

Introduction

Most of this book I've written during the first nine months of our viral awakenings: COVID-19 and the deepened reckoning of our country's systemic racism, America's searing and formative pathology. The pandemic has widened the health and economic divide and has pulled back the curtain, revealing the need for radical changes in the social contract. It's true enough that we were all caught in the same coronavirus storm, but we soon saw that some were weathering it in ocean liners and some in inner tubes. Some, even, clinging barely to a piece of driftwood. We are in different-size vessels, facing the same storm.

The fault lines have been revealed. We've come to see that inequality is not a defect in the system. It is the system. We saw the white, rich curve flatten while the darker, poorer curve was on the rise. (I've buried many who succumbed to the virus, which includes three double funerals.) We are all trying not just to make the present bearable but the future possible. We want a different world.

Eight-year-old Dorothy Day was in San Francisco when the 1906 earthquake struck. What she remembered most was the unifying and generous response of everyone in this time of crisis. She asked herself, *Why can't we live this way all the time?*

It's a good question that we've posed to ourselves during these months. Clearly, 2020 has been our collective "annus horribilis." And yet, maybe we have also been given a new way of seeing more clearly, seeing that scarcity is a myth and abundance our newfound truth. 2020 vision. They say that when we have more than we need, instead of constructing a higher wall, we build a longer table.

Surely our nation was ailing long before the virus arrived. The pandemic didn't create our disparity, but it did exacerbate it. It's become hackneyed to say we don't want to return to "normal." We want to put a stick in the spokes of normal. With both systemic racism and poor communities of color disproportionately suffering from the virus, we all would like an invitation to a new paradigm, please. Our current times have reinforced the notion that we don't change people by arguing with them. The invitation should not enfeeble with guilt but rather enable folks to high purpose. Once we abandon "winning the argument," we can begin to make the argument with our lives.

Masked and at a distance, I participated in two marches during this period. The experiences for me seemed to obliterate long-held narratives that undergird the lie and denial that hold up a racist system. White folks, I think, felt an epiphany of our complicity in four hundred years of systemic racism, awakening in us a new language and a resolve to grow more and more antiracist. We needed to see each other with the eyes of belonging. Now we must choose to be allies as never before.



For every one of us, the pandemic didn't just alter plans, it also torpedoed identity. Who am I, after all, if how I am relational gets toppled? Giving talks, presiding at mass in detention facilities, or kicking it in my office with gang members. It all stops and there is grieving to be done. So, you lean into the grief. You

allow yourself to be curious about it. This curiosity will always lead to savoring. It will blossom into what Saint Ignatius calls "relishing." Before you know it, next stop: joy. If we're lucky, grief never leaves us where it found us.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote toward the end of his life: "If a person survives an ordinary span of sixty years or more, there is every chance that his or her life as a shapely story has ended, and all that remains to be experienced is epilogue. Life is not over, but the story is."

Epilogue. It's okay, really. Once you're a geezer, I'm not sure how "shapely" the story gets. I was interviewed on a podcast recently and the woman asked what I wanted my legacy to be, "you know, now that you're sliding into home plate?" I said that I didn't "do legacies" and that I mainly felt I was still at bat. But surrender is the order of the day, and you relinquish things all the time. Eventually, life itself.

While I write this above paragraph, I am interrupted by a call from an LAPD officer, telling me about a guy in the psych ward at White Memorial Hospital Medical Center who says the voices in his head are telling him to "kill Father Boyle." I've never met him. Apparently, he's never even been to Homeboy Industries. The officer asks if I'm "scared," meaning, I think, do I feel threatened? and if I am, he will need to pursue this. I ask him to tell the gentleman to "take a number and get in line." Not sure the cop fully appreciated my humor.

We know that the kinds of stories Jesus told were parables. A man, after a weeklong series of talks I gave at the Chautauqua Institution, told me, "I'm Irish, so don't tell me what to do; instead, tell me a story." Okay. I'm Irish, too. And besides, people hope for our attention, not our opinions. Arguments don't change minds, stories do. Jesus seemed to understand this. Parables don't tell you what to do and they have no didactic endings. After all, what's the conclusion of the Prodigal Son? The "moral

of that story” is what we put on it . . . our response to it. Parables were how Jesus tricked people into things. This book will also have parables.

Years ago, I was in the office, all alone, at 7:30 a.m., and I answered the phone.

The voice on the line said, “Hey, G. Are you there?”

I just repeated the question back to the homie on the other end. “Are . . . you . . . there?” The homie quickly recognized it as a less-than-stellar question and tried to repair things. “When I said, ‘Are you there,’ I meant, ‘Are you ALL there?’ Like, you know, right in the head?”

“Good recovery,” I told him.

I suppose this book is about being all there.

It’s not every day I get called to testify in a deportation hearing at the Federal Building. The hearing was about a kid I know named Peter, who after ten years in prison now faced being shipped back to Uzbekistan. He came to this country with his mother when he was seven years old and settled in a part of Lincoln Heights where, once he hit his teenage years, he found himself incorporated into a Latino gang. I knew him only from detention facilities. I was happy to help him not get deported.

Throughout the brief proceedings, Peter would try and jog my memory. He was seated behind a table with his lawyer. I was in the witness stand. He’d blurt out, “I was your altar server at Camp Miller.” Or another time, he said quite loudly, “I made my first community with you at Central.” Finally, the judge admonished him enough and threatened to cancel the entire hearing. (Months later they allowed him to stay in the country, and upon his release he worked at Homeboy. Some on the staff took him once to eat sushi. I asked him how he liked it. “I’m doin’ things I never done before, G. I never ate sushi. I still never been to Six Flags, and I never even been to a strip club.” Well, at least . . . cross sushi off your bucket list!)

After testifying that day, I returned to the office and ran into Mario. I knew he and Peter were from the same gang, so I asked about him. “That’s my dog right there. Yeah . . . we call him Russian Boy.” Mario continued, with a degree of excitement, to reconnect to the memory of “his dawg.” “Watcha . . . we were locked up together in County. Cellies. And he’d go out every night and talk to his mom on the pay phone. He talked . . . Russian . . . with her.” Then Mario gathers the energy a bit. “Damn, G . . . he spoke . . . the WHOLE language.”

Mario meant fluency when he said the “whole language.” I wish to suggest the same here. We are on the lookout for a fuller expression and a wider frame within which to view things. Allow the extravagant tenderness of God to wash over us. Permit the lavishing of such love to surround and fill us, then go into the world and speak the “whole language.” This is the fluency of the mystic, who chooses to live in the soul, inhabiting the tender fragrance of love. The longing of the mystic is to be at home with yourself and then put the welcome mat out so that others find a home in you. In this, we want to be “all there.” The Magi hear in a dream: “Depart by a different route.” In this book, I hope to whisper the same invitation. The whole language sees us departing by a different route.

If we’re honest, the world kind of yawns at “religion,” but snaps to attention when offered the authenticity and authority of the fluent, mystical, nondualist view. We want to both hear and speak this whole language, because, mostly, we only know the half of it. We get stuck in a partial view.

This mystical kinship, this speaking the whole language, is the exact opposite of the age in which we currently live: tribal, divisive, suspicious, anchored in the illusion of separation—unhealthy, sad, fearful, other-izing, and demonizing. Mystics replace fear with love, vindictiveness with openhearted kindness, envy with supportive affection, withering judgment with

extravagant tenderness. Now is the time, as author Brian Doyle suggests, to embrace “something other than combat.”

A mystic wants to imagine a world without prisons, for example, then set out to create that world. Prisons, after all, are where we practice exclusion. As Pope Francis says, “the only future worth building includes everyone.” At Homeboy Industries, we long to see deeply—to see homies in their soul fullness. We want to see beyond rap sheets and past behavior; beyond tattoos and trauma. We aspire to see the mystical wholeness of the other. God sees this way. Jesus sees this way. We want to see this way.

The poet Rumi writes: “Where am I going on this glorious journey? To your house, of course.” This house we create will be filled with acceptance, nonjudgment, and peace. Refining how we will love in this “house” will always be a good use of our time. A homie, working alongside his enemy in the Homeboy Bakery, told me, “I found an ease with him already.” The ease is brought to you by tenderness. We are mindful that the power of the tender heart needs to be activated always. A homie Sergio told me once, “We need to fan the flames of tenderness in each other.” Once we are reached by tenderness, we become tenderness.

This book is the last of my three Power books. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*; *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. Now this one. Like these previous works, the stories, parables, and lessons learned in this book are gleaned from my thirty-seven-year involvement with gang members and Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention, rehab, and reentry program on the planet. Like my other books, there is some theological tree climbing here, with some occasionally half-baked musings.

I find that I write like I talk. When I am speaking to a group, I give some content and ideas until I sense that eyes are starting to glaze over. Then I’ll shift to a story. My talks can be

scattershot and move from something funny to a moment that is moving. Laugh, cry, and change your mind on something. These are always my goals in a keynote address, and they are the same here. I am not the proud owner of an attention span, so that gets reflected as well. I personally like to change things up, so my assumption is that others feel the same. I could be wrong. But I write jumping from story to concept to quote to homie wisdom. I ask your indulgence and permission to explore these notions together and in this way.

Homeboy Industries, along with providing concrete help and a culture of healing and transformation to gang members, also wants to be what the world is ultimately called to become: a community of kinship and a sangha of beloved belonging. Homeboy doesn’t want to simply point something out. We want to point the way. Not just a solution, but a sign. It points the way to the power of transformation; the holiness of second chances; a commitment to demonize no one; and the power and possibility of redemption. If Homeboy were a volume, you’d have to cover your ears. Homeboy Industries reminds us that we belong to one another. There is no “Us” and “Them.” Surely, we stand with those left behind, but we also ask, what keeps them behind? Our organization wants to be the front porch of the house we all long to live in. Especially in these polarizing, tribal, and divisive times, Homeboy Industries modestly embodies a world of interconnection and relational wholeness. As the homies who now run the place often say, “We are saved by the relationship.”

I use the word “extravagant” here because our tenderness needs to be generous. The word means to “wander outside.” It originally meant “unusual” and “outside the norm.” It meant this until the 1700s, when it started to mean “spend too much money.” When someone lavishes us with an extravagant gift, we say, “You shouldn’t have.” The extravagant gesture doesn’t hold back nor show restraint. It has “wandered outside,” beyond our

expectations . . . outside of anything we know. It hobbles us a bit as we feel unworthy in the face of such largesse. Because tenderness begets tenderness, we insist on extravagance, which liberates our hearts. The view is wider and the container more spacious. Saint Francis writes, “No obstacles in my heart—everything a frail-boned kindness.” We find rest in this.

In this book, I will draw upon my beloved Sufi poets, the gospel, a wide variety of mystics, and the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus—the Jesuits—of which I am a humble son.

The homies, generally speaking, don’t know what a Jesuit is, though anywhere from two to four of us Jesuits accompany the ministry at Homeboy Industries at any given time. One day, Arturo is giving a tour to a fairly large group. Formerly a lifer, he’s starting to discover comfort at Homeboy and in the world. He is robust in his sense of liveliness and I admire this in him. He also has what the homies would call “a loud-ass voice.” He parks his tour group in front of my glass-enclosed office. It is the observe-our-founder-in-his-natural-habitat moment. I’m in a meeting. I wave faintly. Arturo bellows: “THIS IS FATHER GREG . . . THE FOUNDER OF HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES. HE . . . IS A JUJITSU PRIEST.” From behind my desk, I display some of my best karate moves.

The usual disclaimers apply to this book as to the previous ones. I don’t mention the names of gangs and I change the names of gang members in the telling of these stories, parables, and snapshots from the barrio. Everything is true and remembered as best as I have been able to recall. I will admit to some telescoping of details in the interest of economy, and the merging of moments to be expeditious. I make references to my years as pastor of Dolores Mission Church, as chaplain at Folsom State Prison, and to my numerous moments in countless detention facilities.

The Whole Language acknowledges that we are all born into the world wanting the same things, and we are all naked under our clothes. We start from this place, then, of our own unshakable goodness, so we jettison blame and embrace understanding. We see God’s light in everything and thereby choose mysticism over morality. We choose connection, not perfection. We explore the things that help us feel beloved rather than on probation. We want to know the God of love, which is more than knowing the love of God. We long to see the wholeness of things and find our wholeness in Christ.

I travel here through essays and prolonged homilies on our notion of God, the immeasurable goodness present in every human being, and the need to re-sacralize things. I look at death; the church; the methodology of Homeboy’s therapeutic mysticism; tenderness; and a sangha of beloved belonging, among other themes.

It’s probably been ten years since funders and others have asked about some “succession plan.” At Homeboy Industries (HBI) we are a sangha, which is to say, a community of practitioners. A homie told me that he “was Homeboy Industries raised,” and so, he now “practices” the culture of it in how he sees and operates. We are all called to be practitioners. Otherwise . . . we’re audience.

At the Chautauqua Institution, four homeboys and four homegirls were leading a brown-bag discussion at lunchtime. I snuck into the back of the very packed room and no one knew I was there. During the Q and A, an ancient woman stood, grabbing the back of the chair in front of her for support, and said with an emphatic and overly loud voice, “FATHER GREG IS GOING TO DIE.” (I startled immediately, thinking she was privy to some information I didn’t have.) “SO, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WHEN HE’S GONE?” The panelists knew it was a question about a succession plan. José stood and

gestured to the other panelists and said simply, "All of us . . . have keys to the place." The cramped room was filled with deafening applause. Frail-boned kindness. Practitioners, all.

A Southwest Airlines flight attendant, after finishing her takeoff instructions, signed off, "Now sit back and relax and enjoy the flight . . . OR . . . sit up and be tense all the way . . . Up to you." It is up to us.

Let's all depart by a different route.

But where are we going?

"To your house, of course."

The Whole Language