

Recipes for a Sacred Life: True Stories and a Few Miracles

Rivvy Neshama

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Rivvy Neshama's simple practices come alive in the stories, illuminating how she moved through fear and darkness.

A sacred life requires no ashrams or mountaintops, according to author Rivvy Neshama, who calls her stories from life “recipes.” She honors her mother’s nearly blank recipe book who, like the author, “wasn’t much of a cook” in *Recipes for a Sacred Life: True Stories and a Few Miracles*, giving shape to a bright promise of awakening that comes from simple ingredients and life’s most everyday moments—sunrises, walks, animals, neighbors, parents, being a grandparent, and making lists.

Everyone’s recipe book will be unique, the author observes in the story “Speaking Spanish in Mexico.” There she notes, “I was going to list the things I do that make my life feel sacred ... Then I realized that this would be my list,” advising that your list would be “whatever connects you with your passion and love.”

It’s the shaping of these common experiences that illustrate how each person has access to similarly sacred moments. Neshama invites her audience along into her mother’s hospital room prior to a surgery. There, both mother and daughters sing before mom was wheeled away, and “she blew us kisses until out of sight.”

The author does not stint in sharing her own shadow, including panic, anxiety, and depression after the breakup of her first marriage. Her simple practices come alive in the stories, illuminating how she moved through the fear and darkness of that and other parts of her life. The stories are journeys into Harlem with the young woman battling anxiety; onto a plane to miraculously meet a cousin she didn’t know she had; and to the beach with her grandchildren.

In “Tea and Compassion,” she and her beloved visit her Sufi teacher. It’s a day when the author reports, “I have a dark side. ... Which is why I felt uneasy that Sunday afternoon ... right after one of my darker moments.” This is a contrast to her morning habit of greeting her ancestors along with the sun, and other practices detailed in “The First Few Steps.” There’s even a story called “For Days When It’s Hard to Feel Grateful.”

The author’s inspiration ranges widely, from the Desiderata to the Chinese New Year, from Jewish Shabbat to a Rosh Hashanah forgiveness rite learned from Shakti Gawain. She recounts wisdom gleaned from the Taos Pueblo on Christmas Eve, her Sufi teacher, visits to a shaman, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the Dalai Lama, and her dad, “a teller of tales and a singer of songs.”

With her goal to add to the “wonder, love, and sacredness of your life,” these stories provide gentle nudges for waking up to a spiritual path. The tales carry a resonance similar to healing stories from Rachel Naomi Remen’s “Kitchen Table Wisdom.”

Only a few of the “recipes” resemble actual recipes, with suggestions of things to do. Some may be disappointed there’s so little prescription. “In Jewish tradition, the best jokes are stories,” says the author. Likewise, Neshama’s audience will experience that the most sacred recipes are also the stories.

BOBBYE MIDDENDORF (November 8, 2013)

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