

The Road Home: Stories of the Spiritual Journey

By Beverly Beem

Books Discussed

- Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace* (Chicago: Loyola, 1997)
Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995)
Charles Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977)
Madeleine L'Engle, *Bright Evening Star: Mystery of the Incarnation* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1997)
Larry King, *Powerful Prayers* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998)
C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955)
Martin Marty, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983)
Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1948); *The Way of a Pilgrim*, (Garden City, NY: Image, 1978)
Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996); *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993)
Henri Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997)
Karl Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1996)

Getting students to appreciate Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher of colonial New England, is one of my goals in my survey of literature class. After reading *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* it is a bit of a challenge. I try to help them see his picture of God holding the sinner like a spider on a slender thread over the flames of hell as an image of God's grace. It's not an easy sale.

I push them toward his *Personal Narrative*. Here he tells his own story. They see the hell-fire preacher in a new light, struggling with the idea of God's sovereignty to come to that "inward, sweet delight in God" that becomes the foundation of his life. "If you haven't already done so," I tell them, "you will probably soon be asked to write your own spiritual autobiography." It is a frequent assignment: write the story of your relationship with God, the story of your spiritual journey. It is sometimes most daunting to those students who don't think they have one, not because they are not conscientious disciples of Christ, but because they always have been. They have no exciting conversion stories to tell, like the ones sometimes featured in chapel or vespers, no dramatic before and after pictures to show. But they, too, have a spiritual journey.

The story of a soul's journey to God is a genre all its own. More and more, people are telling their stories from the inside out. Unlike the memoir, the value of the story is not in the significance of the events but in the integrity of the telling. Touching the core of human nature and exploring the working of the Spirit in ordinary lives, these accounts are theology in first-person narrative form. They may or may not be exciting. That is not the point. These are not the saints' stories, providing awe-inspiring role

models. Though God may lead some into high adventure, most of us live out our callings in the mundane dress of ordinary lives. These stories are our stories, told with rigorous honesty and with the humble awareness that God is with us.

A familiar form of journey narrative is the conversion story, sometimes accused of lingering too much over the debauchery of the past life before celebrating the conversion to a new life. Actually, I can think of few examples of that pattern. It may be only a stereotype, or it may have a short shelf life. Conversion is clearly a life-changing experience and one well worth examining, especially if it is the entry into a thoughtful and reflective walk with God. One well-known conversion story is C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955) with its memorable picture of that night in 1929 when "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

Another picture of a kneeling convert comes in Charles Colson's *Born Again* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977). If Lewis takes us into the intellectual struggles of an Oxford don, Colson takes us into the political struggles of Nixon's "hatchet man." Known for his ruthlessness, Colson's conversion raises skepticism in the Christian world as well as the political world. Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* asks him what he has done to make amends for his attacks on others. "Well, I confess you leave me somewhat bewildered, then, as to the meaning of your faith," says Wallace. The challenge is a wake-up call for Colson. His conversion is only a first step. He works out its meaning in the specifics of the Watergate hearings, his guilty plea, his prison term, and his later prison ministry. Conversion, for Colson as it was for Lewis, is the beginning of the journey from intellectual assent to discipleship.

No beginner in the Christian journey, Karl Rahner tells the story of a long life in prayer in *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1996). The German theologian exemplifies the interconnection of theology and spirituality. He seems to work out his theology in dialog with God.

"Thanks to Your mercy, O Infinite God, I know something about You not only through

concepts and words, but through experience. I have met You in joy and suffering. For You are the first and last experience of my life. Yes, really You Yourself, not just a concept of You."

In these prayers the theologian takes his theology into the daily routine of life and tests it.

"If there is any path at all on which I can approach You, it must lead through the very middle of my ordinary daily life. If I should try to flee to You by any other way, I'd actually be leaving myself behind, and that, aside from being quite impossible,



would accomplish nothing at all."

Daily life is not something to escape but a means by which we live out God's will. If God is working through us, it is in the activities of our ordinary day. If God is refining us, it is not in great tasks but in the ordinary challenges and irritations of our own life. The challenges of living the spiritual life are challenges to mind and spirit. If our life is tedious and dull, the fault may be in us. "My days don't make me dull—it's the other way around." The great enemy is mediocrity, even the "frightening mediocrity of my 'good conscience.'" If God is working in our lives, the result cannot be mediocrity, "the cloak behind which I hide the worst thing of all, in the hope that it will not be discovered: a selfish and cowardly heart, a dull and insensitive heart which knows no generosity of

spirit nor breadth of mind."

If Rahner's prayers show the vibrancy of prayer over a lifetime, a collection of interviews by Larry King called *Powerful Prayers* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998) shows the role of prayer in the lives of celebrities. He asked the rich and famous, athletes and politicians, artists, and writers and CEO's when and how they prayed. Not a man of prayer himself, he elicited the aid of Rabbi Irwin Katsof to help him negotiate the untried waters of spirituality. This study of the journey of others may have been something of a journey for himself. One brief phone exchange demonstrates the depth of the mystery of prayer to the uninitiated:

"Rabbi, hello? Are you still there?"

"I'm still here, Larry. I was just saying a prayer."

"Again?"

Do you pray for a parking space? And what does your answer indicate about your concept of God? Do you talk with God? How do you pray for yourself and others? Though these stories will not take you far in knowing a person's relationship with God, seeing how people in the public eye pray might be a key to understanding how the spiritual life is practiced in the marketplace these days.

Bringing theology home to daily life is the theme of much of Henri Nouwen's work. The author of many books on the spiritual life, Nouwen focuses on the journey home to God in community, solitude, prayer and service. Just before he died in 1996 he had intended to write a study of the Apostles' Creed, looking at the theology behind Christian beliefs. He didn't write that book. Instead, he wrote *Adam: God's Beloved* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), the story of a severely handicapped man at L'Arche Daybreak Community, where Nouwen had pastored the last years of his life. How can one write the story of a man who could not speak or walk or dress himself or perform the simplest of life functions during his thirty-three years? Only with the eyes of love.

For Nouwen, Adam becomes God's gift, teaching him to see himself, as well as Adam, as God's beloved. In Adam, Nouwen sees the image of God in weak and vulnerable human flesh and sees with fresh eyes the mystery of the Incarnation. The story of Adam is the story of a friendship, of a

relationship in which each gave to the other and in which Nouwen grows to understand Adam's sonship and his own. "Adam bore silent witness to this mystery, which has nothing to do with whether or not he could speak, walk, or express himself, whether or not he made money, had a job, was fashionable, famous, married or single. It had to do with his being. He was and is a beloved child of God." The story of Adam becomes Nouwen's book on the Apostles' Creed, embodying abstract theology in concrete human experience.

Nouwen brings the writings and history of the church to contemporary Christian experience. An increasing interest in these ancient paths has led many to look to the resources of monasteries and their guesthouses. Kathleen Norris describes her stay at St. John's Abbey in *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996). A modern married Protestant poet, she seems an unlikely candidate for the monastic experience. But she has taken the idea of spiritual journey literally. She first wrote of her experience as a New Yorker living in the Great Plains and discovering the power of the land on the human spirit. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) tells the story of a year in a town so small that even "poets and ministers have to hang out together" and a landscape so awesome that "like Jacob's angel, the region requires that you wrestle with it before it bestows a blessing."

In Dakota and in a Benedictine monastery, Norris finds "an experience of the holy." In both she finds "stability: commitment to a particular community, a particular place." In both she finds "a school for humility." In both she finds the environment "where I've wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance," her "spiritual geography." I found myself reading the two books together, and each is a commentary on the other. Participating in the daily routine of Benedictine life helps her see the significance of the daily routine of her life in small town Dakota. As she shaped Dakota around the calendar year, tracing the year through weather reports, she shapes *The Cloister Walk* around the liturgical year. Participation in the liturgical hours of each day gives a balance to life, endowing work and play and prayer with the spirit of the sacred.

Norris samples for a short time the life that

for many is a calling. Thomas Merton was one of the first to draw that calling to the public eye in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1948). He abandoned a promising career as a teacher and literary critic to become a Trappist monk, moving from words to silence. But words came out of silence. Now, twenty-five years after his death, his journals are being published, and his writings on prayer and contemplation are making the ancient paths accessible to the contemporary world. Though few will follow Merton's example of entering the monastic life, he whets our appetites for lives of community and solitude, of prayer and service, and of a constant awareness of the presence of God. Now, people like Nouwen and Norris who have received the hospitality of the monks show us how to take it home, how to bring these ancient Christian practices into our busy modern lives.

These experiences in the traditions of the early church show us that there is treasure unmined in traditions not our own and in times before our own. One such treasure is *The Way of a Pilgrim* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1978), by an anonymous Russian wanderer of the 19th century. He introduces himself:

"By the grace of God I am a Christian, by my deeds a great sinner, and by my calling a homeless wanderer of humblest origin, roaming from place to place. My possessions consist of a knapsack with dry crusts of bread on my back and in my bosom the Holy Bible."

This is all.

His pilgrimage is a literal one and a quest. How is it possible to pray without ceasing? This is the command he reads in the Bible, but how does one do that? He goes from city to city to find the answer and no one can tell him until he finds a hermit, a starets of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, who teaches him the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." This is the prayer of the heart, the continuous calling on Jesus in the constant awareness of his abiding presence. This abiding presence transforms his life. After spending a summer with his elder learning to pray the Jesus Prayer, he continues his vocation as a pilgrim, praying and teaching others to pray and seeing all around him with the love of Christ.

The recovery of the old classics of spirituality can lead us to new classics of spirituality. One prolific writer, Madeleine L'Engle, reflects on her life in the context of the birth of Jesus in *Bright Evening Star: Mystery of the Incarnation* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1997). She, too, works out her theology in the context of daily life, especially in her autobiography, *The Crosswicks Journal*, and in facing the death of her husband in



Two-Part Invention. In *Bright Evening Star*, she approaches the evening of her life and reviews the questions that have touched her life from the age of the universe to the meaning of love. Her questions are answered in Christ. "Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me! It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine." Her reflections glitter with the memories of an active and creative life, full of wonder and gratitude, as she seeks to understand her life in the context of the life of Christ.

Like the Psalms, these journeys to God express the full spectrum of emotions, fear as well as praise and anger as well as hope. The Psalms show us that the only criterion for emotion is its authenticity. Sometimes this authenticity is difficult in a community that can reject experience that does not conform to its norm and emotions that show a struggle with God. But the ability to speak the truth of one's own experience with God is essential

to the literature of spiritual journey. Roberta Bondi, a church historian and theologian, speaks precisely to this need for truthfulness in telling her own story in *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). As a theologian she examines the distorted images of God that subvert the life God has for us. As a church historian she examines the way the church has devalued women and failed to see in women the image of God. As a woman she seeks to tell her own story and recover a voice that the church needs to hear. Wounded by an authoritarian and perfectionist father and a church that would not acknowledge the validity of her experience, she saw herself as unacceptable and her experience as invalid.

Her study of the early church theologians showed her a different God. Through them she "approached the great questions of human life and the way God relates to us not through abstract theological statements but through the medium of sayings and stories that take the world of individual experience very seriously." Theology became "learning to know God as God is, as a healing God, and learning to know ourselves, individually and communally, as people who correspond with that God in whose image we are made." Learning to tell one's own story is hard work, and for Bondi it meant learning to identify the woundedness in her own life and experience the healing power of God. She does both with "awe and gratitude to God for the gift of my own particular life." The picture of God as the healer inspires the gratitude that underlies her experience and inspires the wonder at "the reality of each separate human life and the mystery of God's presence in it."

Not only is each person's journey different, but each person experiences different "seasons of the heart," as Martin Marty calls them in his book, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983). For most, sooner or later, this journey of the soul will take them through winter. For Marty, the occasion of this journey was the death of his wife. Feeling the Absence, people in winter feel the chill even more intently in the presence of the "summery" souls who see no mystery in the ways of the Lord and rejoice in the certainty of their explanations. Such

"shadowless joy" is sometimes presented as the norm, while those in the wintery landscapes are there because of some failing in their faith. Marty's journey through winter led him to the Psalms for guidance where he discovered that many addressed "windswept spirituality" as well as the "sunny" sort. His chapter titles such as "Slanting Toward Solstice," "January Thaw," and "Winterfallow" capture the shadings of the seasons and the complexity of the image. Whatever the season, the Psalms, as well as other journey literature, demand absolute honesty. This honesty in all seasons records the journey in its completeness and its complexity.

If we began this trek through the literature of spiritual journey with a conversion story, the story of a birth in the Christian life, it is only right to end with the story of a death. Though everyone will die at some point, not everyone consciously goes through the experience of dying. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin left us his reflections on his own death in *The Gift of Peace* (Chicago: Loyola, 1997). Like Charles Colson in *Born Again*, Bernardin lived out his most intimate experiences with God in the public eye. Colson describes the beginning of a life with God; Bernardin the end. If he has words of counsel to those he leaves behind, it is the theme of letting go. "By letting go, I mean the ability to release from our grasp those things that inhibit us from developing an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus." The self-examination that comes at the end of his life centers on that theme.

He focuses on the last three years of his life, beginning with the traumatic experience of a false accusation of sexual impropriety and continuing with his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. Both he turned into opportunities for ministry. The first experience began with the false charges and concluded with a meeting and reconciliation with the accuser. The hundred days of the ordeal he describes as "a profound education of the soul." The experience brought him to minister to others in difficult times, a ministry that he will repeat as a cancer patient, "a priest first, a patient second." In all of this he says, "His special gift to me is the gift of peace," an explanation of the title. "In turn, my special gift to others is to share God's peace, to help them deal with illness, troubled times."

The ability to experience God's peace, he believes, comes from prayer, especially a prayer life established in good times. "By talking about my inner peace, I hope people can see that there is a lot more to prayer and faith than mere words. God really does help us live fully even in the worst of times. And the capacity to do precisely this depends upon the deepening of our relationship to God through prayer." This reflection on the relationship of events in a life to the walk with God is what makes the book more than a memoir. It is an examination of the soul and a testament of faith and an invitation to others.

What I would like to leave behind is a simple prayer that each of you may find what I have found—God's special gift to us all: the gift of peace. When we are at peace, we find the freedom to be most fully who we are, even in the worst of times. We let go of what is nonessential and embrace what is essential. We empty ourselves so that God may more fully work within us. And we become instruments in the hands of the Lord.

I have chosen just a few favorites that reflect something of the scope and variety of this genre of

literature. I imagine that you are making a list of all those I have missed. I would love to see your list. I have two more favorite authors: you and me. Writing an account of our own spiritual journey, whether published or not, is writing that can give wings to the soul. It connects our theology with our lives and helps us discern the Spirit's workings in the course of our days. It develops in us an authentic voice to express ourselves honestly to God and to call things by their right names. Sometimes it can be our testimony to others. Journal writing never intended for publication becomes good reading for ourselves, for God, and sometimes a good friend.

Beverly Beem, professor of English at Walla Walla College, chairs the Department of English. She holds a Ph.D. in Renaissance Literature from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. She frequently conducts workshops on keeping a spiritual journal called "Writing Our Way Home." Beembe@wwc.edu

Stimulating Books and Videos!

Qty.		
_____	<i>Abortion: Ethical Issues & Opinions</i> edited by David R. Larson	\$ 9.95
_____	<i>Remnant & Republic: Adventist Themes for Personal and Social Ethics</i> edited by Charles W. Teel, Jr.	\$ 9.95
_____	<i>The New Relatedness for Man & Woman in Christ: A Mirror of the Divine</i> by V. Norskov Olsen	\$ 9.95
_____	<i>War No More: Options in Nuclear Ethics</i> edited by James W. Walters	\$ 9.95
_____	<i>Choosing Who's To Live</i> edited by James W. Walters	\$ 16.95
_____	<i>What Is A Person?</i> by James W. Walters	\$ 19.95

Shipping \$3 first book, \$.50 each additional book,
\$5 for ten or more books.

Shipping _____
Sales Tax (CA only) 7.75% _____
Total _____

Please include this form with your order.

Send with payment to:
Center for Christian Bioethics
Coleman Pavilion, 11121S
Loma Linda University, CA 92350
FAX: (909) 558-0336

Qty.		
_____	<i>A Conversation with Paul Heubach</i> 4-video set, interview by David R. Larson	\$ 34.95
_____	<i>A Conversation with Jack Provonsha</i> 4-video set, interview by David R. Larson	\$ 34.95
_____	<i>A Conversation with Graham Maxwell</i> 4-video set, interview by David R. Larson	\$ 34.95
_____	<i>A Conversation with Harold Shryock</i> 2-video set, interview by David R. Larson	\$ 24.95

Shipping \$3 per set

Sales Tax (CA only) 7.75% _____
Shipping _____
Total _____

Ship to: (Please Print)

Name _____
Address _____
City, State, ZIP _____
Phone _____
Payment:
Total Enclosed \$ _____
 Check \$ _____ Credit Card Exp Date _____
 MasterCard VISA Discover
Card No. _____
Signature _____

