

# The Smile on a Dog:

## Retrieving a Faith That Matters



by Krin Van Tatenhove

**THE SMILE ON A DOG:  
RETRIEVING A FAITH THAT MATTERS**

**By Dr. Krin Van Tatenhove**

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*Dedicated to courageous souls who question authority,  
who fashion a faith that brings healing to themselves and the  
world.*

*It is wise to ask questions. The only way for anyone to experience truth is to find it on their own through their own seeking, experience, and inner knowing. The depth of knowledge a person obtains through experiencing something firsthand, and by it resonating as truth within one's heart, far exceeds a belief taught to them using mere words. - Renee Chae*

*You are completely free to reject everything we have to say about spirituality. What we believe is not that important. What really counts is what you believe that gives your life meaning, direction, and purpose. -Gary Eby*

*For those who believe in God, most of the big questions are answered. But for those of us who can't readily accept the God formula, the big answers don't remain stone-written. We adjust to new conditions and discoveries. We are pliable... We are here to unlearn the teachings of the church, state, and our educational system. - Charles Bukowski*

*Taught by the powers that preach over me  
I can hear their empty reason  
I wouldn't listen, I learnt how to fight  
I opened up my mind to treason  
- from Shot in the Dark by Ozzy Osbourne*

*Every whisper  
Of every waking hour  
I'm choosing my confessions  
- from Losing My Religion by R.E.M.*

*He was religious but had refrained from allowing his religious  
ideals to be obscured by a god.*

- from *The Dogs of Riga*, by Henning Mankell

*Therefore, let us pray to God that we may be free of God, and we  
may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally...* - Meister Eckhart

*What if all you understand  
Could fit into the center of your hand?  
Then you found it wasn't you  
Who held the sum of everything you knew*  
- from *Live to Rise* by Soundgarden

*No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted  
without proof.* – Henry David Thoreau

*True spirituality is liberation, not just from the delusions of reality  
but from the delusions of religion as well.* – Deng Ming-Dao

**Note one:** I relish hearing the stories of others on their spiritual journeys. For this book, I invited 20 people to share personal experiences from the laboratories of their lives. These are moving and diverse testaments to the overall thesis of this book. Each chapter includes their testimonies under the heading *Las Historias de la Gente*. If you read only their words and none of mine, this project will be a great success. I thank them for their contributions!

**Note two:** In the stories of others, you will find language and concepts that differ from yours. Some may seem too expansive or “out there.” Others may seem parochial. Please suspend your judgment. Practice tolerance. Give yourself to each person’s journey with a measure of grace. Look for the underlying pattern of liberation. Celebrate with them!

**Note three:** This book arises from a time and place in history shaded primarily by Judeo-Christian teachings. Thus, many of the stories are about emerging from a particular compression of culture. Obviously, it would be different if I were writing from an Asian or Middle Eastern setting. This is why I urge you to see the pattern in each story, not just the details.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE FORK IN THE ROAD

*Holy diver, you've been down too long in the midnight sea. -*

Ronnie James Dio

*I come from no country, from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road... all tongues and all prayers belong to me. - Amin Maalouf*

For anyone brave and restless enough to challenge accepted notions of religion, there comes a time of awakening. We have torn down idols, smashed icons, shredded creeds. We wake up to our moment and place in history, like a deep-sea leviathan that rises and breaks the ocean surface, glimpsing, for the first time, glittering constellations in a night sky.

Or, switching metaphors, we are like dreamers who have wandered half-hypnotized through a labyrinth of mirrors that reflects only the truths of others. We finally come to an open door, walk through it, then find ourselves on the road of our own destiny. Before long, we arrive at a fork, a lonely intersection that poses far-reaching questions. Will we take a path that leads to new horizons of faith, opening ourselves to what the universe still wants to teach us? Or, filled with anger and cynicism about our journey to that point, will we choose a way that detours to the death of all belief?

Sadly, I know people who chose the latter option. Their period of deconstruction left them feeling bitter and betrayed. Even today, they will quickly enumerate the hypocrisies and repressive actions of their former faith systems. Who can blame them? Who can deny the history of

religious atrocities: racism, forced conversions, homophobia, misogyny, blind support of nationalism.

Cases in point...

As I write these words, a brand of Christianity called American Evangelicalism holds sway over many of my fellow citizens. It is an unholy blend of patriotism, bigotry, and blind support of militarism. It has turned the Prince of Peace into a whoop-ass defender of supposed American values. Witness *ickthus* and NRA bumper stickers side by side. Ponder a political yard sign I recently saw in my neighborhood that stands like a monument to this aberrant world view. It read “God, Guns & Country.”

Or, consider this horror from one of Dante’s rings of hell. Investigations over the past decades have shown that scores of American Roman Catholic priests have sexually preyed on children, mostly young boys in their dioceses. They even marked the most vulnerable ones with silver crosses around their necks, secret signs to other pederasts. As I read the news, a furious anger rose up inside me. I wondered why rank-and-file Catholics were not running wild in the streets, tearing down cathedrals and dragging these sexual predators into prison!

In 2018, as an investigative journalist, I visited the Navajo Nation. I went under the aegis of the Presbyterian Church (USA), an institution that still conducts “missions” among the Diné. A question with profound implications guided me. Given how white Christians historically savaged the Navajo—armed attacks, land stealing, forced relocation to Bosque Redondo, broken treaties, reeducation centers—

had my denomination learned from its past? Or (inconceivably!) does it still engage in practices that disrespect the Diné's indigenous identity? What I found grieved me. One of our supported pastors, a full-blooded Navajo, called traditional beliefs of his people "the work of the Devil." A young Navajo Park Ranger at Canyon de Chelly put it succinctly as she spoke of Christians in her extended family. "I have attended their memorial services," she says, "where the message is loud and clear. Unless I follow this Jesus, I have no salvation on this earth and I'm not going to heaven. I cannot accept this kind of thinking!"

Make no mistake. Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus have historically joined Christians in persecuting people of other faiths. The blood and forfeited dreams of countless innocents soaks the soil of history and standing over it are (mostly) men in hoods, flak jackets, religious robes and academic capes. There are countless reasons to be angry, even enraged, at the heinous acts performed under the color of organized religion. But remaining in these emotions closes our eyes, hearts, and souls to the essential beauty of faith as an illuminating flame in our human lives. We can too easily mire ourselves in the oily Vaseline of cynicism.

There are others who choose the alternate fork in the road, the one we often call "less travelled." I count myself among them. After spending decades subservient to a particular faith, I selected a different course, embarking on a spiritual adventure outside the boundaries.

This doesn't mean I have ignored the intermittent beauty of our world's great religions. Some of their beliefs,

practices, and sacred writings still enrich my life. It's just that I trust myself to choose what is true *for me*. Not for you, *for me*—an underlying precept throughout this book.

**Examine everything for yourself!**

**Analyze it, probe it, experiment with its truth in your daily life!**

**Only then will you move towards a faith that matters!**

My journey hasn't been easy. It takes courage to challenge authority, to think for ourselves, to cast off the pressures of cultural conditioning. I believe it is a miracle when *anyone* finds faith beyond the scripts hardwired into us from birth. Faith that unflinchingly views our world in all its warring madness, yet still trusts in love. Faith that weathers those nights of existential angst, the abyss yawning, yet still reorients to hope. Faith that empowers the Sisyphus in each of us to stand at the peak, drop that infernal stone, and shout a victorious *grito* into the face of eternity!

Are you still going through the motions, practicing a faith that no longer addresses your deepest longings and questions?

Have you extricated yourself from a particular religion or philosophy, but now feel unmoored, wondering what that word "faith" even means to you anymore?

Are you suspect of spirituality in *any* guise, firm in your conviction that the mysteries of the universe are impersonally beyond our knowledge?

If any of these questions stirs you, or if you are simply a fellow adventurer who wants to join me in a joyful, liberating dance, then this book is for you.

### **A Brief Summary of My Background**

My parents carefully tutored me in the faith they still cherish. It was central to their generation’s cultural mandate. They had me baptized and confirmed, passing on the stories, creeds, and doctrines of Western Christianity. Never—and I mean, *never*—was I encouraged to think for myself.

I remember a moment during a confirmation class when I was twelve years old. By that time, I had memorized the “right” beliefs. It was a grim example of banking method education—teachers depositing “correct” concepts into their students’ brains, then withdrawing them later through tests. Digest, regurgitate, repeat the process. It would have given Paulo Freire apoplexy.

In that particular class, the test would be to answer catechetical questions properly. I was a bright student, ready to ace my final exam. Bring it on! Let me please the powers that be! But there were scores of nagging doubts prodding my conscience. I mustered the courage to raise my hand and pose one of them to the pastor conducting the class.

“Yes, Krin. You have a question?”

“I do. You’ve told us that God is all-knowing. If that’s true, why did God put the apple tree in the Garden of Eden, knowing that we would eat from it and cause so many problems?”

“God gave us free will, Krin. We had the choice, and we chose badly.”

“I understand all that, Pastor. But according to you, God *knew* we would choose badly. That meant God would cast us out of Eden and there would be pain and misery. Why did God do that? Why did God place the tree in the garden knowing we would disobey?”

The pastor seemed irritated, a dark cloud flitting across his countenance, but then he quickly put on his game face.

“There are some things, Krin, that we just need to accept by faith. That is the meaning of Original Sin and the Fall of Humanity.”

There you have it. The insistence on articles of indoctrination, fundamental dogmas perceived as essential. Even if they make no earthly sense, we are spoon-fed this medicine to prevent heresy. I think of countless young minds over the centuries told to accept, conform, and obey rather than question and grow wings. How can we make amends for the unconscionable conditioning of billions of young lives?

Experiences like that confirmation class pulled on the threads of my conviction, and the unravelling happened quickly. Within a couple years, I refused to attend church and began a more liberal education, especially for a teenager. I read voraciously with a keen focus on existentialist philosophers. By the time I graduated from high school, I thought of myself as an atheist. Since (I *believed*, LOL!) there is no *a priori* essence to our lives, and no celestial destination

after death that compensates us for the absurdity we've endured, I would choose to become the protagonist in a drama of my own making. Deity had no hand in it. I thought I was level-headed in these convictions, but to use the analogy at the beginning of this introduction, I took a road that was a negative reaction to my upbringing.

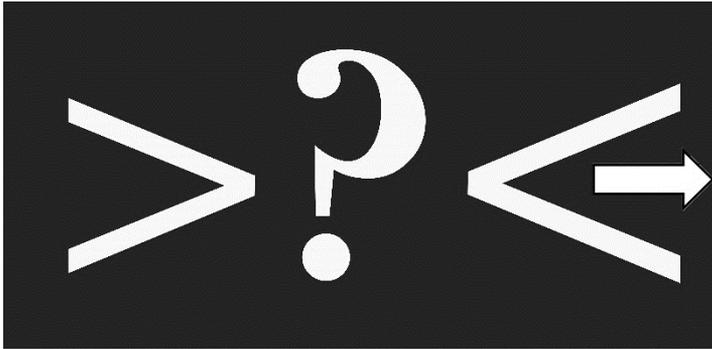
It didn't work. Like many I have met, I was still restless inside. I believe there is a part of us that seeks meaningful connection beyond our individual life. Until we make this connection, our growth stymies. I needed something to believe in that represented more than my existential willpower. I read sacred texts from Hinduism, Buddhism, and authors like Alan Watts, D.T. Suzuki, Baba Ram Dass. I widened my horizons with vertiginous speed.

The ironic story of how that search took me back to traditional Christianity, then out again, is a testament to how circuitous our faith journeys can be. I won't go into it here. If you are interested, consider reading my earlier book, *Invitation to The Overview*, available at my website, [krinvan.com](http://krinvan.com). To summarize, I went from an open-minded seeker to a peddler of some of the same traditions I had earlier rejected, even achieving a doctoral degree as part of my pedigree.

Each of us must come to peace with our past. I have learned not to be too hard on myself. Even when I became "evangelical," I was a staunch promoter of ministries of justice, a reality I find somehow redeeming.

For me, traditional Christianity eventually became what Jesus called an old wineskin, unfit to contain the

fermentation of my spiritual growth. I now laugh at how inverted my journey has been. If I were to draw a picture, it would look like this:



So, here I am today, and I can unequivocally say that though I may not fit into any semblance of orthodoxy on this planet, I have *never* had more faith. It is this unlikely reality that prompted me to write this book for you and for me.

### **Let's Dance**

Though our places in history meant that I never met him in person, Alan Watts had a keen effect on me. His countercultural writings—suffused with truths from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism—brought timeless Eastern truths to a Western audience. He once said this:

“We thought of life by analogy with a journey, a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end, and the thing was to get to that end, success or whatever it is, maybe heaven after you're dead. But we missed the point the whole way along. It was a musical

thing and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played.”

I still use terms like pilgrimage and journey, but I celebrate that the journey IS the destination. We are in a glorious process, arriving only as we dance into the light with our final breath. Who really knows; even that may be a transition to more learning and delight.

The title of this book and its chapters give you an idea of this playful dance I am inviting you to join: *The Smile on a Dog, Run Barefoot, Memes and Misused Truths, Clouds in a Cup of Joe, Blue Religion and the Cry of Circumstance, 21 Grams and the Weight of Glory*.

The joy of deepening our faith takes courage, but it also requires a childlike sense of humor and an openness to wonder. This dual mindset of daring and awe gradually reveals that *everything* we encounter in our daily lives is a chance to grow our faith and spirits.

Before we start, let me describe how I will use certain terms. When you see them, feel free to substitute your own definitions, since that freedom lies at the center of all we will discuss. Here is my mini-lexicon.

**Source/Divine/Higher Power.** Human beings have used countless names to describe the mystery around us, from gods and goddesses to Creator, Father, Great Spirit. Words and rituals matter because they shape our mindsets and behaviors, but ultimately, I am less concerned with the terms people use for their higher reality (if they have one) than I am with how they treat others. I have chosen to use

*Source, Divine, or Higher Power* whenever my writing calls for a pronoun, even as I realize the limitations of language.

**Spirit/True self:** There is something in us that resonates with a higher (and deeper!) plane of existence. Scientists might simply call this “self-consciousness.” Hindus call it *Atman*. I have chosen the words *Spirit* and *True Self* for these links to Source within and without us.

**Spirituality/Spiritual:** Surely these words have many meanings. People of faith and no faith hold to their own definitions. For the purpose of this book, I use these terms to describe any thoughts and behaviors that help draw our Spirit/True Self closer to Source.

**Faith:** I use this word to summarize the guidance and connectedness that comes from focusing on Source. Faith is active, not static. It is not a butterfly pinned under glass, gradually losing its luminous colors; it has beauty to impart to us on a daily basis. It takes a variety of forms, but its powerful benefits are common to humanity.

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One last introductory remark.

*Chance encounters often haunt me.*

It may be a child in some setting, our eyes meeting for an instant, causing me to wonder how his or her life will unfold. I have a photo of a Hindu girl I met while walking through the village of Munnar in south India. She has old soul eyes, and her parents marked her forehead with the traditional red *bindi*, symbolizing the third eye, the sixth chakra, the seat of concealed wisdom. Where is she now?

Has her life been fulfilling or plagued by constant struggle? Was she able to grow into her promised wisdom as a woman?

It may be someone staring out a bus window, our eyes locking briefly before we hurtle off on our own trajectories. I wrote a short story about a chance encounter called *Four Truths on a Crosstown Bus*. You can find it at my website.

It may be a photo in a book, museum, or historical place. While on the investigative writing assignment I mentioned earlier among the Navajos, I stopped at Bosque Redondo. That place is a sad reminder of America's genocidal history, the site where the U.S. military forcibly relocated the *Diné*. Gazing at photos in the Visitors Center, I focused on the faces looking back at me, musing once again about their thoughts and emotions, our human connection across nearly two centuries.

Sometimes it's a biographical detail about another person's life that burrows its way into my subconscious. Consider Stuart Adamson, co-founder, lead vocalist and guitarist of Big Country, an '80s rock band that I loved. In 2001, though he had been sober for over a decade, relapse led him to a drunk driving charge and the deterioration of his marriage. On November 26 of that year, his estranged wife reported him missing. Then, on December 16, they discovered him dead at the Best Western Plaza Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. He had hanged himself by an electrical cord in the closet, and the autopsy showed that he had an astronomical blood alcohol level at the moment he killed himself. This, like the untimely deaths of other

addicts/alcoholics, still haunts me. Why? Because I experienced the same darkness and despair during my active alcoholism, even contemplating suicide. Others may call you a coward, Stuart, but my spirit goes out to you.

On a recent trip to West Texas, I stopped at a railroad crossing as a long train passed through the dusty town of Van Horn. I was listening to music, scanning the colorful graffiti that festooned the rail cars. Yes, a lot of vandalism, but some of it amazing in its artistry.

As the last car passed, I saw a scrawled message: "R.I.P., Junior."

Junior. Who was he? What kind of life did he lead? Did he die too young, or did he carry that nickname into old age? Most importantly, did he pass into the next stage filled with a faith that makes all elements of life brighter? A faith that matters!

That question is for all of us. Our time in this chapter of our existence is exceedingly short. Even if you count yourself among the faithless, dance with me for a while. Who knows? You might have a different perspective when we leave the floor.

Namaste! God bless you! As-salamu alaykum! Mitakuye oyasin! May the Force be with you! Keep on truckin'!

LOL!

## CHAPTER ONE: THE SMILE ON A DOG

**(Chapter question:** What is your understanding of Higher Power, and does it help you face the challenges of your life?)

*Each mind conceives god in its own way. There may be as many variations of the god figure as there are people in the world. -*

Bangambiki Habyarimana

*God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. - from Book of the 24 Philosophers*

I enjoy Sirius (the dog!) XM Radio, especially given my passion for traveling. I can flip through wildly eclectic mixes for my road trip soundtracks: classic rock, folk, alternative, new age, favorite artists, reggae, jazz, songs curated by decade.

While driving through the Texas Hill Country recently, *What I Am* by Edie Brickell & New Bohemians came through the speakers. I have heard its lyrics countless times, but for some reason they popped at me that day.

*Philosophy is the talk on a cereal box*

*Religion is the smile on a dog*

I laughed and instantly thought of Pearl, a beloved canine member of our household. My wife, Donna, found her abandoned along a remote country road in south Texas. Being a big-hearted animal lover, she brought the little stray home. *Just for a few days*, she said, *until we find another owner*. I objected at first, but those puppy licks on my face won me over. Of course, Donna knew that would happen, despite her

feigned innocence. Ahh, the irresistible force of feminine wiles!

People debate whether or not a dog really grins, but I am telling you right here and now that Pearl truly and authentically smiles. She smiles when you look at her and call her name. She smiles when she greets us at the door after an absence, her tail wagging furiously. I have even seen her smile in her sleep as she dreams and makes these gentle, muffled barks, perhaps loping after imaginary hares. Her smile is an image of peace and contentment, a natural state of union, similar to the beatific grins I have seen on countless depictions of the Buddha.

Back to Brickell. In a 2011 interview published in *Vanity Fair*, we hear this exchange.

Interviewer: “Did you feel like you were saying something controversial when you wrote, ‘Religion is the smile on a dog?’”

Brickell: “No, I didn’t mean to. I meant that in an endearing way, because what is more expressive and sweet than that smile on a dog? And I felt that in terms of religion, some people see it, some people don’t see it.”

Do you hear that? Some people see it, some people don’t. Some let their religion and beliefs saddle them with guilt, obligation, and judgment. Others find a faith that gives them wings, transforming their lives into an experience of joy and wonder. Some become evangelistic in their insistent zeal that everyone should convert to their world view.

Others find a paradigm that promotes the freedom of every person's journey, no matter how different it is from theirs. Some are so focused on being right that they forget to let go and live in the moment. Others are humbly aware of the limits of knowing; they celebrate mystery and ambiguity.

Do we want to see it or miss it? The choice is up to each of us. No matter how much we have drifted from what the world calls faith, we can reorient in a way that is personally meaningful.

As a recovering alcoholic, there is a foundational truth I treasure in Twelve Step fellowships. We believe that we are both physical and spiritual beings. Our wholeness and healing depend on nurturing *both* aspects of our existence. We also know how difficult faith can be for many people, especially those with active intellects who are disgruntled or disgusted with organized religion. With a sensitivity to each person's needs, we offer a truth found in Step Two: *Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

Think of sanity as a mind unfettered from false conceptions and turned towards a Source that promotes freedom, joy, and self-actualization. Step Two does not prescribe a particular notion or image of this power. It only requires a willingness to explore, trusting that there is overarching meaning for our lives. Does this entice you?

### **Higher Power as You Understand It**

What we believe about Source matters greatly. These beliefs inform our decisions, shape our moods, prompt our

daily behaviors. It is easy to see this in the realms of religion and politics, where people start with fixed paradigms, frozen banners under which they conduct all aspects of their lives. Beneath the surface of every fanatic is a calcified creed or doctrine.

I have a daily meditation book entitled *365 Tao* by Deng Ming-Dao. It is full of Taoist wisdom that often gives me clarity. One morning, these words leapt off the page. Whether or not you agree with them, listen for their deeper meaning.

There is no god in the sense of a cosmic father or mother who will provide all things to their children. Nor is there some heavenly bureaucracy to petition. These models are not descriptions of a divine order but are projections from archetypal templates. If we believe in the divine order as cosmic family, we relegate ourselves to perpetual adolescence. If we regard the divine as supreme government, we are forever victims of unfathomable officialdom.

Ming-Dao may challenge your cherished notions of Source. After all, even Jesus appealed to a Heavenly Father, and countless indigenous cultures pray to Sky Fathers and Earth Mothers. We have all heard the term “children of God” to describe our journeys as human beings.

The point here is not to cast aspersions, but to realize that even the most enlightened of us can fall prey to

projecting our human metaphors on Source. Whether we call it wishful thinking or anthropomorphism, it is vital to recognize this propensity. By trying to understand a mystery beyond our ken, we often resort to shopworn fantasies. To use an old-timey word, this becomes a form of idolatry. We forget that the symbol we have fashioned is only pointing to another reality and dimension.

There is nothing essentially wrong with the comfort these notions bring us. However, they often exact a steep price. As a pastor for 30 years, with simultaneous service as a Hospice Chaplain for part of my career, I saw the limitations of sentimentalized images of Source. People whose agony over the death of loved ones grew deeper in the face of perceived silence from their Father God, a deity designed to answer prayers. People who grew increasingly cynical about world events—humanity’s endless chaos—long ago dismissing the notion that there is a Sovereign Ruler who makes all things right.

However, I also saw the luminous strength of faith as I ministered to others who blessed me far more than I blessed them. Even in the face of tragedy, they remained connected to a peace and joy that seemed unflappable. Yes, they cried at the coils of mortality we all must face. Yes, they hugged their loved ones with regrets about time they could have savored. But when they faced their final moments, they walked into light.

As pop theologian Brickell said: “Some people see it, some people don’t.” This begs a couple questions for ALL of us, no matter our level of faith or faithlessness.

*First*, what is our notion of ultimate truth (our Higher Power), those convictions that serve as our compass? *Second*, do these convictions sustain us, providing inner strength through the seasons and challenges of our lives? Do they bring a smile to our face, an abiding peace and contentment to our soul? Our answers to these questions will arise from a deeper connection to both our own natures and the nature of Source.

There is a lot of talk, especially in Christian circles, about having a personal relationship with “God.” Depeche Mode (and later, Johnny Cash) nailed it in the song, *Personal Jesus*: “Your own personal Jesus/Someone to hear your prayers/Someone who cares.” The word personal has taken on the weight of orthodoxy, another projection that rarely holds up under scrutiny.

Still, could it be that the notion of a *personal* Higher Power is essential to our health and evolution? I believe so! Unless we connect with Source on a level that *personally* sustains us, it remains a bloodless abstraction.

I have met people in the recovery movement who do not use anthropomorphic terms for their Higher Power. It is clear they are not speaking about a god or deity in customary ways. It is also clear that their version of faith is one that offers higher levels of orientation and wisdom in their lives. It has personal significance. It *matters*, and that is why they have chosen it!

I cite this example from one of my previous books, *The Pattern*, downloadable for free at my website.

One woman, raised in oppressive church environments, rejected all notions of god or religion. She believed that ever since we crawled out of caves, we have grappled with the question of being born to die, the issues of ultimate meaning, the enormity of mystery surrounding us. She saw the beauty in certain faith systems and philosophies, but if those who practiced them became even slightly insistent that their truth trumped others, she quickly exited the scene. She had forever had her fill of judgment, misguided zeal, and the pressure to conform.

In early recovery, she had to confront the truth that her life had led her to anger, cynicism, isolation from others—a state of mind she medicated with prescription drugs.

One morning she sat on her porch, meditating on a passage of daily reading. The air was cool, the early light soft upon her face, a chorus of birds lilting from the trees. A sense of peace settled over her. It was deeper and more profound than anything she had ever experienced, calming her body, mind, and soul. Though she had always balked at prayer, familiar words echoed in her mind: “Grant me the serenity...”

She says she will never personify this experience, attributing it to a deity, but its power is undeniable, and she believes it is not an outcome of her own thinking. It is something greater than herself. Her Power is this peace, this serenity, and learning to live in the middle of it one day at a time is her program.

Now, let's hear from some precious souls who have found the smile on a dog through their own unique journeys.

### *Las Historias de la Gente*

**Heiwa No Bushi** is a Buddhist-Christian monk, founder and Abbot of the Thomasville Buddhist Center in Thomasville, North Carolina. A former Christian minister, he has degrees in philosophy and theology. He also received classical training in both Mahayana and Zen Buddhism. He holds black belts in three different Japanese martial art forms, making him, as friends often say, an "official badass." He places his teachings under the moniker "Bodhi Christo" which means "enlightened Christ," an amalgam of the two rich streams of Buddhism and Christianity. Here he gives some reflections on this journey.

This is my story, but I believe it reflects *all* our stories.

I grew up in south Florida, essentially a preacher's kid because my grandmother was heavily involved in both the southern and primitive Baptist movements. She was

so devoted that when people within her circles wanted to erect a building, she loaned them the money.

By the time I was six years old, my grandmother had become a minister in that church, but she struggled constantly against patriarchy. The congregation was so misogynistic that they wouldn't allow her to be a regular preacher. However, she was a very clever bird. She decided that every time they gave her an opportunity to fill the pulpit, she would use her grandson to introduce her. It was a way of deflecting all the attention from her, and the result was that I became a phenomenal, entertaining bit of Sunday mornings! People came to hear my grandmother because this young boy really knew how "to lay it out there."

All that time I worked with my grandmother, I saw the inconsistency between her church life and her home life. At church she was outwardly "righteous," but at home she would speak in ways normally prohibited. I thought it was hypocritical, but she quoted the Apostle Paul from I Corinthians: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."

As grandma's ministry grew, I began to feel a calling to attend seminary. I received my training and then, in my early 20s, I traveled overseas with the military. It was a time of hands-on experience, what I call "tacit education." It challenged me to look at the deeper and wider aspects of life on our planet. I encountered many other faiths, not only seeing their beautiful richness, but their many parallels, especially the "golden rule."

In my experiences as a Christian, I had not encountered a real moral teaching about how to treat our planet, especially "lesser creatures." As a lover of the earth, I found a much greater connection to creation through other religions, especially Buddhism and its tremendous emphasis on caring for *all* living things. Jainism also intrigued me. It insisted on not naming "God," believing there is no particular god outside of ourselves.

These religions lifted up a type of humanity that many circles of Christianity seemed to usurp and ignore. They spoke volumes of higher learning to me, and it seemed to me that Christianity did not stand up in the court of reality. For instance, where in Christian scripture was the

insistence on an intimate relationship with all living things that I found so beautiful in Buddhism?

Then I thought of the parable Jesus told of seeking out the one lost lamb. He was saying to the majority, “You hold on tight, I’m going to get the one that matters.” This began to bring out what I call the “more mature” interpretation of Christ that I am trying to live out today.

In my teachings, I emphasize that there are three types of knowledge.

- **Explicit knowledge** that comes to us from textbooks, manuals, Sunday school lessons taught as literal. This is a form of cultural programming, even indoctrination.
- **Codified knowledge** which is the design of the society around us—from traffic signs to laws to the licenses we need to practice our professions. All this is meant to make sure that we follow the rules and remain in compliance with the status quo.
- **Tacit knowledge** which we gain firsthand in the laboratories of our own lives. It can’t just be told to us; we must *experience* it and adapt it to reality of our own understandings.

The bottom line is that we *must* test any truth for ourselves! Examine it in the

light of our minds, hearts, consciences, and personal experience. I feel religious institutions, especially the Christian church, should be some of the most unregulated organizations in our society. They should always call us to the high adventure of exploring a fuller spiritual life.

On this adventure, I remain a lifelong learner, carrying on something my grandmother taught me long ago. “Go beyond what educational systems teach you,” she said.

Take on the world. Tacitly hold it, experience it, live it and understand it!

**Tim R.** was one of my early sponsors in AA. As a man who historically insisted on factual views of life, most conjectures about gods left him cold. Yet he realized that his personal growth required some kind of Higher Power as a lodestar, so he fashioned a faith that suits his temperament. I asked him to share his thoughts.

Before I began my spiritual journey of recovery, God *did not* receive a favorable rating from me. I would characterize my old self as a militant agnostic. I did not want to hear your opinions or convictions. I was closed-minded and fearful.

My beliefs have since opened up, and my fear of such matters has abated. I now

refer to my higher power as God because of convenience and the perception of common understanding among so many people. While I do not personally embrace an identifiable religion, I am happy for those who find solace in those convictions.

I have come to recognize there *is* a power throughout everything we can see, hear, touch, feel, love—and also in everything we cannot yet perceive. My higher power is often beyond my comprehension, but it still fills me with comfort and faith that the world is as it is *and* as it should be. The moment I stop trying to control a particular event or situation, my higher power flows in and puts the immediate universe back in balance. This is one of the greatest benefits of my newfound faith.

Is the God of my understanding a single source of power, an entity controlling all aspects of life as we know it? The answer is not particularly important to me. Nor do I find it useful to see experiences simply through the lens of science unless I am also willing to ponder the power that initiated creative processes like evolution. Lenses that allow me to question and consider *all* such possibilities are better optics for me.

Willingness to believe in a power greater than myself is more fundamental than any scientific or religious dogma. This willingness has made all the difference.

My higher power created the galaxies, the earth, the trees, the mountains and oceans. My higher power also gave me a life that it will eventually take away. I *do* believe my life is a gift from God, but I emphasize the idea that any life is really a series of gifts and events. Sometimes the sequence makes sense; other times, it doesn't. God's will for me is to accept—even cherish—*all* these sequences.

I am a part of God, but I am not God. God's power comes from inside each of us, moving through us, and together we are whole and complete.

Here is what Tim's wife, **Emily R.**, has to say.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the bed, I lie comfortable in describing myself as a benign non-believer.

Atheist? By definition, yes, but I felt more at ease with that term in my 20s and early 30s, when I was firmer in my belief that I was smarter than all those "churchy people" and didn't understand how they could devote so much time and energy to an

entity that is neither tangible nor explainable.

But in witnessing my husband's 20-year journey to acceptance of a higher power, loving him through it, and appreciating what it means to his sense of self, I've given up my prejudices.

An atheist, to me, is a non-believer with an *agenda*.

I have none. I'm not in the business of trying to convince people that my way of thinking about religion is right and theirs is wrong.

As the child of a Christian father and a Jewish mother, I was raised as "none of the above," so faith isn't something I've rejected—I've just never *had* it.

Nor have I come to believe in a higher power spontaneously, and it just doesn't strike me as something I could learn to do by sitting in a pew. It is something we should *feel*, deeply and authentically.

And then there are our many friends who truly inhabit their faith, drawing strength and sustenance from their religious communities. It is part of them, and after a few patient, intelligent, non-judgmental conversations about faith with them over the years, I've come to realize that I cannot love

them without loving this part of who they are. I mean, they still love *me* even though I lack that part, right? And generosity of spirit is something we can *all* demonstrate to one another, whether we worship a god or not.

So why then, would someone like me wear a “Jesus loves me & my tattoos” shirt?

That’s a good story.

It was a gag gift from a devout Christian friend, who knows full well that I am not.

I respect the way she lives her faith, and I adore the way we can poke fun at each other about our religious beliefs (and lack thereof), while also maintaining a deep, abiding friendship.

I am absolutely certain that a bearded dude who’s been dead for 2000 years doesn’t care one bit about my tattoos.

She is absolutely certain that he does.

And there’s room here for both of us.

Just...maybe not inside my shirt.

Another friend of mine, **Kimberly G.**, has a been a light to many people. As a participant in AA, with many years of sobriety behind her, she acts as a sponsor to younger women trying to overcome their suffering. A key component of her wisdom is her own growth in the area of

faith. Here she gives a simple summary of the changes in her spiritual evolution over the years.

I grew up thinking of God as critical, a fearful deity ready to judge my thoughts and actions. Today, I see God as a source of love and peace, the One who believes that all of us are precious. In my morning prayers, after giving thanks, I ask what I can do to serve this higher peace through service to others.

It has taken many years of studying various faiths, learning from their diversity of truths, to find this place of love. One of my favorite simple summations is the Dalai Lama's statement that "Kindness is my religion." I do not practice this perfectly, so I seek to work on what it is *in me*, not others, that needs changing. Meditation is an important tool to facilitate this peace and help me act on my faith. At the end of my day, I imagine God holding me in loving hands as I fall asleep. Truly, I have come a long way from my early years, and it fills me with gratitude.

This next reflection is from my friend, **Rebecca Blackwell**, a creative and courageous soul who has labored, like I did, for many years as a Presbyterian pastor. Even if the details of her faith journey don't apply to your life, look

at the pattern of questioning and emergence, summarized in her statement that “embracing paradox is the heart of wisdom.”

For the last 48 years, I’ve been on a journey that took me from the solid ground of Christian Fundamentalism to the misty mountaintops of whatever kind of Christian I am now.

The journey has required that I leave some things behind on the trail. I had to let go of certainty, fear, and shame. As my load lightened, I discovered a deep freedom, a peace that passes all understanding, a closer connection with God/The Sacred and the confidence that nothing can separate me from the love of God that permeates the cosmos.

I took the first step on this journey in 1972, when at age 18, I walked away from the church I grew up in. I could no longer abide their sexism, patriarchy, narrow-mindedness and fear-based way of life. Since they taught me that they were the One True Church and the God they proclaimed was the One True God, that left me with nowhere to go. So, I did not affiliate with any church.

About ten years into my exodus, I began to notice that even though I had left

“church,” I was still praying (though not in a hands-folded, head-bowed kind of way), and I was missing a spiritual community. Could it be that God was bigger than I had been led to believe? I took what felt like a huge risk and began exploring other churches.

The willingness to explore and to say “maybe” to new experiences or ideas, and to trust my instincts and intuition (which I believe are the way Spirit speaks to us), have been key to this journey. I said “maybe” and then “yes” to the Presbyterian Church (USA); I said “maybe” and then “yes” to the Charismatic movement. I said “maybe” and then “yes” to seminary and ordination in the PC(USA); I said “maybe” and then “yes” to yoga, meditation, Reiki and other practices. I said “maybe” and then “yes” to seeing God at work in the deep dimensions of other faiths.

With each exploration that resulted in “yes” (and not all of them did), my heart grew more expansive, my faith more inclusive. So, where am I today? I consider myself a Christian, though I hold few of the traditional doctrines (heaven, hell, penal substitutionary atonement and others are gone), and the doctrines I *do* hold have been significantly re-shaped. My conviction is that the Mystery at the heart of the universe

is infinitely knowable through a variety of means. The Bible (especially the stories of Jesus) is the organizing narrative for wrapping my head and heart around this Mystery, and so I call this Mystery “God” and “Christ.”

Should you be on a spiritual journey of your own, I offer the following aphorisms and suggestions in the hope that they will help you.

- Faith is a journey, not a trip. There is no precise road map, no timetable, no certain destination...the journey IS the destination.
- Hold everything lightly.
- Don't confuse God with any church or religious institution.
- Your convictions don't have to make sense or be logical/systematic to be true. Embracing paradox is the heart of Wisdom.
- Read and study widely...history, spiritual biographies, theology, faith stories, poetry, and great literature.
- Find some traveling companions, including people of different faiths or no faith at all; people who will talk, walk, think, and sit with you. A good Spiritual Director is an invaluable traveling companion.

- Trust your inner wisdom, no matter where and how it leads you...it is the voice of the Spirit.

I met **Bonnie Steele** while we both were teaching in a private Christian school. I was in a tough patch of my life—newly divorced, still drinking, unemployed, navigating a new relationship. I still had mouths to feed, a family to support, so I took the teaching job even though they required me to sign a “statement of faith” that didn’t jibe with my conscience. I’m not proud of that decision. I chafed within the structure of evangelicalism. I never realized that my coworker, Bonnie, was struggling with similar frustrations. We felt compelled to hide. No longer! Here she shares some of her journey.

I was born into a Lutheran family, became Baptist as a young adult, then later joined a Christian and Missionary Alliance church. I spent most of my career in Christian ministry, with about 30 years teaching in Christian schools. Church involvement was *always* a part of my life.

Now, I'm not attending any church. My journey to this decision comes from a number of factors: the burnout of constant service, conquering fear, and—*most importantly*—finally becoming aware of what I truly believe.

It was around the time I received

training to become an educational therapist that I started to examine why I was in the church. Educational therapists ask questions that encourage critical thinking, not simple yes or no answers. I began to ask a host of questions. Why did I have to be serving in church every Sunday? Why did I have to attend Bible studies where my questions received standard answers? Why did others in these classes frown on thinking outside the box? Why did people always ask me, "How is your walk?" Why did they seem to think I would "fall away" if I missed a Sunday or a Bible study? How could the stories in the Bible have literal meaning? And, if we aren't supposed to take the stories literally, then who decides the metaphorical or figurative meanings? Was the Pastor the only one who could decipher what God had to say? I didn't think so. God gave me a good brain to ask questions, and I didn't like the answers I was getting.

Since leaving the church, I have read the writings of many others who walked away. I know I am not alone in thinking there has to be more to our spiritual lives. I have concluded that God is much bigger than we imagine, and that Jesus of the Bible cannot be the only way to God. If God is

indeed a God of love, then surely this extends to *all* human beings.

It reminds me of the discussions I have with my adult son about current events in our country. Can't we critically think about what the government is doing? Do we only blindly listen and accept what the news stations are telling us? And, to which news should we listen? I fear we have lost our critical thinking skills. A song we sang repeatedly in Christian schools was "I just want to be a sheep...baa, baa, baa, baa." NO! I no longer want to be a sheep and follow someone blindly. I want to think things through and make good, sound decisions based on facts.

The decision for me was to reclaim my Sundays, to leave the church and find peace in a quiet life. I am experiencing "God" in this beautiful paradise of Hawaii where I live, enjoying the people around me with deep gratitude.

As I now see it, my life has been a journey to freedom!

### **Litmus Tests**

If our belief in Higher Power is to have an authentic impact on our lives, evolving beyond bloodless abstraction to personal meaning, we will see the benefits in many areas.

Source can help us overcome the following challenges if we strengthen our connection. I call them *litmus tests*.

**The Power to Forgive.** Throughout our short time on this planet, life will call on us to offer forgiveness. It may be for a transgression against us, both real or imagined. It may be forgiveness for someone whose shortsightedness is hurting other people. It may be forgiveness for our parents or other family members who treated us unfairly in the past. It may even be self-forgiveness as we come to see the unnecessary pain we have caused ourselves through obstinate forms of thinking or behavior.

Does the connection we find through faith in our Higher Power give us this ability to forgive?

**The Power to Restore Hope.** We all encounter dark nights of the soul, seasons of grief, valleys of despondency and cynicism. Sometimes these interludes last longer than it seems we can bear. Perseverance is key, of course, but ultimately our emergence from this depression has a lot to do with our faith.

Does our connection to Source help us restore hope?

**The Power to Let Go.** One of my first books has the title *Consider the Lilies: Five Ways to Stop Worrying and Enjoy the Kingdom of God*, downloadable for free at my website. Written during my time as a Christian pastor, it is an extended reflection on Jesus's celebrated words from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

*See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one*

*of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Which one of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?*

The word worry stems from the Old English *wyrgran*, meaning “to strangle.” Surely this is what worry does to us, choking off our vitality, siphoning the beautiful flow of each moment into stagnant cesspools of anxiety. Learning to let go is essential for our mental and spiritual wellbeing. As Thich Nhat Hahn once said, “Letting go gives us freedom, and freedom is the only condition for happiness. If, in our heart, we still cling to anything—anger, anxiety, or possessions—we cannot be free.”

Does our Higher Power help us truly let go?

**The Power to Love.** I agree with those spiritual guides and religions that believe love is our highest calling. The forms and meanings of love vary depending on the situation or relationship, but we know the real thing when we see it. The beauty of a growing love is that its effects are like a pebble dropped in water. The ripples expand further and further, influencing our surroundings with positive vibrations. True love—not misguided or stubborn loyalty—leads us on an ever-expanding lifetime of inclusion, tolerance, and acts of mercy.

This often requires repentance and reorientation. The Black Lives Matter movement in America has challenged *all* of us to examine our unconscious biases and judgments

based on race, class, or creed. These ingrained attitudes cause our love to be cold and narrow. As the author Aberjhani says, “There is no envy, jealousy, or hatred between the different colors of the rainbow. And no fear either. Because each one exists to make the others’ love more beautiful.”

Does Source give us the power to love with ever-expanding horizons?

**The Power to Achieve Balance:** We live in a world of extreme imbalances. Warring nations, ideologies, and political parties often ensnare us, separating us from the unity so necessary for our healing as a human species. We see power imbalances between economic classes, the sexes, racial groups. Our response requires thoughtful participation, especially if we find ourselves angered by what we see. In chapter five, we will discuss how to convert our angst into peaceful action in more depth.

Does our concept of Source draw us back to equilibrium?

**The Power to Actualize:** Each of us has unique gifts and talents. Our lives are infinitely more meaningful when we exercise these abilities to their fullest extent. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) famously called this “self-actualization.” He described it in many ways (overlook the sexist language):

- *What a man can be, he must be. This need we call self-actualization.*
- *If you plan on being anything less than you are capable of being, you will probably be unhappy all the days of your life.*

- *A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself.*

Wayne Dyer (1940-2015) left writings that resonate with me on multiple levels, especially since later in his life he blended his psychological training with an evolving faith in Source. It was his belief (and mine as well) that when we align with Source in the deepest recesses of our spirit, truth about our higher calling takes shape. Dyer called this “manifesting our destiny,” saying:

- *The more you see yourself as what you’d like to become, and act as if what you want is already there, the more you’ll activate those dormant forces that will collaborate to transform your dream into your reality.*
- *Your Highest Self is not just an idea that sounds lofty and spiritual. It is a way of being. It is the very first principle that you must come to understand and embrace as you move toward attracting to you that which you want and need for this parenthesis in eternity that you know as your life.*

Does our Higher Power give us the vision and vigor to actualize our lives?

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By now, it should be clear that finding a faith that works for us is no small matter. It can make all the difference in how we live our meteoric existence. This is why the only prescription in this book is not to have a particular faith, but to connect with one that helps us deal with all the issues just mentioned, as well as any others that emerge.

Amidst the beloved Psalms of Hebrew scripture, we find Psalm 84. Substitute any notion of Higher Power for “you,” then consider these verses.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they  
pass through the Valley of Baka, they make  
it a place of springs; the autumn rains also  
cover it with pools. They go from strength  
to strength...

Let’s translate this into words that fit the context of this book.

We are *all* on a pilgrimage called Life, and when we set our hearts on a Source of faith, it guides us ever forward. The Valley of Baka, known as a desert wilderness to the Israelites, becomes a place of new springs and fresh water. Symbolically and literally, our faith transforms even the desolate times of our lives. We grow stronger, not weaker, as we continue our journey. And, as we have already celebrated, the journey IS the destination. We learn to pause at each of the lifegiving oases, drinking deeply of their sustenance.

This is both a beautiful metaphor and a potent reminder. **Find a faith that matters! The fullness of our lives depends on it.**

## CHAPTER TWO: RUN BAREFOOT!

**(Chapter question:** Do you have a special place, literal or figurative, that helps you connect to Source?)

*People ask me, “What is the mystique of the Texas songwriter?”  
Well, we ran barefoot from March until November. I think there’s  
something about being a barefoot kid that gets you closer to the  
place. You take root. - Rodney Crowell*

One of the most celebrated stories in Hebrew scripture is that of Moses at the burning bush. The patriarch is 80 years old, having fled Egypt 40 years earlier after murdering an Egyptian overlord. He is tending his sheep near Mount Horeb when he sees a bush that is flaming but not consumed.

“Moses! Moses!” a voice calls from the blaze.

“Here I am,” replies Moses.

The voice has startling news. Moses will be the one to return to Egypt and emancipate the Hebrews. Despite heroic portrayals of the prophet, I imagine him quaking in his boots. An octogenarian shepherd going up against the most powerful empire on the planet? Gulp! Moses asks the voice, “Who do I tell them has sent me?” The answer is a Hebrew phrase translated various ways: “I Am What I Am,” “I Will Be What I Will Be,” or “I Am Being What I Am Being.” The Israelites transcribed this as YHWH or Yahweh, the tetragrammaton, shorthand for the name of their deity, with its root meaning of “to be.”

Unpack the power of what this means, even if history obscures it with anthropomorphic fallacy. The voice is essentially saying, “I am the Source of all being. None of

your images or human descriptions can ever fully define me or place me within boundaries.”

So powerful!

Yahweh tells Moses something else.

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

Holy ground. Sacred places. Locales we imbue with stronger degrees of spiritual significance. These can be as lofty as Europe’s cathedrals, the pyramids of Egypt, Middle Eastern mosques, Hindu temples of India, or Shinto shrines in Japan. They can be magnificent natural settings that transmit Creation’s majesty. Conversely, they can be as humble as roadside grottos, historical markers, or a family homestead. No matter their form, these sites draw us as travelers, pilgrims, and students into a relationship with the Divine.

At the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, I sat in the exact bus seat once occupied by Rosa Parks. Certainly, a plastic bench in a nondescript public transportation vehicle doesn’t radiate the beauty of a stained-glass window, cathedral spire, or lofty pyramid. Still, it seemed sacred to me as I recalled Park’s humble but courageous act of civil disobedience that helped fan the flames of a movement.

I will never forget my visit to Machu Picchu. I had seen many photos of this Peruvian World Heritage site, even watched travel videos, but nothing compared to that moment I emerged from beneath a stone archway and saw the holy Incan city for the first time. Perched high in the

Andes, surrounded by peaks and drifting clouds, it was breathtaking. To use the metaphor of this chapter, I felt like flinging off my boots and running barefoot through the ruins!

I have other pilgrimages in mind, my own versions of a haj. Someday I would like to visit the Sikh's Golden Temple in the Punjab, India. My Sikh friends, with that expansiveness at the heart of their faith, encourage me to take this spiritual journey. I am especially intrigued by the Golden Temple's design. It features four geographical entrances, signifying that *all* of humanity—from north, south, east, or west—is equally welcome within its sanctuary.

What makes these places holy? Is it their sheer beauty? Is it the fact that multitudes of hungry seekers and spiritual adventurers have passed through them, leaving traces of their wonder and desire? Or, is it simply because an institution has ordained the locale as special?

As much as I relish the splendor of sacred sites, I bristle when an artificial sense of holiness bars common people from admittance. I think of temples where only initiates or priests can enter. I think of rituals closed to unbelievers who haven't proven their worthiness.

If a common bush in the Palestinian wilderness could become a holy place, can't all of our planet radiate this sacredness? As Jesus reportedly said in the Gospel of Thomas, "The Kingdom of God is within you and all about you, not in buildings made of wood and stone. Split a log and I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me." Awareness of

this truth is at the heart of a faith that matters. People with a growing connection to Source see life as inherently sacred. It is the dawning of a new perspective, an embracing of each sacramental moment as it opens its portals.

Look around you. Realize that multiple places in our world can take on holy significance, acting as conduits to Source. They can be:

**Favorite Settings in Nature.** Many of us have natural locales that stir us and connect us with the Divine. One of my favorites is to walk along the Medina River near my home in San Antonio, Texas. No matter the season or time of day, there is always a sight or sound that draws me deeper into nature and the peaceful center of my soul.

Some have a favorite hiking or running trail, a special place at the beach, or a mountain getaway that stirs them beyond words. Others will tell you they love fishing or hunting, when the excursion into nature is the real attraction. These times in nature not only fill us with faith; they are necessary for wholeness. I wrote a meditation combining words and photos on this topic which you can find at my website. Here is a sample from *The Necessity of Wildness*.

I grew up in the Los Angeles Basin, a vast metropolis of tangled freeways, stucco homes, and foul air. My earliest school memories precede the Clean Air Act. It was not unusual for our region to issue Smog Alerts, keeping students indoors during

recess. I recall the burning sensation in my young lungs.

Those years could have easily degenerated into life in an urban desert. Yet my father, at great personal sacrifice, gave a precious gift to his family. Despite the long commute it required, he chose a semi-rural area for us to live, one that retained vestiges of California's past. We lived amid chaparral-covered hills mingled with orange and avocado orchards. My brothers and I roamed those fields, naming special places, catching lizards, snakes, and toads. I have an early memory of lying on a hillside covered in tall mustard, gazing up at clouds as bees swarmed busily overhead. I remember the immense silhouette of a great horned owl flying over our house at twilight, taking its perch in the eucalyptus trees that bordered our property. I can still smell the fecundity of nearby creek beds.

Later, my love of nature grew stronger through the influence of Scouting. Our troop was adventurous, scheduling frequent treks into the outdoors. We hiked the John Muir Trail in the Sierra Nevada Range, rafted down the Colorado River, camped in the Mojave Desert surrounded by silhouettes of

Joshua trees and the distant yipping of coyotes.

All those experiences deposited fertile soil in my life, a layer where my deepest roots could return. Sometimes, however, I forgot to reach down to that rich loam, especially during the most difficult period of my life—a time of choosing life over death. That is when I benefitted from the wake-up call of a spiritual guide. “As you put together the pieces of a new beginning,” he said, “make sure you schedule time alone in nature. This is not only a healing part of your childhood; it is a portal to the serenity your soul so desperately seeks.”

I took that counsel to heart. Finding time in nature is now woven into my schedule, and if I ever neglect it, I feel a gnawing restlessness.

**A Favorite Place to Meditate.** In the Hebrew scriptural book of Judges, we find the story of Deborah. She would become a great warrior, leading the Israelites in one of their incessant wars against the Canaanites. The story says that she “held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.” If you have ever sat beneath a mature palm tree in a desert environment, enjoying its shelter from the sun, you

understand why Deborah chose her spot. It was her oasis, her *axis mundi*.

Many of us like to meditate, and it can help our focus if we find a place that is both comfortable and significant. This can be at home, our local park, or our customary house of worship. I love to enter the interiors of missions and cathedrals in whatever city I visit, observing people of all ages kneeling, praying, adoring. It is not their god or their particular spiritual practice that attracts me; it is their surrender to devotion, their resonance with a particular place.

We don't need to visit an established shrine to get the same effect. We can practice mindfulness anytime, anyplace. Still, the routine and comfort of a chosen locale can make a great difference. We can erect some kind of altar or memoriam in our own home or backyard. We can design a prayer garden beneath our canopy of trees. We can leave these places spartan or populate them with statues and mementos that stimulate our connection to Source. I call these "icons of our personal mythology," objects that resonate with significant aspects of our journeys.

My daughter constructs altars in the places she lives, including totems from her spiritual odysseys around the globe: a sprig of white sage gifted by a member of the Taos Pueblo, a Mayan-style amulet from a shaman in Cusco, a Celtic cross from the Iona Community in Scotland, a picture of her and her "sisters" dancing under a full moon near the ruins of Templo Mayor in Mexico City. The possibilities are endless.

I have a friend whose Meyers-Briggs personality type is completely opposite of mine. I'm an ENFP; he's an ISTJ. With an engineering background, he has categorically dismissed religious and spiritual thinking. If you can't prove it in some way, what is the point of believing it? We couldn't be more different, which is one of the reasons I enjoy our friendship. This friend built his retirement home on a lake. He has a covered decking that overlooks the water and an armchair that affords him a view no matter the weather or time of day. He loves to sit there and watch the moods of sky and water. If pressed, he will not call this either meditation or a connection to Source. Who cares? He has found his place. Have you?

**The Presence of a Wise Person.** In our individualistic society, not enough of us regularly seek out the wisdom of someone whose spirituality exhibits a quality we desire. The recovery community emphasizes the need to have a sponsor, someone who has walked the path of sobriety and enlightenment further than we have, someone whose wisdom can assist us on our journey.

This can be a loved one, a spiritual guide, a pastor, or professional mentor. What matters is that when we are with them, there is a sacredness to the time spent, a value to each moment spent together.

Do you have such a person in your life?

**Seemingly Mundane Moments.** I frequently suggest that people study the life of Brother Lawrence, that monk of the Middle ages who learned to experience the divine amidst life's everyday details. As the keeper of his monastery's

kitchen, he once said: “For me, the time of business does not differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, with several persons simultaneously calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were on my knees.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, the wise Buddhist teacher, emphasizes a similar attitude towards menial tasks, a way of redeeming the time of our lives. Speaking of fellow members in his community called Plum Village, he said: “When we wash dishes...it is to live every minute of the washing. Wash each bowl...in such a way that joy, peace, and happiness are possible. Imagine you are giving a bath to the baby Buddha. It is a sacred act. *I have arrived. I am home.* Through these two phrases, you can experience a lot of joy and happiness.”

**Inner Temples:** My wife and I enjoyed the BBC’s version of *Sherlock*, an imaginary recasting of the famous sleuth’s adventures with Dr. Watson. Throughout the series, when faced with a baffling conundrum, Sherlock demands silence as he goes to his “Mind Palace.” It’s an imaginary place where he accesses data he has received, piecing it together through crystalline concentration.

The writers of the series borrowed their idea from Greek history. According to myth, the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos invented the technique after attending a banquet gone wrong. Simonides had stepped outside to meet with two young men, but the fellows were gone. Suddenly, the hall collapsed behind him, crushing all the banqueters so completely that no one could identify their remains. Simonides reportedly reconstructed the identity of each

person based on where they had been sitting in the hall. This technique of remembrance became variously known as the method of loci, memory theater, the mind palace.

Now, let's hear from some precious souls who have found their own places to run barefoot!

### **Las Historias de la Gente**

I met **Dan Rodriguez** while I was Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Pomona, a city in east Los Angeles County. That congregation sat in the midst of numerous Latinx gangs, their warfare often spilling into the streets. Dan was part of a neighboring church body that had an outreach to gang members, trying to help them transition into a life of peace and serving others. They called it *From Gangs to Grace*. I began to work with them, and for a while, Dan and I ran an alternative school called Set Free Academy, offering those who had dropped out or been expelled from the local school district a chance to earn their GEDs. Dan has remained a lifelong friend. We share a love of people and a passion for spending time outdoors. It is his connection to the healing power of nature that he shares here.

One step forward, one step back, and  
both with a smile!

I love trekking mountain peaks and chasing illusive views of the sun rising and setting on distant horizons. These are constant reminders of my pursuit of God and God's relentless pursuit to look into my eyes.

I spent much of my childhood running from pain—the agony and hardship of growing up with a missing father, my single mom and four siblings struggling to make ends meet. Thankfully, my neighbors—a loving man and woman—took me on trips to the local hills and mountains, easing my mind from the trials of my home life

After those neighbors left my hometown of Pomona, California, I plunged back into a terrible feeling of loneliness and darkness. I desperately missed those trips and mountain hikes to watch the sunrise. I missed that sense of security, of belonging to something greater than just me. I was constantly looking up into the night sky, wondering who or what had created its beauty, but I always felt like that majesty was too elusive and out of reach. I yearned for that beauty to enter my ash-filled life, hoping that whoever or whatever had created the heavens would touch me.

At eighteen, I had a life-changing experience when rival gang members shot me in the face. I remember lying on the cold ground, looking up into the heavens as I waited for the ambulance to come, the stars fading as I lost consciousness.

After months of healing, I moved to Encinitas, California, where a surfer shared his beliefs about a Creator God who loved me. He told me I was the apple of this God's eye. I thought he was crazy, but something woke up inside me.

Within a year, I was pursuing and chasing the God of the universe. I found Him in people, in the streets, and on mountaintops, shouting His love for me as I hiked and trekked with my family. This was a joyful experience of a big, caring, all-embracing God! These outdoor pursuits consumed me because they gave me hope.

I got involved in ministry at a church, helping to heal others, until one day I fell from grace with the church's leadership. They claimed I was attempting to take over the congregation and oust the pastor and his wife. I was devastated by the false allegations. I left with my young family and never looked back. It was one of the most painful times in my life. I had never felt so much resentment towards people and a God I thought had abandoned me.

Angry and confused, I ran to the hills, looking up once again and asking God how He could leave me and my family when I needed Him the most. Gently, with the care

of a loving father, God began to nurture me with sunrises and sunsets, reminding me that He loved me desperately. It was as if, for those moments, there was no one else on earth except me and my Creator.

Today, I have three beautiful children and a lifelong partner who have helped me to forgive myself, to love and give again. Time in nature remains my strongest spiritual discipline. Even when I am not trekking in the wilds, I can close my eyes and remember my last trip to the Sierra Nevada Range, Mount Baldy or Azusa Canyon. I also take quick hikes, listening to the voice of God in the cool breeze, a beautiful sunrise or sunset.

One step forward, and sometimes one step back, making sure I get a better listen to this Presence that always revives me.

I met **Joedy Yglesias** while training to become a Texas Master Naturalist. He calls himself a Bodhisattva of the Earth, someone whose compassion extends to every living creature. It is his calling. Here he shares the journey of how he came to this place in his life.

My parents raised me as Catholic during the '70s and '80s, a time when Chicano Americans were having an existential identity crisis. For those of us on

the left, it meant consolidating our power, supporting *La Raza* or the United Farm Workers. For conservatives, it meant identifying more with their Spanish colonial roots and ignoring the indigenous aspect. The Catholic church and the government had always done a good job of separating us from those roots, which led to internalized racism. For my own parents, who wanted to make things easier for their children, it meant giving their children English names. This was part of the American Dream as they saw it.

I was quite involved in our local parish church. I taught catechism and sang in the choir, all the while trying to deal with my gay identity. I eventually thought I might join the priesthood as a way of circumventing that issue, essentially shutting it down.

Then, one day while visiting Austin, Texas, I saw a poster advertising a group called Shaman's Circle, hosted by gay activist Toby Johnson. Toby had an earlier association with Joseph Campbell, having spent time with him in northern California. He had been a Roman Catholic priest but gave up his ordination and dedicated his life to focusing on gay spirituality. Like

Campbell, Toby understood religion as myth and metaphor, and he introduced me to a much wider awareness of my spiritual journey.

I attended their shaman drumming circles and discovered that it was all white men. I approached them with the idea that even though I couldn't afford their retreats, I could join them as a worker and bring a different ethnic perspective to their group. It was a great experience! Toby took me under his wing like a spiritual father, teaching me some of the primary truths from Campbell, like the journey of "the hero with a thousand faces."

I came to understand how important my indigenous heritage was to me. I discovered that many of my relatives had practiced indigenous rituals in the past, but they hid it because the culture considered it pagan. The more I delved into it, the more I developed my own unique spirituality as someone who is half Native American.

Toby convinced me that the priesthood wasn't right for me, so I joined the Navy. I loved the adventure. I saw it as a challenge to participate in the military from the inside, showing how the LGBTQ community could bring honor to the institution. I was still

practicing my Catholic faith, operating as the lay leader on ships, but after I returned to America from one deployment, I saw a Unitarian Church flying the rainbow flag. I visited their fellowship, and it blew my mind how they welcomed the spiritual writings and traditions of so many faiths. I began to attend there on a regular basis.

After a final deployment to Iraq, I returned to live in San Antonio, Texas, suffering from PTSD. To get my head clear, I began to visit a number of Texas State Parks—camping, volunteering, and eventually receiving my certification as a Texas Master Naturalist.

I believe that the universe opens up to us at just the right time. While touring Seminole Canyon State Park, I saw, for the first time, the ancient pictographs for which the park is famous. When I looked at them, I instantly had a connection. I intuitively understood what they were really communicating, an awareness that amazed our “expert” tour guide.

As I spent more time outdoors, everything seemed to fall into place. Even the snakes, tarantulas, and vinegaroons emerged when I was there. I felt a deep connection and kinship with my indigenous

roots, especially in the Trans-Pecos desert region of southwest Texas. I knew I was home.

Today, I am working with Texas Parks and Wildlife at Big Bend Ranch State Park, a remote and beautiful region of our country. It's where I belong right now, and I feel it is part of my journey to help protect this majestic landscape. Our natural resources are under attack through neglect and development, and although I know I can't fully stop it, my presence can help preserve the spiritual magic of nature for others.

My ancestors call me here, and every time I go into the canyons, I sing a prayer song of the Lakota Sioux to let the spirits know I am present.

*Tunkasila wamayanka yo  
Le miye ca tehiya nawajin welo  
Unci Maka narwecijin na  
Wowah'wala wan yuha wauwelo.*

Grandfather look at me  
This is me standing in a hard way  
I defend Grandmother Earth  
and I come humbly with these ways

I met **Brad Dodson** and his family while pastoring a large church in Fort Worth, Texas. We had a natural

affinity and spent many hours discussing faith, our families, our hopes for the future. Brad's grandfather was a lumberman in the East Texas pine forests, passing on his love for the natural world to his grandson. Brad shares this passion with us.

I have hunted, fished, hiked, climbed, skied, paddled, and camped across the years. Nature has been a constant element in my life.

I have also been blessed with companions who pursued these adventures alongside me. One, a childhood friend, became my primary partner each year during late summer and early fall as we hunted migrating doves. We spent countless afternoons sitting below majestic live oak trees, waiting for the birds to come. They would arrive, and we would strive for our limits. But regardless of the outcome, we never missed our true aim: spending time outdoors with someone you appreciate. The smell of the grass, the sound of the retrievers as they bring back the birds, the feel of the last sunlight on our cheeks—it is all etched in my memory. So is the sound of my friend's voice and the smile across his lips and eyes as he also delighted in those days.

My friend died unexpectedly in our late 30s. As I grieved for him, I found I had no desire to spend time outdoors without him. Instead, I turned my life towards work and remained that way for six years. My father would also leave us during that time. Each year grew more frustrating than the last and I began to question life in ways both large and small.

I became active in my church and found some purpose there, but something was always missing. At a weekend youth retreat one spring in the country, I was standing outside cooking hotdogs and burgers. Suddenly, I heard the call of a male turkey. Almost immediately, a second tom joined him vocally. I went inside, got a few of the kids, and brought them outside. I called the two turkeys to our cabin, feeling alive in a way I hadn't for years.

Shortly after that, I went to a river to try fishing again. In a dark pool that fed into a small waterfall below a canopy of trees, a rainbow trout took my presentation. The pull of the line as it darted across the pool gave me a smile. It was my first rainbow trout. When I held that fish in my hands, preparing to let it go back into the water, it transformed me. Its muscular energy and

desire to swim away were powerful. It was the most alive thing I had ever felt. I fished the remainder of that evening and all the next day, slowly letting my grief dissolve. In the years since, I have not stopped. I have traveled and camped across thousands of remote miles in pursuit of trout.

Fly fishing brought me back to nature. It did more than that; it brought me back to God. Although I was active in my church, I had become numb to what God has created for us on this planet, its flora and fauna that surround us every day. I had neglected to notice the beauty. That fish and those turkeys brought it back into focus and renewed my perspective.

I have come to appreciate that the natural world is God's earthly gift to us. I have experienced this in so many ways. Watching geese skim the water in flight, then settle next to me as I wade-fished a fog-covered river in early morning North Carolina. Having a beaver swim between my legs while casting in the waters of Wyoming. Sharing five minutes with my wife in the Sea of Cortez as hundreds of dolphins chasing tuna swam past our kayak. Or, simply standing outside my workplace and delighting as a juvenile mockingbird

imitated my whistled tunes. These and many other experiences have shown me repeatedly how wonderful God's love is to have created such beauty, song, light, and motion for us to enjoy.

As a young boy, I watched a lone wolf with my grandfather early one winter morning. "That may be the last wolf you will ever see," he said. Many years later, sitting around a fire with a dear friend next to our raft in Western Alaska, we watched in silent awe as a lone wolf loped casually down the rocky beach just across the river from us. He paid us no mind. In that place, so remote and seldom visited, we were simply part of the environment. We could hear his call many hours later.

As with all the moments I have had in nature since that first trout, I smiled and thanked God for the gift.

## CHAPTER THREE: MEMES AND MISUSED TRUTHS

**(Chapter questions:** Do you regularly expose yourself to spiritual writings? Just as importantly, have you developed your own discernment about the truths of these writings as well as their authors?)

*I have the profoundest respect for people who behave in a generous way because of religion. But I come from a country where the misuse of religion has had catastrophic consequences. One must judge people not by what faith they proclaim but by what they do. -*  
Amin Maalouf

**T**he Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it! Not one word of the (Bible, Koran, Sutra) shall be changed or corrupted!”

We’ve all encountered fundamentalist lunacy when it comes to spiritual writings. It’s a shame, because we are forever indebted to those who commune with Source and record their experience in language. It doesn’t matter if these reflections come to us as scripture, journals, letters, or essays. What matters is how the light refracts through them, illuminating our collective journey. Unquestioning adherence only dims this illumination.

Reading is a discipline none of us should neglect. By encountering other human beings through the medium of language, we grow in our own ability to express the beauty that also flows through us.

The truth we are unpacking in this book applies to anything we read that claims to be spiritual. Test it with our intellect! Experiment with it in the laboratory of our daily

experience! This includes the creeds of established faiths. In the human search for truth, world religions too often turn their holy writings into irrefutable claims. When we turn *any* record of our human yearning into unquestionable dogma, that record becomes an idol that bars our way to spiritual freedom. We transform our holy writings into a Medusa that, in turn, converts us to stone.

If we are to retrieve a faith that matters, we must develop the capacity to test *any* assertion against its power to free both us and the world around us.

Since I come out of a Christian context, I want to briefly look at how that religion has abused its scriptures to justify repressive behavior. If you doubt any of my assertions here, do your own research.

**South African Christians justify apartheid with scripture.** The evil legal system of institutionalized racism called apartheid began in 1948. At that time, nearly 50% of white South Africans (Afrikaners) belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). That denomination's hierarchy conspired to support apartheid and justify it theologically.

How would they do this? Their solution was bizarre and brutal. They wrote an authoritative document entitled *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture*. It focused on a famous myth of the Hebrew Old Testament, one we refer to as the Tower of Babel. That fable says that human beings attempted to build a pyramid reaching the heavens, but "gods" put a stop to it lest the upstarts become too divine. After all, the creatures can't become Creators! To insure this didn't happen, the "gods"

scattered them into separate regions across the earth, increasing their confusion and disunity by making them speak separate languages.

Here is the evil proof-texting applied by the DRC. Diversity may be a good thing, but God intended us to live separately. They called this “autogenous development,” meaning separate development, which the government turned into law. This is how the DRC described it in their document.

“For the purpose of our report the question arises as to whether Genesis 11:1-9 can serve as a Scriptural basis for a policy of autogenous development? Our answer is a qualified yes. The diversity of races and peoples to which the confusion of tongues contributed is an aspect of reality which God obviously intended for this dispensation. To deny this fact is to side with the tower builders. Therefore, a policy which...bears this reality in mind, is Biblically realistic in the good sense of the word.”

Biblically realistic? No! Staggeringly surreal! Think of it. Stories meant to be myths were co-opted and used as literal truths to justify *all* kinds of oppression. Here’s another example.

**The Great Commission.** At the time I am writing this book, there is continuing unrest regarding monuments from America’s past, especially statues commemorating

leaders who were racist and/or colonialist. I don't call this "cancelling culture." I call it "redeeming culture." This process of reevaluation in light of expanding consciousness should include written idols as well!

Consider how Christians have historically twisted a particular passage in their scripture to support proselytizing. Called "The Great Commission," we find it in the closing chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus's final words to his disciples: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Many scholars question the veracity of this passage, challenging the notion that Jesus ever spoke such words. I agree with them. I said this in a blog post written a few years ago:

Do the research yourself, but even if you don't go down that rabbit hole, consider this. Why would a first-century Galilean carpenter who taught in simple parables suddenly lapse into the exact Trinitarian formula used by the Roman Church as it co-opted the People of the Way?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? *In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti?*

Really? I don't think so. This is clearly a scribal interpolation, an addition to early manuscripts that justified the expansion of

Christendom. And where did that lead? Surely to much beauty and goodness, but also to untold misery. Ask those who suffered the Inquisitor's tortures. Ask indigenous peoples stripped of their dignity and lives. Witness the wholesale plunder of riches and land under the banner of a cross. Witness the unholy alliances between kings and pontiffs. Look at the flag-waving aberration called American Evangelicalism.

I recently read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. The very first chapter dissects the multiple invasions of Christopher Columbus, leading to the demise of the Arawak/Taino Indians and their Caribbean culture. In a missal written back to Spain, Columbus said: "Thus the eternal God, our Lord, gives victory to those who follow His way over apparent impossibilities." Here are the grim statistics of that victory. At the time of Columbus's first contact, the Arawak/Taino tribe numbered in the hundreds of thousands. A few decades later—decimated by massacre, enslavement, and exposure to disease—they numbered only 1,148.

The primary motive for the rape and plunder of the Americas by Columbus, Cortes, and Pizarro was the lust for gold and territorial expansion. To cloak these dark impulses, colonial rulers and their unholy bedfellow, the Roman Catholic Church, needed a piece of scripture, a divine stamp of approval on their brutality. They used The Great Commission as their spiritual *carte blanche*.

You may say that people no longer do such things. Really? Think for yourself. Look around the laboratory of your own life. When someone today claims that Christ (Buddha, Allah, a political party) has given them a mandate to “make disciples,” isn’t it outrageously arrogant? Doesn’t it mean that those who are acting as evangelists, no matter how well-intentioned they consider themselves, are still trying to convert other human beings to their own version of the truth?

A friend of mine, David Reed, tells how his association with Campus Crusade for Christ at a Texas university was primarily about converting others. “After some intense training,” he says, “we stormed the beach off Galveston. My enthusiasm was unbounded as I repeatedly rehearsed the ‘four spiritual laws’ with absolute strangers. At the end of the day, I returned to my supervisor to gleefully report, ‘I just saved four people out there!’ His response? ‘All by yourself?’”

It’s almost comical if it wasn’t so obtrusive. The spiritual journey is one we must take for ourselves without pressure. If we are people who have faith, we must appreciate and preserve the sanctity of each individual’s quest, not have a controlling intention to conform them to our notions of the truth.

**Homophobia and Misogyny:** Western culture’s oppressions of both women and the LGBTQ community have a long, sordid history. Once again, the Christian church has supported these injustices by citing scriptures to justify patriarchal abuse.

When it comes to people of different sexual orientations, conservative churches cite a few obscure passages in the Old and New Testaments that prohibit these expressions of love. This is tragically archaic. Homosexuality, according to first century Hebrew law, was punishable by stoning, even unto death. Yet, after 2,000 years of moral and scientific awakening from this brutality, homophobic discrimination still lives on in conservative Christian circles, justified by scripture.

Women face the same oppression. In my years as a Christian pastor, most often through ecumenical associations, I encountered pastors and other leaders whose churches were brazenly sexist, even as they cloaked themselves in modern garb. Many nondenominational congregations use contemporary praise music and media savvy. Young hipsters fill their pews. But if you scratch beneath the surface of their theology, you find beliefs reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Women cannot be ordained or hold positions of leadership in these places.

The largest Christian institution in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, remains locked in this misogyny.

I remember a discussion with a conservative pastor about this issue. He stripped out his proof-texts from the New Testament, like I Timothy 2:11-12: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”

There was really no arguing with him, but I tried anyway. I cited another passage from Paul, that same first-

century patriarchal Jew, an uncustomary flash of unity and equality found in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

“Which seems truer to you,” I asked the other pastor, “the passage you cite from Timothy or the one from Galatians? Which seems to more deeply reflect the heart of what Jesus taught?”

He looked at me with a smug smile.

“All of the Bible is fundamentally true. Every word. We may enjoy Paul’s passage in Galatians on a metaphorical level, but scripture still prohibits women from church leadership.”

I am going to stop right here. You see my point. While I believe it is vital for us to feed our souls with writings about spiritual matters, it is equally important to finely tune our critical faculties. Ernest Hemingway once said, “The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, shit protector.” The same thing is true for any of us who want to develop a faith that matters. We must filter out the bullshit and get to what is real, what resonates fully with our spirits.

This not only applies to actual words, but to the people who speak or write them. None of us are perfect. Dig into our histories and you will find contradictions and errors. I now see that operating under the guidance of half-conscious muddled truths caused me to commit many errors throughout my life. This is the struggle to be free, and we *all*

need grace. The important thing is to be as fully aware as possible. Here's an example from my own writing career.

In my book, *Invitation to The Overview*, I chose to include a chapter of quotes from spiritual writers and thinkers who exhibit a universal faith. These men and women go beyond promoting a single religious system. They respect the diversity of spiritual thoughts and practices across our planet.

Here is one of those quotes, from Sri Chinmoy. Again, substitute your own chosen pronouns for "God."

"Each religion has its own way of expressing itself with regard to the unlimited One. Love of God is the only true religion...but the problem with religion is that it seeks to limit our love of God. Religion will say, 'Only if you love God the way I love God are you doing the right thing. Love God but do it in my way. Only if you come to church, only if you come to the temple, only if you come to the mosque will your love of God be perfect. The other ways are all wrong.' But love of God is not like that. If I love God, God will tell me, 'Why should there only be roses in the religion-garden? There can be other flowers as well.' We have to love God in God's own Way. Then we will never be trapped in the confines of religion and we will never try to confine anyone else."

So much about these words resonates with me. Their essence encapsulates the overall theme of this book—to expand, question, and never let anyone else dictate what you are supposed to believe.

However, if we go beneath the surface and study Chinmoy’s life, we find sporadic accusations about the excessive control, even sexual misconduct, present within his organization that some deemed a cult.

So, I had a question. Do these allegations negate everything that Chinmoy taught? In the end, I decided to include the quote with a disclaimer about the controversies surrounding him.

This will happen often as we sift through the complexities of human lives. We must choose what speaks to us and reject those things that are injurious to ourselves or others. We operate with the unavoidable conclusion that *all* of us are prone to behaviors and thoughts that still need redeeming. We *all* need copious amounts of grace. Consider these examples.

- John F. Kennedy had numerous affairs during his political career. Does this annul his leadership in our country?
- Mother Teresa revealed in her letters that her faith had dried up. She felt God was cruel in not answering her prayers. Does this drain the power from her example of service to the poor?
- Thomas Jefferson, like many of America’s “founding fathers,” possessed a number of slaves. Does this invalidate his words in the Declaration of

Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness?" Or, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, do these words nonetheless remain a lofty goal to which our nation aspires?

- Do the aforementioned sexist writings of the Apostle Paul cancel out the amazing poetry of I Corinthians chapter 13?
- The legendary conservationist, John Muir, was known to have racist views and even hobnobbed with those who espoused white supremacy. Does this invalidate his tireless work to protect America's natural resources?
- The early feminist movement in America notoriously neglected women of color and their unique perspective on both racism *and* sexism in our culture. Does this negate their initial groundwork for greater equality?
- Throughout many of his resistance campaigns with the United Farm Workers, Cesar Chavez carried banners displaying *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the Roman Catholic Patron Saint of Mexico. Does Chavez's support of an institution that colonized and brutalized most of his ancestors cancel out the human rights he championed?

We live in era that has coined the term “fake news.” People bend the facts to fit cozily into their own worldviews or to strengthen their lust for power. This trend, beginning at the highest levels of media and politics, is a great concern. Social media memes and quotes taken out of context have become commonplace. “I saw it on the Internet, so it must be true” is more prophetic than we like to admit.

This is also a grave problem when we consider an uneducated electorate. Too many of us succumb to the influence of unexamined half-truths that burn through our collective consciousness like daily wildfires. Finding a faith that matters is intricately related to our power of discernment. I enjoy inspiring memes on social media as much as the next person, but I always ask myself some questions. Was this attributed to the right person? If so, what is his/her background? Were these words simply taken out of context, or do they point to a larger and truer reality in that person’s life?

In the following reflection, you will hear from a man whose growing spirituality helped him develop a shit detector about the scriptures of his own tradition.

### **Las Historias de la Gente**

I met **Rob Mueller** because of our association in Mission Presbytery, a consortium of Presbyterian churches in south Texas. I quickly grew to admire many things about him: his openness to other faiths, his commitment to justice, and his nearly three-decade devotion to a bilingual congregation on San Antonio’s westside. Eventually, we

joined in writing a book entitled *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission*. The Co-moderators of the Presbyterian Church (USA) chose it as “book of the year” for our denomination in 2019. It was a great experience, not just the creative birthing, but how my partnership with Rob changed me. In that process, I learned that the expansiveness of his faith had not always been present. He, like anyone with spiritual courage, struggled to be where he is today. Here he shares the evolution of his views on Christian scripture, an example of the underlying pleas in this book to question and keep growing. I especially love what he has come to embrace about Jesus’s saying, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

At age 16, I had a powerful and life-rearranging conversion to Christ. I gave myself and my future to God at the altar of my best friend’s Pentecostal church. Seeking fellowship, I attended my girlfriend’s Evangelical Free Church youth group and started opening the scripture with studies produced by the Navigators. These fellowships instilled in me a desire to devour the scripture and steeped me in a doctrine of biblical inerrancy. They told me that the essential meaning and purpose of the scripture was to lead us to personal salvation. At the time, it was a powerful and animating message for me. I swallowed it; I

believed in it. I developed such a fanatical daily discipline of reading and studying the Word that my parents worried I had joined a cult!

In college, I joined the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, continued with a Navigators men's study, and joined an ad hoc Tuesday night prayer group. The prayer group was wildly ecumenical, including folks from Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Baptist, nondenominational, and mainline traditions. We would pray, share, and discuss our faith lives. The deep relationships I developed with Christians of varying perspectives opened me up to new ways of looking at scripture. My friend Matt English, a deeply-rooted Presbyterian, introduced me to the persistent thread through scripture that presents the divine imperative for justice. This thread expressed a concern for *collective* salvation more than personal salvation. It viewed God's activity as transformative of *society* and not simply of individuals.

InterVarsity introduced me to Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, a book that turned my world on its head! For the first time, I began to understand that the Kingdom of God was not just about me and

Jesus, but about how the world around us should look. Another friend introduced me to *Sojourners* magazine, the reflections of justice-oriented evangelicals in inner city Washington, D.C., *Sojourners* helped me build bridges between these two often opposing theological camps.

I read biblical scholarship from a historical-critical perspective. In my Sociology of Religion class, I read Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*, and discovered how we set up certain unassailable truths to act as a canopy of meaning over us, while in reality, all of those "unassailable truths" can be critiqued and even changed. This discovery began to pry open the rigid frameworks I had inherited from conservative influences and prepared the way for a significant shift in my view of scripture and how it acquires authority.

My seminary education helped me to identify and appreciate the diversity of voices within the scriptures, even how they critiqued one another. Biblical inerrancy no longer worked for me. Gospel parallels revealed the many differences in Gospel details, and I learned that factual historicity was not the dominant concern of Gospel authors. Rather, the effort to communicate

*meaning* was central. The Bible became a library of books assembled by diverse writers over thousands of years. These writings were shaped by their particular places and times in history. They were still “inspired” by the Spirit of God, but not dictated word by word, detail by detail. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg helped me realize that a story could still convey truth and meaning without being factual.

My most challenging hurdle during seminary was the exclusive claim by many in the Christian faith that salvation is *only* through Jesus. Today, I have a completely different understanding of certain “exclusivist scriptures.” When Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me,” I believe he is inviting us into the pattern of death and resurrection he exemplified. Jesus’s “Way” is the surrendering of our ego, a dying to self, so that we may discover our unity with others in God for an abundant new life.

I have encountered this wholeness in other people of profound faith who do not share my same tradition. Interfaith conversations now enrich me; at an earlier time, they would have simply been

arguments in an attempt to convert the other person to my way. The writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, Anthony de Mello, Thomas Merton, John Philip Newell and Richard Rohr, helped me build bridges between my tradition and other faiths. They speak a language I can understand.

Today, when uncertainties or challenges to my understanding of God arise, I delight in being stretched into new ways of thinking. Together with Meister Eckhart “I pray to God to be rid of God” because every attempt I make to understand God is flawed and limited, so I must forever open myself to the God I don’t yet know or understand.

And so, my journey continues!

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There is an obtuse word I learned during my years in seminary; it fits what we are trying to convey in this chapter. It is *hermeneutics*, defined by Webster’s as “methods or principles of interpretation.” We use it in the realm of studying scripture or philosophy. For instance, echoing Rob’s story, it makes all the difference if we start from a perspective of scripture as historical/scientific truth, or that it is stories/myths meant to convey meaning beyond words.

What is your hermeneutic? What methods do you use to evaluate written or spoken truths in your own life?

Sometimes, a given piece of spiritual writing has no definitive interpretation. It is up to each of us to intuit what it is saying.

There is a verse in Christian scripture that continues to intrigue and inspire me. It is from the third chapter of the Gospel of John. A man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus with questions about his teaching. It is a huge risk. Many were already labelling Jesus a heretic, and Nicodemus belonged to the Great Sanhedrin, a ruling group of Jewish Elders who wielded supreme religious authority in Jerusalem. To hide his clandestine meeting, he comes to Jesus under the cloak of night.

In the course of their conversation, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be “born again,” a phrase that, unfortunately, became a formulaic test amongst Christians that separates the “saved” from those who aren’t. I think, instead, Jesus was referring to a spiritual pattern. We need to be “born out of” the acculturation heaped on us by family and society. We need awakenings that launch us on trajectories uniquely our own.

In verse eight, Jesus says this: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

No scholar has the final say on what these words mean. Is it that our faith—like a wind that ruffles leaves, bend trees, or ripples water—will affect the world around

us? I prefer a different meaning. I believe Jesus was saying that when Spirit infuses and motivates us, we become unfettered. We experience new freedom and joy, swept up in an entirely new experience of life.

Examine each truth for yourself!

Find meaning that makes sense in light of your own journey!

## CHAPTER FOUR: CLOUDS IN A CUP OF JOE

(**Chapter question:** Do you have a regular practice, discipline, or ritual that connects you to Source in a vital way?)

*And I do believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you are craving, then you are absolutely permitted to make up a ceremony of your own devising, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet. - Elizabeth Gilbert*

**A** Buddhist gardener risks his life to remove creeping foliage from the pinnacles of Angkor Wat. He believes he is protecting spirits that live within the temple.

A Catholic man, one of 242, lifts the 11,000-pound throne of *Virgen de la Esperanza*, parading it through the streets of Malaga, Spain, on Holy Thursday. He endures the pain because, “Life has no meaning without going out under the *Virgen*.”

An initiate at China’s Shaolin Temple practices Monkey Stick routines and memorizes scripture, hoping for ordination as a Kung Fu Warrior Monk. His ultimate goal is to reach enlightenment.

A young Palestinian man volunteers as a paramedic at Al-Aqsa—the Dome of the Rock—during *The Night of Power*, Ramadan’s crescendo. By caring for those who have collapsed in the crushing crowds, he seeks to prove himself to Allah.

These and other religious practices come alive in the PBS documentary series *Earth’s Sacred Wonders: Closer to the Divine*. My wife and I marveled at the color and passion of

our human family. We have so many rituals, prayers, and metaphysical systems designed to deepen our awareness of the One. The forms are as diverse as the plumage on our planet's species of birds!

How do we make sense of these many spiritual disciplines? Is it even important to have repeated ceremonies in our lives? Once again, the answers to these questions *must* matter to us individually. If we simply adopt the rituals prescribed by others, we can easily end up substituting form for function, adherence for vibrance.

Here's an example from my own life

What Christians call Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist no longer has intrinsic meaning for me. This may strike you as a surprising statement from one who once presided at communion tables, speaking the Words of Institution. To some, it may seem like an abandoning of what was once sacred in my life.

What happened?

First, I long ago rejected the historical Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement, the notion that Jesus had to die on the cross to appease God's need for sacrifice. I came to see it as a brutal example of archaic Jewish thought, stemming directly from the lambs slaughtered at Passover, the bull butchered on Yom Kippur, or the scapegoat run through Israelite encampments until it hurtled over a cliff. Jesus's willingness to die for his beliefs was noble, but history is rife with examples of selfless sacrifice. I could no longer stomach the notion that *any* deity would require bloodshed. Different ways to phrase the sacrament

eventually sounded hollow. We were still commemorating a savage moment on the cross. We were still offering body and blood.

Second, it bothered me that only members of a priestly class could utter the Words of Institution. Early in my career, I took off my robe and stole during worship. I told the congregation I was serving that I saw these vestments as a pre-Reformation vestige of the separation between clergy and laity. “My particular gifts are no more important than yours,” I said. “Any robe is a *community* robe, and we will alternately wear it at different times as we serve each other with our unique talents.” I have met many people whose lifelong faith *easily* qualified them to speak the words over communion in lieu of a priestly class. Power to the people, not the institution or its guardians!

Finally, I grew weary of the bickering over correct ways to participate in this ritual. Intinction or pass the plates? Wine and wafers or bread and juice? Open table or closed table? Frankly, I didn’t give a damn. I see this as another example of emphasizing minutia rather than transforming truth, akin to “how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

My intent here is not to denigrate your own adherence to this ritual or any other. There are people very dear to me who practice communion with solemnity and reverence. Blessings to them! I am simply underlining the primary thrust of my argument.

**Your faith is your faith!**

**Think for yourself!**

Have you examined all the meanings and underpinnings of your spiritual practices, or do you follow them unconsciously? Truly, as Socrates said during his trial for allegedly corrupting Athenian youth, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

I recently spoke with a young man who has decided to follow Tibetan Buddhist teachings as his chosen path. Some of its adherents use prostrations—kneeling and bowing—as a daily ritual. They believe this simple exercise purifies them from defilements, prepares them for meditation, and accumulates good karma. With great enthusiasm, the young man said he had a goal of 1,000 prostrations in 100 days!

I smiled. The skeptical, sometimes cynical, part of me thought (along with John Lennon), “Whatever gets you through the night.” Then I censored my judgment with a well-known maxim from the recovery movement: “Live and let live.”

Ultimately, it doesn’t matter what form our spiritual practices take. Memorized prayers, weekly worship services, physical demands like yoga, repeated visits to certain holy places, even tarot cards, tea leaves, or clouds in a cup of coffee! It’s your choice, but it does beg two questions.

**First, are spiritual disciplines really necessary for the evolution of a faith that matters?** My simple answer is yes.

Even though I know that every moment and place is sacred, we live in cultures that strip this sacredness from our lives. This stems from materialism, the commodification of nearly every area of human existence. It is the shameless

promotion of an insidious lie that material things will satisfy our deepest spiritual longings. How many times have you heard the word “soul,” “spirit,” or “freedom” when listening to a pitch about a new car?

This onslaught of capitalistic drivel distracts, even separates us, from the influence of Source. This is why it is important to have daily practices that center us and lift us above the cultural fray. The form of these practices is less important than their intent to remind us of our highest selves, our true callings, the journeys that ultimately matter.

**Second, have our chosen practices born fruit in our lives?** Have they helped us connect with Source in a way that produces spiritual growth and emotional maturity? Have they helped us pass the litmus tests detailed in chapter one?

Throughout my pastoral counseling over the years, I noticed a tendency that many of us have in our human experience. We get so intent on reaching certain goals that we fail to notice the headway we have already made. This is when it is important to stop and give ourselves credit for how far we have come. We may not be where we hope to be, but we are often further along than yesterday. Isn't this a metaphor for our spiritual journeys? As those in Alcoholics Anonymous remind themselves at every meeting, “We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”

I have a playful way to remind people of their evolution. I erect imaginary road signs. I tell them to stop and read these indicators. I encourage them to lift up similar markers for their family members, friends, and coworkers.

For instance, one woman came to our initial counseling session with a crackling load of stress, mostly a result of over-functioning in relationships, taking on more than her share of responsibilities. We examined how important it is to say no, to be fully conscious of the choices we make, to be careful about what we pick up and what we put down. I remember one session a few months later. She expressed resentment about a division of labor issue with her husband. I smiled and said, “You’ve actually come a long way. Compared to our first session, your level of frustration is about a four compared to a nine. You are also using terms like ‘division of labor,’ a way to examine what is happening rather than responding from your old, dysfunctional pattern. I want to hold up a road sign for you. It says, ‘Look how far you have come!’”

There is a statement in *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* that has always spoken volumes to me. In highlighting the importance of living one day at a time, it says, “What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.” There are two words here worth examining in light of our chosen practices.

**First, reprieve.** All of us face daily pressures and challenges. Some are external—working jobs, paying bills, raising children, maintaining homes. Some are internal, tied to unresolved character traits, grief over losses of all kinds, resentments towards those we feel have wronged us. We need regular breaks from these struggles, oases in the midst of life’s ongoing battles. Nightly sleep may not be enough to

unwind us. Too often we carry the conflicts of our waking hours into the shadows of our dreams and nightmares.

**Second, maintenance.** We apply this word primarily to the upkeep of material objects. We may go a bit further and talk about the need to maintain our physical health through proper diet and exercise. Maintenance of our spiritual condition is just as vital, if not more so. Our chosen rituals and practices help us find a reprieve and release of pressure. And, as the AA quote powerfully reminds us, this happens one day at a time. If we relegate our spiritual sustenance to once a week, once a month, or only when pressures have built to explosive levels, it undermines our health.

In the following reflections, you will hear people describe diverse disciplines that help them connect with Source. Hopefully, they will encourage you to find ways to maintain your own connections.

### **Las Historias de la Gente**

My only daughter, **Hanna Leigh**, has always been an inspiration to me. She has never been content to let the prescriptions of others dictate her life's journey. She is a spiritual adventurer, searching for the best and most freeing elements of various traditions around her. She is also a gifted singer, with two musical compilations to her credit. In the following words, she describes how singing has become a Source-connecting discipline for her.

To me, the gift of singing is what I call  
“embodied presence,” shifting me from

thinking to feeling. For this to happen, I need to be truly present in my body. The more I focus on the physical vibrations moving through me or ponder the meaning behind lyrics (like a finger pointing to the moon), the deeper I come into this place of fuller awareness.

On a physiological level, singing regulates my nervous system, either through upbeat songs and sounds that spark me out of a slump, or soothing melodies that calm my frenetic energy and quiet my mind. I like to carve out time to have “sounding sessions” with myself, where I simply sit and make the sounds of whatever I am feeling in my body. Sometimes my mind judges these utterances as weird or ugly, but as I allow them to express what could be more difficult through English, there is relief, healing, wholeness...sometimes bringing tears, sometimes laughter. This is a valuable part of my spiritual and emotional hygiene.

As with other art forms and spiritual practices, when I’m truly immersed in the expression, I’m not worried about how I’m going to fix something of the past or achieve something in the future. I spiral into a deeper connection with myself and the living world, opening my senses. I realize

that this organic connection was here even before I started singing. It is *always* here. I just need to tune in and ride the wave.

A beautiful elder and song-leader named Laurence Cole, who has inspired me and many others to sing in circles together, calls singing “a technology of belonging.” When we sing together in a group, we come into a resonant field and remember that we belong to each other. Some of my most powerful memories of growing up in the Christian church are moments of group singing; raising our voices in praise of the glory of a greater power that animates the world. This same impulse continues to inspire me, just as the birds rise at dawn to offer their songs to the web of creation.

I met **Ann Averbach** on the island of Maui while staying at a commune called *Lokahi*, which means *harmony* in Hawaiian. It’s a beautiful place. One night while sleeping in a bamboo hut, I heard the booming sound of humpback whales playfully slapping their fins on the water of a nearby inlet. Ann is a longtime practitioner and teacher of yoga. Here she shares her insights on why it is such an important part of her spiritual journey. I especially resonate with her description of those moments when we get elevated visions from the peaks still ahead of us.

Yoga is a lifestyle, a discipline, a path, and a constant practice. Many people in our modern world debase it to a series of postures designed for physical fitness. We all need healthy bodies, but the truest benefits of yoga are in our subtle body, our *pranic* body. Yoga is a full mind, body, spirit discipline whose goal is to bring us home to the luminous peace of our true nature. We are all gods and goddesses and have unlimited potential lying dormant within us. We are powerful beyond measure, and we can activate this power through practices which awaken our kundalini energy—that life-force lying dormant at the base of our spine, waiting for us to raise it up to our higher energy centers.

Like any practice, the more we commit ourselves, the deeper we go. As well-known yoga teacher, B. K. S. Iyengar, says, “Practice and all else is coming.” I tell my students that three times a week is the minimum to keep our practice in balance. If we really want to progress, I recommend five to six days a week with a day off to rest. Anything worthwhile or beautiful in this life takes commitment and dedication.

The wonderful thing about practicing yoga is that it changes with our lifestyle, the

seasons, and the seasons of our lives. It adapts to our ever-evolving needs. At first, we may have to force ourselves to practice. However, as we realize that we are more energized and centered, our discipline—what we call our daily *sadhana*—becomes a joy that gives back to us a thousand-fold!

For many others and me, it is often through crisis that our practice grows. Yoga became my absolute lifeline and saving grace during my mother's final months on our planet. Losing her was one of the greatest challenges I have faced in this lifetime. Along with my aunt, I was her constant caregiver, and the one activity I had for personal space was to go to my yoga classes. It's so true that in order to care for others and not burn out, we must first care for ourselves. During this extremely difficult time, I realized how yoga saved my life. It deepened my daily practice and commitment exponentially. Often, when we start inventing reasons why we are too busy or unable to come back to our mats, that is when we need it the most.

Many of yoga's practices, especially working with the subtle body, are nebulous and theoretical at first. For example, working with the *bandhas*, or energetic

locks, when we first learn to breathe into our pelvic floor. Most people can't even bring their breath to the low abdomen. However, as we purify ourselves physically, we are able to purify ourselves mentally, energetically, and spiritually as well. We start to tune in to increasingly subtle realms and have “aha moments” and breakthroughs.

I would illustrate it like this, based on my personal experience. We may have times where we are climbing and climbing the metaphorical mountain of our spiritual journey and it seems as if we are *so far* from the summit. Then, one day, we suddenly fly to the top and have an awakening where we can see from an elevated state, experiencing bliss, samadhi, nirvana. We may slide back down to where we were previously climbing, but that glimpse from the top inspires us carry on, to chop wood and carry water as the Zen Buddhists say. We return to our practice 1,000 times, *a thousand times*, until eventually we make our way back to that highest summit of spiritual experience and elevated awareness.

**Steve Nootenboom** comes closest to a Renaissance person of anyone I know. He is a filmmaker, painter, master carpenter, sailor, rock climber, and hang glider. I first met him when he and his family visited a church I pastored in

north Los Angeles County. We soon became lifelong friends. I have always admired his dedication to a simple, nomadic way of life. With very few possessions to tie them down, he and his wife travel in a bus whose interior Steve designed to be amazingly livable. Our conversations about art, creativity, and the spiritual life can last for hours. I asked him to share his amazing perspective on how hang gliding has become a spiritual discipline for him.

In 1977, I had my first hang gliding flight. I will never forget the moment my feet left the ground and I felt completely free of the earth and its cares. I was hooked!

Every time I launch my glider, I get the same sensation as that first time I flew. I feel so connected to God when I am flying that I have nicknamed the sport "Sky Church." I tell people that I have to fly up in the sky to find God.

Hang-gliding requires intense focus in the moment—shutting out cares, events, worries, and the 10,000 things mentioned in Taoism. When you are flying, you are looking for the invisible, such as hot air rising in "thermals." Some of the indications of a thermal are the smell of sage brush rising in the desert air, or the smell of French fries when you're over a city. When you get in a thermal, you circle around in that tube of ascending hot air and it can

send you soaring at up to 5,000 feet per minute. You also keep your eyes on those local pilots, the birds. They know right where to go!

My glider is about 70 pounds, and I can easily carry it on my shoulders. My flights average about two and a half hours. Some have been at 18,000 feet with a small oxygen tank tied to my harness. I have soared for over six hours at a time, crossing more than 150 miles of bleak desert with no motor, simply searching for and trusting the lift of air currents.

The concentration required for these flights focuses and clears my mind. I can hear instructions from God about what to do in business or my marriage, and I get strong impressions of what the future holds outside my scope of knowledge.

Here is an example of Creation speaking to me during a flight.

I was traveling through Montana with my hang glider tied on my truck top. I found a high ridge facing the prevailing wind. I launched and soared for about two hours down the wooded backbone of this beautiful slope. I found myself getting very low and finally began to sink in a canyon with no way out. My first instinct was terror. Then

something I believe to be God cut through my fearful thoughts and I felt hope and peace in spite of seeing myself crashing into giant pine trees. Just then, a red-tailed hawk came strafing under my wing and I knew I needed to follow him. I followed him into a deeper part of the canyon where all logic would say DON'T GO! At the end of that box canyon, the hawk started to circle, a clear indication of a thermal. He and I did a sky dance together, around and around, until I was 1,000 feet safely above the ridge again.

I continue to attend my "Sky Church," sometimes as much as twice a week. After every flight, I feel rejuvenated with a clear perspective and a new direction. I have often said to non-pilots that a two-hour flight hanging in the Presence is equivalent to a two-week vacation. Although I find similar connections to God in prayer and meditation, there is still something special for me about soaring above my troubles below. It certainly takes faith in your glider, your abilities, and God to just run off a mountain with some Dacron and aluminum strapped to your back.

But I am a believer that faith honors God, and God *always* honors faith.

During a period of intense spiritual searching during my early 20s, I did a lot of reading about Zen Buddhism. I was intrigued by Zen koans and poetry, words meant to spark awakenings beyond reason. Looking back now, I was desperate for relief from the pressures of my daily thinking, what Buddhists call the “monkey brain” or that “unbridled horse” ridden by those who have no idea of their frantic destination. I wanted a semblance of satori, but I was unwilling to put in the work required by Zen initiates—sitting in zazen. I found it nearly impossible to quiet myself long enough. Even if I had, my motivation would have been suspect, a Western form of endeavoring.

In compiling this book, I reached out to the San Antonio Zen Center to see if someone would be willing to share their story. What follows are the words of **Enrique Valdivia**, an attorney at a legal aid center. All these years later, he confirms what I suspected about Zen practices, especially how they are essentially antithetical to striving. Enrique was undergoing treatment for cancer at the time he wrote these words.

I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin. My mother was Roman Catholic, but my father professed atheism. My mother had me baptized and I went to catechism and confirmation. After that, my father insisted that my siblings and I have no further exposure to the Church. I still went to Mass occasionally as an adult, and I kept a small

statue of the Virgin Mary gifted to me by the nuns upon my confirmation.

After leaving home, I attended Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, a liberal arts school where I majored in philosophy. In the winter of 1978, my sophomore year, I took a class with professor Bardwell Smith, a well-regarded Asian religion scholar focused on Japan.

As part of his course, we did a field trip to the Minnesota Zen Center in Minneapolis. The founder, Dainin Katagiri, had first come to the U.S. from Japan to assist Rōshi Shunryu Suzuki at the San Francisco Zen Center. He then moved to Minnesota to establish his own sangha.

We arrived at the Center the night before and slept in the Zendo. Getting up well before dawn, Katagiri Roshi led us through several intervals of zazen, alternated with a walking meditation called *kinhin*. We then ate breakfast *ōryōki* style. The meal's every detail was done with great care. I was particularly struck by the completeness of it, unwrapping and setting out the bowls and utensils, accepting and eating the food, washing everything afterwards with hot water, then drinking the

wash water and wrapping everything back together just as it had been when we started.

That first zazen experience was also memorable, but the practice was far too austere to appeal to 19-year-old me. The Buddha's way is meant to point the way out of suffering. Perhaps I had not yet suffered enough. That time came much later, in late midlife, when I was living in San Antonio, Texas.

After turning 50, I became seriously depressed. I decided I needed to try everything I could to recover my sense of wellbeing. By that time, various mindfulness practices had entered American mainstream culture, even reaching San Antonio. About two miles from my house was a sangha in the same tradition as the one I had encountered in Minnesota during college. I still had my copy of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki from Bardwell Smith's course. I took all this as a sign that it was time to practice in earnest at the San Antonio Zen Center, which I have done now for nearly twelve years.

This is how I would describe zazen to those who have not experienced it. We are not trying to reach an end goal with our meditation. It is object-less. We simply sit

and start by counting our breath from one to ten, then settle into our sitting without striving.

This practice connects me to the Buddha's teaching of impermanence. It helps me stay calm during the vicissitudes of my life, to allow changes to happen, knowing I will arrive at something else. I find solace in not letting myself get worked up over things, for better or worse. I go through emotions like anyone else, and some of them are quite challenging, but I can sit, follow my breath, and things will work out.

Not necessarily solved. There's a difference. It's the notion that what I'm experiencing now is temporary, and I find comfort in that.

**Kara French** has been a spiritual nomad since birth. Growing up in a small working-class town of New Hampshire, neither of her parents embraced a religious tradition. But Kara was curious about god and the faith practices of her peers, something she jokingly calls an “anthropological interest.” During grade school, she convinced numerous friends to invite her to their places of worship, including one whose family had an Indian guru as their guide.

Later, while attending highly academic, all-female Smith College, she grew discontented with the career goals of her fellow students. “It seemed everyone wanted to be the

first female president, a lawyer, or doctor.” She desired something different.

After college, she worked on farms for several years. She wanted to grow food, learn about herbs, live simply and close to the Earth. Following that, she joined a famous cooperative community called *The Farm*, working various jobs and studying to be a midwife. Pressing onwards, she then chose to travel with a mobile food ministry called *Everybody’s Kitchen*, a group that shared meals with people in need and served activists at the sites of their protests. She briefly assisted the Black Mesa Indigenous Support group, a movement to protect land from mining interests trying to invade the Navajo Nation. Always adventuring, serving, learning!

Then, during a time of spiritual rest, working as a nanny in Martha’s Vineyard, she met a man who spent his winters on Maui. He invited her to join him. At first, the option seemed frivolous. She felt that one of her primary purposes was to evoke change in the world. How would that take place in Hawaii’s remote, idyllic setting? She was so conflicted about the decision that she visited an ashram in New Mexico to meditate and obtain clarity. She finally chose to go.

Early in my time here, some friends introduced me to the South American spiritual medicine plant, ayahuasca. I had never done any hallucinogens, so it was a new experience. I was scared at first, but I felt a calling to be open to this medicine. I

received a very clear message during my first ceremony that I was to continue living on Maui, learning to love the land and care for the Earth.

It has been a powerful time since then, and ayahuasca has assisted me. It has taught me how to relate to myself and others in a more loving way. I remember one journey when I saw that judging people in *any way whatsoever* makes me physically and spiritually sick. I have also seen repeatedly that *any* kind of negative thinking about myself or others is extremely detrimental.

Most of all, I have clearly and beautifully realized that being human is a divine gift from God. It is important for each of us to honor our own sacredness.

Ayahuasca has also taught me about Earth, especially plants. I once read an article about the Zuni's world view. The biggest thing I took from it is their belief that humans are actually the least intelligent creatures. Animals, then plants, then the elements, and finally Earth itself have much greater wisdom.

A couple weeks later, I attended an ayahuasca ceremony where I experienced that very perspective of the Zuni. The plants around me were *so* alive, *so* intelligent, each

with their own teachings. It was as if they understood that humans have moved away from deeply knowing the Earth. It seemed they were happy that I was coming back to them, learning to reconnect. It felt like they were grandparents welcoming me as a precious child, happy that I was learning something new.

During another journey with ayahuasca, I was lying on the ground, feeling the Earth beneath me and gazing at the stars. I truly understood that my body is the sacred temple of my soul and that it is a gift from the Earth. My consciousness, my spirit, is part of the expanse of Great Spirit, or God.

To me, this realization is the beginning of all wisdom.

## CHAPTER FIVE: BLUE RELIGION AND THE CRY OF CIRCUMSTANCE

**(Chapter question:** Do you have a faith that not only matters to you personally but to the world around you at this juncture of time and history?)

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.* - James Baldwin

I have a taste, some might say an addiction, for crime novels. One of my favorite writers is Michael Connelly and his hard-bitten detective, Hieronymus (Harry) Bosch. In the excellent Amazon adaptation of Connelly's stories, Harry is talking to his partner, Edgar, as they investigate the cold-case murder of a young boy.

"You asked me before if I had faith," says Harry.

"I remember," replies Edgar.

"I told you I didn't," says Harry. "That wasn't the truth. I do. I have my own kind of faith. Blue religion. Arthur Delacroix's bones came out of the ground for a reason. They came out of the ground for me to find them, so I can put some part of this right."

By "blue," Harry refers to the color associated with policing, but he uses the term as personal mythology. It's his way of saying that circumstances, if we are attentive to them, reveal what we need to pursue. Think of it. Though he is essentially an atheist who has repeatedly seen the worst of humanity, he still believes there is a force working behind the scenes that demands justice. Not only that, he feels this circumstantial force is calling him to use his unique skills as

a detective. Literally, the blood of victims cries out to him from the ground!

Throughout this book, I have used the term “a faith that matters.” Does our connection to Source impact our daily wellbeing? Does our faith, no matter how we define it, help us experience new freedom? Does it urge us to love and forgive others, overcome despondency, and aid in the actualization of our truest selves? Each of these aspects is *critical* in living our lives to the fullest.

Now, let’s take it a step further. A faith that matters must *always* go beyond self-service. A faith that matters *personally* should also matter *communally*.

Why? The reasons are obvious. There is struggle in the world around us. A struggle towards light and human unity. A struggle for the end of racism, intolerance, and the widening gap between the rich and poor. If our faith is simply a seal of approval on our comfortable, unengaged lives, then we not only siphon off the goodness of what Source is pouring into us, we contribute to the world’s malaise of apathy. Desmond Tutu famously said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

We find disciplines aimed at the common good woven into faith systems around the globe. Here are some examples.

- **Islam:** One of this faith’s “five pillars” is zakat, the offering of alms. Muslims believe we are merely

temporary stewards of everything entrusted to us. Ultimately, it all belongs to Allah, and giving to others is a way of growing in our response to the Divine.

- **Buddhism:** One of the great aims of Buddhist thought is the development of *karuna*, a compassion for all living things. It compels us to alleviate suffering whenever possible, whether that pain is mental, physical, or emotional. As the Dalai Lama says of *karuna*, “It’s not passive—it’s not empathy alone—but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering.”
- **Twelve Step Recovery:** Those in recovery from addictions call The Twelve Steps a pattern for living. As we work progressively through these steps, we surrender control, clean our own lives of shame and guilt, then make amends to all those we have harmed in the past. The culminating step calls for action, sharing the strength and wisdom of this process with anyone who is dying of addiction—not as zealous evangelists, but as our service to humanity.
- **Sikhism:** Sikhs hold to the divine unity and equality of humankind as a core belief. We are meant to be one with each other. Valarie Kaur, founder of *The Revolutionary Love Project*, has a Sikh background. She reminds us that, “The call to love beyond our own flesh and blood is ancient. It echoes down to us on the lips of indigenous leaders, spiritual teachers, and social reformers throughout the centuries.”

- **Christianity:** In Christian scripture, there is a famous admonition found in the Letter of James, brother of Jesus. It is a blunt counterweight to Paul's ethereal writings about grace and love. James insisted on practical application, summed up in his famous statement that "faith without works is dead." If what we believe does not compel us to compassionately address the suffering of those around us, it smacks of empty piety. James is very pointed, as we see in this passage:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." – James 2:14-17

Jesus emphasized this need for compassionate action in numerous parables such as *The Good Samaritan*, *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, and *The Sheep and the Goats*.

- **Hinduism.** The Hindi word *daan*, translated as charity, emphasizes the spiritual practice of giving to others. Hindus believe that *daan* begins with one's family, then extends out to friends and society at

large. It can take many forms, from personal gifts to collaborating on projects such as care homes, community wells, or public parks. The *Bhavishna Purana*, an ancient Sanskrit scripture, says that there are three important forms of *daan*: offering one's personal wealth, giving something that helps another maintain their livelihood, and the imparting of wisdom.

Any compassionate action begins right here and now, precisely in our moment of history. At the time I am writing, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is calling for new consciousness across America, a country still tragically gripped by systemic racism, an ingrained injustice that perniciously continues. BLM has challenged me to again rethink my presence as a human being in my given place and time. What aspects of white privilege have I taken for granted? How can I educate myself to understand the fullness of systemic racism and injustice in American history, no matter how learned I think I am? How can I join the struggle for greater consciousness, unity, and love?

Aren't these questions all of us should ask ourselves repeatedly? How are the circumstances of our time crying out to us? How are they calling us to put whatever faith we have discovered into service for the common good of humanity?

In my decades of ministry, I have labored alongside many individuals whose faith stirred them to address the injustices of this world. They understood the need for a personal sense of faith that imparted hope, inner peace, and

courage. But they were not content to stop there. They used the lens of their faith to clearly focus how they could act to alleviate suffering through compassion and love.

The best of them had to learn the following lesson.

### **Converting Angst into Creative Action**

There is a standard misrepresentation of Buddhism that runs something like this. All desires are bad. They cause attachment, and attachment causes suffering. Actually, the Buddha never advocated life without desire. What he warned against is *tanhà*, meaning thirst, a burning need to quench a certain drive or need within us. This can take many forms: greed, lust, a craving for recognition. Clinging to these kinds of desires undermines our psychological and mental health. In its extreme forms, we call this addiction, and too many of us have seen its tragic consequences.

In contrast to *tanhà* is the presence of aspirations. These are Source-given desires and intentions that stem from the truest parts of our being. They lead us to actualize our unique purpose and identity. Sometimes, aspirations are related to creative endeavors; at other times, to our urge to find serenity and balance. According to the Buddha, aspirations for our own enlightenment or compassionate engagement with the world are admirable expressions of desire.

Let's look at this in light of our current situation. If inner peace is a desirable aspiration, what happens when our perception of injustice stirs anger, even rage, within us? We find part of the answer as we consider the difference between *righteous concern* and *self-righteous anger*.

Righteousness is something we must handle with extreme delicacy. We can all point to examples when people used this term to justify intolerance towards the realities of others. This does not lead, however, to the conclusion that all truth is relative, that there is ultimately no foundational premise upon which to stand. The suffering of others is undeniable. It calls us to respond in a way that has moral gravity and certitude. Righteous concern is a perfectly normal response to the very real injustices around us: racism, economic inequality, the power grabs of politicians, unchecked pollution that continues to escalate global warming. Though it can all seem overwhelming, a response of concern, even anger, is natural for those who have not isolated themselves from humanity. In short, it is right for us to join the struggle in eradicating these evils. This is a heartfelt expression of our compassion and love.

*How* we join is the question! If we come from a place of self-righteous anger, we have lost our center of love and compassion. This kind of anger is a clear indicator of underlying anxiety or fear—destructive emotions that urge us to take our viewpoints and bludgeon others out of personal angst. We begin to objectify our opponents and treat them as two-dimensional types. Ironically, we begin to use the same tactics as those whose unjust behaviors we abhor; we sink to their level, perpetuating the same cycle of action/reaction that has enthralled our planet since the dawn of consciousness.

Even though many followers of Jesus ignore his non-violent teachings as impractical, it doesn't diminish the

power of his words. Consider these from the fifth chapter of Matthew:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Mahatma Gandhi is known as the greatest practitioner of nonviolence in history. He took the Hindu concept of ahimsa (respect for all living things; avoidance of violence) and applied it to India’s struggle against British colonial rule. However, it is important to realize that Gandhi was never a passive, weak-kneed guru. Nor was he a man who had permanently purged himself of anger. It was what he did with this emotion—these moments of necessary righteousness—that made the difference.

In his book, *The Gift of Anger*, Arun Gandhi, one of Gandhi’s grandchildren, remembers conversations with his grandfather. He says that the great man, called Bapu by the

Indian people, regarded anger as a positive force. He quotes his grandfather as saying, “It is an energy that compels us to define what is right and wrong...I have learned to use my anger for good. Anger to people is like gas to the automobile—it fuels you to move forward and get to a better place. Without it, we would not be motivated to rise to a challenge. It is an energy that compels us to define what is just and unjust.”

Another way to think about this is the difference between *revenge* and *justice*. America has always been a culture that adulates frontier ass-kicking—gun-slinging lawmen who mete out righteous retaliation. We have a perverse fascination with vigilantes who get lethal satisfaction outside the boundaries of law. Think of how many “revenge movies” begin with the protagonist experiencing the tragic murder of a spouse, child, or even a dog! The film then runs on the steam of expected reprisal for its duration. Viewers and the protagonist will not be satisfied until the moment of retribution, which usually means the shedding of blood.

Revenge is personal, a deep-seated, almost primordial need to carry out a vendetta for gratification. Justice, on the other hand, is impersonal and impartial. It flows from an ethical center that desires protection of both individuals and society.

How can we know the difference? One way is to examine our inner emotional state of being. Revenge elicits hotheaded emotions, fantasies of getting even, including harming the other person so that they “know how it feels.”

Justice is rational. It is about righting a wrong that most members of society consider morally culpable. It is our angst converted into creative action.

Let's return to our primary point in this chapter. *Any faith that matters will matter not just for us but the world around us!* If it is true that our personal happiness and contentment radiate out to those around us, the same goes for our passion to promote justice. The art is in realizing when our passion has turned us into the very crusaders we are crusading against. Intolerance and self-righteousness can infect *all* of us. It behooves us to keep watch over our hearts and minds.

America is a land where *e pluribus unum* remains a hollow phrase. We are a divided nation, one that uses the colors red and blue to label our separation. Having said that, I clearly align myself with the worldview characterized as blue. Think of that color as “blue religion” and listen to these people share how their faith compels them to address the circumstances of our time and place in history.

### **Las Historias de la Gente**

*(Note: the following three contributions are more closely linked than in previous chapters. Each of these women is a Presbyterian cleric, a background that surely shades their viewpoint. I find their voices to be powerful and engaging. I hope you do also!)*

I met the Rev. Dr. **Helen Boursier** while serving on a committee she chaired within our denomination. Since then, I have admired her deep devotion to a group of people she would never have met without a faith that compels her to

action. She has let these people “tattoo her soul.” Frankly, her witness continues to convince me of the need to act in my own life. See what you think.

Since 2014, I’ve been a volunteer chaplain with refugee families seeking asylum. Together, we have talked, laughed, sung songs, shared time in worship, made artwork, wept, and prayed. Most of these asylum seekers have been young women with small children who are fleeing violence and death threats in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Serving as a volunteer chaplain is my Christ-centered response to Jesus’s proclamation: “Whatever you have done for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done for me.” (Mt 25:40)

The preparation for my spiritual journey of love and hospitality started long before I first visited the detained families. It began over a decade earlier with my sense of disconnect from the Christian church and its increasing disregard for the ethical teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount and many of his parables. Disheartened, I saw that the church is too often a social club of like-minded members who look, believe, and act like people of the world, rather than disciples called by Jesus to challenge and change injustice. However,

despite my disillusionment, I still wanted to continue as a Christ-follower.

Ironically, in the middle of my disappointment with the formal Christian church, I sensed God calling me to vocational ordained ministry. After completing the education and ordination requirements, I became the organizing and senior pastor of a new church start in the Presbyterian Church (USA). The job came with no funding, no building, no land, no people: go build a church from scratch! It felt like God was calling me to “put up, or shut up,” challenging me to put into practical action Jesus’s teachings so that “right belief” intersected with “right action.” Community Fellowship Presbyterian Church in New Braunfels, Texas began with core values to be uplifting, friendly, welcoming, spiritual, fun, Christ-centered, and culturally relevant. The church’s DNA was to welcome every possible type of diversity with radical hospitality and unconditional love. The congregation responded to the community with a spirituality of love and hospitality by being fully present in whatever capacities and contexts.

Then, in 2014, I received an invitation to chair the Mission Outreach and Justice Committee for 150 Presbyterian churches located in central and south Texas. I had been so busy planting a church that I hadn't realized what this committee oversaw. I did some homework and research to familiarize myself with its areas of concern. This included an immigration task force formed in response to the large influx of unaccompanied minors and young families seeking asylum at the southern border of the U.S.

I began volunteering with many of these families as *Pastora Helena*. As Dr. Boursier, I had been writing about the racist policies and practices centered on immigration, but this was firsthand experience. As thousands of detained mothers shared their personal stories of trauma, courage, and love, it suffused my academic perspective with deep love and compassion. As one ministry colleague said, "Your experience with these families has tattooed your soul." These families became my lifelong forever friends.

Their witness to my spirit intersected with the words of Dorothee Soelle, a prominent German theologian who began

teaching after the Nazi regime ended. In her memoir, Soelle said she was appalled by the complicity, through silence, of the German people and their repeated excuse, “We didn’t know...” She made it her life’s mission to ensure that people around her would never again give that same lame excuse regarding injustice in our world. Her words and work inspired me to unmask the racist policies and practices meted out against immigrants seeking asylum.

To this day—through teaching, public speaking, and advocacy—I bear witness with these families. I hope and pray that my writing provides historical documentation for future generations. Each book I research and write becomes a learning experience that reinforces my spiritual journey of solidarity with these wonderful mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters who are desperately seeking asylum in the United States of America.

**Le Anne Clausen de Montes** is a Presbyterian pastor living in North Iowa. In the following words, she characterizes herself as unsuccessful. That begs the question: what is success? Laboring behind the scenes as a volunteer, she is creator of the Iowa Faith Leadership Network, the Farm Crisis Ministry Network, Spectrum Spirituality

Project, Family Welcome Centers International, and We Parent Together. She has studied, volunteered, or worked with organizations such as L'Arche, Christian Peacemaker Teams, Middle East Council of Churches, the International Solidarity Movement, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Voices for Creative Nonviolence, and Women Against Violence (the first Arabic-speaking women's crisis center in the Middle East). This is a woman who has answered the cry of circumstance!

At this stage of my life, I may not be anyone's definition of success. I'm in my 40s and I've never owned a home. My car is ancient and slowly dying, with 270,000 miles and a lot of rust. In 2015, I became a struggling solo parent of a low-income family. The first few years, we were an *extremely* low-income family, living in public housing, and although I was working all the time, we needed a lot of assistance to make ends meet. What I remember most from that time is the exhaustion and the mice.

I took a break from parish ministry when my youngest was about to be born, my second child was showing signs of autism, and members of the congregation I served were not really supportive. My spouse was going through his own behavioral health struggles, and we ended up separating, then divorcing. I'd hoped to return to parish

ministry when my youngest was ready to start school. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 changed plans again.

People these days might mistake me for “white trash” when they see me out and about. I do look the part sometimes, with worn clothes and a worn face. They may not realize until they get to know me the adventures I’ve had in the past, or the social justice work I do today, about which I am so passionate.

Between college and seminary, I was a human rights worker in the Middle East and on the U.S./ Mexico border; I was among the first investigators to discover what later became known as the Abu Ghraib scandal. Later, in seminary, I spent a month in maximum security as a federal prisoner of conscience for my nonviolent protest of torture at the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia—a facility that teaches torture tactics to militaries from other countries. While imprisoned, I translated and transcribed letters from women facing deportation who were writing to their lawyers, friends, and families.

Although away from the parish, I found other ways of doing ministry. I

“shared life” with adults with intellectual disabilities in a L’Arche community. I worked in a school for children with severe behavioral health disorders. I started a storefront hospitality ministry for families with young children. The friendships were wonderful, but the heating bills ate us alive that winter, and the roof leaked. I redesigned the ministry so that we could operate without building woes.

Throughout college and seminary, three pastorates, and even in poverty as a solo parent, I keep finding ways to work for peace and justice. I work for racial equality, for the homeless and hungry, and for the well-being of families with young children, especially those whose children have special needs. I find that this work often dissolves my despair over the brokenness of the world. It has also led me to many wonderful people and places.

I recall a few poignant moments in my youth that propelled me to work for justice.

I remember the 1991 war on Iraq, when I was in sixth grade. The teacher rolled in the TV cart so that we could watch the airstrikes. The class cheered for every explosion as bombs hit the city. I felt sick to my stomach.

I remember the racism on my college campus, toward Black students in particular, as well as students from other countries and religions. Fundamentalism drove the LGBTQ+ students off the campus after my first year there. I felt both rage and fear at the harm being done. Fortunately, I had friends who knew how to organize and were willing to teach.

What keeps me going is the “knowing.” Knowing that Jesus calls us to this work of feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the foreigner, tending to the sick, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Knowing the suffering of so many people from the experiences and friendships I’ve had. These days, I simply seek to use the community organizing and advocacy skills I’ve learned so that I can work with others to build a better world.

*Every breath is a prayer:  
for wisdom and courage;  
sometimes for rest;  
and always for hope.*

**Aisha Brooks-Lytle** is the Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta. She is multi-gifted as a preacher, teacher, and musician, bringing all these skills to bear as she helps oversee 84 congregations and 26 new worshipping communities. She believes her role is to equip

healthy and innovative leaders as they live out their passion and purpose. Her inner calling stems directly from her personal life experience which she shares candidly and powerfully in the following words.

*“Aisha, you have two strikes against you. You are Black and you are female.”*

These words casually fell out of my mother’s mouth like two stones hitting the ground as she was combing and styling my hair. I cannot recall the content of our conversation before these words, and I don’t remember the conversation afterwards. I do remember how I felt as an elementary school student hearing them for the first time. *“Well, damn!”* I thought. My reaction was quiet, internalized, heavy. My mother was stating what was obvious to her and what was a harsh reality for me. No matter how talented I felt, no matter how bright and beautiful I may have appeared, my life would be fraught with difficulty and an uphill battle as a young Black girl growing up in a country with a terrifying history of racial violence and discrimination towards Black and Brown bodies.

Growing up in a Black working-class neighborhood with a single mom offered sociological observations that made a profound impact on me. I could see the

disparity on our block. I remember the crack epidemic and watching addiction snatch adults away from their children. I also remember asking larger questions about supply and demand and who profited off the pain of low-income and working-class communities. I lived in a city divided by the haves and have-nots. I knew there was a system at play that benefitted from an underpaid work force, division among the masses, and an unrealistic obsession with excessive wealth. I often thought, “There has to be a better way than this.” I wanted to be the kind of person who was part of the solution, not part of the problem.

While my mother instilled in me the truths about being Black in America, she also instilled in me a faith that is resilient and continues to dismantle the myths of superiority and inferiority. After taking a break from the church, my mother reconnected to her faith in the early '80s with the rise of conservative white evangelical Christianity. In other words, I did not grow up hearing any sermons about justice, freedom, and the need to march in the streets when we saw harm done in our community. I grew up learning that Jesus was the only way, the truth, and the life. I

grew up learning that I needed to live holy, confess my sins, obey God, love others, and be kind. There was not much talk about the gospel of liberation.

Ironically, I found a message of concern for the marginalized in the world of Contemporary Christian music. In the early '80s there was an artist named Keith Green. He was of Jewish heritage and had converted to Messianic Christianity. He and his wife, Melody, sang with fire and passion about the Lord. By the time I really listened to his music, he had already died in a plane crash in 1982 at the age of 28. His music ministry only spanned six years. For many, his work still speaks to this day.

Green's song *The Sheep and the Goats*, a musical interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46, captivated me. It's a stirring rendition of this parable wherein Jesus reveals that we can find him in the poor, the hungry, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. One group could see Christ reflected in the marginalized; one group could not. I must have listened to this for hours upon end. I listened to it for years! How could people who followed Jesus miss his presence in the most vulnerable of the world? I knew as a kid with "two strikes" that I needed Jesus

and the followers of Jesus to advocate for kids like me.

I also knew that there were people in my own city who had it worse than me. This was a cry for *all* of us, no matter where we found ourselves, to see Christ in those too often overlooked and invisible in our world. It was a call to love them, care for them, advocate for them, and to see them with eyes of compassion. I now know what I only suspected back in the day. I, too, am counted in the number of the marginalized, the overlooked, and the forgotten. I am also a marginalized voice who has come to recognize my position and power in the world. I am situated in this world to be an advocate for justice, to see Christ in the most vulnerable, and to serve Christ among the lonely, hurting, hungry, and lost.

This is my call, two strikes and all.

## CONCLUSION: 21 GRAMS AND THE WEIGHT OF GLORY

*Virtually all the great spiritual traditions of the world share the conviction that humanity is the victim of a tragic case of mistaken identity. There is a “self” and a Self, and our fatal mistake lies in confusing the two. - Cynthia Bourgeault*

In 1901, a physician named Duncan MacDougall conducted a decidedly quirky experiment. His aim was to discover whether or not the human soul had actual weight. He found six terminal patients in a nursing home near Haverhill, Massachusetts. As they neared their final moments, he placed them and their entire beds on an industrial-sized scale that was sensitive within two tenths of an ounce. When one of his subjects died, he found a decrease in weight that equaled 21 grams, or 7.5 ounces.

In 1907, MacDougall published his findings in the *Journal of the American Society of Psychological Research*. Mainstream scientists immediately rebuked him. Too small a sampling, they said. Too many other factors going on in the human body at the moment of death that could account for both weight loss *and* weight gain. Nevertheless, the notion of 21 Grams lives on in popular culture, most notably as the title of a 2003 crime film starring Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, and Benicio del Toro.

Why mention this flashback into weird science? To make us think about the weight and substance of our chosen faith! We may not be able to measure it on a standard scale, but faith has demonstrable effects in just about every area of

our lives. It is the spark that animates us, the hope that leads us onward, the calm center in our maelstroms.

The other phrase here, *The Weight of Glory*, is the title of a famous sermon by the late C.S. Lewis, a man who converted from agnosticism to his own chosen brand of Christianity. Many have quoted these words, and I do so again because they are fitting as part of the conclusion to this book.

“If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Let me translate this into language that aligns with this book.

“If you have given up on the notion of faith because you have seen its excess, or it strikes you as absurd, or it has never made a real difference in your daily life, try again! The joy and purpose that comes from a deeper connection to our Higher/Truer selves is one of the greatest rewards of life. But it requires a new willingness. It requires the courage to take a road beyond the conventions and dogmas our cultures try to spoon-feed us. Commit yourself to spiritual adventure! Don’t let the cynicism of this world and its rampant materialism throw you off course. Don’t let cookie-cutter, sentimentalized notions of religion anesthetize your deepest longings. There is a reality available to all of us that infuses life with a power—in *this moment*—that is incomparable!”

I have steered away from quoting mystics in this book, aware that their descriptions may sound too ecstatic or other-worldly for many of us. But, just for a moment, consider these words from a few who broke through to an awareness of Source that is rare on this planet. Suspend your disbelief and savor their words.

- *Synchronicities, epiphanies, peak, and mystical experiences are all cases in which creativity breaks through the barriers of the self and allows awareness to flood through the whole*

*domain of consciousness. It is the human mind operating, for a moment, in its true order and moving through orders of increasing subtlety, reaching past the source of mind and matter into creativity itself.* - F. David Peat

- *If you are ready for mystical experiences, you have them.* - Elisabeth Kubler-Ross
- *I firmly believe that all human beings have access to extraordinary energies and powers. Judging from accounts of mystical experience, heightened creativity, or exceptional performance by athletes and artists, we harbor a greater life than we know.* - Jean Houston
- *Every one of us is a mystic. We may or may not realize it, we may not even like it. But whether we know it or not, whether we accept it or not, mystical experience is always there, inviting us on a journey of ultimate discovery. We have been given the gift of life in this perplexing world to become who we ultimately are: creatures of boundless love, caring compassion, and wisdom. Existence is a summons to the eternal journey of the sage - the sage we all are, if only we could see.* - Wayne Teasdale

### **Las Historias de la Gente**

I met **Shine Tretter** and her sister, Emily, at Lokahi, the communal living compound I mentioned earlier. Both of them grew up in a loving family that taught traditional Christian values and practices. When those values no longer spoke personal truth to them, they had the courage to follow their own stars. In many ways, the following words from

Shine encapsulate the call to freedom at the heart of this book.

My life today is a unique fairy tale, quite different than I imagined when I was a child. Sitting here on my back deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean at sunset, coconut trees waving in the breeze and the sound of children giggling and playing, is a dream come true. A dream I didn't even know I had.

I grew up with loving parents in a wonderful home, but I felt a lot of anxiety as a kid. Anxiety about school, church, and the soccer games in which I competed. We lived in a sweet little neighborhood, and I spent a lot of time outdoors. I felt a strong connection with the wooded area behind our house, so I spent hours by a babbling brook that had a mysterious, magical appeal. It sparkled with a sense of freedom that matched the freedom within me. A sense of freedom that over time grew dull and dim, eventually stuffed so far away that I had forgotten it existed.

So, at 25 years old, I walked away from my life as I knew it. I left my job as a social worker living in the city. I sold most of my belongings and drove out West. Something

was calling me, something I could no longer ignore. It was the call of freedom.

From where I sit now, 30 years away from that enchanted little girl in the woods, I believe our society has evolved (or devolved) to diminish freedom. Imagine if we all followed the deepest calling of our souls. Would we allow ourselves to be cooped up in an office all day? Or sit in rush hour traffic? Or spend only two days a week with our families and the rest working? I have come to realize that the conventional trajectory of so many folks might have an allure of freedom, but in reality, it's a life chained to materialism and starved for fulfillment. Fancy cars, designer clothes, and that condo on the beach sparkle with illusory joy, but do they bring us any closer to love, truth, or our deepest selves?

Finding the courage to step outside of the norm was the biggest obstacle between me and my dreams. This was something I had never done before. Even though I always wanted to shine my true colors, I was afraid of what others might think. I played it small and quiet to avoid judgment, but I had a mediocre life, feeling safe but empty. I believe the first breakthrough happened for me when I ended an uneventful

relationship. This was something I held on to for so long, thinking it would change, but it finally fell loose, leaving me light and free.

This had a domino effect; I suddenly had ample time to focus on myself. I dove heart first into books, practices, and events that fed my soul. Then, when I moved to the West Coast, I began to find my soul family. I traveled around to music festivals and gatherings that had a common theme of spiritual growth and self-development. Eventually, I made an impromptu trip to Maui, where I landed in a small, intentional community focused on spiritual development using sacred plant medicines.

During the five years I lived there, I went deep into physical cleansing and emotional healing. I woke before the sun to practice kundalini yoga. I fasted on coconuts and cleansed my liver. I sat in ceremonies with ancient-plant teachers to illuminate the truth within my soul and clear my spiritual lens. Something inside me merged with the natural elements around me. I became highly sensitive and intuitive. Perhaps I had always carried these gifts, but they had gone undeveloped. I was able to manifest anything I desired into my reality: financial wealth, a beautiful home by the sea, vibrant

health, and eventually my partner with whom I now have three beautiful children.

I believe we *all* have the capacity to make our wildest dreams come true. It takes courage to step beyond our edges and trust that life will meet us there. It requires shucking off the baggage we carry and freeing ourselves from inhibition.

The freedom we chased as children is our birthright. We simply need to claim it!

After so many wonderful spiritual adventurers sharing their journeys, I want to close with some words about where I find myself on my sojourn. I shared these words through a blog post in April of 2020, and they still resonate for me.

I respect faith expressions no matter how foreign they seem to me. But lately, I've been gripped by a simple, profound intuition. T.S. Eliot summed it up perfectly in words that many of us treasure, found in *Little Gidding*, the final of his *Four Quartets*.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

For me, this knowing, this waking up, is more than just living in the moment. It is an awareness that Presence, Tao, Spirit,

God—*whatever term you use*—surrounds us with love, encouragement, and serenity. It is like inhaling sustenance and light, letting our Source heal us in the deepest recesses of our spirit.

As soon as we start dissecting this experience, giving it names and developing disciplines to grasp it more fully, it can easily slip away. Seeking the “spiritual” often buffers us from Spirit. In the Tao Te Ching, we find these words:

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao;  
The name that can be named is not the eternal  
name.*

*The nameless is the beginning of heaven and  
earth.*

*Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.*

How hard this is for human brains that want to categorize and control!

Could the end of our explorations really be here, right now? Is it ultimately so simple, so obvious? I believe it is. And this awareness can infuse every task with new meaning.

Eliot’s words are probably true. We will not cease from exploration. We will continue to invent elaborate rituals designed

to find the One. But what if, sooner than later, we discovered we are already home?

### **My Closing Prayer for All of Us**

Prayer is a unique human enterprise, often fraught with magical thinking and strange notions of deity. Long ago, I gave up the idea of prayer as an attempt to bend the will of the Almighty. So many congregations I served had a common belief. If they could just muster enough prayer warriors, god would grant their petitions. They not only tried to mobilize more prayers among their friends and relatives, they reached out to activate prayer chains across the planet.

Think about what this concept of prayer says about deity. Imagine a young boy stricken with cancer, suffering immeasurably. The grief of his parents is inconsolable, and they reach out desperately to their social circles with an appeal for petitions. Their plea, augmented by email and social media, spreads out across the globe until tens of thousands are pleading with their god to spare the life of this child.

A couple months later, he dies. What does this mean? It was god's will that the boy suffer? God had a better place for the lad in "heaven?" Were the prayers of so many people still not numerous enough? Did they lack enough sincerity of faith to move god's fickle heart?

I remember a time in my grandmother's life. One of her six boys, my uncle Jerry, suffered from schizophrenia. Even with medication, he could not hold a job; he lived with

my grandparents for most of his life. After my grandfather died, Grandma was his primary caregiver. She belonged to various Christian churches that espoused a theology called “word of faith.” This teaching held that if your faith was strong enough and you spoke words of conviction, god would grant *all* your prayers. Ask for healing or prosperity and it will be yours!

One ministry that promoted this heresy was that of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker before their corrupt empire collapsed. Grandma lived on the meager fixed-income of her social security, yet she continued to give the Bakkers amounts of money she could ill afford. When I asked her why, she told me that the Bakkers promised to mobilize enough prayers to bring about Jerry’s healing. Gently, but to no avail, I tried to steer her away from that travesty, telling her to find a church that did not see Jerry as sick but as a beloved child of god. A community of faith that would support him and her by walking alongside them through the trials of their lives. She scoffed and kept giving.

You might ask if I have completely abandoned the notion that we can appeal to our Higher Power for help? No, I have not. I just have a different notion of what that means. Like all of us, there are times when I feel alone, overwhelmed, consumed by the need to reach out for assistance I can’t seem to find, even from my loved ones. At those moments, I prayerfully return to my experience of an upholding Presence that surrounds all of us. I tune in to the present moment. The particulars of my worries and concerns, even my petitions for others, dissolve in a serenity

and courage to face whatever life brings. This is my form of prayer, my style of attention.

So often during my decades of ministry, people asked me “why?” when confronted with hardships and tragedies. Their own suffering or the suffering of loved ones seemed to make no sense in light of their belief that a benevolent, loving god was orchestrating life. It’s classic theodicy, summed up in our question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

I have gently and persistently offered a different path. What if the ultimate questions are not “why?” but “how?” How do we move forward during the most difficult periods of our lives? Surely, this means holding the hands of our family and community, letting them walk beside us through our grief. But it also means reconnecting with this power that surrounds us, the Source of existence that is beyond our notions of life and death.

Prayer changes us even if our outer circumstances remain the same. It transforms our perspective. During her own dark night of the soul, Mother Teresa said, “I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things.”

Having said all this, I have a prayer for each of us as we reach the final words of this book. It is my loving summation of what we have been discussing, a distillation of the underlying pattern of growth and engagement seen in the stories of all the people who graced these pages with their stories.

I pray that you will have the courage to challenge all the truths passed on to you, using your mind and experience to test their veracity. I pray that when this process brings you to a fork in the road, you will choose an adventure of faith rather than cynicism. I pray that on your road less traveled, you will discover a faith that gives you power to forgive and love more fully. An inner strength that restores your hope, enabling you to let go of whatever is holding you back. An embracing of life that leads to you to actualize your own destiny, no matter how different it may be from the blueprint given to you during your upbringing.

I pray you will find sacred places that stir your soul, practices and rituals that keep your flame burning. I pray you will steep yourself in the spiritual wisdom of others, but never receive it without testing it through your own conscience and personal experience.

Most of all, I pray that your faith will not only influence your own life but the lives of those around you as you seek to be part of the solution, not the problem, in our often-troubled world.

Namaste! God bless you! As-salamu alaykum!  
Mitakuye oyasin! May the Force be with you! Keep on  
truckin'!

LOL!