From the Mountain to the Cross: Revisiting 1968 through the Prophetic Words of King, Kennedy, Chavez and Merton

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Between the "Long, hot summer of 1967"[1] and the soaring optimism heard in the 1969 hit "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In" (from the musical *Hair*), the American consciousness was burdened by a wave of fear and hopelessness: the dreamer died, the reconciliation of men did not occur, and the spiritual bridge between the West and East fell. 1968, "a beast of a year"[2] as Thomas Merton referred to it, is remembered as one of the most turbulent in American history. International and national violence permeated the news, from the Tet Offensive in January to the first confirmed murders of the Zodiac killer in December. In the midst of the overwhelming emotions of grief, confusion and anger, however, pearls of immense hope were cast, although their presence has been somewhat obscured by the rough exterior of the times. The prophetic messages of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, Cesar Chavez and Thomas Merton can continue to offer great wisdom and insight for the twenty-first century, especially for a nation that finds itself again in political turmoil.[3] Although these change agents left little by way of an interconnected history, their message of recognizing the dignity and rights of the human person permanently bound their lives through a spiritual connectedness.[4]

1. The "long, hot summer" was a phrase used to refer to roughly 159 race riots that occurred throughout the United States during 1967; see Malcolm McLaughlin, *The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). See Merton's essay "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven" in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 165-81.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 78 [4/6/1968]; subsequent references will be cited as "*OSM*" parenthetically in the text.

3. Notable scholars have examined the prophetic aspects of the writings of Merton and King; see for example M. Shawn Copeland, "The Watchmen and the Witnesses: Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Exercise of the Prophetic," *The Merton Annual* 30 (2017) 156-70. There has been little focus, however, on the spiritual connectivity that illustrates a prophetic parallel among King, Kennedy, Chavez and Merton, specifically within the year 1968.

4. Although Chavez, Kennedy, King and Merton advocated for human rights and the recognition of human dignity for the marginalized, there exists little evidence of

This article will focus on selected key events of 1968 to explore the spiritual congruence that bound Merton, King, Kennedy and Chavez through their justice advocacy, activism that continues to serve as a concrete and tangible example of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-8) in practice. This exploration may offer seeds of greater recognition of human dignity, reconciliation and progress today and for the future.

When he saw the crowd, he went up the mountain. . . .
He began to teach them.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was not originally planning to speak on the evening of April 3 at the Masonic Temple in Memphis, Tennessee: a storm was coming, a large crowd was not expected, and he was occupied with preparations for the Poor People's Campaign.[5] When the crowd surpassed

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direct interaction among them as a group. Kennedy and Chavez had the most extensive history of physical interaction. They initially met in 1959, again crossed paths through the Delano congressional hearings and exchanged correspondence in 1966 and 1967, and famously broke bread together in Delano in 1968. See Robert F. Kennedy, *RFK: His Own Words*, ed. C. Richard Allen & Edwin Guthman (New York: HarperCollins, 2018) (subsequent references will be cited as "Allen & Guthman" parenthetically in the text). It is documented that King and Chavez corresponded as well as supported each other as brothers through the common goal of their work beginning in 1966: for additional information, see Cesar Chavez, *An Organizer's Tale: Speeches* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008) (subsequent references will be cited as "Chavez" parenthetically in the text), James T. Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Although Merton never met King, there is evidence of Merton's admiration of King and plans for a retreat with King at Gethsemani; see Patricia Lefevere, "Witnesses and Watchmen: Merton and King, Spiritual Brothers Who Never Had a Chance to Meet," *National Catholic Reporter* 54.12 (23 March-5 April, 2018) 1, 8-9; available online at: https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/merton-and-king-spiritual-brothers-who-never-had-chance-meet. For Merton's connection with the Kennedys, particularly Robert Kennedy's wife Ethel, especially through their mutual friendship with Daniel Walsh, see Thomas T. Spencer, "Merton and the Kennedys," *The Merton Seasonal* 37.1 (Spring 2012) 3-9. While there is little connecting Merton with Chavez, they had mutual friends including Dorothy Day and Eileen Egan, as well as articles published concurrently in *The Catholic Worker* (December 1966; June 1967; November 1967). In an unpublished May 29, 1968 letter to Merton (now in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY), Egan seems to be introducing him to Chavez, as if explaining Chavez's work for the first time. It could be that this letter was Merton's first acquaintance with Chavez, since Chavez did not come to national recognition until he concluded his fast, in the presence of Robert Kennedy, in March 1968.

5. See Philip A. Goduti, Jr., *RFK and MLK: Visions of Hope, 1963-1968* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017) (subsequent references will be cited as "Goduti" parenthetically in the text); see also *The Witness from the Balcony of Room 306*, a film directed by Adam Pertofsky (GoDigital, 2014).

expectations, however, he was called to weather the storm and deliver what was to be his final speech to the capacity crowd. King, an eloquent orator and exegete, wove together images from both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures in his address. He recounted chronological advances of humanity as if God had taken him by the hand, as a prophet of old, to each of those great civilizations. King clearly stated that he would not want to stay in those ancient worlds but proclaimed, as if to God: "if you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy."[6] King prophetically acknowledged that this great point of history – 1968 – had a profound context and was at a turning point in human history.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"*I AM* A MAN" – the slogan of the Memphis sanitation workers' strike – was not a haphazard phrase designed merely to address change for better working conditions and better pay for garbage collectors; it was a visceral cry to raise awareness of the dignity of every human person, no matter their status or position. Although the topic of human dignity had been preached about, written about, and addressed before by individuals such as King, Merton and Chavez, the direct and simple form of this slogan brought a new and poignant directness to the message. From February to early April, the Memphis Sanitation Workers' strike became a prominent focus within the Poor People's Campaign. Dr. King came to Memphis and demanded the recognition of human rights and economic justice for Americans living in poverty. He knew well that legislation alone would not change hearts. Although the law could mandate equality, in practice it did not mean that everyone would be recognized as equals in heart and mind; that took greater effort. As he wrote in his book *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* (1967), "the great majority of Americans are suspended . . . uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it" (King, *Testament* 562).

King and the Memphis sanitation workers were advocating for the sacredness of humanity. In his final speech, King uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to challenge a traditional perspective; instead of focusing on the natural concern for safety of one's self, King asserts that the primary care and concern of an individual is the good of one's neighbor. King's "Mountaintop" speech concludes by striking a profound Mosaic

6. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I See the Promised Land" (3 April 1968), in James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986) 280; subsequent references will be cited as "King, *Testament*" parenthetically in the text.

parallel: "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land" (King, *Testament* 286).

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Less than twenty-four hours after his April 3 speech to the sanitation workers, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. His death shook the nation. Dr. King's assassination did not resolve the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, nor did it open the hearts of all people with compassion. It did, however, manifest a deep and insatiable mourning across the country. The reactions of sorrow and anger became so intense that riots seemed to be the only way to purge the aching soul of many throughout the nation.

On the evening of King's assassination, Robert Kennedy arrived in Indianapolis to campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. But he was cautioned by his advisers to skip the scheduled rally in fear for his safety, because the gathered crowd, mostly African-American, had not yet heard of the death of Dr. King, and it was believed that Kennedy would be in danger because the devastating news might cause rioting. Kennedy, however, did address the crowd. He took his time to be forthright and empathetic with them. Instead of campaigning that evening, he mourned with the people. He told the crowd about the assassination, and after a brief silence he encouraged them to remember the great work of Dr. King by carrying on his understanding, compassion and love instead of giving in to bitterness, hatred and polarization (see Goduti 564-73). In rare openness, Kennedy also indicated that those who grieved were not alone. He acknowledged that he too had lost a member of his family through violence – at the hands of a white man. Although most metropolitan cities throughout the nation had riots and violence in the wake of the assassination, Indianapolis did not. Although in grief and lamentation, Kennedy exhorted the crowd to find comfort and to continue to live as King advocated:

> What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.[7]

7. Robert F. Kennedy, "On the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr." Indianapolis,

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

In 1968, the call for recognition of human dignity and economic justice did not focus exclusively on the urban poor; movements challenging the treatment of those who worked the land were also active. Workers in the grape vineyards of Delano, California had been on strike since 1965, protesting unjust practices. Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez struggled through the United Farm Workers (UFW) to better the conditions of the Latino communities living in poverty. Although not adopted as the motto of the UFW until several years later, "Sí, se puede"[8] resounded in their dedication and optimism for social change. Through the inspiration of Gandhi and King,[9] Chavez decided to commit to a fast as a sign of humility and non-violent resistance in stark contrast to the violent actions that had recently developed during the strike. Throughout the course of his 25-day hunger strike, Chavez risked his health and safety for the betterment of those around him. Chavez did not just challenge the establishment and landowners through his work; he also challenged the silence of the Church. In his outcry on behalf of the land and the future of the laborers, Cesar Chavez echoes the cry of the prophet Jeremiah (see Jer. 12:4-6):

> In fact, we could not get any help at all from the priests of Delano. When the strike began, they told us we could not even use the Church's auditorium for the meetings. The farm workers' money helped build that auditorium! . . . what do we want the Church to do? We don't ask for more cathedrals. We don't ask for bigger churches or fine gifts. We ask for its presence with us, beside us, as Christ among us. We ask the Church to *sacrifice with the people* for social change, for justice, and for love of brother. We don't ask for words. We ask for deeds. We don't ask for paternalism. We ask for servanthood.[10]

IN (4 April 1968); available at: https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/statement-on-assassination-of-martin-luther-king-jr-indianapolis-indiana-april-4-1968.

8. "Sí, se puede" could be roughly translated as "Yes, it is possible" or "Yes, it can be."

9. See Luis D. Léon, *The Political Spirituality of Cesar Chavez: Crossing Religious Borders* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

10. Cesar Chavez, "The Mexican-American and the Church" (10 March 1968) in Timothy Matovina and Gerald E. Poyo, eds., *Presente! U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins to the Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 207, 209.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst
for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Although Cesar Chavez had become physically weak from his lengthy hunger strike, his living witness of nonviolent resistance came to the national forefront. It was said that Chavez would only break his fast if Senator Robert Kennedy would personally come to see him and ask him to resume eating (see Allan & Guthman 365-66). Chavez desired to get the attention of a deaf nation. Kennedy, moved by Chavez and his dedication, felt no other choice but to go, to have dialogue with Chavez, and to observe firsthand the poverty of the community. Kennedy was so astonished by the deplorable conditions that he commented that it was worse than what he previously experienced in the Deep South. Chavez broke his fast with Kennedy through the celebration of the Eucharist (see Chavez 39-40). The meal of Thanksgiving brought grace and hope for the future for the thousands that gathered for that sacred event. Kennedy's decision to partake of the Eucharist with Chavez and the subsequent declaration of his candidacy for the presidency satisfied a yearning body and a yearning spirit within the Latino community. Although he had clearly stated earlier that he was not interested in pursuing the presidency, within a week of the shared sacramental experience, Kennedy declared his candidacy for president, citing his exposure to the social injustices suffered by the powerless of the country as his motivation:

> As a member of the cabinet and member of the Senate I have seen the inexcusable and ugly deprivation which causes children to starve in Mississippi, black citizens to riot in Watts; young Indians to commit suicide on their reservations because they've lacked all hope and feel they have no future, and proud and abled-bodied families to wait out their lives in empty idleness in eastern Kentucky. I have traveled and I have listened to the young people of our nation and felt their anger about the war that they are sent to fight and about the world they are about to inherit. . . . I cannot stand aside from the contest that will decide our nation's future and our children's future.[11]

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

The Poor People's Campaign did not end with the assassination of Dr. King; it continued. The movement and witness that sought the recognition of human worth evolved. By May of 1968, after further marches and

11. Robert F. Kennedy. "Announcement of Candidacy for President" (16 March 1968), in *Presidential Campaigns: Documents Decoded*, ed. Daniel M. Shea and Brian M. Harward (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013) 64.

demonstrations, thousands of activists descended on the Washington Mall to create a consistent presence advocating for change. There they established their city on a hill: "Resurrection City." It was estimated that 3,000 people came together to build a tent city comprised of wooden shanties. In the area surrounding Washington, DC "Resurrection City" captured the eye of the nation's leaders, at the heart of the nation – in all its glory and challenges. As reported by Calvin Trillin, "The poor in Resurrection City have come to Washington to show that the poor in America are sick, dirty, disorganized and powerless – and they are criticized daily for being sick, dirty, disorganized and powerless."[12]

Though it is often remembered for its failures, "Resurrection City" could be considered a success as it offers an historical example of how the Poor People's Campaign received legitimate recognition; the encampment was designated with its own zip code: 20013.[13] Over its 36-day existence, resident-advocates tirelessly worked for change, living in community and offering a communal sign of hope and need for mercy and compassion. Although not directly inspired by the events of "Resurrection City," Thomas Merton's poetry offers relevant insights and opportunities for reflection in light of the efforts and toils of "Resurrection City" and other "cities on a hill": "Not to be without words in a season of effort. Not to be without a vow in the summer of harvest. What have the signs promised on the lonely hill? Word and work have their measure, and so does pain. Look in your own life and see if you find it."[14]

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.

After his 1958 illuminating experience in downtown Louisville, something changed in the heart and writings of Thomas Merton.[15] There was a greater urgency in his tone and attention to the dignity and tribulations of the human person. Merton also became more affected by the horrors of the world during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. He was especially moved by the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bomb-

12. Calvin Trillin, "US Journal: Resurrection City," *The New Yorker* 44 (15 June 1968) 71.

13. "The Scene at ZIP Code 20013," *Time* 91:21 (24 May 1968) 34.

14. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 55-56 [#81]; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 449-50; subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text.

15. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82 [March 19, 1958]; and Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.

ing in Birmingham.[16] He searched for a sense of peace[17] and developed a renewed interest in ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. By 1968, Merton offered scathing criticisms of the control and power used against humanity as well as Western culture's definitions of material success.[18] Merton was drawn toward a more universal spiritual identity with an appreciation of diverse expression in culture and in the human person; he found clarity in ancient traditions of the East.

Merton saw through the façade and illusions of the material world to the true holistic nature of human existence. He also deeply appreciated the wisdom and advocacy of others that recognized that unity of humanity. There is evidence that Merton was eager to spend time with King and was arranging an opportunity for him to experience a retreat at Gethsemani, in 1968.[19] Tragically, that event did not take place, and we are left to wonder what a meeting of those men of great heart and vision would have looked like. Upon King's death, Merton wrote of King's prophetic nature:

> But it is evident that Dr. King was expecting something and went to meet it with his eyes open. His final speech was certainly prophetic in its way. I believe he felt the best thing he could do would be to lay down his life not only for the Black people but for the whole country. He always hoped to preserve the country from senseless violence that would be merely destructive, and may have hoped that sacrifice of his life would bring home to people the need for a fully Christian solution of the grave problems we all face. (*RJ* 114)

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16. See Merton's poem "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" (*CP* 626-27) and his October 12, 1964 letter to Chris McNair, father of Carol Denise McNair, one of the four murdered children and the subject of Merton's poem, in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to Old and New Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 332-33; subsequent references will be cited as "*RJ*" parenthetically in the text.

17. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995); Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Roots of Spiritual Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

18. See, for example, Thomas Merton, "Circular Letters to Friends: Midsummer 1968" (*RJ* 115-17).

19. See the letters to King's associate June Yungblut in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 639-41, 644.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God.

Throughout the course of the year it seemed like violence continued to escalate, on the national and international levels. The war in Vietnam did not seem to slow but just pushed forward. American aerial assaults were combated by a defense more resilient than expected – Operation Rolling Thunder carried on for years without making significant headway. In March the aerial tactics changed; President Johnson announced that all bombings north of the nineteenth parallel would cease.[20] Peace talks were later held in Paris between the United States and North Vietnam, and by November, all bombings were halted in North Vietnam.

The deadly cycle of violent war games did not end in the peace that people hoped for; the lethality was put on hold for a short time. Even in the lull there was a grotesque pallor upon the peace talks, as evidenced in the language of a CIA Intelligence memorandum regarding casualties in North Vietnam. Operation Rolling Thunder "had resulted in an estimated 52,000 casualties. This number of casualties, as a result of military action, is small when related to North Vietnam's total population of 18 million. Over 34,000 of the estimated casualties were civilians."[21] If the value of human beings was expressed only in numbers and percentages, could peace last? Merton stated that some significant change would be needed to serve as a catalyst for breaking the cycle of violence:

> Several magazines asked me to write something concerning the assassination of Robert Kennedy. I refused because I am a bit suspicious of what seems to me to be a growing ritual cycle: murder, public acts of contrition, deploring violence, gestures of appeasement, then everything goes on unchanged and presently there is another assassination. The cycle continues. . . . In a word we are beginning to sense in our society a tendency to harm and to destroy the very things we claim to need and admire. (*RJ* 115)

20. See Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018) 342-43.

21. "Civilian Casualties Resulting from ROLLING THUNDER Program in North Vietnam," *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*. CIA, 9; available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000600020001-0.pdf.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Closing out the year, Thomas Merton made a pilgrimage to Asia, reaching out, fascinated with its culture and spirituality. He was eager to meet with the Dalai Lama.[22] Merton and the Dalai Lama quickly became spiritual brothers, respecting the insight and wisdom of each other. They both had experienced struggles with authorities and their respective governing bodies: the Dalai Lama was exiled to India, while Merton's writings were censored within his community, and he was targeted by the Un-American Activities Committee – identified as an "undesirable," although that label for Merton was not known until after his death.[23] Speaking the truth had often led both men to censure, labeling, anxiety and restlessness.[24]

Far from home and reveling in the beauty of Asia, on December 10, 1968, Merton offered his last lecture at the Red Cross Conference Center in Samut Prakan, outside of Bangkok, Thailand (see *AJ* 257). His comments resonate today with as much potency as they did then. In essence, Merton reminds us that we cannot rely on temporary structures to support us and opens up the question as to what one ought to do when an individual's faith must be his or her only support:

> If you forget everything else that has been said, I would suggest you remember this for the future: "From now on, everybody stands on his own feet." This, I think, is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about, what monasticism is about – if you understand it in terms of grace. It is not a Pelagian statement, by any means, but a statement to the effect that we can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by a political power or a political force. You cannot rely on structures. . . . They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away, and if everything is taken away, what do you do next? (*AJ* 338)

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22. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 100-102, 112-13, 124-25 (subsequent references will be cited as "*AJ*" parenthetically in the text); *OSM* 250-52, 258-59, 266.

23. See Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and his Abbot, James Fox* (Boston: Shambhala, 2015) 157, 177-78, and Robert Grip, "The Merton Files: Washington Watches the Monk," *The Merton Seasonal* 11.1 (Winter 1986) 5-7.

24. See Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015) for detailed discussion of Merton's monastic restlessness.

Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In his journal of May 6, 1968, Merton wrote: "We are all secrets. But now, where there are suggested gaps, one can divine rocks and snow. 'Be a mountain diviner!'" (*OSM* 94). The exploration contained in this article has sought to divine a wellspring of renewal from profound historical moments of clarity throughout 1968. The words of King, Kennedy, Chavez and Merton offer prophetic counsel that reminds us of the necessity of recognizing the dignity of humanity, especially that of the most marginalized; the need to search for peaceful resolutions and to maintain non-violent resistance against injustice and evil; the need to press rigid and myopic institutions for greater compassion and unifying policies; and ultimately to witness truthfully that sacrifice and suffering find resurrection beyond the Cross.

Today, as fifty years ago, we are caught up in polemical ideologies, scandal in traditional religious institutions, and an ever-growing sense of despair and hopelessness. But it is in such times that individuals rise above the mire to challenge the status quo to renew their recognition of human dignity. We have the actions and words of King, Kennedy, Chavez and Merton as individuals who advocated for change in their time and culture. May we today listen to the wisdom of those prophetic voices for the courage to find God beyond stereotypical confines and to risk the comfortable in order to follow where the wild Spirit leads.