The Omnibus

Collected Works of Jeff Hood

Volume 3

The Omnibus: Collected Works of Jeff Hood, Volume 3

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This volume presents Theosemantics: The Complete Work (2025).

Introduction, notes and conclusion by the editors.

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INTRODUCTION

Eighteen Doors: The Courage to Be in Jeff Hood's Theosemantics

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Volume 3 holds one work. Theosemantics (2025) is eighteen books under a single cover, the longest work in the Omnibus.

Volume 1 gathered eleven works under three offices: prophet, priest, witness. Volume 2 gathered five under the incarnation, each book placing God at an address: a barn in Cooper Creek, a death row pod, a planet, an Alabama runoff, a hospice in Tupelo. This volume has one address left. It is the person reading.

Hood calls each of his eighteen words a door: God, Tangible, Now, Love, Real, Art, Christ, Human, Justice, Here, Defiant, Beauty, Spirit, Magic, Electric, Fire, Uncanny, Freedom. He wrote them, he says, because the language for the largest things is exhausted by overuse or contaminated by the purposes it has served. He wanted the old words back.

The book has its own volume because of its size. It also stands apart in posture. In Volume 2, Hood tells stories or

builds cases. Here he turns his chair around. He speaks to "you" for more than ninety thousand words, asks you to notice your breath, asks what you will refuse.

He says where the words were tested. He has sat with people on death row, in addiction recovery programs, in the middle of family crises. The theology met suffering there, he writes, "and it has held."

Eighteen doors follow.

— The Editors

BOOK 17

Theosemantics: The Complete Work

Jeff Hood

2025

On This Book

Theosemantics is eighteen books under one cover, published in 2025 by The New Theology School Press. It runs past ninety thousand words. Hood asks that it be read slowly.

Each book takes one word. The first six, which he calls funda mentals, are God, Tangible, Now, Love, Real, Art. The next six turn outward: Christ, Human, Justice, Here, Defiant, Beauty. The last six go where language reaches its limit: Spirit, Magic, Electric, Fire, Uncanny, Freedom. Every title begins the same way: The Courage to Be.

The voice is new. The books of Volume 2 talk about Texas, about Alabama, about a planet. These books talk to “you.” They open with a meditation: find a quiet place, notice the breath. They close with sections that carry the word from the private life into the common one.

Hood says what the books are not: a system, a self-help program, a defense of his own tradition. He says where they came from. He has sat “with people on death row” and “at the

edge of everything." The theology, he writes, was forged in those encounters, not in a library.

The wager is stated before the first book begins. The words we have for God, the body, time, love are worn out or bent to bad use, yet an old word taken seriously still has life in it.

The courage he means is specific. It belongs to the person who is afraid and acts anyway. It belongs to the one who is broken and loves anyway.

After eighteen words, he does not sum up. He asks what the reader will do tomorrow morning, what will be said to the person across the table.

THEOSEMANTICS

The Complete Work

Eighteen Books on the Courage to Be

Jeff Hood

THEOSEMANTICS: The Complete Work

Eighteen Books on the Courage to Be

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Published by The New Theology School Press

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A Word Before You Begin

You are holding eighteen books. I want to tell you what they are and what they are not, and then I want to tell you why I wrote them.

They are not a systematic theology. They do not build, in careful logical sequence, from premise to argument to conclusion. They circle. They return. They approach the same territory from different angles, with different language, at different depths. If you are looking for a theological system, you will not find it here. What you will find is something more like an extended conversation…with these words, with yourself, and with whatever you are willing to call the sacred.

They are not a self-help program. They do not offer five steps to a more spiritual life or a method for achieving enlightenment by the end of the chapter. What they offer is something more honest and more demanding than that: an invitation to take seriously the life you actually have, with all its difficulty and all its grace, and to discover in it more depth than you have been giving it credit for.

They are not a defense of any particular religious tradition, though they emerge from mine. I am a Christian minister…a pastor who has spent his ministry in the places that other pastors have sometimes preferred to avoid. I have sat with people on death row and in addiction recovery programs and in the middle of family crises and at the edge of faith crises and at the edge of everything. The theology in these pages has been forged in those encounters, not in a library. I say this not to give it authority but to give it context. This is theology that has been tested against real human suffering and real human courage, and it has held.

What these books are is an invitation. Each of the eighteen words at the center of each book…God, Tangible, Now, Love, Real, Art, Christ, Human, Justice, Here, Defiant, Beauty, Spirit, Magic, Electric, Fire, Uncanny, Freedom…is a door. Each door opens onto territory where a different quality of living becomes possible. The work of these books is to open those doors. What you do with what you find on the other side is yours.

The courage in the title is not the courage of the fearless. I want to say this clearly at the outset, because I know that the word courage can be intimidating…that it can create the im-

pression that this work is for the especially brave or the unusually strong. It is not. The courage I am writing about is the courage of the person who is afraid and acts anyway. Who is uncertain and commits anyway. Who is broken and loves anyway. This courage is available to everyone. Including you. Especially you.

How to Read This Book

Each book can be read alone. They do not require each other. Open to any of the eighteen and begin there. What you find in one will deepen what you find in another, but there is no required sequence. The territory is not linear.

Each book has a similar structure: a meditation to ground you in the territory, a series of substantive parts exploring that territory from different angles, and a closing section that connects the book's word to the vast network of mutual relationship in which we all live. These closing sections…Parts Eight and Nine…are among the most important in each book. They are the place where the inquiry moves from personal to communal, from interior to political, from what this word means for me to what it demands of us.

Read slowly. Stop when something strikes you. Return to the lines that do something to you. Let the questions the books raise be questions you actually live with, rather than questions you quickly answer and move past. These books are not meant to be completed. They are meant to be inhabited.

A Final Word

I wrote these books because I believe the words matter. I believe that the language we use to speak about the most important things in human life…about God, about the body, about time, about love, about beauty, about freedom…this language is not neutral. It shapes what we are able to perceive and what we are able to become. And most of the language available to us for these things is either exhausted by overuse or contaminated by the purposes it has been made to serve.

I wanted new language. Or rather…I wanted to find in old words the new life that is always available in them when they are taken seriously. The courage to be God is a very old idea. So is the courage to be real, or the courage to love, or the courage to refuse what is wrong. What I have tried to do in these pages is strip those ideas of their accretion…the cen-

turies of institutional use and misuse that have sometimes buried them…and return them to what they are at the root. Which is an invitation to be fully what you are, in relationship with everything else that exists.

May these words find you where you are.

May they call you forward.

May you have the courage to be.

✦ ✦ ✦

SERIES ONE

THE COURAGE TO BE FUNDAMENTALS

Books One through Six

Series One

Before you begin, a moment.

Not instructions. Not an orientation session. Just this: put your hand on your chest. Feel the rhythm there. This organ has been beating without your permission since before you were born. It will beat until it stops. Between those two moments is the territory of this book. Between those two moments is your life.

That is not an abstraction. That is where you are.

The six books you are about to enter were written from that awareness. From the understanding that the most important questions are not the ones that can be deferred. That the spiritual life, when it is genuinely alive, is not a supplement to the ordinary life but a direct engagement with it. That the sacred is not somewhere you are going. It is where you are.

Six words: God. Tangible. Now. Love. Real. Art.

Each one a door. Each door opens inward, not outward. Each leads not away from your life but deeper into it. Into the body

that carries you. Into the moment that is actually here. Into the love that is actually available. Into the self that is actually you, beneath the performance. Into the creative act that is waiting for the person only you can be.

Do not rush.

These books will wait. They have been waiting. They know that you will come to them when you are ready…which may be now, or may be in the middle of the night three weeks from now when something shifts and a sentence finds you that you did not know you needed. This is how real reading works. The book waits. The reader arrives. Something happens between them that neither could have predicted.

Come as you are. Bring what you have. That is all that is required.

That is, as it turns out, more than enough.

Series One

Book One

THE COURAGE TO BE GOD

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Divine Nature and Human Becoming

Before we begin, find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed.

Sit comfortably and close your eyes if that feels right for you. Notice your breath moving in and out of your body. This ancient rhythm, shared by every conscious being that has ever lived, connects you to the fundamental aliveness that moves through all creation. Notice the subtle awareness that observes the breathing…the consciousness that knows that you exist, that you are present in this moment. This knowing, this awareness of being aware, is what we might call the divine spark that dwells within you.

This book is an invitation to recognize that spark. To honor it. To claim it. To understand that you are not separate from the sacred dimension of existence, but rather an expression of it…a particular, unique, irreplaceable expression of divinity itself.

But let us begin even more slowly than that. Before the recognition, before the claiming, before the philosophical exploration and the mystical inquiry…there is this. There is simply this. The breath.

The heartbeat. The strange and irreducible fact that something is happening, that you are present, that awareness exists and you are its dwelling place. This is not a metaphor. This is not poetry. This is the most factual thing that can be said about your existence: you are here, and you know that you are here and this knowing is the beginning of everything we will explore together.

Most of us move through our days at a remarkable distance from this fundamental fact. We are consumed by our concerns, our plans, our regrets, our identities, our stories about who we are and what we deserve and what is happening to us. The surface of life is full of noise. But beneath the noise, always, there is this quiet truth:

awareness. Presence. Being. Whatever name you choose to give it, it is here, it has never left, it cannot leave, because it is not something you have but something you are.

Sit with that for a moment longer before we proceed.

What does it mean to be God?

This question emerges not from arrogance or blasphemy, but from a deep spiritual humility. It emerges from the recogni-

tion that if we are truly made in the image of the divine…if the sacred dimension of existence flows through us…then we must ask what it means to embody that truth. To live it. To become it.

Throughout human history, theologians and philosophers have attempted to define God. They have offered attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, eternality, immutability, transcendence, perfection. They have constructed logical arguments for existence, engaged in debates about divine nature, developed sophisticated systems that attempt to contain the infinite within the boundaries of human language and logic. These efforts have profound value. They represent humanity's ongoing attempt to understand the source and ground of all existence.

But there is something crucial missing from these academic approaches.

They treat God as something to be understood intellectually, as though the divine were a problem to be solved, an object to be analyzed from a distance. In doing so, they create a funda mental separation: God exists over there, in some transcendent realm beyond human reach. We exist here, in the mate-

rial world, seeking to understand something we can never truly know. This separation becomes institutionalized. Religion becomes about worshipping something distant rather than recognizing something present. Spirituality becomes about seeking what is missing rather than awakening to what is already here.

The danger of this separation is not merely intellectual. It has practical and even political consequences. When the divine is located elsewhere…in heaven, in sacred texts, in institutions, in the authority of designated representatives…then access to the divine becomes a matter of permission. You must go through the proper channels.

You must speak the proper language. You must accept the proper mediators. Those who control access to the divine thereby control access to ultimate meaning, ultimate value, ultimate legitimacy. This is how theology becomes ideology. This is how the sacred becomes a tool of power.

Conversely, when you recognize that the divine is not elsewhere but here, not absent but present, not to be acquired but to be acknowledged, the whole architecture of spiritual

authority collapses. There is no longer a need for mediation. There is no longer a hierarchy of access.

The divine is available, without appointment, without credential, without institutional sanction, to every being that exists. This recognition is not merely comforting. It is revolutionary.

This separation is the root of profound spiritual suffering. It creates a distance that prevents genuine encounter. It makes the sacred something always beyond our reach, always requiring mediation through priests or texts or institutions. It turns spirituality into a quest for something we lack rather than an awakening to what we already are.

There is a particular quality of suffering that comes from this arrangement. It is the suffering of people who are told that they are not enough, that their access to the sacred is conditional, that they must earn or prove or demonstrate worthiness before the divine will receive them. How many people have spent decades in spiritual seeking, accumulating practices and reading texts and attending services, all the while carrying a secret fear that they are fundamentally unworthy of what they seek? How many have approached the divine

with the posture of a beggar rather than a beloved? How many have loved the sacred from a respectful distance, never allowing themselves to feel the warmth of return, because they were told that such intimacy was presumptuous?

The courage to be God begins with a radical shift in perspective.

Instead of asking 'What is God?' in the abstract, we ask 'What is the divine that expresses itself through me?' Instead of seeking God somewhere else...in heaven, in scripture, in the teachings of others ...we ask what would happen if we recognized the divine nature that is intrinsic to our own existence, right now, in this moment, in this body, in this consciousness.

This is not a new idea. It echoes through the greatest mystical traditions of human history. The Hindu non-dual philosophy points to Atman...the individual self...being identical with Brahman, the ultimate reality. The apparent separation between individual consciousness and divine consciousness is understood as an illusion created by limited perception. The Sanskrit word 'maya' points to this illusory quality of ap parent separation...not that the world is unreal, but that the

separateness we perceive is a kind of dream from which we can awaken.

The Christian mystics, drawing on the depths of their own tradition, spoken this truth from deep within their own tradition…boldly, without apology. I have met this union not in borrowed language but in the hours when prayer dissolved the membrane between me and what I can only call God. The soul does not merely resemble the sacred; it is woven from it. I have stood in the ruins of my own certainty and discovered something underneath that could not be ruined…a ground that was not mine and yet was more me than anything I had claimed as self. Creation is not a report about God. Creation is God's own ongoing act of speaking. Every body, every breath, every ordinary moment of the ordinary day is the divine pouring itself into form. The extraordinary does not come to visit the ordinary. The extraordinary is the ordinary, seen truly.

The Sufi poets, exploring the mystical dimensions of Islam, speak of the human as the mirror in which God sees itself, the vehicle through which the divine knows itself. I know this longing firsthand. It is not metaphor…it is the oldest ache in human experience, the pull toward something we cannot

name but cannot stop reaching for. Every true prayer I have ever prayed has begun in that ache. The soul moves toward God the way water moves toward the sea. Not because it is commanded to. Because it cannot help it. It is what the soul is made for. And in this movement, in this very longing, the sacred is already present. The reaching is itself the arrival. The ache is itself the embrace.

Even within secular philosophy, we find echoes of this understanding.

Arthur Schopenhauer suggested that what we experience as separateness is ultimately illusory, that all individual consciousnesses are manifestations of one underlying reality. His idea of the Will as the fundamental nature of reality has strange resonances with Eastern metaphysics, even though Schopenhauer arrived at his conclusions through Western philosophical methods. What I have come to believe is this: history is not something that happens to us. History is the sa cred working itself out through human hands and human choices and human failures. We are not observers of this unfolding. We are participants in it...the means by which the Infinite presses itself into time, tests itself against resistance and discovers what love requires in the particular circum-

stances of this century, this moment, this life. That is a staggering thing to hold. I do not always hold it well. But I cannot stop believing it.

Contemporary physics, through quantum mechanics, reveals that separation at the quantum level is less fundamental than we assumed…that reality is fundamentally interconnected in ways that challenge our ordinary intuitions about separate, isolated objects. The phenomenon of entanglement suggests that once two particles have interacted, they remain in some kind of instantaneous connection regardless of the distance between them. The observer and the observed are not cleanly separable. Consciousness and matter are not as different as classical physics assumed.

But intellectual understanding is not enough. We can read these ideas, agree with them philosophically and still live as though they are not true. We can believe in the unity of all things while experiencing profound isolation. We can acknowledge that the divine flows through us while continuing to seek it elsewhere. The transformation we need is not merely intellectual but embodied, lived, expressed through how we actually move through the world.

What is required is what the philosophers call an existential shift...

a change not merely in what we believe but in how we exist. The difference between knowing that love is the ground of being and actually living from love. The difference between understanding that all things are sacred and actually treating all things as sacred. The difference between agreeing that you are divine and actually claiming your divinity in the concrete choices you make, the relationships you enter, the work you do in the world.

The courage to be God is the courage to live as though this truth is real. Not as a metaphor, not as a poetic way of speak ing, not as something to believe in after death, but as something true right now, in this moment, in this body, in this life.

Before we can understand what it means to be God, we must ask: What is God? Not as a definition to be memorized, but as a question we sit with, allowing the answer to emerge from our own deepest experience.

The Ground of Being is what we might call 'what is.' Not nothingness, not void, not absence. But the fundamental reality from which all things emerge and in which all things are

present. Some traditions call this the Godhead. Others call it the Tao, the One, the Absolute, the Primary Consciousness, the Field of Infinite Possibility, the Source. The particular name matters less than the direct recognition of what is actu ally present when we stop adding our interpretations to reality.

Consider the experience of being alive right now. Not your thoughts about being alive. Not your story about yourself. Not your plans or worries or memories. But the bare fact of consciousness…the fact that something is being experienced, that there is awareness present in which all these thoughts and feelings and sensations are appearing. This awareness is prior to the content that appears in it. It is like the sky, which contains all clouds, all weather, all light and shadow, without itself being any of those things. The sky does not become the clouds. The awareness does not become the thoughts. Both remain as what they are: the space in which arising happens.

This ground of being is not a force that acts from outside of things, intervening occasionally in human affairs like a cosmic puppeteer. It is not a deity dwelling in some realm beyond the material universe, separate from creation, occasionally communicating through prophets or miracles.

Rather, it is the very nature of existence itself. It is being aware of itself. It is consciousness recognizing itself. It is the principle by which anything at all exists rather than nothing existing.

Think about this carefully. Why does something exist rather than nothing? This is perhaps the deepest question that philosophy can ask.

Every answer we offer leads to further questions. If God created the universe, who created God? If energy and matter simply always existed, how is that possible? If all things arise from natural processes and evolution, what explains the emergence of consciousness itself? What explains the fact that the universe has laws that can be discovered by minds? What explains the existence of minds capable of discovering them?

Leibniz called this 'the principal question of metaphysics.' What astonishes me is not how the world is but that it is at all. There is something that analysis cannot fully reach, something that calls forth awe before it calls forth explanation. There is something astonishing about existence itself, something that analysis cannot fully reach, something that

calls forth awe before it calls forth explanation. And this astonishment…this recognition that existence is not self-explanatory, that being is not simply given but is somehow miraculous…is itself a kind of spiritual opening. The question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' cannot be answered from within the world, because the world itself is the thing in question. To answer it, you must somehow stand outside…or, more precisely, you must recognize that what you fundamentally are is not inside the world but is the awareness in which the world appears.

What I mean when I say God is not a divine being among other beings…not a super-person with superhuman attributes, but the ground of being itself…that by virtue of which anything at all exists. You cannot ask what created this ground of being, because the question presupposes the ground. You cannot ask where it is located, because location itself is an aspect of the world that arises from it.

You can only recognize it directly, in the moment when you stop asking questions and simply notice that you are.

The mystics of every tradition, when they speak of their deepest experiences, speak of this recognition. They speak of a moment…

sometimes preceded by years of practice, sometimes arriving unbidden…

in which the ordinary construction of experience falls away and what remains is simply this: being, awareness, presence. No subject over here looking at an object over there. No inner world and outer world. No self and other. Just this open, luminous, aware presence that is somehow everything and nothing at once.

These experiences do not produce identical metaphysical conclusions. The Hindu mystic may say that Atman is Brahman, that individual consciousness is identical with divine consciousness. The Christian mystic may say that the soul rests in God, merged in love without ceasing to exist as a particular soul. The Buddhist may say that both the individual and God are empty of inherent existence, that the recognition is of emptiness itself as luminous and alive. These are not the same description. But they are pointing at something in the same direction, describing an encounter with the same

astonishing fact: that at the root of experience, there is some thing that cannot be reduced further, something that is the source of all apparent things and that this something is not different from what we most fundamentally are.

What does it mean to be made in the image of God…what the Hebrew scriptures call being created b'tzelem Elohim?

The traditional reading focuses on certain human capacities:

rationality, language, creativity, moral discernment. These are the properties we share with the divine that lower animals do not possess.

We are made in God's image because we can think, speak, create, choose between good and evil. This reading has the merit of grounding human dignity in something transcendent rather than merely in cultural convention. But it also, if we are not careful, becomes a hierarchy…

humans above other animals and within humans, those who are more rational, more articulate, more creative are somehow more in the image of God.

But there is another reading. What if the image of God is not a property but a relationship? What if to be in the image of

God means not that you have certain attributes but that you are the means by which the divine sees itself, the particular window through which the infinite looks out into the world of finite forms?

Every mirror reflects what stands before it. But each mirror has its own character…its size, its clarity, its frame, the angle at which it is held. Each reflects the same light differently. The divine light is one.

But you are a particular mirror, with a particular angle and character and history and what you reflect is the divine light in the particular way that only you can reflect it. This is not a diminishment of your uniqueness. It is the ground of it. You are unique precisely because the divine expresses itself through you in a way it does not express itself through any other being.

This understanding has consequences. If you are the image of the divine …not as an attribute but as a living relationship, a process of expression…then when you refuse to be yourself, when you diminish yourself, when you live inauthentically, something is lost. Not just for you. Something in the divine′s self-expression is diminished. There is a quality of being that

only you can contribute to existence. When you silence yourself, that contribution does not happen.

This is not pressure but invitation. It is not demand but calling. The invitation is simply this: be yourself, fully, without apology, without diminishment. Because what you are is not a mistake or an accident or an inferior version of what you should have been. What you are is the precise form through which the divine expresses itself in you. And that is enough. That is, in fact, everything.

One of the oldest debates in theology concerns the nature of God′s relationship to the world. Is God transcendent…utterly beyond, wholly other, existing in a realm completely separate from the material world? Or is God immanent…present in all things, woven into the fabric of existence, closer than breathing?

The great monotheistic traditions have generally emphasized transcendence. God is not the world. God is not nature. God is not identical with any creature or any collection of creatures. This emphasis was partly a reaction against polytheism and animism, which located the divine within nature itself. It was also an insistence on the infinity and incompre-

hensibility of the divine…God cannot be contained within any finite thing, cannot be fully represented by any image, cannot be reduced to any concept.

But the mystical streams within these same traditions have always insisted on immanence as well. I have known this immanence in the body…in moments of prayer so interior that the distinction between me and what I was praying to dissolved entirely. God's presence, the Shekhinah, dwells in exile within the created world, longing for reunion. The Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit as the divine presence dwelling within believers and throughout creation. Islamic mysticism's insistence that God is closer to you than your jugular vein.

The philosophical tradition called panentheism…distinct from both classical theism and pantheism…offers a synthesis. In panentheism, God is not merely transcendent (existing apart from the world) nor merely immanent (identical with the world) but both. The world exists within God, but God is more than the world. Like a mind that contains all its thoughts without being reducible to any of them, God contains all of creation without being exhausted by it. This cap-

tures something important: the divine is genuinely present in all things, while also being more than the sum of all things.

What this means practically is this: You are not merely a creation of God, dependent on God, separate from God. You are an expression of God.

You are God becoming aware of itself through your particular consciousness. You carry within you the creative power of the universe itself. You are at once fully human and fully divine. These are not contradictory. Your humanity is the form through which your divinity expresses itself.

This is what some traditions call theosis or deification…not becoming literally God in the sense of replacing or competing with the source, but rather realizing your essential unity with the source, allowing the divine power and wisdom and love to express fully through your particular being. The Eastern Orthodox tradition has a beautiful formulation: God became human so that humans might become divine. This is not metaphor. It is a description of the spiritual journey available to every person who has ever lived.

Some people fear this understanding. They worry that recognizing the divine nature within themselves will lead to arro-

gance, to the belief that they can do whatever they want, to the abandonment of morality and ethics. They fear that if ev eryone recognized their own divinity, the world would descend into chaos.

But the opposite is true. When you genuinely recognize the divine nature within yourself, you naturally recognize the divine nature in others.

You cannot truly see yourself as divine while treating another being as less than divine. When you recognize that what you are is present in all beings, arrogance falls away. Judgment softens. The impulse toward domination or exploitation dissolves. You cannot exploit what you recognize as sacred.

True recognition of divine nature naturally leads to humility and compassion. Not the false humility that is really self-deprecation, not the performance of smallness that keeps power safely in the hands of those who claim to speak for God. But the genuine humility that comes from recognizing that you are not separate from all things, that you are part of a vast web of being, that you are one expression among infinite expressions of the sacred. The more fully you recognize

your own divinity, the less possible it becomes to see yourself as the center of the universe, because you recognize that the divine is the center, and it is equally present in all.

Recognizing that you are divine, that the creative power of the universe flows through you, that you carry the sacred within your being...this requires courage. Tremendous courage.

Because when you claim your divinity, you claim responsibility for your life. You can no longer blame others for your circumstances. You can no longer claim to be merely a victim of fate. You must acknowledge that you have been participating in the creation of your life, often unconsciously and that you have the power to create differently.

This is frightening. It is easier to believe that you are helpless, that circumstances are beyond your control, that you are merely a passive recipient of what happens. Because if you are helpless, you are also blameless. You are not responsible. You can maintain the comfort of victimhood.

But when you claim your divinity, when you recognize your creative power, you accept responsibility. And responsibility is both liberating and daunting. It is liberating because it

means your life is not determined by forces outside your con trol. It is daunting because it means you must actually take the risks, make the choices, bear the consequences.

There is a particular kind of spiritual courage required for this claiming. It is the courage to disappoint people. Because when you begin to live from your own divine knowing rather than from the expectations of others, you will inevitably disappoint some people. The people who needed you to be small will be threatened by your bigness. The people who depended on your compliance will feel abandoned by your authenticity. The institutions that benefited from your deference will resist your independence. Claiming your divinity means being willing to lose certain relationships, certain approvals, certain securities…

and trusting that what you gain in exchange, namely your own aliveness, your own authenticity, your own genuine power, is worth more than what you give up.

The courage to be God is the courage to look at your life and ask: What have I created? What patterns have I participated in? What beliefs have I held that have shaped what became

possible? And then, from that honest acknowledgment, to begin to create differently.

It is also the courage to claim your own authority. For so long, you may have looked outside yourself for answers. You asked others what you should do, what you should believe, who you should be. You sought permission from authorities…parents, teachers, religious leaders, society. You learned to doubt your own knowing and to trust the knowing of others.

The courage to be God is the courage to reclaim your own au thority. To recognize that you have access to deep knowing. To honor your own intuition, your own experience, your own wisdom. To make decisions based on your own inner truth rather than on what others say you should do.

This is not the rejection of wisdom wherever it appears. It is the recognition that wisdom must ultimately be received and evaluated by your own discernment. No one else can do your spiritual work for you. No one else can live your life. The authority for your becoming resides in you.

Many forces in society work against this courageous claiming of divinity. You are taught from childhood to conform, to

fit in, to be acceptable. You are taught to doubt yourself and trust authorities. You are told that your body is shameful, your sexuality is dangerous, your anger is wrong, your needs are selfish, your uniqueness is strange. All of these messages are designed to diminish your sense of your own power and to make you more controllable.

The courage to be God is the courage to refuse this diminishment. To say no to the internalized voices that tell you that you are not enough. To recognize that those voices do not speak truth…they speak the fears and limitations of those who taught them to you. Those voices may have had your protection in mind, or they may have had their own interests in mind, but either way, their message was false. You are enough. You have always been enough. The divine does not make mistakes and you are not a mistake.

If you are God…if the divine expresses itself through your consciousness…then this must be equally true of every other being.

Every person you encounter carries divinity. Every consciousness is an expression of the sacred.

This has profound implications. It means that there are no superior and inferior beings. There is no hierarchy of human worth based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, or any other category. Because the divine expresses itself through all beings equally. The divine does not have preferences among its expressions. The ocean does not prefer one wave to another. The light does not shine more truly through some windows than through others. Each expression is equally the divine, differently expressed.

It means that the person you disagree with fundamentally, the person whose choices you judge harshly, the person you fear or dislike…that person also carries divinity. The dictator and the saint, the criminal and the victim, the person you love and the person you hate…all are expressions of the sacred. This is not a comfortable claim. It does not suggest that all choices are equally good or that harm is not harm. But it does suggest that beneath harmful behavior, there is a human being who carries the same divine spark that you carry. And that recognition, if we take it seriously, transforms how we approach conflict, justice, and redemption.

This recognition of universal divinity is radically egalitarian. It dissolves the boundaries that separate us into categories of

worthy and unworthy, superior and inferior, us and them. It reveals all beings as expressions of the same sacred source. It generates compassion not from superiority or charity, but from the recognition that you are looking at yourself in every other being. When you harm another, you harm an expression of what you yourself are. When you serve another, you serve what you yourself are. The ethical implications are not abstract…

they reshape every relationship, every decision, every interaction.

This is one of the great healing gifts that comes from the courage to be God. When you genuinely recognize that you are divine…that the sacred flows through you…you naturally extend that recognition to all beings. You become capable of radical compassion. You become capable of genuine justice, grounded not in condemnation but in the commitment to the flourishing of all beings. You become capable of love that is not dependent on the behavior of the beloved, because you recognize the divine in them that exists prior to and indepen dent of their behavior.

Understanding that you are divine is one thing. Living that truth is another.

It is easy to read these ideas and think 'Yes, that makes sense' while continuing to live exactly as before. It is easy to believe in the divine nature of all beings while treating people poorly. It is easy to recognize your creative power intellectually while continuing to act as though you are a helpless victim of circumstances.

The real work begins when we ask: What would change if I genuinely lived as though this is true?

If I genuinely believed that I am divine, I would stop accepting mistreatment. I would speak my truth even when it is uncomfortable. I would make choices based on what matters to me rather than on what others expect. I would hold myself to higher standards, because I would recognize my own worth. I would treat my body with respect. I would honor my own needs and desires as legitimate.

If I genuinely believed that I am creative, I would take responsibility for the circumstances of my life. I would ask what I am creating and whether it aligns with what I actually want. I would begin to make different choices, knowing that

different choices create different realities. I would risk failure because I would recognize that the power to create includes the possibility of creating poorly and that is how learning happens.

If I genuinely believed that others are also divine, I would ap proach them differently. I would listen to understand rather than to defend. I would assume good intent even when actions seem harmful. I would work toward justice and restoration rather than punishment. I would honor their autonomy and their path even when it differs from my own. I would practice the difficult discipline of seeing the divine in the person who has harmed me, not as a denial of my own pain, but as a recognition that healing is possible because the humanity in both of us is fundamentally intact.

If I genuinely believed that the sacred flows through all existence, I would treat the earth with reverence. I would recognize that what I do to the earth I do to myself. I would make choices about what I consume, what I create, what I waste, based on the understanding that all matter is sacred. The en vironmental crisis is not fundamentally a scientific or political problem. It is a spiritual problem. It is the consequence of

a civilization that does not recognize the divine in the natural world.

Healing it requires a transformation of perception as much as a transformation of policy.

The courage to be God is the courage to live these truths. Not perfectly …that is impossible. But genuinely. Actually. With real consequences in how you move through the world. Each day is a new opportunity. Each moment offers a fresh beginning. The divine is not interested in your history of failure. The divine is interested only in what you choose now, in this moment, from this recognition of your own sacred nature.

There is a place beyond all concepts of God. Beyond all the beautiful and necessary words we use…transcendence, immanence, ground of being, divine spark. Beyond the arguments and the theologies and the maps. There is a place where all of these things fall quiet and what remains is simply the reality they were always pointing toward.

The mystics called this place many things: the cloud of unknowing, the divine darkness, the desert of the Godhead, the great silence. What they share is the recognition that the deepest encounter with the divine is not intellectual but con-

templative, not conceptual but direct. Not knowing about God but somehow knowing God…or better, being known by God, discovered in the very depths of what you are.

To reach this place, you must be willing to release your ideas about God. Even the beautiful ideas. Even the ones that have helped you. Even the ones that feel most true. Because ideas, however beautiful, are always one step removed from the reality they describe. The word 'ocean' is not wet. The concept of the divine is not divine. At some point, you must be willing to go beyond the concept into the silence where the reality it self speaks…not in words, but in the immediate, unmistakable recognition of presence.

This practice of going beyond concepts does not require formal meditation or years of retreat. It can happen in an ordinary moment of stillness. It can happen in nature, when the beauty of the world momentarily stops the mind's commentary. It can happen in grief, when the usual structures collapse and something raw and open is all that remains. It can happen in love, when in the presence of the beloved all self-concern falls away and there is simply this extraordinary fact of another person's existence.

These moments are not rare gifts given only to certain people. They are available in every life, in every moment, to anyone who has the courage to pause, to be still, to let the noise settle and notice what is always there beneath it. The divine is not absent from your life, waiting to be summoned by sufficient spiritual effort. The divine is the very ground of your experience, always present, always sustaining, always here. The courage to be God includes the courage to notice this…quietly, without fanfare, in the ordinary moments of an ordinary life.

Closing Practice: Recognizing the Divine Within Find a quiet space where you will not be disturbed. Sit comfortably.

Close your eyes.

Begin by bringing your attention to your breath. Notice the natural rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. This breath has moved through countless beings before you and will move through countless beings after you. In this moment, you share this breath with all of creation.

Now bring your attention to your heartbeat. Feel the steady rhythm of your heart, keeping you alive. There is something

sacred in this. There is something miraculous in the fact that you are alive.

Now expand your awareness to include your whole body. No tice the thousands of processes happening right now…cells dividing, immune system functioning, digestion happening, all the extraordinary processes that keep you alive without your conscious effort.

Now bring your attention to your mind. Notice the flow of thoughts.

Notice awareness itself…the capacity to observe your own thoughts, to be aware of being aware. This is consciousness. This is the divine recognizing itself through your particular mind.

Now, from this place of recognizing your own remarkable be ing, ask yourself: Who am I? Not your name. Not your role or status. Not your history or your circumstances. But the fun-damental being that you are.

The awareness that is present. The consciousness that knows. The creative force that has brought you to this mo-ment.

Sit with this question. Let the answer emerge from your own deepest knowing. Do not rush. Do not reach for an answer from your thinking mind. Let the silence speak. Let what is already true make itself known.

And as you sit with this recognition, know that the same sacred presence that animates you animates all beings. From this recognition, make a commitment: I recognize my own divinity. I claim my creative power. I commit to living this truth. I commit to recognizing the sacred in all beings.

When you are ready, bring your awareness gently back to your surroundings. Open your eyes. Return to your day, carrying this recognition with you, knowing that you carry it not as a burden but as a gift…the knowledge that what you are is enough, has always been

There is something I have been trying to say for years that I have not yet found the right words for. I will try again here.

When I say the courage to be God, I am not speaking only about God. I am never speaking only about God. The word God does not exist in isolation…it never has, in any tradition that has taken it seriously. The word God is always already relational. It points beyond itself. It draws a line from the

eternal to the temporal, from the source to the expression, from the ground to the thing that stands on the ground. And that line runs directly through you. It runs directly through me. It runs directly through every person we will ever encounter.

I have come to believe that the question What is God? cannot be answered without also answering What are we? These are not two questions. They are one question asked from two directions. When I reach toward God, I discover something about the nature of my own being. When I examine my own being honestly, I find something that can only be called God. This is not arrogance. This is the most humbling recognition available to a human consciousness…that what I am, at the root, is not mine. That the awareness that wakes in me each morning did not originate in me. That I am, in the most literal sense I know how to use, a creature…something that has been made, that continues to be made, that is participated into existence by something larger than itself.

And this changes everything about how I see you.

If I am a creature…if I am participated into existence by the sacred ground of being…then so are you. Not in a way that is

similar to how I am. In a way that is identical. The same source. The same ground. The same inexhaustible creativity pouring itself into form. What looks out from behind your eyes is the same awareness that looks out from behind mine…not because we are the same person, but because we drink from the same well. Because we are expressions of the same inexhaustible act of divine self-giving.

This is what I mean when I say we live in a vast network of mutuality. It is not a metaphor. It is the most precise descrip tion I have for what existence actually is. We are not isolated nodes, not separate containers of consciousness that happen to bump into each other in shared space. We are woven together at the root. We emerge from the same source. We are sustained by the same presence. And when any one of us is diminished, something in all of us is diminished, because we are not as separate as we appear.

I think about this when I sit with someone who is suffering. When I walk through a jail cell block and hear the sounds of human beings warehoused against their dignity. When I stand at a graveside and watch a family try to hold each other up against the weight of loss. What I am watching in every one of these moments is not someone else's experience. It is

a particular expression of the shared experience…the experience of being creatures together, of being fragile together, of being sustained together by something that will not let go of us even when we have let go of everything else.

The courage to be God, then, is not only the courage to claim your own divine nature. It is the courage to see that nature in everyone else. It is the courage to refuse the hierarchies that tell us some expressions of the divine are more divine than others. It is the courage to look at the person you have been taught to fear, to dismiss, to diminish…and to recognize the same sacred ground looking back at you.

This is the most demanding thing I know how to ask of anyone. It is more demanding than any theology I have ever studied. It is more demanding than any spiritual practice I have ever undertaken. Because it asks us to extend to others the recognition we are still learning to extend to ourselves. It asks us to see God in the face of the one whose existence threatens us, challenges us, or simply inconveniences us.

But this is precisely what the word God has always demanded, in its deepest registers. The God who is ground of all being is ground of all being…not some being, not the be-

ing of those we have decided deserve it, but all being, without exception. And if we are expressions of that ground, then our primary obligation to each other is the obligation to see each other truly.

I have failed at this more times than I can count. I will fail at it again. But the failure itself teaches me something…that the demand is real, that the connection is real, that when I look past another person or through them or around them, I am doing violence to something sacred. Not to an abstraction. To a person. To a particular, irreplaceable expression of the divine creativity that I claim to honor when I say God.

What would it look like if we actually lived from this recogni tion? Not occasionally, not in our best moments, but as the operating assumption of our days? I think it would look like a world in which the suffering of any person was understood as a wound in the fabric of existence…not a private misfortune, not someone else's problem, but a tear in the web of which we are all a part. I think it would look like a politics, an economics, a set of social arrangements entirely different from the ones we have. I think it would look like mercy. I think it would look like justice. I think it would look, finally, like love.

The courage to be God is finally the courage to live as though all of this were true. As though the sacred ground really does run under everything and everyone. As though the web of mutuality really is the structure of reality. As though every person I encounter is, in the most literal sense, a member of my being.

This is not easy. It was never going to be easy. But it is, I believe, what the word God has always been asking of us, if we were willing to hear it all the way down.

I want to press further into this, because the implications are more radical than they first appear.

If God is the ground of being…if the sacred is not a being alongside other beings but the very source from which all being springs…then the word God is not primarily a claim about something out there. It is a claim about the nature of what is. It is a claim about reality. And it is a claim about you. About every person you will ever encounter. About the structure of the network in which we all live and move and have our being.

I grew up hearing God spoken of as a noun…a specific, definable entity with a list of attributes, a set of opinions about hu

man behavior and a particular investment in certain people and not others. I spent years trying to believe in that God and failing, not because I lacked faith but because something in me kept insisting that the God I was being offered was too small. Too much like a person with preferences. Too easy to enlist in the service of human agendas.

The God I have encountered…in prayer, in the extremity of suffering, at the edges of what language can reach…is not a noun. It is a verb. It is an act. It is the act of being itself, ongo ing, inexhaustible, the endless pouring of existence into form. And this act does not choose its expressions. It expresses itself everywhere, through everything, without reservation.

This is what changes everything about how I see the person across from me. If God is the act of being and you are a being, then God is acting in you. Not symbolically. Not metaphorically. Actually. The same source from which I emerged is the source from which you emerged. We drink from the same well. We are sustained by the same inexhaustible act of divine generosity.

And this means that when I dismiss you, I dismiss something sacred. When I diminish you, I diminish a form of the divine. When I fail to see you…when I look through you or around you or at a version of you that I have constructed from my own needs and fears…I am committing what I can only call a theological error. I am misreading the nature of reality. I am failing to perceive what is actually in front of me.

I have failed at this many times. I will fail again. But the failure matters. It matters because the person I failed to see was not an abstraction. Was not a symbol or a lesson or a case study in the limits of my compassion. Was a person…a particular, irreplaceable expression of the sacred creativity…who deserved to be seen and was not.

The courage to be God asks me to be held accountable by this failure. Not destroyed by it, not crushed by the weight of my own inadequacy, but genuinely reckoned with it and changed by it. To come back, again and again, to the recogni tion that what I see in the mirror of my own consciousness is not the only consciousness that matters. That the network of mutuality includes every person I will ever encounter and that every encounter is an opportunity either to strengthen the web or to contribute to its tearing.

What would it look like to live as though this were true? Not occasionally. Not in our better moments. Not when it is convenient or rewarding or socially approved. But as the operating assumption of ordinary life?

I think it would look like a world in which no one fell through the web unnoticed. In which the suffering of any person triggered a response in the community…not a bureaucratic response, not a charity response, but a genuinely relational response, the response of people who understood that what had happened to that person had happened to something that was connected to them. In which the wellbeing of each person was understood as a stake in which everyone had a share.

I think it would look like politics that took seriously the dignity of every person without exception. I think it would look like economics organized around the flourishing of the whole rather than the enrichment of the few. I think it would look like communities in which no one was invisible, no one was disposable, no one was valued only for what they could produce or consume.

I think it would look like mercy. I think it would look like jus tice. I think it would look, finally and irreducibly, like love.

This is what the courage to be God has always been pointing toward. Not a theological proposition but a way of being in the world. Not a doctrine but a practice. The practice of seeing the sacred in everything that has being…which is to say, in everything and everyone. The practice of responding to that sacred presence with the reverence it deserves. The practice of building, slowly and imperfectly and never completely, a world in which that reverence is the foundation of how we treat each other.

The word God does not only help us think about the divine. It helps us think about ourselves…about the sacred nature of our own existence, about the dignity that cannot be earned or revoked. And it helps us think about each other…about the obligations that flow from our shared source, about the web we are all part of, about the love that is not sentiment but structure, not feeling but commitment.

This is the theology I have been trying to live. I commend it not because I have mastered it but because it keeps calling me forward. Because every time I fail it, I discover again why

it matters. Because the alternative…the world in which we are not connected, in which other people's suffering is not our concern, in which the web is just a metaphor and not a reality…that world is one I refuse to accept.

We are woven together. All of us. Without exception. The word God is one of the names of that weaving.

I want to return to something I said earlier and press it harder, because I think it is the most important thing in this book and I have not yet said it with enough precision.

The word God…when we receive it fully, when we allow it to do what it is capable of doing rather than domesticating it into something manageable…does not just change our theology. It changes our ethics. It changes our politics. It changes the fundamental orientation of our lives toward the people around us.

If God is the ground of all being…if the sacred is not a separate entity watching us from a distance but the very source from which all existence springs…then the sacred is present in every person without exception. Not in some people more than others. Not in the people who have performed the correct rituals or held the correct beliefs or belonged to the cor-

rect community. In every person. The most despised and the most celebrated. The most broken and the most apparently whole. The person whose politics you find abhorrent and the person whose life you find most beautiful.

This is not a comfortable theology. It does not allow you to rank people by their proximity to the sacred. It does not permit you to construct a hierarchy of spiritual worth and place yourself somewhere comfortable in it. It demands something harder: the recognition that what you are, at the source, is identical to what every other person is. That the awareness that makes you capable of asking the question What is God? is the same awareness, from the same source, as the awareness looking out from behind the eyes of the person you find most difficult to love.

I have tested this recognition against the hardest cases I know. The people who have done real damage…the people whose choices have caused genuine suffering, whose capacity for cruelty or indifference or the casual diminishment of others has been amply demonstrated. Is the sacred present in them too?

My answer, after years of ministry in places where I encountered many such people, is: yes. Not because their choices were not wrong. Not because the damage they caused did not matter. But because the source from which they emerged is the same source from which all of us emerged and that source does not abandon its expressions, however badly those expressions have gone. The sacred is present in the person who has caused harm, not as an endorsement of the harm but as the ground of the possibility of transformation…the possibility that something different could still emerge from the same source.

This is what infinite worth means. Not that all choices are equal. Not that harm does not matter. But that the person is always more than the sum of their choices…that there is something in every person that cannot be exhausted by their history, that remains open, that has not yet said everything it has to say.

To live from this recognition is to live in a fundamentally different relationship to the people around you. Not because you pretend the harm is not real or that accountability is not required. But because you hold the person's worth as some-

thing prior to and deeper than their actions…as something given, not earned, not revocable.

This is the hardest thing the word God asks of us. And it is, I believe, the most necessary. Because a world that has learned to revoke the worth of persons…to sort people into the valuable and the disposable…is a world that is tearing the web from which we all hang. And the web, once torn beyond a certain point, does not hold anyone.

The courage to be God is the courage to hold everyone's worth. Even when…especially when…it costs you something to do it.

The word God is not only a word about divinity. It is a word about us. About who we are to each other. About the obligation that our shared source creates. About the world we are capable of building if we are willing to take that obligation seriously.

Take it seriously. The web depends on it.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series One

Book Two

THE COURAGE TO BE TANGIBLE

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Embodiment, Materiality and Sacred Presence

Before we begin this exploration, pause for a moment.

Feel your feet or your body making contact with the ground or the seat beneath you. Notice the physical sensation of being a body in space.

Feel the temperature of the air around your skin. Notice the weight of your body, how it is held by the earth's gravity. There is something grounding, something stabilizing, something deeply real about this physical presence.

This book is an invitation to honor that physicality. To recog nize that the spiritual dimension of existence is not separate from the material dimension. To understand that the body is not something to transcend or escape, but something sacred to inhabit fully. To claim the courage to be tangible…to be present to your embodied existence with reverence and love.

Most spiritual traditions, at their core, know this truth. But they are often transmitted in ways that lose it. The teachings that were meant to awaken the body's wisdom become formulas recited by minds that have learned to ignore the body. The practices that were meant to bring heaven to earth become escapes from earth to an imagined heaven. The invita-

tion into full embodiment gets distorted into a program for transcendence.

This book is a recovery. It is an attempt to restore the original invitation, which was never to leave the body but to inhabit it fully.

Not to escape the material world but to recognize it as the very place where the sacred lives. Not to become less than human in pursuit of something more than human, but to become so fully human that the divine shines through every as pect of your embodied existence.

One of the most destructive ideas in Western spiritual tradition is the notion that the spiritual and the material are fundamentally opposed.

That spirit is good, pure, transcendent. That matter is inferior, base, corrupting. That true spirituality requires escaping the body and the material world, transcending the physical, leaving behind all earthly concerns in pursuit of something higher.

This idea has a history. It enters Western thought most powerfully through Neoplatonism, the philosophy developed by

Plotinus and others in the third century of the common era. For the Neoplatonists, reality was arranged in a hierarchy: at the top, the One, utterly beyond all description and attribute. Below it, the realm of Nous or Divine Mind.

Below that, the Soul. And below the Soul, matter…the furthest possible reach from the One, the least real, the most deficient form of being. To be embodied was to be mired in the least valuable level of reality. Spiritual practice was a matter of ascending, of purifying oneself from matter, of returning to the higher levels from which one had descended.

This idea runs deep through Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions, though it is not the only strand in these traditions. It finds expression in the concept of original sin…the idea that embodied existence, sexuality, pleasure, the material world itself is fallen and corrupted. It finds expression in the exaltation of celibacy and asceticism as higher forms of spiritual practice. It finds expression in the promise of heaven…understood as a non-physical, purely spiritual realm…as the real reward, with earthly life being merely a test or a prison to be escaped.

The consequences of this separation have been profound and damaging. It has led to shame about the body…a shame so pervasive that many people cannot inhabit their bodies comfortably, cannot receive physical pleasure without guilt, cannot speak of their embodied experience without embarrassment. This shame is not natural. It is learned. It is taught. And it is one of the great spiritual crimes committed against ordinary people in the name of religion.

It has led to the denigration of sexuality and desire. The natural appetites of the body…for pleasure, for touch, for intimacy, for food, for rest…have been treated as dangerous impulses to be controlled, suppressed, or transcended. Entire spiritual traditions have been built around the heroic resistance of embodied desire. And countless people have spent their lives in shame and self-condemnation for the simple act of having a body that wants things.

It has led to the exploitation of women, who have been associated with the body and matter while men have been associ ated with mind and spirit.

This is not accident but design. To devalue the body is to devalue the people who are most associated with bodily

life…those who gestate, nurse, care, cook, tend the sick and the dying. The spiritual hierarchy that places mind above matter maps neatly onto a social hierarchy that places men above women. Recovering the sacredness of the body is inseparable from recovering the equality of those who have been associated with it.

It has led to the justification of environmental destruction. If matter is low and unimportant, if the spiritual world is what really counts, then the earth is merely a backdrop…a stage on which the real drama of spiritual salvation plays out. Why protect what is not sacred? Why limit your exploitation of what has no ultimate value? The spiritual devaluation of matter has enabled and justified the physical destruction of the planet.

The courage to be tangible begins with a radical statement: The spiritual and the material are not opposed. They are uni fied. Spirit is not higher or better than matter. Matter is not lower or worse than spirit. They are two aspects of a single reality. The divine does not dwell in some realm beyond the material world. The divine dwells in the material world…as the material world, expressed through and within it, inseparable from it.

Your body knows things your mind does not know.

This is not mysticism. This is neuroscience. The body has its own nervous systems, its own information-processing capacities, its own ways of knowing and responding. The enteric nervous system in your gut…

sometimes called the second brain…contains more neurons than the entire spinal cord and processes information independently of the brain.

Your body responds to situations before your conscious mind has registered them. You experience fear before you can name what you are afraid of. You feel love before you can articulate what has moved you.

You sense wrongness in a situation before you can construct an argument for why it is wrong.

This bodily knowing is not inferior to mental knowing. It is different.

It is older, deeper and in many ways more reliable. Your ana lytical mind can rationalize almost anything. It can construct elegant arguments for harmful choices. It can tell you that you are fine when you are not, that a relationship is working

when your body has known for months that it is not. The mind is a magnificent instrument, but it can be deceived.

The body is less easily deceived. The body keeps its own counsel.

When you are told that the body is inferior to the mind, that spiritual life requires the subordination of the body to the in tellect, you are being told to distrust one of your most reliable sources of wisdom. You are being told to override the knowing that is most directly in contact with reality and substitute for it a system of thoughts and concepts that is always one step removed from experience. This is, spiritually speaking, a disastrous instruction.

Learning to listen to the body is one of the essential spiritual practices. Not in a simplistic sense...not 'if the body wants something, give it.' But in the sense of treating the body's communications as meaningful information worthy of attention and respect. When your body tightens in someone's presence, that is information. When your body opens and re laxes, that is information. When your body is tired in ways that sleep does not fully relieve, that is information. When your body carries tension in specific places...

shoulders, jaw, gut, chest…that is information about where emotional material has been stored.

The great spiritual traditions that honored the body…indigenous traditions, earth-based religions, Tantra, certain strands of Sufism and Kabbalah and Christian mysticism…developed sophisticated practices for listening to the body's wisdom. Practices of movement, breath, sensation, touch. Practices of learning to feel rather than only think.

Practices of allowing the body to be the primary site of spiritual experience rather than a vehicle to be transcended in pursuit of mental or spiritual states.

These traditions understood something essential: the divine does not speak only in words and concepts. The divine also speaks in sensation, in beauty, in the felt sense of aliveness, in the body's deep recognition of truth and wrongness. To develop spiritual sensitivity is to develop sensitivity to these bodily forms of communication alongside the mental and emotional forms. To become spiritually mature is to become whole…integrated across body, emotion, mind and spirit…

not to ascend away from the lower levels into the higher ones.

Your body is sacred. Not in spite of its materiality but because of it.

Not as a container for a sacred soul but as itself an expression of the sacred.

Think of what your body does. It transforms food into life. It converts breath into consciousness. It turns light waves and sound waves into color and music. It generates warmth from chemical processes. It heals itself when it is damaged. It grows new cells, repairs broken structures, adapts to changing environments. It falls in love, gives birth, mourns losses, feels music as physical vibration, knows homecoming as a body-sensation before the mind recognizes it.

Is this not miraculous? Is this not sacred? The alchemists of the Middle Ages spent lifetimes trying to transmute base matter into gold. Your body accomplishes this transmutation continuously, without effort, without intention, simply by existing. It converts the most ordinary things…air, water, food…into consciousness, into creativity, into love, into music, into the capacity for prayer and poetry and courage.

The body you inhabit has been billions of years in the making. The atoms in your body were forged in the hearts of ancient stars that exploded billions of years ago, scattering their elements into the universe. The carbon, the nitrogen, the oxygen, the iron in your blood...these came from stellar explosions. You are, quite literally, stardust that has learned to be aware of itself. The matter that composes you has passed through countless forms over billions of years, through rocks and ocean and single-celled organisms and complex life and primate consciousness, until it arrived here, in this particular arrangement, in this moment, being you.

To be ashamed of this body is to be ashamed of the most extraordinary journey in the known universe. To treat it as a prison or an obstacle is to mistake the vehicle for a limitation when it is in fact the very means of all experience. To neglect it, abuse it, or ignore its wisdom is to turn away from four bil lion years of evolutionary intelligence that has been gathering, refining and integrating since the first stirrings of life on this planet.

Pleasure is a form of wisdom. It is your body communicating with you, telling you what it needs and what sustains it. Disconnecting from pleasure means disconnecting from this

wisdom. It means moving through life without one of the pri mary means of knowing what is good for you.

The great teachers of pleasure…sensory, aesthetic, relational, contemplative…are not spiritual decadents. They are people who have learned to trust the body′s capacity to point toward what is life-giving, nourishing, real.

To be tangible is to reclaim pleasure as sacred. It is to recognize that the pleasure you feel in your own body is not shameful but sacred. It is to understand that allowing yourself to feel good is not indulgence but honoring the body that houses your consciousness. It is to take seriously the teaching that is written not in texts but in the lived experience of your own nervous system: what brings you alive is pointing toward what is real.

At the heart of Christian theology is a radical claim: God became incarnate. The infinite, transcendent divine entered the material world.

Spirit took on flesh. The divine was born as a human being, lived in a body, experienced material existence, knew hunger and thirst and exhaustion and the longing of the heart, felt

the roughness of wood and the heat of the Palestinian sun, wept at a friend′s grave, was arrested and beaten and killed.

This claim is astonishing if you take it seriously. It is not that God disguised itself as human while secretly remaining fully transcendent and unaffected. It is that God became genuinely, vulnerably, materially human. Whatever God is…whatever the infinite ground of being is…

it chose embodiment. It chose the limitations of having a body, the vulnerability of need and pain and death. It chose to know what it is to be hungry, to be lonely, to be misunderstood, to be exhausted. Whatever the incarnation means theologically, it means at minimum this:

materiality is not an obstacle to the divine. Embodiment is not a fall from grace. The body is the site the divine chose for its most direct encounter with existence.

But perhaps the incarnation is not just a historical event that happened once two thousand years ago. Perhaps incarnation is a spiritual principle, a description of how the divine continually expresses itself through matter, through bodies, through the material world. The divine is always incarnating. Every time consciousness emerges in a body, the divine is

taking form. Every time love expresses itself through physical touch, the divine is incarnating. Every time someone creates something beautiful, the divine is incarnating. Every time someone acts justly, every time someone offers compas sion, every time someone shows up fully as themselves…the divine is incarnating.

This is what it means to be tangible. It is to recognize that you are not just a spirit temporarily housed in a body. You are an incarnation of the divine. Your particular body, with its particular characteristics, its particular history, its particular way of moving through the world…this is how the divine expresses itself through you. There is no more sacred form that the divine could take than your actual, embodied, material self.

This understanding is profoundly liberating. It means that you do not need to become something other than what you are to express the divine.

You do not need to be thinner, more attractive, more capable, more this or less that. You are the form through which the divine is expressing itself right now. Your body, your par ticularity, your embodied existence …these are not obstacles

to overcome. These are the very means through which the sa cred becomes visible. The divine has already chosen you. The work is not to become worthy of that choosing. The work is to receive it.

If the body is sacred, then the material world itself must be sacred.

For your body is part of the material world. The atoms that compose your body came from the earth and will return to the earth. You are made of the same material as trees and rocks and rivers. You are an expression of the material world become conscious of itself.

When you separate spirit from matter, you create a hierarchy. Spirit becomes good, valuable, important. Matter becomes bad, trivial, disposable. This hierarchy has justified the destruction of the natural world. It has justified the exploitation of other beings. If matter is low and unimportant, why care for it? Why not extract from it, destroy it, use it for our purposes?

But if matter is sacred, everything changes. If the earth is sacred, then what you do to the earth matters. How you treat it matters. The waste you create matters. The pollution you

generate matters. The extinction of species matters. Not because of abstract environmental principles, but because you are doing this to something sacred. You are degrading the very substance through which the divine expresses itself.

You are diminishing the community of sacred beings with whom you share this world.

Indigenous spiritual traditions have generally understood this. The land is not property to be owned but a relative to be respected. The animals are not resources to be managed but beings with their own forms of sacred existence. The rivers, the mountains, the forests...these are not scenery but living presences with their own integrity and worth.

This is not primitive animism to be condescended to by more sophisticated spiritual systems. This is a perception of reality that many 'advanced' traditions have lost and desperately need to recover.

To be tangible is to recognize the sacredness of the material world. It is to move through your material existence with reverence. It is to make choices about what you consume, what you create, what you waste, based on the understanding that all matter is sacred. This is not about perfection or

purity…it is not about achieving some impossible standard of ecological virtue. It is about bringing genuine consideration and care to the material dimensions of your life, recognizing that every material choice has sacred significance.

The tree that gave its life to become this page. The water that traveled through unknown valleys to reach your tap. The food that came from soil that is itself a living community of organisms beyond counting. The garment that someone…somewhere, in conditions you may not know…made with their hands. All of these have their own form of existence, their own way of participating in the sacred web of being. To be tangible is to recognize this, to receive these things with gratitude, to use them with care, to return what you can to the earth that gave it.

One of the ways that spiritual teachings can become problematic is when they become so abstract that they lose all connection to concrete reality. People speak of 'raising consciousness' while their neighbor is hungry. They speak of 'transcendent love' while maintaining systems of injustice. They seek 'enlightenment' while remaining disconnected from the actual pain of their own life and the lives of others around them.

There is a particular spiritual danger in abstraction. Abstract principles feel very clean and beautiful. They do not have the messiness, the inconvenience, the discomfort of actual reality. Abstract love is much easier than loving an actual person who disappoints you and sometimes behaves badly and needs things you do not want to give.

Abstract justice is much easier than working within broken systems with imperfect allies toward partial solutions that fall short of the vision.

Abstract truth is much easier than the embarrassing specificity of what is actually true in your actual life.

To be tangible is to insist that spiritual truth must be grounded in concrete reality. Not in abstract principles, but in actual circumstances. Not in general ideas, but in particular situations. The test of a spiritual teaching is not whether it is beautiful or internally consistent. The test is whether it helps people live better, love more fully, suffer less unnecessarily, build more just and humane communities.

This means that if your spirituality does not make you kinder in your actual relationships, something is wrong. If your spiritual practice does not help you show up better at work,

in your family, in your community, then it is not actually spiritual. It is escapism dressed up in spiritual language. True spirituality is always practical. It is always relevant to actual life. It addresses the challenges people face.

It offers wisdom and practices that help people navigate the difficulties and opportunities of being alive in a body in a ma terial world.

When you are tangible, you do not retreat into abstraction. You stay in relationship with reality as it actually is, not as you wish it to be.

You make decisions based on the concrete circumstances you find yourself in. You take into account the actual impact your words and actions have on actual people. You are interested in what is true, not in what is comforting or beautiful or spiritually impressive.

This is not a rejection of vision or imagination or ideal. Concreteness does not mean settling for the merely practical or abandoning the aspiration toward transcendence. It means ensuring that your vision, your imagination, your aspiration remain in living contact with the ground of actual experience. The tallest tree is the one with the deepest roots. The

most transcendent spirituality is the one most firmly rooted in embodied reality.

Your body remembers everything that has happened to you. Not in the way your mind remembers…not in the form of narratives and images and explicit recollections. But in patterns. In postures. In the places where it holds tension. In its habitual ways of responding to certain situations, certain people, certain kinds of contact.

This bodily memory is sometimes called somatic memory…from the Greek word soma, meaning body. When you experience something frightening or threatening, your body responds with mobilization: increased heart rate, tensed muscles, heightened senses, the surge of stress hormones. This is the fight-or-flight response and it is life-preserving in moments of genuine danger. But when the danger passes, the body needs to complete this cycle of mobilization and return to rest. When it cannot…when the danger is ongo ing, or when the situation does not allow for the completion of the cycle…the mobilization becomes stored in the body.

The tension remains. The nervous system stays in a state of alert.

Over time, these stored responses become part of the body's habitual landscape. The person who was frightened repeatedly as a child may carry that fright in their body for decades…in shoulders that never fully drop, in a belly that is always slightly braced, in a startled response that seems disproportionate to current circumstances. The person who was not held as an infant may carry that absence in their body…in a hunger for touch that is never quite satisfied, in a difficulty letting themselves be comforted.

To be tangible is to be willing to enter into relationship with this bodily memory. Not to rummage through it endlessly in search of explanations for current difficulties, but to offer the body the presence it needs to complete what was incomplete, to release what has been held, to restore a more natural and relaxed way of inhabiting the self. This is the work of somatic healing…and it is, at its deepest level, a spiritual work, because it is the work of coming home to the body that was always meant to be a sacred dwelling.

The courage to be tangible includes the courage to feel what is in the body. Not to excavate it anxiously or to re-traumatize oneself by returning too quickly to difficult material. But to allow sensation to be felt, to notice what is present in the

body's experience, to trust that the body's process of healing is real and that the completion of incomplete cycles brings relief. This is the courage of returning, again and again, to the body as the site of experience…not to fix it or change it but to be with it, to inhabit it, to honor what it has carried and what it knows.

One of the most powerful and most neglected forms of human spiritual experience is touch. Physical touch…the contact of skin with skin, the warmth of another body, the pressure of a hand on a shoulder or an arm around a body…is one of the primary means by which humans know they are not alone in the world.

Research on touch is remarkable in its findings. Infants who are not held and touched, even if all their physical needs are otherwise met, fail to thrive. The nervous system requires touch for its healthy development. Adults who experience touch deprivation show increased rates of anxiety, depression and physical illness. Touch communicates things that words cannot communicate…reassurance, care, connection, recognition. The capacity to be touched and to touch others is one of the most fundamental dimensions of being a social, embodied creature.

Yet in Western culture, particularly in the United States, physical touch has become fraught with suspicion. We touch less than almost any culture in the world. We have conflated appropriate touch with inappropriate touch until many people are simply afraid to touch anyone.

We have responded to genuine and necessary concerns about sexual boundary violations by creating cultures in which virtually all touch is suspect, in which adults go days or weeks without meaningful physical contact with another person.

The spiritual cost of this touch-deprivation is enormous. People are starving for the basic human need of physical con tact and they are ashamed of that need and they are unsure how to meet it appropriately.

They meet it inappropriately…through sexual connections that are not truly desired, through relationships sustained past their natural end because ending them would mean returning to isolation, through the accumulation of pets that can be touched when human touch is not available.

To be tangible is to recognize touch as sacred. Not all touch, not all contexts, not without consent and care and appropri-

ate relationship. But within those boundaries, to honor the human need for physical contact, to recognize that offering and receiving touch is one of the ways we communicate the sacred to one another. A hand held in grief. An embrace offered in reunion. The simple presence of one body near another in a moment of fear or pain. These are not small things. These are forms of incarnate love.

Closing Practice: Inhabiting Your Body Find a comfortable place where you can sit or lie down without being disturbed.

Close your eyes. Begin by bringing your attention to the crown of your head. Notice the sensation of your skin, the feeling of being at the top of your body. Slowly bring your awareness down through your body…

your face, your neck, your shoulders, your arms, your hands. Notice any sensation, any tension, any numbness. Do not try to change anything.

Simply notice and acknowledge.

Continue down through your chest, your heart, your belly. Notice the movement of breath in this region. Continue

down through your lower body, your legs, your feet. Bring your attention all the way to the tips of your toes.

Now bring your awareness to the whole of your body at once. Feel yourself as a unified whole. Notice your body as a sacred temple housing your consciousness. Notice the aliveness within your body…the subtle hum of being alive.

From this place of embodied awareness, ask yourself: What does my body need right now? What is my body asking for? Listen to the answer that arises. It is your body's wisdom speaking. Do not argue with it or edit it or translate it into something more acceptable. Simply receive what your body communicates and offer it your attention.

Now, offer gratitude to your body. Thank your body for carrying you through your life. Thank it for perceiving the world…for the miracle of sight, the gift of sound, the intimacy of touch, the pleasure of taste, the information of smell. Thank it for moving and creating and connecting. Recognize it as sacred…not as something you have, but as something you are.

When you are ready, bring your awareness back to your surroundings. Open your eyes. Return to your day, carrying with you the awareness of your body as sacred.

The body is the place where the network of mutuality becomes most undeniable.

I do not mean this abstractly. I mean it in the most concrete, immediate way I know. When you are hungry, your hunger is not a private event. When you are cold, your cold is not yours alone. When you are sick and have no access to care, when you are exhausted and have no place to rest, when your body is in pain and no one is present to witness that pain…these are not individual failures. They are communal failures. They are failures of the web.

I have spent enough time with people whose bodies have been neglected, abused, imprisoned, or simply ignored to know that the body is never just personal. The body is always also political. The body is always also relational. What happens to bodies in a community tells you everything you need to know about the theology of that community…about what that community actually believes about God, regardless of what it says it believes.

Because if the divine has taken on flesh…if the sacred really does inhabit matter, if every body is an expression of the divine creativity…then the treatment of bodies is theological. It is not peripheral to our spiritual concerns. It is the center of them.

I think about this when I encounter the ways our society treats certain bodies. The bodies of those who are poor. The bodies of those who are dark-skinned. The bodies of those who are incarcerated. The bodies of those whose gender or sexuality places them outside the circle of acceptability. These are not abstract categories…they are particular people, with particular bodies, who are being told by the arrangement of our world that their flesh is less sacred than other flesh.

And I want to say, with everything in me: this is a theological error. It is not merely a political error, not merely a moral er ror, though it is those things too. It is a fundamental misreading of what the divine took on when the sacred clothed itself in matter. The incarnation…the radical descent of the holy into the bodily…was not a descent into one particular kind of body. It was a descent into bodies as such. Into flesh

as such. Into the vulnerability, the need, the beauty and the mortality that all bodies share.

The courage to be tangible, then, is not only the courage to be present in your own body. It is the courage to honor the bodies of others. It is the courage to take seriously the bodily conditions of the people around you…their hunger, their exhaustion, their need for safety, their longing for touch and care and the simple dignity of being seen.

This is the mutuality of flesh. We are not minds that happen to have bodies. We are embodied creatures in relationship with other embodied creatures, all of us dependent on the same basic conditions for our flourishing…food, shelter, safety, belonging, rest. And when any of us is denied these conditions, all of us are implicated. Not because we caused the denial, necessarily, but because we are part of the web from which the denial emerges. And being part of the web means being responsible for what the web does.

I find myself returning again and again to the body of the person who has been told their body does not matter. The in mate whose body is controlled absolutely by the state. The child whose body is malnourished in the wealthiest nation

on earth. The elder whose body is warehoused and forgotten. The person whose body does not conform to the standard of acceptability and who has spent decades learning to be ashamed of the very flesh that is their dwelling place.

What the courage to be tangible asks of me, in the presence of these realities, is not sympathy. Sympathy is too easy. What it asks is solidarity…the willingness to let their bodily reality actually matter to me, to enter into relationship with it, to allow the discomfort of that contact to change what I do and how I live and what I demand from the world around me.

Because if we are woven together…if the sacred really does inhabit all flesh…then what is done to any body is done to the body of the sacred itself. This is not poetry. This is the most radical claim the incarnation makes. And if we believe it, even partially, even on our best days, it changes everything about how we are obligated to treat one another.

The body is where the network of mutuality becomes tactile. Touch the suffering of another person's body and you have touched something real about your own. Tend to it and you have tended to something in the fabric of existence itself.

Let me be more specific about what this means in practice, because I think the abstraction can let us off the hook.

The condition of bodies in any given community is a direct expression of what that community actually believes…not what it professes to believe, not what it says in its founding documents or its sacred texts or its Sunday morning rhetoric, but what it actually believes about the worth of human life. You can tell what a community believes about the sacredness of embodied existence by looking at how it treats the bodies it finds inconvenient. The bodies of the poor. The bodies of the imprisoned. The bodies of the elderly. The bodies of children in the communities that have been written off.

I have spent time in those communities. I have sat with people whose bodies bore the marks of what the world thought of them. And I want to say plainly: the theology that does not reckon with this is not a complete theology. The spirituality that floats above the condition of actual bodies…that retreats into the interior life while the exterior conditions of embodied existence are allowed to remain unjust…is not a spiritual ity I recognize as adequate.

The courage to be tangible is the courage to stay grounded in the material reality of human life. It is the courage to ask, always, not only What do I believe? but What do the conditions I tolerate say about what I believe? Not only What is my inner life like? but What are the conditions of the inner lives of people whose bodies are being treated as though they do not matter?

The network of mutuality is a network of bodies. It is a network of hunger and satiety, of warmth and cold, of safety and danger, of touch and isolation. And the health of the web is measured, in large part, by the condition of the most vulnerable bodies in it. Not the strongest, not the most privileged, not the ones who have the resources to protect themselves from the worst of what the world can do. The most vulnerable. The ones who fall through.

This is the measure. This is where the theology of tangibility becomes most demanding: not in how we treat the bodies we find easy to love, but in how we treat the ones we find easy to ignore.

What the courage to be tangible asks of us, in relation to each other, is this: take bodies seriously. All bodies. Not only the

bodies we find beautiful or useful or familiar. All of them. The body of the person whose pain is invisible to you because it is invisible to the systems that organize your world. The body of the person who has been told, in a hundred different ways, that their flesh is less worthy of care and protection than other flesh.

To take that body seriously…to let its suffering actually regis ter, to let it change what you demand from the world around you…this is the courage to be tangible in its most complete form. This is where the word Tangible stops being a spiritual concept and becomes a political commitment.

I do not say this to create guilt. Guilt is not a productive foun dation for sustained action. I say it because I believe the sa- cred inhabits all flesh without exception and that belief has consequences. Real, material, structural consequences for how we organize our common life and what we are willing to accept from the systems that govern it.

The body is holy. Every body. Act accordingly.

The body’s vulnerability is the clearest proof we have of our mutual dependence.

No body is self-sufficient. Every body requires air, water, food, warmth, shelter, touch, rest. Every body is subject to illness and injury and the inevitable deterioration that is part of being mortal. Every body needs care…not occasionally, not only in crisis, but consistently, across a lifetime. And the degree to which that care is available determines, more than almost anything else, the degree to which a person is able to flourish.

This shared vulnerability is not a weakness to be overcome. It is the foundation of the network of mutuality. It is the reason we need each other. It is the structure that makes community not merely beneficial but necessary…not a luxury for the relationally inclined but the basic condition of human survival and flourishing.

I am troubled by the cultural current that valorizes independence…that treats the need for care as a deficiency, that celebrates the person who needs nothing from anyone as though needlessness were a virtue rather than a fiction. Because needlessness is always a fiction. The people who appear to need nothing are people whose needs are being met invisibly…by structures and relationships and accumulated privi-

lege that they have learned to take for granted and therefore to see as simply the natural order of things.

No one is self-made. No one gets through this life on their own. And the pretense that they do…the social fiction of radi cal independence…is one of the most damaging lies our culture tells, because it makes the need for care shameful. It makes dependence something to be hidden. It makes the people whose needs are most visible…the sick, the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the young…into objects of charity rather than members of the web whose needs are as legitimate as anyone else's.

The courage to be tangible in community means the courage to acknowledge need…your own and others'. To let the vulnerability of embodied existence be visible rather than managed. To build communities in which the need for care is not shameful but normal…in which taking care of each other is understood as the baseline of shared life rather than a special occasion of generosity.

Every body that is cared for strengthens the web. Every body that is left to struggle alone tears it. The question of what kind of community we are building is always, at its root, a

question about what we do with bodies…especially the ones that need the most and have the fewest resources to meet their own needs.

This is the theology of incarnation made concrete. God took on flesh. The sacred became vulnerable. And the care we extend to vulnerable flesh is the measure of how seriously we have received that truth.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series One

Book Three

THE COURAGE TO BE NOW

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Presence, Time and the Liberation of the Present Moment

Not the moment you imagine is coming. Not the moment that has just passed. But this moment, exactly as it is, right now. Notice your breath. Notice the slight sounds around you. Notice the sensations in your body. Notice the quality of light, the temperature of the air. All of this is happening now. This is your actual life happening right now.

This book is an invitation to reclaim this moment. To recognize that the only moment you actually have is now. To discover the freedom, the power and the profound aliveness available in the present moment.

Before anything else, notice this: you are here. Whatever you have been worrying about, it is not happening right now. Whatever you wish had happened differently, it is over. Whatever you hope is coming, it has not arrived. There is only this. There is only now. And somehow, in the midst of everything, that is enough. It has always been enough. We have simply forgotten how to receive it.

We experience time as if it were a river. We imagine ourselves standing on the bank, watching the past flow away and the future flow toward us.

We think of ourselves as moving along this river, propelled by forces beyond our control, toward a future that is not yet real.

This metaphor is so deeply embedded in how we think that it seems like simple reality. We speak naturally of time 'passing' as though time were a flowing substance. We describe the future as 'coming toward' us and the past as 'receding into the distance.' We plan for tomorrow as though tomorrow were a place we will arrive at. We grieve over yesterday as though the past were a place we have been forced to leave.

But this experience of time as a river is actually a construction.

According to the theory of relativity, time is not a flowing river. Time is a dimension, much like the three dimensions of space. There is only one point in time where you are present at any moment: now.

The past and the future do not flow toward you. Rather, they exist as static reality in the dimension of time. Your past is still there, existing in time, just as Paris exists in space at a distance from you.

Your future is also there, waiting for you to move toward it. There is no actual flowing. There is simply your movement through the dimension of time.

From this perspective, the present moment…now…is where you actually are in the temporal dimension. It is the only place where you are present. It is the only place where anything is happening. The past is no longer happening. The future is not yet happening. Now is the only moment in which reality is actual.

And yet we spend the vast majority of our mental energy dwelling in the past or the future. We replay conversations that have ended. We agonize over what we should have done differently. We fantasize about future scenarios. We worry about what might happen. All the while, the only moment we actually have…the only moment in which we can actually feel, actually act, actually be alive…slips away unnoticed. This is not a minor inefficiency. This is a fundamental way in which human beings are separated from their own existence.

The philosopher William James observed that attention is the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains

of thought. Whatever you attend to, that is what is real for you. Whatever you ignore, that recedes from reality, even if it is happening right in front of you.

This means that the person who spends their life in mental time travel …constantly reviewing the past, constantly anticipating the future …is living in an imaginary reality while their actual life unfolds unattended.

There is something almost tragic about this arrangement. We have been given a life…this extraordinary, improbable, singular life…and we spend the majority of it somewhere else. In a past that no longer exists. In a future that may never arrive in the form we imagine. And in this elsewhere, this actual moment, which is the only moment that will ever be ours to live, passes.

The disconnection from the present moment is the source of much of our suffering.

When we dwell in the past through regret, we torture ourselves with what cannot be changed. We replay moments, imagining different outcomes, condemning ourselves for choices we made with different levels of knowledge and capacity than we have now. The past event is over. It has al-

ready happened. There is nothing we can do to change it. And yet, by dwelling in regret, we allow that past event to poison the present moment. We are, in effect, choosing to suffer twice: once when the event happened and again and again and again, each time we revisit it in the mind's relentless courtroom.

Guilt is another form of suffering rooted in the past. We feel guilty for what we have done or failed to do. This guilt can be useful if it leads us to make amends, to change our behavior, to repair harm. But too often, guilt becomes a form of self-torture. We punish ourselves endlessly for past mistakes, believing that our suffering somehow makes up for what we did. It does not. Suffering does not undo the past. It does not repair the harm. It does not improve the future. It only diminishes the present...the only moment in which repair is actually possible.

There is a distinction worth drawing between healthy remorse and destructive guilt. Healthy remorse says: I did something that caused harm. I feel the weight of that. I am willing to make amends. I am learning from this. I will do differently. This remorse is present-moment awareness of the past's consequences and it leads to action. Destructive

guilt says: I am bad. I am fundamentally flawed. I do not deserve to feel at peace. This guilt is not awareness…it is identity. It is turning a past action into a permanent description of the self. And it leads only to paralysis and suffering.

When we dwell in the future through anxiety, we create suffering for events that may never happen. We imagine worst-case scenarios. We rehearse conversations that have not yet occurred. We worry about things we cannot control. Most of what we worry about never happens. And the things that do happen often turn out to be less terrible than we feared …partly because when they arrive, we face them in the present moment, with our actual capacities, rather than in the imagination, where they loom without limit.

Anxiety keeps us from being available to what is actually happening right now. If I am anxious about what might happen tomorrow, I cannot fully be present to my relationships, my work, my life today. I am missing my actual life in service of imagining a possible future. And the more I practice this imagining, the more skilled I become at it, and the more of my life disappears into it.

Depression, that great darkness that settles over so many lives, often has a temporal dimension. The depressed mind is frequently oriented toward a past that feels irredeemable or a future that feels hopeless.

It is, in different ways, disconnected from the present. The present moment, for all its difficulties, is the only place where connection, beauty, meaning and hope are actually available. The mind that cannot be in the present moment cannot access these things, not because they are absent but because the mind is not where they are.

The Buddhist tradition identifies this temporal displacement as one of the central mechanisms of suffering. The Sanskrit word dukkha, usually translated as suffering, refers literally to a wheel whose axle is off-center…a wheel that wobbles, that cannot turn smoothly, that creates friction and difficulty in its movement. The mind that is not centered in the present moment is like this wheel. It wobbles between past and future, never finding the smooth rotation of being fully here.

The present moment is the only place in which you have any power.

You cannot change the past. You cannot control the future. But you can choose differently right now. You can choose to respond with patience instead of anger. You can choose to speak truth instead of protecting yourself with a lie. You can choose to reach out instead of withdrawing.

You can choose to persist instead of giving up. You can choose to be kind instead of cruel. You can choose to be present instead of distracted.

Each of these choices, made in this moment, creates a different reality going forward. Over time, as you consistently make different choices moment by moment, your life transforms. Not because you are waiting for some future transformation, but because you are constantly choosing differently in the only moment where choice is possible…now.

This is why presence to the present moment is so crucial to spiritual development and personal transformation. If you are not here, in this moment, you cannot make a conscious choice. You are simply running on autopilot, driven by habits and conditioning and reactivity. The habitual response takes over. The old pattern repeats. Nothing changes, not because

change is impossible, but because you were not present enough to choose something different.

But when you are present, when you are here, now, you become capable of something different. You can notice a habitual reaction arising and choose not to follow it. You can notice an opportunity and take it. You can notice someone's pain and respond with compassion rather than defensive self-protection. You can notice your own capacity and act on it rather than waiting for permission or certainty or perfect conditions.

There is a paradox here that is worth sitting with. The present moment feels small. It feels like almost nothing compared to the vast expanse of past and future. It seems obvious that the big decisions happen elsewhere...in the planning, in the reflection, in the long view. But the paradox is this: all of history is made of present moments. Every great thing that was ever done was done now. Every word of love ever spoken was spoken now. Every act of courage was taken now. Every injustice was committed now and every act of justice was accomplished now. There is no other time in which things happen. Everything, always, happens now.

This means that the present moment is not small. The present moment is everything. It is the only place where any thing real happens. And your presence to this moment…your willingness to be here, fully, without the divided attention of a mind that is partly somewhere else…is what makes you an active participant in the unfolding of your life rather than a passenger being carried along by forces you have not noticed and not chosen.

When you are fully present to this moment, something unexpected happens.

Life becomes rich. Life becomes vivid. Life becomes full of texture and meaning.

We have been conditioned to believe that richness and satisfaction lie somewhere else. We believe we will be happy when we achieve a certain goal, acquire certain things, find the right relationship. We are always reaching toward a future that contains more life than this moment.

But this is backwards. The fullness of life is available right now, in this moment, exactly as it is.

There is a contemplative practice that involves truly tasting a single piece of food. You slow down. You place the food in your mouth. You pay attention to its texture. You notice the flavors as they unfold. Most people are amazed by how much richness and pleasure is revealed when they actually pay attention. What had been a mechanical act of fueling the body becomes, through attention, a genuinely sensory experience. The ordinary becomes extraordinary.

This is what happens when you are fully present to any moment…when you truly notice, truly listen, truly feel. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. The simple becomes profound. The familiar becomes fresh.

This is not a trick or an illusion. It is the discovery of what was always there, waiting beneath the surface of habitual inattention.

A conversation becomes rich when you actually listen instead of preparing your response. You hear not just the words but the emotion beneath the words. You notice the person's expression, their body language, the texture of what they are communicating. You become present to them and in that presence, genuine connection becomes possible. You

are not performing listening while actually thinking about yourself. You are actually here, actually with them, actually receiving what they are offering.

The natural world becomes extraordinary when you are truly present to it. The sky is not a backdrop to your thoughts about other things. It is this particular sky, at this particular moment, with these particular clouds, these particular light conditions, this particular quality of air and color that will never exist in exactly this way again. A tree is not a generic tree-thing you have already categorized and filed. It is this tree, in this specific moment of its existence, doing the extraordinary thing of being alive. A bird's song is not background noise. It is a communication, a presence, a moment of another being's aliveness intersecting with yours.

This richness is not dependent on circumstances. You can experience richness in difficulty and in ease, in solitude and in company, in work and in rest. Richness comes from presence itself. When you are truly here, when you are fully present, this moment…whatever it contains …contains everything you need. Not everything you want. Not everything that would be ideal. But everything that is here, which is everything that is real, which is all there ever actually is.

We experience time as a prison. The past haunts us. The future terrifies us. We feel trapped between what has been and what might be, never fully present to what is.

But what if we could be free from this prison? What if we could reclaim the present moment as the source of freedom and power?

Release of the past does not mean denying what has happened. It means acknowledging what has happened, learning from it if there is something to learn and then releasing it. It means forgiving yourself and others ...not because what happened was acceptable, but because continuing to be bound by it serves no one. Forgiveness is not a statement about the past. It is a choice made in the present about how the past will affect the future. It is the decision to stop being controlled by what has already happened. It is the recovery of freedom from the prison of old injury.

This is why forgiveness is so difficult and so crucial. It feels, from the inside, like a betrayal...like releasing the person who harmed you, like pretending the harm didn't happen, like giving up the power that your ongoing grievance gives you. But none of these things are true. Forgiveness releases

you, not the person who harmed you. It acknowledges rather than denies the harm. And the power of ongoing grievance is not real power…it is the power of being bound, of being defined by what was done to you, of living in the past. Real power lives in the present. Forgiveness is the path to it.

Release of the future does not mean abandoning planning or ceasing to have goals. It means planning and setting goals from a grounded place of presence, rather than from anxiety or fantasy. It means recognizing that the future will unfold as a result of the choices you make now. It means trusting that you will have the capacity to handle whatever comes, just as you have handled what has come before. You have a history of surviving everything that has happened to you. You have not been destroyed by any of it. You have carried what needed carrying. That record of survival and resilience is the evidence for trust in your own capacity to face the future.

This trust is liberating. When you can release the anxiety about an imagined future and trust in your own capacity to respond to whatever actually arrives, you become free. Free to be here now. Free to take advantage of this moment. Free to be alive without the constant background noise of worry about what might be coming.

The mystical traditions are unanimous on one point: the divine is not to be found in the past or the future. The divine is encountered only now.

'Be still and know that I am God.' Not be still and remember when I was God, or be still and anticipate when I will be God. Be still…

here, now…and know. The knowing is present-tense. The en counter is immediate. The sacred is available now, in this moment, or it is not available at all.

This does not mean that historical traditions or scriptural teachings are without value. They are enormously valuable…as maps, as guides, as accumulated wisdom about the territory. But the territory itself must be encountered directly, in the present moment of your own experience.

The map is not the territory. The description of water does not quench thirst. The theology of the divine does not replace the direct encounter with the sacred.

This is why the great contemplative traditions all center on practices of presence. Not practices of studying or analyzing or debating, but practices of being here, of attending, of re-

ceiving. Sitting quietly with the breath. Attending to the body's sensations. Opening to sound without interpreting it. Being with what is, without the overlay of concepts and judg ments and narratives. These practices are training in presence…training in the capacity to be here, fully, in the only moment where the sacred is available.

The courage to be now is the foundation for all the other courages explored in this work. When you are present, you can recognize your own divinity. When you are present, you can inhabit your body fully. When you are present, you can love authentically. When you are present, you can be real. When you are present, you can create. When you are present, you can take action.

Presence is not the end of the spiritual journey. It is the beginning.

It is the ground upon which everything else is built. Without presence, all the other spiritual capacities float untethered…beautiful in theory, unavailable in practice. With presence, even the smallest moment becomes a gateway to the depths.

The most important thing about a meditation or presence practice is not the quality of the presence you achieve. It is the quality of the return.

You will get distracted. Your mind will wander. You will drift into thought, into planning, into fantasy, into worry. This is not failure.

This is what minds do. They wander. The practice is not to achieve a state in which the mind never wanders. The practice is to notice when you have wandered and to return. Again. And again. And again.

The act of return is itself the practice. It is not the distraction that matters…it is the moment of noticing, the gentle choice to return to presence. This moment, repeated thousands of times in a lifetime of practice, gradually creates something in you: a more practiced noticing, a quicker recognition of distraction, a more natural ease with presence.

Not a permanent state of perfect presence…that is not available to ordinary human beings and the aspiration toward it is itself a distraction, a form of future-orientation that takes you out of the present. But a gradually deepening capacity to be here and to return when you have gone elsewhere.

This practice of return is not only relevant to formal meditation. It is the practice of your entire life. Every time you notice that you have drifted into resentment about the past or anxiety about the future, you can return. Every time you notice that you are somewhere else while your child is talking to you or your partner is trying to connect with you or someone is asking for your help, you can return. Every time you find yourself moving through an experience…a meal, a walk, a sunset, a conversation…without actually being there, you can return.

The return does not require drama or self-criticism. The noticing that you were elsewhere and the gentle return to here does not need to be accompanied by judgment about your failure to stay present. The judgment itself is another form of elsewhere. You notice, you return, you are here. That is enough. That is the whole practice. That is, in its deceptive simplicity, everything.

There is a teaching sometimes attributed to various spiritual traditions that says: What you are looking for is here. Where you are going is where you already are. The treasure you seek is buried in the field you are already standing in.

We tend to read these teachings as beautiful poetic exaggera tions.

Surely the treasure is not literally here, in this ordinary moment, in this ordinary life. Surely spiritual wisdom is about transcending the ordinary, not about finding the extraordinary within it.

But what if it is literal? What if the life you are living, right now, with all its ordinary texture and difficulty and beauty and limitation, is the life in which everything you could ever need is present? What if the sacred is not somewhere else but here, hidden in plain sight, waiting for your attention to reveal it?

This is what the mystics insist. The Zen masters point to the ordinary ...the cup of tea, the washing of dishes, the chopping of wood...as the site of enlightenment. Not as metaphor for some deeper truth but as the actual location of the deepest truth. Francis of Assisi found the divine in a worm, in a leper's face, in the winter cold. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that washing the dishes is the same as washing the Buddha.

Brother Lawrence found the divine most fully not in formal prayer but in the kitchen, in the midst of ordinary work, in the sustained attention to the sacredness of simple acts.

The courage to be now is ultimately the courage to let your actual life be enough. Not to be passive or to stop growing or to give up on the changes you need to make. But to recognize that the material for your spiritual transformation, the substance of your deepest life, the ground of your encounter with the sacred…all of this is present in the moment you are already in. You do not need to be somewhere else, someone else, at some future time when things are better or different or more what you expected. The work is here. The love is here. The sacred is here.

Right now.

Here.

This.

Closing Practice: The Anchor of This Moment Find yourself in this moment. Not in your thoughts about the past or future, but in this actual moment.

Close your eyes. Notice the sounds around you. Notice the quality of light, even with your eyes closed. Notice sensations in your body. Feel yourself sitting or lying down, your body held by the ground or the seat beneath you.

Now, focus on one thing. Just one. It might be your breath. It might be a sensation in your body. It might be a sound. Choose one thing and bring all of your attention to it. Let all the other concerns, all the mental chatter, fade into the back ground. Just this one thing.

Notice what it is like to be fully here. Notice the quality of presence.

Notice how even something simple…your breath, a sensation, a sound …becomes rich and interesting when you truly pay attention. Notice how the mind wants to move away, to analyze, to compare, to plan. Simply notice this impulse and return to your chosen anchor.

Stay with this for a few minutes. When you notice that your attention has wandered, gently bring it back. This is the prac tice. Attention wanders. You notice. You bring it back. Again and again. Each return is not a failure corrected but a suc-

cess…the success of noticing, which is itself a form of presence.

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and return to your day. But carry with you the knowledge that this presence is always available.

Every moment offers the opportunity to be here, to be fully alive, to be now. The gateway does not close. It is here and it is always open, and you are always, already, on the threshold.

The present moment is the only place where we actually meet.

This is a simple observation that has radical consequences. All our relationships…every genuine connection we form, ev ery moment of real contact with another person…happens now. Not in the memory of the past, not in the anticipation of the future, but in the living, breathing, irreducible now. The present moment is not just where we encounter ourselves. It is where we encounter each other. And it is where we encounter God.

I have spent too much of my life, I confess, not being present to the people in front of me. I have been physically in a room while mentally somewhere else…rehearsing what I was going to say, processing what had just been said, worrying about a conflict I would have to navigate later or grieving a loss I had not yet finished metabolizing. And in those absences, however understandable they were, I missed something. I missed the person. I missed the moment of contact that was being offered and that I was too distracted to receive.

The courage to be now is the courage to actually show up for the people who are present. Not partially. Not with one eye on the door. But fully…with the quality of attention that says: you are not an interruption of my life. You are my life. This moment with you is not a step toward something else. It is it self complete. It is itself sacred.

And when two people are genuinely present to each other…when the defended surfaces come down, even briefly and actual contact is made…something happens that I can only describe as the sacred becoming visible. The network of mutuality, which is always there, becomes briefly transparent. You can see it. You can feel it. It is the quality of aliveness

that fills a room when something true is being said, when genuine recognition is being exchanged, when two people are actually with each other rather than merely near each other.

This is why presence is a spiritual practice and not merely a psychological technique. Being present to another person is an act of theological significance. It is a form of witness…bearing witness to the reality and worth of another person's existence. And it is a form of receiving…allowing yourself to be witnessed in return. Both directions matter. The mutuality is essential.

What I have learned from the hardest moments of my life is that presence is also the thing most people long for and least often receive. People do not ultimately need our answers. They do not ultimately need our advice, our solutions, or our theology. They need our presence. They need someone to be actually there with them…to hold the space of their suffering without trying to fix it, to accompany them through the terri tory of their grief or their fear without needing them to be somewhere other than where they are.

Now, lived this way, is the fabric from which community is woven. Every genuine now shared with another person strengthens the web. Every moment of real presence adds a thread to the network of mutuality. And every absence…every moment we are in the room but not really there…is a small thinning of the web, a small failure of the connection that sustains us all.

The courage to be now is finally the courage to need each other in the present tense. To stop deferring the actual relationship to some future moment when things will be better arranged. To stop carrying the weight of the past into every present encounter as if that weight belonged there. To arrive, clean and open, into the moment that is actually happening…and to find there, in that arrival, not only yourself but everyone you have ever loved and everyone who has ever loved you, present in a way that transcends time.

The now is where God lives. It is where we live, when we are most fully alive. It is where we find each other. It is enough.

Let me press into what this means for our shared life, because the implications of now extend beyond the individual

practice of mindfulness into the structure of how we actually relate to each other.

The present moment is where injustice is most visible. When you are fully present…when you are not defending yourself against what is actually happening by retreating into abstraction or future-planning or the comfortable management of your schedule…you see things. You see the person who is struggling and needs to be seen. You see the arrangement that is causing harm and has been normalized into invisibility. You see the disconnect between what we say we be lieve and how we are actually living.

Presence is threatening for this reason. It shows us things we would rather not see. And one of the primary functions of distraction…of the endless scroll, the constant busyness, the life organized around never quite arriving anywhere…is to protect us from the discomfort of really being here and seeing what is here.

The courage to be now, in community, is the courage to collectively refuse that protection. To insist on being present to what is actually happening…in our neighborhoods, in our institutions, in our relationships…rather than to the comfort-

able version of it that we have collectively agreed to maintain.

Communities that practice presence together become capable of things that distracted communities cannot manage. They can hold grief without rushing it. They can sit with con flict without immediately trying to resolve it into false peace. They can be honest with each other about what is not working, because they are present enough to notice. And they can celebrate what is genuinely good…the actual goodness that is here, now, in the midst of everything…without needing to in flate it or diminish it.

The now, shared, becomes the ground of genuine community. Not the history we carry together, not the future we are working toward together, though both of those matter. But the present moment, inhabited together, is where the community becomes real. Where it stops being an organization or an institution or a set of shared beliefs and becomes a living thing…a web of actual connections between actual people who are actually here.

Be here. Together. Now.

There is a discipline available to communities that is rarely named as such: the discipline of shared presence.

By this I mean the practice of being together without agenda. Without the pressure of productivity. Without the need to re solve something or accomplish something or prove that the time spent together was worthwhile by some external measure. Just…being together. Present. Available to each other. Not going anywhere.

This is becoming increasingly rare. The pressure of modern life organizes time around output. Every hour is supposed to be justified by what it produced. And gathering with other people is increasingly justified by what the gathering accomplishes…the problem it solves, the decision it reaches, the project it advances. The gathering that produces nothing…that is simply the experience of being together, of being known, of being in relationship…is increasingly treated as time wasted.

But this is a profound misunderstanding of what presence does. What shared presence produces, if we must use that word, is the web itself. It is the connection that makes everything else possible. The relationship that sustains us when

everything else fails. The knowing and being known that is, finally, what human beings most need.

Communities that practice shared presence…that set aside time simply to be together, without agenda or production…are communities with a different quality of connection. They are communities in which people actually know each other, not just know about each other. In which there is genuine intimacy…the intimacy of having been together enough that the performed self has been able to relax and the actual person to emerge.

This takes time. It cannot be rushed. It cannot be accomplished in scheduled one-hour slots optimized for efficiency. It requires the kind of unhurried, recurring, non-instrumental togetherness that our culture increasingly treats as luxury.

It is not a luxury. It is the foundation. Without the web of genuine presence…without the accumulated hours of simply being together…nothing else a community tries to build will hold. The programs and the projects and the shared commit ments will all eventually collapse under the weight of their own disconnection.

Be together. Not to accomplish something. To be together. Let that be enough. It is more than enough. It is the thing that makes everything else possible.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series One

Book Four

THE COURAGE TO BE LOVE

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Connection, Vulnerability and Sacred Relationship

Before we speak of love, sit with your heart. Place your hand on your chest and feel the rhythm of your heartbeat.

This organ, this center of your being, beats continuously to sustain your life. It is the seat of your capacity to care, to con nect, to be moved by the presence of another.

This book is an invitation to trust that heart. To honor it. To understand that love...real love, not sentimentality or possession...

is the most powerful force available to a human being. That love is what transforms us, connects us, heals us and calls us toward our highest possibilities.

We come to this subject carrying so much. Every one of us has loved and been loved, has been hurt in love and has hurt in loving, has experienced the soaring lift of love and its devastating withdrawal. We carry the shape of every love we have known in the very structure of our nervous systems. We carry the places we were held and the places we were dropped, the times love arrived unexpectedly and the times it failed to arrive when we needed it most.

So let us not speak of love abstractly, as though it were a con cept to be analyzed from a safe distance. Let us speak of it as what it is: the most real thing in human experience, the thing we most need and most fear, the thing that makes us most fully ourselves and most profoundly vulnerable. Let us speak of it with the honesty it deserves.

At the foundation of existence is not fear or chaos or empty mechanics.

At the foundation is love. This is not poetic metaphor. Look at nature.

A mother bird will risk her life to protect her young. Trees in a forest send nutrients through underground fungal networks to support other trees…including dying trees, including trees of entirely different species. There is a principle of connection, of holding together, of giving across the distances of difference, woven into the very fabric of existence itself.

The physicist Carlo Rovelli writes that the properties of the elementary particles of quantum physics are defined by their interactions…that things only exist in relation to other things, that separateness is a convenient approximation

rather than an ultimate truth. The biologist Lynn Margulis showed that the very cells of which we are made are the result of ancient partnerships, ancient acts of cooperation in which separate organisms came together and became one. Life itself, at its most fundamental level, is the story of connection.

Love is so powerful, so central to human experience, that we have built entire civilizations around it...poetry, music, art, religion. We have written about it in every language, made it the subject of our greatest stories, organized our social struc tures around it. No subject has occupied human creative energy more completely. No force has shaped human history more profoundly.

Yet we rarely understand what love actually is. We confuse it with romance, with desire, with emotional excitement. We confuse it with the particular chemical cocktail that floods the brain in early infatuation ...oxytocin and dopamine and norepinephrine creating a state that resembles, in brain scans, both drug addiction and obsessive-compulsive disorder. We call this feeling love and are bewildered when it fades, when the person we adored becomes ordinary, when

the excitement gives way to the more complex and demanding reality of actually knowing another human being.

But what if love is not a rare emotion that strikes us unpredictably, leaving us helpless in its grip? What if love is not something that happens to us but something we actively choose and practice? What if love is the fundamental capacity of consciousness to recognize itself in the other…to see, in another being, the same awareness, the same aliveness, the same sacred spark that you know from the inside of your own experience? What if love is available in every moment and the only obstacle is our own contraction, our own fear, our own learned habit of closing?

The Christian tradition insists that God is love…not that God has love as an attribute, but that love is what God most fundamentally is.

This means that love is not a quality that some beings possess more than others. Love is the very nature of being. It is what the universe most fundamentally is, when you strip away all the appearances and get to the ground. Your capacity to love is not a talent or a gift or an achievement. It is your

nature expressing itself. It is the divine recognizing itself through your particular heart.

At its deepest root, love is recognition. It is the act of truly seeing another being. Not the surface of them…not the performance they put on, not the role they play, not the way they fit or fail to fit your categories and expectations. But them. The actual living person behind all of it.

Most of us move through life half-blind to the people around us. We see their surface but not their depth. We notice whether they are useful or inconvenient, pleasant or difficult, similar to us or different from us.

We do not perceive the particular beauty of their being. We do not understand the unique texture of their consciousness, the specific weight of what they carry, the precise quality of what they long for. We have categorized them and moved on, without ever truly encountering them.

What I have learned from the people I have sat with in their dying…in their crisis, in their grief, in their most desperate hours…is this: the rarest and most powerful gift one person can give another is pure, unhurried attention. Not advice. Not theology. Not the right words. Attention. To attend to

someone truly is to ask, from the depths of your being: What are you going through? And to remain with that question un til the real answer comes, rather than the polite answer, the expected answer, the answer that lets both of you off the hook.

When I do not truly see you, I can justify treating you poorly. You are, in my mind, a flat figure…useful or not, pleasant or not. I can dismiss you, ignore you, use you, discard you. But when I truly see you …when I perceive the depth of your experience, the particularity of your suffering and your joy, the irreplaceable specificity of your existence…something shifts. You become precious. Not because of what you can do for me. Not because you are admirable or agreeable or impressive. But simply because you are. Because the sacred has taken this particular form and that is enough.

And this recognition has a reciprocal power. When someone truly sees you …when you feel perceived, known, received in your actual specificity rather than a projected image…you become more real to yourself. You find something in yourself that you might not have known was there, because no one had ever looked for it before. You expand into the space of

being seen. You become more fully yourself in the presence of someone who genuinely recognizes you.

This is love in its most fundamental form: attention. The willingness to see another being truly, to give them the extra ordinary gift of your genuine perception, to receive them as they actually are rather than as you wish or fear they might be. This is the beginning of love and it is also, in some ways, the whole of it.

Every person has been hurt. Every person carries wounds…some visible, some so carefully hidden that even the person carrying them has almost forgotten they are there. Every person has ways they have learned to protect themselves from further harm. These protections often show up as difficult behavior: defensiveness, withdrawal, anger, manipulation, the thousand strategies people use to keep themselves from being hurt again.

From the outside, these protective behaviors can look like character flaws. This person is selfish. That person is cold. This person is impossible to reach. That person is always angry. We see the behavior and we judge it and from a place of

judgment we cannot love. We can tolerate. We can manage. We can be patient or polite or professional.

But we cannot love, because love requires seeing through the behavior to the person underneath it…seeing the wound, the fear, the unmet need that is generating the difficult behavior.

Psychologists call this the ladder of inference: the gap between observable behavior and its actual meaning. We see what someone does and we rapidly infer what it means…about them, about their character, about their intentions toward us. And we respond to our inference rather than to the actual person. Most conflict between people, most failure of love, happens in this gap between behavior and meaning.

Love does not require that we ignore the difficulties. It does not require that we pretend harmful behavior is acceptable or that we submit to treatment that damages us. It requires that we see the humanity beneath the behavior. To love someone is to accept them as they are, wounds and all, while also hoping for their growth. It is to say: I see all of this…the defensiveness, the fear, the ways you protect yourself, the ways you sometimes hurt people because you are hurting.

And I still care about your wellbeing. I still recognize your worth. I still hold the possibility of who you might become.

This kind of acceptance is not weakness. It is extraordinary strength.

It is the capacity to hold the full complexity of another person without collapsing into either idealization or condemnation. It is the refusal to reduce a person to their worst moments or their most difficult patterns. It is the insistence that the human being is always more than their behavior, that beneath the wound there is still wholeness, that beneath the protection there is still the person who deserves to be loved.

Acceptance does not mean approval. You can fully accept someone…can love them completely and without reservation…while also being clear that you will not participate in certain behaviors, while also naming what is harmful, while also holding appropriate boundaries about what you will allow in your own life. The most loving parents, the most loving teachers, the most loving partners are not the most permissive ones. They are the ones who combine genuine accep tance with genuine honesty, who love the person enough to tell them the truth.

When you love someone, you give them power over you. You make yourself capable of being hurt. Your happiness becomes entangled with theirs.

Their pain reaches you in ways that other people's pain does not. Their absence creates a specific and irreplaceable emptiness. Their approval and disapproval carry a weight that the approval and disapproval of others does not carry.

This is why people pull back from love. They have been hurt before. They have opened their hearts and had that opening exploited or ignored or rejected. They have loved and lost. They have given deeply of themselves and found that the gift was not received, or was received and then withdrawn. They have learned…sometimes in childhood, sometimes later …that opening the heart leads to pain. And so they have learned to keep the heart partly closed. To love a little. To invest a little. To be available in certain ways but not in others. To manage the risk by managing the exposure.

The philosopher Alain Badiou writes that love is a wager…a bet made in the face of uncertainty, a commitment to build a world with someone without any guarantee of how it will turn out. This is exactly right, and it is exactly why love re-

quires courage. Not the performative courage of heroics, but the quiet, sustained courage of remaining open in the face of uncertainty, of investing deeply without the security of guaranteed return.

But in pulling back from love, in managing the exposure, a person sacrifices the very thing that makes life most worth living. A life without vulnerability is a life without genuine connection. It is a life spent among people who know your performance but not yourself. It is a life where you are safe in the way that a stone is safe...nothing can hurt you because nothing can reach you. And nothing can reach you because you have sealed yourself against the very possibility of being touched.

The research of Brené Brown, synthesized from hundreds of interviews with people across all walks of life, reveals something startling in its clarity: the people who live with the greatest sense of wholeness and belonging are not the people who have been most protected from vulnerability. They are the people who have the greatest willingness to be vulnerable...who have made peace with the uncertainty of love and connection, who have decided that the risk is worth taking,

who have learned to sit with the discomfort of not knowing how things will turn out.

To love fully is to practice vulnerability. It is to let yourself be seen…not the polished, edited, acceptable version of yourself, but the actual you, with all your uncertainties and contradictions and needs. It is to risk being hurt, because the possibility of real connection is worth that risk. It is to say to another person: I am here. I am real. I am offering you some thing genuine. And I am willing to not know what you will do with it.

This vulnerability is not recklessness. It is not indiscriminate openness to everyone regardless of whether they have demonstrated that they can be trusted with what you offer. Vulnerability requires discernment…the wisdom to distinguish between people and situations that are safe enough for the kind of opening love requires and those that are not. But within that discernment, the direction must be toward opening rather than closing. The default must be toward connection rather than protection. Because the cost of a life spent primarily in protection is, finally, the loss of what makes life most fully itself.

Our culture has turned love into sentiment. It has made love something that feels good…something warm and comfortable and affirming, something that reassures us rather than challenges us. And when love stops feeling good, when the warmth gives way to difficulty or discomfort or the demand that we grow, we conclude that it was not real love, or that it has ended, or that something has gone wrong.

But true love is often difficult. It is often not comfortable. It is often inconvenient. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is not what the other person wants, but what they actually need. Sometimes it means saying something hard. Sometimes it means refusing to participate in a pattern that is harming them. Sometimes it means stepping back so that they can step forward on their own. Sometimes it means staying present to their pain rather than rushing to fix it, because the presence is what is needed rather than the fixing.

Real love is grounded in the wellbeing of the beloved, not in the feelings of the lover. The sentimental version of love is oriented toward the lover's feelings…it seeks the warmth of being in love, the pleasure of the beloved's presence, the emotional satisfaction of the connection. When these feel-

ings are present, sentimental love flourishes. When they are absent, sentimental love falters.

But love as commitment to the other's wellbeing persists through feelings and beyond them. It is present when the feelings are warm and when they are absent. It is present when the beloved is easy to be with and when they are difficult. It is present in the long middle years of a relationship when the early electricity has given way to the deeper and quieter knowledge of having built something together, of having been through things together, of having chosen each other again and again through difficulty and disappointment and the steady accumulation of shared life.

The Greek language, more precise than English in this regard, distinguishes between several forms of what we call love. Eros: the passionate, romantic, desiring love. Philia: the love of friendship, of deep companionship, of mutual affection between equals. Storge: the love of family, of natural belonging, of the bonds that connect parents and children, siblings, kin. And agape: the love that is something more than feeling, something more like will and commitment and the fundamental orientation of the heart toward the other's good. It is agape that Paul describes in his great letter to the

Corinthians…that famous passage about love that is patient and kind and bears all things and endures all things. This is not a description of a feeling. It is a description of a practice, a discipline, a way of moving through the world.

This kind of love is mature. It is built on the willingness to prioritize another person's true wellbeing…not their momentary comfort, not their desire for approval or validation, but their genuine flourishing. It is the kind of love that can hold another person through their worst without losing faith in their best. It is the kind of love that tells the truth when telling the truth is the most loving thing, even when it is the most uncomfortable thing.

Love transforms. This is one of its most extraordinary properties and, perhaps, the deepest reason it occupies such a central place in human experience and in every spiritual tradition that has ever sought to describe the sacred.

When you are truly loved…when someone sees you clearly and chooses you anyway, when someone's care for you is not contingent on your performance or your attractiveness or your usefulness…something fundamental shifts in you. You become capable of more. You relax into a security that was

not available before. You discover resources in yourself that fear and guardedness had kept hidden. You take risks you would not have taken without the ground of being loved to stand on.

This is not metaphor. The developmental psychologist John Bowlby spent decades studying the relationship between secure attachment…the experience of being reliably loved and responded to by a primary caregiver…and the capacity for exploration, resilience, and emotional regulation in children. His findings were clear: children who are securely attached explore more boldly, recover from distress more quickly and develop greater capacity for healthy relationships in adulthood. Being loved well literally expands what is possible.

And when you love, you are also transformed. You become more compassionate. Not because you have decided to be more compassionate, but because love opens your perception. When you love someone, you begin to understand them from the inside…to feel something of what they feel, to know something of how the world looks from within their particular experience. This understanding becomes a template. It becomes the beginning of the capacity to extend that same quality of understanding to others who are not yet beloved.

Love calls us toward our highest possibilities. In wanting another to flourish, we become better ourselves. We find ourselves making choices we would not otherwise have made…choices that serve the beloved's wellbeing at some cost to our own convenience or comfort. And in making these choices, repeatedly, over time, we become people who are capable of making them. We develop the muscles of generosity, of patience, of long-term commitment to another's good.

What I have come to believe about love is that it is not a private transaction between two people. It is a force that moves through the cosmos…the very principle by which human emotion but as a cosmic force…the very principle by which the universe draws toward greater complexity, greater consciousness, greater unity. In this view, when you love genuinely, you are participating in something larger than yourself. You are joining the movement by which existence draws toward its own deepening. You are becoming, in your particular and embodied way, a force for the world's flourishing.

There is a quality of love that the mystics speak of with particular reverence: the love that is not attached to outcome. The love that does not need to be returned. The love that does not shrink when the beloved does not respond as

hoped, does not expand when they respond better than hoped. The love that is, in some sense, unconditional…not because it has no discernment, not because it tolerates every thing indiscriminately, but because it is not fundamentally transactional. It is not love given in exchange for something received.

What I have seen in the people who love most fully…and I have been graced to know a handful of them…is that their love has ceased to be transactional. They have moved beyond the exchange. This is a startling and nearly impossible standard. Human love, as most of us experience it, is deeply relational…it responds to response, it grows in the warmth of being received and contracted in the cold of being rejected. To love without any need for return seems to require something that transcends ordinary human capacity.

And perhaps that is exactly the point. Perhaps the love that asks nothing is not primarily a human achievement but a quality of the divine that can, when we are open, flow through us. The traditions of contemplative prayer…Christian, Sufi, Jewish, Hindu…speak of moments of absorption in divine love in which the ordinary boundaries of self dissolve, in which the person is no longer primarily identified

with their own needs and desires, in which something larger and more generous than usual self-interest moves through them. In these moments, love that asks nothing becomes available…not as an achievement of the will but as a gift, a grace.

This does not mean that ordinary human love, with all its needs and dependencies and investments, is somehow deficient. It is human. It is real. It is precious. But it points toward something…toward a quality of love that our ordinary experience only approximates, a love that is finally indistinguishable from being itself, from the ground of existence, from what the traditions call God.

Love is not primarily a feeling. It is primarily a practice. This is the most important thing to understand about it…the thing that most clearly distinguishes love as a spiritual discipline from love as a romantic fantasy.

The practice of love is made up of small things, repeated over time. The decision to listen rather than defend. The choice to speak with kindness rather than with the sharpness that efficiency sometimes tempts. The willingness to show up when showing up is inconvenient. The practice of attention…truly

paying attention to the person in front of you, to what they are actually communicating rather than what you expect them to communicate.

It is the practice of repair: returning after rupture, acknowledging what happened, taking responsibility for your part, offering and receiving apology. Every relationship, no matter how loving, will have ruptures…moments of misunderstanding, hurt, failure. What distinguishes loving relationships from others is not the absence of rupture but the practice of repair. The willingness to come back, to work it through, to choose connection again after disconnection.

It is the practice of curiosity…approaching the people you love with genuine curiosity about who they are and who they are becoming. Not assuming you already know. Not relating to the person you have categorized rather than the person who is actually present. Remaining open to being surprised, to discovering new dimensions of someone you thought you knew completely.

These practices are available in every day, in every interaction. Love does not require grand gestures or perfect circumstances. It requires only the daily courage to choose connec-

tion over protection, truth over comfort, the other's good over your own convenience. This is, in its way, the most ordinary and the most extraordinary practice available to a human being.

Closing Practice: Opening the Heart Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Bring your attention to your heart center…the center of your chest. Breathe slowly and gently into this area. With each breath, allow the area around your heart to soften slightly, to become a little more open, a little more receptive.

Bring to mind someone you love deeply. Let the feeling of love for this person arise naturally. Do not manufacture it. Simply let the image or sense of this person be present and notice what happens in your heart.

Notice the warmth, the opening, the quality of care that arises.

Now, gently and without forcing, extend this same quality of warm attention to someone you know less well…perhaps a neighbor or colleague, someone neutral in your life, someone you pass without much thought. Extend to them the

same quality of care: may they be well, may they be safe, may they know love.

Now extend this care to someone with whom you are in difficulty…

someone who has hurt you, or whom you have judged harshly, or with whom there is unresolved tension. This is more difficult. Do not pretend the difficulty is not there. Sim ply, beneath the difficulty, extend the recognition that they too are a being who wants to be well, who carries wounds, who is doing their best. May they be well.

Finally, let this quality of care expand to include all beings…all the people on this earth, all living things, the whole web of life. Not as an abstract concept but as a felt sense of radical inclusion. All of this is held. All of it matters. All of it is worthy of care.

When you are ready, slowly return to the room. Carry with you the knowledge that this capacity…this extraordinary capacity for love …is not something outside you that you must find. It is what you most fundamentally are.

Love is not a feeling I have toward you. Love is the structure of reality.

I mean this literally. I have come to believe…through experience, through failure, through the slow patient work of learning to be in relationship without using the other person as a mirror for my own needs…that love is not something we generate. Love is something we participate in. It is already there, already the deepest current running through existence, already the force by which the universe holds together and draws toward greater complexity and greater consciousness. What we call love, when we love well, is our alignment with this force. Our willingness to let it move through us rather than blocking it at the gate of our own defended selfhood.

And if love is the structure of reality, then our relationships are not incidental to our spiritual lives. They are the place where our spiritual lives are most directly tested and most fully expressed.

I have spent my ministry alongside people in their most intimate struggles…marriages fracturing, families in crisis, friendships betrayed, communities torn apart by conflict

that started small and metastasized into something that felt irreparable. And what I have observed in all of these situations is not that love failed. What I have observed is that something pretending to be love failed…something smaller, something more conditional, something that was actually need or control or fear dressed up in the language of love.

Actual love…the kind that is patient, that keeps no record of wrongs, that bears all things and believes all things and hopes all things and endures all things…this is rarer than we like to think. It is not the default setting of human relationship. It is the thing we are called toward, the thing we sometimes glimpse, the thing we occasionally inhabit for a stretch of time before our fear or our wound or our need pulls us back toward safer ground.

But here is what I have also observed: we are capable of more love than we think. The capacity is there. It is native to us…not because we are naturally noble, but because we are made from love. Because love is what we are made of, at the source. And when we encounter it…when we feel it pouring through us toward another person, or feel it pouring from another person toward us…we recognize it not as something foreign but as something deeply familiar. As a homecoming.

The network of mutuality is love's structure. It is what love looks like when you step back far enough to see the whole pattern. Every genuine act of love adds a thread to the web. Every act of cruelty or indifference or calculated self-interest tears one. And the web is what we all depend on...not only those we love personally, but all of us, the whole of the human community, sustained by the accumulated love of all the people who have chosen, again and again, to keep the thread intact.

This is why love is not private. This is why love is always also political, always also social, always also structural. The quality of love available in a community...the degree to which people are willing to see each other truly, to tend to each other's needs, to refuse the hierarchies that say some lives matter more than others...this determines the health of the web. A community with high levels of genuine love is a community in which people flourish. A community in which love has been replaced by transaction, by competition, by the zero-sum logic of scarcity...that is a community in which everyone suffers, including those who appear to be winning.

The courage to be love, then, is not only the courage to love the people close to you. It is the courage to let your love ex-

pand…to let the circle keep widening…until it includes not only those you find easy to love but those you find difficult, those whose existence challenges you, those whom the world has made into strangers or enemies. Because the web includes them too. The network of mutuality includes them too. And the love that refuses to cross that line is not yet love in its fullest form.

I am not there yet. I suspect I will not get there in this lifetime. But I am moving toward it. That is what the courage to be love requires: not arrival, but direction. The willingness to let love keep asking more of you than you thought you had to give. The willingness to discover, in that asking, that you have more than you thought.

The implications of love as the structure of reality are larger than any individual relationship can contain.

If love is what reality is made of…if it is not only what we feel toward the people we have chosen but the very force by which the universe coheres…then the failure of love in any particular relationship is not only a personal failure. It is a small tear in the fabric of existence. And the practice of love…the daily, unglamorous, often frustrating work of

choosing connection over defensiveness, generosity over withholding, presence over management…is not only a personal practice. It is a contribution to the world.

I have come to believe that every relationship that is genuinely loving…not perfectly loving, not loving without conflict or failure, but genuinely, durably loving in the sense of being oriented toward the other person's actual good…every such relationship makes the world more capable of love. Not in a mystical way that bypasses causation, but in the most practical way: by modeling what is possible. By demonstrating that two people can actually see each other and stay. By showing, to everyone who witnesses it, that the defended life is not the only option.

The visible love of people who are genuinely connected is one of the most powerful forces for social transformation available to us. Not visible in the sense of performed for an audience. Visible in the sense that it cannot be hidden…that when two people or a community is genuinely loving, it shows in the quality of the space they inhabit, in the way they speak to each other, in the particular grace that characterizes their interactions.

This is why the courage to be love is never only personal. It is always also public. Always also communal. Always also polit ical, in the broadest and truest sense of the word…the sense in which politics means how we organize our shared life. Love, practiced genuinely and persistently, is one of the most subversive forces available to human beings. It refuses the zero-sum logic. It refuses the hierarchy of worth. It refuses the premise that some people matter more than others. And it does all of this not through argument but through demonstration…by being, consistently and visibly, something that the world does not expect.

Love each other. Not as a spiritual practice separate from the world. As the practice that changes the world.

The world we are building together is built, ultimately, from the quality of love we bring to the building.

I mean this literally. The institutions we create, the communities we form, the relationships we sustain or fail to sustain, the care we extend or withhold…all of these are expressions of the love or the lovelessness that operates at the center of our shared life. And the world they produce is the world that love…or its absence…makes possible.

I have seen communities built from genuine love. Communities where the orientation toward each other's good was not merely stated but practiced…where people gave each other the benefit of the doubt, bore with each other's failures with patience and without holding them permanently against each other and consistently chose connection over the comfort of righteous withdrawal. These communities had a quality that I can only describe as grace. A quality of ease and generosity and resilience that allowed them to hold difficulty without being destroyed by it.

And I have seen communities built from something that looked like love but was actually control…communities organized around conformity, where the price of belonging was the suppression of what made each person genuinely themselves. These communities had a different quality: a kind of brittle cohesion that held as long as no one pushed against it and shattered when the genuinely difficult arrived.

The difference, I have come to believe, is not primarily about doctrine or practice or the external forms of community life. It is about whether love…the real thing, not the performance of it…is at the center.

The real thing is patient. It is patient with the pace of growth, with the slowness of change, with the way that the most important transformations always take longer than we want them to. It is patient with failure…not indifferent to it, not willing to pretend it did not happen, but capable of holding it without making it the permanent defining feature of the person who failed.

The real thing is also demanding. It does not let us be less than we are capable of being. It holds up a mirror that is accurate rather than flattering. It says, with the combination of tenderness and seriousness that only genuine love can sustain: I believe you are capable of more than this. Come further.

This is the love the world needs from its communities. Not the love that comforts without challenging. Not the love that challenges without comforting. The love that does both…that holds us in our difficulty and calls us toward what we are capable of becoming.

Build your community from this love. Tend it. Protect it. Do not let it be replaced by the easier substitutes.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series One

Book Five

THE COURAGE TO BE REAL

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Authenticity, Truth and Sacred Vulnerability

There is a version of yourself that you present to the world. It is more polished than who you are in private. It is more controlled. It performs confidence even when you feel uncertain, competence when you feel confused, ease when you feel afraid.

This book is an invitation to move beyond the mask. To recognize and honor the authentic self beneath the performance. To claim the courage to be real…to show up as you actually are, unedited, unfiltered, and fully present to your own experience.

This is among the most demanding courages in this collection. Not because it requires anything extraordinary of you…but precisely because it requires only what you already are. And to offer only what you already are, without addition or subtraction, without the protective covering of performance…this turns out to be one of the things human beings find most difficult.

We are afraid that who we actually are is not enough. We are afraid that if people truly knew us…knew our doubts, our fears, our failures, our contradictions, the parts of ourselves

that don't fit the image we have worked to project…they would withdraw. They would judge us.

They would leave.

And sometimes they do. This is a real risk. Authenticity does not guarantee acceptance. But what it does guarantee is that when you are accepted, you are truly accepted…that the connection is real, that the love is for you rather than for the per formance. The question is whether that genuine connection is worth the risk of being seen.

This book is an argument that it is.

From childhood, we learn to perform. We learn what gets us approval and what gets us punishment. We learn what is acceptable in our family, our culture, our religion, our social group and we develop a version of ourselves that fits those requirements. This is necessary for survival.

Some adaptation is essential for living in community. The capacity to read social situations and adjust our behavior accordingly is part of what makes us human.

But often, this performance becomes so complete that we lose touch with who we actually are beneath the mask. The

adaptation that was originally a strategy becomes an identity. The performance that was originally a survival mechanism becomes what we take ourselves to be. And the original self…the actual, unperformed, unedited self…retreats further and further from the surface of life, until we have almost forgotten it exists.

The psychologist Donald Winnicott distinguished between what he called the true self and the false self. The true self is the spontaneous, authentic expression of the person…the feelings, desires, perceptions and impulses that arise naturally from within. The false self is the constructed, adaptive identity that is built in response to the demands of the environment. In a healthy development, the false self is a useful surface…a social face that allows the true self to engage with the world without being constantly exposed or overwhelmed.

But in many people, particularly those who experienced early environments that could not tolerate authentic expression, the false self becomes dominant, while the true self goes into hiding.

The cost is profound. We experience a fundamental disconnection from ourselves…a sense of unreality, of going through the motions, of being a stranger to our own inner life. We cannot be truly loved because no one knows the real us. We cannot act on our authentic desires because we do not know what they are…we have been performing so long that we have lost access to our own wanting. We make life decisions based on what we think we should want rather than what we actually want and we arrive at destinations that do not satisfy us, wondering why.

We become exhausted by the effort of maintaining the performance. This exhaustion is real and cumulative. It is not just the exhaustion of doing difficult things. It is the exhaustion of constantly monitoring yourself, constantly editing your expression, constantly managing the impression you are creating. It is the exhaustion of the actor who never gets to leave the stage…for whom every moment is a performance and there is no backstage where the actual self can rest.

And we are lonely. Deeply, specifically lonely in the way that is only possible when you are surrounded by people who know your performance but not yourself. This is the particular loneliness of the person who is socially successful but pri

vately invisible, who has many acquaintances and few witnesses, who is appreciated for what they project rather than known for what they are.

Within all of us are parts we do not want to see. Parts that are selfish, envious, resentful, petty. Parts that are needy beyond what seems dignified. Parts that are angry in ways that feel dangerous. Parts that want things we think we should not want. Parts that have done things we are ashamed of. Parts that remind us of people we have judged.

Carl Jung called this the shadow…the collection of everything we have deemed unacceptable in ourselves and pushed out of conscious awareness. Not because it does not exist, but because we cannot bear to look at it. We have decided that this is not us, that these impulses and desires and reactions belong to someone else, to a worse version of humanity, to the people we judge and condemn.

But the shadow does not disappear when we deny it. It simply moves underground. And from underground, it exerts tremendous influence over our behavior…more, not less, than if we had acknowledged it and brought it into conscious relationship. We find ourselves saying or doing things that

surprise us, that seem out of character, that seem to come from somewhere beneath our usual identity. We react to certain people with a disproportionate intensity that seems to go beyond the actual situation. We are inexplicably attracted to or repelled by qualities in others that we do not recognize in ourselves.

Jung observed that we tend to project our shadow onto others…to see in them the qualities we cannot acknowledge in ourselves. The person who constantly accuses others of dishonesty is often, unconsciously, deeply dishonest. The person who rages at others' selfishness is often, beneath the per formance of generosity, profoundly selfish. The person who cannot tolerate weakness in others is often terrified of their own vulnerability. Projection is the unconscious outsourcing of shadow material…taking what belongs to us and attributing it to someone else, where we can examine it, fear it and condemn it without having to claim it.

To be real is to integrate the shadow. This does not mean act ing on every impulse, giving expression to every dark desire, abandoning all discernment about what to express and what to contain. It means acknowledging that the impulse is there. It means being willing to say …at least to yourself, at least in

the privacy of your own awareness …yes, I have this in me. I am capable of this. I am not only what I prefer to show.

This integration is not destructive. It is profoundly liberating. When you acknowledge the shadow, it loses its compulsive power. The impulse you have refused to acknowledge drives behavior from underground. The impulse you have acknowledged can be seen, considered and consciously engaged with. You become able to notice: I am feeling envious right now.

I am feeling resentful. I am feeling the pull toward something that would harm rather than help. And in the noticing, you have a choice you did not have when the impulse was invisible.

The shadow also contains gold. Jung insisted on this: the shadow is not only darkness. It contains the qualities that were judged as unacceptable in our particular environment…but many of these qualities are not actually dark. They are simply inconvenient. The child who was told that their anger was wrong and learned to suppress it entirely carries that energy as shadow. The woman who was told that her ambition was unfeminine and learned to hide it carries

that drive as shadow. The man who was told that his tenderness was weakness and learned to perform toughness carries that capacity for gentleness as shadow. Retrieving the shadow is not just reckoning with darkness. It is recovering aspects of yourself that are genuinely good and genuinely yours, that were pushed away not because they were harmful but because someone, somewhere, could not hold them.

Being real is a practice. It begins with telling the truth. Not the whole unmediated contents of your consciousness shared with everyone at all times…that is not honesty, that is chaos. But the commitment to bringing your actual experience into language rather than substituting for it whatever you calculate will be most acceptable.

If you do not know something, you say so. If you disagree, you say it …clearly and respectfully, but actually. If you are afraid, you say it. If you are confused, you say it. If you are in pain, you say it. If you made a mistake, you acknowledge it without the elaborate self-protective maneuvers of minimizing, deflecting and justifying that most of us have developed into an art form.

This is radical in a world where we are trained to say what will be accepted, what will make us look good, what will avoid conflict. We have learned to modulate our expression so carefully that the distance between what we say and what we actually mean is often vast. We give feedback sandwiched in so many qualifications that its actual content is obscured. We express disagreement so tentatively that it does not register as disagreement. We perform enthusiasm for things that leave us cold and suppress responses that might create friction and generally manage the impression we create with such thoroughness that genuine communication barely occurs.

When you practice radical honesty, the world becomes simpler. You do not have to manage different versions of yourself for different audiences.

You do not have to remember which story you told to whom. You do not have to maintain the elaborate internal ledger of what you have claimed to feel versus what you actually feel. There is only one version of events and it is what actually happened and you can speak it.

And people respond to honesty in ways that can be unexpected. Yes, sometimes honesty creates discomfort. Sometimes it disrupts. Sometimes it reveals differences that were more comfortable when hidden. But it also creates trust…the deep, specific trust that comes from knowing that when someone speaks, they are telling you what they actually think.

It creates genuine relationship…because genuine relationship requires genuine persons and you cannot meet a person who is always performing. It creates the possibility of real help…because help that is based on accurate information about what is actually happening is incomparably more useful than help aimed at the edited, approved version of reality you have allowed people to see.

There is a particular exhaustion that comes from living inauthentically.

It is not the healthy exhaustion of meaningful work. It is the draining, depleting exhaustion of constant internal conflict…the friction between who you actually are and who you are pretending to be, between what you actually want

and what you are performing wanting, between what you actually think and what you are saying.

When you are real, this conflict disappears. There is alignment between your inner truth and your outer expression. You are not pushing against yourself anymore. You are not spending energy on the containment of the parts of yourself that you have deemed unacceptable. You are not maintaining the gap between performance and reality. You are moving in the direction of your own becoming, with all of yourself available for the journey.

This alignment is deeply energizing. You access your full power because you are not wasting a significant portion of it on internal conflict.

The creative energy, the emotional energy, the intellectual energy that was going into performance and suppression is now available for actual engagement with your actual life. You become more effective not because you have acquired new skills but because you are no longer working against yourself.

The philosopher Albert Camus wrote about authenticity…about the courage to face the genuine condi-

tions of existence without the comfort of illusion. There is something bracing and clarifying in the willingness to be real about what is actually happening, what you actually want, who you actually are. The relief of ending a performance that was never sustainable. The strange freedom of having nothing to hide.

Alignment also makes relationships more sustainable. The person who is authentic does not require ongoing management of their relationships in the same way as the person who is performing. Because they are consistently themselves, the people in their lives can orient to them reliably. There are no unpleasant surprises when the performance slips.

There is no exhausting vigilance required to maintain the necessary distance between the authentic self and the performed self. You can rest in the relationship, because there is nothing to manage.

When you let yourself be seen as you actually are, you risk being judged, rejected, or misunderstood. Some people will not like who you are. Some people will withdraw their approval when they discover that you are not what they needed

you to be. Some people will be threatened by your authenticity, because your willingness to be real will highlight their own performance to them and that is uncomfortable.

This is real. These are real risks. Authenticity does not produce universal acceptance. Some of the most authentic people in history were the most rejected by their contemporaries…the prophets who spoke truth that no one wanted to hear, the artists who created work that broke all the familiar patterns, the visionaries who refused to pretend that what everyone was pretending was fine was actually fine.

But the alternative…living a false life to maintain everyone′s approval, performing a self you do not recognize in service of relationships that cannot hold your actual weight…is far worse. It is the sacrifice of your actual existence on the altar of other people′s comfort. It is the choice of a diminished, manageable, acceptable version of yourself over the whole, unwieldy, unpredictable, irreplaceable actual person you are.

And you discover something remarkable when you begin to be real: there are people who will love you exactly as you are. Not despite your particularity and your difficulty and your

strangeness. For those things. People who have been waiting for someone who would not perform at them, who would actually show up, who would trust them with something real. People who are also tired of performing, who are also hungry for genuine contact, who have been looking for someone with the courage to go first.

When you are real, you make it possible for others to be real. Your authenticity is a gift not only to yourself but to everyone you encounter. It creates permission. It models possibility. It says: this is available. You can do this too. You do not have to keep performing.

Real contact is possible. Real connection is possible. Real love is possible. But only here, only in this territory of authenticity, only where we are willing to be seen as we actually are.

At the heart of authenticity is the discovery and cultivation of your own voice. Not the voice you have been given…the voice that expresses other people's values, other people's certainties, other people's ways of understanding the world. But your voice. The particular way you see things. The specific quality of your perception.

The unique combination of experience and sensitivity and thinking that constitutes your actual perspective.

Finding your voice requires a kind of spiritual courage that is easy to underestimate. Because your actual voice…your actual perspective…

is often inconvenient. It does not align perfectly with any existing tribe. It cannot be fully represented by any ready-made identity. It contains contradictions, uncertainties, half-formed insights that are difficult to articulate. It is easier to adopt someone else′s voice…

a tradition, an ideology, a community′s established language…than to do the difficult work of discovering and devel oping your own.

But the voice you adopt rather than discover will always feel borrowed.

It will never quite fit. You will speak words that are technically accurate without feeling that they are true for you. You will profess beliefs that you have not verified through your own experience. You will represent a perspective that is not actually yours and over time this will erode your sense of

yourself, your confidence in your own knowing, your ability to trust what you actually perceive and feel and think.

Developing your authentic voice is a lifelong practice. It involves paying close attention to your own experience…not as filtered through what you think you should be experiencing, but as it actually is. It involves noticing when you are using someone else's language for your own experience and finding words that actually fit. It involves being willing to say 'I don't know yet' rather than borrowing the certainty of others. It involves trusting your own perception even when it runs counter to the consensus, while remaining genuinely open to the possibility that you are wrong.

Authenticity is not merely a psychological virtue. It is a spiri tual necessity. The spiritual life, at its deepest, is not about adopting a set of beliefs or performing a set of practices. It is about the alignment of your entire being…your body, your emotions, your thoughts, your actions…with what is most deeply true. And this alignment is only possible if you are willing to know what is actually true for you, rather than per forming what is expected.

The great mystics were, above all, people who refused to per form their spiritual experience. I have known what it costs to refuse the performance. I have lost rooms, lost approval, lost the comfort of institutions when I would not sand down what I had actually encountered in prayer, in the street, in the jail cell, at the deathbed. The people I most admire in this work are those who documented their doubt as faithfully as their certainty, their failures as carefully as their breakthroughs. These were not people who performed holiness. They were people who pursued truth, even when truth was uncomfortable, even when it violated the expected patterns.

The spiritual life requires exactly this kind of honesty. It requires being willing to know what you actually believe rather than what you think you should believe. It requires being willing to acknowledge when your faith has been shaken, when your practice is not working, when the tradition you have been given no longer fits the dimensions of your actual experience. It requires bringing your genuine self…with all its complexity and uncertainty and resistance…into the spiri tual relationship, rather than offering only the parts you con sider spiritual.

This honesty is not the enemy of faith. It is the ground of gen uine faith. Faith that requires the suppression of honest doubt is fragile.

Faith that has been forged in genuine encounter with uncertainty and difficulty is resilient. The spiritual life that has room for the whole person…for the doubts and the failures and the resistances as well as for the insights and the devotion…is the spiritual life that can actually sustain a person through the full range of human experience.

Closing Practice: Meeting Your Authentic Self Find a quiet place. Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed or softly focused downward.

Take a few slow breaths. With each exhale, let the performance relax a little. Let the face you present to the world soften. Let the monitoring of impression ease.

Imagine stepping out of the role you play in the world…the version of yourself that you present to others. Set it aside for a moment. Not permanently. You can pick it up again. But just for now, let it rest.

Who are you without the performance? Not who you think you should be.

Not who you have been told you are. Not the sum of your achievements and failures and roles and relationships. But the essential person who has been present through all of it. What do you actually want? What do you actually believe? What matters to you, when no one is watching and no one will judge you?

Sit with this for a moment. Acknowledge whatever arises…with kindness, without judgment. This is your authentic self. It is not perfect. It is not finished. It is not what you expected or what you wished for. But it is real. And real is the only material from which a genuine life can be built.

When you are ready, open your eyes. Return to the world. But carry with you the thread of this recognition…that beneath all the performing, there is someone here. Someone real. Someone worth knowing and worth being.

There is no such thing as a private authenticity.

I know this sounds contradictory. We speak of being real as though it were an individual achievement…as though the

work of becoming authentic were something you did alone, in the privacy of your own interior and then brought out into the world as a finished product. But this is not how it works. The self that becomes real becomes real in relationship. It becomes real through contact with other selves. It becomes real, if we are honest, through the friction of community…through being known and misknown, through being seen and unseen, through the long slow patient work of learning who you actually are by discovering who you are not in the presence of other people.

I became more real…more genuinely myself…through every relationship that was honest enough to show me where I was performing. My most honest friendships have been the ones in which someone loved me enough to say: that is not you. That is a version of you that has learned to be acceptable. Come back. Let me see the person I actually know.

This is what community does when it is functioning at its best. It holds up a mirror that is more accurate than the one we hold for ourselves. It sees through the performance to the person underneath. And it says…sometimes gently, sometimes with the bluntness that only deep love can

sustain…you do not have to do that here. You can be what you actually are.

The mutuality of realness is this: I cannot be fully real without you. I need witnesses. Not an audience…witnesses. People who are present not to evaluate my performance but to see me truly. People whose own realness calls forth mine, because when someone is genuinely themselves in my presence, it makes it harder for me to hide. Their courage to be real is an invitation to my own.

And this runs in both directions, always. When I am real in your presence, I give you something…not only myself, but permission. Permission to stop performing. Permission to let the defended version step aside and let the actual person step forward. This is the gift that genuine authenticity offers to community: not inspiration, not admiration, but permission.

Which means that every act of courage to be real is also an act of service to the community. Every person who refuses to perform, who insists on bringing their actual self into the shared space, makes that space more habitable for everyone else. The community of the real is built one honest person at

a time. And each honest person makes the next one more possible.

The vast network of mutuality is woven, in part, from the threads of genuine encounter. And genuine encounter requires genuine persons…people who are actually there, actually themselves, actually present in the full weight of their particular being. Performances do not connect. Only people connect. And the world needs us to connect.

The mutuality of realness has political dimensions that I want to name directly.

A world in which people are expected to perform rather than be…in which the authentic expression of who someone is threatens the order of things, in which whole groups of people have been trained to make themselves smaller and more acceptable and less threatening…that world is doing active damage to the network of mutuality. It is breaking threads. It is making the web less capable of sustaining the weight of what we are all carrying.

Every system that demands performance…that says your worth is conditional on your conformity to a standard that was not designed with you in mind…is a system that is tear-

ing the web. And the courage to be real, in the face of such systems, is not only a personal act of self-liberation. It is an act of resistance on behalf of the community.

When a person who has been told their authentic self is unacceptable insists on being that self anyway…when someone refuses the performance and shows up as they actually are…they are doing something for all of us. They are saying that the standard is wrong. That the conditions of acceptabil ity are unjust. That the web cannot be healthy if it requires some of its members to hide what they are in order to remain within it.

The courage to be real in community is finally the courage to demand a community that is large enough to hold everyone's realness. Not a community of sameness. A community of genuine diversity…the kind of diversity that requires real encounter between really different people, rather than the management of difference at a safe distance.

This is hard. Genuinely hard. Requiring realness from community means being willing to be destabilized by the realness of others. It means encountering people who are genuinely different from you…not cosmetically different, not

different in ways that can be smoothed over or managed, but genuinely, challengingly, productively different…and finding, in that encounter, the expansion of what you thought was possible.

The real self, met in community, makes the community more real. And a real community can do things a performed one cannot.

A community of genuine truth-telling is one of the rarest and most necessary things in the world.

Not the community that performs honesty…that stages the appearance of vulnerability without the actual risk of it, that does the vocabulary of authenticity without the substance. But the community in which genuine truth can be spoken and received. In which people trust each other enough to say what is actually true and trust each other enough to receive what is said without weaponizing it.

This kind of community does not happen by accident. It is built through accumulated experience…through the repeated experience of truth being told and received without catastrophe. Through the gradual discovery that the actual

person…the one beneath the performance…is acceptable. That belonging is not contingent on perfection.

And it is built through the practice of telling the truth even when it is not required. Telling the truth when the easier thing would be to manage the impression. Telling the truth when the stakes are low enough that the habit can be formed without everything being on the line. So that when the stakes are high…when the truth that needs to be told is genuinely costly…the practice is already there.

The courage to be real, practiced in community over time, builds a community that can hold what is real. That can receive difficulty without shattering. That can hear hard things and stay in relationship. That can say what needs to be said and then keep going, together, into whatever comes next.

This is one of the most important things a community can become. A place where the truth can be spoken. Where the actual condition of people's lives can be named rather than managed. Where the difficult realities do not have to be hidden in order to maintain the fiction of everything being fine.

The world needs communities of genuine truth. The web of mutuality depends on it. Build one. Tend it. Protect the conditions that make it possible.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series One

Book Six

THE COURAGE TO BE ART

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Creativity, Expression and Sacred Creation

The act of creation is among the highest expressions of the divine. When you make something that did not exist before… when you bring something new into being through the alchemy of your attention and your craft and your vision… you are participating in the fundamental creative act that un derlies all existence. You are doing what the divine does. You are being, in your particular and finite way, a creator.

This is not limited to people who think of themselves as artists, or who have been told by some authority that their work is art. To be art is to recognize your fundamental nature as a creator…as someone who does not merely receive existence but participates in its ongoing unfolding.

Every human being who has ever lived has been called to this. Not all have answered the call. But the call has gone out to all of them.

Think of something you have made…

anything. A meal. A garden. A letter. A piece of music. A busi ness. A friendship. A family. A solution to a problem that no one else had solved in quite that way. Anything that you brought into being through the combination of your intention and your effort and your particular way of seeing.

Notice how it feels to remember that. Notice what it was like to be in that act of making. Notice the particular quality of attention it required, the particular satisfaction…or frustration…in the process, the particular feeling of having created something that was not there before you made it.

This is what we are speaking of. This territory of making, of creating, of bringing the inner world into contact with the outer world in ways that generate something new. This is a sacred territory. And entering it fully requires courage.

Spirituality includes both stillness and creation. When you sit in meditation or contemplative prayer, you are practicing one form of spiritual engagement: the reception of what is. You open. You quiet. You allow what is already present to make itself known, without your intervention or interpretation. This is essential.

But there is a complementary form of spiritual engagement: the expression of what has been received. The movement from inner to outer.

The bringing of what has been glimpsed in silence into concrete form…

into words, into image, into sound, into structure, into relationship.

This movement from reception to expression is what creation is, at its deepest. And it is every bit as spiritual as the stillness that precedes it.

Creation is a form of prayer. Not prayer in the sense of petition…

asking for things…but prayer in the sense of its original Latin meaning: to entreat, to implore, to address with intensity. When you create from genuine depth, you are addressing existence with your full capacity. You are saying yes to life, yes to the possibility of making meaning, yes to your own capacity to shape something in the world. You are responding to what you have received with the full force of your being.

The great spiritual traditions have understood this. The Jewish tradition of Tikkun Olam…the repair of the world…understands every creative act done with intention and love as a contribution to the healing of existence. The Christian tradition, at its most vital, understands art as a participation in the ongoing creation of the divine. Icons, cathedrals, sacred music…these are not decorations.

They are prayers made visible. They are attempts to bring the invisible sacred into the visible world. The Hindu tradition understands the universe itself as Brahma′s lila…divine play, divine creativity, the cosmos as the ongoing artwork of the sacred.

Through creation, you are not just making something external. You are making yourself. You are developing skill, discernment, patience, the capacity to tolerate failure and persist, the ability to see what is actually there rather than what you expected to see. You are learning to be moved by the world and to respond to that movement with form and intention. You are developing the capacity for genuine encounter…

encounter with your own depths, encounter with the material you work with, encounter with the tradition you are working within and working against.

There is a particular fear that arises when we contemplate creating something. What if it is not good enough? What if people judge it? What if I expose something of myself in this work and people use that exposure to confirm their worst

fears about me, or to confirm my own worst fears about myself?

These fears are universal. Every creator, from the most celebrated to the most obscure, from the most experienced to the most inexperienced, has known this fear. The novelist who has published ten acclaimed books still experiences it when starting the eleventh. The musician who has performed for thousands still feels it before stepping onto the stage.

The painter who has filled galleries still knows the moment of looking at the blank canvas and feeling the full weight of the gap between what they can imagine and what their hands can produce.

The fear does not go away with experience or with success. This is the most important thing to understand about it. You cannot solve it. You cannot think your way past it. You cannot achieve the level of competence or recognition that will finally make it safe to create. The only way through it is to create anyway…to feel the fear and make the work in the presence of the fear, to let the fear be one of the materials you work with rather than an obstacle to working.

What changes with experience is not the presence of the fear but your relationship to it. You develop what the researchers call a growth mindset…you learn to interpret the fear not as a signal that something is wrong, that you should stop, that this is not for you, but as a signal that you are attempting something that matters, that you are at the edge of your current capacity, that you are in the territory where genuine growth is possible. Fear becomes not a stop sign but a compass…pointing toward the work that most needs to be done, the risk that most deserves to be taken, the expression that most urgently wants to be made.

You do not create in order to guarantee success. You create because something in you needs to be expressed…because there is something you have seen or felt or understood that wants to take form, that will not be quiet until you make the attempt to give it form, whether or not the attempt succeeds by any external measure. The impulse to create is, at its core, an impulse toward truth. It is the insistence of your inner world that it deserves to become, in some form, visible.

Your creativity is unique because you are unique. This sounds like a platitude until you take it seriously. No one else has lived your exact life, absorbed your exact influences,

been shaped by your exact experiences, developed your exact combination of sensitivities and blindnesses and ways of seeing. The perspective you bring to any creative act is singu lar. No one else can bring it. When you create, you are bringing into existence something that literally cannot exist without you.

This means that the question 'Am I good enough to create?' is, in a fundamental sense, a category error. Good enough compared to what? Good enough by whose standards? The point is not to create something that matches some external standard of excellence. The point is to bring your particular vision into contact with your medium in a way that generates something true to that vision. Excellence matters…craft matters, the development of skill matters, the willingness to put in the long work of learning your form deeply matters. But these things are in service of expression, not substitutes for it.

The great enemy of authentic creativity is comparison…the habit of measuring your work against the work of others and finding it deficient.

This comparison is always technically possible and always spiritually destructive. There will always be someone who is more technically skilled, more experienced, more recognized, more celebrated. Comparing yourself to them cannot tell you whether your work has value. It can only tell you where you stand in a hierarchy of craft, which is interesting information but not ultimately the relevant information.

The relevant question is: Is this true? Is this work true to what I have seen and felt and understood? Does it accurately represent some aspect of reality that I have been given to perceive? Is there something genuine here…some quality of actual encounter with the world…

that could not have been produced by anyone else?

Your creativity emerges from your authenticity. It emerges from your willingness to be honest about what moves you, what disturbs you, what delights you, what confuses you. When you create from this place of genuine response to genuine experience, the work has a quality that cannot be manu factured: it is real. It is alive. It resonates with people not because it is perfect but because it is true…because in it they recognize something of their own experience, or encounter

something that expands the boundaries of their perception, or feel the specific quality of contact that happens when one genuine consciousness meets another through the medium of a made thing.

The mythology of creativity that dominates popular culture is the mythology of inspiration: the bolt from the blue, the sudden vision, the muse that arrives unbidden and generates the work in a single miraculous outpouring. This mythology is not entirely false…there are moments of creative breakthrough, moments of seemingly inexplicable clarity in which a work or a solution suddenly becomes available in a way it had not been before. These moments are real.

But they are the exception, not the rule. And they do not hap pen to people who are not already deeply immersed in the long, slow, unglamorous work of their craft. The breakthrough comes to the painter who has spent ten thousand hours in front of canvases. The insight arrives for the writer who has written ten thousand pages. The musical phrase appears to the musician who has played ten thousand scales. The inspiration visits those who have prepared the ground for it by the steady, patient, often frustrating work of learning to see and to make.

The discipline of making…the commitment to show up regularly to the work, regardless of whether inspiration is present, regardless of whether you feel like it, regardless of whether the work that emerges is good by any measure…is what separates people who sometimes make things from people who develop genuine creative power. It is not glamorous. It is often discouraging. Much of what you produce in the daily discipline of making will not be good. It will be practice. It will be the necessary waste material of a creative practice, without which the good work cannot emerge.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote: 'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' This is a question about creativity in the broadest sense…about what you will make of the time you have been given. But it is also a question about discipline. Because the wild and precious life is not lived by waiting for inspiration. It is lived by showing up, again and again, to the work that calls you. By honoring the calling with the discipline it deserves. By being, as the poet said, a bride married to amazement…open to the world's extraordinary gifts while also doing the steady work that makes you capable of receiving them.

Every significant creator has failed repeatedly. They have made things that did not work. They have produced work they later rejected. They have spent months or years on projects that ultimately had to be abandoned. These failures were not obstacles to their creative development. They were essential to it. The willingness to fail…to attempt things you cannot guarantee succeeding at, to take risks that do not always pay off, to spend effort on work that turns out to be practice rather than finished work…is what makes it possible to eventually create something genuinely new.

The deepest creativity is not about expressing yourself or getting attention or achieving recognition. It is about service. It is about offering something to whoever encounters your work…something they need, whether or not they can articulate what it is they need.

What does creative work offer? At its best, it offers a new way of seeing. It takes something that was familiar and makes it strange again, or takes something that was strange and makes it recognizable, or shows the ordinarily invisible, or gives form to what seemed formless. It expands the vocabulary of human experience…gives people words, images, sounds for things they have felt but been unable to express. It

creates connection across difference…showing that the intimate, particular experience of one person's life is recognizable in the intimate, particular experience of another person's very different life.

It offers beauty…and beauty is not a luxury or an ornament. Beauty is a form of truth. The beautiful thing discloses some thing about the nature of reality that cannot be disclosed in any other way. It speaks directly to something in us that predates language and analysis, something that recognizes wholeness and harmony and rightness without being able to explain why. To offer beauty is to offer the experience of real ity at a level of depth below the conceptual…to give someone contact with what is, rather than with our ideas about what is.

When you create from a place of genuine authenticity and care, you are creating for whoever will encounter your work. You are trying to offer something…a moment of recognition, a source of solace, a spark of possibility, a permission to feel what they have been afraid to feel, an articulation of something they already knew but had not found words for.

This service orientation does not require selflessness in the sense of erasing your own perspective. Quite the opposite: your specific, irreplaceable perspective is exactly what makes your work potentially useful to others. What it requires is the orientation of your creative energy toward connection rather than toward impression…toward offering rather than performing.

Every creative tradition works with materials. The painter has paint and canvas. The musician has sound and silence. The writer has language. The chef has ingredients. The gardener has soil and seed and light. The architect has space and structure and the human needs that both must serve. The materials are not incidental to the creative work. They are its very substance. They are what the vision must become, what the inner world must engage with, what the idea must be tested against.

The great creators develop a relationship with their materials that approaches reverence. Not the paralysis of treating materials as too sacred to touch, but the deep attention of someone who knows that the material has its own nature, its own tendencies and resistances, its own intelligence and that working with it…rather than against it, rather than imposing

on it a vision that ignores what it is…is what makes possible the work that could not have been imagined before the making began.

This relationship with materials is itself a form of spiritual practice.

To attend closely to what is in front of you…to what the wood wants to do, what the phrase wants to become, what the light is doing at this particular hour in this particular place…is to practice presence. It is to interrupt the self-absorbed loop of your own intentions and projections and be genuinely responsive to what is actually there. The material talks back. And the creator who knows how to listen to that response…whose vision is strong enough to guide the work but humble enough to be shaped by the material′s own nature…makes work that has a quality of inevitability, of rightness, that purely willful creation cannot achieve.

Children create constantly. They make things with their hands, with their voices, with their bodies. They play…not to produce anything, not to achieve any outcome, but because the making itself is the point.

The drawing is not made to be hung on a wall and admired. It is made because something in the child needed to be expressed and the crayon was there and the paper was there and the impulse could not wait.

We are born creative. The impulse to make is not something that must be installed in us. It is something that must be protected in us...

protected from the gradual pressure of a culture that values products over process, that teaches us to compare our making to others' making and find it deficient, that divides people into artists and non-artists and tells the non-artists to leave the creating to those who are qualified.

The recovery of creativity is, in large part, the recovery of the child's relationship to making. Not childishness...not the abandonment of skill and discipline and the demands of craft. But the child's quality of unconditional engagement: the making for the sake of making, the willingness to play without knowing where it leads, the freedom from the tyranny of the finished product, the pleasure in the process itself regardless of outcome.

Picasso said that all children are artists…the problem is how to remain an artist once you grow up. The problem is the internalization of the judge, the critic, the voice that measures what you are making against what already exists and finds it wanting. The recovery of creative life requires finding a way to work in the presence of that critic without being paralyzed by it…to hear its assessment, to use what is useful in its judgment and to continue making anyway, because the making is not ultimately subject to the critic's approval.

There is something that you alone can make. Something that requires your specific vision, your specific history, your specific combination of influences and experiences and sensitivities. It may be something that others would consider large…a book, a building, an organization, a body of work. It may be something that others would not recognize as art at all…the way you raise your children, the quality of presence you bring to your work, the specific contribution you make to the community you are part of.

But whatever it is, it requires you. Not a performance of you, not an edited and improved version of you, but actually you…with all your particularity and all your limitation and all your irreplaceable vision.

The world will not be the same without it. Something will be missing that only you could have contributed. A particular way of seeing will not have been expressed. A particular quality of beauty or understanding or care will not have been offered.

The courage to be art is the courage to take this seriously. To recognize that your creative contribution matters…not because you are special in the sense of being better than others, but because you are specific, because there is no one else who can offer exactly what you have to offer and because the world needs what each specific person has to offer in order to be whole.

What are you making? What is it that only you can make? What are you waiting for?

Closing Practice: Awakening Your Creative Nature Sit quietly for a moment with these questions. Do not rush to answer them. Let them settle into you.

Think of something you have wanted to create but have not allowed yourself to try. Something you have felt pulled toward but have turned away from…because you were afraid it wouldn't be good enough, because you didn't think you were

the kind of person who does that sort of thing, because you were waiting until you had more time, more skill, more permission.

Ask yourself: What am I afraid will happen if I try? Name it specifically. The fear of failure, of judgment, of discovering that you don't have what it takes…name it. Look at it directly.

Now ask: What am I afraid will NOT happen if I do not try? What will be lost if this thing that wants to be made never gets made? What part of you will remain unexpressed? What potential contribution will the world not receive?

Sit with both questions. Feel the weight of both risks…the risk of making and the risk of not making.

Then make a commitment. Not to produce something perfect. Not to guarantee any particular outcome. But to begin. To give yourself permission to try. To honor the creative impulse in you with the respect it deserves.

Make a commitment: I will create. Not because I am certain it will be good. Not because I am ready. Not because I have permission from the authorities of quality and taste. But be-

cause something in me is alive and wants to be expressed and that aliveness deserves to be honored.

I will have the courage to be art.

Every act of creation is an act of communication.

When I create…when I find the words, when the sentence finally says what I needed it to say, when the form emerges from the formlessness and stands there complete…I am not alone in that moment. I am in conversation. With the language I have inherited from every person who spoke and wrote before me. With the tradition of thinking and praying and struggling that has shaped the categories through which I understand the world. With the imagined reader who will someday receive what I am making…the person I do not know but am already in relationship with through the act of making something meant to be received.

Art is never private. Even the most private art…the journal no one reads, the song hummed to no one, the doodle in the margin of the notebook…even this is in conversation with something. With the self that needs to be expressed. With the silence that needs to be broken. With the grief or the joy or the confusion that has been carried without form and now, in

the act of making, takes on form and becomes, for the first time, fully real.

This is why the courage to be art matters not only to the one who creates but to the community in which the creation takes place. What I make changes what is possible for you to make. What you make changes what was possible for me to see. The history of human creativity is the history of this con versation…reaching across centuries, across cultures, across every boundary we have drawn to separate ourselves from each other…saying: I was here. I felt this. This is what it looked like from where I was standing. Do you recognize it?

And again and again, the answer comes back: yes. I recognize it. Not because we are the same, but because the deepest human experiences…love, grief, wonder, terror, beauty, longing…are not private property. They belong to all of us. And when one person finds the form that makes them visible, they give them to all of us. They add them to the common inheritance.

The network of mutuality includes the inheritance of beauty. Every poem, every painting, every piece of music that has survived because it was true…that has been carried forward

through time because it said something that needed to be said and said it with a precision that could not be improved…all of this is part of the web. Part of what connects us to our ancestors and to our descendants and to each other across every boundary that would otherwise keep us apart.

When I think about what the courage to be art asks of us in relation to one another, I think it asks us to take each other's creativity seriously. To treat the creative act of another person…even the tentative, imperfect, early-stage creative act…as sacred. Because in that act, someone is trying to find their form. Trying to make what they are into something visi ble and shareable. Trying to add their thread to the web. And that deserves reverence. It deserves the kind of attention that says: I see what you are making. I see why it matters.

The world is more beautiful than we have made it. And it is more beautiful than we have allowed ourselves to see. The courage to be art is the courage to keep making it more beau tiful…not by adding ornament, but by adding truth. By saying what needs to be said, in whatever form is available to you and trusting that the web will carry it.

The mutuality of art has particular urgency in a moment when creativity is being systematically commodified…when the question asked of any creative act is not What does this say? or What does this contribute? but What will this sell for?

The commodification of art is a threat to the network of mutuality because it transforms the act of making from an act of communication into an act of production. It changes the question from Is this true? to Is this marketable? And in doing so, it severes the connection between the creator and the community…turning the audience from participants in a shared act of meaning-making into consumers of a product.

Genuine art…the kind that comes from the actual interior of a person, that says something that needed to be said, that offers something to the receiver rather than extracting something from them…this art is irreplaceable. It cannot be generated by algorithm or produced by committee. It can only come from someone who has done the work of going deep enough into their own experience to find something universal.

And when it comes…when someone makes something true…the community is nourished by it in a way that cannot

be replicated by anything produced for consumption. Because the act of receiving genuine art is the act of being recognized. Of having your own experience reflected back to you with a precision that says: yes, this is real. What you felt was real. The thing you could not name has been named. You are not alone in it.

This recognition is one of the things the network of mutuality most needs to provide for its members. And it can only be provided by people who are willing to make things that are true rather than things that are safe.

The courage to be art, in community, is the courage to make true things and to receive them. To create and to be nourished by creation. To insist that beauty and truth are not luxuries but necessities…that a community without genuine creative life is a community that is starving, even if it does not know what it hungers for.

Make things. Receive what others make. Keep the exchange alive.

What we make together is a measure of who we are together.

The art of a community…the songs it sings, the stories it tells, the objects it makes with care, the rituals it maintains, the ways it marks the passages of time and the events of a shared life…all of this tells you something essential about that community. Something that the official statements and the stated values and the organizational charts cannot capture.

A community that creates together is a community that is alive together. The creative act is, among other things, an act of trust…the trust that what you are making will be received, that the space is safe enough to risk the exposure of making something real. And the experience of creating together, of contributing something of yourself to a shared making, builds the kind of trust that sustains communities through everything that is not creative. Through the difficult conversations and the unresolved conflicts and the ordinary grind of shared life.

I have been part of communities where the creative life was taken seriously…where people made things together, where beauty was understood as a communal value rather than a private luxury, where the songs and the stories and the rituals of shared life were tended with care. And I have been part of communities where the creative life had atrophied…where

efficiency had crowded out beauty, where productivity had displaced play, where the making of things had been outsourced to professionals.

The difference was not only aesthetic. It was relational. The communities that created together were communities that knew each other differently. More intimately. With more generosity and more delight. The making had done something to the relationship that the meeting agenda could not do.

Make things together. Sing together even badly. Mark the passages of your shared life with rituals that mean something. Keep the creative life alive in your community. It is not peripheral to the work. It is the work, in its most essential form.

✦ ✦ ✦



Before You Turn

Six words. Six doors. Six different ways of asking the same question.

The question is this: Are you willing to be what you are?

Not the performed version. Not the version that has learned to be acceptable. Not the version that has made its peace with smallness because smallness seemed, at various critical moments in your history, safer than the alternative.

The actual version. The one that exists beneath the performance, beneath the strategy, beneath the carefully managed presentation of a life. The one that knows what it loves and what it refuses and what it is for. The one that woke up this morning in a body in a particular place at a particular moment in history with particular gifts and particular wounds and particular obligations that no one else has.

That version.

The six books you have just read have been arguing, from six different angles, that this version…the actual you…is not a liability to be managed but a gift to be offered. That the world

does not need another performance. That what it needs is the specific, irreplaceable, impossible-to-substitute thing that you actually are.

The next section will ask what that means in community. In relationship. In the shared life that is both the context and the cost of being fully human. But first…before you turn the page…take a moment with this.

You have been invited, six times in six different ways, to be what you are. The invitation stands. What do you say to it?

What the six books in this section have been arguing is some thing simple and something radical. Simple, because it requires no special knowledge or technique or institutional affiliation. Radical, because it contradicts the most fundamental assumptions of the spiritual marketplace…the assumption that what you need is somewhere other than where you are, that who you need to be is other than who you already are, that the divine is elsewhere and the sacred is later and the life worth living is the one you will have when circumstances finally align.

The argument is: no. The life is now. The divine is here. The person capable of genuine love and genuine courage and

genuine creativity is you…not a better version of you, not a more spiritually developed version, not the version that has completed the program and achieved the state. You. As you are. Right now. With all of it.

This is either the most liberating thing you have read today or the most terrifying. Probably both. That is appropriate. The truth that sets you free is almost always also the truth that asks more of you than you thought you had.

You have more than you think.

✦ ✦ ✦

SERIES TWO

THE COURAGE TO BE GROWTH

Books Seven through Eighteen

Series Introduction

You have survived the first six.

Or perhaps they have survived you. Perhaps something in them found its way past the defenses you did not know you were carrying. Perhaps one sentence in one book landed somewhere it was not supposed to land and you are still, weeks later, living in its aftermath. Perhaps you read all six in an afternoon and are still waiting to feel something. All of these are honest responses. All of them are welcome here.

The twelve books ahead are different. Not harder, exactly. But deeper. Or wider. More insistent about the places where the interior life refuses to stay interior. More willing to press into the territory where what you believe becomes visible in what you do, in what you allow, in what you refuse.

Twelve words: Christ. Human. Justice. Here. Defiant. Beauty. Spirit. Magic. Electric. Fire. Uncanny. Freedom.

If the first six asked what it means to be alive, these twelve ask what you are going to do about it.

That is not a rebuke. It is an invitation. The most serious one this book makes. Because the courage to be fully alive…the courage that the first six books were pointing toward…does not resolve into a private achievement. It opens outward. It becomes, whether you planned it or not, a way of being present to the world and to the people in it. A way of insisting, quietly or loudly or in whatever form is available to you, that things matter. That people matter. That the web connecting us is real and worth tending.

You do not have to have finished the first six to enter here. You do not have to have resolved the questions they raised. You can bring the questions with you. They are good company.

Enter with your full weight. These books will hold it.

Series Two

Book Seven

THE COURAGE TO BE CHRIST

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Incarnation, Manifestation and Divine Expression

The principle of transformation, sacrifice and resurrection.

To be Christ is not to claim identity with a historical figure or to accept a particular religious doctrine. It is to embody the principle of sacred manifestation. It is to become a vehicle through which the divine can be seen and known and encountered in the world.

This is the deepest calling available to a human being. And it is a calling extended to every human being without exception. Not to the specially chosen. Not to the specially gifted. Not to those who hold the right beliefs or perform the right practices or belong to the right institutions. To every person who lives and breathes and carries the sacred spark within them…which is to say, to everyone.

Let us sit with the weight of this. The claim is not merely that the divine once became human in a singular historical event. The claim is that the divine is always becoming human…that incarnation is a continuous process, that every life is a site of sacred manifestation, that the question before each of us is not whether we will express the divine but how fully and how faithfully we will allow it to move through us.

This is not arrogance. It is the opposite of arrogance. Arrogance says:

I am divine and therefore special, elevated above others. The Christ principle says: I am divine, as all beings are divine and therefore I am called to serve...to let what I am flow toward others, to make visible what is real, to offer my particular form of sacred presence to a world that is hungry for encounter with the sacred.

The divine does not remain abstract and distant. This is the central claim of incarnational theology and it is a claim that runs far deeper than any single religious tradition. The divine continually seeks to manifest through creation, through consciousness, through the concrete forms of existence. The movement of the sacred is always toward embodiment...toward taking form, toward becoming particular, toward expressing itself in the irreducible specificity of actual things and actual lives.

Consider what it means for something to truly exist. Existence is not abstract. To exist is to be here, in this form, at this time, in this place. The tree exists not as the concept of a tree but as this tree, with these particular roots and this par-

ticular configuration of branches and these particular leaves that catch this particular light.

The human being exists not as the concept of humanity but as this person, with this history and this body and this consciousness that has never existed before and will never exist again in exactly this form.

You are a manifestation of the divine. Your life is the site where the sacred becomes visible. Not the sacred in general, not some abstract divine quality, but the specific and irreplaceable expression of the divine that is available through you and through no other being. This is not something you must achieve or earn or demonstrate. It is what you already are. The question is only whether you will allow it…whether you will live in a way that makes your fundamental nature visible rather than hiding it beneath performance and fear and self-diminishment.

When you show up with integrity, with love, with courage…when you are fully present to what is before you, fully honest about what is true for you, fully committed to the wellbeing of those around you…you are allowing the divine to be seen through your actions. This is not a metaphor for

being a good person. It is a description of what actually happens when a human being lives from their deepest nature. The sacred becomes visible. Not because you have become more than human, but because you have become more fully human. Because the more completely you inhabit your humanity, the more fully the divine shines through you.

The principle of Christ is this: the sacred and the human are not opposed. They are unified in a single being. The divine does not dwell apart from humanity, requiring humanity to transcend itself in order to reach the divine. The divine dwells within humanity, requiring humanity only to be itself…fully, honestly, courageously itself…in order for the divine to be present and visible. You are that being. Your life is that expression. The invitation is to live as though this is true.

To be Christ is to make the sacred visible. To allow what is transcendent to be seen through your particular form. To let others encounter the divine through encounter with you. This is the most profound form of ministry and it requires no ordination, no title, no institution, no credential except the credential of your own authentic presence.

When did you last encounter the sacred through another person? Think of a moment…perhaps it was someone who truly listened to you when you most needed to be heard. Perhaps it was someone who acted with extraordinary courage in a situation where most would have chosen safety. Perhaps it was someone whose joy was so genuine, whose love was so unconditional, whose presence was so complete that you felt, in being near them, that you were near something larger than the ordinary dimensions of life. Perhaps it was someone who told you a truth you needed to hear, even though it was difficult for both of you.

In that moment, the sacred was visible. Not because that per son was perfect or specially chosen or elevated above ordinary humanity. But because they allowed what they most fundamentally were to be present in the encounter. Because they were not performing or managing the impression they created. Because something genuine, something real, something that could only come from them moved through the in teraction.

This is what the Christ principle asks of us. Not perfection. Not spectacular spiritual achievement. Not the performance

of holiness. But presence. Authenticity. The willingness to bring your actual self…

with its genuine love, its genuine perception, its genuine courage and its genuine limitation…into genuine contact with others. This quality of genuine contact is the most powerful thing one human being can offer another. It is what heals. It is what transforms. It is what makes life bearable in difficult times and extraordinary in good ones.

This happens not through perfection but through authenticity. The most spiritually powerful people are rarely the most polished. They are often the most honest, the most present, the most willing to be with what is without the layers of man agement and performance that keep most of us at a comfortable distance from our own experience and from the experience of others.

When you are present to someone in pain…genuinely present, not managing the discomfort of their pain by rushing to fix it or minimize it, but actually sitting with them in it…you are making the sacred visible. You are demonstrating by your presence that the pain is bearable, that they are not alone in it, that what they are experiencing has been wit-

nessed and has dignity. This is incarnational ministry. This is Christ-work. And it requires nothing more extraordinary than the willingness to be with another person in their actual reality.

The Christ principle also involves sacrifice. Not self-destruction, not martyrdom for its own sake, not the glorification of suffering. But the willingness to give up what no longer serves the fuller expression of your being and the willingness to give of yourself in service of something larger than your immediate comfort or safety.

The sacrifices the Christ principle requires are often smaller and more intimate than we imagine. They are not usually dramatic public acts of self-giving. They are the daily choices to be honest when dishonesty would be easier. To be present when withdrawal would be more comfortable. To take a stand when silence would protect you. To tell the truth about your own failure when minimizing it would preserve your reputation. To remain in relationship with difficulty rather than escaping into the easier distances.

You sacrifice the false self to allow the true self to emerge. This is perhaps the most fundamental sacrifice…the willing-

ness to release the performed, managed, acceptable version of yourself in favor of the actual, unedited, unpredictable person you actually are. This sacrifice feels dangerous. The false self is familiar. It has kept you safe, in certain ways, for a long time. Releasing it feels like losing something solid when you are not sure what will replace it. But what replaces it is so much more valuable: your actual life, lived by your ac tual self, in genuine contact with actual others.

You sacrifice the need to be liked by everyone in order to be authentic.

This is a genuine sacrifice, because the desire to be liked is not a weakness or a vanity...it is a fundamental human need, woven into us by millions of years of evolution in social groups where exclusion meant death. The sacrifice of universal approval in favor of authentic self-expression is costly. And it is necessary. Because a life shaped entirely by the desire for approval is not your life...it is everyone else′s life, lived through you. The Christ principle asks you to give up the management of others′ approval in favor of the more demanding and more rewarding practice of being genuinely yourself.

This sacrifice is not imposed from outside. It arises from your own deepening awareness of what is true and what mat ters. As you grow in self-knowledge, as you become clearer about what you actually value and what you actually are, the things you once sacrificed your authenticity for begin to seem less worth the cost. The approval of people who do not actually know you becomes less satisfying than the recognition of people who genuinely do. The comfort of a life without risk becomes less appealing than the aliveness of a life in which you are genuinely engaged. The sacrifice happens naturally, as the fruit of a deepening spiritual life, not as an imposed discipline.

The third element of the Christ principle is resurrection. The knowledge that what dies is not final. What is released is transformed. What seems like an ending is actually a transition into something that could not have existed without the ending that preceded it.

This is not a claim about what happens after physical death, though it may be that too. It is a description of the pattern that runs through every genuine spiritual life. The pattern of death and resurrection…of release and renewal, of loss and transformation…is not something that happens once, at the

end of life. It is something that happens repeatedly, through out a life, whenever genuine growth is occurring.

You will die to who you have been. You will release identities and beliefs and ways of being that once served you and no longer fit. The identity you claimed in your twenties will need to die to make room for who you are in your forties. The beliefs that sustained you in one season of life will need to be released to make room for the deeper understanding available in the next. The relationships that defined you at one stage of your becoming will need to transform…or end…as you change and grow.

These small deaths are real. They involve genuine loss. The identity you are releasing was real. The belief you are surren dering provided real comfort. The relationship that is ending or transforming was genuinely important. To pretend otherwise, to rush through the grief of release in an unseemly hurry to get to the resurrection, is to cheat the process.

The death must be honored before the resurrection can be meaningful.

But the resurrection is also real. Every genuine spiritual practitioner, every person who has been willing to go

through the deaths that growth requires, testifies to the same extraordinary experience: what emerges from genuine loss and genuine release is something more…more alive, more spacious, more capable of love and courage and genuine encounter than what came before. The life on the other side of the small death is not simply the same life minus the thing that died. It is a different life, qualitatively richer, more deeply itself, more capable of participating in the ongoing miracle of existence.

Each time you release an old pattern, you are engaging in the resurrection principle. Each time you allow yourself to be remade by experience…when you let what you have been through actually change you rather than defending against the change…you are participating in resurrection. Each time you move through difficulty and emerge changed but alive and more yourself than you were before, you are embodying the principle that death is not the last word, that endings are always simultaneously beginnings, that the sacred is always available to make something new from what has been released.

To be Christ is not to stand apart or above. This is perhaps the most crucial clarification. The Christ principle is not a

principle of spiritual superiority, of special calling, of elevation above ordinary human community. It is a principle of radical solidarity…of being fully present to the community you are part of, of allowing your incarnate presence to speak to the incarnate presence of others, of recognizing the divine in every face you encounter precisely because you have recognized it in your own.

The historical Christ, whatever else he was, was consistently oriented toward those on the margins…the sick, the poor, the excluded, the despised. He was found most often not among the religiously distinguished but among those whom the religious establishment had written off. This orientation is not incidental to the Christ principle.

It is constitutive of it. To be Christ is to be drawn toward the places where the sacred is least visible…toward the suffering, the excluded, the diminished…not to rescue them from above but to recognize the divine in them, to stand alongside them, to make visible what the world has rendered invisible.

The Christ principle expresses itself through relationship, through connection, through the willingness to see and be seen by others without the armor of performance or the pro-

tection of social hierarchy. When two people meet with full presence and recognition…when both are genuinely themselves, genuinely attending to each other, genuinely open to what the encounter will bring…the sacred is present between them.

The divine is made visible in that meeting. Not in one of them, not in both of them separately, but in the space between them, in the contact itself, in the extraordinary fact of genuine encounter between two forms of the one sacred real ity.

This is the most available and the most profound form of spiritual experience: genuine human encounter. You do not need a monastery or a pilgrimage or a lifetime of spiritual practice to experience the sacred.

You need only to be genuinely present to another person…to set aside your own agenda long enough to actually receive them, to see them truly, to let what they are touch what you are. In that moment, however brief, the Christ principle is fully expressed. The divine has become visible.

Incarnation has occurred.

There is a tradition in Christian mysticism…and in many other spiritual traditions…that understands the wound not as an obstacle to sacred expression but as one of its primary vehicles. The wounded healer: the one who has suffered, who has descended into darkness and returned, who carries in their own body and soul the knowledge of what it is to be bro ken and who can therefore meet others in their brokenness with a recognition that is unavailable to those who have not made the descent.

I have learned this from my own wounding. The most honest thing I can say about my capacity to accompany others is that it was not built in seminary. It was built in the places where I broke. Where I came apart and had to be slowly put back together…differently, with the cracks showing. The great spiritual guides are not those who have transcended their wounds but those who have integrated them…who have allowed their suffering to become wisdom, their vulnerability to become strength, their own encounter with darkness to become the ground of their capacity to accompany others through theirs.

Your wounds are not disqualifications. They are credentials…not for superiority or special treatment, but for the specific kind of ministry that only the wounded can offer. The

person who has known addiction and recovery can meet the addict in a way that no one who has not made that journey can. The person who has survived grief can sit with the griev ing in a way that the untouched cannot. The person who has doubted, who has been lost, who has made catastrophic mistakes and found their way back …this person can offer something to the doubting, the lost, the catastrophically failing that no amount of perfection could provide.

To be Christ is to allow your wounds to be in service. Not to perform your suffering, not to make your pain the center of every encounter, not to remain indefinitely in the role of the wounded one. But to let what you have been through make you more available, more compassionate, more genuinely present to the range of human experience. To allow your par ticular darkness, worked through and integrated, to become a specific quality of light that you can offer to others.

The Christ principle is not reserved for extraordinary moments. It lives in the ordinary. It is expressed most consistently not in dramatic acts of self-giving but in the daily qual ity of attention and care that you bring to the life you are actually living.

It lives in the way you listen. In the quality of presence you bring to conversations…whether you are genuinely attending to the person you are with or merely waiting for your turn to speak. It lives in whether you are willing to be inconvenienced by someone who needs something from you. In whether you tell the truth when a comfortable lie would serve you better. In whether you acknowledge your mistakes or defend against them. In whether you treat the people who serve you in restaurants and shops and offices as full human beings or as functional objects.

These seem like small things. They are not small things. They are the substance of a life. The accumulated quality of all these ordinary moments…of how you treat people, of how present you are, of how honest and how kind and how willing to be genuinely engaged with the actual texture of your actual life…this is what constitutes your incarnation. This is the Christ principle expressed in the only medium that ultimately matters: the lived reality of how you move through the world.

Closing Practice: Becoming an Incarnation Sit quietly and breathe. Let the day's noise settle. Allow yourself to arrive in this moment.

Ask yourself: In what ways am I already making the sacred visible? Not in some idealized version of your life, but in this one…the actual one you are living, with its limitations and imperfections and ongoing incompleteness. Where are you already showing up with genuine presence?

Where are you already telling the truth? Where are you already offering something of real value to the people around you?

Do not answer from ego or from what you think you should be. And do not answer from self-deprecation either…that dismissive voice that says you are not doing enough, not being enough, not any kind of Christ-figure by any stretch of imagination. Both of those voices are lies. Answer from honest assessment of who you actually are and what you actually have to offer. It is there. It has always been there.

Then ask: Where am I being called to show up more fully? What am I holding back that wants to be expressed? What sacrifice am I being asked to make in service of my fuller becoming?

Sit with the answers. Do not rush to act on them. Simply let them be present…let the recognition settle into you. This is

your incarnation. This is the sacred expressing itself through your particular form. The question is only how fully you will allow it.

The principle of incarnation has consequences.

If we take seriously the claim that the divine became human…that the sacred clothed itself in particularity, in flesh, in the limits and vulnerabilities and needs of a specific body in a specific time and place…then we cannot confine this principle to a single historical instance. Incarnation, by its nature, is ongoing. The divine keeps taking form. The sacred keeps pressing itself into the particular. And every human life is, in some sense, a site of this ongoing incarnation.

I have come to believe that every person I encounter is a place where God is trying to happen. Not metaphorically. Not as a pleasant theological overlay. But as the actual structural reality of what persons are…expressions of the divine creativity, particular instantiations of the sacred life, each one irreplaceable, each one carrying something about the nature of the divine that no other person carries.

This means that when I dismiss a person, I dismiss a form of the divine. When I diminish a person, I diminish a manifes-

tation of the sacred. When I refuse to see a person truly…when I reduce them to a category, a function, a problem to be managed…I am refusing to see the incarnate God in the only form it is actually available to me in the present moment: the form of this person, here, now.

The mutuality of Christ is the recognition that we are all in this together…not in a vague, feel-good sense, but in the most specific and demanding sense. We are all sites of the ongoing incarnation. We are all expressions of the divine life taking form in the world. And this means that we are all responsible to each other in a way that goes deeper than social contract or ethical obligation. We are responsible to each other because what is in you is the same source as what is in me and what is done to you is done to something that is not separate from what I am.

The tradition I come from makes the bold claim that Christ appears in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. I believe this. Not as allegory but as description. The sacred is where need is. The divine takes form in vulnerability. And if you want to find the incarnate God, you do not look first in the places of power and beauty and ease. You look where the network of mutuality has been

torn…where people have fallen through the web, where the connections have failed, where someone is without.

This is not a comfortable theology. It does not allow me to confine my relationship with the divine to the interior life or the spiritual practice or the beautiful sanctuary. It demands that my relationship with God be lived through my relationship with people…all people, especially those whose claim on my attention and care is most inconvenient.

The courage to be Christ is the courage to let the incarnation be ongoing in you. To let the sacred take form through your particular hands and voice and choices. And to recognize that same ongoing incarnation in everyone you meet.

The ongoing incarnation…the principle that the sacred keeps taking form in human life…has a particular urgency when applied to the people who are easiest to look past.

The incarnation in Christian theology is not primarily about a single miraculous exception to the ordinary. It is about a principle…the principle that the divine does not remain at a distance from human suffering and human limitation, but enters into it. Chooses it. Inhabits it from the inside.

If that is true, then the places where the divine is most present are not the places of beauty and ease and spiritual achievement. They are the places of need. The places where human beings are most vulnerable, most dependent, most stripped of the protections that allow the rest of us to forget that we are fragile. The incarnate God appears where need is greatest, because that is what incarnation means: a God who does not stay safe.

The courage to be Christ, in community, is the courage to go where the divine is…which is to say, to go where the need is. Not as a savior, not from a position of superiority, but as a fellow creature who happens to have resources or mobility or access that the person in need does not. As a person who rec ognizes, in the face of the one who needs, the same sacred source that animates their own being.

This is the radical democratization of the sacred that the incarnation makes available. The divine is not found primarily in the temple or the academy or the places reserved for those whose credentials certify their access. The divine is found wherever need is honestly named and honestly met. Wherever one person sees another truly and responds with what is actually required.

The network of mutuality is sustained by this kind of showing up. By people who go where the need is and who bring what they have to give. Not because they are heroes but because they have understood, at some level, that the suffering of any member of the web is a wound in the web in which they also live. And they would rather tend the wound than live comfortably in a torn web.

The courage to be Christ is finally the courage to incarnate…to let the principle of divine presence take form in your specific, ordinary, limited, particular life.

The incarnation is not finished.

I want to dwell on this for a moment, because I think it is the most generative and the most demanding claim available within the tradition I inhabit.

If the principle of incarnation is ongoing…if the divine keeps taking form in human life, keeps pressing into the particular, keeps choosing the vulnerable and the limited and the mortal as the site of its self-expression…then the question is not only Where did the incarnation happen? The question is Where is it happening now? Who is carrying it? Whose life is being used by the sacred for its ongoing self-disclosure?

My answer, after years of ministry, is: everyone. Everyone is carrying some piece of it. Everyone's life is being used by the sacred for some aspect of its self-expression. And our obligation to each other flows from this recognition…from the understanding that every person is, in some sense, the current form that the ongoing incarnation is taking.

This means that when we dismiss a person…when we decide that their life is not worth our attention, that their story is not worth hearing, that their needs are not worth meeting…we are dismissing a form of the ongoing incarnation. We are refusing to receive what the sacred has clothed itself in, in that particular case.

And this is the most serious thing I know how to say about why it matters how we treat each other. Not because of social contract, not because of ethical obligation, not because it makes us better people or produces better outcomes. But because the person in front of us is a form of the sacred taking shape in the world and our response to that person is our response to the sacred itself.

The community that understands this…that lives from this recognition, even partially, even imperfectly…is a commu-

nity that treats its members differently. That handles the vul nerability and the difficulty and the inconvenience of actual people with a quality of care that is not available from obliga tion alone. Only from reverence.

Be reverent. This is what the ongoing incarnation asks of us, in every encounter with every person.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series Two

Book Eight

THE COURAGE TO BE HUMAN

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Embodied Existence, Wholeness and Sacred Humanity

Humanity is not a fallen state from which we need to escape. Humanity is the very form through which the divine expresses itself.

To be fully human…to claim your humanity, to honor your embodied existence, to embrace the full spectrum of human experience…is to be fully divine.

These are not opposed. They are two descriptions of the same reality.

The courage to be human is the courage to fully inhabit your incarnate existence without shame, without apology, without the belief that you should be something other than what you are. Without the spiritual ambition to transcend yourself before you have had the courage to be yourself.

This book addresses one of the strangest and most pervasive patterns in spiritual life: the use of spirituality as a means of escape from the human condition rather than as a means of inhabiting it more fully. The flight from emotion in the name of equanimity. The dismissal of bodily needs in the name of transcendence. The avoidance of conflict and difficulty in the name of peace. The suppression of desire for the sake of non-attachment. These can be genuine spiritual disciplines,

properly understood. But they can also be sophisticated forms of self-abandonment, dressed in the language of spiritual achievement.

True spiritual maturity does not produce a person who is less human. It produces a person who is more fully, more courageously, more compassionately human. More capable of feeling, not less. More capable of genuine engagement with the full range of experience, not more removed from it. More present to what is real, not more safely enclosed in the abstractions of spiritual ideology.

Your body is sacred. Your emotions are sacred. Your desires and fears and struggles and contradictions are sacred. You are not a soul trapped in a body waiting for release. You are not spirit temporarily imprisoned in matter, biding your time until the prison doors open and the real life can begin. You are a unified being…one thing, not two…in whom spirit and matter are woven together so inextricably that the attempt to separate them is a kind of spiritual violence.

Consider what it means that you have emotions. Not the philosophical question of how emotions work, but the simpler and more astonishing fact that you have them at all.

That you can be moved. That things matter to you. That the existence of other people affects you…that their joy can become your joy, their suffering can become your suffering, their loss can reach into you and leave a mark. This capacity to be moved is not a weakness or a vulnerability to be overcome. It is one of the most extraordinary things about being alive as a human being.

When you touch another person with love…when you offer your hand or your arms or your full attention…you are expressing something sacred. You are making tangible the invisible reality of connection. You are demonstrating in the most concrete possible way that you are not alone in the universe and neither are they. When you feel grief, you are touching something true about the nature of love and loss and the preciousness of what passes. When you experience hunger or tiredness or the need for rest, you are honoring the wisdom of your embodied existence…the body's testimony that it is finite, that it needs replenishment, that it cannot be treated as a machine without cost.

Human existence is not inferior to some other form of being. It is not a diminished version of angelic or divine existence. It is precious in its own right…precious precisely because of

its particularity, its finitude, its embodied and temporal character. Consciousness that experiences itself in time and space, that knows it will die, that loves in full awareness of impermanence…this is not lesser consciousness.

This is consciousness with an urgency and a depth available precisely because of the conditions that might seem like limi tations. The brevity of life is what makes each moment precious. The inevitability of loss is what makes love so fierce. The fact that you will die is what makes the courage to live so extraordinary.

You are not alone in your humanity. This simple statement contains more healing than almost anything else that can be said to a human being. You are not the only one who struggles. You are not the only one who fails.

You are not the only one who carries wounds, or doubts, or the persistent, exhausting suspicion that everyone else has figured out something you have somehow missed.

The philosopher Charles Taylor writes about what he calls the social imaginary…the collective, largely unconscious understanding of who we are and how things work that we absorb from the culture around us.

One of the most destructive features of the modern social imaginary, particularly in individualistic Western culture, is what Taylor calls the buffered self: the idea that the individual is a self-contained unit, essentially separate from others, primarily responsible for their own wellbeing, not fundamentally defined by their relationships and community. This buffered self is lonely by design. It has no essential connections to others…only chosen ones, which can always be unchosen.

But this is not the reality of human existence. The reality is that you are constituted by your relationships. Your capacity for language, for love, for consciousness itself, emerged through relationship…through the long slow process by which human beings shaped and were shaped by each other over hundreds of thousands of years of social living. You are not a self-contained unit that subsequently chose to enter into relationships. You are a relational being who only becomes a self through and within relationship.

This recognition is liberating. It means that you are not uniquely broken or uniquely deficient. Whatever you struggle with, others struggle with it too…not in exactly the same form, not with exactly the same intensity, but with the same

fundamental texture of human difficulty. You are not the only person who has ever doubted themselves profoundly. You are not the only person who has ever made a catastrophic mistake. You are not the only person who has looked at their life and wondered whether it amounted to anything. You are not the only person who has loved imperfectly and been loved imperfectly and felt the gap between love as imagined and love as actually lived.

This shared humanity is a source of deep compassion…for yourself and for others. When you recognize that everyone around you is doing their best with the resources they have and that their resources have been limited by the same forces that have limited yours…by fear, by pain, by the things they were taught and the things they were not taught, by the wounds they carry from experiences that were not their fault…

judgment falls away. Harshness becomes tenderness. The righteousness that made you feel separate becomes the compassion that makes you feel connected.

The African philosophy of Ubuntu…I am because we are…captures something that the individualistic West has

largely forgotten: that human identity is fundamentally com munal. You are not a self who happens to live among others. You are a being who becomes yourself through others and whose full humanity is only available in genuine community.

The courage to be human is in part the courage to acknowledge this dependency…to stop pretending to the independence that our culture prizes and to embrace the interdependence that is the actual condition of human life.

To be human is to experience the full spectrum of emotion and sensation.

Joy and sorrow. Love and anger. Fear and courage. Desire and renunciation. Ecstasy and desolation. The sacred is not found only in the pleasant experiences. It is found in all of it. The full range of human experience is sacred…not because suffering is good or because grief should be sought, but because all of it is real and the sacred dwells in the real.

We have been taught to sort our emotional experiences into acceptable and unacceptable categories. Joy, gratitude, love, peace…these are acceptable, even encouraged. Anger, fear, grief, desire…these are suspect, even dangerous. Spiritual practice, in many traditions, is understood as the cultivation

of the acceptable emotions and the suppression of the unacceptable ones. The spiritually advanced person is serene, peaceful, beyond the turbulence of ordinary emotion.

But this understanding has it backwards. The spiritually advanced person is not beyond the turbulence of emotion. They are more fully present to it. They have developed the capacity to feel what they feel without being controlled by it…to be moved without being swept away, to experience the full reality of emotion without the suffering that comes from resistance to it, from fighting against it, from adding to the emotional experience the additional layer of judgment about whether you should be feeling it.

This is why suffering is such an important teacher. Suffering breaks you open. It cracks the defensive shells you have built around your vulnerability. It forces you into contact with the full reality of being human…with the fragility, the impermanence, the radical dependency on forces outside your control that is always true of your existence but usually manageable enough to ignore. Suffering also connects you to the suffering of others. When you have genuinely suffered, you recognize suffering in others with a directness and a compassion that

no amount of philosophical understanding of suffering can provide.

The contemplative psychologist Gerald May wrote about what he called the addictive process…the way human beings habitually reach for something to ease the natural discomfort of being alive. The discomfort of uncertainty. The ache of longing. The bite of loneliness. The rawness of grief. The itch of desire unfulfilled. These are not pathologies.

These are the textures of human experience. But we have been taught that they should not be there…or at least that they should be manageable, should be smoothed out, should not interfere with our functioning. And so we reach for the things that soothe: substances, distractions, busyness, entertainment, the thousand forms of anesthesia available in a consumer culture.

To be human fully means allowing yourself to feel it all. Not being enslaved to feeling…not letting every emotion drive your behavior, not living in the reactive chaos of an untended emotional life. But not numbing yourself either. Not escaping the natural textures of human experience in a desperate

pursuit of the permanently pleasant. The courage to be human is the courage to feel what is actually present…

to honor the grief when it comes, to feel the anger without acting it out, to sit with the longing rather than rushing to fill it, to let the joy be large rather than managing it into something socially acceptable.

Most people live only a portion of their humanity. They suppress certain emotions, certain desires, certain aspects of experience that have been judged as unacceptable or dangerous or simply inconvenient. They have learned that some parts of being human are not welcome…not in their family, not in their culture, not in the religious tradition they were raised in, not in the social group they need to belong to. And so they have learned to hide those parts, to contain them, to pretend they are not there.

The parts most commonly suppressed vary by gender, by culture, by religion. Men suppress tenderness, grief, vulnerability, the need for comfort and connection. Women suppress anger, ambition, desire, the insistence on their own needs and perspectives. People of faith suppress doubt, sexuality, the inconvenient body. People in certain cultures sup-

press anything that would mark them as different, as insufficiently successful, as having needs that the culture does not recognize as legitimate.

But when you suppress parts of your humanity, you become less human, not more. You become smaller. You become defended…armored against the very experience of being alive because the experience of being alive includes things you have decided you cannot afford to feel. You become disconnected from your own depth, because depth requires access to the full range and you have put gates across portions of the interior landscape.

To become fully human is to reclaim all of it. This is not a de mand for perfection or a claim that all impulses should be ex pressed without discernment. It is the commitment to knowing your own full interior landscape…to having access to your own feelings and desires and needs, even the ones you will not always act on, even the ones that are inconvenient or socially unacceptable. You can feel your anger without enact ing it destructively. You can feel your grief without being consumed by it. You can feel your desire without being enslaved to it.

But you cannot manage any of these things wisely if you refuse to know they are there.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow, best known for his hierarchy of needs, spent the later part of his career studying what he called self-actualization…the process by which human beings develop toward their fullest potential. He found that the self-actualized people he studied were characterized not by the suppression of emotion and desire but by a certain quality of integration…a capacity to be in full contact with their own experience, including the difficult parts, while remaining oriented toward what they most deeply valued. They had not transcended their humanity. They had embraced it more completely.

To be human is to be limited. This is not a problem to be solved. It is the very nature of the human condition and it is the condition from which all human greatness emerges.

You are limited in time. You will die. Every person you love will die.

The life you are living is bounded…has a beginning you did not choose and an ending you cannot fully control. This limi tation is one of the most difficult facts of human existence

and the attempt to manage the anxiety it produces accounts for an enormous proportion of human behavior. Ernest Becker argued, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning The Denial of Death, that virtually all of culture is at some level a response to the fact of mortality…an attempt to achieve symbolic immortality, to make a mark that will outlast the finite life.

But the limitation of finitude is also the source of the urgency, the preciousness, the intensity that characterizes human experience at its best. The Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki said: In the beginner′s mind there are many possibili ties, but in the expert′s mind there are few.

The limitation of your single perspective, your single life, your single moment of being…this is also the ground of your particular vision.

You see what you see because you are where you are. The limitation that makes you finite also makes you specific and specificity is where all genuine seeing occurs.

The courage to be human includes the courage to accept limitation without despair. To work within the actual conditions of your actual life rather than endlessly fantasizing about the conditions you wish you had. To bring your full capacity to

bear on the actual situation you are in, rather than waiting for the ideal situation that may never arrive.

This is not resignation. It is the realism that makes genuine engagement possible.

Not every human life is characterized by extraordinary achievement. Not every person becomes historically significant. Not every person produces work of lasting brilliance or leads movements of social transformation or makes discoveries that change the world. Most human lives, measured by the metrics that dominate our cultural imagination, are ordi nary. And there is a deep spiritual teaching hidden in this fact.

The ordinary life, lived with full attention and genuine care, is sacred. The life of the parent who raises their children with love and wisdom. The life of the neighbor who knows everyone on the street and checks in on those who are struggling. The life of the teacher who makes learning safe and joyful for children who have known neither. The life of the craftsperson who makes things well, with pride and skill and care for the people who will use them. The life of the person who sim

ply shows up, consistently, for the people and communities that need them.

These lives leave no historic record. They produce no monuments. They generate no cultural artifacts that will be remembered. And they are the substance of which human civilization is actually made. The extraordinary achievements that history records are possible only because of the vast, invisible, ordinary substrate of human care and labor and pres ence that underlies them. The genius could not think if someone had not fed them. The movement could not move if ordinary people had not made it their ordinary practice to show up.

The courage to be human is, in the end, often the courage to be ordinary …to embrace the scale of your actual life rather than measuring it against an imaginary scale of greatness that most lives will never achieve. To find meaning and dignity in the particular, the local, the daily. To recognize that what you do in the small compass of your actual life matters…not in spite of its smallness but through it.

Closing Practice: Honoring Your Humanity Stand, if you are able and feel your body in space. Notice your weight, your

height, your particular form. This is your human body. This body, with its exact dimensions and its specific history and its irreplaceable way of moving through the world, is sacred.

Feel your emotions…whatever is present in this moment. Joy, sorrow, fear, gratitude, weariness, hope. Do not edit them. Do not manage them into acceptability. Simply notice what is actually present. All of it is real. All of it is part of being human. All of it is sacred.

Think of one way you have suppressed or hidden a part of your humanity …one part of your experience that you have not allowed to be fully present, fully expressed, fully honored. Name it. Acknowledge it. And offer it a moment of gen uine recognition: this is part of me. This is real. This is human. This is sacred.

Make a commitment…not to perform your emotions or to act on every impulse, but to bring more honesty and more care to the full reality of your human experience. To let more of what you are be present. To honor your humanity not in spite of its complexity and difficulty, but through it.

I honor my humanity. I claim my full humanity. I refuse to diminish myself or hide myself. I am sacred in my full,

flawed, struggling, striving, wondering, loving, mortal, irreplaceable human existence.

We become human together or we do not become human at all.

I do not mean this as hyperbole. I mean it as description. The self does not develop in isolation. The person does not emerge from a vacuum. Everything that I am…my language, my categories of thought, my capacity for empathy and for cruelty, my sense of what matters, my understanding of my own worth…all of this was formed in relationship. It was formed by the people who held me and the people who failed to hold me, by the communities that shaped me and the ones that excluded me, by every significant encounter I have had with another human being.

This means that my humanity is not mine alone. It belongs, in a real sense, to everyone who contributed to its formation. It belongs to my parents and their parents. It belongs to the teachers who saw something in me worth developing. It belongs to the friends who stayed. It belongs to the adversaries who forced me to discover what I actually believed. It belongs to the strangers whose anonymous humanity re-

minded me, in my hardest moments, that the world contained more kindness than I had been able to see.

And it belongs…in the most demanding sense…to the people whose suffering shaped me without my knowledge or consent. The people whose labor made possible the conditions in which I was able to develop. The people whose exclusion from the circle of full humanity created the conditions in which my inclusion was taken for granted. I carry them too, whether I acknowledge it or not. The network of mutuality does not ask our permission before weaving us into it.

To be fully human, then, is not a private achievement. It is a communal one. It requires that we be in genuine relationship with other humans…not the managed, surface-level relationship of social interaction, but the deep, costly, transformative relationship of actually being known and actually knowing. It requires that we take other people's humanity as seriously as we take our own…that we refuse the graduated scale of worth that our society constantly pressures us to accept.

And it requires that we work…actively, concretely, without waiting until the work feels convenient…to create the conditions in which everyone's humanity can flourish. Because the

courage to be human is not only about claiming your own hu manity. It is about insisting on the humanity of everyone else. It is about living as though the humanity of the person whose life looks nothing like yours is as sacred and as real and as worthy of protection as your own.

We are woven together. What diminishes you diminishes me. What allows you to flourish makes flourishing more pos sible for all of us. This is not sentiment. This is the structure of reality. And the courage to be human is the courage to live from that structure, even when it costs us, even when it de- mands more than we thought we had.

The conditions of genuine humanity…the conditions under which people are able to develop their full capacity for con- nection, creativity, dignity and love…these are not naturally occurring. They have to be built. They have to be protected. And when they are damaged or destroyed, the damage rever berates through the web.

I think about the children who grow up in communities where the conditions of genuine human development have been systematically stripped away. Where schools are un- derfunded and buildings are unsafe and teachers are over-

whelmed and no one has been given the resources to do what needs to be done. Where the message delivered to children…through the quality of their environment, through the attention or inattention of institutions, through the presence or absence of beauty and safety and possibility…is: you are not worth the investment.

That message does something to a person. It does something to a community. And it does something to the web…it creates a kind of permanent hunger at the center of the network, a deficit of human flourishing that affects everyone, including the people who think they are safely outside it.

Because there is no safely outside. This is the fundamental truth that the network of mutuality insists on. The children who grow up without adequate conditions for human development do not disappear from the web when they grow up. They remain in it. They bring their deficit into the web…not as a judgment on them but as a consequence of what was done to them. And the web carries the deficit.

The courage to be human, in community, is the courage to insist on adequate conditions for everyone's humanity. Not as charity. Not as the compassion of the privileged for the

poor. But as the recognition that the humanity of each person is a stake in which all of us have a share. That the flourishing of each person makes flourishing more possible for all. And that the stunting of any person's humanity makes the web less capable of sustaining us all.

We become human together. This is not optional. It is not an aspiration. It is a description of how human development ac tually works. The only question is whether we will organize our shared life accordingly.

We are not finished becoming human.

This is among the most hopeful and the most demanding things I know how to say. Hopeful, because it means that the failures of our history…personal and collective, the ways we have fallen short of genuine humanity in our treatment of each other…are not the final word. Demanding, because it means the work is not done. The becoming requires our active participation.

The history of human development is the history of the grad ual expansion of the circle of who counts as fully human. It is an ugly history in many respects…the expansions have come slowly, have been resisted bitterly, have required enormous

sacrifice from those who were outside the circle and demanded to be recognized as within it. But the direction of the expansion is unmistakable. And the direction tells us something about the nature of humanity itself…about what we are capable of when we are most fully what we are.

We are capable of recognizing the full humanity of people who are not like us. We are capable of extending genuine regard to people whose experience of the world is genuinely different from our own. We are capable of organizing our communities and our institutions around the flourishing of everyone rather than the convenience of those with the most power.

We are capable of this. History demonstrates it. The question is whether we will continue the expansion…whether we will extend the circle further, include those who are currently excluded, recognize the full humanity of those whose humanity is still being contested.

The courage to be human is the courage to keep becoming human. To not accept the current boundary of the circle as final. To insist that the circle has not yet been drawn wide

enough…and to keep drawing it wider, at whatever cost, until it includes everyone.

This is the work of becoming human. It is our work. Together. Without end.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series Two

Book Nine

THE COURAGE TO BE JUSTICE

A Spiritual and Theological Inquiry into Fairness, Accountability and Sacred Healing

Justice is not about punishment. Justice is about right relationship. It is the commitment to creating conditions in which all beings can flourish…not some beings, not the beings we have decided deserve to flourish, but all beings, with out exception. It is the refusal to tolerate systems that dimin ish human dignity.

To be justice is to make yourself a force for the healing of the world.

Not through grand gestures or heroic self-sacrifice…though sometimes those are called for. But through the daily practice of seeing clearly, speaking truthfully, acting in alignment with what you know to be right, and refusing to pretend that what is wrong is acceptable.

Notice what the word justice evokes in you.

Perhaps a sense of moral clarity, of righteous anger at what is wrong.

Perhaps a sense of overwhelm at the scale and depth of what needs to be healed. Perhaps a sense of inadequacy…who am I to work for justice, given my own complicity in systems of harm, given my own failures and limitations?

All of these responses are worth honoring. The clarity and the anger and the overwhelm and the inadequacy are all legitimate parts of the experience of taking justice seriously. The work does not begin when you have resolved all of these tensions. The work begins in the midst of them, imperfectly, with what you have. It begins with the decision to see…actually see, without the comfortable filters of denial…and then to respond to what you have seen.

At its root, justice is about alignment. When a system is unjust, it means that reality does not align with what ought to be true…that the actual distribution of suffering, of opportunity, of dignity does not match what the sacred dignity of every human being requires. People suffer who should not suffer. People are excluded who should be included. Power is distributed in ways that protect those who already have much and grind those who have little.

The great Hebrew prophets understood justice as primarily a relational concept…about the quality of relationship between human beings and between human beings and the earth. Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah…

all of them were fundamentally concerned with the gap between what the covenant promised and what was actually happening in the community. The covenant promised a society in which the widow and the orphan and the stranger would be protected, in which no one would accumulate so much that others lacked what they needed, in which the powerful could not simply use their power to exploit the powerless. Justice was the alignment of social reality with the demands of the covenant.

The courage to be justice is the courage to see clearly where things are out of alignment…to look honestly at the gap between what is and what ought to be, without minimizing it and without sentimentalizing it.

To see the actual conditions in which people are living, not the abstracted statistics but the lived reality: the parent working two jobs who cannot be present to their children, the child in a school that has given up on them, the elderly person dying alone because the systems of care have failed them, the community bearing the disproportionate burden of environmental harm because it lacks the political power to refuse.

But seeing clearly is not enough. The courage to be justice re quires moving from seeing to speaking and from speaking to acting. It is the willingness to name what you see…to say clearly and without polite qualification that something is wrong, that a harm is occurring, that a system is producing outcomes that violate the dignity of the people it affects. And it is the willingness to act in ways that work toward realignment…not through violence or force, but through the creative, persistent, often slow and often frustrated work of building alternatives, speaking truth, organizing communities, challenging institutions and refusing to accept the normalization of what is not normal.

Justice without mercy is cruelty. When accountability becomes punishment for its own sake, when the desire for consequences becomes indistinguishable from the desire for revenge, when the determination to hold people responsible for harm tips over into the refusal to allow for their humanity or their capacity to change…justice has ceased to be justice and has become something darker.

But mercy without justice is complicity. When forgiveness is extended in a way that allows harm to continue, when recon ciliation is sought before accountability has been estab-

lished, when the peace of the powerful is purchased by silencing the claims of those they have harmed...mercy has ceased to be mercy and has become a tool of oppression. The premature peace that asks the harmed to forgive before the harm has been acknowledged and addressed is not mercy. It is a way of protecting the harmer from the consequences of their actions.

True justice holds both. It seeks accountability without destroying the possibility of redemption. It insists on consequences while also creating space for transformation. It refuses to tolerate ongoing harm while also maintaining faith in the possibility that those who have caused harm are capable of change. This is perhaps the most difficult balance in spiritual maturity...to be both gentle and fierce, both forgiving and unwilling to accept harm, both committed to accountability and committed to the possibility of human transformation.

The restorative justice movement offers a practical attempt to embody this balance. Rather than asking only 'What rule was broken and what punishment does it require?' restorative justice asks 'Who was harmed?

What are their needs? What are the obligations of those who caused the harm? How can the relationships and the community be repaired?' This reframing shifts the center of grav ity from punishment to healing…

from the satisfaction of a system's demand for retribution to the actual repair of actual harm to actual people.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, spent years working in this territory between justice and mercy. He articulated something that became a touchstone for the Commission's work: there can be no future without forgiveness, and there can be no forgiveness without truth. The sequence matters. Truth first…the honest, public acknowledgment of what actually happened, who was harmed, how deeply. And then, in the space that truth creates, the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Not as a demand, not as a requirement, but as a possibility that becomes available when truth has been genuinely spoken.

Justice is not something you think about or feel good about or pray for from a distance. Justice is something you do. It is concrete, particular, local and demanding. It requires your

actual time and energy and resources. It will cost you things you would prefer not to give up. It will bring you into conflict with people and systems that prefer the status quo. It will frustrate you with its slowness and its resistance to the changes you know are necessary.

And it is your calling. Not because you are specially equipped or unusually courageous…though perhaps you are. But because you are here, alive, in this time and this place, with particular gifts and particular relationships and particular access to particular levers of change. The work of justice is not reserved for people who have dedicated their entire lives to it in spectacular ways. It is available to everyone, in the particular sphere of their actual influence and their actual life.

Justice is your willingness to use your particular gifts and po sition to create more fairness in the world. If you are a teacher, it is the commitment to seeing every child in your classroom as fully capable of learning, regardless of what their file says or what previous teachers have assumed about them. If you are an employer, it is the commitment to paying people fairly and creating conditions in which everyone's dignity is respected. If you are a parent, it is the commitment

to raising children who understand that their own wellbeing is connected to the wellbeing of others. If you are a neighbor, it is the willingness to notice who is struggling in your community and to respond.

I believe…with everything in me, against all evidence to the contrary on the worst days…that justice work bends something. That the long arc of the moral universe is not fixed. That it moves. The arc is long…much longer than any individual life. No one who works for justice will see the full fruit of their labor. Harriet Tubman did not see the end of slavery in her lifetime. Suffragettes who were imprisoned for demanding the vote did not live to see full voting rights. The activists who first organized for LGBTQ rights in the 1960s could not have imagined what would become possible within decades. The work of justice is multigenerational. You are not completing it. You are carrying it.

This understanding is both humbling and liberating. Humbling, because it deflates the ego's need to see results, to be the one who makes the decisive difference, to accomplish something historically significant in a single life. Liberating, because it releases you from the impossible burden of solving everything…of having to win, in your own lifetime, the

battles that have been fought for centuries. You are called only to do your part. To carry the baton faithfully for the por tion of the race that is yours to run. To pass it on in better condition than you received it.

Justice begins not in policy or legislation but in relationship…in the immediate, particular ways you relate to the specific people in your actual life. Do you listen to those who have been harmed? Do you take seriously what they say about their experience, or do you filter it through your own assumptions about what their experience should be? Do you take responsibility for your own harm…for the ways your choices and behaviors, however unintentionally, contribute to the diminishment of others?

This is where justice work becomes genuinely uncomfortable. Because it is easy to identify injustice that is far away, perpetrated by other people, against other people. It is much harder to see the ways that you yourself…however committed to justice you may be, however genuinely opposed to oppression…participate in systems and relationships that are not just. The ways your comfort is purchased at someone else's expense. The ways your assumptions and habits and unexamined privilege affect the people around you.

The work of justice in relationship is the work of becoming more consistently honest about this participation…not as a form of self-flagellation or performative guilt, but as a genuine commitment to seeing and responding to the actual impact of your actions on actual people. It is the work of listening more carefully to those who have been harmed by systems you benefit from, without defending yourself or minimizing what they are saying. It is the work of repairing what you can repair, changing what you can change and acknowledging honestly what you cannot change alone.

It is asking: Do I speak up when injustice happens in my community? When someone is mistreated in my presence, do I remain silent for the sake of comfort, or do I find the courage to name what I have seen? When a policy is being made that will harm people who are not in the room, do I bring their perspective into the room, or do I allow the ease of their absence to let me off the hook?

Justice in relationship is daily, ordinary and demanding. It does not produce the satisfaction of dramatic victories. But it is the ground from which all other justice work grows. The person who has learned to practice justice in their immediate relationships…who has developed the habits of seeing, nam-

ing, listening, repairing and speaking…is the person who can sustain the larger work of justice over a lifetime without burning out or losing their humanity in the process.

Justice work has a spirituality that is often neglected in conversations about activism and social change. The people who sustain this work over decades, who continue to show up for the long, slow, frustrating, and occasionally glorious work of bending the arc of history, are almost invariably people with a deep inner life…a contemplative practice, a community of mutual support, a source of renewal that goes beyond the politics of the work itself.

Without this inner dimension, justice work tends to produce burnout, cynicism and the kinds of toxic dynamics that damage the movements it is meant to serve. When the work is sustained entirely by anger…by the energy of outrage at what is wrong…it tends to exhaust itself, because anger is a finite resource. When it is sustained by the need to be right, by the satisfaction of identifying and condemning the enemy, it tends to produce the rigidity and purity culture that fractures movements from within. When it is sustained by the belief that if we just work hard enough, the arc will bend, it tends to break when the arc resists.

The spirituality of justice work begins with the recognition that justice itself is a spiritual value…not merely a political goal or a moral preference, but a reflection of the sacred real ity that all beings are equal in their dignity, all are expressions of the one sacred source, all deserve the conditions in which they can flourish. This recognition connects justice work to something larger than any single campaign or cause. It grounds the work in a love that is not contingent on success…a love for the people being served that persists even when the outcomes are disappointing.

The contemplative traditions offer resources that justice workers desperately need. The practice of centering prayer, of meditation, of sabbath rest…these are not escapes from the work of justice. They are what make the work sustainable. They restore the inner resources that the work depletes. They provide perspective when the immediate battles are consuming. They keep alive the quality of love and hope without which justice work becomes simply a form of warfare.

Justice work can be discouraging. The problems are vast and ancient and deeply entrenched. Progress is slow and often followed by regression.

You speak truth and are not heard. You work for fairness and injustice continues. People who have worked for decades see the issues they have spent their lives fighting still very much alive. The despair that can accompany long engagement with injustice is real and should be honored rather than dismissed.

But to be justice is to maintain hope…not the naive hope that ignores the evidence, not the optimism that denies the scale of what needs to change, but the stubborn, mature, eyes-open hope that insists on the possibility of transformation even in the face of evidence that might seem to contradict it. This is what the theologian Jurgen Moltmann called the theology of hope…the recognition that hope is not simply optimism about the future, but a fundamental orientation of the self toward the possibility of the new, even when the new seems impossible from the standpoint of the present.

The evidence for hope, when you look for it, is more present than despair allows us to see. Slavery existed for millennia before it was abolished and then it was abolished. Women had been excluded from political participation for all of recorded history before they demanded and won the franchise. The apartheid regime of South Africa seemed so pow-

erful, so entrenched, so certain of its permanence…until the day it was not. The Berlin Wall stood for twenty-eight years…and then it fell, in a matter of hours and the world that had seemed fixed was suddenly, astonishingly different.

These transformations did not happen without the long, slow, often invisible work of people who maintained hope in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. Who continued to speak and to organize and to build alternatives and to maintain the vision of a different world even when that vision seemed disconnected from any foreseeable reality. The courage to be justice includes the courage to maintain this hope…to be a guardian of possibilities…to hold open the future that fear and exhaustion would close.

To work for justice without hope is to work from exhaustion. To work for justice with hope…with the living conviction that transformation is possible, that the arc does bend, that the sacred desire for human flourishing will not be permanently suppressed…is to work from something deeper than human willpower. It is to work from the ground of being itself, from the source of all creativity and renewal, from the love that does not finally accept that what is broken must remain broken.

The need for justice is so vast, the forms of injustice so multiple and interconnected, that it can be paralyzing. Where do you begin? What is your particular contribution to the healing of what is broken? How do you choose your focus when everything needs attention?

The answer, for most people, is discovered through the intersection of three things: what breaks your heart, what gifts you have to offer, and where you are. What breaks your heart…genuinely breaks it, not theoretically disturbs you…is significant information about your particular calling. Not all forms of injustice will call to you with the same urgency. Some will. The injustice that makes you feel simultaneously outraged and implicated and responsible, the one that you cannot turn away from, the one that comes back to you even when you have tried to put it aside…this is probably yours to work on.

Your gifts…the specific capacities and skills and resources and relationships you have…shape what form your contribution can take.

Not everyone can do everything. The person who can write needs to write.

The person who can organize needs to organize. The person with financial resources needs to deploy them. The person with access to power needs to use that access in service of those without it. The contribution must be made from your actual gifts, not from the gifts you wish you had.

And where you are…the actual community and context and relationships within which your life is embedded…shapes where your work can most immediately and most effectively occur. Justice work that begins close to home, that is rooted in actual relationships and actual community, tends to be more sustainable and more effective than justice work that is primarily directed at distant problems that allow you to remain emotionally comfortable while feeling morally engaged.

Closing Practice: Identifying Your Justice Work Sit quietly. Take a few slow breaths. Let yourself arrive in this moment.

Ask yourself: Where do I see injustice that breaks my heart? Not theoretically disturbs me, not abstractly concerns me, but actually breaks my heart…reaches into me and produces something that feels like grief or outrage or the urgent sense that this must not continue.

Name it specifically. The more specific, the better.

Now ask: What gifts do I have that are relevant to this? What can I actually do? Not what should I do, not what would impress others as the right response, but what can I actually do, with the actual gifts and resources and relationships I actually have?

Do not answer from guilt or obligation or the sense that you should be doing more than you are. Those voices produce burnout, not justice.

Answer from genuine calling...from the recognition of what moves you, what gifts you carry, what particular contribution is yours to make.

Then ask: What is one concrete step I can take in the next week? Not a resolution about a new identity as a justice worker. Not a sweeping commitment to transform everything. Just one step. One conversation, one action, one decision to show up where you have been absent.

This is your justice work. This is how the divine works through you toward the healing of what is broken. One per-

son at a time. One step at a time. One moment of seeing and responding and refusing to look away.

Justice is what love looks like at scale.

I first heard this idea from a mentor early in my ministry and it has never left me. It clarifies something that can get muddled in the conversation between spirituality and politics…the idea that love and justice are two different projects, that one belongs to the interior life and the other to the public sphere, that you can be a person of deep love with out being a person of deep commitment to justice. I do not believe this. I have never been able to believe it. Because justice is simply what happens when love encounters structural suffering and refuses to look away.

The network of mutuality is not only a spiritual reality. It is a political one. It is an economic one. It is a social one. The ways we have organized our common life…the ways we have distributed resources and opportunity and dignity and safety…either strengthen the web or tear it. And a community in which the web is chronically torn for some of its mem bers while others move through life on a surface that has never given way beneath them…that is a community that has

organized itself against love, whatever its stated values may be.

Justice work is the work of repairing the web. Not from the outside, not from a position of superior virtue, but from within…as a member of the web ourselves, as people who benefit from its integrity and suffer from its tearing, as people who are implicated in the systems that damage it and also capable of participating in the work of repair.

This is the mutuality of justice: none of us is outside the system. None of us stands at a clean distance from the arrangements that produce inequality, that sort people into deserving and undeserving, that decide whose suffering counts as a public emergency and whose can be managed or ignored. We are all inside the web. We are all affected by the quality of the web. And we are all, therefore, responsible for what the web does.

I have found that this recognition…that I am inside the system, not above it…is both humbling and galvanizing. Humbling, because it refuses me the position of the righteous observer. Galvanizing, because it makes the work personal. If I am part of the web, then my choices add or subtract from its

integrity. My voice, my vote, my money, my attention, my presence…these are not politically neutral. They either tend the web or they let it fray.

What the courage to be justice asks of each of us in relation to each other is this: take each other seriously. Take the suffering of people whose circumstances are different from yours seriously. Not as an abstract political concern. As the suffering of real people, in the same web you are in, whose pain di minishes the web in which you also live. And then act…not from guilt, not from the performance of righteousness, but from the recognition that the web is real and your care for it is real and the repair is necessary and you have something to contribute to it.

Justice is not someone else's project. It is the project of everyone who believes that the network of mutuality is sacred. It is the project of everyone who believes that love is real and therefore what love requires at scale is real too.

The justice work I have been part of across my ministry has taught me things that I did not learn in seminary and could not have learned from a book.

It has taught me that justice is slow. That the systems which produce injustice have been refined over centuries and will not yield to anything that is not equally persistent. That the arc does bend, but it bends so slowly that you cannot see it bending on any given day. What you can see is whether you are adding your weight to the bending or not.

It has taught me that justice work is relational at its core. That the abstract commitment to justice…the commitment that exists in the head but has not yet made its way into actual relationship with actual people who are experiencing actual injustice…is not yet justice work. It is justice feeling. Justice feeling is not nothing, but it is not the same as justice doing. Justice doing requires contact. Requires presence. Requires the willingness to let the reality of another person's suffering actually change you, not only move you.

It has taught me that justice work is also inner work. That the person who has not reckoned with their own capacity for harm, their own participation in systems of injustice, their own wound and its relationship to their justice impulse…that person is a liability to the movement, however good their intentions. The inner work and the outer work are not separate. The person who neglects one impoverishes the other.

And it has taught me that justice work is sustained by love. Not by anger, though anger has its place and is sometimes the most honest response to what is happening. Not by guilt, though guilt can motivate. But by love…the love that is fundamentally oriented toward the flourishing of the other person, that wants what is best for them not because it reflects well on you but because their flourishing is genuinely good and genuinely matters.

The network of mutuality is what justice is trying to restore. Every act of genuine justice…every repair of a torn thread, every insistence that a person who has been excluded from the web be included, every structural change that makes the web more capable of sustaining everyone in it…is an act of love at scale. Of love that has graduated from the personal to the political without losing its essential character.

Justice is love. Done at scale. Sustained over time. Requiring the full engagement of everyone who believes the web is real.

The Beloved Community is not a utopian fantasy. It is a direction.

By Beloved Community I mean a community organized around the recognition that every person in it has infinite

worth…that the worth of each person is not contingent on their productivity, their compliance, their acceptability, or their usefulness to others. A community that takes this recognition seriously enough to build its structures around it. To organize its common life so that the conditions of genuine flourishing are available to everyone, not only to those who were born into circumstances that made flourishing easy.

I have glimpsed this community in moments. In the brief, ex traordinary clarity that sometimes emerges in the midst of genuine struggle…when people who are working together for something larger than themselves discover, in the shared work, a quality of connection and mutual regard that they did not expect. In the communities that have gathered around the most vulnerable among them and refused to let the vulnerable fall. In the moments when the hierarchy has been suspended and something more genuinely human has taken its place.

These glimpses are not illusions. They are previews. They are the network of mutuality becoming briefly visible…the web showing itself, letting us feel what it would be like if it were

always this strong, always this capable of holding everyone in it.

The work of justice is the work of making those glimpses more frequent and more durable. Of building the conditions under which the Beloved Community is not only a possibility in the best moments but a reality in the ordinary ones.

This work will not be completed in our lifetimes. That is not a reason to despair. It is a reason to do our part with more care, knowing that we are contributing to something larger than ourselves, that the work will continue after us and that the contribution we make now determines what is possible for the people who come after.

Work for the Beloved Community. It is real. It is possible. It is what love asks of us at scale.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series Two

Book Ten

THE COURAGE TO BE HERE

A Lyrical Inquiry into Presence, Place and the Sacred Ground Beneath Your Feet

Place your feet on the floor. Feel it.

The weight of you pressing down. The resistance of the earth meeting the weight of your body. This is not metaphor. This is the first and most honest fact of your existence: you are somewhere. You are here. Not elsewhere, not in the future, not in the memory of yesterday. Here. In this room. In this body. In this breath.

This word…here…is perhaps the most radical word in the hu man vocabulary. It does not describe an idea. It does not point toward an abstraction. It points at the ground. It points at you. It says: this is where existence is happening. Not over there. Not then. Here.

Most of us spend the majority of our lives somewhere other than here. We are in our thoughts about tomorrow, rehearsing the words we will say, imagining the outcomes we hope for or dread. We are in our memories of yesterday replaying what happened, revising what we said mourning what we lost. We are in the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we deserve and what is being done to us. We are ev erywhere except here.

And yet here is all there ever is.

This book is an invitation to come home.

You are not everywhere. You are somewhere.

This is the beginning of everything. Before theology, before philosophy, before the long argument of the mind with itself about what is real and what matters…there is the irreducible fact of location. You occupy space. You have a body that is here and not there, present and not absent, rooted in this particular corner of the universe and no other.

For a long time we have treated this as a limitation. The body is a prison. The particular is inferior to the universal. To be here is to be not-there and the universal mind longs for everywhere and nowhere all at once.

But what if location is not a limitation but a grace?

What if the very specificity of your being here…in this body in this place in this unrepeatable moment…is the form that sacred love takes in giving you to yourself?

To be here is to be given. Not scattered like mist across all possibilities but concentrated. Specific. Present. The gift of existence is always and only given in the particular. The universal is not a place you can stand. The here is.

Think of what it means to be told by someone you love: I am here. Not I am available in principle. Not I am emotionally present in some general and unspecified way. But here…beside you breathing the same air occupying the same moment. The body in the room. The hand on the arm. The eyes that look at you from close enough to see.

This is what the sacred says to you always: I am here. You have never been alone in this universe. The presence that holds all things was never at a distance from you. It was here in the breath in the ground in the very aliveness of your alive ness. The only reason you could not feel it is that you were somewhere else.

Come back. Come back to the ground. Come back to the specific irreplaceable fact of being here.

Where is here for you?

Not in the abstract…not here as a philosophical position not here as a spiritual concept…but here as geography. As the ac tual specific place where your life is happening right now.

Look around. What do you see? What light falls through what windows onto what surfaces? What sounds arrive from

outside…from the street from the neighbors from the birds or the traffic or the wind? What smells? What textures? What is the quality of the air in this room?

Most of us do not know where we live. We move through our places like ghosts our attention perpetually elsewhere our senses muffled by the noise of our own thinking. We are in our homes without being in them. We walk through our neighborhoods without seeing them. We sit in the same chair day after day without ever fully arriving in it.

The courage to be here includes the courage to actually look at where you are.

This is harder than it sounds. The familiar has a way of becoming invisible. The home you have lived in for ten years you no longer see…it has become a backdrop a stage set something your eyes move across without registering. The street you walk every day has disappeared into habit.

And yet these places these streets these faces…they are your life. They are not the backdrop to your real life. They are your real life. The way the light falls in your kitchen in the morning.

The way the neighbor′s dog sounds when someone walks past. The way the air smells at this particular latitude in this particular season. These are the textures of your existence. To miss them is to miss your life.

Come back to where you are. Look at it. Let it be more than backdrop. Let it be the sacred particular in which your existence is taking place…because that is exactly what it is.

Every here has a history.

The ground beneath your feet has been stood on before you.

It holds the memory of everyone who has ever been here…the ones whose names you know and the countless ones you will never know the ones whose lives shaped this place and the ones whose lives were shaped by it.

This is not merely historical sentiment. It is a spiritual reality. The places we inhabit are not neutral. They carry the weight of what has happened in them. They are saturated with the lives that have passed through. The joy that has been felt here leaves something in the air. The grief that has been grieved here leaves something in the walls.

Ancient peoples understood this. They did not move through the world as though it were merely geography. They moved through it as though it were alive…as though the places themselves had personalities had spirits had claims on those who passed through them.

The mountain was not just rock. The river was not just water. The particular meadow was not just grass. Each was a presence an entity something that spoke and needed to be listened to.

We have lost this fluency. The landscape has become resource…something to be used extracted exploited passed over. We do not ask what the place is saying. We do not listen to what the ground holds.

But the listening is still possible. The relationship is still available.

Where you are has a story. It has been breathed by other lungs walked by other feet loved by other hearts. The very air you are breathing now was breathed before…by people who are gone by animals whose bones are in the earth by trees that fell centuries before you were born. You are breathing

the exhalation of the past. You are part of a conversation that began before you and will continue after you.

To be here fully is to be in that conversation. To stand on this ground with some awareness of what it holds. To let where you are be more than a location…to let it be a relationship a community a responsibility.

Your body is your here.

Not the body as you think about it…

not the body as appearance as performance as the object of scrutiny and judgment and endless project. But the body as pure location. As the place where you are. As the form that here takes in your particular case.

You are not in your body the way a driver is in a car. You are your body. The body is not the vehicle for the real you that lives somewhere else in thoughts in spirit in some realm of pure consciousness. The body is you…the you that is here that is present that is in the world in the concrete and irreducible sense that matters.

When you are not in your body you are not anywhere. You are in your thoughts about your body or your feelings about

your body or your plans for your body…but you are not in it. And to be not-in-your-body is to be not-here. It is to be homeless in the deepest sense…without the ground that only presence in the body can provide.

Notice your body now. Not how it looks not how it should look not how it compares to other bodies. But how it feels. What it is doing. The weight of it in the chair. The temperature of the air on your skin. The subtle movement of breath in the chest and belly. The aliveness that hums in the limbs the quiet industriousness of the heart the darkness inside the skull where thought assembles itself from mystery.

This…all of this…is here. This is where you are.

This is the specific location that your existence is given to inhabit.

The body is the form that here takes in your case. To be in it…truly in it actually inhabiting it living from the inside of it rather than observing it from some imagined distance…is to be present in a way that makes everything else possible.

You cannot be here without being in your body. And you can not be in your body without being here.

Be honest about the elsewhere.

There is something in us that does not want to be here. That longs for a different life a different body a different set of circumstances. That dreams of elsewhere…of some better place some better time some better version of events in which things are not the way they are.

This longing is not pathological. It is the evidence of imagination of the human capacity to conceive of what does not yet exist and to desire it into being. The vision of the elsewhere has driven every great human project…every journey every creation every social transformation.

Without the dream of somewhere else we would never leave where we are.

But the longing for elsewhere becomes a problem when it makes here impossible to inhabit. When the distance between where you are and where you wish you were becomes so painful that you cannot rest in the present moment. When the gap between your actual life and your imagined life becomes a source of chronic suffering rather than creative energy.

What they share is the recognition that this condition…however understandable however human…is a form of exile from the sacred. Because the sacred is always here. The sacred has no elsewhere.

The presence that underlies all existence does not live in the future.

It lives now here in this breath in this body in this particular and unrepeatable moment.

The courage to be here includes the courage to grieve what elsewhere promises. To mourn the imagined lives you will not live the roads not taken the selves you decided not to become. This grief is real and must not be dismissed. But on the other side of the grief…or perhaps through it not around it…is the possibility of settling. Of actually arriving where you are. Of finding that here which always seemed insufficient compared to the shining elsewhere contains something the elsewhere never could: the actual sacred texture of your actual life.

This is it.

Not a rehearsal. Not an anteroom to the real event. Not a waiting room in which you pass time until the important part begins. This…here now this ordinary and unsensational moment…is it. This is what you have been given. This is what ex istence in its unfathomable generosity has offered you.

The ordinariness of here is not a failure. It is a gift in disguise.

There is a particular kind of suffering that comes from believing that your life should be more interesting more dramatic more significant than it is. That the sacred should announce itself with trumpets and burning bushes and undeniable signs rather than arriving in the smell of coffee the sound of rain the face of someone you love the heft of a pen in your hand the quiet satisfaction of work done well.

But the sacred has always been most present in the ordinary.

Not because it is not present in the extraordinary…it is…but because the ordinary is where most of us spend most of our lives. And if the sacred can only be found in the exceptional moments then most of your life is a spiritual desert. Which is an unbearable conclusion and also a false one.

The sacredness of the ordinary here is not a consolation prize. It is the main event.

When you allow yourself to be fully present to an ordinary moment…truly unreservedly present without planning your escape to somewhere more interesting…something remarkable happens. The ordinary becomes translucent. The familiar reveals its strangeness. The simple fact that anything exists at all…

that there is something rather than nothing that you are here to notice it that consciousness has shown up to witness this particular moment …becomes overwhelming in the best possible way.

The ground is holy. The moment is sacred. Here always is where the burning bush is.

You just have to be here enough to see it.

You will leave here.

Not in death…not only in death…but in the ordinary way that attention wanders that consciousness drifts that the mind abandons the present moment for the territories of memory

and anticipation. You will leave here a thousand times today and tomorrow and every day of your life.

This is not a failure. It is the nature of being human. The mind is restless. It wanders. It is built to imagine beyond the immediate to plan and remember and reflect. These are capacities not defects.

The practice is not to never leave. The practice is returning.

Every time you notice you have drifted…that you are not here that your attention has wandered to some other time or place …the noticing itself is the return. The moment of awareness is the moment of arrival. You do not have to struggle back. You simply notice that you are not here and in the noticing you are.

This is the most important practice in the spiritual life and the simplest. Not complicated not requiring special conditions or special skills or special states. Just this: when you notice you are not here come back.

Again and again. Ten thousand times. Without judgment without frustration without the story about how you should be better at this by now.

Here is always available. The present moment has never closed to you. No matter how far you drift here is always one breath away. One noticing away. One small act of return.

Come back. You are welcome here. You have always been welcome here.

This is your place. This is your moment. This is your life.

Be in it.

Sit quietly. Let your breathing settle.

Feel the ground beneath you…

the floor the chair whatever surface holds you. Let your weight sink into it. Let yourself be held.

Look around you slowly. Let your eyes rest on three things…just three…and really look at them.

Not to analyze or evaluate or remember. Just to see them. To let them be here with you.

Listen. Without trying to identify or categorize the sounds just listen to the texture of sound in this place. The sound of here.

Feel the temperature of the air on your skin. Notice what your body knows about being in this particular place at this particular moment.

Now say…quietly inwardly or aloud if you wish…

these words:

I am here.

Let that be enough. Let it be everything. Let the fact of your presence in this moment in this place in this body…let that be the whole and complete truth of you right now.

You are here.

The here that you inhabit is not a neutral fact. It is a theologi cal statement. To be somewhere rather than everywhere is to be particular, and particularity is the form that love takes in the created order. The divine does not love in the abstract. The divine loves in the specific. And the specific is always here.

I have learned this slowly. I am a person who has spent much of his life trying to be many places at once…present in body to the person in front of me while absent in spirit to some

obligation or conflict or grief that was competing for my attention. I have been in conversations I did not hear, in rooms I did not enter, in relationships that I was maintaining rather than inhabiting. And I have learned, through the patient instruction of failure and loss, that the here I was always escaping was the only place where anything real could happen.

The here of this moment is the only place where you can love someone. You cannot love a person in the abstract. You cannot love them in the future or in your memory of the past. You can only love them now, in the actual encounter, with the actual person…not the version of them you carry in your mind, not the version you wish they were, not the version that fits more comfortably into your existing life, but this person, here, with all their difficulty and all their particularity and all the inconvenient reality of their actual existence.

This is the discipline that presence requires. Not the discipline of sitting still…though that is part of it. The discipline of release. Of letting go of the other place you are trying to be. Of trusting that the here in front of you is worth your full attention. Of believing that what is available in this moment, in this place, with this person, is enough. Is, in fact, everything.

There is a tendency, when we speak of presence, to reach for the extraordinary. The mountaintop. The mystical encounter. The moment when the veil parts and the sacred becomes visible in unmistakable terms. These moments are real. I am not dismissing them. But if we anchor our understanding of sacred presence only in the extraordinary, we make a serious error. We train ourselves to be absent from our actual lives while waiting for a life that is worth being present to.

The sacred ordinary is the recognition that this…exactly this, the unremarkable Tuesday afternoon, the familiar room, the conversation you have had a hundred times, the body that aches in the same places it always aches…this is where the di vine is. Not as a consolation prize for the absence of the spec tacular. As the primary site of the sacred′s self-disclosure.

I have met God more often in ordinary rooms than in sanctu aries. In the particular quality of afternoon light through an unremarkable window. In the way a person′s face changes when they feel genuinely heard. In the taste of coffee in a cup held in hands that have survived things the hands′ owner barely mentions. In the texture of the actual world, which is always richer and stranger and more worth attending to than

the abstracted version of the world we spend most of our lives inhabiting.

The courage to be here is the courage to let the ordinary be enough. Not merely enough in the sense of resignation…I suppose this will have to do. But enough in the sense of abundance. In the sense that what is actually available in this moment is more than I can fully receive. That the here I keep escaping to get somewhere better is, in fact, the best place available.

This does not mean that circumstances cannot be changed or should not be changed. It does not mean that the here of suf fering is sacred because suffering is good. Suffering is not good and the conditions that produce it should be resisted and dismantled. But even in the midst of the work of changing what needs to be changed, there is the requirement to be here…to be present to what is actually happening, to the peo ple who are actually suffering, to the specific and unglamorous reality of the work itself.

The practice of presence is a practice of return. Not a single achievement but an endless returning. You will leave here…in your mind, in your attention, in the subtle ways that

consciousness wanders from the actual to the imagined. This is not a failure. This is the nature of consciousness. The practice is not the elimination of wandering but the cultivation of return.

Every tradition of contemplative practice knows this. The instruction is not: never leave. The instruction is: come back. Again. Without judgment. Without the punishing self-criticism that turns a moment of distraction into evidence of your fundamental unsuitability for the spiritual life. Just come back. Put your feet back on the floor. Feel the weight of you again. Notice the breath. Notice the room. Notice the person.

Come back ten thousand times. Each time is the practice. Each return is itself the arrival. There is no final arrival at presence…there is only the repeated, patient, gentle choosing to be where you are. And in that choosing, again and again, you discover what is actually here. Which turns out to be more than you expected. Which turns out to be enough. Which turns out, on the best days, to be exactly what you needed.

Before you finish this book…or close this device or set this down…do this. Feel your feet on the floor. Feel the weight of

your body in the space it occupies. Take one full breath. Notice the air entering you and leaving you. Notice that you are here.

This is not a small thing. In a world organized around abstraction, around the virtual and the deferred and the imagined, to be actually here is a form of resistance. A form of fidelity. A form of love for the only life you actually have.

You are here. Let that be the beginning of everything.

Closing Practice I want to press deeper into something that I believe is one of the most neglected dimensions of Christian theology, and of spiritual life more broadly. That is the theology of place.

We have a theology of time…of the sacred history, of the moment of encounter, of the eternal breaking into the temporal. We have a theology of the self…of the soul, of consciousness, of the interior life where God meets the human. But we have tended to neglect the theology of the specific place where the body stands. The here. The particular patch of earth, this corner of the city, this building, this room.

Every here has been stood in before. Every here carries the weight of the lives that have been lived in it. The ground you walk on has been walked on by people whose names you do not know, whose stories you cannot access, whose suffering and their flourishing are encoded in the place itself in ways that are real even when they are invisible. To be fully present to where you are is to be present to all of that…to let the history of the place be part of your experience of it, even when…especially when…that history is uncomfortable.

I live in a country whose here has been contested and taken and held and fought over and that sits on top of earlier heres that belong to people who are still here, who are still contest ing, whose relationship to the land is more profound and more ancient than anything my tradition or my culture has yet been able to honor adequately. To be present to my here is to be present to that complexity. To let it complicate my re lationship to the place. To let it create obligations that are not of my choosing but are real nonetheless.

This is not guilt. Guilt is paralyzing and self-focused and ulti mately another form of avoidance. This is presence. The will ingness to be where you actually are, in the full weight of what that place is and has been and continues to be. The will

ingness to let the here make demands on you…demands of memory, of respect, of the particular forms of care and repair that this specific place, in its specific history, requires.

To be here…truly, completely, without the comfortable filters of abstraction or nostalgia or the managed distance of the tourist…is among the most demanding practices available to a human being. And among the most necessary.

Closing Practice Sit wherever you are. Feel the ground or the floor beneath you.

Now imagine…try to actually feel, not only think…all the people who have occupied this space before you. Not a romantic version. The actual mix. Those who lived here before you. Those who were excluded from here. Those who built what you are sitting in. Those who cleaned it. Those who were afraid in it. Those who found safety in it. Those who loved in it. Those who died in it.

You are the current inhabitant of a place with a history longer and more complex than you will ever fully know. Let that be real. Let it sit in your body alongside your own weight.

Now notice: you are still here. And here is still worth being present to. The complexity does not diminish the value of presence. It deepens it. The here that holds all of this is richer than the here that holds only what we choose to see.

Be here. All the way here.

That is the beginning of everything.

Every here is a shared here.

The place where I stand is not mine alone. The ground beneath my feet has been stood on by countless others before me…has been walked, worked, inhabited, mourned over, cel ebrated on, fought for and in many cases taken by force from those who were here before. The here I inhabit is layered with history, with the traces of everyone whose here it was before it became mine. To be fully present to where I am is also to be present to all of that.

And it runs in the other direction too. The here I inhabit is a here I share with everyone who inhabits it alongside me. My neighborhood, my community, my city, my watershed…none of these are mine. They are ours. The quality of the air, the safety of the street, the presence or absence

of trees and parks and gathering places, the conditions under which children grow up and elders age…these are shared realities. They affect everyone. They are produced by the accumulated choices of everyone. And they can only be shaped by the effort of everyone who is willing to show up for the place they share.

The mutuality of here is the recognition that place is commu nal. That there is no private geography. That the here in which I am grounded is also the here in which you are grounded and our shared grounding creates a shared responsibility.

I have been shaped by the places I have lived. By the particular quality of light in certain latitudes. By the sound of certain streets. By the smell of certain seasons in certain climates. By the specific communities in which I was formed and in which I have tried to be faithful. I carry all of these places with me. They are not behind me…they are in me. And the people I encountered in those places are in me too. The here is always already full of others.

To be here is to be in relationship with the place and with ev eryone who shares it. The courage to be here is the courage to

belong to a particular place, to let it matter to you, to take re sponsibility for it…not as a possession, but as a commons. As something held in trust, to be tended and returned to the next generation in better condition than you found it.

This is the deepest form of local loyalty…not the loyalty that excludes the stranger but the loyalty that tends the place in which the stranger will also need to live. The loyalty that says: I will be faithful to this ground and my faithfulness will make it more possible for everyone who stands on it to flourish.

The places we share are not neutral. They carry the history of everything that has happened in them. The ground remembers.

I mean this as more than poetry. The places we inhabit are shaped by the choices of everyone who inhabited them before us…the choices about who was welcome and who was not, about what was built and what was demolished, about whose memory was preserved in the landscape and whose was erased. To be fully present to where you are is to be present to that history. To let it matter. To allow it to compli cate your relationship to the place you think of as yours.

This is particularly important in a country like ours, where so much of the land we inhabit was taken. Where the here of our daily life sits on top of a deeper here that belongs to people who were removed from it, often violently, not so long ago. To be here fully is to be honest about that. Not as a paralyzing guilt, but as a genuine reckoning…a willingness to know what happened and to let that knowledge shape what we do next.

The mutuality of here requires this historical honesty. It requires that we hold the complexity of place…its beauty and its damage, its gift and its cost, its present reality and its full history…without collapsing into either uncritical celebration or paralyzing shame.

And it requires that we take responsibility for the here we are creating. Every community is continuously being made by the choices of the people in it. The quality of the public space, the degree to which it welcomes everyone or is subtly organized to welcome some and exclude others, the presence or absence of beauty and safety and gathering places…these are not accidents. They are the accumulated result of choices. And we are making choices right now, whether we are aware

of it or not, that are shaping the here that the next generation will inherit.

Be here. Know where you are. Take responsibility for it. Make it a place worth inheriting.

Every here is sacred ground.

Not only the designated sacred spaces…the temples and cathedrals and holy sites that have been set apart by tradition and recognized by communal agreement as places where the divine is particularly present. Every here. The street corner. The kitchen. The hospital waiting room. The jail cell. The schoolroom. The field and the factory floor.

The divine does not reserve itself for spaces that have been officially sanctified. The sacred does not require architecture or liturgy or the approval of religious authority to be present. It is present wherever life is present. It is present wherever consciousness encounters the world. It is present in you, here, now, in exactly the circumstances you find yourself in.

This recognition has consequences for how we treat every space we inhabit. If the divine is present here…if this ground, this building, this street, this community is sacred

ground…then how we tend it is a theological act. The way we maintain public spaces, the quality of beauty and safety we allow or deny, the degree to which we take responsibility for the conditions of the places we share…all of this is a form of worship. Or a form of desecration. The choice is always being made, whether we are aware of making it or not.

To tend a place well…to care for the conditions of life in a particular community, to insist on beauty and safety and dig nity for everyone who inhabits it…is to act from the recognition that the ground is sacred. Not because we have made it so. Because it is.

The courage to be here is the courage to take this seriously. To stop moving through places as though they were interchangeable containers and to recognize that each place is a particular expression of the sacred…a specific, irreplaceable site of the divine self-disclosure. And to treat it accordingly.

Tend the ground you stand on. It is holy. Act accordingly.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series Two

Book Eleven

THE COURAGE TO BE DEFIANT

A Lyrical Inquiry into Holy Refusal, Sacred No and the Dignity of Resistance

There is a No that is holier than Yes.

Not all No is holy. There is the No of fear, the No of selfishness, the No that closes the heart and contracts the world.

There is the No that mistakes contraction for protection and refusal for wisdom. This No diminishes. This No hardens.

But there is another No. The No that rises from the deepest Yes…the Yes to life, to dignity, to truth, to love. The No that is only possible because something in you knows what is sacred and will not allow it to be profaned. The No that is an act of love…for yourself, for others, for the sacred order of things that certain violations threaten to destroy.

This is the No of the defiant. And defiance rightly understood is a spiritual discipline.

Before we begin ask yourself: What have you not said No to that you should have?

What have you allowed that a deeper part of you…a part that knows what is right and what is sacred…refused to sanction?

The answer to that question is the territory of this book.

We are taught to be agreeable. To cooperate. To smooth our edges and sand our angles and make ourselves easy to be with. To avoid conflict. To keep the peace. To get along.

These are not entirely wrong teachings.

Community requires accommodation. Love requires the willingness to yield. A life devoted entirely to getting your own way is a life of poverty…narrow defended and alone.

But the teaching of unconditional compliance…the teaching that agreement is always virtue and disagreement always selfishness that keeping the peace is always holy and disrupt ing it always wrong…this teaching is a lie.

And it is a dangerous lie. It is the lie that keeps abuse in place, that allows injustice to persist, that silences the prophets and domesticates the sacred.

The peaceable person who never says No is not a spiritual master. They are more often someone who has confused the absence of conflict with the presence of love. Someone who has mistaken the smooth surface of enforced agreement for the genuine depth of honest relationship. Someone who pays

for the appearance of harmony with the currency of their own integrity.

True peace is not the absence of conflict. True peace is the presence of justice…of conditions in which all parties can live with dignity in which what is real can be said and what is wrong can be named. This kind of peace sometimes requires disruption. It sometimes requires the courage to say loudly and clearly No…this is not acceptable this will not continue I will not pretend this is fine.

Defiance is not the opposite of peace. Sometimes it is the only path to it.

You are not alone in your defiance.

You stand in a lineage of those who refused…who said No when the world said Yes who stood still when everything and everyone commanded movement who spoke truth when silence would have been so much safer.

Think of the woman who would not give up her seat. Think of the people who hid others in their attics and cellars and barns who said No to the machinery of extermination with

the only tools they had …their own homes their own silence their own bodies as shields.

Think of the voice that said No to empire that said this person is a human being that the categories by which power divides and dominates are false.

These were not exceptional people. Not people born with special moral equipment or unusual courage. They were peo ple who arrived at a moment in which something was asked of them…not in a dramatic scene from a film but in the ordinary terrifying immediate reality of their actual lives…and who said No.

What made them capable of it?

Not the absence of fear. Every testimony from the defiant confirms the presence of fear…the shaking hands the racing heart the voice that would not quite hold steady. The fear was there. Defiance was not the absence of fear. It was the decision to act from something deeper than fear from something that the fear could not finally reach.

That something is what we are after. That place in the self where the deepest Yes lives…the Yes to life to dignity to the

sacred worth of every human being…from which the holy No arises.

Find that place. Know it. Learn to act from it.

Because the moment will come…it always comes…when it will be asked of you.

Before the grand historical defiance there is the daily one.

The No you have not said to the person who continually diminishes you. The No you have not said to the relationship that takes more than it gives that has confused your care for an inexhaustible resource and your patience for permission. The No you have not said to the expectation that is not yours…the obligation that was put on you by someone else's need and that you carry because laying it down felt too much like abandonment.

Personal defiance is not selfishness. This is the first thing to say and the hardest to believe. We have been so thoroughly taught that saying No to others is a failure of love that we often cannot distinguish between genuine self-abandonment and appropriate self-protection. We mistake our own in-

tegrity for stubbornness. We call the limits we need to set for our sanity the evidence of our smallness.

But a life without limits is not generous. It is unsustainable. The person who cannot say No will eventually have nothing left to give. Not because they are weak or selfish but because love without limits is not a feature of the divine …it is the fan tasy of a system that wishes to consume without conse-quence.

You are allowed to say No.

No to what diminishes you. No to what uses you. No to the demand that you make yourself smaller so that someone else can feel larger. No to the version of yourself that performs wellness while suffering in private. No to the lie that your needs do not matter.

This No is an act of self-respect. And self-respect is not the opposite of love. It is its ground. You cannot love from a place of self-abandonment. You can perform love…you can go through the motions say the words make the gestures…but the living substance of love requires a self to love from. A self that is intact that knows its own value that does not offer it-self up for consumption and call it virtue.

Say the No.

Whatever it is. Wherever it needs to be said.

The love on the other side of it will be real.

The deepest defiance is an act of love.

This sounds paradoxical. We have been taught to think of No as the opposite of love…love as unconditional acceptance love as the willingness to receive whatever is offered love as the dissolution of limit and preference. But this is a confused and sometimes dangerous idea of love.

Real love has bones. Real love has a spine. Real love does not simply absorb whatever is done to it and call that absorption devotion. Real love has the courage to name what is wrong…in relationships in systems in the structures of power that organize our shared life.

When a parent says No to a child who is about to harm them selves that No is love. When a friend says No to the story a friend is telling themselves…the story that is keeping them trapped that is protecting their ego at the cost of their freedom…that No is love. When a person says No to the demand that they betray their own integrity that No is love…for them

selves yes but also for the relationship which cannot be real if it requires one party to be false.

Defiance as devotion means saying No from the same place you say Yes. From the ground of love. From the commitment to what is real and true and life-giving even when honoring that commitment is uncomfortable or costly.

Love that cannot say No is love without the strength to protect what it loves.

Stand in your love. Let it be fierce enough to refuse what threatens the sacred. Let your devotion be strong enough to include the holy No.

Be honest about what it costs.

Defiance is not free. The person who holds the line who says No when No is unpopular who refuses to collude with what is wrong …this person pays a price. Sometimes a small price: discomfort awkwardness the temporary displeasure of someone who wanted a Yes.

Sometimes a larger price: lost relationships professional consequences social exclusion the particular loneliness of the person who stands apart.

Sometimes the price is everything.

We should not romanticize defiance. We should not speak of it as though the holy No carries only spiritual benefits and no material costs. That would be dishonest and it would prepare no one for the actual experience of resistance which is often harder lonelier and more costly than any inspiring story about it suggests.

What makes the cost bearable?

Not the certainty of reward. Not the guarantee of vindication. Not the assurance that history will prove you right that others will recognize your courage that the sacrifice will be acknowledged.

What makes the cost bearable is the integrity. The knowledge…felt more than thought known in the body more than in the mind…that you have been true to something that matters. That you did not betray what you know is sacred. That when the moment came you were who you hoped you would be.

This is not nothing. It is in fact the most important thing. Be cause you have to live in yourself. You have to inhabit the

consciousness that knows what you chose. And the consciousness that chose No when No was the true thing…that consciousness has a particular quality of peace that no amount of social approval can manufacture.

The cost is real. The integrity is worth it. Know this before you are asked. Know it now while there is still time to choose.

The defiant are not loners. Or they should not be.

There is a romantic image of the lone dissenter…the prophet alone in the wilderness the single voice against the chorus the hero who stands without backup. This image has its truth and its beauty. There are moments that are genuinely individual…moments when the choice falls to you alone and no one else can make it for you.

But defiance sustained over time…the long slow grinding work of refusing what should be refused…requires community. Requires people who know what you stand for and stand with you. Requires relationships sturdy enough to bear the weight of resistance warm enough to make it worth enduring.

Find your people. The people who will recognize your holy No who will not mistake your defiance for mere obstinacy who understand that what you are protecting is worth protecting. Who will hold the line with you when your own strength is not enough. Who will remind you of what you stand for when the pressure to capitulate becomes almost unbearable.

You need them. This is not weakness. This is wisdom. Even the most necessary defiance enacted in isolation tends to harden into something other than love. It becomes rigid. It becomes embattled. It loses the warmth that was its original fuel.

Stay in community. Stay connected. Let your No be rooted in shared love not private grievance. The defiance that comes from love is the only defiance worth sustaining.

What comes after the No?

This is the question that defiance must eventually face. The No clears the space. It removes what should not be there. It refuses what should be refused. But the No alone does not build anything. The No makes room. What enters the room is the question.

Holy defiance is not an end state. It is a passage. A clearing. A refusal that creates the possibility of something better…

not by guaranteeing it but by refusing to allow the thing that was blocking it to remain.

After the No there must be a vision. Not a rigid plan…life does not submit to rigid plans…but a living sense of what you are for of what you hope to build in the space your No has created. The defiant who only refuse who never envision who do not know what Yes they are protecting their No for…these people are in danger of becoming merely oppositional. Of making resistance itself into an identity a permanent posture a way of being in the world that no longer serves the original love that called the resistance into being.

But the defiant who know what they love…who say No from the depths of Yes who refuse what should be refused in order to make room for what should be built…these people are the ones who change the world. Not because they are fearless. Not because they are extraordinary. But because they have found the place in themselves where love is strong enough to say No and clear enough to know what it is saying No for.

Say your No. Know your Yes. Build what you refused to let be destroyed.

This is the whole of the defiant life.

Sit quietly. Breathe.

Ask yourself without judgment and without urgency: Is there something in my life right now that I am saying Yes to when my deepest self knows the answer should be No?

It might be a relationship. It might be a situation. It might be a demand…from someone else from a system from your own fearful self. It might be something you have been tolerating for so long you have almost forgotten that toleration is a choice.

Let the question be quiet inside you.

Don't rush to answer. The answer will come.

When it comes…and it will come…notice what it feels like in your body. Notice where you feel it. Notice the quality of the feeling. Is it fear? Is it grief?

Is it underneath the fear and the grief a quiet and steady certainty?

That quiet steady certainty…that is your deepest Yes speaking. That is the love in you that knows what it is for and what it will not allow.

Your No is in there. It may be small and tentative now. It may be afraid of itself. But it is there and it is rooted in something real something sacred something worth protecting.

Begin there.

What is the smallest most manageable No you could say…today this week…that would honor that sacred certainty?

Defiance lives in the body before it lives in the mind. Before the conscious decision to refuse, there is a physical response…a tightening, a recoiling, a sensation of wrongness that arrives in the gut or the chest before language can name what it is responding to. This somatic wisdom is often more reliable than our reasoned positions. We have been taught to distrust it…to override the body′s knowing with the mind′s calculation, to keep the peace even when the body is saying clearly that something is wrong.

The courage to be defiant begins with learning to trust that physical signal. Not to act on it blindly…the body can also

carry trauma and fear that are not always accurate guides. But to listen to it. To take it seriously. To not dismiss the sen sation of wrongness as mere emotionality or personal sensitivity that should be overcome. To understand that the body's resistance is often the first form of the truth.

I have learned to pay attention when my body says no before my mind has given me permission. When something in me contracts in the presence of a person or a situation or a demand. When I feel the particular tension that comes from being asked to be complicit in something I cannot fully name. This is not always reliable...I have misread it. But I have misread the override more often. The times I have dismissed the body's signal and complied have rarely served me or anyone else.

The body of defiance is not an angry body. It is a clear one. The clarity of the person who knows what they are for and therefore knows what they are against. Who is not resisting out of personal offense but out of commitment...to something larger than their own comfort, to the dignity of the peo ple being harmed, to the sacred order of things that is being violated.

I want to be honest about what defiance costs. Because the romantic version of refusal...the version where the courageous person says No and is vindicated immediately, where the community recognizes the justice of the refusal and rallies around the one who refused...this version does not often correspond to what actually happens.

What actually happens is more like this: the No is said. And then there is silence. Or there is pushback. Or there is the particular punishment that institutions and communities deliver to people who will not go along...the exclusion, the rumor, the sudden unavailability of people who were previously available, the slow reorganization of the community's warmth around the fact of your refusal.

I have experienced all of this. I do not say it to discourage you. I say it because the defiance that expects immediate vin dication is fragile defiance. It will not survive the silence or the pushback. Only the defiance that has counted the cost and chosen the No anyway...that has reckoned with the loneliness of the position and committed to it regardless...only this defiance is durable enough to be worth anything.

The courage to be defiant is not the courage of the person who refuses before counting the cost. It is the courage of the person who has counted it carefully, who sees clearly what the No will cost in terms of comfort and belonging and the ease of a life organized around compliance…and who chooses the No anyway. Because the alternative, which is to continue saying Yes to what cannot be sanctioned, costs something more fundamental. It costs the self.

The most defiant people I have known have also been among the most loving. This is not a coincidence. The holy No is only possible when it rises from a deep Yes…a Yes to something real, something sacred, something worth protecting. And that Yes is love. It is love for the people being harmed. It is love for the truth that the compliance would require denying. It is love for the community itself…a love fierce enough to refuse the community's comfort when that comfort is purchased at the cost of its integrity.

The parent who refuses to pretend that the family's dysfunction is not happening is not acting against the family. They are acting for it…for the version of the family that could exist if the truth were allowed to be said. The employee who will not participate in an ethical violation is not acting against the

organization. They are holding open the possibility of an organization worth being part of. The citizen who refuses to normalize what should not be normal is not acting against their country. They are insisting on the country's better nature.

Defiance is an act of faith. Faith that the truth, said clearly and at cost, is worth more than the peace that is purchased by its suppression. Faith that the community can bear the honesty. Faith that the people you are refusing for...the people whose dignity you are protecting with your No...are worth the discomfort of the refusal.

Say your No from love. Not from bitterness, not from the accumulated grievance of years of compliance finally released in an explosion that is as much about the self as about the cause. But from love. From the deepest love you know. From the love that is willing to be uncomfortable for the sake of something it will not stop believing in.

The world will not always reward this. The No said from love is not always received as love. Sometimes it is received as attack, as betrayal, as the selfishness of the person who cares more about their own purity than about the community's

peace. This misreading is painful. It does not mean the No was wrong.

Say it anyway. Say it from love. And keep saying it. The No sustained over time, in love, is one of the most powerful forces available to a human being. It is the force that has changed things. It is the force that can change them still.

Closing Practice The individual No, however courageous, is not sufficient by itself. The history of change…of actual structural transformation in the systems that organize human life…is the history of individual No′s that found each other and became collective.

Rosa Parks did not transform American segregation by herself. She was preceded by Claudette Colvin and others whose refusals created the conditions for hers. She was accompanied by a community that was ready to sustain a boycott…that had been organizing and preparing and waiting for the moment when a No could become a movement. The individual act of defiance was real and necessary and morally significant. But it became transformative only in community.

This is not a diminishment of the individual No. It is a description of its completion. The No said alone plants a seed. The No said together…the accumulated defiance of enough people refusing enough of the same wrong things at the same time…this is what changes the ground itself.

I think about the communities of defiance I have been part of or witnessed over the years. The moments when individual refusals found each other and recognized themselves as part of something larger. When the person who had been refusing alone in their organization discovered that there were others in other organizations refusing the same thing. When the loneliness of the principled No was suddenly replaced by the solidary of the shared refusal.

These are among the most alive moments I have known. The moment of recognition…we are in this together…is a form of resurrection. Something that had been contracted and defended and isolated opens into something communal and sustained and capable of endurance. The No that will not outlast the individual now has a structure that will hold it.

Build the community of refusal. Find the others who are refusing what you are refusing. Name to each other what you

will not do and why. Create the solidarity that allows individ ual courage to become collective transformation.

Closing Practice Think of one thing you have been tolerating that you should not be tolerating.

Name it clearly to yourself. Not with self-punishment…with clarity.

Now think of one person you could name it to. One person who might be refusing the same thing. One conversation you could have that would move your private No toward the shared space.

Have that conversation. The No you have been carrying alone deserves company. The community of defiance is built one honest conversation at a time.

Begin with that. The rest will follow.

The holy No is never only personal.

When someone refuses what is wrong…when they stand in the path of an unjust system and say, I will not move, I will not comply, I will not pretend this is acceptable…they are not acting only for themselves. They are acting for everyone who

is being harmed by what they are refusing. They are acting for everyone who does not yet have the courage to refuse. They are acting for the future people who will be protected by the precedent of the refusal.

The courage to be defiant is always, at its root, a communal act. Even when it is lonely. Even when it is done in isolation. Even when no one is watching and no one will ever know. Be cause defiance shapes the web. It tightens the threads. It says to the forces that are trying to tear the network of mutuality: not here. Not with this. Not on my watch.

I have seen this in the lives of the people I most admire. The ones who said no when everyone around them was saying yes. The ones who refused the comfortable accommodation that would have made their lives easier but their integrity impossible. These were not people who were defying for the sake of defiance, not people who confused obstinacy with courage. These were people who had reached the point where compliance would cost them something they were not willing to lose…not their comfort, but their connection to what they knew was true.

And what I have observed is that their defiance created space. It opened up room for others to refuse too. It made the no possible for people who had been holding it inside without knowing how to let it out. The community of defiance is built this way…one person's courage enabling the next person's, the web strengthening as more and more threads are added by people who decided that the cost of refusal was worth it.

We need each other's defiance. We need to know that others are holding the line. We need to see the no said clearly and without apology so that we can find the no in ourselves. The mutuality of defiance is the mutuality of courage…the recognition that bravery is contagious, that one person's willingness to refuse can break a spell that has been holding entire communities in compliance.

Say your no. Say it cleanly. Say it knowing that it reverberates through the web in ways you will not be able to measure or predict. Say it knowing that someone is watching who needs to see it said.

The relationship between personal defiance and communal transformation is not simple.

Not every act of personal refusal becomes a communal act. Some acts of defiance remain private…they protect the integrity of the person who refuses without rippling outward into the community in visible ways. And these matter too. The private maintenance of integrity, the refusal to participate in a small injustice that no one else would have noticed, the personal no that cost something and produced nothing visible…this is not nothing. It is the foundation of the larger refusals.

But at some point, the personal no has to become communal. Has to be spoken aloud. Has to enter the shared space where it can do the work that private defiance cannot do alone. Because the system that is producing injustice is not a system that can be dismantled by private integrity, however admirable. It is a system that requires organized, collective, vis ible refusal.

The community of defiance that I am most committed to is the one that refuses not out of rage but out of love. That says no to what is wrong precisely because it is so committed to what could be right. That maintains its humanity in the face of dehumanizing systems…not by descending to the level of those systems, but by insisting on a different level. By model

ing, in the very act of resistance, the world it is trying to create.

This is the most difficult discipline I know. It is easier to resist with bitterness. Easier to allow the dehumanization we are fighting against to seep into the character of the resistance itself. Easier to become hard in the face of what is hard. The courage to remain soft…to remain human, to remain capable of love and grief and wonder, in the midst of the struggle…this is the deepest courage I know.

The network of mutuality depends on it. The web is woven from the character of the people who tend it. If we tend it with love, it becomes a web capable of holding love. If we tend it with bitterness, the web takes on that character. The defiance that transforms the web is the defiance that is rooted in love and refuses to let even the battle change that root.

Say your no from love. Keep saying it. Do not let the struggle make you something you would not recognize.

There is a form of defiance that is not dramatic. That does not announce itself. That looks, from the outside, like nothing in particular.

It is the defiance of the person who refuses, day after day, to stop believing that things could be different. Who refuses to accept the gradual normalization of what is wrong. Who maintains, in the face of all the evidence that nothing will change, the conviction that change is possible and that their continued engagement in the work of change matters.

This quiet defiance is, I have come to believe, the most important form. Not because the dramatic refusal is without value...it is essential, it breaks open what was sealed, it makes visible what had been hidden. But because the dramatic refusal depends on the quiet defiance that preceded it and sustained it. The person who erupts in visible refusal at the critical moment does so because they have been refusing quietly for years...maintaining their integrity, tending their capacity for indignation, refusing to let the slow attrition of normalization take their sense of what is wrong.

The network of mutuality needs the quiet refusers as much as it needs the visible ones. Needs the people who, day after day in unremarkable circumstances, maintain their orientation toward what is true and what is right and what could be. Who hold open the possibility that change is coming even when the evidence is against it. Who tend the flame of gen-

uine hope…not wishful thinking, not denial of what is, but the conviction that the situation is not fixed, that the future is not determined, that what we do now matters.

Be a quiet refuser. Maintain your capacity for indignation. Do not let the normalization take it. Tend the flame of genuine hope and pass it to everyone around you.

The long refusal is what makes the decisive moment possible.

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Series Two

Book Twelve

THE COURAGE TO BE BEAUTY

A Lyrical Inquiry into Radiance, Form and the Sacred Face of the World

Something in you responds to beauty before you can think about it.

You see the light breaking through clouds over water and something in you…before any thought, before any evaluation, before the mind can say gorgeous or beautiful or lovely…something in you opens. Turns toward it. Is moved.

This response is not decoration. It is not an extra feature added to human consciousness for aesthetic enjoyment. It is one of the deepest things about you. It is the recognition faculty of the soul.

When you respond to beauty you are recognizing something.

Something true. Something that the beautiful thing is pointing toward …or perhaps more accurately something the beautiful thing is participating in. A quality of existence that is always present but not always visible. A radiance that underlies all things and occasionally shows through with such force that even the defended distracted armored human heart cannot ignore it.

This is what beauty does. It breaks through.

Before we begin let a beautiful thing come to mind. Not the most beautiful thing you have ever seen…not some superlative some apex experience. Just something beautiful. Simple.

Near. Something that moves you.

Hold it in your mind. Let yourself be moved by it again. Let the response happen…the opening, the turning, the quiet yes that beauty elicits from the deepest part of you.

That response is the beginning of this book.

Beauty reveals.

Not beauty as decoration…as prettiness applied to surfaces, as ornament added after the fact to things that would be complete without it. But beauty as the quality that allows the truth of something to be seen. The particular radiance that certain things have when they are fully themselves, when the inner nature of the thing shines through its outer form, when what the thing is becomes visible.

The beautiful face is not beautiful because it conforms to some abstract standard. It is beautiful because it is itself…because the particular arrangement of that face the specific quality of the eyes and the mouth and the skin expresses

something that could not be expressed any other way. This is beauty…not the universal template but the irreducible particular.

Not the category but the singular instance that overflows every category.

This is why beauty cannot be entirely manufactured. You can produce attractive things. You can make things that conform to the current aesthetic standards that hit the right notes that do everything correctly. But beauty is not correctness. Beauty is not the achievement of a formula. It is something that happens when the inner truth of a thing meets its outer form in a way that allows the inner truth to be seen.

You have encountered this in people. The person who is not conventionally attractive but is beautiful…radiantly unmistakably beautiful…because something true about them shines through. Because they are in some fundamental sense themselves and their being themselves is visible.

Beauty as revelation means that beautiful things tell us something. Not in words not in arguments but in the direct language of encounter. They tell us that the universe has more texture more richness more light than our ordinary

perception allows us to notice. They tell us that the surface is not the whole story. They tell us that there is something worth loving about being alive.

The cracked glaze on the old bowl. The weathered wood of the old door.

The asymmetry of the face that has lived in it. The moment in the music when the voice breaks and the break is more beau tiful than any flawless note could be.

This is beauty telling us something important: that the demand for perfection is an enemy of the real and the real is where beauty lives.

We live in a culture that has declared war on imperfection. The edited image the smoothed surface the corrected face …the technology of perfecting has become so pervasive that we have begun to experience actual human faces actual human bodies actual human lives as defective. Because they have lines and asymmetries and accumulated marks. Because they show that they have been in the world for a while that they have weathered things that they have been used and marked by use.

But the bowl with the crack is more beautiful than the flawless bowl. Not in spite of the crack but in some sense because of it…because the crack is the mark of the bowl's history the evidence of its having been in the world the visible record of the life that has happened to it.

The human body is like this. The face that has laughed and wept and been outside in the wind that shows in its lines the accumulation of experience…this face has a beauty that the smooth and untouched face does not. Not more conventionally attractive perhaps. But more beautiful in the sense of more real more storied more itself.

To learn to see the beauty in imperfection is to learn to see the beauty in what is real rather than the beauty in what is imagined. It is to accept the terms of existence…that to be alive is to be marked by aliveness that time leaves its record that the use of a thing changes its appearance and that these changes are not defects but the visible evidence of a life having been lived.

The most beautiful things often have sadness in them.

Not sentimentality…

not the sweetly sad the prettily melancholy the aestheticized grief that stays at a safe distance from actual pain. But the particular quality that certain works of art and certain human faces have of having been in contact with suffering and having been shaped by that contact into something true.

There is the beauty of music written for the dead…music that moves through grief with such honesty and such craft that the grief becomes something the listener can enter and be moved by and emerge from slightly changed. There is the beauty of the poem that tells the truth about loss…not soften ing it not resolving it but holding it with such precision and such care that the loss becomes somehow luminous.

There is the beauty of the human face that has suffered and survived. Not the face that has been untouched…that smooth and fortunate face…but the face that shows what it has carried whose lines are the record of how life has pressed on it and what it has made of that pressure. This face has a depth that the untouched face does not. A resonance. A beauty that the beautiful-by-conventional-standards face often cannot achieve.

What is happening in this kind of beauty?

Something is being transformed. The suffering is not denied or escaped or transcended…

it is transmuted. The raw material of pain is worked on by at tention by craft by the willingness to stay present to what is hard and to find in it something that can be given…to others to the future to the possibility of something meaningful being made from what seemed merely destructive.

This is the deepest work of beauty: the transmutation of suffering into something that can be offered. Not the elimination of pain but the alchemy that makes meaning from it.

Beauty requires courage to see.

Not the easy beauty…the sunset the perfect flower the conventionally gorgeous face. These require nothing of us. They announce themselves. We do not have to work to find them.

But the beauty that sustains a life…the beauty that can be found in ordinary circumstances in difficult situations in the material that life actually offers rather than the material we would choose…this beauty requires an act of attention that is itself a form of courage.

It is easier to complain than to look for what is beautiful. It is easier to become habituated to the familiar and see nothing there. It is easier to focus on what is wrong what is missing what should be different…

and these things are real these complaints are often justified…than to turn the same attention toward what is here what is present what the world is actually offering in this mo ment.

The courage to find beauty is the courage to keep looking. To refuse the cynicism that insists nothing is beautiful or that the beautiful is irrelevant or that attention to beauty is an escape from reality. To continue to be moved to continue to be surprised to continue to let the world break through the hardened shell of habituation and touch you.

This courage is a practice. It must be cultivated. The person who finds beauty easily…who seems to move through the world in a state of continuous aesthetic openness who is surprised and moved by what others walk past unnoticing…has not been born with a special gift. They have developed an attention. They have chosen again and again to look.

To notice. To be moved rather than defended.

You can choose this.

Anyone can choose this.

Look for the beauty. Not instead of seeing what is hard but alongside it. In it sometimes. Through it.

It is there. It has always been there.

Every human being has been called to create beauty.

Not art necessarily…not the formal practice of a recognized art form not the production of objects that will be displayed in galleries or published in books or performed on stages. But the simpler more fundamental call to bring some form of beauty into the world…to arrange to make to attend to the quality of what you create to offer something back to the world that has been given some care some thought some love.

This call is universal. It comes to the person who arranges flowers as surely as it comes to the person who writes symphonies. It comes to the person who makes a meal…who does not merely assemble food but prepares it with attention to flavor and color and texture and the pleasure of those who will eat it…as surely as it comes to the sculptor. It comes to

the person who decorates a room who writes a letter who teaches a class with genuine attention to how ideas can be made vivid and alive.

Beauty is created wherever attention is brought. Wherever someone slows down enough to ask not just how does this function but how does this feel. Not just what does this accomplish but what does this express. Not just what is this do ing but what is this saying about what it means to be alive.

This is the root of all artmaking: the refusal to be purely func tional. The insistence that existence has a quality not just a quantity. That how we do what we do matters not just what we do. That the beautiful and the true and the good are not in competition…that they are finally one thing seen from different angles.

Create something beautiful today. Something small is fine. Something that will last ten minutes is fine. What matters is the attention…the decision to make this rather than merely to produce it to bring care to it to let it be an offering rather than merely an output.

The world needs the beauty you can make. Make it.

Beauty is not a supplement to the spiritual life. It is one of its primary languages.

The sacred has always communicated through beauty. The great cathedrals were not built to be impressive or to display wealth or power…they were built to create an environment in which the beauty of the space would work on the visitor would open them would prepare them to receive something that cannot be argued into a person but can be given through the experience of the beautiful.

This is why liturgical traditions placed such emphasis on music on art on the ritual beauty of word and gesture and in cense and light. Not as ornament. Not as bribery. But because beauty is one of the ways the sacred speaks. Because when something beautiful breaks through to you…when you are moved by the music or the painting or the face or the landscape…you are in that moment permeable in a way that you are not when you are defended and armored and thinking. You are open. And what enters through that opening is not just the particular beautiful thing but the quality of existence that the beautiful thing is pointing to.

To practice beauty as a spiritual discipline means to cultivate your capacity to be moved. To choose regularly and deliberately to expose yourself to beautiful things. Music. Visual art.

Language used with care and attention. The beauty of the natural world.

The beauty of other people. The beauty of thought…the elegance of an idea that suddenly makes something that seemed complex seem simple that makes the hidden visible that says: yes. This is true.

Let beauty do its work on you. Let it open you. Let it speak.

You are beautiful.

This is not compliment. It is not consolation. It is not an attempt to make you feel better about whatever you have decided is wrong with you. It is a theological statement…a claim about the nature of existence and your place within it.

You are beautiful because you exist. Because the sacred in giving rise to you chose this particular form this particular face this particular voice this particular way of being in the world that is yours and no one else′s. The particularity of you…

the specific unrepeatable irreducible way that you are you…is itself a form of beauty. The universe has never made this before. It will never make this again.

This is hard to believe. We carry so many verdicts against ourselves…the voices that say you are not attractive enough not impressive enough not compelling enough that the particular form you take in the world is somehow a mistake or a disappointment. These voices are everywhere. They are ancient. They are loud.

But they are wrong.

The beauty that you are is not the beauty of conformity to some standard some ideal some template of what a beautiful person should look like or sound like or be. It is the beauty of the specific…of you being yourself with the fullness that only you can bring.

You are beautiful when you are most yourself.

When you forget to perform and simply are. When the mask slips and what is underneath…which is not worse than the mask but better more real more interesting…is briefly visible.

Let it be visible.

Let yourself be seen. That is the most beautiful thing you can do.

Take a few slow breaths. Arrive in this moment.

Begin a list…in your mind or on paper…of beautiful things in your life right now. Not the most beautiful things that have ever existed not the peaks of aesthetic experience. The ordinary beautiful. The close and familiar and easy-to-overlook beautiful.

The light at a particular time of day.

The sound of a voice you love. The feel of a particular texture. A color that reliably moves you. The smell of something familiar. A face. A piece of music. A sentence in a book you have loved. A memory that has beauty in it.

Let the list grow. Let it include things that would not appear on any canonical list of beautiful things. Let it include the beautiful things that are only beautiful to you…that are beau tiful because of who you are and what you have lived and what you love.

Now ask: How often do I give these things my actual attention? How often do I actually look actually listen actually let myself be moved?

And then: What would change if I did this more? If I chose each day to give some portion of my attention to the beautiful things that are already present in my life?

This is the practice.

Not the acquisition of more beautiful things. The attending to the beautiful things already given.

Begin today. Choose one beautiful thing. Give it your full unhurried attention.

Let it open you.

Beauty requires attention the way a fire requires oxygen. Without sustained, patient, unhurried attention, beauty fades from perception…not because it is no longer present, but because the perceiver has ceased to perceive. We move through beautiful worlds without seeing them. We inhabit beautiful relationships without recognizing them. We pass through moments of extraordinary grace without pausing long enough to receive what they are offering.

The discipline of beauty is the discipline of slowing down. Of training the attention to linger where it would otherwise rush past. Of developing what the contemplative traditions have called the gaze…the quality of looking that is willing to stay with what it sees long enough for the deeper truth of the thing to become visible.

This is a practice. It is not a natural talent that some people have and others lack. The person who seems to move through the world with unusual attentiveness to beauty has usually developed that attentiveness through practice…through years of choosing to slow down, to look again, to let the first impression be the beginning rather than the end of the encounter. They have trained their perception the way a musician trains their ear. Through repetition. Through the patient accumulation of attention.

I have tried to learn this. I am still learning it. What I have found is that the capacity for beauty is less about the quality of what is available to perception and more about the quality of the perception itself. The same walk taken with full attention and with distracted half-attention reveals entirely different worlds. The same conversation inhabited completely and inhabited superficially offers entirely different gifts. The

practice of attention does not change the world. It changes the perceiver. And that change is the beginning of everything.

There is a beauty available in difficulty that is unavailable in ease. I do not say this to romanticize suffering or to suggest that hard things are better than good things. But I want to name something that I have encountered repeatedly: that the most lasting and transformative beauty I have known has often arrived in the context of difficulty…in the aftermath of grief, in the midst of struggle, in the places where the comfortable version of existence was no longer available.

The Japanese tradition has a word for this: wabi-sabi. The beauty of imperfection, impermanence, incompleteness. The beauty of things that bear the marks of their use, their age, their having-been-through-something. This is a different aesthetic from the beauty of the pristine and the polished…but it is, I believe, a deeper one. It points at something true about the nature of beauty itself: that it is not the absence of difficulty but the presence of truth. And truth includes the hard things.

When I sit with someone in their grief…when I am present to the particular quality of beauty that grief makes visible, the heightened aliveness of the bereaved, the clarity that comes to a life when death has announced itself…I am not looking at tragedy and calling it beautiful. I am recognizing that in the grief there is a depth of feeling, a quality of presence, a re alness of human contact that is not often available in easier times. The beauty is not the grief. The beauty is what the grief has made possible…the stripping away of pretense, the directness of love and loss, the particular grace of a human being fully present to what is actually happening.

I have come to believe that beauty is not only something we perceive. It is something we participate in. When we bring genuine attention to the world…when we slow down enough to actually look, to let the light and the form and the quality of what is here actually register…we are doing something for the world, not only for ourselves.

The world wants to be seen. Not in a mystical sense that requires a particular metaphysics. In the simple observable sense that things seen truly tend to flourish, and things unseen tend to diminish. The plant that receives attention grows differently from the plant that is ignored. The person

who is truly seen…who is looked at with the quality of attention that allows their actual being to be perceived, not their utility, not their function, but their being…that person is changed by the seeing.

And the one who sees is changed too. This is the reciprocity of genuine attention. When you let the beauty of something actually reach you…when you let the light through the window, or the quality of the silence in this room, or the particu lar face of the person across from you actually arrive in you…you receive something. Some quality of the thing′s being transfers into yours. You become, for a moment, more alive to the world. More present to what is real. More capable of the kind of attention that allows other beautiful things to be perceived.

This is not a small thing. In a world that has developed extra ordinary technologies of distraction…that is organized, in many of its most powerful arrangements, around the capture and commodification of attention…the practice of genuine attention is an act of resistance. Of choosing depth over speed. Of insisting that the world in front of you deserves the same quality of engagement as the world in your device.

Let things be beautiful. Let yourself be moved. Let the world do what it is always trying to do…which is to break through the defended surface of your managed life and remind you that it is here, that it is real, that it is extraordinary, that it has been waiting for your attention with the patience that only the eternal can sustain.

I want to close with something that I believe is essential and that tends to get lost in the conversation between justice work and aesthetic life. That is the recognition that beauty is not the opposite of justice. It is one of justice′s demands.

The world that justice is trying to build is a more beautiful world. Not more decorated…decoration is beside the point. But more truly beautiful in the sense of more aligned with the actual worth of the lives in it. More capable of honoring what is genuinely valuable. More organized around the flourishing of all its members rather than the convenience of some.

Ugliness is often a symptom of injustice. The environments from which beauty has been deliberately or negligently stripped…the public schools with peeling paint and broken windows, the neighborhoods in which no one has invested

anything worth investing, the places that communicate through their every surface that the people who inhabit them do not count…these are not merely aesthetic failures. They are political ones. They are the visible form of the invisible decision that some lives are not worth the cost of beauty.

And beauty, deliberately brought to those environments…the mural on the crumbling wall, the garden in the vacant lot, the care brought to a space that has not received care…is not merely aesthetic repair. It is political witness. It says: the people here are worth this. Their experience of this space matters. The quality of their daily life is a legitimate concern of the community.

This is why beauty is a justice issue. And why justice work, if it neglects the aesthetic dimensions of human flourishing…if it organizes only around the material conditions and ignores the beauty that the soul also requires…is incomplete.

Closing Practice Look at the space you spend the most time in. Your home. Your workplace. The places of your daily life.

Ask yourself honestly: does this space communicate to the people who inhabit it that their experience here matters? Does it offer any beauty…any quality of light, of form, of care

in arrangement…that says to the person entering it: you are worth this?

If not: what would it take to change that? Not an expensive renovation. Something simple. Something within your reach. One beautiful thing brought to one important space.

Do it. It is not an aesthetic act. It is a theological one.

Let that be enough.

Beauty is always a gift.

I mean this in the most literal way. When something is beautiful…truly beautiful, in the way that stops you and makes you catch your breath and feel, for a moment, that existence is more than you had been giving it credit for…that experience is not private. It cannot be privatized. The beauty is not yours. You did not make it. You received it. And the receiving of it changes you in ways that inevitably affect everyone you are in relationship with.

Beauty moves outward. It does not stay contained. The person who has been genuinely moved by beauty…who has let a piece of music actually enter them, who has let the light on water actually arrest them, who has allowed a true sentence

to do what true sentences do…that person brings something into every room they walk into afterward. Not necessarily visible. Not necessarily expressible. But real. A slightly different quality of presence. A slightly wider aperture of attention.

This is the mutuality of beauty: it is shared, not hoarded. It is offered, not demanded. And it is received in a way that makes us more capable of offering it in turn.

When I think about the places in my life where genuine beauty has been most present, I think first not of natural landscapes or works of art but of people. The beauty of a person who has been fully seen. The beauty of a moment of genuine contact between two people who have stopped performing for each other. The beauty of honesty, of vulnerability, of the particular grace that shows up in the space between people when the performance comes down and the actual persons are actually with each other.

This beauty is available everywhere. It is not rare. What is rare is the quality of attention that allows it to be perceived. And the courage to be beauty is the courage to cultivate that attention…in yourself and in your communities. To slow

down enough to see what is actually here. To resist the relentless pressure toward abstraction and efficiency and productivity that would have us move through the world without ever actually seeing it.

The network of mutuality is woven with beauty. Every moment of genuine attention, every act of creative care, every instance of someone taking the time to do something well rather than merely doing it…all of this is part of the web. All of this makes the web more beautiful. And the more beautiful the web, the more worth sustaining it is.

Let yourself be moved. Let the beauty in. Let it change you. And then offer what it has made possible in you to everyone around you.

The practice of attending to beauty is not escapism. Let me say this clearly because I know it will be heard that way.

In a world with as much suffering as ours, the attention to beauty can seem like a retreat…a withdrawal from what matters into what merely pleases. But this misunderstands what beauty is and what it does.

Beauty is not the absence of difficulty. The most beautiful things often have difficulty in them…the music that breaks your heart, the story that reveals something hard about human nature, the landscape that is beautiful partly because of its indifference to human comfort. Beauty does not pretend things are other than they are. It sees things truly…with the kind of attention that does not flinch or soften or arrange for comfortable viewing…and it finds in that truth something worth affirming.

This is why attention to beauty is not escapism but engagement. It is the practice of looking at what is actually here without the protective filters of distraction or numbness or managed distance. And that practice…the willingness to see truly, without flinching…is exactly the practice that is required for genuine justice work. The person who can sit with beauty can sit with suffering. The person who has learned to give things their full, unhurried attention can give the person in front of them their full, unhurried attention.

Beauty and justice are not opposites. They are companions. The world that genuine justice is trying to build is a more beautiful world…not more decorative, but more true. More aligned with the actual worth of the lives in it. More capable

of seeing and honoring what is genuinely valuable. More organized around the flourishing of all rather than the convenience of some.

The courage to be beauty is the courage to practice the kind of attention that makes justice possible. To refuse the managed distance. To let things matter. To be moved by what is moving, including the suffering that calls for response and the beauty that sustains the capacity to respond.

Attend to beauty. It will make you better at everything else.

The world is not as beautiful as it could be.

I say this not in despair but in conviction. Not as a lament but as a call to action. Because if the world has a capacity for beauty that exceeds its current expression…if the gap between what is and what could be is real…then we are not merely invited to attend to beauty. We are obligated to create it.

This obligation is not primarily aesthetic. It is ethical. The world that is more beautiful is the world that more fully expresses what human life is capable of. And the work of making it more beautiful…not more decorated, but more true,

more aligned with the worth of the lives in it, more capable of honoring what genuinely matters…is among the most important work available to us.

I think about the places in our world that have been deliberately stripped of beauty…the environments designed for maximum efficiency and minimum cost, with no regard for the quality of the experience of the people who must inhabit them. The schools with peeling paint and broken equipment. The housing projects designed for containment rather than for life. The hospitals that are functional but joyless. The prisons that seem designed to confirm the worthlessness of the people in them.

These environments are not neutral. They say something to the people in them. They say: your experience of this space does not matter. Your need for beauty and dignity and the particular quality of aliveness that beautiful environments make possible…this does not count. You do not count, not enough for us to make this place worth being in.

The courage to be beauty is the courage to refuse this message. To insist that beauty is not a luxury but a need…that ev ery person, regardless of circumstances, deserves to inhabit

environments that honor their worth. And to work, practically and persistently, to make the places we share more beautiful. Not because it is aesthetically pleasant, though it is. But because it is just.

Make things more beautiful. Do it for everyone, not only for yourself.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series Three

THE COURAGE TO BE FUTURE

Books Thirteen through Eighteen

Series Introduction

You have made it to the edge.

Not the edge of the book…though that is close now. The edge of what the previous twelve books were building toward. The recognition that the courage this entire work has been about is not finally a personal courage. It is not the courage of the individual achieving some private form of aliveness and calling it done. It is the courage of the person who has become so fully themselves that they can no longer stay contained within themselves. Who has become, in some way they did not plan and cannot fully explain, available.

Available to what? To the breath that moves in all things. To the strangeness that lives just underneath the ordinary surface of the world. To the current that runs through everything that is alive. To the fire that has been trying to burn in you since before you had language for it. To the uncanny grace of existence itself, which keeps exceeding every explanation you give it.

These six books are not a conclusion. They are an opening. They take everything the first twelve books established…the grounded theology, the embodied presence, the communal

obligation…and carry it to the place where those things become something harder to name. Something that the theological traditions call spirit. Something that the poets call fire. Something that the mystics gesture toward and then fall silent about, because language here reaches its limit and what is required is not more words but a different quality of attention.

Bring everything you have learned. Bring the body that Book Two taught you to honor. Bring the presence that Book Three asked you to practice. Bring the love that Book Four said was the structure of reality. Bring the defiance that Book Eleven called holy. Bring all of it into these last six books and let it become something you did not expect.

The breath that moves in all things is the same breath that is moving in you right now.

Let it.

Series Three

Book Thirteen

The Courage to Be Spirit

A Lyrical Inquiry into the Breath That Moves in All Things

You have always been more than you think you are.

Not more impressive, not more accomplished, not more important in the world's ledger of significance…but more. More spacious. More connected. More alive in the ways that matter most and least like to be measured.

Underneath the name they gave you and the story you tell about yourself and the roles you have accumulated like coats in a hallway…underneath all of that there is something that is not named and not storied and not role. Something that watches the story without being contained in it. Something that has been present through every version of you that has ever existed.

This is spirit. Not the spirit of doctrine or of theological category. Not the spirit that lives only in formal religious contexts that requires institutional authentication. But the spirit that is simply what you are when everything you are not falls away.

Breathe. Let one breath be the whole of your attention. Just this breath. The body opening to receive what the air contains. The slow return. The rise and fall.

This is spirit's most basic movement. In and out. Receive and release. Open and close. The breath that life requires is the same gesture as the spirit that life is.

We will go deeper into this together. But the breath is where we begin.

Spirit is not the opposite of body. Spirit is not the opposite of matter. Spirit is not the ghost inside the machine, the tenant in the apartment of the flesh, the real thing imprisoned in the visible thing.

Spirit is the animating quality of everything. It is what makes the body alive rather than merely material. It is the presence that allows matter to know itself, to move toward what it loves, to reach beyond itself in the endless creativity of existence. Without spirit the body is not imprisoned spirit…it is simply matter without animation. A house without the life that makes it a home.

The ancient word for spirit…in Hebrew ruach in Greek pneuma in Latin spiritus…was also the word for breath and for wind.

The invisible movement that animates and connects and car ries. The thing you cannot see but whose effects you cannot miss. You cannot see the wind. You can see the grass bending the trees responding the surface of the water changing. You know the wind by its effects on what it moves through.

This is spirit. You cannot see it. You know it by what it moves. By the aliveness you feel when it is present. By the deadness…the going-through-the-motions quality of a life lived without it…when it is absent.

Spirit is present in you when you are most fully alive. When you are engaged with what you love when you are being most truly yourself when the work you are doing asks everything you have and you rise to meet that asking…in those moments you are spirit moving. You can feel it. Something is flowing through you that is larger than your ordinary self. Something is operating in you that you did not manufacture.

That something is spirit. And it is not foreign to you. It is your truest nature. The question is only whether you live from it or above it.

Most of what is real is invisible.

This is not mysticism …or not only mysticism. It is physics. The overwhelming majority of what exists is not visible to the naked eye is not accessible to ordinary sense perception is not amenable to the kind of direct observation that the ma terialist epistemology demands. The forces that hold matter together the fields that organize energy the quantum weirdness that underlies the apparently solid world…none of this is visible. All of it is real.

The invisible world is not the less-real world. The invisible world is the more-fundamental world. It is where what is vis ible comes from. What you can see is the surface; what is invisible is the depth.

Spirit is the invisible dimension of every visible thing. Not a different world alongside the material world not a spiritual realm that exists separately from the physical realm…but the depth dimension of this world of this reality of this breath and this body and this moment.

This is why the materialist account of existence…the account that says only what can be measured and observed is real that consciousness is reducible to neurochemistry that love is an adaptive strategy and beauty is a survival

mechanism…always feels incomplete. Not wrong exactly but flattened. Like a map that is accurate as far as it goes but has dropped the third dimension. You can navigate with it but you will miss the mountains.

The spiritual traditions are not at their best competing with the scientific account of the world. They are adding depth to it. They are insisting that the third dimension exists…that the visible world is held within something larger than itself something that cannot be fully captured in the language of mechanism and function something that requires a different kind of attention to know.

This is what it means to be spirit: to live in contact with this depth. To allow your perception to include not just the surface of things but what is moving beneath and through and in them.

Spirit does not escape the body. Spirit inhabits it.

This is the great misunderstanding of so much religious tradition: that spiritual growth means increasing distance from the physical that holiness means transcendence of the bodily that the saint is the person who has most successfully es-

caped the demands and the pleasures and the limitations of having a body.

This misunderstanding has caused tremendous harm. It has taught people to distrust their physical experience…their sensory delight their sexual love their hunger and their tired ness and their pleasure in the warmth of the sun. It has created a split in the human person that breeds shame and self-rejection and the particular suffering of people who have been taught to be at war with their own flesh.

Spirit is not at war with the body. Spirit is what the body is when it is most fully alive.

The breath that fills the lungs is spirit. The impulse that moves the hand toward the face of the beloved is spirit. The exhaustion that falls after genuine effort…the good tiredness of a body that has been used for what it was made for…this is spirit′s trace in the flesh.

To be spirit is not to leave the body. It is to be so fully present in the body that the body becomes transparent…

that the life moving through it is visible that what the body is doing becomes an expression of what the spirit is. A person

dancing from the deepest place of themselves is not less spir itual for being in their body. They are more spiritual. A person making love with full presence and full attention and full care for the one they are with is not less spiritual for being in the flesh. They are more.

The body is not the prison of the spirit. The body is spirit's most particular and most beautiful form.

Spirit is sustained by practice.

Not manufactured by practice…you cannot manufacture spirit any more than you can manufacture the wind. But you can arrange your life in ways that make you more open to spirit's movement. You can clear the channels. You can reduce the noise. You can create conditions in which spirit is more likely to be felt and known and followed.

Silence is one such condition. Not the silence of absence but the silence of deep listening …the silence you enter when you stop talking and stop planning and stop performing and sim ply become still enough to hear what is always moving in you but is usually drowned out by the noise.

Attention is another. The practice of genuinely attending…to the present moment to the person in front of you to the work you are doing to the beauty that is asking to be noticed…opens you to spirit because attention is spirit′s basic posture. Spirit is among other things the capacity to be fully here fully present not distracted or fragmented but gathered.

Love is the deepest practice. Not the feeling of love…

not the warm emotion that comes and goes…but the choosing of love.

The daily practical often unglamorous decision to act from love rather than from fear to open toward rather than contract from to remain curious and caring when defensiveness and withdrawal would be easier.

This is what spirit does when it moves through a human life. It loves.

And service. The offering of yourself in service of something larger than yourself…your family your community the work you were given to do the love you were given to carry into the world.

Service is not self-abnegation. It is self-expression at the deepest level. Spirit finds itself most fully in the act of giving itself away.

Practice these things. Not perfectly. Not always. But as a direction as an orientation as the general drift of a life.

Spirit sometimes goes silent.

Or seems to. You wake one morning and the light you had grown accustomed to is not there. The sense of presence of connection of being held within something larger…it is gone. What is left is the bare bones of existence: the obligations you must meet the motions you must go through the empty hull of a spiritual life from which the spirit has apparently departed.

Every serious spiritual traveler encounters this. The mystics named it the dark night…not a metaphor for depression though it can resemble depression but a particular spiritual experience of apparent absence. Of the beloved withdrawing of the sense of connection becoming sense of distance of prayer becoming words thrown at a ceiling.

The temptation in the dark night is to conclude that the spirit was never real. That the connection you felt was illusion that the presence you knew was projection that the whole appara tus of spiritual experience was a comfortable story you told yourself that has now mercifully been corrected by a clearer and more honest perception.

But those who walked furthest into the dark night and came through it do not emerge with this conclusion. They emerge saying something different…that the dark night was not the absence of spirit but its deeper presence. That the withdrawal of the felt sense of connection was the invitation to a connection that does not depend on feeling. That the silence was not emptiness but a different kind of fullness. That what seemed like abandonment was preparation.

This does not make the dark night easy or pleasant. It is what it is: dark. But it is not the end. It is a passage. A deepening. A stripping away of the more superficial forms of spiritual experience to make room for something more fundamental more durable more truly one′s own.

Walk through it. Do not give up on it. The dark night is spirit teaching you to trust what cannot be felt.

Spirit is not private property.

The experience of spirit…the encounter with the depth dimension the felt sense of connection with what is real beneath the surface…this can happen in solitude in silence in the quiet of personal practice. And this is good. This is neces sary.

But spirit does not stay private. It moves outward. It has a tendency…when it is genuinely encountered when it is genuinely alive in a person…to flow toward others. To express it self in care in creativity in the willingness to be present to what is real in the lives of other people. Spirit that stays entirely inward becomes stagnant. The river that has no outlet becomes a swamp.

This is why the great contemplatives were also almost invari ably people who took the overflow of their inner life and poured it into the service of the world. They did not choose between the inner life and the outer life.

They understood that the inner life without outer expression is incomplete and the outer life without inner grounding is unsustainable.

Spirit in the world looks like love made visible.

Like the care that cannot rest while others suffer unnecessar ily. Like the creativity that makes beautiful things for others to encounter. Like the presence that offers itself…genuinely fully without the protective distance of the professional role…to another human being in their need.

You carry spirit into every room you enter. You leave some- thing of it in every interaction every relationship every choice you make. The question is only whether what you are carrying is fear or love contraction or expansion the spirit that protects itself at all costs or the spirit that knows it is most fully itself when it is giving itself away.

Bring spirit into the world. Every room you enter needs it. Every face you meet is waiting for it. Let what moves in you move outward.

No one sustains spirit alone.

This is one of the most important things to know about the spiritual life and one of the most frequently misunderstood. The image of the solitary mystic the lone contemplative the individual seeker apart from community…this image has a

truth and a romance. But the solitary life is almost never truly solitary. Behind every great mystic is a community…teachers companions traditions the inherited wisdom of generations the living relationships that sustained and challenged and corrected and loved the person into their most complete expression of themselves.

Spirit needs community the way a fire needs oxygen. It can burn alone for a while…the ember can glow in isolation…but it will not become a true fire without the air that community provides. Without the friction of real relationship the challenge of genuine encounter the nourishment of being known and knowing others.

Find your community of spirit. Not the community that agrees with everything you think…

that is not community that is an echo chamber. But the community that is committed to the same deep direction: toward truth toward love toward the gradual clearing away of everything that is not finally real toward the deepest possible encounter with the sacred dimension of existence.

This community is not always found in churches or meditation centers or formal religious institutions…though it can

be. It is found wherever people have committed to being honestly and humbly together in the pursuit of what matters most. Wherever people bring their full selves…their doubts and fears and questions as well as their certainties and their joys…and are received without judgment.

Seek this community. Build it if you cannot find it. The spiritual life lived entirely alone is a difficult and often impoverished life. The spiritual life lived in genuine community…in the warmth of shared practice and honest relationship and mutual accountability…is the fullest life available to us.

Sit quietly. Let your breathing slow. Let the noise of thought settle not by force but by gentle attention…the way sediment settles in a glass of water when you stop stirring it.

Ask: Where have I felt most fully alive in the last week? Not most successful not most productive not most impressive…most alive. What was happening? What were you doing? Who were you with?

Now ask: In those moments what was present that is not always present? What quality of experience? What sense of connection or aliveness or rightness?

That quality…whatever name you give it…is spirit. Your spirit expressing itself through the particular form of your particular life.

Now ask: What gets in the way of that? What are the conditions, the habits, the patterns that make that aliveness harder to access?

This is your work. Not to achieve a more impressive spiritual life. Not to accumulate more experiences of the sacred. Simply to remove what is in the way. To create more of the condi tions in which spirit moves freely. To let the life that is trying to live through you live through you more fully.

Breathe. Rest in what is here.

Spirit does not need to be imported. It is already present. It is what you are beneath everything you are not.

Let Spirit is most available in silence. Not the silence of emptiness…not the silence that is merely the absence of sound. But the silence that is itself a presence. The silence that arrives when the noise of the managed life settles enough for something deeper to be heard.

I have learned to seek this silence not by escaping the noise of my life but by descending beneath it. The surface of a life…the obligations and the schedules and the competing demands and the relentless stimulation of a connected world…this surface is noisy. It is loud with urgency. It insists on its own importance. And it is not nothing…the surface of life contains real obligations and real relationships and real work that genuinely needs to be done.

But beneath it, always, there is this. The quiet that the mystics have been pointing at across every tradition. The ground of being that underlies the being. The awareness that is aware of the noise without being consumed by it. Spirit does not shout. Spirit is what becomes audible when the shouting stops. Or…more accurately…it is what becomes audible to the person who has learned to listen at a frequency the shouting cannot reach.

The practice of silence is the practice of descending. Of going beneath the surface noise into the quieter levels of your own being. This is not a technique for the spiritually advanced. It is available to anyone who is willing to slow down long enough to let the noise settle. You do not have to be in a monastery. You do not have to have thirty minutes of unin-

terrupted meditation. You only need to be willing, for the length of a few breaths, to let your attention move downward…away from the surface and toward the ground. Away from the noise and toward what is beneath it.

That willingness is all it takes to begin. The spirit is already there, already present, already the ground of everything you are. You are not creating it with your attention. You are discovering what was always already there, waiting to be recognized.

I want to speak directly to the misunderstanding that I encounter most often about spirit…the idea that spirit and body are opposed. That to become more spiritual is to become less physical. That the path of the spirit is a path away from the body and toward some purer, less embodied form of consciousness.

This is not what I have found. This is not, I believe, what the deepest spiritual traditions have found. The body is not the prison of the spirit. The body is the form the spirit takes in this world. To be more fully in your body…more present to its sensations, more attentive to its wisdom, more willing to re-

ceive what the body is telling you…is to be more fully spiritual, not less.

The breath that I asked you to attend to at the beginning of this book is not a preliminary exercise to be completed before the real spiritual work begins. It is the real spiritual work. The attentiveness to the body′s aliveness…to the rise and fall of breath, to the weight of the body in space, to the sensations that signal where you are holding tension and where you are allowing ease…this attentiveness is spiritual practice in its most fundamental form.

Because spirit is not disembodied consciousness. Spirit is what animates consciousness. Spirit is what makes the body alive rather than merely material. And to attend to the aliveness of the body is to attend to the spirit that is its animating ground. You cannot separate them without losing both.

The courage to be spirit is therefore also the courage to be fully embodied. To be present in the flesh. To not flinch from the physicality of your existence…its needs and its pleasures and its limits and its eventual death. To inhabit the body as the sacred dwelling place that it is. To find, in the body′s aliveness, the spirit′s most immediate form.

I want to end with something that I have come to believe is among the most important things that can be said about the spiritual life: that spirit is not a possession but a capacity. You do not have spirit the way you have a quality or an attribute. Spirit is what you are capable of…what becomes available to you when you are fully present, fully alive, fully open to what is here.

This capacity is not fixed. It can be cultivated. The person who practices presence, who develops the quality of attention that allows the depth of things to be perceived, who tends the conditions of their own aliveness…this person becomes more capacious. More able to receive what spirit is always offering. More permeable to the grace that is always available but not always received.

And the person who does not tend these conditions…who allows the surface noise to fill every available moment, who has no practice of descent, no regular encounter with the silence beneath the noise…this person's capacity contracts. Not through any moral failure. Simply through neglect. Spirit is like a muscle. It requires use to remain strong. It requires the regular practice of being exercised in order to be available when it is most needed.

Tend the capacity. Practice the descent. Learn to recognize the silence beneath the noise and to rest in it, however briefly. Let this be a daily practice…not a grand spiritual undertaking but a simple, regular returning to what is most fundamentally true about your existence: that you are here, that you are alive, that beneath everything you are and every thing you do, there is something that does not diminish. Something that has been present through everything you have ever experienced. Something that will not leave.

This is spirit. This is what you are at the root. And the courage to be spirit is nothing more, and nothing less, than the courage to know it.

I would be dishonest if I wrote about spirit only in its accessi ble form…the breath, the silence, the quiet depth available on ordinary days. I have to say something about the long dark. About the seasons when the spirit seems to have withdrawn…when the silence beneath the noise is not peaceful but empty, when the descent does not lead to the ground but only to more absence, when the practices that have sustained you in other seasons seem to offer nothing.

The mystical traditions call this the dark night. I have experi enced it. Not as a romantic spiritual crisis but as a real and grinding experience of absence…of reaching toward what had always been present and finding nothing. Of the practices that had been reliable becoming hollow. Of the sense that what I had thought was the ground turned out to be, in the particular season, not there.

What I have learned from these seasons…and I am still learning…is that the absence is not what it appears to be. The spirit does not withdraw. What happens in the long dark is more subtle and more important: the forms through which we have been experiencing the spirit reach their limit, and something is asked of us that those forms cannot provide. The practices, the experiences, the reliable routes to depth…these are real and valuable. But they are not the thing itself. They are vehicles. And sometimes the vehicle must be set down so that the destination can be found by a different means.

The dark night is the experience of having to find your way without the usual guides. Of having to encounter the ground of your being not through the mediated forms of practice and experience but more directly…stripped of the forms, left with

only the bare fact of existence itself. This is not comfortable. It is not reliably brief. But the people who have come through it report, consistently, that what waits on the other side of the long dark is a more durable and less dependent form of spiritual life than what they had before.

Hold on through the long dark. Do not conclude from the ap parent absence that the spirit is gone. What may be happening is that the spirit is stripping away the forms you have been using to experience it, in order to teach you to find it more directly. Stay in the practice even when it feels empty. Stay in the silence even when it produces nothing. Stay in the descent even when the ground seems further away than it ever has.

The ground is there. It is always there. It is what you are at the root. You cannot lose it. You can only, for a season, lose your way to it. And the losing of the way is often the beginning of finding a truer path.

Closing Practice Breathe. Just breathe. Not to achieve a state. Not to produce an experience. Just because you are alive and breath is what alive things do.

In this breath, whatever season you are in…the season of clear access or the season of long dark…spirit is present. Not as an experience. As the ground. As what makes the breath possible. As what is beneath the breath and beneath the body and beneath the story you tell about where you are in your spiritual life.

You are here. You are alive. The spirit that animates your aliveness has not gone anywhere.

Rest in that. Even if resting feels like nothing. Even if nothing is the most honest description of what you have access to right now.

The nothing, rested in with patience and without conclusion, often turns out to be something after all.

Let that be everything. Let that be the beginning.

The breath that moves in all things is one breath.

This is the deepest claim I know how to make about the network of mutuality. Not that we are connected by shared interests or shared values or even shared humanity…all of which are true but insufficient. But that we share a breath. That the animating principle that makes you alive is the

same animating principle that makes me alive. That the spirit…ruach, pneuma, prana…by which the universe moves is not divided among individual containers but is one movement, expressing itself through each of us without being diminished by any of us.

I have felt this. I want to be careful here, because claims about mystical experience are easy to make and easy to hollow out with repetition. But I have felt, in certain moments…in prayer, in the thick of grief, at the edge of the inexplicable…a dissolution of the boundary that usually separates my experience from the world's experience. A moment in which the membrane became permeable, in which what I was breathing out seemed to be what everything else was breathing in, in which I was not separate from what I was part of.

I am not asking you to have this experience. I am saying: the experience points at something that is structurally true whether or not you have the experience. We are not sealed off from each other. The spirit that moves in you is continuous with the spirit that moves in me. And this means that what I do with my spirit…how I tend it, how I allow it to be

expressed, how much of it I bring into the spaces I inhabit…this matters to you. It matters to the web.

A community in which the spirit is suppressed…in which people have learned that their aliveness is inconvenient, that their depth is threatening, that their inner life is irrelevant to the practical business of getting through the day…this is a community that is starving. Not physically. Spiritually. And the spiritual starvation of a community is as real as its physical hunger and as consequential.

The courage to be spirit is the courage to be alive, to bring your full aliveness into the shared space, to refuse the dimin ishment that tells you your interiority is private and therefore irrelevant. Because your interiority is part of the web. Your spirit is a thread in the fabric. When you bring it fully into the shared space, the web becomes more alive. And a liv ing web sustains everyone in it.

Breathe together. Notice that you are breathing together. Notice what that means.

The spirit that moves in all things is not something we can possess individually. We can be more or less open to it. We can tend the conditions in which it becomes most available.

But we cannot contain it, control it, or claim it for ourselves in a way that diminishes its availability to others.

This has profound implications for how we think about spiri tual authority and spiritual hierarchy. The claim that some people have more direct access to the spirit than others…that some possess it in a way that gives them special authority over those who have less…this claim is in fundamental tension with the recognition that the spirit is one and moves through all.

I have been in communities where spiritual authority was used as a form of control. Where the person with the most visible access to the sacred…or the most persuasive claim to such access…used that position to keep others dependent, to suppress the independent spiritual authority of ordinary people, to maintain a hierarchy that served the institution more than the souls in its care.

This is not what the spirit does. The spirit is not hierarchical. It does not flow through channels of institutional authority. It is not contained by ordination or education or the approval of structures that exist primarily to perpetuate themselves.

The spirit is democratic. It moves where it moves. It appears in the person with the least institutional standing as readily as in the person with the most. It speaks through children and through elders, through the articulate and through the silent, through the person who has studied theology for decades and through the person who has never set foot in a formal religious community but who carries an unmistakable aliveness and depth.

The courage to be spirit, in community, is the courage to acknowledge this. To resist the hierarchies of spiritual authority that would concentrate access to the sacred in the few. To insist that the spirit is available to all…that every person has direct access to the ground of their own being, to the aliveness that animates them, to the sacred dimension of their own existence.

This does not mean that all spiritual expression is equally mature or equally trustworthy or equally oriented toward the good. Discernment is real and necessary. But it means that the capacity for genuine spiritual life is not the exclusive property of any institution or tradition or class of persons.

The spirit blows where it will. Our job is to stay open and to help each other stay open.

There is a practice that many traditions have maintained, in various forms, that I want to name here: the practice of breathing together.

Not metaphorically. Actually. The deliberate synchronization of breath…the shared attention to the most fundamental of bodily rhythms, the rhythm that all embodied life shares, the rhythm that connects us to every conscious being that has ever breathed.

When a group of people breathes together…genuinely, with awareness, not as a performance but as a practice…something happens. The boundary between individual experience and collective experience becomes less rigid. The sense of separateness that is the default condition of individual consciousness relaxes. Something of the shared ground beneath individual existence becomes available to perception.

I am not making a mystical claim beyond what I have experi enced. I am reporting what happens. And what happens, again and again, in my experience of communities that practice this kind of shared attention, is a quality of connection

that is deeper than what is available through conversation or shared activity or even shared suffering. A quality of being together that is prior to all the contents of being together.

The spirit that moves in all things is most available at the level of the body. At the level of breath. At the level of the fun damental aliveness that precedes thought, that is more basic than belief, that is present in every person regardless of what they believe or disbelieve about the sacred.

When we breathe together…when we attend to the shared foundation of our embodied existence…we are doing theology in its most fundamental form. We are acknowledging the ground we share. We are recognizing, in the most direct way available, that the source of our aliveness is one source.

Breathe together. Let it be a practice, not only a metaphor. The spirit is there, in the breath, waiting to be recognized.

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Series Three

Book Fourteen

THE COURAGE TO BE MAGIC

A Lyrical Inquiry into Wonder, Synchronicity and the Aliveness of the World

There are moments when the world stops being ordinary.

You are walking down a street you have walked a hundred times and something catches your eye…a shaft of light, a stranger's face, a bird on a wire…and for a moment the ordinary world becomes strange and beautiful and more than it appeared. The surface parts like a curtain. What is behind it is not different from what was before…it is the same world the same light the same bird…but you see it differently. More truly. As though the ordinary veil of habit and familiarity had briefly lifted and you were seeing what is actually there.

This is magic. Not the magic of illusion…not the trick, the misdirection, the sleight of hand. But the original magic the older magic the magic that preceded all the theater: the pure strangeness and aliveness of a world that is so much more extraordinary than we typically notice.

The courage to be magic is the courage to remain open to this. To not close down not get too sensible not allow the practical machinery of getting through the day to entirely suppress your awareness that you are living in a world of impossible and ongoing miracle.

Close your eyes for a moment. Think of a time when the world seemed magical. When something happened that seemed too precise to be coincidence when the beauty of something broke through all your habitual defenses when the ordinary world briefly revealed itself as extraordinary.

Hold that. Return there. Let it remind you what we are talking about.

That sense…that quality of aliveness and surprise and wonder…that is what this book is about.

Something has been lost.

Not everywhere and not all the time but in the general tenor of modern life something that our ancestors took for granted has become almost inaccessible. The sense that the world is alive…

genuinely essentially irreducibly alive not as metaphor but as a fundamental feature of what it is…has been replaced by a vision of the world as mechanism. Matter arranged in various patterns. Systems operating according to describable laws. Events caused by prior events in chains of causation that extend backward and forward into infinity.

This vision has given us extraordinary power. The disenchanted world…the world from which the magic has been ex tracted from which the spirits of place and the intelligence of nature and the communication between things have been stripped…is a world that can be analyzed predicted manipulated mastered. This is the knowledge that produced medicine and technology and the increase in human capability that allows billions of people to live who would have died in any previous century.

But something has been lost.

When the world is purely mechanism then nothing has intrinsic value…value is assigned by humans and exists nowhere in the world itself. When the world is purely mecha nism then there is no reason for wonder…wonder is an error a subjective response mistaken for objective truth. When the world is purely mechanism then meaning is an illusion…we project it onto a world that does not contain it and mistake the projection for discovery.

And human beings cannot live without meaning. Cannot thrive in a world that is only mechanism. Cannot sustain the

attention and care and love that life requires if the world is merely matter moving according to law.

The cost of disenchantment is exactly this: the loss of meaning. The loss of the sense that existence is participating in something larger than itself that the world is more than material that what happens is not merely caused but also signifi cant.

Magic is not a superstition. It is the name for what is lost when we forget that the world is alive.

You have experienced this: the event that seems too well-timed to be coincidence.

You are thinking of a person you haven't heard from in years and that person calls. You are wrestling with a question and open a book at random and the page you land on speaks directly to the question. You are in a country you have never visited and meet someone who changes your life.

You are in despair and see at the exact moment you most need it something that restores your hope.

The rationalist explanation:

coincidence. Given the enormous number of events that hap pen in any life some will appear to coincide in meaningful ways. We notice the meaningful coincidences and forget the countless non-meaningful ones. We see pattern because our minds are pattern-recognition engines. The apparent meaning is not in the world; it is in us.

This explanation is not wrong. But it may be incomplete.

What if the world is not merely a field of random events in which our meaning-making minds perceive pattern? What if there are genuine connections…not in the language of mechanism and cause but in some other language some other order of relationship…between things that seem separate?

What if the call that arrives when you are thinking of someone is not explained away by coincidence but is in some sense connected to your thinking? What if the book that opens to the right page is participating in something…something we do not yet have adequate language for…with your need?

These are not necessarily mystical claims in the sense of requiring you to abandon your critical intelligence. They are invitations to consider that the world may have more struc-

ture more intelligence more responsiveness than the mechanistic model allows.

That the universe may be something more like a mind than a machine.

Magic is what you call this when you trust it enough to be moved by it.

The forest is thinking.

Not in the way that you think…

not with language and concept and the elaborate self-reflection of human consciousness. But the forest is doing something that resembles thought:

it is processing information communicating responding remembering adapting solving problems that arose long before you were born and will persist long after you are gone.

The vast slow underground network of fungal threads that connects tree to tree across the forest floor passes nutrients and signals and what can only be described as information between organisms that from the surface appear to be entirely separate. The old tree sends sugars through this net-

work to the seedling growing in its shade too small to photosynthesize adequately on its own. The tree under stress sends chemical signals through the network…a kind of alarm…to which the surrounding trees respond by increasing their own chemical defenses.

This is not metaphor.

This is biology. But it is biology that reads very much like what we would call in human terms community. Care. Communication. A web of relationship that makes the individual organism a node in something much larger than itself.

The world is more intelligent than we have been taught to ex pect. More interconnected. More alive to its own complexity.

The animism of indigenous traditions…the understanding that everything is alive that the river and the mountain and the tree are not objects but subjects participants in the web of being…is not prescientific superstition. It is a different way of seeing one that may be more accurate in some important respects than the view that placed human consciousness at the apex of intelligence and everything else below it.

Magic is what you call the world when you see it this way. When you recognize that you are not a subject moving through a world of objects but a participant in a community of subjects…most of whom do not speak your language but all of whom are as real as present as alive as you.

Wonder is not a luxury. It is a survival skill.

The person who has lost the capacity for wonder…who has become too sensible too experienced too resigned to the way things are …has lost something essential. Not just aesthetically not just in terms of the quality of their experience but in terms of their ability to respond to what is actually happening. Because wonder is the precondition for seeing clearly. The person who thinks they already know what the world is cannot actually look at it. They are seeing their idea of it not the thing itself.

Wonder keeps the eyes open. It keeps the mind porous permeable able to receive what it had not expected. It is what makes learning possible at any age…because learning requires the admission that there is something you do not yet know that the world contains more than your current model

of it that reality is under no obligation to conform to your ex pectations.

But wonder can be practiced. It is not a gift distributed randomly to some people and withheld from others. It is an attention that can be cultivated…a way of approaching experience that can be developed through deliberate choice and habitual practice.

The practice is this: to approach the familiar as though it were strange. To look at what you see every day as though you were seeing it for the first time. To resist the instant cate gorization that habit provides…this is a tree this is a face this is a sound I recognize…and to stay with the bare fact of what is here before the category closes around it.

Children do this naturally. The child who is genuinely absorbed in watching an ant does not need to be reminded to wonder. They are wonder in that moment. The challenge is to recover something of this quality of attention as an adult…not naively, not in denial of what you know but in addition to what you know. Knowing what a thing is and still al lowing it to be strange.

The world is strange. It has always been strange. The strangeness is not hiding. Only your attention has gone elsewhere.

Return to wonder. It will show you things.

The body knows magic before the mind does.

The spine that prickles. The heart that lifts without apparent cause. The skin that responds to something in the air.

The feeling in the chest that is not emotion exactly…not joy, not fear not grief…but a quality of presence of something here that matters of the world pressing more closely against you than usual.

These somatic experiences are often the first sign that something significant is happening…that an encounter is not just superficially meaningful but deeply so that a place is not just pleasant but significant that a moment is not just passing but teaching. The body knows before the mind has organized its response. The body is already open when the mind is still assembling its categories.

Magic is felt in the body before it is understood in the mind. The shiver at the beautiful piece of music. The tears that ar-

rive before you understand why. The sense of rightness…of being exactly where you should be doing exactly what you should be doing…

that you feel not as a thought but as a physical certainty a set tling a coming home.

Pay attention to these responses. They are not irrelevant noise to be filtered out in the interests of clear thinking.

They are information. They are your body′s way of telling you that the world has touched it at a depth where thought does not operate…that something real is happening that something that matters is here.

This is the magic of embodied existence. You are not just a mind that happens to have a body. You are a body that happens to be capable of mind. And the body′s way of knowing…somatic immediate pre-conceptual…is one of the most reliable guides you have to what is actually happening.

Trust it. Trust the prickle and the lift and the certainty that arrives before you can explain it. The body is closer to the magic than the mind.

The enchanted life is not an escape from reality.

It is the most fully real life available.

To live enchanted…to maintain the sense that the world is more than mechanism that consciousness is more than accident that love is more than strategy that meaning is more than projection…is not to be confused about the nature of things. It is to be in contact with more of what is actually real than the purely disenchanted perspective can access.

The enchanted life is characterized by certain qualities. Attention…genuine sustained patient attention to what is actually here rather than to what thought says should be here. Receptivity…the willingness to receive what arrives including what was not invited what was not expected what does not fit the current plan. Relationship …the treatment of other people and other beings and even places as subjects rather than objects as participants in a shared world rather than props in one′s own story.

And the quality that is perhaps the deepest signature of the enchanted life: the capacity to be surprised.

The enchanted person is regularly genuinely surprised…not by events that were merely unexpected but by depth. By the fact that what seemed ordinary turns out to be extraordi-

nary. By the arrival of grace in places where it was not expected. By the world's continuous inexhaustible excess…the way reality always seems to contain more than any model of it can hold.

This surprise is not gullibility.

The enchanted person is not credulous does not believe everything does not follow every synchronicity into irrationality. They are in fact often more discerning than their disenchanted counterparts…because they take more seriously the quality of experience the texture of what arrives the difference between what is genuinely meaningful and what merely appears to be.

Live enchanted. The world can bear it. The world needs it.

And you can bear it. You were made for it.

Go somewhere you can be with the natural world…a garden a park a forest even a single tree on a city street. If that is not possible sit near a window and attend to whatever sky and light and air is available to you.

Be still. Let your eyes settle. Let your breathing slow.

Ask nothing. Expect nothing. Make no effort to have an expe rience. Simply be present to what is here without evaluation or agenda.

Stay for longer than is comfortable. The first few minutes are easy…the mind cooperates the attention holds. Then the restlessness begins. The thought that this is not productive that you could be doing something else that nothing is happening.

Stay.

Stay past the restlessness. Stay past the boredom. Stay until something shifts…and something always shifts if you stay long enough. The quality of attention changes. The world begins to look slightly different. Things you were not seeing become visible.

The particular aliveness of this tree this light this moment begins to register.

This is the beginning of re-enchantment. Not a dramatic rev elation. Not a vision or an epiphany. Just the world coming into a slightly fuller focus. Just the reality that was always here becoming slightly more perceptible.

Come back to this. Regularly. Whenever the world has flattened into pure mechanism whenever wonder has dried up whenever the magic has gone elsewhere.

It has not gone elsewhere. You have. Come back.

The magic is here.

By this I do not mean something supernatural in the sense that defies understanding. I mean something more quietly radical: that the world is not indifferent. That existence has a quality of aliveness, of participation, of call-and-response, that the purely mechanistic account of reality cannot capture. That when you reach toward the world with genuine attention and genuine openness, the world reaches back.

I have watched this happen too many times to dismiss it as coincidence. The right person appearing at exactly the moment they were needed. The unexpected opening that followed the honest admission of where I was actually stuck. The synchronicity that you could explain away if you chose to but that felt, from the inside, less like randomness than like something being offered.

The mutuality of magic is the recognition that we do not move through the world alone or in one direction. The world is not a passive backdrop for our activity. It is a participant. And the other people in it are participants…responding to us in ways we cannot fully predict or control, but that are shaped, in ways we can influence, by the quality of attention and openness we bring.

This has enormous implications for how we relate to each other. If the world is responsive, then so are the people in it. And if people are genuinely responsive…not just reactive, but capable of being reached, of being moved, of being surprised into recognition…then the way I show up in relationship with others matters more than a mechanistic worldview would suggest. The quality of my presence, the genuineness of my attention, the degree to which I am actually open rather than merely performing openness…these things affect what becomes possible between us.

The courage to be magic, in relationship, is the courage to stay open to surprise. To resist the closing-down of possibility that comes from deciding we already know what someone is capable of. To bring to every encounter the quality of attention that says: I have not yet seen everything you are.

Something in you has not yet been reached. And I am willing to keep reaching.

The network of mutuality is alive. It responds. It is more creative and more surprising than any of its nodes, taken individually. When we bring genuine openness to our shared life, what becomes possible exceeds what any of us could have generated alone. This is not magic in the diminished sense of something inexplicable. It is magic in the full sense…the emergence of possibility that was not predictable from the parts.

Stay open. The web is more alive than it appears.

The mutuality of magic is most visible in the creative life of communities.

When a community comes alive…when something happens in the shared space that none of the individuals could have predicted or produced alone…the experience is unmistakable. Something beyond the sum of the parts appears. A new possibility opens. The conversation goes somewhere that no single person could have taken it. The creative energy of the group exceeds what any individual brought to it.

This is not magic in the diminished sense…not something inexplicable or supernatural. It is magic in the full sense: the emergence of genuine novelty from the encounter of persons who are genuinely open to each other. The responsiveness of the world, showing up in the form of the responsiveness of people.

I have been in communities where this happened regularly. Where the conditions of genuine creative encounter were sustained…conditions of honesty and openness and willingness to be surprised…and where, as a result, things kept happening that no one had planned. Where the work kept exceeding what any individual member was capable of. Where the community became more than the sum of its parts because the parts were genuinely in contact with each other.

And I have been in communities where this never happened. Where the structure was so rigid, the expectations so fixed, the acceptable range of expression so narrow, that nothing genuinely new could emerge. Where the community kept reproducing itself…its existing ideas, its existing conflicts, its existing limitations…because the conditions for genuine encounter had been closed off.

The difference between these communities is not talent or resources or opportunity. It is openness. It is the willingness to be surprised by each other…to bring genuine curiosity to the encounter rather than the certainty of already knowing what the other person is and what they have to offer.

The courage to be magic in community is the courage to stay open to the creative possibility that is always present when genuine persons are genuinely in contact. To resist the closure. To keep the conditions of encounter alive.

Something will happen that you could not have planned. Pay attention when it does.

A community that has lost its capacity for wonder has lost something essential.

Wonder is not a luxury. It is not the preserve of children who have not yet learned to be appropriately skeptical. It is the basic cognitive and spiritual stance that allows genuine discovery…the openness to being surprised by what is actually here, the willingness to encounter the world as it is rather than as we have already decided it to be.

And a community that has organized itself around certainty…around the management of experience into predictable categories, the administration of life according to established procedures, the suppression of anything that does not fit the existing map…that community has closed off the primary avenue through which genuine renewal comes.

Genuine renewal comes from encounter with what is actually here, not with what we expected to find. It comes from the surprise…the discovery that the world is stranger and richer and more responsive than our existing categories could accommodate. It comes, in a word, from wonder.

The courage to be magic, in community, is the courage to maintain the conditions of wonder. To resist the premature closure…the decision that we have already figured out what this community is and what it is capable of and what the future holds. To stay open to being surprised. To keep asking, in the presence of each other and in the presence of the world: What is actually here that we have not yet seen?

This is a practice that can be cultivated. Not by manufacturing experiences of wonder…wonder cannot be manufactured, only received…but by clearing away the conditions

that prevent it. By slowing down. By paying attention. By staying curious about the things that are most familiar. By approaching even the most ordinary aspects of shared life with the quality of attention that says: I have not yet seen everything here. Let me keep looking.

The community that keeps looking will keep finding. And what it finds will sustain it through everything that certainty cannot sustain.

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Series Three

Book Fifteen

THE COURAGE TO BE ELECTRIC

A Lyrical Inquiry into Aliveness, Energy and the Current That Runs Through All Things

You are electricity.

Not metaphorically. The signals that travel through your nervous system are electrical…literal pulses of charge moving from cell to cell, from body to brain, from brain to the extremities that feel and move and reach toward what they love. The thoughts you are thinking right now are electrical events. The feeling of reading these words, the recognition or resistance or curiosity that arises…electrical. The consciousness that watches the reading, the awareness that is aware of itself…we do not fully understand what it is, but we know it cannot happen without the electrical activity of the living brain.

You are, in the most literal sense, a being of electricity. A pattern of charge and field and current. A storm given temporary and beautiful form.

But there is another electricity…the one you feel when you are most fully alive. When you walk into a room and feel the particular energy of the people gathered there. When you touch someone and feel the current between you. When you are doing the work you were made to do and feel something running through you that is not fatigue and not excitement

exactly but something deeper and more constant: aliveness. The sense of being on.

This is the electricity we are after in this book. Not the physics of it, though the physics is astonishing enough. The electricity of full presence. Of genuine engagement. Of a life lived at the voltage that existence makes available to those who do not insulate themselves against it.

Feel where you are on that spectrum right now. Are you fully on? Dimmed? Somewhere in between?

Let that honest reckoning be the beginning.

Before there was anything else, there was energy.

Not matter…matter came from energy. The universe beginning as pure undifferentiated energy and then cooling and differentiating and gathering itself, across unimaginable spans of time, into the improbable complexity of matter and life and consciousness. Energy is the ground of everything that exists. Matter is energy in a particularly stable configuration. Life is energy organized by information. Consciousness is…we do not know exactly what consciousness is, but we know it runs on electrical current.

I find this not merely interesting but theologically significant. If energy is the ground, and if what we mean by God is the ground of all being, then energy and the sacred are not strangers. The current that runs through your nervous system is not separate from the creative force that underlies the universe. You are the universe being alive in a particular form. The electricity in you is the same force that holds atoms together and pulls galaxies into relation. You are not a spectator of this. You are a participant. You are, in your very physical constitution, an expression of the energy that existence is.

This does not make you special in a way that others are not. It makes everyone special in exactly the same way. The person you find most difficult to love is also a storm of electrical activity, also a temporary and intricate organization of the energy that underlies everything. The person sleeping on the street is carrying the same sacred current. The child who will be born next year into circumstances you cannot imagine is already, in potential, a being of electricity. The aliveness is not distributed according to merit. It is simply present, in ev erything that lives.

Most of us are running at partial voltage.

I do not say this as an accusation. I say it because I know it from my own life and from the lives of the people I have accompanied over the years. The full electrical aliveness that is available to a human being…the state in which every sense is open, every capacity is engaged, presence is complete and contact is genuine…this state is not our default. Our default, in a world organized around the suppression of inconvenient vitality, is something more muted. More managed. More carefully calibrated to the demands of the social situations we must navigate.

We learn early that our electricity can be dangerous. The child who is fully on…who brings their complete aliveness into the classroom, the family dinner, the social gathering…is often experienced by others as too much. Too loud. Too demanding. Too present. The message arrives in a hundred different forms: dial it down. Be more manageable. Stop taking up so much space.

And most of us comply. Not because we are weak but because the alternative…the social cost of remaining fully on in a world that cannot consistently hold that level of aliveness…is high. We learn to modulate. To perform a version of our-

selves that is socially acceptable. To reserve our full voltage for the moments and the people who can receive it.

This is not a moral failure. It is adaptation. But it is also loss. And the loss accumulates. The person who has spent decades managing their aliveness, carefully dimming whenever the full current might be inconvenient, often arrives at midlife or later with a sense of absence they cannot quite name. The feeling of having been somewhere without fully arriving. Of having lived without quite inhabiting the life.

The cost of chronic dimming is not only personal.

When people are running at partial voltage…when whole communities have been trained out of their full aliveness… the collective capacity of those communities diminishes. The creativity, the resilience, the capacity for genuine encounter and genuine problem-solving…all of these are functions of aliveness. And a community in which the aliveness has been systematically suppressed is a community that cannot access the full range of what it is capable of.

I have seen this in institutions. The organization that has spent years punishing the fully alive…the employees who ask the inconvenient questions, the colleagues who care too visi-

bly, the leaders who lead from genuine passion rather than from careful calculation…this organization eventually discovers that it has optimized itself into mediocrity. It has traded aliveness for manageability and found that what it purchased was not stability but stagnation.

I have seen it in families. The family that has organized itself around the suppression of one member's inconvenient aliveness…around the management of the person who feels too much or speaks too directly or loves with too much urgency… this family often discovers, when the suppressed person finally burns through the management or leaves, that the suppression was the family's primary project. And that without it, they do not know who they are or what they are for.

The suppression of aliveness is a form of violence. It may not look like violence from the outside. It may look like appropri ate social modulation, like maturity, like the wisdom of knowing when to dial it back. But from the inside it is violence…the violence of being asked to be less than what you are, repeatedly, until you begin to believe that what you are is too much.

The good news is that the current does not turn off.

It dims. It goes underground. It gets redirected into less visible channels. But it does not turn off. I have been with people in their seventies and eighties who, in the course of a genuine conversation…a conversation in which they felt truly safe and truly seen…lit up in a way that made them suddenly and unmistakably young again. Not because they had recovered something lost. Because what was never lost had been given permission to be present.

The recovery of aliveness is not a project of addition. You are not missing electricity that needs to be acquired. You are insulated against electricity that is already there, waiting to run freely. The work is the removal of insulation. The patient, sometimes frightening work of discovering what you have been covering and why and whether the covering is still necessary.

It is sometimes no longer necessary. The wound that required the covering healed enough to allow a different relationship to it. The social situation that could not hold your full aliveness has changed or you have changed or both. The relationship that required you to dim has ended or deepened. The work of recovery is the work of discovering which

insulations are no longer serving you and beginning, carefully and at your own pace, to remove them.

This work takes time. It is not a weekend retreat or a single breakthrough conversation. It is the gradual accumulation of moments in which you discover that you can be more fully yourself than you have been…in this relationship, in this context, in this area of your life…without the consequences you feared. Each moment of safe aliveness makes the next one more possible. The current, finding a clear path, flows more freely. The voltage, given permission, rises.

You cannot recover your aliveness alone.

You can begin alone. The internal work of discovering where you have dimmed and why is necessarily solitary, at least ini tially. But the full recovery of aliveness…the state in which you are genuinely, durably, sustainably on…requires other people. Specifically, it requires the people in whose presence your aliveness is welcomed rather than managed. In whose presence you discover that what you are is not too much but, in fact, exactly enough.

These people are among the most important people in any life. Not the most powerful or the most successful or the most

prestigious. The ones in whose presence you are most fully yourself. The ones who can receive your full voltage without flinching, who are, in fact, made more alive by your aliveness, just as you are made more alive by theirs.

The community of aliveness is not assembled by chance. It is built by the willingness to be fully present in relationship…to bring your actual self rather than your managed self, to allow genuine contact rather than performing it, to receive the aliveness of others rather than cataloguing it from a safe distance. It is built by the risk of being fully on in the presence of people who might not be able to hold it…and discovering which of them, surprisingly, can.

The highest voltage available to a human being is the voltage of the present moment.

Not the past, which is sealed. Not the future, which is imagined. The present, which is actually here, actually happening, actually available for genuine contact and genuine response. The person who is fully present to this moment…who has brought their complete attention and their complete self to what is actually here…is running at the highest possible volt-

age. The person who is everywhere except here is dimmed, however capable they may be in other respects.

This is why presence is not merely a psychological technique but a spiritual practice. To be fully present is to be fully alive. And to be fully alive is to participate in the sacred as directly as it is available to be participated in. The current of the divine, which is the current of existence itself, runs through the present moment. You can encounter it there. You cannot encounter it in your thoughts about the past or your plans for the future, however important those thoughts and plans may be.

I have found, again and again, that the moments in which I have been most fully alive…most fully myself, most fully in contact with what is real and sacred and worth being committed to…have been moments of complete presence. Not moments of great achievement or dramatic revelation. Just moments of being actually here, actually attending, actually in contact with what was actually in front of me. A person in grief who needed to be witnessed. A morning of unusual clar ity in a particular quality of light. A conversation that went somewhere neither party had planned. A prayer that stopped being words and became something else.

These moments are available. They are not reserved for the specially spiritual or the particularly gifted. They are available in the present moment, which is always here, always the place where the current runs most freely.

Let yourself be on. The world needs the electricity you carry.

Closing Practice

Sit quietly for a moment. Notice your breath. Notice the elec trical activity of your own body…the signals moving through you right now, carrying information, sustaining your life, making this moment of awareness possible.

Now notice: where are you dimmed? Where have you insulated yourself against your own aliveness? What are you holding back, and from whom, and why?

You do not have to answer all of those questions today. But let them be real questions. Let them be questions you actually live with, in the days that follow.

The current is there. The question is what you are willing to let it run through.

Be the opening.

Your aliveness is not a private matter.

When you are fully alive…when you are operating at the volt age that existence makes available, when the current of genuine engagement is running through you rather than being blocked or redirected or suppressed…you change the room. You change the people in it. You change what becomes possi ble in the shared space.

I have been in the presence of truly alive people. Not people who were simply enthusiastic or energetic…energy without depth is just noise. But people who were genuinely, deeply, fully alive…awake to what was happening, responsive to it, bringing their whole selves to the encounter. And the effect is unmistakable. Something in the room changes. Something in you changes, in their presence. Your own aliveness is called forth by theirs.

This is the mutuality of aliveness: it is contagious. It is not competitive. When you are fully alive, it does not diminish my aliveness. It amplifies it. It creates conditions in which my own aliveness becomes more accessible, more real, more expressible. The current runs between us and through us and

the circuit becomes more powerful with each node that is fully engaged.

The opposite is equally true. A community in which people have learned to suppress their aliveness…in which the full, electric expression of what someone is has been trained out of them through shame or fear or the grinding of circumstances that left no room for anything but survival…that community runs on a lower current. The possibilities available to it are narrower. The creativity, the joy, the resilience, the capacity for genuine encounter…all of these are diminished.

This is why the courage to be electric matters for everyone, not only for the individual. When you do the work of recover ing your aliveness…when you refuse the numbness, when you let yourself feel again, when you bring the full current of your being back online…you are doing something for the community, not only for yourself. You are adding voltage to the web. You are making more aliveness available.

We need each other's aliveness. We need to see people who are fully engaged, fully present, fully themselves…not because it makes us feel good to watch, but because it shows us

what is possible. Because it gives us permission to be alive too. Because the permission to be fully ourselves is one of the greatest gifts we can offer each other.

Be electric. Do it for yourself and do it for the rest of us.

The electricity of genuine aliveness is most needed in the places where the conditions of life have made aliveness most difficult to sustain.

I have spent time in places where the suppression of aliveness was a structural condition…where the grinding poverty or the chronic violence or the complete absence of beauty and safety had trained people, over generations, to keep themselves small. To expect less. To not let themselves want what they could not have or feel what they could not express or reach for what the world had told them was not available to them.

The suppression of aliveness is a form of violence. It may not look like violence from the outside…it may look like resignation, like practicality, like the wisdom of people who have learned how the world works. But from the inside, it is violence. The violence of a world that has decided some people's electricity is too inconvenient to allow.

The courage to be electric in community is the courage to refuse this suppression…not only in yourself but in the conditions you help create for others. The courage to insist that aliveness is everyone's birthright, not the privilege of those whose circumstances have not required them to surrender it.

This means building communities where aliveness is welcomed and protected. Where the full, electric expression of what a person is is met with recognition rather than manage ment. Where children are allowed to be fully what they are…loud and curious and intense and inconvenient and gloriously alive…rather than trained, from the earliest age, to be manageable.

It means taking seriously the conditions that suppress aliveness…poverty, violence, chronic stress, the absence of beauty and safety and genuine relationship…and working to change them. Not as a spiritual project separate from the political one. As the same project. Because the aliveness of the community is a political concern. The electricity available in a given community…the degree to which its members are fully alive, fully engaged, fully themselves…determines what that community is capable of.

Keep the current running. Tend the conditions that allow it. Do not accept the suppression of anyone's aliveness as normal or inevitable. It is neither.

The current of genuine aliveness is what keeps the network of mutuality from becoming merely a structure.

Structures can exist without life. Organizations can function without the people in them being genuinely engaged. Communities can maintain their external forms…their meetings, their programs, their stated commitments…long after the aliveness that gave those forms their meaning has departed.

The structure without the current is a husk. It may be an impressive husk. It may maintain the appearance of vitality for a surprisingly long time. But it cannot do what only aliveness can do: generate genuine encounter, produce genuine transformation, sustain genuine hope.

What keeps the current running is the aliveness of the people in the network. Not the aliveness of some of them…the leaders, the most energetic members, the ones whose particular temperament inclines toward high engagement. The aliveness of all of them. Because the current runs through the

whole network and a section of the network where aliveness has been suppressed or withdrawn is a section where the current is low or absent…and that affects the whole.

This is why the attention to each person's aliveness…the gen uine concern for whether each member of the community is actually engaged, actually present, actually bringing themselves rather than merely their compliance…is not merely pastoral kindness. It is structural maintenance. It is keeping the current running through the whole network.

A community that takes everyone's aliveness seriously…that asks, genuinely and persistently, what each person needs in order to be fully present and fully themselves…is a community that is doing the essential work of maintaining the current. Of keeping the network alive.

Take each other's aliveness seriously. Ask what each person needs. Tend the current.

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Series Three

Book Sixteen

THE COURAGE TO BE FIRE

A Lyrical Inquiry into Passion, Transformation and the Burning Heart

You were made to burn.

Not to smolder. Not to maintain a carefully controlled and sustainable flame, tended by prudence, never too bright, never consuming too much, producing the steady lukewarm warmth of a life carefully managed.

To burn.

Fire does not manage itself. Fire is not careful. Fire transforms everything it touches…not always to destroy but always to change. To make what was dense and slow into light and heat and movement. To release what was locked inside the material. To allow what was trapped in form to become energy again.

You have passion in you. The word comes from the Latin passio…suffering, but specifically the suffering inseparable from what we love most. The intensity indistinguishable from the deepest forms of care. To be passionate about something is not merely to prefer it, not merely to find it interesting. It is to be willing to suffer for it. To let it cost some thing. To allow it to matter enough to hurt.

Before we begin: What are you willing to suffer for?

Not what you think you should be willing to suffer for. Not the noble answer. But honestly…what in your life has you leaning forward, spending yourself, returning even when it is hard, caring even when caring costs you?

Hold that question. It is the whole of this book.

Fire is transformation.

It does not leave what it touches unchanged. It cannot. The very nature of fire is to convert…to take the complex organization of matter and release it as energy, to make the fixed fluid, the heavy light, to take what is frozen in its current form and allow it to become movement.

The wood does not disappear when it burns. It becomes heat. It becomes light. It becomes ash that becomes soil that feeds the next thing that grows. The energy locked inside the form of the wood is released and made available. The burning is not destruction…it is liberation. The energy was always there. The fire simply lets it out.

Passion operates this way. The passion that burns in you…for a person, for a calling, for a form of truth or beauty you cannot remain indifferent to…does not destroy your ordinary

life. It transforms it. It takes the energy locked in your habitual patterns and safe arrangements and careful routines of not-quite-living and releases it. Puts it in motion. Makes it available for the becoming that your life is always trying to do through you, if you will allow it.

This is why the courage to be fire is not the courage of destruction. It is the courage of transformation. The willingness to allow the fire to do what fire does…to refuse the man aged smolder in favor of the actual burning, with all its risk and all its heat and all its uncontrollable tendency to exceed whatever container you try to put it in.

Every person has a fire. I believe this without qualification.

I have sat with enough people, in enough circumstances, including the most desperate and the most impoverished of spirit, to have encountered the fire in each of them. Sometimes it is buried under years of disappointment or depression or the accumulated weight of a life in which it was never safe to burn. Sometimes it has been banked so low for so long that the person themselves has forgotten it is there. But it is always there. It is part of what it means to be human.

The work of finding your fire is the work of honest attention to your own responses. What moves you? Not what should move you, not what a person of your background and education and sensibility is supposed to find moving, but what actually moves you? What makes you lean forward? What do you find yourself returning to, even when you have told yourself you should stop? What do you care about with a caring that exceeds your ability to explain or justify it?

These responses are not accidental. They are the fire's way of signaling its location. The things that move you without explanation…the subjects you cannot remain dispassionate about, the injustices that keep you up at night, the forms of beauty that arrest you without warning, the work that makes time disappear…these are the fire making itself known. They are not distractions from the important business of your life. They are clues to what your life is actually for.

I have found my fire, over the years, not by sitting and deciding what to be passionate about but by paying attention to what I was already passionate about whether I had chosen it or not. The ministry I have ended up in…in the most difficult and overlooked places, with the most difficult and overlooked people…was not a rational choice made from a career

menu. It was a fire that kept burning in a particular direction regardless of how many times I tried to point it elsewhere. Eventually I stopped arguing with it and let it go where it wanted to go. That submission to the fire has been the most important thing I have done.

There is a cost to refusing the fire.

It is not a dramatic cost. It does not announce itself as a crisis or a collapse or a single definable loss. It is the quiet, accumulating cost of a life in which something essential is being withheld. The person who has spent years managing the fire…banking it, redirecting it, expressing it only in the ways that are socially acceptable and personally safe…this person often arrives, somewhere in the middle of their life, at a sensation they cannot quite name. A sense of absence. Of having been somewhere without fully arriving. Of watching their own life from a slight remove, as though through glass.

The theologian would call this a form of spiritual poverty. The psychologist might call it a failure of self-actualization. I call it the cost of the unburned life. The price paid for safety. For the managed smolder.

Because the fire, denied its proper expression, does not simply go away. It goes underground. It finds other channels. The passion that was never given a legitimate direction discovers illegitimate ones. The intensity that had no place to go turns inward and becomes depression, or outward and becomes rage, or sideways and becomes obsession with things that do not ultimately matter. The fire needs to burn somewhere. If you will not give it something worthy to burn for, it will find something unworthy.

This is why the courage to be fire is not optional for the person who wants to live fully. The alternative is not peace and safety and comfort. The alternative is the slow leak of a life in which the most essential thing is perpetually withheld…from yourself, from the people who would benefit from your burn ing, from the work that needs your fire to be done well.

The fire gets things wrong sometimes.

I want to be honest about this. The passion that burns without wisdom can cause real damage. I have seen it in my own life and in the lives of people I love. The person who burns too intensely for a cause that turns out to be wrong. The leader whose fire consumes the people around them instead

of warming them. The visionary whose absolute conviction in their vision closes them off from the reality checks that would have saved them.

Fire needs tending. Not suppression…tending. The difference is critical. Suppression says: this fire is dangerous and must be put out. Tending says: this fire is real and valuable and needs to be given the conditions in which it can burn well rather than burning wildly.

Tending a fire means giving it proper fuel…the right work, the right relationships, the right contexts in which the burning serves something larger than itself. It means protecting it from the things that would extinguish it…the chronic exhaustion, the isolation, the absence of genuine community, the work that does not correspond to the fire′s actual direction. It means allowing it to rest at times without concluding that the resting means it has gone out.

And it means accountability. The person whose fire is burning in genuine service to something beyond themselves needs the honest witness of other people who can see them clearly and say, when necessary: you are burning in the

wrong direction. The fire that is subject to no accountability is the fire most likely to burn destructively.

The hardest thing about fire is keeping it burning over time.

The initial ignition is often the easy part. The early passion, the opening conviction, the first discovery that there is some thing you are genuinely for…this is exhilarating. The fire is high and everything seems possible. The problem comes later. After the initial excitement fades. After the first significant failure or disappointment. After the accumulated weight of the ordinary daily work begins to feel less like a vehicle for the fire and more like an obstacle to it.

Most passionate commitments are lost not in a single dramatic abandonment but in the slow attrition of the ordinary. The thing you were burning for becomes routine. The routine becomes a grind. The grind becomes invisible. And one day you look up and realize that the fire you were burning for has been reduced to a small, managed flame that you tend out of habit rather than out of anything that still resembles genuine passion.

The courage to be fire includes the courage to attend to this. To notice when the fire is going low. To resist the normaliza-

tion of a dimmed commitment. To ask, honestly and without self-punishment: what does this fire need right now? More fuel…more genuine engagement with the substance of what you are for? More air…more community with people who share the burning? More rest…the paradoxical discovery that fire sometimes needs to be banked in order to sustain it self over the long distances?

The people I most admire in this life are not the people who burned most dramatically for a short time. They are the people who kept burning steadily over decades. Who brought their fire to the ordinary Tuesday as well as to the extraordinary moment. Who found a way to sustain the passion without needing it to be always at its most intense. The coal at the center of the fire…steady, consistent, deeply hot without being dramatic…this is the model for the sustained burning that changes things over time.

I want to say something about the purpose of the fire.

The fire in you is not only for your own benefit. It is not primarily about your self-actualization or your personal fulfillment or even your own happiness. These things matter. The

flourishing of the person who tends the fire matters. But the fire serves something larger than the person who carries it.

Every genuine passion that I have ever encountered has been, at its root, about something beyond the self. The person who burns for justice is burning for the people for whom justice is denied. The person who burns for beauty is burning for the quality of life available to everyone who encounters their work. The person who burns for the truth is burning for a world in which truth is more available than it currently is. The fire reaches toward the other. It always has. That is part of what makes it fire.

This has implications for how you understand your own burning. The question is not only What do I care about? but also Who benefits when I burn well? Whose flourishing is served by my fire? What does the world lose when I smolder instead of burning?

These questions are not meant to burden you. They are meant to clarify. Because the fire that burns only for itself tends to burn out. And the fire that burns for something larger than itself tends to find, in that larger purpose, a fuel

source that outlasts any individual's capacity to sustain enthusiasm alone.

You were made to burn. For something real. For something that needs the particular heat you carry. That something is waiting for you to stop managing the flame and let it do what fire does.

Closing Practice

Sit with these questions. Do not rush them.

What is the thing in your life that has most clearly had the character of fire? Not the thing you chose rationally but the thing that chose you?

What has happened to that fire over time? Is it burning well? Has it been banked? Have you been managing it rather than tending it?

What would it look like to tend it more honestly in the next season of your life?

The fire is not out. It may be low. But it is there. It has always been there. It is the most alive thing in you.

Give it room. Give it air. Let it burn.

Tend it.

Passion, shared, becomes something beyond the sum of its parts.

I have been in rooms where people were on fire for the same thing…where a group of people had gathered around a shared vision with genuine passion and genuine commitment…and I have felt what happens in those rooms. Something comes alive that none of the individuals could have generated alone. The fire feeds on itself. The passion of each person makes the passion of every other person more possible. The collective flame burns hotter and steadier than any individual flame could.

This is the mutuality of fire. Passion does not diminish in the sharing. It multiplies. When I bring my genuine fire…my deepest commitments, my most non-negotiable loves, the things I would do regardless of whether anyone was watching or rewarding me for doing them…into contact with your genuine fire, something happens between us that did not exist before. We become more capable, together, of sustaining what we cannot sustain alone.

This is why movements require community. This is why the person who tries to sustain their passion in complete isolation almost always burns out…not because the passion is insufficient, but because passion needs company. It needs the testimony of others who are also burning to know that the burning is real, that it is not madness, that it is possible to keep going. The fire of a single coal left alone will go out. The fire of many coals together sustains itself.

I have found this to be true in the work of justice, in the work of art, in the work of prayer. The moments of deepest fire in my life have almost always been moments of shared fire…moments when I discovered that others were burning for the same things I was burning for. In those moments something was possible that had not been possible before. The web became more alive. The network of mutuality revealed itself as a network of passion…of people who cared, deeply and irreversibly, about something larger than themselves.

Your fire is a gift to the web. Your passion…tended, not hoarded…warms everyone in the circle. Do not keep it to yourself. Let others see it burning. And look for theirs. The fire is everywhere, if you know how to see it.

The fire that sustains…the passion that endures through difficulty and disappointment and the long stretches where nothing seems to be working…this fire is almost never maintained alone.

I know this from my own experience of ministry. The periods in my life when the fire burned steadiest were the periods when I was most deeply in community with other people who were burning for the same things. When I could see their fire and be warmed by it on the days when my own seemed low. When they could see mine and remember, in the seeing, what they were burning for.

The community of fire is not only for the support of individu als, though it does that. It is also for the sustaining of the fire itself…for keeping alive the shared vision, the shared commitment, the shared refusal to accept that what is must be what always will be. The fire of a movement, of a community of resistance, of a shared spiritual practice…this fire feeds on the aliveness of all its members. When any member's fire goes low, the community's fire is diminished. When it is tended back to fullness, the whole community benefits.

This is why the isolation of the prophetic voice…the solitary visionary burning alone, unsupported, unaccountable to community…is almost always a recipe for distortion. The fire that burns without community tends, over time, to burn in unhealthy ways. Without the tempering of genuine relationship…without the people who love you enough to tell you when you are burning in the wrong direction…the fire can become destructive rather than generative.

The courage to be fire, in community, is the courage to tend each other's flames. To notice when someone's fire is burning low and to offer what you have…your own fire, your testi mony that the burning is worth it, your presence in the season of low flame. And to receive this tending in return. To not be too proud to let others tend you when you need it.

We keep each other burning. This is one of the primary purposes of community. Do not underestimate it.

Every community has its fires. The question is whether they are burning for something worth burning for.

The fire of a community…the passion at its center, the thing it is most genuinely committed to, the vision that drives its effort when the effort is hardest…this fire is what gives the

community its character. A community burning for justice looks different from a community burning for preservation. A community burning for genuine human transformation looks different from a community burning for institutional self-perpetuation.

And over time, the fire at the center of a community shapes everything about it. The people it attracts. The decisions it makes. The way it handles conflict and failure. The quality of the relationships it fosters. The impact it has on the world around it.

I have seen communities whose fire had gone cold at the cen ter…where the original passion had been replaced by habit, by tradition, by the accumulated momentum of doing what had always been done. These communities were often still functioning. Often still doing recognizable versions of the things they had always done. But the quality of what they were doing had changed. The fire that had given it meaning was out and the absence of the fire was palpable.

I have also seen communities whose fire burned with terrible clarity. Where the passion at the center was genuine and the commitment was real and the thing they were burning for

was genuinely worth burning for. These communities were not always easy to be part of. Fire is not comfortable. But they were alive in a way that the cold communities were not. And they were capable of things that the cold communities could not imagine.

What are you burning for? What is your community burning for? Not what are you formally committed to, not what are your stated values, but what genuinely moves you, genuinely costs you, genuinely keeps you up at night with a kind of urgent, demanding love?

Burn for that. Together. Keep the fire real.

✦ ✦ ✦

Series Three

Book Seventeen

THE COURAGE TO BE UNCANNY

A Lyrical Inquiry into Strangeness, Mystery and the Sacred Edges of the Known

Something is stranger than it appears.

You, for instance.

You are a collection of atoms arranged in a pattern so improbable that, considered from a distance, it should not exist. And yet it does. You are the universe having organized itself, over fourteen billion years, from the raw material of exploding stars into a form complex enough to wonder at its own existence. You look out at the world from behind two small windows of flesh and you call what arrives through those windows reality and you live your life as though the matter were settled.

But the matter is not settled.

The uncanny is what happens when the familiar suddenly reveals itself as strange…when the thing you thought you understood shows it is more mysterious than you had allowed. When the ordinary world briefly shows its true face. When what seemed safely categorized opens into something larger and stranger and impossible to fully contain in any explanation.

This is not only frightening. It is also liberating. The world that is fully understood…fully mapped, categorized, explained…is a world in which nothing can surprise you. In which wonder is not possible. In which the deepest truths, which are always stranger than any explanation, cannot reach you.

Come to the edge of what you know with me. Let it be strange. Let the strangeness be a gift rather than a threat.

The ordinary world is extraordinary. It has always been extraordinary. You have simply grown accustomed to it.

Consider your hand. The thing you carry everywhere, that you use a thousand times a day without looking at. Look at it now. Study the arrangement of bone and tendon and skin, the way the light falls across the knuckles, the lines in the palm that are yours alone. The way it moves when you direct it to move…or rather, when something you call yourself sends a signal through pathways you do not understand to muscles that contract in response, producing the miracle of intentional movement.

You do not know how you move your hand. You know that you do it. But the actual translation…of intention into electri

cal signal, of signal into chemical cascade, of chemistry into the precise contraction of specific muscles that produces exactly the movement you intended…this is a mystery. You are, right now, performing a miracle of coordination that the most advanced robotics cannot fully replicate, and you are doing it without the slightest awareness of the process.

This is the uncanny in its most immediate form. Not the paranormal. Not the supernatural. The ordinary, seen truly. The hand. The breath. The fact of consciousness itself…that there is something it is like to be you, that experience has a quality from the inside, that awareness exists at all when it could, as far as the laws of physics are concerned, have failed to appear.

The universe, as far as we can tell, produced consciousness once, in a particular form, after billions of years of apparently unconscious process. And then it looked at itself through the eyes you are looking with right now. This is strange. This is genuinely, irreducibly strange. And the person who has lost the capacity to find it strange has lost something important.

The uncanny has a territory.

It is the space between the known and the unknown. Between what can be fully explained and what resists explanation. Between the familiar and the strange. This territory is not beyond the edges of ordinary life…it is woven through the ordinary at every point. It is available in the space between two people who are genuinely present to each other. In the moment before sleep when the self begins to dissolve at its edges. In grief, which opens the ordinary world to dimensions it usually keeps hidden. In art, which creates objects that participate in the strange in a way that documents and explanations cannot.

I have found the uncanny in rooms I had not expected to find it. In prisons, where the bare fact of human consciousness persisting under conditions designed to suppress it reveals something about the stubbornness and the depth of what we are. In hospitals, at the boundary between life and what comes after it…or what we do not know comes after it…where the ordinary categories seem suddenly and urgently insufficient. In conversations where something is said that was not planned and could not have been predicted and yet arrives with the quality of something that was always going to be said, that was waiting to be said, that needed this particular

moment and this particular combination of people to find its way into the world.

The uncanny is not rare. It is everywhere. What is rare is the quality of attention that allows it to be perceived. Most of us are moving too fast, under too much pressure, insulated by too many layers of the familiar and the managed, to let the strange actually register. The practice of the uncanny is the practice of slowing down enough to let what is actually strange about existence be strange.

The familiar is a filter.

Familiarity is necessary. Without the capacity to habituate, to categorize, to treat the already-known as background rather than foreground, we would be overwhelmed. Every moment would be the first moment. Every sensation would demand complete attention. We could not function.

But familiarity has a cost. It closes the world. It reduces the inexhaustible strangeness of what is here to a set of recogniz able categories that can be navigated without fully encountered. The tree outside the window becomes not a tree in its full singularity…this particular arrangement of wood and leaf and light and history and biology, this thing that has

been doing what trees do for longer than you have existed and will continue doing it after you are gone…but a background element of a familiar scene. The face of the person you have been with for twenty years becomes not the face of this astonishing particular human being but a familiar form that no longer demands your full attention.

This is one of the deepest losses available in an ordinary life. The loss of the other person. Not their physical presence, not their availability…but their genuine strangeness. Their irreducible particularity. The fact that no explanation of them is adequate and that they continue, even after decades of intimacy, to be someone you do not fully know. The person who has been thoroughly familiarized, who has been reduced in perception from a mystery to a known quantity, has been in some important sense abandoned…even by someone who loves them.

The courage to be uncanny includes the courage to keep find ing the people closest to you genuinely strange. To resist the flatness that familiarity imposes. To practice a kind of permanent beginner's mind toward the people and the places and the circumstances of your life…to approach them again and again with the willingness to be surprised.

The sacred is always strange.

This is something that the most vital forms of religious life have always known and that the most domesticated forms of religious life have consistently forgotten. The sacred cannot be fully domesticated. The divine cannot be fully explained. The holy is, by definition, what exceeds ordinary categories… what is more than can be contained in any doctrine, any liturgy, any institution, any human attempt to give it manageable form.

When the sacred is domesticated…when God becomes a character in a comprehensible story, when prayer becomes a transaction with a predictable outcome, when the spiritual life becomes a program to be completed rather than a reality to be encountered…the life goes out of it. What remains may be culturally valuable and socially functional and personally comforting. But it is no longer genuinely alive. It is no longer in genuine contact with the strangeness that makes it sacred.

The courage to be uncanny is, in its deepest register, a theological courage. It is the courage to refuse the domesticated sacred. To insist that what you mean by God remains genuinely beyond your understanding. To let prayer be a real

reaching into genuine uncertainty rather than a performance of reaching directed at a known destination. To allow the spiritual life to remain strange…to remain the kind of thing that can surprise you, that can overturn your assumptions, that can take you somewhere you would not have planned to go.

I have found, in my ministry, that the people with the most alive spiritual lives are not the people with the most confident theology. They are the people who have remained genuinely curious. Who have allowed the questions to stay open. Who are still, after decades of spiritual practice, capable of genuine surprise about the nature of what they are practicing. Who have not flinched from the places where the faith admits it does not know.

These people carry a quality of aliveness that is unmistakable. The uncanny has not been driven out of their spiritual lives by premature certainty. And as a result, the sacred remains genuinely present to them…not as a known quantity to be managed but as a living reality that continues to exceed every description of it.

The edge of the known is where the most interesting life hap pens.

Not the edge in the dramatic sense…not the edge that requires unusual courage or exceptional circumstances. The ordinary edge. The place in any conversation where you don't quite know what you are going to say next. The moment in any creative work where the outcome is genuinely uncertain. The place in any relationship where you have arrived at the limit of what you understand about the other person and are now in contact with what you do not understand.

These edge-moments are available in ordinary life constantly. Most of us avoid them. We steer conversations away from the genuinely unknown territory, toward the places we can navigate from existing maps. We do the creative work that we know how to do, rather than the work that reaches past our current capacity. We stay in the zone of comfortable familiarity with the people we love rather than pressing into the places where genuine contact requires genuine uncertainty.

The courage to be uncanny is the courage to seek the edge rather than avoid it. To move toward the places where the fa miliar thins and something stranger becomes visible. To trust that the stranger territory, however uncomfortable, contains something that the safe familiar territory does not.

I have taken this seriously in my ministry. I have tried to go where the edge is. To sit with people at the boundaries of what I understand…at the edge of life and death, at the edge of what one human being can do to another, at the edge of what faith can sustain and what it cannot. These are not comfortable places. But they are alive places. And the alive-ness available at the edge…the quality of presence and clarity and strange grace that becomes available when the familiar has run out…this is something I would not trade for any amount of comfortable certainty.

I want to say something in defense of not knowing.

We live in a culture that treats not knowing as a deficiency. As something to be overcome as quickly as possible. As an embarrassment that should be hidden or a problem that should be solved. The premium is on certainty…on having

the answer, on knowing what you think, on being able to explain your position with confidence and consistency.

But not knowing has gifts that knowing does not have.

Not knowing keeps you open. The person who does not know is still in genuine relationship with the question, still affected by new information, still capable of being moved in a direction they would not have predicted. The person who knows… who has arrived at certainty and closed the question…has stopped being in relationship with the territory and has begun maintaining a position about it. These are very different things.

Not knowing keeps you humble. The person who does not know cannot claim authority over those who disagree with them. Cannot treat the disagreement as evidence of the other person's deficiency. Must remain, at some level, genuinely curious about what the other person is seeing that they are not. This humility is not weakness. It is the condition for gen uine learning.

And not knowing keeps you alive to the sacred in a way that knowing often cannot. The religious tradition that has resolved all its questions…that has an answer for everything,

that has no territory it cannot navigate by existing maps… has, to that degree, closed itself off from genuine encounter with what the sacred actually is. Which is always more than any answer, and always stranger than any explanation, and always the kind of thing that exceeds the capacity of its most devoted students to fully comprehend.

The courage to be uncanny is finally the courage to remain in genuine relationship with the not-knowing. To treat the unanswered questions not as deficits to be filled but as open windows through which the strange and sacred air keeps moving.

Closing Practice

Find something ordinary and make it strange.

The hand again, if you like. Or the face of someone you love. Or the room you are sitting in, the building that contains it, the ground beneath the building. Follow the strangeness as far as you can take it. The atoms. The space between the atoms, which is almost all of what the atoms are. The empty space that makes up the solid-seeming world.

Let what is actually strange about your existence be strange. Not for philosophical purposes. Not as a spiritual exercise. But because it is true. Because the world is stranger than you have been giving it credit for. Because that strangeness is a form of grace, available always, free to anyone willing to slow down enough to let it register.

You are strange. You are inexplicable. You are the universe's improbable attempt to know itself through a particular pair of eyes.

Let that be astonishing. It is.

That strangeness is not a threat. It is the truth.

We are strange to each other in ways that are sacred.

One of the most significant failures of intimacy…and I say this from my own experience of failing at it…is the failure of strangeness. We get to know a person and we think we have arrived at them. We have their patterns, their predictabilities, their regular responses. We have a map. And we begin to navigate by the map rather than by the actual territory. We stop being surprised by them. We stop allowing them to surprise us.

And when that happens, we have stopped seeing them.

Because every person is, at the root, inexhaustible. Every person contains more than can be known in a single lifetime of close attention. Every person is strange…genuinely, irreducibly strange…in the sense that they are a unique expression of the divine creativity that has never existed before and will never exist again. And this strangeness is not a problem to be solved. It is a gift to be received.

The mutuality of the uncanny is the recognition that we are all mysteries to each other and that this is good. That the strangeness of the other person is not a threat to the relation ship but a condition for it. That the person who has stopped being strange to you has, to that degree, been reduced…flattened into a version of themselves that fits comfortably into your existing categories.

And the person who has done that reducing has also lost something. Has lost the possibility of being genuinely encountered…of having their own strangeness received with curiosity rather than managed with familiarity.

To live with the courage to be uncanny in relationship is to practice a kind of permanent beginner's mind. To approach

even the most familiar person with the openness that says: I have not yet seen everything you are. Let me keep looking. To resist the comfort of the map and remain willing to be surprised by the actual territory.

The network of mutuality is made more alive by the strangeness of its members. It is the diversity of mysteries…the fact that each person is uncanny in their own unique way…that makes the web capable of responding to situations that no single perspective could have anticipated. The strange and inexhaustible mystery of each person is not a threat to our shared life. It is the source of our shared life's resilience.

Be strange. Receive the strangeness of others. Let the mystery sustain you.

The strangeness that connects us runs deeper than the differ ences that divide us.

I have found, in my ministry among people whose lives are very different from mine…in jails and shelters and hospitals and communities that the comfortable world has written off…that the strangeness of another person is often the doorway to genuine connection. Not in spite of the strangeness but through it. Because when I encounter something in an-

other person that I cannot easily categorize or comprehend, I am forced into a different mode of engagement. I cannot manage the encounter from behind my existing map. I have to put the map down and actually see what is in front of me.

And in that seeing…in the willingness to be genuinely, humbly encountered by someone whose experience of the world is genuinely different from mine…something opens that does not open in more comfortable encounters. A recognition. A shared ground beneath the difference. Not sameness…we are not the same and flattening the difference would be a disservice to both of us. But something more fundamental than sameness: the shared fact of being here. Being alive. Being strange. Being, in our deepest nature, inexhaustible mysteries to ourselves and to each other.

The courage to be uncanny in community is the courage to stay in genuine contact with the people who are most unlike you. Not to make them into mirrors for your own experience. Not to colonize their strangeness with your existing categories. But to let them remain genuinely other…genuinely strange…and to find, in that otherness, the particular gift that only they can offer to the web.

The network of mutuality is not a network of sameness. It is a network of difference in genuine relationship. Its strength comes not from the uniformity of its members but from the diversity of mysteries it holds in connection. The more genuine the diversity…the more fully each person is allowed to be strangely and irreducibly themselves…the more resilient the web.

Be different. Let others be different. Stay in contact anyway. This is the hardest and most necessary practice available to us.

One of the most important things a community can learn to do is sit with not knowing.

Not the performative uncertainty of people who have actually made up their minds. Not the managed ambiguity of institutions that have learned to sound open while remaining closed. But genuine, uncomfortable, productive not-knowing…the willingness to remain in the presence of a question that has not been answered, to resist the pressure to resolve it prematurely into something manageable.

The capacity for genuine not-knowing is, I believe, one of the measures of a community's spiritual maturity. The mature

community does not need to have all the answers. It is secure enough to hold the questions…to let them be live, to let them do their work, to trust that the questions themselves are part of the process of becoming what the community is called to become.

The immature community is frightened of questions. It is organized around the suppression of inquiry…around the maintenance of the official answers against the pressure of genuine experience that keeps producing inconvenient data. This community is also, inevitably, fragile. Because the world keeps producing what the official answers cannot accommodate. And the community that has organized itself around suppressing those questions becomes more fragile with every question suppressed.

The courage to be uncanny, in community, is the courage to welcome the questions. To create the conditions in which genuine inquiry is possible. To resist the comfort of premature resolution in favor of the productive discomfort of staying with what has not yet been answered.

This requires trust. Trust that the web is strong enough to hold the uncertainty. Trust that the community's identity

does not depend on having all the answers. Trust that the genuine encounter with genuine questions…including the ones that challenge the community's existing self-understanding…will make the community more rather than less.

Welcome the questions. Let them be live. Trust the process. The not-knowing is not the enemy of faith. It is, in many cases, the beginning of it.

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Series Three

Book Eighteen

THE COURAGE TO BE FREEDOM

A Lyrical Inquiry into Liberation, Responsibility and the Open Future

This is among the most frightening and the most glorious things that can be said about a human being.

Free not in the shallow sense…not free from consequence, not free from the weight of your history, not free from the claims that love and responsibility place on you. These things are real. Their reality is not a diminishment of your freedom but part of its texture, part of what gives it substance. Freedom without weight is not freedom. It is weightlessness. It is the freedom of the void, which has nothing to choose and nothing to love.

But free in the deep sense: free to choose who you will be in the face of whatever has happened to you. Free to respond rather than merely react. Free to make meaning from what has no inherent meaning. Free to say yes from the depths of yourself and no from the depths of yourself, and to feel the difference between those two kinds of speech.

This freedom is not comfortable. It would be easier if you were not free. If the past simply determined the present, if the circumstances simply operated through you without the terrifying space of choice that opens between what happens to you and what you do with it.

But you are free. And the weight of that freedom falls on you.

Sit with that before we begin. Not to be crushed by it...the weight of freedom is not the weight of punishment. It is the weight of significance. The weight of being the one who matters in this particular and unrepeatable story.

Let this last book open all the others. Let freedom be the word that gathers every word we have spoken into itself.

Freedom is not the absence of constraint.

You live in a body, in a world, in a history, in a web of relationship and obligation and love. These are not the obstacles to your freedom.

They are the conditions of it. Freedom without conditions is not freedom ...it is the pure vacancy of nothing, which has no choices to make because it has nothing to choose between, nothing to love and nothing to lose.

The people who pursue freedom as the elimination of constraint spend their lives in flight. From commitment, from relationship, from the weight of loving anyone deeply enough that their needs make claims on you. They call this freedom. It is not. It is a very expensive form of imprison-

ment…the imprisonment of a self that cannot be in genuine relation without feeling trapped, that cannot commit without feeling the walls close in.

True freedom is not freedom from. It is freedom for.

The freedom to love fully, knowing that genuine love makes you genuinely vulnerable. The freedom to commit to what matters, knowing that commitment forecloses other possibilities and thereby makes the chosen future real. The freedom to be genuinely affected by the people you are with. To let their reality matter to you. To let what is happening to them actually happen to you.

This freedom is not available at a distance. It is not available through managed engagement or strategic withholding. It is available only by arriving…fully, without the parachute already packed…in the life you actually have.

Freedom is what happens when you stop running from your life and start living it.

You did not choose your beginning.

The body you inhabit, the family you were born into, the culture and the language and the history that shaped your most

basic sense of what is real and what is possible…none of this was chosen. You were given a beginning. And that beginning shaped everything.

Some of what was given was gift. Some was wound. Most was probably both.

The work of freedom is not to pretend the wound is not there. Not to perform an escape from your history that you do not actually manage. Not to claim a freedom you have not achieved by refusing to acknowledge the constraints you are still working within.

The freedom available to you is the freedom of genuine engagement with what was given. Of looking clearly at it…the gifts and the wounds and the complicated mixture of both…and choosing, from as much awareness as you can bring, what you will carry forward and what you will set down. What you will pass on and what you will refuse to pass on.

You cannot choose your beginning. You can choose what you make of it.

This choosing…real choosing, from genuine awareness, not the choosing that is simply the momentum of what was given…this is the beginning of freedom. It is the specifically human contribution to the story that began before you and will continue after you.

Every genuine choice costs something.

To choose this is to decline that. To commit here is to close off elsewhere. To say yes to this relationship, this work, this life…is to walk away from all the other relationships and works and lives that were, at some moment, genuinely possible. Choice is always loss as well as gain.

And the person who cannot accept this…who insists on keeping all options open, who commits to nothing so that everything remains available…this person is not free. They are paralyzed. They are living in the anteroom of their own life, waiting for a moment of perfect certainty that will never come.

The grief of the foreclosed possibility is real and must not be dismissed. The other possible selves, the roads genuinely not taken, the lives genuinely not lived…these deserve to be

mourned. Not endlessly. But genuinely, because they were genuinely real.

But this grief is part of the cost of living freely. It is the cost of choosing. And the person who refuses to pay this cost…who chooses nothing in order to avoid the grief of foreclosure…is paying a price infinitely larger: they are paying with their actual life.

Choose. Deliberately. From your deepest self. From the clear center of what you actually are and what you actually value.

Then carry the choice. Own it. Live it.

The courage to choose fully is the beginning of freedom.

The deepest freedom is the freedom to love.

Not the freedom to love when it is convenient, when it is reciprocated, when it costs nothing. But the freedom to love fully, without the guarantee of return, without the security of permanence…because you have found something inside yourself more fundamental than the need for safety.

Freedom and love are not in tension. They are the same thing seen from different angles.

The free person loves freely. Not without discernment…not without the wisdom that knows what deserves love and what does not. But generously. Without the compulsive withholding that passes for self-protection. Without the careful accounting of who has given what.

And love makes free. Not immediately…love is initially binding, initially terrifying, initially the experience of your carefully defended freedom suddenly at risk. But in the long arc of genuine love, you become freer than you were before you loved. Because love dissolves the defended smallness that was the most real constraint on your freedom. Because love shows you that you can be more than you thought you were.

To be free is to love without the insurance policy. To commit without the exit strategy. To open without the guaranteed safety of what happens if the opening is not reciprocated.

This is terrifying.

It is also the only way.

This is among the most liberating and the most demanding things that can be said about a human being. Not finished…not yet fully who you will be, not yet arrived at the

destination of yourself, still in the active process of becoming the person that your life is trying to make of you, if you are willing to be made.

The freedom to become is the freedom to be surprised by yourself. To discover capacities you did not know you possessed. To love in ways you did not know were available to you. To find, in the later chapters of your life, the gifts that the earlier chapters did not know how to use.

To discover, at any age, that the story is not over.

This becoming is not passive. It requires your active participation…

the choice to remain open to transformation, to bring your full capacity to what life is asking of you, to say yes to the growth that is always more uncomfortable than the familiar.

But it is also not entirely within your control. The becoming that is most significant tends to arrive as gift…as the unexpected development, the unplanned encounter, the event you would not have chosen that turned out to be the pivot point on which your whole life turned. The freedom to be-

come includes the freedom to receive what you could not have planned.

Stay open. Resist the temptation to declare yourself finished. The depth of what you are is inexhaustible. The life that is trying to live through you has not yet said everything it has to say.

You are not finished. Let this be the best possible news.

The freedom you exercise occurs in a world full of other people who are also exercising their freedom, also navigating their histories, also trying to find their way through the particular formation they were given toward something more fully their own. Your choices affect them.

Their choices affect you.

This means genuine freedom cannot be pursued in isolation from justice.

The freedom available to you but not to others…that depends on their unfreedom, that is sustained by arrangements that foreclose their possibilities while opening yours…this is not the freedom the human spirit is after. It is the freedom of the beneficiary of an unjust arrangement. Real in the limited

sense that you can exercise it. But without the quality of the freedom that comes from a person living from what they most fundamentally are.

Genuine freedom includes the commitment to the freedom of others. Not as an obligation imposed from outside…not as a duty that constrains your freedom…but as an expression of what genuine freedom is. The person who is truly free does not need to protect their freedom by diminishing someone else's. Their freedom is not threatened by others' freedom. It is deepened by it.

Work for freedom…yours and others'. They are, in the end, the same work.

God. Tangible. Now. Love. Real. Art. Christ. Human. Justice. Here.

Defiant. Beauty. Spirit. Magic. Electric. Fire. Uncanny. Freedom.

Each word a door. Each door opening onto territory the defended, comfortable, managed life tends to avoid…not because the territory is dangerous exactly, but because entering it fully requires something.

Requires presence. Requires honesty. Requires the willingness to be in genuine contact with what is actually real rather than with what is more comfortable to believe.

The courage these books have been asking for is not one courage. It is one root from which eighteen branches grow. The root is this: the willingness to be what you actually are.

Not what would be safer to be. Not what would be more admirable, more approved of, less threatening to those who need you to be smaller. Not what the wound settled for in the absence of anything better. Not what fear constructed to keep you from having to feel the full weight of being alive.

What you actually are.

This is simultaneously the simplest and the most demanding invitation available to a human being. Simple, because it requires no acquisition …everything you need to be what you are, you already have. You simply are it. The question is only whether you will allow it.

Demanding, because being what you are requires the gradual, gentle, patient dismantling of everything you are not. The false selves. The protective performances. The carefully

constructed versions that have served, at various necessary moments, their necessary purpose…and that now stand between you and the life that is trying to be lived through you.

Dismantle them gently. With compassion for the person who built them and the circumstances that made them necessary. With gratitude for what they protected. And with the willingness, when the time comes…and it comes…to let them go.

You were made for something real. You were given a life of singular and irreplaceable particularity. You were placed in a world that needs exactly what you…not the generic version, not the performed version, but the actual, living, struggling, loving, afraid-and-choosing-anyway version…have to offer.

That version is enough. That version is more than enough.

That version is everything.

Closing: The Open Future You have come to the end of this book. But you are not at the end of anything.

The courage to be is not something you complete. It is not a course with a graduation. It is something you practice…every day, in each small choice to be honest rather than safe,

present rather than defended, loving rather than strategic, alive rather than merely functional.

Some days the courage will be fully present and the choice will be clear and you will feel the aliveness available when you are genuinely yourself, living from your actual center, bringing your actual gifts to your actual life. These days are real and should be celebrated.

Some days you will fail. Will contract back into the defended smallness.

Will choose the comfortable lie over the uncomfortable truth. Will be less than what you know you are capable of. These days are also real, and should be acknowledged…honestly, without excessive self-punishment, with the gentleness that is possible when you remember that the failing was always going to be part of the practice.

Both of these belong. The practice is not the achievement of some permanent state of courageous aliveness. It is the returning…again and again, ten thousand times, without judgment and without despair…

This is the paradox of freedom that our culture most consistently gets wrong. We think freedom means independence…the reduction of dependence on others, the expansion of individual autonomy, the ability to live as though we need no one. But this is not freedom. This is the performance of freedom at the cost of the conditions that make freedom real.

The future is open. Not because it is undetermined…much is already given, much is already in motion. But because who you choose to be in the face of what happens genuinely shapes what happens next. Because the specific, irreplaceable thing that you are has not yet said everything it has to say, has not yet given everything it has to give, has not yet become everything it is capable of becoming.

This is your life. No one else can live it. No one else can be you for you. The world that is waiting for what you have to offer has been waiting specifically for you…for the particular combination of gifts and wounds and loves and fears and courage and failure and rising that is yours alone.

Be what you are.

With all the courage you have.

And more than you think you have.

The world is waiting.

Freedom is not the absence of obligation. It is the capacity to choose your obligations from the deepest place in yourself.

And that freedom…that genuine freedom, not the freedom of mere license but the freedom of authentic self-determination…cannot exist in isolation. It can only exist in community. Because the self that chooses freely is a self that has been formed in relationship, supported by relationship and made capable of genuine choice precisely because other people have given it the conditions in which genuine choice became possible.

The network of mutuality is not the enemy of freedom. It is its foundation. The freedom I have…the degree to which I am able to choose who I am and how I live and what I give myself to…is inseparable from the community that formed me, the relationships that sustain me and the shared arrangements that make it possible for me to function at all. Strip those away and what is left is not a freer person. It is a diminished one.

True freedom…the freedom that deserves the name…is the freedom to be genuinely what you are, in the full presence of others who are also genuinely what they are. It is the freedom that comes from being known and knowing, from being accepted and accepting, from belonging to a community that is large enough to hold your full complexity without needing you to be smaller than you are.

This freedom is given and received. I cannot be fully free without contributing to your freedom. My freedom is incomplete while yours is constrained. The mutuality of freedom is total…it extends in every direction, to every person, without exception.

The courage to be freedom, finally, is the courage to work for the conditions of freedom for everyone. To refuse the private enjoyment of liberty while others remain bound. To understand that the web of mutuality in which we all exist means that my freedom is entangled with yours…not as a limitation on mine, but as its completion.

Free yourself. Then refuse to stop until everyone is free. The two are, in the end, the same work.

The freedom I am describing is not something any of us can achieve alone. It is too large. It asks too much. It requires the support of a community that is genuinely committed to the conditions of freedom…not only for its favored members, but for all.

I have come to believe that the most important question a community can ask about itself is not What do we believe? or What are our values? or even What have we accomplished? The most important question is: Who is not yet free among us? Who is still constrained…by poverty, by fear, by the accu mulated weight of what has been done to them and what has been withheld from them…in ways that the community has the capacity to address?

Because freedom is contagious in the same way that alive-ness is contagious. When someone is genuinely free…free in the full sense, free to be what they are and to give what they have and to live from the deepest place in themselves…that freedom creates conditions in which freedom becomes more possible for others. The free person gives permission. The free person shows what is available. The free person widens the circle of the possible for everyone they encounter.

And the opposite is equally true. A community with high levels of unfreedom…in which people are constrained by conditions they did not choose and cannot escape alone…is a community in which everyone's freedom is diminished. Not only the freedom of those who are most directly constrained, but the freedom of everyone who is part of the web. Because the web cannot carry freedom in one place while it is torn in another. The tearing diminishes the whole.

This is the final thing I want to say about the network of mutuality, the thing that all eighteen of these words have been pointing toward: we are responsible for each other's freedom. Not in the sense of controlling each other's choices…freedom cannot be given from the outside, only from the inside. But in the sense of creating the conditions in which genuine freedom becomes possible. In the sense of tending the web so that it can hold everyone's weight without breaking.

The eighteen words of this work…God, Tangible, Now, Love, Real, Art, Christ, Human, Justice, Here, Defiant, Beauty, Spirit, Magic, Electric, Fire, Uncanny, Freedom…each one is a door. Each one opens onto territory where genuine freedom is possible. Where the defended, managed, performed

life can be set down. Where something more real can be taken up.

The courage to be free is the courage to walk through the door and to hold it open for everyone behind you.

We are woven together. All of us. Without exception. And the freedom of each of us is the work of all of us.

This is the theology I have been trying to live. It is, I believe, the theology the world most needs.

The future is not determined.

This is the most important thing I know. More important than any theological proposition, more important than any ethical framework, more important than any political analysis of the current moment, as grim as that analysis may sometimes be. The future is not determined. What happens next is genuinely open. And what we do now…what you do, what I do, what we do together…genuinely shapes what becomes possible.

I cling to this not as wishful thinking. I cling to it because the alternative…the belief that the future is fixed, that the forces that currently shape our world will inevitably continue to

shape it, that the freedom we reach for is illusory…this alternative is, quite simply, a form of despair. And despair, for all its apparent sophistication, is not honest. It is not honest because it claims to know what cannot be known: how the story ends.

No one knows how the story ends. History has repeatedly shown that what seemed inevitable was not inevitable. That arrangements that appeared permanent were not permanent. That the arc does bend…slowly, unpredictably, at great cost to those who bend it…but it bends.

The courage to be free is the courage to act from this recogni tion. To contribute to the bending. To do what you can do, in the circumstances you actually inhabit, with the resources actually available to you…not the ideal resources, not the perfect circumstances, but these ones, now, here.

And to trust that your contribution matters. That the web is real. That what you add to it or subtract from it has effects that you cannot trace or measure but that are real nonetheless. That the love you practice, the truth you tell, the justice you work for, the beauty you attend to and create, the alive-

ness you bring and tend…all of this matters. All of this is part of the fabric from which the future will be woven.

The future is open. The web is real. The work is ours.

Go do it.

✦ ✦ ✦

After the Eighteen Words

You have now passed through all eighteen.

I want to say something about what it means to have made this journey…to have spent this time in this territory, moving through these words and these questions and these invitations. Not what you are obligated to take away. Not the lesson, neatly packaged. But what I have come to believe about the kind of person who reads books like this one.

You are someone who suspects there is more available than what most people are getting. You are someone who has felt, in various moments of your life, the difference between the managed existence and the fully inhabited one…who has tasted enough of the real thing to know the difference between it and the performance. You are someone who is not satisfied with the comfortable distance. Who wants actual contact with what is actually here.

These books were written for you. Not because you are special in any way that others are not. But because you are willing. And willingness…the simple, stubborn, recurring will-

ingness to show up to your life with more of yourself than safety requires…is the beginning of everything.

You have encountered eighteen words. You have passed through eighteen doors. The question that remains is not a theological one, not a philosophical one, not a question that can be answered by reading another book.

The question is what you do tomorrow morning. What you say to the person across from you. What you refuse and what you commit to and what you show up for. How much of your self you bring to the life that is actually yours.

That is the question. It has been the question all along.

Go answer it.

The twelve books you have just completed form, together with the six that preceded them, a map of what the courageous life looks like. Not a perfect map…maps are always simplifications, and the territory always exceeds what any representation can capture. But a map that points at something real. At a way of being in the world that is more fully alive, more honestly engaged, more genuinely responsible to the web of relationship in which we all exist.

What the eighteen books together argue is that the spiritual life and the ethical life and the political life are not separate projects. They are aspects of a single project: the project of becoming fully what you are, in full relationship with everything else that exists. The person who is genuinely committed to the inner life will inevitably be led toward justice. The person who is genuinely committed to justice will inevitably discover that the inner life is part of the work. The person who loves genuinely will eventually confront the structural arrangements that make love impossible for those who lack their particular set of privileges. And the person who takes those structures seriously will eventually discover that the inner transformation of the persons who constitute the structures is as necessary as the structural change itself.

It is all one work. Eighteen words for one work.

The next section…the Conclusion to the Volume…will say what I want to say after all of that. For now: you have done the reading. The harder and more important work begins in the living.

Turn the page. Or close the book and begin.

✦ ✦ ✦

After the Last Word

You have come to the end. But I want to tell you what I believe about endings, which is that they are not what they appear to be.

The end of a book is not the end of the conversation the book began. The conversation continues in you…in the ways these words have settled into you, in the questions they have opened that have not yet been answered, in the territory they have pointed toward that you have only begun to enter. The book closes. The inquiry does not.

I want to say something about what I hope you have found in these pages. Not what I intended…intention is a minor thing compared to what actually arrives. But what I hope.

I hope you found courage. Not the courage of the heroic…the dramatic refusal, the public stand, the sacrifice that earns admiration. Those are real, and they matter. But I hope more than that you found the ordinary courage…the courage to get up in the morning and be who you actually are rather than who the world expects you to be. The courage to love the peo ple in front of you with genuine attention rather than with

the managed performance of love. The courage to say what you actually think, to name what you actually see, to live from what you actually believe rather than from what is safer to appear to believe.

This ordinary courage is the most important kind. It is the kind that changes things over time. It is the kind that the world most needs from each of us…not the spectacular gesture but the sustained orientation toward what is real and true and worth being committed to.

I hope you found connection. The eighteen words in these books are not separate territories. They interpenetrate. The person who has the courage to be God has, to some degree, the courage to be human…because the recognition of the divine in the self opens into the recognition of the divine in others, and from there into the obligation to create conditions in which others can flourish. The person who has the courage to be real has, to some degree, the courage to be defi ant…because honesty, taken seriously, will eventually require you to refuse the performance. The words are aspects of a single courage, seen from different angles.

And the courage…all of it, in all its forms…is finally about this: the vast network of mutuality in which we all live and which most of us inhabit only partially. We are more connected than we know. We are more responsible for each other than we have been willing to acknowledge. We are more capable of genuine encounter…of the kind of relationship in which another person is actually seen and actually received and actually allowed to matter…than our defended ordinary lives would suggest.

The courage these books have been about is the courage to live from that connection. To refuse the comfortable isolation of the managed self. To keep saying yes to the world and to the people in it, even when the yes is costly, even when it asks more than you thought you had.

What Comes After

You have read eighteen books. Or parts of eighteen books. Or one book that moved you, and glimpses of the others. Whatever the shape of your encounter with these pages, something has been offered and something has been received.

What comes after is not more reading. What comes after is the living.

Go back to your actual life…the specific, irreplaceable, unrepeatable life that is yours and no one else's. The relationships that are waiting for more of you than you have been giving them. The work that needs your actual gifts rather than the managed version of your gifts. The community that needs your presence, your honesty, your willingness to be defiant when defiance is called for and tender when tenderness is called for and present when presence is the only thing that can help.

Take what served you from these pages and leave what did not. Take the questions that opened something in you and live with them. Let them be productive disturbances in the comfortable arrangements you have made with your life. Let them call you toward what you are capable of but have not yet claimed.

And return, whenever you need to. These books will be here. The words will wait. And the courage…the courage to be God, to be tangible, to be now, to be love, to be real, to be art, to be Christ, to be human, to be justice, to be here, to be defiant, to be beauty, to be spirit, to be magic, to be electric, to be fire, to be uncanny, to be free…this courage will be here too. It is not

something you acquire once. It is something you choose, again and again, every day.

Choose it.

The world is waiting.

✦ ✦ ✦

CONCLUSION

Tomorrow Morning

Hood ends Theosemantics twice. After the eighteenth word, he tells the reader that the question left is what happens tomorrow morning. Then, in a last section, he says endings are not what they appear to be.

Seventeen works now stand in the Omnibus. Sixteen of them point at something: a hospital room, a ballot, a barn, an execution. The seventeenth points at the reader.

He does not ask for agreement. Take what served you, he writes, leave what did not. He asks for one thing: the courage of a person who is afraid and acts anyway, chosen again each day.

The book closes on a short sentence. The world is waiting.

— The Editors