
What a lovely respite from the endless “My childhood was worse than yours” memoirs we have been battered with. Instead, Atkinson recalls a memorable year where he spent whole seasons withdrawn from the world in self and book study, much as Joseph Campbell did, who appears in this narrative at the end of this year like the archetype he may have aspired to be, and gives Atkinson what he needs, a stirring affirmation of what he has been doing, and a push to go even further into his quest for self-discovery. The book recalls rather than recounts some pleasing adventures with Pete Seeger on the ship the Clearwater, that was a floating activist center to get the Hudson River cleaned up to a few amazing soul-lifting jam sessions with other serious folk singers.

He spends the winter in a kindly monastery, almost fairy tale-like in its goodness to him, and benefits from his reading, his insights, and his reconnection with the natural world.

The adventures are easy, the insights within the reach of any of us and the results favorable. He is given a wonderful opportunity at the end of this time in his life to teach what he learned to a college class. His students seem, in the narrative, to display such eager intelligence such as most of us college teachers only dream of when we have smoked that which we should not even admit to knowing about.

Be forewarned, this is a book by a good person who had led a good life and whose youthful experiences were healthy. They say in fiction that the good characters are the hardest to create; villains come easy. If so, Atkinson has pulled off a rare feat, giving us a thoroughly nice human being, himself, whose small flaws do not overshadow his essential nature.

Throughout this time of his life and as a child, he hears an inner voice, which is stronger, clearer, more profound and a better writer than Atkinson.

Here is the voice coming to him at age 24, working not too successfully as a summer camp counselor, “Awake and become conscious of that part of yourself that is a part of everyone. Allow yourself to pass beyond the gate of limits into a land of wonder where boundaries cease to exist. Listen every day as if each sound were just for you to understand. Feel the life in each moment it comes to you” (p.12). Caught up with the wonder of what he’d been told, he goes back into the camp and sees on a small TV set the first moon landing and the awe-inspiring view of the earth “without boundaries.” It is an auspicious start for his ultimately successful quest.
It is this prophet-like inner voice that eventually elevates the whole narrative from a nice kid dropping out and enjoying himself to a blend of insights and transpersonal events that linger with one after the book is closed.

In a series of notes and afterthoughts he discusses his growing pleasure in finding and eventually becoming a member of the Baha’i faith. How he connects this final turn in his self-transformation might make you explore this faith more deeply. He includes a list of books and suggestions if you wish to do so.

The Author

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The Reviewer

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