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# Crossing Lines/Weaving Lives: Storytelling as a Means of Building Bridges across the Progressive/Conservative Divide

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This research is a product of the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at George Fox University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

CROSSING LINES / WEAVING LIVES:  
STORYTELLING AS A MEANS OF BUILDING BRIDGES  
ACROSS THE PROGRESSIVE/CONSERVATIVE DIVIDE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JENNIFER YOCUM

PORTLAND, OREGON

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Portland Seminary  
George Fox University  
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by  
the Dissertation Committee on February 15, 2018  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Preaching as Story.

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## **DEDICATION**

The spirit of this work is dedicated to all those who have ears to hear, hearts to listen, and willingness to make connections across barriers that falsely divide us from loving each other as Christ has loved us.

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Robert Warren whose inspiration and financial support made my dream of earning my doctorate possible. Thanks, Uncle Bob!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, always first, I'd like to thank my beloved Ellen for her patience, encouragement, support, editing, humor, and willingness to support me jumping into this program with less than two days of notice because that's how I roll. Thanks, honey.

I also thank my fantastic church, the Forest Grove United Church of Christ, for their support, love, care, and occasional time off through this DMin process. And for all those who continue to tell me, "That DMin program has really improved your preaching," thanks, I think.

For all of my friends and family members who watched me disappear into stacks of books and behind computer screens for two years and promised to help me get the dust off my kayak and social life when I re-emerged, I'm back!

Last, I'd like to acknowledge the faculty, staff and cohort members of Portland Seminary for their profound wit, wisdom, and courage in welcoming me as their colleague and sister in Christ. I'm so glad we had this time together. May your stories continue to reveal love, justice, hope, joy, and grace. Amen.

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## PREFACE

*I sat in the front seat of my Subaru Forester with my hand on the key of the ignition, engine running, heart racing. I'd just pulled into the parking lot of the hipster coffeehouse I'd been told to come to, but I could just as easily back out again, head home, and not engage in this ridiculous venture. "These people hate me," I thought. "They don't know me, but they hate everything I stand for. What the hell am I doing here?" Somehow, the Holy Spirit nudged me to turn off the engine and I took a breath. "All right, Lord," I said, "I'm going to follow your lead on this," and walked, with my knees shaking, toward the coffeehouse to meet and join the most fearsome group of people I could imagine, Evangelical Christian pastors.*

That moment of dread and anxiety began my doctoral program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary (GFES).<sup>1</sup> I chose to attend GFES in a serendipitous whirlwind of finding a one-time-only Doctor of Ministry program, Preaching as Story, set to begin in less than 48 hours from the moment of my discovery. Through a series of miraculous feats of administrative gymnastics, I was enrolled in the program by the time I arrived at the Lake Oswego, Oregon coffeehouse. Only now did the wave of second thoughts crash in—would my church support this decision to enter a school for the people who reviled

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<sup>1</sup> George Fox Evangelical Seminary changed its name to Portland Seminary in 2017, but it is still associated with George Fox University, an evangelical Quaker institution.

many of our Progressive stands? Would my physical safety be at risk? Would other students decide they had to drop out because of my presence?<sup>2</sup>

Evangelical Christians struck terror in my heart due to their frequent and often violent condemnation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. After being “out” as a lesbian for almost 30 years, my sexual orientation is not the most interesting or important thing about my character, but it has played a significant role in my faith development, more of which will be explored in the memoir associated with this dissertation. However, my sexual orientation, and the larger topic of variant sexual orientations and gender identities/expressions has become a significant flashpoint within and among Christian denominations and the larger American political stage.

In my personal experience as a lesbian, I have been spit at, lunged at, shouted at, legislated against,<sup>3</sup> demonized, prayed against, and seen friends and fellow community members physically hurt, fired from jobs, maimed and even killed<sup>4</sup> due to the efforts of Evangelical Christians, their pastors and churches. I have more reason than most to disdain Evangelicals and their ilk, and remain within the small bubble of Progressive

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<sup>2</sup> Some religious denominations regard worshipping, praying, or studying with openly gay Christians, or even other Christian denominations, as anathema and cause for rescinding religious orders. See Karl Wyneken, “Article on Which the Church Stands or Falls,” *The Daystar Journal—Gospel Voices in and for the Missouri Church, Lutheran Synod*, November 13, 2013, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://thedaystarjournal.com/the-article-on-which-the-church-stands-or-falls/>.

<sup>3</sup> See George T Nicola, “Oregon LGBTQ History Since 1970,” Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, last updated July 7, 2015, accessed June 11, 2017, <https://www.glapn.org/6007historyLGBTQrights.html>.

<sup>4</sup> From the murder of Matthew Shephard to the millions left to die of AIDS before funding became available to fight this pandemic due to gay-blaming, significant responsibility for these deaths can be left at the feet of Evangelical Christian pastors who claimed this suffering was ordained by God. For example, see David Badash, “Christian Pastor Says Gays ‘Worthy of Death’ At Conference With 3 GOP Presidential Candidates,” New Civil Rights Movement, November 6, 2015, accessed June 11, 2017, [http://www.thenewcivilrightsmovement.com/davidbadash/christian\\_pastor\\_says\\_gays\\_worthy\\_of\\_death\\_at\\_conference\\_with\\_3\\_gop\\_presidential\\_candidates](http://www.thenewcivilrightsmovement.com/davidbadash/christian_pastor_says_gays_worthy_of_death_at_conference_with_3_gop_presidential_candidates).

Christians in which I've found my spiritual home and support for my vocation. And yet, my calling as a follower of Christ would not let me stew in the discontent of righteous indignation or allow me to remain subject to my fears of, and, let's face it, jealousies toward, the highly successful efforts of Evangelical Christians.

Jesus calls those faithful to his word to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matt. 5:43-48). This call is not easy, even in the abstract. Then again, love in the abstract is not love at all. Real love requires face-to-face, in-person encounters. But getting across the threshold for those face-to-face encounters can be difficult. Showing up on the doorstep of a person or institution that has declared that you are damned to the flames of eternal hell with smile and a request to grow in friendship and fellowship in the name of Christ, is awkward at best. Moreover, I am far more interested in spreading Good News about God's never-ending, all-redeeming, everlasting call to loving compassion and justice for ALL creation than I am about focusing on the singular issue of LGBT salvation/ministry. It is that larger story that I want to learn how to tell as well as possible, hence the Preaching as Story program.

The Spirit-filled irony that placed this ideal subject matter in the setting of an Evangelical seminary was too good to pass by. I am grateful beyond words for this experience and I can now truly say that I have learned to love and respect these Evangelical Christians, and that my experience of coming to love these people *and their stories*, has enriched my faith and my life. Even if, by personal choice or denominational decree, I could not preach in most of their churches due to my gender or sexual orientation, I love them and I believe that they have come to care for and respect me. I did not enter this program with the intent to advocate for an LGBTQ cause *per se* (and

was only admitted to the program with the promise I would not do so). I came because I didn't want to hate and fear Evangelical Christians anymore, and I wanted to figure out if there was a way to bridge the aching, widening, devastating chasm between Evangelicals and Progressive Christians more broadly. I knew this bridge would not be built through doctrine, through politics, through principles, or even through partnerships. But I believe it can be built, through stories.

### **Tell Me a Story**

Christians are predisposed to accept the wisdom and authority of stories. Jesus was a masterful storyteller who chose to deliver most of his teaching through parables: short stories that borrowed characters and settings from his own time to offer truths to stand for all time. Later sections of this paper will delve more deeply into the reasons why we, as human beings, are hard-wired to think, learn, and remember through stories.

Advertisers understand the fundamental power of stories. Our current culture saturates us with demands, suggestions and compulsions, trying to influence our opinions and behaviors in the marketplace. Storytelling for relationship-building slants the marketing paradigm slightly. Rather than trying to influence a particular behavior or transaction, storytelling for relationship-building intends to cultivate trust, empathy, comradery, and connection across time, issues, and frameworks for the long-term.

Storytelling offers a low-barrier, low-commitment entry into relationships which might otherwise seem too fraught with logistical, doctrinal, or other baggage that causes people to shrink away from engaging with the Other. This strategy does not suggest that other approaches to building relationships, particularly project-based partnership efforts among churches, cannot be successful, but my experience suggests that relationship must

play the primary role in those partnership efforts. The following story illustrates my point.

*The local Baptist Pastor fidgeted in his seat in my office. He had been coming over to see me for several weeks, trying to understand how I could justify my vocational calling in light of biblical teachings against homosexuality. I was not interested in that conversation, but I was interested in finding ways that our churches could collaborate on projects, such as our ministries to people experiencing homelessness or creation care. I figured that if I could get him past the tired arguments reconciling Christianity and homosexuality, we might be able to do some great things together.*

*Per his inquiries, I had offered all of the arguments about social-historical context,<sup>5</sup> the arc of Jesus' ministry to the despised and the outcast,<sup>6</sup> and finally, my personal experience of vocation and call.<sup>7</sup> It was the last part that had him flummoxed. He couldn't deny the authenticity of my call or the witness that my church and I offered for Christ. But I never asked him about the personal struggle my story had set up for him.*

*All I wanted to know was if he wanted to offer the first prayer for an upcoming Earth Day lake cleanup event I'd organized with three other churches.*

*"I'd like to, personally," he said, "But I can't."*

*"You can't go first?" I asked. "We can put you in a different spot in the order."*

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<sup>5</sup> See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 1980.

<sup>6</sup> John Shore, "The Best Case for the Bible Not Condemning Homosexuality," *Huffington Post*, last updated June 3, 2012, accessed June 11, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shore/the-best-case-for-the-bible-not-condemning-homosexuality\\_b\\_1396345.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shore/the-best-case-for-the-bible-not-condemning-homosexuality_b_1396345.html).

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Yocum, Track 2 artifact, chapter 5.

*“No, I can’t...” he paused. “I can’t pray with you.”*

*“That’s silly,” I said, “We pray every time we meet. We pray for each other. What are you talking about?”*

*“I can’t pray with you in public,” he confessed. “My congregation doesn’t believe we pray to the same God.”*

*I felt the theological ground beneath my feet swoop from under me. “I don’t use this word lightly, but isn’t that heresy? There’s only one God.”*

*He looked down at his hands and played with his fingers. “I know that, but I guess we understand him differently. Look, my wife and I can still come to the event. We can still invite people to pick up trash, but we can’t pray together.”*

That was the last time I saw my colleague in my office or in town. He was planning to retire within the next few months and his church folded up shortly after that. I realize now that I had seen our relationship as a vehicle to get to the goal of a project-based partnership, not as an end in itself. Other than a fairly mechanical acknowledgement that having to bow out of our cleanup day must have been difficult for him, I never asked him to tell his own story about different challenges to his faith or what he had overcome in a long ministerial career. I had never paid real attention to his story and had sacrificed our relationship in pursuit of a project.

Ultimately, while I sincerely believe that the crisis of decline in the Christian church in the U.S. will have to be met with institutions coming together in a variety of ways, I have come to realize that relationships are fundamental, a need in their own right, as well as a means to facilitating partnerships. And as a way to begin those relationships, storytelling/story sharing is the right place to start.

## Structure of this Paper

Section One of this paper contains the introduction and context of my thesis that storytelling can act as a powerful tool to build bridges and braid relationships across the Progressive/Conservative Christian divide. It tells an abbreviated version of the long story of divisions among Progressives and Conservatives in White American Protestantism up to the present day.<sup>8</sup> These divisions began with William Brewster and the first boatloads of pilgrims who touched Plymouth Rock and have only multiplied since.

Section Two discusses different approaches to bridging Conservative and Progressive divides between churches. I contend that dissension between churches, differences in doctrine and application of Christian teaching, and even, denominationalism itself, is not the culprit in the decline of American Protestantism. The true fractures in our faith – and in our larger culture for that matter – come from our willingness to demonize, demean, and dismember ourselves from each other, and that these damage the body of Christ as a whole.

Section Three of this paper will outline my thesis that storytelling is an effective means to build bridges and braid relationships across the Progressive/Conservative divide. It will outline several of the ways that stories work in the brain and on the heart to create connection among listeners including application of storytelling and story-sharing technologies.

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<sup>8</sup> There are certainly Progressive and Conservative Black and other ethnically mixed and singular churches in the United States, but the cultural dynamics that shape these churches differ from those of the predominantly White religious structures in this country. For the purposes of this paper, my focus will remain on the dynamics of dominant-culture White churches.

Section Four describes the artifact developed for this project: a personal memoir chronicling efforts to cross over into different cultures and learn about myself and others in the process. Section 5 contains a book proposal for a memoir titled *We'll Cross That Line When We Come to It: Memoir of a Veteran, Lesbian, Reverend*. Section Six contains a Postscript with summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

## ABSTRACT

Christians in the United States have been divided against each other since before the Pilgrims touched dry land and Plymouth Rock. These divisions have created disaster in their wake, ranging from literal witch hunts in the early Massachusetts colony, to religiously fueled engagements in World War I, through to the continuing battles over sexuality, civil rights, and the American Christian exceptionalism that exist today.

While the divisions are not new, our contemporary context suggests that these divisions themselves, even more than the subjects over which Christians are divided, are creating mortal danger to the body of Christ as a whole. The bitterness of these battles between the Progressive/Liberal/Mainline (PLM) churches and the Conservative Christian (CC) churches taints the flavor of the Gospel itself, making the experience of Church as a whole less palatable, less powerful, and less relevant.

This bitterness, coupled with our increasing ability to tailor our newsfeeds in ways that align with our own preconceived notions, means that all of us, inside the Church and out, are more easily able to silence and ignore the voice of the Other thus narrowing our circles of information and impact. Overcoming the divides between the PLM and CC churches will require many different approaches, but this dissertation suggests that storytelling offers an effective, low-barrier means of bridging those divides and braiding relationships. Storytelling serves as the most basic technology of our Christian faith, and my hope is that storytelling can lead us back toward each other through the Master Storyteller himself, Jesus.

## SECTION 1—THE PROBLEM

### Historical Perspectives of American Progressive and Conservative Theologies

We begin at sea. Charting the turbulent waters of North American Progressive and Conservative theologies could begin as far back as Jesus on the Sea of Galilee, or with Moses at the Red Sea, or with our Native American or African ancestors staring at the vast oceans, but we will begin off the shore of Plymouth Rock with Puritan separatists striking an agreement for mutual protection with their non-separatist fellow passengers in the Mayflower Compact on November 21, 1620.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than try to recreate a sweeping survey of the whole of American religious history, this section will invite readers to get their feet wet by reviewing early colonial religious trends, briefly touching on the significance of the Great Awakenings, and then bringing us forward to the milieu of the Social Gospel movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and into the early Progressive era. The section will then consider the patterns of growth and decline in American Protestantism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century before bringing us to the shores of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and our contemporary context.

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<sup>9</sup> The Mayflower Compact is often described as a document of governance because it pertains to creation of “a civil body politic.” However, the Compact specifically states that the purpose of the voyage is “for the Glory of God, and advancements of the Christian faith and honor of our King and Country.” For the Separatists at least, the purpose of their undertaking is primarily a religious act. The text of the Compact can be accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mayflower\\_Compact](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mayflower_Compact), accessed November 28, 2015.

*Puritanism Crosses the Waters*

The Puritans (also known as Separatists, Saints, and Congregationalists in various writings) founded the first colonies of New England and have the reputation of being a stern and joyless lot, with a fondness for round hats and witch-burning. According to Francis J. Bremer, this vision is an unfair cartoon of what was a lively and diverse group.<sup>10</sup> Bremer says,

Puritans were dedicated to raising the kingdom of God, but the nature of what that kingdom would be was never completely spelled out. It was always an ideal just beyond their reach as they journeyed on a pilgrimage toward an unattainable perfection. They were attempting to build a better society, the best that human effort could achieve. The starting point for making the Earth truly God's kingdom began with the individual's struggle to subject him- or herself to the divine will, a struggle that could not succeed without the blessings of God's grace. Having transformed oneself into a "shining light," the puritan sought to bring others into the kingdom by persuasion and the example of a godly life.<sup>11</sup>

That transformation depended on a thorough understanding of scripture. Bremer says, "Puritans were particularly concerned that individual believers had access to the scriptures, the word of God, in a proper vernacular translation. This required a commitment to teaching all to read. They agitated for the placement of university-trained preachers in every parish."<sup>12</sup> Intellectual exercise was not separate from emotional conviction. In fact, a profound "conversion experience" was required for full baptism into Congregationalist churches early on.

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<sup>10</sup> Francis J. Bremer, *First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in an Atlantic World* (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012), 2, accessed November 28, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71188522090001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_su\\_mmit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71188522090001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_su_mmit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Note: Bremer chooses to not capitalize the "P" in "puritan" as this group encompassed a wide range of beliefs and practices and never formalized themselves into a single institution.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

As Congregationalists raised their children within their churches over time, however, fewer of these young adults experienced “conversion” (or being “born again”) to the faith in which they had been steeped. A unique solution to this problem came about in the form of the Halfway Covenant. James Cooper describes the Halfway Covenant as follows,

Its provisions allowed unregenerate [not yet “born again”] children of regenerate [“born again”] parents to baptize their offspring, providing that they led an upright life and agreed to own the church covenant before the assembled congregation. As adults, all halfway members assumed the benefits and responsibilities of mutual watchfulness incumbent upon those engaged in church covenant, but did not enjoy the privileges of voting or participation in the Lord’s Supper until they experienced conversion and became full members.<sup>13</sup>

Here already, within one small group of co-religionists, the seeds were being sown that would come to characterize divisions in later American Christianity. The distinctions between those who had been “born again,” and those who had not had this experience would come to demarcate those who had been “saved” against those who had not, in the collective mind of the Evangelical movement of the 1970s and 1980s. It is all too likely that those who were “born again” during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century would have been only too happy to have withheld the right to vote from those who had not, in keeping with this earlier precedent.

Another influence from the Puritan strain that will show up in later American theological struggles focuses on millennialism. Millennialism proposes that the second coming of the Messiah will usher in a thousand years – a millennium – of direct rule by

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<sup>13</sup> James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 90-91, accessed November 29, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195084040001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195084040001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

Jesus Christ. The interpretive struggle from scriptural verses related to the millennium<sup>14</sup> is whether that thousand-year reign requires that the world becomes as good as it can possibly get under the influence of the Church before Jesus comes (postmillennialism), or as bad as things can get under the depredations of the world (premillennialism).

The Puritans of New England were in the postmillennial camp, intending to shape their colonies into a God-centered community in every way. Bremer says, “Those who advocated the strict adoption of the Mosaic code in the colonies did so, in part at least, because they believed that in turning back to those ancient ways they would bring their society closer to the millennium.”<sup>15</sup> Ironically, but predictably, the Puritan insistence upon literacy and people reading the Bible for themselves led, not to uniform understandings of faith and life in community, but to great diversity of opinion on these subjects.

The most famous early case of this diversity was showcased in the trial and expulsion of Anne Hutchinson who, in 1637, accused the region’s preachers, excluding those related to her, of preaching a doctrine of salvation by works instead of the doctrine of Free Grace.<sup>16</sup> Hutchinson’s banishment followed John Winthrop’s efforts to limit

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<sup>14</sup> Most of the biblical verses related to the millennium are found in Revelation 20. A few other verses found in Isaiah and Jeremiah speak to days of liberation when God’s love shall reign without specifically referencing a period of time.

<sup>15</sup> Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70, accessed November 29, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71253466580001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71253466580001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

immigration to those of similar mindset to his community,<sup>17</sup> but these efforts to “purify” the Puritans could not bear the influx of more colonists, more people, and more ideas.

By 1640, Calvinists were able to exploit the “born again” ambiguities of the Congregationalists and establish a Baptist church in Boston. Quakers, who came to American shores in 1656, proved even more tenacious, returning after multiple banishments to continue their evangelism, even when doing so put them, briefly, under a death penalty.<sup>18</sup> “Intolerance of dissenting voices was characteristic of the age. ... Eventually, puritans in both Englands would lose the power to coerce those who disagreed with them.”<sup>19</sup>

Intolerance of dissenting voices has been characteristic of many ages in American religious history. But the new religious enthusiasm, and the diversity of religious expression in New England and throughout the colonies, could not sustain its role in the forefront of this new community. Accordingly, religious faith took a background role to the exigencies of commerce, governance, and daily life. That is, until Jonathon Edwards and George Whitefield exploded onto the national religious landscape.

### *Great Awakenings*

The first and subsequent Great Awakenings were phenomena combining religion and entertainment. The decline of Puritan power was certainly due in part to the influences of new ideas and the needs of daily life as stated above, but other factors were

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 91.

at work. As Brett Zimmerman describes, “A corresponding decline in church attendance occurred not only because of the nation's growing secularism but also because of the tedious nature of the traditional Puritan sermon.”<sup>20</sup> Bad preaching will drive people out the doors in any era. Zimmerman says that Calvinist predestination had snuffed out the appeal of living Godly lives and that people were becoming more compelled by the doctrine of Arminianism, which promised the possibility of earning one’s way into Heaven by virtue of good works.<sup>21</sup> Zimmerman goes on to say:

[D]octrinally, parishioners needed to be reminded that God alone, a terrifying, mysterious, angry deity, determined upon the saved and the damned and that people had no control over the matter--except through a genuine spiritual awakening through which they became convinced that the grace of God had touched them, was working in them as a sign that they might be among the Elect. People, in short, were no damned good and desperately needed to be reminded of that fact. They needed to be humbled; someone needed to scare the hell out of them. What was needed was a Great Awakening in religious piety and right-thinking.<sup>22</sup>

Jonathon Edwards was the first of the Awakeners in his era. Edwards brought the fire and brimstone, decrying wrong relationship with God,<sup>23</sup> but the majority of his other sermons speak to rapturous images of God’s mercy and tenderness. Zimmerman says,

People needed to be awakened from what Edwards called their old complacency. It is not enough simply to attend church every Sunday and call ourselves Christians; we must be born again in Christ, experience God's grace working through us--be truly converted. It is not enough for the preachers simply to give us moral instructions on how to be good Christians; the Great Awakening

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<sup>20</sup> Brett Zimmerman, “Edwards, Whitefield, Franklin and the Great Awakening,” *Humanist Perspectives*.182 (Autumn 2012): 31, accessed December 2, 2015, Academic OneFile.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” has been called “the most famous sermon ever preached on American soil.”

conversion experience was not intellectual or abstract, it was overwhelmingly emotional.<sup>24</sup>

That emotionalism caused concern and doubt among the clergy of the day. Wilson N. Brisset writes, “In the 1740s, the revivals of this Great Awakening split New England Clergy between those who supported the movement as a work of God and those who detested it as so much emotional claptrap.”<sup>25</sup> This “head/heart” split will also show up in contemporary religious context of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The Great Awakenings saw people come to worship Christ in vast numbers through attendance at camp and revival meetings. The question was whether these events made a difference in the lives of the communities they touched. Herbert Schlossberg writes, “Does a renewal of religious conviction make much difference in the quality of life in a given society? Some of the most disquieting trends in America have taken place just when religious life, by some measures, has flourished.”<sup>26</sup>

Schlossberg could certainly point to the existence of slavery during the time of the First Great Awakening where Edwards himself preached that “slavery was justified as long as slaves were treated kindly and evangelized.”<sup>27</sup> But Edwards was able to influence Samuel Hopkins of Rhode Island in his theological development and abolitionist

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> William N. Brisset, *Prophecies of Godlessness: Predictions of America's Imminent Secularization from the Puritans to the Present Day* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, “How Great Awakenings Happen” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life* 106, (Oct 2000): 46, accessed December 2, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_gale\\_ofa65859160&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_s\\_ummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_gale_ofa65859160&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_s_ummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>27</sup> Brisset, 30.

leadership.<sup>28</sup> The First Great Awakening is largely credited for engaging the emotional fervor that brought about the Revolutionary War<sup>29</sup> (another pattern of religious revival that will be repeated prior to World War I) but, despite causing lasting changes in preaching styles in the South, scholars point out that once the fervor had passed, church attendance once again slid back to prior levels.<sup>30</sup>

The Second Great Awakening (1790-1850) produced more outlets for women, Native Americans, and African Americans to lead and create their own religious experience. This included the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, and the beginnings of the Holiness Movement in 1837. Again, the appeal of camp meeting revivals mixed religious fervor with entertainment and the experience of belonging, but new theological strands countered Calvinist predestination.

Nathaniel Taylor, out of Yale Divinity School, developed the proposition that rather than depending solely on the Holy Spirit for conversion, people could choose to experience conversion through their own will.<sup>31</sup> Julius Rubin writes, “Taylor made each person responsible for his or her own conversion. Should the person fail in this effort, effectively failing to will for God, holiness, and benevolence, then the individual alone

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Hopkinsian Theology would go on to influence the Second Great Awakening with a teaching that expanded ideas of Atonement and Benevolence.

<sup>29</sup> Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction,” *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 2 (1982) [Oxford University Press, Organization of American Historians]: 305–25, 310, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/stable/1893821>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>31</sup> Julius H. Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132, accessed November 30, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195070980001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195070980001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

shouldered the responsibility to find grace.”<sup>32</sup> Rubin suggests that the weight of this responsibility rested far too heavily on some shoulders and contributed to several cases of suicide and mental breakdown.<sup>33</sup>

The temporary triumphs of the Great Awakenings supported the primacy of emotion over intellect, supported at least one (and arguably more) wars, and broadened the scope of religious expression for those who had previously been disenfranchised from it. Strands from these movements will continue to show up in our contemporary context, but the next great influence in the American religious movement would come from science and the Progressives.

### *The Social Gospel and Progressive Movements*

From the time of Galileo, scientific breakthroughs into understanding the ways the world worked created optimism for the advancement of humankind concurrent with an increasing lack of tolerance for the role of the Church as mediator of the Truth. Enlightenment principles, stemming from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that elevated the dignity of humankind sometimes did so at the expense of the mystery, not to mention the majesty of God. The Romantic Nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced the concept of utopianism, which further extended the optimism of the age promising that all of the advances of science, coupled with the increasing dignity of humankind, could create a form of Heaven on earth.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Publications, 2003), 2.

Clergy who embraced the science and the optimism of this new, modern era called themselves Progressives. Richard M. Gamble writes, “The self-described ‘Progressives’ among America’s Protestant clergy at the turn of the twentieth century were well known for their advanced thinking on theology, politics and foreign affairs.”<sup>35</sup> They saw a world in need of what they called at first “Applied Christianity,”<sup>36</sup> which became the Social Gospel. Gamble writes,

In the new Decalogue engraved by the finger of progressive idealism, abstract society had to conform to the concrete ethical standards once reserved for individual Christians. To be sure, the admonition to ‘Love thy neighbor’ was as old as the Law of Moses, but in the new social order, this commandment was to be applied to ‘sinful’ institutions as well; sin was identified as lying not so much in the human heart as in society as a whole...progressive Christianity aimed at nothing less than national and international righteousness.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike the Puritan efforts to escape what they experienced as the tyrant of a government in place, the Progressives believed they could reform the institutions of society *in situ*. Their optimism was such that they believed that all forms of progress were positive, a philosophy called “meliorism,” and that there was no end to humankind’s ability, with the help of Christ, to overcome societal ills.

The advent of Applied Christianity was in no small part influenced by Darwinian evolutionary theory. Some theologians, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, adopted both the positive notion of technological and scientific progress improving the state of humankind while, at the same time, embracing the horrors of eugenics and presumptive superiority of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51.

the Caucasian race.<sup>38</sup> This racism within the Christian traditions in the US continues to be a lasting stain, and strain, on our churches.

Progressive influence made powerful impacts on economics and government. As Thomas C. Leonard writes, the Progressive Era provided a means for people of good faith to put that faith into practice outside of professional ministry:

Many... failed to have the conversion experience so central to the evangelical Protestantism they were raised in, which led...to a characteristic period of self-doubt and wandering. These personal crises led many future Social Gospelers to devise new vocational roles, most characteristically social worker, muckraking journalist, and university-based social scientist, professions they helped devise.<sup>39</sup>

The Progressives worked inside and outside of churches to ban child labor, to pass food safety laws, and to help the indigent.<sup>40</sup> But they also veered significantly from the orthodoxy of personal salvation through Jesus in order to focus on societal sin of the day.<sup>41</sup> The metaphor chosen for this encounter was, all too commonly, war.<sup>42</sup> With clergy and other leaders leading a the battle cry against a large range of societal sins in their own communities, it was easy enough to shift that battle cry against Germany and old Europe in the run up to the Great War, i.e. World War I. Gamble writes, “In every respect, the

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas C. Leonard, “Religion and Evolution in Progressive Era Political Economy: Adversaries or Allies?” *History of Political Economy* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 441, accessed November 22, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_proquest897838447&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_proquest897838447&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>40</sup> Jane Addams’ work with Hull house is a famous example of these efforts.

<sup>41</sup> Gamble, 60.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

Great War was waged as a ‘war for righteousness,’ a war transcendentalized (sic) out of all normal mental categories.”<sup>43</sup>

Betraying their post-millennial enthusiasm, Progressive clergy trumpeted the need to go to war in Europe to bring about a triumph of Christian society even while deploring the bloodshed that would occur. Gamble writes, “Knowing that God has a purpose in calamity is very different from knowing what that purpose is. The progressive clergy claimed to be able to read and reveal what God was doing and why he (sic) was doing it.”<sup>44</sup> This hubris would drive Progressive leadership to seek a church-state partnership with Woodrow Wilson in support of the United States’ direct involvement in the Great War.<sup>45</sup>

The realities of that bloody conflict, finally ended in 1919, dealt a body blow to Progressive optimism that now opened itself up to some forms of internal critique.<sup>46</sup> But greater backlash was to come. Martin Marty writes,

More than any other single event, World War I turned the Protestant intramural split into a chasm. Wartime fears nurtured by the Wilson administration made tolerance a rarity... For theologically conservative Protestants, the war had special significance. Most obviously, it made a mockery of facile liberal optimism.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>47</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 19, accessed December 2, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195236030001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_su\\_mmit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195236030001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_su_mmit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

Progressive embrace of all things modern, including social-historical criticism of the Bible, had contributed greatly to the rift cited above. The Fundamentalist movement, which has its roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, attempted to codify the beliefs necessary to legitimately call oneself “Christian,” primarily by insisting on anti-modernist interpretations including belief in the Virgin Birth, biblical inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, bodily Resurrection, and authenticity of miracles.<sup>48</sup>

Fundamentalism in its heyday was never monolithic, nor did those who declared themselves Conservative embrace all that the Fundamentalists described. Nevertheless, the Scopes trial of 1925 would harden the lines between liberal and conservative, urban and rural, head and heart, faith and science in profound ways that are still with us today.<sup>49</sup>

### **Setting the Stage for Contemporary Context**

The Great Depression would put religious thought on the back burner for many people, as survival became a paramount concern. World War II would reinforce the depths of humankind’s willingness to destroy itself and bring about the all-but death of Christendom in Europe. While church attendance in the US reached its highest point ever in the 1950s, the 1970s saw membership in mainline Protestant churches begin to embrace the same well-earned distrust that plagued the US government and other institutions. Mainline Protestantism had become institutionally-focused, unwilling to

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<sup>48</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117, accessed December 2, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71189005520001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71189005520001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

follow, much less lead, social changes, while many Christian Conservative Churches (CCCs) – a term which includes Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Pentecostal and other non-Mainline affiliated churches – gained huge followings in the 1980s and 1990s through stressing individual salvation and, in many cases, the Prosperity Gospel.<sup>50</sup> The decades of the 1990s and early 2000s would bring polarizing splits between theological liberals and conservatives that would wrack the church and bring about decline in almost all expressions of Christianity today.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Rear View*

We began this splash and dash survey of North American Progressive and Conservative religious history “at sea” on the shores of Plymouth Rock, and we will end it just offshore of the sea change that took place in American politics and theology, marked by the rise of the Religious Right. That fundamental shift and its reaction, sets the stage for the theological framework for Progressive/Emergent Christians that will be proposed in later chapters. This survey, however, has illustrated several common themes in American Protestant religious history that remain with us today.

First, historical religious expression in America seems to be based on a volatile mix of optimism and discord. Unhappy with the present structures or themes in one

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<sup>50</sup> Pentecostalism is the fastest growing form of Christianity in the world today. See Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostalism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 97, accessed December 2, 2015, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP99136024901869&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP99136024901869&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>51</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, accessed December 2, 2015, [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/?utm\\_expnid=53098246-2.Lly4CFSVQG2lphsg-KopIg.0&utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/?utm_expnid=53098246-2.Lly4CFSVQG2lphsg-KopIg.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com).

setting, groups or individuals simply break off and create or join another church, or stop attending church altogether, without much ill effect and often with much enthusiasm.

Second, periods of religious revival in the US ignited fires in the heart that did lead to significant social change, i.e. expanded roles for women and people of color in the Second Great Awakening, and Progressive Era reforms, but often also to war, specifically the Revolutionary War and World War I.

Third, whether the movements were pre-millennial or post-millennial, the idea of Jesus' Second Coming has played a profound role in shaping religious momentum. With statistics pointing to our nation becoming less Christian and less traditionally religious overall, it will be interesting to see how people's waning sense of a need to be accountable to God, to face a Judgment Day, will impact our future. Similarly, if people no longer feel the need for salvation, by grace or by works, much of the current theological framework for what motivates good and righteous behavior will also come into question. With these conditions in mind, we enter the contemporary context of the American Christian religious divide.

### *The Contemporary Horizon*

The first part of this section described an historical overview of various splits between Progressive/Liberal/Mainline and Conservative/Fundamentalist, White Protestant churches in America since the founding of the United States and up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This section continues that history and delves into the political and sociological ramifications of those divides.

A word of disclaimer: attempts to categorize churches or individuals as Progressive or Conservative, Mainline or Evangelical are always fraught with

inaccuracies and exceptions.<sup>52</sup> Efforts to frame the divides along neat lines can oversimplify positions and unintentionally limit points of view. Nevertheless, this paper will attempt to provide historical perspective on a few of the major wedges within these divides in an effort to understand their sources and estimate their impacts.

### *Godless Communism and the Romance of the Right*

The seeds for the contemporary fractures within White American Protestant Christianity in the present day were sown in during the advent of the Cold War of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Fearing the rise of communism, Evangelist Billy Graham married American patriotism with Christian faith through the influence of his revivals which, beginning in 1949, hosted millions of attendees.<sup>53</sup> Although Graham's revivals were nondenominational, and his politics non-sectarian, Graham's personal friendship with

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<sup>52</sup> The distinctions between Evangelical and Mainline Christians are described by Matthew Wilson as follows:

“Evangelical Protestants emphasize that the Bible is the Word of God, whereas mainline Protestants have been more willing to hold that the Bible either contains the Word of God or becomes the Word of God to the believer. Second, evangelical Protestants tend to be exclusivist theologically, whereas mainline Protestants tend to be more universalistic in their religious perspective, noting that there may be “many roads unto salvation.” Third, evangelicals tend to emphasize religious conversion, a “born again” experience, as necessary for salvation; mainline Protestants are less likely to view conversion as specific in time and place, typically describing personal belief in terms of being nurtured in the faith, religious commitment, or simply church membership. Fourth, evangelical Protestants are more oriented toward sharing their faith than mainline Protestants, whereas the latter are more likely to espouse the “Social Gospel” of reform.”

Matthew J Wilson, *Religion and Politics Series: From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 33, accessed December 8, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71189096080001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71189096080001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>53</sup> “God in America Part 5: The Soul of a Nation,” *PBS Frontline*, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, aired 2010, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/view/>.

Richard Nixon, especially during the 1960 presidential campaign, tied early knots in the fortunes between Evangelical White Christians and Republican politics.<sup>54</sup>

Prior to the turmoil of the 1960s, Mainline churches stood as Republican strongholds, but internal and external struggles shifted that base.<sup>55</sup> Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks write:

Long associated with the political and economic status quo, mainline denominations were deeply influenced, as well as thrown into turmoil, by the great moral crusades of the period: the civil rights movement and the demand for racial justice, protests against the war in Vietnam, and the women's movement. A growing split between liberal Protestant clergy who supported civil rights and other sixties movements and a more conservative laity appeared to generate intra-denominational (and/or intrachurch) tensions.<sup>56</sup>

Those tensions and other forces manifested in significant declines in attendance, and resulting political influence in the Mainline churches, which continue to this day.<sup>57</sup>

Concerns over race and poverty fractured families, legislatures, churches, and the nation as a whole, but also formed new associations. Penni M. Pier writes:

Coalitions between religious groups began to form in the 1960s to push reforms such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Throughout this era of legislative reform, religious justification was used to address issues of racism, poverty, labor laws, and, toward the latter half of the decade, the Vietnam War. It was during this time that mainstream media began

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jeff Manza and Clem Brook, "The Changing Political Fortunes of Mainline Protestants," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 161, accessed December 5, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71103093190001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71103093190001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>57</sup> Tobin J. Grant, "Measuring Aggregate Religiosity in the United States," *Sociological Spectrum* —*Mid-South Sociological Association* 28, no. 5 (July 30, 2008): 460-476, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02732170802205973>.

making links between mainline religious groups and the advocating of specific public policy.<sup>58</sup>

Andrew Bacevich writes that, toward the end of the Vietnam War, the US presidential administration could not count on Catholic or Mainline church support but, “Evangelical denominations were the exception to the rule. To the very end an overwhelming majority remained steadfast in their support of the war and of those who waged it.”<sup>59</sup>

For the country as a whole, the Vietnam War would throw all of playing cards of institutional stability up in the air. Bacevich says:

It was a foreign policy crisis but also a domestic crisis. It was a cultural crisis but also a moral one. It touched on matters that were immediate and personal—family and the relationship of men to women, for example—while also raising profound questions about national purpose and collective identity. No group in American society felt more keenly the comprehensive nature of this crisis than did Protestant evangelicals. It was here, among committed Christians dismayed by the direction that the country appeared to be taking, that the reaction to Vietnam as a foreign policy failure and to Vietnam as a manifestation of cultural upheaval converged with greatest effect.<sup>60</sup>

Pier writes that the success of religious political organization came under duress of shifting cultural tides in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with that rift significantly emerging during the 1972 Democratic National Convention. She continues:

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<sup>58</sup> Penni M. Pier “Deities, Divisions and Democrats: The Political Left and Religion,” in *What Democrats Talk about When They Talk about God: Religious Communication in Democratic Party Politics*, ed. David Weiss (Blue Ridge Summit, KY: Lexington Books, 2010), 31, accessed November 26, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71135927170001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71135927170001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US)

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 125, accessed December 3, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71209736330001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71209736330001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Such a fundamental division threatened the unity of the Party by giving rise to the antifundamentalist voter and the inevitable clash with the evangelical voting bloc that ensued. It could be argued that this schism in the Democratic Party allowed Republicans to build more effective evangelical coalitions within their own party as well as to appeal to disenfranchised Democratic evangelicals.<sup>61</sup>

A later portion of this paper will track the origins adopting abortion as a “wedge issue”<sup>62</sup> that took place during this time frame, but to continue with the presidential political theme, 1976 was a turning point for Conservative Christian engagement with politics. In a biography of Jimmy Carter, Randall Balmer writes:

In October 1976, just prior to Jimmy Carter’s election as president, Newsweek had christened 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical.” Carter’s candidacy had introduced many Americans to the term “evangelical,” and his articulation of the themes of progressive evangelicalism—care for the poor, concern for human rights, and an aversion to military conflict—brought many evangelicals into the arena of politics, some of them for the first time.<sup>63</sup>

Evangelical enchantment with President Carter did not last long. In a separate article describing the roots of the Religious Right, Balmer says that Evangelicals unfairly blamed Carter for targeting the tax-exempt status of Christian schools based on racial segregation.<sup>64</sup> Criticism against Carter also came from evangelical progressives on the left. Balmer writes,

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<sup>61</sup> Pier, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Fredel M. Wiant, “Exploiting factional discourse: Wedge issues in contemporary American political campaigns,” *The Southern Communication Journal* 67.3 (Spring 2002): 276-289, accessed December 14, 2016, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/226932996?accountid=11085>.

<sup>63</sup> Randall Balmer, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (Boulder, CO: Basic Books, 2014), 137, accessed December 2, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71209736330001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_su\\_mmit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71209736330001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_su_mmit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>64</sup> Randall Balmer, “The Real Origins of The Religious Right: They’ll Tell You It Was Abortion. Sorry, The Historical Record Is Clear: It Was Segregation,” *Politico*, May 27, 2014, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133>.

Progressive evangelicals tacked on other complaints during the course of Carter's presidency. He was timid about addressing the economic roots of racial inequality and inconsistent in his demands for human rights. Carter, they believed, was too cozy with business and corporate interests. He did not press hard enough for education funding or lobby sufficiently for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>65</sup>

Disappointment in Carter on both sides of the Evangelical spectrum did not hamper Evangelical engagement in electoral politics at all, and may have contributed to further galvanize momentum. By the 1980 election, Carter and Ronald Reagan both ran as evangelical Christians. On August 21<sup>st</sup> of 1980, Reagan made a speech at an event organized for televangelists with an estimated combined audience of 50-60 million potential voters.<sup>66</sup> As a bipartisan gathering, no endorsements for political candidates were expected. Nevertheless, Reagan was able to capture the moment saying, "You can't endorse me, but I endorse you."<sup>67</sup> Ed Dobson, an aide to Jerry Falwell said of that meeting, "I don't think people understand that the average fundamentalist felt alienated from the mainstream of American culture. That was a significant moment, because the candidate came to us; we didn't go to the candidate."<sup>68</sup>

That sense of outsider becoming insider was parlayed into significant gains in the political arena, which included electing a Republican Congress and Ronald Reagan in 1980. But electoral wins did not necessarily bring about desired policy goals. Neil J. Young writes:

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<sup>65</sup> Balmer, *Redeemer*, 139.

<sup>66</sup> William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 215.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

The joy of Reagan's win, though, soon gave way to the disappointments of politics. Reagan had courted religious conservatives by promising action on their cherished causes: overturning *Roe v. Wade*, restoring school prayer, and fighting against gay rights and other perceived threats to the traditional family. But once in office, Reagan mostly ignored those issues. His nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor, a moderate pro-choice jurist, to the Supreme Court outraged his evangelical supporters.<sup>69</sup>

Much of the same disappointment would follow during the Bush administration after the Conservative Evangelical voting block once again swept Republicans into power.<sup>70</sup> While *Roe* was not overturned during the Bush administration, or the Obama administration that followed, Evangelically identified Republican state legislatures have increasingly placed restrictions on and limitation to abortion rights.<sup>71</sup>

### *The 1970s and the Rise of Wedge Issues*

The historical review above briefly touched on abortion and gay rights, the two hot-button issues that have defined public political and religious debate for the last forty years in America. Two Supreme Court cases bookend this time frame: *Roe v. Wade* in 1973<sup>72</sup> (legalizing abortion), and *Obergefell v. Hodges*<sup>73</sup> (legalizing same sex marriage)

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<sup>69</sup> Neil J. Young, "The Religious Right's Power Grab: How Outside Activists Became Inside Operatives," *Religion and Politics*, October 31, 2016, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2016/10/31/the-religious-rights-power-grab-how-outside-activists-became-inside-operatives/>.

<sup>70</sup> To Carnes, "Disappointed but holding: while overall support for George W. Bush has plummeted evangelicals remain surprisingly loyal," *Christianity Today*, February 2006, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/february/22.78.html>.

<sup>71</sup> S. M., "The Economist explains: How America's abortion laws have changed," (March 1, 2016), accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/03/economist-explains-0>.

<sup>72</sup> *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

<sup>73</sup> *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. \_\_\_\_ (2015).

in 2015. Religious arguments were made in public and in court on both sides of each case, with different lessons learned from each side that continue to be applied.

### *Abortion*

Religious grounds for the abortion debate vary.<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, abortion is a religious issue and an ethical issue, a medical issue and a science issue, a policy issue and a political issue, a privacy issue and a public issue, and perhaps more as well. For the purposes of this discussion, however, history shows that, as a whole, early Protestant Christian response to *Roe* was mild. Randall Balmer writes:

In 1968, for instance, a symposium sponsored by the Christian Medical Society and *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of evangelicalism, refused to characterize abortion as sinful, citing “individual health, family welfare, and social responsibility” as justifications for ending a pregnancy. In 1971, delegates to the Southern Baptist Convention in St. Louis, Missouri, passed a resolution encouraging “Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.” The convention, hardly a redoubt of liberal values, reaffirmed that position in 1974, one year after *Roe*, and again in 1976.<sup>75</sup>

Abortion would become a major issue for Evangelicals, but only after it had been used successfully to lure Catholics away from voting for nominees in the Democratic Party. Writing for the *Yale Law Journal*, Linda Greenhouse and Riva Siegel describe the strategy as it was piloted in California during the Nixon campaign in 1972. “As the campaign progressed, Republican strategists increasingly deployed abortion as a symbol

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<sup>74</sup> Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life, “Religious Groups Official Positions on Abortion,” January 16, 2013, accessed December 8, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/01/16/religious-groups-official-positions-on-abortion/>.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Balmer, “Real Origins of the Religious Right,” 1.

of cultural trends of concern to social conservatives distressed about loss of respect for tradition.”<sup>76</sup> Greenhouse and Siegel note that Beverley LaHaye<sup>77</sup> was able to pick up on themes articulated by Phyllis Schlafly’s campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s to organize Evangelical women against abortion in 1979.<sup>78</sup> They write, “In the late 1970s, conservative evangelical Protestant engagement with anti-abortion politics grew within the evangelical movement as part of a more broad-based attack on cultural developments evangelical critics termed ‘secular humanism.’”<sup>79</sup>

Secular humanism would become a favorite epithet of the Right. William Martin writes, “...secular humanism came to be regarded not simply as an increasingly widespread way of looking at the world, but as a coherent movement diabolically bent on luring their children into every sort of immorality and unbelief in the course of undermining America’s moral and spiritual foundations.”<sup>80</sup> The “secular humanism” banner was raised to cover a multitude of concerns including abortion, feminism, evolution, and gay rights.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Linda Greenhouse and Reva B. Siegel, “Before (and After) Roe v. Wade: New Questions About Backlash” *Yale Law Journal* 120 (2011): 2056, accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.yalelawjournal.org/feature/before-and-after-roe-v-wade-new-questions-about-backlash>.

<sup>77</sup> Beverley LaHaye is the wife of Timothy LaHaye, the author of the premillennial dispensationalist “Left Behind” book series.

<sup>78</sup> Greenhouse and Siegel, 2061.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2065.

<sup>80</sup> Martin, 196.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Gay Rights*

Arguments linking gay rights with abortion are not just matters of chronological convenience, although their arrival on the cultural scene was relatively concurrent. The Stonewall Riots of 1969, when LGBT people had their first major public protest against laws limiting their self-expression and humanity,<sup>82</sup> predated *Roe* by just three years and were quickly swept into larger socio-political frameworks including women's liberation, feminism, the civil rights struggle, and the 'sexual revolution' that challenged the social mores of prior decades.

While abortion and gay rights were often linked, religious arguments for and against each subject were not the same. Those arguing the abortion debate and application of the commandment "thou shalt not kill" to embryonic and fetal development could shift quickly from religious to scientific grounds. But the LGBTQ community could not be spared the "clobber verses" used for easy biblical condemnation.<sup>83</sup>

That condemnation was personified in Anita Bryant, who used her celebrity in 1977 to attract attention to repeal anti-discrimination ordinances that had been passed by

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<sup>82</sup> Walter Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story: The Long Search for Equal Justice in a Divided Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 33, accessed December 10, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71226370200001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71226370200001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>83</sup> Fred Clark, "But What About All Those Anti-Gay Clobber Verses?" *Patheos*, September 11, 2012, accessed December 8, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2012/09/11/but-what-about-all-those-anti-gay-clobber-verses/#>.

some communities in her native Florida.<sup>84</sup> Bryant's activism inspired John Briggs of California to develop legislation in 1978 that would have banned LGBTQ people from working in public schools. The Briggs Initiative failed, but that initiative and other efforts to discriminate against LGBTQ people galvanized movements over the next 40 years. After years of struggle and prayer on many fronts, the Supreme Court in 2015 ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, that the right for same sex couples to marry, and to receive all the rights and privileges of marriage, is guaranteed under the Equal Protection clause and the Due Process clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment.<sup>85</sup>

### *Voices of the Religious Left*

Conservative Evangelical Christian voices were successful in their communications and political strategies, in part because of their large network of churches, universities, and broadcast and print media infrastructure that was poised and ready to become engaged.<sup>86</sup> The Religious Right was so well financed and well organized that for many years, the very idea of a Religious Left seemed like an oxymoron to the public at large.<sup>87</sup> But voices of the Progressive/Liberal Mainline (PLM) church have

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<sup>84</sup> Tina Fetner, *Social Movements, Protest and Contention: How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 50, accessed December 4, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_ebrary\\_pqebary10274273&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_ebrary_pqebary10274273&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>85</sup> Lyle Denniston, "Opinion Analysis: Marriage Now Open to Same Sex Couples," *SCOTUSblog—Supreme Court of the United States blog*, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.scotusblog.com/2015/06/opinion-analysis-marriage-now-open-to-same-sex-couples/>.

<sup>86</sup> Fetner, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Michelle Tang, "The Christian Left—Possibly the Most Interesting Group You've Never Heard Of," *Huffington Post*, updated October 13, 2016, accessed December 8, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-tang/the-christian-leftpossibl\\_b\\_8270596.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-tang/the-christian-leftpossibl_b_8270596.html).

always been present, and the voices of Progressive Evangelicals have begun to rise more prominently.<sup>88</sup>

On the Mainline Left, the United Church of Christ was the first of the Mainlines to ordain an openly gay man, William Johnson, in 1972. This denomination was also the first to ordain a person of color in 1785 and the first to ordain a woman as a pastor in 1853.<sup>89</sup> The UCC formally approved pro-choice statements beginning in 1971, and has maintained advocacy for women, LGBTQ, and other minorities since that time.<sup>90</sup> But the UCC is the smallest of the Liberal/Mainline churches and lacks the infrastructure to get their message out. Other Mainline church positions on abortion and gay rights vary significantly.<sup>91</sup> As long as the Religious Left, and Center, do not have a single, clear message to send, their voices in the public square remain largely unheard.

### *Church and State*

While the separation of church and state stands as one of our country's foundational principles, our European, largely Protestant, and all White founders never

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<sup>88</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005). *God's Politics* was a breakthrough voice for liberal/progressive Christians.

<sup>89</sup> United Church of Christ, "UCC Firsts," accessed December 9, 2016, [http://www.ucc.org/about-us\\_ucc-firsts](http://www.ucc.org/about-us_ucc-firsts).

<sup>90</sup> United Church of Christ, "General Synod Statements and Resolutions Regarding Freedom of Choice," accessed December 11, 2016, [http://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy\\_url/2038/GS-Resolutions-Freedom-of-Choice.pdf?1418425637](http://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/2038/GS-Resolutions-Freedom-of-Choice.pdf?1418425637).

<sup>91</sup> Hannah Fingerhut, "Support Steady for Same-sex Marriage and Acceptance of Homosexuality," *Fact Tank - Our Lives in Numbers*, May 12, 2016, accessed December 8, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/12/support-steady-for-same-sex-marriage-and-acceptance-of-homosexuality/>. Also see Pew Research cited in footnote 22.

doubted that these institutions would still significantly influence each other. Martha Nussbaum and Saul Olyan write:

Among the early (Protestant) reformers, it is safe to say that there is only consensus in the notion that the state's function is soteriologically inferior and incomplete. The state is the institutional embodiment of "law" in human communities and its function is to manage some of the symptoms of fallenness. The church is the institutional embodiment of "gospel;" its presence in the world reflects God's forgiveness for, and anticipates God's final healing of, fallenness. They represent different movements in God's own reconciliation with fallen humans. The state performs its role through the threat, and sometimes the application, of violent coercion with the aim of preventing harm to the order of creation and humans in their individual and common lives, and by enjoining covenanted relations. But this conception can be turned into meaningful normative prescriptions for political life only if there is consensus about the symptoms of fallenness and an appreciation of the inevitable limits of politics as a remedy for fallenness.<sup>92</sup>

To the dismay of some and the delight of others, as time passes, definitions of "fallenness" change. The courts, the church, and the culture all wrestle with each other to determine what is right and wrong. The more organized, coherent, and resourced voices in that struggle tend to win political victories which rely on majority public opinion, with courts acting to ensure that opinion does not infringe on basic constitutional protections. Faithful reading of the gospel calls Christians on all sides of the political spectrum to challenge the opinions of the majority and those of the courts. We fail the higher calling of the gospel when we fail to challenge each other and listen to each other's stories in a spirit of love.

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<sup>92</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum and Saul M. Olyan, *Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in American Religious Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114, accessed December 9, 2016, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195084430001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71195084430001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

At present, abortion rights continue to face legislative restrictions.<sup>93</sup> Recent data demonstrates that access to birth control and sexual education appears to provide more effective strategies to reduce the number of abortions than legislation.<sup>94</sup> Abortion access has gradually become more restricted over the decades since *Roe*. Gay rights have achieved legal protections unimagined since Stonewall, but at the time of this writing, just 14 months after the *Obergefell* decision, over 150 pieces of legislation are pending in state legislatures aiming to reduce or restrict legal protections for the LGBT community.<sup>95</sup>

While abortion and gay rights still consume a great deal of political capital, a new wave of Progressive Evangelicals are turning their attention to other significant issues including climate change, the environment, poverty, racism, *and* the inclusion of LGBTQ people.<sup>96</sup> While many in the Mainline churches continue to be consumed with the concerns of their own decline, there are more efforts to create coalitions among like-minded Christians along these lines.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Camila Domonoske, “Ohio Legislature Moves to Ban Abortion as Early as Six Weeks After Conception,” *The Two Way*, December 7, 2016, National Public Radio, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/12/07/504663799/ohio-legislature-moves-to-ban-abortion-as-early-as-6-weeks-after-conception>.

<sup>94</sup> Katherine Harmon, “Free Birth Control Can Reduce Abortion Rate by More Than Half,” *Scientific American*, October 4, 2012, accessed December 12, 2012, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/free-birth-control-access-can-reduce-abortion-rate-by-more-than-half/>.

<sup>95</sup> Jeremy W. Peters and Lizette Alvarez, “A Death Toll Fails to Narrow a Chasm on Gay Rights,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://go.galegroup.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=newb64238&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA455256671&asid=05b9c96a32f8da716a08c59566feda08>.

<sup>96</sup> See [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net) for examples.

<sup>97</sup> See events like “OPEN Faith 2016” conference, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.theopennetworkus.org/events-1/>.

## Conclusion

People of faith will always seek to shape the environment around them as an expression of that faith. When they seek to do so within the legislative or electoral process, they may find victory at the polls,<sup>98</sup> but they risk becoming captive to political systems and candidates that may lead them to lament those choices.<sup>99</sup> The religious/political landscape of the last forty years has been marred not so much by the topics under consideration, but by the bitterness and condemnatory tone of those debates. If Christians are supposed to be known by our love,<sup>100</sup> we will need to find ways to actually love each other and listen to each other even when we disagree.

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<sup>98</sup> Ed Cyzewski, “American Evangelical Self-Preservation and the Destructive Policies of Donald Trump,” *Christianity Today*, November 28, 2016, accessed December 4, 2016, [http://www.christiantoday.com/article/american.evangelical.self.preservation.and.the.destructive.policies.of.donald.trump/102096.htm\\_](http://www.christiantoday.com/article/american.evangelical.self.preservation.and.the.destructive.policies.of.donald.trump/102096.htm_)

<sup>99</sup> Will Samson, “The New Monasticism,” in *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, eds. Brian Streesland and Philip Goff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 96.

<sup>100</sup> Jn 13:35.

## **SECTION 2:**

### **OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

The yearning for unity within the body of Christ is as old as Christianity itself. Paul pleads for unity at several points in his letters, warning young church-starts in every community about the perils of false teaching and inner discord.<sup>101</sup> In the Gospel of John, Jesus prays for unity in the last hours of his life.<sup>102</sup> Unity presumes to offer alignment, purpose, harmony, and accord for those who claim common allegiance to a person, state, or proposition, but when unity demands uniformity, churches tend to balk. Each congregation lives and dies within a community milieu, and church contexts vary even within the same zip code. Cries for unity may sound reasonable, but those efforts can also disguise tyranny, quashing the needs and contributions of those not part of particular power structures.

Christian unity might be a bridge too far, but this section does explore different approaches to spanning the widening and hardening chasm between Progressive and Conservative Christians. It explores the following means of uniting churches: anti-denominationalist (or doctrinal approaches), ecumenism (or institutional efforts at alignment), connectionalism (covenantal partnerships between churches), and more broadly, the practice of civility.

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<sup>101</sup> Eph 4:1-3-6; 1 Cor 16:12; 1 Cor 12 (NRSV).

<sup>102</sup> Jn 11:17, 21.

### **Denominationalism—For and Against**

Russell Richey describes denominationalism as follows,

Denominationalism presents the denomination as a voluntaristic ecclesial body. The denomination is voluntary and therefore presupposes a condition of legal or de facto toleration and religious freedom, an environment within which it is possible, in fact, willingly to join or not join, and space to exist (alongside or outside a religious establishment if such persists). Typically, the denomination exists in a situation of religious pluralism, a pluralism of denominations.<sup>103</sup>

Richey’s description highlights the notion of religious freedom and tolerance, emphasizing that a person might voluntarily choose to affiliate or disaffiliate with a variety of churches and/or larger church structures. Richey says that denominations developed as “a social form emerging with and closely akin to the political party, the free press, and free enterprise. With these other institutions, the denominations and related expressions of voluntary religion produced and have sustained the democratic state.”<sup>104</sup>

This sociological approach to denominationalism roughly corresponds to the idea that different denominations offer a “31 Flavors” variety of Christianity, with each church appealing to a different set of theological taste buds. Some church bodies, however, condemn, in the strongest terms, the idea that diversity of faith in practice or doctrine is tolerable within the Body of Christ. One tract from the Church of Christ decries denominationalism as gravest sin, calling for strict scriptural adherence in all structure, form, and practice, and calls on every practicing Christian to follow a singular

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<sup>103</sup> Russell E. Richey, *Denominationalism: Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), i, accessed June 24, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_gale\\_ofa378369334&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_gale_ofa378369334&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

interpretation of biblical authority to achieve the aim of unity. Following a path of “Four Simple Steps to Attain Unity,” the tract abjures Christians as follows:

Step II: Repudiate All Human Doctrines and Practices

(Read Matthew 15.7-9; Ephesians 5.11-13; Colossians 2.6-8; 1 Peter 4.11.)

To do this we should be able to give a “thus sayeth the Lord” (i.e. book, chapter and verse) for all we teach and practice in religion; and be willing to teach and practice everything for which there is a “thus saith the Lord.” This will do away with such things as popery, infant sprinkling (baby baptism), holy water, transubstantiation, clergy-laity system, women preachers, instrumental music in Christian worship, and such like which is taught and practiced among religious people today without Bible authority.<sup>105</sup>

The author of this tract does not seem to recognize that all of the practices decried in the statement above do have scriptural antecedents or some basis of “Bible authority” according to the traditions that incorporate them. Scripture does not provide a uniform approach to doctrine or practice and in fact records a broad diversity of both.<sup>106</sup> Many of these practices are deeply cherished by their adherents, and the idea of sacrificing them for the sake of unity is unpalatable at best. Ultimately, unity within the Body of Christ cannot depend on uniformity among populations of a size, and is not a useful objective on its own merits.

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<sup>105</sup> Churches of Christ, “Christian Unity: A Practical Plan for Peace in our Divided World,” accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.churches-of-christ.net/tracts/job118u.htm>.

<sup>106</sup> For an example, see T.M. Drange, “Biblical Contradictions Regarding Salvation,” *Free Inquiry*, 14, 56, accessed June 24, 2017, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/230089669?accountid=11085>.

## Ecumenism

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson begins her article titled, “Lament For A Divided Church: Why The Ecumenical Movement Keeps Working To Overcome Fraying In The Body Of Christ,” by saying, “I used to think of it (ecumenism) as either a boring academic exercise in doctrinal compromise, or a winner-takes-all struggle to forge one monolithic superchurch.”<sup>107</sup> These are the two great criticisms of ecumenism by most churches and individuals not engaged in ecumenical discourse. In her article, Wilson outlines some of the history of division and unity within the Church. Citing Cyprian she says,

By definition the church is one, indivisible; so if there appear to be “divisions,” the reality is simply the true church versus a wicked pretender. And outside the church, there is no salvation. But this approach works only if the isolation is strictly maintained. What happens if Christians in one “church” encounter those of another “church” and are startled to find genuine faith, piety, and good works?<sup>108</sup>

Wilson goes on to say that efforts to define the doctrines or practices of a *one* church as *the* church may deny the calling and vitality of the Holy Spirit moving within a particular context, but defining “church” as one living an authentic Christian life denies the validity of structure and disregards those voices that condemn, sometimes violently, the practices of others.<sup>109</sup> Wilson points out, “It was the experience of competing on the mission field that exposed the hypocrisy (dare we say heresy?) of competing factions, all

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<sup>107</sup> Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “Lament for a Divided Church: Why the Ecumenical Movement Keeps Working to Overcome Fraying in the Body of Christ,” March 17, 2014, *Christianity Today*, 36, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/march/lament-for-divided-church.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Wilson cites the Europeans religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century as examples of this violence, but could also include the civil war in Ireland, and, to some extent, the clashes between professed people of Christian faith in the U.S. in conflicts over abortion and civil rights.

claiming to be the supreme bearers of the truth and love of Christ. Potential converts were not impressed, and the missionaries knew it.”<sup>110</sup>

The Edinburgh Missionary Council of 1910<sup>111</sup> was born out of the concern that in order to have a credible missionary appeal, Christians would need to be known by their love for each other, and they should also at least be talking to each other. Ecumenical efforts have been successful during the last century at fostering dialogue and confronting global concerns.<sup>112</sup> But steering large institutional ships with their own political and cultural freight through the sometimes stormy or bogged down waters of history can be wearing.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, who served as president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity 2001-2010, wrote, “[A]fter the first rather euphoric phase of the ecumenical movement which followed the Second Vatican Council, the last decade has seen us experiencing signs of tiredness, disillusionment and stagnation. Some speak even of a crisis, and many Christians no longer understand the differences on which the Churches are arguing with each other.”<sup>113</sup> In his writing, Kasper focuses attention on the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> World Council of Churches, “History—World Council of Churches,” accessed June 24, 2017, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/cwme/history>.

<sup>112</sup> World Council of Churches, “What We Do,” World Council of Churches, accessed June 24, 2017, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do>. The World Council of Churches continues to unite church efforts to confront issues including climate change, women’s education and advancement, AIDS education and prevention, and a host of other concerns.

<sup>113</sup> Walter Kasper, “Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology,” Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, February 27, 2003, accessed June 24, 2017, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20030227\\_ecumenical-theology\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20030227_ecumenical-theology_en.html).

distinctions that keep various denominations from sitting together at the Lord's table, a major area of theological fracture in Christ's call to love each other.

Kasper's sense of "tiredness" most likely stems from an essential sense of brokenness and betrayal as institutional jealousies flare up over questions of ultimate authority to determine the one "true" faith. Churches that proclaim their doctrine as "true," fundamentally imply that other variations of doctrine are "false." The true/false paradigm places apologists on the defensive and ignores the potential of other findings outside of that context. The theme of going beyond right and wrong will be developed further in future sections of this paper, but for now, note that the institutional nature of the ecumenical approach carries the seeds for its own success in facing external challenges – such as disease and climate change – and the seeds of its own paralysis in confronting areas of internal discord.

### **Connectionalism: United and Uniting Churches**

To some extent, denominations act as institutional resources, providing instruction, communication, licensing of ordained ministers, legal services, human resource management, data management, etcetera: all the tasks of centralized organization. The cost to maintain these services alone can drive denominations to look at mergers as a way to cut costs and share resources to more effectively participate in the Gospel mission. But beyond the potential of sharing efficiencies, the larger Gospel imperative "that they may all be one" has driven many churches around the world to

become what the World Council of Churches (WCC) calls “united and uniting churches.”<sup>114</sup>

The WCC describes united churches as follows, “They have adopted a ‘kenotic ecclesiology’ whereby divided churches from different confessions are prepared to ‘die’ to their former identities in order to ‘rise’ together into a new, united church.”<sup>115</sup> The WCC counts forty such churches worldwide with another 15 churches in process. These processes may look very different from each other, with some groups maintaining elements of separate organizational structures. The United Church of Christ, for example, has entered four “full communion partnerships” which “recognize each other’s sacraments and allow for orderly transition of ministers from one denomination to another” maintaining full ordination standing in process.<sup>116</sup>

The decision to let old institutional bodies die away in order to let new ones rise displays a tremendous amount of courage and effort on behalf of those bodies, and their successes are often tinged with a sense of loss.<sup>117</sup> Other research indicates that efforts to centralize or merge churches or church functions can have the opposite effect and lead to outright schism.

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<sup>114</sup> World Council of Churches, “United and Uniting Churches,” accessed June 25, 2017, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/church-families/united-and-uniting-churches>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> United Church of Christ, “Ecumenical Partnerships and Relationships of Full Communion,” accessed June 25, 2017, [http://www.ucc.org/ecumenical\\_ecumenical-partnerships-and](http://www.ucc.org/ecumenical_ecumenical-partnerships-and).

<sup>117</sup> My own denomination is in the family of “united and uniting churches” and proud to be so, but memories of earlier church polities still linger among long-time members who remember the “old days” with nostalgia.

Surface explanations of the reasons why churches choose schism, seem to center on questions of theology or doctrine,<sup>118</sup> but exhaustive research into the history of schisms in the U.S. suggests that doctrine is not the primary cause of splits, control is key. In the *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, John R. Sutton and Mark Chaves write,

Overall, we believe that the results (of the research) support our central argument that denominational schisms are largely generated by resistance to attempts at consolidating nonlocal organizations. ...By this we mean three things. First, schisms are primarily events that occur to national-level organizations, and they most directly represent the realignment of existing congregations to new nonlocal organizations. Second, since schisms are generally conflicts about the scope of nonlocal organizational authority, they are not reducible either to social differences or to theological disagreements among members. Third, an understanding of schisms requires paying close attention to the organizational dynamics of denominations, as we have tried to do here.<sup>119</sup>

Chaves and Sutton suggest that schisms can be seen as part of a denomination's organizational life cycle, which, while feeling like loss to some, can feel like an upwelling of hope and new vitality to others. Schisms might be a normal aspect of organizational development, but when factions build walls against each other, sacrificing not only synergies but relationships and good will among brothers and sisters in faith, something sacred is lost. While structural unity among Christians along the lines of the John 17:11, 21 may not be realistic, this paper takes a much more modest position that

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<sup>118</sup> Rebekah Simon-Peter, "Is There Hope for a United Methodist Church," *United Methodist Insight*, May 15, 2017, accessed June 25, 2017, <http://um-insight.net/perspectives/is-there-hope-for-a-united-methodist-church/>. The United Methodist Church appears to be under threat of schism over questions related to the ordination of LGBTQ people.

<sup>119</sup> Mark Chaves and John R. Sutton, "Explaining Schism in American Protestant Denominations 1890-1990," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43 no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 171, accessed June 25, 2017, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=645f2b51-81c6-4600-b221-0a323464e105%40sessionmgr103&vid=1&hid=107>.

Christian churches at least ought to maintain some form of relationship/communication with each other.

Since structural unity (connectionalism) may be too large or too unpalatable a strategy for overcoming division, and institutional alignment (ecumenism) is less effective at dealing with issues of theology than of mission, and questions of doctrine and tradition cannot be incorporated within anti-denominationalism, the next strategy asks for a simple recourse to common civility between both sides.

### Civility

The history of Christians persecuting other Christians on matters of faith, doctrine, and practice in the US is a long execrable stain against the Church, often made in blood. From the Salem witch trials, through violence against slaves and on both sides of the abolition argument, to the persecution of Unitarians, Mormons, and those on each side of the Temperance movement, through continuing conflicts today over civil rights and abortion, American Christians have a long history of disregarding Christ's call to love one another, instead favoring killing, condemning, imprisoning, or otherwise disparaging each other.<sup>120</sup>

Yet, calls for civil discourse often come from all sides of these arguments throughout history. William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania and an early adopter of Quakerism in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century was imprisoned and threatened with death on several

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<sup>120</sup> Keith Hardman, *Issues in American Christianity: Primary Sources with Introductions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993). See Hardman for more details about these conflicts in the words of their proponents.

accounts due the Quaker tenant refusal to swear an oath to serve the King of England. In a letter to Justice Fleming, and despite great evidence to the contrary, Penn writes, “I know no religion which destroys courtesy, civility, kindness.”<sup>121</sup>

Within the context of so many bloody battles between Christians, the question emerges whether the slings and arrows of today indicate a climate which is more or less civil than it used to be. Richard Mouw suggests that today’s religious/political/social climate is harsher than it has been at other times, but that harshness is not limited to large scale issues. Mouw points to local issues of “road rage” and bad behavior at grocery stores. He writes, “These less global manifestations of incivility have increasingly become preoccupations for all of us.”<sup>122</sup>

That preoccupation has something to do with the way people approach civility in general. Mouw writes,

Many people today think of civility as nothing more than an outward, often hypocritical shell. But this cynical understanding of civility is yet another sign of the decline of real civility. In the past civility was understood in much richer terms. To be civil was to genuinely care about the larger society. It required a heartfelt commitment to your fellow citizens. It was a willingness to promote the well-being of people who were very different, including people who seriously disagreed with you on important matters. Civility wasn’t merely an external show of politeness. It included an inner politeness as well.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *Memoirs of the Public and Private Life of William Penn* (Manchester, UK: Bradshaw and Blacklock Printers, 1849) 51, accessed June 28, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/memoirsofprivate02cla>.

<sup>122</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), i, accessed June 27, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP9998320601869&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP9998320601869&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>123</sup> Mouw, Chapter 1, *Convicted Civility*. (Note: The ebook version of this publication does not reveal page numbers.)

Muow says that this “inner politeness” needs to be cultivated as a spiritual practice. He emphasizes empathy and teachability, the ideas that we can feel for each other and learn from each other, and suggests that these traits can be built up through intentional exercise. Mouw offers the metaphor of art appreciation, saying “we need to learn how to study each other spiritually,” to find out how to appreciate each other while also emphasizing hospitality, the idea of making room for the other, even while being able to name brokenness, sin, and suffering.<sup>124</sup>

The practice of civility offers two benefits as a strategy to overcome the Progressive/Conservative divide. First, cultivating empathy, teachability, hospitality, and “appreciation of Divine Art” as Mouw describes above, furthers the spiritual formation of every committed Christian in every aspect of daily life. Second, civility as construed in this manner contributes to personal and societal well-being. Civility may be the new Vitamin C in terms of community wellness. But civility can devolve into relativism, which makes no distinction between veracity of statements or appropriate behavior, or worse, become a thin veneer of politeness that masks disconnection and disinterest.

### **Conclusion**

This section has outlined four “other” approaches to bridging the divide between Progressive and Conservative Christians. 1) Anti-denominationalism calls for dismantling denominational and institutional bureaucracies in favor of a uniform set of

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<sup>124</sup> Mouw, Chapter 6.

doctrines, practices and traditions. This approach is both unrealistic and unpalatable in a culture that values diversity. 2) Ecumenism seeks to create institutional alignment through shared missions, an approach which has been successful as long as the vision remains focused on external areas of need. 3) Mergers, or “connectionalism,” focus on aligning like-minded organizational structures to common institutional aims. These “united and uniting” churches can leave residues of resentment among those with prior institutional memory or unintentionally create the grounds for schism when local churches do not feel they can control their own polity or destiny. 4) Civility incorporates foundational spiritual practices, but risks becoming a caricature of itself if it is not grounded in deep, personal conviction and love.

### **The Case for Storytelling**

The case for storytelling as a bridge to span the Progressive/Conservative divide will be made more fully in following sections, but in brief, storytelling offers the following strategic features. First, storytelling offers a low-barrier point of entry for communication. Stories do not have to be judged as doctrinally correct or incorrect. If a story is true for the teller, it does not have to be received as “correct” for the receiver’s life experience in order to have impact at a relational level (i.e. a person can tell a story about the grace of God that was present for them at an infant baptism without having to argue the merits of infant baptism.)

Second, storytelling requires low risk/low cost. A teller can share a story without having to convince a receiver that they must change an idea or practice or engage in some specific task. Story receivers can choose to act or not act based on a story, all the while appreciating the intention of relationship-building within which the story is offered. For

example, an LGBTQ person can tell a story about their call to ministry without insisting that their story receivers be open to changing their own ordination processes to LGBTQ people.

Third, stories get stronger with retelling. Unlike a policy statement or a slogan which is easily forgotten, stories carry emotional “Velcro” which allows them to stick in people’s minds. Fourth, stories connect to other stories. A new story is powerful to the extent that it connects to a story that is already true for the receiver. In this way, stories build on each other to create layers of connectional context.

The following is a story told about the founding of my church and demonstrates several of the advantages and pitfalls of the strategies described above.

*The grassy meadows of the Tualatin plains stretched out like a sheet fluttered to rest at the foothills of the Oregon Coast range. The plains were not natural; they had been burned out of the forest by indigenous tribes in an effort to create a centralized hunting area for deer. By the time the missionaries arrived, the deer were still plentiful but 90% of the native human population had died due to diseases brought by European hunters and trappers. Tracts sent out to prospective Christian missionaries emphasized the necessity of bringing Christ to the heathen savages in the frontier, neglecting to mention that these “savages” were few and far between.*

*Those first few missionaries who arrived to begin their own spiritual hunting quest were bitter in their disappointment. As the story goes, rivalries and jealousies between these men and their denominations kept the scattered handful of missionaries from cooperating with each other, until yet another missionary arrived from Oberlin, by way of Independence, Missouri. His name was Harvey Clark and his zeal for the Lord*

*was balanced by a pleasant disposition. Harvey's dispirited and disgruntled colleagues recognized that some kind of critical mass of population had been achieved and, after a fair amount of infighting, elected the newcomer as pastor of the West Tuality Plains First Congregational Church in 1845.*

*Struggles over personality, finances, temperance, and dancing, dogged the early days of this congregation and the other small churches in the area. By 1847, the profound hardships of pioneer life, including illness, injury, and hunger, had left many orphans in the area. Tabitha Brown, a 67 year-old pioneer grandmother and Episcopalian had moved in with the Clarks to endure the winter months. She came to Harvey to offer to teach, feed and care for these children with the support of the community and his church. In the meantime, the Whitman massacre of 1847, up to the north (in what would become Washington state), drove the Presbyterian missionaries in that area out of their homes. However, the Clark family had formed many relationships on the way West, and these displaced Christians were welcomed into the new church setting and the little church, with its new mission, thrived.<sup>125</sup>*

Missionary zeal, scarce resources, an emphasis on relationships, and a willingness to adapt to changing mission needs made an opportunity for these individuals to create a new church and write a new story. The next section looks more closely at how stories function in our brains, and in our communities, to create new ways of being in the world.

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<sup>125</sup> Elements of this story come from Carolyn M. Baun, *A Changing Mission: The Story of a Pioneer Church* (Forest Grove, OR: United Church of Christ (Congregational), 1995), 22-37.

### **SECTION 3:**

#### **THESIS**

##### **Kofi's Hat**

*There once were two sisters who loved each other very much and never fought at all, not even a hint of disagreement. They decided that when it came time to marry, that they would find brothers who were just as close as they were so that they could buy and work a farm together and eat suppers together every night to share all they had seen and learned. And so they did.*

*Now the area in which they lived was difficult to farm, but each year there was a contest to see who could grow the biggest, best, and most beautiful yams. All the villagers generally assumed that the person who won the contest was the wisest person in the whole village and the winner was treated as if they were the unofficial mayor. The winner, for as long as anyone could remember, was named Kofi, but he was bitter and mean and jealous of his power.*

*Our two happy couples shared everything as they worked their farm, especially what they observed over the seasons of growing yams on their property. They did so well learning and sharing, that in just a little time, they actually beat old Kofi to win the yam contest. They were so proud of their success they even began to talk about teaching what they had learned to the rest of the village so everyone could prosper.*

*Kofi was not pleased. He wanted to reclaim his title of yam champion and to be the unofficial mayor again. He had an idea. Kofi went to another town and bought fabric to make a fela, a kind of hat. One side of the hat he made deepest black and the other*

*side, shiny red. Then he walked down a path that divided the couples' farm without saying a word.*

*That night at dinner, one sister said to the other, "Did you see Kofi's hat? I've never seen such a deep black hat!" Her sister, who had been on the other side of the path, said, "No sister, it was shiniest red."*

*The first sister's husband said to his sister-in-law, "You are mistaken, dear sister, the hat was black as a moonless night." But his brother-in-law replied, "No, brother, it was red as a sunset." And so it went, they argued and fought and did not eat together the next night, or the next week, or speak ever after that. By the following year, their yams were small and poor like everyone else's. Old Kofi won his title back and the village never prospered.<sup>126</sup>*

The Tale of Kofi's Hat illustrates the division and brokenness that characterizes relationships between Conservative and Progressive Protestants today. Plagued by enmities arising from differing interpretations, these brothers and sisters in faith have fought to the point where they barely speak to each other, such that the "village" of Christianity itself has grown poor. Relationships between Christians on all sides of the theological spectrum in our nation need to come into some kind of respectful relationship with each other to ensure that Christianity itself can thrive.

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<sup>126</sup> This story is adapted from Susan O'Halloran's retelling of "Kofi's Hat." Susan O'Halloran, "Compassionate Action through Storytelling," in *The Healing Heart for Families*, eds. Allison M. Cox and David H. Albert (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2009), 196, accessed April 6, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_ebrary\\_pqebrary10089256&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_ebrary_pqebrary10089256&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

The first section of this paper told stories of brokenness and division among the primarily white, Progressive and Conservative wings of American Protestantism from the time of colonization. Section 2 outlined other approaches to overcoming these divides through various means. This section demonstrates the potential of first-person storytelling<sup>127</sup> to help heal the broken, divided presence that characterizes Christianity among American Protestants today.

This section begins with an exploration of the neurobiology of stories, especially as they relate to developing empathy for the other. From empathy, we move into the action phase of overcoming division, to build bridges and braid relationships between Conservative and Progressive Christians in this nation.

### **This Is Your Brain on Stories**

Neuroscientists have discovered that when people tell stories about their experiences, brain chemistry and neural processes function much in the same way as if story receivers<sup>128</sup> were living those stories themselves. Neuroscientists believe that mirror neurons account for the transfer of virtual experience.<sup>129</sup> This transfer allows us to

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<sup>127</sup> The type of storytelling most often referred to in this paper is first-person true narrative, such as memoir. This form of storytelling contributes to dialogue by establishing a platform for shared values. See Maggie Herzig and Laura Chasin, *Fostering Dialog across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project* (Watertown, MA: Essential Partners, 2006), 1, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Fostering%20Dialogue%20Across%20Divides.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> The term “story receivers” incorporates multiple modalities of story “reception” including reading, hearing, watching, video game play, etc.

<sup>129</sup> Mirror neurons were discovered in the early 1990s as a cluster of neurons in macaque monkeys which fired in the same patterns between a monkey performing an action and a monkey who watched the action being performed. Initial research for mirror neurons was first described by G. di Pellegrino, L. Fadiga, L. Fogassi, et al. in “Understanding Motor Events: A Neurophysiological Study,” *Experimental Brain Research*, 91 (1992): 176-180, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00230027>.

consider new perspectives, ideas or challenges within the context with our own lived experience with low risk, but potentially high reward. Writer and lecturer PJ Manney says, “Storytelling is both the seductive siren and the safe haven that encourages the connection with the feared ‘other’.”<sup>130</sup>

The neurological rewards for overcoming fear of the “other” include learning new skills, forming new relationships, and learning more about the self through empathy.

Storyteller and Diversity Consultant Susan O’Halloran describes empathy as follows:

Empathy refers to our ability to relate to how other people feel and see the world. As we inquire into the perceptions and feelings of others, we also learn how to identify our own emotions more carefully and to sort out our thoughts, opinions, and behavioral choices. . . . Empathy can also be viewed as the basis for a civil society, since it is the root source of human traits such as affection, compassion, courage, forgiveness, generosity, tenderness, honesty, commitment, and modesty — traits that serve to create a society that is fair, honest, respectful, trustworthy, and enjoyable. People who possess these sensibilities are often referred to as having *heart*.<sup>131</sup>

Research indicates that having “heart” appears to have a lot to do with what goes on in the brain. Neurochemistry plays a significant role in why stories stimulate empathy and emotions. Executive Leadership consultant Harrison Monarth writes,

Storytelling evokes a strong neurological response. Neuroeconomist Paul Zak’s research indicates that our brains produce the stress hormone cortisol during the tense moments in a story, which allows us to focus, while the cute factor of the animals releases oxytocin, the feel-good chemical that promotes connection and empathy. Other neurological research tells us that a happy ending to a story

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<sup>130</sup> P. J. Manney, “Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is the Key to Empathy,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 19, no. 1 (September 2008): 51-61, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://jetpress.org/v19/manney.htm>.

<sup>131</sup> O’Halloran, 204. Italics in original.

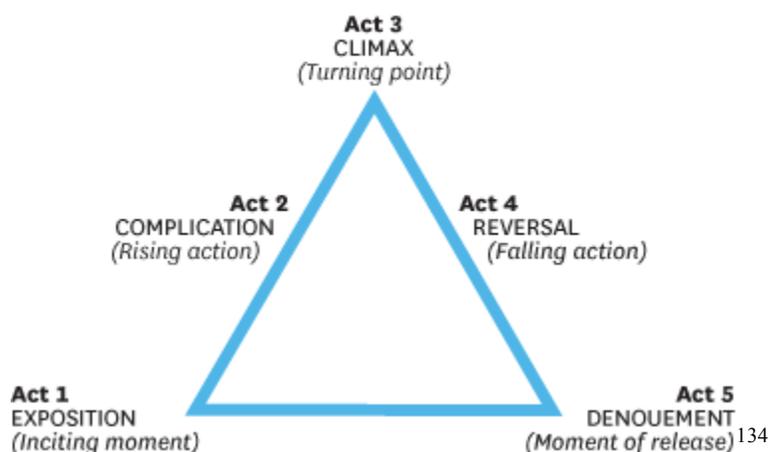
triggers the limbic system, our brain's reward center, to release dopamine which makes us feel more hopeful and optimistic.<sup>132</sup>

The arc of neurobiological chemical release described above can be overlaid on the classic storytelling structure called "Freytag's Pyramid." Gustav Freytag, a 19<sup>th</sup> century German novelist, observed this recurring pattern running across folktales, plays and the great literary works of the past and of his day.<sup>133</sup>

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#### FREYTAG'S PYRAMID

This simple storytelling structure has worked for thousands of years.



The pyramid begins with the introduction of characters. As the story unfolds, the listeners begin to form virtual relationships with the characters. The plot is instigated

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<sup>132</sup> Harrison Monarth, "The Irresistible Power of Storytelling as a Strategic Business Tool," *Harvard Business Review*, March 11, 2014, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2014/03/the-irresistible-power-of-storytelling-as-a-strategic-business-tool>. Other research indicates that these effects are relatively long lasting. See Gregory S. Berns, Kristina Blaine, Michael J. Prietula, Brandon E. Pye, "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain," *Brain Connectivity* 3, no. 6 (December 2013): 590, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/brain.2013.0166>.

<sup>133</sup> "Analyzing a Story's Plot: Freytag's Pyramid," Hartley Fiction & Drama Unit: Freytag's Pyramid, accessed April 3, 2017, [www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/freytag.html](http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/freytag.html).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

when characters (and the listener with them) encounter a problem or complication.

Tension builds (resulting in cortisol being released) while at the same time, empathetic bonds with the characters are cemented through oxytocin release, the “love” hormone.<sup>135</sup>

At the climax of the story, story listeners either share in the victory, triggering dopamine, or in the heartache of tragedy, which stimulates oxytocin release. Describing research done at his lab, Paul Zak writes, “those who saw the highly emotional part of the [sad] video had a 47% increase in oxytocin as measured in blood. Controlling for distress (which was associated with elevated stress hormones), empathy was highly correlated with the spike in oxytocin. This is the first evidence for the speculation, often from my mouth, that oxytocin is a physiologic signature for empathy.”<sup>136</sup> Sociologist Christopher Badcock describes the effects of oxytocin as follows,

[O]xytocin regulates social interaction, memory, attachment, and the reading of emotions; it acts as a buffer against social stress, and is critical in building trust. It enhances the motivation to initiate and sustain social contact by dampening social stress, and promotes the initiation and maintenance of close social contact, which is essential for learning about the mental states of others.<sup>137</sup>

But behavioral scientist Carsten De Dreu, et. al. warn that oxytocin may not just have indiscriminate “feel good” effects. He says the hormone may also contribute to ethnocentrism, which creates an experience of “in-group” bonding at the expense of “out-group” exclusion. He writes,

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<sup>135</sup> Paul Zak, “How Stories Change the Brain,” *Greater Good*, December 17, 2013, accessed April 3, 2017, [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_stories\\_change\\_brain](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_stories_change_brain).

<sup>136</sup> Paul Zak, “Why We Cry at Movies: Confessions of a Movie Crier,” *Psychology Today*, February 3, 2009, accessed April 4, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-moral-molecule/200902/why-we-cry-movies>.

<sup>137</sup> Christopher Badcock, “The Dark Side of Oxytocin,” *Psychology Today*, October 25, 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-imprinted-brain/201610/the-dark-side-oxytocin>.

Human ethnocentrism—the tendency to view one's group as centrally important and superior to other groups—creates intergroup bias that fuels prejudice, xenophobia, and intergroup violence. Grounded in the idea that ethnocentrism also facilitates within-group trust, cooperation, and coordination, we conjecture that ethnocentrism may be modulated by brain oxytocin, a peptide shown to promote cooperation among in-group members.<sup>138</sup>

The dangers of out-group exclusion are real, but Sophie Scott, a neuroscientist from the UK, suggests that stories run deeper than biochemistry. In an interview about research into how watching sad films correlates with a rise in endorphins and pain tolerance, she said:

[The research] suggests that it is not simply [with] positive emotions that you have this bonding effect – maybe there is something about a shared emotional experience which is really changing how your endorphins are being taken up and making you feel closer to people. . . . Stories are everything for humans – if we can fit something into a story we will do. We understand things better if they fit to stories, we remember things better if they fit to stories...I don't know if you are going to account for that simply with shared emotions.<sup>139</sup>

Scott suggests that story works so powerfully in human beings, that we cannot limit our understanding of how stories function to just their emotional impact or hormonal triggering. More forces are at work here.

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<sup>138</sup> Carsten K. W. De Dreu, Lindred L. Greer, Gerben A. Van Kleef, Shaul Shalvi, and Michel J. J. Handgraaf, "Oxytocin Promotes Human Ethnocentrism," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 4 (January 10, 2011): 1262-1266, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1015316108>.

<sup>139</sup> Nicola Davis, "Watching Sad Films Boosts Endorphin Levels in Your Brain, Psychologists Say," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2016, accessed April 4, 2017, [www.theguardian.com/science/2016/sep/21/watching-a-sad-films-boosts-endorphin-levels-in-your-brain-psychologists-say](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/sep/21/watching-a-sad-films-boosts-endorphin-levels-in-your-brain-psychologists-say).

## An Axis of Stories

The world spins on an axis of stories. Storytelling undergirds all religions.<sup>140</sup> Research across a broad spectrum of fields demonstrates that storytelling has several therapeutic uses and serves the principle platform of psychotherapy.<sup>141</sup> Storytelling teaches across curriculum and ages.<sup>142</sup> Storytelling connects generations and cultures.<sup>143</sup> Storytelling shapes political movements and governmental policies.<sup>144</sup> Storytelling is the primary driver behind art, literature and the entertainment industry, but storytelling also plays an enormous role in business,<sup>145</sup> and social behaviors.<sup>146</sup> Storytelling may have

<sup>140</sup> R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaïke de Haardt, Michael Scherer-Rath, *Religious Stories We Live By* (Leiden, TN: Brill, 2013), 1, accessed April 4, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71242941730001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71242941730001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>141</sup> Camilla Asplund Ingemark, *Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Narration as Therapy* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2013), accessed April 4, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71242330690001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71242330690001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>142</sup> Sherry Norfolk, Jane Stenson, and Diane Williams, *The Storytelling Classroom: Applications across the Curriculum* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006), 1.

<sup>143</sup> Shannon Smith, "Native Storytellers Connect the Past and Future," *Native Daughters* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 2010), accessed April 4, 2017, <http://cojmc.unl.edu/nativedaughters/storytellers/native-storytellers-connect-the-past-and-the-future>.

<sup>144</sup> Francesca Poletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1, accessed April 4, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71189299240001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71189299240001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>145</sup> Janis Forman, *Storytelling in Business: The Authentic and Fluent Organization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2013), 1, accessed April 4, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71249239580001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=gfox\\_alma\\_suummit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71249239580001451&context=L&vid=GFOX&search_scope=gfox_alma_suummit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>146</sup> Nancy R. Lee and Philip Kotler, *Social Marketing: Changing Behaviors for Good*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016).

become so pervasive and profound that it suffers from its own strengths. Francesca Polleta, Columbia University Associate Professor of Sociology, writes:

Alongside testimonials to the power of stories, however, run deep anxieties. We worry that stories are easily manipulable, that the line between art and artifice too often blurs. The emotional identification that stories produce may compel moral action but may also undermine rational action. And perhaps stories are simply too variable to serve as the basis for social policy. After all, if everyone has her own story, then whose story should be privileged when it comes to making policy for everyone? Finally, we worry that, in the end, stories may be just stories. They may be untrue: fiction masquerading as fact. Or they may be true, but fleeting in their impact, with their normative force easily trumped by considerations of economic efficiency or political expediency.<sup>147</sup>

Stories may also oversimplify, misrepresent, or mask complexities of larger issues. Stories told about struggling coal miners, for example, may lead to experiences of empathy which encourage changes in laws that allow for more mining. But attention to those stories may ignore related stories (and scientific evidence) about the impact of coal mining on global warming. Stories matter, but the choices we make over which stories matter to us, which stories we choose to tell, and which we choose to hear, matters more.

### **Stories That Heal the World**

Stories might inform, entertain, distract, or delight, but more importantly, stories influence people. In her book, *The Story Factor*, Annette Simmons encourages the desire to influence others by teaching people about crafting and using stories to change their world for the better. She writes, “Everyone, deep down, wants to be proud of their lives and feel like they are important — this is the vein of power and influence you can access

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<sup>147</sup> Poletta, 2.

through storytelling.”<sup>148</sup> Arguments based on rhetoric and data aim to change minds, but storytelling aims to open the heart. Simmons taps a deep chord of frustration with people who are overwhelmed by conflicting information and competing rational arguments. She writes:

People don’t want more information. They are up to their eyeballs in information. They want faith—faith in you, your goals, your success, in the story you tell. It is faith that moves mountains, not facts. Facts do not give birth to faith. Faith needs a story to sustain it—a meaningful story that inspires belief in you and renews hope that your ideas indeed offer what you promise. Genuine influence goes deeper than getting people to do what you want them to do. It means people pick up where you left off because they believe. Faith can overcome an obstacle, achieve a goal.<sup>149</sup>

Simmons recognizes that a story listener already has some kind of preconceived notion about a new story they might hear, but, she writes:

If you tell them a story that makes better sense to them you can reframe the way they organize their thoughts, the meanings they draw, and thus the actions they take. If you can convince them they are on a hero’s journey, they can begin to see obstacles as challenges, and choose behaviors more befitting a hero than a victim. Change their story and you change their behavior.<sup>150</sup>

Simmons references “the hero’s journey,” a story archetype described by Joseph Campbell.<sup>151</sup> The hero’s journey puts an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances that create a transformation in the character allowing them to bring gifts of that transformation back home again. Writing in a similar vein as Simmons, creativity

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<sup>148</sup> Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), Kindle, 215.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle, 244-247.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle, 710-713.

<sup>151</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

consultant and author Jonah Sachs says that those who want to influence behavior changes—such as building bridges across deep ideological divides—do well to craft stories that account for Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs<sup>152</sup> and emulate Campbell’s hero’s journey.<sup>153</sup> Examples include a Nike ad with a wheelchair-bound athlete naming every possible excuse to not exercise thereby dismantling the story listener’s own reticence to exercise and encouraging her to “Just Do It.”<sup>TM,154</sup> A story listener hears will.i.am’s rendition of Barack Obama’s “Yes we can”<sup>155</sup> speeches and he, too, wants to become part of that “we.” Sachs says, “Recognizing one’s own hero potential is what the journey is all about.”<sup>156</sup>

Twenty-first century storytelling is largely mediated through screens carrying content including narrative, music, sound effects, lighting effects, computer generated images, complex editing, iconography and other techniques. This new environment begs the question, what role does person-to-person storytelling still have in today’s setting?

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<sup>152</sup> Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (July 1943): 370-396, accessed April 6, 2017, [https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_apa\\_articles10.1037/h0054346&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search\\_scope=fox\\_alma\\_summit\\_primocentral&tab=default\\_tab&lang=en\\_US](https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_apa_articles10.1037/h0054346&context=PC&vid=GFOX&search_scope=fox_alma_summit_primocentral&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US).

<sup>153</sup> Jonah Sachs, *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell—and Live—the Best Stories Will Rule the Future* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013), 131, 149.

<sup>154</sup> Matt Scott, “No Excuses,” produced by Weiden+Kennedy for Nike, posted to YouTube, December 31, 2007, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obdd31Q9PqA>.

<sup>155</sup> will.i.am, “Barack Obama music video—‘Yes We Can’” February 2, 2008, YouTube, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>.

<sup>156</sup> Sachs, 149.

### **Building Empathy Face to Face**

Take the storyteller off the stage, or off the screen, or off the page, put them in a seat directly across from another person who has their own profound story fueling an opposite point of view for a story exchange, and you have the foundation for Narrative 4 (N4). N4 is an initiative that works with deeply divided communities to build empathy through story. Their website states:

Our vision [is] to achieve a sense of fearless hope through radical empathy....Our core methodology centers around a story exchange, which pairs participants and asks each participant to tell their partner’s story in the first-person. The story exchange works on a simple idea: If I can hear your story deeply enough to retell it in my own words, as if it happened to me – and you can do the same for my story – then we will have seen the world through each other’s eyes.<sup>157</sup>

N4 seeks to enlarge that world and build empathy across deeply divided groups all over the planet. Working in Ireland, South Africa, and many states in the US, the program brings together immigrants and those opposed to immigration, people entrenched on either side of the gun ownership debate—notably Newtown, Connecticut, and communities experiencing severe racial prejudice. N4 uses survey formats to measure empathy for “the other” before and after their storytelling exchanges, but also measures success through replication of their efforts within other communities.

According to N4 facilitator Lee Keylock, one of N4’s next set of initiatives will focus on

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<sup>157</sup> “Narrative 4: What We Do,” accessed April 6, 2017, <http://www.narrative4.com/mission-vision/>. See also, “It Won’t Stop Until We Talk,” a program from *The Parents Circle, Israeli/Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace*, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://www.theparentscircle.com/>

developing longitudinal strategies to measure long-term effectiveness of these story exchanges.<sup>158</sup>

Face to face storytelling has strong potential to help bring people from opposite ends of social and religious issues face to face, but other forms of storytelling can also have powerful impacts. Carl Jensen created an anthology titled *Stories that Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, chronicling the impact of newspaper stories that changed hearts, minds, and laws in the last century.<sup>159</sup> Movies like *Philadelphia*<sup>160</sup> and television programs like Alex Haley's *Roots*<sup>161</sup> confronted Americans with the ugliness of civil rights bias and slavery. Books that tell stories, both nonfiction and fiction, have powerfully influenced opinion across cultures and through time. Stories have enormous potential to connect people to each other when policies, principles, and practices might otherwise divide them, but people have to be willing to hear those stories. Willingness to listen indicates an openness to consider new ideas, shed old mindsets, and cross the "lines" of identity, convention, assumption, and expectation. That is the impetus for the artifact portion of this dissertation to be sketched in Section 4.

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<sup>158</sup> Personal interview with Lee Keylock of Narrative 4, April 4, 2017.

<sup>159</sup> Carl Jensen, *Stories that Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000).

<sup>160</sup> *Philadelphia*, directed by Jonathon Demme, written by Ron Swanner, featuring Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington, Roberta Maxwell (Tristar Pictures, 1993).

<sup>161</sup> *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, David L. Wolper Productions, Warner Brothers Television (American Broadcasting Company, 1977).

## Conclusion

Efforts to overcome the divisions between progressive and conservative Christians will be realized, “not by might, not by power, but by my spirit.”<sup>162</sup> Calls for uniformity in doctrine or practice will only generate more resistance. Calls for massive church organizations to work side by side on issues may have some effect, but the results are more likely to shift resources than to shift hearts. The Spirit called on here is a spirit of love, relationship, authenticity, vulnerability, generosity, and sacrifice. The best vehicle for this spirit remains the same as it has been since our ancestors gathered around fires, or put pen to paper: stories.

Stories span differences and distances much like a spider spins a web sending out gossamer strands of truth that weave our lives together. Stories reveal us to each other, in our particularities and in our shared experiences. In his memoir *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Beuchner writes,

My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours... it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself (sic) known to each of us more powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.<sup>163</sup>

Policies and practices will not bridge the divide between progressives and conservatives.

Only willingness to shift perspective, to see ourselves in the Other will do that. Toward that end, I offer my own story which is, as Buechner says “not important because it is

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<sup>162</sup> Zech 4:6.

<sup>163</sup> Frederick Beuchner, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1991), 30.

mine, God knows,” but because it reveals myself to the Other and thereby reveals the other to me.

**SECTION 4:**  
**ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION**

As a child, I was mortally afraid of coloring outside the lines. I was afraid of breaking a rule at all, really. Convinced that my lovability, my sense of identity, and my worth as a human being was predicated on being good at following the rules and staying inside the lines, I was terrified of making mistakes.

When I realized that I did not want to be afraid of my own life anymore, I started skipping, hopping, and dancing outside of the lines that had previously defined me. I became a soldier, a foreign missionary, an outcast, an apostate, a lesbian, a Christian, an athlete, and a pastor, all identities I'd been told I could never or should never inhabit. By crossing lines, I became more free and more fully the person God called me to be.

I also became more interested in people who were across the lines by which I defined myself. As a Liberal/Progressive, I became curious about Evangelical/Conservatives. I wondered if learning their stories, and coming into relationship with them, would help me understand them and lessen my fear of them. So I crossed the line myself and enrolled in an Evangelical Seminary.

My artifact is the first 3 chapters of a memoir of the many lines I've crossed to become who I am today. I wrote it as inspiration for other people who are curious about life on the other side of the lines they live behind. I believe that the way across the lines that separate us in society requires telling and receiving each other's stories, finding connection through shared struggle and shared admiration. I offer my own story as a place to start.

**SECTION 5:**  
**ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION**

**Book Proposal Template—Non-Fiction**

*Cover Letter:*

Jennifer Yocum  
1323 Hawthorne St.  
Forest Grove, OR 97116  
503-781-3951  
jenniferyocum@gmail.com

Greetings,

I'm Jennifer Yocum, lesbian, veteran (U.S. Army National Guard), and Reverend, an ordained pastor serving a church in Forest Grove, Oregon. If that story sounds unlikely enough, add in the twist that I just received a Doctor of Ministry degree from an evangelical seminary. That makes my story not just unusual, but darn near impossible.

My book, *We'll Cross that Line When We Come to It: Memoir of a Lesbian, Veteran, Reverend* tells the stories that weave through the contradictory improbabilities of my own life in a way that intends to build bridges between polarized communities on the Left and the Right. I know that sounds like a heavy topic, but I think my stories, told with humor and hope, can at least throw a rope across that increasingly deep divide.

Thank you for considering this proposal. I look forward to working with you. And if you don't mind a blessing from a queer lady pastor who knows how to throw a hand grenade, may your days be as bright as your hopes for the world to come.

In Joy,

Jennifer

*Title:*

*We'll Cross that Line When We Come to It: Memoir of a Lesbian, Veteran, Reverend*

*Author:*

Jennifer Yocum, 503-781-3951,

jenniferyocum@gmail.com,

@revjenniferyocum (Twitter)

jennifer.yocum@facebook.com

*Overview:*

Jennifer Yocum invites readers to stretch the hamstrings of identity politics by straddling streams of social and religious polarizations through her own life's story. This memoir asks readers to stretch their own willingness to incorporate "the other" within themselves.

*Purpose:*

American society continues to fragment itself into smaller and smaller pixels of identity. The resulting landscape view leaves us with incredible sharpness, but little clarity or connection. This book uses one life as a canvas that blends apparent

contradictions into a more whole and holy panorama. Readers will be invited to view their own lives with the same soft-focus and softened hearts.

*Promotion and Marketing:*

Publisher's Weekly reported in 2015 that religion/bibles was the number one seller in adult non-fiction with autobiography/biography/memoir in the number four spot.<sup>164</sup> This book will appeal to readers of both of those genres. It will also speak to readers who are weary of being stamped into categories of "X" or "Y" but who yearn for a more interesting and integrated life.

This book can be marketed through excerpts posted on special interest blogging sites such as Patheos and HuffPo Religion. Short videos of stories can be accessed through a YouTube channel and cross-promoted on Facebook and Twitter. Other traditional media outlets successfully targeted to these genres will also be successful.

*Competition:*

Bellinger, Martha E. *From Robe to Robe: A Lesbian's Spiritual Journey*. Trafford Publishing, September 16, 2000.

Merrick, Lee. *Julian Rush: Facing the Music: A Gay Methodist Minister's Story*. iUniverse, 2001.

Creech, Jimmy. *Adam's Gift: A Memoir of a Pastor's Calling to Defy the Church's Persecution of Lesbians and Gays*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Gushee, David P. *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism*. Cokesbury, 2017.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*. Viking, 2013.

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<sup>164</sup> Jim Milliot, "The Hot and Cold Book Categories of 2015," *Publisher's Weekly*, January 14, 2016, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/69138-the-hot-and-cold-book-categories-of-2015.html>.

*Uniqueness:*

Most stories about LGBTQ people focus on the breakdown of relationships between themselves and their families, churches, and relationships with the Divine, and then chart a recovery path outside of the norms and forms that wounded them. My story includes that breakdown, but reclaims those norms and builds bridges toward embracing and including the Other.

*Endorsements:*

Jennifer Garrison Brownell, author of *Swim, Ride, Run, Breathe: How I Lost a Triathlon and Caught My Breath*. The Pilgrim Press, 2015.

Jen Violi, author of *Putting Makeup on Dead People*. Hyperion, 2011.

*Book Format (non-fiction):*

Each chapter will be its own story, presented in a chronological flow.

### **Chapter Outline and Sample Paragraphs**

#### 1. Introduction

I sat in the front seat of my Subaru Forester with my hand on the key of the ignition, engine running, heart racing. I'd just pulled into the parking lot of the hipster coffeehouse I'd been told to come to in Lake Oswego, Oregon that late August Sunday in 2015. But I could just as easily back out again, head home, and not engage in this ridiculous venture. "These people hate me," I thought, "They don't know me, but they hate everything I stand for. What the hell am I doing here?" Somehow, the Holy Spirit nudged my hand to turn off the engine and I took a breath. "All right, Lord," I said, "I'm

going to follow your lead on this,” and walked, with my knees shaking, toward the coffeehouse to meet and join the most fearsome group of people I could imagine, Evangelical Christian pastors.

## 2. The Disappearing Game

The car swerved toward the curb and lurched to a stop as Mrs. O’Brian’s terrified blue eyes searched the rearview mirror sorting through the jumble of kids in the back seat. “Where’s Jen?!” she shrieked in panic.

“I’m here,” I piped up half-buried between the car door armrest and a junior O’Brian.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” she muttered, her voice never far from Ireland even under the calmest circumstances. “I never saw you and you never make a peep.”

I smiled in my victory; I’d won the Disappearing Game again.

## 3. A Wretch Like Me

I’d enlisted in the Oregon Army National Guard at age 17, over my parents’ objections, but with their permission. I joined the Guard for a couple of reasons: to help pay for college tuition, and to serve my country. In the early 1980s, advertised duties of the Oregon Army National Guard focused on helping people evacuate out of fire, flood, or volcanic disaster areas. While I was aware that the National Guard was part of the Army – it was in the title after all – I didn’t have a strong image of myself as a soldier. Now here I was, Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in early July, in church, with my left arm paralyzed, and knowing I wasn’t going to make it as a soldier after all.

#### 4. Colorado

But for the brief disappointment of learning I could never be the priest I knew I was called to become at age four because I was a girl, I loved the church because I belonged to her. I was voted Most Likely to Become a Nun at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. And again in High School. I did make an afternoon trip to a convent to consider that career option, but knew within the first 90 minutes that was not for me, so I invested my energies into something that was easy for me to do, writing, and decided to study journalism.

#### 5. Korea

My mental slide show of Korea contains vivid images of student/police clashes in the streets. Corruption in the Korean government was the norm. Bribes didn't just grease the wheels of licenses, permits, and contracts; bribes were how business was done. At the time I lived in Seoul, stories of building collapses were common, due to substandard construction and falsified building code reports. Then again, my presence as a Catholic Missionary in Korea was itself built on a lie. It was the lie I only told once, but the truth behind it would tear my world apart.

#### 6. Are You a Christian?

I was raised Catholic, with rosaries braided into my DNA, as sure of the One True Church and my place in it as I was sure of gravity and the inherent evil of the New York Yankees. I grew up in Catholic schools, imbued with a strong sense of religion, social

justice, a love of saints, martyrs, and the Mass, but a very poor acquaintance with scripture. We Catholics were strongly discouraged from reading the Bible on our own, for fear we would misunderstand it. Funny thing is, I don't recall ever being told to avoid any other book in our school or library. But there were Bibles in nearly every classroom, forbidden literary fruit with blackened covers to tempt and terrify our young minds.

Further chapters include—Called and Chosen, (stories of ministries in several settings) and Good/Gay, stories of being a Queer Pastor.

*Intended Readers:*

- Those who are interested in building bridges across the American religious landscape
- LGBTQ readers interested in spirituality and church
- Those who love or are affiliated with LGBTQ people

*Manuscript:*

The manuscript's first four chapters (20,000 words) have been written and are appended.

*Author Bio:*

Jennifer Yocum is a storytelling, bridge-building, song-singing, love-bringing preacher, community leader, and full-on human being. She is an award-winning songwriter and a Moth storyteller. Jennifer loves live audience, has just a skosh of a Facebook addiction, and tweets when she can't think of anything better to do. She has three master's degrees and is inches away from a doctorate in Preaching as Story.

Jennifer has written this book because she just plain can't stand the breakdowns, isolation, and fear between Progressives and Evangelicals, Queers and Christians, Red

and Blue, and other false dichotomies. She either is or loves people at all ends of these spectrums and feels like everyone should be able to recognize themselves in the Other.

*Publishing Credits:*

*Don't Miss the Moment: Selected Sermons by Jennifer Yocum*, Portland Seminary, Portland, OR, 2017.

## **SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT**

### **Summary of Execution**

This dissertation began with an historical overview of the divisions between White American Protestant churches from the period of European colonization until the present day. The paper then moved into a discussion of various unification efforts to help bridge those divisions, including calls for uniformity, ecumenism, connectionalism, and civility. Each of these approaches has their adherents and some of them have produced admirable results in terms of facilitating communication and promoting mission in the name of Christ.

Section 3 of this paper offered a thesis proposing that storytelling could offer a means of bridging some of these deepening and hardening divides. Storytelling offers a low barrier, low-risk means of entertaining ideas from the Other without entering formal agreements or having to adopt certain practices or principles. Ideally, storytelling can lead to other forms of engagement or inquiry, but the desire is for deepening relationship, rather than righteousness or recruitment, which forms the basis of the engagement.

Section 4 outlined the artifact proposal, which consists of a memoir of my own “line-crossing” back and forth across different perspectives and life experiences. Section 5 is the book proposal for that artifact and this section, Section 6, serves as the summary, analysis, and conclusion.

## Analysis

The widening and hardening divisions between Progressive and Conservative Churches in the United States may be the most damaging dynamic to Christianity in our country today. The infighting, backstabbing, you're-all-going-to-hell damnation flung from Left to Right and everywhere in between makes a mockery of Christ's call "that they may all be one."<sup>165</sup> In this context, participation in organized religion at any end of the theological spectrum seems hypocritical and antithetical to the call to live as brothers and sisters to each other.

The paper outlined some of the main themes driving these divisions including: emphasis on education and literacy, requirement of being "born again," millennialism, denominationalism, and marketing mentality, industrialization and the impacts of poverty, entanglement with political parties, and new attitudes toward sexuality. I contend that these dynamics are all still very much at work in various forms, but the current challenge in our day is that it has become easier to shut out and shut down different voices and different points of view than ever before due to our ability to tailor our information sources towards only those "feeds" that make us feel comfortable, safe or affirmed.

This paper tells stories. It tells histories and science stories. It tells stories about marketing and politics. It contains at least one fable and offers stories from my own life. I used stories to talk about the efficacy of storytelling because stories, over facts, over principles, over any other means I can name, make the world make sense to me.

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<sup>165</sup> John 17:11, 21.

## Conclusion

The fabric of a faith is woven by its stories. Sadly, the fabric of most faith traditions is also rent by stories of division and exclusion. The insider/outsider narratives that first called, and then united, the early Christian church also severed it from its surrounding cultures and eventually from its Jewish roots. American Protestants, of all colors, continue to share the same basic story trove from our common scriptures. Interpretation of those stories, and the calls to action that come from those interpretations, differ. Those different interpretations create tensions, but the real loss Christians have endured over the past century is the loss of empathy for brother and sister Christians.<sup>166</sup>

That loss of empathy creates social and cultural bubbles where people who share one faith simply stop interacting with each other. It is not that Christians do not continually hunger for stories, or that people do not have an emotional or biological draw toward empathy, but it is becoming easier to filter out any ideas not instantly liked.<sup>167</sup> The breach among Progressive and Conservative Christians is further complicated by the idea that openness to different interpretations of doctrine can result in charges of heresy,

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<sup>166</sup> Examples of the bashing that goes on between Conservative and Progressive Christians can be seen here, Adelle M. Banks “Conservative Christians Criticize Progressives’ ‘Destructive Agenda,’” *Religion News Service*, September 29, 2016, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://religionnews.com/2016/09/29/conservative-christians-criticize-progressives-destructive-agenda/>, and Allen Clifton, “It’s Time For Liberal Christians To Reclaim Christianity From Conservatives Who’ve Distorted the Faith,” August 16, 2015, *Forward Progressives*, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://forwardprogressives.com/time-liberal-christians-reclaim-christianity-conservatives-whove-distorted-faith/>.

<sup>167</sup> Tomas Chamorro-Premuzik, “How the Web Distorts Reality and Impairs our Judgment Skills,” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2014, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/may/13/internet-confirmation-bias>.

being fired from jobs, and, as cited in an earlier section of this paper, expelled from entire church structures.

Among other strategies, including dialogue, shared work projects, and intentional friendships, storytelling can work to build bridges and braid relationships. But, in order for stories, or another strategy, to work toward repairing the breaches between Progressive and Conservative Christians, those on each side need a willingness to listen to each other's stories fearlessly and without trying to prove one side right or the other wrong. The primary goal of storytelling must not be to get the "other" to change their minds on an issue or to prove a point.

The goal of relationship is relationship itself. Relationship requires willingness to abandon righteousness to make room for other interpretations that may be uncomfortable. If we cannot reconcile our differences, we are at least called to love each other through them. Both sides of this divide have to be willing to see both sides of Kofi's Hat, per this Section 3's framing tale, and learn how to forgive each other in love. As Jesus said, "Whoever has ears, let them hear."<sup>168</sup>

Merely listening to each side's stories will not heal the brokenness between Progressive and Conservative Christians. However, willingness to listen can increase empathy toward the other and allow each side to work together on initiatives where doctrinal differences do not play a central role. While this goal may fall short of Jesus' wish "that they all be one" a move toward empathy through storytelling at least brings each side closer to acting as sisters and brothers in the body of Christ.

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<sup>168</sup> Mark 4:9; cf. Matthew 11:15.

## **Lessons, Applications, and Future Research**

Two years after I turned off the ignition of my car in the parking lot of that hipster coffee shop, the stories and faces of those “terrifying” Evangelical Christian pastors have become dear to me – the eighth-grade teacher trying to establish a church for millennials; the Nazarene pastoring in his living room; the megachurch Methodist trying to build church one table at a time. They’re all just trying to follow Christ the best way they can; trying to live out the call to be pastors, spouses, parents, friends, community leaders, and whole people of God. The stories of their stumbles and their successes have shown up on message boards and Facebook pages. Across the country, Oregon to New York, we cheer each other on and we covet each other’s prayers. Sharing our stories has made us more human and more whole.

In days before photo plate processing, when newspapers were printed on hot metal presses – linotype machines – ink from papers “hot off the press” would rub off on the fingers of readers. In a way, readers were marked by the stories they read. Stories that matter to us leave a mark, stories told by people we like and respect over time become part of our own larger story in the world. Through this research, I have become marked by the stories of the historical background of American Protestantism and my research into several means of overcoming that which divides the larger Church. I have become more “evangelical” in my preaching, as well as a better storyteller, but most importantly, I have become less fearful in telling my own story and listening to those of others. By engaging in their stories, my professors and classmates have “rubbed off” on me and become part of my larger story.

Research on the long-term impacts of how storytelling influences empathy is still in its infancy.<sup>169</sup> Empathy is one of the building blocks that can create respect for or a sense of connection with the Other, but the ability to achieve that end still requires a story receiver to want to engage with ideas and perspectives outside their own experience. I have contended that storytelling provides a low-barrier means of doing so, but to re-coin an old adage, you can bring a story receiver to a book, a YouTube video, a movie or some other form of story, but you can't *make* them truly receive it.

Still, if we as leaders of the church are willing to trust and tell the stories we've lived through ourselves as valuable gifts for the Church as a whole, then they may become part of the larger braid that reweaves our rent and torn fabric together in a way that can re-member the Body of Christ to itself.

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<sup>169</sup> Karen Swallow Prior, "How Reading Makes Us More Human," *The Atlantic*, June 21, 2013, accessed July 13, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/how-reading-makes-us-more-human/277079/>. See also Perry Firth, "Wired for Empathy: How and Why Stories Cultivate Emotions," *Firesteel*, July 23, 2015, accessed July 13, 2017, <http://firesteelwa.org/2015/07/wired-for-empathy-how-and-why-stories-cultivate-emotions/>.

## APPENDIX A: Artifact

*We'll Cross that Line When We Come to It: Memoir of a Lesbian, Veteran, Reverend*

By Jennifer Yocum

### Preface

*I sat in the front seat of my Subaru Forester with my hand on the key of the ignition, engine running, heart racing. I'd just pulled into the parking lot of the hipster coffeeshop I'd been told to come to in Lake Oswego, Oregon that late August Sunday in 2015, but I could just as easily back out again, head home, and not engage in this ridiculous venture. "These people hate me," I thought, "They don't know me, but they hate everything I stand for. What the hell am I doing here?" Somehow, the Holy Spirit nudged my hand to turn off the engine and I took a breath. "All right, Lord," I said, "I'm going to follow your lead on this," and walked, with my knees shaking, across the striped lines of the parking lot toward the coffeeshop to meet and join the most fearsome group of people I could imagine, Evangelical Christian pastors.*

That moment of dread and anxiety began my doctoral program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary (GFES).<sup>170</sup> I chose to attend GFES in a serendipitous whirlwind of finding a one-time-only Doctor of Ministry program, Preaching as Story, set to begin in less than 48 hours from the moment of my discovery. Through a series of miraculous

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<sup>170</sup> George Fox Evangelical Seminary changed its name to Portland Seminary in 2017, but is still associated with George Fox University, an evangelical Quaker institution.

feats of administrative gymnastics, I was enrolled in the program by the time I arrived at the trendy coffeehouse. Only now did the wave of second thoughts crash in—would my church support this decision to enter a school for the people who reviled many of our Progressive stands? Would my physical safety be at risk? Would other students decide they had to drop out because of my presence?<sup>171</sup>

Evangelical Christians struck terror in my heart due to their frequent and often violent condemnation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. After being “out” as a lesbian for almost 30 years, I don’t believe that my sexual orientation is the most interesting or important thing about me, but it has played a significant role in my faith development, more of which will be explored in later pages. However, my sexual orientation, and the larger topic of variant sexual orientations and gender identities/expressions has become a significant flashpoint within and among Christian denominations and the larger American political stage.

In my personal experience as a lesbian, I’ve been spit at, lunged at, shouted at, legislated against,<sup>172</sup> demonized, prayed against, and seen friends and fellow community

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<sup>171</sup> Some religious denominations regard worshiping, praying or studying with openly gay Christians, or even other Christian denominations as anathema and cause for rescinding religious orders. See Karl Wyneken, “Article on Which the Church Stands or Falls,” *The Daystar Journal—Gospel Voices in and for the Missouri Church, Lutheran Synod*, November 13, 2013, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://thedaystarjournal.com/the-article-on-which-the-church-stands-or-falls/>.

<sup>172</sup> See George T Nicola, “Oregon LGBTQ History Since 1970,” Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, last updated July 7, 2015, accessed June 11, 2017, <https://www.glapn.org/6007historyLGBTQrights.html>.

members physically hurt, fired from jobs, maimed and even killed<sup>173</sup> due to the efforts of Evangelical Christians, their pastors and churches. I have more reason than most to disdain Evangelicals and their ilk and remain within the small bubble of Progressive Christians in which I've found my spiritual home and support for my vocation. And yet, my calling as a follower of Christ would not let me stew in the discontent of righteous indignation or allow me to remain subject to my fears of, and let's face it, jealousies toward, the highly successful efforts of Evangelical Christians.

Jesus calls those faithful to his word to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, Matt 5:43-48. This call isn't easy, even in the abstract. Then again, love in the abstract isn't love at all. Real love requires face to face in-person encounters, but getting across the threshold for those face-to-face encounters can be difficult. Showing up on the doorstep of a person or institution that has declared that you are damned to the flames eternal hell with a smile and a request to grow in friendship and fellowship in the name of Christ is awkward at best. Moreover, I'm far more interested in spreading Good News about God's never-ending, all-redeeming, everlasting call to loving compassion and justice for ALL creation than I am about focusing on the singular issue of LGBT salvation/ministry. While my personal experience of being outcast from my church for being homosexual is what brought me back to Christ, I see my story as a microcosm of

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<sup>173</sup> From the murder of Matthew Shepherd to the millions left to die of AIDS before adequate funding became available to fight this pandemic due to gay-blaming, significant responsibility for these deaths, can be left at the feet of Evangelical Christian pastors who claimed this suffering was ordained by God. For example, see David Badash, "Christian Pastor Says Gays 'Worthy Of Death' At Conference With 3 GOP Presidential Candidates," New Civil Rights Movement, November 6, 2015, accessed June 11, 2017, [http://www.thenewcivilrights\\_movement.com/davidbadash/christian\\_pastor\\_says\\_gays\\_worthy\\_of\\_death\\_at\\_conference\\_with\\_3\\_gop\\_presidential\\_candidates](http://www.thenewcivilrights_movement.com/davidbadash/christian_pastor_says_gays_worthy_of_death_at_conference_with_3_gop_presidential_candidates).

God's redeeming love for everyone. It's that larger story that I wanted to learn how to tell as well as possible, hence the Preaching as Story program.

The Spirit-filled irony that placed this ideal subject matter in the setting of an Evangelical seminary was too good to pass by. I am grateful beyond words for this experience and I can now say that I have learned to love and respect these Evangelical Christians, and that my experience of coming to love them *and their stories*, has enriched my faith and my life. Even if by personal choice or denominational decree I could not preach in most of their churches due to my gender or sexual orientation, I love them, and I believe they have come to care for and respect me. I did not enter this program with the intent to advocate for an LGBTQ cause per se (and was only admitted to the program with the promise I would not do so). I came because I didn't want to hate and fear Evangelical Christians anymore, and I wanted to figure out if there was a way to bridge the aching, widening, devastating chasm between Evangelicals and Progressive Christians more broadly. I knew this bridge would not be built through doctrine, through politics, through principles, or even through partnerships. But I believe it can be built, through stories.

### *Tell Me a Story*

Storytelling offers a low-barrier, low-commitment entry into relationships which might otherwise seem too fraught with logistical, doctrinal or other baggage causing people to shrink from engaging with the Other. This strategy doesn't suggest that other approaches to building relationships, particularly project-based partnership efforts among churches, cannot be successful, but my experience suggests that relationship must play

the primary role in those partnership efforts. Lord knows I've made plenty of mistakes when I forget that primacy.

*The local Baptist Pastor fidgeted in his seat in my office. He'd been coming over to see me for several weeks, trying to understand how I could justify my vocational calling in light of biblical teachings against homosexuality. I wasn't interested in that conversation, but I was interested in finding ways our churches could collaborate on projects, such as our ministries to people experiencing homelessness or care for the earth. I figured that if I could get him past the tired arguments reconciling Christianity and homosexuality, we might be able to do some great things together.*

*Per his inquiries, I'd offered all of the arguments about social-historical context of biblical teachings on homosexuality,<sup>174</sup> the arc of Jesus' ministry to the despised and the outcast,<sup>175</sup> and finally, my personal experience of vocation and call. It was the last part that had him flummoxed. He couldn't deny the authenticity of my call or the witness that my church and I offered for Christ. But I never asked him about the personal struggle my story had set up for him.*

*All I wanted to know was if he wanted to offer the first prayer for an upcoming Earth Day lake cleanup event I'd organized with three other churches.*

*"I'd like to, personally," he said, "But I can't."*

*"You can't go first?" I asked. "We can put you in a different spot in the order."*

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<sup>174</sup> See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1980.

<sup>175</sup> John Shore, "The Best Case for the Bible Not Condemning Homosexuality," *Huffington Post*, last updated June 3, 2012, accessed June 11, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shore/the-best-case-for-the-bible-not-condemning-homosexuality\\_b\\_1396345.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shore/the-best-case-for-the-bible-not-condemning-homosexuality_b_1396345.html).

*“No, I can’t...,” he paused. “I can’t pray with you.”*

*“That’s silly,” I said, “We pray every time we meet. We pray for each other. What are you talking about?”*

*“I can’t pray with you in public,” he confessed. “My congregation doesn’t believe we pray to the same God.”*

*I felt my theological ground tremble beneath my feet. “I don’t use this word lightly, but isn’t that heresy? There’s only one God.”*

*He looked down and played nervously with his fingers “I know that, but I guess we understand him differently. Look, my wife and I can still come to the event. We can still invite people to pick up trash, but we can’t pray together.”*

That was the last time I saw my colleague in my office or in town. He was planning to retire within the next few months and his church folded up shortly after that. I realize now that I’d seen our relationship as a vehicle to get to the goal of a project-based partnership, not as an end in itself. Other than a fairly mechanical acknowledgement that having to bow out of our cleanup must have been difficult for him, I never asked him to tell his own story about different challenges to his faith or what he’d overcome in a long ministerial career. I’d never paid real attention to his story and had sacrificed our relationship in pursuit of a project.

I wrote this book to remind myself of the necessity of telling and hearing people’s stories, not so I could get people on my side, or do something I wanted them to do, but just to tell stories so we could know each other. It’s a collection of the lines I’ve crossed, tripped over, skipped over, slid over, sometimes willingly, oftentimes clunkily, but always finding some kind of grace or blessing on the other side. As I reflect on these

stories, I notice there's a pattern of what looks like failure. Spoiler alert: I basically flunked out of the Army and there are a couple of bad breakups in these pages that I would never want to repeat. But as much as I like to do things right, I've always learned more from my failures. And most of the time, those failures allowed me to "cross into" a greater sense of compassion, patience, generosity and faith.

The image of "crossing that line" references three experiences that motivate me. First, I can't stand to be told I have to stay behind the lines that someone else has drawn for me. Being told that I can't do something turns out to be a terrific impetus for me to try to do it. Second, I'm certain there is no place I can go where Jesus hasn't already "crossed" into by virtue of his life, death, resurrection and love for the least, last and lost. Third, there are simply too many lines being drawn between people in the world today. I don't want to be cut off from people because they vote or think differently than I do. People are way more interesting than the lines that get drawn around them.

This book is a testimony to the power of crossing lines and an invitation to do likewise—to not let lines of borders, race, class, experience, ideology, gender, age, yadda, yadda, yadda, limit our journeys to become fully human and fully alive. Failures, scars, heartaches, embarrassments, that's all part of the price of admission, but man, what a ride and with Christ, we never ride alone.

## Chapter 1 – The Disappearing Game

The car swerved toward the curb and lurched to a stop as Mrs. O’Brian’s wildly darting blue eyes searched the rearview mirror, sorting through the jumble of kids in the back seat. “Where’s Jenny?!” she shrieked.

“I’m here,” I piped up half-buried between the car door armrest and a junior O’Brian.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” she muttered, her accent never far from Ireland even under the calmest circumstances. “I never saw you and you never make a peep.”

I smiled in my victory; I’d won the Disappearing Game again.

As a first-grader, I avoided attention like an ant trying to scurry away from the pinpoint of a sunbeam’s death ray created by a magnifying glass. Shyness doesn’t begin to describe my desire to hover along the outer edge of my peer group, invisible as a ghost. I just didn’t understand other kids. They knew the rules of correct behavior—Don’t Hit; Don’t Yell; Don’t Cheat; Don’t Roughhouse; Don’t Throw Sand at People’s Faces; Don’t Make Other People Eat Bugs, Don’t Do THAT in the Sandbox; but they committed all of these infractions, plus other diabolical nonsense that should have been covered by the one rule: Be Kind. When caught, they’d say they were sorry, then do the same things all over again. Kids didn’t make sense to me.

Following the rules kept the grownups from sizzling me with negative attention, but my refusal to break the rules made me a target for teasing. Thus, I practiced the Disappearing Game in one form or another until my junior year of high school. By then, I was still afraid of breaking rules; the nuns at my Catholic schools had been very effective

at motivating my compliance at risk of eternal suffering, but I'd developed a sweet tooth for the honey of positive affirmation.

Every so often, I'd get a taste of that warm glow, from good grades, from theater or band, but mostly from being a Good Helper. The strokes from being a Good Helper weren't just gratitude in the moment. In what I now know is a complex point of theology,<sup>176</sup> I believed that Good Helpers could earn their way into heaven and into every other place of Highest Honor.

My whole persona was built on following the rules and being "good" in the eyes of the grownups, and I had a tangible goal for all this goodness up to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. With all my heart, I wanted to be on the Encounter Team. The Encounter was the name of the junior year retreat at my Catholic high school. All the juniors, boys and girls, went on their own gender-specific Encounter weekend. The Encounter was supposed to be a turning point in our lives, when we Encountered our Future in Christ, determining Who we would Become in the World. In a way, the Encounter was like a religious version of The Bachelor, when we would get our red roses from Jesus.

In actual fact, the Encounter ran the way most youth retreats ran with a lot of songs, skits, crafts, circle talks, late nights, and teenage girl drama. But the last event of the Encounter weekend was the Flower Ceremony. At The Flower Ceremony, team leaders described the characteristics of a particular flower, then each girl was named to her flower, as in—"The tulip can be many colors, but is always a cheery spot when skies

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<sup>176</sup> Catholics and Protestants debate the role of "good works" in salvation, with Luther coming down on the side of "grace alone" being the key that unlocks heaven's gate and Catholics saying that a mix of faith and good works trips the combination. Me, I don't think heaven is a gated community. More on that later.

are grey. Welcome wherever she goes, the tulip is eager to make friends and blend in with a group. Ronnie, Susan, Grace and uh, um, Joanie, you are all tulips.”

The only flower that mattered to me was the rose. The Rose was fragrant yet mysterious, a symbol of love, devotion, value and power. Roses were the BVM’s (Blessed Virgin Mary’s) flower but they were also messengers, with each different rose bearing a different meaning. I was already a writer by this time, and I knew I was a Rose, unique and special, a carrier of messages and eternal truths. When it came time for the Roses to be named, I was eager to be recognized for all my giftedness, but my name was not among the Roses. Or the Tulips, or the Daffodils or Carnations, no, all the flowers had been named but for the last group, the Daisies.

“The Daisy is so common that she is often overlooked. She’s always there, though, just waiting to be discovered for the nice girl that she is. Our Daisies are name, name, name . . .and Jenny. A hot rage boiled in my stomach. Common? Overlooked? Waiting to be discovered? These weren’t value traits; these were adjectives for a particularly bland wallpaper. My palms sweated. I refused to take the flower that was offered to me. I couldn’t speak through my upset. I flashed back to every time I’d allowed myself to be pushed to the back of a pack of kids surging to a table of goodies to get whatever was leftover or broken at the bottom of the pile. I thought of the times I’d pretended an interest in dandelions on the playground so I could avoid the humiliation of not just being picked last, but actually having classmates physically fight over who would have to have me on their dodgeball team. I thought of all of the times I’d taken the smaller cookie, given up the good seat, or made some other sacrifice, not through generosity but because I didn’t believe I was worth the space I took up on the earth.

“I’m not a Daisy,” I muttered.

“What’s that, Jenny? Come up and get your flower.”

“I’m not a Daisy!” I spat out. The Encounter Team Leaders and grownups froze in shock. No one in this group had ever seen me get mad. “I’m not a Daisy and I don’t want that stupid flower.”

Notes of exasperation and dismay clashed in the air like a sixth grade band trying to tune up without a conductor.

“Well, you don’t have to take the flower. But, I guess we’ll just move on then,” some faceless grownup nervously sang out before hustling us on to the next activity.

I was surrounded by disapproval, but I hadn’t disappeared or burst into flame. I had shown up, stopped time, and even messed up the moment. And I didn’t die. I wish that my recovery of self-worth was fully completed in that moment, but at least that’s when it started. The next year, when the Encounter Team was named, I was not on the list, either because I’d been overlooked again or because of the scene I’d made during the Flower Ceremony. The omission stung but it spurred a new thought.

I realized that perhaps I’d played the Disappearing Game too well. I still liked being a Good Helper, but I resented being taken for granted and given all the garbage jobs to do. Furthermore, I was getting bored with being a good girl all the time. In all the books I’d read, the most interesting people were the ones who’d broken the rules, who’d even been bad in the eyes of many. Every hero I’d ever heard of, including Jesus, had broken rules and crossed lines to achieve some kind of greater good. Maybe it was time for me to do something un-Daisy-like, to break out of my shell and leave the

Disappearing Game behind. Maybe I could do something nobody would ever think of for me. Like...join the Army.

## Chapter 2 – A Wretch Like Me

I leaned back against the church pew, my sweat-soaked t-shirt conducting the coolness from the wooden church pew to my skin, and nearly wept. Since the church was not air-conditioned on this July Sunday morning, we'd been given permission to remove our heavy camouflage BDU (Battle Dress Uniform) "blouses" for Mass. Taking off the blouse hadn't been easy; my left arm was paralyzed by a fall I'd taken on the obstacle course earlier in the week.

Once more, I mentally flipped through the series of choices I'd made that had gotten me here. A year earlier, the summer before my freshman year at the University of Portland in Oregon, I'd enlisted in the Oregon Army National Guard. I was 17, just before my freshman year in college. I enlisted over my parents' objections but with their permission. My Basic Training would be deferred until the summer after my freshman year. I joined the Guard for a number of reasons: to help pay for college tuition, to serve my country, but mostly to carry out that image of the Good Helper I still idolized, just in a way that no one would mistake for being a damn Daisy. In the early 1980s, advertised duties of the Oregon Army National Guard focused on helping people evacuate out of fire, flood or volcanic disaster areas. While I was aware that the National Guard was part of the Army (it was in the title after all), I didn't have a strong image of myself as a soldier. Now here I was, Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in early July, in church, injured, and knowing I wasn't going to make it as a soldier after all.

A month prior to reporting for basic training, when I'd planned to get serious about getting into shape; instead, I decided to tag along in an end of year ice skating trip with other members of my freshman class at the University of Portland. As a 6-foot tall,

120-pound, stork-limbed adolescent who tended to overbalance and stumble in good shoes on dry land, lacing up into ice skates turned out to be a poor choice. I wound up with a severely sprained knee and discovered an allergy to codeine all in one afternoon.

My plans to hit the gym were replaced by learning how to navigate campus on crutches and I was fearful for my still-healing knee when I got off the plane in Columbia, South Carolina. My knee worries were quickly smothered in the thick, hot, humidity of the air slowly rising off the tarmac. At eighteen years old, I'd never been out of the West Coast's moderate temperature bubble, and the East Coast humidity strangled my respiratory system with a watery clutch. I would have gasped for air but feared that by doing so, I'd drown.

Shocked by the heat and staggered by the fact there was no air in the air, I stumbled through the reception stations and within two hours of landing, was suited up in leather boots, wool socks, and heavy camouflage, just what one wears on a summer day in Dixie.

Right after we'd gotten into uniform, my Drill Instructor (DI) snapped an armband with sergeant's stripes around my bicep. I was delighted. Had my leadership potential been realized so quickly? I would later learn that my "promotion" was due to having selected a bunk near the door of the barracks. There are worse ways to earn a promotion.

"Form up, goddamn Privates," Sergeant Jackson yipped. He had an oddly high voice, nasally, with an accent thick as grits and his articulation further muddled by clenched teeth and surreptitious chewing tobacco.

We fumbled our way into columns.

“We goin’ out on a little run, Privates. Keep up and do not fall out.”

My heart sank. Right off the bat my weaknesses were going to be on full display unless I could overpower them by sheer force of will. We took off at a slow jog. After just the first five minutes it was hard to tell what hurt most, my knee or my sinuses. After 15 minutes, I felt like I was going to throw up. At 20 minutes, I stepped off the side of the road, doubled over trying to catch my breath and then limped back to the barracks.

Sergeant Jackson scurried up to me, mad as a banty rooster. “D’you FALL OUT?” he screamed. “D’you fall out after I told you not to fall out?”

A cold, coiled serpent of fear unwound its way from the pit of my abdomen through my body. “I was going to throw up, Sergeant.”

His Smoky the Bear hat brim nearly touched my chin.

“I didn’ ask if you was gunna throw up. If you was gunna throw up, throw up an’ keep runnin’. I asked, ‘Did you fall out?’”

“Yes, Sergeant.” The heat of his disapproval continued to drop my internal temperature until I shivered with fear.

He tore the armband off my sleeve. “Move that duffel off that bunk,” he snapped. “Worthless,” he muttered. “Private Benjamin,” he mocked, referencing a recent movie by that name. “Private Living Room,” he said, “That’s what we call the privates who ain’t gonna make it. You on my list.”

I found a new bunk and looked around at the rest of my platoon as they averted their eyes and put their gear away, my humiliation wafting from me like a bad smell. The women were all older than me. I would later learn that I had the distinction of being the youngest, tallest, and furthest away from home of all of my platoon mates; 46 soldiers all

told. Our platoon's average age was about 23. We were 50% Black, about 20% Latina, with the rest White. Prior to Basic Training, I had lived in a veritable snow globe of middle-class Whiteness. From my white neighborhood, to my white school setting, to my nearly all white city and state, I was raised to believe that prejudice was wrong, but I could count the number of persons of color with whom I'd actually spoken on one hand. When I'd enlisted in the Army, I'd crossed more lines than I'd imagined.

I barely knew any kids from families that had experienced divorce, much less hunger, or crime. Within the next few days, I would learn that a significant number of my platoon mates had enlisted in the Army as an alternative to being sentenced to prison. I would also discover that some of them had retained the behaviors that ran them afoul of the law.

A few days after the armband incident, I had to approach Sergeant Jackson with evidence toward that fact. Trembling with shock and fear, I knocked on his door at the barracks. "Sergeant, Private Yocum requests permission to speak."

About 20 minutes earlier, we'd received our first pay allotment, all in cash, so we could buy a list of required items from the PX, the general store. We'd returned to the barracks before heading out to that destination and had been given a smoke break.

"What is it, Private?"

"Sergeant, my wallet. My cash is all gone." I'd discovered the loss after returning from a quick trip to the latrine. If we hadn't had to buy the list of items from the PX, I wouldn't have reported the theft, so steeped I remained in fear of disappointing authority figures in general, not to mention reconfirming Sergeant Jackson's low opinion of me.

Having to report the theft felt like staring at a steep downward pitch of hiking trail covered with loose rock and cockle burrs. Not lethal, but it was going to hurt.

“Goddammit, you can’t keep a hold of two hundred dollars for two hours? Did you leave your goddamn locker open or what?”

“Probably for less than a minute, Sergeant.” I felt myself tumbling down that slope with no way of stopping.

“Goddamn stupid, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Shit. I’ll go report it.” He got up from his gun metal chair to go to the office of the company commander. This was bad. The sergeants hated having to talk to the officers and the officers never spoke to us trainees under any circumstances.

A few minutes later, I was summoned to report to the duty officer who whose irritation over the matter was as plain as the furnishings of her office. My dismay at having been robbed was nothing compared to the outright dread of having to report my loss to an officer. But, then, I saw that the duty officer was a woman! A butter bar second lieutenant, maybe there’d be some empathy, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“Ma’am, Private Yocum reporting.”

“What the fuck happened, Private?” My hopes for a sympathetic response puddled at my feet.

“Ma’am, the cash in my wallet was stolen from my locker.”

“You fuckin’ left it open, didn’t you?” While I didn’t exactly expect to be comforted in my predicament, having my personal failings reconfirmed up the chain of

command recaptured that feeling of the ant desperately trying to evade the sunbeam under the magnifying glass.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Private, you sure you don’t have it on you? Thinkin’ the Army is gonna pay you double today?”

I nearly passed out. I’d never been accused of so much as a fib, much less theft.

“No, ma’am,” I squeaked. Now, the sunbeam caught me. Humiliation and shame burned through my body and formed up in a betrayal of tears.

“Stop fuckin’ cryin’, Private. ‘Less you guilty of somethin’. Shit, I don’t know. Go ask your buddies.”

“Ma’am, I do not understand.”

“You are fuckin’ stupid. Ask them to return the money or help you out.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied mechanically. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“You ain’t thankin’ me for shit. Dismissed.” I saluted and left.

By this time, a small crowd of my platoon mates had surreptitiously gathered outside the office door. I emerged to a sea of faces and headed over to my locker to look again for the cash that wasn’t there.

Mex from Texas (I am not making this up, this is how she referred to herself) asked what happened.

“Mex,” I replied, “I don’t know what to do. All of my cash was taken and we have to buy supplies in an hour. The duty officer told me to come out and ask you all for help, but I don’t even know what that means.”

“Geez,” she muttered, “the whole wad. Goddamn. Well, shit. Go talk to Africa and I’ll see what I can find out.” Desperately trying not to cry but sobbing and wiping my eyes into the shoulder of my BDU jacket away, I made my way over to Africa’s bunk.

Africa was the oldest member of our platoon. She was in her late 20s, had babies at home, and had joined the Army to provide an income for them. She was a white girl from Maine who’d come by her nickname due to a mispronunciation from a younger sibling. Africa loved nicknames and had given me one almost immediately – G.G. – which stood for Gentle Giant.

I choked out my story, concluding, “And she accused me of taking it, Africa. I don’t know what to do.”

Not knowing what to do had become familiar in these last few days. I intellectually understood that disorientation was part of the Army’s break-down-to-build-up training strategy. Being kept on the run, hurry up and wait, being yelled at, cussed at, and told to change orders mid-task without question was part and parcel of the experience, but I’d never been robbed before and the idea of having to disobey an order to buy the required PX items put me in a cold sweat.

“I’d like to get my hands on the bitch who ripped you off,” Africa growled.

Africa was my best friend at Basic. The coming weeks would see her become our platoon’s “mayor” while I became the “professor.” She kept the other 46 women in our unit in line while I drilled them in military nomenclature, rank and insignia, equipment method and operation, and the other bits of trivia we were required to recite in unison at the top of our lungs. I would break Africa’s heart in about four weeks but we didn’t know

that then. My stolen cash would buy us a friendship that almost withstood what was to come. Almost.

Mex returned. “No one’s gonna give it back, but we’re gonna take up a collection. Don’t worry about paying it back. Maybe you’ll do us a favor some time. Here’s twenty.”

I’ve been on sports teams, in theatrical companies, study cohorts, and other settings where people rely on each other, but there is nothing like the bond between military buddies whose actual lives depend on each other. You may not be able to stand each other, share nothing in common but the uniform, but that’s all that matters. This was not a life or death situation, but failure to obey an order, in this case to buy those PX items, was a punishable offense no matter what the circumstance. We’d been told that failure to obey this order could result in being sent to Army jail for at least two weeks and “recycled”: forced to start Basic Training all over again with a new unit, from Day 1, and with a mark against your name. We couldn’t image how bad that could be.

Mex placed that \$20 bill in her hat and walked it around the barracks. My buddies fished bills out of unfamiliar pockets as I stood in the middle, embarrassed and moved, trying not to cry all over again. The cash would be enough to buy the required items, with nothing left over to save or send home, but I’d be able to fill the list and obey the order.

In a completely unexpected way, this act of theft and restoration contributed to a sense of unit cohesion we’d missed before. Now, instead of being united just through the low-level bonding of misery and fear of our Drill Instructors, we demonstrated that we could and would help each other out of trouble; that even though we couldn’t trust each other individually, we could trust each other collectively. At least sometimes. It was a start.

*No Color But Green*

Our Drill Instructors dismissed the subtleties of race, class, and gender with the statement, “I don’t care what color you think you are; I only see green.” Ironically, the design of the U.S. Army soldier’s uniform had recently changed to incorporate multiple shades of green creating a camouflage pattern which might have symbolically reflected the value of diversity, but no matter. The Army’s system looks like fairness on its face. Treat everyone the same and let them succeed or fail on their own merits. No back story, no cover story, no history.

Of course, things weren’t that simple. The black, white and brown girls constantly tripped over each other’s cultural landmines and occasional fist fights broke out due to such misunderstandings. Several of my platoon mates were functionally illiterate due to the disadvantages of poverty. My job as “professor” included reading our Operations Manual aloud and helping drill the parts we were supposed to memorize through oral repetition. A number of the women talked about family members back home in trouble with the law or with drugs, or struggles with children left back with other family members. In the Army, equality meant that every one of the same rank received the same pay, followed the same orders, and the “go/no go” standards for all of the fitness tests were the same. It’s a surface level equality that has nothing to do with equity, but for many people of color in the US, it’s the closest thing to equality our society has to offer.

After the first few days of training, a failure on the part of a one soldier could bring punishment to the whole unit. Johnson was late for breakfast? Everyone had to drop for 20 pushups. Dewey’s blouse was buttoned incorrectly? Everyone drop for 20. This shared punishment strategy, meant that everyone had to look out for each other. All my life to this point, I had been focused on personal accountability and individual

achievement or failure. I'd been left out on the bench of every kind of team sport I'd ever tried, and had little experience of being part of a larger whole. Inasmuch as looking out for 40-plus other soldiers could be nerve-wracking, realizing that I was as necessary for their success as they were necessary to mine made me feel honored and humbled, and more than a little scared.

### *NBC*

The heat, humidity, and constant movement in and outside of air-conditioned spaces continued to aggravate my upper respiratory system. I would later learn that I had a milk protein allergy that made me susceptible to the constant stream of ear and sinus infections that would plague me for the next few years. I could tell I had a sinus infection within a few days of landing at Fort Jackson, but my first sick call visit had only resulted in over-the-counter meds. When I asked for antibiotics and was told that regulations required initial treatment with non-prescription medication, I was surprised enough to say, "But this isn't going to help me."

The bored pharmacy tech snarked back, "Then we'll see you in three days."

The streams of goo coming from my nose were hard to ignore, but I managed to hide the limp from my sore knee for the next few days of training up until NBC.

"Shee-it," Sergeant Jackson said, looking at the training schedule tacked to the bulletin board in the mess hall. A heavy rain poured down outside. "We got NBC in LPC." Nuclear, Biological, Chemical training all happens in one day at Basic, but the training center was a few miles from our location. Our transport was designated LPC, Leather Personnel Carriers, i.e. boots.

“Shee-it,” he repeated, “I’m gonna make a call. Listen up, goddamn Privates. Pack your ruck with MOPP gear, we goin’ on a walk today.” MOPP gear, Mission-Oriented Protective Postures gear, included gas masks and charcoal-lined pants and jackets to help filter out biological and chemical agents. The gear weighed about 45 pounds.

We set out on a march, but the rain slowed our progress and Sergeant Jackson called out double-time. That’s a slow jog in formation, and I quickly fell behind. Trying to clear my sinuses and spit out bloody phlegm, I coughed and staggered up the last hill. With my rucksack covered in a poncho and my now obvious limp, I resembled a snotty version of Quasimodo.

I kept up a slow jog up the muddy river that was the road to our training site, but had to stop several times to clear my congestion. I looked up to the top of the hill and saw what looked like two hundred women, our whole company, standing in formation while their sergeants shot the breeze. I figured that if their attention was distracted, maybe I could sneak into formation. Instead, I slipped and fell with a thump.

“Goddamn, Yocum, get your goddamn ass over here!” Sergeant Jackson barked. I jogged over to him and stopped.

“No, goddamn Private, don’t stop double-timing. You run in place.”

“Knees up,” he shouted. “Get those knees up.” I began coughing through the snot running down my face, now mixed with a few tears of pain and embarrassment.

“Knees UP,” he repeated, “and hold that weapon up over your head. Now why was you the last one in?”

“I’m sick, Sergeant,”

“Is that a goddamn excuse, Private? I don’t want no goddamn excuse.”

“No excuse, Sergeant.”

“Get your weapon and your goddamn knees up higher, Private.”

My breath rasped through the congestion and the slightly averted gaze of 200 women observing my punishment. The Disappearing Game would have come in handy right now, but no such luck.

Sergeant Jackson seemed to be enjoying the moment.

“You’re fuckin’ breathin’ hard. The weapon, get it higher!” he snapped. “Tell me about your weapon.”

My explanation came out in gasps, “The M16-A2...is a shoulder-operated...gas-powered weapon...It has a maximum effective range...of 500 meters.”

“You’re fuckin’ quiet, Private,” he snarled.

I raised my voice through the pain and disgrace. “It has a maximum...effective range of 500 meters. It has a maximum...range of 800 meters.” My efforts to jog in place now took on a corkscrew motion. Everything burned: my knee, my sinuses, my sense of self-worth. With the rain, the snot, the grotesque dance under the poncho, the scene could have been something out of a Fellini film. I hate Fellini films.

“Private, you fuckin’ cryin’? Is that what you fuckin’ female is doin’?”

I couldn’t lie. “Yes, Sergeant,” I shouted.

“Fuck, get out of my face.”

He walked away, the game over. I returned to my place in formation to the side glances of the women of my platoon. Pity, disgust, and shame mixed with the rain pouring down on us all. I’ve never wanted to move on to the next moment in life,

whatever it might be, more badly than at that time, a condition which turns out to be a great frame of mind for considering nuclear holocaust.

We marched over to the nuclear training site and the rain stopped. Nuclear turned out to be the shortest training module. “Privates,” the trainer said softly, “If you are anywhere near a nuclear attack, you are going to die. Your manual says that in case of an attack, you should try to find a rock to hide behind, or a house, or some kind of cover. That may help you for a minute, but probably not. Your job, in case of nuclear attack, is to turn 180 degrees away from the flash of light and fall on your weapon. You will die, but if your body absorbs enough of the heat, someone else may be able to roll you over and use your weapon. Do you understand?”

“YES, SERGEANT!” We yelled.

“Good. Wait for the light and practice the maneuver.” A large flash pot went off; we turned 180 degrees, tucked our weapons against our bodies and fell down “dead.”

“This training is complete,” he said. As we turned to leave, he added, “See you in El Salvador,” referencing the war that the US not officially involved in. I was strangely irritated by this send off. While I wasn’t a pacifist, I expected that use of US military forces had to be authorized by an act of Congress. I didn’t realize at the time how many covert operations US forces were involved in, and how many of those engagements were based on less-than-worthy causes. This guy had just taken 10 minutes to teach us how to turn around, fall on our weapons and die. Now he was suggesting we might repeat the maneuver in a dirty war against jungle peasants? Ick. His creepiness was only exceeded by trainers of the next module—Biologics.

We marched to the next location and gathered inside a small hut. “Take a seat anywhere,” the grizzled instructors told us. We’d been trained to drop into metal chairs in formation, but there were few chairs in the room so we sat on the floor wherever we could. The instructors were scruffier more than any others we’d seen, wearing boony hats and sun-weathered uniforms. It was as though the rules of the rest of the base didn’t apply to them.

“This here’s biological and neurological training. Tom there and me, we’re what they call Sniffers. We go into places where they think someone’s been using something bad and we figure out what it is. We have some equipment that works sometimes, but mostly we rely on this,” he said, tapping his nose. The trainers went on to tell stories of the different kind of neurological and biological weapons we might encounter.

“You got your germ agents,” he said. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t drink the water. Don’t breathe where anybody else isn’t breathin’. Not much you can do about the viruses and bacteriologicals until you get to a hospital. But if you got your nerve agents, yer fluttering eyes, convulsion, and seizures, and what not, then you’ve got to inject yourself hard in the thigh with atropine. This here syringe is spring-loaded with a needle that’ll jab about three inches in the meat of the muscle, so don’t aim for the bone. Then, and this here’s real important, you’ve got to inject yourself with this second needle to stop the effects of the atropine. They got numbers on’ em, one and two. You got to do them in order, one then two, or yer dead. Why, Tom, you remember that one feller who got’em mixed up in the field?”

“Yeah, he wound up dead and there wasn’t even a chemical in the air,” he chortled, “Just out and panicked is all.”

“You all got any questions?” Not-Tom, asked. One of my platoon-mates piped up, “Have you ever had to inject yourself?” Not-Tom and Tom both smiled. “You don’t get to be a Sniffer without sniffin’ something sometimes. Yeah, ‘bout three or four times.”

“Yeah,” he said, “You might break out in blisters, or start convulsing, or frothing at the mouth. It’s like everything comes leaking out of you at once. Like you’re melting from the inside out.” We practiced with our self-injector training pens. A hard enough jab released a plastic pop-up “needle” while we tried, unsuccessfully, not to imagine melting from the inside out.

William Tecumseh Sherman is the man who gave us the phrase, “War is hell.” He’s also burned a swath through the South in what many argue was a naked display of state-sponsored terrorism during the Civil War. There’s an intellectual understanding of the idea that war is unimaginably awful, but the step of physically practicing how to avoid death by poisoning was a new level of imagination. I was horrified to realize that, in a chemical weapon attack, I would be likely to come across civilians or perhaps other soldiers without access to atropine or its antidote. How does a person cope with watching other people die around them? That’s what seemed like hell to me.

“Once you done those injections, Privates,” Not-Tom said, “You got to open up these here wipes and decontaminate yer skin. Now the real thing will take off the first layer of your skin. But these here are just alcohol wipes for practice.” We dutifully and glumly practiced with the wipes. Tom and Not-Tom sent us on our way.

We marched to the last location, the CS Confidence Training Site, through rising layers of steamy evaporation under the canopy of trees. Our MOPP suit-laden rucksacks had grown heavier as the day went on, but at last we were allowed to put the charcoal-

lined suits on for a minute, just long enough to realize that it was possible to be even hotter and more uncomfortable than we already were in our BDUs. We took the MOPP suits off and were left covered in a fine layer of charcoal, then were issued gas masks and told to inspect their condition. I'm no gas mask expert, but it was obvious to me that my mask had a broken strap. I showed my broken mask to the trainer and was told to stand at the side and wait.

The broken gas mask felt typical. My last name begins with a letter at the end of the alphabet and my damn Daisy conditioning made me used to accepting the short end of the stick, but this was not okay. Now I was scared and angry.

I stood alongside other women who'd also been issued defective gear, watching the trainers demonstrate how to clear and seal the masks, knowing I wouldn't have the chance to practice the maneuver until I was in the little gas-filled hut that was now disgorging crying, sputtering, moaning huddles of a dozen women at a time.

The CS Confidence Chamber sat on a small hill, the highlight of the course. Four to five of the D.I.s donned MOPP gear and stood inside the building making sure that we were good and exposed to the gas for several seconds with masks on and then off.

The trainer gave us these instructions. "Privates, the purpose of this chamber is to show you that you can trust your protective masks. You will enter the chamber in groups of 12. After 15 seconds, you will be asked to remove your protective masks. You will then wait for the sergeants inside to give you permission to leave. Do you understand?"

"YES, SERGEANT."

Waiting there at the side of the hut, I was already getting enough exposure to the gas to smell it and feel the first tingles of burn. A sergeant ordered a soldier staggering in

my direction to hand over her mask to me adding to her, “Don’t touch your eyes, goddamnit. Don’t touch your eyes.” The mask was still full of gas. I tried to wave the mask around in the air to clear the gas.

“Put that on, Private, you’re in the next group.” I put the mask on over my head, trying to clear and seal it to my face, while adjusting the straps and being chivvied into the small building. CS gas is commonly called tear gas. CS is derived from capsaicin, the substance that makes chili peppers hot. Imagine habanero peppers being sprayed on your eyes, up your nose and down your throat. CS is not like that exposure, CS is that exposure.

Walking into the hut, my skin was on fire, it felt like someone was rubbing sand into a bad sunburn. The chamber was dark and thick with gas. The sergeants in their heavy gear waved gas spitting out from 4-5 opened canisters in our direction. One of them spoke through his mask. “I’m gonna count down from 5 and you are going to take off your masks and keep your eyes open. Then you are going to wait until I give the order to clear the room. 5-4-3-2-1. Masks off. Masks off.” We followed the order.

My plan was to hold my breath for as long as I could, then exhale slowly, but the shock of the gas on my eyes took my breath away. Ahh, my eyes...feel like they’re frying...God, it’s like hot soup is being poured into my lungs...my nose, it feels like I’m breathing through a blow torch... the group is surging...they’re yelling...the sergeant’s been knocked down...they’re holding us back. Wait,... light! The door is open...out!

I plunged through the trees for about ten yards before I heard other people shouting for us to come back. The panic and knock down at the front of our group had kept us in the chamber for twice as long as the intended exposure. “Open your eyes!

Open your eyes!” the other soldiers kept repeating. “Don’t touch your eyes. Your hands have gas on them.” I staggered a few more steps and tried to force myself to breathe.

“Hurry up, goddamn Yocum,” Sergeant Jackson yipped. “Goddamn end of the line again.”

I think I knew it then. I knew I was not going to make it through Basic. I wasn’t going to quit, but I wasn’t going to make it, either. One of my buddies said it a week later. “They’re going to have take you out of here on a stretcher, but you’re not gonna make it.”

From that point on, I felt split in two. Mentally, I knew that I could learn everything I needed to learn. Physically, I simply was not strong enough to meet the standards of the training. Mental attitude could only take me so far. I didn’t know how far that could be and I would do my best every day, but mostly, I just felt as though I was waiting to fail.

### *The Dirty Name*

A few days later, the obstacle course loomed. I was relieved to learn that the purpose of the course was not to run it fast, but to “build confidence” in being able to overcome each challenge. “Heck,” I thought, “If I go slow and steady enough, I can make it.”

We marched down the red clay roads into the deep piney Carolina woods. I’ve always loved the forests of my Northwest home where firs and ferns offer sanctuary and renewal. Smells of tree sap, waving branches, and birdsong softened the air. The forest floor sprung vital beneath my boots. This forest was different, but felt familiar enough that I relaxed far more than my city-dwelling platoon mates who kept looking around for

bears. The obstacles, built out of logs, boards, and rope weren't fancy, but neither were they designed to emphasize safety.

The sergeant in charge of the course gave us our instructions. "This course is designed to instill confidence in yourself and your teammates. If you do not feel confident in your ability to complete an obstacle challenge, you may refuse it." I was elated. I could choose to refuse anything that I thought might hurt my knee. My confidence was growing already. As we left the assembly area, Sergeant Jackson glared at us, "Goddamn Privates," he growled, "I better not see any of you fuckin' chickenshit your way 'round this course." My confidence deflated, but my stubbornness took its place.

One obstacle required us to climb 25 feet up a tree onto a platform, grab a wire cable, and shimmy on down to its anchor point 40 feet across the forest floor with no belay or catch net below. Just as I was about to take my turn, the corporal at the platform said, "We just opened up the course about 20 minutes before y'all came. Girl fell off this obstacle and shattered her leg. Now you hold on tight."

I did hold on tight on that obstacle, and managed two more before coming to a series of platforms. The object was to scramble up the platforms until achieving the top level before jumping off into the "cushion" of a few inches of pine bark on the ground. My knee throbbed in anticipation. I skittered and stumbled up to the platform, jumped off and landed....WHUMP...on my back. No air. Got to get up. Can't breathe. Got to get up. God, help me. A bullhorn sounded over the field, "Is that goddamn Yocum lying spread-eagled on the goddamn ground?" That was the Company Senior Field Leader, the sergeant in charge of all the other sergeants in the field. The fact that he could tell out of

200 other people on the course that it was me lying “spread-eagled on the goddamn ground” proved that I had attracted far more attention in my short military career than I wanted. With a gasp, my lungs re-inflated, I rolled over and made my way to the next obstacle, completing it and one or two more before coming face to face with Sergeant DeShong.

Sergeant Jackson was our daily Drill Instructor, but Sergeant DeShong was our DIC, Drill Instructor in Charge. We would only see her every few days, but each time caused a chill dread to flutter in my heart. She stood by the next obstacle with a smile playing at her lips.

“Privates,” she said, “Privates, you notice that the obstacles all have numbers, but some of them also have names.”

I was puzzled. I’d only seen the numbers. “You don’t know the names, but we do. This obstacle,” she said, “This obstacle is called ‘The Dirty Name.’ It’s called that because so many people have gotten hurt on it. It’s called ‘The Dirty Name,’” she sang out the word “Name” like she was tuning up to preach.

“Now, Privates,” she continued, “You can refuse any obstacle on this course. You can refuse them and we can’t punish you for it. But we’ll know, privates, and you’ll know and you’ll have to live with that.”

The Dirty Name stood perhaps 12 feet tall. It was a simple construction, just a large crossbeam laid over two support beams with a shorter version of itself, perhaps four feet tall in front of it. Imagine the uneven parallel bars of a women’s gymnastics event on steroids. The trick was to use the smaller structure to mount up to the bigger structure,

scoot out hand over hand to the middle of the crossbeam with your legs dangling in the air and drop to your feet.

That was the part that worried me. My overall height and arm length made that drop less significant for me than for the other soldiers, but I calculated that my fall would be at least three feet and I was worried that I'd blow out my knee for good. I could have refused, of course. Sergeant DeShong had made a point of reminding us of the prerogative. When my turn came, she looked at me straight on. Smiling like a sadistic Cheshire cat she asked, "You sure you want to do this? You bein' brave or stupid?"

I most certainly was being more stupid than brave, but I was frightened of the consequences of refusal. I came up with a plan. If I could throw my weight backward, I could end up on my rear rather than my feet and avoid further injury to my knee.

I clamored up to the hanging crossbar of the Dirty Name and let go, throwing my weight backward and fell with a WHUMP! Suddenly there was no more fear or embarrassment, there wasn't anything but the flat blank slate of unconsciousness. From far away, I heard a voice calling out a name. "Private Yocum! Private Yocum! What's her first name? ... Jennifer! Wake up! Did they call an ambulance? Shit, how did she fall like that?" I felt like I was hearing everything from 10 feet away. I couldn't respond in the moment, but I thought about how nice it would be to just go to sleep and wake up somewhere else. But then I thought about the consequences of not trying to wake up when perhaps I could.

I slowly opened my eyes to see a face hovering above me. Focusing was difficult. It took me a while to realize the identity of the person speaking to me. Sergeant DeShong had taken off her mirrored sunglasses in alarm. "What is your name?" Hmm. It had been

a long time since I'd heard my actual first name since it had been replaced with G.G or "Goddamn." Maybe if I thought really hard, I could catch it. I concentrated. "Jennifer?" I said more as a guess than an answer.

Sergeant DeShong held up her hand. "How many fingers am I holding up?"  
Fingers? Oh, that's what those are. Let me see, how many are there? One. Two...

"Three?" I guessed, uncertain of my counting skills.

"Where are you?" she asked.

Well now, that was a hard one. I thought for a moment. South something. "South Carolina?"

"Get up," she said, "You're fine. Walk it off."

I'm not sure how I became upright again, but it probably involved a buddy yanking me into a vertical position. I staggered over to another obstacle, and tripped over a log. From across the obstacle course I heard the voice of the Company Senior Field Leader, magnified by a bull horn repeat a familiar refrain, "Is that goddamn Yocum on the ground again?" Sergeant DeShong ordered me off the course and I was allowed to sit, a remarkable concession, until the rest of the platoon formed up to march back to barracks.

I somehow made it back to the barracks, but by the next morning, my back had seized up and my left arm had gone numb. With my arm dangling uselessly, I was excused from regular training duty, but allowed to march to Mass on that Sunday where I profoundly understood my own wretchedness and begged for some touch of amazing grace.

“God,” I prayed, “I’m trying so hard to make it. Please help me. Please heal me.”

After a few days, I was able to recover some movement. Although I was restricted from PT – physical training – Africa decided she needed to get me ready to re-enter regular training with illicit PT at night.

### *Genuflections*

It was about a week after the accident, 2 a.m., and Africa and I had pulled night guard duty. She had me drop into the front leaning rest pushup position. I held myself up by my right arm, trying to keep the weight off my left and slowly lowered myself toward the floor. My left arm collapsed, just as it had the four times before and my chin hit the floor.

“Africa, I keep trying but I just can’t do it.”

“G. It was gonna be you and me. The rest of the bastards could have folded but it was gonna be you and me graduating from this goddamn place.”

I had not only failed myself, but failed my friend. I felt as worthless as my dangling left arm. I repositioned myself and tried to lower my body down, with the same chin-smacking result.

“Africa?” I whimpered.

“I know G, I know you are trying. Don’t hurt yourself anymore. Goddamnit. I’m sorry. I just hate these fuckers so much. That’s what keeps me going. I hate them too much to let them win.” That was my betrayal. I had let the bastards win and she hadn’t.

She rubbed her own right arm. She’d fractured it a few days earlier but she’d refused to let the medics cast it for fear that she would be “recycled.” Sergeant Jackson had made her drop for 20 pushups after he learned about the refusal. When she completed

her pushups, she jumped back to her feet and fixed him with a freeze-ray of a glare. “Shee-it,” he said, walking back to his office.

“I’m sorry, G,” she said, as I set back up for another try at my modified one-armed pushups. “I’m sorry I made you do it. Get up from there,” she said, with a tenderness reserved for her babies back home, “Stop it now. Goddamn it’s hot in here.”

From the next morning on, Africa became distant. Every so often, I’d catch her eye at a meal and she’d look at me with a strange sadness, like a lover who knows they are going to break up with you, but can’t find the words to say so. While I still bunked with my buddies who were still in active training, I no longer existed for them. I’d crossed the line out of their lives. I watched myself vanish from their world with a silent ache in my heart.

Since I’d been unable to recover from my accident in a way that let me continue training, I’d been reassigned to office duty for the platoon, continuing to report every few days for medical evals, but mostly waiting to be sent home. I felt like a broken piece of plastic furniture, waiting for garbage collection day, just taking up room on the front porch. Every day from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m., I answered phones or pulled CQ, guard duty. So far, I’d been set up to work with one woman with a serious eating disorder, another who had gotten pregnant the day before reporting for training, and another with some kind of serious depressive disorder. The office work wasn’t bad, but the days were long, and now that we’d been declared unfit for duty, some of the D.I.s took it upon themselves to reinforce our sense of failure.

One day, I was somehow left alone at the desk and one of the other platoon sergeants in the company came into the office looking for something, not expecting to see me. “Goddamn Private,” he asked, “What the fuck are you doin’ in here?”

“CQ duty, Sergeant,” I replied. I was “guarding” the company office.

“That’s right,” he smiled. “They finally gettin’ you the fuck outta here. Worthless piece of shit. That’s what you are, Private. Spendin’ the fuckin’ government’s time and money on you. Worthless. You hear me, Private?”

“Yes, Sergeant.” The diatribe went on longer and became more profane, if less creative. In truth, I could no longer hear what he was saying. Something broke inside me as the cold, black thought came into my mind. “God damn him straight to hell.” I didn’t say the words out loud, but that curse, mentally hurled with the full force of conviction ripped a gaping hole in my innocence. I was mortified, horrified at my willingness to do the absolute worst thing I could imagine. I immediately asked God’s forgiveness for my sin even as the man was leaving the building. In that moment as in no other before or since, I genuflected to the Devil. I’ve done things that were mean, thoughtless, and maybe even cruel, but that curse still stands in my mind as the worst thing I’ve ever done, because in that moment, I meant it. I meant for him to suffer.

In the Army, I learned how to fire an M16 into a human-shaped target. I learned how the ammunition for that weapon is designed to flip end over end to cause maximum damage. I learned how to wire and fire a Claymore anti-personnel device, how to throw a hand grenade, how to launch an anti-tank weapon. I learned the necessity for dehumanizing an enemy so that all that other death and injury could be justified. I didn’t learn how to save people from earthquakes, floods and volcanos. I learned how to kill

people and much worse, I learned that I had within my heart the potential to damn someone to eternal suffering. Crossing that line left a mark. A mark that let me know how easy it can be to give in to fear and rage, how easy it can be to give an order or assent to blow the bastards all to hell. It's a wound I still pray over to this day.

It would take another three weeks for my travel orders to get cut, returning me to civilian life. I left Fort Jackson just days before the rest of my platoon graduated, without a chance to say goodbye, and lost track of everyone, including Mex and Africa. But my injury/failure/betrayal had already broken our bond and that break would not be repaired.

I returned to the University of Portland to continue classwork toward my journalism degree with my injury and a new sense of myself that was at the same time stronger and a bit more damaged. It would take another two years of diagnostic tests at Madigan Army Hospital in Tacoma for the Army to conclude that I was not injured enough for a medical discharge, but not worth the effort to retain. I never went through any more training or reported for a more drills with my unit. I took my honorable discharge with relief, and, although I had nightmares for years that a bus would drive up to my door with orders that I was to report for Basic all over again, I am grateful for having had the experience.

There are times when I look back on my time in the Army and marvel at how my stubbornness and ego kept me going. I should have reported that I was not physically prepared to successfully complete Basic Training, and ask to defer training to another time. But that's the act of a mature person and I was a long way from mature. I might also be a tiny bit bullheaded.

In the decades since my military service, I've marched more miles in protest against wars than I ever marched while I was in the service. Having worn the uniform, I am extremely reluctant to support U.S. military involvement in conflicts that do not have clear justification, objectives or exit strategies because the soldiers and sailors in service today are still my buddies. I am still tied to them in a connection that will never be undone. Soldiers cross a moral line where we become willing to make war in order to preserve peace, to take lives in the name of larger values. Crossing that line makes us all siblings to each other and makes us all worth saving in some way, even a wretch like me.

I didn't make it as a soldier, but the desire to write and to serve my community stayed with me. I returned to school with a zealous purpose captured by my school motto, *Veritas vos liberabit*: the truth will set you free!

### Chapter 3 – Colorado

“Su-su-ssudio, whoa-oh!” Phil Collins crooned his nonsense over the speakers in the darkened gym. I didn’t usually attend dances on campus, but a bad case of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) led me to wander in. Most of the campus faces at the University of Portland (Oregon) were familiar by my junior year, but there was one small group dancing together I’d never seen before. They looked a little older than the rest of our crowd and they were having more fun than anyone else.

After two years of alternating college classes with making trips every few months to various medical specialists following my injury at Basic Training, I’d finally been granted my Honorable Discharge from the Army and embraced my identity as a journalism student. I adored the campus weekly paper, *The Beacon*, and I let my role as a reporter provide entrée into conversations and experiences I’d never have undertaken on my own. I now had a cause, to help people know and understand the News. I was a superhero with my powers including: Laser-like Interview Questions, Strong Active Verbs and Fast Typing. As a reporter, I felt I had permission to go anywhere and ask anything. Now, instead of trying to avoid attention, my job was not only my shield against the magnified ray of the sun, it was to keep that light shining through my pursuit of truth. I loved it!

One of the young men caught my eye and waved me over to dance with the group. He was cute, with brown eyes, curly hair, and a mustache. On a break for industrially-produced fruit punch, I learned his group was made up of recent grads from Notre Dame University who were doing a year of volunteer service in Portland with a program called Holy Cross Associates.

I thought I'd like to get to know the curly-haired young man better so I asked if I could interview the group for our campus newspaper. That interview would change my life.

Before we head into that interview, though, I'll need you to hop in your imaginary time traveling DeLorean and fire up the flux capacitor to journey to 1964, the year I was born Catholic.

Rosary beads entwined with my DNA at conception. I was born with as much certainty in the primacy of Catholicism, as I was in the fact that the USA was the greatest country in the world, and that milk does a body good. I am now lactose-intolerant and Protestant, and Donald Trump is president, but those are other stories.

Catholicism was the slightly-incense-and-wood-polish-scented air that I breathed every day of my life from birth to young adulthood. I went to Catholic schools, attended Mass whenever and wherever possible, participated in Youth Groups and Campus Ministry with the same uncritical acceptance of the need to do so as I accepted the need to eat. Even when I was confronted by the obvious gender inequities of church power dynamics or logical inconsistencies of church teaching, answers of, "You'll understand when you're older," or, "It's a mystery," sufficed.

But for the brief disappointment of learning that because I was a girl I could never be the priest I knew at age four I was called to become, I loved the church because I belonged to her. I was voted Most Likely to Become a Nun at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. And again in High School. During my senior year, I made an afternoon trip to a convent to consider that career option, but knew within the first 90 minutes that becoming a nun was not for me. I was a baby of the Watergate era. I grew up watching

the Vietnam War on television, and I understood that journalists had an essential role to play in righting wrongs in the world. So I threw myself into journalism to emulate my heroes, Woodward and Bernstein, Cronkite and Murrow, with the goal of becoming the Dan Rather of my generation.

You can now buckle up into that mental DeLorean and come screeching back on to the dance floor in Portland. The Notre Dame crew agreed to the newspaper interview, which is how I found myself sitting in their living room at a house just off campus, about a week later, wrapping up my notes.

“Well, that’s about all I need for the story,” I said, “Thank you for your time and good luck with whatever next year brings.”

“Do you have any more questions?” a fellow named Gary asked.

“No,” I said, slightly puzzled. “I’ve got everything I need for the story.”

“No,” the curly-haired guy who’d turned out to not be dating material asked, “Do you have any more questions for you?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, now becoming alarmed at the way the group was staring at me, “I don’t understand.”

Gary spoke, “You’ve been pointed out to us a person who might like to participate in this program.” My mouth dropped and a cold chill tickled my neck. Who had been talking about me behind my back? My interview had divulged that the Holy Cross Associates program was a year of domestic volunteer service emphasizing community, spirituality, service, and simple living in four cities in the US. In each city, six recent college grads shared a modest one-family home, hosted mass once a week, worked full-time jobs in teaching, social service, or church settings, and scrimped by on

an allowance of \$40 per month for all personal expenses. It sounded awful. I couldn't imagine who'd played this kind of practical joke on these sweet, naïve people, telling them I might be one of them.

“No,” I laughed, “I don't know who you've been talking to. I'm going to graduate and get right into journalism.” I did not share with them my career aspiration to host the CBS Evening News by the time I was thirty. But now there was a seed of something planted in my mind. Maybe a year of doing volunteer service would look good on a resume? Maybe having a year in between college and a career could work as a transition into real life? No, that was stupid. I already had an invitation from a camera man I'd met to go to Atlanta to check out some kind of crazy idea of a 24-hour news station called “CNN.” It was sure to fail, but it might be interesting.

Since I knew I couldn't be professionally religious, I figured my faith would remain my foundation, but that I'd have to put the roof over my head through some other career. My church would continue to tell me what was right and wrong, providing guidance and solace along the way, but would do so in the background of my life. But perhaps a year of real-life practical application of my faith could be more central. Those primary values of justice for the poor, love in community, sacrificial service – the refrains I'd heard all my life in pew and classroom – rang my bells. Maybe a year away from the life of my certain career path would provide stories down the road.

Eighteen months later, with my University diploma packed away in a box at my parents' house, I walked up the driveway of the campus of St. Mary's College in Moraga, California for Holy Cross Associate orientation. Whatever came next, it wasn't likely to include combat boots, Drill Instructors, or CS gas. Whatever might come, I'd already

faced the biggest challenges I was going to face, right? I walked up that driveway into the campus to face this year “off” my intended career track with a bit of a swagger, confident I could handle whatever came next.

That’s how I met M.

When I first saw M through the dusty haze and eucalyptus-peppered air of Contra Costa county, she was sitting on a low rock wall wearing a navy t-shirt with the word “RICE” printed in big block letters across the chest. At the time, I was not aware that Rice University was a pre-eminent school for engineering and sciences in Houston, Texas, so when I asked her, “Do you have t-shirts that say ‘Wheat’ and ‘Corn’ on them as well?” she laughed and thought I was being clever. I went with it.

She was clearly at least four notches above me on the social status food pyramid. M was captain of her flag football team, valedictorian, and a homecoming queen. I was a social bottom-feeder, a band geek/theater nerd, a failed soldier who hadn’t cracked the top 10% of her graduating class. We should have had nothing to do with each other, but since the HCA program was primarily filled with students from Notre Dame University – Domers – we at least shared a bond of being outsiders.

We became adept at rolling our eyes in sync at the Domer dynamics and jargon that kept us feeling like we were sitting at the kids’ table, waiting for someone to pass the gravy. On that last day, we hugged goodbye as M headed to the Portland house while my housemates and I hopped on board the Running Dog headed east for the Rockies.

We didn’t talk more than a few times that year. M and I were both having a rough go: living in a two-bedroom house with five strangers on no money turns out to be challenging even with spiritual support. We weren’t inclined to talk about our continuing

sense of being outsiders, lost and unable to find a sense of center, when both of us could be overheard by our housemates. But M lingered in the background like a song or the scent of eucalyptus on a hot August Day.

*Rocky Mountain Highs and Lows*

Somehow, I thought there'd be more trees. Colorado is the only place I've ever lived where people talk about elevation before population. Colorado Springs was high, 6,035 feet, and dry, with humidity usually under 40% and not nearly enough oxygen in the air for sea level dwellers. The atmosphere was a mirror image of South Carolina's heavy humidity, but still, it felt like there was no air in the air. My housemates and I could not figure out why we were flattened after two or three trips up and down the stairs of our new house that first day. People from the church parish to which we were assigned chuckled at us sprawled in the living room gasping like stranded fish. "You'll get used to it," they said, "but it'll take about six weeks."

We laughed at their puny assessments of our vitality. My housemate Jim signed us up to volunteer at the Pike's Peak Marathon a few days later. We took a van up 13 miles of switchbacks to hand out space blankets and juice boxes at the top of the mountain. Within 30 minutes, the race organizers looked at our blue faces and packed us back down the mountain as we clutched our heads, pounding from altitude sickness.

I grew up with an assumption that I was a citizen of every state in the US, that wherever the Stars and Stripes flew, I was home. I was learning that that wasn't the case. Whether it was the thick humidity of the Eastern Seaboard or thin air at altitude, home wasn't where my flag flew, home was where I could breathe freely. It would take another

30-plus years for me to truly draw the deep breath of freedom in my native land, but that's a later chapter.

What Colorado lacked in trees, and breathable air, it made up for in spectacular rock formations in fiery reds, oranges, yellows, and golds. Once that fabled six weeks of acclimitization passed, I could at least catch my breath enough to enjoy my surroundings.

Of the six of us, I was the only HCA actually working in a church. I was supposed to oversee the Food Pantry, organize social justice education events, attend to the needs of the hungry and homeless who came to the church, and perform the ubiquitous "other duties as assigned." The job turned out to be harder than I thought, especially since I was fired from at least one of the tasks in my job description on my very first day.

### *Leave a Light on for Me*

I stealthily flipped the lights on and snuck down the hallway sniggering over my small win. The ladies running the food pantry at Sacred Heart Catholic Church already had their victory. They'd had me fired from overseeing the pantry after my first day shenanigans, but for the rest of the year I worked at that church, my weekly act of resistance was to at least turn the lights on for my homeless and hungry brothers and sisters while they waited in the dark for their moment of charity. The ladies would come out to the gym to snap the lights off again, but for a moment, I would triumph.

Even in the ruins of my food pantry fiasco, I was given a fancy title for a volunteer job, Director of Social Justice Ministries. I know now that there are a number of ways to grow in faith. People can travel a path of contemplation and introspection. People can invest in personal relationship with Jesus through charismatic devotion. People can choose an intellectual path of study and writing. Me? I was all about the

action. Social Justice ministries was all about doing Jesus. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, fight the power. Why did this appeal to me? I'm driven by a fundamental need to demonstrate my value through accomplishment. I secretly, or not so secretly, couldn't stand happy-clappy Christians who didn't advocate against the death penalty, or pious contemplatives who didn't protest wars. I was more than a little self-righteous and more than a little scared that I would be found wanting on Judgment Day because of the good I'd left undone.

Motivated more by fear than love, I wasn't able to bring a personal experience of being in need to my job, but I did have one idea. Since no one knew me at the church or in the town, I could pretend I was hungry and see what it was like to go through the process of getting help from a "customer" perspective. Delighted with myself for thinking of the idea, I dressed up in my rattiest purple sweatshirt and cutoff shorts and rode my bicycle to the church gym.

"S'cuse me, ma'am?" I mumbled to the woman at the window. "I'm in town to start school at the Colorado College and my loan check isn't in yet and I'm wondering if..." I knew I was acting in a role and still the words stuck in my throat. "I was told this was where I might come for some food?"

The woman glared at me. I recall her face only as a series of dots and lines: pencil-point eyes behind small glasses; a pin-prick of a mouth angrily sketched in crayon; her hair severely pulled back on her head and wound into a furious coil. "You have to go to the community center," she clipped at me through the glass.

"S'cuse me, ma'am? The paper here says to come here for food."

“You have to go to the community center and get your slip, then you come back here if we’re still open.”

“Uh, okay.” I looked at my watch. The window would close in ninety minutes. I hopped on my bike and pedaled to the community center to wait in line for a social worker. The waiting area was filled with squirrely children, tired mothers, and desperation. I began to feel bad about my ruse knowing that time with the social workers was valuable, but I was determined to have as much of this experience as I could get away with.

My number was called and I sat down on the metal chair next to the social worker’s desk, prepared to lie for my own good. The woman was kind and patient as she listened to my story and had me fill out a sheaf of forms. I was surprised at the amount of information I was expected to have just to qualify for a box of food. Driver’s license number, social security number, current address, last address, job history, etc. I had all that information memorized, but I thought about the number of people who must show up at these offices without this or that data point, meaning a return home for the information and another day or more without food. Some of the form questions were so awkwardly worded I was stumped, even with my college education. I couldn’t imagine how people with high school educations, or literacy challenges, could fill them out successfully.

The social worker helped me navigate the forms all the way down to the last line asking for my signature at which point I stopped the process. I explained who I was and what I was doing, and much to her credit she just laughed and said, “You stinker!” I was embarrassed and relieved. She agreed to give me the slip I needed to get the food box and

as I left I said, “I really hope I didn’t waste your time. This was a lesson I’ll never forget.” She waved me off and called, “Next.”

I scampered back out to my bike and pedaled back to the church just a few blocks away, twenty minutes left until the pantry closed. I handed my slip through the window and was told to take a seat in the unlit gym. It was August. There was no reason to feel cold, but I shivered nonetheless.

After a few minutes, my name was called and I went to a counter to retrieve my box of food. I mumbled a thank you and took the food box back to my office where I went through the contents: a package of lasagna noodles, a can of peaches, a can of stewed tomatoes, a jar of pickles, a few boxes of rice side dishes that required milk and butter, two jars of baby food—in short, nothing that went together, nothing that didn’t require pots, pans, or a fairly complete set of kitchen equipment to open or prepare. No one had asked if I had access a kitchen or running water. No one had inquired if I had food allergies or dietary needs, or a baby. For that matter, none of the food pantry ladies had even so much as told me to have a nice day.

I repacked food into the box and returned to the food pantry as the ladies were closing up, now introducing myself with my shiny new job title. “I want to thank you for all the work you do here,” I said, “and I have a few suggestions about how we might do things better.” Their faces went blank and the air took on the kind of chill you feel when the sun drops behind the mountains in wintertime. I was mildly surprised that they weren’t enthusiastic about my suggestions, but soldiered on.

I went through my list of suggestions with the dogged confidence of a 21-year old who knew so much better than these church ladies how their charitable duty should be

done. After all, I was a professional volunteer. While ice crystals crackled in the air, I concluded, “And the last thing is that we really should turn the lights on in the gym while people are waiting. It’s like a scary cave in there. Well, that’s it for now. We’ll talk more later.”

Apparently after my exit, those biddies flushed to the rectory like a fury of wet badgers. I was fired from the food pantry by the perturbed head priest before the hour was out. I had crossed a line into their domain from which there was no return, at least no return to that food pantry in Colorado. But I knew I’d done the right thing. I knew that there was a better way to meet people’s needs with dignity and respect. That desire to do better would continue to lead me to profound involvement with people who were hungry and homeless. Oh boy, would it.

### *Jesus Goo*

After being fired from the food pantry, my portfolio of “other duties as assigned” expanded greatly. I got to teach sixth grade catechism to about a dozen boys whom I kept in line with the promise of karate lessons at the end of class if they behaved themselves. After a few unauthorized demonstrations of the karate lessons on unsuspecting siblings, I was relieved of that duty and assigned to bringing communion to shut-ins. One day, I brought my pix (the small vessel containing sacramental communion wafers) into a Catholic nursing home. I visited the rooms I’d been told to go to, but then noticed another patient in a room that wasn’t on my list.

The woman was delighted to see me and grasped my wrist as though she were a large bird of prey. I asked if she was Catholic.

“Oh yes,” she said, “All my life.”

I was surprised that she wasn't on my list of rooms, but figured there'd been a mistake. "Would you like to receive communion?"

"Oh yes," she said, tears springing to her eyes, "I haven't had communion in so long."

That was odd. I knew that the church tried to send someone out with communion at least once a month. I assumed she was mistaken. I withdrew the wafer out of the pix to offer it to her and just then noticed the sign above her bed. "Nothing by mouth."

She was so eager for the host, her whole face glittered. I felt my whole interior collapse. I'd never seen anyone want Communion so much, nor had I ever had to withhold the sacrament from anyone. It felt like a cheat and a betrayal. "I'm so sorry," I said, withdrawing the wafer. "I see you aren't supposed to have anything by mouth." She started sobbing.

"It won't hurt me," she begged. "The body of Christ could never hurt me."

"Are you sure?" I asked, my 11 years of medical expertise gained through watching M\*A\*S\*H reruns had not prepared me for this scenario.

"Yes, I'm certain," she said, drawing my hand toward her mouth.

I put the wafer on her tongue.

Those who haven't had a Catholic communion wafer on the tongue can't truly understand the adhesive properties of this quarter-sized stamp of gluten. Half of the reason Catholics drink wine with communion is just to have enough fluid to swallow the thing before it sticks to the roof of your mouth. A dry communion wafer is hard enough to get down without impairments.

My bed-ridden friend coughed, then gasped, then began to choke.

“Spit it out,” I pleaded, cupping my hand to her mouth. She shook her head, coughing and gasping more. “Please,” I said, “It’s okay. I promise.”

Catholics believe in the metaphysical transubstantiation of the communion host into the actual body of Christ. My little old lady was having to choose between a medical crisis and the gravest sacrilege.

Near respiratory failure won the moment; she spat the wafer into my hand and was able to breathe again. I wrapped my hand with a purificator, a kind of holy napkin, and said, “I’m going to let you rest now. God bless you.”

My interior monologue ran a bit differently, along lines of. “Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God.” I’d nearly killed this woman and now had the Body of Christ oozing in the palm of my hand. If shame, guilt and humiliation had a physical manifestation, it would feel like that puddle of glutinous spit in my hand, just smeared all over my body. I’d crossed another line, trying to do the right thing by letting Mercy (God’s favorite Sacrament) transcend a rule that the patient wanted me to ignore. What an idiotic thing to do! I had no idea what to do next, just to get back to the rectory as fast as possible and get the priest to do whatever holy juju was necessary to keep Jesus from becoming hazardous waste or me from burning in hell.

Oh, and there was one other complication. The little orange pickup truck that I drove on church errands was a stick shift. For the drive back to the church, a Jesus-y goo puddled in my right hand while I managed the stick shift between my upturned fingers. Ashen-faced, I parked the truck, reaching over with my left hand to pull the emergency brake and sought out Father Clem.

I told him my story, and as I think of it now, I'll bet the gruffness in his voice came from trying to bite back his laughter, as I was so clearly upset about the incident. He took me back to the holy sink in the sacristy (the priest's changing room) and explained that the holy sink was plumbed to discharge directly to the ground. The key to disposal of leftover sacred elements was to return them to the earth. Trust the Catholics to return to their pagan roots in a crisis. All that fire and water ritual came from somewhere.

I don't recall being sent out to do more nursing home visits after that, but by spring, halfway through that volunteer year, Fr. Clem did decide to send me to the local hospital to farm me out as a volunteer chaplain.

I was suspicious of the instructor for the chaplaincy class. He was the first person with whom I'd ever spoken wearing a clerical collar who wasn't a Catholic priest. He was a Unitarian. Alarm bells went off in my head before he explained that no, he wasn't part of Rev. Moon's Unification Church. That was something else. He believed all paths to God had their own wisdom, validity, and value. And while we, as volunteers, may not believe the same thing, our first job was never to try to convince other people our path was the right or better path.

Mind: blown. Up to this time, I'd accepted that Catholicism was the one true path as a matter of fact. The existence of other religions in the world was a reflection of people's unknowingness or unwillingness to see this fact. But here was an obviously good, well-educated, compassionate man who was willing to not only accept that other religions existed, but that they were valid and beneficial. The idea cracked my worldview open just enough to allow for the possibility that other religious perspectives might have merit. Who'd have thought? That crack eventually reached my most basic foundations;

but at the time, it meant a little light shone through. I'd crossed another line, opening up to the wisdom of other traditions.

Other cracks appeared. HCAs, Peace Corps alumni, and other volunteer workers sometimes talk about their lives being "ruined" by their experiences. In truth, it's just our worldviews that get upended, career plans derailed, and relationships fundamentally re-examined. No biggie. For me, my up close and personal view of hunger and homelessness, coupled with the hospital gig, led me away from thinking I could ever be happy as a journalist – a professional observer of life. If I was going to make a difference in the world, I was going to have to be the difference in the world. (Note: I might have developed the tiniest bit of a Messiah complex in my 20s. These days I have a whole congregation to remind me I am not actually their Savior. That job has been filled.)

I worked at Sacred Heart Church for six months before I started to understand the difference between church work and ministry. Anybody can work at a church. There are all kinds of jobs that need to be done. Ministry is a way of being in that work that's all about holding space for the presence of God to show up, however it will. My introduction to ministry began with a volunteer chaplaincy program called Clinical Pastoral Education.

Fundamentally, Clinical Pastoral Education taught me how to be a calm presence in highly emotional settings including birth, death, suffering, pain, and fear. I was taught how to be present to people without trying to make them feel better. You read that right, I had to learn how to NOT try to make people feel better. Like a lot of people, I grew up in a home where I was told making people feel better was my reason to be alive. "Make

your father proud.” “Make your mother happy.” I was supposed to bake cakes, sing songs, or provide some form of service to force family frowns upside down.

Making these helping gestures out of generosity and kindness is wonderful. Performing these same gestures so you can “make” people feel a certain way is just plain manipulation driven by codependency. I had to learn that the path through the grief, anger, and sadness of a serious illness or death meant having to feel those feelings, all the feelings. Those feelings might include anger, sadness, and loss, but they might also include relief or humor, lust or even joyful gratitude. Trying to distract people from their feelings through “making” them feel a different way subverted the healing process and sometimes pissed them off.

I learned how to listen for moments of the patient’s best selves, and to mirror those moments back to them, how to pray for grace without being attached to what that grace looked like, and how to not fear death. I also learned how to move in that crazy time warp of the hospital environment when minutes and hours and whole days can get lost in the ever-present orbit of modern medicine, which includes a lot of waiting—waiting for test results, waiting for the procedure to begin, waiting to get better, or not. In short, these were my first lessons in how to become a human “being” instead of a human “doing.” And by doing so, I crossed a line into becoming more fully alive.

I also learned to adore nurses. One night, at about 2 a.m., a nurse came to the on-call room where I was sleeping to let me know they’d brought in a man who’d died and the family wanted the chaplain to stay with his body until they could arrive.

The nurse brought me down to the morgue area and checked in with me. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Have you ever seen a dead body before?”

“No, ma’am,” I said, my military training kicking in. I’d never seen a dead body at Basic, but I knew I could tap into soldier-mode if I needed to face something difficult, “I’ll be all right.” She gently pulled back the sheet from his head. The man’s face was white, going to blue. He was a big man, perhaps early in his early 60s. He’d had a heart attack, I think. He’d died with a breathing tube down his throat and now his mouth wouldn’t quite shut. His hair was laced with silver streaks. It had been brushed back from his face. There was a sense of absent presence about him, like he was already becoming a memory. The nurse asked again, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I wasn’t scared, or even sad. There was something about being in the presence of a dead man that made me feel more alive. I was aware of the gift of my pulse, of my breath, the fact that I had a future that he no longer had. Death itself wasn’t anything to fear. As I’d learned from my patients at this hospital, and would learn many more times in life, death wasn’t what people feared: it is living without hope or love that makes us most afraid.

I recalled a conversation I’d had on an earlier chaplaincy shift within the last few weeks. I’d visited a woman, a member of my congregation, whose husband was a doctor. I’d entered her room with a smile of greeting. She was in terrible pain, but she tried to smile back. After opening words, she asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead,” I replied.

“And you won’t tell anyone?”

“No ma’am, not unless you ask me to say something to someone.”

“Is it okay to want to die?”

I might have forgotten to breathe for a second as I riffled through my mental Cliff Notes for how to respond. It felt okay to take a beat or two to think this idea out, like, really okay. Was it okay to want to die? Suicide is a mortal sin in the Catholic church, but that wasn't her question. I leaned back into my training as a journalist, when in doubt, ask a clarifying question.

"Tell me more about that," I said.

"I've been in awful pain for over six weeks," she gasped. "No one knows what's wrong with me. My husband wants to treat this as aggressively as possible, but he doesn't know what to treat. The pain medications don't do anything. I can't sleep. I'm so tired. I just want to die."

"I hear you," I said, "That sounds awful."

Her face filled with relief. "You're not going to tell me I'm going to hell for wanting to die?"

"Of course not," I said. "You're in pain. You probably have forgotten what it feels like to feel well..."

"Yes!" she interrupted, "That's exactly it. I can't even remember what that's like."

"So, what I think you really want is to be out of pain, right?"

"Yes!" she said.

"And to not be afraid any more, or have your husband be worried and upset any more, is that right?"

"Yes!" she affirmed, actually smiling a bit.

“Well, I can see that death seems like a way toward those ends, but we can hope it’s not the only way, right?”

She dropped her head back to her pillow. “That’s it. That’s right. I don’t have to die.”

“Well, we can hope for that not to happen right away” I said, “But instead of praying for death, how about we pray for an end to pain and suffering, and an end to worry and fear, whatever that looks like.” Holding her hand and praying for her in that way, that felt like standing in a clean shower of grace. It was a Wholly moment – whole and holy – a moment when I felt fully connected to my purpose and to God. There aren’t that many Wholly moments in life, but when they come, it feels like sunlight streaming through the soul.

But now, here I was, several hours later looking at Death; cold and quiet. This man was somebody’s father, somebody’s husband. The family’s grief would be their own. My training told me to be there as a non-anxious presence, to make phone calls on their behalf, to pray with them as they desired, to stay until they didn’t need me any more, and for God’s sake, to not say anything stupid, which kept me much quieter than I otherwise might have been.

When the family arrived, the amazing Nurse explained what had happened, how he’d been treated, and when he’d died. The Nurse got them coffee and cookies, she held their hands and brought them Kleenex, and told them about the next steps. I would learn to do all those things later on, but now I watched the Nurse embody the presence of Grace. It was such a beautiful thing to see. I knew I didn’t want to be a nurse, but I knew for certain that whatever I’d do in life, I wanted to embody that caring and that

hospitality. I knew these gifts weren't my personal strong suit, but they were more beautiful to me than a work of nature or art, and still are.

When the family finally left, one of my housemates picked me up from the hospital just as sunrise began pouring a fruit bowl of colors over the mountain tops of the Front Range. It was coming on summer again, near the end of our time in Colorado. I felt deepened by my experience, like I had more of a substantial sense of who I was in the world. I was relieved and grateful that the year was coming to an end, ready to face the next chapter.

The fragrance of the morning sky hummed a song in the back of my mind that reminded me of eucalyptus and August and the recent phone call I'd had with M where we'd made plans to share an apartment for a year in Portland while she applied for graduate school and I applied to serve as an overseas missionary. It smelled of new life waiting to begin.

## Chapter 4 – Oz

M met me at the gate of Portland International Airport dressed in full nun regalia, save for the seafoam green converse sneakers peeking out below her improvised habit, carrying a small sign that said “Welcome from the mission field, Sister Mary Jennifer.”

I guffawed and fell immediately into the game, the guitar case I carried serving as the perfect prop. We adopted loud voices talking about the orphans and the villages I’d served all the way to baggage claim. We felt a little bad when the porter refused to take a tip after wheeling my luggage out to M’s car, but not too bad.

M had found a house for us to stay at for a few weeks until we could find jobs and an apartment to rent. We processed our respective housemate dramas from the prior year while searching the classifieds for jobs, homes, furniture--basically everything.

With no qualifications aside from knowing the difference between Claude Monet and Andy Warhol, I became a retail picture framer. When I called my parents to tell them about my job, my father, who could barely change a lightbulb without breaking a lamp, was convinced my work with large panes of glass, chop saws, and nail guns would leave the shop floor littered with my fingers. In the year I worked at the framing shop, I never so much as needed a Band-Aid; but I was convinced that everyone should work retail through at least one Christmas season. Anyone who can maintain a wish for Peace on Earth and good will toward all while working retail at Christmas, earns their angel wings immediately.

M became a bike mechanic, because on top of all of her other skills, she was handy. Our jobs allowed us to make rent through the year to come. We’d both been “ruined for life” by our HCA experience and wanted more of the same, but different.

Our experiences with the Holy Cross Associates had sharpened our appetites for God. We knew how much we didn't know about the Bible, about church, or ministry, and although the path to priesthood was closed to us, we hungered for ways to center our professional and personal lives on God. The HCA years we'd individually experienced had their struggles. A year of stuffing six young spiritual idealists in a small house to live together in service and planned poverty could have made for an interesting season of MTV's "The Real World."

Sure, we had a religious purpose, but we had plenty of drama all the same. We squabbled over groceries and chores and who was tying up the phone line. Add to that our "simple lifestyle," with each of us trying to manage all of our personal expenses on \$40 per month, and our living in a fishbowl with church members ready to drop by any time asking help, and things got tense.

There was also the fact that one of my housemates was a deeply closeted lesbian. I knew she was hiding something, but I couldn't figure out what it was, and I resented being blocked out of her life, deflected. She resented my continuing efforts to try to get into her life. I felt frustrated and confused and constantly rebuffed. It was kind of miserable.

But with M, things would be different. We were two friends in a two-bedroom apartment, doing regular jobs just to make money until we took off on our respective independent adventures. M wanted to continue her journey through academics and applied to Harvard Divinity School. I wanted to continue my journey through overseas ministry and applied to become an Associate Lay Missioner with the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (the Maryknolls).

M and I liked each other and I knew we were going to become good friends. It didn't matter if our jobs were good or bad or if we ate ramen noodles three nights a week. We would go through our respective application processes, drive out to the beach whenever our schedules coincided to have a day off together, and wait out the year. There were no worries.

Except that M seemed worried about something. We'd just moved into the apartment and were sitting down to a nutritious supper of Kraft Mac'n'Cheese.

"I've got to tell you something," she said. "Don't freak out. I probably should have said it before you moved in with me, but the thing is, I think I'm gay, a lesbian."

I put down my fork. "Uh huh. Okay. Well, that's... Well, as long as you don't develop any feelings for me, because I'm not that way. Right? It'll be okay. You're not seeing... dating anyone? I mean you can, and all, but we'll have to work something out, so you can... okay. It'll be okay."

My exterior monologue was interrupted by the interior monologue of, "What the hell? How could she do this? Not tell me when she knew? Crap. Don't be an ass, Jen."

M was shaking, "You're taking this much better than I thought. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I mean. It's not like I want you to have to lie to me." I said what I thought a grown up might say.

"No," she said, "I wouldn't do that."

I had only ever knowingly spoken to one gay person in my life. Paul was a tuba player I knew from my one year of playing in the college pep band. He had come out as gay during our senior year of college, a brave thing to do on the campus of a Catholic

college in 1986, and I'd interviewed him for the student newspaper. For the interview, Paul turned up the flaming gay boy schtick big time, teasing me in a way I'd later find hysterically funny, but at the time made horribly uncomfortable. I was so thrown by the teasing, I never wrote the article. Later, I learned I'd been surrounded by lesbians at various times in my life, especially at the Girl Scout camp where I'd worked as a counselor (duh!). But my formal exposure to "homosexuals" was through stereotypes and silences. I knew homosexuality was a sin, a really bad sin, something so bad that no one ever spoke about it.

At that time, nobody talked about homosexuality *per se* outside of conversations about AIDS. Gay men got AIDS because that was God's punishment. That sentence makes me shudder to write it, but I didn't question the idea at the time. Homosexuality was something alluded to in whispers, gestures, and curse words. A "faggot" was a boy who was small, sensitive, capable of showing emotion, interested in art, or who somehow violated a hyper-masculine ideal. A "lezzy" or "dyke" was a woman who was big, assertive, able to remain calm in an emergency, interested in sports, science or something outside of boys, or who somehow otherwise violated a hyper-feminine ideal.

I had been called a "lezzy" on campus, not because of my actual sexual orientation, but because I'm 6 feet tall and have a deeper than average speaking voice. I'd never thought about my own sexual orientation. Most people never do. I just went along with the script – Cinderella, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast – every story or movie that had a happy ending, ever. Meet your gender opposite, fall in love, marry, have babies, grow old holding each other's wrinkling, age-spotted hands, be buried in side-by-

side plots with “loving (gender-specific) spouse and (gender-specific) parent” etched beneath your names. That’s the way life was supposed to be.

I’d dated boys in high school and college. They were sweet. I loved them well enough, I thought, but I didn’t have the head-over-heels Hollywood gush for them. Kissing was nice, but I was way too much of a “good girl” to do anything more. I was a brain, not a body, and that was that. I guessed I’d probably meet a man who was equally brain-oriented over body and we’d figure out the rest, but I wasn’t terribly excited about the idea of finding or catching a man, particularly if doing so meant wearing makeup or uncomfortable shoes.

For the next week or so after she told me she “might” be gay, M didn’t bring up the subject and we continued to bond over the joys of nesting in our new place and the shared vicissitudes of working for minimum wage in service industry jobs. I adopted my favorite strategy of conflict management at the time, ignoring the issue and hoping it would go away. I really liked M and the way she made me laugh and feel at home. I admired her deep faith, her intelligence, her curiosity. I loved her in the way I loved anybody I ever loved, passionately, but without a sexual flicker. Then, about a week after the first revelation and over another meal of pasta-in-a-box, M said, “I think I’m in love with you.”

I took a breath. I got up. “Look, I love you as a friend. I really do. But, this is a lot. Okay? I think I need to walk around for a bit. I’m coming back. I promise. But, I just need a minute.” I walked outside to the parking lot of the apartment complex. Huge cedar trees stood sentinel over the edges of the driveways. They made me feel safe, like someone was always standing guard over my home. I walked over to one of the trees and

embraced it, pressing my cheek against the resinous bark. I took a few deep breaths and walked in circles for a few minutes before returning to the apartment. I didn't really have anywhere else to go.

M had been sobbing. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"No," I said, "It's not your fault. You can't help how you feel." I took her hands. "Look, I know that I love you, but I've never thought about loving you like that. I just need some time to think, okay?"

"You're not leaving me?" She was wrecked, surprised, hopeful.

"No, I'm not leaving you," I said. "I just need to think. Could we just not talk about this for a little while? I need to go into my room and just, like pray."

And that's what I did for the next few weeks. I thought and prayed. I felt nervous and curious, like an explorer heading into an area that other people thought repulsive, but it didn't feel that way to me. At one point, I made a trip out to my university campus to see if I could find someone to talk to about my situation. I don't remember the counselor asking me about my feelings, but she focused on setting up physical boundaries to ensure my safety. "She's not going to attack me," I said.

"You just want to be safe, and clear," the counselor said. "You don't want to give any mixed signals."

But my signals were all mixed up in my own heart. I loved M in the way I'd loved all my best girlfriends. She lived in the deepest corners of my heart. We shared each other's most tender secrets, we cried each other's tears. I wanted to be with her all the time, but I'd had no strong feelings of physical attraction for her, because I'd never had strong feelings of physical attraction to anyone.

Like I said, kissing boys was nice, but mostly, dating felt like theater: I say something witty, he says something charming. I say something sweet, he says something awkwardly romantic. Even when the script was followed well, it still felt like a script, like I was directing myself in a play. Romance, even flirting, felt like an out of body experience.

I'd grown up watching Perry Mason reruns, and my dating life felt like that: a mystery to be solved in black and white. If I could say the right things and do the right things and unlock the puzzle, then my one-day husband and I could live our own lives, mutually supporting each other but generally independent of each other, until next week's episode.

But now this whole new possibility emerged, terrifying and beautiful. M and I had a container, a year of in-between time before real life started. It felt okay to explore an idea about sexuality that would be over and done come next Fall. "This could be a chapter in a book I write one day," I thought, never imagining it would become the most important "line" I crossed in my life. I prayed harder than I've ever prayed in my life for God to tell me what to do, to give me a vision of which way I should go.

During one of these fervent prayers, I had a vision. I saw myself praying on my knees at a moss-covered rock. My face was wet with tears and from the moss itself. I heard a voice telling me to look up from my rock. On my left, a grey, rocky path wound its way up a mountainside. It was desolate, but beautiful in its way, like the desert at dawn. On my right a rich brown dirt path wound its way into a lush, green valley. Down on the valley floor, I could see a large present wrapped in a red bow. I felt in my bones the left-hand path was a path of celibacy, while the right-hand path promised the

wilderness and vitality of relationship. The wrapped present held the gift of sexual intimacy. A voice in my prayer said, “Whichever path you choose is holy, I am there with you always.”

I don’t claim to be on speaking terms with God lightly. There have only been a very few times in my life when I’ve gotten a clear message from the Holy and this was one of them. Regardless of anything else I’ve ever studied or come to know about God, I know that God wants us to be happy – authentically happy – no matter which path we choose. God’s ringer is that true joy comes from serving others, but that’s another sermon.

In my vision, there was a temptation to the left-hand rocky path. By this time, I had discerned that whatever my future contained, a flat-scripted pretense of relationship with a husband and family was not going to be part of my picture. I was too enlivened by my love for M to accept anything less. But I was also dreadfully afraid of what I might lose by going “down into the valley” of being identified as a gay/queer/lezzie/dyke/faggot, any one of these terms could get me fired, evicted, disowned, or killed under the right circumstances, if the wrong person knew about us.

The enticement of that green valley and the box in the clearing were strong, but the promise that God’s love and grace would be with me no matter what, made the trip down the right-hand path toward joy possible.

Weeks passed until a road trip took us out of state. The pull of relationship and intimacy won the struggle in my heart. We kissed for the first time in a Motel 6 in Mountain Home, Idaho. Do you remember how in “The Wizard of Oz” everything before and during the tornado is in black and white, then Dorothy wakes up in Technicolor? It

was like that. Suddenly all the grainy greyness of kissing and fooling around with boys was shattered into the full expression of color and depth and ecstasy. I finally got to feel the in-body experience that love is supposed to be. It took a while to for me to come around to full-on R-rated sex, but dang, that's when I finally got what all the fuss and bother was about.

Part of what made that first year with M possible came from knowing we were only going to be together for that year. But now we were cocooned with each other in an environment where only the two of us existed. We were terribly afraid of being found out by our employers, our friends, or our families. We barely spoke to anyone outside of each other. M had a few friends who were lesbian, but I was too scared of being found out to even be seen with them.

I remember sneaking copies of *Just Out*, the local LGBTQ newspaper, home from forays into Portland, pouring over the stories of these strange and wonderful people who were, somehow, my people. It was thrilling and disturbing to read stories of people who were actually living their lives openly. I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of my parents finding out about M and me. I couldn't bear the thought of telling them about our relationship, but again, it wasn't going to last. Our fairytale bubble would pop into rainbows as soon as M went to school. My missionary gig would be two and a half years, wherever I might wind up in the world. We'd drift from each other over time and distance. She'd find someone new. I'd find my joy in Christ. That was the plan all the way until I crossed the International Date Line to land in Seoul, Korea.

## Chapter 5 – Korea

*Snapshots of Seoul, 1989: A wizened, tiny woman squats at the edge of the street pouring salt over an aluminum bowl of chopped cabbage and peppers, preparing kimchi about 14 inches away from the tailpipe of a motorcycle revving its engine.*

*A table full of dried squid arranged by size for sale as snacks gathers flies under the hot summer sun. A cloud of tear gas blooms over the tops of cherry tree blossoms.*

*The surprised look on a couple of old ladies' faces who'd been trading insults about me in Korean, when I bowed to them as I left the bus and said to them, in Korean, "Thank you, grandmothers."*

The missionaries who'd been in-country twenty years or more told our group, "You will never understand Korea. You can become fluent in the language, you will learn to navigate and make friends. But you will never understand Korea." After just a few weeks in Seoul, I was ready to believe them. Of course, I barely understood why I was in Korea in the first place. This was not a country I would have chosen for my service assignment, and leaving M, while not feeling like a mistake, hurt like a regretted elective surgery.

I'd been sent to the Republic of Korea, of course, South Korea as it's called in the west. In-country, we never called it "south" Korea. Koreans clung to the hope of reconciliation, of being reunited with their families and allowed to return to their ancestral homelands across the bleeding wound of the DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone, that ripped through the peninsula to create a cease fire in 1952. To this day, the Korean War is still not officially over.

The wound of the DMZ was only one of a long list of injuries to Korea, sometimes called the "Shrimp between two Whales" for the ways China and Japan have

raided and conquered the tiny Korean peninsula between them. The Koreans resented the Chinese and loathed the Japanese. Some had appreciation for Americans, but the Korean culture was, and still is, remarkably homogenous and ethnocentric. Children born from unions between American soldiers and Korean nationals were *persona non grata*. I taught English to some of these kids who intended to immigrate to the US, and saw them treated with contempt outside my classroom.

Korea wasn't the location I'd had in mind when I'd signed up to serve as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner. I'd hoped for placement in Kenya or Japan, but consent to our placement location was not required, so there I was.

My mental slide show of Korea contains vivid images of student/police clashes in the streets. Corruption in Korean government was *de rigueur*. Bribes didn't just grease the wheels of licenses, permits, and contracts; bribes were how business was done. At the time I lived in Seoul, stories of building collapses were common, due to substandard construction and falsified building code reports.

Then again, my presence in Korea was itself built on a lie. It was the lie I only told once, but that lie and the truth behind it would upend my world.

Entry into the Associate Lay Missioner Program through the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America – the Maryknoll Missioners – required a long application process, physical exam, and finally, a psychological evaluation. I'd always been mistrustful of psychologists and had an irrational fear of their mind-reading powers. My anxiety was heightened because I had a secret I was trying to keep, and walking into this kind of examination intending to keep it went against all of my values. But, after 40

minutes or so of poking around the more tedious parts of life, there it was. “Are you homosexual?”

I flushed, squirmed, sweated and squeaked out, “No.” I am a terrible liar, always have been. And it’s not just the “on the spot” lie that I would have to improvise. I cannot plan to tell a lie, bluff, use a cover story, none of it. Even with practice, and Lord knows, I’ve tried. I knew this question would come and still, anyone with any kind of BS detector at all would have thought they were in the middle of a cattle pen. But the examiner jotted down my answer and moved on.

Much to my surprise, I was accepted into the Associate Lay Missioner program in Ossining, New York and M was accepted into Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We packed our lives into a tiny, red Honda Civic and struck out for Ohio where M wanted to spend the summer with her parents.

### *Ohio to Harvard*

It’s one thing not to be out to your parents, it’s another thing to share a home with your parents and your lover pretending to be “roommates.” M’s mother did everything she could to never fix her frosty blue eyes on mine, but her disapproval radiated like a heat shimmer on asphalt every time we shared a room during that hot Ohio summer. M’s father was slightly more cordial to the extent that he tried to ignore me as much as possible. M’s parents were not stupid, but their denial ran deep enough to never confront us. Thus, we all played along like there wasn’t a giant lavender elephant in the middle of the room.

Of course, I couldn’t complain that M wasn’t out to her parents because the mere thought of me coming out to my parents made me hyperventilate and want to throw up at

the same time. Families can be fragile things. Plenty of LGBT people are certain that sharing their real lives will give relatives strokes or heart attacks, or send them into a spiral of self-blame and depression. We tell ourselves that we can't come out for their sakes: "It will *kill* grandma if I say I'm gay, so I don't." But more often, we're afraid for ourselves. Most all of us in the queer community at that time experienced some form of being cut off from families after coming out, and in several cases, of being sent in for deprogramming or "reparative therapy" (a practice that has now been outlawed in many states). Even today, LGBTQ youth make up one-third of the homeless population.

The tragedy of staying in the closet lay in the fact that keeping our real selves hidden from our parents, speaking and acting out of a false front, meant we'd already lost our authentic connection with them. We remained in relationship with phantoms who wore our faces: chimeras without character. When we couldn't talk about our broken hearts or our first dates, conversations skimmed the surface like the headlines of a TV news broadcast: politics, sports, weather, and stocks, nothing of value.

### *Coming Out for Christmas*

I did come out to my parents later that year, by accident, on Christmas Eve. Save for the fact the story didn't involve anyone being naked, coming out by accident, on Christmas Eve, was about as awful and awkward as one might expect. It happened like this. My Dad wasn't a fan of the Church. As was required by other non-Catholics marrying Catholics, he'd been required to sign documents promising to raise his children in the faith. This promise had meant significant sacrifice on my parents' part, in the form of paying tuition for private schools, but also in "giving up" Sunday morning family time as we went off to church, usually without Dad, but sometimes with him. He hated the

hypocrisy of the Church, hated the opulence of the Vatican, and resented the authority of priests and the pope. So, with his daughter planning to go to the other side of the world for two and a half years to serve that Church, my father was understandably perturbed. Unfortunately, my dad didn't choose to communicate his upset directly, but had reverted to sarcastic jabs. With about 15 minutes until family friends would arrive to join us for Mass, my dad made the statement that "People only go into the ministry for the money and half those priests are faggots anyway."

I lost it. I turned on my dad and blurted out that anybody who said the primary reason to go into ministry was for the money had no idea what ministry was about. But besides that, I was gay! My father went pale. My mom got up and found a Bible. But, since she was Catholic and didn't know how to find the passages she was looking for, I found them for her.

"Yes, Mom, I know what the Bible says."

"No, Mom, I don't believe that it applies to me. God loves me, period."

It would take about three years for my parents to finally attend a Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays meeting and realize that being queer was not their fault, but my father told me that very night that he loved me no matter what, and my mom did the same the next day. Coming out to my parents was hard, but it didn't actually kill them or me. In fact, over time it helped us grow closer together because I could be my authentic self with them.

### *Cross Country*

But that was all in the future. Back with M, the Ohio summer sentence peeled off like a bad sunburn and we packed up the little red Civic who'd picked up the nickname

“Tatonka” after facing down a buffalo during our eastward travel through Yellowstone National Park, and headed to Harvard.

I’d marveled over the time-travel aspect of the eastward journey, agog at architecture that dated from the 1800s, but Massachusetts put that sense of history to shame with stone churches from the 1600s nonchalantly open for business. Harvard and Cambridge reeked of history, privilege, and intellectual excellence, but to all this, the Divinity School added the delightful bouquet of lesbians.

After a year of holding our breath in desperate fear of being found out as gay, plunging into the atmosphere of Harvard Divinity School meant discovering our difference was no longer a disadvantage. It was like learning those odd apertures on your neck that you’ve been so desperately trying to hide are actually gills and you’ve finally found home waters.

At Harvard, there were lesbians on faculty, lesbians in leadership, lesbians in the student body, we were everywhere! My six-week long wall of silence in Ohio was shattered by a butch dyke named Priscilla who tossed me a football that bounced off my hands on the front lawn of the main academic building. Priscilla shouted in a voice accustomed to reach the rafters of a sold-out basketball arena, “You call yourself a lesbian with those hands?”

When the remark was completely ignored by other people walking around campus, my embarrassment tumbled into a belly laugh that toppled me to the ground in joy. This was what freedom felt like! For the first time in my life, I felt like I could be completely myself. At the most prestigious school in the world, not only did I not have to hide, I was an insider elite. For the first time, my sexual orientation didn’t make me a

pariah, rather it made me a person of interest. M and I were, gasp, popular! We were invited to dinner parties, we were admired for our devotion to each other even as our professional plans drew us apart.

Crossing over from the land of silence and shame to a land of celebration and acceptance startled me. I knew Harvard was a bubble, but I didn't even know these bubbles existed outside of the bar scene. Since I didn't drink or have a desire to hang out in bars, even that knowledge was theoretical. As a person who'd never been popular or considered unique, that first foray from outsider to insider left me giddy.

But Harvard was only a way station on my journey. After about a week of orientation, M settled in for school and I made the trip to New York, where I made my first taxi, subway and train rides all in the same day.

### *Maryknoll*

The Maryknoll campus in Westchester County, New York, rests its great stone bulk above the banks of the Hudson River, and looks like it was transported, stone-by-stone from the mountains of Japan. Maryknollers have a long and proud history of bringing Catholicism to Japan and other nations of the world. Sometimes, that infusion brought about great improvements in the wellbeing of those other nations, sometimes the interventions left disaster in their wake.

My fellow lay missionaries and I were not trained to create converts, we were trained to exercise a "ministry of presence" to offer our skills and learn how to deepen our own faith from our experiences within our host cultures. To the extent that our ministry might draw inquiries into our spirituality, we were encouraged to answer

questions, but not proselytize. That suited me fine. I loved the church, but like most American Catholics, I felt allergic to overt evangelism.

Once on the Maryknoll campus, I stepped back into the closet, barely mentioning M save for having to give an address for those weekends when I had enough time and money to ride the bus to Boston. The spiritual formation/training for my cohort lasted three months. The training included coursework on interpersonal communication and boundaries, Catholic social justice, history of missiology, and even some study of scripture.

Professor Kathleen O'Connor was a Professor of Old Testament at Maryknoll with a specialty in the figure of Wisdom Woman as mentioned in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Job, and other sources. I adored her, both of them, Wisdom Woman and Dr. O'Connor. Up to that point, I had never heard of the idea of the Divine Feminine. The best ideal of biblical femininity up to that point, as I'd heard it, was the portrait of Mother Mary as meek and mild. I wore "meek and mild" like a two-sizes too small polyester jumpsuit on a hot summer day.

But Wisdom Woman, she was hot in an entirely different way. Here is a passage from Proverbs 8, (New Revised Standard Version).

Does not wisdom call,  
 and does not understanding raise her voice?  
<sup>2</sup>On the heights, beside the way,  
 at the crossroads she takes her stand;  
<sup>3</sup>beside the gates in front of the town,  
 at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
<sup>4</sup>"To you, O people, I call,  
 and my cry is to all that live.  
<sup>5</sup>O simple ones, learn prudence;  
 acquire intelligence, you who lack it.  
<sup>6</sup>Hear, for I will speak noble things,

and from my lips will come what is right;  
<sup>7</sup> for my mouth will utter truth;  
 wickedness is an abomination to my lips.  
<sup>8</sup> All the words of my mouth are righteous;  
 there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.  
<sup>9</sup> They are all straight to one who understands  
 and right to those who find knowledge.  
<sup>10</sup> Take my instruction instead of silver,  
 and knowledge rather than choice gold;  
<sup>11</sup> for wisdom is better than jewels,  
 and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

How terrific is that? The Source of Wisdom is Feminine! Women are not just supposed to silently read ourselves into all that biblical “He/Him/Mankind” language, we have our own place in the text! I remember sitting in the library reading this passage and barely able to restrain myself from jumping up and whooping in excitement. And from later in the same chapter,

The LORD created me at the beginning<sup>[b]</sup> of his work,<sup>[c]</sup>  
 the first of his acts of long ago.  
<sup>23</sup> Ages ago I was set up,  
 at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
<sup>24</sup> When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
 when there were no springs abounding with water.  
<sup>25</sup> Before the mountains had been shaped,  
 before the hills, I was brought forth—  
<sup>26</sup> when he had not yet made earth and fields,<sup>[d]</sup>  
 or the world’s first bits of soil.  
<sup>27</sup> When he established the heavens, I was there,  
 when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
<sup>28</sup> when he made firm the skies above,  
 when he established the fountains of the deep,  
<sup>29</sup> when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
 so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
 when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
<sup>30</sup> then I was beside him, like a master worker;<sup>[e]</sup>  
 and I was daily his<sup>[f]</sup> delight,  
 rejoicing before him always,

<sup>31</sup>rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race.

What a revelation! I felt vindicated and revealed for my worth at the same time. Prior to this moment, I'd had a vague idea that there might have been some mention of women in the Bible who were warriors (Judith, Deborah, Jael). But every other female character I'd ever learned about was categorized as a whore – Mary Magdelane, Tamar, Rahab, Jezebel, Bathsheeba – or as a mother figure – Mary, Leah, Rachel, Hannah. I knew I wouldn't take on either of those roles. Wisdom Woman gave me someone to admire, even to aspire to. She was a figure beloved of God, powerful, but also not confined by a role as a wife or mother. She was amazing!

And She got me in trouble, of course.

Wisdom Woman shattered the illusion that somehow as a woman I was “less than.” I was a child of the 70s. I grew up with Helen Reddy singing, “I Am Woman,” Title IX, Billie Jean King, and the completely radical idea that women should be able to do a job a man could do, for the same pay. I also grew up with a not so subtly reinforced view from Augustine's teaching that women were misbegotten males and that there was a “natural order of things” that was supported by socialized gender roles. The existence of Wisdom Woman in scripture suggested that there was an entirely different way to approach the characterization of women in the Bible, therefore in faith, therefore in life.

Later, I would learn about the tradition of referring to the Holy Spirit in the feminine, of the idea of the Christ/Christa construct, of the partnership and co-equal ministries of Paul and Thecla and Phoebe and others in the early Christian church. But for now, I was just glimpsing a new world where the idea of “womanhood” was so much more than had been before, and that there might be a place in it for me. I wasn't going to

be a wife and mother. I wasn't going to be a nun, and I couldn't be a priest, but God was going to make some kind of way for me, I could feel a change coming in my bones.

Seismic shifts mean something's got to rumble.

Vicky, one of my cohort members, and I popped over to Mass at the Seminary one Friday afternoon. Vicky was a published poet, a remarkable woman, about 10 years older than I. In fact, everyone else in my cohort was quite a bit older than me. The average age of our group was 32 or so, I was the baby at 23. We had a few young families with kids, as well as people heading into second careers. At any rate, Vicky and I popped over to Mass in part because we'd heard that one of the Maryknoll Fathers who'd been in Bolivia for the past 50 years had just returned, and we thought he might have something interesting to say about his life in mission ministry.

He sure did. I don't recall the scripture text from which he was preaching, but that doesn't matter. His homily focused on the decline of the authority of the church. He said that the problem with the decline of the influence of the church, and the deplorable state of the world because of that decline, was the fact that the power of the church had been taken away from the priesthood and first been given to the nuns, who'd asked for an inch and been given a mile, then been given to lay people who'd done the same. All the ills and evils of the current day were due to the fact that the natural order of male, clerical power had been weakened by women and the laity. What? I thought this kind of sentiment was a cartoon. People didn't actually think that way, did they? My recently inflated sense of female empowerment hissed out in a slow, sickening leak.

Vicky and I glanced over at each other and one of us, probably me, murmured, "Um, I think we better leave." We were, after all, the epitome of the evils he had

described. We quietly and respectfully, rose up from our pew and silently exited the sanctuary.

By the time we got back to the lay missionary dorm, the word got out that we'd practically swung half-naked on chandeliers through the sanctuary, smashing the stained glass while shrieking, "Death to the Patriarchy."

We were called into separate rooms and grilled by our mentors to relay every last detail of our defiance.

"We just got up and left," I said, stunned by the attention. "We didn't say anything to anyone. We didn't make a scene. We just left."

"Why did you leave?" one of the program leaders asked.

"Because what he was saying was really bad and I didn't need to listen to it."

"Don't you understand that you are going to countries where men are in charge of everything and women are barely allowed to talk? If that's going to bother you that much, maybe you aren't suited for this work," a nun said.

"I expect it in their culture," I said. "I don't expect to have to endure that in this culture, when I'm home."

"If you are going to be a feminist, you'll have to leave your principles at home," the lead trainer concluded.

That was the first time I'd been called the f-word, a feminist: a person who had the temerity to believe that women were people and that we shouldn't have to shut up when powerful men said otherwise. I liked it, and I was afraid of it.

I now understood that there could be a feminine principle of the Divine and that my belief in gender equality could put my ability to work in ministry in jeopardy. Add

that to the fact that I was trying to keep my relationship with M and my lesbian identity a secret, and I was off to Korea with a potent mix of consciousness-raising ingredients starting to ferment like a vat of kimchi, ready to burst.

### *In-Country*

The plane to Seoul smelled of garlic. The Korean diet is very garlic-heavy and garlic eventually seeps out of the pores. Apparently, to the Koreans, Americans smell like butter. That's not a bad flavor combination. My memories of Korea are seared into my mind in still images, like pages of a magazine-spread that still make me gasp or chuckle or sigh.

*The subway car is packed with bodies pressed in on each other like a blue ribbon-winning mason jar of pickled asparagus. The average height of the Korean male is about 5'4". At my blond-topped curly-haired 6 feet tall, I look like a dandelion waving above a sea of black mushrooms, or Galadriel among the Hobbits.*

*My Korean teacher sits in front of me with a box of colored sticks and flash cards. She is teaching me the sentence, "Nuron maktegi-rul madong aso, isupnikka?" This translates to, "Is the yellow stick out on the lawn?" I feel confident I will never actually need to speak this particular sentence in a real-life setting.*

I retain my experience of being in-country primarily in these snapshots because the overwhelming emotional experience of being in the Maryknoll house was crushing. Much like my experience of being an HCA in Colorado, doing the work of ministry was sunshine and lollipops compared to the challenges of living within religious community and its stifling expectations. I learned early on that the "ministry of presence" spiritual-formation training we'd received was light years ahead of what the Church practiced in-

country. In Korea, proselytizing was both illegal and expected of us. This was just one of many contradictions that made up my Missioner life. We were there to grow the Church, even though the Church abused women and lay people in much the same way that the Bolivian priest had preached about. Nothing made sense to me. I felt like a Slinky coil that had been mangled by a two-year old.

I realized early on that half the priests in the region, and most of those living in the mission house with me, seemed to be bitter, burned-out, heavy drinkers. I felt bruised by this discovery, realizing for the first time that doing God's work was no guarantee of inner peace.

I also discovered that the painful process of language acquisition that had dogged my earlier attempts to learn French and Spanish in college was even more difficult in Korean. At some point in my research about the country that was going to be my home, I read that US Army linguists had placed Korean among the ten most difficult languages to learn, and I was ready to agree.

At the time, I didn't drink at all and therefore missed out on my fellow lay missioners favorite form of language acquisition: sitting in bars. I also missed M like a limb or a lung. Phone calls were hideously expensive and our phone lines were tapped by the Korean CIA. Letters took forever. I felt lonely, stupid, and wretched most of the time, with the secret of being gay burning through my system like tear gas.

There was also plenty of tear gas in the air. Political demonstrations were a highly choreographed event in Korea. Riot police in "plain clothes" milled about the advertised protest locations for a few hours before the event. We could tell they were cops because their "plain clothes" were made up of matching denim jeans and jackets that no civilian

could afford. Students would then neatly line up their rows of bricks and bottles to throw at the cops at a signal. The riot police would retreat to their buses about 30 minutes before the protest to don their MOPP gear, very much like the gear I'd trained in. Then the two sides would take their positions and slowly advance toward each other, shouting, until enough violence warranted the tear gas mini-tanks to start firing into and dispersing the crowd.

The dance was so predictable that we could time our travels through the nearby subway stations to avoid most of the inconvenience. On the summer evening that I casually got up from watching an episode of "Jeopardy" on Armed Forces TV, the only English-language broadcast station, to close the window when I heard the mini-tanks firing their canisters, I knew I'd become acclimatized to a new normal.

But I was also heartsick to my core. One day, a unicorn came to the house. He was a Maryknoll brother, a professed religious male who is not a priest, who was out as a gay man. I'm not sure how he pulled this off, but he was sweet and fun and I was desperate. I asked him to visit me in my room.

He bounced in, all smiles. "Hi. What's up?"

So scared I thought I might die, I told him about M.

"Aw," he said, "You poor baby. Do you have a picture?"

I showed him the photo I kept near my bed of M hugging a teddy bear.

He gasped, "How could you have left her?"

I felt gut-punched. "That's not quite the response I was going for. I was hoping you could tell me how I could stay."

"But you love her," he said. "And she loves you, right?"

“Of course,” I wailed.

“Listen,” he said. “Somebody is going to talk to you in a few days. Don’t tell anyone what you told me and don’t tell anyone about the person who talks to you next.” That was weird. It felt a little James Bond to me, not necessarily in a bad way, but in a way that was uncomfortable none the less.

A day later, one of the fun priests, not the bitter ones, walked past my room. “Saturday at 6 at this corner.” He showed me a hand-drawn map. “Do you know how to get there?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Someone will meet you. Don’t tell anybody else that you have this appointment. Don’t tell anybody about anything.”

What the hell? I’d never been involved in anything that smacked of skullduggery, but what did I have to lose?

I showed up at the corner at the appointed time to be met by one of the other fun priests. I was happy to see him.

“Did you tell anyone you were coming here?”

“No,” I said. This was bizarre. Not telling anyone at the mission house where I was going or when I’d be back was a gross violation of protocol, but I’d followed instructions and was getting a little tired of the whole Secret Agent treatment. I figure that if you can’t tell someone where you are going or what you are doing, you probably shouldn’t be doing it, but I didn’t want to back out now.

I was nervous. “You didn’t say anything to anyone?” he checked again.

“No,” I said. We walked into a restaurant and through a beaded curtain. There at the table were all the “fun” priests, and their boyfriends or dates for the night. My jaw dropped so far, I could have tripped over it.

The Father Superior of the house greeted me. “Welcome to the Caucus meeting of the Democratic Party in Korea,” he smiled, letting me in on their joke. That’s what we call it when we all get together, a Caucus meeting. And we have voting and non-voting members, if you get my drift,” he giggled.

My emotions went through Gumby-like evolutions. I wanted to laugh, cry, throw up, run away, and sit right down. It wasn’t so much a shock that so many of these priests were gay, but I’d been under the impression that Catholic priests were celibate. Part of their power and mystique was that they’d given up sex, intimacy, marriage, and family in order to follow their call from God. Celibacy was a sacred vow, without exception. I cringe now to say it but yes, I really was that naïve. Each of the men at the table had their own way of reconciling their celibacy with their sexual interests.

“I can flirt and tease all I want as long as there’s no touching,” said one. “I really like to send naughty postcards,” he winked.

“My sweetie and I have been together 12 years,” said another with his boyfriend on his lap. “We hardly ever have serious snuggle bunnies anymore, so it’s fine.”

Another said he could have all the sex he wanted, he just wouldn’t ever be able to get serious with anyone. And so it went around the table until the questions came to me, the token lesbian, who was now asked every question they could think of while I tried to answer on behalf of all lesbians, everywhere. Hah! I had barely spoken to more than a dozen lesbians in my life. I felt like a total fraud.

The night was festive yet furtive, celebratory yet secretive. I could smell the fear that everyone ignored under the party atmosphere like a bowl of shrimp gone bad. These laughing, joking men could not be their authentic selves outside this room for fear of losing not just their jobs, but their whole identities. They laughed too loud that night. Many of them drank too much, flirted too much, said too much. I felt twisted inside, unable to name the discomfort I felt, or its cause, until the next day.

A Sunday. One of the priests from the night before was up to preach...about marriage. Without a blink or a wink, he spoke about the proper relationship of women to men according to the text from Paul, “wives be submissive to your husbands.”

Something small snapped inside me. The last straw can be like that, without drama, without fanfare, just with the sadness of farewell. I couldn't take being party to this fraternity of deceit. Homosexuality wasn't a choice for these men, any more than it was for anyone else. Breaking the celibacy vow was a choice. Speaking with the authoritative conviction of the Church on subjects that required the submission of women was a choice. Masking the pain of their secret identities with alcohol, drugs, and deceitful sexual practices was a choice.

I was so disturbed, I thought to actually do some research. What was the Church's actual position on homosexuality? There was no internet at the time and the library at the mission house was small, but it did have its own collection of recent writings from the Vatican. The piece I needed was right there, a recent publication written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who would later become Pope Benedict XVI. Published October 1, 1986, the letter is often referred to by its first two words *Homosexualitatis problema*, the problem of homosexuality.

The letter affirmed the position of all the major psychological associations of the day that homosexuality was an immutable trait, not subject to change or correction. The cardinal wrote, “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.” Although the letter deplors violent acts against homosexual people, it says that homosexual acts are always an occasion of sin and homosexual persons are to be treated with an attitude of “pastoral care.” In other words: *God made you this way, but loving anyone with the full expression of sexual intimacy is a spiritual illness, a moral evil, and a grievous sin.*

I’d been reading the letter outdoors in the hot summer sun but I froze inside. This letter was wrong. The Church was wrong. This conclusion was wrong. I didn’t know my Bible. I was no expert on theology, but of some truths I was sure, chief among which was that God made me without mistake and that God loved me no matter what. My frozenness turned to fury.

I had one thought. My university motto rang in my ears, *veritas vos liberabit*, the truth will set you free.

I wrote a letter to the Superior General of the Order, anonymously. I said that there were Maryknoll Missioners, good people, doing wonderful, important work all over the world, called by God to serve. I said that the work was hard but worthy, that we knew and understood the value of sacrifice, that we were willing to give up home and comforts all for the greater glory of God, but some of us were gay or lesbian. Some of us were heart and soul committed to this call, but the fear of being found out was driving many to despair, to drink, or to other unhealthy practices, and just some word, some sign that we

would not be persecuted for being who we were would be a tremendous, tangible expression of God's grace.

I was Joan of Arc with my anonymous pen. I was a hero in disguise. I was an idiot.

I put the letter in the mail and waited. Not for long.

Father Superior, the same fellow who'd welcomed me to the secret dinner two nights before, summoned me to his office, all traces of joviality that had wreathed him in smiles a few days earlier wiped from his face. He held my letter in his hands. It had been plucked out of the mail. I knew our phone calls were tapped by the Korean CIA. I didn't know that our mail was screened by the Maryknoll Fathers.

The ultimatum was clear: I would end my relationship, never speak of lesbian and gay missionaries again and fulfill my mission assignment, or I would be sent home as soon as they could put me on a plane. It's not like I needed time to make up my mind. I'd seen enough lying, cheating and whiplash in expectations to want to end my relationship with this organization; not just the Maryknolls, but the Catholic church as a whole.

To my credit, I pushed back enough to insist that I be paid some portion of the cash I'd been promised to help me restart my life after my assignment was completed. I was allowed to say a few goodbyes, without stating the circumstances of my departure. I stepped on the plane feeling like I was coming out of a long fever, weak in the moment, but knowing I'd become strong again. There was no farewell party, but the snapshots remain.

*Learning to drink shochu, Korean fortified wine, after throwing off the first two inches of the liquid because the formaldehyde rose to the top.*

*Taking visiting priests on a tour of the Children's Park during cherry blossom time only to notice dark clouds of tear gas rising over the trees. Military training kicked in, prompting me to reach for the gas mask where it should have been strapped to my leg, but, of course, it wasn't there.*

*Standing at a bus station with the instruction to "take the 46" and realizing there are four buses with that number, all of which are heading in different directions.*

*Seeing the door of my Church, my mother, my sanctuary close in my face, knowing I would never be welcome home again.*

When I think of the cultures I crossed through the course of my time in Korea, some are obvious. I crossed the International Date Line, the line from Occident to Orient, the line from civilian to professional religious person, and even the line of consciousness into feminism. But the most important line I crossed was that of coming out of the closet as a lesbian for good. I would never lie about who I was again, and never be a part of organizations that demanded that I lie, even if that meant losing out on job opportunities, friendships, or family relationships. For me, the presumed promise of the lie would never be worth the cost.

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