

APPRECIATE THESE THINGS

eight ways of cultivating compassion

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AUTHOR NOTE

While all the stories in this book are true as I remember them, names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of those who've been on this spiritual journey with me. I appreciate beyond measure the saints who invited me into their stories, thought well of me in ways that made me want to be better, and relentlessly showed me the love of Jesus. This book is dedicated to all the faithful who helped me mature in Christ.

INTRODUCTION

“Appreciate It!”

I believe the phrase is strictly a Southern one: “Appreciate it.” At least, I never remember hearing it until my family immigrated from Nova Scotia to North Carolina. Canadians are known for being polite, and I was taught early and often to say please and thank you. Yet it was in my new home that a variation of those utterances rolled off the tongue of neighbors I’d come to, well, appreciate. Even if the place and the people felt strange to me—and sometimes, some forty plus years later, still do—that one phrase shaped me, and it still does.

The waiting room of my father’s medical practice remained busy from the time the door was unlocked until the waning hours of the business day. It was there among the plastic seats and the worn magazines that again and again I heard people say, “preciate it.” As they shook my dad’s hand in the hall: “preciate it, Dr. Johnson.” After the next appointment had been made, “preciate it.” Even when they paid the bill, “preciate it.” The first letter was rarely included in their everyday niceties.

I noticed in South Carolina, the state where we raised our children, and in Texas, the place I’d come to visit frequently

and for extended periods as an adult, that there is a variation on this expression. The people in passing said, “preciate *you*.” The clerk at the grocery store, the person for whom the door was held, the mother who you let go ahead of you in line, each would take the time to say, “preciate you.” This is an even more personal expression of gratitude that seems to me an affirmation of our worth not based on anything other than our human connection and small kindnesses.

More and more I’ve come to believe in the need to appreciate. More specifically, to appreciate people, the ones right in front of us, here and now. For a season a bumper sticker was seemingly on every car in the university town where we lived. It read: “If you aren’t outraged, you aren’t paying attention.” This was often accompanied by one reading “Coexist” on the other end of the fender. This seemed a strange juxtaposition to me, or perhaps coexistence is the best we can do if we’re perpetually outraged. Don’t bother me, and I won’t bother you. But I’m hoping for more than mere coexistence. I’d like to move to admiration and even to awe of the people and creatures with whom I share this earth. I’d like to think that a generosity of spirit might be a means of resistance to the contempt that threatens to render all of us extinct. Perhaps appreciation could draw us into a curious proximity that reveals our inextricable and our much-resisted need for one another.

Is this naive? It could be, but given the current state of our life together, might it be worth giving it a try?

I’m a minister, which means I am privileged to be with people at some of their most joyous and most devastating moments. I baptize babies. I bury those who’ve lived a long, full life and those whose days end tragically and prematurely. I visit the sick. I watch people I love grow old and see the losses they experience along the way to the inevitable end. In all of it, I witness so much that so many of us thought to be so

important fade away. Status gets stripped away when we can no longer tend to our own basic needs. Political differences don't matter when we're utterly dependent on each other for care, community, and companionship.

I see the power of our human connections when we are undeniably in need. Strangers run to help the woman who collapsed in the hotel lobby. The man with the T-shirt that makes me cringe sees me struggling to push my father's wheelchair over the threshold and rushes to give me a hand. The high schooler guides the disoriented toddler back to their pew and parents.

At the end, sitting with family and friends to plan a funeral, I hear people name the best of the person we're going to commend to God. There's honesty, often, about flaws and failings and mistakes and hurts. There should be. But even in the hard truths, there is *appreciation* for the good, no matter how small or obscured.

What if we exercised that kind of grace with everyone, while they are alive? What if we saw and said what we appreciated about others instead of what causes us to judge and recoil? Would such appreciation topple unjust systems? End oppression? Usher in a time when crying and mourning are no more? Likely not. It might, however, move us in that direction. It could even lead us away from outrage and toward awe, from condemnation to closeness, from contempt to compassion.

There is a verse in the New Testament letter from Paul to the Philippian church, which is often cited as one of Paul's most pastoral letters. In it he instructs that nascent community comprised people from vastly different backgrounds: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about

these things” (4:8). The phrase translated here as “think about” could also be translated “take account,” give credit where credit is due. Even more, though, focus, meditate on, and, yes, *appreciate* these things. Appreciate whatever is worth admiration, anything worth praise, in anyone.

Could it be worth a try? Given that focusing on what causes outrage, contempt, and disdain doesn’t seem to enable us to coexist, let alone love and care for one another, appreciating these eight things could increase our compassion and nurture so that rather than tearing us apart, we come to celebrate our human connections.

APPRECIATE WHATEVER IS TRUE

true: genuine, real, trustworthy;
the opposite of false.

“Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.”

Matthew 22:16b (ESV)

What Is True?

“What is truth?” Pilate asks Jesus in those final scenes before the crucifixion (John 18:38). John’s Gospel more than any other speaks of truth. Frequently, *alēthēs*, translated as “true,” refers to testimony or bearing witness. Imagine a court scene with a witness placing a right hand on the Bible and swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The gravitas becomes evident when coupled with the Ninth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16). Pilate’s rhetorical, philosophical question feels flippant in the face of grave consequences. Jesus’ declaration counters any cheapening of life with the declaration that he is the truth and that truth sets people free.

Salvation, the good news of the gospel, is truth. Jesus’ miracles, teaching, life, death, and resurrection testify to that truth. Jesus’ disciples both witness and then bear witness to that which is true. Followers offer public testimony, in word and deed, to what is true by embodying the attributes of their Teacher: justice, mercy, grace, peace, and love. Such truth telling comes with risk and only through the power of the promised Holy Spirit.

True in the biblical context implies much more than factual. Being true includes being faithful and reliable, trustworthy and constant. So much so that one is willing to stand up for that which one believes to be right and unquestionably true, no matter the cost.

Brian Blount describes this kind of truth telling in the context of the book of Revelation. He writes, “Revelation craves witness as engaged, resistant, transformative activism that is willing to sacrifice everything in an effort to make the world over into a reality that responds to and operates from Jesus’ role as ruler and savior of all. In other words, ‘Jesus is Lord!

*Can I get a witness?*²⁰¹ All other truths derive from and are in service to this reality, and those who know Jesus is Lord are called to give testimony to what, and who, we know to be true. No matter the cost.

God is true. Jesus is true. The Spirit gives us the words to voice the truth. The triune God is merciful, just, gracious, and loving. Faithfulness, being a reliable witness to our God, that's the role of disciples. No matter the cost. The question for us, then, isn't: What is truth? It is: Can I get a witness? Will we witness to God's goodness by appreciating the divine image in every human being? Will our recognition of the priceless worth of neighbors, near and far, Jew, Gentile, Samaritan, Cretan, and Arab reveal the love of God we know to be true through the life, death, and resurrection of our servant Lord?

Practice: *Make a list of the attributes of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. What do you know to be true about God, from your experience and from Scripture? Pick an attribute and bear witness to it in word and in deed.*

Sister Marie

The smell of wet wool, the sight of shiny linoleum, and the sound of buses, ambulances, and traffic: these are the markers of my 1970s childhood, at least a key chapter of it. The place is downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia—The Sacred Heart School, to be more precise. Catholic, all girls, still connected literally, physically, to a convent that is blocks from where I lived in a mid-rise apartment building with my parents and siblings. We were not Catholic, but the school was good and the location perfect, not only a stone's throw from our home but walking distance from the children's hospital where my mom was a nurse and the university where my dad was a medical student.

Uniforms were required: black watch plaid, pleated skirts, or jumpers that were so dark blue they looked black; pale blue button-down shirts; tights or knee-high socks (also navy); and, if I am remembering correctly, penny loafer shoes. White dresses were required on days we went to Mass. Nuns dotted the landscape, but most of the teachers were civilians. My first-grade teacher, Sister McNamara, however, fit the stereotype of an intimidating bride of Jesus. Exacting. Strict. Unsmiling in my memory. There were straight lines in the hallways, and complete silence was required when entering the chapel. No ambiguity about expectations.

I once turned in an assignment, uncompleted, feeling the pressure of my peers finishing the task faster than I could, only to be called up to Sister McNamara's desk to have my subterfuge publicly revealed to the class. Not a shining moment of academic integrity. Perhaps a lesson best learned in the first grade. Sister McNamara could not be categorized as warm, but she did instill in me a sense of high expectations, ones she believed I could meet, and I am grateful to

her for that confidence, even if I could do without the tinge of fear that accompanies it.

I spent three memorable years at the Sacred Heart school in the heart of Halifax, but there was one encounter that stands out the most. I'm sure it is a moment the other participant in the experience never thought of again, but it timestamps a truth I hold onto for myself and try to exercise with others. Another nun walked those linoleum halls, and her name was Sister Marie. She was short; she must have been if my elementary school self thought of her as such. She wore the habit, but the contemporary version: mid-calf-length skirt, blouse, a shorter version of the little cape on her head. Her disposition was perennially cheerful. She was one of those people who seems genuinely delighted to see you. Like that familiar blessing, the priestly one, about God's face lighting up in your presence, that was Sister Marie. She created a circle of warmth on those short winter days when the mittens and scarves hung in our cubbies to dry. Sister Marie represented a bit of unexpected spontaneity in the midst of predictable regiment. She taught art, not arithmetic, and encouraged creativity rather than compliance.

One day Sister Marie came up to me in the hall with a small piece of paper in her hand, a tiny piece of paper torn out of one of those spiral notebooks that could be kept in a purse or pocket to jot down grocery lists or appointments prior to cell phones. She handed me the paper, and on it was a drawing: a miniature portrait of me. Blue eyes, unkempt pixie haircut, uniform. An honest, tender rendering of shy, insecure, trying-so-hard-to-meet-expectations me. The shock of recognition was twofold: this quickly drawn image was unquestionably me, and this image was unquestionably beautiful. Not in the sense of being attractive, no. Something so much deeper, something so much truer. Sister Marie captured what it meant to see through the eyes of faith and

discover the truth of our divinely given worth, regardless of our interior sense of inadequacy or our exterior flaws. She did this all with a lead pencil augmented with no more than three colored ones.

That lilliputian version of myself, created and given in love, revealed a truth that I was worthy of being seen and even appreciated just as I was, assignment incomplete, times tables unmemorized, hair not well combed, social skills suspect, and yet beautiful and valued nonetheless.

Did Sister Marie draw these for all her students? I suspect she did. Did she have any idea about the impact her drawing had on one of them? I am sure she didn't.

I treasured that drawing, took it home, and tucked it away. Made sure it came with me when we moved from Nova Scotia to North Carolina, a talisman of self-worth when the storm of middle school in a strange place descended.

What is it about another seeing us that gives us permission to take up space even when we might rather disappear? The truth is you are beautiful. The truth is you are good. The truth is you are a source of delight. The truth is you are like no other in all the best possible ways, even if those ways are problematic and challenging to some people and hard even for you to navigate and hold and understand. The color of your eyes is stunning. The cowlick in your hair is perfect. The fact that you leave cabinet doors open and ask with urgency, "Do you know what I mean?" is unquestionably delightful because these things mark you as you, and there is no one else like you, and the world would be diminished without you. That's the truth. That's what Sister Marie saw and captured and gave back to me that moment in that hallway all those years ago. That's the truth I want to see and capture and reflect back to everyone I encounter.

I only wish I'd told Sister Marie the impact and the import of her sharing her gift and her faith with me.

I tried, not too many years ago, thinking it possible she might still be roaming the halls of that convent. I did a search of the internet and discovered that she'd died, certainly welcomed home to the place prepared for her after being told, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Google showed me her picture, older but still with the vibrant smile that I recognized. Her obituary told me things I never knew, about her large family, her degree in fine arts from McGill, and the fact that she entered the order at the age of eighteen. It listed the cities where she'd taught. It told of the multiple sclerosis that made it necessary for her to use an electric wheelchair in her later years. It noted that in addition to teaching, she "served in pastoral animation." I'd never heard of such a thing, so I googled that too. I learned that it is just what it says it is: guiding and animating priests and laity on their spiritual journey, in their daily lives.

I can't help but think of another form of animation: making drawings come to life.

Sister Marie, I appreciate you for seeing what was true in me and giving me a glimpse of it. Your gift helped me to see what is true in me and, in turn, helps me to see and appreciate whatever is true in others, in creation even, that divinely made goodness that can be obscured but never obliterated.

Practice: *Reflect on the people you feel see the true you. Write them a note and tell them what their regard for you means. If you are able to tell them in person, do so.*

Core Truth

My father is a brilliant man. I refuse to say *was* because he is still living, even though he can no longer name where he is living or what kind of medicine he practiced for forty years or what year it is. He can, however, sometimes, state his date of birth, and I think, mostly, he knows who I am each week when I go visit him in the nursing home. Once, not long ago, after a hiatus of more than a year since he'd been able to identify me, when the activities director asked who I was, he said without a moment's pause, "That's Jill." Never has hearing my name spoken brought me such elation. Proof that more than a category to him, I remained his daughter. I remained the particular daughter, Jill.

What's that adage about the power of being noticed, named, and known? In a span of seconds, I understood why such literal recognition matters. Being seen in and for our particular self matters. Yes, we occupy many roles, important ones: parent, sibling, spouse, doctor, teacher, truck driver, flight attendant. Yes, our individual selves contain myriad descriptors and categories: gender, ethnicity, country, region, language, stature, political commitments, skills, talents, deficits. But what makes us unique, particularly who we are? How often do we feel recognized as that person like no other? How often do we feel dismissed, judged, or valued for who others assume us to be?

I assumed I knew my dad. The life of the mind consumed his pre-dementia days. He read voraciously and widely. Our family referred to him as "wiki-Peter," combining that website of all knowledge with his first name, because no matter how obscure a subject or fact, he could causally discuss it.

I thought I knew my dad. Work defined his identity and occupied countless hours of his time. He loved being a doctor. He loved the people he treated, the science that made

each one healthy or sick, the rabbit hole of learning required to know the difference.

I believed I knew my dad. Introverted, private, available always, first to call me on my birthday, sometimes the day before because well before his brain began to rebel, he often got the date wrong. He was a person with many acquaintances who thought themselves his friends, though he named fewer than a half dozen in that coveted category.

While all these descriptors remain true, I discovered, in this extended phase of his mental and physical decline, a core truth he'd allowed only me to glimpse, even though I'd always suspected it. His intellect, his work ethic, and his insularity enabled him to protect a tenderness I imagine caused him consternation and pain. What I believe to be most true about my dad is his vulnerability, masked by busyness, buried under books, protected within the confines of his heretofore razor-sharp mind. This was revealed, unbidden and without permission, by a mix of Parkinson's disease and Lewy Body Dementia. This horrible mine of disease contained a few rare, costly to uncover, but priceless gems.

My dad, who still knows me, I think, most days, is beloved not only by me, his wife, my siblings, and our family but also by the residents and staff of the nursing home. They tell me, "He's such a sweet man." Their affection for him is evident in each exchange I witness. This solitary man is now gifted with more community than ever before, not that he's capable of keeping it at bay.

No longer able to work, no longer able to be consulted on any and all things medical, he tends to a baby doll he named Margo, I assume in memory of his older, now deceased sister. He strokes her hair and tells me what a beautiful and good baby she is.

The ubiquitous books I never saw him without for the entirety of my life are now useless and absent. He lights up,

however, at the sight of my husband, my brother-in-law, the dentist making the rounds, the housekeeper coming to clean his room. He laughs heartily at anything that tickles him. He delights when we go outside and watch the birds.

I thought I knew my dad, but what I've discovered to be true, rock-bottom-true, is not in his intelligence, his accomplishments, or his solitary nature but instead in his tenderness, his connectedness, his love. Now, despite the gray hair and the wheelchair, I see him as a little child, vulnerable, curious, longing to care and be cared for with compassion, like all of us, no matter how hard we try and hide it, longing to keep ourselves safe from the possibility that love will be denied.

I thought I knew my dad; now I know better. I know more as he remembers less. Not always a fair exchange, but it is one I refuse to waste. I want to use this hard-won gem to help me be visible and vulnerable, to let my core truth show on the days when I feel brave, and to welcome others and their vulnerabilities while I can still tell them how much it matters, not just to me, but to the world.

Practice: *Share a little-known core truth about yourself with someone you trust. Invite them to do the same with you.*

Seeing Someone's Baby

I once heard a story on the radio that featured a writer or a psychologist who invited those listening to picture others as someone's child, more specifically as someone's baby. That grumpy customer? Someone's baby. That political commentator from "the other side"? Someone's baby. The driver who just cut you off, the one with the offensive bumper sticker? Someone's baby. The family member at the holiday table spouting opinions that make you cringe? Someone's baby. The nursing home resident no longer able to speak? Someone's baby. I'm sorry I can no longer recall the giver of this advice because I've found it to be transformative. At times, the exercise is irritating because I don't always want to see those who make my blood pressure leap or my reptilian brain light up as vulnerable, precious, I-pray-treasured infants. I want to label them with all manner of labels I'd never paste on a baby. I want to write them off in ways I can't when I imagine them swaddled in their caregiver's arms or crying for needed attention.

That's the thing with babies: as demanding as they are, their demands are to be met because we assume no malice, no guile, and no intent, good or bad. The thing about infants is that their story is still unfolding and will be profoundly impacted by how others around them respond to them. The possibility and the peril of what develops will inevitably be contingent on how those in their community see them, support them, provide for them, and love them.

Now, I know adults ought to be held to account for their actions. Adults' behavior cannot be dismissed as not knowing any better. Fully grown people do have intent, malice, meanness, and all manner of ill will and wrongheaded thinking. But I wonder if some of their—some of *our*—worst attributes and acting out don't come from a place of infant-like, primal need

for care and attention. I wonder if those around us recognized that raw, unnamed, perhaps even unknown place of vulnerability in us where we're less than our best selves and responded to that, rather than reacting to the worst of us, then our discourse, both private and public, would be different.

Just this week, a couple sat eating across the room from me at a local restaurant, and when the man at the table turned my way, I saw what was emblazoned on his baseball cap. The camouflaged hat sported the name of a politician with whom I, *ahem*, don't agree. Immediately, a ticker tape of judgment started running through my head. I imagined what he'd think about every subject imaginable, from climate change to critical race theory. I assumed what he would say about me had I been wearing my allegiances on my person. His very presence disrupted my sense of peace.

But then the sweaty and tired young adult working the grill came out from the kitchen and approached that two-top table, hot and with her head drooping. The man with that wretched cap stood up and enveloped her with a hug. She put her head on his shoulder, and he stroked her hair. I heard him say, "You're just tired, sweetheart." He was cradling his baby. It was obvious how much he loved his child, his needy, vulnerable, grown-but-not-grown child.

His hat was no longer the most notable thing about this man because I could picture him as a loving father, caring parent, daddy. I could see him holding an infant, and that prompted me to practice that advice from the person I can't name but wish I could thank. I remembered this man was once a baby himself. Beloved, I hope, by those around him, heard when he cried, and held and fed when he was hungry. Without guile. Without intent. Without malice. A baby at the mercy of those around him and full of possibility. Utterly dependent on how others responded to him, with his survival impossible without a community of care.

That impromptu exchange between camouflage cap man and his exhausted fry cook child changed the way I saw them both and put a spotlight on my own previous reaction, my own judgment, the log in my own eye that obscured my vision of everyone, myself included. I glanced at my table mates, my husband and two of my three grown-but-not-all-the-way-grown children. I looked around the small restaurant at the servers hustling, the patrons waiting, the elderly gentleman eating alone, the family with a wiggly, whiny toddler, and I remembered our need to be heard when we cry, our never-ending hope that we'll be tended to when we hurt, our reliance on those around us, loved ones and strangers alike.

I pictured, for just a moment, each and every one of us as babies. Beautiful. Treasured. Beloved. Dependent. Guileless. Helpless. Fully grown, but still full of possibility, still needy, infants. And, at least for a moment, doing so transformed what I saw and changed what I noticed. Maybe even for a moment, it allowed me to imagine I might want to care for everyone around me, not only the ones with whom I agree. For a moment, I felt the urge to embrace them instead of holding them at arms' length.

Practice: Find a baby picture of yourself and imagine what it was like to be that dependent. Notice what feelings emerge as you look at the photo. Remember that everyone you see today was once a helpless infant.

Telling Truth from Fiction

What's true for you? Rock bottom, capital *T* true for you? Of course, multiple things, many things can be true simultaneously, but what, if you had to choose, do you believe to be True? One wise woman I know wrote a mission statement for herself, just three sentences to which she refers when she's in a quandary or feeling discouraged or tempted to be less than her best self. I like sticky notes, usually the yellow ones. Dotted on my desk, on my computer, and in a spiral notebook where I collect found wisdom, I have collected these small squares of insight that help me tell truth from fiction. Here's a sampling:

- It's not about me.
- Faithful means over desired ends.
- Integrity, not control, is the goal.
- Curiosity, not condemnation.
- Celebration, not cynicism.
- How can I be generous today?
- Be 100 percent present.
- I might be wrong.

These quick mantras reflect what I believe to be true, or at least the truth I aspire to attest to with my actions. They express truths like: others matter. If I achieve the goal through hurtful or deceitful means, the end, no matter how good, will not be right. My hope is that by writing down what I want to be true of me, I will embody a larger truth and see that ultimate truth in others and in the world around me. Otherwise, I will simply capitulate to the loudest voices, often spouting lies, and often inadvertently making those falsehoods incarnate. Their marketing budget is much bigger than the one that purchases my packets of sticky notes. Their clear ends

of profit and power are unrelenting and mostly uninterested in how they achieve them. Their calculus is clear and easy to measure in dollars and influence. That's why it matters that we consider carefully, every day, what we believe to be true.

Perhaps we could flip the script of the fictional, consumerist book of our culture and do an audit of our lives, looking at where we spend our time, our money, and our energy and ascertaining whether what we say we believe to be true reverberates in reality. I've known too many people, myself included, whose desks are covered with noble aspirations and whose walls are decorated with the greatest hits of Scripture but whose actions have obliterated those honorable intentions. What they profess to be true, they negate with how they really live their lives.

We will never, of course, be perfect. And the perfect, as the saying goes, should not be the enemy of the good. If we don't first name what we believe to be true, we will never be able to know if we're being faithful to it or to anything.

Once, at a conference, during the question-and-answer period, a participant asked the speaker, a Christian ethicist, how one might handle pushback when attempting to enact justice. This was a church conference, and therefore the question likely came from a pastor who wanted to know how to navigate the fraught waters of congregational leadership in a deeply divided, hyperpolitical context. The speaker, as I recall, first replied that we should begin by looking at ourselves, at our own motives and behavior. I appreciated his candor because he said something along the lines of "Saying you are seeking justice doesn't give you an excuse to be a jerk." Next, if one was in fact not being a bully in the guise of righteousness, he suggested a practice he used in his life and work. He said, and this I remember vividly, "Articulate your moral framework." In other words, know why you are doing what you are doing. Name what you believe to be true, and

share that with those around you, both your supporters and your critics. He went on to say this practice doesn't mean others will agree with you, but it will help them understand your motive, your intent, your truth.

He said he was concerned with the most vulnerable person in the room. That person will change depending on the room, and that truth will, in turn, shape his comments, his actions, his behavior. The truth of that moral framework dictates what is made manifest in real time and allows for integrity, no matter the shifting circumstance or the pressure of the loud lies.

I've found this advice incredibly helpful. If I am floundering or about to cave to a lesser truth or an outright lie, I stop and ask myself: What's my moral framework?

- All people are created by God and called good.
- Everyone is a beloved child of God.
- Transformation is always possible.
- Faithful ends require faithful means.
- Life is a gift.

If I believe these things to be unshakably true, how then will I respond to the person, the event, the moment?

I've found, too, that in situations that are contentious and tense, asking others what's at stake for them invites a deeper, more reflective conversation. I've discovered that simple invitation reveals what they believe to be true and allows me to see what's true in and for them. Often, these truths come packaged in a story, and we move from a debate about policy to sharing about our experiences as people.

When I edited a magazine, as my role required, I wrote editorials. Editorials, by virtue of their genre, demand a point of view, a stance, an opinion. Unsurprisingly, not everyone agreed with all my observations. Hence the "letters to the

editor” section. Frequently, my inbox filled with reactions to what I wrote. Sometimes I received affirmation, but more often opposition, and, from time to time, downright outrage. I responded to them all. I began with “Thank you for taking the time to write.” That small “thank you” helped me frame whatever came next and, I hope, enabled a kinder, gentler reading by my addressee. Then I attempted, as best I could, to articulate why I’d said what I said. I stated my moral framework.

Almost without exception, if the person answered me, the tone was much less invective and they, even without prompting, shared why they’d been so incensed by my words. They, too, shared their moral framework, what they believed to be true.

I wrote about the imperative of the church performing same-sex marriage. They wrote back about how that would destroy the church. I told them I didn’t think it right to promise in their baptism that we would nurture and love our children only to leave them at the base of the chancel steps when they found the person they wanted to be partnered with for life. And, if I was feeling especially brave on that day, I shared that one of those children was my very own kid.

They then said they thought the church should, eventually, marry all those committed to the vows we make for better or worse, but maybe not now, maybe not in what they thought was too fast, because the issue, this issue, had torn their beloved congregation, the one that surrounded them with care when their son got sick and eventually died from cancer, in two. Couldn’t we move a little slower so as to not split apart?

Now I understood a deeper truth. I said as much but added, “But my child only has one lifetime: this lifetime. That’s why I don’t believe we can wait.”

Now he understood my deeper truth.

We didn't necessarily agree on the right way forward, but we no longer assumed we couldn't find it together. We could see that while our perspectives were different, great overlap existed in what we believed to be true. Relationships mattered. The church mattered. Marriage mattered. Our children mattered. The issue or the policy did not matter as much as the people impacted by it, and perhaps thinking about and appreciating that truth could transform how we saw one another and the outcome too. The means and the ends commensurate, the truth might be stranger, and definitely better, than fiction. Perhaps in that space of wonder and grace, a new thing, a good and divine thing, could be born in God's time and on God's terms.

Practice: *Make a list of your core truths, those principles and values that are unshakable. When you look at the list, consider whether or not your life reflects them.*

Reflection Questions

1. If you had a personal mission statement, what would it be and why?
2. How might you practice remembering the truth that policies are about people and issues are about someone's everyday living?
3. What are the lies you are tempted to exchange for truth? Why are they compelling? How can you combat that temptation?
4. For a period of time—an hour, a day, a week—consciously appreciate what is true about yourself, about others, and about creation. What do you notice? What do you want to take away from this experience?

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