

Interview questions for *Still on Fire—Field Notes from a Queer Mystic* with Jan Phillips

1. Who is this book for?

A: Anyone interested in their spiritual journey, in finding their authentic voice and staying true to it, will find this book helpful. Though it's written from an LGBTQ perspective and speaks to the impact that marginalization and homophobia has had on so many of us, the story is universal and relevant to anyone. While being a queer mystic is a story of its own, the focus is more on our spiritual potential than anything else.

2. How is it relevant for these times?

A: This is a memoir of a spiritually-inspired social activist. My first social encounter with public homophobia led to my activism. I was determined to speak out about injustice and began to build a life based on that---speaking out about nuclear weapons, about women's rights, about LGBTQ concerns. And now, since George Floyd and the racial reckoning this country is experiencing, I am immersed in anti-racist work. The tie-in to spirituality is that the inspiration for this kind of action and purpose-filled life comes from Jesus, from the Buddha and from the Quran. They all agree on three things: stand for justice, be a light in the dark, and remember that everywhere you look you're seeing Divinity Unfolding.

3. Do you have an ax to grind?

Well, if I could remove dualistic thinking from our cultural paradigm, I would do that. Let's start there. If we could entertain two opposing thoughts in our minds at one time, we'd be geniuses. You don't have to be wrong for me to be right. The goal is to see what we have in common, what we agree on. If we can get to that, we could get beyond these dangerous polarities we've become accustomed to.

4. Do you consider yourself religious?

No. I learned in the convent to discern the difference between faith and religion. Religion is an inherited set of doctrines and beliefs. I was raised Catholic and we memorized them by the hundreds. Catholicism was installed in us like software, with all the sensual accoutrements one could imagine: frankincense, candles, heavenly choirs, ever-changing regalia and liturgical seasons, holy water, sacraments, mysteries, and constant reminders that we had the one true faith.

Faith, on the other hand, is not inherited. It's self-created, self-proclaimed. One determines what commitments one will live one's life by and that becomes their living faith. I proclaimed my faith in my first theology class—that I was committed to justice and mercy, that I would stand with the poor and be a light in the world. I was 19 then. By the time I was 21 I'd been dismissed from the convent and disinherited from my church for being gay. I no longer had a religion to cling to but my faith has only grown stronger over the years.

5. What is the good news you come bearing?

The best news is that everyone can disentangle from whatever religion they grew up in, *dismiss what insults their souls*, as Walt Whitman put it, and create a spirit-based life that is blissful,

purposeful and passionate. Everything is available to us. We are in consort with Creation Itself. If one wants to be a mystic, one can set out to be that and devote time each day to a spiritual practice of their own making. We are the authorities in the matter of our spiritual lives. Some may have spiritual directors and spiritual companions who will mirror back to us our thoughts and visions, but there is no mediator required for a holy, sacred life. The path of the mystic is not austere or ascetic. I live the most joyful, pleasurable life I could imagine. I deprive myself of nothing. I go all out for my dreams. I fulfill my desires. And every day starts with a practice of solitude, silence, and deep communion with the divinity all around and within me.

6. What is your hope for this book?

I hope that people find in my story whatever they need to stop blaming anyone else for their suffering, to realize they are creating the lives they experience with their thoughts and words. I hope that they drop the notion of a male God on a cloud and re-imagine God as an active verb, ongoing and ever expanding as the Cosmos Itself, which we came from, belong to, and continually co-create. The Sacred is as close as the air we breathe. It is in our atmosphere, in our lungs, in every cell, and totally unavoidable. It's time, as Rumi said, to stop learning and start knowing.

7. Why the distinction “queer” mystic?

Because in one recent week, according to LGBTQNation.com, 3 adults in Atlanta beat a 12 year old boy and shaved the word “gay” in the side of his head. In Miami, a gay couple was beaten by a mob for dancing together at a bar. Their crime: “being against nature.” Because Philadelphia police shot an unarmed gay Black man several times outside his home and Samuel Luiz, a 24 year old gay man in Spain was beaten to death while 60 people watched. Because LGBT young adults are five times more likely to consider suicide and 25-32% of transgender teens have already attempted suicide.

Research shows a correlation between religiosity and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ community, and *Still On Fire* tells the story of a young lesbian whose commitment to social justice was forged by this kind of homophobia. A cradle Catholic who was dismissed from the convent for being gay, Jan Phillips embarked on a path to reconcile her spirituality with her social activism. She learned the distinction between faith and religion. She discovered the necessity of a spiritual practice. She created a spirituality that honored the words of Jesus, the Buddha and Hindu sages. Any spirituality that does not bring about more justice, more social awareness, more right action in the world is a lame and impotent excuse for faith. My work for justice *is* my faith. It's my spirituality in running shoes.

8. What are some takeaways?

This is a book written by a person who found what she was looking for and discovered the formula for bliss. I'm a finder, not a seeker. What I share with people is how to identify their heart's desire and then achieve it. I engage the heart and the brain. I don't read to people. I stoke the burning embers within them.

Still on Fire will not leave you where you are. It will lift you up and drop you into a new territory where the treasure you've been seeking has been waiting all the while.

Readers will find ideas for closing the gap between the life they're living and the meaningful adventure they were hoping to make of it. They will find pathways to their own spiritual authority and the inspiration to shift from news mourner to newsmaker.

9. Are you working on a new book?

Yes. It's called **Stop Seeking, Start Finding**.

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