

# Invitation to *The Overview*



Krin Van Tatenhove

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*Dedicated to my daughter, Hanna,  
who embraces a path of unity and radical love*

*And to Ernestine Glossbrenner, who died in 2012. Ernie served for 16 years in the Texas State House of Representatives. I was her pastor in the final two years of her life. When I asked her to name a highlight of her legislative career, she immediately said, "Helping to write legislation that banished the short-handled hoe (El Cortito, El Brazo del Diablo) which was causing so much misery for braceros."*

## An Evolving Manifesto

*As a spiritual being on a human journey, I will enjoy the mystery surrounding me. Most often called God, this presence has many names in many languages, an ever-creating force longing for unity and love. I affirm that there are myriad pathways to this reality. I will seek to live by the truths revealed to me without trying to impose them on others. I trust that truth sheds its own light. If I impart hope, grace, or wisdom to the lives of others, it will happen because I am sincerely seeking the transcendent in my own nonviolent way, deeply desiring oneness with our creator and our creator's children.*

## Prelude One

*We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.*

– Richard Dawkins

*A willing suspension of disbelief...*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet and philosopher, coined this phrase in 1817. It means to temporarily set aside our critical faculties and believe the unbelievable, to sacrifice realism for the sake of enjoyment or enlightenment.

We do it all the time, especially as we read fiction or watch movies. Examples are endless, but consider James Cameron's first *Avatar* movie. Our logic could easily dismiss the psychedelic forests, the blue Navi plugging dreadlocks into Mother Pandora, the technology of mining operations on a foreign planet. We could trip over the notion that we are watching all this on a flat screen. Instead, we suspend reason and let Cameron immerse us in an epic fantasy. We pass the portal into another dimension.

I count it a privilege to have atheists and agnostics in my circle of friends. Some of them are increasingly militant, siding with Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*. Like crusaders (ironic?), they say religion shouldn't simply be tolerated, but actively opposed by rational argument wherever it raises its Hydra head.

If your path has taken you in that direction, chances are you didn't make it past *An Evolving Manifesto* on page 4. You might think, not another book on spirituality! Not

another addition to the speculative fiction about gods! Not another brick in the wall!

I ask you, humbly, to suspend your disbelief long enough to finish this short volume.

Why?

The first reason is a basic human appeal. We don't have to agree to grow from one another's perspectives. This world is too often full of monologue rather than dialogue. Taking the time to hear other people and truly encounter their perspectives is an act of peace. Most belief systems—even those that think they have no beliefs—seek same-mindedness the way a magnet attracts filings. One measure of intelligence is to purposely expose ourselves to different viewpoints without fear or defensiveness.

The second reason is this: you may have found an unlikely ally in your criticism. If you view religion as manmade myths, the genesis of endless division, the replacing of rituals for relationships, or a cultural indoctrination that *can* become an opiate of the masses, *I'm with you!*

The sections of this book aren't linear. Don't expect that. Think of them as variations on a theme, a vision from different vantage points, the spokes of a mandala. Most importantly, they are an invitation to dialogue.

Can you spare the time to listen? Will you join the discussion?

## Prelude Two

*Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about God. –*  
Thomas Merton

As a longtime cleric in a former life, I knew what it meant to “preach to the choir.” On countless Sunday mornings I stepped into the pulpit, ready to highlight a message I knew was essentially repetitious. Sure, I performed due diligence to keep things fresh. I did my research, found meaning in ancient scripture, then presented it with sincere intent. But the underlying truths—the clarion calls for peace, love, grace, and justice—remained the same.

Then there were mornings when the old message was brand new for a searching soul. Perhaps he was a refugee from organized religion, bruised and beaten by sectarian legalism and Pharisaic judgments. Perhaps she was feeling empty, drained by grief, worry, or conflict with others. Perhaps he was hopeless, struggling with addiction on the brink of death. Perhaps she was lonely, longing for a place to belong, a sanctuary of human solace. Whatever the antecedent, these precious souls would drink to their fill that morning. I would realize again the necessity and beauty of telling stories of faith within community.

Some of you who read this slim volume will say that I state the obvious, highlighting spiritual realities you have embraced for years. You will say I’m a late bloomer, adding my bud to a bouquet bequeathed by countless others. Bear with me, choir members. To morph the old phrase: it is

better to have lived and bloomed, than never to have blossomed at all. Plus, you may find that some of these thoughts stir you like a favorite book, movie, or song.

And maybe, just maybe, a few of you will find here an invitation to freedom, a chance to tear off the straitjacket of religiosity and embark on a different pathway. If that happens for even one person, my effort isn't wasted.

Let me start with some background.

My spiritual journey has been circuitous. I was raised in a Lutheran family during the era in America nicknamed "Cultural Protestantism." Brand-name denominations filled their pews and erected new buildings. The business of religion was still booming, and my parents assumed that my baptism and confirmation would steer me straight for a lifetime. They were content that they had passed the torch of faith to the next generation.

But the late '60s and early '70s happened. My local stomping ground, Hollywood, happened. Backstage parties with my brother's rock band happened. Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Bowie and Yes happened. Julie, Marsha, Diane, and Mary Ann happened. LSD, cocaine, and my first, fateful sip of alcohol happened. Movies like *A Clockwork Orange* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* happened.

More importantly, there was my own voracious reading and restless spirit. Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre happened. Conrad, Faulkner, and Hesse happened. Neruda, Hughes, Bly, Ferlinghetti and Roethke happened. Suzuki and Watts happened. I opened the spiritual texts of Buddhism,



Hinduism, and Islam. I memorized Zen poems as well as passages from the *Tao Te Ching*.

All of it led to me to emphatically reject the conventional faith of my youth. For ten years I alternately embraced Agnosticism, then Existentialism, then Zen Buddhism, my restlessness driving me inward and onward.

One night over a pitcher of beer, a friend invited me to his home church—a Presbyterian congregation on the northeast side of Albuquerque. I'll never forget what he said because it felt like an unintentional *kōan*. "Maybe you're looking for something you already know, Krin."

From the moment I entered that church, I experienced a homecoming. This was a community of faith that embraced searchers and encouraged free thinking. They respected the sanctity of individual conscience. My personal beliefs were my territory not theirs; they simply celebrated the chance to commune with me.

Giving people the space to connect to Spirit without the pressure of conformity is a priceless gift. This is the real meaning of sanctuary. It was in that church that I sensed a call to enter ministry, the most unlikely turn of events that I (and most of my friends and family) could have imagined.

I say this with chagrin; in my early years as a pastor, my faith pendulum swung to one end of the spectrum. I became a defender of the faith, as if God needed a Secret Service agent, press secretary, or propaganda officer. In those years I became a part of the very problem I am addressing in this booklet. I have made amends to some of

the people I knew during that time. They were gracious enough to forgive me.

Thankfully, my early broad-mindedness, my willingness to embrace a wide spectrum of experience, was still within me. To use the musician Gandalf's phrase, this core of my seeking soul was like "a seed dreaming inside." As it sprouted, it germinated my teachings, my writings, and my sermons—not fully realized, just glimpses of green from hard-packed ground, hints of what was to come.

Even sporadic clues sparked the ire of an orthodox friend. He was an elder in a church I served—a fine family man, pillar of the community, patriotic, hard-working, strident for the cause of Christ. I still love him and his kin.

"Krin," he said, "it sounds to me like you're flirting with the heresy of Universalism. Don't you know that Christianity is inherently exclusive? There is only one way to salvation, and to even suggest otherwise is a betrayal of your calling. It's like a shepherd leading his flock down the wrong pathway. I'm worried about you."

*Inherently exclusive.* The words were a harsh thunderclap in my ears. Hours later, as the ringing subsided, all I could say was "No! Not exclusive! Radically inclusive! A movement started by a Nazarene carpenter that embraced outcasts and Gentiles, which willingly laid hands on the ungodly and untouchable. A love with power to dissolve pride and break down walls of hostility. A message that, when it reached its crescendo, distilled the essence of grace!"

My ears were still stinging as a heavenly host of images flooded my mind. A beautiful Hindu girl I met in

India whose old-soul eyes still haunt me. A crowd of Muslim men kneeling towards Mecca in a New Mexican mosque. Jewish friends with whom I shared a Passover meal inside San Quentin prison. An atheist who worked beside me on numerous Habitat for Humanity projects, our labor synced by altruism. A shaman of Incan descent who opened his Cuzco home and shared a cup of yerba mate tea with me. The people I've buried who claimed no faith at all, but who appeared in death as precious children of God.

When my ears returned to normal and a blessed silence told me “be still and know that I am God,” I could begin to really, truly listen.

I know cynics will say my sentiments are as naively optimistic as John Lennon's *Imagine* or Rodney King's “Can we all get along?” Even as I write these words, our world is mired in multiple wars, fueled by ancient hatreds. Children are starving while CEOs consider their latest luxury acquisition. Our competitive consumption continues to poison the delicate biosphere. My own country, whose motto is E Pluribus Unum—*out of many, One*—is more rancorously divided than it has been since the Civil War. Who am I to write the following platitudes?

Yet I also believe this: as important as it is to work for peace on a communal level, there is infinite wisdom in the oft quoted phrase of Gandhi, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” The enlightenment of one mind, the freedom of one spirit, has healing ripple effects. As a Christian song popular in the '60s said, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

So, I feel compelled to share, to add my voice to the dialogue. I seek to echo, from my own soul, the entreaty of the late Bob Marley:

*One love, one heart...  
I'm pleading to mankind...*

Come with me to *The Overview*.

## The Overview

In my childhood family, what America called the “space race” was personal. I grew up in the ‘60s in Southern California, my father in charge of financial controls for the Apollo module. He consorted with famous astronauts and legends like Werner Von Braun. When it came time for “take your son to work day,” I got a chance to scramble through a mock-up of that small cone-shaped capsule designed to withstand both fiery reentries and violent splashdowns in the oceans of earth.

I remember the excitement in our home when a Saturn V was ready to launch a new mission from Cape Canaveral. Dad would rouse us from bed as if we were about to embark on a dream vacation. He would lead us into the family living room where an early generation color TV sat on its throne. There we could see the rocket, aimed for the cosmos, steam billowing from beneath, its tip crowned with the Apollo module. Dad would stalk around that screen with more intensity than an Argentine soccer fan, the clock announcing T minus 4 hours, then 3, then 1, then the final dramatic countdown and that glorious, thunderous liftoff into the sky.

In retrospect, I know that our efforts to reach that lifeless chunk of rock were as motivated by competition as scientific wonder. It was an expression of US pride, an extension of the longstanding Cold War. No Russian was going to conquer the moon before us! I’m also sadly aware of the military agendas that attended our forays into space, resulting in Strangelovian plans years later to deploy a near

space defense system. Our land and sub-based nukes were apparently not enough, even though they represented enough doomsday power to demolish every major city on earth. We thought we needed missiles in orbit, polluting space with hardware and cancerous hatred. Fortunately, that plan never came to fruition.

Still, when Neil Armstrong took his immortal first step onto the lunar surface, it was a moment of wonder, a celebration of the imagination and possibilities of humankind. It taught us about our potential.

But there's an even more enduring lesson from our ventures into the beyond. It is called the *The Overview Effect*, a term first coined by Frank White, who explored them in his 1987 book *The Overview Effect — Space Exploration and Human Evolution*. It's that moment when we turn and see our planet suspended in the vastness of space. For everyone who experiences it, this vantage point is life-changing. It transforms their perspectives on Earth and humankind's place upon it.

Here are some quotes from astronauts about their Overview.

*When we look down at the earth from space, we see this amazing, indescribably beautiful planet. It looks like a living, breathing organism. But it also, at the same time, looks extremely fragile. - Ron Garan, USA*

*Before I flew I was already aware of how small and vulnerable our planet is; but only when I saw it from space, in all its ineffable beauty and fragility, did I realize that humankind's most urgent*

*task is to cherish and preserve it for future generations. - Sigmund Jähn, German Democratic Republic*

*For those who have seen the Earth from space, and for the hundreds and perhaps thousands more who will, the experience most certainly changes your perspective. The things that we share in our world are far more valuable than those which divide us. - Donald Williams, USA*

*My first view - a panorama of brilliant deep blue ocean, shot with shades of green and gray and white - was of atolls and clouds. Close to the window I could see that this Pacific scene in motion was rimmed by the great curved limb of the Earth. It had a thin halo of blue held close, and beyond, black space. I held my breath, but something was missing - I felt strangely unfulfilled. Here was a tremendous visual spectacle, but viewed in silence. There was no grand musical accompaniment; no triumphant, inspired sonata or symphony. Each one of us must write the music of this sphere for ourselves. - Charles Walker, USA*

*Looking outward to the blackness of space, sprinkled with the glory of a universe of lights, I saw majesty - but no welcome. Below was a welcoming planet. There, contained in the thin, moving, incredibly fragile shell of the biosphere is everything that is dear to you, all the human drama and comedy. That's where life is; that's where all the good stuff is. - Loren Acton, USA*

*The Earth was small, light blue, and so touchingly alone, our home that must be defended like a holy relic. The Earth was absolutely*

*round. I believe I never knew what the word round meant until I saw Earth from space. - Aleksei Leonov, USSR*

*The sun truly comes up like thunder and sets just as fast. Each sunrise and sunset lasts only a few seconds. But in that time you see at least eight different bands of color come and go, from a brilliant red to the brightest and deepest blue. And you see sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets every day you're in space. No sunrise or sunset is ever the same. - Joseph Allen, USA*

*The Earth reminded us of a Christmas tree ornament hanging in the blackness of space. As we got farther and farther away it diminished in size. Finally it shrank to the size of a marble, the most beautiful marble you can imagine. That beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. Seeing this has to change a man, has to make a man appreciate the creation of God and the love of God. - James Irwin, USA*

*Suddenly, from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth...home. My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity. - Edgar Mitchell, USA*

*A Chinese tale tells of some men sent to harm a young girl who, upon seeing her beauty, become her protectors rather than her violators. That's how I felt seeing the Earth for the first time. I*



*could not help but love and cherish her.* - Taylor Wang,  
China/USA

What if, like these astronauts, we internalized this overview, tucking it like a pearl of great price into our hearts and minds? What if it caused us to have a fundamental, life-changing paradigm shift? What if national boundaries remained for governmental purposes, but we saw them from the global vantage point of our human family? What if the current conflicts that divide us were eclipsed by our critical need to create planetary tolerance, to galvanize our collective will and protect this pale blue vessel sailing in space?

This leads me to the primary questions of this book. Is your religion, your faith tradition, or your life philosophy contributing to these universal causes? Is it compelling you to find unity, commonality, and peaceful dialogue with others, no matter how alien their faith or lifestyle seems to you? Or is it promoting exclusivity and privilege, erecting walls, fueling ancient hostilities? Is it setting you apart?

As you answer these questions for yourself, consider the glimpses of Universalism in section three—visions shared from the hearts, minds, and souls of human beings who looked beyond the veil of conventionality. The Overview was—and *still is*—central to their existence. We need more of their breed.

But first, let's move from an overview to an inner view.

## The Inner View

*With my hair almost on end, and the eyes of my soul wide open, I am present in this unspeakable Paradise, and I behold this wide open secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays attention..." – Thomas Merton*

Whatever your name for God, Tao, or Presence, it reveals itself to us through amazing artistry. Even if you have no belief in a Creator, consider the following.

Have you seen...

- A southwest sunset against a turquoise sky?
- A snowcapped peak reflecting the last light of day?
- The blue to red skin patch on a roadrunner's head?
- The staggering variety of piscine shapes and colors that swarm a coral reef?
- The similar spirals of tree knots, Nautilus shells, galaxies and hurricanes?
- Northern lights pulsing over a frozen landscape?
- A stalactite cathedral in a deep limestone cavern?
- The delicate, ephemeral colors of butterflies cavorting over an alpine field?
- The bright, rigid stamen of a calla lily?

Have you smelled...

- The perfume of creosote after a desert rain?
- Ocean brine as your head bursts from a wave?
- Orange blossoms on a warm summer evening?
- Freshly mown grass?

- A rose as you press your nose into its petals?
- Garlic fried in olive oil?
- A split log of cedar?
- A plumeria lei strung around your neck?
- The yeasty fragrance of bread baking in a warm winter kitchen?

Have you touched...

- The smooth, rubbery skin of a dolphin?
- The silky hair of your baby while he or she sleeps?
- The sandpaper edge of pumice?
- The fine bristles on a caterpillar's back?
- The softer fur on a dog's belly?
- The tentacles of a sea anemone just before they recoil?
- Your lover's hand as you walk along a beach?
- Sand sifting through your fingers?
- The leathery hide of an elephant?

Have you tasted...

- A sprig of fennel crushed between your teeth?
- Fresh coconut milk?
- Jackfruit, like Juicy Fruit gum?
- Buttered salmon hot from the oven?
- A glass of fine merlot?
- Warm, buttery croissants?
- Mountain spring water cupped in your hands?
- Enchiladas smothered in Hatch green chili sauce?

- Earl Grey tea with a dollop of honey?

Have you heard...

- The rhythmic breathing of your lover nestled next to you in sleep?
- The sharp, stabbing notes of a bagpipe?
- The crescendo of Beethoven's ninth in an open-air amphitheater?
- The shriek of an eagle as it soars overhead?
- A mockingbird exultantly moving through its repertoire at dawn outside your window?
- Murmurs of wind in the pine trees?
- Booming echoes of thunder over a desert plateau?
- The pattering of rain on your roof?
- The ancient songs of a humpback whale?

It is one thing to have a stellar overview that moves us to unity. But let's be honest; precious few of us will ever have ever the privilege of soaring beyond the stratosphere. Right now, that is the privilege of a few wealthy individuals who can afford a ride on a SpaceX journey.

But we don't need to blast off to connect with a sense of wonder about our planet. We can let the splendor of this paradise unfold for us now, uniting us with others through a deep sense of gratitude. You may not have experienced all the sensory delights mentioned above, but Thomas Merton's comment is so true: they are here for *all* of us to savor if we pay attention! Whatever force set creation into motion, we share the gift of this Paradise and the five senses to relish it.

Will we let our common joy and awe bring us together as a human family? This ecosystem was here long before we emerged into self-consciousness. Will our sentience evolve to the point where we see ourselves as one, not only with nature, but with each other?

## Glimpses of Universalism

**T**he 13th chapter of First Corinthians, part of the Christian New Testament, is a Himalayan peak of world literature. Part of it says: *For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

As zealous as he was for spreading a movement centered on Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul realized a profound truth. Our pusillanimous brains may be magnificent organs, but they are pale instruments compared to the mystery that surrounds us. In the midst of infinity; we see finitude. Immersed in a puzzle that interlocks in wondrous harmony, we fixate on our favorite pieces, too often ignoring others. As I said in a previous book of mine, "Even Einstein at the height of his brilliance only touched the floorboards of God's estate."

But just as space travelers view our planet with a breathtaking new perspective, there are times when many of us glimpse the greater picture. We look beyond illusion, startled by the transcendent. We have what Romain Rolland called "an oceanic feeling." It's an experience, usually brief and unexpected, of being at one with the universe. It casts deep meaning and purpose over even the smallest details of life, accompanied by feelings of compassion and love for *all* beings. It is the central vision of many a mystic.

Some have sought to induce this experience artificially, opening the doors of perception through hallucinogenic drugs. In one of his best essays, *The New Alchemy*, Alan Watts recounts an experiment with LSD. He is in a garden at night, awash in the colors of plant life and the dome of night sky above him. Feeling a joyful at-one-ness with everything around him, he tries to find meaning in it. “All at once,” he says, “it became obvious that the whole thing was love play, where love means everything that the word can mean, a spectrum ranging from the red of erotic delight, through the green of human endearment, to the violet of divine charity, from Freud’s libido to Dante’s ‘love that moves the sun and other stars.’ All were so many colors issuing from a single white light and, what was more, this single source was not just love as we ordinarily understand it; it was also intelligence, not only Eros and Agape but also Logos.”

I’ve had my own experiments. I vividly remember standing on the balcony of a friend’s apartment at dawn, peaking on mescaline. As sunlight slowly illuminated the morning, I focused on a large tree in the backyard. Every leaf seemed to have a distinct personality, unique in its own right but together creating the unity of a beautiful, deeply-rooted plant. Later retelling of this would lead to some hearty laughs—stoner humor—but the moment was precious and profound.

The problem with artificially induced mysticism is the proverbial bummer of “coming down.” Our brief view from the mountaintop succumbs to flatland existence. We return

to the grind of daily living, our greater vision lingering like a vapor in the back of our minds.

However, there have always been those among us who would not settle for fleeting transcendentalism. Through prayer and meditation they pressed into the Presence, the Mystery, longing for a wider perspective to permeate more and more of their waking moments. Think of Jesus in the desert for 40 days, Buddha beneath the Bo tree, Thoreau along the banks of Walden Pond, John Muir hiking the lofty Sierras, Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Hildegard's lifelong visions of the light of God. There are countless others, some familiar, some who lived in joyous obscurity.

Since far too much of what passes for religion in our world is exclusionary, sometimes militantly so, it is deeply refreshing to read the words of those who persist towards unity and all-encompassing love. They were willing to die to cultural indoctrinations and be reborn. Here are the quotes and backgrounds of a few.

**Sri Chinmoy** was an Indian spiritual master who began teaching meditation in the West when he moved to New York City in 1964. Throughout his life, like many public figures, Chinmoy was marred with controversy. Yet his teachings were consistent. He was a prolific author, artist, poet, athlete and musician, one who held high profile public events on the theme of inner peace. He taught meditation, prayer, and selfless acts as a way to God-realization. He encouraged the unity of world faiths until his death. Here is a sample of his teaching.



*Each religion has its own way of expressing itself with regard to the unlimited One. Love of God is the only true religion...but the problem with religion is that it seeks to limit our love of God. Religion will say, 'Only if you love God the way I love God are you doing the right thing. Love God, but do it in my way. Only if you come to church, only if you come to the temple, only if you come to the mosque will your love of God be perfect. The other ways are all wrong.' But love of God is not like that. If I love God, God will tell me, 'Why should there only be roses in the religion-garden? There can be other flowers as well.' We have to love God in God's own Way. Then we will never be trapped in the confines of religion and we will never try to confine anyone else.*

**William Ellery Channing** was a prominent Unitarian preacher in America during the early 19th century. He was an impassioned orator whose teachings led to the rise of liberal theology. Today's Unitarian Universalist denomination can trace its roots back to him. Here are some of his words.

*I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect, which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of his children, which delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering wherever they are seen, which conquers pride, anger, and sloth, and offers itself up a willing victim to the cause of mankind.*

**Karen Armstrong** is a British author and commentator whose books on comparative religion help people discover

their commonalities. In her early life she was a Catholic nun in a conservative order, but left the convent to embrace a more liberal, mystical faith. In February 2008 she received the prestigious TED Prize, and used the occasion to call for a *Charter for Compassion*. Thousands of people from around the world contributed to the first draft on a multilingual website. The final document begins like this: *The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves*. Here are a few quotes from her work.

*We can either emphasize those aspects of our traditions, religious or secular, that speak of hatred, exclusion, and suspicion or work with those that stress the interdependence and equality of all human beings. The choice is yours.*

*Sometimes it's the very otherness of a stranger, someone who doesn't belong to our ethnic or ideological or religious group, an otherness that can repel us initially, but which can jerk us out of our habitual selfishness, and give us intonations of that sacred otherness, which is God.*

*We need myths that will help us to identify with all our fellow-beings, not simply with those who belong to our ethnic, national or ideological tribe. We need myths that help us to realize the importance of compassion... We need myths that help us to venerate the earth as sacred once again, instead of merely using it as a "resource." This is crucial, because unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that is able to keep abreast of our technological genius, we will not save our planet.*

**Bahá'u'lláh** was the founder of the Baha'i faith. Living in Persia during the 19th century, he taught that humanity is one single race and that the age had arrived for its unification into a global society. His claim to divine revelation resulted in persecution and imprisonment by the Persian and Ottoman authorities, including a 24-year confinement in the prison city of Akka, Palestine. Here are samples of his teachings.

*That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicates himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being says: Blessed and happy is he that arises to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindred of the earth. It is not for him to pride himself who loves his own country, but rather for him who loves the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*

*Since we are created from one substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.*

**Thomas Merton** was an American Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He wrote more than 70 books on spirituality, social justice, and contemplation. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is considered one of the 100 best non-fiction books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Merton was a strong advocate of interfaith understanding. He established rich dialogue with prominent Asian spiritual

figures, including the Dalai Lama and Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

*Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and one body, will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures and accidents in our lives. My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labors is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievement. Therefore the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my own achievements. It is seen only in the complete integration of my achievements and failures with the achievements and failures of my own generation, and society, and time.*

**Thích Nhất Hạnh** was a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Monk, world renowned for his nonviolent activism. His call for peace during the Vietnam War caused Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize, saying this, "I do not personally know of anyone worthier of this prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity." Hanh wrote over 70 books, advocating what he called "engaged Buddhism." Plum Village, the monastery he founded in southern France, trains people from all over the world in the art of mindfulness, embracing each moment with a love for others, one's self, and the earth. Here are some of his words.

*People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle.*

*Through my love for you, I want to express my love for the whole cosmos, the whole of humanity, and all beings. By living with you, I want to learn to love everyone and all species. If I succeed in loving you, I will be able to love everyone and all species on Earth... This is the real message of love.*

**Desmond Tutu:** Born in Klerksdorp, Transvaal, South Africa, Tutu grew up as a firsthand witness to the oppressive racism of Afrikaner culture. Though he wanted to be a doctor, his family's economic situation caused him to take up a career as a teacher, later to resign because of the appalling educational standards for black children. He went on to become an Anglican priest. Following the Soweto Uprising in 1976, he was an outspoken critic and tireless organizer against apartheid. Upon its downfall, he oversaw the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He retired as the Archbishop of Cape Town in 1996, and until his death in 2021, he was a global activist for democracy, freedom, and human rights. He received many awards, among them the Nobel Peace Prize, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism, the Gandhi Peace Prize, and the

Presidential Medal of Freedom. Here are a few quotes from him.

*My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.*

*Your ordinary acts of love and hope point to the extraordinary promise that every human life is of inestimable value.*

*Exclusion is never the way forward on our shared paths to freedom and justice. Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need of one another.*

*We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.*

**The Fillmores:** In Kansas City, Missouri, 1889, a woman named Myrtle Fillmore experienced healing from tuberculosis, a cure she believed was the result of her newfound spirituality. Guided by this experience, she and her husband founded the Unity School of Christianity, now rooted worldwide. It rests on five guiding principles.

1. God is the source and creator of all. There is no other enduring power. God is good and present everywhere.

2. We are all spiritual beings created in God's image. The spirit of God lives within each person; therefore, all people are inherently good.
3. We create our life experiences through our way of thinking.
4. There is power in affirmative prayer, which increases our connection to God.
5. Knowledge of these spiritual principles is not enough. We must live them.

Here is a quote from Myrtle Fillmore.

*God is the one perfect life flowing through us...the one pure substance out of which our organism is formed. God is the power that gives us motive power; the strength that holds us upright and allows us to exercise our members; the wisdom that gives us intelligence in every cell of our organism, every thought of our minds. God is the only reality of us; all else is but a shadow that is cast by some foolish belief or unwise combination of thoughts and the elements of being. When we let light flood us with its sunshine, all clouds vanish and we begin to see ourselves in new ways... which lead to wholeness and health and satisfaction and growth.*

**The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (born Lhamo Dondrub):** He was born in Amdo, Tibet, and was selected two years later as the 14<sup>th</sup> incarnation of the Dalai Lama. In 1959, during his people's uprising against Chinese oppression, he fled to India, where he organized a Tibetan government in exile. Since then he has traveled all over the world, becoming a beloved figure. Not only has he advocated

for the welfare of Tibet, he has enlightened people everywhere with truths from his Buddhist beliefs.

*This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.*

*All major religious traditions carry basically the same message; that is love, compassion and forgiveness ... the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives.*

*I find that because of modern technological evolution and our global economy, and as a result of the great increase in population, our world has greatly changed: it has become much smaller. However, our perceptions have not evolved at the same pace; we continue to cling to old national demarcations and the old feelings of “us” and “them.”*

**Ralph Waldo Emerson:** Educated at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1800s, Emerson began his career as a Unitarian pastor in Boston. But he chafed at the strictures of religion, leaving the church to become a teacher, lecturer, and free thinker. Along with his friend, Henry David Thoreau, he founded the *Transcendentalist Movement* of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Its central tenet was the “infinite of the private man,” meaning that the eternal is present in each of us. As we experience this transcendence, our own uniqueness becomes clearer. Transcendentalists also believed that the structures of society and religion ultimately corrupt the power of this transforming realization.



*We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.*

*A person will worship something—have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts—but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.*

## Is it Time to Take Down Our Totems?

*A personalized God can be a mere idol carved in our own image,  
a projection of our limited needs, fears, and desires.*

– Karen Armstrong

Some of the most awe-inspiring moments of my life have been spent above the timberline on America's loftiest peaks. At night, huddled in my sleeping bag, my eyes swept across the Milky Way, so aptly named when undimmed by light pollution.

Among our galaxy's billions of stars, I know there are other marvels, dramatically evident in Hubble Telescope photos. That unique instrument allows the absorption of light which has traveled for countless light years. In a particular picture, its focus was a tiny spot about the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length. What did it discover? Not just thousands of previously uncharted stars, but many new galaxies, some of them grander than our own. To coin an old hippie phrase: doesn't that blow your mind?

Think about this vast canvas, even now expanding at the speed of light. Then think of what we know about our Creator's artistic impulses. Surely there is life on other planets. What is that life like? Is it self-conscious, sentient in the way we are? Is it primitive, or so technologically advanced it makes an iPhone as archaic as an arrowhead? Is it humanoid, walking erect and vaguely recognizable, or has it taken forms even the most feverish fantasy writer can't imagine?

And here's another question I've often pondered. If these life forms are self-aware and intelligent, do they share our innate urge to reach out to a god? If so, what will their conceptions of this universal architect look like?

If you consider the iconography of humanly created deities, the variety is endless and colorful. Here are a few.

- **Anubis** – an Egyptian god with a jackal's head and human body.
- **Sobek** – the Egyptian god of the Nile, with a crocodile's head and a human body.
- **Vishnu** – one of the supreme Hindu deities, his four arms holding the symbolic conch, chakra, mace and lotus flower.
- **Ganesh** – the widely revered Hindu god with an elephant's head and a human body.
- **Zeus** and his pantheon ruling from the heights of Mt. Olympus, including his daughter Athena, who sprung fully formed from his splitting head.
- **Loki** – the Norse shape-shifting god who appears as a salmon, a mare, a seal, a fly, and an elderly woman.
- **Owayodatu** – god of the hunt and protector of the Cheyenne nation, with the body of a Native American warrior and the head of a wolf.
- **Quetzalcoatl** – the Aztec god depicted as a feathered serpent.

The dominant (or dominating?) monotheistic religions of the world—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—

have always forbidden the shaping of graven images. The tablets of Moses included this strict commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.” (Exodus 20:4-5a)

There’s a famous scene recorded in the Hebrew scriptural book of Exodus. Moses descends from Mt. Sinai after his time with Yahweh, the god of the Israelites. He finds that the Hebrew encampment has fashioned a golden calf to worship. He is so furious that he dashes the tablets of stone containing Yahweh’s law onto the ground. He then burns the idol, grinds it to powder, scatters it on water, and forces the Israelites to drink it. How’s that for an ancient form of washing your mouth out with soap?

The story is a prophetic not just for the Jewish people, but for all faith systems. How easily we can slip into superficial idolatry. I won’t point the finger at others, but simply to the tradition I claimed for much of my adult life.

Consider the Eurocentric image of Jesus as a fair-skinned, long-haired, blue-eyed Savior with a clear complexion, chiseled beard, and a pious, faraway expression? Many a child suffered through Sunday school lessons with that picture adorning the wall. No one will convince me that this graven image of a white savior did not underpin the virulent racism and Manifest Destiny of American history. It justified the ungodly mutation of Christians singing in church on Sunday, then donning their KKK hoods during the week.

Or consider the co-opted Jesus of US patriotism, promoted by those who believe in American exceptionalism, the notion that God favors our nation above all others? I will never forget an evening in a small Texas town. We were honoring a fallen Marine, 18 years old, who had been gunned down in the desert outside Kandahar, Afghanistan. In the middle of our candlelight vigil, a preacher stood up and said, "Tonight you must remember that two people died for you. One was Jesus Christ himself, our Lord and Savior, and the other was (he named the young man)!"

Can you see how twisted things become when we create gods in our own images? That night, Jesus became the supporter of an American war in a windswept, faraway desert, justifying the loss of a young man cut down before his prime. No one mentioned the Jesus who championed nonviolence from the first moments of his ministry to his last breath on the cross when he said, "Father forgive them...."

Is it time for some of us to reexamine our cherished images of our gods? Is it time for us to recognize that these mental icons are figments of human imagination, not an awestruck response to mystery?

Perhaps you know the story of Gideon, recorded in the book of Judges, another piece of Hebrew scripture. Israel was in a 400-year period following their partial invasion of Canaan (present day Palestine!). They had a tentative foothold, surrounded by city-states and other nations that were far more powerful.

In the time of Gideon, the nation of Midian would join with allies and swoop down to steal the Israelites' crops at harvest time. So great were their numbers that the Hebrews could only hide fearfully in caves and mountain hideouts.

I won't tell the whole story of how Yahweh came to Gideon with a call to action. I won't go into detail about how Gideon accepted the challenge and with only 300 men routed a Midianite army "as numerous as sand on the seashore." It's a battle scene that rivals the Spartans holding off Xerxes at Thermopylae, or Mexican forces rebuffing the French at Puebla. And yes, all the forces in all of these conflicts justified their violence in the names of their gods. *Que lastima!*

What I want to focus on is a task the Hebrew god gave Gideon prior to the victory. He was commanded to tear down all the totems to Baal the Hebrews had erected. These were Canaanite phallic symbols used to invoke favor for crops and prosperity. Gideon demolished them, clearing the ground for a new chapter.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying we should trash other people's religious traditions. We need only point to the Taliban's desecration of the Buddhas at Bamiyan, a stab to the heart of world heritage. Or Al Qaeda's ravaging of artifacts in Mali. Or Christian decimation of countless indigenous cultures.

I am speaking on a metaphorical level. I am asking you to think of Gideon's story as a parable for each of our lives. It invites us to ask a question. Have I substituted a narrow, tribal totem for a more expansive experience of

mystery? If God is the entire electromagnetic spectrum, have I tuned into my own narrow bandwidth for so long that I think it is the only light? If greater, more inclusive consciousness is the victory, do I first need to tear down my totems?

These questions are critical, not just for our own spiritual journeys, but ultimately for the survival of humanity.

If you are willing, test your current experience against a suggested evolution of spiritual development found in the next section.

## Beyond Stage Three

*When we are grasped by the vision of a center of value and power more luminous, more inclusive and more true than that to which we are devoted, we initially experience the new as the enemy or the slayer - that which destroys our "god."* – James Fowler

Bear with me as we take a short academic detour. It is necessary to fully understand what I mean by “beyond stage three.” My own bias will show, but I will try to keep my tone as neutral as possible.

When it comes to the moral and psychological development of human beings, there are some powerful theories that seem to bear up under observation.

Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” shows how it is difficult for us to reach our highest potential (self-actualization) unless a pyramid of underlying needs are first met, beginning with food and shelter, progressing to love and esteem. Jean Piaget, after countless hours of observing children and adolescents, showed there are recognizable stages of cognitive growth in human beings, moving from concretion to abstraction. Spring-boarding on Piaget’s work, American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg developed a theory of moral development, evolving from self-centeredness to wider circles of engagement.

All three of these men shared a basic premise. Given the right mix of genes and environment, human beings can attain higher levels of development that embrace a more expansive world view. Maslow called this a “lack of



prejudice.” Kohlberg called it a season of “internalizing universal ethical principles.”

If you haven’t read these theories, take some time on Wikipedia, or go more in depth at your local library. They are part of our cultural literacy.

For this chapter, however, I want to talk about James Fowler (1940-2015). Until his retirement in 2005, he was a Methodist minister and Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University.

Fowler asked a basic question. If we human beings grow through ethical and intellectual stages, do we also develop spiritually in a recognizable way?

Using Kohlberg as his main inspiration, Fowler expounded a theory outlined in his landmark book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. Here is a list of the stages.

**Stage One** – Intuitive-Projective faith

**Stage Two** – Mythic-Literal faith

**Stage Three** – Synthetic-Conventional faith

**Stage Four** – Individuative-Reflective faith

**Stage Five** – Conjunctive faith

**Stage Six** - Universalizers

What I want us to focus on is the movement from Stage 3 onwards.

We usually enter Stage 3 sometime in our teenage years. At this point, our lives include several different social circles and there is a need to pull it all together, to synthesize. We commonly adopt some sort of all-

encompassing belief system, most often the conventional one of our culture. This can be a political philosophy or religious faith. It can be an alliance with a group of people who have a distinct set of rules and regulations. On one level this is a natural, understandable way to find security and a sense of belonging.

There's only one problem: we too often get stuck at this stage. We have a hard time seeing outside our box. We don't recognize that we are inside a belief system. We are like a fish in water who cannot imagine what it would mean to breathe air on land. To protect our viewpoint, we place authority in individuals or groups that represent and confirm our beliefs. We like belonging to our own herd, our own tribe. We become attached to the forms of our religion and get extremely upset when these are called into question. This is the stage in which many people petrify. More tragically, it's the stage that has justified intolerance since we crawled out of caves.

As a pastor for over three decades, I often encountered Stage 3 development in the people I served, as well as in my association with individuals from other faiths and denominations.

Listen: I recognize our need to hold on to spiritual stability. This world is so often chaotic that we long for a spiritual port in the storm. But the downside is that Stage 3 people, when they feel their beliefs threatened by doubt or ambiguity, usually resort to dogma, fundamentalism, and a rejection of the validity of other people's journeys. History also shows that they can resort to violence.

Frankly, most of the conflicts and roadblocks I encountered in ministry were stirred by Stage 3 folks. They used phrases like these.

- Pastor, my uncle died, but I'm not sure he was saved.
- Jesus is the only way.
- It's sad when you think that people of so many other faiths will die without salvation.
- How can that (woman, gay person, immigrant) be allowed to have authority? It's not scriptural!
- America has bent over backwards to accommodate this god of "multiculturalism." We are, and will always be, a Christian nation.
- I don't know, Pastor. You seem to preach a lot of grace and love, but what about the consequences of sin? Hell is real!
- I'm thinking of sending my children to a Christian school. Ever since they banned prayer from the public schools, our nation has become more and more godless.

Perhaps the most difficult issue when dealing with those stuck at Stage 3 is their self-appointed role as defenders of the faith. They spend an enormous amount of time trying to prove that their worldview is correct and exclusive, trumping all others. This shuts down effective dialogue. It makes it nearly impossible for conventional people to see the beauty and mystery in the stories of others.

However, if we are courageous, we will push on to the next stages, beginning with 4—Individuative-Reflective Faith. This is a tough transition which many have dubbed “a deconstruction period.” We start seeing outside our box and realize there are other boxes. We begin to critically examine our own beliefs and often become disillusioned with our former faith. Stage 3 people usually think that Stage 4 people have become “backsliders,” when in reality they have actually moved forward. Those who break out of Stage 3 usually do so when they start seriously questioning things on their own. A lot of the time, this stage ends up being very non-spiritual, even cynical, and some people unfortunately stay mired in a new negativity.

Those who continue their quest find the beauties inherent in Stages 5 and 6. This is when we begin to see the limits of logic and start to accept paradoxes. We begin to view life as a mystery. We often return to sacred stories and symbols, but this time without being stuck in a theological or ideological box. We relish the diversity of myths and symbols in our world, gleaning what they can teach us with an open mind. Not enough people reach this stage. Those who do often live their lives in the service of others. They learn to dance, to join the chorus of what Hesse’s Steppenwolf called “the laughter of the immortals.”

A colleague of mine, Jim Rigby, has been a consistent witness to the tenets at the core of this book. He is a prolific blogger with one of the keenest minds I’ve met. Here are some recent words from him that capture this movement through the stages of faith.

*As we start out on life's spiritual journey, we usually begin on the path of our parents. Later in life, as we observe the competing claims of all the various faiths, we cannot possibly know which, if any, leads to the kind of life we seek.*

*While, to the eyes of the world, we begin our journey by walking in the ways of our culture, some of us construct in our hearts a secret temple that is consecrated to truth, beauty, and goodness alone.*

*While we cannot know if the religion of our youth is true, we can usually know if we are being honest. While we cannot know if the rules we have been taught will work toward the highest good, we can usually discover eventually what makes for shared happiness. While we cannot know if religious rituals are truly sacred, we can often recognize a holy beauty in nature all around us.*

*If we follow a path of radical honesty, compassion and creativity, we may or may not remain with the religion of our youth. We may, in fact, feel called out of anything others would call religious, but we will surely find that mysterious experience that some have called "God" if we build a temple to truth, beauty, and goodness in our hearts.*

I'm a great fan of *National Geographic*, especially its expansive appreciation of history, humanity, and our paradisiacal planet teeming with life. I also appreciate its prophetic voice in calling us to protect these precious resources in a time of global warming and overpopulation.

On a regular basis, *National Geographic* funds explorers and pioneers, men and women breaking through to new realms of knowledge, expanding the limits of known reality. Explorers such as these have so much to teach us, whether they are delving into the atomic realm, the ecosystems of nature, the richness of culture, or the outer reaches of space.

Now, think of this. What if we placed just as much value on those who explore the life of the spirit? What if instead of labeling them as backsliders or heretics, we applauded them for moving beyond conventionality? What if we let them lead us into the frontiers of unity?

As we come to the end of this section, you might agree with one thing. Pioneers of the spirit are not only courageous; they may be the greatest hope for humanity in the precarious years to come.

Is it hard to press on in our journeys? Does it require struggle? Yes! Consider my testimony in the next section.

## Responding to Evil (*Conversations with Harry*)

*Religions of the world will never dwell in peace until we all realize that our words, rituals and symbols are particular cultural inflections of humanity's one common experience of the cosmos. Every claim that one's own group is exceptional or has received special unquestionable revelation is a bottomless fountain of misery and violence. – Jim Rigby*

The Holocaust; killing fields in Cambodia; tribal genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan; American Manifest Destiny; jihads; blitzkriegs; local and worldwide wars; over-consumption at the expense of other people and Mother Earth; the gap between the rich and the poor; murder and torture; sexual and physical abuse...

I could go on, but it's obvious: we live in a fractured and often tragic world. You only need to turn on the nightly news to be reminded of this through one horrific headline after another.

There's a theological word, *theodicy*, which has engendered much thought by brilliant minds. Basically, it's an attempt to answer a profound and searching question. If God is all-powerful, all-good, all-loving, and we have been created in God's image, how do we account for the existence of evil? Is it original sin, a devil, wrong choices in the karmic cycle, or the result of clinging to *maya*? Is it a throwback to reptilian stages of our evolution? Is it self-centeredness inflamed by fear? Is it a genetic mutation?

Just as the fullness of God remains a mystery, so does the presence of evil. There is simply no way to fathom it

completely. Yet who can deny its effects? From my decades of ministry, I have many sobering reminders of violence, brokenness, and pain. These are just a few. They still inhabit my memory.

- Praying with a mother at the bedside of her gay son. The boy was in a coma following a savage beating at the hands of high school homophobes.
- Interviewing a WWII soldier who helped liberate Germany's concentration camps, his eyes seared by a hellish landscape of emaciated human suffering.
- Joining four other full-grown men as we held a 100-pound teenager to the floor in a psychiatric unit I was managing. The boy had just slashed his wrists to the bone and was thrashing wildly, resisting multiple injections of Haldol. We could barely restrain him. He looked up at me and said in a deep manly voice far beyond his years, "Why don't you fucking let me die!" I shivered for hours afterwards.
- Hearing the testimony of a Nicaraguan priest who ministered to families of *los desaparecidos*, loved ones kidnapped in the night by Somoza's death squads.
- Listening to the oral history of an African-American family. They recalled a litany of racist atrocities, including the brutal lynching of an uncle.
- Standing in a dirt-poor *colonia* of Tijuana—shanties built on a landfill dump. No electricity or water. Barefoot children and pigs ran side by side in the muddy streets. I was near the fence that barred



passage to America. Beyond it were verdant agricultural fields watered by vast sprinklers, their mist creating a rainbow through which I saw affluent San Diego, as alluring as the Emerald City itself.

- Entering a crack house near dawn, people sacked out on the floor, trash and excrement everywhere, like a shelter for the undead. I lifted a baby girl and delivered her into the arms of Child Protective Services.

These are just a few haunting images on my journey. I'm sure you've had your own, dramatic or not, reminding you of this world's urgent need for peace, justice, and healing.

I do not pretend to be an airtight theologian. Maybe I'm just lazy, unwilling to formulate an intact theology that accounts not only for God's presence but the existence of the blight we call evil. To be honest, I find that building these intellectual castles in the sky can become a distinct form of hubris.

My path is experiential. I am keenly aware of my feebleness in trying to rationally understand the *mysterium tremendum*. And, that's OK. I know that between the lines of scripture, beyond the walls of temples, released from the dogma of creeds, it is more profound to sit beneath the Milky Way, overcome by an awestruck, joyous experience of creation. I know what it's like to gaze into my newborn baby's eyes and see the presence of the divine staring back at me. I know what it's like to sit in silence and sense that I am

not alone, enfolded in a loving otherness so much greater than myself.

But here's the rub for this section. I also know what it's like to feel compassion and empathy for those who are suffering, especially from the unjust effects of society, religion, and family dysfunction. These are moments of conviction and stricken conscience. They compel me to act in a positive, transformative way.

So how do we respond to the mystery of evil? More importantly, how do we respond in a way that is neither violent nor oppressive in its own right?

Haile Selassie once said, "Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph."

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

It is my personal belief that anyone who has experienced *The Overview* central to this book will want to use their life to promote peace. Though I recognize there are many ways to get involved, I want to express appreciation for two modalities at opposite ends of the spectrum.

First, I am grateful for those who cloister themselves with the aim of inner liberation. I respect their desire to live in community and practice the discipline of contemplation. Thomas Merton believed this kind of communal, monastic devotion can free the world one person at a time. He said:

*There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.*

Second, I am grateful for those who actively engage in the struggle for liberation. They organize, advocate, and serve with the goal of transforming unjust systems. They will even risk their own lives in witnessing for peace. This is where I hang my hat. I have marched, demonstrated, lifted candles in tear-stained vigils, written letters, made phone calls, knocked on doors, labored with shovel, hammer and saw. *Viva la lucha!*

It is my sincere hope that *all* of us find ourselves somewhere on this spectrum. I hope that each of us is actively engaged in furthering our spiritual journey as a contribution to the healing of humanity. If we aren't, I believe we are doing a disservice not only to ourselves, but to the loved ones surrounding us. We are doing a disservice to the world. There is so much more to life than the pursuit of Self and material security.

As we grow, as we attempt to lovingly push back the darkness wherever we are planted, here is my plea. Let us examine our hearts and mind and ask, *once again*, these all-important questions. Is my religion (mythology, belief structure, paradigm, world view) drawing me closer to all human beings? Is it intentionally dissolving the walls that divide us? Is it creating new ways to live and love on this fragile planet? Is it shaping my thoughts and words to be in dialogue with others, or does it exclude their realities?

Our actions create ripple effects in this world, and how we act is plumbed in our dearest convictions. I believe it is incumbent upon each of us to develop wellsprings of thought and experience that foster unity, healing and love; attitudes that avoid contributing to suffering and evil as much as possible.

As I hope I have made clear in this short volume, there are teachers from many spiritual traditions that can free our minds and spirit. In my life, no longer tied to a particular path, I find inspiration in Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and what is known as Christian Universalism. This latter strand of faith stretches back to Origen in the third century, but it became more popular in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, rooted in the liberal thinking of Quakers, Moravians, and certain Methodists. I invite you to read more about their history. Here are some of their central tenets.

- God is the loving origin of all people.
- Jesus Christ, like others, reveals the nature and character of God and is one of the spiritual leaders of humankind.
- All human beings have an immortal soul which death does not end, and which God will never destroy.
- Sin (harmful action and thinking, bad karma) has negative consequences in this life or the afterlife.
- Despite these consequences, God will reconcile all of us to God's self. There is no hell or eternal damnation, and everyone will eventually be conformed to the image of divine perfection. In other words, *everyone is saved*.

Many Christians reading this will immediately run for cover. They will claim it isn't scriptural, that it does not account for punishment, including Jesus's own teachings on judgment and hell.

This is your path and I love you! I also ask you to bear with me for a moment. Let me tell you a story from my own journey. I call it *Conversations with Harry*.

**H**arry Summers was a Presbyterian pastor, retired by the time I met him. I was at the lowest point of my life, numb and demoralized. I had taken a break from ordained ministry to see if I could heal, find my bearings, and shed my inner dis-ease.

This was when Harry entered my life, both of us living in a mobile home community outside of Desert Hot Springs, California, an arid environ straddling the San Andreas Fault. The parched landscape and underlying fissures seemed to mirror my spiritual state.

I was questioning my faith and vocation, burnt out by the demands of ministry. It was easy to point the finger at the failures of those I had served rather than myself. Harry admonished me to get back on the trail. "You think you have scars on your backside?" he said. "I could show you mine, young man!"

I laughed, which was a tonic for my soul. It reminded me of that moment in the movie *Jaws* when Robert Shaw and Richard Dreyfus compare their scars inflicted by sharks at various times and places.

Harry and I began a ritual of sharing coffee in the morning on his patio, warming to our new friendship and the

crisp, early light of the desert. Inevitably, our discussions turned to matters of theology, derived from the Greek Theos logos, “words about God.” I frame these moments in the form of one conversation. This isn’t a transcript; it’s as much a dialogue with my inner self and God as it is with Harry. Which are his words and which are mine? It doesn’t matter. He was a key part of my journey, a companion on the inner way. Because of this, I will always honor him with gratitude.

**Me:** Harry, I’m not sure about going back into the ministry. I’ve become increasingly skeptical of so much of what masquerades as Christianity. I struggle with too many passages in the Bible. I especially struggle with the way a movement of love and grace is used to separate people from others. Even in our supposedly liberal denomination, I think I might be branded a heretic.

**Harry:** What do you mean? Give me some examples.

**Me:** I’ve got so many. I’m afraid it would take too long.

**Harry (smiling and lifting his palms upwards):** Do I look like I’m going anywhere? Let’s take them one at a time.

**Me (drawing a deep breath):** OK, in our tradition we don’t ascribe to the infallibility of scripture. But we still hold to the Bible as our authority, and I find myself alienated from so much of what I read in its pages. For one thing, I can’t wrap my head around the “crime and punishment” god of the Old Testament, a deity who supposedly tortured Israel anytime it turned away to idols. I can’t worship a god who

would call for the wholesale slaughter of every living thing in Jericho, including nursing babies. I think that if I had lived in the second century, I might have thrown my lot with Marcion, eliminating the Hebrew scripture as a testament to a lesser god.

**Harry:** You know as well as I do, Krin, that the Bible, like holy writings in any tradition, must be read part to the whole and whole to the part. It must be filtered through what we know of the people and eras that formulated it. The ancient Israelites were a primitive consortium of tribes surrounded by polytheistic cultures. The prevailing religious belief in the Middle East was that deities were fickle. If you didn't satisfy them with choice sacrifices, they might rain any number of calamities on your head. Look at the cultic passages of Leviticus, telling the Jews in vivid detail how to cut up the bodies of their sacrificial animals, how to burn the fat properly, etc. It was extremely primitive.

**Me:** OK. I agree. Go on...

**Harry:** Given that primitive context, it was a miracle that the Israelites developed monotheistic faith at all. This was a great advance in human spiritual evolution. Yet they still couldn't shake the notion of a wrathful god, one standing ready to punish their indiscretions. When you believe you are God's chosen people, and then you are conquered and oppressed by neighboring nations, how else can you describe it other than as punishment for your individual and collective sins?

Krin, I agree with you. There is no way I can believe that God would order the genocide we see in the book of Joshua. This was the same kind of justification for war and nationalism we witness today—one leader after another invoking their tribal deities as good luck totems for victory. It was like our own Manifest Destiny, backed by Christianity that led this nation westward, wreaking destruction on everything in its path.

**Me:** That makes sense to me, Harry. The way I would put it is this: the Jews gave testimony to a god who was more fully conceived than the deities of their neighbors. Yet in the evolution of spiritual thought, this vision was still limited by their superstitions and ethnocentrism. It was the best truth about our Creator that they could conceive of.

**Harry:** Exactly. It can't be taken literally. This isn't science. It isn't even history as we term it today. And yet, there is so much beauty in the Old Testament.

**Me:** I surely agree with that. So many gorgeous passages in the Psalms! God as a caring shepherd, a lover of strangers, a defender of widows, calling people to live justly in relationship to others. I think of David realizing in Psalm 51 that God does not desire the slaughter of animals, but a humble and contrite heart, a person willing to be healed. I think of the love story of Ruth and Boaz. I think of Isaiah's lofty calls to be a people that serve the oppressed, or Hosea and Micah showing us that love and mercy are the highest good.



**Harry:** Yes! Beautiful indeed, proclaimed through courageous, prophetic voices. The god we have come to know through other revelations such as Jesus can be seen many times in the Old Testament. When you think about it without the compulsion to be literal, it's fascinating to trace this gradual evolution.

**Me:** Ok, so let's move to the writings of the New Testament. Their primary purpose is to give witness to Jesus of Nazareth and the faith movement he inspired. His teachings to love our enemies, to seek inner change and humility, his passion for serving the poor, his foot-washing model of servanthood—all of this still captivates me. And I believe the parables of *The Good Samaritan* and *The Prodigal Son* rank among the best stories about faith ever uttered.

**Henry:** Same here.

**Me:** But even in the New Testament I find so much I can't accept. Forget about the miracles for a moment. What bothers me most is this notion that God required the blood of the cross to appease divine wrath. Here we are, back to a deity who demands sacrifices. And even many sayings of Jesus seem narrow and sectarian, full of apocalyptic zeal and furious condemnation. I don't care if Jesus used the symbolism, I certainly don't believe in hell. Eternal damnation? Really? It resigns God to being less of a forgiving parent than you or me, Harry.

**Harry:** So what's the problem here? You can hold these doubts and still be considered a follower of Christ.

**Me:** OK. Walk me through it.

**Harry:** First of all, scripture is not a paper Pope. Just like we discussed with the Old Testament, it is a chronicle of one tribe's evolving conception of the divine. Let's take Jesus's death on the cross. The Gospel writers cast it as a ransom, a final sacrifice, again showing their primitive need for blood atonement. You can trace this all the way back to the scapegoat beaten and run off a cliff during Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Or, more powerfully, the sacrificial lamb that spared the Israelites from death on the original Passover. But there are other historical ways to view the crucifixion.

**Me:** I'm listening.

**Henry:** The one that makes most sense to me was the dominant teaching of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the years before Christ's followers became co-opted and imperialized by the Roman Empire. We call it the "moral influence" theory today. It's actually quite simple. It's the belief that Jesus' primary purpose was to help us develop as human beings, not to pay a price for us. From this perspective, the cross is a powerful symbol of nonviolence and forgiveness, something our world needs desperately. It's a demonstration of what Joseph Campbell called Jesus's most powerful contribution to spiritual evolution—loving our enemies.

**Me:** OK. So later Christians got fixated on a single interpretation of Jesus's death—substitutionary

atonement—and it became an orthodox tenet. I agree with you, Harry. To me, the final moments of the crucifixion represent a lofty form of sacrificial love. It captivates me and makes me want to live Christ's example in some small way in my life.

**Harry (laughing):** Hopefully not through crucifixion.

**Me (laughing in return):** Yeah, no need for another martyr, or a pastor with a Messianic complex.

**Harry (suddenly serious again):** It's a worthy calling, Krin, a love that has been expressed in other faiths, other times, other places. It has enormous power to transform our lives. I don't think God's done with you yet.

**Me:** Maybe not. But this brings me to a deeper question, one which many would say is the crux of my doubts. Beginning with the Apostle's Creed, then the Council of Nicaea, Christians have always believed that Jesus was uniquely and literally the Son of God, fully divine and fully human. This supposedly makes him the only true and complete revelation. To believe otherwise is considered heresy by most. I have a hard time with this, and I'm struggling to make sense of what I currently believe.

**Harry:** Try putting it into words.

**Me:** I believe there is divinity in all of us. In other words, we are *all* sons and daughters of God. Our brief years on earth give us a unique opportunity to explore the life of the Spirit,

shaping us more and more into what God originally created us to be. Yet there is so much that holds us back--fear, anger, and cultural blinders. What I see in Jesus is the courage of someone who risked everything to experience the truth, who laid down his life to let the fullness of his divinity shine. If you call this the incarnation, I don't believe it happened at his supposed virgin birth. I believe it happened during the final moments on the cross.

**Harry:** What do you mean?

**Me:** Well, look at the final week of Jesus's life depicted in the Gospels. He rails at the Pharisees who are helping plot his death, calling them a brood of vipers and whitewashed tombs, clean on the outside but full of death. He prophesies about the end of time, when people will be divided like sheep and goats based on their service to humanity. Some will enter heaven and others will be cast into eternal darkness. This is hardly what you'd call the messiah of love and grace. Then, just days later, after they have beaten him savagely and nailed him to a cross on trumped up charges of treason, he utters these immortal words: "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." In that moment I see the fullness of what Christians call the Incarnation.

**Harry:** Why that moment?

**Me:** Because I believe that is when Jesus understood the completeness of his message. It is that moment when he allowed his divinity to liberate him from the age-old karmic chain of action and reaction, giving all of us hope. It is that

moment that makes me understand the love that flows from the heart of God, a love that says we are created for something far more powerful than personal, national, or religious leanings. God has created us to love without measure. It is that moment when I understand what Paul said in Ephesians, that Christ was breaking down the wall of hostility between enemies. It is that moment that makes me realize the truth of II Corinthians 5:19-20.

**Harry (picking up a Bible from the table, turning to the passage, reading):** *God was reconciling the world in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making an appeal through us.*

**Me:** That is *so* powerful. Each of us called to make our lives a loving appeal for unity in this world. I think of it as God showing us in Christ that we are loved, that we are right with God no matter how desperate our struggles. And even if we never get beyond our brokenness, this loving grace still enfolds us. It says to me, above all, that everyone is saved, that love has the final word.

**Harry:** Saved from what, Krin?

**Me:** Any permanent consequences of our actions in a real or imagined future life. Any casting into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Any hellish burning. Any purgatorial torture device. Any cold-hearted assignment to one perpetual level of reincarnation, spinning

the karmic wheel like a hamster with bloody stumps for feet. Any...

**Harry (chuckling, holding up his palm like a stop sign):** OK, OK, I get it.

**Me:** Sorry. I just get so tired of God being cast as the Grand Inquisitor.

**Harry: (smiling):** I hear you, Krin. But *everyone* is saved? What about Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot? What about Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, or Osama Bin Laden? What about George Custer or Joe McCarthy?

**Me:** It curdles our sense of justice, doesn't it? We like to think of good lives being rewarded and bad lives punished. But that's our economy, not God's. Think about that moment on the cross again. Jesus is looking out on the very world that stripped him, beat him, and nailed him to a cross. He is thinking about the unjust charges of blasphemy and sedition. He has every reason to be filled with rage and hatred, yet he asks God to forgive his persecutors for their ignorance and blindness. Do you think God did forgive them, Harry?

**Harry:** Yes, indeed.

**Me:** Me, too. So I work my way out from that moment and believe it applies to every other sociopath, criminal, and evil destroyer of human life. This kind of forgiveness, this kind of grace, is why Paul called the cross a scandal, a stumbling

block. It is just so hard to believe that it applies to everyone. But if it doesn't, then God was not reconciling the whole world. If it doesn't, the cross makes no sense.

**Harry (suddenly sitting straighter, more intensely):** Easy for us to say, Krin, when neither of us has been personally victimized by the brutality that exists in this world. There are shoes we have never walked in!

**Me:** I realize that. If someone attacked my loved ones, I would respond in any way necessary to protect them. And in the aftermath of a tragedy I couldn't stop, I don't know how I would react. The impulse to wreak revenge is deeply imbedded in our evolutionary genes, the flaming side of fight or flight. But I know it is possible to forgive and practice forbearance even in the face of such darkness. Christ is not the only example. There have been many others. And when this happens, the hope that we can evolve beyond our animal instincts shines brightly for all to see.

**Harry:** Ok, one other question. How do you respond to Christians who feel the need to evangelize? If everyone is already saved, what is the impetus behind sharing one's faith?

**Me:** The point of communicating this story is not to convert people or have them conform to Christian doctrines and prescriptions. It is not to build churches and count sheep. It is so we can all be reminded of how loved we are by our Creator, hopefully liberating us to treat each other in the

same way. Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

**Harry (lifting his coffee cup in a toast):** That is why I never left the ministry, Krin. I wanted people to understand this grace, this love. It is so far beyond our comprehension, yet it can fill our lives in such a strong and personal way. It is the power of resurrection, giving hope and encouraging us in this world which is often so broken. Whether or not you return to the ministry, Krin, I can see that this love has helped you glimpse what Jesus called “the Kingdom of God.”

**Me (as a mourning dove cries out):** Amen, Harry.



## POSTLUDE ONE

When William Paul Young wrote *The Shack*, he never expected his self-published novel would become a worldwide phenomenon, a bestseller beyond his wildest dreams. The spread of his story's fame is clear proof of "the tipping point" theory outlined by Malcolm Gladwell.

If you haven't read Young's tale, it's about a man named Mack whose daughter is murdered by a serial killer, a tragedy that undermines every mooring of his faith, a period of years he calls The Great Sadness.

Then he gets an invitation from Papa (the term his wife uses for God) to spend a weekend at a shack deep in the woods. The book recounts this experience and the healing conversations with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu (the Holy Spirit). It's an allegorical look at the Trinity and one man's journey back from despair.

What struck me throughout the story was Young's unabashed presentation of universalism, a glimpse into his own faith journey that he corroborated in interviews and lectures. It caused some critics to label Young a heretic.

Here is an excerpt from *The Shack* that illustrates Young's perspective. Mack is speaking to Jesus, who just told him that the ones who know him are free to live and love without agenda. Mack asks:

*"Is that what it means to be a Christian?"*

*"Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian."*

*The idea struck Mack as odd and unexpected and he couldn't keep himself from grinning. "No, I suppose you aren't."*

*"Those who love me come from every system that exists...Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institution...I have no desire to make them Christians, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my beloved."*

*"Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?"*

*"Not all," smiled Jesus..."But it does mean that I will travel any road to find you."*

Another poignant element of *The Shack* is its plea for mercy in the face of unspeakable atrocities. Papa asks Mack to forgive the very serial killer that took his daughter's life. Mack can't conceive of how such an action is possible. As he mulls it over in his mind, he is wracked with grief, sorrow and helplessness. His stomach churns as he calls out to Papa, "How can I do this?" Here is how Papa responds.

*"Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare.*

*"Son, you may have to declare your forgiveness a hundred times the first day and the second day, but the third day will be less and each day after, until one day you will realize that you have forgiven completely. And then one day you will pray for his wholeness and give him over to me so that my love will burn from his life every vestige of corruption. As incomprehensible as it sounds*

*at this moment, you may well know this man in a different context one day.”*

In November 2008, my former nonprofit, Torch of Faith, in partnership with Ridglea Presbyterian Church and WestAid (both of Fort Worth, Texas), sponsored an evening with Young. The 900 seat sanctuary filled to capacity. Young was charming and articulate. The Q&A session that followed was a spirited, free-flowing exchange of love and creativity.

Before he left on his flight home, Young and I said goodbye. I reached over to hug him, just a quick press, a manly catch and release. Then a wonderful thing happened. He wouldn't let me go—holding me until I relaxed and gave into the moment of connection.

I asked him to sign my copy of his book. This is what he wrote.

*Krin,  
face upturned,  
open hands to the falling rain of grace,  
reign of grace,  
slipping softly into the precious places  
and singing into healing.*

## POSTLUDE TWO

I write this final conclusion while perched on a cliff in Kipahulu, Maui. Pacific surf pounds its rhythm on rocks far below. Mina birds pipe in the trees. Soft trade-winds feather my cheeks. All of it breathes the beauty of creation, stirring an emotion the Hawaiians call *aloha aina*, love of the land.

Behind me, on the grounds of Palapala Hoomau Congregational Church, is the final resting place of Charles Lindbergh. He was a man of extreme contrasts: a national hero, then a Nazi sympathizer; a seemingly devoted husband who harbored secret families with two European mistresses; a consultant on war tactics, but also an environmentalist concerned with preserving species like the humpback whale. It was those gentle giants that brought him to Maui.

His simple gravestone has only two chiseled inscriptions:

- *Born Michigan 1902, died Maui 1974*
- *If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea*

The latter comes from Psalm 139, an epic song celebrating God's omnipresence—the one who resides in both dark and light, who attends our conception in the womb as well as our final breath, who envelopes us this moment were we stand, but remains just as near in whatever remote corner of the globe our travels take us.

Attributed to King David, this poem ends with some vulnerable words.

*Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The Hebrew words for “way everlasting” are *derek olam*. They describe the ancient path of peace and faithfulness God has inscribed in our hearts since the beginning of time. It is what the Navajos mean when they say *walking in beauty*, in harmony not only with our creator, but all of creation, especially God’s children in their splendid diversity. This timeless way is often obscured by illusions, by human myopia, but it becomes clear and inviting to all who sincerely seek it.

This is my hope for all of us. That we will rise up and see the absolute necessity of living as one human family. That we will cast off any belief that teaches separatism, judgment, or spiritual superiority. That we will open our ears and hearts to the one message of unity that, ultimately, is our only real hope of saving this planet for generations to come.

This is my *Invitation to The Overview*. Blessings to you, brothers and sisters! Maybe we’ll meet on our journeys.