On Earth as It Is in Heaven

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

a faithful embrace of existence

DAVID FORSELL

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For Shannon, my strength, my partner, my love.

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Introduction

I was encouraged by my friend Matthew Myer Boulton, then-president of the Christian Theological Seminary, to write this book—for myself, first and foremost, and then perhaps for others.

I have a genetic disease called von Hippel-Lindau (VHL) syndrome, passed to me from my mother. To live, I routinely go through weeks of physical and emotional suffering—tests, major surgeries, and related recoveries.

Since my first surgery at twenty-three to fight VHL, I have been restless with routine questions from within, asking how I should spend the time I have and asking myself what is most important in this world. I've thought often about "ultimate" questions. I spent a year in seminary and probably two years of my life—now, at age fifty-two—recuperating from seventeen major surgeries, one at a time, on my spine, brain, kidneys, pancreas, spleen, and other places (!).

But a near-death experience after a surgery in August 2015 had me seeking wisdom from Matt and focusing on how best to live with the time I had. Clinging to life, and surviving, had moved me. More than ever, I needed to clarify, embrace, and put voice to who I am and what I most deeply believe and to live each day consistently with those answers while there was still time for me to figure it out.

It's been more than two years since that coffee with Matt. Two years have been necessary, I think, to become as consistently clear and as peaceful as I've ever been about myself, my beliefs, and my life.

It took that long to say I am seeing the world with different eyes. I am more comfortable with myself, and I have more peace. I am getting more and more comfortable with my experience of faith, God, and how to lead a faithful life. I have clarity and peace that my life is pointed in the right direction: a life directed toward and with faith in God, which I experience as an ever-present (yet often elusive) vitality; an impulse for good; and a source of love, healing, courage, and peace. God is an eternal presence my mind and words simply can't capture, but one I believe is within, between, and beyond all things. I am just recently getting better at accepting that and embracing who I am. I am new to writing and speaking about my perspective, but I'm getting there.

Living with a fatal disease has created a tremendous pressure to live urgently. It has been a powerful motivation to contribute, to live meaningfully, here and now. I have been living as if I'm dying. Now, with contemplation, I am in a place of less struggle and more peace, as I begin to walk a different path not judged by routine, urgent action within a short timeline, but instead by a more consistent intention about how I'm living in this world no matter the time I have.

My hope is that this book will help and inspire you if you struggle with traditional religion and faith, or if you don't confidently grasp meaning in your life, or if you struggle with your purpose.

I hope it helps you if you serve others and are troubled by the paradox between the miracles and joy you feel in existence, and the persistent, concurrent, deep troubles and imperfections in this world.

I hope it is helpful if you haven't accepted yourself for who you are.

I hope it helps you if you feel your life experiences are disappointing and inconsistent with the hopes you have for your life.

I hope it is helpful if you face a chronic or life-threatening disease.

This book reflects the struggles and urgency I've felt to find peace and my place in the world.

This book isn't meant to prescribe an exclusive way to live a faithful life. It's *my* path. Nonetheless, I hope something in this book helps you on your path, in the face of all life's challenges, to find more peace and a sense of personal power through love.

This is my story.

Faith is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.

Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality, Paul Tillich

Faith is not a feature of man's mentality: self-effacement of curiosity, asceticism of reason, some psychic quality that has bearing on man alone. Its essence is not disclosed in the way we utter it, but in the soul's being in accord with what is relevant to God; in the extension of our love to what God may approve, our being carried away by the tide of His thoughts, rising beyond the desolate ken of man's despair.

I Asked for Wonder, Abraham Joshua Heschel

Vitality resists despair; vitality in man is proportional to intentionality; there is hidden meaning within the destruction of meaning; being makes despair possible.

The Courage to Be, Paul Tillich

Often, to be free means the ability to deal with the realities of one's own situation so as not to be overcome by them.

For the Inward Journey, Howard Thurman



1

I Am Amazed

Since I was a kid, I have been amazed by this beautiful world and aware of humankind's potential to steward or diminish it.

When I was little, my mom would marvel at the most common Midwest rural scenery (my dad, brother, sister, and I thought she was a little nuts some days). She'd walk my sister, Cami, and my brother, Mike, and me into the cornfields and forests of our suburban Chicago landscape; she'd take pictures of us next to corn that dwarfed us in midsummer; we'd lie under big trees at the Morton Arboretum; she'd let us stay home from school to watch our pet mice give birth. We fed the birds and squirrels in the backyard. When we did leaf collections for school, Mom would also have us hug the trees. I'm not kidding!

But Mom didn't limit nature walks to Batavia, Illinois. The first family vacation I remember was to the Northeast coast. I was five or six, and I marveled at the Atlantic's waves as they sparkled in the sunlight gracing Maine's rocky coastline. Even at that young age, I felt a deep sense of wonder and fulfillment in and around nature's beauty.

Some years later we traveled west to Colorado in the old faux-wood-paneled Ford LTD station wagon. And although I didn't have the words or wisdom to explain my experience then, standing atop the world in a marvel of snow-capped peaks was transcendent for me. The rush of the wind and the stillness and the grandeur… I was exhilarated by the warm summer air and the snow at my feet. As I walked in my cold, wet sneakers and turned and looked in every direction, I experienced a peace and contentment that I'd never felt before.

I felt the same thing on a college trip to Europe. Standing on a mountaintop in the Austrian Alps felt like a perspective only God could have of the world's beauty and the grandeur of our existence.



2

I Am Shaped

A Lutheran College Choir and Vietnamese Egg Rolls

Between the time I was a toddler and a teenager, my mom and dad not only exposed me to the joys of the living world; Mom also included me in church and in her numerous efforts to serve and connect with others.

Although church experiences were generally far less interesting to me than nature—or a Chicago Bears football game on television—I *occasionally* was moved.

Easter was an amazing and joy-filled celebration, a miracle. Joyful life everlasting was assured just a few short days after candles were extinguished by every congregant during Good Friday evening services.

Even more striking to me at a young age was a group of young musicians who came to the church one week. I don't remember where they came from, but I suspect it was a solid Lutheran liberal arts college in Iowa, Illinois, or Wisconsin! They sang, *a cappella*, in candlelight at the church.

One song sticks with me more than forty years later. The loving, kind, gentle lyrics permeated the sanctuary:

There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place
And I know that it's the spirit of the Lord
There are sweet expressions on each face
And I know that it's the presence of the Lord…

It *felt* holy, as if God's love were sweeping over the pews and people in Bethany Lutheran Church, a sweet, kind, loving Presence.

Many years later I realize this was the same feeling I'd had at the top of the Alps—an overwhelming sense of awe; a sense of the Holy in my presence. There, at Bethany Lutheran Church; there, in the Rockies; there, in the mountaintops in Austria, *was* a sweet Spirit! Years apart, in a church and in the grandeur of the natural world, I had deep and joyful feelings transcending the everyday, deeply and joyfully!

Although Mom went to church in part to be obedient and to gain strength during her difficult times, church also was a foundation from which she built a life of service, friendship, and community.

She led Bethany Lutheran Church's efforts to help a refugee family settle in Batavia after a harrowing escape from war. The husband and father of the family, To, had been a military officer, and he and his wife, Dung, and their children, Tin, Tam, Thuy, Bach Nga, Trang, Lach Tu, and Mi Hanh, escaped South Vietnam as it fell to the communist north.

When the Forsells and the Nguyens got together in the Nguyens' trailer purchased by Bethany Lutheran, we may not have understood much of what we said to one another, but we did understand the smiles, love, and laughter (Mrs. Nguyen's eggrolls weren't so bad either)!

Mom's love for others extended beyond church walls and deeds. She was drawn to people and experiences different from her own and had a strong desire to honor and relate with people. When I was seven or so, Mom befriended a teenager she met in a Chicago hospital where they shared a room. Soon we were traveling to the city's west side to visit Jenny Casiano, her mom, and her seven brothers and sisters; and they out to the west suburbs to see us!

Even in the sunset of Mom's life, she was still at it, serving in soup kitchens for the homeless and hungry, and tutoring children in a Harlem after-school program. Growing up and into adulthood, I didn't realize the profound influence Mom had on me: her interest in nature; her interest in service; her interest in relationship with all kinds of people

from all sorts of backgrounds! As I grew older, my path would begin to look more and more like hers.





3
I Am Finite

Von Hippel-Lindau Disease

My mom began losing her eyesight at age twenty-nine, not long after I was born. Von Hippel-Lindau (VHL) disease, a genetic syndrome, was the diagnosis. So, beginning when we were little, Mom would pack the kids in the car, and we'd make the annual trip to a Chicago hospital, all of us enduring the pain of the dilating drops to make sure our eyes were free of VHL retinal tumors. Eye surgeries for Mom in Chicago followed.

A young ophthalmologist, Steven Koenig, treated my mom in Chicago, and they remained friends in the years that followed.

Many years after they first met, he researched VHL more deeply and uncovered some disturbing facts. Steve told Mom that VHL was a more dangerous disease than our eye doctors had known. The disease could cause slow but relentless cancer in the kidneys and the pancreas. It could also cause brain and spinal tumors. Although tumors in the nervous system weren't cancerous, without delicate surgery to remove them, they could debilitate and kill patients. And all of these tumors could be

inside the body and growing in multiple places simultaneously in any VHL patient.

Steve urged Mom to take the whole family to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. There we learned that Mom, despite a lack of symptoms, was very sick with kidney cancer at age forty-three. Her kidneys were filled with cancer.

Was this really happening? The news was stunning, numbing, unreal. It was then completely overwhelming, and frightening, and sad.

Mom was a friend, a mentor, a kindred spirit. She was precious to me.

The tone of the geneticists as they shared the news with me, my dad, my brother, and my sister and explained the next steps made it clear she was in danger. We could lose her. A difficult surgery lay ahead, one in which surgeons would remove all but part of one kidney. They—and we—hoped it could keep her functioning and prevent the cancer from spreading.

And then they told me *I* had the disease.

Although I'd never had a retinal tumor in the decade I'd been having my eyes checked, CT scans of my kidneys and pancreas uncovered telltale but benign cysts. I had von Hippel-Lindau disease. I was seventeen.

I was overwhelmed thinking of life without Mom. That shocking information still had my head spinning and heart aching. I was well. I wasn't in danger.

Nonetheless, creeping into my thoughts was this, too: As I looked at Mom, was I looking at my future?

Over the next twelve years, VHL slowly and relentlessly took my mother's life.

This wasn't a quick process. She struggled with the ultimate questions of being, and the eventuality of not being.

It forced Mom to ask the most important questions. What is the meaning of life? What shall I do with the life I have remaining? Soon Mom was sending me books she'd read that she felt I should contemplate

too: the poet and mystic Ranier Maria Rilke; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; and philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich.

I was just out of college, beginning a career, and courting a young lady who I would eventually marry.

At the time, I found Rilke's *Letters to A Young Poet* dark and slow.

I fell in love with Heschel's profound writing and how he demonstrated his philosophies with a life of civic activism.

Tillich was difficult to read, and in my early twenties, when my mom was hoping I'd pick him up, his writing just didn't keep my attention.

Little did I know that later in life, I'd return to Tillich for the language and philosophy that would help me most understand myself and my life's journey, which is lived alternately in the shadow of von Hippel-Lindau disease and in the light of wisdom and joy in living that the disease reinforces.



4
I Am Grasped

My Mystical Minnesota Moment

Paul Tillich was a mid-twentieth-century philosopher and theologian. At thirty-four, I had the opportunity to study his faith and philosophy during my months as a master's student at Christian Theological Seminary. Not only did I like what I read, as challenging as it was, I suspect his being Lutheran helped me struggle through his unusual language and approach to religion. And, boy, his was a different Christian perspective than what I'd grown up with!

He believed in a brand of faith fitting for theological academia, and despite its complexity, his theology leapt into the public realm after the Second World War, a conflict in which six million Jews were murdered and the first atom bomb was unleashed on human beings. *The Courage To Be*, first published in 1952, was widely read throughout the world at a time when millions worried for their very existence.

To Tillich, faith was not a surrender of intellect or a compromise of personal conviction, but just the opposite. It was "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern." And, get this: *Tillich believed doubt could exist within faith.*

Doubt... could... exist... within... faith...

This one was hard for me to comprehend at first. It seemed Tillich was bending the rules on what I had understood about faith. Tillich believed faith could surround, include, and embrace doubt, rather than succumb to it, be contaminated by it, or leave it null and void.

He didn't equate faith in God with a certainty about God, as I'd been raised to believe! Of course! Having *faith* in something doesn't mean you're *certain* of something! You have faith, *despite* material evidence.

Although I'd read Tillich in seminary fifteen years earlier, I picked up his books and read them again at age fifty. After a near-death experience, his theology gave me deep comfort. Although I'd hoped for a life after death, I couldn't ever come around to being unflappably sure. Tillich's take on faith was a forgiving one.

Tillich acknowledged and embraced a sense of mystery about God, which he sometimes called the "Divine Ground of Being." He suggested that the Holy was in, about, and around, and beyond us. Existing. Here! Present! Be-ing! *And impossible for people to fully fathom.*

Tillich believed that there was truly a relationship, rather than stark separation, between humankind, which is born in God's image, and the Holy. Rereading Tillich has revealed answers to my questions and provided me more comfort in my faith than I've ever had. This was a faith I could *believe* in!

Tillich has helped me have a deeper sense of acceptance for my days past, present, and future. Today, I understand that a relationship between me and the Holy isn't exclusively about routine worship in a church to earn a place in heaven, but instead can be expressed through being here, now—active, mutual, and present to God.

In seminary, I studied Christian mystics, those whose lives had been dramatically changed by direct experiences with God. Although some of these folks had led a life that sought this kind of relationship, Tillich believed that those who had not embraced a traditional path could also have a relationship with the Holy and a faithful life. Tillich's firm belief was that "the infinite" could "grasp" us without our volition. In other words, relationships with the Holy aren't exclusively the result of a decision we make, but could be the result of our being *grasped* by God.

Tillich believed a remarkable moment like this could be a forgettable, curious experience for some people, but for others, being grasped by the infinite could produce an ecstatic, profound experience that has the power to transform how we see and act in the world—forever. One moment could stay with us throughout our days and turn us toward a faithful, lifelong response to the Holy.

I think I'm one of those people.

I am grasped by the infinite.

When I was seventeen, my mom, my twenty-year-old brother, and I began making annual trips up I-94 from the western suburbs of Chicago, through Wisconsin, and across the Mississippi River to the Mayo Clinic. There, after diagnosing my mom and me with VHL and her with related kidney cancer, geneticists continued using CT scanning–then a new technology–to check our brains, spines, and internal organs for VHL tumors.

Six years later, I had my first surgery at Mayo to remove a cancerous kidney tumor to keep it from threatening my life. The day before the preoperative tests, Mom and I decided to drive to Minneapolis. It was late March, and the Cubs were playing the Minnesota Twins and Kirby Puckett at the Metrodome. I don't remember much about the game, but the trip from Rochester to Minneapolis has never let me go.

On the road north, my mother was at it again, going on about the beauty of the cornfields. As she drove, we looked out at the expansive landscape as far as the eye could see.

It was early spring in Minnesota. The skies were gray, the fields were muddy, and what corn stalks remained from the previous fall's harvest were yellow and ragged.

Despite all that, she used the fields as a metaphor for God's miraculous order that we see in the world. She had seen it for years in the countless rows of corn around our home in northern Illinois, and she was thinking about the vast fields on every side of our car in Minnesota that day. It was cold and cloudy, and few remnants of the previous summer's stalks remained. Nonetheless, she spoke of each plant, with many cobs and many rows of golden kernels that reach toward summer's sun year in, year out.

And as she spoke, I looked out the window.

The yellowed, wintered fields were alive, full and green!

The winds swept across them. The miles of fields undulated, right then, despite what I'd seen as we drove past. Each full stalk and tassel reached to the sky. In those fleeting moments, I deeply understood and was deeply and permanently connected to the miracle of living. I was exhilarated! Right then and there, I understood William Blake's words: "...everything that lives is holy!" I *was* life, delighting in life!

It was not a rational experience. It was beyond my understanding, but nonetheless, it was real and pointed me to the holy, miraculous gift of being.

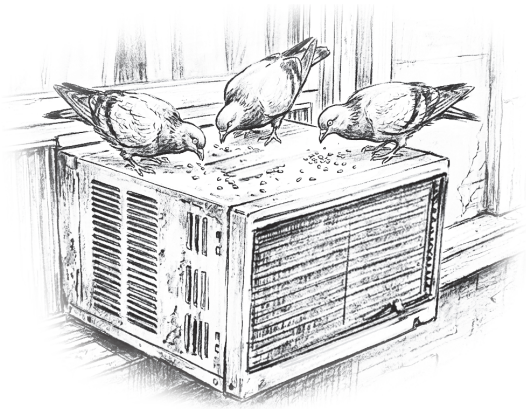
On that ride, a joy and gratefulness and knowing of the holiness of being, of life, of existing, swept over me like the winds over the cornfields. They were tattered and yellow no longer. My Minnesota moment was rapturous and told me a story in the briefest snippet of time that life, our existence, our very presence, and all that was, was full and lush and beautiful and good.

It was for me forever and absolutely stunningly and transformatively clear.

I'd connected to the Holy, that which was beyond me and beyond all, right here in this world.

I saw with my eyes and felt deep in my being the sacred in the earthly and commonplace. The fields were a sacrament of the Holy. The living world, the one I'd felt a deep connection to my whole life, was infused with dignity, beauty, and goodness beyond all understanding.

Being... existence... was holy.



5
I Am Urgent

Death and Impermanence

That road trip resulted in a surgery. They took out the cancerous kidney tumor. I got through it just fine. It was 1989; I was twenty-three.

My mom and dad had divorced by then, and my mom had moved to New York City and married Steven Koenig—the same Steven Koenig who'd extended my mom's life with his advice to be in the care of Mayo Clinic.

Mom and Steve traveled the world; she studied art and exhibited her work at the Salmagundi Club in Manhattan. She served meals at the soup kitchen and tutored Harlem kids in a church basement through an after-school program. She helped them paint and draw, read and write. For ten years, after the removal of one kidney and three fourths of another, she lived, she conquered. Disease be damned!

But the momentum began to shift.

VHL began to take its ultimate toll.

It took my mom's sight in her left eye; it took her hearing in her right ear.

The cancer that had riddled my mom's kidneys on our first visit to the Mayo Clinic had spread to her brain. It was time for another trip to Minnesota. She got through it, but when I saw her in post-op with a gauzy turban on her head, I sensed her recovery from this trauma wouldn't be the same.

She returned home to New York and resumed her painting and pastel drawing. Radiation treatments on her brain left her beautiful face drooping, her memories and strength fading.

She called me one day to let me know the cancer had spread throughout her body. This wasn't surprising, but it was devastating news. Three weeks before she died, I flew to New York and stayed with her while Steve worked.

Over a few days, I made her meals and fed her, our roles reversed as if she were my child. Despite her disorientation and weariness, she provided me encouragement. Twelve stories above West End Avenue, in her condominium, she spoke to me about the beauty of her kitchen houseplant in sunlight. In the middle of her profound difficulty, she was still feeding her birds—pigeons (pigeons!)—on the surface of a window air-conditioner.

She was slowing down.

I wanted to keep her moving; she wanted to be outdoors and engaging with the world. But during a measured, tentative walk down Broadway, she suddenly, frighteningly became profoundly disoriented, craning her neck, looking to the sky, and nearly falling. I got her back inside and cried and cried. The next day, I insisted that I wheel her around the block in her wheelchair. Looking back, I suspect I wanted her outside more than *she* wanted to be.

She wouldn't get better. I had such a hard time accepting it. It was July 4, 1994, and I wrote to cope...

Through a vitreous muffled mass of
Sound and light
The birds serenade
The dying embers of her life
Every morning

An orchestra high above the street
Brings beauty to another day of waiting
In this her final movement
Still there is that which sustains Mom
The venous leaves of a houseplant
With all their colors green
The view outside a kitchenette window
Mom still quietly sings praises to life
Even while beckoning death

I was back to New York City very soon. Steve invited my dad to the condominium so he and Mom could say their last farewells, despite being estranged for years.

My brother and sister, my wife, Shannon, and I were with Mom in her last few days. Each of us had the opportunity, when she was still aware of us, to say our piece.

She no longer could speak. I wrote this lullaby, and her soft, responsive moans as I sang it to her helped me know she heard its words...

Parent-child
I love you so
It's okay now if you leave me
Parent-child
I'll watch you go
With pride
With joy
You see
Because you've been so special
You've taught me so, so much
Parent-child
I love you so
Our oneness brings me peace
Parent-child
I love you so
It's okay now if you leave me

Parent-child
You know you and I
Will
Always forever be
Will
Always forever be
Will
Always forever be...

We told her it was okay to let go.

In her last full day, as she lay at home in bed, thin and contorted and jaundiced from the rampant cancer, she spoke! She seemed to have an interview with an angel. A long series of simple yeses and no's escaped her lips as she looked with her big blue eyes past all of us—past the walls of the bedroom that no longer contained her. The last words we heard her say, meditatively, repeatedly, for several minutes were "I am blessed..."

On July 26, 1994, Karen Forsell Koenig passed away at fifty-five.



6
I Am Justified

My Work and Genesis 2:15

It wasn't long before Mom's passing that I left a brief career as a reporter for two Indianapolis radio stations. In the newsroom, I'd developed a reputation for being passionate about community and environmental stories. The fruit hadn't fallen far from the tree! I was the son of a woman who served others, loved her world, and lived a life consistent with those values.

I'd become frustrated by the reporter's role, limited to the dispassionate conveyance of the news of the day. The role required me to be on the sidelines and report, rather than act, while witnessing many ills in my city and the world.

I lined up a position with Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, which was then called the Indianapolis Clean City Committee. The organization's work engaged volunteers in helping the environment. Little did I know this would become a commitment for the next twenty-five years of my professional life!

The Clean City Committee was a nonprofit, charitable organization that helped neighborhood residents pick up litter; we also led recycling

efforts throughout the city. Not long after my mom's passing, we were asked by Mayor Stephen Goldsmith if we'd consider raising money and planning and implementing projects to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods: painting homes, planting trees, creating little parks. We had an opportunity to transform the physical and human landscape of the city—to help the natural environment and people of Indianapolis one block, one street, one park, one stream, one neighborhood at a time.

My boss, Greg Fennig, left it up to me, and I said we absolutely shouldn't miss an opportunity to deepen our work with neighborhoods and for the environment. And so, we did.

Not long afterward, I met a man who changed my life.

Pastor Kenneth Ward of Community Missionary Baptist Church had a problem. A vacant lot sat across the street from Community Baptist's new day care, which served many church families. The lot was more than a nuisance—it was dangerous. Gang members would fight their dogs to their deaths in the lot and leave the carcasses for others to pick up. Drugs were being sold there, and gunfire was routine. And the children of Community Baptist saw it all.

Pastor Ward had a redemptive vision for this place and called me, wondering if the Indianapolis Clean City Committee could help him create a peaceful place for the children of his church.

We got to it. We asked city government to take down trees on private property. We secured six dumpsters so church members could clean the site. Trotter Construction helped us grade the lot and pour a sidewalk that created a welcoming sense of lasting change on this lot. Soon Jim Hopkins, a local banker charged with community work and a member of Clean City's board, raised some money. Indianapolis Power and Light Company donated more and offered volunteers.

And on a day when it was raining throughout the city except, it seemed, on this little lot, volunteers built raised beds for children to tend vegetable gardens for senior citizens on the block. Beautiful shrubs and flowers were planted at the entry of the lot near the street, and a picket fence was constructed, set, and painted. A play set was built. Joy and life and play drove despair from the block. And soon the vegetables the children tended fed Ms. Moten and other seniors on Roache Street.

The postman walked by that morning and asked us why we'd bother. He said it'd never last.

In April 2017, Keep Indianapolis Beautiful celebrated its fortieth anniversary by meeting Pastor Ward and sprucing up this little park that has served the neighborhood for so many years.

As wonderful as the outcome has been, the moments I remember most were in planning the project. Not unlike my mother working with kids in a Harlem church day care, I sat in the basement of Community Baptist with Pastor Ward and realized that I was walking in my mother's footsteps.

I, too, was caring for people and loving this living, diverse, beautiful, but broken world.

Based in part on our experience with Community Baptist Church, the Indianapolis Clean City Committee changed its name to Keep Indianapolis Beautiful (KIB), recognizing the proactive, impactful difference we could make for people and for the natural world as we beautified it.

Twenty years have passed. KIB has constructed a new headquarters, converting a contaminated, vacant warehouse into a thriving, environmentally designed center for wonderful work. More than 50,000 trees have been planted and tended. We've helped neighborhoods design, construct, and steward more than 100 little parks. Thousands and thousands of people have volunteered more than a million hours of time. Hundreds of teenagers have secured their first jobs through KIB to tend to nature while being enriched, loved, and given work skills. Habitats along urban waterways are being restored, and people who may not otherwise have had beauty have it, as public artists work with them to capture and reflect the culture, history, and ambitions of diverse city neighborhoods through murals and sculpture.

This work began to feel like a vocation to me. And so, after serving Keep Indianapolis Beautiful for about ten years in public relations, programs, fundraising, and management (and expecting my boss Greg would never leave!), I decided to no longer be a full-time employee so I could check out seminary.

And I'm so glad I did. I realized pretty quickly that I wasn't made for parish ministry (I left seminary in the middle of my second semester). But I did have wonderful opportunities and discovered Tillich, Howard Thurman, and Frederick Buechner, who wrote:

> ...the place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet...

And there was liberation theology—the Gospel as grounding for those who demand justice—from Dr. Martin Luther King's day to the present, inspiring change for those marginalized at life's edges.

And then there was Dr. Carol Johnston's environmental ethics class!

She reviewed world religions and the Bible, and discussed the consistent reverence with which First and Second Testament Scripture—and God—held the water, land, and animals. More than fifteen years ago at seminary, I learned this world was, in fact, a growing concern of faithful people across the globe. It was a concern of God's.

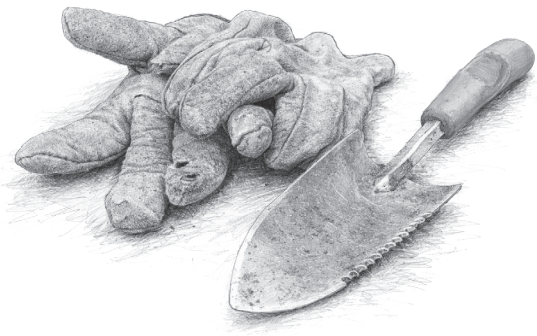
> For God so loved the world, he gave his only son...
>
> John 3:16

Dr. Johnston believed Christ died not only for those who chose to be Christian, but for *all* people and living things. Whether you believe that or not, it was coming from an incredibly bright, experienced source, a theologian with a master's from Union Theological Seminary and a doctorate from Claremont. Her interpretation resonated with me.

In seminary, I learned it was absolutely credible to have a Creator-based theology. If "God so loved the world," *why should we not* be concerned when forests are cleared or the climate changes or species collapse? Why would we not concern ourselves when people live in poverty or in unsafe neighborhoods without a way out? *Why would we not steward and speak for this living world* and devote our lives to it, *especially* if Tillich was right—that the Holy was here, now, and working in it?

Have you ever taken a close look at the second chapter of Genesis? I was familiar with the first chapter. There, the writer's words indicate people "have dominion" over other creatures. Dr. Johnston made it clear that dominion, when translated, did not mean domination, but care. Then she dropped this big one on my classmates and me:

> The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
>
> Genesis 2:15



Carol Johnston called this charge to Adam and Eve to care for the garden in which they found themselves "humanity's first vocation." To tend and to keep the world, that God so loved, was humanity's *first calling*.

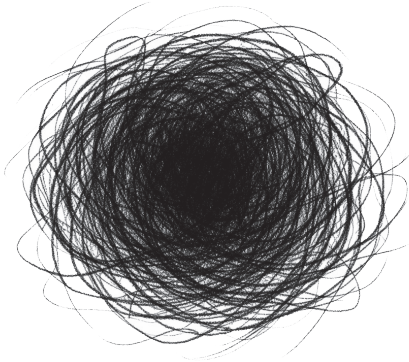
Carol argued that rather than dominion, we must seek "right relationship" with the world; to find balance on the continuum from exploitation to protection and to consider and care for it.

The wisdom I gained from this course enabled me to put words to *my* deepest joys, beliefs, and yearnings. The class also affirmed my life of gladness addressing some of the world's greatest needs!

I started to put things together: my childhood awe of nature; my Minnesota moment; my work and my passion to care for and repair the world... Seminary gave me the words, from Scripture, no less, to fortify and provide a rationale for the deep appreciation I had for this world, for the transcendent moments I often had in it, and for the great joy and engagement I felt in serving it.

I didn't finish my master of divinity; I'd gotten what I'd needed.

Seems to me, I was living a justifiable, faithful life, simply not one that is a traditional path or a road well-traveled.



7
I Am Despairing

Striving, Unknowing, and Facing My Last Night on Earth

And yet... it dogged me. Neighborhood leaders get tired, and little parks get weeded over. Plants die; trees die, though it may take them a little longer. Paint eventually peels. So much of my life's work, and the good I hoped to achieve for others, seemed so impermanent.

In a world focused on results and outcomes, did the impermanence of my life's work make it irrelevant? Was it futile?

And what of me? Did my impermanence negate my having even lived? It's what I began to feel. Did my life matter?

Was my life eventually the weeded-over pocket park, or worse, a mighty oak that may live one hundred years, but eventually stands alone and lifeless?

Time after time, von Hippel-Lindau disease had provided me opportunities to look at death in the mirror, and my response, of course, was to live—with more zeal than before. To get back up with urgency, time and again. To live gladly, gratefully. To love, to serve.

I'd often had the chance to awaken to the miracle of life, quite literally, in hospital recovery rooms with the help of the best medical technology and the most talented doctors. Over and over, I'd bought time; I'd kept debilitation and death at bay and found meaning. The disease had been difficult, but after each of thirteen major surgeries, I'd gotten to the other side, incredibly driven to live fully and do more good.

In my life with my mom, with my mystical Minnesota moment, with Pastor Ward and Community Baptist Church, in the successes of the teens who worked and discovered meaning and purpose at KIB, with the birds I'd see light on the branches of newly planted trees on forgotten urban land, I'd become convinced I'd glimpsed the eternal in an impermanent world.

But were these amazing experiences a curse rather than a blessing? Was I deluded about the miracle of life? Were my work and my life tending and keeping the world all ultimately impermanent? Futile? Without value?

It was July 2015, and I was preparing for yet another surgery. I was getting my 10,000 steps in every day in the month before my scheduled surgery day. I had moved from a "see-food diet" (eating and drinking whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted) to a plant-based diet. My wife, Shannon, and I were going to the Glendale Buddhist Center in Indianapolis, meditating weekly on the notion that all life was precious. We'd squeezed a lot into the first half of 2015. A twenty-fifth wedding anniversary trip to a secluded island off Georgia's coast in May; a long weekend to Tupelo, Mississippi, with my brother, Mike, and his wife, Beth, for an international Elvis impersonator contest(!) and a pilgrimage to Graceland in July.

My fourteenth major surgery since age twenty-three was to remove another cancerous tumor from my kidney. At forty-nine, I'd been through this before. And yet, this surgery had me grasping—grasping for what my life had meant.

Leading up to surgery, I had a long conversation with Shannon, asking, "Do I still thrill you?" The pressure I was putting on her and the pressure I'd been putting on myself, my life, had come to a head in the face of another surgery to keep von Hippel-Lindau disease and its kidney cancer under control.

Shannon asked friends to send me well wishes, to help me understand that the upcoming procedure and related recovery were worth it, and to

help me know I'd had an impact in this world, since I felt *so much* like I was falling short in my impermanent work.

We made our trip to Bethesda, Maryland, and the National Institutes of Health. They'd kept me going strong for fifteen years. Without their care, I wouldn't have been here to worry about surgery, let alone ruminate on the meaning of existence.

It was August 17, and the doctors came in to provide the usual details of what they'd do, what they expected, and what could go wrong, including my death. I'd heard it all before. As they wheeled me to the operating room, I made the customary joke that I was the leading expert on acoustical white-tile ceilings in hospitals. But my attempts at jokes betrayed a deepening fear and lack of ease about this procedure.

As it turned out, the doctors removed seven cancerous tumors in a very difficult, bloody surgery. Eight hours passed, and finally they sewed up and stapled the cuts in my kidney, abdominal wall, and skin.

Despite a blur of anesthesia and painkillers, I knew something was very wrong when I woke. As planned, Shannon was with me; I'd been taken straight to intensive care rather than the recovery room. I was in significant pain, but unlike after numerous kidney surgeries in the past, I was struggling to breathe. An involuntary moan escaped with every breath. In and moan, in and moan, in and moan... Several hours like that... With each inhalation, pain; and with each breath, a foreboding rose within me. The breath I was taking was more difficult than the breath I'd just taken!

I read the concern on the faces of the intensive care doctors and nurses. They weren't sure what the problem was or how to address my deepening emergency.

Were my electrolytes imbalanced from the huge transfusion, they wondered?

As I lay there in pain, my stomach beginning to distend, I felt like I would burst! Breathing became more and more difficult.

And then it hit me...

This might be it!

This might be the last night of my life!

Was I in my last hours? I was incredulous. This was not what I'd imagined.

Sure, the doctors had told me before every surgery about "the less than 1 percent chance" that I may not live through a procedure. But I'd always passed with flying colors! Surgeries, while difficult, had become routine.

They were boxes to check. Were they fun? No. Would I get through them and bounce back better than before? Absolutely.

It didn't seem to me I'd be bouncing back that night.

Five hours had passed since I'd come up from the eight-hour surgery, and I was worse, not better.

Was this going to be my last night on earth?

I was in acute respiratory distress. There was not enough oxygen getting to my body.

"Would you please do something to reduce his suffering," Shannon pleaded to the doctors.

With no solution in sight, I began to agonize, to panic. I began to tear and scratch at the bed covers at my sides. I wasn't nearly as afraid for me as I was for Shannon.

I lay there, struggling to breathe, so sad, anguished, wanting so much to live and so much not to die, and not to have Shannon see me die. Did Shannon know I may never see her again, that I may never have another day with her? (She did.)

Finally, I begged for air. "Intubate me, intubate me. I can't breathe on my own anymore!" I pleaded to the doctors.

They rushed Shannon into the hallway. One nurse ran to get the intubation unit so a machine could breathe for me. Another came in with a portable X-ray machine.

And with it—there!

They saw my awful problem.

I was filling up with blood. My diaphragm struggled to move. My lungs were being crushed, shrinking, curling, retreating from the blood filling my body cavity.

As one of the doctors prepared to rush the breathing tube down my throat, I asked another, "Would you please tell my wife, Shannon, I love her?" I was conscious, so sad... Life was so precious, and I had so many deep questions with which I'd not come to peaceful closure. My eyes were wide open as the doctors forced the breathing tube down my throat. They rushed me back to the operating room and soon put me under to try to save my life.

In the early hours of August 18, the doctors began again in the operating room. They opened me with a ten-inch incision from my back to my belly, and five liters of blood rushed from my body.

Inside my body, blood was running from the wounds they'd cauterized and stitched just hours before. One spot, very hard to find, was in the back of my kidney, opposite the external incision the doctors had made. They found it!

Again, they burned and stitched. Transfusions kept me alive. Doctors and nurses used the equivalent of two people's entire blood supply to keep me alive.

I was in the intensive care unit again. I was stable.

When I woke, though, I had no idea that two days had passed.

With the breathing tube running down my throat, I couldn't communicate, and Shannon and the doctors and nurses didn't know that I thought I was still at death's door! I didn't understand I'd made it through the second surgery, that it'd been two days. I didn't understand I'd been sedated that long to help me recover.

In my mind, my condition was the same. In my mind, two days had not passed. I was right where I'd been before they wheeled me back into the operating room for surgery number two. I didn't want Shannon to have to live having seen me die, so I tried to get her out of my room, even as I welcomed the hospital chaplain. It was a terrible and sad misunderstanding.

Shannon was upset and confused. She knew I would want her close in such a trying time, and my pushing her away was strange and scary behavior.

She feared I'd been brain damaged during the second surgery.

I just didn't understand. I'd made it and was going to be all right. Comprehension tests followed, assuring Shannon that there'd been no brain damage. Nonetheless, doctors kept me restrained in my bed until I finally realized I was out of danger.

I'd made it.

I was exhausted, swollen nearly beyond recognition due to the sedation, the fluids... But I'd made it!

I was here.



8
I Am Faithful

I am and will be.

A near-death experience, even for me, someone who has had to routinely consider my mortality, is a catalytic and profound event. Nearly three years after those harrowing days, I'm still moved.

After that life-sustaining surgery, I needed to understand, love, and accept who I was and acknowledge my deepest yearnings and beliefs while there was still time.

It is a tall order to understand oneself; you must make the time and have the discipline to slowly unpeel the layers to your very essence and deepest beliefs. Could I do that? Would I have the discipline? And could I accept and embrace what I'd discover?

I needed to know how I would go forward in peace with a chronic illness that routinely threatens to debilitate me and end my life.

What do I believe? Does God exist? Is there life after death? Could Shannon and I have "blessed assurance," as a friend put it, when I, or she, pass away?

And while I'm here, could I be at peace with how I most experience God in nature and in serving this diverse, beautiful, broken world, rather than worshiping in a church every Sunday? And were my experiences and beliefs and ensuing life commitments, if I truly owned and expressed them, going to risk the good feelings and friendships and respect of others for whom I have great respect?

I began writing...

I wrote, first and foremost, for myself, to figure these things out...

Lots of big questions...

But there weren't immediate epiphanies. The intensity of my near-death experience dwarfed day-to-day living. It didn't beckon immediate aha moments. Slowly my time writing succumbed to my day-to-day obligations.

I didn't have much energy...

I had to get back to work... *So* much to catch up on...

Soon the writing stopped. Despite the profound call for self-awareness and acceptance, it stopped.

In December 2015, about four-and-a-half months after my kidney surgeries, I had to have a tumor taken from my chest wall. Doctors had seen it in scans while preparing for my summer kidney surgery and had hoped they could remove it during that procedure. Well, the mysterious little chest wall tumor didn't turn out to be the highest priority that August.

Instead, they had me recover for a few months, and I got that tumor out on New Year's Eve. The concern? It was in an unusual spot. Had my kidney cancer spread? To my relief, lab results showed the tumor was benign, like the first benign cysts and tumors doctors saw when I was diagnosed with VHL as a teenager.

After a short recovery, I was back to work. I also began to write again, albeit in fits and spurts.

Less than a year later, in November 2016, I began having trouble swallowing. A trip to see my college roommate Bob Lamprecht in St. Louis included an embarrassing moment choking on red wine at the dinner table. Later, I choked in front of my colleagues during a business lunch. I even choked on a Hamm's at a Wrigleyville bar before Game 4 of the World Series! "Could it just have been the *Hamm's*?" I joked to myself at the time.

Soon I was choking on food, drink, and saliva many times a day. I called my doctors in Bethesda, who said to get there as soon as I could. They were worried that a tumor we'd been watching had begun to grow and that the impacts would get worse. In the immediate term, they were worried I'd inhale food into my lungs and get pneumonia.

Before I even got to Bethesda, neurosurgeons had me on the operating room calendar. The tumor was on my brainstem. The day before surgery, doctors told me that although the tumor was in the worst possible part of the brain to have a tumor, it was in the best possible spot in the worst possible place. Great, right? The brainstem controls involuntary body movements, like swallowing, breathing, heartbeat. So the surgery would be incredibly delicate, but they believed they could get the tumor out with a decent probability there'd be no long-term impact to me.

I'd been to this rodeo!

"What if I don't have the surgery," I asked.

"Your problems will get worse. The longer you wait, the more risk you put yourself in, and the more difficult surgery will be. You shouldn't wait another day."

"Okay," I said.

A moment passed.

"What risks, then, come with getting this tumor out?"

I could die, highly unlikely.

I could be on a breathing tube for the rest of my life or a feeding tube or both. That seemed a little more likely.

What they were most concerned about was that the surgery could leave me permanently unaware of where my arms and legs were "in space," something called proprioception.

I could wake up a very different person with some pretty profound disabilities.

The choice was clear. As frightening as the prospects of surgery were, not having it would only make matters worse. So surgery it was.

Down they wheeled me to the operating room (I skipped the ceiling tile jokes this time). At least, I thought, if nothing else, I'd seen the Cubbies win a World Series!

I promised Shannon that if I came out disabled, I'd do my best to recover, even if the effort wasn't clear to her.

I got through it!

The first thing I did in the recovery room when Shannon greeted me was to show her I could touch my nose, starting with my arms extended far to each side. Not only was I here, I knew where my arms and legs were! I could will my index fingers to touch the old schnoz!

Now, as I write, about sixteen months after the surgery to take that tumor from my brainstem, my right leg is a little weak, and my right hand has a constant buzz, but I'm doing all right!

What did this latest go-round tell me? I'd better get busy writing, discovering, living powerfully, peacefully, and confidently—pronto!

More than ever, I am keenly aware I might not figure things out before I run out of time!

For years, I have lived with a potent duality. I have an incredible tension between two things: joy in living and my life routinely being threatened. I have a calling to restore the living world, and it is regularly and abundantly clear that my time in this world is limited.

How had I responded to my chronic illness my entire adult life? By increasing the intensity and hours dedicated to my vocation. I was living as if I were dying.

But John Wesley's "doing as much as I can, by all the means I can, at all the times I can, for as many as I can" was wearing me *out!*

Prior to a near-death experience and a brain surgery that could have left me permanently impaired, this approach worked for me.

It wouldn't any longer.

Working frenetically to make the world a better place was coming at the expense of peace and balance, my life with Shannon, my spiritual and physical health, and the time I had to steward and cultivate friendships.

After feeling such despair prior to my kidney surgery, nearly dying, and then having two subsequent surgeries, it was clear to me I needed to get back on that path to self-discovery and self-acceptance; and to a consistent walk in peace I'd not yet traveled.

I needed to work less.

I needed to be concerned less about what others thought about me and how I saw the world.

I needed to embrace who I was and to be me, to love my essence, before I lost my chance to do so.

I needed to be clear and grounded; and operate from truth as I knew it.

I needed to articulate my values, beliefs, and faith as I understood them—for myself, and maybe for others.

I needed to strive less and find a depth and source of strength and peace and balance I'd not yet found...

I asked myself how, and from what foundations, I'd live my life going forward.

I've come farther than I anticipated.

I am the sum of my experiences, and how I've understood and integrated them into my thoughts and daily living.

A faithful mother who served people and loved her world... Deep joy, even rapture, on mountaintops and seashores around the world... Direct experiences with God, or the Holy Spirit, or, as Tillich would say, the Ultimate Ground of Being. This Spirit swept over me as a child in a Lutheran church; it was present to me as a windswept, full, green, thriving Minnesota field in early spring.

Time with theologians and poets, teachers and Scripture have helped me humbly claim an untraditional relationship with and faith in the Holy and feel credible, even though my experience may not be fully understood or embraced by others.

In this glorious life, and its threats to it, I have affirmed and, in new ways, discovered and embraced my deepest identity, myself, and have accepted my faithful decision, made years ago, to live, serve, and love in co-creation with a Greater Love.

Paul Tillich, in *Systematic Theology, Volume Two*, writes:

> Life remains ambiguous as long as there is life. The question implied in the ambiguities of life derives to a new question, namely, that of the direction in which life moves.

I know who I am. I embrace the path on which I've been and the direction in which I'm headed, no matter when or if my life may be compromised or shortened by von Hippel-Lindau disease.



9
I Am Living

Affirmations

Until I faced death and permanent disability, I'd not taken the time to fully appreciate, understand, or articulate the relationship between the wonder and joy I have in living and my inner life of faith and belief. Heschel wrote, "just to be is a blessing, that to live is holy." That has always inspired me, but I'm gaining the wisdom to understand why. This is how I am choosing to live:

I am living a faithful life that is a joyful, grateful response, here and now, a co-creative, active expression of good.

> Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love...
>
> Ephesians 5:1

> Humankind is humankind because something divine is at stake in humankind's existence. We are not innocent bystanders in the cosmic drama. There is in us more kinship with the divine than we are able to believe. The souls of humankind are candles of the Lord, lit on the cosmic way, and every soul is indispensable to God. Humankind is needed, humankind is a need of God.
>
> *I Asked for Wonder*, Abraham Joshua Heschel

> …your kingdom come; your will be done; on earth as it is in heaven…
>
> The Lord's Prayer

> Living is not a private affair of the individual. Living is what humankind does with God's time, what humankind does with God's world.
>
> *I Asked for Wonder*, Heschel[1]

With contemplation, I've come to more peace claiming a faith and way of living. I believe God, holiness, exists here and now. There is a mysterious and powerful force of life and love in and beyond me, an inescapable presence I walk through no matter where I am. Dignity and goodness and beauty are present, mingling with my human spirit and in every living thing, therefore demanding my respect, stewardship, love, care. My childhood inklings; my Minnesota moment and resulting impulse to steward and serve; my joy in living; Tillich and Heschel—all have led me to this place.

I am embracing my faithful identity.

As the "Ultimate Ground of Being," the "I Am," God affirms my joy and sense of the Holy *here* and *now*. Why would I *not* exalt in the simple and remarkable fact of existence and be-ing, and be grateful for every

1 To use a more welcoming narrative, I have replaced Heschel's male language with gender-neutral language.

living thing and choose to extend love to existence? And why would I not want to fully participate?

I believe Holiness is *here*, integrated and part of what we experience as impermanent. The Infinite pre-exists me; it is greater than me, greater than you, yet it is in you and me, and among all we experience, and can animate our grateful, active, faithful, and impactful participation in life as we know it—here and now. I believe humans, be-ing, are uniquely positioned to increase consistent, appropriate, caring, respectful thoughts, words, and deeds when we awaken to the dignity and divinity in all life. I believe this is my way to best be and live in the face of so much that is unjust and unfair in this world.

Is this what it means to be *imago dei*, made "in the image of God?" It's a helpful notion. If so, as humans, be-ing, we have an invitation and a responsibility to humbly extend love, grace, and mercy in every moment and at every opportunity. And if Good pervades all that lives, I believe that extension is owed not just to humankind, but to all the good and vulnerable natural world.

Tillich suggests that choosing against the law of love is choosing nonbeing over eternal fulfillment. I can't be sure, but if given the choice, I know which direction to choose, for the good of this glorious world and for my soul—here and now. I hope for and can sense an eternity of unbounded love and good in this impermanent world. In the meantime, I can reflect that hope in my words and deeds in loving kindness for all things and for the restoration of this world.



If God is the great I Am...

If I, though finite and limited, am made in the image of God...

If I am grasped and inspired by God, Heschel says, *I can reflect God's will in deeds*, like "brooks that hold the sky."

I believe my role in this world is to be *a vessel of good and loving all with whom I interact*, with hopes of creating momentum that links these conscious moments together more and more frequently through the precious life and time I have.

Rather than obedience to doctrine or routine worship in a church, *I live each day as a joyful, faithful prayer, a response and an exhilarating responsibility to Infinite Good.*

REFLECTION:

What do you most value? Is your life aligning to your most deeply held beliefs?

I am living a faithful life shaped by suffering.

> We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance; and endurance produces character; and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...
> Romans 5:3–5

What of suffering? I may never be cured of von Hippel-Lindau disease, but oh, there is so much healing as I experience it. The profound worry, the fear, the surgeries, the long recoveries, the mental and physical trials... they enable me to appreciate deeply the remarkably good days I have (even the below-average ones, like a bad day at the office).

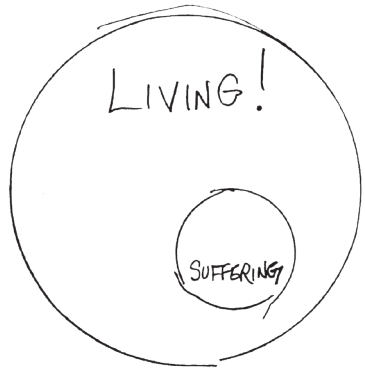
Suffering and contemplating my death also give me an opportunity to be aware of the love and support of others. This disease is not a gift, but it is giving me the gift of surrendering struggle and embracing self-acceptance and purpose and peace greater than I've ever known. VHL, in its threats to my very being, is helping me be.

With the trials I've had, it's understandable to have periods of sadness, fear, anger, and self-pity. But it's not best to get stuck in them.

Despite suffering, I am living! I am a human, be-ing! Maybe this is what Howard Thurman, a twentieth-century Quaker mystic, meant when he wrote that we must "accept our fact" and have faith that despite the paradox of pain we see routinely in this world, every day is holy and a wholly inescapable good gift.

It gives me hope too, because, in my view, the potential for every being to move closer to having fully realized his or her enjoyment of existence, of being, is real.

My suffering has been redemptive.



I won't deny suffering and pain aren't powerful and, at times, overwhelming. They are. But the greater truth, and that to which I direct my attention, is what encompasses and includes the suffering: living; the miracle of being, the "I Am" and "I Will Be" that is beyond our understanding; the good that stubbornly emerges in all experience...

In my life, suffering is a path to greater truth. Greater truth puts suffering in its appropriate place: as a teacher and as a temporary distraction from great joy.

REFLECTION:

Can you choose to see the glass as half full?
Can your difficulties be restorative?

I am living a faithful life, not grounded in theological certainty, but instead one embracing mystery, humility, and doubt.

Enter my good friend Paul Tillich, who speaks of faith as simply an active consideration of the meaning of existence in response to a revelatory experience (my Miraculous Minnesota Moment!). Hmmm... Rather than obedience to doctrine, faith is an embrace of existence.

I gain confidence in my beliefs from wisdom and scripture thousands of years old. But I still hold to the notion I can't possibly be certain about my beliefs and calling.

So I proceed, not prescribing, but *de*scribing my understanding:

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
>
> Micah 6:8

REFLECTION:

How will you act, love, and walk faithfully in this life?

I am living a faithful life that is inspired and beyond rational.

I tell you, that Minnesota moment was *real* and forever changed me. It has inspired my values, beliefs, and life's work since.

The skeptic can easily ask: Am I making way too much of an early spring trip to Minneapolis? Where's the evidence that God or everlasting life exists?

Here's Tillich:

> If a situation claims ultimacy, it demands surrender of him who accepts this claim. Faith is ecstatic. We stand outside ourselves without ceasing to be our selves. Faith transcends rationality and emotion in an ecstatic passion for the ultimate.
>
> from *Dynamics of Faith*

At seminary, when Carol Johnston introduced my classmates and me to Revelation, there was a Biblical vision to inspire my career in restoring the city, improving its urban environment, and helping people make life better in Indianapolis.

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God… "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them…Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more…"
>
> Revelation 21:1–4

> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.
>
> Revelation 22:1–2

My professor, Carol, was particularly moved by Revelation's images of clean water and trees in the city as a vision of heaven come to earth.

Some people of faith imagine we are already experiencing "the kingdom of God," but that it isn't fully realized. Christians often associate this as a time when Jesus returns. My understanding is that many Jews hold dear the idea of *tikkun olam*, which is a charge to do works that restore this world in ways that please God.

I wonder if this city and this world are in an "already, but not yet" state. Faith traditions call on us to co-create and be in relationship with the Holy. I believe by extending love and stewarding this world, we might hasten more consistent experiences of heaven on earth.

What wonderful motivation to be kind and do good in this world for its living beings. I don't know a better way to live my life than one enlivened by a vision of heaven come to earth—where the river of life flows, and trees bear fruit, and there is ultimate abundance. In the meantime, I

live in a far from perfect world, faithfully living and occasionally getting glorious glimmers ("revelations?") of good.

In doing my best to lead a life in loving kindness, and with the belief that I have the power and responsibility to heal the world, I know the glorious *is* here, right now, despite the paradox of this world's injustice.

REFLECTION:

Do you have a healing vision for this world that isn't realized? What change can you make to move the world toward your vision?

I am living a faithful life, in response to a clear calling and the greatest commandment.

We've covered humanity's first calling, Genesis 2:15. Now, what about this:

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...' And a second is like it: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself."
>
> Matthew 22:37–39

When I spent time in seminary, I had honest questions. I was far from certain. I told my theology professor, Charles Allen, I suspected that as complicated as faith and belief could be, I thought a good place to begin, and perhaps conclude, was the greatest commandment: to love *God* and to love your *neighbor* as *yourself*. *This* was something to which I could be obedient!

My biggest obstacle has been accepting, respecting, and loving *myself*. Note that's a requirement to follow the greatest commandment.

A long line of therapists has slowly helped me through this, not to mention von Hippel-Lindau disease. I have struggled with not feeling good enough, courageous enough, smart enough, rich enough, good looking enough, and the list goes on. But in the last few years, I have slowly overcome this poor self-worth and my resistance to embracing my identity.

Because I've been so fervent and active, I realize I have had many accomplishments! I am coming to know that it matters less how *much* I do, but rather, the loving intent with which I carry out my actions. Less important is whether there are permanent monuments to my having been here.

More than ever, I am accepting myself, feeling credible, and becoming more powerful and grounded in my essence. My identity! My being! And isn't it interesting, too, that despite my untraditional faith, the Bible has helped me find my way?

Tillich writes *humankind* (my word) is always put before a decision. Will we choose love, or will we not? It is an urgent decision, if you believe that we can reflect a greater love than we can barely imagine.

I guess I got a break. When God grasped me on I-94 among the Minnesota cornfields, *obedience* to a commandment was no longer operative. Since that moment in Minnesota, I *have had* no choice as to whether I should obey or not obey. I have an *impulse* to live an ethical, loving, grateful, ecstatic life as best as I am able.

Tillich describes this as "mystical participation" and "mystical union." Dr. King spoke of beloved community. Although he spoke of people, I am compelled to extend that love and consideration to all living things—actively and optimistically.

REFLECTION:

Who are you? Do you have a calling you've yet to embrace? Have you ever risked your comfort to share your deepest truth?

I am living a faithful life here and now.

Until I began my research for this book, I'd not come across this very short, but powerful verse: "I will be..." (Exodus 3:14).

I interpret this as eternal presence. Eternity is beyond time.

I have hoped for heaven when I pass from this earthly plane. A heaven of my childhood, filled with joy, beauty, friends, family, and every family pet and little stray Shannon and I have saved. (There are multiple biblical bases for believing all creatures have eternal life in a new heaven come to earth.)

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Now, however, I'm less attached to that outcome than perhaps I've ever been, and instead I'm sensing a continuum between here and now, and there and later; of eternal presence that makes me cling less to this impermanent life and body I know as David Forsell, born on April 1, 1966.

To me, there seems to be an inseparable intermingling between what I'd thought about as the past, the present, and the future.

Perhaps life is everlasting, but not quite how I've thought about it for a good portion of my life.

More than ever, I experience a mutuality between my life and something far more powerful that is boundless and good, of which I'm a part and a contributor, *despite* my impermanence and inadequacies. Being, "I Am," "I Will Be," pre-exists me, infuses me, is greater than me, and will

be here after me. *I am a part—and as often as I'm able, a positive actor—in this unfolding.* Perhaps Good and Dignity and Love and Beauty, this Ultimate Ground of Being in and through which we participate in the world, continues, and continues, a world without end.

Perhaps our lives and love and the gifts we've shared are not unlike the mighty oak I wrote about in bleak terms earlier—the tree that was impermanent and standing alone in death. Perhaps our lives are like the oak, seen differently...



The oak, while thriving, nourishes hundreds of creatures with its bark and leaves and fruits. From its acorns spring new trees! Its life carries on, even in death, prone, but enriching the deep forest humus layer, becoming a part of the next generation of trees. And those trees will carry part of that first oak with them. And so on. Life eternal. Life without end.

Perhaps we participate in a miraculous and glorious present *and* future—now, with unending branches. Perhaps *we are here now and here later!*

I've written quite a bit about my mom. Maybe it's useful to do that briefly again now. Does she have everlasting life? I can't be certain, but this is what I *do* know.

She lives—her spirit, values, and love live—through me and what I hold dear. She lives today, despite her death on July 26, 1994, as the miraculous Minnesota moment once again enlivens me as I write this manuscript.

She lives on in *my* deeds. She tutored kids in a Harlem daycare; for me, a long line of deeds began in the little Community Baptist Church basement and are reflected still in a little park, now more than twenty years old.

The love with which she gathered her children to picnic under the oaks at the Morton Arboretum somehow continues, coursing through me; and my loving intent mixes with hers; and through my breath, her love and mine linger and course through the leaves of every tree Keep Indianapolis Beautiful's teens plant and tend, even though those trees are put in the ground two decades after her passing.

I think her love and life—and mine and yours—linger.

Maybe I need not be afraid of whatever comes next in my journey with von Hippel-Lindau disease, even if it should limit me or take me from the life I know.

Maybe, just maybe, the profound sadness and unknowing I felt as I lay bleeding internally and near death I need not feel again.

Perhaps she and I and you and your life and love and good deeds are *forever*, despite the clear fact that our bodies fail us.

Perhaps we will be. And be. And be. Here, and there, connected to every living thing and to Glory beyond our imagination, now and forever. Please, let it be so.



10

David's Creed

In the Lutheran Church of my upbringing, we memorized a belief statement originally written in the fourth century, called the Nicene Creed. It professes a definitive, prescriptive faith, and it is often recited in Sunday services.

I thought I'd use it as a model for simply affirming my faith.

I consider my death, and I have life.
I am limited; nonetheless, I am enough.
I am grateful, powerful, creative, and responsible.
I love God, and I love my neighbor as myself.
I extend this love to the good earth and its creatures.
I faithfully live.
I'm joyful in my purpose.
And I believe life is eternal, even if my body is not.

Knowing and embracing myself is helping me live a life filled with more gladness than I've known.

Wishing you love, peace, courage, and strength...

REFLECTION:

What do you embrace, and can you articulate it? What is your creed?

II

Poems

In the quiet after the final page, I thought I'd share three poems. One, "With Your Love and Peace, Lord," was written by my mom. I see it as if for the first time, having written this book. She too saw a boundless, wondrous relationship between humans be-ing and the Holy.

My poems, reading them decades later, reflect my essence, which I'm only now fully embracing. It is a spirit that believes the wondrous is here, almost but not quite beyond our understanding.

Thank you for reading.

With Your Love and Peace, Lord

With your love and peace, Lord,
Surround us.
With your beauty,
Touch us.
With your Holy Spirit
Please enter and dwell within us
Until we are Spirit-filled
To such an extent
That your goodness
Can emanate from us,
Touching, moving, whomever we meet,
Until we become truly aware that
We are part of
An endlessly expanding evolution;
Your love and peace are
Limitless.
Thank you,
Thank you, Lord.
Amen.

Sacred Process, Karen Forsell Koenig
November 11, 1992

We Bathe in Angel Sighs

Do angels send chills in the warm night air?
Pine chest, iron bed
Is there something else here?
Something surrounded by these plaster walls,
Something throughout them that gives me pause?

Something magical
Something mystical
Something dizzying
Something Light?
Something that says there is more to this night
Than stars
Than crickets
Than moonlight and mist?
Is it Holy Spirit?
Heaven blessed,
Heaven of,
Heaven kissed?

Clumsy pine chest
Hard iron bed
We soar in this realm
Not having missed
The Eternity
The Calm
The Meaning
The Psalm!

Awakened to Majesty
And Wonder-drawn
We bathe in angel sighs...

David Forsell
September 25, 1994

Thoughts on Stars

Do stars or darkness blanket the night sky?
Are stars tiny pinpricks from a shrouded canopy of white so light we've not imagined it until tonight?
Are stars possibility, wondrous deep and bright?

David Forsell
December 30, 1992

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About the author

David Forsell's lifelong passion, shaped by living with genetic cancer, and a singular, extraordinary spiritual experience as a young man, has been to help the natural world and people thrive. His career has included executive stints with Keep Indianapolis Beautiful and Keep America Beautiful, and recognition for his lifetime achievements by the Arbor Day Foundation. In Indianapolis, David's leadership led to the construction of Indianapolis' first green building; the development of scores of community-led, artful parks; the planting and care of tens of thousands of Indianapolis trees; and the creation of hundreds of green jobs.