

Introduction

People have exploited both religion and its opposite to hurt people. But what if that knowledge helped religious and non-religious folk find a precious piece of common ground? One on which they stand together to bring people greater healing? What if that golden ground existed in the life-filled rainforest of you? You just needed a little help to navigate to it. Would you start the journey? Well, I'm your tour guide and I'm writing this book as a route to that treasure.

Good citizenship requires shared understanding because shared understanding facilitates positive teamwork. You'll see you believe that if you think about it. Allies worked together throughout history to achieve great good. They never agreed with one another on everything. Common purpose unites, regardless of agreement. You don't have to change others' beliefs, either. Persuasion isn't the aim; we seek a different outcome. I aim to help you find that valuable place where we can all stand together. We can proceed from there to shower our communities with greater health and healing. Before we start this journey, let me tell you a little about me, your tour guide.

My mom and dad grew up during the Great Depression. They both had large families that started with a dozen brothers and sisters. Neither of them made it past junior high—they had to work to help support those big families. Some of their siblings died in childhood. Others died as young adults in work accidents or fighting in World War II. Dad landed in Normandy on D-Day and served through VE Day. He made it home alive to marry my mom. Both worked in blue-collar jobs. Alternating shifts meant one was always home when the children were.

They bought a ramshackle house, built in 1825, in the early 1960s. My feet heard those rotting floorboards laugh as they punched slivers into my feet. Guffaws when their loose hand-forged nails sliced open a toe or two. Dad fought hard against that house when he wasn't fighting for pay. That floor's laughter disappeared as he gagged it with new plywood dressed in linoleum and carpet. He built a pine pantry, cabinets, and drawers. Dad even dug out a basement from inside the house. Shoveling the dirt into a steel washtub, he'd haul it up with a block and tackle, then drag it out of the house.

My folks took us to church on the occasional big holidays and ensured we went to catechism. We sometimes went to the other churches of family or friends, but mostly, we stayed home or visited family. Our old house on its half-acre lot was more often the gathering place for our extended family. Mom and dad hosted everything. Visits by siblings and their nuclear families on weekends. A gathering of a hundred on Independence Day. When I was born, mom's side of the family had seven siblings remaining and dad's side had seven as well. A baker's dozen of my aunts and uncles gave me dozens of cousins.

We were Republicans & Democrats, liberals and conservatives, blue collar and white. We were Episcopalians, Catholics, Protestants, and a bevy of different Baptists. Humanists, atheists, and agnostics (that last group was me at various stages of life). We had alcoholics and teetotalers. Deacons and dopers. Hunters and vegans. Promiscuous and prude. Divorcees and developmentally disabled.

One of my uncles was openly gay long before that became so accepted. Conversation and gossip never included the topic. I viewed visits with him, until his death when I was sixteen, no differently than visits with other relatives. Usually that took place at his combination home and antique shop where he lived with his partner. Much later, serving in the Army, I learned my family possibly included lesbians. My point? We were a pretty diverse tribe. To my knowledge, we did not reject anyone as family just because they were different.

Were we perfect? We didn't come close. Periodically, dislike simmered between individuals. But we loved each other. Visiting each other remained something we loved to do. I couldn't wait to "have company" as we called it in all the parts of New England from which my family hailed. Playing with my cousins and having a blast was the result. We didn't let too much malarkey impede getting together. You know what? It all happened under the flag of the United States of America.

That flag draped the coffins of my uncles. The nation provided that flag as part of the military honors for my dad when he died, and again for my brother at his death. I have those folded flags, presented by national officials, displayed on the bookshelves of my study. I have another one on the wall—my wife's late husband's. Glowing colorfully in the homes of my extended family are countless others. If you're getting a hint that I love these family memories and my country, you're on course.

Determined to go out on a limb here, I risk a guess that you love your memories and your country in your own ways. Some memories, anyway. I'll bet we're all grateful for the opportunities we have, the freedoms we're guaranteed, the protections we enjoy. Lead your memories back to your elementary school classrooms for a moment. I'll wager you remember your first encounter with our national motto there, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many, One). Many aspects of our gratitude stem from this motto. Its spirit underscored the extended family with whom I grew up. That family's a little like yours, too, isn't it? We all share a gratefulness for every good thing our flag means or that we hope it can mean—a gratefulness which I have too often neglected. I'll bet you have, too, occasionally.

Even in our neglect, we often remember some lessons in gratefulness. They always poked and prodded me. In a lot of ways, they motivated me to remember gratefulness and to give back.

When I was a directionless 18-year-old, the Iran Hostage Crisis moved me to enlist in the Army. I'd imitate the honorable service of my father, uncles, cousins, and brother before me. (Although some were squids, jarheads, and scare-force! Some good-natured inter-service ribbing here, folks.) One thing the Army gave that kid was a whole new level of understanding of our national motto—*pluralism*—a one-word translation of *E Pluribus Unum*. Its meaning could hold true for all, mirroring its impact on uniformed personnel. Political left or right. Religious or not. Asian or Caucasian. Gay or straight. Black or white. We would fight to protect each other's lives and our country. Years later, my understanding of pluralism grew deeper when I became a chaplain. I had to live, breath, and teach pluralism.

Yes, I'm a believer; if you are not, that's fine with me. I guarantee this isn't a covert effort to change you into one. My aim: demonstrate a path toward unity where we are allies in pursuit of healing. If you don't believe me now, stick with me and I'll prove myself. If you quit now, you'll never know. Let's play with a familiar phrase. It's not about belief or unbelief, left or right, as you'll gather when you hear it. It's the campaign slogan James Carville created. Used in Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign, it became famous: "It's the economy, stupid." Well, let's steal that and pretzel it for *E Pluribus Unum*: "It's our **community**, stupid."

Despite lacking brilliance, lifelong hard work secured me a comfortable retirement. I'd escape to a mountain lake away from everything but beaver and butterflies but for *passion*. Driven by passion, I decided that the United States (and all humanity, of course) needs to become more united to survive. What I see today scares me. I'm afraid we're going to grow more stupid, lose that unity, and lose our country. So, I turned away from beaver lake and butterfly mountain to keep giving back. Because I don't believe I'm being alarmist when I say that the foundations of our country are at risk of crumbling. Not Republican vs. Democrat. Blue states vs. red. Anger at lawlessness or justifying it. It's the eroding of our foundational ideals. Threats to our constitutional freedoms. Freedoms like the ability to believe and worship, or not, without fear. Threats to equal treatment under the law. To equal treatment in society, in employment, or in healthcare for every group. Threats that pit believers against unbelievers and science against spirituality. Threats to America's founding principles of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The ideals that fueled our push for independence from tyranny. If we leave those threats unaddressed, the conflicts they engender will further erode our great unity.

The circumstances behind these threats are a complex mix of many forces. I know that. Those who know me know I'm a lot like my dad: "I'm a jack of all trades and master of none," he would say. I don't have all the answers. I also know the importance of staying in my lane. Therefore, I'm going to focus on a solution in the broad realm of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. Particularly, its free exercise clause that ensures freedom of worship, or lack thereof. It's a solution I have encouraged for decades. One lived in the civic pluralism of soldier,

chaplain, and hospital staffer. It's a solution I call *radical respect*. In the following chapters, I'll chart a path to that solution in three main sections. That path includes the step-by-step directions I have followed. The ones that enabled me to work and fight beside diverse people. People with strong, opposing views of spirituality, religion, and healing.

I'll chart that path in four parts. First, I will define terms like radical respect, religion, spirituality, and healing to make sure we're speaking the same language. The evidence showing the positive impacts of spiritual practices on healing will come next. Then we'll explore some secular, religious, and non-religious theories of spirituality. We'll conclude part one by examining the ethical integration of spirituality and healing, and some of its ethical challenges. Second, we'll survey the healing practices of religions, cultures, and health belief systems. After we have understood them better, we'll transition to section three. We'll look at unique therapeutic interventions we have only recently associated with healing, religion, or spirituality. These include the creative arts, animals, and environmental designs that promote health. Finally, we will return to radical respect. It will serve as a compass to greater cultural competence, compassion, and unity. We'll look at ways to assess situations. Then we'll look at how we can promote healing in response to various human experiences and stages of life. You will see a clear path to that elusive common ground. The golden ground where you can walk arm in arm with different people toward greater wellbeing. Won't you take the journey with me? Thanks! I thought you might.