



## By Love We Are Led to God

**A**T NEARLY SIXTY YEARS OLD, M. FINDS THAT HER faith has fallen away. She tells me that it was love that first led her to God. Thirty-five years earlier, love for the man who would be her husband for most of her life seemed to crack open the world and her heart at the same time, seemed to fuse those latent, living energies into a single flame, the name of which, she knew, was God. There were careers and children. There were homes laid claim to and relinquished. There was something perhaps too usual for a love that had torn her so wholly open, but time takes the edge off of any experience, life means mostly waiting for life, or remembering it—right? She tells me all this, right up to the depressingly undramatic divorce, at a table outside in far west Texas, the country of my own heart.

Faith is found in the mutable and messy process of our lives.

BY CHRISTIAN WIMAN

She asks me: How can a love that seemed so fated fail so utterly? How can a love that prompted me toward God become the very thing that kills my faith? Once, it seemed love lit the world from within and made it take on a sacred radiance, but somehow that fire burned through everything and now I walk lost in this land of ash. If God by means of love became belief in my heart, became the faith by which I lived and loved in return, then what should I believe now that my love is dead? Or no, not dead; that would be easier. Actual death cuts life off at the quick of your soul, but there is yet the quick to tell you what life was, assure you that life was. You grieve the reality of your loss, not the loss of your reality. That former grief is awful, and may seem unendurable, but at least it is more productive, for it is grief that has lost but not renounced life, grief that still feels to the root the living reality of love because it feels so utterly that absence. All I feel is that the life I felt, the love that once scalded me toward God, was a lie.



“CHRIST IS CONTINGENCY,” I TELL M. AS WE CROSS THE RAILROAD tracks and walk down the dusty main street of this little town that is not the town where I was raised but both reassuringly and disconcertingly reminiscent of it: the ramshackle resiliency of the buildings around the square; Spanish rivering right next to rock-like English, the two fusing for a moment into a single dialect then splitting again; cowboys with creekbed faces stepping determinedly out of the convenience store with sky in their eyes and twelve-packs in their arms. I have spent the past four weeks in solitude, working on these little prose fragments that seem to be the only thing I can sustain, trying day and night to “figure out” just what it is I believe, a mission made more urgent by the fact that I have recently been diagnosed with an incurable but unpredictable cancer. How strange it is to be back in this place, where visible distance is so much a part of things that things acquire a kind of space, an otherness, a nowhere-ness, as if even the single scrub cedar outside the window where I’m working holds—in its precise little limbs, its assertive seasonless green—the fact of its absence.



FAITH IS NOT SOME HARD, UNCHANGING THING YOU CLING TO through the vicissitudes of life. Those who try to make it into this are doomed to become brittle, shattered creatures. Faith never grows harder, never so deviates from its nature and becomes actually destructive, than in the person who refuses to admit that faith is change. I don’t mean simply that faith changes (though there is that). I mean that, just as any sense of divinity that we have comes from the natural order of things, is in some ultimate sense within the natural order of things, so too faith is folded into change, is the mutable and messy process of our lives rather than any fixed, mental product. Those who cling to the latter are inevitably left with nothing to hold on to, or left holding on to some nothing into which they have poured the best parts of themselves. Omnipotent, eternal, omniscient—what in the world do these rotten words really mean? Are we able to imagine such attributes, much less perceive them? I don’t think so. Christ is the only way toward knowledge of God, and Christ is contingency.

*Painting by Irene Belknap, “The House of Belonging”; the title and words in the painting come from a poem by David Whyte.*



THE ONLY WAY? INTO MY WORDS, AS INTO THE THINGS AROUND ME, seeps the silence that defeats them. Better to say that contingency is the only way toward knowledge of God, and contingency, for Christians, is the essence of incarnation. And incarnation, as well as the possibilities for salvation within it, precedes Christ's presence in history:

Into the instant's bliss never came one soul  
Whose soul was not possessed by Christ,  
Even in the eons Christ was not.

And still: some who cry the name of Christ  
Live more remote from love  
Than some who cry to a void they cannot name.  
—after Dante



I WOULDN'T WANT ANY OF THIS TO SEEM LIKE I'M BLAMING M. FOR her suffering, or that I'm in any way refusing to acknowledge the full impact of it. (*Christ is contingency?* An absurd, even callous thing for me to have said to her at that moment. It was true, but the time and the context made it, in any ordinary human sense, false.) There is a sense in which love's truth *is* proved by its end, by what it becomes in us, and what we, by virtue of love, become. But love, like faith, occurs in the innermost recesses of a person's spirit, and we can see only inward in this regard, and not very clearly when it comes to that. And then, too, there can be great inner growth and strength in what seems, from the outside, like pure agony or destruction. In the tenderest spots of human experience, nothing is more offensive than intellectualized understanding. "Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom," writes Randall Jarrell. "It is pain."



SORROW IS SO WOVEN THROUGH US, SO MUCH A PART OF OUR SOULS, or at least any understanding of our souls that we are able to attain, that every experience is dyed with its color. This is why, even in moments of joy, part of that joy is the seams of ore that are our sorrow. They burn darkly and beautifully in the midst of joy, and they make joy the complete experience that it is. But they still burn.



AND WHY THIS SORROW? WHY ITS PERSISTENCE, ITS INVOLVEMENT with all that is my soul? Childhood was difficult, and most of it remains inaccessible to me, but I was deeply loved. And I am capable of deep love now for the people in my life, for my work. I love the life that I have been granted in this deepening shadow of death. And it is not the prospect of my own death that sustains sorrow, for it preceded my sickness by many years, by all the years of my consciousness, in fact. And *that* is surely the reason right there—consciousness, which is a setting apart from reality, when all of reality is the expression of God.



FOR MANY PEOPLE GOD IS SIMPLY A GAUZE APPLIED TO THE WOUND of not knowing, when in fact that wound has bled into every part of the world, is bleeding now in a way that is life if we acknowledge it, death if we don't. Christ is contingency. Christ's life is *right now*.



DESPITE THE VALUE AND ABSOLUTE NECESSITY OF SPIRITUAL solitude, Christ comes alive in the communion between people. When we are alone even joy is, in a way, sorrow's flower: lovely, necessary, sustaining, but blooming in loneliness, rooted in grief. I'm not sure you can have Christian communion with other people without these moments in which sorrow has opened in you, and for you; and I am pretty certain that without shared social devotion one's solitary experiences of God wither into a form of withholding, spiritual stinginess, the light of Christ growing ever fainter in the glooms of the self.



WHAT THIS MEANS IS THAT EVEN IF YOU ARE SOCIALLY SHY AND generally inarticulate about spiritual matters—and I say this as someone who finds casual social interactions often quite difficult and my own feelings about faith intractably mute—you must not swerve from the engagements God offers you. These will occur in the most unlikely places, and with people for whom your first instinct may be aversion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that Christ is always stronger in our brother's heart than in our own, which is to say, first, that we depend on others for our faith, and second, that the love of Christ is not something you can ever hoard. Human love catalyzes the love of Christ. And this explains why that love seems at once so forceful and so fugitive, and why, "while we speak of this, and yearn toward it," as Augustine says, "we barely touch it in a quick shudder of the heart."



THERE IS A KIND OF INSISTENCE ON LONELINESS THAT IS DIABOLICAL. It expunges the possibility of other people, of love in all its transfiguring forms, and thus of God. It does not follow, however, that when one is freed from one's addiction to, or sentence of, loneliness that loneliness "ends." But it becomes—even in love's afterimage, even when a love is taken from us—a condition in which God can be. Loneliness, when it passes through love, assumes an expansiveness and active capacity. "The body becomes an easy channel for the invisible," as Fanny Howe writes. "You may be lonely but are not empty."



(HOW I PRAY FOR THIS CONDITION FOR MY WIFE, THAT SHE MIGHT know, when I am gone, this holy porousness, this presence that both stills and fulfills the ravages of absence, this gift beyond grief.)



LAST NIGHT WE WONDERED WHETHER PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE the love of God in them, or who have it but do not acknowledge it, or reject it—whether such people could fully feel human love. I was reading Hans Urs von Balthasar, who suggests that this is the case: God obstructs man, pursues man, haunts him with "a love that runs

after him, pulls him out of the pit, casts aside his chains and places him in the freedom of divine and now even human love.” *And now even human love*. For Balthasar, the man pursued by God may very well have loved another person, but not fully, not in the freedom of ultimate love, which scours the ego and urges one toward the spark of divinity within another person. It is those sparks that must unite; that is the only fire that time and change will not snuff out.

I have a complicated reaction to this. When my wife and I fell in love eight years ago, both of us—spontaneously, and though we’d been away from any sort of conscious religion for years—began praying together. The prayers were, like our love, at once formal and improvisational, clear-spirited but tentative, absolute but open-ended. They were also, for all the whimsy of them (we would often laugh), deeply serious and, as my illness made clear when it came slashing through our lives, seismic. Our passion had a religious element, which danger clarified and intensified. I don’t think the human love preceded the divine love, exactly; as I have said elsewhere, I never experienced a conversion so much as an assent to a faith that had long been latent within me. But it was human love that reawakened divine love. Put another way, it was pure contingency that caught fire in our lives, and it was Christ whom we found—together, and his presence dependent upon our being together—burning there. I can’t speak for other people. I only know that I did not know what love was until I encountered one that kept opening and opening and opening. And until I acknowledged that what that love was opening onto, and into, was God.



But reflect, daughters, that he doesn’t want you to hold on to anything, for if you avoid doing so you will be able to enjoy the favors we are speaking of. Whether you have little or much, he wants everything for himself; and in conformity with what you know you have given, you will receive greater or lesser favors.

—Teresa of Avila

THERE IS MUCH IN THIS PASSAGE THAT CLEARLY ANCHORS IT IN, AND limits it to, an earlier time and consciousness—the automatic personification of God (“he wants”), the presentation of God as an endlessly craving and endlessly jealous father figure, and (worst of all) the assumption that there is a direct link between the quality of your prayers and offerings and the quality of God’s response: what you give is what you get. But there is also a deep truth in this passage that transcends all of this. In any true love—a mother’s for her child, a husband’s for his wife, a friend’s for a friend—there is an excess energy that always wants to be in motion. Moreover, it seems to move not simply from one person to another but through them, toward something else. (“All I know now / is the more he loved me the more I loved the world.”—Spencer Reece) This is why we can be so baffled and overwhelmed by such love (and I don’t mean merely when we fall in love; I’m talking more of other, more durable relationships, in fact): it wants to be more than it is; it cries out inside of us to make it more than it is. And what it is crying out for, finally, is its essence and origin: God. Love, which awakens our souls and to which we cling like the splendid mortal creatures that we are, asks us to let it go, to let it be more than it is if it is *only* us. To manage this highest form of loving does not

mean that we will be showered with earthly delights or be somehow spared awful human suffering. But for as long as we can live in this sacred space of receiving and releasing, and can learn to speak and be love's fluency, then the greater love that is God brings a continuous and enlarging air into our existence. We feel love leave us in unthreatening ways. We feel it reenter us at once more truly and more strange, like a simple kiss that has a bite of starlight to it.



*AT ONCE MORE TRULY AND MORE STRANGE.* I USED THE PHRASE before I remembered the source. And an ironic source it is. Here is Wallace Stevens's "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon":

Not less because in purple I descended  
The western day through what you called  
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?  
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?  
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,  
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.  
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

Beautiful poem, fatal belief. That you are the origin of everything, that the self is its own world, its own god. But, as is often the case, you can't quite tell if Stevens really believes what the music is making him say: that "you" in line two and her (let's make it a her) description of his regal aloofness as lonely introduce another mind and other needs into the poem. The music moves right past them, but they are there. Like the title, lovely but also slightly ridiculous, the you is a hitch in an otherwise perfect, and perfectly self-enclosed, song. And the song is better, and truer, for it.



HOW MANY LOVES FAIL BECAUSE, IN AN UNCONSCIOUS EFFORT TO make our weaknesses more strong, we link with others precisely at those points? How many women who are not mothers spend years mothering some mysteriously wounded man? How many apparently strong and successful men seek out love like a topical balm they can apply to their wounded bodies and egos when they have withdrawn from combat? Herein lies the great difference between divine weakness and human weakness, the wounds of Christ and the wounds of man. Two human weaknesses only intensify each other. But human weakness plus Christ's weakness equals a supernatural strength.



NOT LONG AFTER I FIRST LEARNED THAT I WAS SICK, IN THE DIM time of travel, multiple doctors and tests, when it seemed that I might be in danger of dying very soon, I began to meet every Friday afternoon with the pastor at the church around the corner

from where my wife and I lived. I think that he, like anyone whose faith is healthy, actively craved instances in which that faith might be tested. So we argued for an hour every Friday, though that verb is completely wrong for the complex, respectful, difficult interactions we had. Nothing was ever settled. In fact my friend—for we became and have remained close friends—seemed to me mulishly orthodox at times, just as I seemed to him, I know, either boneheadedly literal when I focused on scripture or woozily mystical when I didn't. And yet those hours and the time afterward, when, strangely enough, I didn't so much think about all that we had discussed as feel myself *freed* from such thoughts, are among the happiest hours of my life. Grief was not suspended or banished but entered and answered. Answered not by theology, and not by my own attempts to imaginatively circumvent theology, but by the depth and integrity and essential innocence of the communion occurring between two people. *Didn't our hearts burn within us*, say the disciples on their way to Emmaus after Christ has appeared among them and talked to them about the scriptures. It is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible, and the trick is not to see it as merely retroactive. It is a truth—a presence—that they can now carry with them forever.



WILLIAM JAMES SAID THAT OUR INNER LIVES WERE FLUID AND restless and always in transition, and that our experience “lives in the transitions.” This seems to me true. It is why every single expression of faith is provisional—because life carries us always forward to a place where the faith we'd fought so hard to articulate to ourselves must now be reformulated, and because faith in God is, finally, faith in change.

Still, it can be easy to understand and apply this idea too bluntly, easy to turn it into the kind of inhuman truth that eats up ordinary lives, and ordinary life. For it is only a short step from saying that our experience “lives in the transitions” to saying that one ought to seek out and even provoke these transitions: if I am closest to God when I am most in crisis, then bring on the whirlwind; if I am most alive when love is beginning or ending, then let this marriage die, let this affair take flame, let me let myself go. Thus do many believers lurch from one extreme of belief to another, thus do many men and women enter a relationship with dead stars in their eyes.

The truth in James's idea inheres in that “always.” If our inner lives are always in transition, then our goal should be to acquire and refine a consciousness that is capable of registering the most minute changes in sensation, feeling, faith, self. Unless we become aware of the transitions that are occurring all the time within us, unless we learn to let experience play upon our inner lives as on a finely tuned instrument, we will try to manufacture inner intensity from the outside, we will bang our very bones to roust our own souls. We crave radical ruptures when we have allowed the nerves of our inner lives to go numb. But after those ruptures—the excitement or the tragedy, the pleasure or the pain—the mind returns to what it was, the soul quicksivers off from the pierce of experience, and the kingdom of boredom, which could be the kingdom of God, begins the clock-tick toward its next collapse.



Be careful what you wish for, be ready for what you crave:

If I ask you, angel, will you come and lead  
This ache to speech, or carry me, like a child,  
To riot? . . .

—Edgar Bowers, “Autumn Shade”



I HAVE A FRIEND—A FRIEND WHOSE FAITH I LOOK TO AND LEAN ON—  
who once told me she could wake up a Christian and go to bed  
an atheist, that every day was this vertiginous inward to and fro  
with God. I found this both heartening and depressing: heartening  
in that if she experiences this spiritual vertigo, she whose life  
seems to me so lit by Christ, then I certainly needn't be ashamed  
of my own confusions; depressing in that if *she* experiences this,  
then there's no escape from it, ever. If I am honest with myself, I  
feel mostly the distance, and this incessant, desperate, sometimes  
(I have to believe) holy hunger to bridge it. Experience lives in the  
transitions. We feel ourselves alive in the anxiety of being alive. We  
feel God in the coming and going of God—or no, the coming and  
going of consciousness (God is constant). We are left with these  
fugitive instants of apprehension, in both senses of that word,  
which is one reason why poetry, which is designed not simply to  
arrest these instants but to integrate them into life, can be such a  
powerful aid to faith.

To wake when all is possible  
before the agitations of the day  
have gripped you

To come to the kitchen  
and peel a little basketball  
for breakfast

To tear the husk  
like cotton padding a cloud of oil  
misting out of its pinprick pores  
clean and sharp as pepper

To ease  
each pale pink section out of its case  
so carefully without breaking  
a single pearly cell

To slide each piece  
into a cold blue china bowl  
the juice pooling until the whole  
fruit is divided from its skin  
and only then to eat

so sweet  
a discipline  
precisely pointless a devout  
involvement of the hands and senses  
a pause a little emptiness

each year harder to live within  
each year harder to live without

—Craig Arnold, 1967–2009,  
“Meditation on a Grapefruit”





LOVE DOES NOT DIE WITHOUT OUR CONSENT, THOUGH OFTEN (usually) that consent has been given unconsciously long before we come to give it consciously. Love is not only given by God, it is sustained by him. There is a constant interplay between divine and human love. Human love has an end, which is God, who makes it endless.



WHAT YOU MUST REALIZE, WHAT YOU MUST EVEN COME TO PRAISE, is that there is no *right way* that will become apparent to you once and for all. The most blinding illumination that strikes and perhaps radically changes your life will be so obscured by shadows of doubts and uncertainties that you may one day come to doubt the truth of that moment at all. The calling that seemed so clear will be lost in echoes of questionings and indecision; the church that seemed to save you will fester with egos, complacencies, banalities; the deepest love of your life will work itself like a thorn in your heart until all you can think of is plucking it out. Wisdom is accepting the truth of this. Courage is persisting with life in spite of it. But it is only grace that, in the deepest part of your soul, in the very heart of who you are, enables you to praise it.



SIX YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE I WROTE THE FIRST WORDS OF THESE notes. I have been in and out of treatment, in and out of the hospital. I have had bones die; joints lock in my face and arms and legs so that I could not eat, could not walk; cancer pack my marrow to the point that it began to expand excruciatingly inside my bones. I have filled my body with mouse antibodies, small molecules, chemotherapies eating into me like animate acids. I have passed through pain I could never have imagined, pain that seemed to incinerate all my thoughts of God and to leave me sitting there in the ashes, alone. I have been islanded even from my wife, though her love was constant, as was mine. I have come back, for now, even hungrier for God, for *Christ*, for all the difficult bliss of this life I have been given. But there is great weariness too. And fear. And fury.

I haven't been in contact with M. since the morning I left Texas, when she called as I was heading out the door. There was a moment of silence before we stumbled all over each other trying to convey how much our tentative and half-candid time together had meant to each of us, the spark of spirit that (though we didn't say so) burned there. We didn't exchange emails. We didn't promise to stay in touch. It was a moment, and we acknowledged it as such, before letting it sink back into our fluid and restless inner lives to do its work there.



My sorrow's flower was so small a joy  
It took a winter seeing to see it as such.  
Numb, unsteady, stunned at all the evidence  
Of winter's one imperative to destroy,  
I looked up, and saw the bare abundance  
Of a tree whose every limb was lit and fraught with snow.  
What I was seeing then I did not quite know  
But knew that one mite more would have been too much.



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