

IF GOD IS LOVE, DON'T BE A JERK

*Finding a Faith That Makes
Us Better Humans*

JOHN PAVLOVITZ

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Introduction

YOU HAD ONE JOB

Love is the greatest force in the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. He who loves is a participant in the being of God.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

If you want a good laugh, Google the phrase “You had one job.” The results are a hilariously tragic parade of seemingly impossible fails, unfathomably poor planning, and facepalm-inducing human error: a piece of melted cheese on *top* of a fast-food burger bun, the word “STOP” misspelled on a street crossing, a “Keep to the Right” sign with its arrow facing left, a toilet lid inexplicably installed *below* the seat itself. Seeing these stupefying train wrecks in task execution tends to elicit two responses: usually making you feel a little bit better about yourself while simultaneously wanting to track down the culprits in an effort to understand how they managed to neglect the primary duty assigned to them. We begin to speculate: Were they temporarily distracted? Did they not properly comprehend the instructions? Did they feel as though someone above them in the chain of command dropped the ball? Were they just plain lazy? When people miss the point so spectacularly, we want to know how and why—because that kind of failure feels impossible from the

outside. It seems unfathomable to get the main thing wrong, and seeing it happen sparks our curiosity. I imagine Jesus knows well the curiosity that comes with watching people given clear direction lose their way.

As a longtime Christian by aspiration (if not always in practice), I often envision an exasperated Jesus coming back, and the first words out of his mouth to his followers as his feet hit the pavement being “You had one job: *Love*.¹ So, what happened?” I wonder what massive wave of excuses and rationalizations would come flooding from the mouths of the faithful multitude in front of him, how they might justify their mistreatment of the assailed humanity in their care, the verbal and theological gymnastics they’d attempt to avoid culpability for their own cruelty. Would they stridently recite him a verse from Leviticus? Would they blame the Liberal Media for morally corrupting America? Would they talk about people’s wicked lifestyle choices? Would they argue that they *were* loving the sinners in their midst but simply hating their sin? Would they frantically offer up the same platitudes and parrot back the same partisan talking points they’d gotten used to brandishing on social media and proferring in Sunday school classes? And, if all else failed to convince him—would they quote Jesus to himself in a desperate Hail Mary effort to pass the buck to him for what they did or failed to do while supposedly standing in for him? And there, fully seen in the piercing gaze of the namesake of their very faith tradition, with all their justifications and excuses exhausted and only their fully exposed hearts left—would any of their responses be sufficient reasons for refusing to *love*, when that was the singular task and primary commandment that he left them responsible for tending to?

In my less compassionate moments, I admit that I like to picture it not going well for them. I know it’s far less than

admirable (let alone Christlike), but some days my heart strangely warms at the possibility of a few billion brimstone-breathing evangelists, sanctimonious conservative politicians, and plank-eyed² judgmental Christian neighbors all having to explain themselves in a sanctified flop-sweat moment they can't exegete or gaslight themselves out of, and they all get what they have coming to them—but my self-righteous revelry doesn't last long. The mirror calls me out as I remember what I think I know about Jesus, and that rescues me from full-blown, unabated hubris. I begin to wonder what *my* excuses might be, how I'd spin the enmity I manufacture here, what story I'd come up with for not doing the one task we both know comprises a disciple's job description. And if I really believe what I'm supposed to believe, are any of my justifications sufficient? If God *is* love and if Jesus is the perfect expression *of* that love and if I am supposedly trying to follow that Jesus—how can I be so love-impaired so frequently? How do I miss the singular point so consistently?

It's not as if I didn't know what I was signing up for, like some lengthy online user agreement I blindly accepted in haste, missing the bombshell fine print beneath. Having read the Gospels a few million times (give or take a few hundred thousand), I know the primary commandment is not something I need to excavate from cumbersome layers of foreign language translations and cultural mores of the time. Jesus himself clearly laid out the most important commandment for me and for everyone who's ever cracked open a Bible (and even most people who haven't but know the story anyway), so we'd all understand what's being asked of us going in; so there would be no post-altar-call buyer's remorse or deathbed claims of a sucker-punch bait and switch. Loving *God* and *neighbor* and *self* is the elemental

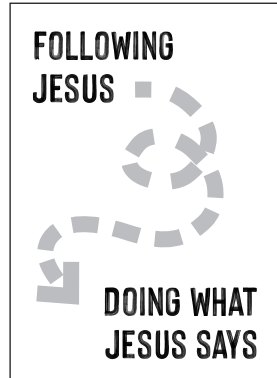
stuff of Christian prayers, songs, T-shirts, and bumper stickers—and we know that. But as the master Morpheus said to protégé Neo in the first (and only truly great) *Matrix* film, “There is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”³ Love is the path that Jesus laid out for us. I’m going to assume we agree on that, and we won’t waste a lot of time arguing it here. This book is about the *walking*: about imagining what love should or could look like if we take that mandate seriously, about whatever it is that interrupts and derails us along the way. It’s about the ways a bigger God is going to yield a greater capacity to love more people, and about what that stretching will cause us to confront and confess and jettison. It’s going to be eventually beautiful but not always pleasant along the way. It’s no fun to face your failures, and I speak from a wealth of experience.

Throughout my life, I’ve often imagined I was a Christian. I was raised in a Christian home and went to a Christian school. After a few meandering spiritual wilderness years as a skeptical but hopeful agnostic, I attended a Christian seminary, became a Christian pastor, and have served in Christian churches for most of the past twenty-five years of my life. (Not enough *Christian* for you? No problem, I’ve got more.) Along the way, I’ve read and studied and preached the Scriptures extensively; led community Bible studies and student retreats and overseas mission trips; ministered in tiny, rural chapels and massive, gleaming megachurches. I’ve crisscrossed the country for the better part of five years, sharing the Good News as I understand it. I’ve done all the religious *stuff* that proper Christians are supposed to do. As a result of these decades immersed in this tradition both personally and vocationally, I thought that I at least had the gist of Jesus, that I was in the blessed ballpark. Now, I think

I might have been doing this wrong all these years. Maybe I assumed something that I shouldn't have, because much of the time I don't quite feel like I fit in the places professed Jesus-folk gather.

I always thought Christians were supposed to care about people—not necessarily agree with them or believe what they believe or even like them, but to see them each as specific and unique image-bearers of the Divine, and to want to work for *shalom* for them: wholeness, happiness, peace, safety, rest—regardless of where they came from or what they believed or who they loved. I grew up believing that one of the markers of a life that emulated Jesus was a pliable heart capable of being broken at the distress of other human beings: when they are hungry and hurting, when they are homeless and afraid, when they grieve and feel alone, when they believe they are unloved and forgotten, when tragedy befalls them, and when injustice assails them. These things are supposed to move the needle within us if Jesus is softening our hearts, or at least I imagined so.

Even in seasons of defiance and doubt, when I wasn't sure that Jesus was who they said he was or that I believed anything about salvation and damnation, I took that *love your neighbor* business seriously. In those obstinate, backsliding seasons of rebellion when I was what true disciples call a hopelessly lost sheep, I was sure that compassion was nonnegotiable for Jesus followers. I always knew sacrificial love was the narrow road and the better path, that loveless Christianity was an oxymoron—and that if I ever claimed



faith, I'd better be more loving than if I didn't. I bet you know all that too, which is why you're in disbelief that so many professed Christians neglect the one job of loving people, and why you're compelled to get it right. We need such human beings walking around now more than ever, given where we're headed, at least in America.

I'm writing these words in the last days of a COVID-ravaged, racism-scarred, election-battered 2020 that seems determined to squeeze in every bit of disaster it can before angrily departing into the annals of history, future therapy bills, and the recurring nightmares of everyone who managed to live through it. Here, in this current disorienting maelstrom of prolonged isolation, wild conspiracy theories, election fraud claims (and other assorted personal and national disasters too lengthy to list here), there are a whole lot of things I *don't* know. I don't know if I'll spend a second birthday in quarantine. I don't know if my kids will homeschool through college. I don't know if I'll ever get to use my frequent flyer miles. I don't know if before the end of the year, Donald Trump is going to declare Mar-a-Lago a sovereign nation and himself its rightful king.

But there *is* one thing about the future I do know right now, one coming reality that I can safely predict with 100 percent certainty regardless of who assumes or retains the presidency, what the composition of Congress turns out to be, or whether there is a blue or a red majority in America: loveless, Jesus-less Christianity is going to leave us fractured in ways we've never been before. There is going to be relational collateral damage in families, faith communities will be broken apart, lifelong friendships will be irreparably harmed, injustice will be prevalent—and hateful religion

will have compounded it all. No political result of November 3, 2020, was going to change what was true on the day before, or on the day I'm writing these words, or on the day you're reading them. The calendar and the politicians are immaterial. These injuries we're tending to are all far bigger than partisan politics or national election results, and they won't be relegated to a single calendar year either. These are evergreen afflictions.

For as long as human beings have been declaring devotion to a God of love, they have been gloriously screwing it up by being hateful in the process. The Bible doesn't shy away from that, and neither should we. If we've been paying attention, we know that for as much as religion has bent the arc of the moral universe toward justice,⁴ it has just as often pulled it into inequity. For whatever liberation has come via the people of Jesus, we have collectively engineered bondage and fortified supremacy as well. It's good to admit this as we try to fashion something better from what has been. It's necessary to see the ugly things in the shadowed places of our nation and in our faith tradition as we work to let a little bit of light in. That isn't going to be as easy or as neat or as comfortable as we'd like.

I can understand why you might not want to accept the invitation I'm offering here. (Lord literally knows, I've avoided it for most of my life.) It's a fairly simple and painless task to identify the people out there who we believe are doing religion wrong and condemn them. We can usually accomplish that with very little effort. And though it's a bit less pleasant, we might even be willing to document the ways and times in which we respond poorly to people and to circumstances. It is a far more invasive and disruptive endeavor to pause long enough and dig deep enough to consider what we actually believe and how that belief shapes

our dispositions and directs our paths. That process leaves a mark. Most of us aren't looking for an existential crisis—but let's be willing to have one: to admit our questions, inventory our struggles, and attend to our burdens. (You're likely having such a crisis whether you acknowledge it or not, otherwise you wouldn't be here.) And since you are, you're probably in some form of deconstruction, reconstruction, or straight-up demolition of your former faith. You are in the emotional growing pains of adult spirituality. Reexamining your entire image of God is going to be a bit of an interruption, something you can't numb with a streaming binge or a couple hours of mindless slot-machine scrolling through your newsfeed. When your previous understanding of whatever you imagine set life into motion and holds it all together and directs your movements faces disturbance, there are going to be consequences and costs and collateral damage. Many people don't want to do that invasive, uncomfortable work, which is why they're satisfied allowing someone else to tell them what to believe.

I'm glad that, for whatever reason, you're not satisfied with that. Our world, starved for love, is glad too.

Chapter 1

UNBOXING GOD

“Oh, no—I’m trapped in these pants.”

That was the first thought I had as I careened wildly around my walk-in closet. It probably sounds as ridiculous to you now as it did in my head in that moment. The situation had deteriorated rapidly. Just five minutes earlier I’d been quietly thumbing through the outer reaches of my clothes rack, far from the well-traveled middle section, where outfits no longer suitable for respectable humans languish for years in dust and darkness before finally being evicted into cardboard boxes or garbage bags and sentenced to spend their remaining days in the attic or garage. As a series of once-sensible (and now tragically laughable) fashion decisions slid past me, I stopped abruptly as I suddenly found myself face-to-face with a thirty-year-old friend: a pair of ladies’ stretch denim pants I’d purchased in 1988 at the Cherry Hill Mall in southern New Jersey. (Author’s note: I was twenty years old, had a long and luxurious mane of thick, naturally curly chestnut hair—and as the male singer in a local “hair band,” as they were affectionately known, there was absolutely nothing unusual about buying my clothes in a women’s clothing store.) As I stared reverently at the glorious acid-washed relic of my youth gone wild, suddenly a voice in my head that strongly resembled my own said, “You know, I bet they still fit.” Like the crafty

serpent tempting Adam and Eve in the garden, the voice dared me forward. "Go ahead . . . try them on." At fifty-one years old, I still consider myself in pretty good shape, so I answered back with naive optimism, "Why not?"

I was about to get a definitive answer.

Things started off promisingly enough. I bent down and grabbed the waistband, stepped into the small leg holes that easily traversed my ankles, but by the time I reached my calves I realized I was in trouble as progress slowed substantially. Undaunted, I doubled my resolve and pressed on (which turned out to be a really terrible idea). I was soon wriggling wildly and my breathing became noticeably labored as I tried to muscle myself all the way into what had quickly become a pair of pale blue human sausage casings. When those efforts proved futile, I began to hop violently like a stationary sack-race participant, hoping the blunt force of gravity would thrust my thighs the rest of the way through the now obviously woefully undersized space provided. After four or five desperate heaves, I felt a rush of air suddenly vacuum-sealing me in, and mercifully came to rest on the ground. I stood there with my chest heaving and forehead perspiring, as if having just completed high-intensity cardio training, and initially feeling pleased with myself—however, any satisfaction was only a momentary victory, as I felt the elastic waistband sharply digging into my skin and my legs started to quickly lose feeling due to lack of blood flow. It was then that I came to three sobering realizations: (1) I was no longer twenty years old, (2) I still hadn't fully exhaled, and (3) I wasn't getting out of these pants by myself.

They say that the first step in getting help of any kind is admitting that you have a problem. I could tell from the substantial tension my lower extremities were under that if

I'd tried to sit down in that moment, I'd surely have set off a powerful explosion, sending spandex shrapnel into every corner of our walk-in closet. In a welcome moment of sober humility, I reluctantly called for help. Hearing my distant, muffled cries for assistance, my wife and kids came running in from other rooms of the house, expecting from the desperation in my voice that I'd had a bad fall or heart episode—and instead were greeted by a grown man imprisoned by his own pair of ladies' slacks. After they helped to extricate me, we all had a good laugh at my expense, and when sensation returned to my legs, I placed the pants (which had now shrunk back to their original size) back on the hanger. I wasn't ready to say good-bye to them just yet.

If I had expired there in that closet, my cause of death would have been listed as *Unintentional Spandecide caused by reckless arrogance*. It would have been a classic case of user error. No one would have blamed the pants. They may have functioned back when I bought them, but they certainly weren't designed to contain me thirty years and four inches of girth later. I wasn't supposed to fit into them any longer and shouldn't have tried. That's how you find yourself in peril in your bedroom closet.

This has been my spiritual journey over the past decade and a half: trying desperately to cram my belief into a space it was no longer capable of fitting into, hoping that sheer will, a little denial, and lots of wishful thinking would allow me to stay in something I'd long outgrown but couldn't quite bring myself to admit did not fit anymore. There's a song church people have sung together for decades: *Gimme that ol' time religion, it's good enough for me*. (Far from a ringing endorsement, by the way.) But what do you do when that ol'

time religion *isn't* good enough for you anymore, when *good enough* is far less than what you are seeking in the deepest recesses of your heart? If I'm honest, the further I've walked into my adult life and the more open I've been to being surprised and to changing my mind and to considering better stories about spiritual things, the more organized religion has been an exercise in diminishing returns: God getting progressively bigger, while the space I'd once created to contain that God grows more and more restrictive, more and more suffocating. When you find yourself in that newly confining space, the fear and the guilt can be overwhelming, and it can make you freeze. For years as a local church pastor I stayed where I was (literally and figuratively), either because I thought something might give if I prayed hard enough, or maybe because I was too terrified to confront the reality that my faith was shifting—but the pressure was profound and constant. Something that was supposed to be life-giving suddenly became difficult to breathe inside of.

A RIGID BOX FOR GOD



A RIGID, FROZEN FAITH

You don't need to be a pastor or a Christian to understand spiritual claustrophobia, because it is consistent in all existential crises, and it's

more common than most of us admit or realize. In my travels both online and around the country, I meet thousands of similarly *squeezed* people: human beings who still passionately crave the wide-open wonder of genuine spiritual pursuits and the transformative spaces of loving community, but who aren't finding those things in the religious stories and systems and buildings of their childhoods. Now that they're getting older, they're taking off the no longer useful

hand-me-down theologies they inherited and looking for something that fits them today. These days, Sundays are different for them, church is different, and God is different, but the yearning is still there and the burdens still twist their insides. They may be losing their ol' time religion, but they haven't lost their hunger to find sacred spaces, to confront the persistent questions, to live in justice communities, to see realities deeper than the surface, or to participate in something greater than themselves—and this is where the journey to a more loving religion begins: embracing the questions, discarding old stories, being humble enough to start again.

Whenver people say, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” this is usually another way of saying, “I’ve outgrown my God box and am currently looking for a bigger one.” They’re telling you that they’ve either willingly left or been evicted from the place they once called home, the geography of their former faith. They are wandering prodigals either by choice or by necessity. They may have discovered an irreconcilable difference with a theological position in their faith tradition or grown exhausted from a silent response to injustice from the pews, or they simply woke up one day and realized they can’t pray the prayers they used to—and something has to give. I think most honest people of faith, every sincere sojourner, and lots of introspective human beings who are pressed up against the profound mysteries of this life (and whatever might happen beyond its conclusion) are looking for a bigger God and for a tangible expression of goodness that feels proportional to that God. We all want something *unbelievable* to believe in—something that is so massive and so capable of surprising us that it is always just slightly out of reach and just a little beyond our capacity

to comprehend—and we want something that makes us and the people around us better humans. If not, it's probably not worth our time.

The moment someone tells you they have this spiritual life figured out, that's a red flag that they're lying to you or to themselves. This book is for the rest of us: the restless, the unsettled, the unconvinced, and even the downright defiantly opposed; for people who want more love than they've encountered in organized religion. I think if we're doing faith right, we're supposed to be there. Evolving spirituality will always give people the desire to shed the skins of their current belief system, always push them to outgrow their present assumptions about the world, and it will forever be increasing their capacity for change. That expansion is necessary. But narrow religion will usually shrink everything over time—until one day it all blows up.

A few months ago I got a frantic email from my friend Tiffany, who said she needed to talk as soon as possible. This was out of character for her, and the unusual urgency of her message moved me to reach for the phone. "I'm in free fall," she said almost immediately, and continued quickly, her voice breaking, "I feel like I have no ground to stand on right now." Then there was silence, broken only by quiet sniffs. I knew a good deal of Tiffany's backstory: a lifelong evangelical, raised Southern Baptist in Texas, she always had a tidy, clearly defined God box and a go-to set of Scriptures she wielded like a rudimentary first-aid kit for herself and others. In college she'd met Scott, a local student pastor, and—like a good, respectable Southern Baptist girl—soon became a Southern Baptist pastor's wife. For years everything was perfect (or at least, it worked for her given the story they'd told themselves), until she began to see hairline cracks forming in the bedrock of what she once believed. Their senior

pastor's increasingly incendiary messages about the evils of the "gay agenda" and her church's silence in response to a new wave of bathroom-bill legislation started to conflict with the LGBTQ people she'd met and come to love. As so often happens as we grow and get better stories, life begins to argue with our theology—and Tiffany was in the middle of that increasingly heated disagreement with her former self. Over the past few years, she'd gradually cut many of the tethers of her previous religious narrative, which at first felt freeing; that is, until her marriage began to go south and her youngest daughter became very sick. In the past, during times of emotional, financial, and relational crisis, she'd gone to the familiar religious places of refuge—and they weren't cutting it any longer.

Tiffany said, "Before, when things fell apart, my (very specific) faith story was the thing I could hold on to. My image of God, my go-to Bible verses, those default prayers, the fallback platitudes, and my church family were all comforting." Her voice grew more desperate as sobs interrupted her. "Now that I don't have those things—what do I turn to? To people? To myself? To medication? I don't know what to anchor myself to anymore! I just feel like I'm drifting here."

Tiffany was feeling the growing pains of an expanding spirituality, of outgrowing the box. She'd let go of the restrictive religious doctrine of her childhood and early adulthood and found that the tiny theological container was no longer big enough for her beliefs, but in a time of trauma she'd struggled to find a suitable replacement. She was and is living with a new disorientation—one we should probably get used to.

If we're going to find a bigger God, one that makes us more loving, we have to admit and address two fundamental realities. The first is that *small religion is a problem*. It is the

culprit of the suffocation and the source of our frustration because it tends to thrive on separation and breed exclusion. We've all seen and experienced small religion, so that may be the easier of the two truths to reckon with. The second and much more challenging reality is that *all religion is small religion*: yours, mine, that of the people you admire and those you can't stand, the traditions you hold tightly to and the ones you've long ago rejected. A God our brains and buildings can fully hold just isn't big enough to be truly God. The moment we imagine a rigid box adequately capable of containing the *who, what, how, and why* of everything that is or ever was or ever might be is the moment we've shrunken all the answers to the elemental questions down into something that is no longer God-sized. If we can fully fathom it, it ceases to be worthy of our reverence.

In writing to his church two thousand years ago and to those who would follow them in this journey, the apostle Paul

writes a prayer that we as people of faith might “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness

FULLY UNDERSTANDING GOD



UNDERESTIMATING GOD

of God.”¹ That seems like both a beautiful aspiration and an impossible task. If there is no mystery left in our belief system, we need to move into a space that will accommodate it. No matter how fervently we've prayed, how earnestly we've searched, how diligently we've studied, or how sure of ourselves we currently are—we're either partially or substantially wrong. Whatever God is made of, we don't have the capacity

to capture it completely in the minds we're equipped with. No religious tradition, no specific denomination, and certainly no single human being can fit it. It's all outdated, tight pants that can't hold the intended occupant. It isn't easy for good religious people to admit this, especially when most of us have been raised with *certainty* as a virtue and *doubt* as a mortal sin. We've been conditioned not only to believe, but to do so without hesitation or reservation or alteration—but that was never really the plan or the expectation. Jesus was surrounded by people who couldn't banish disbelief even with him close enough to touch, human beings who struggled to love people well even with a tangible example in front of them. We should probably give ourselves a break for struggling with two thousand years between us.

My formative religious tradition has been Christianity, and you'll hear many references to Jesus and to the stories of the Bible here, but this isn't about us matching theologically; it's about each of us stretching to reach a more expansive, more compassionate place than we started—which it turns out was always the point. The New Testament records Jesus teaching people about needing to put his "new wine" teaching into "new wineskins," not the brittle, rigid old ones they'd been used to.² He was asking people to have minds pliable enough and imaginations limber enough to consider a God beyond the one they currently believed in or the systems they inherited—and to extend themselves to people they'd never have lovingly engaged before. Much of his initial audience was a group of devout and oppressed Jewish believers who'd been patiently waiting hundreds of years for what they expected to be a conquering warrior to forcibly deliver them from generations

of captivity and oppression. By asking them to embrace a poor, itinerant street preacher who asked them to be “servants of all,” Jesus was inviting them into a disappointing, shocking—but necessary—heresy. His revolutionary movement of sacrificial love often involved him laying out a contrast between religious people’s old story and the better one he was writing for them: “You have heard it said . . . But I tell you . . .”³ Jesus’ gentle challenge has always pulled those of us willing to listen into the discomfort that comes with expanding our understanding of just how big a love we’re talking about here and what the implications are for us: the way we live and move through the world, the kind of audacious kindness we’re being asked to practice.

At first, all this religious rethinking feels like a betrayal, like spiritual rebellion, and many times we resist it in order to stay in the comfort of surety and free from guilt, but there is something life-giving outside of where we started. Our initial faith traditions are all valid and meaningful. They can give us a working language with which to speak about the mysteries of this life, but whoever and whatever God is doesn’t *require* them. Religion isn’t necessarily bad or corrupt or unhelpful (often quite the contrary), but it is always undersized for the task at hand. Religion does its best to give us words for describing something that words aren’t ultimately equipped for. Jesus wasn’t asking people to register for a religion but inviting them into a way of being in the world individually and collectively, a way of being that is rooted in a propulsive love for humanity. I’ve grown to feel really sorry for people whose religion seems settled and finished, those who’ve so systematized and shrunken their spirituality that they no longer question or dream or imagine more.

You were born without a box for God. You probably know this even if you’ve forgotten it: that you met God

before you ever had a religious container. You experienced beauty and wonder without needing church or a Bible verse or a pastor to explain it to you, and you don't need that now. I'm not necessarily telling you to abandon your faith tradition or that it's unhealthy for you—but I *am* telling you that your faith tradition is ultimately incomplete, and that it alone cannot house whatever it is that holds us all together. To admit this isn't a theological mutiny, it's finding the necessary humility to embrace something bigger than even your preferred box. Your own evolution testifies to the inevitability of outgrowing your former self. You probably don't believe what you believed twenty, ten, or even five years ago. (I sure hope you don't.) You've likely come to a fundamentally different understanding of things like climate change or immigration or same-sex marriage or the death penalty, as you've developed new relationships, accrued more life experiences, and been informed by exposure to new ideas. Hopefully you've undergone some kind of perspective transformation, because if not, that likely means you haven't learned anything new in that time. Spirituality should be a continual unfolding. New information will always alter our worldview, always challenge our assumptions, always move us from a former deeply entrenched position—and it will surprise us by coming without the old packaging.

Recently, I took a three-day writing retreat at a beach here in North Carolina. The ocean is medicinal for me. It helps quiet the noises that normally reside in my head, all the swirling worries and fears and obligations and bad news. As always, I waited to head down to the shoreline until late in the day when the sun began to descend and most people had headed to their houses and hotel rooms after

a long and draining day of UV ray absorption. This timing usually allows me to have much of the beach to myself, and for an Olympic-level introvert who spends a good deal of time in front of crowds, the distance is often welcomed. I stepped through the dunes with a backpack and canvas chair over my shoulder, fully expecting to see a vast expanse of open sand and water—and instead was greeted by a group of forty or fifty people stretched in a line from the dunes to the shoreline. Curiosity immediately pulled me toward them, and soon I could see that they were all looking down at a single spot at their feet and realized what it was. I had almost literally stumbled upon an imminent sea turtle hatching. A few seconds later I found my place in the impromptu receiving line and knelt in the sand, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, my head a few inches from the narrow trench volunteers had recently carved out—and waited.

For two hours there was no discernible movement, until suddenly an infinitesimal shift in the grains on the surface, then another, and another. And almost immediately, dozens of tiny black shapes lit only by the moon broke through the ground and made their first, awkward journey into the relentless, churning ocean while fifty strangers quietly cheered them on. There were tears and hugs and high fives and applause all around. I didn't get much writing done. I didn't get alone time. I didn't make any progress on this book. I didn't get the solitary night I planned. I got something better.

Religious people often talk about the *thin places*, those rare moments when the wall between humanity and divinity becomes like onion skin and we can see through to something beyond. At this moment, this small patch of sand, water, and moonlight was that transparently sacred. This was a holy moment, a sudden clearing in the clouds.

Without a hymn or a prayer or a pew or a minister, God felt present and close. It was a *religious experience* in the greatest sense of the words. It couldn't be quantified or contained, and the overwhelming peace of the moment can't be accurately described as much as I'd like to. This was God unboxed. It was divinity digging itself from the sand. It was a beautiful upsizing, breaking out of the shell. You know what that feels like, don't you—an awe that escapes description and explanation?

When we experience moments that we identify as spiritual or miraculous or transcendent, they're seldom attached to organized religion or a single building, and rarely confined to a church service or Bible study.

There is no doorway we need to walk through or threshold we need to cross to encounter the breathtaking stuff of butterflies and goose bumps. Despite our religious worldview or our practiced theology, we can all recognize a kind of sacredness in the disparate experiences of this life: standing in a crowd singing along to a band we love or hiking alone through a sunlit mountain pass or tasting food so delicious that it generates an involuntary sound of gastronomic adoration from somewhere deep within us. We know firsthand through art and music and love and sex and nature and relationship that there is a "thing" beyond the thing, that this life isn't only what we can see and feel and taste. The less dependent we are on a building for an hour on Sunday to replicate the transcendent encounter we have as we live through this life, the more we are able to understand the world as sacred, to embrace the truth that the place where we stand is always

**LESS RELIANCE
ON A BUILDING**



**AN EXPANDED
SANCTUARY**

holy ground—that we are forever in the thin places if we pay attention. When you begin to unbox God, you may find yourself uncomfortable in church or religion because these places begin to feel restrictive to your soul. The prayers might no longer ring as true, the creeds may seem unwieldy, and the sermons start to sound alarms of hypocrisy. These are the growing pains of realizing that whatever holds this life together is a bit bigger than the old story you were taught and memorized; it goes beyond the borders that you'd mapped out. That's when you discover that God has left the building and that maybe you need to as well.

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