

We have felt an invisible hand, or spoken with an angel. Some of us have even met Jesus. And now we're speaking out.

By Charlotte Rørth

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Many people warned me that I would be ridiculed if I went public about my encounter with Jesus. Instead, when I spoke out about my experience, the enthusiasm I met made me realize just how many people are longing to give express themselves freely about the intangible workings of the spirit.

I had certainly not anticipated that so many people would believe I really did meet Jesus. After all, who expects to bump into him face to face, as I did on Wednesday the 25th of February 2009? I was utterly unprepared for the 20-minutes in which he stood a few feet away from me and spoke. It was not something I'd been looking for, or had the imagination to invent. As a rational, agnostic journalist raised as a secular child of the 1970s, the apparition left me in a state of mental chaos. I've never found either a medical or a theological explanation for what happened. His appearance was, and remains, a mystery.

In the wake of it I wrote my book, "I met Jesus". That account is not so much about that life-changing episode as about the thoughts it provoked. I used my real name on the cover of the book, as I do in this article, because I stand by what happened – and because self-censorship hardly suits a journalist.

My message here, and in the book, is not about religion so much as about the human right to report a supernatural experience without being mocked. Free speech is an important tenet, and I see it as my duty to defend it.

If my story were simply about something bizarre that happened to me as an individual, it would be of no great importance. But in the course of documenting and then discussing it, I have discovered that I am not alone in experiencing a phenomenon that defies explanation.

Until I began to speak about my own experience, I had no idea that so many other people had met also Jesus, or felt an invisible hand in theirs, or spoken with an angel, or received some kind of supernatural message. I am trying to discover just how many such people there are. But in a way it doesn't really matter how widespread or how rare such events are: what matters is that they can and do happen.

And I believe that the insights they provide can benefit us all.

There is, I discovered, a huge interest in spiritual experiences such as mine. It's been evidenced not just by the many thousands of copies my book has sold but by the scale of the library loans, the invitations I receive to lectures and public debates, my overflowing mailbox, and the strangers who come up to me on the street, on the train or in the theatre to give me words of encouragement. Some just want to say thank you just because I have dared to write and speak out. Doing so has created a space in which people can discuss a phenomenon that many trivialize as being freakish or unbelievable.

Many of the people I meet have had experiences of their own.

So who are they? Are they fools with no education, knowledge or common sense? Not the ones I've come across. But many of them expressed the fear that they would be ridiculed. It's almost taboo to have faith, they argued. And almost easier to admit to atheism than to belief. I used to think that way too. But since I "came out" I've discovered that most people aren't as judgmental as I anticipated and feared: only occasionally have I been met with condescension.

My own cohort, the "cultural elite" that reads upmarket Danish and international newspapers, has been more reticent. But occasionally I'll get an email from someone who says they've read the book, or would like to, and that they "know someone" who has had an experience similar to mine. Are they talking about themselves? I suspect that the biggest fear, when it comes to acknowledging the supernatural, is loss of control.

In today's culture it is fashionable to express one's religious faith through the traditional argument that God's existence cannot be *disproved*: a form of belief that posits doubt as a key characteristic of the intelligent believer.

When I had my spiritual encounter, I lost any doubt I had. But I sought explanations for it, urgently. Would I find them in medicine? Or in theology?

I have come to realize in the course of my search for answers that it does not really matter whether or not my intellect can create a logical and coherent narrative out of what my senses witnessed. Being an educated, inquisitive journalist, I've sought an explanation from academics and experts of all kinds. But found none.

It was real, and as most people know, reality can't be argued away.

But the loss of control one senses in my situation is massive and permanent. I now know for sure that neither I nor anyone else can explain, know, or control everything. Which isn't good news for the people who depend on mankind maintaining its reputation as the omniscient creature that can do anything and make money in the process.

I occasionally meet with condescension, and when I do, I just sigh. I know I can't and won't reach certain people: there's too much at stake for them. If you meet Jesus, as I did, or speak with angels, as others have done, then you disrupt the hierarchy of their world and threaten its power.

An attitude of contempt for those other than oneself is an ingredient of the populism that scares so many of us at the moment. Yet most people regard others as their equals, and want to see them thrive.

The mystifying encounters that I and others have had, so far unexplained by science, serve as a reminder that we can't and don't know everything. Once upon a time, mankind was convinced the earth was flat. If we can summon the humbleness to admit we were wrong there, why can't we apply the same logic to the testimony of people who have seen things others have not? Those of us who bear witness have been forced to accept that our encounters cannot be explained. Those who have not have the choice of believing us or not. There is a humbleness involved in letting go. Humility is a sympathetic trait: it engenders tolerance and respect for others – including those who are different. It also encourages what drives us as humans: curiosity. What are other people up to? What will tomorrow bring? How can I get my girlfriend to smile? How do you reduce the energy consumption of your fridges, increase aquatic biodiversity and make sure all children can read? Being faced with the unknown forces us to focus on asking questions.

The fact that there's a hunger for stories like mine tells me that people are yearning not for strong leaders with answers, but for a community in which they can safely share something that is not just difficult to talk about, but for which we barely have the vocabulary. These discussions about the spirit –something we have all heard of, but know so little about – are breaking new ground. Beginning such a conversation, or taking part in one, is a big step: a leap of faith in itself.

But, everywhere, people are doing it.

Charlotte Rørth, journalist at NORDJYSKE Media. 'I met Jesus' was released in January 2015 and was on the Danish bestsellerlists for over a year, as well as a bestseller in Norway. Spring 2017 it will release in Spain, in the fall in Sweden and Holland. She is currently working on a sequel to be published October 2017.
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