

Reflections on *Naked Spirituality: A Life With God in 12 Simple Words* | BY BRENTON READING

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When I realized my little girl would be developmentally delayed, I was devastated. Not knowing the severity of her delay, but recognizing signs hinting at the worst, the looming challenges and vanishing dreams threatened to erase hope and strip away faith. In the midst of this crisis, I was gratefully reading Brian McLaren's *Naked Spirituality: A Life With God in 12 Simple Words*.¹

By chance or perhaps providence, my slow savoring of each page meant I was just turning to Part III, *Perplexity: The Season of Spiritual Surviving*. Recalling the initial seasons of faith and the first few of the twelve simple words McLaren uses to frame each chapter, I recognized my own seemingly fatal arc of faith. As McLaren describes it,

If faith shoots up in the springtime of Simplicity, and if it branches out and grows robust in the summer of Complexity, it appears to fade and fall like leaves in the autumn of Perplexity. It falters in the impatient when of aspiration, and then it falls to pieces in the no of rage. The furious no of raging prayer leaves one spent, exhausted... and strangely quiet. And in that quiet, in that bush and stillness of exhaustion, a subtle turning occurs, a turn from no to something beyond it. It's the beginning of a kind of surrender, in a way. We say, "Okay. Life hasn't gone my way. My expectations are shattered. I have no mastery, no control. Why must it be this way?"²

Turning from "No!" to "Why?" my own visceral groan transcended the unknown and split the darkness, revealing a glimmer of light on the

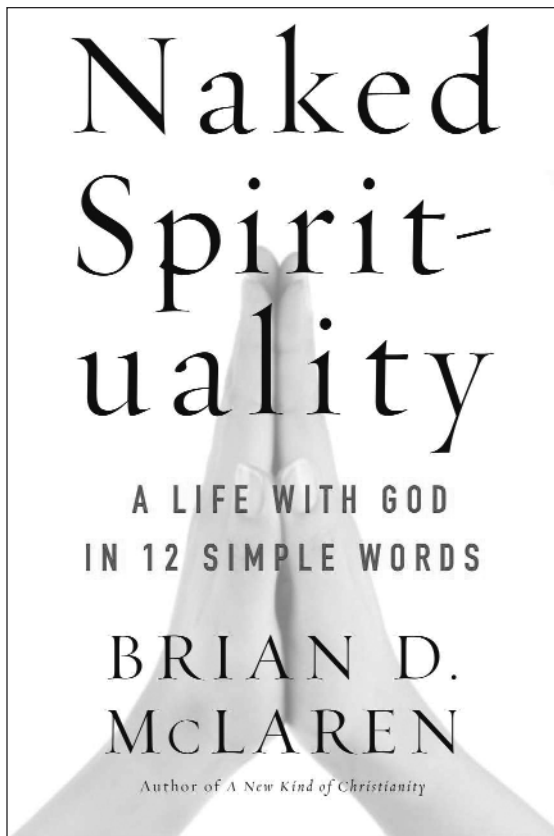


horizon. It dawned on me that the dark void was not the end of faith, but a temporary space with potential for divine renewal.

The dawn cast life's dark moments in new light. Rather than looking back with gratefulness that I never slipped down one of many proverbial slopes into spiritual oblivion, I realized I had already slipped headlong into valleys of the shadow of death, and yet I need fear no evil because when I make my bed in the depths, even there God's hand will guide me. The slippery slope of questioning a 6,000-year-old earth did inevitably lead to a sense of utter loss, with more and more questions on the scientific and historic interpretations of other parts of scripture. Listening to the faithful stories of those from other religions and orientations did cause grace to grow wild with the hope of universal redemption. But, each

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falling away from the wide and familiar path of faith opened space to discover a narrow way winding to new dawns and breathtaking perspectives on once-familiar vistas.

Perhaps you share my initial concern that describing stages of faith will create a spiritual hierarchy allowing those at higher stages to gaze sympathetically on others blissfully ignorant at lower stages. However, McLaren makes clear not only that each stage of faith is filled with beauty and promise all its own, but that arrival is never the point. Rather, just as creation is cyclical, spirituality is similar. The ever-changing journey of faith opens the possibility for circling back to know each familiar place again, as if for the first time. No matter where readers are on their faith journey, they will find in this book affirmation for the present and courage for the future.

At times, I wished McLaren had taken a more communal view of faith. In some places, I wondered if the words obscured rather than revealed truth. Yet the progression in the book spoke to my deep personal need, and I was

reassured to find that the last word is not even spoken but an ellipsis...of silence.

My daughter is now two years old. She walks and even communicates in her own way. She's not where my boys are, even when they were her age. When I come home, she doesn't scream, "Daddy!" and throw herself into my arms as the boys still sometimes do. Instead, when she realizes I am home she glances coyly over her shoulder and claps her hands for more. I knowingly ask, "More tickle?" With that, she buries her head between her toes, waiting for my fingers to release squeals of laughter.

I don't know what the next stage of life holds for her or me; but, I do know that while this stage is not perfect it is very good. And, just as the twelve simple words in McLaren's book lead to one word which enfolds them all, there is one word which claps its hands for more, fills each stage with meaning, and drives out all fear...love. ■

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References

1. Brian D. McLaren, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011).
2. *Ibid.*, 169–170.