

Year of Living Deeply

by Robert Atkinson

Author Q & A

1. What is the significance of the title of your memoir *Year of Living Deeply*?

The primary inspiration comes from Thoreau,... but it also offers a hopeful perspective on how we can take control of our lives, preferably before we get too far into it, so we won't get too caught up in the conflicts of the moment, and rather dig deeper into each moment so we will get the most out of each moment, which will give us a more desirable outcome in the moment as well as later on in our lives. Living deeply is an approach to life that allows us to gain the most from living the life we are given.

2. Your memoir begins in your mid-twenties, but it seems that there were some key events in your early childhood that prepared you for the adventure in your twenties, like being born the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and other events. How have these early events and influences shaped your worldview?

The moment of my birth definitely influenced me, but I was unaware of how much until I started my own process of self-reflection and discovery of what was true for me during college. By that time, what had been part of my unconscious finally became clear: that my life has been – and still is – a subtle quest to find an elusive inner and outer peace.

My grandmother was also an early influence on the direction my life took. She came to live with us for a few months when I was 9,...

3. Was there one thing that set everything up in just the right way for your adventures to unfold the way they did?

In addition to the early influences I just mentioned, I'd have to say that the one decision that set everything up for everything else to follow from was the decision to go for a master's degree in American Folk Culture in the Cooperstown Graduate Program. This led to not only deepening my interest in folklore, mythology, and religion, but also to developing an interest in life stories, which led to meeting Pete Seeger, which led to other adventures that eventually led to meeting Joseph Campbell, all of which, and more, ultimately changed the direction of the rest of my life...

4. What most informs your spiritual perspective, is it your life experiences, your extensive education, or something else?

It's really a combination of all of these, but my spiritual perspective is the deepest part of who I am, and this has informed how I approach everything else in my life. *Year of Living Deeply* tells the story of how this spiritual perspective evolved during my quest to understand the world's religions. All the life experiences I've had have confirmed my spiritual perspective, and my education has been given more meaning *because* of my spiritual perspective. So, my spiritual perspective is the foundation that everything else is built on and depends upon. I have always been more drawn to the similarities of myth and religion than to their differences, and this has carried over into my other studies. I've always been more interested in universals and in looking at the whole to better understand its parts. And I've always been interested in an evolutionary or developmental approach to everything from the human life cycle to the conscious evolution of humanity. Most importantly, my spiritual perspective of placing the principle of the oneness of humanity above all other principles has informed everything I do, and the way I see everything.

5. Can you give us a quick overview of the kinds of events and experiences your memoir covers?

Sure, *Year of Living Deeply: A Memoir of 1969* tells the story of a coming-of-age spiritual quest framed by the marker events of that year – including the moonwalk, Woodstock, and the maiden voyage of Hudson River Sloop *Clearwater*. It is an inner journey expressing universal motifs and archetypes, emphasizing the themes of an openness to the unknown, the investigation of reality through a study of the world's religions, and personal and collective transformation and renewal. It features Pete Seeger and Joseph Campbell as mentors, as well as experiences such as living in a cabin in the woods, visiting Arlo Guthrie at his farm, living as a guest in a Franciscan monastery, and returning to the college I graduated from three years earlier to teach a course on folk-rock lyrics as poetry – what all these adventures had been preparing me for – and sharing with my students the lessons of a life lived deeply.

6. It seems like an important part of your inner journey has been the study of the world's religions. How did this play out for you, and how do you view the world's religions now?

This started when I majored in philosophy in college, which led me into the study of religion and mythology... The more I got into this, the more their similarities became evident to me. And this all made even more sense to me when I started reading the teachings of the Baha'i Faith, which came into being in the mid-1800s with the core principle of the oneness of humanity. This has also enabled me to see Creation as a unified whole, and everything in it as interconnected. And this would mean that the world's religions have to reflect this unity, as well. So, I view the evolution of religion as one tree with many branches, just as the entire tree of life. Religion is the story of one Creator guiding humanity, chapter by chapter, toward its oneness.

7. How does the Baha'i Faith complement, reflect, relate to, or influence other movements emerging in our day, like the Interspiritual movement?

In my view, both are part of the same evolutionary process of humanity coming to a consciousness of oneness. The characteristics of the Interspiritual Age identified by Brother Wayne Teasdale in 1999 – an ecological awareness requiring stewardship, an understanding of the interdependence of all life, a stronger desire for gender equality, economic equity, and racial unity, a greater understanding of the harmony between science and religion, a shift from nationalistic to global concerns, and a growing receptivity to our common spiritual heritage – all represent an evolution in consciousness that resulted from an evolution in religion. Spiritual energies released with each divine Revelation over the entire history of humanity have led us closer to this Interspiritual understanding. The most recent Revelation, that of the Baha'i Faith, which is a century and three-quarters into a process of unfolding over many more centuries, frames the same supporting spiritual precepts Brother Teasdale saw as the leading edge of what is now widely accepted almost two decades later, but were revolutionary at the time of their origin in mid-19th century Persia. The spiritual forces and ideals released with each divine Revelation take centuries to have their fullest impact in the world; it now requires a global Interspiritual effort to bring these principles of our time to fruition.

8. What was it like for you to return to the college you had graduated from three years earlier to teach a course, with a few of the students having been students when you were there as a student?

It was actually a bit surreal, you know, like on the one hand, who am I to think that I could teach anything to essentially my peers. But on the other hand, and this is something I still struggled with, I had just had experiences that transformed my thinking and my life and gave me a perspective that included an awareness of the responsibility I had to pass on to others what I had been given. So, it was both a challenge and an opportunity that the students themselves made easier by being so open to the topic and to exploring not only how the song lyrics related to their own lives but also how this might shape their lives to come. It was a unique experience for us all.

9. You close your memoir by saying “evolution is a journey toward the recognition of the oneness of all and the holiness of everything.” How will this journey change us as human beings?

It may be a long process of evolution, but we will see gradual changes in human behavior along the way. Eventually, by the time we do get there, living in the consciousness of our oneness as a human family, and with the recognition that all things are interconnected, there will have been a complete transformation of human behavior as we now know it. There will no longer be hate, discrimination, prejudice, racism, gender inequality, economic extremes, or nationalistic conquests, terrorism, and war. In their place, we will seek unity in diversity, think and act as world citizens, and work for global harmony and peace. Rather than living by our material nature, we will live more according to our spiritual nature.