

SEISMIC SHIFT

The novel

Probing the mystery of God and life

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

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Keith Martin

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

SEISMIC SHIFT:

The novel
by Keith Martin

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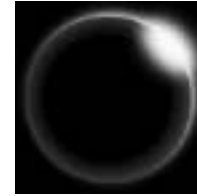
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Chapter 1:
GOD. WHERE ARE YOU?

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



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 Philip could not sleep. He 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 Rwanda genocide for Philip was what the Jewish Holocaust was for many of his parents' generation. It was a slap across the face to wake up and re-examine his faith, for in 1994 Philip was a believer—a Christian believer. He believed in God as a supernatural Being who created and sustains life, including those children in Rwanda.

I met Philip in 1998 during intermission at a play in Toronto. The play was called *Racing Demon* by David Hare, performed at the Royal Alexander Theatre. It portrayed the struggle of four clergymen to make sense of their mission in life.

The play's opening monologue grabbed us both.

“God. Where are you? I wish you would talk to me. God. It isn't just me. There is a general feeling. This is what people are saying in the parish. They want to know where you are. The joke wears thin. You must see that. You never say anything. . . . It's this perpetual absence — yes? — this not being here — it's that — I mean, let's be honest — it's just beginning to get some of us down. . . . There are an awful lot of people in a very bad way. And they need something beside silence. God. Do you understand?”

Philip and I began a friendship that night that lasted almost 20 years. At first his ideas troubled me, for I was still a believer like he had been. But through our visits and a few emails, he helped me tremendously to arrive strug-

God. Where Are You?

gling and resisting, if not kicking and screaming, to a new understanding of God and life.

This is his story, at least as he told it to me.

* * *

Philip was raised in an evangelical Christian home. His parents were not fundamentalists but did view the Bible as the inspired Word of God and Jesus as the Son of God sent to be our Saviour and Lord. Evangelicals believe that all mankind needs the “evangel” or “gospel” or “good news” that God so loved the world that He gave us Jesus to save us from our sins and give us eternal life.

Philip was born in Israel, where his parents were missionaries obeying what they called The Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” As Philip said the night we met, “My parents were in Israel seeking to persuade Jews to follow a Jew.”

In university Philip became an agnostic, not sure if God really existed. He was drawn to ‘philosophers’ like Woody Allen who famously said, “Not only is there no God, but try finding a plumber on weekends.” But as Philip read authors like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the idea that “if God does not exist, everything is permissible” troubled him. Not wanting to live in a universe without a basis for goodness or morality, he was re-

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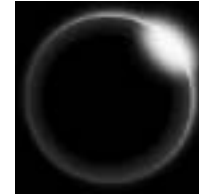
luctant to let go of God. Through the influence of writers like C. S. Lewis, who started out as an atheist and became a Christian, and Francis Schaeffer, who offered a rational ‘apologetic’ or defense of Christianity, he embraced a more thoughtful evangelical worldview.

This is the worldview or ‘map of reality’ that worked for Philip until 1994. If *seismic* means “having a strong or widespread impact; earthshaking,” Philip’s worldview would soon undergo a seismic shift.

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



Over coffee after *Racing Demon*, Philip told me why the Rwanda genocide shook his faith so deeply even though similar atrocities have been going on for centuries.

“My belief in God was always about God being a supernatural Father or Mother, not a Big Brother, the way many atheists describe God—and then treat as a Dictator or Puppeteer. For me God by definition had to be good to be capable of creating humans that could be good.”

When people accuse God of being “jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homo-

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phobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (to quote Richard Dawkins’ description of the God of the Old Testament in his book *The God Delusion*, written eight years after Philip and I met), Philip would say these are human interpretations of God that reflect the character and phobias of the writers, not the nature of God if God exists.

“Reading in the newspaper about Tutsi women and children being slaughtered by militant Hutus *at the same time as I was believing in God as a loving, caring Being* did a number on me,” said Philip.

“‘God, where are you?’ I remember praying. ‘Why aren’t you protecting these people? How can you be answering prayers for things like guidance or healing and not answer prayers for *life?*’”

I, too, had been raised evangelical. But lately I’d become more liberal in my understanding of God, Jesus and the Bible. While the Bible was no longer “the inspired word of God for all time” but a record of what people back then believed, and Jesus was a Hebrew prophet rather than the divine Son of God, I still believed in God as a supernatural Being. So I asked Philip, “But what about when prayer *is* answered? Isn’t one answered prayer evidence that Someone is there, even if many prayers go unanswered?”

“Yes,” said Philip, “if there’s no other way to explain that answered prayer. But as I’ve become more honest with myself, I realize most answered prayers can be explained as coincidence or wishful thinking. And if God really hears and welcomes our prayers, I felt my prayer for those women and children in Rwanda needed either an answer or an explanation.”

Philip seemed to shift gears. “Are you familiar with the book, *The Road Less Traveled*, by Scott Peck?”

“Yes,” I replied. I had read it soon after it was published. “It’s one of my favourite books. A classic.”

“Well as you know, the book is about love and spiritual growth. In it Peck defines love as ‘the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.’ 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.

Pulling out his e-reader, one of the first to hit the market, Philip opened up the book.

“Although truth and reality may not always be as easy to discern as Scott Peck implies, this is why, in his words, 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 equipped we are to deal with the world.’

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“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.’

“Our view of reality, however, is not a given,” said Philip. “And it needs to change as we grow. In Peck’s words, ‘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.’”

“No kidding,” I said. “I’ve been revising my own map of God from an evangelical one to a more liberal one, which is not easy when your family and most of your friends are evangelical.” But I still believed in some kind of a supreme Being. I was not ready to let go of that.

Philip continued. “Mental health, which Peck equates with spiritual health, depends on making revisions to our maps. As Peck puts it, ‘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.’”

Our waiter came by with more coffee, warming up our mugs and enabling us to warm our hands again as we cupped our mugs.

Life is a Highway

Philip was not through talking about roads and traveling.

“After university I attended seminary and received a Master of Divinity degree—a rather presumptuous title to confer on any human being. During the 1980s I was on staff with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational organization 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.”

Philip sketched a cross section of a road on a napkin.

“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 worldview ditches—ditches of thought and behaviour whose maps of reality are inadequate to help us navigate through life.

“Like fundamentalism?” I said.

“Yes. 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.

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“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 his seminary professors described 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.”

I could see where Philip was going with this and added, “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.”

“Exactly,” said Philip. In between liberalism and fundamentalism Philip 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. Philip often used the term *Judeo-Christianity* to describe what traditional Christianity, Judaism and even Islam have in common.

“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

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best summed up by Francis Schaeffer, who had a major influence on me in my college days. Schaeffer described spirituality as two bows, as in bowing to royalty: the reality bow and the moral bow.

“The reality bow meant bowing to the reality that is all around us: that we are not God, that we are not the Creator, that we are creatures before God and are meant to live for and in harmony with God.

“The moral bow meant bowing to the revelation that God is a moral God, that we are not always moral, and that we need God’s forgiveness and strength to live as God intended. This, as I understood things back then, was the core of what Christ, Abraham and Mohammed taught and believed.”

“I guess that’s what I believe as well,” I said.

Philip leaned in on his elbows.

“Even before the Rwanda genocide, I started to get honest about this map. What others might call a midlife crisis of 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.

Philip sketched a road with two levels, one rising above the other.

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“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. 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.’

“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 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 being honest with myself.”

“Now you're sounding like the play we just saw,” I said, “and raising questions about my own experience of God,” I thought.

“Here was a real mystery,” continued Philip. “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 know humans are real and what they are trying to say to me, even if I misunderstand them sometimes, because

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when they speak I know it is *them* speaking, not me. But with God it's different. I have to 'discern' what God is saying, setting aside my own thoughts, the thoughts of others and even 'voices of darkness,' and try to sense what the Spirit of God is or is not saying. I can never be sure."

I silently admitted having the same dilemma.

"The Bible is full of encounters 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?"

"Shit," I thought. "Why can't I think of one either? Especially when some people are so sure they've had one."

Philip leaned back in his chair.

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

At a much deeper level than anything he had experienced in university, Philip started to feel God's silence as keenly as his desire to know God. He now understood what Jean-Paul Sartre meant when he said, "That God is silent, I

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cannot deny. That everything within me cries out for God, I cannot forget.”

I needed a break to clear my head and let the coffee pass on through.

“If you’re sadder when your bladder is fatter, you’ll be gladder when your bladder is flatter,” I philosophized on my return.

Philip smiled.

Years later he told me that when he read the letters of Mother Teresa published in *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, his heart went out to her in a way he 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.

With his e-reader Philip showed me this passage:

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.

“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 experi-

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ence 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," said Philip.

For months Philip also 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," said Philip. "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?"

Philip, too, could have clung to his map, not of the solar system but of God, and just ignored any evidence to the contrary. But the silence he was experiencing forced him to re-examine that map and eventually to revise it.

It was Philip's turn for some relief. Alone again for a few minutes, I realized Philip's journey was raising some unsettling questions that I knew I had to wrestle with. Why *doesn't* God protect us when it's a matter of life and death? And if God is not real, what purpose or meaning can life

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have if there is No-one behind the universe and the evolutionary process?

“Either ‘walking in fellowship with God’ is a higher road which I have not yet attained, but might as I grow spiritually,” Philip said on his return, “or it is a metaphor for the lower road that I am already experiencing.

“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. And I find experiences like an orgasm almost too pleasurable to have simply evolved and not be an act of creation. But I don’t sense a Creator seeking to relate to me personally—even during an orgasm! I’m drawn to the *idea* of a Creator when I wonder how everything came into being. In fact, I can’t grasp with my finite brain how everything could have come from nothing, with or without a Big Bang. 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.”

Philip paused.

“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?”

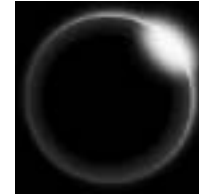
“What if, instead of what atheists call a God *delusion*, I was part of a God *personification*—a personifying of something godlike into a personal Being we call God. That would explain not only why belief in God is so widespread, without implying that believers in God are deluded, but also why more and more people are outgrowing that belief.”

It was almost midnight, time to wrap up our first of several mind-stretching conversations. As I headed towards the subway alone and in the dark, I wondered if I was willing to revise my map of God as honestly as Philip had.

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."

Philip



The next time Philip and I met was in 2001, when he introduced me to his wife Grace. 9/11 had just happened and we realized that an act of terrorism could end either of our lives anytime, with no chance for further conversation, much less to say goodbye. We met at a café on The Danforth.

Philip's wife Grace was born in Brooklyn, New York and grew up in New Jersey. She had been raised Catholic and became an evangelical in high school through a church youth group. She and Philip met at Nyack College, a Christian liberal arts college on the Hudson River. She too was revising her map of reality to fit her experience of reality.

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To Philip 9/11 was another example of tragic deaths caused not by an ‘act of God’ (as insurance companies like to call natural disasters), but by an act of humans in the name of God (a murderous God) that could have been prevented by an act of God (a compassionate God), if God is a supernatural Being that loves and cares for us.

“If, however, God is not a Person but a personification of something, I can no more fault God for not protecting those 3,000 victims than I can fault Mother Earth for not protecting humans during natural disasters.”

Since our last conversation, Philip’s worldview had continued to evolve, unlike so many people who keep believing what worked for them when they were younger even if they have doubts about it later in life. I had to admit I was doing the latter with my belief in God.

For years Philip believed in God as a supernatural Being or Person. And for years he believed he was experiencing God as a supernatural Person. But now he 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?”

Philip used mother earth language all the time. But he used it as a metaphor—a metaphor for the life-giving nature of the earth, and as a reminder to treat the earth as he treated his own mother, with love and respect. He didn’t

For Goodness' Sake

believe the earth was a living, conscious being itself, though he wished it was.

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

“Whether or not the earth is a person,” said Philip, “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.”

Philip had long realized that 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, he always felt a greater kinship with New Age or New Spirituality thinkers who respect the earth than with many people of his own faith background who treat the earth as something to be used and dominated.

“What if *God* is a metaphor as well,” he wondered. “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

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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.”

Philip often wrote the word “Goodness” with a capital “G.” It was his way of meaning more than just aspiring to be good. He meant *bowing* to Goodness the way religious people bow to God. He meant letting Goodness in all its forms—love, justice, compassion, mercy, kindness, etc.—guide and govern his life the way many faiths say God should govern our lives.

“But what about the dilemma you wrestled with in university,” I asked, “that if God does not exist, everything is permissible? How can goodness or morality be real if there is no good God as a moral grounding for goodness?”

“I will admit I no longer have an absolute basis for goodness like I thought I had when I believed in a supernaturally good Being. But that no longer troubles me. In fact, you can make a case that if God *does* exist everything is permissible—that anything can be declared the will of God whether humans view it as moral or immoral.

“My basis for goodness and morality is my observation that most people live or want to live by the Golden Rule, even people who say goodness is an illusion. As humans

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we want to be treated in a good way. So it makes sense to treat others the way we want to be treated.

“Furthermore, as the response of most people to 9/11 illustrates, goodness *is* real. So real, in fact, that we decide what we can and can't believe about God or Allah *based* on our understanding of goodness, not the other way around. We reject certain claims about who God is or what God wants from us based on whether we can imagine a good God wanting us to do that.”

Dammit, I thought. Another reason for my belief in God was being challenged.

“People ask me if believing in God as a metaphor for Goodness means I'm always good?” continued Philip, with a look of incredulity. “Far from it. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, ‘The line separating good and evil passes . . . right through every human heart,’ as does the line between right and wrong. Almost every day I 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.”

“I can attest to that,” said Grace with a smile.

Philip continued. “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,

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at least some of those times.”

I admired Philip’s honesty about his own failures.

“If God is a metaphor for Goodness,” he added, “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.”

Philip saw this connection between God and goodness as almost instinctive. When people are amazed at something they often interchange the words, “Oh, my God!” with “Oh, my goodness!” or “For God’s sake” with “For goodness’ sake.”

Our waitress seemed to be coming by our table more often than usual, possibly trying to catch snippets of our conversation. I flagged her for some water.

The year before Philip and I met, he and Grace had adopted a little boy, Achimah. Philip would never forget the day they met their son. It was December 9, 1997. Achimah was two and a half years old. Philip and Grace were selected to be his adoptive parents just two weeks before his third Christmas and began their visits to his foster home that evening. Within ten minutes he was in Philip’s lap, happy and relaxed and wanting to play. They were committed to loving him before they even met him. But that evening they fell in love with him.

Near the end of the visit, Achimah’s foster mom said it was time for a new diaper. Off he went upstairs to get one.

For Goodness' Sake

A minute later he came sliding down the stairs on his stomach (“feet first, thank God,” said Philip) so fast and with such a rumbling sound Philip and Grace nearly had heart attacks. His foster mom quickly assured them this was how he navigated stairs and that it was perfectly safe, especially when the stairs are carpeted. Fortunately their stairs at home were also carpeted, since Achimah 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 Philip. Immediately Grace said, “I like this kid!” And so Philip got his first of many chances to change Achimah’s diaper.

The visits went so well that five days before Christmas they got to take Achimah home for good.

Because it was Christmas, one of the first songs Achimah 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.”

“Only now,” said Philip, “after so many 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 realize

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that 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,” he said. And by myths he didn’t mean fables. He meant words and stories that point towards and shed light on the mysteries of life we're all trying to understand.

That’s why Philip and Grace were raising Achimah to believe in the myth or story of Santa Claus. Philip admitted he felt a little guilty on Christmas Eve, helping his son put out milk and cookies for Santa and a carrot for Rudolph, eating everything but the carrot stub after he went to bed, and then pretending the next morning that Santa had found the treats when he came down their 8-inch wide chimney and out their natural gas fireplace.

He knew, though, that his children (he and Grace adopted a daughter the following year) would outgrow the literal story soon enough. And when they did, he was 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.

“We also read the Christmas story from the Bible about the birth of Jesus Christ,” said Grace. “But as we read about angels visiting and singing to the shepherds, and a star guiding the wise men and stopping over Bethlehem,

we couldn't read it as literal history the way it was read to us as children.

“Either these are dimensions of reality we no longer experience, or they are symbols of how special and spiritual Jesus was, how good and sacred he was.”

Our waitress returned to see what we wanted for dessert. When dessert arrived, Philip asked, “Are you familiar with *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis?”

“Yes,” I replied. I had read the first three to my son, Ryan and watched the BBC TV production of the first four books. And in 2005, 2008 and 2010 I would see the commercial movie adaptations of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

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

As Philip's map of God changed, he 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 Christi-

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

anity 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,” said Philip. “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.” In the words of the movie, Philip was seeking to take some of the lessons he 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 way Islam is named after the word for Surrender instead of after Mohammed, I think I could still be part of this faith,” said Philip. “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 one man who lived 2,000 years ago.”

When Philip believed in God as a supernatural Being, it made sense that this Being could have become human to show us how to live. But if there is no supernatural Being, then there can be no Son of that Being as traditionally taught.

For Goodness' Sake

“Even if God is a real Being, it still makes more sense that Jesus was a human being elevated to the status of Son of God than a divine being. Only 150 years ago George Washington was elevated to a god in The Apotheosis of Washington painted on the ceiling of the rotunda in the United States Capital Building in Washington. No American I’ve met believes he was more than human. So you can be a Christian today and believe Jesus was likewise human, not divine, elevated by his followers to the status of Son of God. Even Roman emperors were considered sons of God and no one believes they were divine.”

In one sense Philip still saw himself as Christian, if not *a* Christian. Just as he thought in English, even though there are many other languages to think in, when he thought about the mystery we call God and how we should live our lives, he often thought in Christian symbols. That was the language and story in which he was raised. That is what he could relate to most easily. And that is why he respected progressive Christians who have chosen to stay within the faith and seek to redefine what those symbols can mean for people today.

In a book Philip recommended called *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg, a progressive Christian, 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*

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paradigm, with its metaphorical understanding. For Borg 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."

Philip opened up the book on his e-reader. "Here's how Borg puts it. '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.'"

"When I first read this," said Philip, "I thought immediately of my sister Ruth, who would be lost without her faith in a loving, heavenly Caregiver, a faith that has sustained her through very challenging situations and made her a more compassionate person."

For millions of others, however, the earlier paradigm no longer works and has become a barrier to spirituality. Just as the Ptolemaic paradigm of the solar system with the earth at the centre no longer worked when the Copernican paradigm with the sun at the centre was proposed, millions of Christians and people of other faiths have shifted to a more metaphorical paradigm to make sense of their faith.

It was time to wrap up our visit. I thanked Grace for joining us and wished them my best in raising their son. As we parted company, Philip gave me a taste of what we

For Goodness' Sake

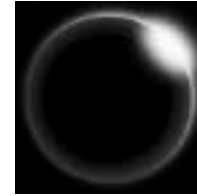
would talk about the next time we got together.

“For me, one of the most helpful maps or metaphors to describe God has always been the sun. 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



In 2005 my wife Jenny and I, with our children Ryan and Carol-Lee, moved from Toronto to Wiarton, Ontario, home of Wiarton Willie, Canada's albino groundhog and weather prognosticator. We wanted to live closer to nature and all that the Bruce Peninsula offered.

We bought a house that needed a lot of work but was almost twice the size of what we had in Toronto for a third the price, with a big enough yard for a trampoline and a skating rink for our kids.

Realizing we had never taken Ryan and Carol-Lee up the CN Tower while we lived in Toronto, the next year we returned as tourists. Jenny and I took in a Crosby, Stills,

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

Nash and Young concert at the Air Canada Centre and the next day we took our children up the CN Tower. Before we headed home I managed to squeeze in lunch with Philip while Jenny, Ryan and Carol-Lee visited friends.

Philip's big news was that they had adopted another child after our last visit, a beautiful girl they named after Grace. She was almost six when they adopted her and was now nine. "She has a strong will and can be oppositional, but is very caring and has leadership potential," he said.

I told Philip about the Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young concert the night before, where they performed songs from Neil Young's new album, *Living With War*. One of the songs began with "Let's impeach the president for lying and misleading our country into war." It was harder for someone to say, "What right does a Canadian have to sing this?" when two of the four singers were American.

To Philip the Iraq war was another example of a tragic loss of human life that the God he used to believe in could have prevented. In the Old Testament God enabled Joseph to win favour with Pharaoh and prepare Egypt for a coming famine, thereby sparing thousands of Egyptian lives and Joseph's own Hebrew family.

"A God-inspired or simply wise advisor to George Bush could have kept America from going to war in Iraq, sparing the lives of 4,500 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians. But as you know, I no longer

Invisible Sun

believe in such a God.”

We ordered lunch and Philip picked up where we left off five years earlier, knowing this visit would have to be shorter.

“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,” he said.

“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. 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. We may *treat* the sun like a person, as the ancient Egyptians did, turning it into a Sun God. But that is not its nature.

“Because the sun is not a person, we cannot relate to it or converse with it like we can with a person. We 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.”

Our lunch arrived sooner than we expected.

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“When a storm hits, no amount of praying to the sun will cause the sun to stop the storm,” continued Philip. “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.

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

“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 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."

"But what about free will?" I asked. "If God created us with free will who could be agents of good or evil, doesn't He or She have to honour that and let us make our own choices even if they are sometimes bad ones?"

"You mean like parents do when raising children," said Philip. "I agree 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, in-

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

cluding children, every day.

“People who believe in God as a real Being say God sees and cares about tragedies like Rwanda and will sort it out in the end, ensuring that those who caused the suffering, pain and death get justice and the innocent get their reward in heaven. But what would you think of me as a human father if I let my children fight and even kill each other and said justice will be meted out after they’re dead. You would call Children’s Aid and have me charged with neglect. Parents are supposed to protect and shield their children from harm. So why do we accept less from a heavenly Father or Mother?”

Why *do* I accept less, I thought. I still hoped God had good reasons for not intervening in genocides, holocausts, and the rape and murder of women and children.

Philip said he no longer has 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, we don’t expect Justice to come riding in on a white horse to save the day. We know that Justice needs to be incarnated in people who will act justly, in order for justice to prevail.”

Invisible Sun

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

Now, with his new map of God, when Philip longs for God to spare someone he loves from cancer, he knows that a good doctor, good treatment and the healing power of life itself is needed, or the cancer will end a good life.

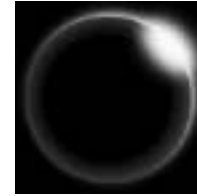
“Remember that song written by Sting when he was part of The Police? ‘There has to be an invisible Sun which gives us hope when the whole day's done.’ What gives me light, warmth and hope in the midst of a pretty dark world at times is a moral and spiritual sun, a moral and spiritual ideal, that some call God and some call Goodness. I now believe these are two names for the same reality.”

It was time for me to pick up Jenny and our children and head home to Wiarton. Little did Philip and I know it would be a decade before we saw each other again. But Philip had already given me enough to think about for those ten years. By the time we saw each other again my own beliefs about God and life would have changed radically.

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



Living in different cities and raising young families made it difficult for Philip and me to get together. We exchanged emails now and then but didn't see each other again until 2017, when he was in Waterloo where I was working one day a week. He invited me to see a movie called *The Shack*.

Prior to watching the movie he gave me some background. In 2008 a novel by the same name appeared on the New York Times bestseller Fiction List, written by William Paul Young. Philip might not have paid much attention to it had he not realized that he knew the author.

Paul (as Philip knew him) and Philip attended the same

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

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

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

They drifted apart after that, though they exchanged the occasional Christmas greeting. In 2005 Paul surprised Philip with an early draft of *The Shack*. He was sorry to say he didn't read it, much less respond. "I've certainly read it now, and have even led a discussion on it," said Philip.

In May 2009 Philip attended a conference in Toronto with Paul as one of the keynote speakers. Afterwards Paul greeted him with a huge hug and they went out for coffee. Philip told him how much he respected and recommended his book, even though his own understanding of God was more metaphorical than Paul's. Just as Paul hoped Philip would re-discover God as a personal Being, Philip told him if he ever had any doubts about such a Being, to keep pro-

moting the ideals his novel captures.

Five months later Philip went to Mississauga to hear Paul again, this time at a United Church. Philip was surprised that an urban United Church would bring in someone with such a strong faith in God as a living Being. He was curious how Paul would be received.

Paul didn't know Philip was coming and the church was so full he couldn't see him at the back. During the Q&A, Philip stood up and said, "Hi, Paul. It's me, Philip." To the audience he said, "This is the second time I've come to hear Paul speak. I don't know if that makes me a groupie or not, but I'm certainly a fan of him and of 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 [a rival of Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*], or who believes in God as a metaphor for Goodness?"

Philip wanted the audience to hear what he thought would be Paul's answer, based on his novel. He was right.

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

“Absolutely,” Paul said. You don’t hear that from many Evangelicals.

The Shack, according to Philip, is a remarkable movie based on a remarkable book, which is why he wanted me to see it. After suffering a family tragedy, Mack Philips, played by Sam Worthington, spirals into a deep depression causing him to question his beliefs. He receives a mysterious letter inviting him to an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Despite his doubts, Mack goes to the shack and encounters a trio of strangers led by a woman named Papa, played by Octavia Spencer. There Mack discovers important truths that transform his understanding of his tragedy and change his life forever.

The cover of the book describes the story 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.

Sophia

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.

Philip was right. *The Shack* is a remarkable movie. I exited the theatre deep in thought. We drove over to the Lion Brewery Restaurant at the Huether Hotel and ordered drinks.

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

“For someone like me who doesn't experience or believe in God as a personal Being, but as the personification of Goodness, I can still get a lot out of this story,” said Philip. “In fact, the author makes it easy to do so.”

“Remember how two-thirds of the way through the sto-

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ry Paul introduces another character just as real as the members of the Trinity?”

“The woman who calls herself Wisdom?” I asked.

“Yes. In the novel she doesn’t say who she is.”

Philip pulled out his e-reader and opened to Chapter 11.

“In the novel when Mack leaves her, he discovers that his constant companion, The Great Sadness, is gone. He re-connects 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.’

“In the same way that Sophia is the personification of God’s wisdom, it is possible to view Papa as the personification of love, especially love of others and self, Jesus as the personification of forgiveness, especially forgiveness of self and others, and Sarayu as the personification of grace and wonder,” said Philip. “These ideals, incarnated into our lives, can transform us without needing to be embodied in divine persons.”

A police car with siren blazing raced by, making conversation impossible for a few seconds.

“Like Mother Teresa, more and more people raised in a theistic religious faith struggle with why they’re not expe-

riencing God as a supernatural Lover,” continued Philip. “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 the movie version implies and as Tony experiences in Paul Young’s follow-up novel, *Cross Roads*.

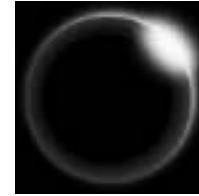
“Even Willie, the narrator of Mack’s story, ends his story with, ‘Well, there you have it—at least as it was told to me. . . . Do I think that it’s true? I want all of it to be true. Perhaps if some of it is not actually true in one sense, it is still true nonetheless—if you know what I mean.’”

Philip made one more comment about the movie. “For those who wonder why they’ve never had a visit from Papa, Jesus or Sarayu, I hope they can 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 movie.”

Chapter 6:
LIFE AFTER GOD

Now—here is my secret: My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

Douglas Coupland
Life After God



We had gone to an early screening of *The Shack*, so the night was still young. We ordered more drinks and I asked Philip how his thinking had progressed since our lunch after the CN Tower.

He told me about a book by Douglas Coupland called *Life After God*. “That’s a good way to describe where I’m at these days, in both senses of the word *after*.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m living *post* God. Remember that quote by Sartre I mentioned the night we first met? ‘That God is silent, I cannot deny.’ That God is silent because God may not be a supernatural Being is even more unsettling. For if God is not a supernatural Being or Person

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then either God does not exist or God is just another word for Energy or Ultimate Reality.

“More and more I feel like a ‘post-believer,’ a post-Christian, or at the very least, a ‘believer in exile.’ When I hear the word God, in scriptures, in hymns, in everyday conversation, I have to substitute the word Goodness, Love or Justice for the statement to have any meaning.

“When I focus on this kind of life after God, I feel less and less at ease around traditional believers. I have to keep translating what they are saying to make sense of it. And I know many of them see me as falling off the road into the left-hand ditch I described that night.

“But sometimes I feel like I’m still living *in pursuit of* God. ‘That everything within me cries out for God, I cannot forget,’ was how Sartre put it. I, too, find myself longing for, crying out for, even pursuing after God. But now I understand that when I long for and pursue Goodness, I *am* pursuing God.

“So while part of me feels like a post-believer, another part of me is seeking to live my life as a deeper believer, a beyond-Christianity believer, a believer in a more symbolic and metaphorical God.

“Even though I’ve become nonreligious I still consider myself a person of faith—not in religious beliefs but in life-enhancing values. And as a person of faith I seek to incarnate or bring into being what God symbolizes for

me—that core of Goodness in the universe—in my life and my relationships.

“When I focus on this kind of life after God, I feel a new kinship with believers who believe in God as a supernatural Being, as long as their faith results in genuine goodness in our world, as long as they respect why I can't believe as they do, and as long as they are genuinely trying to live by the Golden Rule.”

This was the first time I heard Philip call himself non-religious.

“I may no longer be religious but I'm not anti-religious. I know from experience that religion can lead people to life-enhancing values. It can also lead to harmful values and become poisonous, which is why so many people see religion as something that needs to die.

“My biggest problem with many religions is that while they all promote the Golden Rule, many of them don't practice it. When it comes to women or LGBTQ people, for example, many of them do not treat others the way they would want to be treated if they were female or gay.”

“How true,” I said.

“As far as whether we perceive God as a real Being or as a metaphor for Goodness,” he continued, “more and more I long to see spiritual people on both sides of the God-language fence accept and respect each other's use or non-use of such language. Just as I hope traditional believ-

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

ers will try to understand why I can't relate to God as a personal Being, I need to accept that for them God *is* experienced this way, and that such language is meaningful for them, even if it isn't for me or for some of their own children.

“Who knows? Maybe someday I'll experience God as a personal Being and become a theist again. I would never say categorically that God is *not* a personal Being; just that I don't *experience* God this way. Another author I respect, Brian McLaren, reminds us that we have three-pound brains that can barely understand the nature of a grain of sand, much less the nature of God.”

I admired Philip's openness to future revisions to his map.

“In fact, if God is a supernatural Being, whether or not we believe this and relate to God this way does not seem to matter to this Being. Otherwise He or She could end the argument once and for all by giving all of us an encounter like the Apostle Paul had on the road to Damascus, or like the one described in *The Shack*.

“What seems to matter is how we live. Even the writers of the Bible, who clearly believed in God as a supernatural Being, make statements that equate knowing God with godly or just conduct. ‘Your father did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy . . . Is that not what it means to know

me?’ declares the Lord.

“Another verse says ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men and women from every nation who fear him and do what is right.’

“The writers of the Bible also describe God as a loving Parent who wants us to love Him. But they leave open the possibility that to do justice *is* to love God.”

Sensing we were not going anywhere for awhile, our server came by with more coffee.

“You’ve heard me describe myself as a ‘post-Christian.’ Post-Christian has two different meanings. One refers to a person or culture that has gone through a Christian phase, has outgrown it, and no longer adheres to its teachings. We often talk about post-Christian Europe this way.

“But post-Christian can also mean moving beyond Christianity without denying the life-enhancing values it upholds. I want to stay grounded in a spirituality focused on goodness and compassion. That is what I admire about faiths like Christianity and Buddhism.

“And that is why I am restless when I read many authors promoting New Age spirituality or even nonreligious spirituality. I think they’ve lost that. For me, what they offer is not good enough because it is not focused enough on goodness. In a world with so much suffering, pain and self-centredness, *goodness* is what we need, not abundance or

SEISMIC SHIFT: The novel

prosperity, and not just oneness, transcendence or mindfulness, but goodness.”

Philip let his words sink in.

“Grace thinks I’ve become a Quaker—a post-Christian Quaker,” he clarified. “The Quakers are a Christian sect that believes *we* are the hands and feet of God. If we don’t feed the poor, improve our communities, or fight for justice, God won’t. Whether God won’t because God chooses to work through humans, or because God is not a supernatural Being and therefore can’t, the consequences are the same. For the world to be touched and healed by God or Goodness, *we* need to incarnate God or Goodness into our world.”

Philip asked if I was familiar with the Pew Research Center polling on religious patterns in North America. “Already 1 in 5 adults in America and 1 in 3 young adults under 30 say they have no religious affiliation. That’s more like 1 in 4 adults and 1 in 2 young adults in Canada. That’s a 30% increase from just 5 years ago. Nearly 20% of religiously unaffiliated people view themselves as religious, nearly 40% see themselves as spiritual but not religious, and 40% consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual. Most agnostics and atheists consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual, although that may be changing now that a famous atheist, Sam Harris, has written a book called

Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion, clearly using ‘spirituality’ in a nonreligious way.

“I’m glad he wrote that book because many people use or view the word ‘spiritual’ in a quasi-religious way, especially some authors that are part of New Age spirituality. For me spirituality is about having and living by life-enhancing values like goodness and compassion that lift our spirits, promote well-being, and enable relationships to be healthy. So I use the word in a nonreligious way as well.

“What the Pew Research Center findings tell me is that there’s a demographic shift taking place, similar to what happened in North America over the past 200 years. Many of us have ancestors that left other countries and other continents to come to North America, ‘the new world.’ In doing so they often left behind kings, queens and emperors as they became members of democratic societies that do not need, want, or believe in having a king, queen or emperor over them—except here in Canada, where we have a queen but only as a symbol, one we could easily live without.

“We in North America are no less citizens of the world than those who still have or wish they had a monarch over them. We can live by civil, just and caring values that many of our ancestors brought with them and raised us on without allegiance to a monarch.”

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I took him to mean ancestors who brought and lived by such values, not the ones who brought racist and colonial values.

“More and more people today, especially young people, are moving to a new world spiritually. They are leaving behind not only the denomination or ‘country’ they were raised in but the entire religious faith or ‘continent’ they were brought up in, becoming part of a way of life that does not need, want or believe in a deity over them. If they live by life-enhancing values that they were raised on, I believe they are no less spiritual or good than those who still believe in and base these values on a higher Being.

“If this is true, then we need ministers, chaplains, and student groups that are spiritual but not necessarily religious to assist in this demographic shift, encouraging young people to live by values like goodness and compassion whether they choose to do so as theists or nontheists.”

It was time to bring Philip up-to-date on my own journey, as he was affirming what I was already doing at two universities as a nonreligious chaplain. During the ten years since we saw each other last, I finally let go of God as a supernatural Being and Christianity as my identity and became ‘spiritual but not religious.’ And by ‘spiritual’ I mean focused on life-enhancing values like goodness and compassion.

I told him how I felt like C. S. Lewis in reverse, dragged slowly and reluctantly, if not kicking and resentful, into a nontheist and then a nonreligious mindset by the lack of evidence for a supernatural Being. I told him how my own desire for what is true won out over my desire for what is comforting, especially when it comes to believing in a heavenly Father or Mother. I told him how even deism, the belief that there is a deity that created the universe but does not interfere directly with the world—which I had rejected as offering us an uncaring God—now made more sense than the kind of theism I was raised on, that God can be petitioned and answers prayer.

I thanked him for the deep influence he had been on me by his example, and asked if I could share his story with others.

We could have ended our visit then. But knowing it might be years before we connected again we ordered some dessert and continued the daunting challenge of catching up on ten years of experience in one evening.

Philip wanted me to know that his relief that God can be viewed as metaphor did not come without a fair share of grief. As he slowly realized there might be No One out there, he felt like an orphan who had lost his parents. He felt like his son Achimah did when he discovered there was no Santa. Until he made his own shift to seeing Santa as a symbol of the spirit of Christmas, Achimah was devastated.

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And Philip was afraid he'd never believe anything his parents told him again!

“Julian Barnes begins his book, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, with the words, ‘I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him.’ To this day, just as I miss my own dad at times, I miss not being able to turn to a heavenly Dad for guidance and comfort. When I need more patience in raising my children, or wisdom in how best to provide for my family, I miss not being able to talk to a Higher Power. When I watch a movie like *Les Misérables*, I wish I could still ask ‘God on high’ to ‘hear my prayer’ and someday ‘take me home,’ as I could when I first saw the live musical in 1989.”

Philip told me he also misses what he experienced at church, a fellowship of spiritually-caring people who could help him focus on higher values than the rest of society is usually focused on. When he stopped going to church he joined Rotary for seven years, drawn by their foundation’s motto, ‘Doing Good in the World.’

“My involvement with Rotary helped fill this void to a certain extent, but it wasn’t the same. Even though there are some very spiritual and compassionate people in it, as an organization there’s not the same intent to help each other grow spiritually and become more compassionate as there is in a healthy church,” he said.

Occasionally people invite him to attend their church,

especially if it is more progressive. The only way he could be part of a church or spiritual community again, especially in a tradition like Christianity that is full of references to God as a supernatural Being, is if it embraced the concept of God as a metaphor for Goodness as being just as valid. It would have to reflect this in both its communal language and its leadership. At least one of its leaders or ministers would have to be a nontheist to assure him that both understandings of God were truly welcomed.

“I’m sure I’m not alone in this,” said Philip. “Imagine the United Church of Canada, for example, which has proven it genuinely wants to include women and gay members by accepting women and gay ministers . . . imagine if it welcomed and accepted ministers who experience God as a metaphor or not at all. Imagine if it accepted ministers for whom Christ is an example of a life of goodness, not someone to be worshipped or even followed, except as an example. Imagine church signs across Canada saying, ‘Whether you experience God as a higher Being, a higher Ideal, or not at all, you are truly welcome as we encourage each other towards life-enhancing values.’ If there was a church like that in my community, I might actually join it!”

“So would I,” I said.

As Philip’s grief from these losses subsided, and sometimes *in spite of* what he lost, he told me he experienced tremendous relief: relief at not having to reconcile his faith

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in a loving God with the kind of chaos and death that can happen anytime, anywhere; relief that he doesn't need to wrestle with why this God is not intervening when people desperately need divine protection or healing; relief that there doesn't have to be a supernatural God for goodness to be real.

“After a total eclipse, when you first see the diamond ring eclipse, there is a sense of hope and relief that the darkness has ended,” said Philip. “For many people, the struggle to believe in God as a supernatural Being can actually eclipse the goodness that is in our world by causing them to despair of both goodness and evil being real. If God won't intervene and protect children who are being hacked or shot to death, maybe it doesn't really matter that such things happen. We intuitively feel we should protect our own children, but maybe it doesn't matter whether we intervene and protect other people's children if God won't.

“If, however, God is a metaphor for Goodness, and Goodness itself is what God is all about, then in the darkest situation we can long for and fight for goodness and not agonize over why God isn't doing something.”

Philip referred again to the book by Douglas Coupland, calling it up on his e-reader. “At the end of *Life After God*, Coupland has the character narrating the story write these words: ‘Now—here is my secret: My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I

need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.’

“When I first read *Life After God*, I was a believer in God as a supernatural Being. I was impressed by Coupland's honesty. Assuming Coupland felt like his narrator, I wondered if he would ever find God, in the traditional sense.

“Now I see that what he has written is universal. We *all* need God, in the sense of Goodness. Without Goodness we are *all* incapable of giving, of being kind, of being able to love. But when we connect with Goodness, whether through traditional religious means such as faith in God, or through aligning ourselves with the Goodness that is found in Life itself, we can be instruments of goodness and spirituality that this world so desperately needs.”

With so much in the news about what was happening in America, Philip said, “I wish the American Declaration of Independence called its citizens to ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Goodness,’ especially with the current administration. Because, in fact, that is what was intended by the word ‘Happiness.’ The good of the whole was crucial to the well-being of the individual.”

It was almost time to say goodnight.

“Even though I now experience God or Goodness as a

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higher Ideal rather than a supernatural Being, sometimes Goodness almost feels like a higher power or force—a force pulling us towards itself, just as evil sometimes feels like a force pulling us away from goodness,” he said.

“Nine years before we adopted Achimah, Grace and I separated and it looked like our marriage would end. I felt a strong, almost supernatural pull towards despair, recrimination, desolation and death. For the first time in my life I felt the temptation to turn to drugs, alcohol and even suicide to numb my pain.

“But I felt an equally strong pull towards hope, forgiveness, growth and life. And in my pain I knew I had to choose. I had to choose which force to follow: despair or hope, recrimination or forgiveness, desolation or growth, death or life.

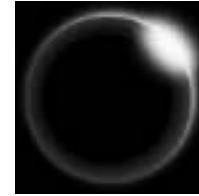
“I chose hope, forgiveness, growth and life—dimensions of Goodness or what others call God,” said Philip. “And even though pursuing Goodness is no guarantee you still won't lose what you hold dear, out of that experience came the relationships I treasure the most in my life, especially my wife and my family.”

On that note we said goodnight and I headed home to Wiaraton. I never dreamed I should have said goodbye.

Chapter 7:
COMING BACK TO LIFE

**I took a heavenly ride through our silence . . .
And headed straight into the shining sun.**

David Gilmour
Coming Back to Life



A few days after our visit in 2017, Philip sent me an email referring to his favourite band and summing up his 20 year journey.

And then he was gone. A tragic fire broke out in their home and, trying to put it out, he was overcome by smoke and died of smoke inhalation. Just like that.

At his funeral I shared his email, summarizing the first part before reading the last part.

“I’ve known Philip for almost 20 years. In his last email to me he said his favourite band since college days was Pink Floyd. He told me about a song written by David Gilmour, the main songwriter after Roger Waters left the

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band, called *Coming Back to Life*. In several ways the song parallels Philip's spiritual journey.

“‘Where were you,’ Gilmour asks, when he was burned and broken, when he was hurt and helpless. Philip asked that of God and the Christian church many times.

“‘Lost in thought, pondering on ‘this dangerous but irresistible pastime,’ Gilmour says the time has come to kill the past and come back to life. ‘I took a heavenly ride through our silence . . . and headed straight into the shining sun.’”

I then read what Philip wrote about that song.

“When I listen to this song, I imagine the famous Rodin sculpture called *The Thinker*, lost in thought, engaged in that dangerous pastime of trying to make sense out of life. Then, like the dawn of a new day, I imagine a sun rising out of the darkness on the horizon ahead of me, overlaid with words that describe different aspects of Goodness. One by one the words fade in and out of the rising sun: beauty, compassion, co-operation, courage, empathy, faithfulness, forgiveness, freedom, generosity, gentleness, honesty, hope, humility, joy, justice, kindness, love, loyalty, mercy, moderation, patience, peace, respect, responsibility, self-discipline, sensitivity, tolerance, wisdom . . .

“As I head towards this shining sun, I realize that these are the qualities and values that make life worth living, that get people out of life's ditches, that define what many of us

Coming Back to Life

mean by spirituality, that result in people and relationships coming back to Life. These are the qualities and values that make up the sun of Goodness itself, that invisible source of moral and spiritual light and warmth that you and I can answer to and belong to. These are the qualities and values that point to and give definition to the mystery we call God.

“Whether Goodness is rooted in a supernatural Being called God, or God is the personification of that Goodness, it’s the same Goodness we’re talking about. That’s what Grace and I have tried to live for. That’s what I hope my children will live for. And that’s what I hope all of us will spend the rest of our lives doing, transforming Goodness from an ideal to something real—something really present in our lives, no matter where or with whom we live.”

When the funeral was over I gave my condolences to Grace and her children and walked out into the night.

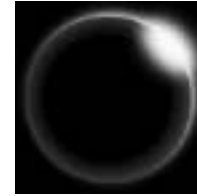
Will I ever see Philip again? Probably not. When it comes to life after death I’m agnostic. As I’ve moved in the same direction as Philip, I find it hard to believe we live on if there is no supernatural Being to bring us back from the dead. But I take comfort in the fact that Philip *will* live on for awhile—in Grace, in me, in his children, and in this novel.

Postlude

**I'd like to know the song you sing in silence
I'd like to know the vision that you follow
The secret worship
I'd like to know.**

Wally McGee & Harry Palmer
Postlude: Looking Back

Postlude



Now you know Philip's story, at least as he told it to me. If you've read my own journey in *Seismic Shift: From God to Goodness*, Philip's story will seem very familiar. In fact, Philip is my middle name. The only fiction in this story is that Philip is a separate person and that he, rather than my brother Dan, died in that fire.

This novel and my own story were written first and foremost for my own children, Ryan and Carol-Lee. If it helps others on their spiritual journey, so much the better.

Somehow it found its way into your hands or your e-reader. In the words of a song from way back when I was in college, called *Postlude: Looking Back*, I'd like to know

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what you thought.

How much does it mean to you
Is what I said still on your mind?
How much did you take with you
How many words did you leave behind?
I'd like to know which way the wind's a'blowing
I'd like to know the pathway of your searching
The secret journey
I'd like to know

If you've been helped by what I've written, I'd like to know.

How much of the gift I bring
Is given back without a care?
How much did you take inside
And give a welcome to and shelter there?
I'd like to know the song you sing in silence
I'd like to know the vision that you follow
The secret worship
I'd like to know

No matter where you are in your understanding of God, or if God is a concept you can't relate to, Philip and I hope you are committed to that which is good, loving and just in life. For Goodness' sake. For God's sake. For the sake of the community you live in. And for the sake of our wonderful but hurting world.

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: God. Where Are You?

Excerpt from *Racing Demon* by David Hare (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p 1.

Chapter 2: Life is a Highway

Excerpt from *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 31.

Excerpts from *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott Peck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 44-51.

Excerpt from *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* ed. by Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 210.

Chapter 3: For Goodness' Sake

Excerpt from *The Heart of Christianity* by Marcus Borg (New York: Harper-Collins, 1998), p. 18.

Chapter 4: Invisible Sun

Excerpt from *Invisible Sun*, lyrics and music by Sting, published by Virgin Music Inc., recorded by The Police, from the CD *Ghost in the Machine*, 1981.

Chapter 5: Sophia

Book summary and excerpt from *The Shack* by William P. Young (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), p. 171.

Chapter 6: Life After God

Excerpt from *Life After God* by Douglas Coupland (New York: Simon and Schuster Pocket Books, 1994), p. 359.

Chapter 7: Coming Back to Life

Excerpts from *Coming Back to Life*, lyrics and music by David Gilmour, published by 1994 Pink Floyd music, licensed to Sony Music Entertainment Inc., recorded by Pink

Floyd, from the CD *Division Bell*, 1994.

Postlude

Excerpts from *Postlude: Looking Back*, lyrics and music by Wally Magee and Harry Palmer, published by D'Azure Music/Karmony Lyann Musci, recorded by Ford Theatre, from the album *Trilogy for the Masses*, 1967.

* * *

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If *Seismic Shift: The novel* has been helpful to you, and you would like to respond or share some of your own journey with the author, email him at kmartin@seismicshift.ca or write to him at:

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You may also connect with him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/KeithMartinSeismicShift, where “the journey continues.”

If you received this book as a gift and would like to pay it forward, send \$10 to the address above and a copy will be given to a student at one of the universities where the author serves as a nonreligious chaplain.

For more information about the novel (available in both paperback and pdf formats), the *book Seismic Shift: From God to Goodness*, and *Seismic Shift: Spirituality for the Rest of Us*, the multimedia presentation by Spectrum A&E Media, visit www.SeismicShift.ca.

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.

Fiction

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 Chretien was prime minister of Canada.

One night in April, Philip could not sleep. He 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?

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

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: The novel is Philip's journey into that light.

Keith Martin lives on the Bruce Peninsula in Wiarton, Ontario with his wife Jenny, where they raised their children Ryan and Carol-Lee. He is the founder and director of Spectrum A&E Media and serves as a nonreligious chaplain at U. of Waterloo and U. of Guelph. He is the author of *Seismic Shift: From God to Goodness*.

For more information about both books and a companion multimedia presentation by Spectrum A&E Media entitled *Seismic Shift: Spirituality for the Rest of Us*, visit www.SeismicShift.ca.

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