

SEISMIC SHIFT



From GOD to GOODNESS

A journey of loss and discovery

KEITH MARTIN

*That God is silent, I cannot deny. That everything within me
cries out for God, I cannot forget.*

attributed to Jean-Paul Sartre

Spirituality/Religion

**For those who want to believe in God but can't.
For those who once believed in God but now aren't so sure.**

Since Medieval Times, our view of the world has undergone enormous shifts: from believing that the world is flat, to understanding that it is a sphere; from believing that the earth is the centre of our solar system, to understanding that the sun is; from believing that kings, queens and popes have a divine right to rule over us, to believing that democracy is far better and fairer. Some of these shifts have been revolutionary. Many of those who first advocated them were branded as heretics and killed.

A similar revolution is happening in our understanding of God. Even though it may seem more subtle, like the shift from a total eclipse to a diamond ring eclipse, it has far-reaching implications. The transition from beliefs that may have made sense in the past but now leave us confused and in the dark, to values that bring insight and understanding, can be the difference between despair and hope, death and life.

Seismic means “having a strong or widespread impact; earthshaking.” And when the ground shakes, there may be a time of grief before there is relief; a time of loss before there is discovery; a time of darkness before there is light.

SEISMIC SHIFT: From God to Goodness is one person's journey into that light. It is a journey from traditional faith in God as a supernatural Being, past New Spirituality concepts of God as Oneness or Energy, to a progressive spirituality that envisions God not as a higher Being, or a delusion, but a higher Ideal—especially the ideal of Goodness. What if God is not a Being but a *metaphor*—a metaphor for life, love and goodness in the universe? What if God is not a divine Person but a *personification* of that life-force, especially of goodness? Then true spirituality is not about using the right God words, or even any God words, but about longing for and bringing goodness into our world, without which life and relationships don't work.

SEISMIC SHIFT was written first and foremost for the author's children. If it helps others on their spiritual journeys, so much the better. It offers a radical but believable alternative to traditional faith similar to John Robinson's *Honest to God*, Marcus Borg's *The God We Never Knew*, John Spong's *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and Gretta Vosper's *With or Without God*.

Keith Martin is founder and director of Spectrum A&E Media, a non-profit, registered charity fostering values that enhance life (www.spectrummedia.ca). A companion DVD, **Seismic Shift: Spirituality for the Rest of Us**, will soon be available from Spectrum.

Keith lives in Warton, Ontario, Canada with his wife Jenny, their son Ryan, and their daughter Carol-Lee. For more information about the book and the DVD, visit www.SeismicShift.ca.



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What Others Are Saying About **SEISMIC SHIFT**

Keith Martin's journey in search of the truth about life and Life is the one to which we are all born. Most of us settle into seemingly comfortable spots along the wayside, though, and others are waylaid. Few continue on as Keith does, and fewer still send postcards of such warmth, clarity and, yes, goodness as are found in *Seismic Shift*.

Gem and Tanyss Munro, Amarok Society

I have just read *Seismic Shift* for the second time. You offer a new way of understanding our passion for being kind, doing good and helping others no longer bound by understanding of God as a supernatural Being but rather a metaphor for all that is good. You write in a clear and straightforward way that is easy to follow. You clearly value the earlier influences in your spiritual journey and speak gently to those who have not adopted your metaphorical understanding of God. But in a helpful way you affirm the faith of those of us who might be called "beyond Christianity believers."

Malcolm Rust, minister, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada

Keith Martin has written a book that will reassure many who, like him, have questioned the reality of God as a Being but who also believe that there is a force within themselves and society to (as he quotes The Rotary Foundation's motto) "do good in the world."

Bob Scott, Chair of Rotary's International PolioPlus Committee

Seismic Shift is an honest attempt by the author to put in lay terms the struggles he experienced to make his spirituality relevant to today, to himself, and to his family. He honours the traditional Christian teaching of his childhood while moving on to a new understanding of the mystery that we call God. He never puts down those who still find the former approach helpful but he challenges those of us still involved in faith communities to rethink some of our beliefs. In addition he helps us to understand why many have left the church while still espousing the teachings of love, kindness and justice.

Peggy Aitchison, Ottawa, Canada

This is not the first book addressing the need of those of us who have fallen out of or who have deliberately deserted their belief in a personal god. Borg, Spong, Vosper, and many others have done so, as indicated in the book. However, there are a few features that make this contribution a unique one:

- (1) The very personal and powerful account of 'A journey of loss and discovery' embedded within what appears to be almost a letter of legacy to the author's children;
- (2) The very clear and convincing shift of perspective from a focus on an increasingly 'absent' personal god to an ever needed presence of goodness that only 'you and I' can bring to the world;
- (3) The very vivid and vibrant metaphor of the 'Invisible Sun' that may well lead us to embrace the 'loss' of many promises we associate with a personal god and the 'discovery' of the potential goodness of a 'life after god'.

May this book inspire, warm, and guide others on their personal journey and quest for a spiritual space to call home between god and goodness—it certainly has the potential to do so!

*Thomas Mengel, Associate Professor,
Renaissance College, University of New Brunswick*

In the late 1980's, I shared two long road trips with Keith, and we spent days discussing God and faith, both of which eluded me despite a powerful hunger for both. Even then, I was deeply impressed by Keith's fearless honesty in wrestling with the issues I raised.

He continues that fearless honesty in *Seismic Shift* and has challenged me yet again. In the book, Keith shares a daunting quote from Irving Greenberg: "No statement, (about God) or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the present of the burning children." *Seismic Shift* meets that standard, provides some relief from the grief of God's silence, and shines a light on the path before us. I look forward to sharing this book with others.

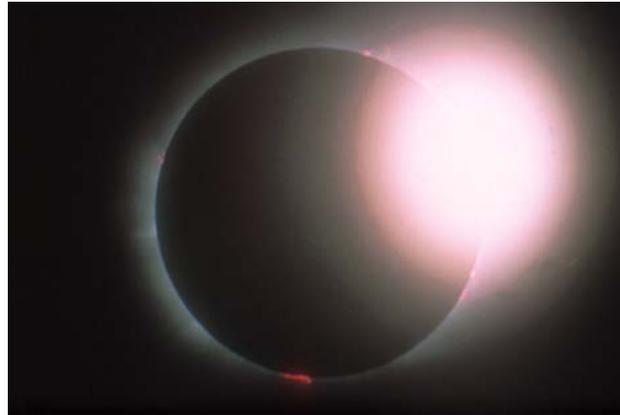
Mark Hill, Yukon, Canada

I have followed Keith's journey since he was associated with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and have supported his endeavours financially all along. I wondered sometimes if we were separated at birth as his spiritual journey has in many ways paralleled my own—from evangelical roots, including a seminary education and intense Christian service, to . . . and this is where the journey gets interesting. Both of us, in spiritual terms, are a long way from where we were—"a seismic shift," so aptly described.

What makes this treatise so relevant to me, and I recommend it for the many former Evangelicals like us, is Keith's perceptive analysis of his shift as well as his current embracing of Goodness. I need to think about this more, but I appreciate immensely the articulation of both his journey and his current status.

*Ed Wilson, MA, MS Ed
Retired community college professor, London, Canada*

SEISMIC SHIFT



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A journey of loss and discovery

Keith Martin

SeismicShift.ca
Spirituality for the Rest of Us
Warton, Ontario, Canada

SEISMIC SHIFT:
From God to Goodness
by Keith Martin

www.SeismicShift.ca

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P.O. Box 188
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info@seismicshift.ca
(519-534-9188)

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Dedicated to:
RYAN AND CAROL-LEE MARTIN

With thanks to:
Phil and Barb Taylor
Glenn Toering Boyes
James Puttick
Mark Goodes
Andrea Gader
Thomas Mengel
Zoe Zessler
Sheila Gatis
Jenny Martin

- To Phil, for 29 years of friendship, and his unwavering belief in the importance of asking questions rather than simply giving answers. And to Barb, for being such a good person and agreeing with Phil to be guardians for our children.
- To Glenn, for his personal and moral support as we both move beyond our faith traditions.
- To James, for supporting Spectrum A&E Media, the organization I founded and work for, as “a place where honesty, true painful honesty, is accepted and encouraged.”
- To Mark, for encouraging me to offer an alternative to the New Spirituality for those who have outgrown traditional faith.
- To Andrea, for being the first person of her generation to read this book and find it helpful for her journey.
- To Thomas, for being the first person outside my previous circle of friends to assure me that others would benefit from what I’ve written.

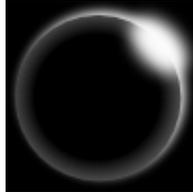
- To Zoe, for her very helpful writing class, her critique of my manuscript, and for telling me that the chapter to my kids made her cry.
- To Sheila, for copy editing my final draft and giving me reason to hope I might have another 20 years of productivity.
- To Jenny, my partner in life, for her input in editing and strengthening this book; and for incarnating Goodness in our marriage, our home and our family, as we raise our son, Ryan, and our daughter, Carol-Lee.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction



“You’re mixing your metaphors.”

I know.

Visually I identify with the shift from a total eclipse to a diamond ring eclipse more than with any earth-shaking image. However, to call my journey Solar Shift or Cosmic Shift might sound like an adventure in astronomy. So yes, I’m mixing my metaphors.

Since Medieval Times, our view of the world has undergone enormous shifts: from believing that the world is flat, to understanding that it is a sphere; from believing that the earth is the centre of our solar system, to understanding that the sun is; from believing that kings, queens and popes

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have a divine right to rule over us, to believing that democracy is far better and fairer; from believing that all men are created equal, as long as they are white, to believing that all men and women of all races are equal. Some of these shifts have been revolutionary. Many of those who first advocated them were branded as heretics and killed.

A similar revolution is happening in our understanding of God. Even though it may seem more subtle, like the shift from a total eclipse to a partial or diamond ring eclipse, it has far-reaching implications. The transition from beliefs that may have made sense in the past but now leave us confused and in the dark, to values that bring insight and understanding, can be the difference between despair and hope, death and life.

Seismic means “having a strong or widespread impact; earthshaking.” And when the ground shakes, there may be a time of grief before there is relief; a time of loss before there is discovery; a time of darkness before there is light.

This book is my journey into that light.

It began as a letter to my son, Ryan, when he was in Grade One. I initially called it *Dear Ryan: Probing the Mystery of God*. I was hoping that when he was older it would help him understand one of the deepest mysteries anyone can explore, the mystery we call ‘God.’

I wanted to put my thoughts in writing while he was young because I didn’t know if I’d be around when he was

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older. Jenny and I adopted him when we were already in our forties, knowing that one or both of us might not be here for much of his adult years. As I sometimes joked with him, “When you're grown up, I might be dead. Rats.”

Knowing the end could come at any time, for any of us, I started putting in writing what I hoped we could talk about in person when he was older.

Ryan is now in Grade 12, and has read books like *Eragon*, *Eldest*, *Brisingsr*, *Inheritance*, *The Golden Compass*, *Angels and Demons*, and *The Da Vinci Code*, and watched movies like *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, and *Les Misérables*. So naturally we've already talked about many of the ideas in this book.

We've also added a daughter to our family. So my original title wouldn't work unless I planned to write another book called *Dear Carol-Lee*.

I thought of calling this book, *Honest To God*, but that title has already been taken. I could have called it *For Goodness' Sake*, but decided instead to use that for one of the chapter headings. Five other names came to mind, but three of them are song titles, one is already a book title, and the other is similar to a book title. I'm using them instead as chapter titles. *Seismic Shift: From God to Goodness* pretty well sums up the journey I've been on for the past 20 years. Part of me, though, would still like to call it *Dear Ryan and Carol-Lee*. I've used that, instead, for my final

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chapter.

Jenny and I love our children—even though one of them gives me considerable grief, and will knowingly smile when she reads this. I hope my reflections at this stage in life will help them on their own spiritual journeys. Whenever they read this, I hope they know that they are in my heart, that my deepest desire is for them to be good, and that I am glad we got to share in the journey for as long as we did.

I started this book while my own father was still alive, and was tempted to wait until after he had passed away before publishing it.

My dad was a good and godly man. I owe him and Mom a great deal: for my initial understanding of God, my sense of Goodness, and indeed my very life. As he neared the end of his own journey, I didn't want him to worry about one of his own children not believing in God the way he did.

When Dad heard from some of my siblings that my faith was changing, he asked me if I was still a believer. I assured him that he and Mom had laid a solid moral and spiritual foundation for each of his five children, and that I was building on that foundation.

Dad passed away in 2003. As I sat beside his gravesite the day after his funeral, I felt a connection I hadn't felt for years. I realized that what I call Goodness is what he called

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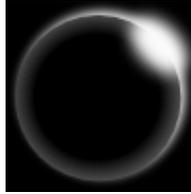
Righteousness. I thanked him again for all he had given and meant to me. And I renewed my commitment to continue the work he was engaged in, helping people see the connection between spirituality, goodness and God. For me, though, this would be to an increasingly postmodern world that relates less and less to God as a supernatural Being.

Chapter 1:
DEAR GOD

No statement, (about God) or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.

Irving Greenberg,
writing about the holocaust

Dear God



Spring had finally arrived. It had been a long winter, but now at last the snow was melting and the birds were returning. It was 1994. Bill Clinton was in the White House. Jean Chrétien was prime minister of Canada.

One night in April I could not sleep. I had just heard reports coming out of Rwanda that Tutsi men, women and children were being slaughtered by militant Hutus on the pews of a church. A church, for Christ's sake!

How could God allow this? How could a loving, heavenly Father or Mother allow hundreds of innocent people, especially children, to be hacked to death, if He or She had the power to intervene and protect them?

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The words of a song called *Dear God*, by Andy Partridge of the band XTC, ran through my mind. Partridge addresses God and says he can't believe in Him because of all the people starving on their feet and fighting in the street. He progresses from "I can't believe" to "I don't believe" to "I won't believe" in heaven, hell, saints, sinners, pearly gates, and thorny crowns. He rails against wars, drowning babies, people lost at sea, and all the hurt in the world, ending with "If there's one thing I don't believe in, it's you."¹

My Wake-up Call

The Rwanda genocide, for me, was what the Jewish holocaust was for many of my parents' generation. It was a slap across the face to wake up and re-examine my faith. For in 1994, I was a believer—a Christian believer. I believed in God as a supernatural Being who created and sustains life, including those children in Rwanda.

So strongly did I believe in this Being that in 1980, with the help of some friends, I founded Spectrum Productions Association, a non-profit media organization dedicated to exploring values and beliefs, especially belief in God.

During the 1980s we produced two multimedia shows: *In Search of a Sun: An Inquiry into Values*, and *Say It Isn't*

Dear God

True: An Inquiry into Faith. Using the analogy that we are like planets drifting through space, needing a sun to revolve around, we explored the possibility that for both light (someone or something to answer to) and warmth (someone or something to belong to), humans need a sun like the God of the Judeo-Christian faith. For eight years we were part of an interdenominational Christian organization known as Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), giving hundreds of presentations on campuses right across Canada.

Probing Values, Beliefs and Social Concerns

In 1992 Spectrum Productions became an independent registered charity, under the name Spectrum Artistic and Educational Media (Spectrum A&E Media, for short). In addition to exploring values and beliefs, our purpose was broadened to include fostering a deeper understanding of social concerns of our day.

About the same time, even before the Rwanda holocaust, I began having doubts about my faith for reasons I'll explain in the next chapter. So I put my spiritual beliefs on the back burner and focused on social concerns.

Over the next few years we produced two multimedia presentations on two of the most pressing issues we could think of—the environment, and global hunger and poverty.

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We called these *Take It Back: Caring for Planet Earth*, and *No More Turning Away: Caring about Hunger and Poverty*.

In the summer of 2000, when our son Ryan was only five years old, he saw both of these productions. I'll never forget his response to *Take It Back*. During the opening song, called *Sorrow*, he started crying and had to leave the room. "Why are they putting all that garbage on the ground and in the water?" he asked. The horror of what we were doing to our planet was too much for his five-year-old eyes.

By the end of the song, even I had tears in my eyes, especially during two of the last quotes.

"We live in a world that has an obsessive preoccupation with the present," wrote Brown, Flavin and French in *State of the World* (Millennial Edition). "Focused on quarterly profit-and-loss statements, we are behaving as though we have no children. In short, we have lost our sense of responsibility to future generations."²

"This earth is precious to The Great Spirit and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator," said Chief Seattle over 150 years ago. "Contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your waste."³

Fortunately, Ryan was strong enough to come back in to see the rest of the production, and to hear what could be done to save our environment.

I was equally moved by how much he understood the

Dear God

message of *No More Turning Away*. I toured Western Canada that fall, and when I called home he would often ask, “What presentation did you give today, Daddy?” If I said, “The one on hunger and poverty,” he would say, “Well, you don't need to show that one at our school. We're already collecting food for people who are hungry. The stage in the gym is full of food. And I helped!”

He was only in kindergarten, but already he was thinking about those who are less fortunate. Already he was starting to understand the final quote in the production:

At the close of life, the question will not be, ‘How much have you gotten?’ but ‘How much have you given?’ Not ‘How much have you saved?’ but ‘How much have you sacrificed?’ It will not be ‘How much were you honored?’ but ‘How much have you loved and served?’⁴

Similarly, when our daughter Carol-Lee was in Grade 6, she took part in her first 30 Hour Famine with WorldVision, personally raising \$140 for people who are hungry.

During the 1990s, we showed *Take It Back* and *No More Turning Away* to thousands of students and adults across Canada (see Appendix 2). They are now available on DVD for schools and communities to use without needing a presenter. I believe the ripple effect of these presentations is helping to make our world a better place for my generation and my children's generation.

Barriers to Faith

A Spectrum production that my children didn't see, however—because I stopped showing it soon after producing it—was *Dear God: Barriers and Bridges to Faith*. It began with the XTC song that ran through my mind that night in 1994 when I couldn't sleep.

Dear God, which I described as 'An Honest, Angry Look at Barriers to Faith,' is a powerful summary of why many people can't believe in God, and why many who once believed either lose their faith or stop believing in God as a supernatural Being. It identifies at least five barriers to faith in God: suffering, evil and death in the world; conflicting views of God; religious wars and fighting; the concept of hell; and the silence of God. By far the most pressing issue in the song is the problem of suffering and evil.

The song reminds me of what Joseph Heller described in his novel, *Catch-22*. Only Heller's description of suffering and pain, set in Italy during World War II, includes an even angrier response on the part of the main character, Yossarian.

After seeing a barefoot boy with tattered clothes and a sickly disposition, "Yossarian was moved by such intense pity for his poverty that he wanted to smash his pale, sad, sickly face with his fist and knock him out of existence because he brought to mind *all* the pale, sad, sickly children

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in Italy that same night who needed haircuts and needed shoes and socks. . . . What a lousy earth! He wondered how many people were destitute that same night even in his own prosperous country, how many homes were shanties, how many husbands were drunk and wives were socked, and how many children were bullied, abused or abandoned. How many families hungered for food they could not afford to buy? How many hearts were broken? How many suicides would take place that same night, how many people would go insane?”⁵

In words similar to what I was feeling as I listened to those reports coming out of Rwanda, Heller concludes, “Yossarian walked in lonely torture, feeling estranged, and could not wipe from his mind the excruciating image of the barefoot boy with sickly cheeks . . .”⁶

In 1992, when I first produced *Dear God*, I was a believer—a Christian believer. I believed in God as a supernatural Being who had created us and spoken to us through the Hebrew prophets, the Bible, and especially Jesus Christ. I thought I could reconcile the existence of God with the questions raised in XTC’s song, including the problem of suffering and evil. In fact, I believed that without God there was no way to even *call* something evil.

Bridges to Faith

The following year I produced a response to *Dear God* called *Through the Pain*, based on the song, *I Still Believe* by The Call. *Through the Pain*, which I subtitled ‘Bridges to Faith in a World of Suffering and Pain’ was an attempt to show glimpses of God in the midst of the same reality *Dear God* described. “Through the pain and through the grief, through the cries and through the wars, I still believe.”⁷ It looked at evidence for faith found in our sense of morality, our longing for justice, and even our doubts and despair.

I began the production with a quote by Irving Greenberg, writing about the holocaust. “No statement, (about God) or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”⁸

I then added, “This includes the statement ‘God does not exist.’ For if God does not exist, everything is permissible,⁹ nothing is finally right or wrong, good or evil . . . including the burning of children.”

For me, Greenberg's statement was—and still is—a double-edged sword. On the one hand it disqualifies religious statements like "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." (Try saying *that* in the presence of a burning child.) On the other hand it disqualifies simple atheism, the idea that there is no moral or spiritual order to

Dear God

the universe.

“If there is no God or moral order to the universe,” said the next graphic in the production, “How do we argue against a man like Hitler, who said, ‘I cannot see why man should not be just as cruel as nature.’”¹⁰

I then looked at our longing for justice in the face of evil, which seems an illusion without some kind of a just God. As French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus wrote: “Confronted with evil, confronted with death, man(kind) from the depths of his being cries out for justice.”¹¹ In the words of C.S. Lewis, though, we have a dilemma: “If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our efforts are in the long run hopeless.”¹²

Finally I looked at bridges to faith in our very doubts and despair. Even though I was raised in a Christian home, I did not arrive at my Christian faith lightly. During university I became an agnostic, someone who isn't sure if there is a God. For months I wrestled with the evidence for Christianity, before finally choosing it over the worldview of people like Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. They believed in what we call atheistic existentialism,¹³ which was the most credible alternative for me back then.

To underscore how difficult believing in God can be, in *Through the Pain* I quoted one of the songwriters of *I Still Believe*. “I have terrible, knock-down, drag-out fights with

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God . . . If being (a believer) means you can hate God at times, then I'll get in under the wire. I love God, too. So I have this serious love/hate relationship with God.”¹⁴

I wanted to assure viewers that doubts and even despair are a healthy and necessary part of faith. So I ended the production with the following statement: “Those who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God and not in God himself.”¹⁵

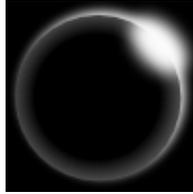
I thought I knew what these words were all about from my days as an agnostic in university. Little did I realize how much more they would apply to me in the days to come.

Chapter 2:
LIFE IS A HIGHWAY

We must always hold truth, as best as we can determine it, to be more important, more vital to our self-interest, than our comfort. . . . Mental health is an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs.

Scott Peck
The Road Less Traveled

Life is a Highway



One of my favourite books is *The Road Less Traveled*, by Scott Peck. The book is about love and spiritual growth. In it Peck defines love as “extending oneself for the spiritual growth of another.” The way we love, both ourselves and others, is to help each other develop four disciplines: delaying gratification, accepting responsibility, dedication to the truth, and balance.

Although truth and reality may not always be as easy to discern as Peck implies, this is why we must be dedicated to the truth. “Truth is reality. That which is false is unreal. The more clearly we see the reality of the world, the better

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equipped we are to deal with the world.”¹

“Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are. . . . If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost.”²

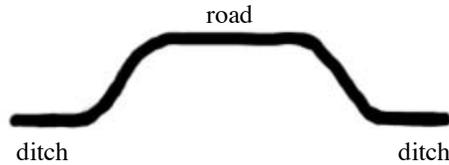
Our view of reality, however, is not a given. And it needs to change as we grow. “We are not born with maps; we have to make them, and the making requires effort. . . . But the biggest problem of map-making is not that we have to start from scratch, but that we have to continually revise them. . . . The process of making revisions, particularly major revisions, is painful, sometimes excruciatingly painful.”³

Mental health, which Peck equates with spiritual health, depends on this. “We must always hold truth, as best as we can determine it, to be more important, more vital to our self-interest, than our comfort. . . . Mental health is an on-going process of dedication to reality at all costs.”⁴

Between the Ditches

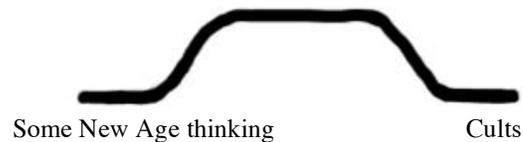
During the 1980s, when I was on staff with IVCF working with college and university students, I often used the analogy of a road—a cross section of a road—to illustrate the need for a map of reality, or worldview, that enables us to navigate through life.

Life is a Highway



On each side of the road are the ditches. There are moral ditches, like apathy, selfishness, injustice, hate and outright evil—all the opposites of goodness, without which life and relationships do not work. And there are world-view ditches—ditches of thought and behaviour whose maps of reality are inadequate to help us navigate through life.

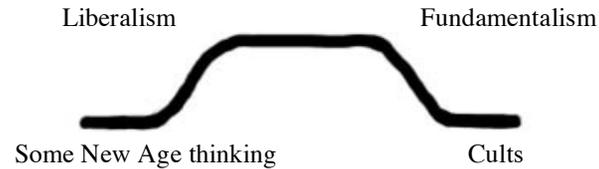
In the right-hand ditch I placed the cults, with their either/or, black-and-white, us-versus-them concepts of good and evil, God and salvation. In the left-hand ditch I placed many of the Eastern religions and much of the New Age movement, with their both/and, ‘everything is God’ and ‘nothing is really evil’ maps, as I understood them then.



Within my own faith, Christianity, I saw fundamentalism as drawing people into the ditch on the right and liberalism as drawing people into the ditch on the left. If fundamentalism, as one of my seminary professors described

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it, is “not much fun, too much damn, and too little mental,” then liberalism seemed to be not much faith, too little damn, and too much mental.

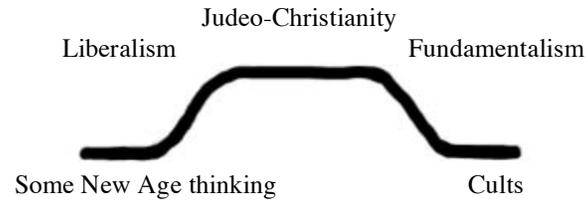


Obviously, no one sees his or her own worldview as being a ditch. To a fundamentalist, fundamentalism is the road, the cults are in the ditch on the right, and everything left of fundamentalism is either on the left shoulder or in the left ditch. To a more liberal believer, liberalism is the road, something like anarchy is in the ditch on the left, and everything to the right of liberalism is on the right shoulder or in the right ditch.

A Wide Road

In between liberalism and fundamentalism, I saw a fairly wide road that included not only most Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, but also many who had the faith of Abraham, the father of Judaism and a prophet of Islam. I'll use the term *Judeo-Christianity* to describe what traditional Christianity, Judaism and even Islam have in common.

Life is a Highway



What traditional Christianity, Judaism and Islam have in common is what I understood to be the core of true spirituality—what God was looking for in us as humans. It was best summed up by Francis Schaeffer, an author who had a major influence on me in my college days. He described spirituality as two bows (as in bowing to royalty): the reality bow and the moral bow.⁵

The reality bow meant bowing to the reality that is all around us: that I am not God, that I am not the Creator, that I am a creature before God and am meant to live for and in harmony with God.

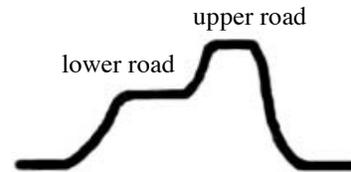
The moral bow meant bowing to the revelation that God is a moral God, that I am not always moral, and that I need God's forgiveness and strength to live as God intended. This to me was the core of what Christ, Abraham and Mohammed taught and believed.⁶

A Cliff in the Road

Soon after producing *Dear God*, I started to get honest about this map. What others might call a midlife crisis of

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faith began with the realization that I was not experiencing God as a supernatural Being or Person, the way my worldview said I should. I thought I had in the past; but now I wasn't sure I had *ever* experienced God as a Person. It was as though the road now had two levels, separated by a cliff.



I was sure of the lower road because I was experiencing it. There are moral and spiritual principles—what religious people call ‘godly principles’—that do work, that determine whether life and relationships are healthy or not, that keep you out of life's ditches. Stephen Covey, author of *First Things First*, calls these “true north principles.”⁷ Gretta Vosper, in *With or Without God*, calls them “life-enhancing values.”⁸ Most of them could be summed up by what we call The Golden Rule, which almost every faith has a version of: Do to others as you would have them do to you.⁹

But my Christian faith said I should be experiencing more than just godly principles. I should also be experiencing an upper road, a “personal relationship” with God. I should be experiencing God as a heavenly Parent who loves and cares for me as His or Her child. And I should be

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experiencing prayer as a form of conversation with God, with me talking to God and God responding “by the Holy Spirit,” “in a still, small voice.” But I wasn’t. Not if I was honest.

Here was a real mystery. If God is a conscious Being—and an all-powerful, all-loving Being at that—why can’t God communicate to me in ways that I know are clearly God?

I knew humans were real and what they were trying to say to me (even if I misunderstood them sometimes), because when they spoke I knew it was *them* speaking, not me. But with God it was different. I had to “discern” what God was saying, setting aside my own thoughts, the thoughts of others and even “voices of darkness,” and try to sense what the Spirit of God was or was not saying. I could never be sure.

The Bible was full of encounters with God that seemed to leave no doubt that it was God—or at least a prophet or an angel—that people were encountering. Why was *I* not experiencing that? Why could I look back over my entire life and not point to one clear encounter with a Divine Being, a prophet or an angel?

When I talked to people who believed in God and claimed *they* were sure what God was saying to them, their experiences rarely helped. Either they were just repeating what the Bible or their minister had already said; or more

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often than not some part of what they “heard from God” was incompatible with what someone else heard, or just did not ring true.

The Sound of Silence

At a much deeper level than anything I had experienced in university, I started to feel God’s silence as keenly as my desire to know God. I now understood what Jean-Paul Sartre meant when he said, “That God is silent, I cannot deny. That everything within me cries out for God, I cannot forget.”¹⁰

Years later, when I read the letters of Mother Teresa published in *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, my heart went out to her in a way I never would have anticipated. Mother Teresa, viewed by many as a saint, struggled with the absence of God and a sense of darkness in her soul for most of her life.

Now Father—since ’49 or ’50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart.—Darkness is such that I really do not see . . . —The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me.—When the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there.¹¹

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Mother Teresa was surrounded by people who believed in God as a supernatural Being, so the only advice she received was, Hang in there, God is letting you experience a prolonged dark night of the soul so you can identify with those who are in darkness and need the light of Christ. It didn't seem to trouble them that it's rather difficult to invite people to enjoy fellowship with God if you're not experiencing it yourself.¹²

For months I, too, felt a darkness, a sadness, a grief that there may be no one out there to watch over us, to give our lives significance, to guide us in life, and sustain us through death and into an afterlife.

Maybe this is why many people in the 16th and 17th centuries clung to the belief that the earth is the centre not only of our solar system but the entire universe. If it is not, if we're only one planet among many planets, spinning around one star among billions of stars, how can our lives be important? Even with their faith in God, they must have wondered, Why would God care about life on a speck of cosmic dust?

I, too, could have clung to my map, not of the solar system but of God, and just ignored any evidence to the contrary. Fortunately, the silence I was experiencing forced me to re-examine that map and eventually to revise it.

Either "walking in fellowship with God" was a higher road which I had not yet attained, but might as I grew spiri-

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tually; or it was a metaphor for the lower road that I was already experiencing.

Is God Really a Supernatural Being?

As long as I used circular reasoning that God is a supernatural Being because “God's Word” (the Bible) says God is, I could assume God still existed in spite of this silence, in spite of this gap between what people in the Bible experienced and what I was experiencing. But would I believe in God as a supernatural Being if I didn't have the Bible to shape my map? What evidence do I have from experience today—mine or others—or from nature, to point me to this kind of God?

When I'm out in nature, I'm drawn by the beauty and majesty of what we call creation. But I don't sense a Creator seeking to relate to me personally. I'm drawn to the *idea* of a Creator when I wonder how it all came into being. But I don't experience Someone present, much less trying to connect with me. And I certainly did not see any evidence of Someone present in those churches in Rwanda.

What if our idea of a personal Creator, of God as a Personal Being, is a personification of something we are already experiencing rather than Something or Someone additional to experience?

What if, instead of what atheists call a God *delusion*,¹³ I

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was part of a God *personification*—a personifying of something godlike into a personal Being we call God. That would explain not only why belief in God is so widespread (without implying that believers in God are deluded), but also why more and more people are outgrowing that belief.

It was time to go deeper into this mystery we call God.

Chapter 3:
FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

If God is the personification of Goodness, then true spirituality is not about using the right God words, or even any God words, but about longing for and bringing goodness into our world, without which life and relationships don't work. It is found in a deeper understanding of those familiar words, "be good, for Goodness' sake."



For years I believed in God as a supernatural Being or Person. And for years I believed I was experiencing God as a supernatural Person. But now I wondered: What if I'm personalizing the impersonal? What if I'm projecting personality onto godly or life-enhancing principles the way some people project 'mother earth' onto the earth?

Mother Earth as Metaphor

I use mother earth language all the time. In *Take It Back*, Spectrum's multimedia production on the environment, we use a song called *Signs of Hope*:

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The earth is our mother
She gives us all we need
It's time we gave her something back
Put an end to greed¹

When I use the words *mother earth*, though, I use them as a metaphor—a metaphor for the life-giving nature of the earth, and as a reminder to treat the earth as I treat my own mother, with love and respect. I don't believe the earth is a living, conscious being itself, though I wish it was.

The closing song to our production, *Take It Back*, after which we named the entire production, says, "I push her to the limit to see if she will break; she might take it back someday."²

I *wish* the earth was a person that could rise up against those who are abusing and raping it. I *wish* it could take back what it gives us—literally and immediately, rather than metaphorically and gradually. But I don't experience the earth as a living, conscious being, so I don't believe it is such a being, though I respect people who do.

Whether or not the earth is a person, it is obviously something that is greater than I am. My very existence depends on 'her.' The food I eat, the water I drink, the air I breathe, all come from the earth or its atmosphere. If it did not exist, I would not exist, along with all other humans and all other life forms on the planet.

Long before I produced *Take It Back*, I concluded that

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what matters is not whether we use mother earth language, or whether we personify the earth, but how we *treat* the earth. That is why, in this area, I've always felt a greater kinship with New Age or New Spirituality thinkers who respect the earth than with many people of my own faith background who treat the earth as something to be used and dominated.

God as Metaphor

What if *God* is a metaphor as well—a metaphor for *Goodness*, for life-enhancing values that underlie healthy relationships, for the goodness of Life itself, when it is not twisted by suffering, pain or death? Then what matters is not whether we use the right God language, or even any God language. What matters is not whether we personify Goodness. What matters is how we *relate* to Goodness, whether we seek to *live* by Goodness, and how we incarnate or put flesh and bones on Goodness in our world.

When I capitalize Goodness, I mean more than just aspiring to be good. I mean *bowing* to Goodness the way religious people bow to God. I mean letting Goodness in all its forms—love, justice, compassion, mercy, kindness, etc.—guide and govern my life the way many faiths say God should govern our lives.

This doesn't mean I'm always good. Far from it. As

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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, “The line separating good and evil passes . . . right through every human heart,”³ as does the line between right and wrong. Almost every day we step across that line, intentionally or unintentionally. My family and close friends have seen me cross the line and become impatient, unfair or selfish on numerous occasions.

People committed to Goodness, however, just like people committed to God, should be the first to realize when they have not been good, and make amends when they hurt or sin against someone. That’s why others have heard me say I’m sorry and ask for forgiveness, at least some of those times.

If God is a metaphor for Goodness, then truly spiritual people, truly godly people, are people who long for and work for goodness in all its manifestations, especially love, compassion and forgiveness.

A few years ago I joined The Rotary Club of Wiarnton because I was looking for a nonreligious but spiritually-caring fellowship of men and women who were making a difference locally and globally. Rotary’s overall motto is “Service Above Self.” The Rotary Foundation, which enables Rotarians to advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through the improvement of health, the support of education, and the alleviation of poverty, has for its motto “Doing good in the world.” That is one of the best

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definitions I can think of for both humanitarianism and true spirituality.

From an early age my children understood this connection between God and goodness almost instinctively. When they were amazed at something, they often interchanged the words, “Oh, my God!” with “Oh, my goodness!”—just as “For God's sake” becomes “For goodness' sake” for many adults.

The Myth of Santa

I'll never forget the day Jenny and I met our son. It was December 9, 1997. He was two and a half years old. We were selected to be his adoptive parents just two weeks before his third Christmas, and began our visits to his foster home that evening. Within ten minutes he was in my lap, happy and relaxed and wanting to play. We were committed to loving him before we even met him. But that evening we fell in love with him.

At the end of our visit, his foster mom said it was time for a new diaper. Off he went upstairs to get one. A minute later he came sliding down the stairs on his stomach—feet first, thank God—so fast and with such a rumbling sound we nearly had heart attacks. His foster mom quickly assured us this was how he navigated stairs and that it was perfectly safe, especially when the stairs are carpeted. For-

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unately our stairs at home were also carpeted, since he continued this method of descent until he was almost three. In his hand was a clean diaper. But instead of taking it to his foster mom, he brought it to me. Immediately Jenny said, “I like this kid!” And so I got my first of many chances to change his diaper.

The visits went so well that five days before Christmas we got to take him home for good. What a Christmas present!

Because it was Christmas, one of the first songs he heard in his new home was *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town*. In it Santa is described in almost God-like terms:

He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good, for goodness' sake.⁴

Only now, after all these years of hearing that song, do I see a deeper way to understand that last phrase. Instead of a reprimand to ‘be good, or you’ll be sorry,’ it could be an admonition, ‘For the sake of goodness, be good.’ Not for the sake of Santa, or God, or your parents, but for the sake of Goodness. More and more I believe the story of Christmas, the point of faith, and even the purpose of life itself, is to be good for Goodness' sake.

If this is so, then whatever symbols, whatever stories, whatever myths help someone grasp this are good. And by

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myths I don't mean fables. I mean words and stories that point towards and shed light on the mysteries of life we're all trying to understand.

That is why we raised our children to believe in the myth or story of Santa Claus. I have to admit I felt a little guilty on Christmas Eve, helping them put out milk and cookies for Santa and a carrot for Rudolph, eating everything but the carrot stub when they went to bed, and then pretending the next morning that Santa had found the treats when he came down our 8-inch wide chimney and out our natural gas fireplace.

We knew, though, they would outgrow the literal story soon enough. And when they did, we were confident that instead of rejecting Christmas as a grand deception, they would embrace the spirit of Santa and of Christmas itself as a time of sharing and caring—sharing with family and friends, and caring for the whole world.

Christian Symbols

As a family we also read the Christmas story from the Bible about the birth of Jesus Christ. But as we read about angels visiting and singing to the shepherds, and a star guiding the wise men and stopping over Bethlehem, I couldn't read it as literal history the way it was read to me as a child. Either these are dimensions of reality we no

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longer experience, or they are symbols of how special and spiritual Jesus was, how good and sacred he was.

In *Prince Caspian*, one of The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis, I was struck by how Aslan tells the older children that they are too old to return to Narnia. I thought he would admonish them to keep their hearts young so they *could* return. Instead he says they have outgrown the age when they can experience Narnia directly or literally. In the movie version they are told to take the lessons they've learned in The Land of Narnia and apply them in the real world.

As my map of God changed, I tried to stay within the Christian faith as a 'progressive Christian.' Instead of seeing Aslan as a symbol for Christ, the way traditional Christians do (including C. S. Lewis), progressive Christianity sees both Aslan and Christ as symbols or metaphors of something beyond them, of a life of goodness that is aligned with what is sacred. That is what I believe as well; but progressive Christians have chosen to stay within Christianity and be an alternative to traditional faith and belief, while I (reluctantly) have become a post-Christian. And as such, I'm seeking to take some of the lessons I learned in The Land of Christianity back into the real world.

If Christianity was called "Believers in Love and Compassion" instead of being named after Christ, similar to the

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way Islam is named after the word for Surrender instead of after Mohammed, I could still be part of this faith tradition. Or if it were called “People for Whom Christ is an Example of Love and Compassion,” I might still be able to belong. But as long as it’s called *Christianity*, most people assume you believe in Christ as the Son of God and therefore Saviour, Lord and King, as so many Christmas carols reiterate every year. Or at the very least, that your spiritual focus is on the life and teachings of a man who lived 2,000 years ago.

When I believed in God as a supernatural Being, it made sense that this Being could have become human to show us how to live. In fact, in a paper I wrote called *In Search of a Sun*, I made a compelling argument from Plato’s Allegory of the Cave that this is precisely what we as humans need (see Appendix 1). But if there is no supernatural Being, then there can be no Son of that Being as traditionally taught.

In one sense I’m still Christian, if not *a* Christian. Just as I think in English, even though there are many other languages to think in, when I think about the mystery we call God and how we should live our lives, I often think in Christian symbols. That is the language and story in which I was raised. That is what I can relate to most easily. And that is why I respect progressive Christians who have chosen to stay within Christianity and seek to redefine what

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those symbols can mean for people today.

Believers in Exile

In his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, John Spong, an Episcopal bishop, describes people like me as ‘believers in exile.’ Just as many Jews were exiled to Babylon 600 years B.C.E. and struggled with how to worship God in a strange land, many Christians today, along with many Jews, Muslims and people of other faiths, find themselves struggling with how to relate to God in a world radically different from the world of the Bible, or the Torah or the Koran.

“Exile is never a voluntary experience,” writes Spong. “One does not leave one’s values, one’s way of life, or one’s defining beliefs voluntarily.”⁵

“Believers in exile . . . refuse to abandon the reality of God, yet they have been driven by forces over which they have no control to sacrifice much of the content of that God reality . . . which must be allowed to find new meaning or it will die.”⁶

For Bishop Spong, the concept of God as a supernatural Being or Person, which we call *theism*,⁷ is outdated and must die. It is the product of an ancient worldview, when anything we did not understand was attributed to God ‘up in heaven,’ who created and put us on earth to watch over

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us, and who seeks to save us from hell below.

When the idea of a three-storied universe—heaven/earth/hell—fell to the discoveries of science, we made a shift from God ‘up there’ (physically) to God ‘out there’ (metaphorically). But that was not enough to prevent the erosion of theism. The more we learned about the universe, including human psychology, the harder it was to point to any evidence of an external supernatural Being.

“Deep in the conscious minds of countless believers,” writes Spong, “is the knowledge that most of the traditional God images have lost both their meaning and their power. Many who still claim to be believers know in the depths of their being that they, too, have rejected these images. . . . The hymns and prayers of the church use images and make assumptions that most of us can no longer make. There is an increasing sense even among believers that the word *God* now rings with a hollow emptiness.”⁸

I am one of those believers. But when people like Spong say the concept of God as a supernatural Being is dead and *must be replaced*, I think that is too strong. It *is* being replaced, for that is what this shift is all about. But it will take another generation before this is what most honest and thoughtful people believe.

Other people, of course, will continue to believe in whatever they are taught, including belief in a supernatural Being, for there will always be ministers who will teach

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those beliefs. And emotionally, belief in a supernatural Being will always be more comforting than belief in God as a metaphor. But gradually, I believe, thoughtful believers in God as a higher Being, who honestly wrestle with why *they* seem to experience God this way and other equally thoughtful and seeking people don't, will conclude that ascribing personality to God is a metaphor—helpful for some but not necessary for others. Certainly more and more of their children and grandchildren will come to this conclusion.

Meanwhile, many people I know and respect, including some of the people I thank in my acknowledgments and many of Spectrum's supporters, find meaning in God as a supernatural Being and are inspired by their faith to be more compassionate people than they would be without their faith. I don't want to dissuade them.

Some people, in fact, like my dear sister, would be lost without their faith in a loving, heavenly Caregiver. That is what has sustained them, sometimes through very challenging situations.

Indeed, when my children are adults, if they are able to relate to God this way, I don't want to discourage them. That's what I believed until I was into my forties. And a lot of my commitment to Goodness I owe to my earlier faith in God as a supernatural Being.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg

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describes two 'paradigms' or ways of seeing the Christian faith (or any faith, for that matter): the *earlier* paradigm with its literal, factual understanding, and the *emerging* paradigm, with its metaphorical understanding. The issue isn't that one of these is right and the other wrong. Instead, the issue is whether a paradigm "works" or "gets in the way."

"For millions, the earlier paradigm still works. And if it works for you—if it hasn't become an obstacle and if it genuinely nourishes your life with God and produces growth in compassion within you—there's no reason for you to change. Being Christian isn't about getting our beliefs (or our paradigm) 'right.'"⁹

For millions of others, however, the earlier paradigm no longer works, and has become a barrier to spirituality.

If you are one of those for whom it has become a barrier, or if you are just beginning to question what you have believed for years, I want to encourage you to consider a different map of God—a non-theistic map instead of a theistic, atheistic or pantheistic one.¹⁰

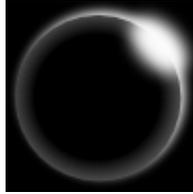
For me, one of the most helpful maps or metaphors to describe God has always been the sun. It is a metaphor I used in Spectrum's multimedia presentations for years. What if God itself is a metaphor for something—Goodness—that is real (not as an entity but as an ideal), but is more like the Sun than a Person?

Chapter 4:
INVISIBLE SUN

**There has to be an invisible Sun
Which gives us hope when the whole day's done.**

Sting
Invisible Sun

Invisible Sun



When I graduated from university, I enrolled in seminary in a Master of Divinity program—a rather presumptuous degree to confer on any human being. To fulfill the requirement of a guided research paper or mini-thesis, I wrote a paper called *In Search of a Sun: The Cry of a Generation Adrift*. I was hoping to publish it when it was finished.

The Parable of the Madman

I began my paper with *The Parable of the Madman* by Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher who wrote over a hundred years ago.

SEISMIC SHIFT: From God to Goodness

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly: "I am looking for God! I am looking for God!"

As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter. Have you lost him, then? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Or emigrated? Thus they shouted and laughed.

The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. "Where has God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed Him—you and I. We are all His murderers.

"But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving now? Away from all suns?

"Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not more and more night coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the grave-

Invisible Sun

diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed Him.”¹

Nietzsche was clearly aware that the full impact of this discovery was yet to come, for the parable continues:

The madman fell silent and again regarded his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern to the ground, and it broke and went out. “I come too early,” he said then; “my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way.”²

The paper I started to write had four parts, based on the parable:

- I. Unchained—How We Lost our Sun
- II. Adrift—Why We Need a Sun
- III. Searching—The Present Options
- IV. An Alternative—A Hard Look at an Eclipsed Sun

To explain why the analogy of a sun is so powerful for me to this day, and how my thinking and faith have changed since then, I’ve summarized what I wrote back then in an appendix at the end of this book.

Before I could finish writing *In Search of a Sun*, I founded Spectrum Productions—now Spectrum A&E Media—and produced a multimedia show by the same name. Some of the ideas in the paper were captured in the media

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production and its sequel, *Say It Isn't True*. But I never did find time to complete the paper or publish it. Now I'm glad. The last chapter would be quite different today.

The Nature of the Sun

By 1999, twenty years after writing *In Search of a Sun*, and ten years after the last showing of the multimedia presentation by the same name, I found myself coming back to the imagery of the sun.

If God is a metaphor for Goodness, the most helpful analogy I can think of for the nature of Goodness, and therefore God, is a sun—something that gives light and warmth to life and relationships.

The sun, like the earth, is something that is greater than us. We depend on it for both light and warmth, either directly or indirectly, through all the forms of energy that derive from it. Without it, we could not exist.

The sun, though, is not a person—something I didn't give much thought to twenty years earlier. Children's songs and TV programs may lead our children to believe otherwise, with catchy little tunes like, "Oh Mister Sun, Sun, Mister Golden Sun, please shine down on me," and "The sun is a very magic fellow, he shines on me each day." But my children soon discovered this was all poetry. I may *treat* the sun like a person, as the ancient Egyptians did,

Invisible Sun

turning it into a Sun God. But that is not its nature.

Because the sun is not a person, I cannot relate to it or converse with it like I can with a person. I can *personify* it, but that doesn't make it a person. And because it is not a person, it does not and cannot intervene to prevent the storms, hurricanes and earthquakes of life.

When a storm hits, no amount of praying to the sun will cause the sun to stop the storm. And when the storm does stop, we don't attribute that to the sun's intervention. This obviously doesn't mean that the sun doesn't exist. It is still there, behind the storm, providing whatever light and warmth we have during the storm. And it is most definitely there after the storm, enabling the survivors to recover, heal and get on with their lives. Indeed, without the sun, recovery, healing and life itself would be impossible.

God as a Spiritual Sun

What if this is how Goodness, and therefore God, operate? Goodness, like love and justice, does not and indeed cannot prevent evil, hatred and injustice. Goodness cannot stop a Hitler, a genocide, or a rape. But that doesn't mean Goodness does not exist (as an ideal rather than an entity). It is present in the midst of whatever happens, especially in those who are *not* evil, hateful or unjust. Its absence in the people and experiences causing the injustice makes us long

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for and strive for its presence even more. And when such experiences are over, or even if they never end, Goodness is what enables us to recover and heal to whatever degree is possible.

When you listen to a song like *Dear God*, it is not *goodness* that the songwriter does not believe in. In fact, his belief in goodness is why he can't believe in God. And as long as he conceives of God as a loving, caring Person, he probably never will.

Beyond God as a Loving Parent

When I used to believe in God as a loving Parent, I had a hard time reconciling my map of God with what God allows to happen to people. I would have an even harder time now, as a father.

In 1997, when I became a dad, I knew I could never stand back and watch people do to my children what God allows people to do to each other. I could never watch my kids get hit by a car, stabbed with a knife, molested or beaten, without doing everything I could to prevent it. And if I couldn't prevent it, I would do everything I could to warn them. Yet God allows accidents, crimes and atrocities to happen to His or Her children all the time, without even a warning, much less intervention. What happened in Rwanda in 1994 happens on a smaller scale every day of

Invisible Sun

every year in every country in the world. Someone's life is violated and brought to a tragic end by someone who is responsible for what he or she is doing and should be stopped.

My belief in freedom of will—that humans are free to be agents of good or evil—helped me up to a point. And I knew that some kinds of pain, like the first time a child touches a hot stove, are unavoidable and not incompatible with good parenting. But what would be the purpose of allowing someone to take your child's hand and hold it on a red hot burner as they screamed and screamed until they collapsed in pain, became mentally scarred for life, or died in agony? Here my faith in God became a troubling mystery, for God allows people to do even worse things to other people, including children, every day.

I no longer have that struggle. I still *wish* God was a loving Parent. I will go to my grave wishing that. But now I understand that the 'Our Father' in Christianity, the 'Jehovah our Provider' in Judaism, or the 'Blessed be Allah' in Islam is a personification—a personification like Justice or Wisdom.

When someone, even in the Bible, cries out to Justice to do something about an unjust situation, I don't expect Justice to come riding in on a white horse to save the day. I know that Justice needs to be incarnated in people who will act justly, in order for justice to prevail.

SEISMIC SHIFT: From God to Goodness

“Do not forsake Wisdom and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you,” says a proverb in the Bible.³ Like Justice, I don’t believe Wisdom is a person that watches over me and can intervene. Wisdom needs to be manifest in people who act wisely, in order for wisdom to prevail.

Now, with my new map of God, when I long for God to spare someone I love from cancer, I know that a good doctor, good treatment and the healing power of life itself is needed, or the cancer will end a good life.

In the multimedia show, *In Search of a Sun*, we used a song written by Sting and recorded by the British rock band, The Police, called *Invisible Sun*. “There has to be an invisible Sun which gives us hope when the whole day's done.”⁴

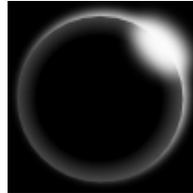
What gives me light, warmth and hope in the midst of a pretty dark world at times is a moral and spiritual sun, a moral and spiritual ideal, that some call God and some call Goodness. I now believe these are two names for the same reality.

Chapter 5:
SOPHIA

“So, how was your time with Sophia?”
“Sophia? Ahh, so that’s who she is!” exclaimed Mack.
Then a perplexed look came across his face. “But
doesn’t that make four of you? Is she God too?”
Jesus laughed. “No Mack. There are only three of us.
Sophia is a personification of Papa’s wisdom.”

William P. Young
The Shack

Sophia



In 2008 a novel appeared on the New York Times best-seller Fiction List called *The Shack*, by William Paul Young. I might not have paid much attention to it, had I not realized that I know the author.

Paul (as I know him) and I attended the same religious college together in Regina, Saskatchewan way back in the 1970s. We kept in touch with Christmas letters up until 1996, when I visited him and his wife Kim on a Western Canada tour with Spectrum. At the time he lived in Boring, Oregon (a noun, not an adjective, he clarifies in the Acknowledgements to his novel). I was traveling as far as Vancouver, so I swung down and spent a day and a half

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with him and his family.

I was right in the middle of my own spiritual shift, and realized that what I ventured to share about my journey was causing him to feel sorry for me. God was obviously very real to him, and I was missing out on the greatest relationship in the world.

We drifted apart after that, though we exchanged the occasional Christmas greeting. In 2005 he surprised me with an early draft of *The Shack*. I'm sorry to say I didn't read it, much less respond. I've certainly read it now, and have even led a discussion on it at one of our Media That Matters nights.

A Progressive Evangelical

In May 2009 I attended a conference in Toronto with Paul as one of the keynote speakers. Afterwards he greeted me with a huge hug and we went out for coffee. I told him how much I respect and recommend his book, even though my understanding of God is more metaphorical than his. Just as I'm sure he hopes I will re-discover God as a personal Being, I told him if he ever has any doubts about such a Being, to keep promoting the ideals his novel captures.

Five months later I went to Toronto to hear him again, this time in a United Church. I was surprised that a United

Sophia

Church would bring in someone with such a strong faith in God as a living Being. I was curious how he would be received.

Paul didn't know I was coming and the church was so full he couldn't see me at the back. During the Q&A, I stood up and said, "Hi, Paul. It's me, Keith." To the audience I said, "This is the second time I've driven down from Wiarnton to hear Paul speak. I don't know if that makes me a groupie or not, but I'm certainly a fan of his and his book.

"Paul and I went to the same college together. If *progressive* means being open to new ideas and thinking outside the box, I see Paul as a progressive Evangelical, while I've become a progressive Liberal and in fact a post-Christian, believing in God as a higher Ideal.

"My question to Paul is this. Allow me to bring C. S. Lewis into my question. If in the long run we discover that you are closer to the truth than I am, will God or Papa or Aslan accept someone like me or anyone else in this audience who happens to follow Tash,¹ or who believes in God as a metaphor for Goodness?"

I wanted the audience to hear what I thought would be his answer, based on his novel. I was right. "Absolutely," he said. You don't hear that from many Evangelicals.

SEISMIC SHIFT: From God to Goodness

A Remarkable Novel

The Shack is a remarkable book. The cover describes it this way:

Mackenzie Allen Philip's youngest daughter, Missy, has been abducted during a family vacation and evidence that she may have been brutally murdered is found in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Four years later, in the midst of his Great Sadness, Mack receives a suspicious note, apparently from God, inviting him back to that shack for a weekend.

Against his better judgment he arrives at the shack on a wintry afternoon and walks back into his darkest nightmare. What he finds there will change Mack's world forever.

In a world where religion seems to grow increasingly irrelevant THE SHACK wrestles with the timeless question: *Where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?* The answers Mack gets will astound you and perhaps transform you as much as it did him.²

The novel addresses The Great Sadness that settles on many of us because of tragic events or disappointments in our lives. It has been compared to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and as such is primarily for Christians, especially Christians who take the Bible more literally than metaphorically. And it presents God as a Being (three Beings,

Sophia

actually, Papa, Jesus and Sarayu, as members of the Trinity) full of love, forgiveness and compassion. I can see why it is striking a chord in people who are hurting or disillusioned with life or with so much of what passes for Christianity. I'm not surprised it has sold over 18 million copies.

If, though, you don't experience or believe in God as a personal Being, but as the personification of Goodness, you can still get a lot out of this book. In fact, the author makes it easy to do so.

Two-thirds of the way through the novel, he introduces a character into the story as real as the members of the Trinity. When Mack leaves her, he discovers that his constant companion, The Great Sadness, is gone. He reconnects with Jesus, who asks:

“So, how was your time with Sophia?”

“Sophia? Ahh, so that's who she is!” exclaimed Mack. Then a perplexed look came across his face. “But doesn't that make four of you? Is she God too?”

Jesus laughed. “No Mack. There are only three of us. Sophia is a personification of Papa's wisdom.”³

In the same way that Sophia is the personification of God's wisdom, it is possible to view Papa as the personification of love (love of others and self), Jesus as the personification of forgiveness (of self and others), and Sarayu as the personification of grace and wonder. These ideals, incarnated into our lives, can transform us without needing

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to be embodied in divine personalities.

Like Mother Teresa, more and more people of faith struggle with why they're not experiencing God as a supernatural Lover. Many experience silence or darkness where they expected to find love and fellowship. Many wonder why encounters like Mack had at the shack only happen in dream-like states (or in a coma, as Tony experiences in Paul Young's latest novel, *Cross Roads*⁴).

Even Willie, author of Mack's story, ends his story with, "Well, there you have it—at least as it was told to me. . . . Do I think that it's true? I want all of it to be true. Perhaps if some of it is not actually true in one sense, it is still true nonetheless—if you know what I mean."⁵

If you are one of those people who wonder why you've never had a visit from Papa, Jesus or Sarayu, I invite you to make the shift from God as a supernatural Being to God as a metaphor for Goodness, from God as a higher Being to God as a higher Ideal, and then live out the ideals that are personified in this inspiring book.

A complete copy of *Seismic Shift: From God to Goodness* in paperback can be ordered from www.seismicshift.ca by sending an email to info@seismicshift.ca with your name and mailing address. Books from SeismicShift.ca are \$15 each or 2 for \$25 (no taxes), plus mailing costs (currently \$4 within Canada and \$8 to the US per book). An invoice will be sent with your book.

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For more information about the book, and *Seismic Shift: Spirituality for the Rest of Us* (a multimedia presentation by Spectrum A&E Media that will soon be available on DVD), visit www.SeismicShift.ca.

To give feedback to the author, email Keith Martin at kmartin@seismicshift.ca or connect with him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/KeithMartinSeismicShift, where “the journey continues.” To inquire about the author speaking to your group or showing the multimedia presentation followed by questions and responses, email kmartin@seismicshift.ca or call 519-534-9188.