

CHAPTER ONE

MOMENT OF TRUTH



ONE SUNDAY MORNING AFTER A CHURCH SERVICE, I was meeting with members of my congregation when someone came and whispered to me that there was a strange man waiting in the vestibule. He wanted to see the minister. I knew what that meant: he wanted money, of course, and what better time to be sure to catch the minister at church than on a Sunday morning?

I left the meeting. As I approached the man, I could smell the alcohol on his breath immediately when he spoke. He said, “I want to pray and to turn my life over to Jesus.”

Sure you do, I thought, feeling less than charitable and wishing I was anyone but the minister at that moment. I explained that the congregation was gathering for a meeting and suggested that he might find someone available at another church down the street. “No,” he said.

“That doesn’t matter. I just need to be able to pray right now. I have really messed up my life with drugs and alcohol, and I want to make a new start. All I need is a place to pray.”

“Well,” I said, still expecting to be asked for money, “as you can see, there is a meeting going on in the church. There really isn’t an appropriate place for—”

“That doesn’t matter,” he interrupted. “I just need to pray, *now*. This is my moment of truth. *Now*. It has to be *now*.” Then he repeated, “This is my moment of truth.”

“I suppose we could go into my office,” I said, still thinking that the church down the street would be better able to serve this man’s need.

As we entered my office, he fell immediately to his knees and amid sobs he began praying. About that time, I finally caught on. He really had come to church to pray! As he prayed, I placed my hands on his shoulders; when he was finished, I asked him his name and offered a prayer, too, saying his name and asking God to forgive him and give him the strength to change and make amends to his family. Then I talked with him for a few minutes about support groups and drug programs. He left, and I went back to the meeting.

His moment of truth? Yes. But it was my moment of truth, too, because in those few moments when that man was on his knees, I let go of my fear; I let go of my distrust; I let go of my judging. I let go of my awareness of the tremendous gap between what he believed and what I believed. It was, indeed, a moment of truth. It was a moment

of holy intimacy, where we two strangers each encountered our own fears and flaws and were held in a bond of sacred trust.

I have shared many precious moments with people in counseling or in conversation, and there has often been an element of grace in those times because of a spiritual connection between us. But in this moment of truth, there was a power at work that brought this strange man and me into a common territory, a territory where human souls connect with each other in a sacred dimension.

In that sacred space, I was not only moved by the power of the moment but given an opportunity to reflect on my own moment of truth, for I had to contend with fears that were uncomfortable for me. For one thing, I was afraid of my own inadequacy. I was the minister of a liberal (Unitarian Universalist) church where we were not accustomed to speaking in terms of “turning our lives over to Jesus.” This man was asking for something that was not part of my usual repertoire of pastoral or liturgical offerings. I squirmed within the narrow confines of my own religious perspective, awkward and unwilling to venture into the holy space where I might have to compromise how I express my religious beliefs in order to be present with the stranger.

I was also afraid of being made to feel foolish. So my defenses were in place. If, as I suspected, the stranger wanted money to support his drug habit rather than prayer to help him kick it, I was determined to be wise to his deceptive attempt to weaken my resolve with his story about wanting to pray. I did not want him to take advantage of my goodwill.

But the fear beneath each of these feelings was something more disturbing. My real moment of truth came when I realized that I was not in charge of the situation. When I would hear stories from strangers about why they wanted money, I often chose to believe them and could help them without giving them cash. I gave them restaurant or bus vouchers, or I wrote a check to the phone company from a special discretionary account. I made referrals to other agencies. There was generally something I could do. When this stranger asked for holy presence, however, I could not open a drawer and salve my conscience or hasten his exit with a simple gesture of charity.

My moment of truth was the recognition of a boundary that had, as a result of my own defensive posture, inhibited my receptiveness to spiritual power and my ability to help a person in need. The Spirit blessed this encounter, not *because* of me, but in spite of me.

Reflecting on my cautious skepticism, I have had to ask, “Suppose this man was just making up the story about wanting to change just to soften me up. What would I lose by believing him? So what, if I’m a fool? What do I lose? Nothing—except control. And so what if the moment evokes an emotional response—a man whose name I don’t even know, kneeling and praying and sobbing in my presence? What is there to fear? Nothing—except loss of control. And suppose I am moved to tears myself. What am I afraid of? Nothing—except not having control.”

So that is what the real moment of truth was about. I think the moment of truth comes for most of us when we come up against

something we cannot control. For me, it meant confronting my awkwardness, my discomfort, my fears, and my resistance. It meant examining my own understanding of God, too. I may as well have said to the man, “I’m sorry, but your God really doesn’t live in this church, and my deity is an all-encompassing principle that has neither gender nor ears.” The irony is that my expansive god-force would turn out to be smaller than his father in heaven. In the moment of truth that was a moment of grace, it didn’t matter. It just did not matter.

What *does* matter? The moment of truth is a moment of connection, that’s all—with the unnamable Spirit, with ourselves, with other human beings who are willing to admit (or perhaps even invite) loss of control. In this surrender to holy possibility and this openness to a common human experience that transcends our particular perspectives, we meet the deep core of ourselves that is not defined by systems of belief, and not threatened by another point of view or a different way of being. This does not mean we lose our individual selves or change what we think; it just means we meet at a level where, having surrendered a layer of identity to a divine or transcendent purpose, we participate in a holy intimacy and receive power from the connection.

STRANGERS AT HOME

A grace-filled connection that occurs with a stranger stirs reflection about how we also defend ourselves against intimacy in our more familiar relationships. Sometimes it is easier to be open to significant con-

nection with a stranger than with our most intimate companions. The issues that we have to confront are the same, however: fear of inadequacy, pride, or stubbornness; hesitation about a situation where someone might take advantage of us; a need to feel we have some control. Although we long to make deep personal and spiritual connection with those we love, we may sometimes find ourselves feeling as though they are strangers to us. We may live according to habitual patterns, or take each other's presence for granted. In simply enjoying one another's companionship, we may not be inclined to explore deeper ways of being together. Perhaps we create ways to avoid conflict or an uncomfortable topic of conversation.

Our moments of truth often occur with family and friends, just as they do with strangers, when we meet a life crisis. Not only do we increase our consciousness of how precious our time is together; we are more aware of our powerlessness and our need for one another when we experience a decline in health, or lose a job, or go through a divorce, or face death, or face the death of someone we love.

One such moment of truth occurred for me in the four days I spent with my father before he died. We had always enjoyed a very loving relationship and never lacked for things to talk about, but our conversation had rarely gone deeper than speculation about whether it would rain, or admiration of a good double play executed by the White Sox. But during our last four days together, I made some precious connections with him, and with my older brother, the only other surviving member of my family of origin.

As my father's kidneys began to fail, I asked the doctor if there was anything he could do. I will not forget his words. "There's always something we can do," he said, allowing his sentence to sit on the air between us, unpunctuated. I completed his train of thought in my mind. Yes, there is always something we *can* do, but *should* we? It became apparent that any measures taken by the medical team would only prolong my father's illness and require that he remain in the hospital for an extended time. I asked the doctor to inform him of the situation and of his options. Knowing how much my father dreaded suffering through a long terminal illness, I knew he would not choose to go on dialysis.

I went into his hospital room after the conference with the doctor. "I guess you just got some bad news," I said. "No," said my father, smiling, "good news." His worst fear had been assuaged. "I understand," I said, and then I lay on his bed beside him and sobbed. He understood too.

For several hours, we were present with each other as never before. As a cartoonist who had only a day earlier been honored with the National Cartoonist Society award for Best Story Strip ("Gasoline Alley"), he grieved for the stories he would not write. "I have lots more stories in me," he said, relieved that he would not have to plot the demise of Walt Wallet, the aging patriarch of his comic strip, during his lifetime. He shared some of his personal regrets, but he was not afraid of dying. "I have had a good life," he said, with gratitude. He told me where to find important documents and explained provisions

in his will. I had never been able to ask him about such matters, since to do so would have been to introduce the topic of his eventual death—not something I wanted to bring up.

Knowing that death was imminent, I called my brother, who is a heart surgeon. “Come here *now*,” I told him. But he could not accept this sense of urgency. He wanted every medical alternative explored, including dialysis. We argued for several minutes, and then finally I screamed at him, “Daddy is dying! Get on a plane as soon as you can and get yourself out here, damn it!”

My brother arrived the next evening. A few hours after my brother visited with him, our father died. Since then, I have been closer with my brother—able to talk about personal issues that we previously avoided. The moment of truth that surfaced our fear, anger, and despair when our father died was also the moment of grace that invited the presence of the holy into our midst. In the fifteen years since that time, we have related to one another at an intimate level. Although we have our regrets with regard to unexplored depths in our relationship with other family members, we strive to maintain honest communication, which requires that we continue to let go of the fears and defenses that create a barrier to our bond of love and trust.

It does not have to be a loss or tragedy that opens you to the moment of truth. It might be anything that brings you to your knees—literally or figuratively. The moment of truth is a moment of humility and perspective on the self. It might occur when you look out at the stars on a clear night in the desert and get a little perspective on what

you do and do not control. Or you may witness the birth of a child and experience the power of creation that is not of your making. These are times when we are brought to our knees—when we are invited to let go of our illusion of power and participate in the creative power of it all. Whether we are humbled by our own inadequacy, touched by the overwhelming beauty of creation, or confronted with the mystery of death, we are acutely aware of how little control we really have. Choices, yes—we have choices about how we will respond to the events of our lives. But when we fool ourselves into thinking we can control those events, we construct an inner barrier that prevents us from experiencing the spiritual power that is available to us.

LOSING CONTROL, GAINING POWER

In the moments of truth I have experienced, I discovered something important: by letting go of my need to be in charge of the situation and allowing myself to be vulnerable, I confronted my own fears. As I met the fears and let go of them, they had less power. In a way, I gained control by being willing to lose it.

If we can receive power by being willing to face what we do not control, we can also *lose* power by *not* being willing to face what we cannot control. What it boils down to is that if we have a strong need for control, we are much more likely to become anxious when we don't have it. The higher our level of anxiety, the more likely we are to become stressed or depressed. In fact, the higher our level of anxiety,

the more vulnerable we are to any number of health problems. The cycle escalates; more need for control means more anxiety, and more anxiety means more symptoms.

I recall speaking with a friend who remarked, “I feel like my life is living me instead of me living my life.” This was more than a yearning for a life that was less busy or less stressful. He was saying that he did not make choices in his life, that he just reacted to what happened to him.

The paradox of trying to gain control of a life that is out of control is that it is likely to spin ever more out of control. Joseph Campbell, with his gift for distilling the wisdom of the world’s religions into archetypal images that speak the language of the soul, spoke of living out of the hub of the wheel instead of the rim. That is the difference between living your life instead of being lived by it. Writer Ann Morrow Lindbergh described what that might feel like: “I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out [my] obligations and activities as well as I can. I want . . . to live ‘in grace’ as much of the time as possible. By grace I mean an inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into an outward harmony.”¹

Call it the spiritual core. Call it the hub. Call it the inner light. Call it the spiritual center of the self, which lives life instead of being lived by it. It is this aspect of soul that gives us our meaning and purpose because it aligns us with spiritual purpose.

When my friend confessed that he felt his life was living him, it was a moment of truth for him. He also admitted that he was drinking

heavily, but he said he found it humiliating to consider going to Alcoholics Anonymous. I told him that it was humbling—it was humility, not humiliation. Humiliation derives from self-centeredness and pride. Humility is self-centering, that is, it centers the individual in the Spirit and in a larger purpose. Humiliation is what he would suffer if he did not do something to regain his inner freedom. Humility, on the other hand, was the Spirit’s way of nudging him toward health, and toward the kind of inner spiritual grace that would enable him to give as he was meant to give.

People who have participated in twelve-step programs designed to assist them with the problems of addiction understand the importance of recognizing their powerlessness. For them, the moment of truth is when they “hit bottom”—when they admit they do not have the power to overcome their addiction. Like the stranger who came to me that Sunday morning wanting to turn his life over to Jesus, many come to their first twelve-step meeting ready to “turn their life over” to a higher power. To admit their powerlessness is an act of courage, for it is stepping into unknown territory. It is painfully humbling. But twelve-step programs work, and one reason they work is because “anonymous” strangers help one another recognize their powerlessness and call upon a power higher than their own.

Letting go of the illusion of control means shedding some of the insulation that protects us from receiving the gifts of life. Consider the effects of any addiction, whether it is to food or alcohol or drugs, or gambling, or sex, or shopping, or surfing the Internet. Saint Augustine is reported to have said that God is always trying to give good things

to us, but our hands are too full to receive them. Addiction keeps our hands full. It is any compulsive, habitual behavior that limits one's freedom to make choices. Some addictions are more destructive than others, but any addiction robs you of your inner freedom and is therefore damaging to your spirit. You become a slave to whatever appetite demands that it be satisfied. Addiction disrupts the natural balance that your body, mind, and spirit seek to achieve, so that you may live in grace, or out of the hub.

The process of turning your life over to God or Spirit, or a higher power of your own definition, is a process of reclaiming your life and your freedom. The paradox is that by acknowledging your powerlessness over the addiction, you receive strength and power. By forgetting yourself and acknowledging your lack of control, you gain freedom and direction for your life. It is, to use the language of Jesus, the process of losing your life in order to gain it.

GIFTS FROM STRANGERS

The moment of truth becomes the moment when we become aware of what it is that keeps our hands (and lives) too full to receive the gifts of life. It is often in the company of strangers that we are invited to empty our hands and our lives and open ourselves to the gifts of grace and the guidance of the Spirit.

Such was the case for the young man who interrupted Betsy Bunn and some of her fellow members of Emmanuel Church in the City of

Boston, as they gathered in Lindsey Chapel after a fire had gutted their sanctuary. It was a few weeks before Christmas, and bitter cold. The people who gathered for evening prayer felt more than ever a sense of gratitude for the warmth and safety of their space, poignantly aware that warmth and safety can be fragile.

The stranger's appearance caught the group off guard. Bunn writes:

After the prayer service a small group gathered to talk about the coming holidays and to acknowledge that this time of celebration puts us in touch with times of sadness and loss, of dreams not fulfilled, of safety not maintained, of disappointment and loss of faith. The very fact of gathering to talk about this was a statement of resilience and hope.

We made a small circle in front of the altar of the chapel. The gathering was scheduled to last about an hour and people were just beginning to talk when the door at the back of the chapel opened. A young man, probably twenty something, stood for a few seconds, then made his way to the front. "Who are you? What are you doing?" he asked.

Another few seconds of surprised silence. It seemed a question we might well have asked of him. Then the reply: "We're part of Emmanuel Church, and we're talking about the holidays. Some of us have some tough times around now."

"Well, can I stay?"

"Sure, you're welcome here."

The conversation resumed while each person was silently making evaluations of this extraordinary appearance. The man

was neatly and warmly dressed, sober, quiet. He did not appear desperate in body or soul. But why was he here? What had brought him to us on this cold Thursday night when no service was scheduled? Our doors had just opened after weeks of being closed after the fire.

After about ten minutes, he spoke. "I have to go," he said. "If I kneel down in the middle of your circle, would you put your hands on my head and pray for me?" He paused for a few seconds and looked around. "My hair's pretty clean, but you could touch my shoulder if that feels better to you."

We looked at each other, and one of us replied, "Yes, we can do that."

We turned to our minister. "What's your name?" [the minister] asked. "What would you like us to pray for?"

He hesitated. "My name is Peter, and I wish I could like myself better," he said. He knelt and bowed his head. The people around the circle put their hands on his head and his shoulders. Our minister said a prayer for the young man, and the rest of us added ours, asking that he be kept safe, that he learn to value himself as surely as he is valued. We asked blessing upon him and gave thanks for his courage and his presence with us.

He stood and looked around the chapel and said, "Thank you. This may be the most important thing that ever happened to me."

Peter went out into the night. We will never know what brought him to us or what happened to him. His coming folded so smoothly into our gathering that it is only in the following

days that we began to be aware of the depth of the gift he brought to us.

Peter's gift to Betsy and her companions was a gift of self. Their gift to him was a gift of presence. They were also willing to suspend their planned agenda to make space for an uninvited person's pain—no questions asked. Peter gave them his trust; they let go of their initial discomfort or irritation and received it. Because of the gifts Peter and the group were willing to make to each other, they received also the gift of spiritual presence that was not theirs to give or receive in a human exchange.

LIKING OURSELVES . . . AND EACH OTHER

The moment of truth in an encounter with strangers creates a bond of mutual humility, made possible through mutual vulnerability. In unspoken recognition that the Spirit blesses our interaction, we share something mystical, precious, and ineffable. Its power is available when we recognize and feel the bonds we have with all human beings, not because we have something to give one another but because if we can remove our defenses to give and receive from each other, the Spirit gives us this grace-imbued gift of human solidarity.

For me, for Betsy Bunn and her companions, and for anyone who is given the opportunity to be present for a stranger whose moment of truth brings him or her into our lives, there is also our own moment of truth. How easy it is to fortify ourselves against intrusion into our

familiar circle—yes, even the circle of support we create with like-minded people in our religious or spiritual community. When someone enters our circle, particularly with a need, it is our usual response to want to help that person in some way. The moment of truth, however, is when we recognize our own helplessness—when the barrier crumbles between us (as the helpers) and them (as the ones in need of our help). Something inside us responds, not out of charity—though we may feel charitable—but in recognition of the human bond we share. Our compassion is more than loving-kindness or concern for the suffering of another person; it is rooted in the pain we share because we too know the place inside of ourselves that cries out for help.

“I want to like myself better.” Yes, so do I. So do we all. Our moments of truth come when, recognizing aspects of our lives or our selves that inhibit our self-respect, we open our hearts to the transforming power of the Spirit, inviting the kind of change that results in our liking ourselves better.

Once, it was an improbable group of strangers who stirred me to consider how important it is that we learn to like ourselves better. In my first year of ministry in a congregation in Maryland, I decided I wanted to become more involved in the community. I wrote to several local organizations—service clubs, mostly—and offered my services as a speaker. I listed several possible topics, most of them dealing with social and ethical issues such as abortion or death with dignity. I made almost one hundred inquiries, but I received only two responses; one of those was from the county detention center. This was rather curious,

as I had not sent the letter there. They had a group of prisoners who met weekly to hear speakers on special topics, and they scheduled me to come. In this diverse group of young people in their twenties, there were only a few women. Most of the students were serving a sentence for drug-related crime.

I was quite nervous as the heavy metal doors closed behind me after I had surrendered my keys and cleared security. I had led a fairly sheltered life—it did not include being locked inside the windowless concrete walls of a prison facility. Wondering what I could possibly have to say to these students, I gave my lecture on the ethical issues of abortion, and I invited discussion. Some of them participated, while others were demonstrably bored.

Then I led them in an exercise in values clarification.² Describing a man who had to make a decision regarding whether he would break the law to obtain a life-saving drug for his wife, I asked them to decide how they would deal with this ethical dilemma, and to give a reason for their decision. Students who had appeared disdainfully uninvolved became quite engaged (or enraged) as they discussed whether or not the man's love for his wife justified his stealing the drug that would save her life. Even the prison officials were impressed as they witnessed the lively discussion among the students, who seriously grappled with the moral dilemma in the situation. A few days later, they invited me to return regularly and continue with several sessions of values clarification discussion.

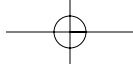
Although the composition of the group changed over the next several months as some of the prisoners completed their sentence or were transferred to another facility, we built a relationship of continuity and trust; the students learned to listen to one another with greater respect, even when they were in disagreement. On one occasion, I gave the students a list of several things they might want in their lives: good health, success, respect from others, wealth, popularity, love, freedom. I asked them to order the values according to which was most important, then to meet in groups and try to agree on a group ranking. They had a very difficult time coming to agreement on the group scale, except for the item at the top of the list. In every group, the item ranked first, above all else, was self-respect. It was even above freedom—and freedom gets a very high rating when you are in prison. What it came down to, as they put it was, “If you don’t respect yourself, none of the rest of those things really mean anything.”

Self-respect. It is the theme that recurs as I consider the nature of the moments of truth that I have related in this chapter. A man hits bottom and comes to my church to turn his life over to Jesus. Just what is the bottom, if not the place where he recognizes that his self-destructive behavior is a form of self-loathing, and that his self-loathing is a cry from his soul for self-respect? Self-respect demands change. Feeling powerless to change, and perhaps having alienated everyone who cares for him, he turns to a stranger, and a reluctant one at that, to mediate the love and power of God.

Similarly, it was self-respect that gave Peter the courage to ask a strange group of people to touch him and pray for him, and then to tell them how significant this event was for him. His gesture of reaching out was in itself an act of self-love and hope. His courage inspired them to shed their skepticism and let go of their expectations for the evening, thus drawing them into a circle where they could grow in their faith and their own self-love.

Self-respect is living your life not according to what others think but what you think and what you know is right. It is living life from the hub, from the spiritual center, where a grace abides. If you have this inner core of self-respect, then you live with a kind of freedom that is grounded in the Spirit, even if you are deprived of other freedoms. Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist who wrote of his experience in Nazi death camps, observed how some prisoners maintained their inner dignity even as they submitted to incredible humiliation and suffering. They retained the “last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” He concluded, “It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.”³ Maintaining dignity and self-respect is a matter of being true to yourself and the values you cherish, no matter what the circumstances.

The insight Frankl gained from his prison camp experience, though filtered through his scholarly research and his expertise as a psychotherapist, is really the same wisdom that emerged from my conver-



sations with a group of young prison inmates, some of whom had dropped out of high school: “If you don’t have self-respect, none of those other things will do much good.”

Curious, isn’t it, how we sometimes have to explore some of the prisons of our lives to discover what it means to be free?

