

IN A CHURCH
DISMANTLED
ONE PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

*Finding My Way
Home in the Dark*



CONRAD L. KANAGY

IN A CHURCH DISMANTLED—
ONE PILGRIM'S JOURNEY
Finding My Way Home in the Dark
by Conrad L. Kanagy

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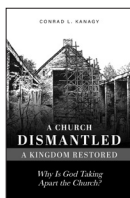


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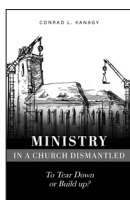
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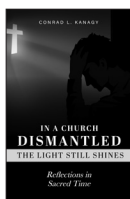
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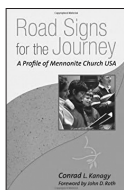


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TO EZRA AND LEVI

You are loved, loved, loved!
You follow a long line of Unifiers and
Dismantlers, Disrupters and Dividers,
Priests and Prophets, all looking for a bet-
ter Home, a heavenly one.
May God give you the courage to journey
that same road to its glorious End!
Pappy and Grammy will meet you there!

**“No aching for the future, gazing onward,
But calm resolve to honor even death.”**

—Reynolds Price, “A Whole New Life” (after Rilke)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, written over the past year, is the fourth in the series entitled “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored,” based upon podcast episodes that I wrote during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the first three books are organized by themes, this one, which represents the most autobiographical of the four, is ordered—more or less—chronologically as the episodes came to me almost on a daily basis. Doing so allows the reader to observe my own journey from the beginning of the pandemic to the present. This process has been, as St. Paul describes the task of each of us, to “work out my own salvation with fear and trembling,” dealing with the progressions of Parkinson’s disease, teaching college courses remotely, and leading a conflicted congregation through the Covid-19 pandemic and the political polarization of this country.

To provide a contextual timeframe, each chapter indicates the month in which it was written. Most of these essays are previously unprinted material. The rush of nearly 280 episodes in eighteen months was a kind of pentecostal experience for me. You don’t need to read the four books in any particular order. They stand alone but also overlap, each representing a different genre respectively: church growth and decline, leadership, devotional life, and memoir/autobiography.

I have so many persons to acknowledge and thank for their support of this project over the past year. I have walked this journey toward Home with my wife Heidi for longer and with far more

depth and intimacy than anyone else—now for nearly 35 years. Neither of us can imagine completing the journey to its glorious End without the other.

Elizabethtown College for nearly three decades has given me space to engage in my church-related research and practice of ministry. Across four college administrations, I have been blessed by the same support and encouragement, without which I would not have been able to “pastor” as a minister and “profess” as a teacher at the same time. In keeping with what I have always experienced, the College has supported and promoted the podcast “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored” and has publicized my efforts widely. The College has also gave me a sabbatical for the fall of 2021 to continue writing and publishing my work.

Our congregation at Elizabethtown Mennonite Church has graciously been a space for me over the last decade to hone my preaching and writing for an audience that lives and labors in the everyday world of work, home, and play.

Dan Mast of Masthof Press has been a valued collaborator on this project and has postured himself to do whatever possible to speed this book along, to keep the pricing reasonable, and to add helpful counsel along the way. His staff has been amazing. Linda Boll has been sent by God to assist with the final editing and proofreading.

All but several of these essays were written during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the most part, I have sought to retain the present tense in which they were initially penned. This book and the podcast episodes that preceded it represent the intersection and integration of various areas of my professional and personal life that had been disparate entities in the past. They have allowed me to draw upon nearly three decades of teaching sociology, thirty-five years of sociological research, fifteen years of church and denominational consulting, twenty years of pastoral ministry, my childhood

and coming-of-age in a conservative Mennonite-Amish community, my life-long struggle with a terror of God's wrath exacerbated by obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the diagnosis, four years ago, of Parkinson's disease.

As you will read throughout the chapters of this book, the Parkinson's diagnosis has been a challenging but transformative experience for me. Uncannily, it has represented my own dismantling while I have been writing about the dismantling of the church. But as you will hear me say repeatedly, this disease has given me a timeline and horizon that I had not seen so clearly before. It has brought with it an encounter of the love of God, a re-conversion to Jesus, and an outpouring of his Spirit in ways I had not previously experienced in my life, which has led to freedom, clarity of identity, and a sense of contentment like unto nothing I had known before. As I have often said, if it finally took Parkinson's disease to bring these gifts to me, then thanks be to God! For it may just be that these graces also ensure that I find my way Home through the dark.

So, accompanied by the gracious words of the apostle Paul, himself plagued by weakness and troubled with a thorn in the flesh that God would not remove, may you receive the words of this book, like St. Paul's, as means of encouragement. For, amid the dismantling: "We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." (2 Cor 4:16-18 NRSV)

—*Conrad L. Kanagy,*
Elizabethtown, PA
November 30, 2021

INTRODUCTION
When My Story Unlocks Your Story

I recently received a note of appreciation for my podcast from an individual who also grew up in Big Valley, PA, but several years ahead of me. She began the letter by introducing herself in the way most of us do after years of distance and separation, explaining who we are by going back a generation or two and placing ourselves in the context that the other also shared and just might remember.

Older than I, I admired this person and her siblings for having left the Valley for parts I had never visited and for doing things I hoped to do someday. When our extended family would gather upon their visits to the valley, I always anticipated a conversation or question that might allow me to connect with them. So I needed no lengthy introduction in her email, for I remembered who she was immediately and had many memories of her and her family—this individual’s quiet, kind and caring demeanor, the tragic passing of her mother, her father’s critical comment in the pew behind me after I won the local VFW Scholarship, the birth of her triplet daughters, and more.

In any event, the writer shared that my podcast episodes had opened memories and stories of her own growing up in the valley, and then she offered what amounted to a prayer that is worth all of us praying these days: “I am being challenged to search deeper for armor to survive Covid-19 and the culture of my community, country and globe while hopefully being a beacon of love and hope. Some days are

going better than others.” There it is—both prayer and confession for what we need in this season of great anxiety and uncertainty.

Remembering our stories from the past is so important, for remembering reminds us that while we’ve not been in this particular place before, we’ve been somewhere like this place. And often that somewhere was when we were kids. We know that our earliest memories are usually those that most frighten us. I remember coming home at the age of two to find a car burning in our lawn, stolen and pushed down the hill to our house. I remember leaving that same house at Sylvanus Peachey’s by the Kish Creek and again, just shy of three years of age, sneaking out of the house while mom washed the car as I was to be napping, and wandering up the through the Lutheran church cemetery. There the the caretaker found me and took me to Crissman’s store nearby where someone was able to identify to whom I belonged. Remembering reminds us that we survived, and by God’s grace will survive the rest of our journey Home.

Hearing each other and our stories give us the courage to go on in this broken and beat-up world. Hearing the stories of others gives us strength, hope, and faith to continue. When I responded to my acquaintance, I suggested that just as she had impacted my life in ways that I’m sure she was not aware of, so I’m confident that someone with her kind of heart continues to make a significant impact on those around her.

Because it is like moments within which we are living now, of anxiety and uncertainty and fear and doubt, even violence and oppression, that being a beacon of light has an amplified effect on the world. Kindness, grace, love, and compassion are heard so much more clearly in a context of division, anger, alienation, and darkness than they are at any other time. And because so many have given up even trying to shine their light, even the weakest efforts count for more than we know most days.

It is painful to see how Jesus has been highjacked these days by some who are doing the most violence in the world, causing the most pain to others, and picking on those who have the most to lose already. Sometimes I read to my students from the book of Matthew, chapters 5-7, when we are studying the theology of the Old Order Amish. I am intrigued by the fact that my students are largely unfamiliar with the Jesus of the Gospels. It's as if there are two or three different Jesus characters walking around in our world—the one of the Gospels, the one of conservative evangelicalism where Jesus joins the white supremacists and embraces a might makes right philosophy, and the one of the more progressive parts of the church where Jesus is stripped of his power to save and transform.

Why can't we just stick with the Jesus of the Gospels? I have half a hunch it is because Jesus usually told stories and listened to stories. He didn't develop a systematic theology, and he didn't waste a lot of time on ideas. Jesus certainly didn't talk about the headlines of the day—about the corruption of Herod and Caesar, the need to get out the vote to defeat Caesar in November, or how to solve the stock market's volatility. Instead, Christ used ordinary language and familiar stories as he talked about lost coins, lost sheep, a lost and rebellious son, lost gems, and goats that were rewarded instead of the sheep because the goats were so busy caring for the least of these.

The Pharisees rejected Jesus for a host of reasons, one of which I suspect was that Jesus' simple stories were the last things these scholars wanted to discuss; stories were for the children, for the unsophisticated, the non-professionals. And we reject Jesus too for similar reasons. Those of high status don't tell stories. They argue and boast. Those in power don't tell stories; they shoot people instead. Those in the top one percent don't waste time in stories, for stories won't earn another dollar at the end of the day. No, from the modern point of view, there just isn't much stock we can put in stories.

Except that when everything else is falling apart, and guns won't fix things, and when all the money goes down the tubes, and when politics implodes in on itself—all we are left with are our stories. But if all truth is God's truth, our stories are all we need, because for people made in God's image, inevitably we will start telling stories about the strange things happening in our souls and how we once felt close to God, and that dream we had as a child that we couldn't explain and on and on. Because though so often we have stopped listening, our loving Creator has never stopped speaking. It just might be that what my podcast listener was hearing was the voice of God echoing through the years with a message that I had quietly heard from her when I was a kid. Not only had I remembered who she was, but I had also remembered the qualities of grace that continued to be reflected in her letter.

The one thing that might hold us back from telling our stories and singing our songs is the fear that someone might challenge, reject, or deny our story. Some have challenged my stories. I expect to hear from others telling me that I got that date wrong, the number of children wrong, the location wrong, the year wrong, that my stories are no more important than theirs, asking what gives me the right to tell my story, or informing me that my story is offensive and on and on. But if telling my story unlocks your story, and your story mine, we just might both be saved from the hell breaking loose everywhere around us.

But who cares if our stories are rejected by others? If they were busy telling their own story, they would care less about what's wrong with mine. And at the end of the day, what is true about a story is more significant than the facts. For a collection of facts does not a story make. I've been a sociologist for more than 30 years; I've dealt in the arena of the empirical and social facts. But a collection of facts is not a story—not unless there is a heart smack in the middle of it.

So don't tell me what's factually wrong with my story until you can share your heart first, and then we can worry about the facts.

This is why I love the Bible still. It is true in the best and most authentic definition of the word. I could care less whether there are contradictions in the Gospels, whether early manuscripts disagree with each other, whether all archaeology supports the biblical record, or whether everything in the Old Testament lines up with everything in the New Testament. I've experienced that the Scriptures represent the only truth I need to meet the needs of my lonely and broken heart. What I know is that when I spend time in the scripture, I meet God. What I know in those moments is that I discover my story in God's story. And that story is enough for me now and forever.

Following my sermon one Sunday, which was focused on my grief over the losses that I and so many of us had suffered during this pandemic, I was approached by one of the saints who was concerned about what he had heard in my podcast. Taken by surprise, I hemmed and hawed from behind my mask. I was tired from having preached, especially since my message was filled with lament. I stutted a few things about the podcast, trying to explain to him where I was coming from. And I'm sure I came across as a bit defensive.

As I turned away, the answer that I wish I had given him suddenly came to me from the titles to two old hymns I love: "Just as I Am, Without One Plea" and "Blessed Assurance . . . This Is My Story, This Is My Song." Accordingly, I thought, he may disagree with "my story and my song," and he may not appreciate me "just as I am." Nevertheless, "this is my story" and "this is my song." And I shall tell it and sing it forever in the presence of the One who receives me "just as I am."

There are so many reasons why I have hesitated over the years to tell my story and sing my song, but mainly because I feared the reaction of some of the saints. You know, don't you? Be careful, tread

lightly, don't reveal yourself, I said to myself, as we all do. For we are bound like prisoners by specific social controls. Sociologists argue that family and friends' stigma, gossip, and rejection are the most potent controls we encounter. We have a hard time being our authentic selves, especially with those who supposedly love us the most. And yet, as sociologists also tell us, it is the stranger with whom we often are most willing to be transparent.

The fact is that the burden of self-shame is all too quickly conveyed to us from the moment we are born, after which the message we too often receive, hard-wired by negative reinforcement in the brain, is "I am of little or no worth." Sadly, this is the conclusion we come to about ourselves when most of all, we need to hear instead of the good news that God loves us and deems us to be of great worth despite all the falsities, pretenses, hypocrisies, and self-deceptions that plague our days.

As Evangelicals, we seem bent upon hearing, talking about, and critiquing others' beliefs. But seldom do we do a good job of listening to each other's life stories and validating one another as persons. Being fixated upon what we think others need to believe, we overlook what we most of all need for ourselves, which is an affirmation of our self-worth in the eyes of God and one another.

The same is true about the self-worth of others. We displace our unworthy sense of self upon others by holding them to standards of "right belief" that we are far from measuring up to. This is what Jesus pointed out when calling the scribes and Pharisees to task: "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." (Luke 20:47a NRSV) Their unjust treatment of widows made hypocrisy of their prayers. Piety provided no cover for their injustice.

Unfortunately, "right beliefs" have become our public persona for many Evangelicals, the equivalent of long pharisaical prayers. We

display our neatly bundled beliefs for others to see and adopt as their own. But what about our acts of justice and mercy? When we take an honest look at ourselves “just as we are,” how do we measure up when it comes to our relationships with persons of color, LGBTQ+ persons, immigrant persons, and others? Do we treat them as any less worthy than we are of God’s abundant acceptance and love? That is to say, if any such persons were to tell us their stories, speaking to us, “Hear me ‘just as I am,’” would we open ourselves to them without prejudice and with the same welcoming compassion that Jesus bears toward each one of us?—“Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me?”

At the beginning of the semester, I often tell my students to find a way to get “their voice out on the table,” since together, we do not learn until we all have made our stories known. And that’s because things will move from head to heart when we share our stories and songs with one another. When I have heard their hearts and stop worrying so much about what is in their heads, lo and behold, my own soul’s longing to share my story and sing my song “just as I am” stirs within me.

In my sociology of religion course, I recently tried something different from my usual practice. I asked students to write their religious autobiography, even if it was about growing up without religion (“nones,” meaning persons of no religion, is now an official religious category for us sociologists). I told them that the classroom is a safe place to tell their stories and to sing their songs and that we would not be critiquing or criticizing or judging one another’s deep-down sharing. Their stories were to be grounded in their socialization, that is, in what they had learned, seen, and experienced at home, in school, in religious settings, and elsewhere. This was to be their time to reveal and explore together without being judged.

The results were terrific—honest, raw, moving, and deeply personal. As students listened to what sprang from the souls of others, the experience had a transformative effect on their beliefs. One person, who assumed that all Christians were right-wing supporters of Donald Trump, had previously declared himself an atheist. But having heard the stories of others, including Roman Catholics and Evangelicals who believed in God, by the end of the semester, he said, “For the first time, I now see that perhaps I can believe in God. I need some time to think more about this.”

It wasn't his hearing about the beliefs of those Christians that opened his mind and heart, but rather it was hearing their deep-down personal stories. As a result, I walked away from the semester, grieving that the church provides few opportunities for honest conversations. We silence our need to express our beliefs long enough to listen to another's heart.

From toddler to grownup, Sunday school is frequently too much about believing the right things and talking about doing the right things, yet rarely about enabling our children and ourselves as adults to integrate the gospel from the biblical stories, including the stories of Jesus, with truth-telling about ourselves. For Jesus enters our stories not as a belief but as a person. Just as God does, Jesus cares and listens to who we are, to what's going on with us, to how we're doing, to what we're facing and struggling with, to our deepest longings, hopes, desires, and, yes, to our darkest moments of despair. “Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”

When the church becomes a safe haven to tell our stories, we find more growth within our souls and ultimately much more love to offer one another. But when we are overly defended and protected by our beliefs, we miss the rich experiences of one another.

As with Truman Burbank in the movie “The Truman Show,” the surrounding culture conditions us to live inauthentically within a walled reality, deprived of the fullness of authentic selfhood. Breaking away from those constraints, those walls do not come down quickly, for we must first disabuse ourselves of the “believed reality” that disguises the truth about our shared human condition. Truman believed from an early age that his father had been lost at sea, only to discover later with his very own eyes, and to his sudden shock, that his father lived as a homeless man on the street. We, too, require such moments of startling awakening. For it is then that we see what’s transpiring not only within ourselves but also within others.

I wish I had broken through this kind of walled reality earlier in my life. I wish that doing so had not required the diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease, which confronted me with the fact that my days were numbered and that if ever I wanted to become an honestly authentic human being, I’d better start now. I wish I had cared far less about what other saints and sinners (we’re all a mix of both) had thought of me and about what I *believed* of what they thought of me. For I knew what no one else could possibly know about me until I shared it, which is the truth of my own deep-down story.

By God’s grace and with thanksgiving, I finally broke through the wall. Yes, it’s better to arrive home late than not at all. It’s better to live authentically for a short time than to live inauthentically all of the time. Such breakthroughs, I believe, are God’s way of preparing us to live in the richness and fullness of God’s kingdom that, yes, begins now.

“Blessed assurance . . . This is my story, this is my song.”

READERS' RESOURCES:

The website www.achurchdismantled.com contains resources to support the material in this book. Readers may subscribe at the website to receive weekly blog posts and series updates.

CHAPTER ONE

Got Jesus? Regardless of How You Answer, Your Story Is Sacred

July 6, 2020

I've had the blessing of teaching at Elizabethtown College for nearly three decades, interacting year after year with the most delightful students a professor could imagine. One of my favorite courses is entitled *Discovering Society*, in which I introduce the basics of sociology.

From the beginning of my teaching career, when I wasn't so far from the students' ages myself, my goal was to speak to the basics of being human. And why? Because if I couldn't convey at least that much, then anything else I shared would hardly matter.

From my observations, I would regularly tell them that the most successful people possess three qualities in common. They work harder than others. They take risks no one else is willing to take. And they "walk the talk," by which I mean that they live with integrity and tell the truth. So I would say to them, "You can have the first two qualities of hard work and risk-taking and yet still end up in the police report or in the obituary section of the newspaper sooner than you need to. But if you have the third and 'walk the talk,' then you're going to do just fine because the world is dying for people like this."

From the very outset, I've also taught my students that their lives are sacred. From my theological perspective, this means they were created sacred and that, therefore, their flesh and bones are sacred, as are their daily and lifetime journeys. This I believe with all of my heart.

Regardless of their religious commitments, lack of them, sexual orientations, experiences of trauma, criminal records, emotional and mental health challenges, or race or ethnicity, each is a sacred person.

To work with these most vital beliefs, I initially asked students to read Frederick Buechner's earliest memoir, *The Sacred Journey*.¹ Buechner spent his life as a teacher, ordained minister, and prolific writer. He is undoubtedly one of the most honest authors I've ever read, as is Anne Lamott.² Buechner's point is that God is always speaking to each of us and that our lives bear the mark of God's sacredness within us.

What do I mean by sacred? In human terms, the sacred is set apart as far more memorable than the everyday throw-away stuff of our lives. It's like the expensive dishes behind the glass window of the china closet or the occasions upon which we dress up in all our finery for grieving our sorrows and celebrating our joys, or the breaking of the bread and lifting of the cup at the Communion Table to eat and drink of the One who came and lived and died to say just how much we are loved.

The problem for us Christians is that we honestly forget that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16a), meaning that it literally is the world (the cosmos) that God loves. While we teach our children this familiar verse early in life, too often, we turn right around and live as if the verse reads, "God so loved the special people of the church." Without saying so, we imply that the rest of the world can go you know where! Our insider's language spells a tale of those poor souls outside of the church who just haven't gotten their stuff together yet, and we aren't sure they ever will. Yet, we will pray for them after we finish shaking our heads and talking about them.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982). See <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/>.

² <https://barclayagency.com/speakers/anne-lamott/>.

The underlying issue then for us is that we may act as if a person's life becomes sacred only after choosing to love God, when in actuality "we love because he first loved us" (I John 4:19). The Psalmist sings of it.

For it was you who formed my inner parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
(Ps 139:13-16 NRSV)

This is more than poetic truth, for it is the ultimate truth that pertains to each and every person that God has created. Every single one of us is a sacred creature of God's own making, with the sweetness of God's breath breathing life into us. This is true whether we have chosen to live our lives for God's good sake or not, which presumably is what some people mean simply by asking, "Have you got Jesus?"

I think that we who say we love Jesus would have infinitely more credibility if our love for Jesus revealed in us the ways by which Jesus universally loves. For then, we would begin to see that same love appearing within our families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, regardless of whether or not they've "got" Jesus. Some of them might even dare to ask us about the hope that is within us.

Living and interacting with thousands of students across these

decades has only increased my love and care for them as the sacred treasures they are in God's sight. I make it my task to encourage them in what is true and good, to call out the gifts God has placed within them, to share whatever wisdom I can from my own hard knocks, failures, and suffering, and to pass on to them my belief that their very being is of far more value than they may yet realize, especially when encountering frustration, doubt, discouragement, or untimely death, tragedy, or illness. For there is a sacred hope within them, whether conscious or unconscious, just as there is in all of us.

Having been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease has only strengthened the bonds that I feel with my students. Something about an old guy with a Ph.D., trembling as he is in the classroom, creates a connection with eighteen- and twenty-year-olds who may not tremor on the outside but are quick to acknowledge they tremor on the inside. I'm not shy about sharing with them my faith and trust in the One in whom I have placed my hope, knowing I, like them, am of far greater worth than I have any idea—even on the days when I am trembling the most inside or outside.

What I know is this. Every semester I have a classroom full of students who bear the distinct mark of God upon them, set apart and given a name uniquely their own, and loved with a sacred love that is from the foundation of the world, offered to them at the very moment of their birth. This means that I am called to love them just as Jesus loves them. And who knows? Maybe one or two or more of them will someday surprise themselves by saying, "I think I've 'got' Jesus." Or, more accurately, Jesus will have "gotten" hold of them in the sense of the prayer that he prayed to God: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word" (John 17:6 NRSV).

CHAPTER TWO

Humpty Dumpty, the King and His Men, and “Dust in the Wind”

June 16, 2020

As a kid, like so many of us, I grew up hearing that familiar jingle: “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, and all of the king’s horses and all of the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again!”

I have no idea where this little ditty came from or how it made its way into our little valley or how something so silly makes its way anywhere in the world, except for the fact that it harbors a central message that gets passed on from generation to generation. The message is this: “Don’t fall, and if you do so, don’t break. For there ain’t nobody going to be able to put you back together again—not even the king and his men!”

And so we spend our childhood trying to balance on the edge of the wall, believing that if we fall, we are a goner and all is lost—that we will lie broken at the feet of the king and his men who will be powerless to put us back together again. This is a tough go for any of us—to chronically hang out on the edge of a precipice upon which one slight misstep could mean our doom. No wonder we all grow up so crazy with anxiety!

But what if falling was the antidote for our anxiety, and brokenness the beginning of our being put back together again? The one thing this ditty gets right is that it will never be the king and his men

who put us back together because they are the last ones to recognize and appreciate the broken people, and the last ones to know what it means to identify with brokenness. They are too busy hanging on to the edge of their walls, which is tough to do while hanging onto a sword that if you fell, you might just fall upon.

But the research is pretty straightforward—that once we get to the point in our life where we recognize that we are broken and that there is no going back up on that wall, we begin to breathe a sigh of relief. We discover that we see the world differently from the bottom than from the top of the wall. We find others who have fallen from the wall and are also breathing more freely. We find out that we see the world more clearly from the margins than from the middle. And for once in our lives, we begin to understand that the king and his men are the ones to pity.

As a kid, I tried desperately to hold it together—to be good, act good, smell good, talk good, walk good—so much so that all those efforts created a chronic two-lane highway in my head. In one lane, I lived life—mowed the grass, prepared for exams, went out with friends, worked on homework, and on and on. In the other lane, I was preoccupied with maintaining “goodness,” chronically asking God to forgive me for my failure to be so. My friends from high school remember seeing me pray quietly even as we played tennis, went bowling, and just hung out together (though they had no idea what I appeared to be saying to myself!). It takes a lot of work to drive in two lanes of traffic and avoid crashing into oneself.

By God’s grace, I finally fell off the wall, and by God’s grace, I keep falling off the wall. And every time I do so, something else that I thought was so good about who I am gets busted up because what I thought was so good about who I am is often simply what I thought others thought was good about who I am.

I will never forget reading, sometime during my college years, I guess, the Psalmist's words that God has compassion on us because God knows we are "but dust," that he knows that we have already fallen off the wall too many times to count and been trampled into broken pieces by the king and his men too many times to remember. And that God is just fine with that and prefers us that way after all. If we are comfortable enough with our brokenness to lie still and wait, somehow through it all, God begins to put us back together—not the way others think we should be but the way God who created us knows we were made to be.

The shame is not in falling off the wall. The shame is not in being so broken that only God can put us back together. The shame is that the church fails to have compassion for those most broken and assumes that ultimately it will be the king and his men who put us back together again. No thanks—like Kansas sang when I was a college student just beginning to listen to pop music, we are all just "dust in the wind," being blown along wherever and whenever the Spirit wills. And the freedom of the breeze and the scenery it stirs up sure beats clinging to the edge of a wall and the view of the king and his men.

CHAPTER THREE

Fallen Tree, Chihuly Blown Glass, and a Dear Friend to Help Me Get Home

June 19, 2020

On February 14, 2017, I heard those exact words again at the University of Penn Medical Center regarding the Parkinson's tremors I had experienced.

"I don't think there is an alternative diagnosis"—which was no more than a reiteration of what I'd heard from my family physician when he said, *"Boy, you sure don't want to have this disease—it's all-encompassing."*

Neither statement offered much hope. I quickly discovered that viewing my situation from the standpoint of medical science offered me little to no *ultimate* hope.

Before I learned of my diagnosis, by God's grace the congregation granted me a three-month sabbatical, which we were to embark upon later that summer. It was a providential gift. It allowed Heidi and me time to process together the excruciatingly painful and discouraging news we had received. It also spared us of the glare of earnest questioners until we first had a chance to listen deeply to God. And, as is so often the case, God's words for us came from a variety of unexpected sources.

The first was from a visit to the Chihuly Garden and Glass exhibit in Seattle, Washington. If you've ever seen the work of artist Dale Chihuly, then you'll understand why any attempt of mine to describe it can't begin to express the grand mystery and beauty

of it all. What intrigued me most was that part of the exhibit that described Chihuly's change of artistic expression due to the onset of his disability.

"After losing sight in his left eye and dislocating his shoulder," the description stated, "Chihuly relinquished the gaffer (the 'boss') position and began drawing as a way to communicate his vision and designs to his team. The drawings evolved beyond a communication tool to become an important part of his expression." Chihuly later concluded, "Drawing really helps me to think about things. I am able to draw and work with a lot of color, and that inspires me."

Here was the first hint that my own dark, all-encompassing life-sentence to Parkinson's disease could be an opening to new creativity and joy, to a new way of revealing to others what lay dormant within me.

It was by his giving up of the "gaffer" position that Chihuly's students were empowered to do what he had done so well. For it was by picking up his brush that Chihuly revealed to others the vision he saw for himself. Up to that point, all that anyone could see of the artist was the grandeur and beauty of his art. But now, enabled by an awareness of Chihuly's disability, they could see into the heart and soul of the man, from whom the grandeur and beauty emerged. Dale Chihuly's disability had provided the giant leap into his maturation as an artist and a mentor. It is no surprise, then, that his drawings now sell for thousands of dollars.

The second window of divine opening to my "Parkinson's self" came during our trip to the Olympic National Forest, which displayed a mystic beauty eliciting considerable awe.

As we hiked the trail, taking photos of gigantic trees standing in majestic splendor as they had for centuries, there appeared a lone tree that I would not have noticed, except for the fact that it had fallen partway across the trail but remained about eight feet above

the path. Despite its misfortune, it had bent itself upward toward the infinite sky. It was that tree, among the other grand, straight, and upright ones surrounding, that caught my eye. I beheld it, not for its perfection but for its persistence—living, breathing, and rising in its crooked, twisted form—persevering against daunting odds, revealing an unparalleled beauty all its own.

It happened just then. As I stood before that arched inhabitant of the forest, I sensed myself more present to my life than I had ever been before. Perhaps, I thought, my own disability would now render me more useful than I could possibly imagine. Who knows? By God's mysterious providence that hobbled tree may have been positioned this way for decades. And perhaps for the singular purpose that all passers-by, lame or laden with burdens, might trace its visage aloft, drawing light and strength from heaven above.

Finally, yet another divine opening during our trip, appeared in a passage from a book about Sabbath rest. It helped me realize that the disease of Parkinson's would make me considerably dependent upon others, more so than I was ever willing to be in the past. I began to see that the gift of dependency could be one of the greatest gifts I could receive or offer in return. For God didn't create us to live independently of one another, nor independently of God himself. Why is it, then, that we think we can go it alone as if we must prove to ourselves, yet certainly not to God, that somehow our independence makes us invulnerable and invincible?

Wayne Cordeiro, in *Leading on Empty*, notes this truth: "When we wrestle with our own infirmities, we are not disqualified from God's plan for our lives. It may just mean we will arrive at it differently from the way we had intended. We may arrive leaning on the arm of a friend."³

³ Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2009), electronic edition, 155.

For me, that thought hurled light into my darkness, causing me to view Heidi, my dear wife, in a way I had not seen her before. With my Parkinson's disease, I would need Heidi more than anyone else in order to find my way home. And that recognition alone deepened my love and thanksgiving for the extraordinary gift that she is to me.

I needn't pretend anymore that I could go it alone. The mask of my independence had fallen away. The façade of my self-sufficiency had fissured and snapped like a dead limb breaking away from an aging tree. I had come to experience what Paul, that Jewish-Christian mystic and ambassador to the Gentiles, so eloquently wrote to the church at Corinth. It is worth our hearing Paul repeat it.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor 4:7-10)

Somehow, by the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord, the depth of our inner darkness disperses when encountering the brilliance of his light, even as the unveiling of our weakness reveals the abundance of his strength.

As Paul professed, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond measure." (v. 17)

So, if by chance I'm ever that Parkinson's man you see hobbling along the sidewalk, crouched over with age, with creases in my face, with shuffling feet, with cane in hand and a limp in my gait, then may you remember to see me just as I saw that fallen tree—bent over, to be sure—but turned upward, yes, yes—by the Light.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mennonite Central Committee, a New Doctor, His Young Family, and a Trip to the Philippines

July 1, 2020

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24 NIV)

...but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV)

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...(Romans 5:3-4 NIV)

One of the most rewarding courses I teach includes a project where students write the story, from a sociological perspective, of someone in their family tree who was born before 1950 and then present that story to the class at the end of the semester. The students love this project, and there have been many exciting outcomes—one student asked an attorney to read the will of her grandmother, and in

doing so, discovered that their grandmother had actually willed the family homestead to the student's family. The family had been told that the grandmother had willed the home to her second husband, who had taken ownership of it.

Another student's grandfather, as he was writing about him, suddenly died during the semester. Another interviewed an individual about his life, only to learn that he died the following day and that she was the last to have ever discussed his life with him, and another's mother passed away suddenly and the student asked if she could process this loss through her paper. One of the qualities that the students consistently identify in the stories they tell is the suffering and challenges that those born before 1950 experienced and how resilient they were in overcoming and persevering, and finding ways to become stronger through suffering. They also consistently identify the strength of the communities where these individuals lived compared to what they as students experience now, particularly terms of in religious and family communities. I have encouraged my students not to run from pain and suffering but to recognize the strength they have to persevere and that suffering will, throughout their lives, be their most excellent teacher. And I have quoted St. Paul's words about suffering leading to perseverance and perseverance to character and character to hope.

Three years ago, the Mifflin County Mennonite Historical Society celebrated and remembered the life of my wife Heidi's grandfather, Jacob James Brenneman, a man whom Heidi always called Poppy and whom she dearly loved. As Heidi prepared to share that evening, she discovered documents related to her grandfather's decision to go with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to the Philippines in 1946 to help develop and offer much-needed medical care following WW II. In his reflections, Poppy or Dr. Brenneman says this:

Upon my return to my home in Hesston, Kansas, Mrs. Brenneman and myself talked and prayed over the matter, and we were led to the conclusion that I would go if the way opened for me to leave for a year and one-half of service in foreign relief. The way seemed to open and on May 28, 1946, we finally decided to dispose of my office, equipment and medicines and engage in the field of medical relief in the Philippines for a term of one and a half years. Naturally enough the disposing of one's office, his equipment, his office supplies and medicines was no easy task. When I gave the key to my successor and walked out of my office door for the last time my heart was heavy within me and my eyes did show some moisture. I had been in the office almost four years and was naturally quite attached to it.

In another document, Dr. Brenneman described the last moments with his family before departing:

The final parting came at 7:30 p.m. of July 31, 1946 on the platform of the Pennsylvania Railroad station in Lewistown, PA. We were quite well prepared for the occasion, but to say goodbye and part for a period of 18 months is no easy task especially from one's dear wife and sweet little babies. I gave little Gwendolyn her goodbye kiss at home because she did not accompany us to the station...I gave each one in turn a goodbye squeeze and kiss and finally came to my dear Maude and it was almost too much. Yes, and eyes were wet and our hearts were heavy, but were sure we were doing God's will. The train pulled up and my things were put on and "all aboard" echoed out and I was off by myself. The picture behind was deeply impressed in my mind and I shall never forget it...Maude had tears in her eyes, but just as the train pulled out and I waved goodbye a beautiful smile broke through the tears and our parting was complete.

In a season when many of us are anxious about the uncertainty of our lives as the result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jim and Maude's shared decision to step from the security of private practice as a physician into the uncertainty of leaving family and community to serve the poor and oppressed is a reality check for us who so much want to avoid suffering rather than embrace it, who want things to return to normal rather than being willing to accept the growth opportunity that comes with the abnormal. The Brennemens' story reminds us that saints do not so much seek comfort as give it up; settle down as much as to keep on moving wherever God leads.

The opportunities for sainthood are all around us these days—the injustices facing black and brown folks, the poverty and homelessness in our local communities, the children and single parents right around the corner from us, those who have lost their jobs—and on and on. I wonder how much of our concern about getting back to normal for American Christians lies in our desire to return to the kind of comfort, security, and familiarity that Dr. Brenneman relinquished to Jesus when he boarded the train in Lewistown and said goodbye.

Dr. Brenneman would return from the Philippines, and he and Maude would set up a medical practice in their home in Belleville. And eventually, they would have a granddaughter named Heidi, who hung out much of the time in Poppy's office and in Poppy and Granny's home. And Dr. Brenneman would treat my family and hundreds of other families over the next several decades until he passed suddenly of a heart attack at age 69 in 1980. It has not been unusual for Heidi to meet people who gratefully, and some in tears, describe her grandfather's care for them or someone else at some crisis point in their lives, including hundreds of folks whose children were delivered by Dr. Brenneman in their home. While coming across a bit gruff to others sometimes, there was also something saintly about Dr.

Brenneman and Maude—something undoubtedly that emerged in the crucible of those years apart.

Oh, how we wish for another way, for another equation that might begin with perseverance and produce character and hope without the suffering. Of course, the truth that suffering is the pathway to sainthood flies in the face of a culture that research shows to be increasingly narcissistic, that prefers to demean and bully and objectify the other rather than recognize our shared humanity and suffering. But Jesus makes it pretty clear that any chance of developing virtues worth remembering and taking to our grave always begins with our own experiences of loss and suffering and even death. For nothing teaches us our shared humanity, like suffering. And nothing creates true community like suffering. And as many of us have learned, nothing produces hope like suffering.

I am grateful that I do not have a theology that teaches me that in this life, bodies should not be broken, that the world should not be broken, that the church should not be broken, or that the brokenness of any of these somehow means God is impotent and that we are without hope. But instead, it is in these realities of life, where we find our only hope.

I do not doubt that among you who have already given up so much and have observed and experienced so much suffering, none of this is news to you and that you could probably tell it much better than I. Still, I trust, nonetheless, there has been within my thoughts something that encourages you to continue traveling the path of our suffering Lord until that day when all of creation will sing a new song.

Indeed the broken will be whole, the sick will be healed, the traumatized will be safe, those in exile will be home, and together we will join around the throne of the One who took up our sins, carried our sorrows, knew our most significant suffering and was in it with

us, was wounded so we might be healed, and whose punishment brought us peace, shalom and wholeness. And it is in looking back that we will be able to see that in some small ways, not only did our suffering reflect his, but the hope we brought to the world did so as well. But I do wonder what has changed for us over the last 70 years such that our primary question in this pandemic is how do we get back to normal and to church rather than how do we leave what is normal and also leave church behind for the sake of the world that God so loved and so loves still?