Why I'm Like This

Life in the Shade of a Dying Church

by

Karen Rohrer

Submitted by:

Karen Rohrer

karenmrohrer@gmail.com

804.484.0519

Acknowledgements:

This book, to the degree to which it rightly names the good, is owed entirely to the people who have raised and taken me in: my parents, Doug and Ann Rohrer, whose love and honesty first enabled me to recognize the good; my sister, Amy Rohrer Applegate, who never let me get too comfortable; my husband, whose willingness to delight in my voice and all the stupid shit I say has made me willing to write at all.

Author's Note:

This a mixed-genre memoir. It is the conviction of this author that literal, factual truth is not the only sort of truth. To that end, you will find liturgy, fiction and non-fiction in the following pages. The goal is to tell these stories—both big human stories and idiosyncratic Karen stories—as I have experienced them, as I have encountered them, and as they have landed into and formed the arc of my life. I don't know how much I believe in the universal and objective, but I trust the particular and idiosyncratic. The following pages are an exploration of the particular, with only my own sense of doing right by reality to catch me. This is both terrifying and difficult to discern. But also, I'm not sure there is ultimately anything else to catch any of us. At the end, the best we can hope is to do right by truths only we have known.

Table of Contents

Chapter 8: Co-Pastor

- Wherein the author shares the beauty and absurdity of her Philadelphia community, and especially her co-pastor and closest friend, through the lens of that co-pastor's camera.

Chapter 9: Church Home

- Wherein the author shares about the building where Philadelphia happened for her, through the lens of that building's person, and the way his embodied and ungoverned prayers made it all possible.

Chapter 10: This World Is Not My Home

- Wherein the author recalls the twin lessons of her overloaded seminary–that she didn't need to know that because there would be someone at her church who would handle those details–and that there were no church jobs, so she wouldn't get one. She explores how that irony has shaped her ministry ever since.

Chapter 11: Making Home Anyway

- Wherein the author seeks to understand her own marriage through the absurdity of her husband's story of a Thanksgiving feast in a washed-away New Orleans neighborhood.

Chapter 12: A New Year

- Wherein the author goes out for her first fancy date at a gentrification restaurant in a $5 polyester dress from Target and gets properly tipsy only to be invited to the block captain's for greens, black-eyed peas, fried chicken, and appletinis. She predicts the barfing to come, delivers on her prediction, and wakes up trapped in a plastic dress.

Chapter 13: Philadelphia Prophets

- Wherein the author, with other do-gooders, gives away some shoes to a toeless woman, leans into the chaos, and encounters several prophets of the present age.

Chapter 14: Exile

- Wherein the author explores the ridiculous nature of calling, the power of place, and the debt she owes to Philadelphia, inspired by a Ross Gay poem.

Interlude: Where Nothing Happens

- Short fiction of the author following the baby boomers to California, looking for the meaning they kept saying was there, finding tacos and an elaborately dying Jesus in Big Sur.

Part 3: Life Together

Chapter 15: Moving On

- Wherein the city of Philadelphia gets under the author's skin and begins to make her bones strong—a process she knows cannot continue forever.

Chapter 16: Far From Home

- Wherein the author makes a incoherent theological confession, cries about blue bathtubs, and decides to move the family to the Paris of Appalachia.

Chapter 17…And Also Many Animals

- Wherein the author explores her own place among the complicit in the empire, is welcomed by those more gracious than her, and recognizes that the good life is in community.

Chapter 18: A Liturgy for an Election Season

- A Litany written by the author for a small community of innovative leaders starting a new thing, to be shared the day before the Trump/Biden election, 2020.

Chapter 19: Let Us Pray

- Wherein the author explores the 2017 election, the following chaos, and all the desparate prayers that came out it.

Chapter 20: Satisfying Needs in Parched Places

- Wherein the author explores her experience of middle management in midlife through the image of a plastic swag water bottle that has become part of her hydration journey.

Chapter 21: The Good Persists

- Wherein the author and her husband say goodbye to several very good things.

Chapter 22: Sunday Donuts

- Wherein the author finds holy space in the Church of the Glazed and Raised.

Epilogue: Re-raising My Inner Child

Wherein I examine the various influences re-raising my inner child as I move toward middle-age, and learn new possibilities for life and life together.

Introduction: Holy[?] Ambivalence

The biblical book of Jonah is one of the many strange scripture stories handed to children in Sunday school with no thought given to their absurdity, violence, or magical realism. A random man (Jonah) is selected by God to go to a wicked city (Nineveh) and tell them God's judgment is coming to them. He has no particular love for the city, and in attempting to flee, he hops a boat and God stirs up a storm so intense that Jonah knows his fleeing caused it and he tells the boat's crew to throw him over to appease God.

Weirdly, since the God of the Hebrew Scriptures pretty much makes God's name on being the one ancient Near Eastern god who doesn't do human sacrifice, God is like, "Great! That IS what I wanted!" and stops the storm as Jonah hits the water.

Then in a gesture of seeming rescue(?), God has a fish swallow but not chew Jonah, and allows the fish belly journey to be a lesson, which somehow Jonah rightly interprets to mean, "Tell the truth. Trust God to be barfed up so you can go to that place you don't want to and then tell them they are evil."

Jonah talks to God about it, gets barfed, and then goes to Nineveh, does what he is told, and counter to all his assumptions about how dumb and terrible these people are, they say, "You know what, stinky fish man? You're right. We need to repent for what we have done and live differently."

Which:

a. Is not the usual response people have to someone yelling about their doom while looking and smelling like someone who has been inside a fish for some time;

and which:

b. Makes Jonah look dumb (in addition to stinky, and pretty weird) because he just said they were going to be destroyed, which, I will remind you, he tried not to say, but then got sacrificed to the god of the storm, nommed by a fish, barfed up, and thus had to go say in order to avoid that or a similar fate in future.

So Jonah, who has been alone this whole time in his strange ongoing conversation with God and who is, by modern standards, uh… "experiencing reality differently" than those around him, begins to (understandably) pout a little.

He goes outside the city, to watch it repent rather than be destroyed, all the time yelling about how he wishes he was dead. While he sits, God takes pity on him again and causes a vine to grow up and shade Jonah so he won't get sunburnt.

Jonah does not take this as the kind turn it is meant to be—or at least doesn't get up to change his whining behavior, and God, like a mother who made chicken nuggets after a long day at work, only to hear more whining about how terrible everything is, chats up a local worm to eat the vine, because maybe a little sunburn will improve Jonah's disposition after all.

Predictably, it does not, and Jonah starts talking about how he wants to die again.

So God is like, "Oh—you're pissed about the vine now? Getting a little sun on your head?" and Jonah is like "YES. I WANT TO DIE." And God is like, "So you care about this vine, which you did nothing for, just sat under the shade of, and you're so mad you want to die?

Ok, fine. Then why shouldn't I care about this great city full of people and also MANY ANIMALS?"

Strangely, this whole story ends up being offered to children on dittoed black-and-white copy paper sheets, along with pieces of string and some brass brads that allow the kids to make paper fishes whose mouths open and close, and crayon-colored Jonahs who can go into the fish-mouths and then get barfed out.

This works well for the kids, who want to talk about barf at church, and the parents, who don't want to talk about the ambiguity of violence, delusional (or at least very idiosyncratic) religious experiences, entire cities of evil, failed prophecies, and the overall arbitrary nature of the God they got up early and put on uncomfortable shoes to talk about.

Not for nothing, I have a lifelong fascination with how often the churches I've been in avoid the God question or the obviously God or spiritually-centric issues in their midst with a staggering amount of practical chores, maneuvering, and busy work, even as they show up week after week ostensibly to talk about just that. It is a strange communal commitment to observe.

As you might have already guessed, the Jonah story came to me in such a dittoed-sheet-and-brass- brad format. I thought the point was barfing fish or, if I was in a serious conversation, doing what God told you to in the first place and not being whiny until I went to college or maybe seminary. Until someone suggested I read the Jonah story as a story—to think of it as literature that defied the black-and-white morals or the semantically empty images I had been handed. Incidentally, this is also when my life started to be what you might call a bit God-haunted.

Which might happen if you suddenly realize the God you were taught to believe has been telling you this whole time that God sometimes makes people go to random cities to announce their doom or get swallowed by a fish for their own good.

This is troubling information.

What's even more troubling is that people have been talking about it this whole time like it isn't weird.

Blessedly, I love books and I love stories. And once I untangled the moralistic take on the story and got myself lost in it, I sort of started to love Jonah.

This is someone I get. He is not all that different from Soren Kierkegaard, one of my favorite theologians, who collapsed in the street railing about the evils of the state church in his early 40s, dying soon after that.

Or Simone Weil, a Christian believer who never allowed herself baptism, who wrote brilliantly about faith and prayer, but died of starvation because even as a chronically ill woman, she couldn't bear to eat more or better food than the French army rations eaten by those on the front lines of World War II.

Which is to say, Jonah is one of the early pissed and intense faith luminaries in a long proud tradition of the pissed and intense. And God is trying to convince Jonah to love and value this city that he thought God wanted him to hate—because they were wicked! Which they were. And God told him to curse them—which God did! Objectively. Remember?

Jonah is here trying to do the right thing, but honestly, he didn't even want to be called to them in the first place, because of the aforementioned wickedness, and now God wants him to be glad they aren't being punished, though God told him to tell them they would be?

What's this bullshit of changing the game, of demanding a response of care for this wicked city on the eve of its supposed death?

Well, I get that Jonah is mad. I would be pissed too.

I think I am pissed too.

My life has been shaded by the vine of the church. I neither planted nor watered it. It protected me, and now it's dying, dwindling in numbers in America and the broader West. I am angry and sad that it is dying—and I also sort of blame it and also the whole world and probably God, for its death.

And, as God, master of metaphor, points out, if I am sad to lose what shaded me, why shouldn't I be more gracious about this city I have been railing about? This wicked city I am so angry at. This big church city that shelters so many people and so many animals but hurts them too.

That's my point.

The city hurts them too. And it IS dying. But it is also not being destroyed like it deserves.

And I wonder what God is doing, and why God isn't madder at this wicked city. This vine that doesn't shade. This church I've found my shade in.

Because I'm as furious as Jonah with a sunburn.

This book is the story of me sitting and staring at this great city, yelling at God like Grandpa Simpson shouting at the clouds, grateful and heart-broken for all these people and animals I still love.

Part 1: Born into the Shade

Chapter 1: Listening to Serpents

The snake was clearly agitated, its slit pupils clouded over with what seemed to me like age, tail rattling as it tried to size us up through the walls of the terrarium.

This was odd.

We'd been coming every summer to this nature center in this West Virginia state park since before I was born, and for all those 20-some years all the snakes were always asleep in the back of their terrariums, hidden and docile. Of course, I was trained from childhood, told never to tap on their cages for humanitarian reasons.

Even now, I would never try to wake any snake napping in their tiny enclosure. But he was ready for us—rattling before we were even on his side of the room.

This was my first rattlesnake. I'd imagined venomous snakes were docile too—more scared of me than I was of them, etc. But this old guy seemed pretty cranky. My Dad, standing over my shoulder, also engaged and a bit surprised, said to the ranger, "Do you get many rattlesnakes in the park? I've never seen one."

My Dad is a bit of a snake enthusiast, something about the way they are unfairly maligned, something about the way people just guess they are poisonous without knowing anything, smash them with rocks, and leave their bodies on the trails. He pointed out such injustices to my sister and me when we were small, and just as I've faithfully cut apart soda-can plastic my

whole life (God save the ducks!), I've always felt sensitive about snakes. Heat seeking creatures who like a good nap, protect us from mice, and smell things with their tongue.

They are not so bad is all I'm saying.

The ranger, in his khaki uniform trimmed in brown, much shorter than my Dad's 6 feet 7 inches, looked over his shoulder from the cage he was working in.

"Ah, we didn't find him in the park. He was donated by one of the uh… local Pentecostal Holiness Churches," he said, with the surprised laugh of hearing himself say it out loud in his gentle mountain lilt, to a family of people who were not from the area.

I made a mental note and was a little bit proud that I had recently read up on snake-handling as a faith practice in one of my seminary classes. I tried to nod like someone who understood, though I still didn't quite know how it worked to handle snakes in church. But it gave some context to how my sister called every church that was at all emotional a "crazy snake church." I don't know how much my sister was a church-going Christian at the time, but she was certainly a Presbyterian.

I guess the snake is agitated, I thought, spending his life getting tossed around in the noise of ecstatic worship, being told he was the adversary and that he had no power, living long enough or biting often enough for those who did the tossing to realize that they really shouldn't be messing with him just to prove what God could do.

I found myself wondering if he was rattling his tail just to remember himself, his brain so shaken that he needed the familiar sound to know where he was--to know he was there at all.

Is it anthropomorphizing to consider a rattlesnake's sense of self? Church had done a number on him. Poor guy was vigilant the whole time we were there, rattling and watching with a dazed suspicion from his terrarium.

Realizing he wasn't calmed by our presence, we circled away, around the room, as we did pretty much every year. My family is big on routines.

I noticed a large black snake, stock still in his terrarium with his face tucked away.

"What about this one?" I said. "He's big! How old is he?"

The faithful ranger, still working in another cage, looked up.

"Oh yea, he's one we rehabilitated. Came to us hurt, and we had planned to release him when he got better—well we tried to release him. Let him go three times and every time we'd come in the next day, he'd be sitting coiled up on the front steps, waiting to come in with us," the ranger said. "I don't know how old he is, but he's been with us quite a while."

I was raised by a father who loved to trust systems and officials and tried to teach me to do the same, which has caused me no end of disappointments as I've aged. But I still think Dad was right about park rangers. I've seen them cry at nationalization ceremonies at Acadia. I've seen them take in irritated and traumatized rattlesnakes. The park rangers in West Virginia especially—they've been kind to me, been gentle with the mining-ravaged local ecosystem. They've taught me about sexism in bird nomenclature. They've given me directions, and shared beef jerky with my dog. They've recognized my Daddy year after year since I was tiny.

I wondered if the old black rat snake felt the same about the rangers. Life wasn't so bad in the care of these folks—they had been good to him. The snake knew the rules in here and the people understood him.

***

Ten years passed before I came back to the nature center. We'd been steadily if not annually in the park over that time, but with the addition of my spouse and two nieces, the changes in the landscape, and the strange transition from daughter-comma-dependent, to daughter-comma-fellow-adult, our rhythms had shifted somewhat in those visits. The nature center had been remodeled, and there were only a couple snakes in residence—none venomous.

The ranger on duty was young, maybe 24 or 25, and he didn't know me or my dad.

After looking around a bit, I decided to ask about their diminished snake population.

"Do I remember right that there used to be more snakes at the center?" I said, thinking of course about that old guy, rattling around in frustration and confusion.

The ranger stood up from his task, looking impossibly young to be a ranger rather than a boy scout in the brown uniform.

"Well," he wrinkled his forehead, "The boss before my boss left 10 years ago. From what I know he was the snake guy."

He explained that the laws had changed since then, and even if the rangers saw venomous snakes in the park, they couldn't keep them in the nature center. They couldn't get a permit for them, so only a couple non-venomous snakes had been allowed to stay.

"We did get to keep this guy, though. He's been here a long time."

I looked down where he was pointing to a big dull black snake looped in over himself in a terrarium on the bottom shelf. His head was buried in the scaly folds, but he was clearly two or three times as long as his enclosure, and completely still. He looked almost dusty.

"How old's this one?" I asked.

"Well we don't know how old he is," the young ranger said, "but he's been here for 37 years. Someone brought him here hurt, but after he was better, when we tried to release him, he wouldn't go."

I had just turned 37 and the last ten years had taken me all over. I had landed in Pittsburgh in a job I liked, I was married to a man I felt deeply at home with, mid-life was beginning to huddle around me, but I still had some broader questions about what was still out there and where I belonged in it. This snake had been in that little cage for that long? This same snake, from ten years ago, who insisted that this was where he wanted to be, was still here, sticking with his choices, taking warm naps, and letting less trained little kids come around and tap his cage. "Do they usually live that long?" I asked, a little horrified.

"Not in the wild," the ranger said, "but I guess since he has been safe here… He has been taking spells lately though, maybe seizures but it's hard to say. He's pretty old."

I understood the draw—napping the years away in safety after the trauma of the outside world. I wondered if he had talked to that elderly rattlesnake from years ago, jarred by spiritual ecstasy and the low lows of life in the church. Maybe that offered some perspective on how good he had it, as long as he didn't insist on taking up too much space or asking to leave the cage. I myself was recognizing the cost of life in the wild and the cost of life in the church—and I was beginning to long for a heat lamp, and for a permanent vacation from the responsibility and moral ambiguity of making my own living.

Chapter 2: Shouting as a Church Lady

My grandmother made homemade macaroni in the face of evil for 60 years and stopped singing at weddings in her 20s because she grew too nervous at her own voice.

After that, she ironed her art into my mother's crinolines every Saturday night for church on Sunday.

And thus, a singer who never sang begot and sustained my mother, a painter who never paints, and so it came to me, a shouter who never shouts.

We, the women in my family, are German and measured—church-goers and community women who work our lives, startle at our own voices, and die in our 90s of general debility five generations back on every side.

The battles we wage are armed with sustenance and hope, domestic art, and quiet voices we hope might keep (start?) speaking after we are gone.

Which is to say, there are a lot of reasons the life that formed me made the idea of cultivating my written voice seem a bit far-fetched. As J. Alfred Prufrock asks, "So how should I presume?" and in my faith tradition the word "Word" means something bigger than what I can say.

How should I presume to write the words I have found true?

But more than that, I know in my bones that the quiet domestic art of church ladies—the prophecy that the women in my family have carried in us, generation to generation, is—both in form and content—beyond words. The meaning of it is both more beautiful and more

quotidian—more food and clothing, more meaning and shelter than mere articulation. We have built a home of it.

But I also know that I have spent my life coveting freedom and power, ordering takeout, and sharpening my elbows to acclimate to tiny, restricted tables in gentrified cafes in anonymous cities.

How does the granddaughter of macaroni, the heiress to strong legs and deep hope write in an American canon of so many sad boys, in a school of literature that one of their own described as "a penis with a thesaurus"?[1]

I have no place at that table, but I was always thought I wanted one.

How can I write my way out of wanting that, while sitting in the eat-in kitchen, munching Chex mix homemade of the finest margarine?

How do I write a way to absolution when my very ambition to do so stands as a monument to the arrogance and inefficacy of the bargain we white women make again and again. Perhaps if I measure up, the faceless well-dressed men who flow by the café windows will accept me as a junior member and take their violence out on someone else. Perhaps they will let me stay and order an entrée on their company card.

Perhaps if my voice slips out past the old metal gate and into the downtown, I too can claim a space and voice that is not my own—and find a way to have people like me make my dinner.

---

[1] David Foster Wallace, *The Observer*, (1997).

Perhaps I too can be safe from the whims and caprices of the powers that be, neither as vulnerable nor as resilient as the women who came before me. Maybe I wouldn't have to make a life by alchemy and ungrounded, stubborn hope. Maybe the right connections and compromises could bring me to a space of certainty where all one needs to be safe is to forgo meaning entirely.

Sometimes I do think I want this enough to try to sabotage myself, to try to forget the fullness of how I was raised, wash myself clean of meaning and any whiff of margarine—to enter only the limits of, and never the healing that is also, my inheritance.

Limits without healing is not the wisdom of the mothers. And so I am seeking another way forward, another path toward shouting the things I have to shout.

We often think of shouting as aggressive, but I am less interested in shouting at than shouting over. I have much to shout because there is much to see and much that I see—and there is so much noise that threatens to cover it with commercials, with unnamed agendas, with silver tongued promises and hidden costs. Shouting for me is about being loud enough that someone else—someone who sees it too, or someone who is looking and might miss it—can hear me. Shouting is about not being the only one who bears witness to the small realities that poke pinholes into the sleek corporate narratives seeking our destruction for the sake of shareholder value. Shouting is about still having a voice left to cry to help, and a community left to hear it out there. Shouting is about the hope that there are still true things unfolding around us, that we can still see them together, that all is not lost.

Into this confusion, I have meted out the joys of words in small ways—thank you notes, newsletters, little articles, even sermon manuscripts I can do for work—surely these are

allowable and not overindulgent. My voice has lived in my gratitude, to my work, to the vows I have taken as a pastor. It has stayed within the confines of my office.

I have been careful not to say too much, not to grow a regular practice or an affection for the task at hand.

I've worked hard not to like it, hearing my own voice showing up from place to place.

I've worked hard to make my voice informative and useful—sturdy even, so others might be able to stand on it if they like, or build their own homes with it.

Or I have tried to make it frivolous and opaque, speaking only to those who know already, or not saying much, and trying not to take any space from those who do not need to hear from another self-proclaimed leader or self-titled sage.

Sturdy and useful have been my implicit guard rails. I'm still learning to claim what I've witnessed and how I've known it.

What I've learned: these are secondary considerations. Neglecting to shout at all when you have born witness to the holy is a sort of blasphemy that grows us into stones.[2]

If shouting carries the risk of moral peril, silence in the face of living as a created being guarantees it.

The value of speech cannot be judged simply by its effectiveness and efficiency. Art and prophecies are not important for their immediate usefulness, but for the cultures and communities they imagine. The alchemy of shouting is both possible and needed.

[2] For the Bible tells me so, see Luke 19:40.

Now, I find usefulness incredibly satisfying, efficiency even more so. Take the band Cake, for instance. I have desired, as long as I can remember, to be "a girl with the right allocations/… Who uses a machete to cut through red tape."[3]

I want to be the girl with the short skirt and long jacket, but that's not enough. I also want to be the girl who can see and name the holy. But my voice is constrained, the words stuck in my own throat, swallowed whole. My life is constrained by my lack of faith that I might be heard, that what I have to shout might be received over all the noise. If I might not be heard, I don't want to give up my machete.

I am trying to remember: macaroni and cheese doesn't cut through red tape or shout over it, it slowly renders red tape irrelevant. Art feeds the masses better than the masters, making the people strong over time. The prophecies that feed us imagine a new truth from the rejected rubble and that truth is also beautiful. A voice worth shouting speaks of truths that are both sturdy and transformative. Macaroni and cheese becomes a feast! Without meat, the truth of time and care, the truth of vision and the willingness to bring that vision to bear transform scarcity into nourishment and delight as long as we gather around the table to eat it.

What I want to say: I have seen the fruit of transformation. I have attended the holy. Of course, the holy is not my story—the holy comes upon us in community and we walk away with fragments of it stuck in our hair. So, perhaps, this story that bears witness is like redemption—it is now and not yet.

---

[3] Cake, *Short Skirt and a Long Jacket*, CD, *Comfort Eagle* (Columbia, n.d.).

In my writing, with my voice, I want to bear witness to the macaroni magic that fed me to this point, and to the moments of holiness that strength made it possible for me to see, just in glimpses, how it is now, and how it could be---or even will be, in the fullness of time.

So I will write down the things I have witnessed—tell them direct or slant, memoir or fictionalized, poem or prose, as full a fragment as is possible. I want to tell them as the now and not yet, and speak as a particular witness—not an authoritative expert, but a doer of the work.

So yes, like my mother before me and her mother before here, I am a church lady.

Still, the place I feel my voice and my theology can give voice to the macaroni that made me and the divinity that left shards in my hair, is more narrative and poetic, more about imagination and experience than about making a point.

I am tempted to pummel you with certainty even though I'm uncertain about many things.

Pummeling others with certainty when you're not certain is a lonely way to live. And so instead I'd like to invite you, dear reader, into whatever holiness is here. I hope my voice grows in clarity, like playing a record too slowly and then just right. I hope my voice grows on you and that we can become friends in our certain uncertainty.

Here's a secret: the places I have seen the holy have mostly been publicly secret. Anyone could have been there but so few chose to be that the whole thing had an air of conspiracy.

God showed up in the middle of the sidewalk when the community was trying hard to look away.

Is this the sort of space more would attend in the retelling?

If there is belonging within or without the church, along with others who have also been littered with holy fragments, will my story be able to bear it?

Can we stumble together toward the fruition of the macaroni we have been fed and the secret holinesses we have witnessed toward the terror of life together out beyond the garden and the gate?

Yes. Let's.

Chapter 3: Getting into Church

My sister is five years older, four inches taller, and 25 pounds lighter, slightly more anxious, and entirely more blonde than I am. The 5-year gap meant that for [at least] the first 15 years of my life she was faster, smarter, and better at everything than I was.

And I don't want to overstate the case, but let's say she wasn't particularly sorry about her relative excellence. It's possible she led me to believe these were essential, rather than age-related, differences between us (I'm afraid some were).

Having been born with a bit of a stubborn streak, I was, by age five, trying my best to beat her at anything at all. She was egging me on out of sight of my parents and playing innocent when they were around—a trick you can pull off seamlessly when you are five-years-worth-of-smarter than your little sister.

Early one evening, when we—my mother, my sister, and I—were going to church for some unknown reason,[4] my sister started to run from the parking lot toward the paned-glass back doors of the church and I set out at full speed, certain this was the time my five-year-old legs could best her ten-year-old legs. By the time I got there, she had transitioned to casually waiting for my mom to arrive with the key, not even flushed or out of breath.

Like a cartoon, I arrived comically late and barreled through the door arms first—having put my arms out to stop myself. The old-school glass that gave the back entry such a lovely colonial look cut deep slashes down both my arms almost to the elbows. As kids do, I stood and looked at both arms, and then up at my mom and my sister, as if to say, "Oh. This is new. Anyone know what we do here?"

They did not.

I remember very little, but I'm told my sister turned green. Suddenly there were multiple church ladies there[5]--Gloria, who worked there as Director of Christian Education[6] was one, so that made sense—I guess it was her job to be there.[7]

---

[4] This was not a rare occurrence for us. My mother had a key to the church's main door, back door, steeple closet, library, and no doubt several classrooms. She designed and maintained all bulletin boards, served as a youth advisor, did some sort of ongoing task that meant I knew the full office staff by name by the time I was 2, and afforded me the recognition and cover I needed to be in any room of the church at any hour of any day of the week. "Oh, it's just the little Rohrer kid. Ann must be around here cleaning out a closet or something."

[5] I have no idea why there were multiple women at the church. There was not an event happening and the lights at the back door were off. It was later afternoon or early evening, but this whole memory is making me wonder now if during the 90s it was normal for churches to have several women there on any given afternoon, doing self-directed service to the community that no one knew about or questioned, while quietly depending on it completely. Is the lack of this why so much has stopped working in the church?

[6] I was so churchy we called it a "DCE."

[7] Likely undercompensated—certainly she wasn't paid enough to get my blood all over her backseat.

Somehow in the flurry of movement, my sister was dispensed with--left in the care of someone who could handle a green pre-teen, while Gloria jumped in her wood grain station wagon. My mom was guided to the front, and Kathy, a family friend who was a dental hygienist, gamely sat in the back with me. She held my arm together with paper towels because, in theory, she was the least afraid of blood.

She did an excellent job of assuring the whole car everything would be ok and holding my arm wounds closed. I have no memory of the fate of the gray-blue velvety cloth upholstery. Gloria drove like a mad woman—she was good in a crisis, and my mother didn't faint, so everyone was really living up to their highest capacity in such a circumstance.

This was the era before cell phones, but by the time we arrived at the hospital, yet another of the many manifest church ladies had reached my dad at work and he was there to meet us. This was great news, as my mother was fading by the minute. I'm pretty sure she was still in the room we went to for me to get the stitches, but I couldn't swear to it, as my Dad was pretty emphatic that I look at him for the process.

The nurse was honest about the pain to come, inviting me to scream as loud as I wanted while I got the numbing shot.

In the moment I thought it felt exactly like having all your arm hair ripped out piece by piece.[8] I did scream—an interesting show of verve from my child self, as I had not been encouraged to shout or scream at or near anyone before, and I was a rule follower. As my

[8] I was a pretty hairy kid.

mother tells it, we talked to Jesus to get through it, but I only remember my Dad. It's possible my mother was having a nausea-induced spiritual experience all her own.[9]

In the end I had 34 stitches over three wounds on both arms, earning an orange lollipop with a loop paper stick for bravery. I started kindergarten with big ace bandages wrapping each arm, looking like a small and bubbly "despair and self-harm" Halloween costume in my first day of school picture.

Occasionally adults from church, some who were there when it happened, some of whom had just heard and prayed and cared and sent stuffed animals and cards and the occasional troll doll to me in my convalescence, would mention it to me in the years following. They would tell me I was a miracle and that they had been so worried and they were glad I was ok. It became a bit of church family lore that stuck around until I left for college—and maybe after.

Maybe that was because that incident started to fit a pattern. Ann and Doug's kid—me—continued to require minor surgeries and stitchings from various mishaps.

Later in 1991, I slipped on an old throw rug and dislocated my left elbow. I fell down the front stairs of our house twice, needing stitches in my chin both times. After a string of similarly mundane-but-stuffed-animal-yielding accidents, I learned to ride a bicycle and tie my shoes later than other friends my age.

---

[9] Mom can be a delicate flower in the face of medical issues. Years later she would forget my Dad was scheduled to have a tooth pulled, and when he came home with no visible evidence of the experience, he gently reminded her the procedure he had had that morning was why he wasn't talking louder and more expressively. She had to sit down at the mere idea of a tooth being pulled. Which is to say, these sorts of things were not her area of comfort—and she was one to turn to Jesus in a time of true crisis.

Despite all the support (and deeply supportive stuffed animals), whether it was those experiences or some deep innate sense of self-doubt, after the bike and shoe-tying delay, I generally considered myself "behind" for the next two decades. In addition to the practical setbacks, there was something about church life that made me feel like people thought I was naïve, like I couldn't keep up with the swift-moving cynicism of the world around me. That remains both deeply true and deeply not true. There is plenty I'm behind on, but I've become an expert in being cynical. When I look back on that, I remember being so embarrassed to be late to ride a bike—and that baby-sister self-consciousness stuck in the back of my throat for years—as if there is something shameful about being young, as if there is something wrong with not knowing how, as if I would have been better off if I never got hurt—never needed anyone—and no one cared about me at all.

Chapter 4: Church Growth

As a kid, prayers were right next to bedtime stories and both came as imaginative exercises for my young and never-sleepy mind as I lay tucked on the full canopy bed, complete with guardrail. The stories my parents read to me were usually from some sort of kid's bible that had none of the comprehensible stories and all of the weird ones. And I, power drunk on requesting that my parents read the weirdest stories and then deal with the aftermath, demanded the same ones over and over.

Ehud the left-handed! Jezebel out the window!

Samson's haircut!

Balaam's donkey!

My mother, with an almost superstitious faith in the scriptures to form me, when they were clearly offering no evidence at all of doing so, let me stick with the weird stories and blindly assumed that I wouldn't respond by throwing any mean girls from windows or stabbing any fat kings. Oh, I was well enough behaved at the time, and didn't show any tendencies to violence, but I did occasionally think too deeply about things, ask a lot of questions about the gory parts, the way it all worked, and the miscarriages of justice in the stories, thus leaving my mother wide-eyed and seeking some mercy.

But, my mother was nobody's dummy—and if the explicit curriculum in our house was scripture, the implicit curriculum was empathy. Read whatever weird stories you want, understand the gospel or don't—but remember that "we"—that royal "we" that parents use to mean "everyone who wants to live here and keep getting fed,"—care about the suffering of all creatures.

The center of the gospel, the center of the family, and the orientation of our lives were and always would be based in empathy. And no excuses will be made for the contrary.

We would be kind to all animals, we would be respectful of all feelings, we would ever put ourselves in the shoes of one who was suffering. There was no one lower than those who punched down, and nothing more shameful than being cruel.

As you might imagine, this made my first and only viewing of Bambi a real life catastrophe.

My Dad came home to my sister and I sobbing, surrounded by tissues. His immediate response was to ask my mother what she was thinking, letting us watch that. This watershed experience is the same reason I have not, to this day, seen ET. Yes, I know the alien doesn't

die. But he is frighten and sad—or so I'm told. I have no interest in finding out first hand. I was never encouraged to build the emotional infrastructure to withstand the suffering of animals. Or aliens. 32 years later, the vet clipped the quick of my dog's toenail, and I cried for 15 minutes and then had to go take a nap.

And so, to add to the formation I was getting from this sort of empathy training, and from the New Dancing Children's Bible of Married Noah Animals,[10] or whatever other cartoon story bible I was being read at the time, my mother turned to her other cornerstone spiritual practice—prayer.

I can only report on my mother's theology of prayer from observation, as she never offered an explanation for what was clearly self-evident. My dad, if asked, would, I'm sure, have a complex and philosophical explanation—something he had thought of over the course of years and never told anyone about, saving it for being asked by a child he would one day have—and so there I was. But my mother didn't and doesn't think that way. You talk to Jesus. It's very simple. He is a good listener, you tell him everything, but especially the hard or scary stuff. And because everyone is important to Jesus, you tell him all their scary and hard stuff too—and you never forget any of it, or any of them, because they matter irreducibly.

And so I had a very long list of prayer subjects from a young age and also all the stuffed animals had to sleep on the bed in prized spots because no one can be left out. I prayed for

[10] My mother was very into jolly kid's story bibles with grinning cartoons. She was also very into Noah's Arc—storybooks, art, figurines—and what I can tell you is, visual representations of Noah's Arc are just full of heteronormative animals, two-by-two, wearing pink bows and blue ties, marching onto boats. The jauntier ones have a spring in their step, the more serious ones look vaguely questioning. No one looks like they are days away from seeing every other body on earth as a floating corpse while they are tasked with repopulating their species—which is what the Noah story implies if taken literally. People love to share this story with children. My mother loved to decorate the house with it.

the large scale and the specific, people who were hungry across the world and for Sarah whose grandma had to get a hip replacement and Bebe the cat who got run over, but survived and was mysteriously fine. I worried over the feelings of Red Fred, a Crayola-branded stuffed bear who happened to be purple (and not a communist, to my knowledge), a bear that I called Foxy, who must have been bought on discount, because it had a long tail, thus leading to the specifies confusion (obviously no one told me how the word "foxy" was generally used), and a bear gifted by my mom's dear friend, named Cindy Bear who I hated (and had some guilt over hating).[11]

I asked endless questions and my parents suggested subjects for prayer as I asked. And pretty much the first people I knew who were vulnerable, who they could suggest for prayer, were the old people we also prayed for at church. And so it came to pass, that as a very tiny person, I was praying pretty often for old people that I didn't know all that well—whoever my parents suggested, whose illness or circumstance they explained. I'd hate to claim credit for this—but there are several people I started praying for at around age 7, who were old then and are still alive. Some still sing in the choir. Others had an ongoing series of health concerns and showed up repeatedly overtime. I prayed for Bill Cooper for years—so long that when he died much later my mom called me and gently broken the news:

"Karen, honey. Bill Cooper died. I'm so sorry. I know you loved him."

I had to admit I had no recollection of knowing him in person, only through my prayer list.

[11] Listen. Cindy Bear had an upsettingly stylish outfit for a stuffed bear, and for some reason the irises of her glass eyes were pink. I don't think I'm alone in finding this combination a bit disturbing.

They were my first exposure to real illness and even death and slowly it went from rote listing of names to stories I followed and asked about, and so I started to know people at church by the prayers that we said for them.

This practice went on, and while I stopped being read to, or prayed aloud with, my teenage-self kept the habit of praying for those people and those stories I had prayed for before, and that we prayed for in church. And if my parents talked about someone who was sick at church, or I heard them named in the prayer requests, I would hold onto their story. Of course the folks who were kind to children or the folks I would see in worship registered more, and I found myself more invested in their journeys.

One such woman, Brenda, was older—both kind to young people and regularly visible in worship, and she had had serious cancer for about a year. The sense was that it was growing worse. I was about 12, and the church had dwindled to such numbers that summer Sunday school was all together—youth and adults, held in the church "parlor" with the shiny upholstered Presbyterian couches you couldn't eat on, that were covered with the same fabrics as the drapes. I was, predictably, one of the only teens who was sucked into this church experiment, and no effort was made to target my pedagogical needs in the presentation of the day. My mother might have been disappointed at me mostly being forgotten in the planning of summer Sunday school, but this is nothing she would have ever mentioned.

"We" go to Sunday school. And so, that Sunday, "we" witnessed the guest preacher leading Sunday school. Me, my parents, Brenda, and probably 20 or so others.

The guest preacher was a mission partner from a community the church did not have a relationship with. He was a friend of the pastor, then newly installed, but already raising my

12-year-old suspicion. The guest preacher was tall and looming, thin and pointy. I don't remember where he was from, but it was a place in the two thirds world—a place we were taught to pity, and he spoke mostly about how increased sacrificial giving to his ministry was a mark of faithfulness and that those in the room should think of the children, forgo vacations this year, and write a check.

I was both compelled by the logic—I mean, *is* it ok to spend all the money on vacations when people are suffering? And turned off by the transparently self-serving nature of his talk. But so far, this was still just Sunday school. Troubling, incoherent, a bit shaming—just as in the children's bible, these sorts of questions and complications were to be expected—was Queen Jezebel bad because of the intense make-up she was wearing in the cartoon pictures? Is all eye makeup bad? Is it ok to defenestrate people just because of their eye makeup?

I had a lot of practice making my peace with the baseline absurdities of Sunday school.

Then we got to prayer time. As it was combined Sunday school, I was invited to pray with the adults. I held my dad's hand for the prayer handhold.[12] And because we had a guest preacher, it was clear that they were looking to get into it. Someone (a true believer) had told the guest preacher that Brenda had cancer. And as we stood up to pray, his eyes were on her. We prayed for a couple of sick aunts, but without travel mercies to cover, he got to Brenda quickly. He had been praying in English, but as he walked toward her, he began to speak more loudly about her healing.

[12] I hate the prayer handhold. I never want to hold anyone's hand but my spouse's and his only for a few seconds. Please don't hold my hand. Just the thought makes me hands clammy. I don't remember exactly, but I'm certain I made a bee-line for my Dad in this circumstance so at least one hand would be held by family. Why do we do these weird Christian things? Does anyone like them?

"To be healed you must believe! If you are going to pray for healing and you want this woman to be healed, you MUST believe in your heart and your mind that it will happen! Everyone here praying must believe together!"

He grabbed her now frail shoulders and gripped them hard, my eyes saw through slits. As his fingers started to tremble her full body followed, like a twig in a stiff wind, still connected to the tree, but barely.

His voice grew and crescendoed into a shout that was suddenly in another language. My eyes popped open fully and without intention, the pretense of prayer gone. What was happening?

He started to shake Brenda harder, and continued to shout as I stood there staring at this little circle of adults, eyes closed in obedient prayer. All these grown people that I trusted, who I thought believed what I believed, all letting this man shake our beloved and fragile member, bullying her to believe harder that her fatal illness wouldn't kill her. They remained silent and bowed, and the group in front of me began to look sinister and proud in its silence.

I gripped my Dad's hand, and when the prayer ended, I ran from the room. I went into the youth room and began to cry. My Dad came in and gave me a hug as I calmed down enough to speak.

"That was not ok. You can't tell someone who is dying to believe harder that they aren't dying. And why did he shake her like that?"

My Dad nodded as he saw his parental skepticism come to fruition in me, his kid. Then a newer member of the church opened the door. She had her best tight, pitying smile on, and she sat down on the chair perpendicular to where I sat, catching my shuddered breath. I

didn't know her well at all, but she had been part of the increasing number of charismatic prayer meetings at the church, and people seemed to think she had some sort of spiritual insight.

I thought she smiled a lot and seemed more smug than happy. She looked at me, as I was tear streaked and pretty clearly angry, and said, "Ah, you will learn more now that you have seen it. This is how the Holy Spirit works."

I did not consider for a second that she knew about the Holy Spirit, or anything for that matter.

Every ounce of my intuition, every fiber of my body knew that what I had witnessed was ugly. It could have been simple human ugly. It could have been more cosmic than that. It was hard to tell in another language and for me as someone who wasn't so into the spiritual warfare stuff--that was all more than my 12-year-old mind could sort out. But I suspected there was something else going on for that woman.

Why does someone need to make sure a 12-year-old kid thinks a certain kind of yelling is the Holy Spirit?

Did she need to imagine she has some spiritual insight that others can only attain through her guidance?

What makes someone walk right into a family moment with a crying kid and direct everyone what to think?

I didn't know then and I don't know now. And I don't remember how I escaped her patronizing commentary either. I know I didn't respond—didn't argue, didn't concede,

simply willed myself out of there silently until either she left or my Dad suggested we go home.

It didn't take long. She didn't seem to have the energy to keep prophesying to my sullen silence. I'm not sure I ever talked to her again.

Of course, Brenda died a few months later—of my doubt or her doubt or my Daddy's, I do not know.

Over the years I grew more open to the idea of the Holy Spirit moving in strange ways, and I'd say I have a pretty wide definition of what might qualify as holy. But I think that moment, all those years ago, was somewhere between a self-serving manipulation and a charlatan bullying a sick lady and trying to shame a community he didn't know.

And I wonder what happened to his grift, and how often that shtick worked on all the churches he went through, and what all the ripple effects of that are—for him, for his community, for the people he talked to, for the choices they made, and the self-doubt they grieved and died in.

Chapter 5: Fast Car

There was a time in my church upbringing where it seemed the adults experienced a kind of collective psychosis.

I was young and had no sense of what happened, but the communal trust was fractured—not interpersonally, but theologically. While it was clear my parents still loved and were loved

by all the people individually, it appeared the broader community was devolving into various camps.

There was a crew of folks who seemed to be growing more charismatic. Raising hands and rumors of speaking in tongues came from that group. Another and overlapping group suddenly grew interested in the afterlife, the end times, and who might have earned or might be earning damnation.

The faithful standby Presbyterians maintained their composure, and continued to volunteer with the hunger ministry and sing in the choir, seeming oblivious to this broader foolishness.

My parents, who seemed to me to fit into none of these groups but had been youth-group leaders, were replaced with the charismatic crew, who hired the "True Love Waits" youth staff (which ended up being a subset of the "earning damnation" group, which may have disappointed the charismatic crew, but I ultimately couldn't tell. There was a bit of an overlapping Venn diagram there).

I hit youth group right about the time all of this was reaching fruition, the pitch rising into what you might call the "jump the shark" season of family ministry at Overbrook Presbyterian.

Things were always weird at church, I think. I mean, I was a child in it. I was loved, and my own parents created an even-keel family system (quiet, persistent, and gentle suspicion from my Dad; endless cheerfulness from my mom) that sort of shielded me from realizing how strange it all was in the early years.

But as I got older and things got weirder, my family's fierce belief in normalcy could no longer crowd out the emerging factions and the degree to which these competing church values were increasingly inconsistent with my at-home values.

Some things my parents tacitly but unenthusiastically approved—the True Love Waits youth bible study and the new raised hands in worship.

Others they questioned quietly at home or allowed us to question, like the adult who shared the threat of hell with fourth graders at vacation bible school or the woman who told me directly in youth group that I couldn't sing at all.

My parents tended toward going along to get along, unless you broke their codes--anything that went against what Jesus would want for my mother and anything that included cruelty or lying for my Dad.

My mother is hesitant to presume on Jesus' behalf, so it has to be pretty clear you are doing something wretched to get her to fight you, while lying and cruelty are a bit easier to define. These were helpful boundaries for me as a child and mostly offered what I needed in terms of moral direction.[13] However, they also allowed for a wide variety of strange church behavior to thrive unchecked in my general vicinity.

[13] The one notable exception here was helping me to navigate the creepiness of adults as it impacted other young people. My Dad's own gentle suspicion taught me to avoid people who read as at all weird in any direction, which I did eagerly and ably, though I didn't have the language to name what was genuine scary weirdness versus simple social awkwardness. When it came to other young people, though, and their lack of clarity on who to avoid, I wasn't able to be much help. This later came to trouble me when I realized that I had kept a creepy youth group secret at the request of a friend, out of confusion, naiveté, and an unwillingness to name the weirdness to any adult in the equation. The creepy adult was a youth group volunteer, she a graduating senior. Perhaps sharing this tale is one attempt at coming clean in that department.

To that end, when I was a junior in high school youth group, one of the pastor's daughters, who was my age, started dating a guy who seemed to be a friend of her family. He was 22, not in school, drove a Nissan sports car, and was "from Florida" but didn't seem to have any particular reason to be here.[14] We were told that he was "from a good family" who "did evangelistic work" and that he was "courting" my peer. It's possible, but I do not properly remember, that he was even living at the pastor's house with the family.

This must have been following the string of "True Love Waits" youth pastors who each left after a year or two, leaving a vacuum in leadership, because someone suggested that he become a youth leader volunteer. Apparently no one was troubled that he was dating one of the (under-aged) youth. Possibly everyone in the equation assumed that as long as true love was waiting the age difference didn't matter? Looking back it truly boggles the mind.

Regardless, this came to pass and I found myself, true to my training around weirdness, generally leaning out of youth group. I didn't have the framework or self-possession to tell you what was wrong there, but I did know I didn't want any part of it. And his sports car and fancy shoes gave me the creeps.

As this shark-jumping absurdity continued to unfold, my mother continued to meet with various configurations of women to pray for various things—and as the pastor's wife was a woman of many sorrows (and seemingly unlimited drama), my mother began to be troubled by the prayer requests she was hearing. Apparently this young (adult) man was planning to return to college—and to fulfill all righteousness, he was planning to go to Liberty University[15] where he was trying out for basketball, but he was desperately in need of prayers

[14] Richmond, VA at the time.
[15] Just, Fonzy on the water skis, great white in the wake, shark jumping absurdity, as I said.

because tryouts were so difficult. These coaches were making him run 25 miles before practice! They were doing 3-a-days in Lynchburg before he could drive home to Richmond! He was vomiting at practice every day!

Already you are seeing that there were no athletes at the women's bible study. But my mother, who had passively watched enough basketball game fragments before she consented to a second television in her home in about 1984, recalled enough to feel that this seemed inordinate. She credulously took her concerns to my father, who had played college basketball, who loved the game, and who knew that Division I basketball teams didn't run open tryouts that were akin to Ironman challenges. I believed at the time she did so to advocate for this young (adult) man, but I couldn't say for sure. My mother seems credulous sometimes, but she sees things.

My father quietly nodded, asked a few clarifying questions, recessed back into his own brain for a few hours, and re-emerged with steely resolve. He would be inviting the pastor, who had hired this young (adult) man to shepherd the youth, while consenting to him "courting" his daughter,[16] as well as the young man, to our home to talk about the tryouts. How were they going? Why were they completely implausible? How stupid did they thing we all were?

I do not at all remember what kept me from home when this interview took place. A fear of the impending awkwardness of watching my Dad's well-earned rage simmer over someone as they slowly realized they were caught? My very busy schedule of being a pretty lonely high school rule follower? No doubt, my social engineer parents made a way for this to all happen away from my watchful eyes and I only heard about it afterward. Apparently this young (adult) man copped to the lie when he knew he was caught, claiming he was hoping to

[16] And maybe living in his house? Again, I don't quite recall.

impress the parents of his girlfriend. I was told the pastor, who was with him, felt embarrassed but had no choice but to join my father in the general conclusion that this was unacceptable. To my memory, without announcement or acknowledgement, the young (adult) man and his sports car disappeared immediately, back to Florida to evangelize, I guess. By then I had leaned far enough out of youth group to miss the further consequences of their strange leadership choices.

I wish I could say that it never happened, that no one would have let it happen. Looking back, the person I most worry about is the pastor's daughter. Lord knows what other lies were being told, and her parents clearly weren't following the no cruelty/no falsehood household code. There are a lot of loose ends like that from my growing up years—people I knew and grew up with who ended up living the follow up to something like that. You don't imagine this when things like that happen, but these stories continue. People grow up like this and end up 40-year-olds, raising their own kids. They end up 40-year-olds who are understandably gun-shy about church, even about community in general. They grow up with questions about authority, hang-ups around purity culture, unhelpful expectations of relationships. These things wreck some people's lives, I'm saying.

I feel grateful and somewhat guilty about the degree to which I got the good of church without the bad, filtered as it all was by my sweet parents. Amidst my mother's hushed concerns about various adult children of the church and what they seem to carry—amidst the significant material of concern in continued prayer meetings, even with my hang-ups and issues, the main wound I carry from this story is a deep distaste for Nissan sports cars. And in light of all the damage I could have ended up with, one might even call that an evolutionary advantage.

Part 2: Blinded by the Light

Chapter 6: Charles Murray Doesn't Live Here

> **31** He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; **32** it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."
>
> **33** He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."
> Matthew 13:31-33, New Revised Standard Version

Beacon Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia was built on the model of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London in 1886, and it rose and fell with leaders and neighborhood fortunes, was damaged and had the sanctuary subsequently demolished as a result of Hurricane Hazel in 1955.

When I got there in 2011, the church was closing and the only remaining remnant of the old Sunday school building was full of church red carpet, portraits of blond Jesus, various masonry leaks, mice, and a good deal more cockroaches than people. The community surrounding it was a post-industrial, Irish Catholic working neighborhood, whose factories had left, leaving the long-standing, hard-working population little to do for a livelihood other than engaging in local small businesses on both sides of the legal legitimacy spectrum.

I was 25 years old, with a degree in English and World Religions, a Master of Divinity from a fancy seminary, a professional leather bag I bought with my last bit of money, and some big, progressive ideas about being a professional pastor, binding up the brokenhearted, and making community work where it clearly hadn't been before—almost as if God only showed up when I got there.[17] In short, I was a cartoon of naiveté, energy, and misplaced confidence—and I was here to help.

The neighborhood Beacon found itself in was part of a greater neighborhood often called Fishtown or Kensington/Fishtown. It was along the Delaware River, split by interstate 95 and formerly home to a large Dutch Boy lead paint factory. The neighborhood was also the focus community of a book called, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, by Charles Murray, political scientist and conservative ideologue, described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an "extremist," who is "using racist pseudoscience and misleading statistics to argue that social inequality is caused by the genetic inferiority of the black and Latino communities, women and the poor."[18]

Which is to say, be mindful of what and who you are reading. Charles Murray has quite the reputation for knowing how to tell an influential story on the age-old presumptive spectrum with hell on one side, privilege on the other, and the smug on the right—and so he told such a story about our neighborhood. He used data on reduced marriages, increased children born to unwed parents, lower earnings, increased substance abuse, and domestic violence to insinuate that the fabric of our community was fraying, and not only that, but that that

[17] To my way of thinking at that time. I can't leave it to assumption that you hear my sarcasm here. I didn't know much of what made community, and I was entirely wrong that it wasn't present and thriving already in that space.

[18] "Charles Murray," Southern Poverty Law Center - Charles Murray, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray.

fraying was a result of a lower class of people, with inferior intellects, continuing to have children with each other.[19]

Since the writing of this book, over 10 years ago, many who are more credible than I have pointed out the suspect nature of his data, the various interrelated and external causes for poverty, suffering, and diseases of despair in communities like Kensington/Fishtown, and the false assumptions that underlie his reasoning.[20]

A retelling of the story of our community that rights those wrongs may be both necessary and helpful, but for the purposes of this story, rather than situate Kensington/Fishtown somewhere on the spectrum of progress, and assign either blame or credit to someone for that placement, I would rather reject the frame and limitations of Murray's argument entirely.

The story I want to tell of this community is how experienced it—and that is as a site of holy in-breaking, leavening outward to feed many, growing branches to house neighbors, hosting miracles that were entirely outside the slow march to either progress or despair.

In the face of Murray's data and analysis, then, the stories I tell here are real—specific, individual, and located, but in a way that relies on and indeed creates the very resplendent fabric that Charles Murray argues is "coming apart." And so these stories should and do start with someone who directly upends some of Murray's ugliest logic.

I met Meghan Teleska early on in my time in the neighborhood, even as the church that had worshiped in the building we used was closing and making space for something new. She

---

[19] And he did not use the data that reflects a system-wide economic inequality crisis to name that system-wide economic crisis that was disproportionately impacting poor and working people in industrial cities that were increasingly outsourcing production.

[20] Nicholas Confessore, "Tramps Like Them," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/books/review/charles-murray-examines-the-white-working-class-in-coming-apart.html, for one.

was sad about the transition, but her relationship with the building and her ability to see and create community through insistence on the good of that space was only growing stronger. Meghan was almost 18, living with intellectual disabilities, a seizure disorder, a faithful mother, and a prophetically clear sense of church. Every time we came to the building and opened the door, she came by. People followed her and trusted her, and she followed and trusted the ways and rhythms of church that grew there.

As we became part of Meghan's community, the neighborhood began to welcome us as a plausible faith community. No matter that the new church gathering there was unconventional—Meghan knew communion and ran with joy to the table before we even finished the liturgy. She came to the children's sermon and slowly people of all ages followed. She sang loudly and the whole lot of us poor singers joined in—leaving our musician, a tiny, Calvinist lesbian pastor a task that only she could meet—to carry the whole chaotic community along in the melody.[21]

Once Meghan took a seizure during the prayers of the people, and as she seized and her mother and another church member tended her, the rest of us prayed aloud. When she came to, before she knew herself you could hear her repeating the words of the Lord's Prayer. The words knew her before she knew them. Meghan brought holiness with her so often that I started to imagine that the Holy Spirit stayed with her—loud, uncontrolled, and uncontainably effervescent.

I start with Meghan because Meghan was one of the first to invite us to be pastors—myself, my co-pastor, the worship leader who was later ordained there, too. She expected us to be

[21] If you are a church person, or even someone who wants to annually get drunk and sing Christmas carols, get yourself a loud and clear singer who can carry the group.

pastors and that taught us what the role meant. Because Meghan came around, our neighbor Sara started to show up. Oh, she never really came to church—that wasn't her thing, but she watched and connected, looked out and provided first for Meghan, but soon for all of us. Sara was the unofficial mayor of the neighborhood. Always on her stoop with a cigarette, she was everybody's mother and everybody's aunt. She chased her kids and your kids and everybody else's kids. She didn't take shit and she walked her huge dog that seemed to hate me on a choke collar, but her sweet youngest son used to paint his claws with sparkly nail polish—so he must not have been so scary. If there was ever a crisis at the church, Sara knew before anybody and sent help in some surprising way.

Of course, once you knew Sara, you knew everybody. Sara's niece was being raised by Caty, because her parents kicked her out and Caty's daughter was her best friend. So somehow on disability and the child support her ex-husband didn't pay, Caty raised her 3 kids plus one extra, made sure everyone was fed and clothed and loved and didn't give up joy either. Against all likelihood and in the midst of the scarcity Charles Murray insisted plagued her and those she shared life with, Caty began to provide and run our community dinners after church. She's the one who suggested we bring takeout containers, so folks could get meals to take with them for the week—in addition to neighborhood food insecurity, she knew some of us weren't cooking at home.

Through the meals we met Helen, who was so plagued and stressed with anger and disappointment that she struggled with the most rudimentary social graces. She would come to the first Sunday of the month, the one with dinner after worship, fill a plate, eat half of it, throw the rest away and then quickly pack up every takeout container in a big tote bag to take with her. Caty was apoplectic with the dual pain of others going without and more food

than could ever be eaten going home with one person to be wasted. She knew too much about scarcity to abide either. I, of course, despaired of a solution and imagined hiding in my office until the tension subsided. I was sure Helen hated me for my own failings and for the failings of the church I represented—and if I'm honest, I probably wasn't wrong. But my brilliant co-pastor gently explained to her—the food is for everyone; can you just take one serving of leftovers until everyone has a chance? And while she still seemed tempted by an extra container or two, the corrective mostly worked—almost as if she wanted to please—could we say even respect?--my co-pastor.

Oddly, that one small thing opened up just the tiniest space for others to start to like Helen, even to poke good naturedly at her consistently terrible attitude. She became another beloved member of the place.

Of course, the thread rolls on from there, and if you start again at Meghan you can follow other threads of relationship all throughout the community. As I remember my time in Kensington/Fishtown, and follow the various threads out from Meghan into the whole web of community that took me in, something beyond a continuum of privilege and pain emerges. What held me there—a pastor at 25, dating and then newly married, naïve and stubborn, broke and scared, angry and idealistic, wasn't the community infrastructure of the well-bred, well-educated and polite upon whom Charles Murray builds his claims. They didn't care about anything north of Spring Garden Street. What drew me there and mesmerized me was not a well-ordered civilization, but the ungovernable possibility and quirky grace that people offered each other in the midst of a complicated world.

In so many ways, it felt like the kingdom of heaven Jesus names in Matthew. After all, the kingdom of heaven isn't loft apartments and urban garage front residential[22]—the kingdom of heaven is the greatest of shrubs. There will be room for you to nest there—it will be noisy in tight quarters. You'll have to work hard and sing hard and share. It will be messy and imperfect and you might know just a smidge too much about your neighbors. But in the kingdom of heaven, knowing a smidge too much of people is better than knowing a smidge too little, and it saved me from missing the delight—from making the same mistake as Charles Murray.

Chapter 7: Life Together

When I started as a pastor, I believed that with enough care and attention, people who seemed bent on being difficult would abandon their commitments to chaos and choose to live well in community. They just needed boundaries, clarity, and hours of pastoral time and attention.

Rick was one such person. He was neat and careful, with bright white hair, surprisingly trendy glasses, and a gentle bearing that felt out of place in rough and tumble Kensington, with its row homes and good-hearted, rough-tongued union workers; sweatpants wearers; and abandoned empty gallon plastic bottles of Jacquin's blackberry brandy dotting the messy sidewalks, just blocks from where this concoction was distilled.

[22] DENSITY DOES NOT ABIDE THIS SELFISH STREETPARKING THEFT! Garage front residential in a high density, mixed commercial/residential landscape is a concrete reminder of what wealth inequality does to shared spaces.

Rick would sweep the sidewalks, mow the church lawn without being asked, and work part time in a long formal black wool coat at his niece's funeral home across the street.

He came by the church to chat occasionally, and then often, and he was "born again," in the sincere way that wants to talk about Jesus rather than hit you with Jesus. Our faiths were formed in different spaces, and he approached this weird, artsy little church with the two young lady pastors as a benevolent curiosity.

Somewhere in the various mythologies he lived by, it made sense to help at the church, come to worship, and ask about what people believed and practiced, even as it slowly became clear that he had some questions about how women might relate to ministry. But at the time we fancied ourselves and this little church a pretty question-friendly community. Of course, it helped that I didn't know who Phyllis Schlafly was when he recommended her book.

Rick slowly became known as a leader in the faith community. He came every Sunday and served as a consummate churchman. He spoke up at prayer time and welcomed visitors with grace, even the difficult ones. But it started to become clear that he would catch himself in cycles of thought.

We missed it at first. He was ever dignified, almost courtly, with his white hair neatly combed and even his casual clothes well ironed. He would come by the church wanting to talk about the same few issues or email the same long form questions again and again and I assumed he just wanted to chat or do a chore around the building (which he did often do), but he was never quite satisfied that we understood the gravity of his query when we offered a response with openness rather than conceding a black and white answer. It slowly became clear that he was targeting the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation. He had found us out--the young lady pastors supported the queer community.

It was hot that Sunday and the little un-air-conditioned church was peopled with the glistening usual suspects—Sarah and David and their little girl Nelly; Gail and Martha, a mother and daughter duo who embodied the generations of faithful women who have formed church communities everywhere; Caty, the single mother of three who made her children's world run on duct tape, disability, and deep goodness; and of course Meghan, who was there rapt with delight and waiting for communion.

The room was filled with the faithful. Leadership was divided between co-pastors, and our student pastor Anna, with long red hair like Venus on the half shell, who was by far the quietest of the bunch, but steely, and secretly five years younger than anyone thought. When the former church had closed the red carpet had been removed, and a lit blond Jesus and red polyester velvet wall curtains came down from the walls. Now worship happened all on the same level, with the sacramental table right in the middle on a secondhand oriental rug. Once we moved to the prayer request portion of the service, the pastors would walk back and forth across the rug to hear and repeat what people were sharing. We didn't do any policing of prayers, but we did a fair bit of repeating, and the occasional reframing.

People often prayed for what was really on their mind, which made for holy moments, but also the occasional intense image or profanity—once a rather graphic prayer for a pregnant cat. On that warm June Sunday, Anna was leading prayers. Each week we prayed right before communion, putting all our hopes and fears right in the middle of the room—almost on the communion table, before everyone was invited to come up and partake of the meal.

Prayers were going smoothly, and I was soaking up the beauty of this precious little community from my perch in the first row of the rolling pews, adjacent to the communion table, just across from the old pulpit. These moments when I could pray invisible, during

worship, were perhaps the moments I loved most in pastoring the little church—just watching it be itself, without any orchestration from me, being led by this brilliant pastoral team, doing what they were called to do. As I remember the moment, it was almost as if the room was lit in a warm yellow glow of holiness when the crash came. I was in a trance when the words of Rick's prayer reached me, "…offer prayers for…pastors who don't take seriously the words of scripture… who call sin a marriage and don't speak up against…"—even when it struck me, the words and phrases never resolved into sentences, though I'm sure they were there. He was angry but not frantic, voice loud and clear, looking somber and controlled with glowing white hair.

Anna was still moving as she heard him, though her steps shifted from walking forward to peddling back just a step, head and eyes still forward, staring right back at him. I was still coming to when she went in for the reframe—loud and clear and even, not giving in to the drama, not offering up a fight, "Lord we pray for wisdom for all of us as we read scripture and listen for your word to us. We pray that we would hear it rightly when we disagree. We pray that our reading and our work would make space for *all* your beloved people."

I don't remember any further prayers about sick aunts or new puppies, or grateful addicts in recovery, and Anna closed with the Lord's Prayer, having served her part well and ready to hand over the liturgist mantle to the communion officiant. I, being that officiant, had absorbed my initial shock and it had turned to rage.

I wasn't angry at him.

A switch flipped and Rick disappeared from my emotional horizon—all I saw were the shocked and defiant faces of the others in the room sitting in their curved pews wheeled around this old rug and rickety table that held us all together.

It wasn't about him.

The whole room was pulsing with shock and silent fury that this precious space had been torn open.

As I walked up to stand behind the table, I pulled together the fragments in my mind—how much I didn't want to do communion—to share bread in this space, when this space had been broken and betrayed.

How could I ask these faithful people to come eat at this table after that? As the dusty sunbeams settled on us, I saw the mother whose eldest daughter had just married her wife, the committed progressive Catholic from across the street who came to our little Presbyterian church for the first time that Sunday, the grown child of the church who got fired in the 70s for selling Mary Kay to the drag community. Every single one of them carried in their bodies a prayer for the excluded to come to this table. Everyone single one of them looked crushed.

I was struck in that moment by how much one is not invited to make up new rules about communion simply because one feels the miserable weight of presiding at the table in the midst of rage.

We are here at this table—it is not my table.

It is not the church's table.

It is not the table of my rage.

It is not the table of my feelings.

I looked at Rick out of the corner of my eye—and felt crushed for him too. This meal is for those who are hungry enough that they can stand to share it, and after all the times he came by the church, all the work he did here, and all the conversations he seemed to want to have, it didn't seem like he wanted to eat with us after all.

The liturgy did its work and I began to weep the repeated words. Not the delicate, beatific weeping of Jesus icons in the garden, but the hot tears every woman from the South knows as the extrusion of full fury through the tiny windows of imaginable behavior. What the hell are we doing? Who could come into this space—who knows it, who has invested, spent time, showed up, made eye contact with the full vulnerable holiness of the place—and hate it like that.

So I said, through angry and resentful tears, the truth I had said over that table time after time, week after week—"This table isn't safe. Jesus was betrayed here and he blessed it anyway. We came here because we are hungry, because we are in need of family and hope and revolution. But the table has a cost. We have to bear the weight that others are invited--that they will be there too and we will eat the same bread they eat, right alongside them. You are ALL invited to this table. It is not my table. It is not a Presbyterian table. It's not this church's table. It isn't mine to fence."

And so we went into the prayer, blessedly written out beforehand, and to the ancient words of institution—

> On the night Jesus was to be arrested, he was eating with his friends. Before the meal, he took bread, and giving thanks to God for it, he broke it, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Every time you eat, remember me."

> In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, "This is the cup of the new covenant, sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of every sin. Every time you drink, remember me."
>
> For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord until he comes again, to wipe away every tear from every eye, to bind up every broken heart, to welcome every last one of us home again.
>
> Friends this is the joyful feast of the people of God and it is set for you. We invite you to come, take a piece of bread that is larger than you think you deserve, bigger than you think you should receive--God's love for you, God's grace for you is more than you can imagine, so take a lot. Dip it into the juice, and return to your seat.
>
> Friends, come and receive.

And so they did come.

They saw that Rick would come too and they came anyway.

They didn't look vengeful or pitying and he didn't look repentant or smug. They came and ate together. The rest of the service has evaporated from memory, but I do recall that immediately when the service ended, beloved Caty, the mother of three, stood waiting to count the offering, completely crushed. She gave me a huge hug and I returned it, both of us sharing the grief of the whole damned experience. In the moment I thought I was comforting her—furious as I was that he would speak, even obliquely, about her kid that way. It took me awhile to realize that Caty, and indeed the whole room had heard him speak ill of their pastors, and that had not been appreciated.

Her anger was for me.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine what could have repaired the tear in that community space of prayer. If I'm honest, I think that even as it stung and did real damage, the reality of who that community is now was perhaps both named and strengthened by Anna's refusal to play by the narrow rules Rick tried to enforce. The community refused to be driven not only from the table but their sharing of it. The attempted realignment of worship, the coup of the man with the white hair and the "biblical values" wasn't shouted down—it just didn't factor here in the same way.

I wish he had never said those things—but, perhaps, it is more accurate to say that I wish he had never thought them.

I wish he had never been formed by the dualism they come from, the same binary energy that keeps men from therapists and healthy emotional lives and women from agency and respect and non-binary people in the closet and out of the history books. If they had only gone unsaid we would have been spared the pain in the moment—but perhaps we would not have known, especially the most vulnerable among us, that this was where we stood, and we would not have seen that this community refused to let the holy be domesticated into judgements and binaries. Perhaps we would have remained a church community awaiting our tyrant, ready to allow bad behavior to show up and run the church into the ground.

Rick wanted that to be his mic drop moment, but we co-pastors asked that he come back to our office after that to talk it through, and he did.

He wasn't smug. He just came in and sat down like he always had. We were grave and he was a bit sheepish.

"I don't know that there is much more to say," he said. "I'm sorry to have said all that when and how I did, but I do hold to that belief. I don't plan to come back to church."

I did my best to look him in the eye when I said, "I'm really sorry to hear that. You are always welcome. But if you do come back, we would need you to apologize."

"I don't plan to."

And so he was right, there wasn't much more to say.

Eventually, via email, he offered a limited apology for his tone and the setting of his comments, but made it clear again that he stood by his sentiment. Then, much later, he stopped me on the street while I was rushing into work, dressed for worship in a bright yellow skirt, holding a bag of garden mulch. He was still in the habit of greeting the staff warmly, even as he didn't come by the church anymore.

"Karen, I wanted to talk to you."

"Hi Rick, what's up?"

"Hey—I'm really sorry about what I said in church. I've been thinking and I just… I shouldn't have done that to you all, especially in front of Caty. And I shouldn't have done that to Anna. Will you tell her I'm sorry?"

"Thank you, Rick. I know. It's ok. You know, you are always welcome back. We forgive you. Anna isn't mad."

"Yes. I just shouldn't have said all that."

I don't think he came to agreement with our theology of celebration, or our way of being church—as those are related to one another in ways both obvious and not, but this time, I felt real regret. I felt him bearing the weight of the tear in a holy moment that his action caused. I told him I would apologize to Anna, though I knew he already had done so. I felt

the weight of the weight he still felt. Anna said later that she had told him already that it was really ok. That she was ok, and we were ok, and he was forgiven.

I suppose what I really wish is that all that time afterward, he could imagine a world where he would neither be required to say that prayer at his friends and to his church for the sake of his faith, nor where he would have to continue apologizing for the same prayer over and over, never quite feeling like he had repented enough. I wish that he could have believed that he was still invited to eat with his friends without needing to judge them, and that he could trust that they would do the work and bear the cost of eating with him, if he would do the work and bear the cost of eating with them. I can't wish it didn't happen—at least not in this life, but I am still wishing for the restoration, where we learn to do the real work and make it to life together again on the other side.

Chapter 8: Co-Pastor

There is an old photograph—more than a decade old now, from a season of my life where most of the pictures I took were lost to various failing phones kept too long, imperiling whole years of contacts, memories, and archived "Notes" grocery lists with price estimates included.

We were "go into debt for a new phone" broke in those days—all of us, but somehow Becca always had a camera. She was somehow more broke and more abundant than the rest of us put together. Always in style, always well fitted, always with a can of Diet Coke that she most

assuredly bought as a single at corner store prices. She was the queen of somehow magically pulling it all off. The rest of us might have appeared more organized, more direct, more suited to capitalism. Becca was the most tragic and the most magical. When I wanted to spreadsheet a plan, I found someone else. When it was an already and emergency, I called her first. When it was ten minutes before, and nothing was beautiful yet, I called her.[23]

This is one of the first pictures of that partnership—me with my cheap haircut-to-repair-the-cheap-haircut short hair and her borrowed scarf. Her with the gold art teacher earrings, the just-so-eye make-up and the expert hair, almost covering the goofy grin, which was almost covering something else. We were not in love, which is a shame because I think we could have led a very dynamic, healthy, well-organized life together.[24] Her extravagance and her scarcity were a perfect match for my measured practicality. I was broke and I didn't need a new phone. She was broke and she needed a camera, and a Diet Coke.

In retrospect, this worked out well for me, as she stewarded that whole season of my life, with all that I wouldn't afford myself, in the way of both scarcity and beauty. Right down to the visual record—indeed, if you were to see the entire visual record of my life that season, you might think I lived only in her imagination—on the other side of her camera. But not in

[23] My car, a 1994 Geo Prizm that I drove from 2002 until 2013, broke down the morning of my wedding, stranding myself and one bridesmaid in the pot-holey parking lot of a Planet Fitness. Becca didn't have a car, but she was the person I called when such things happened—and so I did. She borrowed her housemate's car, left hours earlier for the wedding than anticipated, drove us where we needed to go, took on several additional chores, paid for a full day of Center City parking (enough money at the time to blow either of our monthly budgets). From there she decorated the sanctuary and despite the concern of many present, she completed it beautifully right on time.

[24] Truly—her emotional intelligence and maturity! My rigid insistence on structure! How could anyone imagine sexuality is a choice in the face of the beautiful madness that is trading this for marriage with a man?

this photo—we are in it together, grinning out into the possibility, thinking of all that might come, not realizing that it was already happening.

Chapter 9: Church Home

My ministry was formed not in seminary but in staff meetings. If staff meeting postures were a continuum, Becca was on one pole and Wayne was on the other, the entire identity of Broad Street Ministry, and thus my own formation, balanced precariously between them. The staff had to come up with a rule that Becca could only share one gratitude in the gratitude share time, so she wouldn't keep taking all the gratitudes before anyone else had a chance to share. Wayne sat in the back only when required to attend and rolled his eyes until he fell asleep reliably at 3-5 minutes in. She was the most wide-eyed and credulous, while he saw and knew everything.

The secret of polarities, though, is that the two of them were closer together than anyone. She never stopped staring at the hard reality with her eyes wide open, taking it all in, and he loved that ugly reality anyway—saw the absurdity and showed up anyway, every single day, even when he was off work.

They were both there from the early days and so they dealt with some things together, just the two of them. Like when she was coordinating a wedding and the power went out because the old main electrical box caught on fire. He grabbed the fire extinguisher while she assured the guests that all was well, that this sometimes just happened, pretending she hadn't seen the flames in her perfectly curated cocktail attire.

They trusted each other deeply and had each other's backs.

Someone told me early on that the church building was part of Wayne's recovery practice—that he came there every day—working or not, that he knew every corner, that he knew this building before any of the rest of us were here—even before the building was Broad Street Ministry.

For the rest of us, it was about the mission. The building was beautiful and it was annoying, all flooding toilets and peeling paint and warm stained glass window light. It was there to function and it could have functioned better.

Wayne served the mission through the building.

He kept every one of the staff safe, materialized out of the floor if there was a problem, and never stood still. He had everything you needed and would tell you plainly, "If something is going sideways in this building don't follow me around a corner."

And he meant it. Lord knows what weapons he had squirreled away in that building.

Wayne was clean and sober, and incredibly smart—the kind of smart that can maintain a heroin habit in Graterford Penitentiary for over a decade. The kind of smart that could keep the whole chaos troop of us protected so thoroughly from the consequences of our decisions, that I don't to this day know how much peril I was ever actually in in that building. He didn't suffer fools, he didn't suffer meetings and he, more than any of the rest of us, knew what the do-gooder work in that building could cost us and what risks it had potential for.

We were kids, 20 somethings who didn't know the records, the proclivities, or the diagnoses of the Philadelphians that came through our doors. It was probably better that we not know. But Wayne knew then and he still knows.

We had endless meetings in that building, talking about our mission and how it worked out, talking about what we could do, what we should do, and what we couldn't do if we wanted to be theologically consistent, to be trauma informed, to actually offer radical hospitality.

We talked about every detail until foreheads were on the table and heads were in hands. If Wayne was there, he slept through it.

Those days are gone, and I don't know if conversations like that still happen with the same earnestness or around the same topics—much of me doubts they do. I'm trying to let go of seeing those meetings as the mark of a golden age. I'm trying not to mourn what was as lost like the smooth naiveté of my younger skin. It's possible that the building itself, before it was anything else, was Wayne's prayer for this great city—and in that capacity, he and it are still very much themselves.

And they are both still standing, still doing what they are meant to do.

Chapter 10: This World is Not My Home

The schooling I received for my early ministry was almost entirely unrelated to it. It was good schooling—don't get me wrong. I learned the mechanics of speaking in front of

groups, how to build a worship service attentive to theology and narrative, a couple of ancient languages, various understandings of the incarnation[25] and the way the Trinity is or behaves (and whether or not what it/they are is the same thing as what it/they do)—if you aren't familiar, these are the usual seminary topics. I assure you they were classically and *very* competently taught. I even learned how to baptize a baby doll.[26]

However, no one got into what you say when someone insists on doing a baptism as soon as possible because they understand their baby to be haunted, or how to preach loud enough without yelling to be heard over a screaming child, or a next-door neighbor blasting *Who Let the Dogs Out* on repeat.

No one told you that when you, as the only present staff person, bring the pitcher of water into the meeting, and you are a woman south of 30, no one will think you are in charge of the meeting, even if you explain to them that you are, in fact, allowed to start the proceedings.

Perhaps it is needless to say, but I also didn't learn de-escalation or how to gently and nonviolently remove a large man[27] from the building until after seminary.

I went to seminary in fall of 2008, which you may remember as "a good time to go ahead and not enter the workforce," so there were a good number of us students starting classes that fall and the church was in the slow steady decline it had already been working on for decades.

---

[25] Meaning God becoming flesh—a human being to be specific.

[26] These baby dolls were the kind from horror movies–they had old, patchy, scratchy synthetic hair, dirty off-whitish skin, and those eyes that open and close with you lean then up or down. If ever a baby doll needed a holy cleansing, these were prime candidates.

[27] With a partner! No hard or holy work should ever be undertaken alone.

In the world and the church, there was a lot of talk about job loss and scarcity of work and the need for change in systems from single family housing to church ordination standards.

Coming straight from college and being the daughter of two public school teachers, I didn't have much expectation for wealth, so I was mostly hoping upon hope for a career that would somehow eventually provide health insurance.[28] I assumed I would be my own secretary, manage my own office, book my own travel, type my own bulletin. Why not? I had done such tasks in all my prior pursuits and I was from a small church myself—I knew how that worked—plus, being an AOL-Instant-Messenger-era youth, I was a pretty quick typist.

The seminary I attended, though, had different dreams for me than I had for myself. As our bumper crop of students came into seminary, orientation started with the drumbeat of scarcity. "Be sure to be open to non-church jobs. Many of you won't be able to get church jobs. Even more of you will quit in the first five years." I took this seriously. As you will remember, 2008 was a grim time. As interested as I was in the way the Trinity is or behaves (and whether or not what it/they are is the same thing as what it/they do), I started looking out for classes that could help prepare me for something other than a "church" job. I asked questions about it and talked with peers and professors.

The institution looked at us with a collective confused face and continued its long legacy of excellence in areas outside of agility and student services. In my last year, perhaps even my

[28] A hardy thanks to Barrack Obama, who eventually supplied it, at least for a brief season, so I can sit here today and write this as a mostly healthy middle-aged lady, who is not accidentally a very depressed mother of four. Not to equate motherhood in general with despair, but rather to name that medical care has spared me both conditions separately, which is to say nothing about how each individual condition might have impacted the other.

last semester[29] in school, there was a hastily-thrown together course on ministry leadership meant to address logistical and leadership skills, at least indirectly, and I dove into the course wholeheartedly. It was taught by one of the best professors, but unfortunately the content was hamstrung by certain assumptions. The most notable to me was stated aloud, "Don't worry too much about the budgets or the money. There will be someone at your church who is an expert, who will handle that."

At the time, I took this at face value—this was a relief. These are not skills I already had and everything about the educational cultures I had encountered by that time had made me a bit frightened of learning new things—or even admitting I didn't already know them. Since then, in my life as an educator, I've come to recognize that learning is both a gift and also unavoidable if one wants to truly live one's life. I've also learned that part of learning is integrating.

When I started integrating the information that my schooling offered—namely that there would not be a church job for me, but I would not need practical skills related to finance, budget, or buildings because someone in my church would fill those functions—I was met with an impasse. It seemed these two realities cannot co-exist. I was left, instead, with various perspectives on the way the Trinity is or behaves (and whether or not what it/they are the same thing as what it/they do).

What I've learned since is that we as mainline church leaders, perhaps even we as mainline church people, have consistently, in ways subtle and not so subtle, been encouraged to side-

[29] Only a transcript would tell if it was my last semester, and the last time I ordered one the policy was to pay by a mailed paper check to be processed 13 days later, which was the next occasion the individual in charge of the transcripts would be in office. Given the time constraints of a life lived in the world as it is right now, I will not be taking time to engage in this laughably antiquated process. Alas, both you and I will have live in ignorance on this point.

step the complications of being human in a capitalist system.[30] We imagine we have been invited to prophesy against the empires of the Ninevehs of our day,[31] but never invited to imagine what it is to live within and alongside those empires. Which, in America, is what we do--so, this side-stepping doesn't function for our daily lives.

For years, I thought this oversight in my education was just the small irony, in turns amusing and tragic, of an august institution trying to respond to a particular historical moment. Now I've come to recognize that telling a generation of church leaders and pastors that ministry itself will disappear before the gulf between money management and the work of ministry could ever be bridged, has real consequences for the way our churches understand themselves.[32]

Is it overly dramatic to say this paints a picture of logistics and financial management so threatening as to be completely incompatible with the holy? It feels like this implies that a ledger and its use can sufficiently exorcize the Spirit of the Living God from the community.

I understand that money, like politics, is complicated.

I understand the church's desire to be above reproach.

A shorter list of valid reproaches for the church certainly wouldn't hurt my feelings. But the two choices I was offered in my education were to stay out of the money and the logistics, which is to say, the *labor* of ministry or to become the sneered at, and to be seen as those less

---

[30] "Mainline" churches are several of the "traditional" or longstanding Protestant denominations in the US–Methodist, Lutherans, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, American Baptists.

[31] This call to "prophecy" has shown up more like sneering in me and my communities than I would like to admit.

[32] Perhaps just a generation of mostly *Presbyterian* Church leaders, which is quite a bit smaller, I suppose, than a full generation of church leaders.

intellectual and more instrumental, the base and therefore unholy, those slick prosperity gospel, mega church types.[33]

The gift that my field training both during and after education offered was another way forward and maybe, if I am being fully fair, another polarity.

The church I journeyed with through seminary, which I served for two years, was small and had become a home church for several folks experiencing chronic illness, which deeply impacted the culture of the congregation. The stories of mutual care ranged from the funny to the poignant and everything in between—from a congregant who spent his youth in a band instructing a woman with ALS on how to inhale her medical marijuana to the full community walking with the pastor through the illness and death of a spouse, to the founding of an entire wellness center in the church space.

For my first hospital visit with that church, to an elderly congregant who was nearly deaf, my supervising pastor and I found her sleeping in her hospital bed with clearly painful chapped lips. On her tray was unused Vaseline in tiny one-use packets. My mentor grabbed a packet without hesitation and noticed me back away a half step. She looked across to me and said, "Being a pastor is different from being chaplain. I wouldn't do this if I was a chaplain—but when you are a pastor, this is part of it--HELEN, HONEY, IT'S PASTOR BETH. I'M GOING TO PUT SOME VASELINE ON YOUR LIPS."

[33] Let's be clear—there are classist and racist implications to this attitude. And for a set of denominations (that is, mainline churches) that think of themselves as so dang smart and above it all, that supremacy culture attitude sure ages poorly, when the mega church, prosperity gospel, instrumental models of church have kicked our ass in marketing, mobilizing people, popularly defining faith, and ultimately taking over enough political power to legislate women's bodies pretty entirely, not to mention the other knock-on effects.

And she opened the packet, spread the slippery goo on her finger and gently, like a parent, placed it over Helen's lips.

This, for me, was the beginning of the shift toward the labor of ministry—which took me so far I almost fell off the edge into believing ministry and labor were the same thing, which admittedly brings other problems.

After seminary, I used my last bit of money to buy a pants suit and a dressy leather work bag. I had a short and efficient haircut and understood my pastoral work to include uncomfortable footwear. In short, there was formality, and therefore class, implications to this new work, and after such good training, I intended to play the role well. I am nothing if not unconsciously bent, like a plant toward light, to unexamined external expectations.

What I encountered in my new neighborhood was a sort of reverse scenario to the "Bonjour" montage from "Beauty and the Beast." Perhaps I'm being sensitive, but I walked down the street in that ensemble and windows closed, faces turned away, children went the other direction. It is possible that someone derisively shouted "Goodbye" at me.

By week two, it became clear that in addition to being off-putting, my wardrobe was completely dysfunctional for the kind of work I was actually to do—which was all about the logistics of humans and space and care and bread and water and regularly explaining to someone that, unlike most churches, you actually *did not have* food or money--personal or institutional--to give beyond what was already on offer. It turns out that scarcity doesn't make for the same squeamish response to money and money talk that being well-heeled might.

We talked about money all the time. Grants and donations, costs per plate and art supply budgets, what we got for free and what was on sale, where the best cheap bulk anything was

and who had a connection—we talked about it because we knew what it could do and what we couldn't do without it. We knew exactly what each dollar broke down into, in terms of material necessities and human care items—your proverbial packets of Vaseline.

You might think that all this talk of money gave it power—but I found that, much like exposure does with deep family secrets, our money talk helped us to mitigate money's power over us, over the ministry we shared, over the people who came to be a part of it. Because here is what they didn't teach us in seminary—provisional power is real power, and money might be provisional, but it has real power.[34] Any attempt to be free of that power is to choose to separate yourself from those who are poor without option—which, it turns out, is a spiritually precarious thing to do. So, worship money or power or empire as the answer, like Nineveh did, or try to avoid it and judge its adherents like Jonah did, but either way the house wins and humanity loses. The only way to be with the poor is to share their concerns.

In those ministries, we never figured out a way to win the battle of the money, to have enough to do enough that all the gaps of this present empire were filled in with enoughness and the poor could once and for all join the rest of us in our provision.[35]

A mark of the three churches I served in Philly was their habit of unending staff meetings.[36] Part of the work was to keep grappling with the powers of the world—keep wrestling with them, keep talking it all through, keep reminding ourselves that we and the God we served believed the people of our places deserved better than what we could currently offer—what we could currently afford. Those staff meetings created a multifaceted social service delivery

[34] In a literal and spiritual way—powers and principalities and all.
[35] Maybe not for lack of trying, but also winning was never a goal in isolation.
[36] It sounds like I must have job hopped here, but you should know, the three churches were at the same time.

system for hundreds of people with no lines, built a mail system for 10,000 subscribers and registered many of them to vote. They created careful, kind, and trustworthy after school programming for vulnerable kids, they made a beautiful and loving space that refused to ever ban anyone for life, they created housing for queer teens, and hosted big raucous dinner parties for artists and politicians and pastors and folks experiencing homelessness together. But somewhere in there, at the church that founded the practice, the place where it all started, the staff meetings became too much. The faith convictions that underpinned them grew tiresome to those who didn't share them. We stopped talking about the money and the cost and suddenly they both had all the power. The artists slowly dissipated and the politicians that came around got asked for less and grinned in photos more—the people who made the place by their participation became objects of a transaction instead of the only possible guides and prophets for liberation.

I want to be clear. I don't think talking about money will save us.[37] But talking about money is a symptom of sharing life with those for whom money is a concern—and it is a symptom of sharing that concern.[38] In the end, perhaps my alma mater wasn't wrong. If the church would have someone *else* around to think about the money, the work, the logistics of it all for us pastors, then maybe there wouldn't be any pastoral ministry jobs to be done out there at all.

---

[37] Although, if you check out Acts 5, not talking about money—particularly one's personal and not shared money, did cause a couple, Ananias and Sapphira to be struck dead, so the counter factual is at least there.

[38] In capitalism, the concern of money is the concern of life and death. When I was working with very vulnerable people, the research showed that most of us are about 6 months and a few unlucky tragedies away from being homeless, without money and without social capital. When I was doing the work, we eulogized around 20 people a year in the city who died in their homelessness—and mortality rates of those experiencing homelessness have skyrocketed since then.

After all the beauty and holiness I witness in those churches that formed me, and all the exhaustion of tilting again and again at the giants of money and politics, so much of the work was given up willingly to make the meetings more efficient, to make the processes more professional, to move the people back into numerical categories out of three dimensions. This is not true in every space—but at the church where it all started, well. There is someone else there now to think about the money, the work, the logistics of all of it so the pastors don't have to—and I can certainly tell there are no longer ministry jobs to be done there now.

Chapter 11: Making Home Anyway

For a minute, home was the fig tree at 9th and Christian Street in Philadelphia—the one that Ross Gay writes about,[39] that does exist, nearby or thereabouts, or so metaphorically that it is also literal. Home in that place was (is?) a weatherworn community coming together for a meal convened by an interloper, someone who doesn't and has never belonged, but who came anyway, and made food anyway, because that is what we do to make home in a terrifying landscape.

[39] The poem is called "To the Fig Tree at 9th and Christian," and it is perennially worth your time. I have not reprinted it here as the key is to buy a copy of the poem, as part of the book Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitudes, and keep it handy for reading aloud to friends when just the right joyful solemnity falls. Bring it to dinner parties, use it to start discussions of community and resilience and hope and urban planning and recipe sharing and abundance. Read it when you are reminded of the MOVE bombing, the Katrina flood, the prison system, school shootings, and all the horror that makes you wonder how to be human. If I could include that book for free with a copy of this one, I would.

Sometimes I'm the interloper, sometimes I'm hungry for community, and sometimes it's all church in the middle of a wasteland. Sometimes it's definitely not. Sometimes it's hard to say.

My husband Andy re-built houses after Katrina and there was a woman—the first woman who came back to her block in the flooded out Lower 9th ward, on Reynes street—whose house they were rebuilding. As the house was being completed, volunteers rolling in and out with paint and hammers, she announced that she would be making Thanksgiving dinner—16 pies and 4 turkeys and 5 trays of mac and cheese and, and, and. She told everyone who worked and volunteered there for weeks and weeks—"Come to my house for Thanksgiving. I'll be here on Reynes Street."

One lonely house surrounded by washed away foundations and roads on a treeless landscape. Nothing but scrap for former blocks around. "I'll be here—come for Thanksgiving and there will be a feast."

As my husband tells it, he was scared for her. He was so young at the time, all hope and raw feelings for all the things that just do not work in New Orleans. And for this woman, this one thing had worked, and she had come home.

And she was going to cook for all her neighbors—the neighbors that he knew for sure had re-settled in Houston, Baton Rouge, Dallas, Atlanta, or somewhere else, never coming back from the diaspora.

He went to Thanksgiving, but he was hedging his bets, so he went early. First thing, he got his first thanksgiving plate there—far from home with all the other idealistic 20 somethings, hung over and sad and full of lonely meaning and foreboding grief.

He got his plate and he left quickly, not wanting to see what became of so much food. But he spent the rest of the day wondering—who would come? Who will come for Thanksgiving, and what will happen when we all have to come for leftovers day after day, a slowly souring monument to what there is still to be thankful for in one little house, in a neighborhood washed away?

The woman had survived. She had come back, walked across the wasteland, looked at the rubble, made endless phone calls, filed the paperwork, picked the materials, repeated her story to scores of volunteers—she bought a new oven and a new fridge and new dishes, new spoons and new forks, new bowls and new knives.

She rebuilt a piece of a world washed of possibility, claimed it for the living, and did what generations of women like her have done to live in the face of the wreckage. She made dinner anyway—even if she didn't belong and you don't belong and no one belongs because there is not yet a there there. Even if no one is around. Even in this city that kills its own people—"like most" as Ross Gay writes, you start with a meal. So she did and so we did and, Lord willing, so we will--over prepare and imagine a new dessert; open the wine we've been saving.

Dinner almost never comes from abundance—but from this stubborn need.

Our daily bread comes from bodies that have lived this desire--to give a good gift to whoever comes, to whoever makes the drive across the space where there are no more roads—whoever comes home to be with you in the nothingness you still love, whoever has faith enough in the city of Philadelphia to keep walking down Christian Street, to live and move and have their being there in a place that is beautiful and cruel and angry and

aggressively loving. Whoever knows the daytime bartender through the window or the block captain on their porch—whoever knows them and makes a life with them.

These bodies have built a home for us. Making a feast and standing out on the stoop to holler—"It is dinner time! It's time to come home. We are not destroyed. The food is ready. The sun is coming down and you can come home now. In all of the nothing there is still life to live and we've made a home to live it in. After all the storms, after all the empires of sackcloth and ashes, we are still here."

Chapter 12: A New Year

Falling in love after my first love, a fraught and star-crossed high school sweetheart that lasted into graduate school, was like being invited into my 20s again, without all the baggage of who I had been 5 years ago and all the rules I had gravely and dutifully accepted as a teen.

I actually said to this new man, my now husband, in response to his confession of affection, "I'm interested. But I just came out of something, so I can't give you any commitment or assurances past this—if you pursue, date, or hook-up with anyone else—that's fine. But we're done and I'm no longer interested. I will give you no corresponding commitment, because I need a little bit of breathing space. Each time we get together, it will be because I wanted to in the moment. If I don't want to, I just won't."

God love him, he just said, "Ok."[40]

The joy was built-in for that early season, not the least of which is because I declared it essential. If I didn't want to, I just wouldn't. We went on dates and explored the city. We got burgers at dive bars and walked to the best happy hours and became a part of the city. Through this rhythm, it was decided that New Year's Eve would be a fancy date night. The kind we could not afford. The kind you wore something new for. The kind that meant something pretty serious, when both parties were in graduate school training to be professionally values-driven broke people.

In those days, I scoured the Target clearance racks religiously, knowing the best pieces were hanging in the back by one sleeve, completely invisible to the untrained eye. In one such expedition, I found a polyester crepe number that cost less than the gray tights I got to go with it. It was short, had lace trim, and was so cheap the rubbery elastic was sewed directly to the inside of fabric with no lining next to the skin.

It was like wearing rubber bands under your clothes, squeezing and abrading your softest parts.

I looked awesome in it.

The lace pattern matched my new post-breakup underwear. The silhouette maximized the truth that between the long season of break-up grief and the flexibility a full time school schedule allowed for the gym, I was in the best shape of my life.

[40] His recollection of this is that he stopped listening after "I'm interested." It took me some time to realize that though he is a good listener, almost no one I've ever met is listening as closely as I am. Most people find the way I listen creepy.

I felt as fancy and put together as one possibly could in a dress that cost five dollars and fifty cents. I felt grown and I would be taking my $15 bottle of white wine to the nicest BYOB in the neighborhood with my worldly and expansive and cultured new boyfriend—who knew how to say words like fricassee and foie gras, because his dad was a doctor, and for one night we would no longer be the people who only read the menu hungrily, outside the doors, in the bright light of day, on our 45 minute walk to the discount produce stand.[41]

This time we would read it in low candlelight at an 8:30 pm reservation, like the heartburn virgins we were in our 20s.[42]

And I'll be honest, the ontological shift from outside to inside menu reader was profound.

We had a wonderful time—we ate and laughed and talked about all the pieces of our lives that came up, glowing in response to the other's understanding. It was just the right amount of wine and secrets—of too much food and uncomfortable footwear, to be present to it all and to still sit outside it, looking in, delighted at the moment.

And when we paid and left, layering up and putting on gloves, laughing and thinking, perhaps in small and secret ways, about the rest of the evening, I had a sense of arrival, like maybe I could be possible as a grown woman, with a will and a volition I could act on. Like I might even be allowed to be here now, when here and now was nothing I'd permitted myself before.

---

[41] OK Produce in Reading Terminal Market. Best prices in town. You should probably eat the raspberries the same day you buy them. But truly! So cheap!

[42] Well he was. As you might have guessed, I'm the kind of anxiety marvel that started getting heartburn in my teens.

As we were walking and laughing, back to the gentrification new construction with the roof deck[43] the ministry residency was renting for him at the time, we saw Keith and Ms. Sandra outside on their stoop, drinking and talking.

Keith and Ms. Sandra were the Mayor and First Lady of the neighborhood. This was their block and had been, and any kindness they showed to the roof deck dwellers was a grace beyond what was to be expected—but they were gracious people.

They had always welcomed us and we knew that receiving that welcome was a small rejoinder for what our presence cost the neighborhood, brief as it was always going to be. Plus, Keith was fun as hell and Ms. Sandra knew all the neighborhood gossip.

The thing that was great about Philly—that is great about a lot of big cities, is that 11pm on New Year's Eve, people are outside and the block is buzzing with connection. Keith called out to us—Ms. Sandra made black-eyed peas and fried chicken and he had a pitcher of appletinis, could we come and toast the New Year? We were far enough away but walking fast enough, that I could only look at this man—who I really, really liked, but also knew and didn't know, and say, "This is important, and we should do this. Also if I eat and drink anything more, I'm going to barf—just so you know, if we do this that is where the evening is headed."

He looked me in the eyes—first a question, then a nod. He knew I meant it.

Ok then, let's do this.

[43] You know the row houses I mean? All square angles and modular construction, with roof decks on top and no insulation inside? They are always next to neighbors whose houses were built in a different style, at a different time, and of different materials. Like they were dropped in from an Ikea out in space, with no regard for where they might be landing.

Keith and Ms. Sandra were great—funny and hospitable, inviting us right into a legacy they had kept up on this block since we were playing little league in the suburbs. Good luck for the New Year, black eyed peas and fried chicken. Appletinis, because why wouldn't you?

A new layer of possible adulthood life unfolded and enveloped us.

Again it was just enough to sit in and soak up the goodness of the moment, and to look in on it from the outside and see how magical it was. We were falling in love, and more than that, we—the two of us together—were welcomed into neighborhood love and community love. The gentrification roof deck wasn't mine—I didn't live in that house, but we, together, were neighbors. We were maybe just a little bit watching each other play house.

As the evening wound down and midnight approached, I gently reminded this man of my promise.

The hour grows near and we should head home. So we did, with smiles and laughter and no small bit of drunken silliness. I got up the stairs and into the little bathroom in my precarious shoes like the grown-ass woman I was, and assumed appropriate and responsible formation for adult vomiting.

This man, this new love of mine, was kind if not overly cuddly, as he helped me and my polyester dress into his bed, and climbed over top of me, to sleep on the wall side, like a gentleman.

I was nauseous and inarticulate, but did, as I learned later I often do, when sleeping drunk, awaken with a start around 3:30am.

I was stuck in the rubber band dress and it was digging into my belly sharply. I was bound up in tights and suddenly desperate, a little shaky, both hot in the tights and cold at the shoulders.

What the hell was going on!?

Without a thought, I pulled the whole godforsaken garment up and over my shoulders, revealing a red ring around my waist and the high-rise tights, which I ripped off without regard for their $10 value (a true investment in that season).

Relieved, I took a deep breath and looked down at my 25-year-old body, almost flawless in the low light, in my lacey break-up underwear. I thought—this is ok. You're going to be ok.

Maybe you barfed on fancy date night, but it was for a good cause.

This is good underwear, you have a great ass, and this man took the wall side for you. And he needs you.

He doesn't even have a comforter.

Chapter 13: Philadelphia Prophets

"I don't know what happened, I just walked out of my shoes"—she would say with a smile in her sweet and high voice. "I just walked right out of them."

She would tilt her head and look at her feet, and like it was with so many folks in that place, at that time, I couldn't tell if she was consciously deploying the effect of her toeless feet on our sympathy, or if it was just a fact, like any other. She just walked right out of them.

You had to admire the will to walk out, when there wasn't any other place to go, when the shoes that she had, in truth, placed in a public trash can just around the corner, were lost to her.

A fleece[44] was thrown down—no turning back. She would stand straight on holy ground[45] until another pair was provided.

And they always were. We knew, of course, that she was throwing them away, but even so, even if she could bear her shoelessness, we could not. We might feign frustration or have her wait to be called like everybody else, but usually we would just sneak her a pair down the back stairway.

Ultimately, not so secretly, we all loved to sneak around our own rules. There were, of course, reasons not to break the rules. But the pay for not getting paid enough is that no one can really tell you that you can't give away the shoes.

---

[44] One of the judges in the Hebrew Scriptures, Gideon, devised a way to test God. He told God he would leave out a wool fleece overnight and in the morning, if it was wet, while the ground around it was dry, he would know God was calling him. However, the next morning, when it was so, he grew concerned that could have happened naturally. So he told God he would leave it out again, this time, if it was dry and the ground around it was wet, he would assume God was calling. In Judeo-Christian and then Western tradition, "throwing down a fleece" is often understood as trying to force God to speak. Judges 6:36-40.

[45] In the Hebrew Scriptures, various figures often acknowledge, or are asked to acknowledge holy ground by taking off their shoes. Nothing confers holiness, after all, like touching something with one's bare feet.

Sometimes when she came in, she was called Marguerite and sometimes she called herself "Beautiful, beautiful Aisha."

"My name is Beautiful. Beautiful, beautiful Aisha."

We found out later she had a daughter named Aisha.

She was a survivor—kind and sometimes silly, but not afraid to make demands. She wanted clothes each visit, even if hers were still clean and new from however she got them last time.

Once she got so agitated, she tore her clothes off in the stairwell—She! Needed! New! Clothes!

I remember being in awe of her—willing to call the bluff of this absurd community, pulling us to the logical conclusion of our commitments—to what must be the very edge of our tolerance for chaos.

I'll confess my edge was growing close,[46] but the rest of the staff? They were almost hungry for it. A whole crew sharing the secret of what it was to peer off the threshold of the world into the void.

Tohu wa-bohu.[47]

[46] I've always been more efficient than holy, something I hide whenever possible.
[47] A transliteration of the Hebrew from the book of Genesis, often translated, "formless and void" and referring to what was present before God ordered the world in the creation story in Genesis 1.

The bleeding edge between creativity and chaos. I forget now which one of us restored the order of day and night and land and sea, but she stayed and ate lunch and left clothed that day.

She was almost always there, but not usually with anyone else. She, like so many of the guests, carried chaos as her companion.

Not like the staff who could come to the threshold and peer over, wondering at the chaos out past the edge, she carried chaos with her like a cloud or a swarm of gnats. I learned later that it was normal for some to carry chaos like a perpetual cold chill, when they would wear huge puffy coats in the summer.

Others brought it in bags of trash and luggage, or even in a partner you could tell from yards away was bad news. One woman had it in a jangling mass of keys she wore around her neck.

As staff, we had a sense the chaos threshold was advancing, hovering closer, leaning in. Talking with those outside the community, there was often a tendency to assume that chaos was receding—that we as a society were somehow colonizing it with order.[48]

[48] The most sympathetic to the cause often acted as if we, in our work with that particular population, were furthering the march of order, which always served to make me feel desperately lonely and misunderstood, deeply separate from others and from my former self. I preferred those who didn't care about our work, who thought their technological or banking or government jobs were doing all that needed to be done, were causes for certain hope without a need for examination or explanation. At least then the lonely feeling of misunderstanding felt like welcome (self-righteous?) space from such assumptions.

Of course, I too had thought that way. We had imagined chaos wasn't catching—it was someone else's personal problem, soon to be eradicated. What we missed is easy to miss if you aren't in a place to share life with those who share life with chaos.

But as staff, we had the chance to know the chaos without needing to or being able to fix it. The way to recognize the rhythms of chaos is by sharing life with it, day in and day out—to stop imagining there is a threshold you might advance.

At first it feels contagious, but chaos isn't shared by the infected, it is born in the bodies and the lives of those with eyes to see. They are like Hebrew prophets, telling us what is already true and what is to come, bodies bound to the reality the rest of us imagine we can step into and out of at will.

These are the bodies left behind as the rest of us run toward Babylon from the burning of the city; these are the ones who have, in hope, bought useless land, those who marry prostitutes and offer performance art depictions of the wrath to come, who tear their clothes off in the stairwell and are known by many names.[49]

What you miss, and what I missed before and now again, when you live your life a comfortable distance from the prophets, is not just the burning, holy truth proclaimed across

[49] This is a series of references to prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and then at Broad Street Ministry—Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, Marguerite. They are leaders who give themselves up to holy performance art, showing in their lives and in their bodies the consequences of what God has warned against. They are not themselves the guilty, but they present their pain to the people, so the people might see what God is trying to say.

a whole life—but the peculiar grief of watching the prophets of our time die alone, unheeded and unknown, faithful to the last.[50]

You can only see the prophets if you are there at the threshold, watching with the watchers. Just on this side of chaos, your back to the ordered world of choices we call home, leaving it alone in the literal—clean, well-shod, and like the god of progress we sometimes claim and celebrate in the 21st century, deafeningly silent.

Chapter 14: Exile

We had to leave.

The whole city started to feel too bespoke.

Andy and I owned a tiny row house a mile from the best restaurant district in the city, a mile from the open-air heroin markets, a mile from the elevated train, 400 steps from my work, 12 minutes from IKEA, 10 minutes from Target, 6 walking minutes from the CSA farm, and 200 steps from our local bar, where they served a great burger, vegan food, and whatever beer they knew you would like.

Our internet service provider was a neighborhood guy named Mark who put the antenna on our house using a climbing harness and wearing socks with Birkenstocks. We paid him in checks because he didn't like to work with corporate credit cards and when you called

[50] For followers of Jesus, it is hard to imagine this sort of bearing witness is not the point—maybe even the whole point, of building one's life around a man who was killed by the government, abandoned by his friends, alone in a garbage dump.

customer service to report an outage he would answer his cell phone in harness from the tower, "I'm up here now! Should be back up in about an hour!"

Andy took the El into work in Center City and connected with artists and businesspeople and social service leaders and government officials. He did full contact ministry that afforded him in turn the opportunity to yell indignantly at cops and other authorities, mourn with the vulnerable, and drink sparkling rose at the Ritz for happy hour on someone else's dime. I worked with my dearest friend to build a shared life for our neighborhood out of an old church building, a staple gun, and the good will of friends and strangers. We made our living wages and not much more.

Unbeknownst to us upon adoption, our three-legged rescue pit bull Melody was a local Instagram celebrity via her shelter's "Buy a Dog a Valentine" Campaign. She was regularly greeted by strangers on the street by name,

"Melody! My Valentine!"

The night we got married, when Andy ran out of the after party in Center City to get a drunk cheeseburger, he immediately ran into a woman he knew well through work, who was panhandling between the hotel and the burger joint. They talked for a long time about marriage and love and joy.

The next time she saw him at work she said, "I saw you, Pastor Andy! You were drunk!" and she laughed and laughed.

In terms of drinking, our home brewery was three blocks up the street, with the local small batch distillery in their parking lot, and the wine store that we still pilgrimage to was just over the bridge in New Jersey.

You could get kombucha on draft and an excellent sandwich at the bar around the corner from the brewery.

In Philly, I knew the walking route from anywhere to anywhere, Washington Avenue to Lehigh Avenue, from the Delaware River to Broad Street (even all the way to the river south of Spring Garden Street). I could navigate the Reading Terminal Market on Saturday and get from Suburban Station to the Patco trains at Market East entirely underground. I knew the good thrift stores, the best happy hours, and which brunch places had rats.

Andy knew how to find an open table serving a good sandwich within four blocks of anywhere we were at any hour of the day or night, which side of City Hall held the prayer for the city penned by William Penn, and the story behind every mural in Center City.

We even knew the best shitty Irish bar to go to for great Italian food, if you knew to ask for it. The Ross Gay Poem "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian"? Andy used to live right near there and I'd drive by the tree every time I went to visit, avoiding the three to five cars double-parked with their hazards on Christian Street.

In Philly, everybody was mad and everybody was a Democrat—a whole city ready to emerge from their lives at a moment's notice to throw rocks at Nazis. A whole city of scraping by, living well, eating cold cuts, and embracing irony. It was like God made it for us.

In the end, we had to go. But while we were there, it was a golden age.

And we knew it.

Interlude: Where Nothing Happens

In the eyes of God, or the satellite infrastructure of privatized corporations, I found myself—a small blue arrow moving slowly on a wavy blue track, right next to an expanse of lighter blue. I had flown to San Diego early, looking for someplace holy, and had immediately anchored myself to the earth in a rented Hyundai with a spoiler. Now I was a blue digital arrow, moving up the screen, making good time in the digital realm.

In the airport chaos--both on the country's mountain spine and then even in San Diego, the antiquated dream to drive up the coast and find the holy happening somewhere out there had seemed reasonable—but now all the blues were blending into more and more anonymous digital pixels.

I'd never done the trip before, and I hoped the western sky and the storied water would shine some true insight into why and where I was in life—a bit of transcendent California sunshine on my Paris of Appalachia pale skin. The frenetic pace of my twenties was giving way, and I was chafing at the nothingness that had been so far. I got in a plane to find God in a new frame, the holy outside of church and in between the Sans (Diego and Francisco)—in the home of spirituality washed clean of religion.

It turns out, a Hyundai with a spoiler is sort of the haloed patron saint of the city of Angels--very Fast and the Furious—and that far into the drive I was content with my uncharacteristic choices. It felt like a good spiritual stretch to imagine God anywhere near these low-riding cars, with their noise and smog, until I returned to the coast again. Then the land felt like the chapel of a cheaper and blonder divine cousin—so many beaches! This was truly an all-American version of the holy, untroubled and surface level, no one dying here—no one even old. On this backdrop my whole Christian story seemed ill-fitting—the crucifixion thing is such a drag and all this resurrection shit is sort of base—even carnal—why not just live in the timelessness of sunny youth?

If such imaginative realms were a religious continuum, the coast north of LA fell a bit more to the new-build-McMansion-aesthetic-Mormon side of the Christian imagination than to the old-world-Catholic-cathedral side, even stretched as it was between the two holy Sans.

I kept driving. There was no space for me and my dying God there.

From there the sainted Hyundai looked strangely at home crawling like an ant amongst the redwoods, and I was relieved to be off the many-lane highways in favor of the cool, sage sea air. I found myself in a lonely, storied place--where one road follows the coast, keeping a lonelier light blue expanse within feet of you for several hundred miles.

Besides being within the belly of the holy Hyundai, I both did and did not know where I was. I had been wandering through undifferentiated airport landscapes all morning, but undifferentiated beauty for miles didn't feel more orienting. I was on the edge of something, but it turns out the edge can go on for almost ever—and I was longing for something more centered. Perhaps more to the point, I was longing to be brought to the surface, vomited back in solid ground.

Where was I?

I could see my dot moving along the map over pink California by flat blue water, but in three dimensions, it was almost a simulacrum of storied California coast.

Is this what God sees? Or is this just a patched together Joan Didion novel, soothing me like an entire chorus of baby-boomer parents, incepting me with their disappointed dreams?

"Come, sleep here in California among your noble living ancestors, as the world melts and the wells dry—don't try to fight it."

I could see the appeal—running away, trying psychedelics, finding an ageless, ethereal god and an ant-sized life among the impossibly tall trees, all while wearing unimaginably expensive flowy linen clothing. But the sun was going down, the air was growing cooler, and I was reminded that those young and barefoot war protesters eventually grew hungry and tired, abandoned their big ideas, brought their private, subjective, and spiritual god and their secretly aging bodies back into the bare sanctuaries of their hometowns—and voted for Reagan twice.

I needed to eat something.

The sun was getting low and not knowing the winding landscape, I slowed considerably, giving up on the holy and looking for movement anywhere that might indicate a roadside stop. Around a bend there was a tiny flash of placefulness set back in the pines. I found myself at

The Henry Miller Memorial Library:

BOOKS MUSIC ART

OPEN

The ground was covered with pine needles and brown, a low-slung building fronted by a large wood patio stretched out to greet me. Leading up to and around it was a winding pathway of abstract sculptures and creations. To the right of the porch there was a food truck of some kind, and by the side of the building, three picnic tables, one of which had a vinyl cheerily patterned tablecloth on it. I was encouraged by the brightness of the tablecloth—it wasn't totally clear that the food truck was operational, but that tablecloth was promisingly unfaded. I parked the Hyundai and snaked up the path, ignoring the art, and saw, as I got closer to the food truck, that it was indeed defunct—the paint was quite faded, and it looked like there was old furniture inside. I could smell something cooking somewhere, though.

There wasn't a line, and all the other people present—about five of them, were emphatically solitary, reading or sitting or even walking, looking down or in their books, as if their realm could not see or hear mine. They seemed as rooted in this pine cathedral as the earth itself, while I had floated in and just as soon would float away. They defied any attempt at connection—seeing through me and inviting me to sink into my own thoughts, as I searched

hopefully for eye contact. They did not speak, and every sound I made was muffled by pine needles and the eerie stillness of the place.

A man walked out from somewhere along the side of the building, looking straight ahead and when I saw his movement I noticed a chalkboard sitting in the shade of the flat roof's overhang. It read:

Chicken
Beef
Chorizo
3 for $12

The man didn't seem related to the chalkboard, but he looked at me with curiosity, as if I had walked into his thoughts uninvited.

"You want chicken or chorizo? We're out of beef. Cash only."

"3 chicken, please," I responded, relieved to hear a liturgy I knew and glad that I had remembered to get cash at the airport.

"We'll bring 'em around," he nodded, and disappeared.

Feeling more anchored, I walked the path back toward to road, noticing the art and getting some space from the solitary people seated on the porch—feeling as if, at the current 4:30pm, my presence might disrupt their private morning coffee.

There was a bench along the path, where I could still see the porch, but I could avoid the stubborn solitude of the people who were of this place. My haloed Hyundai, my too-bright trail runners, my too-black running tights, my computer glow pale skin—it was all from another place, and perhaps not even properly from there. This place made me feel

translucent and temporary—global but not local. The interloper experience wasn't unappealing, but it wasn't the sort of feeling one wanted to perform for a group of local strangers either.

I sat on the bench, and raised my eyes to realize I was looking at a cross made of old cathode ray tube monitors, about 10 feet tall. They were old green screen computers stacked on a bespoke rebar frame, similar to the steel cross structures I'd seen on hillsides in the Bible belt. Strapped to the cross was a sharp and swirling metal sculpture Christ figure. I have sometimes wondered about all the places Jesus ends up dying, and what he might have to say about it. But here he was again, a mass of lithe silver wire, dying on the technology of the late 80s—held down even in this place.

In terms of places to die abandoned in a strange new way, I suppose Big Sur wasn't the worst. It occurred to me, though, that if I really was looking for God here—or looking to be seen by God—the one being who might share that in common with me was a shimmering metallic wire mass spliced to a bunch of defunct computers. Perhaps neither of us were getting what we hoped for today—perhaps this was still the dying part of the story.

I let my eyes glaze a bit and sunk into the bench. Just then, a short round woman in an apron approached, cradling a curving paper plate of foil-wrapped tacos in one hand, and three small plastic shot glasses of sauce in the other. I moved to get up and meet her, but she sat down on the bench and faced me. She held the tacos and locked eyes with me in a way that caught me off guard. I don't know what I expected her to sound like in that silent place—she seemed gentle and serious, and something about her expression made me think English might not be her first language.

She handed me the plate and said, quietly, "Chicken Tacos. Eat them with all three sauces. It is a long trip back."

She held the plate as I held it, for just a beat longer than I expected, and I caught our reflections in the cross of computer screens, a small vignette of a conversation happening over and over in each monitor, just partially blocked by metal Jesus, breathing his last.

She slipped the sauce cups onto the bench beside me, nodded, accepted my folded bills without counting them, and slipped away. I carefully portioned the sauces to each taco and savored the meal. The red sauce was blood bright and tomato spicy with a hint of rosemary piney-ness that surprised me. The brown sauce was rich, smooth umami and the green sauce was herbaceous, tart tomatillo and briny, cleansing the palate at the end of each bite. Here in this place where there were no other options, the one meal available was specific and transcendent. The flavors were complex, full of simple tastes I knew and combinations I'd never encountered before.

The shadows were growing longer and a thick contentment enveloped me as I watched the blank crucifix televisions and their reflections grow dim.

I sat there in silence for a long time, rooted by my meal, and finally got up to do a lap through the little bookstore in the building before heading out. It was charming and effortless, full of strange titles, postcards, art prints, and enigmatic local Big Sur based flyers soliciting local poets and offering Reiki instruction. As I turned to the door, I was struck by a poster just next to it. On it was a woman, seated in a chair amidst navy clouds and green trees, and it read, The Henry Miller Library: Where Nothing Happens.

I wondered about what it means to hold and convene all the places where nothing happens—the dinner before the death, the breakfast before the match, the drive before the

visit, the peace before the war, the silence before the words, the loneliness before the love, the death before the life. This convening is holy, even pastoral work. For a moment I was held there in my own nothingness.

Then, well-fed and holding nothing, my Hyundai and I pulled out into the dark and kept going on our way.

**

On the flight home, I wondered which Jesus got to die, rejected and alone in Big Sur, with the revolution being televised blankly behind him. I wondered what he thought about his own salvific death for all humanity, convening solitary strangers in this place as a part of the nothing that happens there. Jesus can die almost anywhere—and maybe that's the purest model of ministry there is. The holy I was looking for was somewhere out beyond the mundane churches and awkward human bodies and familiar people that I knew. But I'm afraid there is no death outside these bodies—and, as a result, there is no life either. Perhaps my work is to consent to die among the people I am called to—or to admit that I am already doing so. Maybe there is real dying to be done in the nothingness and the in between, real meals to convene and real bright colored vinyl table cloths to shake and settle again. Perhaps there isn't anything magical and transcendent in the woowoo of California that isn't already in the chapels of Appalachia. Maybe the holy is in the nothingness—and maybe it's time to go see where Jesus and I are dying at home.

Part 3: Life Together

Chapter 15: Moving On

Like I said before, we had to leave.

If you asked me at the time what my home culture was, I would have described it as something like, anxious-I-95-corridor-middle-class-with-a-bit-of-southern-Presbyterian-style-emotional-stunting.

Philadelphia had begun the healing of my indirect southern formation. I learned to hold my shoulders square and claim my sidewalk space, to give as good as I got as a pedestrian, to tell people no. Everything was emotionally raw in that season, so I did a lot of crying (in front of rooms at lecterns or pulpits or communion tables but also alone), occasional bathrobe scotch sipping, and some not infrequent making and enforcing community rules in ways both blunt and deft.

In short, the fire of the season burned up the southern reserve I had gained in childhood that never quite fit right. This was a fire I hadn't known to hope for until it came, and I imagined it burning forever as I rose like a phoenix again and again, more free and whole with every resurrection.

But that isn't how it went. My experience of faith is that at times, a moment of clarity will emerge that does not follow logically. Or, perhaps more true, we people of faith sometimes experience reality differently—both in the "counter-cultural" way and in the "hearing

voices" way. I, like many prophets in my tradition, was selected for what some might call exile[51] arbitrarily with no consideration for my personality, interests, or my fit to the place to which I would go—or at least is seemed this way.

Of course, in the modern world, one's work makes location choices rather than one's culture doing so, so maybe one can't finally say if God or society is to blame for this exile. Although maybe that was true for Jonah too. For him, the work was in Nineveh. For me, work was still stuck in the church.

Even more, work in the church was about to be in Pittsburgh, the Paris of Appalachia, people told me.

Chapter 16: Far From Home

I had been looking for jobs for Andy, as his season came to an end at the avant-garde, artsy, progressive, chaotic church of our 20s (a mere few years before that church itself would come to an end). I had found something in Pittsburgh—which I knew was far away, but hadn't ever needed to ask how far.

As it turned out, he wasn't interested in the position, which made me realize quickly that I was.

[51] Maybe others would call it a mission? A task? A divine appointment. Jonah and I know these things often amount to the same thing.

At the time my resume reflected that I had "gathered literally tens of people" to "form a Presbyterian faith community" among a neighborhood of rough-and-tumble Philadelphia Irish Catholics. Which is to say, it reflected that I was a very busy, very enthusiastic nutbar, with niche experience, who was pretty lucky to be able to have health insurance to her name.

I figured if I was remotely interested in the position, I should apply just to see if anyone would ever talk to me about a real job.

This new organization didn't even acknowledge receipt of my materials. For months. I wrote them back to ask about that in a rather direct way, in hopes that they would let me know I was no longer under consideration for a job in a city I didn't want to move to. They responded without apology, but with a request for a phone interview.[52]

With equal parts surprise and duty, I accepted, the echoes of every career counselor I'd ever had echoing in my ears, "It is always good to get interview practice." Never mind that we were traveling to be with my family at the time of the interview. Never mind that the only hotel available was a Clarion advertising an indoor pool with neon lights in the photo. Never mind that Melody the dog would be traveling with us, with nowhere else to go for the interview.

I was not invested in impressing these folks. I was not interested in moving. I was not concerned about the mustard-yellow-polyester-comforter-cheap-hotel zoom background.

[52]I've now learned that the "without apology" is industry standard in the job search process. The industry here being "all of capitalism."

I didn't tell them that, due to a variety of familial complications, my mother sat on the floor of the room during the interview, holding the dog to prevent her from barking or whining and allowing me to attend to the hiring committee conversation.

Afterward mom said excitedly, "Karen! They sound really great! Are you excited?" and I rolled my eyes, as I do too often to my poor, wise, unfailingly encouraging mother, and said dismissively, as if I had so much certainty about the world and my future career, "I'm not planning on getting or taking this job, mom. It's just good to practice. I'm plenty happy where I am." She nodded seriously, "Oh. Ok. I understand."

Ever open to my definite pronouncements, my mother.

I was much more concerned that she had sat on the floor of the hotel, where the night before I had removed Melody and placed her with me, to sleep on top of the bed clothes, as I felt the carpet might give her fleas and found the bedclothes questionable. Indeed, as we walked down the musty hallway, past the neon pool with its club music still audible in the midday dust-filled sunbeams, the dog, a perfectly trained and imminently responsible three-legged pit bull rescue, sniffed the carpet aggressively, crouched, and peed. Satisfied, she put her nose back in the air and continued to walk, as my mother and I looked at each other.

Despite the dismissiveness with which I spoke to my mother and the judgyness with which I plucked my formerly homeless street pit bull off the suspect hotel room carpet, I have a deep moral conviction that one must clean up after one's dog. Melody had never done this before—in fact she would wake both us and the neighbors to avoid peeing inside.

Unless of course she found the scent of another dog's urine.

At which point she would pee right on top of that scent without compunction.

You could see the look on her expressive, almond-eyed, square face—which most clearly communicated, "I have handled that. You're welcome. Let's go."

My mother and I looked at each other. My mother, who lives by the ethic that the only thing more important than rules is doing the kindest possible thing, who serves as my conscience and always has, shrugged her shoulders. "It can't be any worse than it was, right?"

We kept walking off to a family gathering and I promptly forgot about the interview. I had liked the hiring team, but I had been honest with them about my niche experience. I doubted they would follow up.

Soon after, though, I heard from the folks at Pittsburgh Seminary that they wanted me to come out for an interview. I delayed and turned the idea over in my mind. I looked at my schedule, unwilling to miss work engagements for an interview that I knew wouldn't lead to something I could even consider. I told them I didn't have time to drive out. They told me they would fly me out—back and forth in one day!—and my guilt spiked. It seemed wrong to lead them on.[53] But again, the voice on my shoulder reminded me that one should always practice interviewing when one had the chance.

So I went.

Reader, I wore a terry cloth dress I bought at a thrift store, seeking to be comfortable on the plane, and perhaps a bit because I didn't really own professional clothes. I had also learned my lesson about the dangers of the Target clearance rack. I reasoned that this was not the job for me anyway.

[53] Once purity culture gets in your head, it nags you for the rest of your life.

Here I offer an open secret: the woman who organized my visit gave me a guest room on campus for the day. With a fruit and snack and cookie and chip tray. With several drink options. She included a basket with toothpaste and toothbrush and tiny travel-size deodorant in case of flop sweat. At 50 minutes after every hour, she arrived at the door of whatever meeting I was in, let my interlocutor know the meeting was over, and brought me to my guest room for a 10-minute break.

The secret is this: I didn't come to PTS because they were good at hospitality—their hospitality helped me to believe the truth of everything else they named. Their hospitality made work in an institution plausible to me. It served to verify their mission. Also, having someone anticipate a nervous flop sweat episode and prepare for it as if it was just another part of my professional portfolio really helped me believe that this was a place I could be a professional.

The secret secret? That kind of hospitality was the vision of one person. When that person is supported, a culture is formed. For me, that one person's work made the rest of the claims of PTS credible and so they have been for many years.

However, this revelation of possibility was mostly horrible news, and in between deodorant swipes and taking one bite of every available cookie on the tray, I called Andy and let him know I had some concerns. Chiefly among those concerns was that I might want this job and I might want to work with these people and what the hell would we do then?

Andy's ability to say yes—to see something and be brave enough to face it, has kept me from the belly of many fish. Left to my own devices, I prefer not to venture beyond Tarshish if I can avoid it. But he is all, "Yea, I'd move!" or "Maybe we should open a

restaurant." or "What if next year we did Mongolia instead of a road trip to the Finger Lakes?"

The hiring manager for my position was honest and kind and wise—willing to answer so many questions, walk with me through my ambivalence, and allow me to imagine that I could actually work for someone again. You know, as long as they were smart, reasonable, high capacity, honest, clear, mission-driven, and incredibly productive. Which she was (and is). When she called to offer me the position after my visit, she suggested I come out again—bring my husband to see the city, imagine if we could live there.

She assured me the city was, "very livable, though you should know it gets gray a lot."

This was the season of the 2016 election, and we professional church folks were dealing with some well-earned self-loathing. We were part of a particularly progressive phalanx of Presbyterian churches. As a result, we had the privilege of representing an institution that we felt ambivalent about while being in deep and daily proximity with those its rising thread of Christian Nationalism threatened most. We earned their trust and supported them, knowing that our mother institution often failed to warrant their trust.[54]

Leaning more into church—through broader church leadership and centralized pastor training, at an institution with a well-known anti-gay faculty member (since departed), in a city with fewer People of Color and more churches per capita made a move to Pittsburgh feel like a move away from the formation that I was seeking.

[54] You know, Queer folks, poor folks, People of Color, those experiencing homelessness, workers, humans needing healthcare, women, trans people, the incarcerated and their families, pacifists, DREAMers, immigrants, those with college debt or no feasible path to college, public school students, public school teachers, etc.

Nevertheless, we went to visit the place, and settled into the campus guest room, with two single beds, one cathode ray tube television, and the sort of deeply neat housekeeping that enables Christian establishments to keep the same commercial, twin bed, polyester comforters 20+ years after they have made aesthetic sense. They didn't look at all worn. I almost wondered if there was still a place to purchase such a thing new.

"I guess we'll be Lucy and Ricky-ing it up in the twin beds," Andy said, as he creaked into the aged commercial box spring on the first bed. I had a flash vision of us long-distance hand-holding between the beds staring at the old TV in the dark.

"You really would be ok moving here? You wouldn't resent me for uprooting our lives or feel like we always do what I want to do and you never get a turn and I always take us to weird backwaters where we have no friends?" I asked.

He cocked his head and eyed me patiently, as if willing, but tired of repeating himself, "I don't feel that way. We need to leave Philadelphia. I like it here. And if we do move here, we won't stop sleeping in the same bed. We aren't going to live in this room."

Somewhat placated, I dug out my toothbrush and went to brush my teeth.

We had a full agenda—meeting multiple potential friends and colleagues and hoping to look at a few houses in the nearby neighborhoods. I had done some research and was imagining what might be possible in a slightly more affordable city. Thanks to a fellowship stipend and a subsidized loan program in Philly, we had bought our house two years prior, with two bedrooms, one bath, and one big open living, dining, and kitchen space on the first floor (big here being a relative term). What might it mean to buy a house with two bathrooms?!

Multiple folks from the search committee hosted us for meals—we had dinner from a restaurant featuring Native American food in the college district, and another dinner was homemade with vegetables from the farm, creative flavors, and a still-warm brownie dessert. I was not accustomed to friends who cooked and found myself enveloped in the simple comfort of it. We had compelling conversation, felt honestly cared for, and wondered what it might mean to share life with a community like this.

And we saw the visual signifiers of a divided landscape. It was not lost on us that most of those who welcomed us were transplants. We heard about churches and encountered neighborhood symbols that reflected a sort of traditionalism that was then being co-opted by the Donald Trump campaign. Having long been part of a merry band of churchy radicals, the notion of moving toward (even if geographically) the part of the church we most rejected felt scary and stifling. We have always believed in loving the place we live, and we wondered if love might even be possible in Pittsburgh. What does love look like without belief or shared values?

Then we looked at houses.[55]

Perhaps you aren't aware, I wasn't, but when Pittsburgh lost a significant percentage of its population during the fall of steel, real estate values plummeted. Though that had been decades before our visit, it had only recently become financially viable to invest in something like a kitchen or bathroom renovation in almost any Pittsburgh neighborhood we saw. The result, now that people were moving back to the city, was a very short supply of homes with

[55] It's worth noting that if you would like to get me off the team, go ahead present me with something that combines the morally objectionable or ambiguous with the aesthetically untenable. One or the other I can maybe overcome. The two together are a serious obstacle.

bathrooms that weren't, for example, filled with all mint green fixtures, or tiled in what had to be asbestos.

The day we had to look was gray. All the houses had a shocking number of stairs up to them, and all the interior colors (besides the bathroom fixtures) were muddy yellows, browns, and greens. Houses were on the market with cock-eyed, broken kitchen drawers and admitted knob and tube wiring. Many didn't have air conditioning and/or only had one bathroom—several with a supplemental toilet that sat, without walls or door, in the middle of the basement. The realtor blithely described this as a sort of local specialty, "a Pittsburgh potty," and she made sure we knew some basements came complete with a similarly naked and exposed shower head, right next to the toilet.

"That way they could do all their business down here after work and before dinner!" she said.

I was not interested in doing any business in these basements. Andy, of course, started requesting only houses that had Pittsburgh potties, going on with excitement about the joys of sitting on a toilet in a wide open room. In as much as these basements were rooms, I guess. One house's only bathroom was in the basement, such that you had to go through the kitchen from the bedroom to take a shower.

In addition to the strange toilet situations, there were a lot of cat smells. Another house we toured still had the people, their dogs, and their dogs' poop in it while we were there.

Our house in Philadelphia was small. But it was also bright and airy, with white bathroom fixtures and no feces on the floor. Moving to Pittsburgh, where the costs were supposed to be lower, was looking like a grim prospect.

I gently mentioned this to my hiring manager, and she nodded knowingly. "Yes," she said, "Pittsburgh is craptastic."

Our visit wound down and we found ourselves merging onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which is the sort of hellscape that makes you feel like you are leaving everything good you've ever known no matter which way you are driving it. I looked out the window at the gray sky and the now-browning fall trees. I started to cry. I looked over at Andy, who looked lighter as he drove, listening to Arcade Fire and David Bowie on the Pittsburgh member-supported radio station he had already found. I willed him to look over at my silent tears and offer some sort of reassurance. But he was merging. Which I guess is important.

So I pushed the words out through twisted lips, in that high-pitched, pre-sobbing voice, "Jesus is going to make us move to Pittsburgh."

He looked at me with some surprise and a sort of gentle concern. "Karen, you know we don't believe that…"

"Even so," I said, "That is what he is going to do."

Chapter 17: …And Also Many Animals

"And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?"

-Jonah 4:11

In Philadelphia, we lived on a contiguous span of concrete over the former splash zone of a lead paint factory and factories like it, extending for miles in almost every direction.

In Pittsburgh, the landscape is no less diseased (it's probably more so), but maybe because of the hills and public stairs and all the trees I get the sense I live in an ecosystem.

As in Philly, we are in the city proper, walkable to four or five neighborhood downtowns, depending on how you count them, and I can get everything I need on foot from my house, except for the occasional trip to the Anthropologie Home Outlet, which is beyond the parish, both physically and spiritually. But they have the best lampshades for the best prices, so sometimes a journey out of bounds is required.

In Pittsburgh, though, there are trees and animals—we know farmers in our network, both rural and urban—and not just because we buy from them. There is a loosely organized east end Christian community that we landed in by working at the seminary. It includes barter and small business and free stuff on text chains or the neighborhood listserv, but it also includes community expertise and movement building and prayer and spur-of-the-moment potlucks.

Socially, we have beloved people in each of those five neighborhoods, and another two at least (also walkable from our doorstep, but with no commercial corridor). I can walk to several of the smartest people I know, several of the best people I know, and many of the best parents, best neighbors, best and most creative cooks. I can walk to at least three of the most satisfying people to hear say something mean, because everything about them is so nice all the time—I regularly walk to and walk with the most psychologically healthy person I've ever met. She is a marvel.

In Philadelphia we knew almost no children. Everyone was 25 or retired, broke or a benefactor, with us or against us.

Life in Pittsburgh has made strange bedfellows.

I'm a godparent to a 4-year-old, a confidant to several parents, even an occasional chicken sitter. My husband, a sort of avuncular bad influence type, is taking kids to baseball games and teaching them to question authority. We are both now playing board games.

There has been a turn, is what I'm telling you.

We've been caught up in a sea of faithful and sincere humans. Christian Pittsburgh, which we might have mocked and certainly feared upon moving, has welcomed us with the sort of communal ethos I wasn't sure existed. A mash-up of progressive values and deeply human-shaped, almost back-to-the-land conservatism has left us outside the neat and disembodied category of coastal liberals and imported wines.

Our friends forage and brew beer, have many children, and gather the neighborhood to make large quantities of kimchi or sausage or sauerkraut. They hunt—at deer camp and sometimes also in their urban backyards, where there are turkeys and deer and even groundhogs. Indeed, one neighbor was once interrupted while making sushi from the local fish market by an even more local groundhog fight. He ended the argument with a pitchfork and a shovel, and the result was groundhog Bourgogne prepared for a neighborhood-wide Groundhog Day Feast. Another—a surgeon and professor at the local medical school, shot a groundhog in his yard and made tacos. Which is to say, there is sort of a gourmet frontier ethos around here, and I would be lying if I said it didn't agree with me.

Even if I love animals. Even if I'm as city as they come. Even if I don't want any children. Even if I don't have chickens. Even if I have no idea how to make kimchi or field dress a groundhog.

When we were moving here, I thought about how cool it would be to be able to afford a bit more—two bathrooms, office-appropriate clothing, maybe even a vacation or two. You may be getting the sense the two-bathroom thing was a big deal. It was. I'm trying to stay married. And I don't hate a vacation either. But the image in my mind was a story where we—that is, my husband and I, were the authors of our story, taking care of business and solving problems, paying for the things we couldn't manage ourselves.

But the gift of moving here has run counter to the freedom I imagined with a middle-class living wage. We have found ourselves in a web of interdependence already in place at the seminary, in Pittsburgh, in the churches, and in the East End. We've found ourselves amidst people who have a vision for a shared life.

What is strange about this,[56] in my experience, is that usually this vision, when held by church people at least, happens in the context of a particular church. But faith-motivated Pittsburgh grafted us in as free agents and somehow in that model there has been room for all kinds of religion, all kinds of goodness, all kinds of backgrounds, and all kinds of choices. There is a mutual trust and all kinds of diversity of perspective built into the DNA of this non-institution we are a part of.

At first this horrified me. There are people in this community who do things I would never do! There are people who have questions about queer people and wear white people dreads!

[56] Aside from the obvious, that community in our capitalist waste land is as rare and precarious as the ivory billed woodpecker.

There are people who love institutions and collaborate with cops! There are people who circumlocute and defend purity culture and send their kids to private school! There are even people who participate in traditions that don't ordain women!

When I came here, I sort of wanted God to invite me to pass judgment, maybe even speak judgment into this community. Maybe that was the meaning of bringing me here to this Appalachian city. After all, the church sometimes needs to be told a little bit in this country and I'm told I'm supposed to be the change I wish to see in the world. Plus, right after the Trump election, I was ready to write somebody off and this place, with its cozy relationship to certain conservative ideals, gave me the creeps. I just didn't trust the people here--their faithfulness or their motivation.

But something strange happened. They trusted me. They would meet me and connect me to their friend, refer me to their hair stylist, tell me where the best farmer's market was. They entertained my impertinences and listened with curiosity to my new-to-town hot takes. Almost no one I encountered was defensive or protectionist. They had questions, but they weren't trying to have answers before doing the work. They opened the secrets to life in their city, their uncertainty, their moral ambivalence, their deep commitments.

I learned that taking loud, correct, and not at all costly public stances didn't give me the righteousness I was hoping it would, and it didn't bring about the shifts I wanted to see in the [post] steel city. In fact, the day-to-day faithfulness to community and right living that was reflected here, in this weird hill-country-big-city-small-town, was compelling anyway—human sized and sort of lovely.

Perhaps one way to say it is that a city never sits on a continuum between good and bad, it sits on both poles. This city is the best and the worst and everything in between and we are

left to hold it all together with our lives here. These things are hard to bear, to accept the beauty and the grace and to stick around for the ugly and the evil.

There are always religious movements that want to take their damning news and sit outside the city, getting sunburnt and waiting for justice to come. The secret I'm realizing is that as much as I can't stand to be here, with the people who are forming me here, in the city that has welcomed me—as furious as it all makes me, it is also true that home and family are always fraught.

And I remember that this place and its people, who make me furious, have also shaded me and taken me in and loved me well. I remember that loving something doesn't mean agreeing with it or owning it or making it in one's own image. I remember that this great city, for all its faults, is full of more than 120,000 persons, and also many animals, and it's a bit more complex, a bit more beautiful, a bit more blessed than it might sometimes seem.

Chapter 18: A Prayer for Cities Loved and Damned

A Liturgy Written for Election Day, 2020

Spirit of all time and place, Spirit of all languages, you have drawn us together here to meet you, even in our loneliness and anger, even in this season. You have reminded us that your goodness and your good news abide with your people far and wide.

Even when we feel ourselves in peril, even when we are silent in fear, and even when we cry out for justice.

Jesus, we trust you are preparing us for what comes next.

As we seek to meet your eyes in pages of all we read, in the mirrors of our homes, in the reflections of our computers, and in the faces of our zoom screens, remind us that you are also God of the world beyond our houses—

That you are God here as you are to all those we cannot see or reach. You are God in the ground below us and the sky before us, God in our cities and in our country. You are God when we are well and when we are sick.

Remind us that you are still God when the world is well and the world is sick—when dynasties begin and when dynasties end.

You are God in times of war and peace, and you are God in times of hatred and times of terror.

Because this is so Lord, we ask for your wisdom for whom and how we are to be in a world bent on rage and destruction.

We ask you to grant that our witness will not be silent amidst racism and xenophobia, fear and blind rage.

Lord grant us strength and vision in the work we do to collaborate with your gospel in this world. Grant us courage to faithfully face all that is to come.

In the shadow of this election Lord, make us brave and grant us clarity. Prepare us for whatever is to come, so that our courage may not fail, and our strength may not grow faint.

We do not know what is coming, but we say again, so that you might hear us, and we might hear ourselves—You are the God of the in-breaking future. You are the God of Life after death.

If there is a chance for the dreary march of these piling months to be transformed, it will not come from the stumbling progress that has brought us to a melting planet, late-stage capitalism, and incarcerated children at the border.

It will not be something that could be polled or predicted. It will not be a small shift to right the ship so that democracy as it was might continue.

Instead we pray for your powerful in-breaking—the great and only hope of faith, that You would come to us from the future and transform us and the world to something worthy of the vulnerable creatures You so love.

We pray because this is our only hope. The healing we can manage on our own is no healing at all. You are the one who can remake our hearts, reimagine our structures, and re-form our world.

Lord God, have mercy on us and on this stolen land we call home. Make us brave so that we might be faithful even in these scary times, make us kind so that we might one day welcome and be welcomed in your heavenly city. Amen.

Chapter 19: Let Us Pray

Here is what I remember from the 2016 election: Our little church was a polling place, and some of my friends went thrifting to find white to wear for the occasion—like the suffragists. My friend Tiffany, a nurse who trained as a lawyer and maintained her bar membership, volunteered all day to prevent harassment at one of the local polling places and was shocked at what she encountered. That was the first sign something was wrong, but I did not receive it as such.

Some people we knew hosted parties, planned to be with loved ones, looked forward to celebrating the first woman president. I didn't do that, but it wasn't because I planned for despair. I had some trust, but I didn't have a plan.

Andy and I were at home in our little Philly row house, watching the old 20 inch TV that was made after flat screens but before high definition, a cast off from my parents that I had tried to clean with spray cleaner and now had a weird splotch on the screen in certain light. The living room was well enough appointed at the time,[57] but I recall sitting in the dark with

[57] We still have the couch, a leather sectional piece we bought at the outlet with one high side for leaning and facing the TV all stretched out. All and all the, the couch is an 8/10, which was pretty good for $500 in 2014 dollars.

Andy on the floor, backs against the wall opposite the TV, in the corner, right in the path of where the front door would open—maybe with our butts sharing the door mat (which I got from the Center City Burlington Coat factory—a maze of trash and treasure that barely functioned but often held just the right thing—a place I completely abandoned after this experience). We were bathed in blue light, limbs slack, eyes agape, sitting in silence when Florida went red.

I went to bed before it was called because I didn't have the stomach for it, and we both woke up still huddled in a sad spoon formation, frightened and miserable. I cried my way into the shower and into my clothes, ever functional, headed for a morning meeting across the city. I walked to the elevated train, rode it to center city, transferred to the trolley, and got off in West Philly, covering a wide swath of Philadelphia and encountering commuters going into and out of the city.

I sobbed through the walk to the station and red eyed neighbors nodded to me. When I reached the train, faces were uniformly dour. White folks were shocked and tearing, Black folks looked sorry, sympathetic even, but not surprised. I got several kind nods on the train.

A couple days later I asked my young medical resident gynecologist if I could buy extra IUDs from her and she laughed as if I was over-reacting. "I don't think *that's* a concern." It seemed she thought it was dramatic to imagine that a non-professional might need to insert the little device outside the confines of a medical establishment—who could imagine a situation that desperate?

In those early days I was so eager to trust the naïve, even as my stomach stayed in my feet.

Around that time—particularly around the inauguration, I remember multiple people who lived through the early 70s gently trying to explain that this was not unlike Richard Nixon--

that democracy and the rule of law were made of sterner stuff, that this election outcome was disappointing, but only a minimal set back. The first time I heard it, my brain jumped at the chance for hope, but by the second time I knew without blinking that this was a sort of generational delusion.

In the election post-mortem, I found out who some of the surprise Trump voters were and hoped we got out of this disaster before I had to hate them for what they had chosen for all of us. Reasons were diverse, but also not—lower taxes, economic advantages, a desire to burn it all down. No one who explained themselves to me mentioned they appreciated his confession of sexual assault or mocking of the reporter with CP, but it's possible they admired his willingness to mention it. Regardless, I did start preparing myself for a dividing line through friends and family that started to feel inevitable. If you are going to threat migrants, if you are armed and angry, if you are planning violence—well. It behooves me to be ready—and in my own way I tried to be.

Memories of the pre-covid Trump era have faded some, which I assume is a result of the fact that my brain was increasingly pickled by the cortisol of fresh hells arriving on my New York Times daily newsletter and shouting on airport televisions and filling the conversations of my concerned and deathly well-informed social circle. Everything we did in those days was a litmus test for political affiliation.

People talk about this polarization like it is some sort of independent and randomly occurring social ill, rather than whole groups of people comprising all sorts of demographics trying desperately to cling to the costly vigilance needed to stay safe when it had been

recently and publically confirmed that about half[58] the population was either excited about or, at minimum, fine with their assault, marginalization, mocking, incarceration, or public defamation. That kind of vigilance will cortisol pickle your brain. Humans don't thrive under ongoing yet unpredictable threats.

And that was before Covid.

By the time Covid got here, I had already stopped the flow of all news as a method of self-protection. Anytime I heard his voice I fled. Every piece of information that found me opened a new depth of previously unimagined vulnerability. Racism was thriving in all directions, news of murders by police officers was flowing, migrants were incarcerated at the border and children were separated from their caregivers. In a matter of months, the closely guarded Boomer myth of progress not only unwound, but re-formed as its opposite—the clear, inexorable degradation of the standards we had long been told were permanently improving.

In this way, the discontinuity of Covid was almost a relief. This was not degradation, this was crisis—and while you must be afraid, you must also do less, stay home more, work on your creative problem solving skills. Covid was a crisis, but unlike the degradation, you had a role to play. Even as we were called out of our lives and into our houses, we were also invited into civic collaboration. Take a break from your incrementalism and put on your tactical gear! We aren't marching toward slow progress, we are triaging disaster!

[58] Well, under half, but that isn't the sort of math that matters in this particular iteration of gerrymandered democracy.

We were also tempted again to pray. Crisis reminded us we are not in control. Our loneliness made us wonder if anyone saw us. Our helplessness made us inclined to ask for help and our crying out helped us to imagine God might be there hearing us.

Prayer can take many forms. Rabbi Heschel talked about marching the civil rights movement as praying with his feet. During Covid, during the Trump years, I saw prayers take increasingly odd forms.

My sister prayed for her children— two adopted biological sisters whose mothering process she was entrusted with. As a true Presbyterian, her call to motherhood was confirmed by the community, and she was clear about her accountability to those girls and for them. All 97 pounds of her was dedicated to her vocation. She prayed with her desktop computer set up at the dining room table in her little Northern Virginia row house, day after day, working full time from home and keeping the girls home for safety, both of them under 6. Time stretched on and she prayed her way into a collapsible pool with chlorine for her postage stamp back yard, and even a flushable boating toilet for the back of her minivan. Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor public toilet Covid plume would stay that mother from the care of her appointed charges. By the end I wondered how much of her own sanity she had metered out and metabolized to prayers for a shield of protection by sheer force of will.

My mother prayed more conventionally, over and over, for everyone but herself, where I had to pick up the slack. I prayed with Happy Mask orders (for her and everyone), with walks with my friend Cheryl in the snow and rain and sun—whatever was available. I prayed with rule keeping, and rule declaring, and zoom shared silence, and centering practices, and check-in zoom chats with my best friends from high school. I prayed imprecatory prayers for the reckless, which got particularly colorful when my parents and grandmother were

made vulnerable. We all prayed for my grandmother as much as we could, putting our masks on and visiting for our allotted 15 minutes, repeating over and over that masks were needed when she couldn't remember why. The last prayer I heard her pray was on a visit late in the crisis, when I sat by her bed and she was mostly sleeping, barely lucid, and when her words would form together all she could say was, "You must be hungry. I'm so sorry I can't make you something. Let me call for someone to bring you something to eat."

Let me call for someone. Let us call for someone. Let us ask again for someone to come and bring us what we need. Let us call again for rescue. Let us call again for the food that will finally feed us, finally complete us, finally mean that all will be well and the work will be done. Let us call for a change of order, an upending of power, for peace in our homes and peace in our communities. Let us call for a future distinct from the present and distinct from the past. Body and soul, sound(ish) mind and full spirit, still-beating hearts and graced still-gasping lungs, running feet and grasping fingernails, clutching hope—let us pray.

Chapter 20: Satisfying Needs in Parched Places

This past season of my life could be called a season of swag—the sort of logo-emblazoned perks of middle management. I've never been part of an organization before that so clearly wanted to be involved in my daily rhythms through plastic and commerce. Swag coaster, swag tee-shirt, swag backpack, swag coffee cup. Swag umbrella, swag tote bag, swag lanyard, swag buff. Swag water bottle.

The water bottle was the first. This was well into the broader Hydroflask trend[59] and my institution was staunchly committed to the Nalgene. At first it struck me as the cultural delay and distortion present in the whole Appalachian region—we are still doing Nalgene bottles here, just like we are still doing coal extraction and racist union democrats.

But the seminary gave me my branded Nalgene my first week, and very quickly I changed my tune.

Everyone on campus had one—I was part of the crew. Plus, Nalgenes just work better. I don't like the water to be too cold anyway, they clip to everything, and, the key—they carry enough water and NOTHING ELSE DOES.

Stop trying to be too slick and trendy, East Coast Karen.

You live in Appalachia now, you have a community, you work at a place that gives you free stuff—you can just admit that you want to have a water bottle that is big enough to hold it all.

Over time a second Nalgene floated into my life and this rotation sustained me when each was temporarily lost, or in one case, in a hockey bag half full for an entire summer. This place and its water bottle went with me everywhere, in and out of the office. This water was who I was and with it was where I belonged.

Sometime in there though, when I was humming along, feeling well-hydrated and untroubled, I got word that the institutional swag no longer included Nalgenes. We were

[59] But not yet to the Easter-egg Stanley craze. Though Pittsburgh was still and firmly in its original green Stanley, scratched up with dirt from the steel mill, rinsed out but never washed of coffee, drying overnight in the basement sink by the back door era. Which is to say, Pittsburgh was still looking purely for a crusty utility in such things. And was completely untroubled by everything from soup to SleepyTime Tea tasting like antique Folgers and backwashed cigarettes.

moving to something more on trend, and the Nalgenes floating around institutional closets were the only ones left.

Of course, I congratulated myself on my foresight at claiming two and kept moving. Not long after, a dear friend, seeing the Nalgenes, asked what it would take to get one. Inside I worried, but I promised to check, and after some digging I found one in a box in the bottom of a closet. I proudly offered it to her and she gladly accepted.

Months later, she mentioned to me that hers had been lost and she needed a second one, and I began to wonder if I could find another one, somewhere in a closet—after all I had grown so accustomed to having my two. Normally I would have left it there, maybe checked a closet or two—but for some reason it stuck with me. She needs another Nalgene bottle. She cares about this place and she is a part of it, and it would make her glad.

Winter was ramping up at the time and the stress of work was growing and I was trying to hold it all together. It seemed like I was always tired and dehydrated, microwaving dinner, trying to catch up on email while I made the Saturday grocery order. One afternoon, running up the slippery frozen steps, with a tote bag, my lunch cooler, my backpack, and my water bottle, one of the Nalgenes hit the pavement of my porch and cracked open, water spirting onto the concrete. Irritable as I was, I expected a rush of anger, but the surprise I felt was almost delight.

Can Nalgenes just break?

I thought they were indestructible.

What happens now that one of my daily life's anchor tenants is no longer?

Ever practical, I took it inside, dumped the remaining water, and threw it away. I got out the second one and filled it up, telling myself it didn't matter. Remember that summer when one of them was in the hockey bag? One is enough and this is fine. It is all fine.

Two days letter at REI they had a giant Nalgene—48 ounces—on clearance at the checkout. I grabbed it and didn't look back. I subbed out the swag Nalgene when I got home and stuck it in the dishwasher. It wasn't mine anymore. It awaited my friend on our counter. I was now a Nalgene person, that wasn't changing. I had also learned a big enough water bottle was worth it. That wasn't changing.

The old bottle wasn't big enough anymore. My friend wanted it and I didn't. This bottle and this place were something to her they weren't for me anymore.

I thought that solved it.

Not long after I brought the new 48-ounce bottle to an out-of-town writing class--part of my new plan for drinking more deeply of my hopes and dreams. The bottom shattered on contact with a carpeted floor and I spent the rest of the trip refilling disposable bottles to mix the taste of disposable plastics with the sulfur-flavored water of Florida.

I was surprised it broke that easily. But, no big deal. I'd get a new one when I got home.

At this point I was starting to feel like a citizen of the REI anyway. Andy had taken up ultra-running and I had gotten both a travel backpack and those sunglasses that don't slip off during outdoor activities, so I was becoming pretty hobby adjacent. I had hiking sandals now and was even eyeing those functional bathing suits that were made for water without chlorine.

So when I got back, we went to REI again. I grabbed another giant Nalgene bottle while Andy compared shoe and sock combinations and traded phrases like "water-resistant gaiters" and "compression lining" with the salesperson. I flirted with another pair of no-slip sunglasses. Look at me building a life outside of work!

This bottle stuck with me for a couple of months. It was green and very outdoorsy, if I do say so. In fact, once someone noticed it at a conference and said, "I see your bottle says REI. Do you have a special connection with the Seattle area outdoors?" Not being prepared to engage in niche small talk, I awkwardly responded,

"No…I just bought this at REI because I like water. [Pause awkwardly] Hydration is the journey of my adult life."[60]

Let this be a reminder to us all to stick to topics I have knowledge in, please and thank you.

Anyway, you won't be surprised the conversation went nowhere from there, as there aren't many responses to that statement from a fellow theology conference attendee besides, "Oh. Huh." Which he duly offered.

This water bottle met a metaphoric end as well, being left next to a car in the parking lot during a home-alone-style-all-talk-at-once departure for the airport, smashed as the first casualty of a trip that ended up costing us dear friends and yet another anchor to the city that had taken us in.

While we were traveling, I did some research and learned that the old cloudy Nalgenes were both lighter and stronger than the clear colorful ones, and also cheaper and more heat

[60] This is a standby laugh line I use probably too regularly. It's not so much performative as an anxious tick to remind anyone sharing life with me that I'll be needing water and bathrooms regularly and that the absence of either is funny only until it's not.

tolerant. They didn't sell them at REI though. Buying it directly from Nalgene felt a little sad, but I ordered the latest version while we were still out of the country and came home to it and my regular life, even as the friendships we had left with faltered.

As you may have gathered from these pages, I'm a bit of an optimizer—a glutton for potential and ever jealous for clarity on how to take the next right step, do the next good thing, charge into the next possibility.

What I'm saying is, I have wanted these shifts to mean something and to tell me some kind of good news. I wanted the water bottles to be the literal symbolism for the sign-seeking superstition I so hate from my fundamentalist siblings. I wanted something meaningful to be brought forth by the repeated breaking of my comfort object, which, having been steady for so long, suddenly shifted like the ground under my feet, over and over for months in a row.

The water bottle kept breaking and I kept thinking, "this doesn't matter," or "this is just a chance for a better water bottle." Or "Perhaps I should see this as invitation to freedom or a chance for something new."

Is it possible that it does matter even if it isn't just a step on the metaphoric trajectory of incremental sanctification?

I think now this might all just mean that we ought to share our water. Or that taking care of yourself in all the ebbs and flows of life will require pivoting and compromises, and the work of bringing what you need with you and leaving what you don't behind won't ever be done. And it won't ever stop breaking your heart.

I think it might mean that it's hard when things break. It's hard when things don't go how you think they will—and you still need to find a way to carry your water and keep on moving.

Chapter 21: The Good Persists

I'm told my great-grandmother used to say she wouldn't give a fig for a kid who wasn't a little stubborn—and thus she founded a gene pool that selected for that trait with shocking efficiency over just three generations.

If my will had that power, the next defining trait of church would be weirdness. I don't give a fig for a church that isn't weird. Yes, it is under-reported—but you heard it here second,[61] a mark (maybe *the* mark?) of true faithfulness is weirdness. Worshiping and trying to follow a guy who was homeless, unemployed, and ultimately murdered by the state is a weird life choice.

Our church in Pittsburgh is what I would describe as truly faithful.

When we moved to Pittsburgh, after a couple Sunday morning misfires, we started to go to a church that no one we knew attended, but everyone referenced as "the liberal church." We might have even asked where the liberal churches were in order to find it, but I remember

[61]Ahem. First in your bibles–try the book of Acts–sharing resources, people disappearing and re-appearing in new places, cross cultural and ancient near-eastern queer friendships, desert puddle baptisms, people being struck dead for personal property reasons, these don't even include the pre-church Jesus followers or the churches that grew up after biblical times.

being struck by the way people would respond, in Pittsburgh, when I told them I went to Sixth Presbyterian. There was always a nod of understanding—as if I had given away more than I meant to by sharing the fact.

This rather delighted me, as I'd become a student of various subtle and not-so-subtle ways to signal early on in social connections that I was progressive--politically, personally, and theologically. When I first moved here, I was looking for a shorthand way to name myself—defend myself from assumption, as I thought of it. The way people responded to Sixth, as if I didn't know that I had just shared that I was almost apostate, gave me a jolt of delight.

Indeed, I did choose to worship amongst people who openly asked deep questions, even to the level of wondering aloud in worship if there was a God at all. I did worship with people who registered voters and organized against gun violence and supported labor unionizing.

But that's not actually who Sixth Presbyterian Church is. I mean, yes, it is progressive and politically engaged. But what we miss when we assume that churches align with political parties, is that partisan politics and human power is not actually what Christians call home—and we must ever be on guard to becoming more at home in any empire than in the community of God.

And yes, politically progressivism *is* empire, even if it shares a Venn diagram with some tenets of the faith. Sure, Sixth had and still has its self-congratulatory moments—talking about its organizing and activism, reminding us of the higher good of bringing our hard-to-recycle disposables to the church and not just our trash cans.

But Sixth's pastor and culture had their eye on something more rigorous, and it took us all of about 15 minutes to see that. When Sixth was at its best—when it lived as who it preached and loved and protested and mission committee-ed itself into being, all those self-

congratulations were just a small part of the larger work of being faithful to the God it believed or trusted or maybe just wanted to believe could be real.

The first time we came we sat near the front and were welcomed heartily. Among 200 or so worshipers, the pastor saw us, knew we were new and bee-lined to ask us our names. The worship service was careful, well-prepared, and not at all stiff, with the bulletin weighing in at about 10 pages, so any anxiety or need for information was met for those braving this church for the first time. The passing of the peace[62] was genuine but never invasive, the moments for special information or spotlights on mission were unfailingly honest—personal and lovely but never saccharine or manipulative. During the assurance of forgiveness[63] every Sunday, the pastor splashed the water audibly in the font, never mindful of the way the water clung to his hands and the floor and his robe in the aftermath. And the children's sermons! Carefully crafted, developmentally appropriate, psychologically sound, theologically informative. When Ms. Jenny, the children's director, announced that it was the time for children, told us to take a deep breath, and to remember that we were there to worship, there is a real way in which my pastor-self started to understand for a moment what worship might actually be. Not because of the breath necessarily, but because of the embodied humanness of the whole thing.

---

[62] The passing of the peace is both a fancy church way of saying "that moment when we say hi to each other" and a profound moment where after we have, as a structured part of our gathering, named some things that are hard and also true about us. It is when we stand up and walk around the room and tell people individually that we are still ok with them and they tell us they are still ok with us–and we offer each other a sign of peace. Which sounds fancy, but it is really just a handshake or a hug or a nod or, during COVID, a fist bump or the like.

[63] Right before the passing of the peace, this is when the pastor reminds the community, after we have named together that we and the world are not as we should be or would like to be, that God loves us, God sees what we have done and what the world is, and loves and forgives all of it. The water here is a symbol of God's love for us right at the beginning, when we are baptized, and now the baptism of that love continues throughout our lives.

Over our time there, I've gotten to know Ms. Jenny. Well, Jenny. Her friends can call her Jenny. Anyway, I've gotten to know her a bit more and had occasion to re-discover the delightful truth that being good does not coincide with naïveté, saccharine sweetness, or inhuman contentment.

Jenny is the no-bullshit real deal.

She writes the Christmas pageant each year herself, exploring such theological issues as the different accounts of the story in the different gospels, while maintaining the light touch necessary to get children to delight in sharing gifts, wearing funny outfits, and being celebrated members of the community in front of everyone for the big event of the year.

This kind of ministry—this kind of thoughtfulness from the pastors, the staff, and the congregation is what makes Sixth a lovely place. They do the work to do community well, they live out their theology faithfully and share life together both deeply and gently. They don't even mention in any public way that they were Mr. Rogers' church. You have to learn somewhere else from someone else, because Sixth is Sixth whether it is fame adjacent or not.

And so. When it came time for our dear friend Vince, the pastor, to empty out his office, disabled as he was because of a serious cancer diagnosis and subsequent aggressive treatment, it was a sad but fitting occasion for all of us. We were there doing that thing with the uncomplicated grief of those who bear everyone involved love and genuinely wish everyone involved well. As such, though, we were facing the loss without the soothing blanket of a just disagreement, or a moral high ground, or an ongoing grudge to warm the chill of loss. We knew the deep goodness of what was ending. Fortunately, the day we were to do the moving, it was about 90 degrees, which distracted from that chill—and from emotions more generally. Like many faithful churches trying hard to focus on their calling

rather than a two-million-dollar HVAC overhaul, Sixth does not have central AC, but a couple of office window units, and handheld fans in the sanctuary.

This evening fell in the middle of a full work season that had Andy and I both grateful and a bit underprepared to do something that felt like it had value—so we rolled up at golden hour, trying to put down the stress of things that didn't matter.

Being a pastor by trade, few things make me feel as at home as urban-church-building-specific logistics: little to no available parking (the church either having been built when the neighborhood was walkable or having redeveloped the parking lot into high-density housing—this church being in the latter category), an exterior door needing to remain locked due to the church being a large ungoverned space that (blessedly) feels welcoming to vulnerable folks who (less blessedly) sometimes come in and do things like camp or bathe in the sink or poop on the rug in the sanctuary (all real examples from churches I too have found shade in), no available elevator, the risk of accidentally finding a mouse (alive or dead--recently departed or, shall we say, aged), patchy climate control if at all, and of course, the risk of finding literally any member of the church around a dark corner in the building at any time of day or night.

We don't talk about it much, but for pastors, these are some of the most core experiences of our "odd and wondrous callings."[64]

Andy and I pulled into a restricted parking space around back, where our friend Vince let us in the still-locked door and we followed him up the stairs to his office. It was a beautiful

[64] There is a book on ministry that takes the title, "This Odd and Wondrous Calling" which I would describe as apt. Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009).

space with a stained-glass window and high ceilings, already ordered and well in hand for the upcoming move. I found myself hit with a wave of grief. He knew we were busy. He had already done so much work, while he was sick, on his own. His work at Sixth was coming to a close, but as much as we were his friends, the habit to pastor dies hard, and so as we were closing this chapter, there was this one more sign that the gift and the calling was still there.

He had bought boxes and the good one-handed tape contraptions and even proper bubble wrap. Vince is our dear friend—he would reject the title of mentor, but I would be remiss if I didn't name that he was and is a Goddamn grown-up and serves as a north star for how to be grown, all the way from how generous and non-judgmental he is to his willingness to just pay for the right moving supplies, especially if everything else about the process is going to be shit for sadness and sickness reasons.

The process didn't take more than two hours, all of us in masks, even in that late season, because of his immunosuppression. Of course, he couldn't be convinced not to help, as much as we tried. We wrapped up the framed pictures and boxed the books and I stood with the portable air-conditioner vents up my skirt when various trips to the car left me momentarily alone. On one of the trips down the back stairs, I noticed some activity at the front stairs, closer to the office but further from the car, and went to investigate.

Jenny was there in jeans with her hair pulled back, doing something in the behind-the-scenes category of church work, peering down the stairs and holding her phone. Vince was already talking to her, and I caught just part of the conversation over the various attempts at climate control around us. It seemed she was there as a timekeeper. A young man was sweating, as he carefully and methodically carried a heavy-looking power wheelchair, with no one in it, up and over each individual step. Jenny was timing him.

It seemed he was getting certified as a caregiver for a child of the church, a child who he would need to be able to carry up or down stairs in a particular amount of time in an emergency. And Jenny, who is pastor to the children of Sixth, is an expert on this certificate because she is a veteran of the process and because she is invested in the broader care of this particular child. More to the point, Jenny is here after hours to help someone train to care for a child of the church outside of the church, because that child is part of her ministry and his thriving inside and outside of church is something she takes as her purview.

This is what I mean when I say Jenny is the real deal.

After greeting them, I carried my box back through the hallway to the back stairs, noticing the hallway of classrooms in a way I hadn't before. There were laminated graphics on the wall and bulletin boards covered in cartoon kids of all races and abilities. There were names and pronouns listed and questions for parents to ask their kids after Sunday school. There were windows in the old doors and little school chairs in the rooms from when molded plastic chairs were standard. It was a welcoming wonderland.

This is a good church.

How is it that the good pastor of a good church with a good children's director is the one that gets cancer while all these assholes are out here, healthy and hale, stealing money and sleeping with the interior decorators hired to renovate their manses when they have wives at home? Or just shaming other people for money or sex reasons, patronizing the children of the church, collecting their paychecks, and not giving a shit?

After we loaded the car, we agreed to re-convene another night for the unloading, so we said goodbye for the evening and walked out into the warm night.

At the corner of Forbes and Murray in Mr. Rogers' old neighborhood, walking out of his old church, you find yourself at a little commercial corridor. When we first moved here, I thought it might be a home for us—a shoe store, some brunch places, a few spots for dinner, a dive bar, a library, some excellent noodles. When we first started going to Sixth this seemed like our new city. I had wondered what it would feel like to see this as home.

It never quite happened that way. We used to do brunch after church, but then the days got too crowded. Another library was closer to our house, and while we liked the noodles quite a bit, we would come and grab them and then leave—we didn't wander the neighborhood. I used a local shoe repair once, but it closed soon after. And when we walked out that night, I found myself pretty nostalgic for the life I'd thought we would have there. It is a charming corner in our city of neighborhoods and I would have liked a life walking it regularly.

Maybe it was just because we were packing boxes or because we worried for our friend or because we were grieving what the church was but wouldn't quite be for us again, but it seemed clear that night this corner wasn't going to be our city. There wasn't time anymore. We loved it as much as we always had, and the same potential was there, but for us the season for that was coming to a close. The good there persists, but it's for someone else now.

Chapter 22: Sunday Donuts

When our pastor got sick, we two pastors, Andy and I, stopped going to church. It's worth naming that Vince was the best I had ever seen—thoughtful, sincere, wise, honest, cranky in all the best ways. He would call bullshit. He was unfailingly gracious. He embraced his humanness and that of others. He remembered names and didn't use male pronouns for God and made eye contact during communion and sat by bedsides and loved his people. We always met him before anyone else did on the way out of church, in the back.[65] Our first Pride Sunday there, we came back to find him sobbing. Not just tearing up, but full on sobbing about the way the church has treated queer people for so many years.

It's just that after that, it's hard to go to a church and hear the bible read by someone that you don't know for sure has sobbed about the pain we've caused and the violence we as the church have done to people who have come to us for hope. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that I only have time for pastors who sometimes weep about these things.

So. We haven't been to church in a while.

It isn't permanent.

Probably.

But, I feel more now than I ever did before I was a pastor that I need to know and trust, maybe even be deep friends with a pastor before I feel open to church with them leading.

[65] This is in part because we exclusively sat in the back and left immediately upon the close of worship. Even after the new music director instituted an interminable postlude during which no one is allowed to talk. Not sitting for that. See you later.

This plus the thing that so often happens when you go to a new church, where you walk in the door that is obviously the main door, the one you are supposed to go in, and somehow find yourself in front of the entire sanctuary in the midst of some contemplative pre-worship music that the gathered community uses to accompany their dead stares at you the entire way to your seat—these two things keep me from worship on Sunday.

So does capitalism, if I'm honest. The need to get up early and earn a living every other day but Saturday, the desire to tidy up and meal plan, and wash the duvet because it smells like dog. My experience of church, combined with my experience with the rest of my life, tends to cause me to want to stay home and self-isolate, just generally speaking. It seems to me the Church has hardly begun to engage those concerns and their broader context.

There are a variety of malformations that arise from the dual formation caused by capitalism and Calvinism, but for me, staying home and self-isolating are the two main results. Because I am so tired. Also, my house is stocked with all my favorite snacks, all the best textiles, and my dog, who is unfailingly warm and soft, and perennially willing to nap with me. Her empathy cannot be doubted, and she cannot talk and thus reveal how morally problematic she might be.

But still, Sundays are the days when the Lord breaks in and lately, the Lord has chosen snacks as a pathway. Given communion, the 5000-person picnic, the revelatory snack on the Emmaus road, etc., snacks are not a surprising choice.[66] Jesus is pretty into snacks as a vessel for the divine.

[66] These are both stories in the Bible—Luke 9 is one place where we hear about a picnic for 5000 people made out of a snack portion of bread and fish and Luke 24 is where we hear about two men meeting a stranger on the road, sharing a meal with him and realizing he is actually a resurrected Jesus.

This time, the snack is donuts. My genetic susceptibility to the holiness of donuts is well documented. Both my German grandmothers were Fausnaught[67] enthusiasts, my Dad's mother staying up with the women's guild all night to make them for Shrove Tuesday, my Mom's mom buying them every year for the family for that same day throughout my mother's and then my childhood. My Dad would buy Krispy Kreme donuts Sunday mornings on the first Sunday of the month for the Youth Sunday School class he taught--and I would get first dibs because I lived in his house.

The move to Pittsburgh, though, has brought me the most holy donut of all.[68]

I do not know what they use to make these donuts. I am concerned, but not concerned enough to ask, that these donuts are fried in lard. These donuts are properly glazed. What I mean by "properly glazed" is none of this just-on-the-top, one-sided nonsense. They are glazed and then flipped and then glazed, it seems to me.

They are sizeable. They are pretty much the size of my face.

These donuts are only available on Sunday, adding to their holiness.

Every week there are two flavors, glazed and then something magical like, Double Stuf Oreo Cookies and Cream with Cream Cheese Icing and Peanut Butter Drizzle. Importantly, they don't do that thing where there are toppings so they don't glaze the donut first—*everything is still glazed*. This is all built on a foundation of fried and then glazed.

This is very important to me.

---

[67] Germany donuts traditionally eaten on "Fat" or "Shrove" Tuesday, the day before lent starts, so as to get all the sugar, flour, and yeast out of your house for the season of fasting before Easter. Most American Christians don't fast, but sometimes people will "give up" something.

[68] Pun never intended, but in this case, accepted.

Sometimes there are dipping sauces or broken chunks of deliciousness on top. Sometimes there is butter crunch crumble or a fresh fruit drizzle. The donuts go live at 10am Sunday morning. This is when the flavor is announced; this is when you can order them for pick-up; this is when you can text the number on the website in the case of internet hiccup or delay. Consequently, this is the time at which I became known to and thus friends with, the donut purveyors.

People who make or sell this kind of donut are not in it for the money. This is not a donut of capitalist efficiency and mass production. This is not the dry donut of shelf stability. You eat this donut the day you buy this donut. This donut speaks of the power of being present to our fleeting lives and soaking up the marrow of community, beauty, hope, wonder, and abundance. This donut shouts down the mighty corporate overlords at Dunkin' Donuts or the slowly encroaching Tim Horton's.

This donut is a revelation.

And I am a minister.

So it is not surprising that I made a connection, on a Sunday morning, with the donut prophets who preach and peddle this message of divine saturated fat fried to perfection.

It took a few weeks of attending the Church of the Glazed and Raised for the woman behind the restaurant text message to see my number in the system and say, "Is this Karen?"

It wasn't long after that I wandered in for pick-up in my sweat pants and she said, "KAREN! It's good to meet you!" Like any good pastor or any good bartender (for these donuts are from a bar), she knew her regulars and checked in with us.

For the past two years or so, this is sort of as close as we've come to church. There was a pastoral change at the bar, and my usual text and pick-up rector changed a few months ago. The new guy is just as committed to donut excellence. He still recognizes me, if a bit less enthusiastically. Even though donuts are only on Sundays, we've started to stop by more. They have good food, made with the same attention to detail and defiance of mass production—the drinks are good too. They know us and as a place that keeps employees long term, they made their culture porous to us as long term customers.

Bars are strange in that small talk and large talk is equally at home—and that's something that I always look for in church as well. The thing about a bar though, is that it never claims on the front end to be a holy or sacred space. When holiness shows up at the bar it is never expected and always a grace. So when it's not there it doesn't leave you feeling empty and disappointed. The bar is not being hypocritical about its values. Even if we don't talk about the heights and depths of human experience—there are still donuts. There is still a friendly face. There is care in the small things and the sense you can return to this place and these people when you need to.

I plan to go back to church. I think. But I'm not quite ready for the promises the Church carries. Not necessarily because they haven't been kept, although, they haven't more often than they have. I think I'm hesitant to go back because, for a few different seasons in my life, those promises have been kept.

Now I know it is possible. And maybe I'm just not ready to grieve that ending again yet.

Epilogue

As middle age approaches, I've re-doubled my efforts to helicopter parent my inner child through the wasteland of late stage capitalism. The little daily tasks she needs—the packing of healthy and portable snacks, the application of SPF moisturizer, the folding of laundry, the filling of the too big water bottle, the daily flossing of teeth. There is so little I can do to protect that little tike from the realities of this world, so I'm thinking I'll do it all.
And now she needs a sleep gummy and a fiber gummy, three allergy meds, a Prozac, an occasional Imitrex for migraines. And she knows that much sugar is going to make her sleepy AND cranky this afternoon, but she'll eat the pie anyway.

My inner child needs a lot of encouragement and also logistical support. I'm trying to tell her she can do hard things—and believe it myself. She wants to keep running and running, she doesn't want to take a nap or come in for supper. I'm a little worried she is going to crash without a guardrail, burst into public tears, pay too much for a car repair, or forget a key step in the tax withholding process.

On Saturday, when she wakes me up with all her worries, I do my best to snooze her a bit. Sleep an extra half an hour, even if you don't want to, we'll get to my daily tasks of self-parenting soon enough. I know she has a big week ahead—she always does, and this rest will be just as important as the changed sheets, washed clothes, ordered groceries. She needs to know she can just be sometimes too. But to gain that time, she will definitely have to get the groceries delivered. It's ok. Sometimes you have to get the groceries delivered.

When she won't be snoozed anymore, when the dog digs sandpaper paws in her bare flesh and her pre-arthritic fingers click with the first flex of day, her list drops into view straight from the cloud, direct to the phone. In the glare of blue light, I remind her that she is worth

a little extra effort—that she will feel better when her night stand is clear enough to hold a water glass. Which reminds her—water. How many cups did she have yesterday? Be in your body, kiddo. How dry is your skin? Do you have to pee? You should have to pee. If you don't have to pee, you should drink at least two cups. She looks at the quart Ball jar in the window sill—half full means two cups on the night. And it turns out, I do have to pee. At least there is that.

So it starts—drink the water, take the various medications. They are the fruit of so many hours navigating the health care system—that's for you, kiddo. No matter how generally healthy you are, this is the only body you have, so it's good to ask for help. Speak of which, remember when the AC stopped working and the repair man told you to change the filter more often? When is that last time you changed the filter? Despite the savings we are working on—always working on, now is not the time for an HVAC repair. Important life lesson, change the filter, turn up the temperature, use less resources, burn less coal.

Pull on stretchy pants, you don't have to wear the dry-clean-onlys on Saturday and plus, maybe later we'll go on a walk. If we took a backpack we could run an errand and soak up some endorphins in the process—although all that coal burning hasn't been great for the air quality here. It's ok to walk outside, I'm sure. You know, be mindful, but one can't just stay inside—and the errands need to be run either way. Might as well enjoy the walk. Efficiency, for joy and chores, must be part of the way we survive all this. If we are to survive it.

We're going to survive it, of course. I hesitate to ask the larger questions in front of my inner child. But she is precocious and probably knows to be more suspect of the system than I tend to allow.

Save for retirement, little one. We might get there.

Just in case she is despairing, I raise my inner voice just slightly—"Never leave something sitting on the stairs if you are going up anyway. Always take the dishes from the table all the way to the dishwasher—the sink is not a holding zone." We do what we can. Thinking about what we can't is hardly worth the time when there is so little of it. Better to be mindful of the dishes and how much easier it is to breathe if they don't just sit there dirty. Go from there to the laundry, change the sheets and fold the tee-shirts, fluff the couch pillows and take down the empty cookie plate from last night's TV treat. I'm re-raising my inner child, but sounding so much like my own mother as I do it, I'm wondering if the results will be any different at all.

When the phone buzzes in my pocket like it never did when I was an actual child, the inner child is dopamine delighted, suddenly grafted into the local, regional, national webs of group texts starting with my mother and going out in every direction from there—memes and photos, memories, and wise ass remarks. The conversation moves from personal to communal, and my inner parent relents for a moment. Breathe for a moment, maybe let these voices take a turn in the parenting. I guess that's what community is--these people who join our monovoce cautious reminders and existential fears with other perspectives—joys and wisdom, angst and art. Babies and dogs, books and meals and poems and weddings and "can you believe it?" and "I remember" and "I love you."

This morning they are in the phone (along with all the usual clutter), but sometime this afternoon or this evening, or tomorrow, or next week, whether the laundry is done or not, some number of us will gather around a table.

In a backyard or a patio, at the counter or at the bar, in whatever neighborhood or city we find ourselves in. My parent voice will go to bed early, and let the kid stay out late. When I

was a child, that child stayed up to eat cookies with my relatives at my parents' green metal-frame, glass-top kitchen table, too tight in a too small kitchen, or at the old rectangular wood one at my grandmother's house with the plant themed wallpaper.

Later, when we first got married, the tables were tall, chair-free, right in the middle of the sanctuary, and scrawled with sacred writing, or at the bar, all shiny wood two tops with the occasional stool wobble. The parishioners and bartenders took shifts babysitting my late-night, child-pastor-self, over homemade, gluten-free communion bread or vegan spaghetti sandwiches.[69] Somewhere in there, I started taking shifts, and now, at my house, it's the table we got at the Crate and Barrel outlet for $149--it has 4 leaves and can hold the whole neighborhood, even if the edges are scratched. Or maybe its Kendall's homemade picnic table, extra big and extra high for his tall Swedish family or Scott and Maribeth's counter height table, still with the crayon marks of their all but grown children, with extra stools for extra guests. We'll bring what we have or buy what we want, or Kendall or Maribeth will cook, or we'll bring takeout or Cheryl will, or we'll all just split a bottle of wine. We'll remember and laugh, we'll talk it through and ask the questions. Heaviness will settle, joy will bubble. If we are at Scott's there will be dessert, the Barlows will have Cadbury chocolates, maybe we'll all walk for late night ice cream, because we can.

I've read somewhere that sleep is where our brains put themselves back together—that the great executive-functioner in our head files and orders, mends and repairs. But these late night tables, while the world sleeps and we stay up, responsible for ourselves and our coming of age together, these are the places I've been remembered. I've found myself, not so much a child growing up to please, learning to live a safe and measured life, trying her legs in the big

[69] The lentil "meat" balls were delicious, but I always subbed in real cheese.

wide world, but maybe a bit more like my elderly three-legged pit bull dog, stumbling around, asking for help, snoozing right under the table of those who love me—those who are aging too—those who are not trying to raise me into anything, but offering treats and staying with me, late into the night. In this it has become clear that the point is not to grow into something better, but to be together in our falling apart. That is where the good snacks are. That is where the laughter is. Perhaps I'm not seeking a community to parent my inner child, but for someone to care with me for my faithful, falling-down, trying-hard old dog self. Maybe I'm looking for a pack to stumble into the night or snooze under the table with—sometimes just for the warmth of them.

I'm grateful for the path marking my younger days—alongside the tasks and processes, the chores and the order there were always tables remembering that child self, putting her gently together and giving her options other than the one wise and rigid voice she woke up to. So yes, I'll keep wearing sunscreen and drinking water—that's how I was raised. I'll keep folding the laundry and carrying things up the stairs, but I'm trying to remember that those things matter because they carry me back to the tables that paste me back together, that give me rest and sustenance when the becoming is done.

This book is the story of the voices that carried me and led me, spoke me into growth and life and hope—and the voices that laugh around me at the table, as we learn to make peace with growing silence. This too is church—and I am grateful.

Works Cited

Cake. *Short Skirt and a Long Jacket*. CD. *Comfort Eagle*. Columbia, n.d.

"Charles Murray." Southern Poverty Law Center - Charles Murray. Accessed February 14, 2024. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray.

Confessore, Nicholas. "Tramps Like Them." *The New York Times*, February 10, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/books/review/charles-murray-examines-the-white-working-class-in-coming-apart.html.

Daniel, Lillian, and Martin B. Copenhaver. *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. Review of Toward the End of Time. *The Observer* 10, (1997).