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BIG BARRIERS TO BELIEVING

Every time I tried to tell you,
the words just came out wrong.
So I'll have to say I love you in a song.
—JIM CROCE

My conversations with seeking friends can validate your own search. You may have been abused by institutional religion, as Melissa was—or found it boring. Or as Steve says, “It just seems wrong-headed, claiming to know answers via being the chosen people or via acceptance of Jesus, or whatever.” You may be a spiritual leader in a religious institution, like Dana, and need a safe way to explore the edges of your own doubts. For others, it is an emotional and spiritual meltdown, as Michael Stipe sings in R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion.” Things fall apart; you say things that shock yourself and it sparks a crisis of integrity.

LOSING YOUR RELIGION

Sometimes you do not plan to lose your religion. Someone loses it for you. A drunk driver, an abusive representative of God, or

You might think you have no religion to lose—that is, anything that consumes your ultimate passion—until you lose it and feel the emptiness.

a betraying lover suddenly turns whatever God you believed in upside down.

Sometimes it just happens, in the way a partly opened soda loses its fizz overnight. Actually, you may

have lost your religion but not your *faith*, though others think you have. You may be experiencing a dark night of the soul—barely finding hints of the Presence, like stars on a foggy night—which I explore in Chapter Eighteen, on emptiness.

It can happen suddenly and gradually. Once, while a minister was preaching, a man suddenly laughed out loud, echoing the minister's own smoldering doubts. The incident led him to leave the local church—and, ironically, thrust him into a new vocation of teaching future ministers the art of people skills.

Or suddenly you wake up one morning and say, "I can't believe this stuff anymore." Questioning the "stuff" can be the catalyst for the journey back home. So if you can befriend the monsters of doubt and disillusionment, like Beauty finally embracing the Beast, they may become the first signs of reawakening.

It is scary to lose your religion. But in the process you may discover beneath it the thing you really treasure most—your true religion. "Those who find their life shall lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it," runs one of Jesus' Eastern-like koans, or riddles. It might be paraphrased: "Lose your religion to find your life."

BIG BARRIERS

But is there any choice between fanatical fundamentalism and a complete spiritual meltdown? Engineers tell me a well-designed bridge requires flexibility as well as stability. A bridge that is too rigid does not give with the rigors of environmental

stress. Here is a worthy vision for the spiritual quest: to be able to give even under stress.

How can we develop genuine faith, passionate *and* open to questioning itself, willing to shed its outgrown shell for a new creature to be born? We cannot go anywhere real unless we face the obstacles honestly. In naming barriers here, I raise big questions to validate your own struggles, which I explore in more depth throughout the book.

OUTDATED GODTALK

In Lake Wobegon, says Garrison Keillor, “All the Norwegians were Lutherans, of course, even the atheists—it was a Lutheran God they did not believe in.” The theism a lot of atheists reject describes a God I cannot believe in either. Many grew up, as I did, with an emotionally or physically absent father, yet hearing of God mainly as a male figure—so no wonder God seemed distant. Images and language skew our attitude toward the sacred. Can a word such as “surrendering” to God perpetuate a distorted spirituality for a child, spouse, or worker who has submitted for too long to an abuser? Trusting in God is more like “yielding” to a cause greater than oneself.

THE BUDDHIST ON YOUR STREET

Our grandparents’ faraway world is now in our living room, on our TV and computer screens. For centuries, missionaries were sent around the world starting schools and hospitals, though mainly, folks assumed, to convert “heathen” Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, or animists. Now the Buddhist child next door is your son’s best friend; Hindus convert a downtown church into a temple; Muslims are invited to explain their faith; and an atheist shovels snow from the widow’s driveway down the street.

THE END OF OTC (ONLY TRUE CHURCH)

“Church” is not the only place where people go for spiritual meaning and service. (Was it ever?) Yet many groups are

founded on the OTC assumption. Like the culture, traces of authoritarian certitude and patriarchal structure persist even in religions trying to be inclusive. So if you will not go to hell for not being part of a religious institution, is there any other reason to engage in a spiritual quest? I am inviting you to explore your unique quest—and new forms of community.

“THE BIBLE SAYS SO”

Abuses among all religions repel thinking and compassionate people. Nevertheless, sixteenth-century reformers, aided by the printing press, made the Bible accessible and with it the free world of ideas, fostering the Enlightenment. But today fundamentalists freeze medieval doctrines, instead of continuing the reformation. Literalists in all religions wrench a few damaging words out of context and cancel the scriptures' timeless message of love. At the same time, ordinary people devour scholars' biblical research, refreshed or puzzled by what is left of the Jesus they thought they knew. How can critical study prepare the way for building up faith? In my tradition, I speak of “journeying alongside the Jesus of history to the Christ of experience.”

THE EXPLOSION OF KNOWLEDGE

In an Internet age, we experience information overload and fragmentation. Having myriad specialists, it is hard to keep up with the whole field, be it health or religion, economics or literature. It is even harder to integrate so many other burgeoning specialties. The poet John Donne describes our time: “T” is all in peeces, all cohaerence gone.” The multiplicity of stimuli makes it difficult to practice simplicity, what the spiritual traditions call a “single eye.” Can we live contemplatively in a complex world?

THE SACRED-SECULAR SPLIT

I am writing out of a passion to bridge this worldly-versus-holy divide. For me, this means taking the Incarnation seriously: “The Word became flesh.” Our fleshy nature can be a vehicle

for the spiritual. *Passion* conveys sexuality but also suffering, as in Jesus' passion and violent death. Still, there is a stained glass split between sexuality and spirituality, violence and values. All of them come together in a movie such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (based on a Stephen King novel): the innocence of a white banker on death row, the sex scandal that caused his wrongful conviction, and his redemption through a black prisoner. Discussing such a film can be sacramental.

SUFFERING

How can a Supreme Love allow suffering? People often misquote the title of Harold Kushner's popular book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* as *Why Bad Things Happen . . . to Good People*. We want answers. But Kushner did not try to figure out *why* suffering happens. Rather, *when* it happens, how do we respond creatively instead of destructively? What kind of God can we believe in since the Holocaust? Vietnam? 9/11? Iraq?

Collateral Damage

FRIENDLY FIRE KILLS INNOCENTS

"War is hell," the General said.

I wonder, God, if you are dead.

Or can it be that where you dwell

is just within such living hell?

Could what people mean by God be the mysterious bits and pieces of love swirling around within the suffering itself?

LACK OF PERMISSION TO QUESTION—OR SHARE EXPERIENCES

Many people do question. But they feel orphaned if they try to express their skepticism or scientific worldview, their anger or spiritual abuse in religious institutions—or to God. Ironically, people who have mystical experiences also fear rejection if they speak of the occasions within the walls of a religious structure.

A child, abused nightly, may have a vision of Jesus standing in the room, protecting her. So often a spiritual vision lies close, in the psyche, to an experience of submerged pain; it is hard to speak of one without the other.

BORING RELIGION

Seekers want to *experience* something they do not have the name for. Instead, many religious folks talk about a God that seems out of touch, often mouthing damaging phrases, such as “It’s God’s will,” at the scene of a car crash. William James quipped, “Faith is either a dull habit or an acute fever.” Is there anything in between?

VIOLENCE CAUSED BY RELIGION

The ultimate turnoff is when a community teaches love but believes so intensely that it harasses or even kills anyone who differs. Osama bin Laden reportedly claimed God attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, killing citizens from many countries. While rescuers were still at work, TV evangelist Jerry Falwell said God was punishing America for homosexuality and abortion—though he later apologized. Both Gods seem vicious or stupid. A little healthy doubt can temper a dangerous certitude. Yet who wants a boring faith?

A human emergency can be the occasion for spiritual emergence.

How can you experience genuine faith and live it out passionately—without a crusade mentality? Somewhere between wallowing in spiritual apathy and fleeing

to dangerous religion, we catch a clue: the true grit of ordinary barriers can create a bridge to a deeper level of faith.

THE BRIDGE FROM CREED TO DEED

As Jim Croce sang, “. . . the words just came out wrong” when

trying to communicate love. The biggest Godtalk barrier is when believers' deeds do not match their creeds. Young people, says Lauren Winner, a popular young writer who recently became Christian, "are not so much wary of institutions as wary of institutions that don't do what they are supposed to do." Shopworn language is an invitation to create fresh images and institutions that embody the words they proclaim. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov speaks to this:

There are people who after a whole lifetime of materialism suddenly feel a strong desire to walk in the paths of God. The attribute of judgment then rises up to accuse them. It tries to prevent them following the way of God by creating barriers. The unintelligent person, when seeing these barriers, starts to back away. But someone with understanding takes this as the very signal that one should draw closer. That person understands that God is to be found in the barrier itself—and the truth is that Godself is indeed hidden in this barrier.

The summer before my sophomore year at Penn State, a classmate called to tell me of a conference in New Hampshire, something like "true faith for times like these." It was free, a farm kid's ideal vacation. But it turned out to be a "Christian right" camp, with actual lists of mainline church ministers branded "communists." I felt my soul gripped in a vice of fear. What saved me from imbibing hate that felt like hell was telling myself a verse in the first letter of John: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." From that point in my life, I involved myself in causes for peace and justice. The barrier became a bridge.

AVOIDING THE TWIN ROADS TO HELL

While I was writing this book, a friend challenged me: "Why do you have such a passion to write this book if you, a minister,

What if instead of dodging the obstacles we turned toward them? We might begin to detect bits and pieces of grace in the grit, bridging the sacred-secular split.

don't think people are going to hell if they're not in a church?" I recalled the story of the radical right camp, and together we affirmed two reasons: rigid exclusiveness creates a hell on earth, and

individualist love without community is powerless to create a loving person or peaceful world.

So how can you avoid these twin roads to hell on earth: clutching rigid beliefs to get a quick fix of security or falling for an anything-goes individualism? Here is a foundation thread woven throughout this book: by following your soul's path with some fellow pilgrims, rather than alone, you become a more loving and genuine person, and more aware of beauty in the brokenness in the world.

Reflection Exercise 4. Losing Track of Time: Contemplation Unawares

When was a time you looked at something or some person with so much love that you lost track of time? Meditate on the experience, revisiting the feelings. Now ask, what are the qualities of such an experience? If you are in a group, you need not share the experience itself (if it is too personal), but pay attention to the qualities people mention.

Reflection Exercise 5. Barriers to Believing, Edges of Growth

By yourself, or in a group, open your journal to two clean pages. Reflect on obstacles that make it hard to believe, writing what you do *not* believe (on the left page), then what you are learning in relation to it (on the right page). Afterward, share your responses with a group, or another person. Here are two examples, with global and personal dimensions:

Barriers: Things I don't believe.

I don't believe religions should fight each other.

I don't believe God causes cancer.

Growth: Things I am learning.

I decided to learn about the world's religions. I'm hoping for a Hindu friend.

Being with my dying friend, I am learning how fragile life is.