

The Guru Question: The Perils and Rewards of Choosing a Spiritual Teacher

Mariana Caplan

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Dr. Mariana Caplan, psychotherapist and author of seven books, including *Halfway Up the Mountain* and award-winning *Eyes Wide Open*, shares her lifetime spiritual journey in search of a teacher. “The spiritual path is neverending,” Caplan concludes, as she elucidates the quest of the student to connect with a “guru.” Throughout *The Guru Question*, she engages readers with her own story, overflowing with lessons drawn from personal missteps and featuring colorful characters like Ringo, a teacher she hooked up with early on, and about whom she reports, “My Summer of Torment in the Van from Hell with my Grandfather from Hades.”

Although personal foibles and naïveté enliven the discussion, the author is a serious scholar examining the pitfalls and benefits of connecting with a spiritual teacher. “How,” she asks at one point, “in a world full of fraudulent teachers, does one decide whether it is worth even trying to find a good one?” Especially for those in the Western religious and cultural traditions, there is little support and a lot of negative press about spiritual gurus. Caplan addresses these complexities in chapters covering the nature of spiritual scandals and false complaints, power dynamics, trust and surrender, defining the criteria for teacher and student, rules and breaking them, pros and cons of following one teacher versus several, and dealing with games and “crazy wisdom.” What requires supreme discernment, and where her book will be especially valuable, is in aiding would-be disciples to sort through a particular teacher’s approach: On the surface what may appear out of line is actually the mentor’s way of awakening the student. Admittedly, it’s a fine line. Another exceptional resource is her section “Four Simple Litmus Tests for Spiritual Scandals.”

In her journey, Caplan connected with a variety of teachers and disciples from numerous mystical traditions, eventually finding the right fit with Lee Lozowick. The appendix comprises one hundred pages of insightful interviews with thirteen spiritual leaders, some with recognizable names, like Ram Dass, George Leonard, and Georg Feuerstein.

Some readers may find sections where the psychotherapeutic terminology obscures the author’s message. Others might wish for more nuanced discussions than those implying westerners can’t abide outside authority, and her meditations on ego. For those seeking to live as mystic “mad for love,” as well as those who desire to understand loved ones seeking the same, this is a compelling and informative must-read. The knowledgeable, informed discussion and interviews at the book’s end ensure this is a valuable addition to world spiritual collections.

BOBBYE MIDDENDORF (July / August 2011)

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