

SEISMIC SHIFT: From God to Goodness

By Keith Martin

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Excerpts from Chapters 1-4 and Chapter 8

Introduction

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; 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.

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

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?

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."

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. . . . I believed that God had spoken to us through the Hebrew prophets, the Bible, and especially Jesus Christ.

(Two years earlier, as a Christian, I even produced a multimedia presentation of *Dear God*.) 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.

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

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.

"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."¹

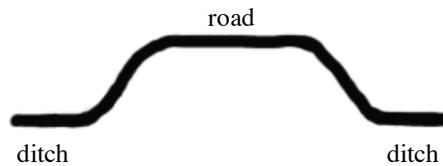
"Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are. . . . If the map is false

and inaccurate, we generally will be lost.”

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.”

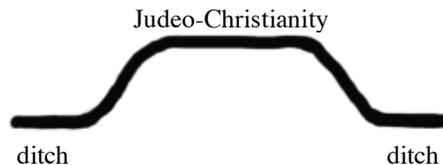
Mental health, which Peck equates with spiritual health, depends on this. “We must always hold truth, as best as we can determine it, to be more important, more vital to our self-interest, than our comfort. . . . Mental health is an on-going process of dedication to reality at all costs.”

When I was on staff with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, 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.

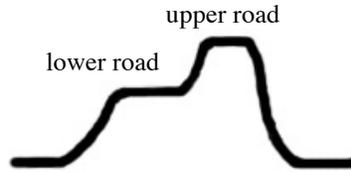


On each side of the road are the ditches. There are moral ditches, like apathy, selfishness, injustice, hate and outright evil—all the opposites of goodness, without which life and relationships do not work. And there are worldview ditches—ditches of thought and behaviour whose maps of reality are inadequate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

In between the ditches, 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 called this map or worldview *Judeo-Christianity*.



Soon after producing *Dear God*, 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.



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.” Gretta Vosper, in *With or Without God*, calls them “life-enhancing values.” 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 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?

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?

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.”

Either “walking in fellowship with God” was a higher road which I had not yet attained, but might as I grew spiritually; or it was a metaphor for the lower road that I was already experiencing.

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.

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?

I use mother earth language all the time. . . . But I use it 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. . . . I *wish* the earth was a person that could rise up against those who are abusing and raping it. . . . 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.

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 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 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.

(When we adopted our son Ryan) 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.

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.

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.

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 those symbols can mean for people today.

Many people I know and respect 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 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.'"

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.

Chapter 4: Invisible Sun

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

Sting
Invisible 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 . . . I 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, 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.

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 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 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 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.

In a 3-screen, 9-projector multimedia show we produced in the eighties called *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."

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 8: Dear Ryan and Carol-Lee

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

David Gilmour
Coming Back to Life

Dear Ryan and Carol-Lee,

I would like to address this last chapter to you.

As you know, one of my favourite bands since college days has been Pink Floyd. . . .

David Gilmour, the main songwriter after Roger Waters left the band, wrote a song called *Coming Back to Life*. In several ways it parallels my own spiritual journey.

“Where were you,” he asks, when he was burned and broken, when he was hurt and helpless. I’ve asked that of God (and the church) many times.

Lost in thought, pondering on “this dangerous but irresistible pastime,” he 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.”

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	kindness
compassion	love
co-operation	loyalty
courage	mercy
faithfulness	moderation
forgiveness	patience
freedom	peace
generosity	respect
gentleness	responsibility
honesty	self-discipline
hope	sensitivity
humility	tolerance
joy	wisdom
justice	

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 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. And these are the qualities and values that Jenny and I have sought to instill in you. Just as Grandma and Grandpa sought to instill them in me, and Nana and Poppy sought to instill them in your mom, so we hope we’ve given you a desire for them during your years with us.

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 your mom and I have tried to live for. That's what I hope you will live for. And that's what I hope you will spend the rest of your lives doing, transforming Goodness from an ideal to something real—something really present in your lives, no matter where or with whom you live.

* * *

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If 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.”

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