

Review: JAN192

## DANGEROUS SPIRITUALITY FOR TEENS

a book review of  
*Teen Psychic: Exploring Your Intuitive Spiritual Powers*  
by Julie Tallard Johnson  
(Bindu Books, 2003)  
and  
*Fire in the Heart: A Spiritual Guide for Teens*  
by Deepak Chopra  
(Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing, 2004)

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Starting with Silver Ravenwolf's *Teen Witch* in 1998 and Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God for Teens* in 2001, books beguiling teens into New Age and occult spirituality have steadily infiltrated the marketplace. Two recent books, Deepak Chopra's *Fire in the Heart* and Julie Tallard Johnson's *Teen Psychic*, fit this pattern. Both are written for teens and offer spiritual views based on feelings; the inner self or inner wisdom; and a nondescript God, soul, spirits, or "Spirit" who acts as a benevolent guide in one's quest.

Chopra's book is the simpler of the two; it is a sort of spiritual Pabulum—very little chewing and easy swallowing for the unwary. Chopra presents a scenario of himself as a 15-year-old boy who encounters Baba, a mysterious old wise man whom Chopra meets one day after school. Chopra spends four days with Baba over a period of months as he answers questions such as, Do I have a soul? How do wishes come true? What is the supreme force in the universe? How can I change the world? Baba answers these by providing parables, stories, and life illustrations for the initially skeptical but increasingly curious and receptive teen.

The young Chopra learns from Baba that each of us not only has a soul but *is* a soul, and the soul knows and sees all. This soul seems to replace God, although Baba equates God with "spirit, the divine spark, the breath of life" or just "essence" (p. 19), and sums up God as "the surprise you never expected" (150). God, self, and soul all are "That," which signifies an intelligent force that unifies all matter and spirit into one (41). Buddhist and Christian monks connect with That during meditation, according to Baba.

Baba explains to Chopra that to achieve his desires, he must trust his soul, as it knows what plan should unfold. He should make decisions in silence by relaxing and listening to the soul and to intuition, because if the mind is "talking," there is doubt. The teacher says that as long as one follows the soul's guidance, and one "wishes from the inside," one's dreams can be fulfilled.

Everyone has the same "light" that Jesus, Buddha, and the saints had, Baba asserts (136). We can change the world because we have the same essence that God has; our thoughts are the thoughts of the universe, which is alive and thinks (134). There is virtually no distinction between God, the soul, the universe, and ourselves, according to Baba; therefore, Chopra learns that the universe's power is ours to "harness," and to use to turn our thoughts into reality; because of this we have unlimited potential to achieve. The supreme force in the universe is love. The book's message is classic motivational thinking such as that

found in the human potential movement. Baba is at heart a blend of spiritual teacher and motivational therapist, just as is the adult Chopra.

Baba encourages some ethical behavior such as compassion, kindness, and forgiveness, but his teaching on good and evil is disturbing. He tells Chopra that there is no absolute evil and destruction is just part of the cycle of life. Evil is relative, and today's evil could be tomorrow's good (118). Baba even admits that he cannot tell the "good guys from the bad guys" (119). Evil is based on perception, and what makes a person good is not his deeds, but who he is. Baba's lesson on good and evil is that balance is the objective. Just as the cycle of nature is a balance of life and death, so we should understand that the cycle of life is a balance of good and evil (122). At the end, Chopra realizes that Baba is just an extension of himself. This is not hard to believe given that what Baba teaches here corresponds with what the adult Chopra has taught for years.

Chopra's slim volume reads like a watered-down version of his books for adults. Johnson's *Teen Psychic* offers some similar teachings, but is longer, more detailed, and complex. Johnson's book essentially presents a blend of New Age, occult, and shamanistic teachings to unsuspecting teens who are seeking meaning and self-acceptance. It lays out instructions for calling on spirits and practicing altered-consciousness meditations. The book's subtitle calls for exploring intuition, but the book goes beyond that into the realm of New Age and occult beliefs, psychic practices, affirmations, Buddhist worldviews, Hindu chakras, creative visualization, energy access, shamanistic spirit contact, obtaining a spirit guide, and step-by-step meditation instructions. In this one book, Johnson has summarized immense amounts of information. It took me several years of reading and learning to discover this same information when I was involved in New Age, Eastern, and occult beliefs in the 1970s and 80s.

The book is aesthetically pleasing and well laid out. Johnson uses quotes from New Age writers, indigenous shamans, and Buddhist practitioners, together with quotes from poets and other writers, to illustrate various points. The reader is led to believe that the sources quoted are worth investigating; Johnson hereby introduces teenagers to a wide array of New Age and occult writers. She also provides a list that consists primarily of New Age organizations and reading materials at the end of the book.

Each chapter is prefaced with two brief narratives: the personal story of a teen who has gained an insight or overcome a challenge, and a tale or fable from an indigenous culture that teaches a principle or moral from a pagan worldview. Johnson refers to the characters and lessons of these narratives as she instructs the reader on particular themes. These teachings encourage readers to believe in themselves and to trust their own instincts and inner wisdom. This is very appealing to teens going through the peaks and valleys of adolescence and struggling with self-image issues.

There are nine chapters, each filled with suggestions and instructions on particular beliefs and practices. Chapter 7, "The Path of the Visionary," for example, begins with the story of Scott, a high school senior who discovers in a dream that he has shamanic vision. He trusts his spirit and has "heard its call" (177-79) and now has courage and the belief that he can succeed in following his dreams. A myth of the Carib shamans in South America follows Scott's account. It is a story of a young boy who, as he is instructed by his teachers, has visions and contacts spirits (some of which are violent). He gets wisdom from the spirits and realizes that he has become a shaman. Johnson draws from these two tales to teach the reader that each person has a higher self within, and an available external power or spirit that speaks to him or her every day. She advises the reader to open doors to the spirit world for healing and she presents a meditation during which the teen reader is supposed to contact his or her spirit guide. The chapter continues with information on dream yoga, meeting animal spirits, going into a trance, and specific steps on doing automatic writing (called "psychic writing"). Johnson states that the spirit guide can be Christ, an angel, or an ancestor (197).

In another chapter, Johnson gives a detailed presentation of the chakras, which, according to yoga philosophy, are the seven centers of spiritual energy in the human body, and discusses how to connect with each one. She also teaches about flower remedies and healing stones, and she recommends consulting "oracles" such as the I Ching and tarot cards.

This is a dangerous book, spiritually, mentally, and physically, because it is aimed at vulnerable teens, and because it approvingly presents teachings involving spirit contact, occult energy, and altered states, thus contradicting God's condemnation and prohibition of these practices in Deuteronomy 18:10–12 and elsewhere. It is essentially an introduction to New Age and occult worldviews and spiritual practices.

It is hard to say which book is more alarming, Chopra's or Johnson's. Both present spirituality as self-empowerment and as an energy to be accessed at will. Both appeal to teens by acknowledging their difficulties, lack of confidence, and fears. Chopra's book, while superficial and general, emphasizes the dangerous idea of going within to make decisions. Johnson's book presents a broader field of New Age practices in detail and addresses a wider range of problems that teens might be struggling with, thereby appealing to a broader audience. These books should not be given to teens, but Christian adults might benefit from seeing how these ideas are being marketed to a younger generation, and thereby become forewarned and forearmed.

— *reviewed by Marcia Montenegro*