

## GRATITUDES

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My heartfelt thanks go to several people who helped bring this thirty-year-old book back to life. First and foremost, to Sheryl Fullerton, my editor at Jossey-Bass, who always sees more in my writing than I do and who surprised me one day by proposing this project. I'm ever grateful for her confidence, imagination, skill, and sense of humor.

Thanks, too, to Marcy Jackson, who read and commented astutely on the 2008 Introduction, and Sharon Palmer, who cast a keen editorial eye on the entire manuscript with her usual insight, care, and skill. Both of them helped me say what I wanted to say in the best way I know how.

Special thanks to my friends at the Servant Leadership School in Washington, D.C. The school was started in 1986 in the Adams Morgan neighborhood as an expression of the Church of the Saviour. The church, founded in 1947, was guided for decades by some of my heroes in the faith—Gordon Cosby, Mary Cosby, and Elizabeth O'Connor.

Shortly after Ave Maria Press let *The Promise of Paradox* go out of print, the Servant Leadership School offered to republish it. In gratitude and with deep respect for its work,

I assigned the copyright and all royalties from the book to the school. When Jossey-Bass suggested yet another republication, the folks at the school graciously returned the copyright to me.

If you want to know what kind of church the Church of the Saviour is or what kind of ministry the Servant Leadership School has, imagine Christianity at its very best, serving the least among us with profound humility and effectiveness, deeply rooted in its own faith tradition but radically open to the truth that is in others.

I am pleased that all royalties from this third incarnation of *The Promise of Paradox* will go to support the good work of the Servant Leadership School in the spirit of the Church of the Saviour. For more information or to make a gift to this important ministry, you may go to [www.slschool.org](http://www.slschool.org), send e-mail to [school@slschool.org](mailto:school@slschool.org), or call (202) 328-7312.

P.J.P.

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE 1980 EDITION



Henri J. M. Nouwen

It is a real joy for me to introduce this first book by Parker Palmer. It is the joy that grows from friendship. I met Parker for the first time only five years ago and today I can hardly think of my life and work apart from the crucial role that Parker has played in them. The many hours we have spent eating together, playing together, dreaming together, talking together, studying together, reading together, writing together, and most of all praying together, have laid the basis for a supportive, nurturing and creative friendship.

This friendship has allowed me to see the pages of this book being born from Parker's own direct struggles with life and its many options and possibilities. Parker has shown me how true it is that you don't think your way into a new kind of living but live your way into a new kind of thinking. Every part of this book is a reflection of a new kind of living in which Parker and his family have engaged.

Parker's life story contains all the elements which contribute to making a well-known scholar: he studied theology, received a Ph.D. in sociology, taught at universities, did successful work as a community organizer, and wrote many remarkable articles. But this book is not the direct fruit of all of these accomplishments. On the contrary, it is the fruit of the many questions with which Parker bracketed these accomplishments. It is born out of the courageous and often agonizing critique of his own social, educational, and religious development.

This book is indeed the beautiful fruit of contradictions which became paradoxes: the contradiction between an educational success story and the growing need for simple community life; the contradiction between acceptance in respectable circles and the feeling of alienation and separation; the contradiction between speaking and lecturing about community and the loneliness of a highly individualized suburban existence; the contradiction between speaking more and more about religion and knowing God less and less. Parker lived these contradictions and tested them with his wife and children in spite of the cautionary voices surrounding him. Living these contradictions brought him to insights, ideas, and perspectives which could have been found in no other way.

This book is important not because it is written by a good scholar, but because it is written by a scholar who dared to wonder if his scholarship really led him to the truth. It is important not because it is written by a man who knows more than most people about the dynamics of community life, but

because it is written by a man who gave up a large salary and moved away from a successful career to find community. It is important not because it is written by a man who has been a consultant to many on educational matters, but because it is written by a man who kept wondering if his own education didn't do him more harm than good and who gave much of his energy to a form of education not dominated by grades and degrees. It is important not because it is written by a man who knows the Bible well, but because it is written by a man who dared to let the Bible make radical claims on his own life and the lives of those he loves.

The way this book came about is the best testimony to its value. It came out of living the contradictions even when it was hard and painful to do so. This explains why the book does not offer one sustained argument; it contains six experiments in thinking which are all very radical in intent. I cannot read these pieces without wondering about my own life and without having to deal with my desire as well as resistance to move in the direction Parker points out.

The issues that Parker discusses are basic: solitude, community, social action, political responsibility, prayer, and contemplation. They are raised in the context of the words of William Johnston: "Faith is the breakthrough into that deep realm of the soul which accepts paradox . . . with humility." Accepting paradox with humility is the spirit that binds the quite diverse pieces of this book together. And it is the spirit that makes this book worth reading.

Parker Palmer has taught me much over the years. He has given me some very helpful concepts to work with; he has shown me how to think clearly and concisely; he has introduced me to many inspiring people and books. But most of all, he has challenged me by his own decisions to keep moving to unknown fields without apprehension or fear. He has taught me to live boldly and freely. That our many hours together can now be shared with others through this book is a source of great joy to me.

I hope and pray that those who read these essays will sense the spirit in which they were written and thus be challenged as I have been to break out of illusions and compulsions and seek a new freedom.

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE 2008 EDITION



Parker J. Palmer

When my friends at Jossey-Bass said they wanted to reissue *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, I was delighted. Few things could make a writer happier than knowing that his first book, a book with real age on it, still has legs. At the same time, I knew that revisiting *Promise* thirty years after publishing it would be both a blessing and a curse.

The curse seemed clear to me. Preparing this new edition would require me to compare what I believed at age forty to what I believe today. And that, I thought, might be awkward. The first edition of *Promise* has an author photo of such studied intensity that it embarrasses me, though I do admire—OK, envy—that young man’s big hair. What if some of my 1980 convictions proved as embarrassing as that photo? What if I felt unable to explain them to myself, let alone to my readers? In particular, how would I deal with the way my

relationship to Christianity has changed from my first book to my most recent?

*The Promise of Paradox* has a lot of Christian language in it, from its subtitle to chapters on the way of the cross and the politically incorrect apostle Paul. But the books I've written in the last decade or so—*A Hidden Wholeness*, *Let Your Life Speak*, and *The Courage to Teach*—rarely use the word God and never speak of Jesus, and not by accident.

I've worked hard for a long time to find a language about the inner life that builds bridges, not walls, and today I am grateful to have both Christian and non-Christian readers. I am especially grateful for readers like Richard Hughes who bridge that gap with open-mindedness and insight. Hughes, a longtime professor of history at Pepperdine University, now at Messiah College, wrote about my book, *The Courage to Teach*:

Parker Palmer has written a book that appears to be—and, in fact, in many ways is—a secular text for a secular audience on a secular topic: the improvement of classroom teaching. At the same time, this text draws so profoundly on the riches of the Quaker tradition that I am forced to regard it as one of the finest examples of Christian scholarship that I have encountered. I regard the book in this way not because it promotes itself as a Christian text, since most certainly it does not, but rather because its secular content draws strength and power from a Christian vision of reality.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Hughes understands my method and my madness. But as I contemplated reissuing *Promise*, it seemed unlikely to me that I would fare so well with all of my readers as I traced my changed relationship to Christianity over the past thirty years. My non-Christian readers might not like where I came from, my Christian readers might not like where I've been going, and this could create what is known in the book biz as a "marketing problem."

I'll return to that little problem later, after I explore some of the blessings this project has brought me. I've learned that I deal better with curses when I remind myself that blessings abound, just as I deal better with my shadows when I remember that forgiveness is real.

Working on these pages has given me a chance to reconnect in memory and meaning with people, places, and events that were formative in my life. It has allowed me to give thanks once again for those miraculously graced friendships and experiences without which my life would have been unspeakably poorer. And as often happens when I am willing to take the risk, I have found blessing laced through what I anticipated might be pure curse.

Revisiting what I believed as a forty-year-old—and retracing the spiritual journey that took me from then to now—has helped me, as I approach age seventy, to get ready to take next steps. Check with me thirty years from now, and I'll let you know what those next steps turned out to be.

## Blessings Abound

Whatever its flaws in substance and style—and I found a few!—*The Promise of Paradox* will always be dear to me, in the way I hold dear all the generous people who opened doors for me along the way. It's not that *Promise* launched me as a writer. By age forty, I had been writing short pieces for nearly twenty years and had even published a few. But *Promise* proved that I could write a book despite my conviction that I could not—and did so even as I clung to that belief. And therein lies a tale.

In the spring of 1978, I was dean of studies at Pendle Hill, the Quaker adult study center near Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> I was teaching a course on Thomas Merton and had rented a film of Merton's last talk for our final session. A week before the end of term, I called the Abbey of Gethsemane to ask when the film would arrive, only to learn that the movie monk had double-booked it and sent it to the other place. (That's when I realized that Merton was not blowing smoke when he complained that even monasteries have bureaucratic screw-ups!)

Wanting to bring the class to a fitting conclusion, I spent the next few days writing a lecture on Merton's spirituality of paradox, a theme that runs through his work. I hardly ever write out lectures word for word, preferring the freedom of speaking from an outline, but this time I broke my own rule. One of my students asked for a copy of the talk, saying that

her uncle, a Catholic priest, had a great interest in Merton. A month or so later, an editor at Ave Maria Press, a small Catholic publishing house in Notre Dame, Indiana, called. My student's uncle had sent him my talk, and he wondered if I'd let Ave Maria publish it in its monthly newsletter. Of course, I gladly said yes.

After a few months, the editor called again to say that reader response to my piece had been enthusiastic. "Do you have any more essays lying around, especially related to paradox?" When I told him that I had been filling file drawers with essays for years, he asked me to send him a dozen or so. A month later, he called a third time to say that he thought six of my pieces could be arranged in a book. Would I be willing to sign a contract?

In a moment of satori worthy of a Zen wannabe, I realized that not only could I write a book, I already had! It was a great reminder of the first lesson in Spirituality 101: *Pay attention!* You may discover that what you wanted is right in front of you, a secret hidden in plain sight.

*The Promise of Paradox* was an accidental book. But once I held a copy in my hands, I knew I could write more books if I wanted to. Apparently I did. *The Company of Strangers* came out in 1981 and *To Know as We Are Known* in 1983. After that breathless sprint, I began to write at a more sustainable pace, with four more books over the next twenty-five years.

Closely tied in memory to the launch of my book-writing career is my friendship with Henri Nouwen, who wrote the

Introduction to *Promise*. I met Henri in the mid-seventies, a couple of years before the book was published. We were among a small group of people called together by the Lilly Endowment for a consultation on spirituality, a notion that was just beginning to attract mainstream attention. We spent three days in New York's Algonquin Hotel evaluating dozens of grant proposals. All of the judges emerged with generous stipends for their time, and some of the applicants emerged with handsome grants. But I emerged with something far more precious: a friendship with Henri that animated a decade of shared work.

When I met Henri, he was already a well-known and much-loved writer. His classic *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (1975) had touched me and many other readers.<sup>3</sup> Henri was only seven years older than I, but to me, he seemed like a wise older brother, a virtuoso of the spiritual life with a genius for writing and teaching. He was also very funny, a requisite quality for any guru who hopes to win my trust.

Given my high regard for Henri and my insecurity as a writer, it was with fear and trembling that I asked if he would help put my accidental book on the map by writing an introduction. Henri immediately said, "Yes, of course," an answer he gave many people on many occasions. A month later, he sent me several pages that I read over and over again, hardly able to believe that those words of affirmation were about me.

Today I understand that those words are only partly about me. They are also about Henri Nouwen's open and generous

heart. His death in 1996 at the far-too-young age of sixty-five means that a lot of us need to step up to replace the generosity lost to the universe when that heart stopped beating.

To round out this recounting of blessings, the reissuing of *Promise* has helped me revisit one of the most transformative periods of my life, my eleven-year sojourn at Pendle Hill. Founded in 1930, this Quaker adult study center is organized as a residential community where some seventy people share a daily round of worship, study, physical work, and shared decision making—a place that has elements of a kibbutz, an ashram, a monastery, a zendo, and on occasion, a madhouse. It is also a place where I received powerful and lasting lessons about the inner journey, the kind of community that supports it, and the way such a journey rightly taken returns us to caring for the needs of the world.

In 1975, when I began working at Pendle Hill as dean of studies, my salary was \$2,400 a year, the equivalent of about \$10,000 in 2008. In addition, my family and I received free room and board, a very helpful supplement to the cash, but even so, not what a person with a Ph.D. from Berkeley would expect to be making then or now. Back in the day, everyone on staff at Pendle Hill received the same compensation package, including an eighteen-year-old with a high school diploma who worked in the garden, the shop, or the kitchen. It was communism Quaker-style, and to a white male who had grown up on Chicago's affluent North Shore, it was a challenge.

Every member of the Pendle Hill staff had a daily job related to one of the meals, either preparing it or cleaning up afterward. My qualifications for dishwashing were weak but much stronger than my gifts for food preparation. So for eleven years, luncheon cleanup was my afternoon delight. As dean, I had to be on the road from time to time, raising money or giving a talk. But like everyone else at Pendle Hill, I had to line up a sub whenever I missed a meal job and then repay that person by doing his or her job as well as my own for as many days as I had been gone. If you can name a dean of anything who currently lives under such a stricture, I will gladly volunteer to do his or her dishes for a day!

And what did Pendle Hill's salary scale and work program have to do with those powerful and lasting spiritual lessons I mentioned? Well, it's all right there: a setup that slammed me into my narcissistic feelings of entitlement, step one on the inner journey for a lot of folks like me; a form of community that not only forced such issues on me but offered disciplines (like shared silence and gentle truth-telling) for dealing with them; and a way of life that deepened my solidarity with people who live with little not by choice but because of economic injustice. These, I daresay, are different from the spiritual challenges that I would have faced had I taken a job at some university.

Remembering all of that is, for me, much more than a trip down memory lane. It is a true blessing, an opportunity as I near age seventy to reclaim and recommit to what I know to be true about myself and my world.

## Curses!

As I reread this book, two things jumped out at me. First, there are many pages where I would not change a word were I to write about the same topic today, in part because I still believe what those words say and in part because I don't know how to say it any better. Second, there are pages in this book that I would not write today, and I feel a bit squeamish about allowing them to be republished. I am doing so largely because I believe that my forty-year-old self has as much right to freedom of speech as the sixty-nine-year-old version!<sup>4</sup>

My squeamishness has little to do with any fundamental change in my beliefs. I still understand myself as a Christian, and many traditional Christian understandings still shape my life. But in 2008, I find it hard to name my beliefs using traditional Christian language because that vocabulary has been taken hostage by theological terrorists and tortured beyond recognition. Of course, this is not the first time Christian rhetoric has been violated in public places. But the violence I'm talking about is happening right here and right now, and the wounds—my wounds—are very raw.

I would be lost in the dark without the light Christianity sheds on my life, the light I find in truths like incarnation, grace, sacrament, forgiveness, blessing, and the paradoxical dance of death and resurrection. But when Christians claim that their light is the only light and that anyone who does not share their understanding of it is doomed to eternal damnation,

things get very dark for me. I want to run screaming out into the so-called secular world—which is, I believe, better-named the wide, wild world of God—where I can recover my God-given mind.

Out there, I catch sight once again of the truth, goodness, and beauty that disappear when pious Christians slam the door on their musty, windowless, lifeless room. Next to a Christian eclipsed by theological arrogance, an honest atheist shines like the sun. Next to a church profaned by its exclusion of “otherness,” a city of true diversity is a cathedral.

How can it be that Christianity—named after one who proclaimed that “the meek shall inherit the earth”—can give rise to so much arrogance? Here, for example, is a scenario that gets played out a lot these days. A man born into wealth and power spends the first twenty years of his adult life as a wastrel and a rake, kept afloat by privilege rather than his own work and wit. Then he encounters Christ, stops drinking, and starts getting serious about *something*—maybe politics, for example.

I am happy for him. Happy until it becomes clear that this man has emerged from his encounter believing that God speaks clearly and directly to him about all things; that whatever conclusions he comes to “in prayer” are divinely inspired and binding on others; and that the outcomes of his God-inspired decisions are always right, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Let us suppose that this man’s newfound seriousness, fueled by his family’s connections and wealth, leads to political

success, and he suddenly has access to real power. Given what he believes about his own corner on truth, I would sooner see him start drinking again. As moral problems go, one person's alcoholism is not nearly as serious as the social, economic, and political damage such a delusional leader can do, all in the name of God. If he stays in office long enough, part of that damage is called "creeping totalitarianism."

If I had been on a journey like this man's—and I have, of course; who hasn't had to be saved from oneself in one way or another?—my take-home lesson would be simple: "I'm capable of making really big mistakes, like being a callow and witless nincompoop for the first two decades of my adult life. Now that I've been given another chance, I must live with appropriate humility."

How does someone meet the grandeur and grace of God in Christ, get saved from his own smallness, and emerge from the experience cocky instead of humble? I can think of only two answers: either he did not meet the Real Deal but a cheap imitation thereof, or he met the Real Deal and blew a chance to be saved. Fortunately, that chance comes again and again, even to nincompoops like him. And me.

Yes, I believe in forgiveness, grace, salvation (which means becoming whole), and in the Word made flesh (which I believe everyone is). In fact, the major convictions of Christian faith are much more than "articles of belief" for me. They are lenses on life that have helped me make sense of myself, a person I find at least as baffling as the fellow I've just described.

Having gone over to the dark side three times with major clinical depression and lived to tell the tale, the cross, death-and-resurrection, and grace are familiar landmarks on the terrain called my life. For me, the Christian story is neither a fairy tale (as it is sometimes portrayed by disbelievers) nor an ought-ridden morality play (as it is sometimes portrayed by believers). It is simply an honest, terrifying, bracing, and ultimately reassuring way of telling it like it is.

I am not sure I could live without this powerful way of naming and negotiating reality as I know it. But I know for a certainty that I cannot live with the way some Christians and their churches deploy this power. How can a person believe in the grace of God and still believe that God's grace is available only to folks who sign up for a particular understanding of how God works in our lives—*their* particular understanding?

When Christians answer that question by saying, “God caused Jesus to die on the cross as atonement for the sins of humanity, so if you want salvation, you must believe in Jesus Christ,” my question ratchets up. What kind of God is it who demands blood—the blood of *God's own son*—for atonement? I'm a father myself, and sure, in moments of hurt and rage, I've wanted to “kill” my kids a time or two. But always for *their* sins, not yours. I don't want a God to whom I can feel morally superior. And I don't want a theology that advocates blood sacrifice as a way of setting things right. There's way too much of that going around these days.

Jesus died on the cross because he got crosswise with the powers that be, a story that has been repeated time and again in human history. For me, his death is redemptive not because it fulfills the puppet master's plan or works some kind of cosmic sleight of hand but because it represents God's willingness to suffer with us in every moment of our lives, not least when we are willing to speak truth to power. That's the meaning of the word *compassion*—"suffering with"—a source of supreme comfort and a gift God gives us so we can pass it on to others. And thank God, Jesus is only one among many embodiments of that gift: the world has endless need for incarnations of compassion.

Think of the Buddhists in war-torn Vietnam or currently in exile from Tibet, bearing the suffering that comes from being victims of violence but committed to a nonviolent campaign for justice and peace that extends compassion to their enemies. Looked at through Christian lenses, they are "Christ-like." But they have every right to look back at this "Christian nation"—remembering how our warplanes napalmed Vietnamese children or watching as we turn a blind eye toward Tibet—and ask themselves, "Is this *really* what Jesus would do?"

When I was growing up in the church, I was grabbed by a biblical quote that I internalized as follows (a composite from several translations, as it turns out, but a reasonably accurate rendering): "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). That line explains two things: why I find

theological arrogance profoundly unchristian and why I still have some hope in the Christian community's capacity to correct itself.

These earthen vessels—the containers that hold and convey the mysteries of faith—include every word in our scriptures and theologies, every doctrine in our creeds, every structure that holds up the institutional church. The pope, the doctrine of atonement, the word *God* itself—all of them are clay pots, prone to crack and leak, crumble and break. And that's a good thing because it reminds us we are embedded in a truth so vast that our mental constructs can never comprehend it; because it cultivates the humility required to look at that mystery through other people's eyes, giving us a chance to learn more about it; because it keeps us from becoming theological fascists.

At least, that's the theory. In practice, it's a very small step from cracked pots to crackpots. Too many Christians believe that their thoughts about God and God's thoughts are the same thing. Anne Lamott has a good response for such folks when they insist that her brand of Christianity is a one-way ticket to hell. She thanks them for sharing and then says, "You know the difference between you and God? God *never* thinks He's you."<sup>5</sup>

As far as I can tell, a person who believes that he or she speaks God's truth in pure, unadulterated form—or believes that some other mortal being speaks that way (e.g., one of the folks whose words ended up in the Bible)—is an idolater,

a person who worships false gods, the false gods of human formulation. I want to say to them, “Neither your concept of God nor mine is the same as God. It says so in the Bible, and it’s just plain common sense. So we should learn to talk to each other in hopes of understanding God—maybe even each other—a little more deeply.”

If I am wrong about this, I hope someone will prove me wrong before it is too late. Until then, I will continue to have a love-hate relationship with any church that spawns and feeds idolaters who compound their sin by condemning to hell anyone who sees things differently. I don’t believe that these idolaters are headed for an eternity of torment, and I certainly don’t wish that for them. They are making things hellish right now, and what I wish is that they would get a life.

## **What’s Promising About Paradox?**

When Thomas Merton was novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemane, his sessions were often taped. He started off one class by speaking these words to the earnest and pious would-be monks who’d been placed in his care: “Men, before you can have a spiritual life, you’ve got to have a life!”

I treasure that line because it sheds the light of humor on one of the big problems of both religion and spirituality: the assumption that the spiritual life is a life set apart from “secular” life—which is to say, from the life one is living.

My guess is that Merton's comment created a two-wave response in some of his listeners: "Wow, he's right, I need to get a life! No, wait a minute, I've already got one—but it's that god-awful mess I tried to leave behind when I came to the monastery!"

Merton's point, of course, is that we will find our spiritual lives in that mess itself, in its earthy realities, unpredictable challenges, surprising resources, creative dynamics. I think he would approve of the proposal that we add a new prayer to the well-known short list of "Thanks!" and "Help!" The new one is equally simple: "Bless this mess!"

If we stand in the middle of the mess assuming that the spiritual life will be orderly and pristine, linear and logical, without complexity or contradiction, we will pray not for a blessing but for an extreme makeover. Of course, the ultimate extreme makeover is an embalmed and well-accessorized corpse, which is what we become in life when we try to defy the wideness and wildness of God.

I believe God wants us to be good, but above all God wants us to be alive: life, after all, is God's original gift to us. To try to put that gift back in the box so it can be retied and shelved is to stick your finger in the eye of the giver. And when Christians use their conception of "goodness" to diminish or destroy other people's lives, either figuratively or literally—as when they declare homosexuals unholy or use God to justify warfare against innocent civilians—they stick fingers in both of God's eyes.

I don't deny the importance of moral order, an order that can only be created by dialogue, not dictation. (Dictating morality is a sin against our God-given freedom, and you can't get moral order out of an immoral process.) But if disorder is not as important as order, how are we to understand what drives personal and social creativity and evolution? As I said to a friend recently, "Why do people think getting 'centered' is such a great thing? I find myself most drawn to 'eccentric' or off-center people because they are interesting and flat-out fun!"

The promise of paradox is the promise that apparent opposites—like order and disorder—can cohere in our lives, the promise that if we replace either-or with both-and, our lives will become larger and more filled with light. It is a promise at the heart of every wisdom tradition I know, not least the Christian faith. How else can I make sense of the statement "If you seek your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life, you will find it"? Or "The first shall be last and the last shall be first"? Or the affirmation that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine? Or the notion that we know there is a God but we cannot claim to know the God that is?

The dictionary defines a paradox as "a statement that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth." Neils Bohr, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, says essentially the same thing with the most lucid words I've read on the subject: "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth."<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that little phrase “may be.” Not all apparent contradictions are paradoxes in disguise, so discernment is required. The Orwellian slogan “War Is Peace” does not qualify, no matter how many presidents say otherwise. But the fact that we are made for solitude *and* for community is a true paradox, one that we fail to embrace at our peril.

The capacity to embrace true paradoxes is more than an intellectual skill for holding complex thoughts. It is a life skill for holding complex experiences. Take, for example, our encounter with “the other,” with the person who sees a different reality from ours because he or she stands in a different place. To some extent, the other contradicts not only our thoughts but also our lives, and that can be threatening. If we lack the capacity to allow this contradiction to segue into a paradox—a both-and that has the potential to open our minds and hearts to something new—we will most likely fall back on our hard-wired “fight or flight” response. But if we understand the promise of paradox, our encounters with “the other” have the potential to make our world larger, more generous, more hopeful.

Or take the experience I call “standing in the tragic gap.” From international relations to what goes on in the workplace to raising a teenager, we find ourselves living between reality and possibility, between what is and what could and should be. But if we are willing actively to “hang in there” with a country, a colleague, or a child—holding the unresolved tension between reality and possibility and inviting something

new into being—we have a chance to participate in the evolution of a better reality.

Standing in the gap is challenging, but the alternatives are irresponsible. One is to fall out on the side of too much reality and into corrosive cynicism. The other is to fall out on the side of too much possibility and into irrelevant idealism. Both take us out of the action. But if we are willing to stand between the poles, refusing to fall out, we have a chance to play a life-giving role in the development of a child, a workplace, or a world that needs to grow into “the better angels of its nature.”

If we are to stand in the gap, we need to know the promise of paradox—and know it in a way that goes deeper than intellect, a way suggested by one of the most famous lines of biblical poetry: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). I believe that those words, written to describe Jesus, name what all are called to do: wrap our whole selves around the truth given to us and live it out in our embodied lives.

For many years, I’ve asked a simple question about any idea that seems life-giving to me: “How can we put wheels on that idea?” It’s an inelegant rendition of “the Word become flesh,” but it works for me. And in the thirty years since this book was published, I’ve had some experience at putting wheels on the idea of paradox, taking myself and others into a lived experience of holding tension in ways that open our hearts and minds to something new and unexpected.

To take one example, people can experience the promise of paradox—or not—in the way churches and other communities make collective decisions. When we make decisions by majority rule, we deprive people of the chance to learn how to hold tension creatively. Under these ground rules, we are encouraged to “resolve” the tension between opposing views by taking a vote and getting it over with (although in practice, the lingering resentment of the losing side can undermine forward movement for a long time thereafter).

But when we make decisions by consensus—when we cannot proceed until everyone is willing to do so—people must learn to listen to those they disagree with in a new way. Now the question is not “How can I win the vote by persuading enough people that you are wrong?” but “How might I learn from your truth in a way that enlarges my understanding and express my truth in a way that expands yours?”

Under the ground rules of consensus, we are encouraged to hold the tension of apparently contradictory viewpoints—and we often find ourselves happily surprised at the new and larger truth that emerges as a result. That is the promise of paradox.

## **A Concluding Postscript**

As I reread *The Promise of Paradox*, I was startled to discover how many of the questions I am working on today are the same ones I was working on thirty years ago. Paradox itself

pops up in every book I've written, and there it is again in an essay I've been sketching out while writing this Introduction.

I can think of several explanations for this fact. One: I'm a fundamentally boring person who is stuck in a rut. Two: I am one of those writers who have only one book in them, a book they rewrite many times. Three: we are born with a core of personal identity that persists to the day we die, so our fundamental questions remain unchanged. I'm going to go with the third explanation because it is the most dignified.

For years, I've wanted a bumper sticker that says "Born Baffled!" I've come to believe that the willingness to be baffled and stay baffled is part of my identity and one of my birthright gifts. I mean "gift" seriously: bafflement has energized my life, including my work as a writer. Writers are sometimes regarded as experts on the subjects they write about. But I've never written on a topic that I've mastered or figured out. Once I arrive at what some might call expertise, I get bored, and writing is hard enough without working on something I find boring. I write about things that baffle me even after I've written about them, which is to say that I write about things whose mystery seems bottomless to me.

Early on, my bafflement was focused on the world and how it does or does not work. Then it came to rest on other people: Why are they the way they are? Finally, I realized that the root of all bafflement is about oneself and that unless I was willing to become more transparent to myself, other people and the world would remain opaque.

So at bottom, my longtime fascination with paradox is rooted in my longtime bafflement about myself. As I wrote thirty years ago on the first page of *Promise*:

Contradiction, paradox, the tension of opposites: these have always been at the heart of my experience, and I think I am not alone. I am tugged one way and then the other. My beliefs and my actions often seem at odds. My strengths are sometimes canceled by my weaknesses. My self, and the world around me, seem more a study in dissonance than a harmony of the integrated whole.

I've made some progress toward personal integration over the past thirty years, helped along by the concept of paradox. But there is still much truth about me in that paragraph, and there always will be—at least, as long as I am fully engaged with life. Which is why I continue to find solace in Thomas Merton's words: "Like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox."

Jonas, or Jonah, is the fellow who was famously swallowed by a whale, lived to tell the tale, and for his troubles got written up in the Bible. He was trying to escape God's calling when the crew of his getaway ship tossed him overboard in the whale's neighborhood. But instead of snacking, the whale swallowed Jonah whole and took him to Nineveh, the very place to which God had called Jonah in the first place. The moral of the story is yet another paradox: running away from

a true calling may be the surest way to run toward it, even though you may arrive soaked and smelly.

The perils of such a flight, of course, are very real. For years I've had an original woodcut by Fritz Eichenberg in my office. Eighteen inches high and nearly twelve inches wide, it tells the Jonah story in a sequence of images running from the top to the bottom of the piece. The depiction is dark and tumultuous, full of leviathans, roiled seas, and high drama, and at the bottom, it shows Jonah safe ashore. For me, this woodcut is an image of what it's been like from time to time to navigate the ocean of life, struggling with my callings as both a public and a private person, resisting and yielding, drowning and surfacing, but somehow being led.

In the middle of the woodcut, left of center, is an all-seeing eye full of light that pierces the darkness. It is surely the eye of God, an eye that has always been on Jonah—an eye that will, as they say, “see him through.” There's a nice double meaning to those words: God sees through Jonah, through his illusions and delusions, and God will stay with Jonah to and through the end.

Of course, none of this seems plausible when you are in midflight, being tossed overboard, or swallowed up into the dark belly of the beast. But when you arrive at that distant shore and have a chance to catch your breath, spiff up, and look around, it begins to become clear that something has been leading you all along.

Looking at Eichenberg's woodcut, it seems clear that it would make no sense artistically to portray this light-filled eye

in the middle of a scene where, say, a couple of well-cushioned gents enjoying a well-heeled retirement are strolling down the fairway toward the nineteenth hole. The image works only because of the challenging backdrop against which it is set, only because it completes the paradox of darkness and light, blindness and sight. I hate to reduce the promise of paradox to a line from a 1950s pop song, but it's just plain true that "you can't have one without the other."

It's not so much that "you can have it all" as that you must embrace it all, if you want life in the round. Margaret Fuller, the nineteenth-century New England transcendentalist, reputedly said, "I accept the universe!" To which the essayist Thomas Carlyle is said to have responded, "Gad! she'd better!"<sup>7</sup>

That's a great quip, but Fuller really did have a choice. Instead of accepting, she could have rejected the complexity and contradictions of life, trying—as many people and belief systems, secular as well as religious, do—to reduce it to a few variables to create the illusion that things are simple and we are in charge.

But that kind of thinking leads us to a world of grief. Witness, even as I write, American involvement in Iraq. Here is grief multiplied by a million, and the math that kicked it off was premised in the American assumption that the complexities of that region could be simplified by our military might, never mind Vietnam or all the other wars we have failed to win since 1945. If we had been able to hold the paradoxical complexity of the fact that the human heart sometimes yearns

both for the sweet air of freedom *and* for the order, however oppressive, that a dictatorship brings, we might have been less cocksure about our mission and more constructive in response to our national dilemma and Iraqi realities.

When you are traveling toward your destiny in the belly of a paradox, as we all are, there are no certainties. But the creative opportunities are boundless. Resist that fact, and life can get brutal. Embrace it, and life becomes one whale of a ride.



*for Sally*



The Promise of  
**Paradox**

