. Drawing from the ranks of the Legion, which was estimated to be 100,000 strong, the I Am Religious Activity grew rapidly.

Betrayed! I don't know what was more painful, finding out the Ballards were charlatans or learning it was my father's mitten, not Santa's, that lay on the snow-covered walk on Christmas morning. Flames!

As I look back, it was fitting that I consign my I Am paraphernalia to the flames. I Am literature is replete with references to all sorts of flames, Threefold Flames, Twin Flames, Heart Flames, Flames of the Seven Holy Kumaras.

I don't recall planning the backyard conflagration; so, it's fair to say that the idea came over me while eating breakfast after work. I went into my bedroom, dragging a box behind me. Into it went *Unveiled Mysteries*, copies of "The Voice," the periodical published by the Saint Germain Press, laminated prints of the Ascended Masters, and a portrait of Saint Germain.

Unlike my father's books and magazines that had been relegated to the attic, the box's contents would never again be touched by human hands. They were unceremoniously dumped into a pile and set afire.

The I Am Religious Activity made inroads into my life, in part, because it never forced me to choose it over Catholicism. In many ways, it actually complimented the church. The Activity did not displace Jesus, it merely introduced a cast of heavenly

characters to share the stage with him. There were Mighty Legions of Light, Powers of Light from the Great Central Sun, Lords of Blue Flame, the Great Angelic Host, and scores of Ascended Masters, including the Great Divine Director, Mighty Arcturus, Lady Master Nada, Archangel Michael, and Beloved Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Activity even claimed that Giovanni Cardinal Bonzano (1867-1927), onetime apostolic delegate to the U.S., was an Ascended Master.

The I Am Religious Activity had meshed so thoroughly and neatly with the supernatural aspects of Catholic belief and practice that I couldn't simply separate one from the other. My critical faculties, which had been sharpened during my library investigation of the Activity, were not going to be turned off.

Certain words of the Nicene Creed, which Catholics recite every Sunday, bothered me. I bristled whenever I said, "the only Son of God," until one day I simply stopped saying it. In my mind, every human being was a child of God, born into the world to grow spiritually. Jesus was not born God, he had evolved, and we could too.

The parish priest, a family friend whom I still very much respect and love, suspected that something was amiss. When we finally sat down to talk, I succinctly told him, "I don't believe that Jesus was God, and I don't believe in divine providence." My second father, for whom I had served Mass since the second grade, sat calmly in his recliner, smoking a cigarette. When the subject turned to my missing Mass, he told me that I didn't have to go until I believed again.

Well, I stopped going and started reading even more. One morning, instead of going directly home after work, I went to the rundown public library, located on Perry Square, in downtown Erie. I came across Peter Gay's anthology of writings on deism, which I found fascinating. I very much appreciated likening God to a watchmaker who, after constructing a fine watch, winds it and then sets it aside, to explain God's relationship to creation.

As I think about it, deism, though revolutionary at its time, was easy. Deists don't have to expend the psychic energy of Jews, who, for example, must reason out why the God of Israel, who worked great miracles for his chosen people, permitted millions of them to perish in death camps. For deists, God did his part: he created the universe, and he can still lay claim, as if he ever did, to being all-powerful and all-loving, just not all-involved.

More than any other work in the anthology, I enjoyed *The Sermon of the Fifty* by Voltaire (1694-1778) and eagerly shared it with friends. I can still remember the passage that we committed to memory: "Admit that you support lies by lies, admit that the rage of dominating men's minds, fanaticism and the passage of time, have established this edifice, which is today crumbling on all sides, a ruin detested by reason and sustained by error." Voltaire minced no words about the Roman church

or Christianity. It is no wonder that the nineteenth-century historian Thomas Macaulay (1800- 1859) said of Voltaire, "Bigots and tyrants, who had never been moved by the wailing and cursing of millions, turned pale at his name." We celebrated his birthday by ordering a cake, decorated with black roses, which bore the inscription, Happy Birthday Lord Voltaire. I was delighted to learn that he had been born in 1694, which, coincidentally, were the last four digits of my parents' telephone number.

In January 1985, I went to graduate school to study international affairs. Though I wasn't going to Mass, the Catholic Church returned to the forefront of my mind as I focused on the relationship between the Sandinista National Liberation Front (F.S.L.N.) and the Nicaraguan Catholic hierarchy, which was the subject of my master's thesis. The words of the liberation theologians Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, and Leonardo Boff impressed me as did the efforts of the base communities (house churches), which educated people about the systemic causes of their poverty and empowered them to throw off their oppressors.

My spiritual evolution would take two turns before leaving Pittsburgh. While enrolled in a class on Latin American mythology, I met a doctoral student in religious studies from India, who taught meditation. I can only remember his first name, Baskaran. I became one of his students. Twice daily, I dutifully practiced the meditation exercises he gave me and recorded my experiences in a journal. On one occasion, he said, "You shouldn't be able to go as far as you are with the techniques I'm giving you. You must have studied meditation in a previous life. I'm going to have to be careful about what I teach you."

My practice of meditation resulted in my experiencing both the immanence and transcendence of God in a fresh way. I felt God inside of me while at the same time looked to God as the Source of All. My inner life was becoming rich and my dreams unusually vivid.

It was during this time that I had one of the most unusual dreams of my life. It more than likely occurred in a hypnogogic state, the state in between waking and dreaming. I had been watching television in my parents' living room, while lying on the couch. I must have fallen asleep around 2:30 or 3:00 am. In the dream, I saw myself, felt myself, lying on the couch in the dark living room, which looked exactly as it does in reality. Everything I saw was clear and sharp. At one point in the dream I was aware that I was not alone. A figure, adult in size, moved toward me. It wore a gown or robe and a pointed hat on its head. It was translucent, translucent blue. It bent over me and pressed its face up against my right cheek, as if to elicit a feeling of fear. As I lay perfectly still, I could hear the tingle of little bells that were attached to its clothing. Moments later, I awoke and had no idea what to make of the dream. Years later, what I would read about the Inquisition would shed some light on the dream's meaning.

Meditating also seems to have awakened my nonphysical senses, that is, my inner senses or so-called psychic senses. The entry in my meditation journal for July 26, 1986, which I made at 9:30 am, reads, "A picture flashed before me of a hole in the ground. In it was a beautiful, yellow-colored light.... It was square around the rim [edge], and you could see down into it." Beneath the entry, I drew a sketch of what I had seen, which looked eerily like a grave. Several hours later, a college friend called to tell me that our friend Karen had been killed in a car accident earlier in the day. At the cemetery, each of us placed a yellow rose, her favorite flower, on top of the casket, which was suspended above a hole in the ground. Her spirit, which I imagine as a "beautiful, yellow-colored light," surely dwelt there for a time before continuing its journey.

My experience as one of Baskaran's students had transformed me into a passionate theist who believed that God was deeply involved in my life and the rest of creation. Where in the Christian West does one go if one is a non-Christian who believes in God? There aren't many options. When I was studying deism, I remembered reading that two early presidents were Unitarians. I knew only a couple of Unitarians, the dean of students where I went to high school, whom everyone whispered had an open marriage on account of the ring she wore on her thumb, and the stepfather of a high school friend, but I knew very little about their beliefs.

One Sunday, I decided to visit the First Unitarian Church, in Pittsburgh. The church's interior, more than its rather aloof congregants, made the biggest initial impression on me. The dark wooden panels, made shiny from numerous coats of varnish, conspired to create a sometimes thick, ominous atmosphere that hung overhead. The chancel, which I knew as a sanctuary, was dominated by a bank of organ pipes in front of which was the pulpit. This was a far cry from the spiraling marble high altar flanked by angels that I had known as a boy.

When the minister found out that I was in graduate school, he recruited me to help him start a Unitarian Universalist student group on campus. My first task was to help promote a public discussion about the meaning of Easter by posting flyers that read, "Why I Deny the Resurrection." The complete freedom of belief, or disbelief, that I found in Unitarian Universalism strongly appealed to me. Encouraged by the minister, I applied to the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, which was a backdoor to the University of Chicago Divinity School.

I was accepted and registered for the winter semester. My new environment was thoroughly engrossing and challenging. One of my classmates at the theological school was a neo-Pagan priestess, another a Buddhist. There were self-styled humanists, some of whom believed that religion was for little people—billions of people were wrong, and they were right. I met people at the divinity school who had had remarkable journeys. One guy, a Catholic, had belonged to the Church of the

Nazarene for awhile. Another had been raised Unitarian Universalist and had converted to Catholicism. Some were studying in one denomination while quietly planning to transfer to another. People were open about their life and their process.

For the first time in my life I had encountered thinking Christians. They didn't allow their beliefs, if they were at variance with those of their church, to prevent them from ministering in a way that was familiar and comfortable for them. Once, while discussing the divinity of Jesus, that is, his being God, a minister and professor at the divinity school remarked, "no one believes that anymore."

Perhaps I had behaved too rashly in leaving behind Catholicism and Christianity, I thought. At a friend's suggestion, I sought out Father David Tracy who was a lecturer at the divinity school, and he put me in touch with a priest at the Catholic Theological Union (C.T.U.).

I had a number of conversations with this priest who appreciated my questions as well as my search for answers. On Trinity Sunday, he heard my confession, and I went to communion. A year later, I found myself at C.T.U. It describes itself as "a place where good things happen, where people pursuing the priesthood study alongside of women and men preparing for the ministry or just hungry for a life of the spirit."

For the next two years, I would live on the ninth floor of C.T.U.'s main building, once the Aragon Hotel. I would sleep, eat, pray, study, go to the library, wash my clothes, get my mail, and even vote under the same roof.

I studied for the priesthood under the auspices of a religious community, the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, known affectionately as the "Bleeders." The community had been founded by Saint Gaspar del Bufalo (1786-1836). According to one community member, Gaspar's third miracle, which established the cause for his canonization, was a card trick.

Aside from an introductory class on the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew Bible, thoughts of Judaism never entered my mind during my first semester at the seminary. The following semester, I registered for Jewish Mysticism and Messianism, a course taught by the late Rabbi Hayim Goren Perelmuter, because it sounded interesting.

I found the class, which, if I still remember correctly, numbered four students, fascinating from the very beginning. The rabbi was a kind, frail, sometimes caustic man, whose knowledge and love of Judaism, especially its more mystical strains, was immediately discernable to anyone who knew him. At no time did he act as anything more than an expositor of his own tradition.

Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* was required reading. It introduced me to a whole new world, populated by fantastic creatures. Metatron, the fierce angel into which the antediluvian patriarch Enoch had been transformed, was one of these beings. Scholem's description of the metamorphosis of Enoch captured my imagination: "This Enoch, whose flesh was turned to flame, his veins to fire, his eye-lashes to flashes of lightening, his eye-balls to flaming torches, and whom God placed on a throne next to the throne of glory, received after this heavenly transformation the name Metatron." Wow! This was great stuff! I was hooked!

As the class's attention turned to messianism, the rabbi suggested that I read another of Gershom Scholem's books, *Sabbatai Sevi: the Mystical Messiah*. I thoroughly enjoyed the antinomian antics of the "the anointed of the God of Jacob," my favorite being the occasion on which he cradled a large fish dressed as a baby to emphasize that the hour of the messianic redemption would occur in the month of Pisces. Because I had never recovered an orthodox christology, I wasn't the least bit threatened by Sabbatai's apotheosis nor by viewing Jesus through a Jewish lens e.

I took other classes from the rabbi, such as his *Texts and Textures of Jesus' Jewish Background and Readings in the Zohar*. I remember a Russian Orthodox, priest who lived at C.T.U., telling me to avoid the Book of Splendor, that is, the Zohar, or else I would lose my faith. Eventually, I decided to pursue a M.A. in Theology, in addition to a M.Div., and chose Jewish Studies as my area of concentration, instead of New Testament or Church History for example. My novel choice, for which I had to receive special permission, raised a few eyebrows.

My study of Judaism fed my intellect and sustained me throughout the painful process of second guessing my decision to study for the priesthood. As I compare my photo ids from the University of Chicago and the Catholic Theological Union, I look very different. In the former I am smiling broadly, a glint in my eye, and in the latter I am sullen and overweight, no smile at all on my face. I was in the wrong place.

I can't compose a litany of offenses committed by my religious community. They treated me very decently. Like any community, any group of people, they possessed a measure of dysfunction, which, in my case, forced on me some painful discoveries. I observed that alcoholism, indeed any active addiction, can make someone into a different person, a cruel person, incapable of sustaining meaningful relationships with others.

Regardless of the community to which one belonged, there were two issues that dominated life at C.T.U. The first had to do with powerlessness. Everyone was aware that a reactionary papal regime was tightening its control over the American church but admitted they couldn't stop it. The Holy See had all the power, all the absolute power. At least once a month, a pall descended on the lunchroom as word

of yet another narrow-minded pronouncement leaked out. The second issue had to do with sexuality.

The student body was composed mostly of candidates studying for the priesthood. In addition, there a number of seasoned priests and women religious who were taking a break from active ministry to further their education. Few candidates reported that they had been prepared to lead a celibate life or belonged to communities where sexuality was talked about openly and honestly. I witnessed firsthand the suffering that celibacy often brings.

The entire school was riveted by a series of events that unfolded in one of the communities. Two men, both members of the same missionary society, became romantically involved with one another. Their relationship came to light with the discovery of a third man's diary in which he had recorded feelings of jealousy. The two were summarily dismissed, and a short while later, the third man was sent out of state until his fate was decided. I remember one faculty member telling me that this incident would more than likely trigger a "witch-hunt," which it did.

Most of the gay men, though accepting of their sexuality, and, to some extent, at ease with disclosing it, were either oblivious or disinterested in the struggle for gay equality. They did not seem to be bothered by the eventuality of their working for an organization all the while it propagates the view that they suffer from "an objective disorder," which predisposes them to engage in "an intrinsic moral evil," and pressures local governments not to enact civil rights protections (Source: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, the so-called "Halloween Letter," October 1986). At the time, I likened the situation to an imaginary SS who, desperate for new recruits, decides to secretly admit Jews while keeping the camps running.

Not long after this incident, another occurred. One of my classmates made his final profession, that is, final vows. After the ceremony, at which he pledged his life to a twelfth-century religious order, there was a big celebration. A few weeks later, he announced that he was leaving because he had fallen in love with a woman. He later explained that had gone ahead with the ceremony and reception because he would have been too embarrassed to back out.

I recount two other incidents with sadness. Both involve middle-aged adults.

A friend of mine, a diocesan priest from New England, who had taken a leave of absence, had told me that he and a friend, a nun, were going to rent a "porno" so they could see what couples did in bed. I was struck by how far removed they were from the joy of adult sexuality.

While on a retreat, the retreat master, who was also a nun, made an almost tearful admission that she had not been true to her vows. She told us that she had had sex with a man. I remember thinking to myself, "there's something wrong with this, with this whole thing."

What did giving up sex get a person? Could celibates fly through the air, walk on water, or pass through walls? I certainly wasn't the only member of the C.T.U. community who had these thoughts. One professor, a priest, candidly told me that celibacy belonged behind monastery walls. Another told me of a conversation that he had had with a group of elderly priests. Most told him that they had had no call to celibacy; it was "baggage" that went along with the priesthood.

My best friend once told me, "what you kick out the front window crawls through the back door." I never forgot his words. I returned to them again and again as I sought to make sense of the unhealthy expressions of sexuality I encountered in myself and witnessed in others during those years.

My decision to leave the seminary wasn't motivated by theological realizations, brought on by studying Judaism, but by a desire to be self-sufficient. On many occasions, I reminded myself that I was twenty-six years old and, because I had always been in school, had had little, part-time jobs. It was time to test myself in the world.

My study of Judaism did, however, precipitate further evolution of my Christianity. I couldn't imagine God, unless he is perverse, saying to himself, "I am going to become a human being, but I am not going to prepare my chosen people. I am not going to tell them anything about the Trinity or my Son, whom I will send to them as their long promised deliverer. Though I am going to condition them, with the help of my prophets, to recognize and worship only me, the invisible one, I am going to put them to the test. Those who FAIL the test are those who remain faithful to all that I taught their ancestors, and those who PASS the test are those who turn their backs on their tradition, those who recognize and worship my Son as their messiah and God; they are the only ones who will inherit eternal life." In my mind, claiming that the Lord God of Israel is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seemed like quite a stretch, the height of theological contortionism.

I respond to Christians who ask, "Why didn't the Jews accept Jesus?" by asking them, "Does the Bible say anything about the Godhead having four persons or has your priest or minister said anything about a quaternity of persons, instead of a trinity of persons?" I go on to tell them. "Now imagine that someone claimed to be the fourth person of the Godhead; first the Father manifested himself, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit; and now the Holy Perfecter, who will make all things as they should be. Would you accept this individual? What if thousands of people claimed to witness him or her perform stunning miracles and a number of church leaders proclaimed this

person to be the completion of God's revelation? Wouldn't it strike you as odd that neither the Scriptures nor the church, in its two-thousand-year history, never mentioned the existence of this divine person?

This scenario has proven effective on several occasions. It has helped Christians to realize that their understanding of Jesus and their consequent reinterpretation of the concept of the messiah is a departure from Jewish teachings just as any talk of a fourth person of the Godhead would be viewed as a departure from Christian teachings.

The idea that God's son becomes a man, dies, and comes back to life and then disappears into the heavens is fantastic. It's down right sexy. But to claim that the God of Israel orchestrated it is crazy. I couldn't see how Christianity can claim to be the fulfillment of another people's religion while its cardinal tenets are in opposition to the very essence of that religion, but I wasn't ready to give up on Christianity. After much pondering and wrestling, I convinced myself to ignore this incongruity.

I went to Mass to worship God, not Jesus, who wasn't God, the Son of God, or the messiah. In my mind, at the time, Jesus was a God-intoxicated Jew from Nazareth who sounded some key justice themes from the Hebrew Bible and challenged the Roman occupation of his homeland, which got him killed. I chalked up his miracles and Resurrection to his close relationship with God and his own spiritual evolution. The Mass's focal point, the sharing of bread and wine, was a meditative moment for me, which allowed me to connect to God. Simply put, Jesus, however much I appreciated him and aspects of his story, was superfluous.

I also went to Mass for "the smells and bells," that is, the ritual, and found a ready supply of both in the Episcopal Church. My experience with this church began in the seminary. I, along with my Hebrew teacher, a priest, would often sneak off to an Episcopal church on Sunday because we enjoyed the liturgy and respected the Church's attempts to be more inclusive. Though it took me a while to juggle the *Book of Common Prayer* and the hymnal, I found the Anglican liturgy lighter and more joyful than the Roman rite. I appreciated the high church liturgies, even though I found them a bit spooky at times. The neighborhood church where I worshiped in Chicago had a reputation for being haunted. Door knobs were turned by invisible hands, and the Paschal candle, which typically has a burning life of somewhere around 200 hours, burnt nearly all the way down in a single night.

It was at this church that I took my Christianity off life support. I remember singing a hymn that began with the words, "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love," and thinking to myself, "this would be a wonderful hymn if the reference to Jesus was taken out." And as I had this thought, it hit me, "If I don't believe this, why bother?" I never went back. With the exception of funerals, that was the last Christian religious service I would attend for some time.

Religion now consisted of reading books about Judaism. Unbeknownst to me, I was engaging in a simple and ancient form of Jewish worship: study.

One of the books that touched me greatly was *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength & Solace of the Psalms* edited by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW. It introduced me to the ten "healing psalms," identified by Nacman of Breslov (1772-1811) and referred to by him as "the complete remedy." Praying these psalms, which, I believe healed my relationship with my mother, who showed me complete and loving acceptance before she succumbed to cancer, grew into my praying the Book of Psalms over the course of a week.

Though the psalms became the cornerstone of my spirituality, I was always on the lookout for new and interesting Jewish books, that is, more spiritual nourishment. One Sunday afternoon, despite a steady downpour, I made my way to a used bookstore in the Chicago Loop.

The big Judaica section kept me busy until the rain stopped. I saw a number of familiar titles: *I and Though*, *The Jewish War*, *Maus*, *The Illustrated History of the Jewish People*, *The Essential Kabbalah*, *Nazi Gold*, *Anne Frank Remembered*, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, and one I hadn't seen before, *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy* by Dan Rottenberg.

Upon seeing this book, I told myself, "I'm not Jewish," and left it on the shelf. My neck, aching and stiff, needed a rest so I sat down on a little stool and looked up at the shelves. As my eyes focused on the title, *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy*, I reminded myself that I was not Jewish and therefore had no interest in Jewish genealogy. Why, then, did I stand up and remove the book from its place on the shelf?

The book's cover, adorned with symbols of the twelve tribes, was particularly attractive. The three pointed tents, which represented the tribe of Gad, was my favorite. More than half of the book consisted of a glossary of Jewish surnames, An Alphabetical List of Family Names. Because all Jews, or so I thought, had names like Blumenthal, Greenberg, Rubenstein, or Schwartz, I turned to the Ws. I grew up hearing stories about my hardworking German ancestors, Julius Wager, my father's grandfather, and Grandma Wettekin, my mother's great grandmother. No Wager. No Wettekin. I looked for Santos, which was my surname at the time, and for Petrone, my mother's maiden name. No Santos. No Petrone.

I decided to search for one more name, Teixeira. By 1923, my great grandfather, Jose dos Santos Teixeira, had had enough. Fed up with having a last name that Americans could neither spell nor pronounce, he abruptly, and probably illegally, changed it. The family surname became Santos.

To my complete astonishment and utter bewilderment I found this long lost, hidden name:

Teixeira (Teixara, Texeira, Teixeyra)—Noble Portuguese Marrano family whose name was originally Sampayo. In 1900, members were in Hamburg, London, Holland, Vienna and Venice.

I wanted to know more. I turned to the Encyclopedia Judaica and to the old Jewish Encyclopedia and was surprised to find four entries on Jews who had bore the name Teixeira: Pedro Teixeira, Abraham Senior Teixeira, Manuel Teixeira, and Bento Teixeira Pinto.

Pedro Teixeira circumnavigated the globe, produced detailed accounts of Jewish life in Persia and India, and traveled to the source of the Amazon. According to some, he became governor of Para where he died, and to others he settled in Antwerp where he embraced Judaism.

Abraham Senior Teixeira was of noble birth; his father was a gentleman of the Portuguese royal house and his mother a lady in waiting to the queen. He and his family settled in Hamburg where they practiced Judaism, which caused a scandal in the Catholic world.

Isaac Hayyim Senior Teixeira, the son of Abraham Senior Teixeira and Sarah d'Andrade, was the trusted confidant of Queen Christina of Sweden and the leader of the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. He was also an enthusiastic follower of Sabbatai Sevi.

Bento Teixeira Pinto wrote the epic poem *Prosopopea*, celebrating the city of Pernambuco (Recife), which is regarded as the first literary work to be written in Brazil. Denounced as a Judaizer, he was brought before an auto-de-fe and died in custody.

According to their biographical entries, these four men were born in Portugal, where my family originated, identified as Marranos or as having Marrano ancestry, and at some point in their lives reclaimed the faith of their ancestors. The Marranos, as I found out, were the *anusim*, the "forced ones," that is, the mainly Portuguese and Spanish Jews who were forced to adopt Christianity. Marrano comes from the Old Portuguese verb *marrar* meaning "to force." In Old Portuguese, *marrano* means "forced one." If one consults a Hebrew-Portuguese dictionary, the Hebrew word for "forced one" is rendered as *marrano* in Portuguese.

Many Jews, I found out, who had been forced into Christianity adopted surnames having to do with trees on account of the Torah being described as "the tree of life."

Teixo is the Portuguese word for yew tree, and Teixeira means "place of the yew trees." Rottenberg was indeed correct. Teixeira was (and is) a Jewish name!

Reading about these four men was exciting and disappointing at the same time. All of them had had money, enough money to leave Portugal for a new life. Abraham Senior Teixeira, in fact, was known as "the rich Jew" throughout his later years, in Hamburg. Could my ancestors have belonged to a poorer branch of one of these families that found itself trapped in Portugal? Could I really be related to these aristocrats and adventurers?

Tracing my family ancestry back hundreds of years in hope of finding a direct Jewish ancestor was more than daunting, it was frustrating. I could go back in time only as far as my great, great, great grandparents, Francisco and Maria da Cruz Teixeira. Because I was living in Chicago, at that time, I contacted the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois, which sent me some information on genealogical resources and a couple of articles on the once thriving Jewish community of Portugal.

Jews had come to the Iberian Peninsula in the year 70 C.E., in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction at the hands of the Romans. They played an important and visible role in the affairs of the Portuguese state from its inception. During the reign of Afonso I (1139-85), the first king of Portugal, who established the present-day borders of the state, a Jew by the name of Yahya ibn Ya'ish served as treasurer. Jews were recognized by the crown as a "distinct legal entity" and, in larger towns, lived together in a community known as a juderia.

The monarchy proved to be a faithful protector of the Jews, resisting church pressure to restrict their civil rights, until the accession of Afonso IV (1325-57). During his reign, Jews were forced to pay exorbitant taxes, wear a yellow badge and fulfill special conditions in order to emigrate. Their fortunes fluctuated from ruler to ruler from that time forward.

The lives of Portuguese Jews would take a series of bizarre turns beginning in 1492. In that year, the last of Spain's Jews were expelled; 150,000 fled to Portugal. Joao II (1481-95), intent on benefiting from the situation, charged each of these Jews eight cruzados to remain in the country for up to eight months. Families who desired permanent residency were charged 100 cruzados. Within months of stepping foot onto Portuguese soil, most of these Jews were declared slaves of the king, and hundreds of their children were kidnapped and sent to the African island of Sao Tome (Saint Thomas) to settle it.

Jewish hopes for a return to normalcy during the reign of Manuel I (1495-1521) were quickly dashed. Eager to oneday extend his rule over Spain, he set his sights on marrying the Spanish princess Isabella, eldest daughter of Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon, whose great grandmother was Jewish. Their Catholic Majesties,

who had long dreamt of a Christian peninsula, consented to the marriage providing their future son-in-law expel the Jews and Moors from Portugal.

On December 4, my birthday, 1496, the Portuguese king gave the Jews and Moors until the following November to leave the country. Not wanting the economy to suffer from the expulsion of so many talented Jews, as it had in Spain, Manuel decided to forcibly convert the Portuguese Jews, turning them into New Christians. On March 19, 1497, all Jewish children were baptized. A short while later, in Lisbon some 20,000 Jews, who had gathered to emigrate, were baptized by force and later detained.

It is hardly surprising that these bewildered and frightened people, Jewish one day, Christian the next, secretly clung to the faith of their ancestors. Even those who outwardly lived as devout Christians were suspected of practicing Judaism. The earthquake of 1531, which shook Lisbon to its foundations, was seen as divine retribution for the secret practice of Judaism.

Calls for the establishment of an inquisition on Spanish lines became louder. The first auto-da-fe took place in Lisbon on September 20, 1540. Permanent tribunals, empowered to confiscate the property of those accused, were created in Lisbon, Evora, and Coimbra. Victor Perera, author of *The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey*, who encouraged me to stay on the trail of my Jewish ancestors, described the three tribunals as "a deadly triangle that cut the heart out of the Marrano communities of northern and central Portugal."

The autos-da-fe, which were instruments of orgiastic greed and sadism, strove to be spectacular, some even staging bullfights as a way to bring in the crowds. Victims were paraded through the streets wearing a sambenito, a knee-length tunic on which their "sins" were inscribed, and a corozza, a three-foot high pointed hat on which their punishment was symbolically depicted. Could I have been visited years before by an ancestor, who, clad in his penitential habit, appeared before one of these autos-da-fe on accusations of Judaizing? Some Jews even had bells attached to their clothing to warn non-Jews of their approach. Could those have been the bell that I observed?

The last auto-da-fe took place in 1791, and on March 31, 1821 the inquisition was finally abolished in Portugal. It is estimated that 750 autos-da-fe were held in Portugal, at which 29,000 people were reconciled to the church, 600 burned in effigy, and 1,200 were burned at the stake. The majority of these individuals were accused of Judaizing.

Pedro, Abraham, and Isaac Teixeira barely escaped the long reach of the inquisition, the first shoah. Their descendents, I eventually learned, who settled in what is today the Netherlands and the Czech State were not as lucky. Thirty-four individuals named Teixeira perished in the Shoah or Holocaust. Most were murdered at

Auschwitz and a handful at Westerbork. The oldest was a woman of 79, whose name was Judith, and the youngest was a girl of six, whose name was Erika. One of them, bore my Hebrew name, 64 year old Shmuel.

In August of 1995, my mother died, and I moved back to Erie to be of support to my father. I lived in a cottage on Lake Erie, and the isolation allowed me to focus on making Judaism more a part of my life and continuing the search for my Jewish ancestors. It was here that I took my first steps to practice Judaism. When I moved into the cottage, I affixed mezuzot throughout, and I was impressed with myself for being so conscientious about their placement.

Winter came early, as if often does in Northwestern Pennsylvania, and I heard on the radio that the first night of Hanukkah, was upon me. I didn't want to spend the holiday listening to Hanukkah music on National Public Radio and eating a bowl of Manischewitz soup as I had the year before; so, I went out in search of a hanukkiyah and found one, probably the only one in town other than those sold at the synagogue gift shops. I was anxious to meet my friend at Barnes and Noble and show him my purchase.

Hanukkiyah clutched under my arm, I entered the bookstore. As I turned the corner of the aisle, I found myself face to face with the recently appointed Catholic bishop of Erie. I was about to celebrate the festival of light, to dispel darkness, and this man, his black raincoat concealing most of his black cassock, seemed an almost tangible extension of the thick, winter darkness outside. But more than that, he was, at least in my mind, heir to the institutional forces that had caused a blanket of darkness to fall on the Iberian Jews.

I returned home and once more unwrapped my hanukkiyah. It resembled a wavy block of ice with a strand of cobalt blue running through it. I consulted my "how to" books about how to load it and what blessings to say. During the lighting, I unplugged the Christmas tree, one of the last. As I lit the hanukkiyah, I felt connected to Jews around the world and imagined them lighting their candles and lamps at the same time.

Around this time, I made my first Jewish friend, and come Passover we hosted a small seder. I made haroset, using a Sephardic recipe, which required, among other ingredients, dates, apricots, and figs. I joked with my father that this was the first Passover a member of our family had celebrated in more than 500 years.

The article on Portugal in the Encyclopedia Judaica included a map of Jewish communities that had existed from 1200 to 1497. Unfortunately, Freixo, where my family originated, was not on the map. I couldn't find Freixo on any map. Through the Portuguese embassy, I was to discover eight different towns called Freixo not to mention Freixo Seco, Freixo de Baixo, Freixo de Cima, Freixo de Nuinao, and Serra do

Freixo. There was Freixo de Espada Cinta, Freixo de Espada a Cinta, and Freixo de Espado a Cinta! How could I hope to find my Jewish ancestors if I couldn't even locate on a map where my grandfather had been born?

As it turns out, Freixo da Serra, at the foot of Serra da Estrella, was my grandfather's birthplace. Oftentimes, he referred to it as "that jerk town where I was born." Standing before a tattered map of Portugal that hung on his basement wall, he took a flat, red carpenter's pencil and put Freixo da Serra on the map, drawing an x and then a circle around it. I was very encouraged. Freixo da Serra is exactly in between two historic Jewish communities, Viseu and Guarda. A few years later, in the old synagogue at Tomar, I came across a map of Jewish settlements. It was covered with black dots representing places where Jews had lived. I wasn't surprised that the north of Portugal had been referred to as Jew country.

I was even more encouraged to learn about the town of Belmonte, which is southeast of Freixo da Serra. In 1917, a Polish mining engineer by the name of Samuel Schwarz, while conducting a routine survey in the area of Belmonte, came upon a close-knit group of Marranos. Retaining knowledge of their Jewish ancestry, they married among themselves and carried out Jewish rituals, most of which had been corrupted over time. Schwarz's discovery was miraculous; families still clung to the Holy One of Israel 377 years after inquisitors had staged the first auto-da-fe. I dreamed of contacting these Marranos to find out if they knew of any Judaizing Teixeiras. I tried to make contact with them through the internet and in the process discovered that the internet itself could facilitate my research.

When I typed the words, portugal jewish roots, into a search engine, the search for my Jewish ancestors took an unexpectedly positive turn. I was led to the organization Kulanu, which means "all of us" in Hebrew. Kulanu explains its mission in these words: "Our primary goal is to find lost and dispersed remnants of Jewish migrations and to help those who wish to rejoin the Jewish people." In my initial post, I explained what I was after and soon found myself in contact with people who were very knowledgeable about the fate of Portuguese Jews and dedicated to helping individuals, like myself, uncover their Jewish roots. One subscriber to the list wrote, "I hope you find a Magen David at the end of your genealogical quest." The biggest thing that Kulanu did for me was to shift my focus from genealogy to family customs.

Someone on the list recommended *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of Crypto-Jews* by David M. Gitlitz. This work, in which the author describes the practices of Portuguese New Christians and their descendents from the time of the Inquisition to the early twentieth century, led me, with the help of my grandfather, directly to my family's Jewish roots.

The steamship Mexico brought my then twelve-year old grandfather Anastacio dos Santos Teixeira to Ellis Island on July 7, 1920. He made the journey alone and had

to endure three days in immigration custody until his father arrived to claim him. Before leaving Portugal, he had lived with his father's parents, Jose and Vitorina Saraiva Teixeira, in Freixo da Serra.

Because he had been exposed to family traditions and customs, I decided to interview him in hope that our family's Jewish origins would come to light. Based on the information in Gitlitz's book, I developed a questionnaire. The ninety-one questions had to do with the lifecycle events, birth, marriage, death, weekly and yearly customs, and food.

I didn't tell my grandfather that I was searching for our Jewish ancestors, but I didn't lie either. I told him that I was collecting information on family customs, which I was. The interview, which took place over a two-day period, was tape-recorded.

He responded positively to thirty-four of the ninety-one questions. I carefully transcribed his responses and sent them to David Gitlitz, Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, a Reform rabbi who works among the descendants of the anusim in Brazil, and Schulamith Halevy, an Israeli poet and researcher of Portuguese Jewry. All three concluded that Jewish practices had survived in my family. David Gitlitz wrote, "in the aggregate you build a pretty good case." Schulamith Halmy wrote, "there are indications that your great grandfather was of Jewish origin and interested in observing Jewish laws, but that your grandfather did not carry on these traditions, perhaps because his mother was a devout Christian." Among the responses the three found significant, two stood out.

When asked whether his family would cover the face of the dead, my grandfather responded, "Sometimes they would cover a person with something like a sheet; the person's body would be placed in a three-sided box—bottom and two sides. And dirt would be shoveled on top of it."

Burying the dead in this way reflected the Jewish practice of wrapping the body in a plain linen shroud and then burying it directly in the earth or placing it in a simple wooden coffin, which had holes bored into it.

And when asked how his family butchered chickens, my grandfather responded in detail, "When I was a boy, my father took me to a Portuguese farmer who taught me how to butcher chickens. You take all the blood out of them. You hold the head, bend it a little bit; bring the beak to the neck. Make a cut right on top of the crown, or the head; make a curve-like cut. Use a knife like a bread knife and make sure it is sharp. When finished, throw the blood away and the wash the chicken in hot water."

Butchering chickens in this way closely approximates the Jewish practice of slaughtering an animal; a razor-sharp knife is used to swiftly cut through the animal's

wind and food pipes and its blood is avoided.

Alongside these vestiges of Jewish and anusim practice were others. Burying the dead with money, sitting on the floor after a funeral, eating eggs when someone died, and using olive oil instead of lard were among the family customs my grandfather described.

When I finally asked my grandfather whether we were the descendents of Jews, he looked down at the ground, smiled broadly and said, "could be." The discoveries left me thinking to myself "I have a stake in this," and for the first time I started to think about joining, that is, rejoining the Jewish people.

If I were in fact a descendant of hidden Jews, it somehow made sense to me that a long lost, hidden surname would be my link to them. My thoughts turned to Lurianic Kabbalah, a school of Jewish mysticism named after Isaac Luria, which speaks of the kelipot, the husks or shells that cover sparks of Divine Light. Santos was the husk that covered, obscured, Teixeira, which, for me, was the spark illuminating the path back to Judaism.

A year later, my grandfather, in whom that spark glowed brightly, was dead, from an apparent fall down the basement steps of the house he had built with his own hands. At his funeral, I had the privilege of delivering the family tribute. When it came time for me to share my reminiscences, I said these words, "I will remember Pop's patience as I asked him question after question about family genealogy in an effort to let ghosts talk, to uncover long buried roots, to reconnect to the tribe from which we came." Before they closed the casket for the last time, I slipped a white kippah under his pillow.

In the months that followed, I reached out to other family members to further uncover the Jewish roots of the Teixeira family. I contacted Cesar Teixeira, the son of my grandfather's cousin, who was living in Rhode Island. Cesar, whose parents lived in Freixo da Serra for part of the year, had strong ties to the village. Most recently, he had helped to raise funds for a retirement home. He shared with me what he knew about our once big family—his grandmother and my great grandfather were two of eight children—and then volunteered this information, "we have some Jewish blood too."

A year later, I finally made it to Portugal. Midway through the trip, I set out for Freixo da Serra, which had figured prominently in my imagination for years. After meandering for hours on narrow mountain roads, I got there, jumping out of the car to take a picture of the sign. I found the home of Cesar's parents, Manuel and Eduarda. Manuel, who resembles my grandfather, and Guilherme Nunes, the town secretary, wasted no time in giving me a tour.

They showed me where my grandfather had lived with his grandparents before coming to the U.S., and for some reason, the two were eager to show me where Jews had once lived. Perhaps details of my conversation with Cesar had made it to Portugal. They took me to one of several old houses, the stones so weathered they resembled volcanic rock, brownish gray, porous, and they pointed to a curious feature in the stone door frame. There, in the upper third of the right doorpost, was a vertical indentation as long and as thick as one's index finger. I explained that it once held a scroll with passages from the Bible (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21) written on it. I had remembered reading that Sephardic Jews used to position the mezuzah vertically. A niche, such as the one I was shown, is visible in the stone door post of the house in which Nachmanides was born in Gerona, Spain.

They introduced me to another cousin, Jose Teixeira, a lanky, articulate man, who was a used car dealer in the United States before returning to Freixo. He pointed to a building that a Spanish anthropologist identified as a synagogue and then told me, "there's some Jewish in us."

My tourguides brought me to the town church. The sanctuary is surprisingly ornate, almost Baroque. The walls are covered with beautiful blue and white ceramic tiles, known as azulejos. Manuel points to an image, which interrupts the monotony of the tiles. It depicts Moses, rays of light beaming from his head, descending Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Manuel, beaming, tells me that it was a gift from the Teixeira family. I beamed as well for I too had received a gift, a precious gift, from the Teixeira family!