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7-1-2013

Coming Home To Herself

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Recommended Citation

Steven P. Hopkins. (2013). "Coming Home To Herself". *Swarthmore College Bulletin*. Volume 110, Issue 5. <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/217>

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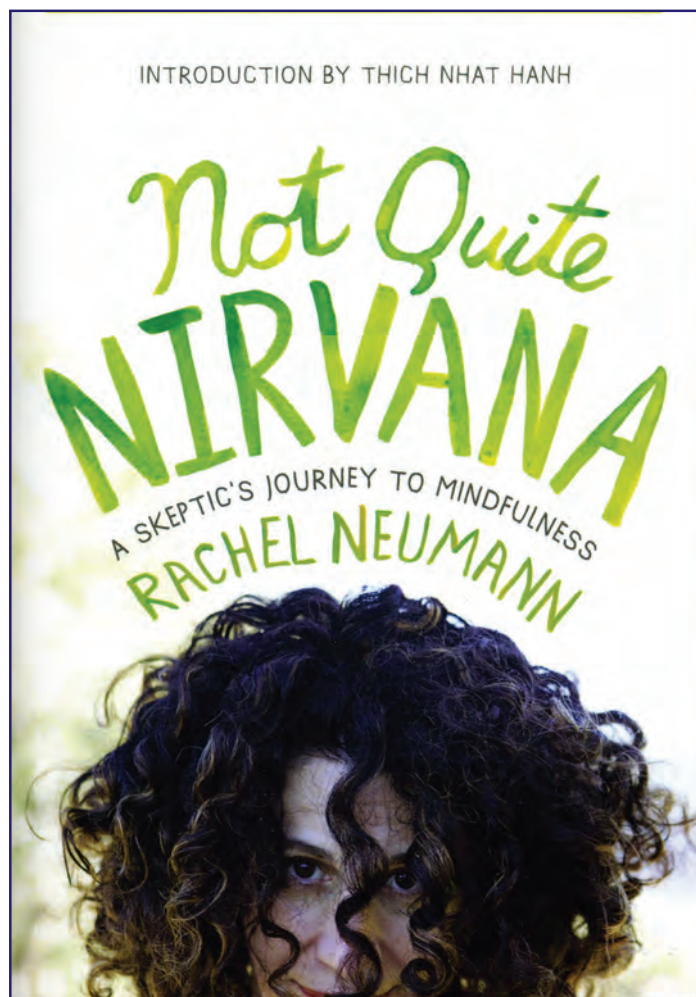
Coming Home to Herself

Rachel Neumann '92, *Not Quite Nirvana: A Skeptic's Journey to Mindfulness*, Parallax Press, 2012, 208 pp.

SPENDING TIME WITH THIS disarmingly moving book by Rachel Neumann '92 is like sitting across a table with a close friend, sharing a meal—"friends, warm food, light elemental"—or simply a cup of nettle tea, "breathing and riding waves of joy and sadness as they fall." Neumann evokes the virtues of "Interbeing," using the vocabulary of Vietnamese monk and Buddhist activist Thich Nhat Hanh, when she speaks about patiently cultivating connections with others—being "available," "engaged," "connected"—and of creating intentional forms of community with our erstwhile neighbors—"the easy ones and the hard ones."

Neumann also reflects throughout her book on experiences of commensality—community defined as the sharing of food, hospitality, the sometimes risky opening up of one's home as a gathering place, "a community center and a think tank," with an extra room and perhaps bed for the night. This sense of a shared community in which doors are open to all neighbors seems to come naturally to Neumann, who grew up in the '60s as a commune kid.

Neumann is not only the child of a "hippie anarchist commune" and the personal editor for Thich Nhat Hanh and several other Buddhist teachers but a person for whom core Buddhist virtues of mindfulness, compassion, and the truths of impermanence and karma are always close at heart. She is also the child of her father, Osha, a "rebellious and angry child of German Jewish refugees—intellectuals whose only religion was rationality. ..." Osha's stepfather was Herbert Marcuse, whom



Neumann visited in San Diego as a child, and whose critique of "repressive tolerance" she quotes in some detail, reflecting on her father's influences. It is this blend of Nhat Hanh's "engaged" Buddhist ideals and a critical, skeptical political consciousness that gives Neumann's memoir its vital tensions and center of gravity. Do not judge others, for sure, but do not simply tolerate them either. Mindfulness and social critique exist in tension together.

The book begins in fall 2002, when Neumann begins working for Nhat Hanh, and weaves fluidly back and forth through her life, from her childhood as one of a roving gang of "dirty, half-naked children" on the commune, through the births of her two children (most notably Plum), her partnership with the father of her children,

irreparable loss ("an idea named Grace"), and the quotidian struggles of motherhood and middle age.

After I finished the book, I closed my eyes, took a couple of deep breaths, and let one of the last images sink in: a family—a father, a mother, two young daughters—"burrowing into the darkness" of a grandmother's house at Muir Beach, wrapped in blankets and listening "to the wind and the waves" as they talked about "the Earth tilting away from the sun here in the Northern Hemisphere."

With subtle deep feeling, Neumann describes a gloriously present moment during the winter solstice when, as Nhat Hanh phrases it, one has "come home" to oneself. As Neumann herself remarks before describing this final scene of momentary familial peace, teetering in the darkness: "Even when I get home, I often forget to come home." And "coming home to myself," she then observes, "does not mean that I am alone." As with many passages in this memoir, when Neumann

"comes home" to herself, taking account of so many poignant and worrisome moments of her life as a child, a mother, an activist, and a life partner, she also invites the reader to come home with her.

This gracious book inspires us to periodically close our eyes, drawing in our energies to better witness the moment that is passing, but it also wills us to open them again and—with a bit of luck in this "unfair" world that is "not quite nirvana"—to emerge refreshed and newly engaged. ☘

—*Professor of Religion Steven Hopkins teaches the history, religion, and culture of India, with an emphasis on Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Islamic traditions and on Buddhist traditions of Asia, among other courses.*