

Here for the Joy: A Memoir of Survival, Addiction Recovery, Spiritual Enlightenment, and In-Depth Personal Transformation

Ananda Forest

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Here for the Joy is a spiritual growth memoir that models how every human being can achieve freedom and deep, abiding joy.

Ananda Forest's memoir *Here for the Joy* is about achieving freedom from trauma, addiction, and despair.

Born into a Boston family with a generational legacy of physical abuse and mental health issues, Forest seemed set up for more of the same. Instead, he discovered New Age spirituality, became fascinated by the spiritual quests represented in ancient traditions, and made contact with living saints. These experiences represented new possibilities to him when he was wounded and young.

Joseph Campbell's call to "follow your bliss" was Forest's permission to forge his way—but not by flinging himself headlong after it, regardless of the consequences, as Forest says the phrase is often misread to encourage. In 1994, after graduating from Yale and teaching English, he moved to upstate New York, worked as a carpenter, made whiskey, and undertook vision quests. Travels to India followed. He had intense healing encounters with Neem Karoli Baba, guru to Ram Dass and Krishna Das, and with "the hugging saint," Amma, who had a transformative effect on him.

While part of its work is sharing information about the teachings and spiritual practices of Native Americans and the saints and gurus of India, this confessional narrative also covers addiction issues, including substance abuse and sexual addiction, that impacted Forest's long-term relationships. In the course of Forest's life, it notes, multiple people were hurt. It references fractured relationships and divorce, though without addressing the suffering that those breakups caused to the women involved in full. Instead, it sticks to conveying the overwhelming emotions that Forest himself felt from within throes of his destructive addictive behavior. Intimate revelations of inner conflicts precede Forest's accounts of how he came to see his challenges as a "fierce grace," strengthening and tempering his spirit and turning him into a person who could help others navigate their own ways to spiritual enlightenment.

In the end, it is the book's strong current of emotion that drives it forward, making its topic and speaker compelling. Even its descriptions are laden with emotion: as a child, Forest describes feeling his grandmother as "an embracing rush of joy and generosity"; later, he honors her role in his life by noting that her face as she lay dying had the look of "an ancient Central American shaman."

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KRISTINE MORRIS (January 25, 2023)

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