GOD IN THE FLAMES

A Modern Spiritual History of Self-Immolation

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Jeff Hood

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Introduction

The Grammar of Fire

There is a particular silence that settles over a person who has stood at the edge of another's dying. It is not the silence of emptiness. It is the silence of excess...of having seen and heard and felt more than language can ordinarily carry. This book is written from somewhere near that silence. It is an attempt to speak across the threshold that fire makes between the world we inhabit and the world we sense burning beneath it.

The figures gathered in these pages each set themselves on fire in public. Each did so with deliberate intention. Each left behind a world altered by the fact of their burning. They span a century of human history...from a Vietnamese monk sitting still in a Saigon intersection in 1963 to a Tunisian street vendor whose act of desperation in 2010 set an entire region of the world ablaze; from American Quakers and Catholic Workers who burned outside the Pentagon and the United Nations, to climate scientists and activists who offered their bodies in grief for a dying planet. What they shared was a conviction so total, so absolute, that the body became its only available vessel.

This book does not explain them away. It does not pathologize them or transform them into cautionary figures or smooth their sharp edges into something comfortable. What it attempts, instead, is to enter their lives and their moments with the full weight of historical, theological and spiritual seriousness...and then to walk through those moments with reverence.

We use the language of God in these pages, not the language of any single religion's exclusive claims. The Sacred is too large for any one tradition's custody. The figures in this book came from Buddhism, from the Society of Friends, from Roman Catholicism, from Protestant Christianity, from Islam, from secular humanism, from a love of the Earth itself. What they all touched, in the moment of the flame,

was the same ground. We call that ground God...not as a theological argument, but as an act of reverence toward a force that exceeds all our naming.

How to Read This Book

Each chapter is devoted to one person. You will find, for each of them: the historical account of who they were and what they did and why; a theological and spiritual reflection on the meaning of their act; and finally, a contemplative vision...a piece of visional writing that invites you to enter their story as a participant rather than a spectator.

Read slowly. The chapters are written to be inhabited, not consumed. Allow yourself to be troubled. Allow yourself to be moved. These are not comfortable stories, but they are luminous ones. The beauty in them is real and it will find you if you give it time.

The world has always had its fire. And in every fire, if we look carefully enough, the Eternal is present...not as a cause or a comfort, but as a witness, a companion and the deepest truth about what love can do when it has run out of other words.

God is in the flames. That is the claim this book makes. Not as a slogan. As a discovery.

PART ONE

The Spark: Vietnam

1963

Chapter One

Thích Quảng Đức

The Burning Monk and the Crisis of Conscience

Who He Was

Thích Quảng Đức was born in 1897 in the province of Khánh Hòa, in what was then French Indochina. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk at the age of fifteen, studying under his uncle and spent the following decades in intensive practice and teaching. By the time he was in his sixties, he had become one of the most respected figures in Vietnamese Buddhist life...a man known for his scholarship, his compassion and his unshakeable stillness.

He lived through the full weight of what the twentieth century brought to Vietnam: French colonial rule, Japanese occupation, the war of independence, the partition of the country and then the regime of Ngô Đình Diệm, a devout Catholic who governed South Vietnam with authoritarian intensity and a systematic preference for Catholics over the Buddhist majority. Temples were taxed and raided. Monks were arrested. Catholic priests organized militias that attacked Buddhist villages. The country was formally consecrated to the Virgin Mary.

The crisis that precipitated Thích Quảng Đức's act began in May 1963, when government forces fired on a crowd gathered in Huế to celebrate the birthday of Gautama Buddha, killing nine people. The government denied responsibility and intensified the repression. Buddhist leaders demanded redress. Diệm's sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, made contemptuous public statements dismissing Buddhist protests, calling the monks' suffering a "barbecue" and offering to provide the fuel for the next one.

What He Did

On the morning of June 11, 1963, Thích Quảng Đức rode in a small blue sedan to the intersection of Phan Đình Phùng Boulevard and Lê Văn Duyết Street in Saigon. He was accompanied by hundreds of monks and nuns. He sat in the lotus position on a cushion placed in the middle of the intersection. Two fellow monks poured gasoline over him. He struck a match and dropped it into his lap.

He did not move. He did not cry out. He sat in absolute stillness as the flames consumed him and around him the monks and nuns chanted and wept. The American photographer Malcolm Browne captured the image and within hours it had circulated around the world. President Kennedy reportedly said that no news picture in history had generated so much emotion worldwide.

The Diệm government's response...intensifying repression rather than negotiating...contributed to its overthrow. Diệm was assassinated later that year. But Thích Quảng Đức's act had already changed something larger than one government. It had shown the world what absolute conviction looks like in a human body. It had planted a seed.

What It Means

Within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that shaped Thích Quảng Đức's practice, the offering of the body in service of others represents the bodhisattva ideal carried to its ultimate expression. A bodhisattva is one who has vowed to remain present in the world until all beings are liberated, forgoing personal ease out of compassion for others. The Lotus Sutra...one of the central texts of Mahayana Buddhism...describes bodhisattvas offering their bodies as lamps, burning themselves in supreme acts of devotion and compassion.

Thích Quảng Đức's stillness during the burning was itself a teaching. It demonstrated the power of meditative practice to hold the self in equanimity before the most extreme suffering. The act was not desperation. It was deliberate, composed, consecrated intention. He had filled his body, as he said, with the fire of the dharma. He was not being destroyed. He was being offered.

The prophetic traditions of the world's religions have always understood that the body is the prophet's primary instrument. Words can be ignored. Marches can be dispersed. But a human being sitting still in the middle of a burning intersection...that cannot be dismissed. The Sacred was present in his stillness, in his fire, in his silence.

God is in the flames. This is where the claim begins: with a monk in a lotus position, not moving, not screaming, choosing love over survival at the center of a Saigon intersection. The world has never fully recovered from the sight.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức self-immolated on June 11, 1963, at a busy Saigon intersection, in protest of the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. As you read these words, allow yourself to go there. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in stillness, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement. Sometimes this is the nature of following the Sacred.

The eyes opened. High in the mountains, a group of Buddhist monks sat in meditation. The Eternal joined them.

Join us.

Sitting down, everything slowly went up in smoke. Then there was only the Sacred and one Buddhist monk, together in the silence.

Listen. Follow us.

The higher we traveled, the more was visible. Time and space stopped. An ancient people appeared below...marginalized, oppressed. The Sacred and the monk led the way into the middle of it.

Colonialism had touched the entire world. Vietnam was no different. The French had staked their claim and ruled with an iron fist. Buddhism was pushed to the fringes. If you wanted to belong to society, you converted. If you refused, you did not matter.

There were children screaming, people running, fire shooting into the sky. Bodies in the ditches. Villages decimated. Buddhist monks arrested and tortured. And in the churches...celebrations of the fruits of exploitation.

None of this was of God.

Together there was weeping. Then, pressing forward against the resistance, the monk and the Eternal led on. Ordinary people praying together in a desperate gathering, hoping to end the oppression...and then the authorities arriving to break it up.

The world went to war. Even France burned. Pain had no borders. Then the monk and the Eternal returned to Vietnam. From a great height, a charismatic figure declared an independent republic. Hundreds of thousands cheered. The French responded with brute force. Nations watched the destruction from a safe distance. The Vietnamese people were left to suffer.

When a ceasefire came, it did not bring peace. Vietnam was divided. In the South, Ngô Đình Diệm continued every oppressive pattern the French had established. Dissidents were executed. Buddhists were particularly targeted.

Then the birthday of Gautama Buddha arrived. The government forbade Buddhist flags. Protestors marched in defiance. Gunshots. Bodies bleeding in the street. The government grew more murderous.

Your time has not yet come.

Hundreds of monks and nuns followed a small blue sedan to an intersection in Saigon. The monk exited the car. Two young monks placed a cushion. He sat. Over his head, gallons of gasoline were poured. He sat still. He prayed with beads. Then, quietly, he struck a match and dropped it into his lap.

Greater love has no one than this.

Flames shot into the sky. The monk sat in absolute stillness. The world was bewildered. The Eternal and the practitioner joined him in the flames. They were now one. They were love. They were eternal. They were God.

Everything changed in an instant. Justice was closer now. The flames had touched the world. On the back of those flames, they rose into the highest heavens. There was peace. From deep within, the assurance came: there are many paths to this place. God was in everyone. God was. God is. God.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART TWO

The American Pacifists: Quakers and Catholics

1965

Chapter Two

Alice Herz

The Elder's Fire and the Witness of a Life

Who She Was

Alice Herz was eighty-two years old when she set herself on fire on a street corner in Detroit on March 16, 1965. She was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1882...into a Jewish family, educated and politically engaged from an early age. She came of age in the intellectual ferment of Wilhelmine Germany, developing commitments to peace, to justice and to the rights of working people that would organize the rest of her life.

She fled Germany in 1933, the year Hitler came to power and made her way eventually to the United States, settling in Detroit, where she became a Quaker. The Society of Friends' tradition of peace witness...its refusal of war service, its insistence on the direct relationship between the individual and the divine without the mediation of clergy or creed, its commitment to speaking truth to power from a place of interior spiritual authority...aligned precisely with the convictions that had shaped her entire life.

Over the following decades, Herz was tireless. She wrote and circulated petitions against nuclear weapons testing, corresponded with public officials about American military policy, organized local events and demonstrations and maintained a voluminous correspondence with peace activists around the world. She had done, by the time she chose fire, everything that a private citizen can do. The world had not listened.

What She Did

In early 1965, the Johnson administration authorized Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing campaign that would eventually drop more ordnance on North Vietnam than the entire Allied bombing campaign of the Second World War. Villages were destroyed. People were incinerated. The gap between the stated American commitment to freedom and the reality of what American military power was doing to the Vietnamese people was, to Herz, unbridgeable.

She was the first American to self-immolate in protest against the Vietnam War. She went to a street corner near Wayne State University in Detroit, poured cleaning fluid over herself and set herself on fire. She survived the immediate act, lingering for ten days in the hospital before dying on March 26. In the statements she left, she invoked the Buddhist tradition directly, making explicit the connection between her act and the tradition that Thích Quảng Đức had begun nearly two years earlier.

Her final words were these: “God is not mocked.” She was eighty-two years old. She had tried everything else.

What It Means

Alice Herz presents a figure whose self-immolation cannot be understood apart from the arc of an entire life. She was not a young person acting in the intensity of early conviction. She was an eighty-two-year-old woman whose lifetime of deliberate, methodical, principled activism had arrived at a point of terminal seriousness.

The Quaker tradition speaks of being ‘led’…of arriving at a certainty about a course of action that is so thorough, so deep in the spirit, that it overrides the usual calculations of prudence and self-preservation. This is not enthusiasm or emotion. It is discernment: a long, careful, prayerful process of listening to what the Spirit requires. That Herz had arrived at her act through this kind of discernment seems beyond serious question. She had spent decades attending to every available channel of witness. She had not arrived at fire quickly.

She was also a Jewish woman, shaped by a tradition that insists on the ethical seriousness of the present moment...on tzedakah, justice, righteousness...as an obligation that does not expire. Her body, in those final days in Detroit, was her final available word on the subject. It was the word she had earned the right to speak through eighty-two years of living.

God is not mocked. She was right. The Sacred does not look away when the powerful destroy the powerless. And when an eighty-two-year-old woman offers her body to call that truth to account, the Sacred is in the flames she makes.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

On March 16, 1965, in Detroit, eighty-two-year-old Quaker peace activist Alice Herz became the first American to self-immolate in protest against the Vietnam War. She lingered ten days before dying. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

In the distance, a woman and her child were fleeing terrible oppression. The instinct was to pull her to safety. But she was pulling us toward her. For years, or perhaps only seconds, she drew us through her life. She demanded that we see.

Through her tears she found a way out. She grabbed her daughter and fled. Then there were factories, large buildings, horns blowing, the world spinning. And there she was, writing letter after letter demanding peace. Planning action after action. Making statement after statement. Giving everything she had. Nothing changed. She knew it too.

The groanings of her heart rose to the heavens.

The Eternal heard them all. Then the Eternal took her hand and they became one. She was not afraid.

> *""I've mailed countless letters. I've written countless articles. I've marched countless steps. I've spoken countless words. I've protested countless times. What else can I do?"*

I am here. This is my path. I won't look back.

With fierce determination she picked up the container. The contents dripped down her face.

> *""Quit wiping out whole nations of your choosing. No more war. Stop the oppression. Make this a habitable world for all human beings. Get out of Vietnam. Now is the time for dignity and peace."*

Then the flames shot to the sky. We joined her. In her flaming body, we met all who had gone before...those who had justly chosen to give their bodies to the flames. Before we knew it, the flames were out. The mortal body of the woman lay on the concrete, somewhere between life and death. Her clothes were still smoldering.

She lingered just long enough. At her bedside, the Eternal held her hand. Then it was time for her to come home. She joined the great saints. Light perpetual shone through her.

Her final words echoed: God is not mocked.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Three

Norman Morrison

Fire beneath the Pentagon

Who He Was

Norman Morrison was thirty-one years old when he drove to the Pentagon on November 2, 1965, with his infant daughter Emily and a can of kerosene. He was a Baltimore Quaker, a graduate of the College of Wooster in Ohio and Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh and the executive secretary of the Stony Run Friends Meeting. He was a father, a husband and a man who had been absorbing, with increasing anguish, the reports coming from Vietnam.

He had been particularly affected by a report in the Catholic magazine Ramparts that described, with unflinching specificity, the experience of a French priest named Yves Quéguiner who had witnessed American air attacks on Vietnamese civilian populations. The priest described napalm...the jellied incendiary compound that adheres to skin as it burns...being dropped on villages. Children had been burned. The priest described the sounds and the smells and the impossibility of helping the people who were on fire. Morrison had read this account and could not set it down.

What He Did

He drove to the Pentagon on a Monday afternoon and positioned himself beneath the window of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. He held his infant daughter Emily in his arms. At some point before he set himself on fire, he placed Emily in the arms of a bystander. The child survived, unharmed. Morrison was engulfed in flames and died within minutes. He was thirty-one years old.

The response in the United States was muted. But in Vietnam, it was extraordinary. Morrison became a national hero in North Vietnam. Streets were named for him. Postage stamps were issued bearing his image. The Vietnamese poet Tố Hữu wrote

a poem about him that became famous throughout the country. For the Vietnamese people, Morrison...an American, a Christian, a family man...had chosen to die in solidarity with them and that choice was received as a gift of incalculable weight.

What It Means

The Society of Friends holds that there is something of God in every person...what early Quakers called the Inner Light, the Seed of God, the Spirit that lives in every human being. The Inner Light is the guide for action and when it speaks with clarity and conviction, it is to be followed, even at cost. Morrison had followed the Inner Light to the Pentagon. The journey was not impulsive. It was the culmination of a long process of discernment.

The presence of his infant daughter Emily has troubled commentators ever since. Whether he intended her to be near the flames, whether releasing her to a stranger was a last-moment reversal...these questions cannot be resolved. What can be said is that he loved her, that he was not a reckless person and that the image of the father holding the daughter before the fire has remained, in its way, as disturbing and as luminous as the burning monk. The father who gives himself so that others' children might live is an ancient image. It belongs to every tradition.

Morrison's act did not stop the war. The Secretary of Defense above whose window he burned would later, in his memoir, describe his own anguish at what the war was doing. But what Morrison's act did was to place in the human record an undeniable declaration: that an American, a Christian, a father, had looked at what his country was doing and could not live with it. That truth is still there. The Sacred bore witness to it with him.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read

Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Baltimore Quaker Norman Morrison self-immolated on November 2, 1965, outside the Pentagon, beneath the window of the Secretary of Defense. He was thirty-one years old. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

In the distance, a man meditating with his baby daughter. They were waiting to hear something. The invitation came: go, become one with them. So we sat in the circle, closed our eyes and listened. Time stopped.

Then, out of nowhere, bombs exploded. The man and his baby daughter stood amidst the horror. Everyone was on fire. The bombs grew closer. There was no running. Then death came straight toward us. In a million pieces, unable to gather together. Deader than dead.

The only thing to do was sit in the pain and wait. Somewhere between time and timelessness, the pieces began coming back together. The man and his daughter gathered every single one. Alive again...but still changed from all that had been seen.

In the distance, a man at a desk, in deep anguish but deeply determined. The bombs, the shrieks of horror, the scenes of death played out again and again above his head. Every word he wrote was accentuated by their blood. And yet love flowed from his fingertips. He was writing a love letter...to his family, but also a proclamation for all of humanity.

The presence of the Eternal entered his body. There was no turning back. There was only now.

Oxygen flooded the nostrils. A baby breathing. A father breathing. The world flew by the window. The totality of pain was palpable.

The car stopped. The journey was over. The journey was just beginning.

Looking up, a figure watching from on high. Then light. Then greater light. Then light shooting from his entire body, transforming everything.

Alone in the same place as before, crying out in deep anguish: Why have you forsaken me? Then peace washed over. From deep within, a voice...then a symphony of voices:

Arise. Let us take this light to the world.

God was us and we were God. The light was us and we were the light.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went... and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Four

Roger Allen LaPorte

The Catholic Worker and the Fire of Conscience

Who He Was

Roger Allen LaPorte was twenty-two years old when he set himself on fire in front of the United Nations building in New York City on November 9, 1965...just one week after Norman Morrison burned outside the Pentagon. He was a member of the Catholic Worker movement, a young man of intense spiritual seriousness who had left a seminary, concluding that his vocation lay not in the institutional church but in the radical Catholic witness of the streets.

He had come to the Catholic Worker house in New York through the same path that many young people of his generation were finding...drawn by the combination of deep Catholic piety, commitment to the poor and uncompromising opposition to war that Dorothy Day had embodied since founding the movement in 1933. The Catholic Worker was not pacifist by accident. Its pacifism was rooted in the conviction that war is fundamentally incompatible with the Gospel's demand for love of neighbor.

LaPorte had been formed in this tradition. He had read Day. He had prayed with the community. He had served the poor. He had participated in protests against the war. And he had watched, week by week, as the escalation continued. He had also been deeply moved by Norman Morrison's act the week before. Morrison had shown that this kind of witness was possible.

What He Did

In the early hours of November 9, LaPorte made his way to the United Nations building and set himself on fire in front of it. He was still alive when emergency services arrived and was transported to Bellevue Hospital, where he lingered for thirty-three hours before dying. In the hospital, he told a nurse that he was a

Catholic Worker and that he was doing what he was doing to show his opposition to war.

Thomas Merton, who was at the Abbey of Gethsemani when LaPorte died, wrestled with the meaning of the act in a way that illuminates its complexity. Merton had been one of the most important American Catholic voices against the Vietnam War. He honored the spirit of what LaPorte had done, while also expressing his own troubled sense that the tradition of Christian nonviolence pointed toward living witness rather than dying witness. Both things could be true simultaneously.

Dorothy Day's response was also complicated. She feared his act would alienate more people than it reached. But she also recognized something she could not dismiss. She wrote that the young people who were willing to lay down their lives, who understood themselves as responsible for the world's condition, who refused to accept that things had to go on as they always had...these people were doing something the church needed to reckon with honestly.

What It Means

LaPorte was twenty-two years old. He stood in front of the institution that was ostensibly dedicated to the prevention of exactly the kind of war that was consuming Vietnam. He was saying, with his body, that the lives being taken in Vietnam were worth more than his own continued existence in comfortable complicity. This is an ancient theological claim: that some truths are worth dying for.

The Catholic tradition has always honored the martyr...the one who witnesses to truth by the shedding of blood, whose death is a form of speech. LaPorte's speech was this: that the war was wrong, that the church bore responsibility for remaining silent and that the conscience of a twenty-two-year-old young man was more reliable than the strategic calculations of governments. He was not confused about this. He was clear.

The Sacred was present in that clarity. The Sacred is always present where a human being risks everything for truth. The fire in front of the United Nations was also a fire that God stood beside...not approving the loss of a young life, but honoring the love that drove the young man to make it.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Catholic Worker Roger Allen LaPorte self-immolated in front of the United Nations building in New York City on November 9, 1965. He was twenty-two years old. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

In the corner, a man deep in study. Every word he thought was a prayer. Every word he read was a prayer. Every word he spoke was a prayer. He was alone. He wanted so much more than solitude. The Eternal grabbed his hand.

Let's go.

The man was learning to pray with his feet. So were we. Then there was a house full of people, the world changing, ideas bouncing off every wall. And then the war came up. Images of burning children. Images of ransacked villages. Images the mind could not shake.

The man saw the burning monk in Vietnam. He knew exactly what he needed to do.

These are my people.

A huge crowd, chanting slogans against the war. The fire burning within him. His desperation visible.

He walked up the steps. We joined him. He lifted the gas can above his head. He struck a match. The fire burned with great intensity. We were ready to go. Then the fire went out. The man was still alive. We were still alive.

I am against war, all wars.

The man was rushed to the hospital. We lay with him. The pain was immense. The suffering of the innocent was ever present.

Death was near. The room grew colder and colder. Then singing in the hallway. This little light of mine. We ascended from the hospital together. The singing took us higher and higher. Down below, the Eternal left a light. The light of the man still burns. The fire will never die.

And then these words, spoken in response by one who had devoted her life to the poor and to peace:

> *"They have a keen sense that they must be responsible and make a profession of their faith that things do not have to go on as they always have...that human beings are capable of laying down their lives for others, taking a stand, even when the all-encroaching State and indeed all the world are against them."*

...Dorothy Day

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART THREE

The Vietnamese Peace Movement

1967

Chapter Five

Nhất Chi Mai

The Torch That Dissipates the Dark

Who She Was

Nhất Chi Mai was born in South Vietnam in 1934. She became a teacher, a social worker, a poet and a Buddhist nun. She was an exceptional student who had been educated in both Vietnamese Buddhist traditions and the French colonial school system and she devoted herself especially to the welfare of orphaned children and students displaced by the war that was consuming her country.

She worked closely with Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Buddhist monk and writer who was developing the concept of “engaged Buddhism”...a practice that does not retreat from the world into quiet contemplation but brings Buddhist compassion directly into contact with social and political suffering. She was among the founding members of the Order of Interbeing, a community of practitioners committed to bringing their practice into the streets.

By 1967, the war had reached a new intensity. The bombing campaigns, the counter-insurgency operations, the displacement of civilian populations...all of it was accelerating. Nhất Chi Mai had been watching, from within the communities she served, what the war was doing to human beings. She had decided, after long preparation, that the only act commensurate with what she had witnessed was the offering of her own body.

What She Did

On May 16, 1967, she came to the Tu Nghiêm Pagoda in Saigon. She placed before herself two statues...one of the Virgin Mary and one of Quan Âm, the Buddhist

bodhisattva of compassion...and surrounded herself with letters and writings she had prepared in the days before. She then set herself on fire.

She was the first woman to self-immolate in the Vietnamese peace movement. Her writings described her body as a torch offered to dissipate the darkness, to awaken love among all people, to give peace to Vietnam. She called simultaneously on the leaders of South Vietnam, the United States and North Vietnam to come to the negotiating table. Her act was not an act of despair. It was an act of luminous, deliberate, sacrificial love.

What It Means

Nhất Chi Mai stood between the figures of Mary and Quan Âm as a deliberate act of interreligious witness. She was not asserting the superiority of one tradition over another. She was claiming that compassion is the ground beneath every tradition and that she was standing on that ground.

Quan Âm means 'one who listens to the sounds of the world.' Nhất Chi Mai had spent her life listening...to the cries of orphaned children, the moaning of the wounded, the silence of the dead. Her immolation was her response to what she had heard. She could no longer only listen. She had to become, in some sense, part of the answering.

Her image of the body as a torch to dissipate the dark is not merely poetic. It is a claim about the nature of the act: that the burning is not destruction but illumination. That the darkness of war can be met by a light of sufficient intensity to change the quality of the world. God was present in that light. God is still present in it.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read

Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Vietnamese Buddhist nun Nhất Chi Mai self-immolated on May 16, 1967, in front of the Tu Nghiêm Pagoda in Saigon. She was the first woman to make this offering in the Vietnamese peace movement. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a woman in an orphanage. There: students crowded around her, loved beyond love. She was telling them they could change the world. This was no ordinary teacher. This was a sage. Love flowed.

Then a room filled with candles. The woman chanted prayers. Then six women joined her. The Sacred was among them. They gave themselves to the people. They became the incarnation of love, of justice.

The woman began to write.

> *""I offer my body as a torch… to dissipate the dark… to awaken love among all people… to give peace to Vietnam."*

Her words rippled throughout the world. Then the departure came. The Sacred in front. The Buddha there too. She marched upward. Divinity bowed to the holiness of the moment. As she chanted words of life, she struck a match. Flames went in every direction.

Following the Sacred, we joined her. As her chants rose to the heavens, so did we. In those moments, the certainty came that peace would come. She told us so.

Now she is a torch that can light up the soul, that can light up our tomorrows.

Her face remains. She stays to guide the way.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART FOUR

The Iron Curtain Burns: Eastern Europe

1968–1970

Chapter Six

Ryszard Siwiec

The First Flame Against the Curtain

Who He Was

Ryszard Siwiec was born in 1909 in Poland and he lived through nearly everything the twentieth century could do to a person in Central Europe: he survived the Nazi occupation of his country, he fought in the Polish Home Army during the Second World War and then he lived through the installation of a Soviet-aligned communist government that replaced one form of totalitarianism with another. He was an accountant, a father of five children, a man of deep Catholic faith and a person who had spent his adult life watching his country be controlled by forces that had no interest in the genuine freedom of its people.

By 1968, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia...in which Soviet and allied troops, including Polish forces, crushed the Prague Spring, the brief period of democratic reform that Alexander Dubčäk had initiated...was the event that broke something open in Siwiec. He had written extensively about his anguish and his conviction that the Polish people, his people, were being made complicit in a terrible crime. He had tried every available form of protest.

What He Did

On September 8, 1968, Ryszard Siwiec set himself on fire at a harvest festival in Warsaw's Tenth-Anniversary Stadium, in full view of a crowd of approximately one hundred thousand people, including many government officials. He was fifty-nine years old. He had come to the stadium wearing a sign with words protesting the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He had poured flammable liquid over himself

beforehand. As the harvest celebration proceeded around him, he lit himself on fire, shouting his protest before the flames overcame him.

He died four days later from his injuries. The communist government suppressed all news of his act. His family was pressured into silence. His name disappeared from public consciousness within Poland for decades. It was only after the fall of communism that his story emerged, documented in a film made by a Polish director who had known him. He has since been recognized as one of the earliest and most courageous acts of protest against Soviet totalitarianism in European history.

What It Means

Siwiec acted in isolation. He had no movement to support him, no tradition of contemporary immolation that he was consciously invoking in the way that the Americans in 1965 had invoked Thích Quảng Đức. He arrived at the decision through his own faith, his own conscience and his own clear-eyed understanding of what was being done to his country and to the people of Czechoslovakia. This is the prophetic tradition in its most solitary form: one person, one conscience, one body, one fire.

He chose a public harvest celebration...a moment of official national festivity...as the site of his act. The contrast was intentional. The regime was celebrating. He was mourning. The harvest was being offered as a sign of the system's success. He offered his body as a sign of its cost.

For decades, the regime was able to make him invisible. This is what authoritarian systems do: they suppress the witnesses, erase the evidence, silence the families. But the Sacred does not forget. The truth that Siwiec spoke with his body was not erased by the government's silence. It waited. And when the wall came down, when the curtain lifted, there he was...still burning, still speaking, still refusing to be silenced. God was in the flames he made, even when no one was allowed to see.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Polish accountant and father of five Ryszard Siwiec set himself on fire at a harvest festival in Warsaw on September 8, 1968, in protest of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. He was fifty-nine years old. His act was suppressed for decades. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don’t recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a country that had already died twice and was being asked to die again. Flags of false celebration everywhere. A harvest festival. The music too loud. The smiles too official. And among the crowd, one man who could not smile.

The Eternal took us to his side. We saw his hands shaking as he fastened the sign to his coat. We saw his lips moving in prayer. He was a husband, a father. He had kissed them goodbye without telling them why.

The speeches continued. The officials took their seats. The crowd sang. And then he poured the liquid over himself, there in the middle of the celebration. There in the middle of the lie.

I cry out to you, perhaps the last time in my life… Wake up!"

The flame rose. The crowd turned. The officials froze. And the Eternal stood there too...in the fire, with him, not turning away.

They suppressed his name. They buried the footage. They pressured his family into silence. The harvest festival continued. The invasion continued. The system continued. And yet —

Truth cannot be permanently buried.

Years later, after the wall fell, after the curtain lifted, his face emerged from the suppressed footage. A man who had been invisible for decades suddenly became visible to the whole world. His eyes, before the fire, looking directly at the camera. Looking directly at us. Still speaking.

God was in the flames he made. God was in the silence that tried to erase him. And God was in the moment the world finally saw his face.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went... and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Seven

Jan Palach

The Student Who Woke Prague

Who He Was

Jan Palach was born in 1948 in Czechoslovakia and he grew up in a country that was officially communist but culturally alive with ideas, with art, with a stubborn insistence on human dignity that no system could fully extinguish. He was a history student at Charles University in Prague and he had lived through and been formed by the Prague Spring...the extraordinary period in 1968 when Alexander Dubčäk's reforms had briefly opened space for a more humane form of socialism, for freedom of the press, for the possibility that a different future was within reach.

Then, in August 1968, the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies invaded Czechoslovakia, crushed the Prague Spring and reinstalled a hard-line government. The sense of loss was catastrophic. The brief, vivid, shining possibility of something better had been extinguished by tanks. Palach was twenty years old. He was a student of history watching history happen to his country in real time. He was also a young man who understood, with the absolute clarity that sometimes comes to the young, that he could not remain silent.

What He Did

On January 16, 1969, Jan Palach set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square in the center of Prague. He was twenty years old. He had written a letter before his act, explaining that he was protesting the invasion and the demoralization of the Czechoslovak people and that he was the first in what he hoped would be a series of human torches...people who would, one by one, wake the country from its despair. He signed the letter "Torch Number One."

He survived the initial burning and was hospitalized, but died from his injuries three days later, on January 19, 1969. The response was immediate and

overwhelming. More than 200,000 people came to pay their respects as his body lay in state at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University. His funeral cortege through Prague brought the city to a standstill. He became an instant symbol of the resistance to Soviet occupation, not only in Czechoslovakia but throughout the Eastern Bloc and beyond.

The communist government tried to suppress his memory...reinterpreting his act as the result of a disturbed mind, moving his grave under pressure, erasing his name from public discourse. But they could not make him disappear. He had become too large for erasure. Wenceslas Square had seen him. The world had heard.

What It Means

Jan Palach called himself Torch Number One. This is one of the most precise and most haunting self-descriptions in the history of prophetic witness. He understood himself not as an isolated individual but as the beginning of something...as a light intended to be passed to others, as a fire meant to spread not as destruction but as illumination. He was offering himself not as a memorial but as an invitation.

He was twenty years old. He had read enough history to know that human beings had done this before him and that some of them had changed things. He had the specific courage of someone who has looked at the worst thing that can happen and decided that the worst thing is not the loss of the body but the loss of the soul...the gradual, managed, comfortable surrender of everything one believes, traded for the safety of remaining quiet.

The Czech people have never stopped honoring him. Wenceslas Square, where he burned, still bears his memory. In 1989, when the Velvet Revolution finally brought down the communist government, the demonstrators gathered where he had stood two decades before. His fire had waited twenty years and then the world it had been calling into being finally arrived. God was in the flames he made in 1969. God was in the revolution his flame helped to ignite in 1989.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

History student Jan Palach set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square in Prague on January 16, 1969, in protest of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. He was twenty years old. He called himself Torch Number One. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a country that had briefly tasted freedom. There: the tanks arriving in the night. There: the faces of people watching the possible future be dismantled. And there: a young man reading history books, understanding exactly what was happening, refusing to look away.

We sat with him in the library. The books surrounded him. The Eternal was there too, reading alongside him. History is full of people who chose courage. He was choosing to join them.

I am Torch Number One. I am the first.

He wrote his letter carefully. His handwriting was steady. He was not shaking. He had already passed through the fear and come out the other side, into the place where only clarity remains.

Wenceslas Square in January. The cold was absolute. He walked into the square with the bottle. People passed him without looking. Then he poured. Then he lit.

The square became a square of fire. The Eternal stood there with him. He was not alone in the flames. He has never been alone.

He burned for those who were afraid to burn.

Two hundred thousand people came to see him. They came from every part of the city, every part of the country. They came because they understood. He had spoken the thing that no one had been allowed to speak. And the speaking had cost him everything.

Twenty years later, the Square filled again. Different people, same cause. The revolution came. The system fell. And somewhere in the light of that moment, a twenty-year-old student's fire was still burning.

God was in the flames he made. God is in every act of courage that his act inspired.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Eight

Jan Zajíč

Torch Number Two

Who He Was

Jan Zajíč was eighteen years old when he died. He was a Czech student who had read Jan Palach's letter, who had seen what Palach's fire had done to the country and who had decided that the fire must not go out. He was born in 1950 in a Czechoslovakia shaped by the same forces that shaped Palach...the false promise of communist ideology, the slow suffocation of genuine human freedom under Soviet domination and then the brief, brilliant hope of the Prague Spring, extinguished in August 1968 by the tanks of the Warsaw Pact.

He was a secondary school student. He was not a philosopher or a political theorist. He was a young man who had been watching his country slowly surrender to despair in the months after Palach's death...watching the act that had been meant to light a torch be processed into silence and grief and eventual forgetting. He could not bear it. Palach had called himself Torch Number One, had explicitly invited others to carry the fire forward. Zajíč had decided to answer that invitation.

What He Did

On March 25, 1969...exactly two months after Jan Palach's death...Jan Zajíč set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square, in the same square where Palach had burned. He left behind a letter that identified him explicitly as "Torch Number Two," carrying forward the series Palach had begun. He was eighteen years old. He died from his injuries.

The communist government suppressed his story as it had suppressed Palach's...trying to reinterpret, minimize and erase. But Zajíč had done what he set out to do: he had demonstrated that Palach was not alone, that the fire had not died

with its first bearer, that the chain of witness had been taken up by another hand. He was Torch Number Two. The fire had been passed.

What It Means

There is a particular kind of courage required to be second. The first person to do a thing bears the originality of the act, the shock of it, the singular weight of being the one who opened the door. But the second person...the second person knows exactly what the first person suffered. The second person has watched the first person die. The second person has seen the country's response, has measured the cost in the most specific terms available. And the second person has decided to do it anyway.

Jan Zajíč answered Palach's invitation in the most literal way imaginable. He was not imitating Palach. He was completing what Palach had begun...demonstrating that the fire was not the act of one exceptional person but the expression of something that had taken root in the heart of a generation. Palach had said: I am the first. Zajíč answered: I am the second. The fire is real. It does not die.

The religious traditions understand this dynamic: the fire passed from one bearer to the next, the lamp lit from a lamp, the sacred truth carried forward not by institutions but by bodies willing to bear it. God was in the fire Palach made and God was in the fire Zajíč made...a fire that confirmed, beyond any official denial, that the first fire had told the truth.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision

Record

Czech student Jan Zajíč set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square on March 25, 1969...two months after Jan Palach...leaving behind a letter calling himself Torch Number Two. He was eighteen years old. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a student reading. Not a textbook but a letter...the letter of a young man who had burned two months before, who had called himself the first and invited others to become the next. The student read it slowly. His face did not show shock or grief. It showed something else: recognition.

The Eternal sat beside him. There was the cold of a Central European winter. There was the weight of a country learning to be quiet, learning to look away, learning the survival that looks like living but is not. The young man was learning it too...and he was refusing.

He called himself Torch Number One. I will be Torch Number Two.

He wrote his letter. He was eighteen years old. His hand was steady. The Eternal stood beside him and did not intervene...because the Eternal does not overrule what love has decided. There is a love that knows the cost and chooses anyway. This is what holiness looks like when it wears the face of a teenager.

He walked to Wenceslas Square. The same stones Palach had stood on. The same cold air. The square that a country had come to in hundreds of thousands to mourn and which was now quiet again, the way a country is quiet when it has been told to forget.

He poured. He lit. The fire rose. And in the Square where one young man had already told the truth, another young man confirmed it: the fire is real, the fire is not one person's act of madness, the fire is the country's own burning conscience made visible.

God was in the flames of Torch Number One. God was in the flames of Torch Number Two. God is in every act of courage that dares to answer another act of courage and say: the fire was not wrong, the fire was not wasted, the fire goes on.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "Fifty Years After His Self-Immolation, Czech Student Jan Palach Remains a Symbol of Defiance." January 16, 2019. https://www.rferl.org/a/czechoslovakia-politics-palach/29708646.html.

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Worth, Robert F. "How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution." New York Times Magazine, January 21, 2011.

Chapter Nine

George Winne, Jr.

Fire at the Center of the Campus

Who He Was

George Winne, Jr. was a twenty-three-year-old history student at the University of California, San Diego in 1970. He had come to UCSD with military aspirations...he had applied to a military academy, participated in ROTC and in his early years at the university displayed the kind of patriotic fervor that the Vietnam era was producing in equal measure with its opposite. But the war had changed him, as it was changing a generation.

What He Did

The specific context of Winne's act was the most explosive moment of domestic anti-war protest in the entire history of the conflict. Four days earlier, on May 4, 1970, National Guard troops had opened fire on a crowd of student protesters at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four students...Jeffrey Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder and Sandra Scheuer...and wounding nine others. The killings sent a shockwave through the American campus community.

On May 10, 1970, Winne walked into Revelle Plaza at UCSD holding a sign that read, in his own hand: "In the name of God, end the war." He set himself on fire. Students rushed to him and beat out the flames, but he had suffered burns over the majority of his body. He was transported to the hospital, where he died later that night, still repeating the Lord's Prayer. He was twenty-three years old.

What It Means

In the name of God, end the war. This is not a private spiritual statement. It is a public theological claim. It asserts a specific relationship between the divine will and political reality: that God is against this war, that the war is being conducted

in defiance of God and that the name of God is being taken in vain by those who prosecute it. Winne was not confused about this. He was clear.

His act is also notable for what it suggests about the way the tradition of anti-war immolation had, by 1970, been absorbed into a broader spiritual vocabulary. He was not Vietnamese. He was not a Buddhist. He was not from the Catholic Worker tradition or from the Society of Friends. He was an American student from a military family who had looked at the tradition of witness that stretched from Thích Quảng Đức through Alice Herz through Norman Morrison through Roger LaPorte and had recognized in it a grammar adequate to what he needed to say.

The Lord's Prayer that Winne repeated as he was dying is perhaps the most moving detail in his entire story. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven. This is a prayer for the transformation of the world...not escape from the world, not acceptance of its injustice, but the insistence that the world be brought into conformity with the will of God. In his dying repetition of this prayer, Winne was not capitulating. He was insisting. God was in the flames he made. God heard the prayer he would not stop praying.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

American student George Winne, Jr. self-immolated at Revelle Plaza on the campus of the University of California, San Diego on May 10, 1970. He died that night, still praying. He was twenty-three years old. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a young man saluting the flag. There: a young man applying to a military academy. There: a young man marching to the commands of an ROTC instructor. There: the young man becoming increasingly despondent. Something was wrong.

He kept changing things in his life. Nothing could shake his increasing conviction that the war was wrong. But what could one person do?

The young man was trying to figure out how to pray with his feet. He was becoming more and more isolated. Reaching for God. Desperate to see the hand of God in the land of the living.

Protests were growing in the middle of campus. Four students had been shot dead by their own government. The young man was desperate to do more. A light was welling up within him, a determination.

It's time.

God drew us to his side. Together, we walked into the Plaza. He held up a sign: In the name of God, end the war.

Then he lit the match. Fire engulfed every part of his body. God was there too. The pain was immense. Everything burned.

People tried to put the fire out. Eventually, we lay burnt on the ground together.

And then this prayer, incessant, returning again and again like breath:

> *"Our Father which art in heaven… hallowed be thy name… thy kingdom come… thy will be done… on earth as it is in heaven… give us this day our daily bread… and forgive us our debts… as we forgive our debtors… and lead us not into temptation… but deliver us from evil… for thine is the kingdom… and the power… and the glory… forever and ever… amen.*

I will see you in heaven.

He died later that night. The Eternal raised his body anew. The eternal fire burned brightly. The young man still lives… and the dream of peace will never die.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART FIVE

Eastern Bloc Resistance

1972–1978

Chapter Ten

Romas Kalanta

The Fire That Woke a Nation

Who He Was

Romas Kalanta was nineteen years old when he died. He was a Lithuanian student, born in 1953 in the city of Kaunas, in a country that had been forcibly absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1940, briefly occupied by Nazi Germany and then reabsorbed by the Soviets in 1944...a country that had not known genuine sovereignty since the Second World War began. Lithuania's distinct language, culture and Catholic faith had survived, battered, under Soviet rule, but the political reality of Soviet Lithuania was the reality of all Soviet republics: surveillance, repression, enforced ideological conformity and the systematic suppression of any expression of genuine national identity.

Kalanta was not a well-known activist. He was a young man...thoughtful, sensitive, shaped by the particular grief of belonging to a people who remembered what it meant to be free. He had been watching, with the clarity that sometimes belongs to the very young, what his country was and what it could not be under Soviet rule.

What He Did

On May 14, 1972, in a public garden in Kaunas near the State Musical Theatre, Romas Kalanta set himself on fire, shouting "Freedom for Lithuania!" before the flames overcame him. He died from his injuries later the same day.

The response was immediate and remarkable. At his funeral two days later, young Lithuanians gathered in the streets and the gathering became a spontaneous uprising...demonstrations, clashes with Soviet security forces, chants of "Freedom!" and "Lithuania!" spreading through the city. In the weeks that followed, at least thirteen more people self-immolated across Lithuania in direct response to his act. His death had ignited exactly what it was meant to ignite: the

smoldering national conscience of a people who had been told their suffering was over.

What It Means

Kalanta's act belongs to a specific and recurring pattern in the history of prophetic fire: the single act that names what a whole people has been feeling and releases it. Bouazizi would do this in Tunisia forty years later. Kalanta did it in Soviet Lithuania in 1972. His act was the precise word that a grief-saturated population had not been able to say aloud and when it was said, it could not be unsaid.

The thirteen immolations that followed his are among the least-known facts of Soviet-era resistance. They did not appear in Western newspapers. They did not generate the photographs that circulate in historical memory. But they were real and they were consequential...a wave of witness that the Soviet authorities suppressed with tremendous effort precisely because it carried such obvious power.

Lithuania gained independence in 1990, the first Soviet republic to do so. The road to that independence ran through decades of resistance and among the earliest and most incandescent moments of that resistance was a nineteen-year-old student standing in a public garden in Kaunas, choosing fire over silence. God was in the flames he made. God was in the thirteen fires that followed his, each one a confirmation that what he had done had told the truth.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision

Record

Lithuanian student Romas Kalanta set himself on fire in a public garden in Kaunas on May 14, 1972, shouting “Freedom for Lithuania!” He was nineteen years old. His act sparked a national uprising and at least thirteen further immolations. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don’t recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a country that had been a country and been told it wasn’t. A language that had survived centuries and been told it didn’t matter. A faith that had shaped a people and been told it was superstition. And there: a young man who had grown up inside all of this, who knew what freedom smelled like from the memories his parents carried and who could not continue living as though the absence of freedom was acceptable.

The Eternal walked with him through the streets of Kaunas. The city had known occupation before...the Nazis, the Soviets and then the Soviets again. The people had learned to carry their grief quietly. The young man had not yet learned this. He was still carrying it loudly, the way only the young can.

Freedom for Lithuania!

The garden. The bright May air. The Eternal standing there too, in the light. He poured. He called out. He lit. The fire rose into the spring sky and everything changed.

At the funeral, the streets filled. Young people came who had not planned to come, who had heard something in his death that they had not heard before...a permission, a recognition, a confirmation that their own grief was not private but

shared. They walked. They chanted. They refused, for the first time in years, to be quiet.

Thirteen others made the same offering in the weeks that followed. The flame had passed from one body to the next, to the next, to the next. The Eternal was present in each one...present in the fire, present in the grief, present in the moment when a whole people looked at what had been done and found, inside their grief, the seed of what they would one day become.

Lithuania became free. The road was long. But it began, in part, in a garden in Kaunas, in May, with a young man who could not stay quiet any longer.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went... and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Eleven

Willie B. Phillips

The Invisible Fire

Who He Was

Willie B. Phillips was a civil rights organizer and a former military veteran. He was a Black American man who had served his country in uniform and returned home to a country that continued to treat him and people like him as less than fully human. The specific contours of his biography are incompletely documented...a fact that is itself part of the story of his life and his death. He existed in the tradition of Black American men who gave their bodies to the nation's wars and came home to find the nation's promises still withheld.

Understanding Phillips requires situating him within the broader historical conditions that shaped him rather than isolating him as purely individual. He was a person formed by war, race, and the uneven realities of post-civil rights America. Military service did not guarantee stability, recognition, or protection. For many Black veterans, the transition back into civilian life meant confronting the same racial barriers they had left behind, often without adequate support or opportunity. He was not a nationally known figure, nor widely recognized as a leader within established civil rights organizations. He existed in the tradition of Black American men who gave their bodies to the nation's wars and came home to find the nation's promises still withheld.

What He Did

On October 7, 1972, as a public parade organized by Morris Brown College moved through the streets of downtown Atlanta, Willie B. Phillips stepped forward from the crowd at approximately 11:25 that morning and carried out an act that brought that day's narrative to a halt. Atlanta had been presenting itself as a model of the "New South," a city where the most visible structures of segregation had been

dismantled. It was within that setting…without warning or visible buildup…that the twenty-seven-year-old SCLC organizer moved into an open space along the parade route.

Carrying a container of flammable liquid, he poured it over his body and ignited it in full view of those around him. For a moment witnesses did not fully understand what they were seeing. That uncertainty gave way almost immediately to shock as the reality became clear. This was not an accident. It was deliberate and it was public. As the flames spread, Phillips spoke, directing his words toward those present and by extension to a wider audience. According to accounts recorded afterward, he called on white Americans to stop mistreating Black people and urged unity within Black communities. Emergency response followed, but the severity of his injuries left no chance of survival. Phillips died as a result of the burning, and the parade intended as a demonstration of civic progress came to an immediate stop.

What It Means

The near-total erasure of Willie B. Phillips from public memory is not incidental. It is the continuation, by other means, of the violence he was protesting. In the days following his death, those who were aware of the event attempted to interpret what had taken place. Leaders associated with the SCLC…including Rev. Hosea Williams…framed his death as a form of sacrifice, emphasizing that his actions exposed the persistence of racial injustice at a moment when many Americans believed the central struggles of the previous decade had been resolved. A mule-drawn wagon funeral procession followed, presenting Phillips not only as a victim of circumstance but as someone whose death carried broader moral significance.

At the same time, other voices within the Black freedom struggle were less inclined to adopt that interpretation. Activists associated with the Black Panther Party and similar currents of Black Power politics were more likely to view Phillips' death in terms of its practical consequences rather than its symbolic meaning. From this

perspective, the central question was not whether the act revealed injustice but whether it contributed to the ongoing struggle in a material way. Self-immolation in this view removed an individual from the community without strengthening its capacity to organize, defend itself, or pursue structural change. These competing interpretations did not resolve into a single consensus, leaving Phillips' death difficult to categorize within existing frameworks of protest.

He burned in the same year that Romas Kalanta burned in Kaunas. He was an American veteran who had already given his body to his country once, in military service, and who was giving it again, in prophetic fire. By 1972, self-immolation had entered a global repertoire of protest, legible through the acts of Buddhist monks in Southeast Asia and the broader realities of the Vietnam War. Phillips lived in a cultural environment shaped by those images. The country did not hear him. But the Sacred hears what the country refuses to hear. The Sacred does not require a photograph or a news story or a Wikipedia entry to receive a witness. God was in the flames Willie B. Phillips made in Atlanta in 1972. God was in his name, which the record tried to erase. God is in the act of speaking his name now, here, refusing the erasure that has been his second death.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
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Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

On October 7, 1972, Willie B. Phillips, SCLC organizer and Vietnam veteran, stepped forward from a crowd watching a Morris Brown College parade in downtown Atlanta and set himself on fire in public protest. He called on white Americans to

stop mistreating Black people and urged unity within Black communities. He died from his injuries. He is nearly absent from the historical record. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a man in uniform. He had served. He had gone where he was told to go, had borne what he was told to bear, had come home carrying the wounds that soldiers carry...and had come home to a country that was still killing people who looked like him and calling it something other than what it was.

The Eternal walked with him through the years of organizing. The meetings that went nowhere. The petitions that received no response. The names of the dead that appeared in no newspaper, that were mourned in no national ceremony, that the country continued to produce with the same mechanical indifference as it had always produced them.

I have given my body to this country once already. I am giving it again.

Atlanta in 1972. He stood in the place he had chosen, in a city that was a center of Black American life and Black American struggle and he made his offering. The Eternal stood there too...as the Eternal has always stood with those who burn for the dignity of the poor, the murdered, the erased.

The cameras did not come. The newspapers did not write his name. The country did not hear what he was saying. The erasure that had killed the people he was mourning now erased him too...turned his fire into silence, his witness into absence, his name into a blank.

But the Eternal received him. And somewhere in the long work of telling the truth about what has been done and what has been ignored, his name surfaces again: Willie B. Phillips. Veteran. Organizer. Prophet. He spoke. He burned. He was here.

God is in the flames of the remembered and the forgotten alike. God is in this name: Willie B. Phillips.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Twelve

Oleksa Hirnyk

Fire at the Tomb of the Poet

Who He Was

Oleksa Hirnyk was born in 1912 in Ukraine and his life contained everything the twentieth century could do to a person in that land: he had lived through Soviet collectivization and the enforced famine that killed millions of Ukrainians, through the Nazi occupation, through the postwar Stalinist terror. He had spent years as a political prisoner in the Soviet labor camp system for his participation in Ukrainian cultural and national life. He was a former teacher, a man who had devoted himself to the Ukrainian language and to the culture that language carried...a culture that the Soviet state was engaged in the systematic project of erasing.

By the 1970s, the Russification of Ukraine...the replacement of the Ukrainian language and cultural identity with Russian...had accelerated under the Brezhnev regime. Ukrainian intellectuals who resisted were imprisoned or committed to psychiatric institutions. The dissident movement that had briefly flourished in the 1960s had been crushed. Hirnyk, who had survived the camps and returned to ordinary life, was watching the culture he had served his entire life be slowly extinguished.

What He Did

On January 21, 1978...the anniversary of the declaration of Ukrainian independence in 1918...Oleksa Hirnyk set himself on fire near the tomb of Taras Shevchenko, the national poet of Ukraine, at Shevchenko's memorial in Kaniv. He left a note protesting the Russification of Ukraine and the suppression of Ukrainian culture. He was sixty-five years old.

He chose his location with absolute precision. Taras Shevchenko is not merely a poet to Ukrainians; he is the embodiment of the Ukrainian language and national

consciousness, the figure whose nineteenth-century verses kept the Ukrainian language alive through imperial Russian pressure. To burn beside his tomb was to place one's body in the care of the tradition, to say: what Shevchenko kept alive with words, I am defending with my death.

What It Means

Hirnyk's act carries a particular resonance in the light of subsequent history. Ukraine would declare independence in 1991. In 2014, Russian-backed forces would seize Crimea and part of the Donbas. In 2022, Russia would launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, accompanied by explicit ideological claims that Ukrainian identity, culture and language were not real...were inventions, fabrications, things that did not deserve to exist. The Russification that Hirnyk burned against in 1978 would become, forty-four years later, the stated justification for a war of annihilation.

He did not live to see any of this. But he had already seen, with terrible clarity, what the erasure of a people's language and culture leads to. A people whose culture is erased becomes a people who can be told they never existed. He was burning against that logic...not only as a political act but as a theological one. Because the claim that a people do not exist, that their language and their memory and their identity are not real, is a lie against the Sacred. Every human community that has been made in the image of God has a name that deserves to be spoken.

God was in the flames Hirnyk made beside the poet's tomb. God is in the ongoing determination of the Ukrainian people to exist, to speak their language, to remember what they remember. The fire Hirnyk lit in 1978 is one of the long ancestral flames of a people's refusal to be erased.

A Contemplative Vision

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Pray
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Envision
Record

Ukrainian dissident and former political prisoner Oleksa Hirnyk, sixty-five years old, set himself on fire near the tomb of the poet Taras Shevchenko on January 21, 1978, in protest against the Russification of Ukraine. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a language. Not an abstraction, but a living thing...the words that a mother uses to name her child, the songs that carry a people's grief across centuries, the poems that made it possible, under every empire that tried to silence them, for Ukrainians to know who they were. There: a man who had spent his life in service of that language, who had survived the camps, who had come home to find the language still under assault.

The Eternal walked with him to the hillside above the Dnipro. The tomb of the poet lay there in the earth...the poet who had written in Ukrainian when writing in Ukrainian was an act of resistance, who had named his people's grief and their beauty and their stubborn insistence on existing. The old man came to stand beside that tomb.

They want us to forget who we are. I will not forget.

January 22. The anniversary of independence. He stood at the tomb and poured and lit and in the fire he made, the Eternal received everything he had carried:

every year in the camps, every Ukrainian word that had been banned, every student he had taught to know their own language, every grief and every love that had organized his entire life.

The Soviet authorities suppressed the news. They had practice by then at making witnesses invisible. But the Eternal does not suppress. The Eternal holds every fire in the memory of the Sacred, holds every name that was meant to be erased, speaks every language that was meant to fall silent.

Ukraine is still speaking. It is speaking with particular urgency now. And in its speaking, the voice of Oleksa Hirnyk is present...not as a ghost but as a root, one of the deep roots of a people's refusal to surrender the names by which God knows them.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went... and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART SIX

The Performance of Social Transformation

1996

Chapter Fourteen

Kathy Change

A Dance of Fire for a World That Would Not Dance

Who She Was

Kathy Change was a performance artist, a peace activist, a philosopher and a woman who had spent years conducting street performances on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania and in the streets of Philadelphia. She was known as a local eccentric and a passionate advocate for radical social transformation...someone who believed that the economic system that governed American life was fundamentally incompatible with human dignity and with the possibility of genuine peace.

She performed regularly near the “Peace Symbol” sculpture at the University of Pennsylvania. She danced. She chanted. She distributed leaflets. She made art. She was not a marginal figure in the way that the word ‘eccentric’ might suggest...she was a deeply serious person, intellectually engaged and spiritually committed, who had chosen performance as her primary mode of protest because she believed that the imagination had to be awakened before anything else could change.

What She Did

On October 22, 1996, Kathy Change set herself on fire in front of the Peace Symbol sculpture at the University of Pennsylvania. She died from her injuries. She was in her late forties. In the writings she left, she described herself as a “torch for liberty” and said that she was seeking to spark a “discussion of how we can peacefully transform our world.” She described her act as a “dance of fire,” intended to awaken students from their passivity.

She was not widely covered in the national press. Her death, like the deaths of many women who choose extreme forms of protest, was processed as aberration rather than as witness. The students who walked past the Peace Symbol sculpture

every day continued to walk past it. But the fire she made was real and the question she asked...how do we peacefully transform our world?...is one that the world has not yet answered.

What It Means

Kathy Change lived in the gap between what the world is and what it could be. This is the gap in which all artists live, in which all prophets live. She had made that gap the subject of her life's work and her final act was the most extreme expression of that work...the performance that was not a metaphor, the dance that was not a symbol, the fire that was not a stage effect.

She chose to die in front of a peace symbol. The irony is not accidental. She was saying, with her body, that peace is not a symbol. It is not a bronze sculpture on a university campus. It is a living demand on living people. It requires something from us. It costs something. And when it costs everything, the one who pays that cost is speaking a truth that bronze cannot hold.

The world dismissed her. But the Sacred does not dismiss anyone who offers themselves in love. The Sacred was in the fire she made at the Peace Symbol. The Sacred honored the dance she had been dancing all her life, even when no one was watching. Especially when no one was watching.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
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Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Performance artist and peace activist Kathy Change self-immolated in front of the Peace Symbol sculpture at the University of Pennsylvania on October 22, 1996. She called her act a dance of fire. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don’t recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a woman dancing on a street corner. Students walking past without looking. A leaflet pressed into an unwilling hand. A chant that hung in the autumn air and dissolved. She kept dancing. She had been dancing for years.

We watched her from a distance at first. Then the Eternal took us closer. We saw her face. It was not the face of a person who had lost her mind. It was the face of a person who had found her mission and could not let it go.

How do we peacefully transform our world?"

She asked this question every day. She asked it in dance. She asked it in art. She asked it in the careful, passionate prose of her leaflets. The campus walked past. The economic system hummed along. The wars continued.

She had asked the question long enough. Now she would become the question.

In front of the Peace Symbol…the bronze sculpture that students passed every day without stopping…she poured the fuel. She lit the match. She became, for a moment, exactly what she had always been trying to say: a torch for liberty. A fire in the shape of a human being.

The Eternal stood beside her in that fire. The Eternal is always present where a person gives everything for love.

The campus kept walking. The world kept moving. But the question she had made with her body is still burning. And somewhere in the light of that question, the answer is still being formed.

God is in the dance of fire. God is in the question that would not stop being asked.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART SEVEN

The Prophetic Witness: Fire in the American South

2014

Chapter Fourteen

Charles Moore

O Grand Saline, Repent

Who He Was

Charles Moore was a retired United Methodist minister from Texas, a man whose entire life had been shaped by the conviction that the Christian gospel demands something concrete in response to racial injustice. He was born in 1940 and raised in the South. He had spent decades in ministry, and in his later years he became increasingly consumed by grief over what he saw as the failure of the white church—and white Christians in particular—to genuinely reckon with the sin of racism.

Moore had grown up in Grand Saline, Texas, a small East Texas town with a deep and largely unacknowledged history of racial violence. He knew that history. He had lived inside it, had seen how the silence around it persisted, had watched as his hometown and his church refused to speak what he believed needed to be spoken. His final years were marked by an intensifying sense that ordinary witness—sermons, letters, conversations—was not adequate to the magnitude of the wrong.

He was seventy-nine years old when he died. He had thought about this for a long time. He left behind a letter—addressed to his hometown, to his church, to his God—that made his reasons clear.

What He Did

On June 23, 2014, Charles Moore drove to the parking lot of a Dollar General store in Grand Saline, Texas—the town where he had grown up, the town whose history of racial violence he had spent a lifetime grieving. He set himself on fire in the parking lot and died from his injuries.

Before he died, he left a letter titled “O Grand Saline, Repent of Your Racism.” In it, he named the town’s history of sundown town practices, of racial violence, of the particular silence of white Christians in the face of that violence. He wrote that he was “sickened” by what he saw as the ongoing reality of racism in America and in the church. He wrote of his love for Black people. He wrote that he had prayed and reflected and concluded that his death might do what his life had not been able to do—shock the church awake, force a reckoning.

He chose a parking lot rather than a church or a courthouse because he wanted to reach ordinary people—the people going about their daily lives in a town that

had never been asked to reckon with its own history. He was wearing a T-shirt that read “Racism is why I did this.”

What It Means

Charles Moore did something that is almost impossible to do from within an institution: he turned against his own tradition and demanded that it see itself clearly. He was not an outsider condemning the white church from a distance. He was a product of it—an ordained minister, a man who had spent his life inside its structures, who had believed in its capacity for transformation. And he had concluded, in his seventies, that belief alone was not enough. That words were not enough. That something more costly was required.

His letter is one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of American Christian witness on race. It is not a theological treatise. It is a cry—specific, local, named. He did not speak in abstractions. He named Grand Saline. He named the silence. He named his own complicity, the years he had spoken and not been heard, and the grief of a man who had run out of other languages.

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets—who used their bodies as instruments of proclamation, who enacted rather than merely described the word they were given—Moore performed what he was saying. The body itself became the text. The fire became the sermon. And the parking lot of a Dollar General in a small East Texas town became, for one terrible and luminous moment, holy ground.

God was in the flames Charles Moore made in Grand Saline. God was in the letter he wrote. God was in the love—specific, costly, embodied love—that drove a seventy-nine-year-old minister to that parking lot on a June afternoon. What the church would not say, Moore said with his body. What the town would not see, he tried to force it to see. Whether it saw is a question that remains open. But the witness was made. The fire was real.

A Contemplative Vision

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Record

Retired United Methodist minister Charles Moore, seventy-nine years old, set himself on fire in a Dollar General parking lot in Grand Saline, Texas, on June 23,

2014, in protest of the ongoing sin of racism in America and in the white church. He left a letter calling his hometown and his tradition to repentance. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement. Sometimes this is the nature of following the Sacred.

There: a man at a desk, writing. He had been writing for years—letters, sermons, pleas. He had written to his church. He had written to his town. He had written to his God. The words had gone out and the silence had come back. Not a hostile silence. Something worse: a comfortable silence. The silence of people who had decided that the past was the past and that nothing more needed to be said.

The Eternal walked with him through the decades. Through the ministry. Through the years of hoping that the church would find the courage to say what the gospel demanded it say. Through the grief of watching it choose comfort instead. Through the long, slow exhaustion of a man who had given his life to a tradition and was watching that tradition refuse the very thing his life had been given for.

O Grand Saline, repent of your racism.

He folded the letter. He drove to the parking lot. He was seventy-nine years old. He had thought about this for a long time. The Eternal was there too—as the Eternal is always present where love takes the form that costs everything.

The parking lot of a Dollar General in East Texas. Not a cathedral. Not a sanctuary. An ordinary American place. He made it holy. He made it the place where a man said: I have nothing left but this body, and I am giving it in testimony. That the church might see. That the town might see. That someone, somewhere, might finally look and understand what the silence had cost.

God was in the flames Charles Moore made. God was in the letter he left. God was in the love that drove him there and did not flinch.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went... and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART EIGHT

The Tibetan Wave: A Movement of Fire

2009–2018

Chapter Fifteen

Tapey and the Tibetan Wave

One Hundred and Sixty Flames

Who They Were

On February 27, 2009, a Tibetan monk named Tapey set himself on fire in the town of Bora in Amdo, Tibet. He was a monk at Kirti Monastery and he carried Tibetan flags and a photograph of the Dalai Lama as he burned...objects whose possession alone was sufficient to result in imprisonment under Chinese rule. He survived his injuries, though he was shot by Chinese security forces as they extinguished the flames and was subsequently imprisoned.

Tapey was the first. Between 2009 and 2018, approximately one hundred and sixty Tibetans...monks, nuns, laypeople, young and old, men and women...followed him, setting themselves on fire in protest against Chinese rule, the suppression of Tibetan Buddhist practice and the ongoing effort to erase Tibetan cultural and religious identity. It was one of the largest sustained campaigns of self-immolation in human history and it was met with near-total silence from the governments of the world.

They came from across the Tibetan plateau and from exile communities. They called for the return of the Dalai Lama, for freedom for Tibet, for the right to practice their religion and speak their language. Some left written testimonies. Others left only the fact of the fire. All of them were acting within the framework of a Buddhist tradition that understands the offering of the body as the ultimate act of compassion...the bodhisattva's fire, made not for oneself but for all beings.

What They Did

The wave began as an echo of the 2008 Tibetan uprising, in which protests across the plateau were met with violent suppression by Chinese security forces. The

crackdown that followed...mass arrests, restrictions on movement, intensified surveillance of monasteries, the deployment of paramilitary forces through Buddhist communities...created the conditions in which ordinary language of protest had been made impossible. What remained, for those who felt they had no other voice, was the body.

Among the most prominent figures was Palden Choetso, a fifty-five-year-old nun who burned in November 2011 in Tawu County, chanting Buddhist prayers as she died. There was Rinchen, a young laywoman and mother, who burned in December 2012. There were monks as young as eighteen and laypeople in their fifties. Each act was distinct...each person brought their own life, their own grief, their own love for Tibet to the fire...and each act belonged to a single sustained movement of witness that the world largely refused to see.

China responded with mass arrests of those connected to immolators, collective punishment of their communities, intensified restrictions on Tibetan religious life and international diplomatic pressure to prevent other governments from acknowledging what was happening. The policy of erasure extended beyond Tibet itself: the Chinese government pressured foreign media, worked to prevent the story from reaching international audiences and used its economic weight to discourage Western governments from speaking.

What It Means

The Tibetan wave of immolations is the largest sustained campaign of self-immolation in the history of this practice and it is the one that has received the least Western attention. This disproportion is itself a theological and political fact. The world's selective attention to prophetic suffering is not neutral; it reflects the hierarchies of power and interest that determine whose witness is legible and whose is not.

Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the act carries specific and profound meaning. The Lotus Sutra, the foundational text of Mahayana Buddhism, describes

the bodhisattva who burns his own body as a lamp, offering it as a supreme act of devotion to all sentient beings. Thich Quang Duc...who appears in the first chapter of this book...was acting from within this same tradition. The Tibetan immolators were his inheritors: monks and nuns and laypeople who had been shaped by the same texts, the same practices, the same understanding of what the body can be offered for.

One hundred and sixty people. Each one a name. Each one a life that had loved Tibet, had practiced the dharma, had watched their community be systematically dismantled by an occupying power that denied what it was doing. Each one had arrived, through whatever inner path, at the conviction that the only remaining witness was the body. God was in each of those flames. The Sacred does not count by the attention of governments or the reach of news cameras. The Sacred counts by the love that drove each person to the fire and that love, multiplied by one hundred and sixty, is a testament of extraordinary proportions.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Beginning with the monk Tapey in 2009, approximately one hundred and sixty Tibetans self-immolated between 2009 and 2018 in protest against Chinese occupation and the suppression of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Their wave of witness was one of the largest sustained campaigns of self-immolation in history. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a monastery on the high plateau. Prayer flags in the wind. The chanting of monks who have chanted for centuries, whose lineage runs back to teachers whose teachers' teachers could not have imagined the world that now surrounds them. The mountains. The sky. And below the sky, the checkpoints, the surveillance cameras, the soldiers who are stationed here to ensure that the monks do not gather, do not speak freely, do not carry the image of their teacher.

The Eternal moved through the monastery as the Eternal has always moved through places of prayer. There was grief here...the specific grief of a people who can see exactly what is being taken from them and cannot stop the taking. And there was something else: the particular quality of equanimity that long practice brings, the stillness that is not passivity but the deepest form of presence.

I carry the Tibetan flag. I carry the image of my teacher. I carry the dharma in my body.

The first fire...Tapey, in the town, with the flags. The security forces coming. The shots. And still the fire. And then, over the months and years that followed, fire after fire after fire, each one a monk or a nun or a laywoman or a young man, each one chanting, each one choosing the body as the last available language.

The Eternal moved through every fire. One hundred and sixty fires. The Eternal was in each one...not as a cause or a comfort, but as a presence, a companion, the deep love of the Sacred that does not abandon anyone in the moment of the flame.

The world did not hear them the way the world heard Thich Quang Duc. The cameras were kept away. The governments looked elsewhere. The diplomatic calculations produced silence. But the Eternal heard. And the dharma, which has survived every empire that has tried to extinguish it, is still alive on the plateau

and in the exile communities, still chanted, still practiced, still burning with the quiet fire that no occupation can reach.

God is in the flames of every one of the one hundred and sixty. God is in the name of Tapey. God is in the name of Palden Choetso. God is in the name of Rinchen. God is in every name that was not reported, in every fire that the cameras did not reach. The Sacred keeps the count that the world refuses to keep.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART NINE

Revolutionary Sparks: The Arab Spring

2010

Chapter Sixteen

Mohamed Bouazizi

The Vendor Who Toppled Regimes

Who He Was

Mohamed Bouazizi was twenty-six years old when he died. He was a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, a small city in the interior of Tunisia, a country that had been governed for more than two decades by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, a corrupt authoritarian president who maintained power through an apparatus of surveillance, arbitrary detention and the systematic humiliation of the poor.

Bouazizi had been selling fruit and vegetables from a cart since he was a child, helping to support his family...his mother, his stepfather and his siblings. He had hoped to go to university but had not been able to afford it. He was known in his neighborhood as a generous person, someone who would give fruit to children whose families could not pay. He was also known as someone who had been repeatedly harassed by the municipal authorities, who routinely demanded bribes or confiscated his goods.

He was not a political activist. He was not a philosopher or a theologian or an artist. He was a young man trying to earn enough money to feed his family, in a country that made that daily act of survival unnecessarily difficult for the poor while the connected and the powerful took what they wanted without accountability.

What He Did

On December 17, 2010, a municipal official named Faida Hamdi confronted Bouazizi in the market, allegedly slapped him in public and confiscated his cart and his produce...his only means of livelihood. He went to the local government

offices to complain and was refused an audience. He stood in the street in front of the offices and set himself on fire.

He was hospitalized with severe burns covering the majority of his body. He never regained consciousness. He died on January 4, 2011. President Ben Ali visited him in the hospital...a public relations gesture that satisfied no one. The act had already done what it was going to do. Within days of his immolation, protests had broken out across Tunisia. Within weeks, Ben Ali had fled the country. Within months, the Arab Spring had spread to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. The wave of popular uprisings that reshaped the political geography of the Arab world had been ignited by a single flame in a small city in the Tunisian interior.

What It Means

Mohamed Bouazizi did not intend to start a revolution. He intended to protest an injustice. He was a young man who had been humiliated...publicly, by a representative of the state...and who had run out of options. The act of setting himself on fire was, in the immediate sense, an act of despair. But the reason it lit the world was that it was also an act of recognition: millions of people across the Arab world recognized in his story their own story, felt in his humiliation their own humiliation and understood that his fire was saying something they had all been waiting for someone to say.

This is what prophetic acts do. They do not create new realities out of nothing. They name realities that already exist but that have not yet been named, that have not yet been placed in the public light where everyone can see them. Bouazizi's fire named the reality of life under Ben Ali's Tunisia...the arbitrary cruelty, the impunity of petty officials, the daily degradation of the poor...and in naming it, made it impossible to pretend it was not there.

He was not a religious man in any obvious sense. But the act he performed belongs to the oldest and most universal of religious truths: that every human being has a dignity that cannot be permanently suppressed, that the humiliation of the poor is

an offense against the Sacred and that when someone finally says ‘enough’ with their whole body, the world changes. God was in the fire Mohamed Bouazizi made in front of a government office in Sidi Bouzid. God is always in the place where the dignity of the poor is being defended, even at the cost of everything.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Twenty-six-year-old Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, in front of a government office in Sidi Bouzid, after a municipal official publicly humiliated him and confiscated his livelihood. His act ignited the Arab Spring. He died on January 4, 2011. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don’t recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a market in the early morning. The cart loaded with fruit. The child who received a free apple. The neighbor who received a free handful of figs. The mother who received a free bunch of coriander. He gave because he could and because the act of giving made the difficulty bearable.

The official came. The slap. The confiscated cart. The humiliation visible on his face. The Eternal was there for that too...standing with him in the street, bearing witness to his dignity even as it was being denied.

Every human being deserves to be treated with dignity.

He went to the offices. The door was closed. The official would not see him. He stood in the street and understood, with terrible clarity, that there was no recourse. The system had no mechanism for hearing him. He was a vendor. He did not matter.

He stood in the street in front of the government offices. The Eternal stood beside him. He poured. He lit.

The fire rose in the street in Sidi Bouzid. And then something extraordinary happened.

The fire spread.

Not his fire...though that fire burned too. The fire of recognition. Millions of people across the Arab world looked at a twenty-six-year-old fruit vendor dying in the street and saw themselves. They had all been slapped. They had all had their carts confiscated. They had all stood in front of closed doors.

They rose. First in Tunisia. Then in Egypt. Then across the region. The governments that had seemed permanent, immovable, eternal...they began to fall.

A single flame can still topple regimes.

God was in the fire Mohamed Bouazizi made. God was in the dignity he refused to surrender even in the moment of his death. And God was in the millions of people who looked at his fire and finally found the courage to say: enough.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART TEN

The Climate Martyrs: Existential Despair

2018–2022

Chapter Seventeen

David Buckel

The Lawyer Who Mirrored the Earth

Who He Was

David Buckel was a renowned civil rights and LGBT rights attorney who had spent his career defending the most vulnerable people in American society. He had worked for Lambda Legal, the organization that litigates for LGBT equality and he had been involved in landmark cases that helped extend legal protections to people who had been systematically denied them. He was the lead attorney in the case of Brandon Teena, the transgender man who was raped and murdered in Nebraska...a case that became the subject of the film Boys Don't Cry. He had later shifted his work to environmental causes, serving as a compost director at a community farm in Brooklyn.

By the time he died, he had spent years watching the scientific consensus on climate change become undeniable, watching the political response remain catastrophically inadequate, watching the people who would suffer most from the warming of the planet...the poor, the young, the people of the Global South...be systematically excluded from the conversations that determined their fate. He was a man who had devoted his life to the proposition that every person deserves legal protection. He was watching that proposition be denied to everyone on Earth by the failure to address the climate crisis.

What He Did

On April 14, 2018, David Buckel set himself on fire in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York. He died from his injuries. He had left a note, delivered by email to news organizations, that explained his act in precise, lawyerly prose. He wrote that most

human beings on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels and that many die early deaths as a result. He wrote that his early death by fossil fuel was intended to reflect what human beings are doing to themselves and to the Earth.

He was sixty years old. He had chosen a park as the site of his act...a place of natural beauty, of trees and living things, of families walking with their children on a spring morning. The contrast was deliberate. He was dying in a place that embodied what was being destroyed, using the substance that was destroying it, in the hope that the act might wake someone up.

What It Means

David Buckel introduced something new into the history of self-immolation: the explicit mirroring of the act to the cause. He was not simply protesting the destruction of the Earth. He was enacting it. He was saying, with his body: this is what is happening to the planet and I am going to make it visible in the most immediate way available to me. His body was the Earth. His fire was fossil fuel. His death was a model of what is being done to every living thing.

This is a profound theological move. The Christian mystical tradition has understood the body as a microcosm of the created order...as a place where the same forces that govern the cosmos are at work in miniature. When the body is offered, it is not only the individual life that is being surrendered; it is the whole of what that life contains, including its participation in the living community of Creation. Buckel's act placed his body in explicit solidarity with a dying planet.

The Earth is sacred. Every religious tradition that has engaged seriously with the natural world has understood this. The destruction of the Earth's capacity to sustain life is not merely an environmental problem. It is a theological crime...a desecration of the sacred order that God called good. Buckel bore witness to that desecration with his body. The fire he made in Prospect Park was also God's grief, made visible in one human life.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
Meditate
Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Civil rights attorney David Buckel, sixty years old, self-immolated in Prospect Park, Brooklyn on April 14, 2018, leaving a note that said his death by fossil fuel was intended to mirror what humanity is doing to itself and to the Earth. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a courtroom. A young lawyer standing for people who had no other advocate. There: a client who had been beaten, humiliated, denied. There: the careful, precise language of law being used, for once, in the service of justice.

He had spent his life translating pain into language that the powerful were required to hear. He had won. He had built something. And then he had watched the Earth begin to lose.

We walked with him through the years of watching. The reports accumulating. The temperatures rising. The political conversations that went nowhere. The children who would inherit a world that their parents' generation had failed to protect.

Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels.

He chose the park. He chose the spring morning. He chose the place of living things. The Eternal was there in the trees, in the birds, in the families walking past. The Eternal has always been in the living world.

He poured. He lit. His body became what he was trying to say…a mirror of the Earth burning, held up for anyone who would look.

The families kept walking. The birds kept singing. Prospect Park kept being beautiful. And in the middle of the beauty, a man was on fire, trying to make the invisible visible.

This is what we are doing to ourselves.

The Eternal received him in the flames. The Eternal also wept. God weeps for the Earth. God weeps for every species that has been silenced, for every river that runs toxic, for every child who will inherit the cost of this failure.

David Buckel's fire is still burning. It burns every time the ice melts. It burns every time a species disappears. It burns in the conscience of everyone who hears his story and asks: what am I doing with the life I have been given?

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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Chapter Eighteen

Wynn Bruce

Earth Day Fire at the Court of Last Resort

Who He Was

Wynn Bruce was a fifty-year-old climate activist from Boulder, Colorado. He was a practitioner of Shambhala Buddhism, a man who had spent years in contemplative practice and who understood the Earth's suffering not as a political abstraction but as a spiritual emergency. He had been posting about the climate crisis on social media for years...quiet, earnest posts that documented his growing anguish about the failure of the world's political systems to respond to the scientific reality of what was happening to the planet.

Those who knew him described him as gentle, thoughtful and deeply committed...a person whose Buddhist practice had shaped in him a quality of care for all living things that extended naturally to the Earth itself. He had not made grand public gestures before. He had lived quietly, practiced seriously and watched the climate crisis unfold with the same attentiveness with which he brought to his meditation.

What He Did

On Earth Day, April 22, 2022, Wynn Bruce set himself on fire on the steps of the United States Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. He died from his injuries the following day. He had left a date marked on his calendar...Earth Day...and he had chosen the Supreme Court as the site of his act. The Court is the institution that ultimately determines what American law will and will not protect. He was standing before it with his body, asking what it would do about the dying Earth.

The timing was deliberate. Earth Day is a day of mourning and hope for the living world...a day on which people who love the Earth gather to declare that love and

to insist that it be honored. He chose that day to make the most extreme declaration of love available to him.

What It Means

Wynn Bruce was a Buddhist. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the Earth is understood as alive...as a community of sentient beings, as a sacred body, as the ground of all existence. The destruction of the Earth's capacity to support life is, within this framework, a catastrophe of almost inconceivable proportions...the suffering of billions of beings, human and non-human, present and future, compounded across centuries.

He offered his body as a form of tonglen...the Tibetan practice of taking on the suffering of others and transforming it through the alchemy of compassion. He breathed in the Earth's suffering. He breathed out fire. He was trying, in the most literal way available, to take the suffering into himself so that others might not have to bear it alone.

The Supreme Court, before whose steps he burned, would within weeks issue rulings that would significantly limit the federal government's ability to regulate carbon emissions. The irony is almost unbearable. He burned on those steps and the Court proceeded. The Earth continued to warm. The political system continued to fail. But Wynn Bruce's act entered the human record as a fact that cannot be erased: that on Earth Day 2022, a man who loved the living world offered his body at the seat of American legal power and asked it to do better. The Sacred was in the flames he made. The Sacred heard the Earth that he was speaking for.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read

Meditate

Pray
Contemplate
Envision
Record

Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and climate activist Wynn Bruce, fifty years old, self-immolated on the steps of the United States Supreme Court on Earth Day, April 22, 2022. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a man in meditation. The mountains of Colorado beyond the window. The stillness of practice. And beneath the stillness, something that would not be quiet...the sound of the Earth's distress, audible to anyone who had learned to listen.

He had learned to listen. That was what his practice had given him: the capacity to hear what the world was saying. And what the world was saying was: I am dying. And no one is acting as though I am dying.

We sat in his silence with him. The Eternal sat there too. The silence was full...full of the weight of everything he had absorbed: the melting ice, the burning forests, the dying coral, the species disappearing one by one like lights going out.

He marked the date on his calendar. Earth Day. The day designated for honoring the living world. He would honor it in the most complete way he knew how.

The Supreme Court steps in the morning light. The Eternal was there...in the marble, in the morning air, in the cherry blossoms that bloom each spring in Washington regardless of what the humans are doing.

He sat down. He poured. He lit.

The Earth is alive. The Earth is dying. I am the Earth.

The flames rose in the morning light on Earth Day. The Eternal received them. The Eternal receives every offering made in love, regardless of the form it takes.

The Court proceeded with its business. The governments continued their negotiations. The Earth continued to warm. And the fire that Wynn Bruce made on those steps continued to burn in the conscience of everyone who heard of it and found they could not look away.

God is in the flames of a dying planet. God is in the fire of the man who loved the planet enough to make his death a mirror of its crisis. God is in the Earth that keeps living, that keeps making spring, that keeps calling us back to our responsibility.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART TWELVE

The Recent Witness: Fire in the Twenty-First Century

2024

Chapter Nineteen

Aaron Bushnell

I Will No Longer Be Complicit

Who He Was

Aaron Bushnell was twenty-five years old when he died. He was an active-duty member of the United States Air Force, a software engineer assigned to a unit in San Antonio, Texas. He was also a person of serious conscience...someone who had been watching, with increasing anguish, the military operation that Israel had been conducting in Gaza since October 2023 and who had arrived at a point of conviction so complete that the only act commensurate with it was the most extreme one available.

He was not a prominent activist. He was not a public figure. He was a twenty-five-year-old man in uniform who had been doing his job and who had reached the conclusion that doing his job made him complicit in what he could only describe as genocide. He had thought about this carefully. He had come to it through conscience, not impulse. He had prepared.

What He Did

On February 25, 2024, Aaron Bushnell drove to the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. He was wearing his Air Force uniform. He had arranged to livestream what he was about to do. He approached the embassy entrance, stated that he would "no longer be complicit in genocide," and set himself on fire. As he burned, he shouted "Free Palestine" until the flames overcame him. He died from his injuries.

Before his act, he had posted a message on Facebook: "Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South?

Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?' The answer is, you're doing it. Right now." He was speaking not only to others but to himself...naming, with precise honesty, what he had concluded about his own situation and what he felt called to do about it.

What It Means

Aaron Bushnell is the most recent figure in this book and in certain structural respects he is among the most significant. He was an active-duty military member, in uniform, who set himself on fire outside a foreign embassy while livestreaming the act. The echoes of Norman Morrison are precise: a military family man who could not bear what his country's military was doing and who chose fire outside a symbol of the policy he was opposing. Sixty years separated them. The uniform and the fire and the embassy and the conviction were the same.

His statement on Facebook is one of the most theologically precise self-descriptions in the entire history of this practice. He was not claiming an exceptional heroism. He was making an ordinary demand: that the question people ask about historical atrocities...what would I have done?...be applied to the present moment. He was saying that the comfortable distance between historical injustice and present complicity is a lie. And he was saying it with the only available form of absolute credibility: his body.

His choice to livestream his act places him squarely in the tradition of immolation as public witness. From Thich Quang Duc...for whom the photographer's presence was understood as essential to the act's meaning...through every figure in this book who chose a public location and a visible act, Bushnell understood that witness requires an audience. The livestream was his intersection. The world was his Wenceslas Square.

The question of what one does with the specifics of his political claim...the specific conflict he was protesting, the specific word he used to describe it...does not diminish the theological seriousness of the act. This book does not require

agreement with the political positions of those it honors. It requires only that we take seriously the weight of a conviction so absolute that it drove a twenty-five-year-old man in uniform to the most extreme act available. God was in the flames Aaron Bushnell made on February 25, 2024. The Sacred was present when a young man in uniform said: I will no longer be complicit. And meant it with his life.

A Contemplative Vision

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Read
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Pray
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Envision
Record

United States Air Force serviceman Aaron Bushnell, twenty-five years old, set himself on fire outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. on February 25, 2024, in uniform, while livestreaming, saying he would no longer be complicit in genocide and shouting “Free Palestine” as he burned. Stop to breathe at the end of each paragraph. The beauty will find you.

I don’t recall where I was. I only recall where I went.

Deep in prayer, the Eternal appeared. Follow me. There was no speech, only movement.

There: a young man in uniform, at his desk, doing his work. He was good at his work. He was the kind of person who does his job carefully, who takes his responsibilities seriously, who believes that service means something. And he was also the kind of person who reads, who thinks, who cannot separate what he is asked to do from the consequences of doing it.

The Eternal walked with him through the months of watching. The images arriving...not the sanitized images, but the ones that the algorithm did not catch, the ones that other soldiers and civilians were posting from their phones. The children. The hospitals. The numbers climbing past any frame of reference that felt adequate to what they represented. And the question, arriving in the night, not for the first time: what would I have done?

Many of us like to ask ourselves: what would I do if my country was committing genocide? The answer is, you're doing it. Right now.

He wrote his message. He put on his uniform. He set up the livestream. The Eternal was present for all of this...present in the deliberateness, in the clarity, in the love of the truth that had driven him to this point. He was not in despair. He was in a different country entirely...the country of absolute conviction, where the only remaining question is not whether but how.

The embassy. The street. The cameras recording. He stated, clearly and calmly, that he would no longer be complicit. Then he lit. Then he burned. And then he called out, in the flames, the thing he believed...called it out until he could call out no more.

Norman Morrison stood outside the window of the Secretary of Defense in 1965 and offered his body against a war. Aaron Bushnell stood outside an embassy in 2024 and offered his body against what he could only call by one name. Sixty years. The fire is still being passed. The tradition of witness runs through both men and through all the figures in this book, connecting them across time in a single long chain of bodies that chose the truth over the comfort of silence.

God is in the flames Aaron Bushnell made. God is in the question he asked...the question that is still in the air, still waiting for the rest of us to answer it. What are you doing, right now, with the life you have been given? The flames are still waiting for the answer.

Just as quickly as it all had happened, it all ended.

I found myself back where I was before it all began.

Then again, I don't recall where I was. I only recall where I went… and there was no denying the truth that remained:

"God Is in the Flames."

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PART TWELVE

The Communion of the Flames

Last Things

Shared

What These Lives Share Across Time, Nation and Tradition

The Exhaustion of Available Language

To hold all of these persons together in a single field of vision is to discover patterns that no single life would make visible. They come from different nations, different spiritual traditions, different stages of life, different historical moments. A Vietnamese Buddhist monk of sixty-six. An eighty-two-year-old German Jewish Quaker. A thirty-one-year-old American Quaker family man. A twenty-two-year-old Irish American Catholic. A thirty-three-year-old Vietnamese Buddhist nun. A twenty-three-year-old American student. A fifty-nine-year-old Polish Catholic accountant. A twenty-year-old Czech history student. A forty-something American performance artist. A seventy-nine-year-old Methodist minister. A sixty-year-old civil rights attorney. A fifty-year-old Tibetan Buddhist climate activist. A twenty-six-year-old Tunisian street vendor.

The first common thread is the exhaustion of available language. Every one of these persons had, before reaching fire, engaged in the full range of available protest...writing, speaking, marching, organizing, petitioning, demonstrating. Every one of them had arrived at the conclusion that these means were insufficient. Fire was not their first choice. It was their last.

The Centrality of the Body

The second common thread is the centrality of the body. These were not acts performed at a remove. The body was not used as a tool. The body was the offering. Each of these persons understood that the credibility of their witness depended on

the completeness of the offering...that a partial giving, a giving that held back the self, would not carry the weight of what needed to be said. The theological tradition calls this kenosis: the self emptied out in service of something larger. Every tradition represented in these pages has a name for it. They are all the same name.

The Direction of the Act

The third common thread is the direction of the act...outward, not inward. These were not acts of personal despair. They were acts of political address. Each person chose a location that made the audience clear: a busy Saigon intersection, a street corner near a major university, the window of the Secretary of Defense, the United Nations building, the steps of a pagoda, the center of a university campus, a stadium full of a hundred thousand people, a public square in Prague, a sculpture called Peace, a parking lot in a hometown, a park in Brooklyn, the steps of the Supreme Court, a government office in a small Tunisian city. The location was part of the message.

Fire as the Language of God

The choice of fire as the medium of witness is not incidental. Fire is irreversible. It is total. It is visible from a distance. It cannot be retracted. And in the religious traditions that shaped these persons, fire carries its own weight of sacred meaning. The burning bush. The pillar of flame. The tongues of fire at Pentecost. The eternal fire of the Zoroastrian tradition. The fire of the Lotus Sutra's bodhisattvas. When these persons chose fire, they were not merely choosing a dramatic gesture. They were choosing a theological symbol that their traditions had loaded with meaning for centuries.

The fire they burned in was not only the fire of political protest. It was the fire of theophany...the fire in which God is present. And the claim at the heart of this book...that God is in the flames...is not a rhetorical gesture about the value of their

deaths. It is a theological claim about the nature of their acts: that in these fires, as in the burning bush, something divine was present and is still present for those with eyes to see.

The Question of Efficacy

It must be acknowledged that these acts did not, in most cases, immediately achieve their stated goals. Wars continued. Systems persisted. The Earth kept warming. By the ordinary measures of political effectiveness, it would be difficult to argue that these sacrifices all achieved what they sought.

But efficacy is not the only relevant measure of a prophetic act. The Hebrew prophets were, by the standards of their own time, largely unsuccessful. Jeremiah was imprisoned. Isaiah was ignored. The measure of a prophetic act is not whether it immediately changes the course of events. It is whether it inserts into the human record a truth that cannot be erased...a truth that will work its way through the historical sediment and continue to exert pressure long after the prophet is dead.

By this measure, these acts have been extraordinary. Thích Quảng Đức contributed to the destabilization of the Diệm regime and to the global understanding of what was happening in South Vietnam. Norman Morrison became a national hero in the country he was trying to stop his own nation from destroying. Jan Palach's fire waited twenty years and then the revolution it called into being arrived. Mohamed Bouazizi toppled governments.

The truth these persons spoke with their bodies is still in the world. It is still working. God is in the flames they made. And the flames are still burning.

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Conclusion

What the Flames Say

There is a moment in every contemplative practice when the practitioner arrives at the edge of what language can hold. The mystics have given this edge different names. Meister Eckhart called it the ground...the Grund that lies beneath all ordinary experience and all ordinary language. John of the Cross called it the dark night. Thomas Merton called it le point vierge...the virgin point, the place at the center of the self where God is most immediately present precisely because the self has been most completely relinquished.

The persons gathered in this book arrived at that edge and crossed it. What they found there...what they found in the fire...is not available to any description that stays on the safe side of language. This is why this book has tried not only to describe their acts but to enter them, to sit with them, to follow them into the moment of the flame and discover what is present there.

The God Who Burns

The central claim of this book...that God is in the flames...does not mean that God planned these deaths or desired this suffering. God is not a director of human tragedy, staging extremity for theological purposes. What it means is something both simpler and more demanding: that God was present in these moments. That the love that drove these persons to the flame was, in the deep structure of its motivation, a love that participated in the divine love...the love that empties itself out, that holds nothing back, that gives itself for the life of the world.

The body of Thích Quảng Đức sitting still in the flames at a Saigon intersection is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Alice Herz lying on a Detroit sidewalk, still alive, still insisting, is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Norman Morrison burning at the edge of the most powerful military bureaucracy in human history is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Roger Allen LaPorte ascending from Bellevue Hospital with the sound of singing in his ears is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Nhất Chi Mai burning between the Virgin and Quan Âm is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Ryszard Siwiec burning in a stadium full of people who were being celebrated for their compliance is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Jan Palach, Torch Number One, burning in Wenceslas Square is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of George Winne, Jr. praying the Lord's Prayer in the hospital is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Kathy Change dancing her final dance at the Peace Symbol is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Charles Moore offering his final letter and his final fire to his hometown and his God is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of David Buckel mirroring the Earth's destruction in Prospect Park is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Wynn Bruce sitting on the steps of the Supreme Court on Earth Day is a site of the Sacred made visible. The body of Mohamed Bouazizi standing in the street in Sidi Bouzid with nowhere left to go is a site of the Sacred made visible.

God is in the flames. This is not a comfortable truth. It is not meant to be. It is the kind of truth that, once received, changes the person who receives it. And it is the truth that this book ends on, trusting the reader to carry it forward into whatever fire their own life requires.

What This Book Asks of You

This book does not ask you to approve of these deaths. It does not ask you to imitate them. It asks you to receive them...to let them do what prophetic acts are always trying to do, which is to wake something up in the person who witnesses them.

The question that every one of these persons was asking, in the only language that finally felt adequate to the question, is the same question that the Sacred has always been asking the human community: What will you do with the life you have been given? What will you do with your body, your voice, your conscience, your one irreplaceable moment in the human story? What will you do when you see clearly what is happening and you understand that your comfortable silence is a form of complicity?

These persons gave their answers in the most extreme terms available. The rest of us are invited to give ours in whatever terms our own lives make possible. But we are invited...demanded, even...to give an answer. The flames are still waiting for it. God is in the flames and God is waiting to hear from us.

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God Is in the Flames.

May the Sacred that is forever able guide your heart, your mind, your body and your soul...until all things are brought to their perfect fruition in the flames.

Amen.

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