

The Way of Trust

Chapter 1 of Ruthless Trust

By Brennan Manning

This book started writing itself with a remark from my spiritual director. “Brennan, you don’t need any more insights into the faith,” he observed. “You’ve got enough insights to last you three hundred years. The most urgent need in your life is to trust what you have received.”

That sounded simple enough. But his remark sparked a searing reexamination of my life, my ministry, and the authenticity of my relationship with God—a reexamination that spanned the next two years. The challenge to actually trust God forced me to deconstruct what I had spent my life constructing, to stop clutching what I was so afraid of losing, to question my personal investment in every word I had ever written or spoken about Jesus Christ and fearlessly to ask myself if I trusted him.

Through countless hours of silence, solitude, and soul searching, and prayer, I learned the act of trust is an utterly ruthless act.

The film *Chariots of Fire* won the Oscar in 1981 as the best movie of the year. It dramatized the story of two British runners. Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, who captured gold medals in the 1924 Olympics. Heavy underdogs, the pair triumphed through a remarkable display of character, discipline and courage. One scene in the film moved me in a profound way.

Liddell, an uncompromising Scottish Congregationalist, has been called by God to serve as a missionary in China at the conclusion of the games. However, his deeply religious sister fears that if her brother wins the gold, he will be so enamored of the fame and glory of an Olympic victory that he will opt out of his missionary vocation. On the eve of the race she pleads fervently with him not to run.

He looks at her with great affection and says, “But God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.”

The underlying premise of this book: the splendor of a human heart which trusts that is is loved gives God more pleasure than Westminster Cathedral, the Sistine Chapel, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, the sight of ten thousand butterflies in flight or the scene of a million orchids in bloom.

Trust is our gift back to God and he finds it so enchanting that Jesus died for love of it.

A venerable spiritual mentor, Paul de Jaeger, penned these words. “Trust is that rare and priceless treasure that wins us the affection of our heavenly Father. For him it has both charm and fascination. Among his countless children, whom he so greatly loves and whom he

heaps with tenderness and favors, there are few indeed, who truly entrusting themselves to him, live as veritable children of God. There are as few who respond to his goodness by a trust at once filial and unshaken. And so it is that he welcomes with a love of predilection those souls, all too few in number, who in adversity as in joy, in tribulation and consolation, unfalteringly trust in his paternal love. Such souls truly delight and give immense pleasure to the heart of their heavenly Father. There is nothing he is not prepared to give them. “Ask of me half of my Kingdom” he cries to the trusting soul, and “I will give it to you.”

Unwavering trust is a rare and precious thing because it often demands a degree of courage that borders on the heroic. When the shadow of Jesus’ cross falls across our lives in the form of failure, rejection, abandonment, betrayal, unemployment, loneliness, depression, the loss of a loved one; when we are deaf to everything but the shriek of our won pain; when the world around us suddenly seems a hostile, menacing place—at those times we may cry out in anguish, “How could a loving God permit this to happen?” At such moments the seeds of distrust are sown. It requires heroic courage to trust in the love of God no matter what happens to us.

After thousands of hours of prayer and meditation over the intervening years, I can state unequivocally that childlike surrender in trust is the defining spirit of authentic discipleship. And I would add that the supreme need in most our lives is often the most overlooked—namely, the need for an uncompromising trust in the love of God. Furthermore, I would say that, while there are times when it is good to go to God as might a ragged beggar to the King of Kings, it is vastly superior to approach God as a little child would approach his or her papa.

In first-century Palestine the question dominating religious discussion was, How do we hasten the advent of the Kingdom of God? Jesus proposed a single way; the way of trust. He never asked his disciples to trust in God. Rather, he demanded of them bluntly, “Trust in God and trust in me” (John 14:1). Trust was not some feature out at the edges of Jesus’ teaching it was its heart and center. This and only this would bring on speedily the reign of God.

When the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at “the house of the dying” in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, “And what can I do for you?” Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

“What do you want me to pray for?” she asked. He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States. “Pray that I have clarity.”

She said firmly. “No, I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh commented that she always

seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, “I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

“We ourselves have known and put our trust in God’s love toward ourselves” (I John 4:16). Craving clarity we attempt to eliminate the risk of trusting God. Fear of the unknown path stretching ahead of us destroys childlike trust in the Father’s active goodness and unrestricted love.

We often presume that trust will dispel the confusion, illuminate the darkness, vanquish the uncertainty, and redeem the times. But the crowd of witnesses in Hebrews 11 testifies that this is not the case. Our trust does not bring final clarity on this earth. It does not still the chaos or dull the pain or provide a crutch. When all else is unclear, the heart of trust says, as Jesus did on the cross, “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

If we could free ourselves from the temptation to make faith a mindless assent to a dusty pawnshop of doctrinal beliefs, we would discover with alarm that the essence of biblical faith lies in trusting God. And, as Marcus Borg has noted, “The first is a matter of the head, the second a matter of the heart. The first can leave us unchanged, the second intrinsically brings change.”

The faith that animates the Christian community is less a matter of believing in the existence of God than a practical trust in his loving care under whatever pressure. The stakes here are enormous, for I have not said in my heart, “God exists,” until I have said, “I trust you.” The first assertion is rational, abstract, a matter perhaps of natural theology, the mind laboring at its logic. The second is “communion, bread on the tongue from an unseen hand.” Against insurmountable obstacles and without a clue as to the outcome, the trusting heart says, “Abba, I surrender my will and my life to you without any reservation and with boundless confidence, for you are my loving Father.”

Though we often disregard our need for an unfaltering trust in the love of God, that need is the most urgent we have. It is the remedy for much of our sickness, melancholy, and self-hatred. The heart converted from mistrust to trust in the irreversible forgiveness of Jesus Christ is redeemed from the corrosive power of fear. The existential dread that salvation is reserved solely for the proper and pious, the nameless fear that we are predestined to backslide, the brooding pessimism that the good news of God’s love is simply wishful thinking—all these combine to weave a thin membrane of distrust that keeps us in a chronic state of anxiety.

The decisive (or what I call the second) conversion from mistrust to trust—a conversion that must be renewed daily—is the moment of sovereign deliverance from the warehouse of worry. So, life-changing is this ultimate act of confidence in the acceptance of Jesus Christ that it

can properly be called the hour of salvation. So often what is notoriously missing from the external mechanized concept of salvation is self-acceptance, an experience that is internally personalized and rooted in the acceptance of Jesus Christ. It bids good riddance to unhealthy guilt, shame, remorse, and self-hatred. Anything less—self-rejection in any form—is a manifest sign of a lack of trust in the total sufficiency of Jesus’ saving work. Has he set me free from fear of the Father and dislike of myself, or has he not?

The grace-laden act of trust is the landmark decision of life outside of which nothing has value and inside of which every relationship and achievement, every success and failure derives its final meaning. Unbounded trust in the merciful love of the redeeming God deals a mortal blow to skepticism, cynicism, self-condemnation, and despair. It is our decisive YES to Christ’s command, “Trust in God and trust in me.”

The words of the fifteenth-century theologian Angelus Silesius, “If God stopped thinking of me, he would cease to exist,” are thoroughly orthodox. Silesius merely paraphrases the message of Jesus: Can you not buy five sparrows for two pennies? And yet not one is forgotten in God’s sight. Why, every hair on your head has been counted. There is no need to be afraid, you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows” (Luke 12:6-7).

God, by definition, is thinking of me.

The merchant of mistrust dismisses these words as hyperbole and remains grim, sullen, fearful. The trusting disciple receives them and has an attack of the happies. THE BASIC PREMISE of biblical trust is the conviction that God wants us to grow, to unfold, and to experience fullness of life. However, this kind of trust is acquired only gradually and most often through a series of crises and trials. Through the indescribable anguish on Mount Moriah with his son Isaac, Abraham learned that the God who had called him to hope against hope was eminently reliable and that the only thing expected of him was unconditional trust. The great old man models the essence of trust in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: to be convinced of the reliability of God.

The story of salvation history indicates that without exception trust must be purified in the crucible of trial. David, the most beloved figure of Jewish history, was no stranger to terror, loneliness, failure, and even sinister plots to destroy him, yet he ravished the heart of God with his unwavering trust.

“When I am most afraid, I put my trust in you; in God whose word I praise, in God I put my trust, fearing nothing; what can men do to me?” (Psalm 56:3-4).

“My trust in God never wavers” (Psalm 26:1).

“He rescued me, since he loves me” (Psalm 18:19).

“But I for my part rely on your love, O Lord” (Psalm 13:5).

“Put your trust in Yahweh, be strong, let your heart be bold, put your trust in Yahweh” (Psalm 27:14).

“Happy is the man who puts his trust in Yahweh” (Psalm 40:4).

“I mean to thank you constantly for doing what you did, and put my trust in your name, that is so full of kindness, in the presence of those who love you” (Psalm 52:9).

“I, for my part, like an olive tree growing in the house of God, put my trust in God’s love for ever and ever” (Psalm 52:8).

Behold the splendor of a human heart which trusts that is loved!

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the apostle John has come to be known as the beloved disciple. Why? “We ourselves have known and put our trust in God’s love toward ourselves” (1 John 4:16a). David and John, soul-mates, singing the same lyrical song of unfaltering trust in the love of God!

I will never forget the witness of an Episcopal named Tom Minifie several years ago in St. Luke’s Church in Seattle, Washington. He spotted a high-profile couple sitting in the last pew with their one-year-old Down’s syndrome child. It was clear from the parents’ demeanor that the little one embarrassed them. They hid in the rear of the church, perhaps planning a hasty exit once the worship service had concluded.

On their way out the door, Tom intercepted them and said, “Come into my office.” Once seated. Tom took the Down’s baby in his arms and rocked him gently. Looking into the baby’s face, he began to sob. “Do you have any idea of the gift that God has given you in this child?” he asked.

Sensing confusion and even concern in the parents he explained his reaction: “Two years ago my three-year-old daughter, Sylvia, died with Down’s syndrome. We have four other children, so we know the blessing that kids can be. Yet the most precious gift we’ve ever received in our entire lives has been Sylvia. In her uninhibited expression of affection, she revealed to us the face of God as no other human being ever has. Did you know that several Native American tribes attribute divinity to Down’s children because in their utter simplicity they’re a transparent window into the Great Spirit? Treasure this child, for he will lead you into the heart of God.”

From that day forward the parents began to brag about their little one.

Uncompromising trust in the love of God inspires us to thank God for the spiritual darkness that envelops us, for the loss of income, for the nagging arthritis that is so painful, and to pray from the heart, “Abba, into your hands I entrust my body, mind, and spirit and this entire day—morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Whatever you want of me, I want of me, falling into you and trusting in you in the midst of my life. Into your heart I entrust my heart, feeble, distracted, insecure, uncertain. Abba, unto you I abandon myself in Jesus our Lord. Amen.”

In the arc of my unremarkable life, wherein the victories have been small and personal, the trials fairly pedestrian, and the failures large enough to deeply wound me and those I love. I have repeated endlessly the patter of falling down and getting up, falling down and getting up. Each time I fall, I am propelled to renew my efforts by a blind trust in the forgiveness of my sins from sheer grace, in the acquittal, vindication, and justification of my ragged journey based not on any good deeds I have done (the approach taken by the Pharisee in the temple) but on an unflagging trust in the love of a gracious and merciful God.

When Roslyn and I married, we were both unemployed. My ministry had been shut down in the Catholic Church, and I was virtually unknown in other ecclesial communities. Offers to preach the gospel went a-begging, and the knock on the door never came.

Our story is perhaps a paradigm for every trusting disciple. The way of trust is a movement into obscurity, into the undefined, into ambiguity, not into some predetermined, clearly delineated plan for the future. The next step discloses itself only out of a discernment of God acting in the desert of the present moment. The reality of naked trust is the life of a pilgrim who leaves what is nailed down, obvious, and secure, and walks into the unknown without any rational explanation to justify the decision or guarantee the future. Why? Because God has signaled the movement and offered it his presence and his promise.

Of course there were days when I was afraid, when my heart sank and my body trembled, when I felt muddled and befuddled, when I felt like a bewildered child alone and lost in the dark night, hearing strange and frightening noises, put simply, there were days when anxiety and uncertainty prevailed. Then out of nowhere came a calm, reassuring voice, “Do not be afraid. I am with you.”

The biggest obstacle on my journey of trust has been an oppressive sense of insecurity, inadequacy, inferiority, and low self-esteem. I have no memory of being held, hugged, or kissed by my mother as a little boy. I was called a nuisance and a pest and told to shut up and be still. My mother had been orphaned at age three—both her parents died in a flu epidemic in Montreal—and sent to an orphanage where she lived for several years until she was eventually adopted. Then, at age eighteen, she moved to Brooklyn, New York, for training as a registered

nurse. Having received little attention or affection through those early years, she was incapable of giving any.

In his later years, my father became the kindest, gentlest man I have every known. But when I was a child, he was never there. Burdened with the limitations of an eighth-grade education, he sought work futilely and frantically during the Great Depression. I could not understand why he was never around (except to speak a word of correction or to impose physical discipline). When I saw kids my own age enjoying a great relationship with their moms and dads, I concluded that there must be something missing in me. It was my fault. Because I constantly blamed myself, the seed of corrosive self-hatred took root. In the absence of any expression of attention or affection on the part of others, I found it unthinkable that God might have tender feelings for me.

One snowy night when I was six years old, my father returned home from a hard day of job-hunting and asked my mother how we boys had behaved. Pointing to my brother, Rob (fifteen months older than I), she said, "He's incorrigible. I want you to march him down to the police station right now. Tell the cops to put him in jail and leave him there."

And my father did just that. I knelt on the broad windowsill with my nose pressed against the glass, hoping against hope that my brother would return. Half an hour later, my father came walking up the street alone. The terror of rejection and abandonment gripped my heart. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Trembling, I realized that there was no one to protect me. I was utterly alone. I knew that I would be next.

Then I saw Rob about thirty yards behind my father. He was making a snowball. The inner panic subsided a bit, though I was still scared and shaken. Wiping the tears from my eyes. I climbed down from the sill, assumed the macho position of a little-boys-don't-cry six-year-old, and pretended disinterest in a traumatic event that haunted me for years.

But there is more. One morning in prayer—I was an adult by this time—I had a vivid image of my now deceased mother at age six in the orphanage, kneeling on the windowsill, her nose pressed against the glass, tears streaming down her face as she begged God to send two nice people who would adopt her. Suddenly all the anger simmering within me at my mother, all the resentment I had felt because she hadn't been there for me as a child, disappeared. Sobbing, I asked her forgiveness. With a radiant smile she said, "I may have messed up, but you turned out okay." As she hugged and kissed me, the greatest enemy of trust in my life was disarmed.

Wallowing in shame, remorse, self-hatred and guilt over real or imagined failings in our past lives betrays a distrust in the love of God. It shows that we have not accepted the acceptance of Jesus Christ and thus have rejected the total sufficiency of his redeeming work.

Preoccupation with our past sins, present weaknesses, and character defects gets our emotions churning in self-destructive ways, closes us within the mighty citadel of self and preempts the presence of a compassionate God. From personal experience I can testify that the language of low self-esteem is harsh and demanding; it abuses, accuses, criticizes, rejects, finds fault, blames, condemns, reproaches, and scolds in a monologue of impatience and chastisement.

Rather than being surprised that we have done anything good—as certainly we have—we are shocked and horrified that we have failed. We would never judge any of God’s other children with the savage condemnation with which we crush ourselves. Indeed, self-hatred becomes bigger than life itself, growing until it is seen as the beginning and the end. The image of the childhood story about Chicken Little comes to mind. In our self-hatred, we feel that the sky is falling.

Understandably, then, we hide our true selves from God in prayer. We simply do not trust that he can handle all that goes on in our minds and hearts. Can he accept our hateful thoughts, our cruel fantasies, our bizarre dreams? We wonder. Can he cope with our primitive images, our inflated illusions, and our exotic mental castles? We conclude that he cannot and thus withhold from Jesus what is most in need of his healing touch.

In order to grow in trust, we must allow God to see us and love us precisely as we are. The best way to do that is through prayer. As we pray, the unrestricted love of God gradually transforms us. We open ourselves to receive our own truth in the light of God’s truth. The Spirit opens our eyes to see what really is, to pierce through illusion so that we can discover we are seen by God with a gaze of love.

However, if we picture God as touchy, unapproachable, and easily annoyed, if we imagine God as haughty, indifferent, or angry, if we invest him with unlovable qualities and cringe before his glance, we will dismiss the way of trust as a chimera, a cul-de-sac, or a soft, easy path for wimps and wusses. Our skepticism, cynicism, or triumphant rationalism will banish the Beyond-in-our-midst to outer space, a Being aloof and disengaged from the joys and struggles of his children.

In the 1930s Daniel Considine wrote, “Never was a mother so blind to the faults of her child as our Lord is toward ours.” Therefore, we should never be discouraged by our faults. We can begin by not being astonished at them. A little child who does not know how to walk is not astonished at stumbling and falling with each step taken. While the gravity of sin is not to be minimized, wasting time deploring the past keeps God at a distance. As the second-century shepherd of Hermas said, “Stop harping on your sins and pray for righteousness.”

Of what avail is our life of prayer, our study of scripture, theology, and spirituality, if we do not trust the insights that we have received? Waffling back and forth between a decisive YES

and discouraging No keeps us in a state of terminal procrastination. Likewise, an exclusive emphasis on the burying theological issues of our day (many of which are neither burning nor theological) or a one-sided emphasis on the pressing issues of social justice can temporarily or even permanently postpone a decision to trust in the love of God, thus keeping us in a state of spiritual limbo.

“To live without risk is to risk not living,” my paternal grandma used to say. The way of trust is risky business, no doubt about it. To change careers suddenly because one feels unfulfilled, to assume the energy-depleting care of elderly parents, to retreat for three days of silence and solitude with Jesus without climbing the walls, to volunteer for a summer in the sub-Sahara with only meager spiritual resources, to take an unpopular position with rumblings of fear in the background, to conquer disillusionment when one finds untrustworthiness where least expected—all these challenges require a willingness to risk a journey into the unknown and a readiness to trust God even in the darkness.

A person should not act impulsively, of course. A careful discernment process involving family, friends, and spiritual mentor should precede every major decision. But when the appropriate time comes, only the disciple with an unflinching trust in God will dare to risk. And that trust is not naïve, it knows that the possibility of making a mistake and getting hurt is very real. But without exposure to potential failure, there is no risk.

In explaining the growth of his faith, psychiatrist Gerald May writes, “I know that God is loving and that God’s loving is trustworthy. I know this directly, through the experience of my life. There have been plenty of times of doubt, especially when I used to believe that trusting God’s goodness meant I would not be hurt. But having been hurt quite a bit, I know God’s goodness goes deeper than all pleasure and pain—it embraces them both.”

Naturally, the risk takers are unnerving to the palace guards, who are threatened by anyone trusting in God rather than the law. The latter tend to despise men and women who are not as cautious as they. They elevate themselves above the sinner and the nonconformist. Because of this reliance on self, coupled with a lack of self-knowledge, the legalists render themselves incapable of receiving grace, they do not and dare not live by trust in a loving God. They shake their heads, invoke hallowed traditions, and gradually employ their most potent and cruel weapon, guilt-tripping. Threatened by the freedom of anyone who trusts in God rather than the law, legalists warn of dire consequences like a howling wolf pack in the night.

The disciples, however, no longer plagued by the desire to please others and valuing God’s approval more than the disapproval of humans, moves on with eyes fixed on Jesus, “the author and pioneer of our trust” (Hebrews 12:2).

I found Henri Nouwen's most recent book fascinating. In *The Inner Voice of Love*, a relatively brief (115 page) book published on the day of his death, Nouwen uses the word trust or trusting sixty-five times. Some examples: "At every moment you have to decide to trust the voice that says, 'I love you. I knot you together in your mother's womb' (Psalm 139:13)", "Stop wandering around. Instead, come home and trust that God will bring you what you need"; "For as long as you can remember, you have been a pleaser, depending on others to give you an identity. But now you are being asked to let go of all these self-made props and trust that God is enough for you"; "The root choice is to trust at all times that God is with you and will give what you need."

Nouwen's earlier books are peppered with the word faith. And yet in his swan song, he uses faith once and trust sixty-five times. My point? Somewhere along the way, in the life of the maturing Christian, faith combined with hope (more on this later) grows into trust. Based on the lived experience of God's relentless faithfulness, a confidence blossoms that God is with us to continue and finish what he started. So unwavering was this trust in Nouwen's life that he envisioned his own death as a happy experience. Of this I am convinced.

And I suspect that fidelity to the way of trust will lead us to the same place it took Job. "Even though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15).