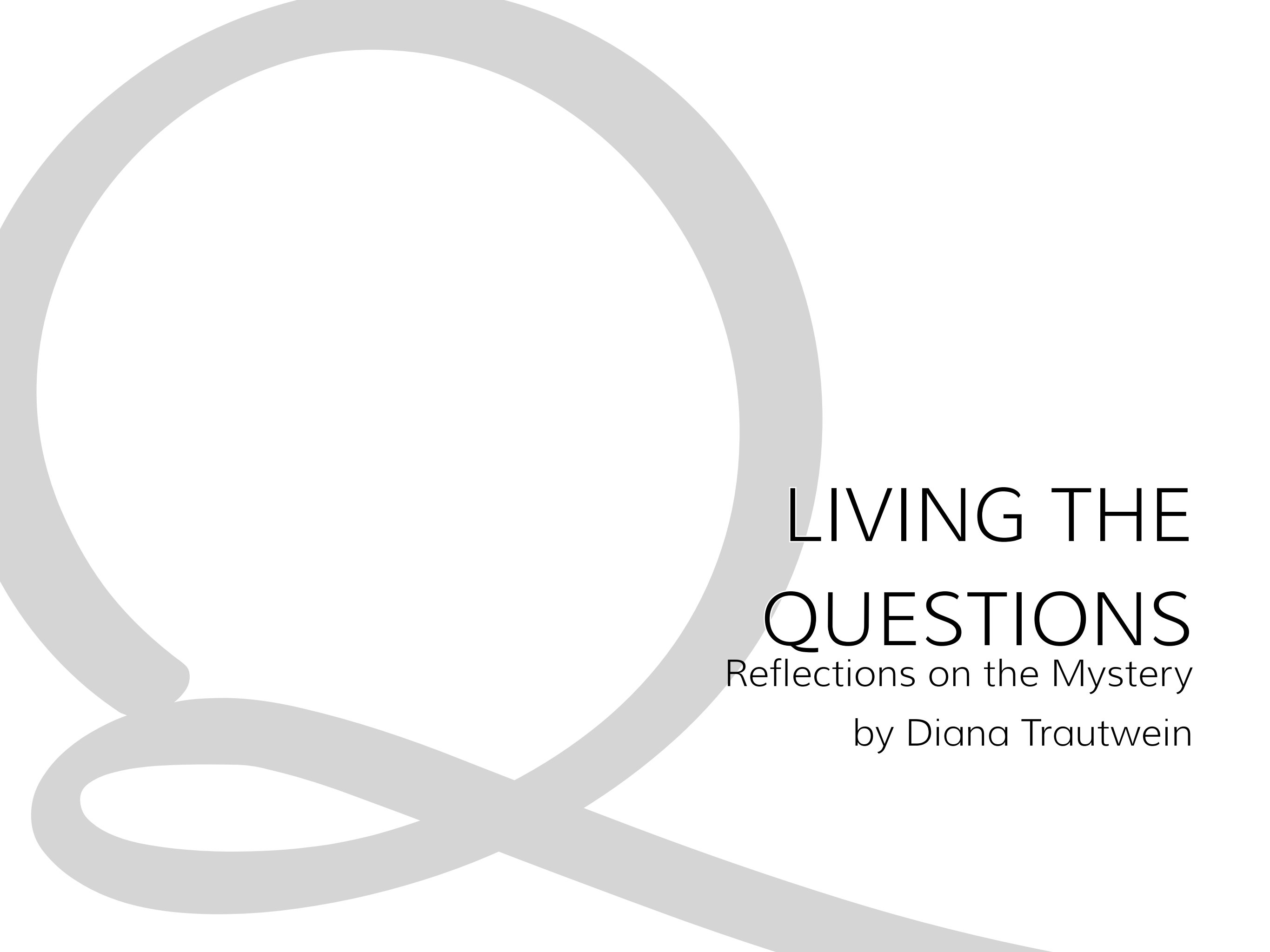
A photograph of a surfer in a black wetsuit riding a green wave. A large, semi-transparent circular graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image. The text is positioned on the right side of the image.

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

Reflections on the Mystery
by Diana Trautwein



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introduction

DELVING INTO THE MYSTERY

Introducing Q & A

As I enter the 8th decade of my life, I have to say that I am painfully aware of each one of those years. My husband has already moved through the milestone of 70, and he's feeling it, too.

We're tired, cranky at times, worry too much over my old, dementing mom (and his mom, until the end of May 2014, when she passed away). We're trying to keep up with our beautiful, energetic grandchildren, and our joints ache almost all the time. We're feelin' it.

Yet, here I sit, staring out at the brilliant noonday sun on a winter day, grateful right into every aching bone for the life I've lived, the gifts I've enjoyed, the things I've learned. Yes, these joints hurt. But this heart and soul are still beating, still singing. I am grateful to be here, inhabiting this space for however long the Lord grants it.

And in between the groans and sighs, I've been listening. Paying attention. Reading. Learning.

Case in point:

I took a walk on the bluffs near the University of California, Santa Barbara. I love that walk, the glorious views in every direction, the en-

ergy of a university campus beating its way underground clear out to Coal Oil Point, where the surfers hang ten.

So I took my very fancy new point-and-shoot camera and I walked. And I watched the surfers as they inhabited that immense sea.

Who knew that surfers could be such powerful teachers?? Here's a little of what I learned on a Tuesday afternoon:

To be a surfer requires *dedication*. These kids ride their bikes out the long, dusty pathway, holding their boards close to their bodies.

To be a surfer requires *community*. You will never see a lone ranger, waiting for the next set. Always, always, they do this thing together. Yes, their rides are individual, but the waiting? The learning from the water? The ebb and flow? This, they do together.

To be a surfer requires *patience*, long stretches of sitting, watching, sensing, obeying the rhythm of the water. In between the thrilling stuff is a whole lot of boring stuff, but all of it is what makes an expert out of a beginner.

To be a surfer requires *flexibility*, and a willingness to go with the flow. From straddling to crouching to half-standing, to a full-out-

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

stand-up-look-at-this, you've got to be willing to change your position on a dime. See what I mean?



LIVING THE QUESTIONS



Dedication, community, patience, flexibility – all part of the surfing life. And all part of being obedient to what the water has to teach, don't you think?

If we want to learn –

we've got to get wet,
we've got to find a tribe,
we've got to be willing to wait out the lulls,
and we've got to move with the rhythm of the water.

I've been following Jesus all my life, cannot remember a moment when I didn't know him. And still, I fall off that board, miss the cues, lose the rhythm. I'm not there yet — not exactly a beginner, but not quite an expert, either.

Along the way, I have managed to learn a few things. Some of them are painful, painful enough to leave scars. And though I would never seek it out, I've lived long enough to know that pain can be a place of profound growth, even of transformation.

Every surfer worth his or her salt has endured bruising, battering, humiliation and defeat. But the ones who choose to learn from all of that

are the ones who become adept, adaptable, creative and committed. In short, the ones who yield to the mystery of it all, and accept that an occasional punch to the gut is part of the process — these are the ones who catch the waves, time after time.



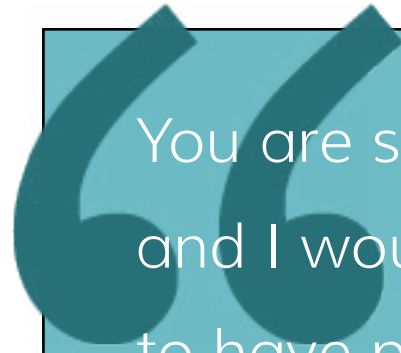
This cross stands at the edge of the cliff that sits between the two primary surfing coves along the Coal Oil Point Reserve. It is glorious and sturdy, withstanding wind and weather for as long as I've been living. I like the juxtaposition of sturdiness and wildness that I find in this place, the unpredictable mingling of formed and unformed, hand-created and God-created.

It reminds me of life – this crazy mix of goodness and grief, beauty and horror, healing and brokenness

that makes our four-score-and ten the rich and remarkable thing that it is. Over the years that have been granted me, I have never been able to settle for the quick and easy when I think about that crazy mix we enjoy (or endure) during our lifespan.

Don't offer me truisms, cliches, pat answers or formulas, please. I'd rather hear a different way of asking the question. Because, here's the truth of it: I am a person who loves the questions; I believe they are worth the patient work of exploration, prayer and lived experience that can sometimes lead to answers. In fact, I believe that my word for 2014, obedient, is as much about asking the right questions as it is about finding answers.

For as long as I pastored, there was a beautiful calligraphic print that hung in or near my various offices. It contains these words, written by Rainer Maria Rilke in his small book, "Letters to a Young Poet." This is a truth I believe; this is a truth I try to live:



You are so young, you have not even begun,
and I would like to beg you, dear one, as well as I can,
to have patience with everything that is unsolved in
your heart and to try to cherish the questions them-
selves,

like closed rooms and like books written in a very
strange tongue.

Do not search now for the answers, which cannot be
given you because you could not live them.

It is a matter of living everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps you will then, gradually,
without noticing it, one distant day,
live right into the answers.

—Rilke

I would like to invite you to spend some time living the questions with me. Each chapter of this little book will provide some reflections on a question that I've lived with for a while. I've got a list of the ones that I've discerned from my own life experience and from much of what I read on the internet. I'm hoping that this kind of reflective meandering might be what you hunger for when you come up against a question without an easy answer. I think we'll come closer to living an answer if I begin by telling you my own story, my own journey -- if I talk about how I've tried to live into the questions during my seven decades of life.

I encourage you to read this at your own pace, working through a chapter at a time, and then responding to the reflection questions provided with each one. I am inviting you into a conversation -- a conversation with me, with God and with yourself. I do not have all 'the answers,' and I'm not sure I even want them. I believe that wrestling with, reflecting on, temporarily coming to peace with and then asking again is the way we learn, the way we make room for the Spirit to work transformation in us. We are works in progress, designed by God to search and seek until we are found. I hope you will consider

this small book a safe space for your own exploration, wondering and prayer.

Here is the question I'll focus on in Chapter One:

Why is there so much talk about 'obedience'?

chapter • one

LETTING GO OF THE LIST

*Why is there so much talk
about 'obedience'?*

Surf's up! And the water looks great. So grab your board, find a trail down to the beach and let's venture out into the deep, blue sea.

Safety first, however.



Remember that the ocean is vast, extends way beyond our view, is deeper than we can imagine and can sometimes prove treacherous. Even if we're waiting right next to each other for a new set of waves, each of us will have our own experience.

We'll use the same general skill set, grapple with similar pieces of equipment, and wave at one another when the next swell rises. But when we catch that ride, we're on our own, finding our way back to the beach. I encourage you to share with other seekers any helpful hints, scary stories, good (or bad) memories of past ventures out into the deep. That's a very good thing, that sharing, because we can teach each other, learn together, experience the rolling of the water as a team. But what we cannot do is make assumptions or hold onto unrealistic expectations about any of it. We're all finding our way. And by the grace of God, we'll discover reservoirs of courage and grace we didn't know were possible.

So, bearing all that in mind, let's push our way out into the deeper water for a while.

I mentioned in the introduction that my word for 2014 was *obedient*. Let me say at the outset that this word I was given is NOT a favorite

of mine. It's a word that carries piles of negative freight, instills fear in the hearts of toddlers, and frustration in the minds of most adults. It flies in the face of what we believe is the highest value known to humanity: *freedom*.

I've wrestled with this word for most of my life, my rebellious heart resisting the very sound of it. Strangely enough, however, I have *lived* my life in an outwardly obedient way. I never did anything as a teenager that brought angst to my parents. Yes, I was outspoken, given to crying jags, and beginning to pull away from a wonderful but sometimes invasive mother. Still, I was a good girl.

A very good girl.

There was a problem with that, however, and it took me a long time to figure out what that problem was. Yes, I was obedient to the 'rules,' both written and unwritten. The rules of my family, my culture, my church environment. I was downright dutiful in many ways, helpful around the house, caring for my much-younger brother, getting good grades in school, not experimenting with *anything*. I learned to conform, to live up to the expectations of all kinds of others, and I worked hard to be pleasing, lovable, accepted. I had a clear picture

of right and wrong in my mind and I toed the line conscientiously. Sometimes too conscientiously.

Yes, indeed, I was obedient.

But I don't think I had a clue what that word meant. In fact, I'm still learning, unpeeling layers, redefining terms. I had internalized a long list of rules as a young kid, and that list just kept getting longer as I moved through high school and college. A few of those rules are part of my life today — I've learned that boundaries and limits can sometimes be gifts, giving shape to life, and hope in the midst of confusion.

But the problem with a too-long list of rules is that it can become like that many-headed water monster of old, the Hydra, the one that grew two heads for every one you cut off. Before you know it, you can find yourself gasping for air, the very life sucked out of you as you frantically try to contain all of life's contingencies in their own secure, little boxes.

Here is just one, small example. Very personal to me, not necessarily applicable to you.

I began teaching Bible studies when I was 14 years old, immersing

myself in devotional reading, prayer, journaling. And I kept teaching Bible studies, off and on, for the next fifty years. FIFTY YEARS. And I loved it. For one thing, it kept me ‘in the Word,’ which had been drilled into me as the most important rule of all, to be in that Word every day of my life. I am grateful for the depth of my own experience with scripture and I love it dearly.

But a funny thing happened when I retired from pastoring: I stopped doing daily devotional reading. And you want to know something even ‘funnier?’ I believe I was being obedient when I did so.

Okay. Now catch your breath, close your mouth and relax.

I still *read* the Bible. I still *love* the Bible. I even still *study* the Bible, though not as often as I once did. But I know now, four years into this strange land called retirement, that daily reading had become a ‘list’ item for me, one that had to go, at least for a while. Why? To draw me deeper into the heart of God, that’s why. To teach me — again — that obedience is not about adhering to a list, not about earning my way to grace, not about proving myself worthy.

For hundreds of years, people followed Jesus with their whole hearts without ever — EVER — holding a Bible in their hands and reading


from it by themselves. Sometimes we forget that truth. I do not mean to diminish the remarkable gift that is ours in this book we call holy — it is the very breath of God and a primary means of encountering God in this life. I am grateful for it every day of my life.

But following a reading plan, in obedience to some inner call to toe the line, be a good girl (or guy), to check those fifteen minutes off the list, *to prove to myself, or heaven help me, to God, that I am worthy of love and grace?* Not good. Yes, the discipline of reading the Word is important, especially in the earliest years of faith commitment. But doing it in response to an internalized list of rules does not necessarily lead us into God's heart.

And that's where this word 'obedience' can get tricky, isn't it? Obedience to what? To whom? To an ever-growing external or internal list of acceptable behaviors? Or does it look more like this: ***learning to listen to the voice of Love within, and to follow where Love leads.***

This is where Jesus tells us we are to look, this is how we're called to listen: to love God, and to love others as we love ourselves. Our dear Lord took the shining sword of his own sweet tongue and sliced through the multitudinous lists of the professional religious folk all

around him when he said this:



‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.

– Matthew 22:37-40, The Message

Now that is a very short list.

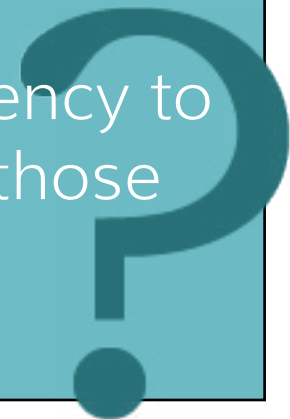
So this is how this small facet of obedience is unfolding in me at this juncture of my life, at this end of fifty years of immersing myself in the Word of God. Over those years, I memorized some good-sized chunks of God’s word. And much of it, I still remember. During

these last four years of digging deep instead of spreading wide, I've been grateful for that memory work. Most days, I chew on phrases — sometimes just a single word! — from that memory bank, and I ponder them while I walk, focus on them when I sit in contemplative prayer. I think I spent about four weeks just holding the word 'glory' in my mouth and in my heart, amazed at all the ways in which I could see it shimmering all around me.

Being obedient to this strange new call has brought profound reminders of who I am and who God is. I am grateful that as I move into the next decade of my life, I am slowly re-learning that God calls us to relationship, not a head trip; to transformation, not information; to love, not lists.

So, you over there, the one riding the board next to me? Here are some questions I'd love for you to wrestle with as you contemplate what 'letting go of the list' might look like for you:

1. What is God teaching you about obedience these days?
2. What further questions are being raised as you think about it, or as you read my thoughts?
3. How do you counteract our stubborn tendency to create lists, make boxes, and then live inside those boxes (and insist that others live there, too)?



Question for Chapter Two:

What's with this 'more of Jesus, less of me' stuff?

chapter • two

FEAR OF ABANDONMENT

*What's with this 'more of Jesus,
less of me' stuff?*

This week, we're moving out beyond the first set of breakers in this adventure we're taking, out into the deep waters of our faith. The story I tell this week is a deeply personal one, and you may not be familiar with some of the emotional and psychological backwater I've had to push my way through, by the grace of God, to learn a different way of understanding this particular phrase: *More of Jesus, less of me*. I think what I've learned is important for all of us, at the very least because this story might help us all to be more careful and thoughtful with our choice of words, especially when we're teaching those who are young — in age, or in the faith.

When I was a little girl, faithfully attending Sunday school each week, we had a little saying that went like this: “Jesus, **O**thers and **Y**ou – that's how you spell **J**OY.”

And I inhaled that sentiment like it was the sweetest of perfumes. YES! We should always be last on the list, giving ourselves away to Jesus and to other people. That's how you live like Jesus, right? That's how you are a good girl, a truly good girl.

As I got older, that simple phrase became a little more complicated, and the scent of it a little more cloying. This time, it went something like this: “He must increase, I must decrease,” lifting the words directly out of the mouth of John the Baptist near the end of chapter 3 in John’s gospel.

From there, it morphed into, “More of Jesus, less of me,” and the older I got, the more terrified I became when I heard those words.

I didn’t recognize it as terror initially. In fact, I didn’t know how deeply this message had affected me until I began to be interested in spiritual direction. I first learned about direction by reading a series of novels, of all things. In the late 80’s and early 90’s, British author Susan Howatch wrote a great bunch of stories about priests in the Anglican church and I devoured those books when I was in my 40’s. They were earthy, to be sure, but they were also rich and filled with beautiful tidbits of theology and ecclesiology. Throughout the entire series, some of my favorite characters were spiritual directors.

So I began to read some rich and informative non-fiction books about direction, and to ask likeminded friends about it. One of those friends was a woman of spiritual depth and breadth with whom I co-taught

several Sunday school classes for adults. She was also a psychologist and a spiritual director. In the mid-1990's, I met with her to explore whether or not we might enter into a director/directee relationship. At our first session, she handed me a copy of Foucald's "Prayer of Abandonment" and told me to take it home and reflect on it. Here is that prayer:

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

– Charles de Foucald

It's beautiful, isn't it? Filled with love, joyful submission, and trust.

But I could not pray that prayer.

I tried, but I'd get to the word 'abandon,' and start gulping great gasps of air. I prayed about it, I talked it over with the woman who had given it to me, and her immediate response to me was this: "Diana, you need *therapy*. Not direction." (Did I mention I was in seminary at the time and beginning to hear God's call to professional ministry? *What???* Pastors might need therapy? Well, that's a great big YES.)

I have spent the last twenty years trying to unpack what happened inside me as I read that prayer and, in the process, I have taken a long look at that old Sunday school saying and the use (or mis-use) of that verse from John 3. And I've done a TON of personal work on all kinds of important things. . . all because I gagged on the word, "abandon."

We all have a fear of abandonment. Along with the fear of falling, it's one of the most primal fears human persons carry. But what I was feeling was not quite that, was it? This is what I finally realized: ***I was terrified of disappearing.*** I had somehow inhaled some really lousy theology along with that early Sunday school ditty; I had taken the

words of John the Baptist completely out of context* and come to believe that the way to the heart of the gospel was for me to somehow be sublimated to the point of extinction, for Jesus alone to inhabit this flesh.

There are all kinds of interesting reasons why this particular woman came up with these particular fears and most of them, I understand a whole lot better now than I did then. But what I want to talk about here is the sometimes dangerous way we throw words around when we teach and when we preach.

Because *this* is the beautiful truth of the gospel, the powerful, life-changing, miraculous truth:

As we learn more about the heart of Jesus, as we open ourselves to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, this happens:

"More of Jesus, MORE of me."

Yes, you read that right. Think about it for a minute or two: why would God go to all the trouble of creating the wildly different and wholly beautiful human race if the goal was for each one of us to disappear, to lose our distinctiveness, to be pushed into the waters of oblivion that some have chosen to call “Jesus?”

Is that wave supposed to cover us completely?

In some ways, YES, YES, YES. We are covered by the grace of God made tangible in the blood of Jesus. We are; yes, we are.

BUT also, NO. *We are not lost* when we are covered by the grace of God. We are not ever lost. No.

WE ARE FOUND.

The true me, the real me, the best me, the apple-of-God’s-eye me, the very particular, very unique, highly individual me is given space. Room to breathe and grow and flourish. The heart of the mystery, the wonder is this: the more we allow Jesus to fill us with love, to inhabit us, the more ‘me’ we discover. The me that God had in mind when he created the world, the me that reflects the image of God, the me that Jesus sees when he moves in for good.

And I do mean *for good*.

Because Jesus is the one who calls forth from us health, wholeness, obedience — in the best sense of that word — and *life*. And in the growing and refining process that we use such big, ole theological words to describe (like sanctification, even justification. . . ohh, they make me shudder a little!) what emerges, over time, through all the good stuff that happens and all the hard stuff that happens — what emerges is the truest ‘me’ possible this side of heaven.

There is certainly much that has been and can be written about all the possible pieces of this truth. Things like good self-care, healthy boundaries, learning what it means to love ourselves *so that we can more fully and healthily love others*. But for today, I want to give witness to the truth that the beautiful prayer listed above, the one that started me down the road of serious self-reflection and earnest biblical study, is now one of my favorites.

Because today I know that God has no desire to devour me, to make me some kind of freakish ‘walking dead’ person. No. Jesus came to this earth to show us what a truly human life looks like. And he wants us to discover what OUR truly human life looks like.

It's true, we will look a lot like Jesus.

But we will also look like ourselves.

**John is replying to questions from his followers who have become jealous of all the attention Jesus is getting. John recognizes that his own work is done, that Jesus is now at center stage. In that context only, he says, "He must increase and I must decrease." Like so many other catch phrases grasped from scripture, this one cannot be directly applied to each of us, at least not in the way in which it too often has been. When we come to Jesus and ask him to live in us, we are joined to this Elder Brother of ours as partners — not equal partners, but partners nonetheless. This is the way God designed it — God works through the likes of us. Amazing. It is my heartfelt prayer that I will more and more closely resemble this Brother of mine. But it is also my prayer that I will more fully inhabit myself, the one Jesus came for. The one Jesus died for. The one Jesus prays for at the right hand of the Father.*

For your own personal reflection on this chapter:

1. What impact has well-meant, but misguided teaching had on your life, in this area, or any other?
2. What practices do you follow to help you discover, own and celebrate the truest 'you?'
3. Try praying through the ancient prayer in this chapter and see if there is any hesitation as you say it. If so, be honest with God about it, and honest with yourself. This is the point at which the Holy Spirit wants to do some good work in you -- are you open to that work?

The question for Chapter Three:
What's with all this talk about 'sin?'

chapter • three

REMEMBERING WHAT COMES FIRST

What's with all this talk about 'sin'?

Interesting surfing weather this week. I took another trip out to Coal Oil Point and discovered that the entire coast — and at least 200 feet inland — were shrouded in fog. The sun shone through it, which actually made it more difficult to orient myself, as the light bounced around the thick air. As I walked that gravel path, I thought to myself that the entire experience was akin to trying to write this chapter. SIN is a huge topic. An important one, and for most of us, absolutely central to our understanding of who we are, who God is, why Jesus came to earth, and what the cross means. So wading out into this particular topic is a whole lot like wading out into the fog. It's harder to see what's coming at you, it's tough to find your fellow travelers, and it feels decidedly more scary than the exact same water does on a sunny day.

In the early chapters of this booklet, I featured photos taken at the exact same spots along the path that you'll see here. They looked decidedly different on this second trip. The foggy weather felt slightly threatening, even a bit frightening, which pretty much mirrors my feelings as I delve into this discussion about sin.

So . . . *here we go.*

Remembering back to my earliest years in Sunday School, at about age 4 or 5, I remember a little booklet. It had no words, just different colored pages, and the teacher used it to tell the gospel story. I don't remember all of the pages and their contribution to the overall narrative, but I do remember these: a deep black double page to represent the state of my small, 4-year old heart, completely darkened by something the teacher called 'sin,' then a bright red page which represented the spilt blood of our Savior, then a white page, to indicate my now-clean heart if I said 'yes' to Jesus, followed by a shiny gold spread, which assured me of my eternal destination.

Oh, I loved that book! And I loved that story. And I wanted that white heart, yes I did. And I definitely wanted that shiny gold future. This little tool was meant to be a good, simple means for helping children begin to understand some of the truths of the Christian faith. I'm not sure, however, that those truths actually sank into my little heart as intended.

And here's why:

Children that age are just beginning to understand about good and bad behavior; they have no real concept of 'sin.' I think I internalized

the message this way: *Jesus wants me to stop doing bad things; if I don't stop doing bad things, I am a bad person and I cannot get to heaven.* And I worked very, very hard for a very, very long time to be a very, very good girl.

So very hard, that I began to believe that my sinful self was the most important thing about me. Otherwise, why did Jesus come? Why did Jesus die?

Because I am a sinner. Everybody is a sinner. And that's all that matters about us: *we are sinners.*

I had a sense of diligence, of always working hard to be better, of trudging through life, walking the straight and narrow. I was a church girl — and I loved church, don't get me wrong. I was a church girl in conservative southern California (and no, that is not an oxymoron. . . there was a lot of fundamentalism in CA in the mid 20th century). And every single invitational sermon I ever heard in the first twelve years of my life was centered around how sinful I was and how much I needed to be assured of a place in heaven someday. So *by cracky*, I'd better raise my hand, walk down that aisle and say 'yes.'

I overstate. A little. But I think you catch my drift, right?

Then we moved and began attending a different church, one where I came to know Jesus in a much different way. The central truths were the same; it was the presentation that differed. More layers were added and the story of salvation took on deeper, richer hues. There began to grow in me the sense that maybe there was something more to be found in Jesus than forgiveness.

Forgiveness is powerful, wonderful stuff – and it is so very important. BUT. There is also Restoration. Empowerment. Redemption. Transformation. And I was deeply moved by the stories of Jesus I read in the gospels, the way he moved to the edges, called out the best in people — even people the rest of society had already written off, like Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus.

Jesus saw something else in them that no one else seemed to see: he saw something worth his time, worth his goodness, worth his invitation. *He saw them.*

He also, of course, saw their sin. And he did not ignore it — he exorcised, he healed, he questioned, he called for newness. But here's what I began to understand during my adolescent years and then reflected on more and more in my 20s and 30s:

Jesus saw beneath their behavior, beneath the swirling demons, beneath their bad reputations. He saw something else, something real and true and more important, even than their sin: *he saw God's image in them, and God's design.* And then he reached right in and pulled that beauty out so that others could see it, too!

Take a look at these two photographs for a minute.



When I put my camera up to take this shot, I saw only water with my naked eye. My camera, however, showed me — ever so dimly — that there were surfers out there! At least four of them! And then, I hit the

‘enhance’ button in iPhoto and *voila!* There they were, in sharper contrast and detail — four strong surfers, doing their thing, despite the messy day.



God can see us, my friend. He can see us beneath all the fog of sin and brokenness.

Not only that, God LOVES what he sees, desperately, passionately, eternally. God hates sin, that is true. God hates anything that cuts us off from relationship, from ‘walking in the garden’ together. That for me is the clearest, simplest and best definition of the word — ‘sin’ is anything that separates us from God.

But God loves us. *And that means that sin is NOT the most important thing about us.* Our created humanity is. That’s what needs rescuing, that what’s needs saving, that’s what needs restoration, that’s what needs transformation.

And that’s why Jesus came as one of us: to show us what it means to live a fully human life, with all of its ups/downs/struggles/joys/questions/answers. And to show us that neither sin, brokenness, nor death has the last word. The cross followed by the empty tomb become the place where heaven and earth meet, where God shows us what it means to be a ‘king,’ where power and authority (and forgiveness and redemption) are redefined forever.

I’m not sure how or why the dominant picture of the atonement — what happened in the incarnation/death/resurrection — became

sin-centric in the last few hundred years. It has not always been so. Scripture teaches us that many things happened with the Great Event of Jesus.

Indeed, we do need to grapple with, understand and relinquish our inner ‘bentness,’ our direction-toward-sin, and we need to do that each and every day. Confession is good for the soul, and by that I mean it is *good* for the soul. It reminds us that God is God and we are not.

But. BUT. When we focus so much of our attention, our study, our prayers, our worship, our conversation on what a mess we are (even though we are, indeed, very messy people!), we take the focus off of God’s ongoing work of redemption and transformation within us. We lose sight of our utter loveliness to God, despite the messes we make, despite our proclivity for willfulness and idolatry.

LOVE COMES FIRST. And if we can allow ourselves to be loved, without apology or hesitation — well, the earth moves, you know? Read the story of the Forgiving Father in chapter 15 of Luke’s gospel. Read it through carefully and prayerfully. *The father loves that boy*

long before he sees him coming down the road. Long before the boy repents of his sin. Long before anything.

Love comes first.

“To God be the glory, great things God has done!”

Some questions for your reflection:

1. What does a ‘foggy day’ look like in your life? Where do you find yourself straining to see, to understand?
2. Was your own early instruction in the faith anything like mine? Were you told that your sin was the most important thing about you? What do you think about folding in a few other ideas when you think about why Jesus came to earth?

The question for Chapter Four:

“Is there room for my tears here?”

chapter • four

IS THERE ROOM FOR
MY TEARS HERE?

As we work our way through each chapter, you'll notice that my reflections will always be general in nature, not specific. And you do not have to agree with the answers I come up with! I have been ordained for nearly 20 years in a denomination that holds as one of its core values 'the reality of freedom in Christ.' That means that we agree to disagree on any and all theological questions that are not essential to our salvation. That leaves room for *lots* of disagreement!

In this chapter, I'm taking a small detour away from the surfing imagery that has been central to my thinking and pondering thus far. Not a big detour, but a definite shift to the side.

The surfers I know have some special tools or talismans that they like to carry or wear when they're looking for the perfect wave. And I do, too. They aren't the typical things used by surfers, however, as I am most definitely not one! But they are treasures to me, reminders of who I am and whose I am. Let me introduce you to them. Each of these sits on the desk in my small study and I see them every time I am in that room.



Treasure Number One

One weekend in early April, nearly thirty-five years ago, we had a brief respite after a huge rainstorm that lasted almost a week. So we piled our three kids in the car and drove an hour west from our home in Altadena, headed towards the ocean. All five of us walked out onto

the beach and immediately noticed that there were thousands of tiny shells scattered all over the hard, damp sand left behind by the ebbing tide. We don't get a lot of shells in southern California. Sometimes; after a big storm, we might find a few here and there. But this was just stunning to see — and delightful. We all began to gather as many as we could in the hour we'd set aside for beach-walking.

My middle daughter, who has always had great observational skills, was the champ that day, bringing back several handfuls of these beautiful, delicate things, almost all of them scallop shells. We rinsed and dried them and I kept some of them separate from the several baskets full of shells that have always adorned our homes over the years.

These were special to me. They were small, very small. And they were perfect. Something about them spoke to a deep place in me.



Treasure Number Two

Within the first two weeks of moving to Santa Barbara to begin my very first (and only) paid position on a pastoral staff, I was browsing

among some of the quaint shops on State Street in my new hometown. I quickly located a place that remains on my top 10 list to this day, a tiny, crowded shop that features jewelry, brightly colored linens, wonderful seasonal decor, and collections of tiny things. Do you see that basket? It's about an inch and half square. And can you see what's in it? Five tiny loaves of bread and two small fish. Does that sound familiar to you?

Treasure Number Three

The last piece of my favorite trio is this small carving of the weeping Jesus of Lithuania, a gift from a friend who used to be my boss. This is what Wikipedia has to say about this figure:

Wooden carvings of Rūpintojėlis, “The Jesus who cares for us,” are often seen at crossroads and in cemeteries. He always rests his head on his right arm, his left hand rests on his knee, a crown of thorns on his head shows drops of blood, and his face is full of solicitude and sorrow.

The pose may represent Jesus’ anticipation of his crucifixion, after his scourging and crowning with thorns. It is also said to depict Jesus after his



*resurrection and before his ascension. One legend has it that Jesus traveled throughout the world wearing his crown of thorns; during his journeys, **he sometimes sat on stones near the road and wept.***

(emphasis mine)

At first glance, it might seem to you that this last piece of the three is the one that relates most readily to the question of the week. And, in one way, that is indeed true. This is a small copy of a figure that appears all over the country of Lithuania, a figure that encapsulates the suffering endured during communism's rule, a figure that reminded faithful Catholic believers that Jesus had not forgotten them in the midst of their suffering. His tears made their own more bearable somehow.

In truth, however, it is also the shells, and those tiny reminders of the miracle on the hillside, in combination with the weeping Jesus figure — all of these together — that help me to remember and believe that my own tears are seen by God. Not only are they seen, they are treasured, collected in God's bottle and remembered. I believe that my tears, and your tears, are gifts *from* God and *to* God.

And also? Your tears and my tears are gifts to the larger body of Christ.

Tears are small things, you see. Tiny, actually. Just droplets of water that flow from our eyes when we're feeling deep emotions or when we're enduring physical pain. Did you know that the tears that come when you are peeling onions or blinking at a fierce wind are not a chemical match for the tears you shed in either pain or joy? 'Real' tears carry toxins away from the body, they are a cleansing agent, a release. And part of God's design.

I also believe that they are evidence of the Holy Spirit's good work within us. I believe that tears can be a *charism*, not unlike tongues or prophecy, wisdom or miracles. No, they're not listed anywhere in scripture. But I believe it nonetheless. For me they are the gift that came when I asked for the gift of tongues, the gift of a special prayer language. I have not received the language, but the tears spring forth, unbidden, many times when I pray, when I counsel others, when I read the Word. And over and over again, I have learned that they are *gift*.

They are also often *sign*, providing a ‘pay attention to this’ inkling that God is up to something in my heart or the heart of another. Yes, they are tiny. But they are perfect — just like the shells. And they represent what God’s Spirit can do in and through us when we ***relinquish what we have***, when we let go of our tendency toward too-tight control over our emotions and our thought life. A lesson that I remember whenever I look at the loaves and the fishes.

God, you see, can do miracles with very small things. And sometimes, those very small things are our tears.

So, why then, I wonder, do so many Christians shy away from them? Why is the predominant mood on Sunday morning too often one of incessant good cheer, hail-fellow-well-met, I’m-fine-thank-you-I’m-just-fine? In truth, the Sunday morning good cheer wouldn’t bother me so much if I were confident that the tears that I KNOW most people are carrying in their bodies and their spirits were given permission to flow somewhere in the midst of the community, maybe on another day of the week!

What worries me is that too many Christians simply do not feel safe admitting that they carry those tears, believing instead that they have

managed to flunk the primary test of authentic discipleship. Where is the JOY?, they wonder. Where is the gratitude?

I have Jesus, why am I not ‘fine?’

What I want to say — what my beautiful shells and my small reminder of miracles and the figure of our crying Jesus remind me — is that life is not always grand. ***And that is to be expected.***

Injustice abounds. Wars rage. Children die. Health gives way. Minds deteriorate. Relationships break apart. Jobs are lost. Bad habits persist. Doubt looms large. Everything is not just hunky-dory all the time, you know? We are so.not.fine.

And. . . there is this, oh-so-important piece of our story:

Jesus wept.

Hang onto that truth. With all that is in you, hang onto it. Our holy book is laced with the language of lament, fists raised to the heavens, tears streaming down the cheeks. Because tears are a part of what it means to live as human creatures in a broken but beautiful world. Tears are a primary means of release, of communication, of grief, pain, loss and even of joy and gratitude. ***It all melds together, you see.***

Mourning and dancing ‘kiss each other,’ and all of it is part of what it means to live a full, real, human life.

This is a huge topic, so many layers to be unpacked and wrestled through. But for this chapter, the most important answer to our question is **YES**, there is room for your tears here. In fact, they are **welcome** here. Because if you let me see your tears, then I know you are giving me a gift; you are giving me the truth. You are letting me in, so that I can weep with you, and then together, we can weep with God.

When we offer our tears to one another and to the living, loving God of the universe, we are allowing ourselves to be truth-tellers and image-bearers more powerfully than at almost any other time in our lives for precisely this reason: ***we know a God who weeps with us.*** And his name is Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

Further questions to ponder:

1. How easily do you cry? What kinds of things trigger tears in you? Do you battle embarrassment when they show up? Does anything I've said here help you to welcome rather than deny them?
2. Are tears welcome in your own Christian community/church? Why or why not?



The question for Chapter Five:
What do we do with our suffering?

chapter • five

LIVING LOVED

*What do we do with
our suffering?*

Valentine's Day has never been a favorite day for me. It's become over-commercialized and too often leads to tiny heart-breaks instead of warm fuzzies. Yet when I wrestled with this question about suffering on my blog, the post happened to fall on that very day.

And it somehow seemed truly appropriate. Because this is the most important truth I've learned over my long life, and the one I hope you carry away with you, deep inside:

The greatest task, and the deepest joy, of the human journey is learning to live loved.

Trusting that despite all kinds of evidence that might, at first glance, seem to be to the contrary, **we are loved.** Loved beyond reason, beyond our ability to comprehend, beyond imagining.

Why are we loved?

Because ***we are***. Because we ***live***. Because we existed in the mind of God before ever we drew breath. Because each and every one of the billions of us who have walked the deserts and jungles of this planet is beautiful, lovable, glorious and a totally unique bearer of the image of God. A Great God, who is both beyond us and with us, who rejoices when we rejoice and weeps when we weep.

We are loved.

Everything else begins and ends with that statement.

On days when the sun is shining, the sky is clear, and we and our loved ones are busy enjoying the good things this life has to offer — on *those* days, the whole idea of living loved seems possible. Good feelings overflow, endorphins rush through our brains and bodies, and Life.Is.Good.

Yes, maybe we are **loved!** Maybe this is what love looks like — happy feelings all around, blue skies wherever my eye lands.

But when the blue begins to fade a bit, and clouds drift by, when harder things hit us and interrupt the good vibes of blue-sky days. . . well,

then that whole idea begins to seem a lot more iffy, doesn't it? Something uncomfortable begins to intrude, a physical ailment or a ruptured relationship, job dissatisfaction or not enough money at the end of the month – *living loved?* Not likely. Living ignored feels more like it.

But here's what I'm coming to believe. I'm not all the way there yet, but I'm getting there, and I'm breathing prayers for grace and patience to live into this truth:

It is when the storm looms large that all the edges of living loved begin to be visible. It is in the storm that we meet God most intimately. And we encounter ourselves there, too. We learn a heck-uva lot more about who we are, how we're built, where our strengths and weaknesses are, and what our own personal shadows have to teach us when we're navigating through gale-force winds than when we're enjoying a blue-sky day.

If I'm honest — and I'm trying to be! — I don't like this very much. I prefer sunny days and happy feelings. I'm grateful for loving family and financial stability and good health and the ability to be generous — and it's easy to be grateful for all of that.

But life is not simply blue-sky days. And when the storms hit, gratitude is much harder to find. Sometimes we can go years without seeing a hint of blue in the scene unfolding around us. Life is complicated, often difficult, sometimes filled with pain. What then? *Living loved?*

Now, it feels more like living *abandoned*.

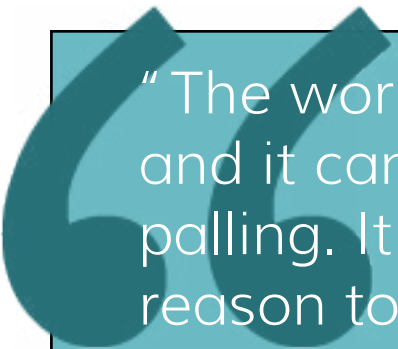
In the last chapter, I encouraged you to give yourself permission for the tears that come with all those feelings, all those stormy days. I believe scripture invites us to lament, giving us words and emotions and stories that underscore the reality of human suffering. Biblical faith is not stoicism and it is not saccharine or cheesy, either.

Biblical faith is muscular, tough, stubborn. Joseph held onto hope despite calamity after calamity. Jacob learned everything the hard way. David was great at music and kingship, but lousy at parenting and integrity. Elijah was aces when the big show demanded it, but fell apart

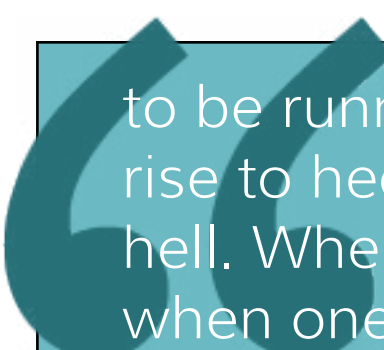
when fatigue overwhelmed. Hannah cried out to God when her life felt empty and bitter and then gave up God's gift when he arrived. Ruth begged and borrowed the very food she and Naomi needed while learning to trust Israel's God. Mary pondered and sang, questioned and grieved.

Suffering is never minimized in scripture. It is acknowledged on almost every page. We are never told to 'rise above it.' Instead, we are invited to *live into it* and to learn from it. And to recognize that God is right here with us, in the middle of every sob session, in the heart of every loss, right here in the muck with us.

Here are some powerful, beautiful words from Fred Buechner that begin to summarize what I want to say today:



"The world floods in on all of us. The world can be kind, and it can be cruel. It can be beautiful, and it can be appalling. It can give us good reason to hope and good reason to give up all hope. It can strengthen our faith in a loving God, and it can decimate our faith. In our lives in the world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes us, to drift with whatever current happens



to be running strongest. When good things happen, we rise to heaven; when bad things happen, we descend to hell. When the world strikes out at us, we strike back, and when one way or another the world blesses us, our spirits soar. I know this to be true of no one as well as I know it to be true of myself. I know how just the weather can affect my whole state of mind for good or ill, how just getting stuck in a traffic jam can ruin an afternoon that in every other way is so beautiful that it dazzles the heart. **We are in constant danger of being not actors in the drama of our own lives but reactors.** The fragmentary nature of our experience shatters us into fragments. Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces, full of darkness at one moment and full of light the next.

It is in Jesus, of course, and in the people whose lives have been deeply touched by Jesus, and in ourselves at those moments when we also are deeply touched by him, **that we see another way of being human in this world, which is the way of wholeness.** When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what

it is, and the reason we recognize it, I believe, is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, **we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us.** It is part of what the book of Genesis means by saying that we are made in the image of God. It is part of what Saint Paul means by saying that the deepest undercurrent of all creation is the current that seeks to draw us toward what he calls mature humanhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

– Frederick Buechner, from a sermon included in the book, “Longing for Home” (bold face mine)

Wholeness. Living loved brings us as close to that as we can get this side of heaven. Choosing, every single day, no matter the weather, to believe that God loves us — *and to learn to love ourselves **because God loves us*** — this is the only path I know that leads to wholeness, to healing.

That means jettisoning a lot of bad theology along the way. It means choosing to hold the tension of God’s sovereignty and God’s good-

ness loosely and humbly. It means choosing to live with unanswered questions. It means letting the tears loose, crying ‘uncle,’ stomping our feet on occasion or shaking our fists in heaven’s direction. And then. . . sitting still long enough to hear the gentle whisper of love echoing in our hearts — right there, in the middle of our frustration, our rage, our impotence.

It also means refusing to put suffering on a sliding scale of any kind. If you find yourself in the middle of deep personal pain for any reason — ANY REASON — then you are suffering. Please do not undervalue your own struggle by looking across the aisle, or across the newspaper, or across the world to someone else’s struggle. You will always find someone who is ‘worse off’ than you are. I promise. Instead, fully inhabit your pain, as much as you are able. Release the anguish of it, take it to God and say, “See this? Do you see this? Do you see how hard this is? Are you God or aren’t you? Can you fix this or can’t you?”

Yes, go ahead. Pour it out.

And then — *shut up.*

Sit by the side of the road and *listen*. Listen to what God has been teaching you about love and about yourself. ***Really listen***. “I am with you always,” God says. “I collect your tears in a bottle.”

And remember that when these times hit — and they do, they will — that you are in such good company, the author of Lamentations to name one. He rages and sobs. . . and then he remembers. *He listens to what he knows*:

13 He shot his arrows
deep into my heart.
14 My own people laugh at me.
All day long they sing their mocking songs.
15 He has filled me with bitterness
and given me a bitter cup of sorrow to drink.
16 He has made me chew on gravel.
He has rolled me in the dust.
17 Peace has been stripped away,
and I have forgotten what prosperity is.

18 I cry out, "My splendor is gone!
Everything I had hoped for from the Lord is lost!"
19 The thought of my suffering and homelessness
is bitter beyond words.
20 I will never forget this awful time,
as I grieve over my loss.
21 Yet I still dare to hope
when I remember this:
22 The faithful love of the Lord never ends!
His mercies never cease.
23 Great is his faithfulness;
his mercies begin afresh each morning.
24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance;
therefore, I will hope in him!"

The LORD is our inheritance.

Can you still 'dare to hope?' No matter what sort of crap life hands you? Do you know how loved you are, even when the s**t hits the fan? Do you know how to love yourself when the pain level rises? Can you release the temptation to write off your own pain because someone else's may be worse?

And here's the question I need to ask myself right now, in the middle of the muck that we're wading through: **can I remember that there is only one Savior and that Savior's name is Jesus?** Can I release my need to be the giver of help and begin to receive what I need to get through this round? Can I believe enough in the immensity of God's love for me that I can make good choices, ones that lead to health and healing?

I'm workin' on it.

For your reflection:

1. How are you 'working out your own salvation' on this particular topic?
2. Where do you need to spend some time in lament right now?
3. And where do you need to be quiet, and sit by the side of the road for a while?



The question for Chapter Six takes us further along this track:

How do I make all the pieces fit?

chapter • six

HOLDING THE REINS LIGHTLY

How do I make all the pieces fit?

When I was writing the original versions of these chapters on my blog, I had a tough week right about here on the journey. And the best way for me to delve into the question was to pensively write it out in a different format. Sometimes changing things up, coming at them from a slightly different angle, can make all the difference.

So, it's been a week.
Not one of my favorites,
and I'm looking for the lessons in it.
So far, I don't like what I see.

Because what I see is the truth:
some days, life stinks.
People you love deal with worrisome things,
you feel like you're caught
in the middle of a personal
third-time's-a-charm kinda deal,
only there's no charm to be found.

And that close encounter with a good God
you had last week?
Well, that's last week's news.

But then. . .
you read words that nourish,
or you spy a photo that
gives your soul wings.
A bird calls,
the breeze blows,
and the sun shines brightly
on the water.

And you remember.
You remember that this is
what it means to be
a human person,
living on planet earth.

There is so much pain,
struggle, outright evil.
And there is so much beauty,
goodness and wonder.

Together. *Always together.*

And most of it is way beyond
our power to control.
Yes, we are invited into a
partnership, of sorts.
A dance, with the God of the Cosmos,
who chooses to work stealthily,
covertly, through very leaky vessels.

Like you. And like me.

And there is no explaining it,
not any of it.
Except to say

it is, indeed,
a mystery.

And the bigger mystery,
at least to my eye,
is this one:
the good stuff.
All the good stuff:
the beauty of creation,
the selflessness of some,
the revelations of modern
science and technology,
the miracle of a true friend.

Large or small,
new or old,
I cannot find a way to
tell you why there is anything
redeemable at all
in this crazy, wide world.

If I think about it at all,
which I do, on occasion,
I 'get' the bad stuff,
the 'nature, red in tooth and claw.'

But I can't for the life of me
figure out why
a hummingbird hovers
so perfectly,
or when love happens,
or why it lasts.

I can't reason it out,
make it fit the facts.

So I'm learning to live in the
valley between,
holding two realities in
creative tension,
very, very loosely.

And in the process,
I'm learning more about God
and more about myself
than I sometimes wish I knew.

But then, that's the way with questions, right?
That's the way with questions.

Not sure I feel exactly upright this week, but looking at this photo,
'watercolored' through a phone app, reminds me that it's good to keep
afloat whenever possible!



For further reflection:

1. What are the images and/or ideas that you find helpful when trying to hold all the pieces together? I have a friend who describes life like this: "It's like a train track -- one side is beauty, joy, love, happiness -- and the other is sadness, trauma, tragedy, bitterness. But you've got to have both sides of the track to make any progress to your destination, right?" Does that one work for you?
2. Have you ever tried writing down your thoughts in a different format? Short lines, fewer words? How does that help you crystallize what you're thinking/wondering?

The question for Chapter Seven:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

chapter • seven

THE QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

*Why do bad things happen
to good people?*

Indeed, this is a tough one: why do bad things happen to good people. It sits at the center of so many struggles, for me and for people I love — indeed, for just about everyone who takes their faith seriously. My words here are not meant to be final, but simply a reflection of my own processing around this important question over many years. Wrestling with hard questions is important work, necessary work, even when the answers do not always satisfy. And this question? There are no ‘satisfying’ answers out there. What there is . . . is acceptance and — here’s a hard word! – submission.

i.

I suppose you might call me blessed. I was well into my forties before I ever experienced the death of anyone close to me. I had lost three grandparents before that time, but somehow, their deaths seemed the normal progression of things, almost orderly. I was sad and I was sorry, but I was not cut to the quick. And I didn’t actually see any of them when they were near death; I didn’t watch them suffer.

Looking back now, I’d have to say that any blessing involved in that particular twist of the calendar was a mixed one.

I didn't know.

I didn't know what it was like to watch someone I love suffer. Suffer and then die. I wasn't ready when it happened. And, as it does to every one of us, *it happened*. A lot.

ii.

My midlife foray into seminary and then pastoral ministry exposed me to a lot of death and dying. And I was given a great gift early on. A woman I knew moderately well was close to death and I went to visit her while I was still a student. I uttered a prayer under my breath as I pushed open the door to her hospital room: I had never been close to a dying person in my life and I truly did not know what to expect.

But as I stood with her, praying and talking (which are so often the same thing, aren't they?), it seemed as if God gave me a vision. She had little hair, she was incoherent, she wore only a hospital gown and a diaper — and it hit me: *she is getting ready to be born!* And I said that to her as I stroked her forehead, “Oh, my friend! God speed you on the journey.”

iii.

In the years since that afternoon epiphany, I've watched my father-in-law, my best friend, my father, my son-in-law and dozens of parishioners suffer and die. And I've watched their families suffer and try to live, so this question is one I've carried around inside me for a long, long time. However, I have changed the question considerably over these years. In fact, I would have to say that the 'why' part of it has pretty much disappeared from my vocabulary.

Because there is no answer to the 'why,' at least not one I can live with. I choose to hang onto the biggest possible picture of God — believing that God is good and God is powerful and God is loving and God is just. And holding all those things together makes the 'why' question unanswerable, at least for me. A big God, and the ways of a big God, are beyond my power to comprehend. *Beyond*. So I am increasingly at peace with leaving that huge area over to the side and focusing instead on questions like these:

What can I do to offer comfort/support/encouragement/hope to people who are struggling?

How can I pray for myself and for others when the tough times hit?

When is the best time to talk/be silent/offer practical help/sing a lament?

Where can I find more resources for those who are suffering?

Who is here? Who needs to be here? Who needs to be re-directed? Who needs more help than I am equipped to offer?

iv.

Those are the questions, those are the concrete activities, those are the best-case-scenario, left-brain things that happen when I click into crisis mode, in my own life or on behalf of someone else. And they are necessary, good and helpful things to think/do/offer/plan/

imagine. But there is more. There has to be more. Because sometimes the weight of it all, the fear that creeps in and around the edges of serious suffering, the uneasy, uncertain darkness of it all — well those things are not quite so amenable to left-brain thought processes. The truth of God's goodness/power/love/justice must somehow permeate *me*, not just my rational, thinking self. There must be room for the mystery, and somehow that ole left-brain just isn't big enough.

v.

The journey of the last half of my life is a journey away from the left side of my brain, that default position I have explored so heartily for so many years. It is a journey toward wholeness, an acknowledgement that I don't know — I can't know — what everything 'means.'

To get to the center, to make room for the mystery, I must carve out time to . . . shut down the noise. Most of that noise happens inside my head, but some of it comes from outside: other people, outside commitments, expectations, assignments, distractions. And when something difficult happens to me or to someone I love, finding that quiet place becomes much more difficult.

But that is *exactly* when it is most needed. And slowly, with much trial and error, I am learning to find the quiet right smack dab in the middle of the noise. Sometimes it's three minutes of deep breathing, eyes closed. Sometimes it's the Jesus prayer, said over and over just before I drift off to sleep. Sometimes it's taking a familiar phrase of scripture and looking at it, *without* dissecting it. Sometimes it's a quiet 30 minutes in my car, perched on the bluffs, overlooking the ocean. Sometimes, it's a poem or a song that winds its way around my soul, reminding me of Beauty and Grace and Peace. Sometimes, it's falling asleep in the sunshine of my backyard.

All of that helps me to find center, to make space for the Spirit, to transfer the swirling anxieties within to the strong, double yoke of Jesus, who has so graciously offered to carry those burdens with me. All of that helps me to come to peace with the unanswered 'whys' of my life.

Quiet. Stillness. Contemplation. Meditation. Wordless prayer. These are the gifts, these are the invitations.

vi.

Discipline is the other side of discipleship. Discipleship without discipline is like waiting to run in the marathon without ever practicing. Discipline without discipleship is like always practicing for the marathon but never participating. It is important, however, to realize that discipline in the spiritual life is not the same as discipline in sports. Discipline in sports is the concentrated effort to master the body so that it can obey the mind better. Discipline in the spiritual life is the concentrated effort to create the space and time where God can become our master and where we can respond freely to God's guidance.

Thus, discipline is the creation of boundaries that keep time and space open for God. Solitude requires discipline, worship requires discipline, caring for others requires discipline. They all ask us to set apart a time and a place where God's gracious presence can be acknowledged and responded to.

- Henri Nouwen

vii.

The only way for me to hold the tension of ‘bad things’ happening to ‘good people’ is to remember that I do not and cannot know the reasons why these hard, horrible things happen. I can, however, resolve to enter into the suffering — my own and others’ — and look for God there, because everything I read in scripture and everything I know about Jesus tell me that ***right there, in the middle of the mess, is where God is sure to show up.*** And all the topics that we’ve been exploring in this small book come together in that central truth.

We worship a God who knows what it is to suffer and who walks with us through whatever terrible things unfold in front of us. More than that, we worship a God who promises to somehow, some way, redeem that suffering in ways we cannot now imagine.

viii.

“This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What’s next, Papa?” God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We

know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!

That's why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any

more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good."

- Romans 8:15-28, The Message

As you wrestle with this chapter's question, ask yourselves this:

1. Can you live in the middle of the paradox?
What helps or hinders that?
2. How have you seen God redeem your own suffering or that of someone you love?



Question for Chapter Eight:

What do I do with all the hard/weird stuff in the Bible?

chapter • eight

THE BOOK OF LOVE

*What do I do with all the
hard/weird stuff in the Bible?*

We have arrived at the end of the journey, this exploratory willingness to sit in the middle of the hard questions and LIVE them a little. You'll notice that I've picked up the surfing image once again, ever grateful for all that I learn about God and faith when I watch them do their thing!

It was stormy last week. Much-needed rain fell by the bucketful, and we were thoroughly and delightfully doused. From my perch on the bluffs, I could just barely make out a couple of surfers, trying valiantly to take advantage of the buffed-up waves. They were heading into rough water, with swells extending well above their heads.



Depending upon where they were located in relation to the development of the wave, these surfers only had a couple of options. They could quickly turn their boards around, climb on top and try like crazy to stay upright. Or, they could duck their heads and dive underneath the wave as it broke heavily above them.

On this stormy Sunday morning, I saw a whole lotta ducking!

Sometimes, that's what we have to do, too. Maybe this is particularly true in regard to this week's — or any week's — question about the Bible. I do not pretend to have all the answers about this book of ours, about its origins, its contextual issues, its multiplicity of genres. I do have *some* answers and I've enjoyed all the learning I've done over this life of mine to get to those answers. But there are times when I truly do not know what to do with some of the strange or difficult things I find in scripture.

That's when it's time to duck myself beneath the wave and swim through. Because if there's one thing I know about our holy book, it is this: we are meant to place ourselves *under* its authority.

This does not mean blind obedience, nor does it mean adhering to a strictly literal interpretation of what we find there. It does mean that

the Bible is *primarily* designed to be a book of revelation and of transformation. It is not a book of information, not a list of facts to be digested mentally. It is not a science book, nor is it a history book in the sense that we currently define the subject of ‘history.’

It is, I believe, a love story. A love story that is meant to be ‘eaten,’ thoroughly ingested and lived into. And it is a story told in *words*. Genesis 1 and John 1 each tell us that the WORD of God breathes out all that is, calls it, and us, into being. And the words that fall off the pages of scripture are words that are designed to be taken in, not simply read and filed. They are words meant to change us, from the inside out.

I was raised by a mathematician father and a word-gifted mother in a home where arguments over inerrancy were simply not important. The Bible, I was taught, is the word of God, the ‘only infallible rule for faith, doctrine and conduct.’ It is God-breathed, in partnership with human authors, and tells us all we need to know about who God is, who we are and how we are made whole. Although I’ve had to wade through, and eventually discard, some pretty lousy theology in my life, my early understandings about what the Bible is, what the Bible

does and how the Bible does it have remained steady.

In my faith community, we look to the word of God to show us Jesus, to guide us into truth and to tell us how to live. We love the Bible and we offer multiple opportunities to study it and learn from it.

We also offer twice yearly day-long prayer retreats, monthly Taize services, weekly prayer gatherings — all because we believe that the Bible, under the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, is meant to *change* us, not just *teach* us. There is a difference there, you see. A big one. Yes, there is a wealth of fun and challenging information to be gleaned from our holy book. The stories of beginnings in the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis. The patriarchs and matriarchs, the exodus, the monarchy, the prophets, the exile, the wonderful, story-laden gospels, the letters to young churches. It is wonderful, rich and true and we love to learn it all!

But beyond learning, beyond memorizing, beyond making and keeping lists or rules, the Bible is a powerful force for inside-out transformation in the human soul. Reading it reverently, intentionally and slowly can change our DNA, if we let it. We must read scripture with

ALL of who we are, not just our brains. And that task? Well, it pretty much takes a lifetime.

By Tuesday morning of this week, the sun had returned and the water had calmed. There were no surfers this day, only walkers and lookers, soaking in the sea air and enjoying the blue of the sky. But as the previous weekend's storm had taught us, not every day is a sunny one.

We don't get to decide if the day is going to be sunny or stormy, do we? Maybe that's because WE are not the center of the universe and not nearly as powerful as we sometimes believe ourselves to be. And some of our experiences with scripture feel more closely akin to sunny days than others, don't they? Sometimes our reading brings us glimpses of God, glimpses of ourselves, glimpses of grace. But then, of course, there are those other experiences, the ones that descend when we come up against a difficult passage. Some days, it feels like the storm clouds have moved in on us, big-time.

And there is not one thing wrong with butting heads with the word, with arm-wrestling God about how hard it is, with asking questions. This entire booklet is based upon the necessary goodness of questions, of living them well and heartily as we limp our way down the

road called faith. But there is one very important truth that we need to hang onto in the middle of all of our questioning: our *experience* is not all the truth there is to be found. It's important to explore our feelings, responses, reactions and to try to sift out what's going on inside of us.

But we are not the final arbiters of much, truth be told. And sometimes we have to remind ourselves that our personal experience-of-the-moment is not at the top of the pile when we're searching for truth. What we're wrestling with needs to be placed, as Eugene Peterson puts it, "under the authority of the Bible and not over it. . . the Bible, all of it, is *livable*; it is the text for living our lives."

We are invited INTO the word.

And we are invited to let the Word into us. There are always going to be mysterious and strange pieces of story in our book. There just are. Happily, there aren't all that many! Most of what we have, when we take the time and care to understand nuances of language, culture, changing societal norms, the development of the canon of scripture, and the variety of literary genres included in this collection of ours — most of it is readily accessible to us. There are so many resources

available to help us work through the tough spots, the weird stuff, the question marks. And if there are specific texts that are troubling you, I encourage you to look at the commentaries, to speak with your pastors and teachers, and to see if you can find answers that satisfy.

But here's the thing: *please don't lose God* in your efforts to understand the things that trouble you in the Bible. Some of the things I read on the internet make me wonder if the writer has ever encountered God in the pages of scripture. Have tears been shed, jaws dropped, realizations appeared like a bolt of lightning? Because sometimes excursions into questions can quickly become intellectual exercises — a parsing of verbs, a splitting of hairs, and way too much proof-texting.

BUT . . .when our honest, heartfelt questions help to open our souls and widen our spirits, they are very good things, indeed. They can lead us deeper into God and deeper into ourselves by leading us deeper into the word.

And it is the Word of God that centers us, anchors us, transforms us:

“Without this text, firmly established as the authoritative center of our communal and personal lives, we will founder. We will sink into a swamp of well-meaning but ineffectual men and women who are mired unmercifully in our needs and wants and feelings.”

- *Eat This Book*, by Eugene Peterson, page 35

“But the words of Scripture are not primarily words, however impressive, that label or define or prove, but words that mean, that reveal, that shape the soul, that generate saved lives, that form believing and obedient lives . . . Having and defending and celebrating the Bible instead of receiving, submitting to, and praying the Bible, masks an enormous amount of non-reading.”

- *Eat This Book*, by Eugene Peterson, page 140

I have one further resource of my own, one that applies specifically to this final question, which is, ***What do I do with all the hard/weird stuff in the Bible?*** Seven years ago, I was invited to be a writer for a denominational resource paper on how we read scripture. I offer it [here](#), if you'd like to read it, as a more detailed and somewhat more academic approach to the whole topic of our relationship with the Word of God. I also commend to you these fine posts, written in early 2014, by Morgan Guyton and Ed Cizewski. Both men did stellar work on these biblically related themes: [Here's the link to Morgan's](#) and [here's the one to Ed's post](#) at Micha Boyett's beautiful blog. Lastly, I cannot recommend too highly Eugene Peterson's beautiful tome called, ***"Eat This Book: a conversation in the art of spiritual reading."*** He says everything I would say and he says it so.much.better.

For your reflection:

1. What do you understand and believe about the Word of God? Have you ever been 'beaten up' by the argument over inerrancy? Where do you land?
2. Are you familiar with the practice of lectio divina, of 'holy reading?' It's a rich and wonderful way to encounter scripture and I highly recommend learning about it if you do not already use it. You can find multiple references on line and there are even a few sites where you can practice it on your computer screen! (<http://www.sacredspace.ie/> is one of my favorites)



There are a lot of different people woven together inside this aging body. First of all, there is Diana -- beloved child of God. I am also daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, pastor (retired), spiritual director, writer, reader, solitaire player, cookie-baker, beach-sitter and walker. I have lived in southern or central California all of my life -- minus two years in Zambia, Africa as a newlywed -- and cannot imagine living anywhere else. At the end of 2015, I will have been married to the same man for fifty years. And yes, that is a scary number. It is also remarkable and I am grateful. Together, we raised three kids, who are now happily married middle-aged adults, and we have eight grandchildren, ranging in age from 24 to 5, six boys in a row, followed by two girls at the end. They are the delight of our lives.



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