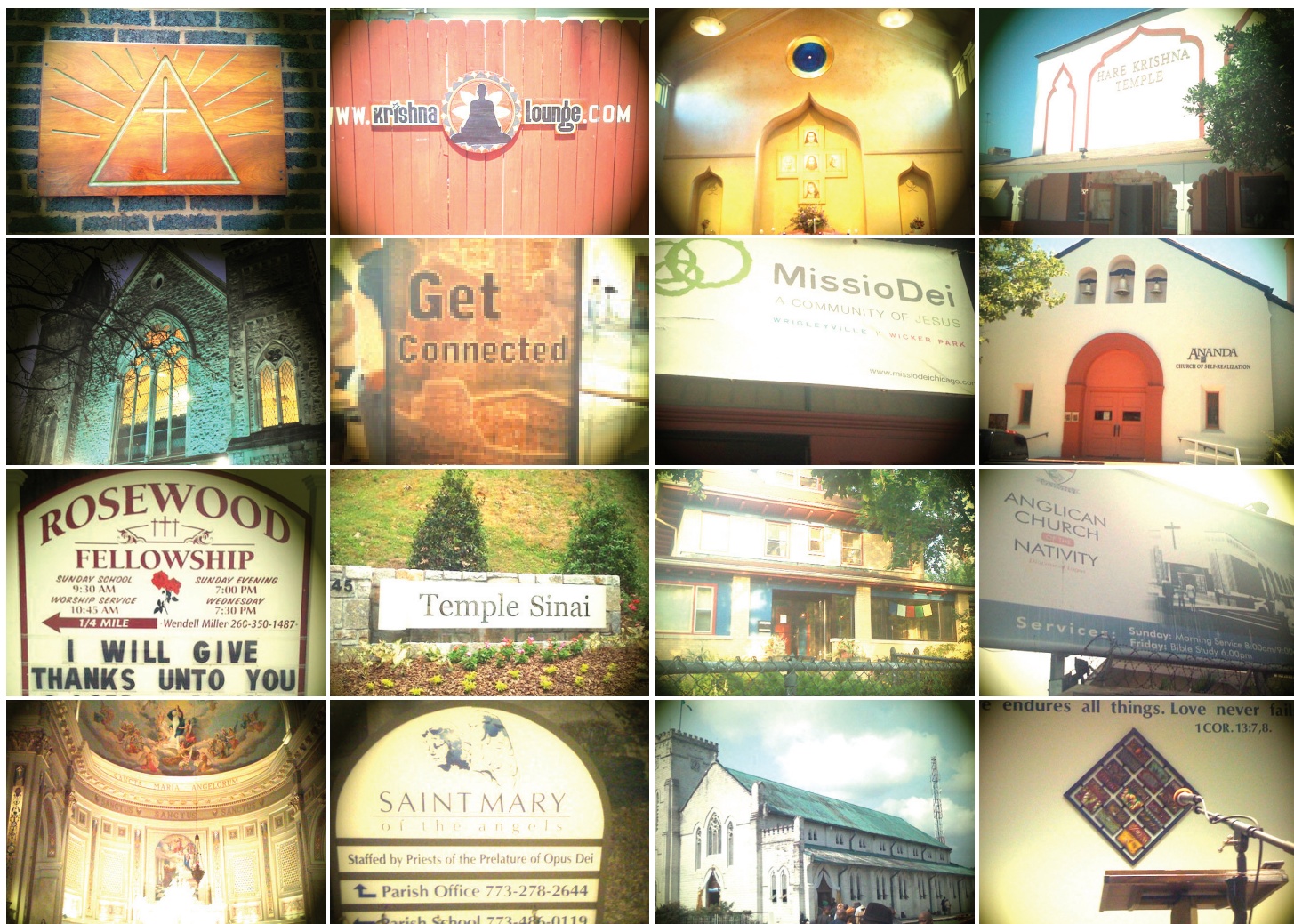


Elevate

WELLNESS | SPIRITUALITY



SPIRIT QUEST

52 Weeks of Worship

DIVINITY CAN MANIFEST IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED WAYS

As told to MICHELLE BUFORD

Two years ago, Pamay Bassey lost the man she loved most, and heartache sent her on a year-long exploration of her faith. The 38-year-old Chicago writer set out to visit a different place of worship every week—and what she discovered brought her hope and healing.

The worst year of my life was 2009. After a long battle with prostate cancer, my father—a proud Nigerian man who will always be my hero—died in August. In the middle of his illness, my grandmother suddenly passed away. Then before I could get over those two big losses, a relationship I'd had for four years ended. So by December, I worried, 'How am I supposed to be in this world without my father?'

← Around January 1, 2011, I did what I've often done: I made out my list of resolutions. On that day I wrote, "Visit a different place of worship every week." Although I was raised Christian, I'm not a particularly religious person. But after so much loss, I wanted a strong spiritual foundation. I also wanted to follow in my father's footsteps. He was raised in the Catholic tradition, but he'd always

been a seeker, a person who was open to wisdom wherever he could find it.

I've been a member of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ for 15 years—so I went there the first weekend in January. On January 31 while I was on vacation in Mexico, I visited a place called *La Viña*, or The Vineyard, where I was the only chocolate chip among a lot of American and Canadian snowbirds. At first, I thought, "This is random." But then the praise team started playing "To God Be the Glory," a song played at my father's funeral. I felt as if he was saying, "This is not random at all; I'm here with you."

The following month, I had my first non-Christian church experience: I went to hear the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan speak at Saviours' Day in Chicago's Mosque Maryam. The mix of culture with religion became my theme.

As the one-year anniversary of my father's death approached, my mother, sisters and I flew to San Diego to spread his ashes into the ocean.

The week leading up to the anniversary, I was in turmoil as I remembered the pain of losing him. So when I spotted a Hare Krishna temple shortly thereafter, I went in, and I was told there would be a 5:30 a.m. meditation the next day. The following morning when I arrived, one of the monks explained: "There's no service, just meditation." For two hours, I sat in silence and reflection.

My 52 weeks of worship took me to a LGBT-friendly Pentecostal community organized by two gay men, a Hindu temple, a Unitarian Universalist church and an Ethiopian Hebrew congregation. In the dozens of communities I visited, I had a similar insight: There's divinity everywhere as our lives unfold exactly as they should—and I draw solace from that.

No, I didn't find a new religion. But I have a newfound appreciation for people of all faiths. My father once told me, "Your life should be a prayer. Every choice you make should honor the Creator." I'm not quite there yet—but this journey brought me so much closer.



“
I felt as if
my father was
saying, 'This
is not random
at all; I'm here
with you.'
”

(Above) Bassey visiting Chicago's Urban Village Church in May 2010. Interestingly, services are held in the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies.



COUNT MY BLESSINGS

In Loss, An Unexpected Gift

MAKE EACH AND EVERY MOMENT COUNT

Since 1997, Curtis Benjamin has advocated for teens: The Atlanta organization he started, *Saving Our Daughters*, pairs girls with high-profile mentors such as All My Children's Debbi Morgan and actress Nia Long. But this father's world splintered when he lost his own beloved girl to cancer. Somehow, amid the heartbreak, the dad has emerged with a daily prayer of gratitude—and an important message for parents.

IN MAY 2009, my wife, Deborah, and I received devastating news: Our youngest daughter, Iliss, then 11, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. After a few months of chemotherapy and radiation, we thought she'd beat it. But when Iliss returned to school that September, she complained of lower back pain. An MRI confirmed the worst: The cancer had spread through her lumbar region.

As Iliss went through more chemotherapy for the next five months, I discovered just how much of a rock baby girl was. "Daddy," she'd often tell me, "you have to be strong." I tried—but nothing could have prepared me for seeing her suffer. In January 2010, Iliss' doctor called me aside to deliver a sentence I'll never forget: "There's nothing more we can do." On February 22, our baby passed away. I have never been in so much pain.

A parent never fully gets over the loss of a child. Some pain will always be there. But I get through the days by remembering that Iliss belonged to God first—and He entrusted me with her care. That's why my message to fathers is, "Tell your children that you love them every day." Our sons and daughters are a gift.



(Top) Benjamin and his daughter Iliss. (Above) The Benjamin family in happier times.



DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL?

Send your stories of faith and perseverance to elevate@ebony.com.