
The Path to Depth

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Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon Ga.,
Nurturing Faith is a book imprint of Good Faith Media (www.goodfaithmedia.org).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: # 978-1-63528-196-5

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All scripture citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
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To Marcia
Josh and Bett
Ansley, Emma Kate, Charlotte, Walker, and Ailey
Maria and James
Mary Hazel, Marcia, David, Mason, and Brock

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Preface

“The path to depth” is a simple name for the never-ending journey to a deeper life with God. A phrase that first appears in my daily prayer journals on May 6, 2007, the path to depth came to me on a small trail in a thick forest near High Falls, Georgia, when I noticed how the path I was walking kept disappearing, then reappearing, at every turn and bend; a narrow, winding way that, it occurred to me, was not unlike the path to a deeper life with God—the path to depth.

“The path to depth” sounds a little like “the path to death.” Which, in a way, it is:

...a path to death that is also a path to life; as in “We are crucified with Christ, nevertheless, we live.”

...dying to an old way of life, as Paul said in his letter to the Romans, to rise and walk in a new way of life—a deeper, wider life with God;

...what scripture sometimes calls “walking in the Spirit” or “growing in grace”;

...the life the late Mary Oliver captured so beautifully with her single simple sentence, “Another morning, and I wake, with thirst, for the goodness I do not have.”¹

For many seekers of every faith, myself among them, that is the story of our lifelong journey: thirsting for the goodness we do not yet have; longing for a deeper life with God, not because we think we must be better so we can persuade God to love us, and not because we think that the better we do in this life the more rewarded we will be in the next life.

Rather, we wake each morning with the desire to live more deeply, fully, and faithfully because, as far as we know, this is the only life we are ever going to have in this world. While no one can say for certain, as far as we know, we are not going to get to come back around, do this over, and get it right the next time. So we long to get on, and stay on, the path to depth so that we can live the one and only life we are ever going to have as deeply, fully, and faithfully as we can.

The path to depth is a narrow way; narrow, not as in exclusive, but as in centering; a lifelong reaching for a more thoughtful, mindful, centered life; praying, each day, all through the day, to be kind and gentle, brave and true.

However, while the path to depth is a narrow way, it leads to a wide place. On the path to depth, the deeper we go, the wider we grow. The longer we stay on the narrow way, the wider we draw our circle of welcome, hospitality, friendship, and grace, until, eventually, the size of the circumference of the circle of our welcome is the same as the size of the circumference of the circle of welcome around God.

I, myself, am still a seeker on the path to depth, with a far way yet to go, and much failing and growing yet to do. Which is to say that these “sermons for seekers” are not offered from a sure-footed guide on the path to depth as much as from a fellow traveler, stumbling forward, seeking a way of knowing God and loving the world that will lead, at last, to the wide place of boundless grace that awaits us all at the far end of the narrow way: the path to depth.

— Charles E. Poole
Pentecost, 2022

The way down and the way up are the same.

—Heraclitus

Acknowledgments

Tom Long, in his very helpful book, *What Shall We Say?* resurrects that beautiful old Latin phrase, *solvitur ambulando*, which means “solved by walking.”² Which, in my experience, has almost always been the case: new light on old truth coming to us slowly, eventually, while walking in the Spirit of God with the people of God—*solvitur ambulando*.

For all the people of God alongside whom I have been blessed to walk, I offer, in this space, my deepest gratitude:

- the dear and good souls at Log Cabin Baptist Church in Macon, Georgia, who formed my mother, my father, my sister, and me in ways as well as they knew;
- all the friends in each of the congregations since, who, across the years, have surrounded and supported Marcia, Joshua, Maria, and me;
- writers, thinkers, poets, and teachers I have not met in person, but who, nonetheless, have stretched my mind and spirit, leading me to places I might never have gone alone—Fred Buechner, Barbara Brown Taylor, Mary Oliver, Martin Luther King Jr., Naomi Shihab Nye, Richard Rohr, and Marilynne Robinson, to name a few—for all of whom I am deeply grateful.

Among the many guides who have helped me find my way along the path to depth, I would like to thank, in this space:

- Kirby Godsey and Walter Shurden, who have embodied the Spirit of God for me in ways that have left me forever in their debt;
- the Northminster family of faith, a congregation of dear and good souls who have gently drawn the trajectory of my life toward an arc of love and truth I might never have known without them.

To all of these, who have been walking partners on the path to depth—*solvitur ambulando* friends and teachers, mentors and guides—I offer my deepest gratitude; with special thanksgiving to, and for, Marcia, and the beloved family that has grown around us, to whom this small work is dedicated, with much love.



"Lake McDonald Twin Reflections Black and White," copyright Bruce Gourley.

Part One

The Narrow Way

Swimming Inward, Floating Outward

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Romans 12:1-8

“I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” With those words, this reading from Romans brings us to the place where the path to depth begins; those many moments in life when we open our minds to be changed by God and offer our lives to be used by God.

Paul’s call for us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds is clearly an invitation to change. Those words, “be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” call us to a life of openness; thinking, praying, pondering, asking, seeking, waiting; following the new light the Holy Spirit gives us until we are transformed, truly changed.

That life of openness to the Spirit is part of what it means to get on, and stay on, the path to a deeper life with God—opening our minds to be changed by God. And, another part of life on the path to depth is offering our lives to be used by God.

The path to a deeper life with God is not only about exploring, with our minds, the truth of God; it is also about incarnating, in our bodies, the love of God. Or, as Paul said in our scripture, “presenting our bodies as living sacrifices”—embodying the love and care of God in the world.

More than fifty years ago a group of women, all then in their thirties and forties, went to the fair grounds on High Street in Jackson, Mississippi, to take sandwiches to the Freedom Riders who had been arrested in Jackson and were being held there. One of them, now in her nineties, told me, “We went because we just knew it was the right thing to do.” To borrow Paul’s phrase, they were “presenting their bodies as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God.”

Which, Paul says, is our “spiritual worship.” “Present your bodies as living sacrifices to God,” Paul writes, “which is your spiritual worship.” All those small, simple, physical things we do that embody the love and care of God are, according to Paul, acts of spiritual worship.

Which is the way life looks on the path to a deeper life with God; the lines that once separated the physical part of our lives from the spiritual part blend, blur, and fade. The spiritual becomes physical, and the physical becomes spiritual, as we present our bodies as living sacrifices.

We get on the path to depth by opening our minds to be changed by God and by offering our lives to be used by God. And then, we spend the rest of our lives walking that same path—our minds ever open to see whatever new light the Holy Spirit gives, our bodies ever open to do the smallest acts of physical kindness.

This is the life that Mary Oliver once described as “swimming inward” and “floating outward.”³ We get up every morning and do the daily work of swimming inward; praying, each day, all through the day, to be more mindful with our words, more gentle with our judgments, more liberal in our embrace, more kind and brave, more brave and kind, until all that intentional swimming inward eventually causes us to start instinctively floating outward.

The same things we once thought impossible to do, we now find impossible not to do. Now, we are so transformed that we can’t not sit down with and stand up for the same people Jesus would sit down with and stand up for—those who are marginalized, ostracized, demonized, dehumanized, oppressed, vulnerable, left out, and alone. Now, we can’t not embody the love of God wherever life is hardest and worst: all that going deeper in our life with God causing us to grow wider in our love for the world; all that prayerful swimming inward eventually becoming a life of floating outward.