

# An Invitation to Journey

*Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far  
in the future, you will gradually, without even  
noticing it, live your way into the answer.<sup>1</sup>*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

**T**here's an old joke about a man talking to his rabbi. He asks, "Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with another question?" The rabbi answers, "So what's wrong with a question?"

Jesus was typical of the rabbis of his day. According to the canonical Gospels, Jesus rarely gave a straight answer to a question. Instead, he put his questioners in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than offer his disciples answers to life's most perplexing problems, Jesus introduced them to deeper and deeper levels of ambiguity.

Clearly Jesus knew what mystics and the wisest of spiritual guides have known all along: that answers can provide a false sense of security and pride that can stand in the way of a deeper awareness of the Divine.

And yet our twenty-first-century Western culture revels in instant gratification—the easy fix. We want our answers, our entertainment, and our sense of personal fulfillment and we want it now! The idea that something worthwhile might require careful thought or take a long time

to develop is not only uncomfortable for some, but often condemned as suspicious or morally questionable by those who like to think they have all the answers.

This consumer mentality bleeds over into religion and spirituality. We want salvation or fulfillment in a simple, easy-to-understand, instantly accessible formula. Rooted in our primal fascination with all things magic (just say this prayer/incantation and you're all set!), many churches have warped Jesus's life-transforming call to "follow me" into a smorgasbord of methods for achieving wealth, health, and victory in a few painless and mindlessly easy steps.

Take, for example, the way many churches use the phrase "born again" to indicate that a person is a Christian. Even though a whole religious culture has risen up around the phrase, the concept of being born again is essentially based on a mistranslation.

The phrase comes from John 3:3. And while some biblical translations have Jesus telling Nicodemus that he must be "born again," the more accurate translation has Jesus telling Nicodemus that he must be born "from above" (*anothen* in Greek). Nicodemus misunderstands and asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

This mistranslation has led to two very different approaches to the spiritual life. Being born again has come to mean a once-and-for-all experience of God's grace and love. Insofar as it can be the first step in a life's journey of faith, being born again can be a helpful experience and concept. But Jesus never said you have to be born again. He said you have to be born "from above." Being born from above implies a journey, a process, an orientation, a way of life.

Consider the words of John Shelby Spong, who says:

The Christian life is a journey and people ought to enjoy it. The people that think they have arrived are the ones that always get us in trouble. Anytime somebody thinks the journey is over and they have finally achieved the truth, they always put their wagons in a circle and begin to defend their truth against all comers and



in the process they kill one another. There is nothing about the Christian life that says it ever is complete. It is ultimately a journey into the mystery of God. Now, there are some things about the journey that I think are important: One is you can't start anywhere. You've got to start somewhere in particular. You cannot just say, "Well I'll go out here into the wild blue yonder." The way you start a journey into the mystery of God, I believe, is in the faith tradition, which is native to you. For you and me this would be the Christian tradition. Jesus becomes the doorway, the point of entry; so you enter into the journey through the tradition with which you are familiar and then you begin to walk into and journey toward the mystery.

## EVOLUTIONARY, NOT REVOLUTIONARY

The author Maya Angelou speaks to the lifelong journey of faith. She says, "I'm startled or taken aback when people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question 'Already?'"<sup>2</sup> Arriving at some point of spiritual completion is unlikely for most of us. Besides making us totally insufferable, this view prevents us from examining ourselves critically, learning from other faith traditions, or even opening up the Bible and looking at it again with the openness, thoughtfulness, and the critical thought necessary to help us along the way.

Each denomination has developed its own particular formula for salvation. Some churches view salvation as a once-and-for-all decision, while others see it as a lifelong process of transformation. In the Methodist tradition, the moment that some would compare to being born again is called "justification"—a revolutionary experience for many. But then, as one practices the faith, the evolutionary work of "sanctification" begins and one works toward becoming more whole as life goes on. A person doesn't become complete by simply reciting the Jesus prayer or claiming Jesus as Lord and Savior.

## LIVING THE QUESTIONS

Churches who hold to the evolutionary perspective on faith might be characterized by their desire to draw the circle wider in an effort to stay open to new ideas and experiences in which the Divine might be revealed. When fundamentalism rules the day, new information becomes a threat. There can be no latitude as to belief and practice. Those who believe that they alone possess the once-and-for-all truth are much more likely to oppose differences of opinion and seek the ouster of their opponents—by legislative or other, more violent, means. John Dominic Crossan warns, “Every religion today must take responsibility for its own fundamentalism—because religious fundamentalism is probably the most dangerous thing in the world at the moment. Christian or Muslim. I am not making any distinction.”

Reverend Mel White explains it this way:

When people begin to become fundamentalist, it becomes a real challenge to the church to maintain the Spirit of Christ. What happens is people get defensive about their faith because they're insecure and this is a very insecure time for the world. Fundamentalism says we know the answers; therefore, we should superimpose them on anybody who doesn't agree with us. And along comes the organization of fundamentalists into a political bloc that not only takes over their churches but takes over (or attempts to take over) the governments of their countries, whether you're a fundamentalist Muslim or a fundamentalist Jew or a fundamentalist Christian, the spirit is about all the same.

Those who slip into fundamentalism can develop what Crossan calls a “genocidal germ” that too often manifests itself in oppression of anyone who disagrees with their perspective. In some cases, that oppression happens at the church level—certain groups of people are not allowed to receive communion or become members of the church. Sometimes it happens at the government level—churches support political candidates or legislation that limits personal freedoms based on a particu-



lar moral perspective. And sometimes, that oppression becomes violent. The bombings of abortion clinics by radical pro-life proponents or the torture and murder of Matthew Shepherd, a young gay man attacked by those who considered his sexuality an abomination, are just two examples of the way in which, in the words of Crossan, “the trajectory of human violence escalates almost inevitably from the ideological through the rhetorical to the physical.”<sup>3</sup>

The push for certainty has led to dangerous, terrible places. Yet for most of us, the cost is far more subtle. Absolute certainty keeps us separated from God and our neighbors by claiming that what we know is the whole truth and that there’s no room for others’ experience or input. When we’re not open to ambiguity and different ways of looking at things, we risk becoming stagnant, stuck in a cul-de-sac rather than being out on the adventure and open to the mystery of the Divine. To say you ascribe, without question, to a dogmatic set of beliefs that were developed and set in stone by someone else is easy. The bigger challenge is to follow a story that is always evolving, one in which the ending is not yet written. Like Jesus, we can opt for a story that demands thought, raises questions, and often runs counter to conventional wisdom. Perhaps real “faith” involves seeing ambiguity not as an enemy, but as a vital part of the journey.

## THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

When Billie Holiday sang: “Them that got shall get, them that not shall lose... God Bless the child that’s got his own, that’s got his own,” she was tapping into a profound truth about life—and spirituality. Relying solely on doctrines and dogma passed on from others has seldom been a satisfying exercise for those longing for something deeper spiritually or thought-provoking theologically. To not ask questions is tantamount to forfeiting one’s own spiritual birthright and allowing other people’s experience of the Divine to define your experience.

## LIVING THE QUESTIONS

Wrestling with life's injustices, resisting the urge to be satisfied with the way the world is, and asking difficult questions are all at the heart of theological integrity and spiritual growth. Excessive certitude can become a substitute for God and cripple an otherwise dynamic relationship with the Spirit. In short, being satisfied with easy answers is a cop-out.

A far richer, and perhaps more faithful, alternative is to wrestle with the questions. Emilie Townes of Yale Divinity School says, "I would hate to think that there would be a point in time in life where we would actually think we've arrived at the fullness of what faith can be for ourselves as people molded into the Christian tradition. That tradition is still alive and growing. I take the revelation of God very seriously as being one that is ongoing. I would think that in order to be attuned to that, our faith would have to be ongoing."

Every question we ask without receiving a satisfactory answer makes us more adept at honing our questions. Every ambiguity with which we wrestle strengthens us for dealing with life's ever-increasing complexities. The Center for Progressive Christianity's "8 Points of Progressive Christianity" suggests there is more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.<sup>4</sup> It's in living the questions that we find direction in life.

Retired UCC minister Culver "Bill" Nelson remembers a conversation with theologian Paul Tillich in which Tillich pointed out that, "Everyone seeks answers, mostly to questions that are not very important. The great concern in life should be to discover which are the right questions. Then, even if you rarely get answers, you are at least journeying in the right direction."

On any authentic spiritual journey, asking the hard questions is not only permitted, but necessary! What we learn along the way, through difficulties and disequilibrium, mistakes and challenges, discoveries and unlearnings, is that the process is what's important. The unanswerable questions asked in the company of fellow seekers along the way become a central part of the process of the deepening quest, the broadening understanding, and the journey beyond our otherwise limited horizons.





STRIPPED BY GOD

What would happen if I pursued God—  
If I filled my pockets with openness,  
Grabbed a thermos half full of fortitude,  
And crawled into the cave of the Almighty  
Nose first, eyes peeled, heart hesitantly following  
Until I was face to face  
With the raw, pulsing beat of Mystery?

What if I entered and it looked different  
Than anyone ever described?  
What if the cave was too large to be fully known,  
Far too extensive to be comprehended by  
    one person or group,  
Too vast for one dogma or doctrine?

Would I shatter at such a thought?  
Perish from paradox or puzzle?  
Shrink and shrivel before the power?  
Would God be diminished if I lived a question  
Rather than a statement?  
Would I lose my faith  
As I discovered the magnitude of Grace?

O, for the willingness to explore  
To leave my tiny vocabulary at the entrance  
And stand before you naked  
Stripped of pretenses and rigidity,  
Disrobed of self righteousness and tidy packages,

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

Stripped of all that holds me at a distance from you  
And your world.

Strip me, O God,  
Then clothe me in curiosity and courage.

—Cynthia Langston Kirk