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Sample Interview with Author and Blogger, S.A. Snyder

If you get annoyed when plans change without warning or when people don't respect your rules or when life seems to dump on you constantly, this witty little book offers some guidance for coping.

S.A. Snyder, author of a new book, *The Value of Your Soul: Rumi Verse for Life's Annoying Moments*, talks about shifting perspectives on some common aggravations in life to find a little peace—and your sense of humor.

Q: Welcome, Sarah. Can you tell us a little about this book?

SS: Sure, in a nutshell it's a collection of short, real-life stories where something disastrous happens, I learn from it, and have some advice to share about it. Well, it's not all disasters, even though it felt like it at the time. A lot of the experiences I write about were just annoying in some way, as the title suggests, and I spent more time agonizing about them instead of just dealing. With the help of the poet Rumi, I pull apart the lessons learned and offer some ways to switch the narrative, so to speak, as a way to cope. All of the stories took place in Scotland, where I lived at a spiritual retreat off the grid for two years. I was a volunteer on the estate, which meant I spent most of the time working outside in mostly bad weather doing a lot of manual labor. Mix it up with living with all kinds of people from all over the world, sharing bathrooms, meals, and the TV remote, and, like I said, disaster ensues! You can read all about it in my memoir, published in 2019.

Q: Where did you get the idea for the new book?

SS: I've been around long enough now that I feel a duty to pass on to others what I've learned, sometimes the hard way. No, *most times* the hard way! I learned so much about myself during my two years in Scotland and about what I want my legacy to be. I experienced the high of highs and low of lows, sometimes both in the same day. Although I feel that everyone has their own path, and everyone has to walk it themselves, covering the stony ground is easier when someone who's passed that way before can share a little wisdom. It sounds a little like hubris to say I'm wise, so maybe what I offer is just helpful advice, for what it's worth. The book pretty much wrote itself from my memoir, so it's like memoir lite for those who want to skip to the lessons learned without reading all the words in between.

Q: How can readers relate to your rather unique experiences, most of which probably none of us will ever have?

SS: What, you mean you've never mucked out chicken coops or had to haul water for forty people for two weeks because your well ran dry? Although in the times we're living in now, anything can happen, right! Yes, the lessons I learned come from experiences that not a lot of folk are familiar with, unless you live on a farm or in a commune off the grid. But everyone can relate to being annoyed when people let you down or don't pull their weight, or when things don't go as planned or expected. That's the mass appeal of this book because those things lie at the heart of my experience. Readers might recognize themselves in the way I reacted to what life dished out. They might think, *been there, done that* and then, *hey, if a similar thing happens again, maybe I'll be better prepared to handle it*. If they follow my suggestions, that is!

Q: Your book is divided into three sections, each describing a grouping of pretty negative sounding human emotions. Tell us why you chose those.

SS: Well, who hasn't ever had expectations or felt disappointment, anger, fear, vulnerability, and resentment? Who hasn't wanted to have control or been impatient? These are the bugaboos that get us into trouble all the time. They're the stumbling blocks of the ego, and people of all stripes have tripped over them dozens of times in their life. That's a conservative estimate! They're a drag, but we shouldn't be ashamed when we fall into their clutches. Life happens. For these reason I wouldn't call them negative emotions so much as *teaching* emotions. I subtly organized my book into sections that speak to these emotions because they're universal. And because all my stories are lessons based on them.

Q: It's apparent in your writing that you have a strong faith in God, yet this book isn't necessarily religious. What's the appeal to those who might not share your faith, or follow a spiritual path?

SS: It's true that I believe deeply in a supreme creator, what many of us call God. I would describe that relationship throughout my lifetime as going from being in awe of the classic old, white man Upstairs to resenting the punitive Grand Poohbah to getting upset at the indifferent Master Puppeteer to embracing the genderless, loving parent, teacher, friend, and guru who's always there whether I needed it or not and whether I believed it not. I don't think God really controls things all the much because that would be pointless. It's up to us to live the life we see fit. You don't have to follow any particular religion, though, to get something out of my book. It's about very real emotions that we all have, which have nothing to do with religion and everything to do with being humans ensnared by ego. Even atheists might enjoy my book if they don't mind wading through the occasional references to God. My spiritual beliefs, like everyone's, are unique and personal. I don't push those beliefs on anyone or think mine are right. They right for *me*, and what's right for others is between them and the supreme being of their choice. I'm a live-and-let-live person who loves the multifaceted dimensions of spirituality and the different ways we all celebrate and worship the Divine, that is, our humble humanity in awe of something much bigger, whatever that means for each person as an individual. I do think

people who use religion as an excuse to harm others is seriously messed up, though.

Q: Tell us who Rumi is and why you chose his verses and not a more contemporary poet?

SS: Rumi was a 13th-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic. We know Sufis by another name, the Whirling Dervishes, so called for their meditation practice, which involves spinning in circles dressed in long, flowing robes. I chose to apply what he had to say about the meaning of life in poetry for two reasons. The first is I'm a huge fan of his love poems to God. He's my go-to when I need a reminder that we are beings manifested by the Almighty, born from love. His poems and fables deal with life's annoyances and the distractions that people throughout the ages have wrestled with. He knew what it meant to love God and also how hard that is for mere mortals. I find his words inspirational, and he had a sense of humor too. The second reason I chose Rumi is because the Braemar community that I lived with in Scotland studies Rumi, among other inspired teachings. Their MO is about examining Man's relationship with God, just as Rumi did. So part of it is I wanted to introduce Rumi to people who might not be familiar with his work. A lot of his writings really make you think.

Q: The spiritual retreat you write about sounds interesting. Can you tell us more about that?

SS: Interesting, aggravating, bizarre in some ways—it was a lot of things. Much of it has changed since I lived there in the late 1990s, though. For one thing, they've had to reinvent themselves because they weren't getting as many people taking their courses as in years past. Also, people can't really be living in close proximity anymore, at least until current global situations get resolved. So as a residential retreat, Braemar is currently on hiatus. But they do offer courses online. It's one of those places that's hard to describe, although you get a much better taste for it in my memoir than you do in my new book.

Q: Tell us why you chose humor to make your point.

SS: We live in scary times because so much in our world has changed so fast in less than a lifetime. Even before a global pandemic flattened us, leaving millions of people unemployed and all of us facing uncertainty, there was this underlying fear in America. For a couple of decades we've feared terrorist attacks and random serious violence. We need a refuge, a distraction, otherwise the constant pummeling destroys our spirit. Even though this book deals with life's garbage, it all seems kind of quaint now. Like yeah, can we go back to dealing with impatience and people getting under our skin instead of existential questions like is our species even going to be alive in two years? Besides, humor is just how I roll; it's also a great way to cope when life opens its junk box and dumps it on you.

Q: Do you follow your own advice given in the book?

SS: Of course—not! Do as I say, not as I do, right? There’s a story in the book about my getting revenge on my fellow housemates because of a perceived notion of how they should be behaving and they’re not. My excuse is I’m only human. Although true, I don’t recommend revenge in any case. Justice is different than revenge, keep in mind. So yeah, I stumble and fall; I grumble and blame others. It’s the baser aspect of our nature, yet we don’t have to give into this ego. I have to constantly remind myself about my pledge to lead a spirit-centered life instead of an ego-centered one. It takes vigilance and practice. All. The. Time. The good news is the more you practice, the better you get. Aging helps too! The older I get, the less I’m bothered about all the things that used to be real burrs under my saddle blanket.

Q: The illustrations are also amusing and help set the scene for each chapter. How did they come about?

SS: Pictures say a lot, and because my chapters deal with odd situations, it helps to get a visual. Simon Blackwood is a fantastic professional artist living in Scotland. He’s involved in the Braemar community, so he’s intimately familiar with the retreat as well as the landscape. I didn’t have to coach him in getting the right feel and tone. I would have had to with any other artist who didn’t know Braemar or the Scottish Borders. I wanted whimsical, and Simon delivered.

Q: What’s one piece of advice you’d like to leave with readers?

SS: As I’ve said, many people waste a lot of time taking life too seriously; me included. And for what? We think our beliefs and habits and thoughts are the only beliefs, habits, and thoughts that matter. Or that everyone should think, do, and behave the way *we* do. But how boring the world would be if we were all alike. I truly believe that God put us on this earth to enjoy ourselves. Yes, we need to experience hardship and difficulty to know what their opposites feel like—and to appreciate the good things. But we don’t have to wallow in it. Give yourself permission to be annoyed by situations that don’t go your way or to be annoyed by other people, but put a time limit on it. After you’ve had your sulk, move on. Never waste an opportunity to learn and to become a better person. And pretty much everything is a learning opportunity. In the end, all that matters is that you have a life well lived, one you can be proud of.

Q: What’s your next book?

SS: On the back page of my two most recent books I promised readers another spinoff of my Scotland memoir, so I guess I’m committed! It’s similar to *The Value of Your Soul* in that it includes lessons learned but focuses specifically on animal stories. Some of the tales (or tails!) in this next book, which I’m calling *Hu Let the Sheep Out*, are taken from my Scotland experiences. I’m also going to throw in some stories about pets I’ve had and other animals I’ve encountered.

Q: Interesting title. Who, or what, is *Hu*?

SS: You'll have to wait for the book to find out!

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About the Author

S.A. Snyder has been writing professionally since 1991. She has worn hats as a newspaper columnist and reporter, technical writer, writing instructor, communications manager and consultant, blogger, and book author. With humor and insight, she inspires others through the telling of her own experiences to examine what it means to live a meaningful life. Her blog (www.LunaRiverVoices.com) focuses on self-care, retreats, and re-inventing the way we live for the benefit of all. She also participates in oral storytelling about her personal experiences. Her other books include her memoir *Plant Trees, Carry Sheep: A Woman's Spiritual Journey Among the Sufis of Scotland* (2019) and a travel guide, *Scenic Driving Montana* (4th ed. 2021). She lives in Virginia.

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