



cries
from
the
Heart

Foreword by Robert Coles

Stories
of Struggle
and
Hope

JOHANN CHRISTOPH ARNOLD

acclaim for the author

The Houston Chronicle

Arnold is thought-provoking and soul-challenging...
He writes with an eye-opening simplicity that zings the heart.

Eugene Peterson, author

With so much junk spirituality on the market today,
it is positively refreshing to come upon Arnold's books...
They are solid and mature, devoid of ego, embracing
of community and ambiguity and integrity.

Madeleine L'Engle, author

We recognize ourselves in Arnold's poignant stories,
and our recognition helps us toward deeper understanding.

Peter Kreeft, author

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he writes straight from (and to) the heart.

Publishers Weekly

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Arnold inspires each of us to seek peace within our own hearts...His writing gives hope that we can find wholeness, happiness, and harmony, which is after all the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity.

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Arnold's message is demanding and exhilarating, which is what disciples of Jesus should expect.

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The candor, simplicity, and humanity of Arnold's writing should recommend it to an exceedingly wide reading public.

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Arnold speaks out of a tradition of radical discipleship... His writings are living water for gasping fish.

Alex J. Brunett, Archbishop Emeritus of Seattle

Arnold offers readers wonderful insights into the meaning of true Christianity...his anecdotal materials are sure to find an echo in the hearts of readers, no matter where they are on the spectrum of faith.

Joan Brown Campbell, National Council of Churches

Arnold's approach is cogent, well-reasoned...some may disagree with this or that conclusion, but all will acknowledge his sincerity.

Bernard Häring, author

Arnold's writing is a convincing testimony to a truly ecumenical spirit. Readers will be grateful for the depth and insights of this outstanding author.

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JOHANN CHRISTOPH ARNOLD

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Stories of
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Published by The Plough Publishing House
Rifton, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

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First Edition 1999
Revised Edition 2001

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

ISBN 10: 0-87486-980-3
ISBN 13: 978-0-87486-980-4

Cover photograph © Paul Clancy

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arnold, Johann Christoph, 1940–

Cries from the heart : stories of struggle and hope / Johann
Christoph Arnold ; foreword by Robert Coles.

p. cm.

ISBN: 0-87486-980-3

1. Christian life—Bruderhof Communities authors 2.

Prayer—Bruderhof Communities I. Title.

BV4501.2 .A734 1999

248.8'6—dc21

99-14692

CIP

Printed in the USA

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Let each of us cry out to God as if we were hanging by a hair, and a tempest were raging to the very heart of heaven, and we had almost no more time left to cry out. For in truth, we are always in danger in the world, and there is no counsel and no refuge, save to lift up our eyes and hearts, and cry out to God.

Martin Buber

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t o t h e r e a d e r

Johann Christoph Arnold

Since time began, people have sought for meaning and purpose in their lives, and even today, despite the rampant materialism of our culture, this is so. Some of us look to science and technology, others to religion and the supernatural; some of us look upward to a higher power, others within.

Whatever our beliefs, all of us sense that somewhere there must be answers to the age-old questions of suffering and death, life and love. Sometimes we may stumble on these answers; at other times they are yielded with learning, with experience, with the passing of years. Sometimes they come only with intense struggle – with cries from the heart.

In my work as counselor and pastor over forty years, I have met hundreds of people whose lives were enriched by their search for life's deepest answers. Though the particulars of their stories may not be important, the pattern they reveal is. In its own way, each shows that courage is rarely won without despair, that joy is often yoked with pain, and that faith is seldom reached without struggle and doubt.

There is hardly a story in this book that does not mention prayer, and none that does not in some way refer to faith in God. But even if you don't count yourself religious, don't be too quick to put it down. No matter your background, I am confident that the wisdom of the men and women in this

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cries from the heart

book will give you something to take away—at very least,
new eyes to see the path your life is taking.

Rifton, New York

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f o r e w o r d

Robert Coles

In the book you are about to read, you will find a stirring collection of personal accounts compiled by a most thoughtful and compassionate writer. Certainly, the men and women who divulge them are ordinary people. Yet that is not a weakness, but a strength. Even where you may not identify with their particulars, you will become, through hearing what they have to say, a participant in their ongoing search for wisdom, purpose, direction. As people whose stories prompt recognition of your own bouts with aspiration and despair, they invite your understanding as kindred souls, your embrace as fellow travelers.

Thankfully, the anecdotes in *Cries from the Heart* are rendered without contrivance: Arnold simply immerses the reader in them. Then, modestly and naturally, he invests them with larger meaning by using them to illustrate his theme: the universal human urge to find worthy answers to the great riddle of existence.

No wonder, then, that this book is more than the sum of its stories, more than a didactic assemblage of experiences. An unusually telling witness to the power of answered (or unanswered) yearning, it will summon you to new hope and call you to a reawakening of the mind and heart.

Cambridge, Mass.

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1.

s e a r c h i n g

I was only seventeen when I first met Sibyl. A sophisticated, articulate New Yorker, she was unforgettable in her bright red dress and in her determination to prove there was no goodness in the world.

My story is a typical atheist's story. We come into the world with a preconceived idea. It's as if we had a pre-birth memory of better days. By the time I was fourteen years old, I knew the place was a mess. I was talking to God: "Look, I think I'll live through parental arguing even if I am an only child who has to carry it alone on her shoulders. But those innocent children lying, fly-covered, in gutters in India—I could do a better job!"

I was born in 1934, five years after the crash of 1929, and maybe people were just gloomy in those days. Anyway, on my fourth birthday I was presented with the ritual cake and told I would get my wish should all the candles go out in one blow. I took this as a guaranteed pipeline to that Person I seemed to have known in pre-natal days. I instinctively knew you didn't have to pepper him with details so, after one successful blow, I told him to "make it all better," period.

Of course nothing got better. If anything, it got worse. At four-and-a-half I attended my first Sunday-school class. Upon being told where we were going, I thought, "At last,

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a chance to meet God face to face.” A miserable Sibyl met her parents on return. “How did you like Sunday school, dear?” “Awful. We cut out white sheep and pasted them on green paper.” Organized, institutional religion never recouped itself in my eyes.

From that point on life was just something to be endured. There was nothing I or anyone else could do about it. As the only child of educated parents, I lived in commandeered luxury. It took only one “horror” a year to keep me shuddering at the prospect of coming to terms with the immense philosophical questions that plagued me. During my grade-school years, the blood-covered face of a drunk who was staggering upright. (“It’s all right, dear, he just bumped his head. He’s fine.”) Hearing about newborn puppies on whom some boys were doing bee-bee gun practice. Running into a flasher after wandering away from my mother in the supermarket. And ultimately, at eleven, seeing “by mistake” the beginning frames of a newsreel showing American forces entering German concentration camps after World War II. My mother and I groaned and covered our eyes, but I had already seen too much.

At fourteen, I had come to the end of my tether, inwardly. My perpetual demand to God for an utterly perfect world had gone unanswered. There was an overabundance of badness and, worst of all, I was beginning to see that the goodness was about ninety-five percent phony. Since the age of ten I had been methodically reading all the books in our house. I started out with *The Diary of a London Prostitute*. Other books I recall were Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, and *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright. If my parents were reading provocative stuff like this, they weren’t the parents I thought they were. In fact, these books were in every house in town. But they made no dent in anyone’s life. Or did they?

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I decided to give God one last chance. In California, a three-year-old was trapped in a narrow drainpipe she had fallen into. The entire nation prayed for her safe release, as men and machines tried to extract her without harming her in the process. It was time for a showdown. This is it, God, your last chance. Get her out alive, or we're finished. Look, if it were left to me, I'd save her without even being worshiped. The girl died in the pipe.

That did it. The last shreds of my regard for God were gone. Now I knew we were only animated blobs of protoplasm.

Then there was the idiocy of human morality, which appeared to be deeply rooted in "what the neighbors would think." And what the neighbors thought depended on where you lived. Morals, ethics, right and wrong—they were all purely cultural phenomena. Everyone was playing the game. I opted for nihilism and sensuality, and lived accordingly. Out with good and evil, out with morality of any kind, out with accepted cultural customs. A line from a movie summed it up: "Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse." So I proceeded to live my beliefs, preaching them to any idiot who "believed." I smoked hard, drank hard, and lived hard. But I could not suppress a wrenching, clawing feeling that there might be a meaning to life, after all. In retrospect I see that I was so hungry, so aching for God, that I was trying to taunt him out of the clouds.

I spent my last two years of high school at Emma Willard, a private school for girls, where I had two close friends. One was a suburban Republican WASP, so intelligent she later went mad. The other was a Baltimore-born black of NAACP descent. Endlessly we discussed philosophy, read books, worked on the God question, reaffirmed our atheism, and read C.S. Lewis so that, just in case we should meet him, we'd be ready to "cut him down."

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Chapel attendance was required at Emma Willard. I refused to bow my head during prayers as a matter of conscience, but was caught and admonished. My punishment? Banishment to the back row, where I sat defiantly reading Freud.

Radcliffe College seemed as phony as church, and I soon dropped out and got married. Born in Madrid to a famous novelist, my husband, Ramón, was orphaned as a small boy along with his baby sister when Fascists executed their mother during the Spanish Civil War. When the New York PEN Club heard they needed rescuing, a well-to-do member offered to take the children in. Ramón's childhood was even more luxurious than mine, but it meant just as little to him as mine to me.

Both bent on escaping the stultifying atmosphere of dull riches, we felt the kindred soul in each other when we met in 1951 or 52. In 1954 we dropped out of our colleges to marry. Each of us was nineteen.

We very soon ran out of money. For two ex-rich kids it was "an experience." Wedding presents were pawned. It was sad, but we had to admit that money must be acquired at times.

The first crack in my hardened heart occurred after the birth of my daughter, Xaverie. She was so innocent—just like the hundred other babies in the maternity ward of the big New York City hospital she was born in. I wept inwardly, thinking that in fifty years half of them will be dying in the gutter, the other half rich and miserable. Why are such pure beings put here on this terrible earth?

While nursing her at night, I steeped myself in Dostoyevsky. Truths were coming at me, but I couldn't have defined them then. There wasn't time for philosophical musings anyway. By the time that baby girl, Xaverie, turned one, there was no father in the house. Ramón was

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coming and going, and a powerful, new force—the survival instinct called mother love—was taking hold of me. Get a job, get a babysitter, pay the rent, find a new husband. The babysitter plus rent left \$10 a week for food and transportation. Not that I let anyone feel sorry for “the poor young mother.” I was a rotten wife who was reaping what she had sown. I knew Ramón and I bore equal blame, and if I were him, I would have left me too.

My life descended steadily into the swineherd’s berth. Ramón and I were going through what I considered our final separation. I was currently “in love” with another man, and I was carrying his child, which he wanted me to abort. I kept hoping he would change his mind at the last minute, but that never happened. So I, tough atheist that I was, went through with the most devastating ordeal of my life. Though still dedicated to the proposition that there was no such thing as “right and wrong” (no one had been able to persuade me otherwise), I was burdened with guilt beyond description.

There soon came a time when I was sure that short of my own death (Xaverie was all that stood between suicide and me), I had reached as close to the bottom as a person could get. It was on a hot August night in 1957, in surroundings I will not describe, that I groaned to a Being I did not believe in: “Okay, if there’s really another way, show me.”

Ramón startled me when he walked into my Manhattan office. A year earlier, he had left me to join the Beat Generation—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, et al.—in San Francisco, and we’d not seen each other since. I was settled in Queens, across the street from my parents, and was working as an editor for a glossy magazine. I should have known Ramón could glide past the receptionist without question. No one in the office knew we were estranged, no

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one knew that this was but the most recent in a steady series of separations. He evoked no twinge of love in me.

Ramón launched into his story, the long and short of which was that he had discovered a religious commune upstate, that he felt drawn to it, and that he wanted me to visit it with him.

I couldn't think of a worse idea. As a professional atheist, I abhorred the religious. They were people whose faces froze in disapproving grimaces, who worried about their reputation for neatness and niceness, who never said, "C'mon in and have a cup of coffee and a cigarette." The religious were stiff and contrived and self-conscious. They seemed to be waiting for you to notice how good they were. Aside from that, there was Ramón. I wanted nothing more to do with him. He persisted. Eventually I agreed.

I picked my traveling clothes carefully. My fire-engine red, knit tube dress – that ought to ensure immediate rejection. All the way up from the City, my venom brewed. Then we were suddenly there, rounding the last curve and stopping under huge trees bearing swings for children. Xaverie made a beeline for them. It was October, and the colors were breathtaking, like a premonition of something good where I had hoped for something bad. I took twenty steps into the heart of the community and my resolve crumbled. "What if there *is* a God, after all?"

I tried not to show it, hoped it would pass. A woman came to meet me – peaceful, with loving eyes, a soft, makeup-less face. She didn't even notice that I was evil incarnate in a red dress. Nothing was working. She greeted me as if we were long-parted friends, seemed ready to be my sister for life. All this in a nanosecond.

But I wasn't ready to leap into the burning bush, not me. There was always hope that, in a minute, everything would reveal itself to be utterly phony.

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The heavens and hells I lived through in the next forty-eight hours were as several entire lifetimes. Half my being was moved to tears; the other half scorned my reaction and reminded me that I was probably surrounded by mindless adults—a sort of spiritual schizophrenia.

On Sunday morning I looked forward to surcease in the battle. Surely the worship service would cure me of the strange leanings toward “goodness” I was feeling. It would be like every other nonsensical religious powwow I’d been to. Empty.

Entering the meeting room, however—the same room in which I’d already eaten three meals—I was struck dumb. Tables were shoved back, the kitchen chairs arranged in a circle. People were wearing their normal faded jeans and skirts, and there wasn’t a shred of religious stuff to be seen. Someone was speaking, but it was just some guy in a farmer outfit. But then: horrors! He wasn’t speaking. He was reading Dostoyevsky! It couldn’t be! God, don’t do this to me, I said to myself; don’t hit me in the literary solar plexus. It was *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Ivan the intellectual was telling Alyosha the believer that he, Ivan, refuses to believe in a God who would countenance the torment of even one innocent child. Worlds, galaxies collided; it was my spiritual denouement. Quietly I accepted and then embraced a new question: Is it God who torments the innocent, or is it Sibyl?

Where Sibyl ended up is unimportant; how she got there is. As she says now, her doubting and yearning, her searching and rebelling—even if she was unaware of it at the time—were unspoken prayers. And God finally answered.

f i n d i n g

More than ever before, people are alone. If not physically separated from others, they are certainly more isolated emotionally. This is one of the great curses of our time: people are lonely and disconnected, depression is rampant, more marriages than ever are dysfunctional, and a pervasive sense of aimlessness marks many lives. Why *are* we here on earth? I believe that the answer to this question can only be discovered when we begin to find each other—and, more than that, to find God.

Each of us needs to find God, since our “vertical” relationship with him is always a strong determinant of our “horizontal” human relationships. But what does it mean to find God? Sibyl, whose story is in the previous chapter, says that for her it was “like finding a pearl.”

I was utterly consumed by my joy, as one in love. And once I found God, I saw the people around me—even though they were just normal human beings like myself—in a new light, and sharing life with them was like participating in an ongoing adventure. I continued to go through struggles, but they were punctuated by laughter, of all things. Before I found God I was sure that it would mean living a life of gloomy introspection, but what I found was prayer, forgiveness, love.

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Sometimes it seems that the word “prayer” carries too much religious baggage with it; it is worn out from too much handling by too many people. It has become a duty that people feel they must fulfill, and therefore even a burden to rebel against. Personally, I do not see prayer as a duty, but an opportunity to come before God and tell him my worries, my needs, my happiness, or my gratitude. In this sense, prayer is simply conversing with God—something anyone can do.

Prayer may be a rite that involves a written verse, a prayer book, a certain place and time of day, or even a specific position of the body. Or it may have no form at all, but simply be a posture of the heart.

For most of us, silence and solitude are the most natural starting points for finding God and communicating with him, since both entail laying aside external distractions and emptying our minds and hearts of trivial concerns. It is as if God has come into the room to talk with us, and we must first look up from whatever we are doing to acknowledge him before the conversation can begin. For others of us, the act of becoming silent before God is not only a preparation for prayer, it *is* prayer. Such conversation is like the unspoken dialogue between a couple, or any other two people who know each other so well that they can communicate without words.

Naturally a true conversation has both sound and silence, give and take, talking and listening. Yet it is clear that God does not desire self-centered prattling: he knows what we need even before we ask. And if we do not become inwardly quiet, how will we ever be able to hear anything but our own voice? Nor does he require long, wordy petitions. If our hearts are truly turned to him, a glance upward or a heartfelt sigh, a moment of silence or a joyous song, a tearful plea or

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anguished weeping will do just as well. Each of these can be just as much a prayer as any number of carefully chosen words. Indeed, they may be more.

There are many ways to pray. One woman I know told me that she envisioned herself in prayer “like a baby bird in a nest with my head stretched way up and my oversized mouth open and hungry to receive whatever my father would drop into it. Not questioning, not doubting, not worrying, just receiving and totally appreciative.”

Vemkatechwaram Thyaharaj, a friend from India, says:

I pray silently. All the same, though brought up as a Hindu Brahmin, I do not pray to an abstract being, but to the biblical Creator of the universe and of man – to God the Father. He is not distant from his creation, for Christ brought him down, close to man. It is to him I pray...

Very often I resort to lonely places for prayer. In such times I experience the divine, unseen touch that imparts power and life to my body and soul. True, it is always an effort to get out of bed early, before dawn. But this has been my practice, to sit during the early morning in the presence of God when I meditate and pray. During such times my heart is filled with peace and unexplainable joy.

Vemkatechwaram touches on an important aspect of genuine prayer: insofar as it is a conversation, it is not a vague state of being, but something that moves or takes place between two or more people, even if without words.

According to the early church father Tertullian, praying is also more than directing emotions or feelings toward God. It means experiencing his reality as a power.

Prayer has power to transform the weak, to restore the sick, to free the demon-possessed, to open prison doors, and to

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untie the bonds that bind the innocent. Furthermore, it washes away faults and repels temptations. It extinguishes persecutions. It consoles the low in spirit, and cheers those in good spirits. It escorts travelers, calms waves, and makes robbers stand aghast. It feeds the poor and governs the rich. It raises those who have fallen, stops others from falling, and strengthens those who are standing.

Tertullian also refers to prayer as the “fortress of faith” and the “shield and weapon against the foe.” And Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, admonishes his fellow Christians to put on the “whole armor of God” and thereby enlist the aid of the Creator himself in times of trial.

Valid as these metaphors may be, it is good to remember that even if God’s power can protect, shield, and comfort us, it is also a power before which we must sometimes quake. Especially after we have failed or done wrong, the act of coming to God in prayer and bringing our weaknesses to him means placing ourselves under his clear light, and seeing the wretchedness of our true state.

Our God is a consuming fire, and my filth crackles as he seizes hold of me; he is all light and my darkness shrivels under his blaze. It is this naked blaze of God that makes prayer so terrible. For most of the time, we can persuade ourselves we are good enough, as good as the next man, perhaps even better, who knows? Then we come to prayer—real prayer, unprotected prayer—and there is nothing left in us, no ground on which to stand.

Sr. Wendy Beckett

Given Sister Wendy’s recognition of the contrast between the Almighty and a puny human being, one might fairly ask, “Does God really answer me, or does my praying just get

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me used to the discomfort of my situation?” Indeed, there are skeptics who feel that prayer is simply a forum for working through our feelings, and those who say, “All I want is God’s will, and he can give that without my prayers.”

I have no simple answers to these riddles, but that doesn’t mean there are no answers. As I see it, it is a matter of relationship. If I claim God as my father, I need to be able to talk to him when I am in trouble. And before that, I need to be actively involved in my relationship with him—at least enough to know where I can find him.

Having given us free will, God does not force himself on any of us. He needs us to ask him to work in our lives before he intervenes. We must want his presence, be desperate for the inner food he can provide. Like the figures found on the walls of Roman catacombs, we must lift our eyes and arms to God, not merely waiting for him, but reaching upward to find him and to receive whatever he will give us.

In this sense praying is much more than talking with God. Prayer gives us the opportunity to discern God’s will by coming into direct contact with him. It enables us to ask God for whatever we need, including judgment, mercy, and the grace to change our lives. It is even, as Henri Nouwen has written, “a revolutionary matter, because once you begin, you put your entire life in the balance.”

b e l i e v i n g

Much has changed in the last hundred or so years since Robert Browning penned his famous lines, “God’s in his Heaven / All’s right with the world.” Not many of us have such a cheerful view of things on our planet today. Indeed, because of the happenings of the last century, countless people have turned from faith, doubting the very existence of both God and heaven.

Certainly, we cannot show or see the God we worship. He is God for us just because we can know him but cannot see him. In his works, in all the movements of the universe, we perceive his power always, whether in thunder, lightning, an approaching storm, or in the clear sky.

And you believe that this God knows nothing of the doings and dealings of men? You believe that from his throne in heaven he cannot visit all men or know individual men? Man, in this you are mistaken and deceived. How can God be far away! The whole heaven and the whole earth and all things beyond the confines of the world are filled with God. Everywhere he is very close to us, yes, much more than that, he is in us. Look at the sun again! Fixed in the sky, its light is still poured out over all the earth. It is equally present everywhere and penetrates everything. Its splendor is nowhere dimmed. How much more is God present, he

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who is the creator of all things and sees all things, from whom nothing can remain hidden!

Minucius Felix, 3rd century

God. The very word implies belief, for if we cannot see, we must believe. Our senses, which so marvelously apprise us of our surroundings, are utterly useless when dealing with the unseen. But how is it with joy? With sorrow? Just because they cannot be seen, heard, or touched, is their existence denied? No, for our experience of them is so strong, and their effects so tangible, that we have no difficulty accepting them as reality.

So it is with God, he whom we know and love but do not fully understand. Who is he? Our very notions of him seem full of contradictions. Despite his invisible nature, he is eminently visible. He is so great, yet so small; creator as well as destroyer; immeasurably loving, yet stern. God sees all and moves all, yet is himself unseen and unchangeable. Desmond Tutu quotes a Bantu verse that puts this well:

In the beginning was God,
Today is God,
Tomorrow will be God.
Who can make an image of God?
He has no body.
He is the word that comes out of your mouth.
That word! It is no more,
It is past, and still it lives!
So is God.

And which one of us has not, in distress or anger if not in joy, lifted a voice to God? Perhaps it has been only in a vain hope that if he is there, he might—just possibly—pay attention to our pleading. But that is the beginning.

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Prayer, as I noted in the previous chapter, is often no more than a sigh, a yearning of the heart, an expression of one's need for help. As such, it is also an acknowledgment, even if subconscious, of a being greater than ourselves.

Polls tell us that the majority of Americans pray daily, and almost all of these have experienced satisfactory answers to prayer. What does this mean? Can we conclude that this is a nation of God-fearing souls who love their neighbors as themselves? Hardly. But it tells us that, at least in the privacy of the home, many do turn to God. And apparently they have found a deep inner dimension to their own selves, a dimension that is hidden in the soul of every person, latent, waiting to be awakened.

Ron, an acquaintance whose sister was murdered, was justifiably angry: at God, at society, and at his sister's killer. But underneath it all, there was more:

I probably prayed on and off my whole life, even though I didn't really know it. I guess I was just talking with God... I was at the bottom. I was ready to kill myself; I really was. And I got down on my knees and asked God to come into my life. He answered my prayer: he just didn't say anything. It was the way things changed, I knew he had answered me...I wasn't angry anymore.

Poet Jane Kenyon, who recently died of leukemia, wrote that she and her husband got into the habit of going to church because that is what their neighbors expected of them. Kenyon soon realized how spiritually empty she was. "Before I knew what had happened to me, I'd become a believer, not in the frightening God of my childhood, but in a God who, if you

ask, forgives you no matter how far down in the well you are. If I didn't believe that, I couldn't live."

I like to think of belief as a child slipping her small hand into the welcoming hand of her father or mother. Many emotions and experiences are expressed in that simple act, but perhaps the most basic is "connectedness." Hand in hand, we establish a bond of trust and love. There are times when something within us makes it difficult to reach out with our hand, and it becomes an effort to accept the waiting hand. But when we do, what a relief comes over us! Now we are able to pour out our hearts, and God can work in us. Now we are ready to hear his answer.

How is it possible to find such inner certainty? Because God works in each individual in a unique way, each one will respond differently to his prompting and prodding. For most of us, faith will not come easily. More often given than earned, it may be elusive, too. One day it may seem to drop into our laps; the next, we may have to struggle to hold on to it. When the going is rough, this may seem discouraging. Yet as novelist Flannery O'Connor once suggested in a letter she wrote to a young friend, there is no such thing as belief without doubt or struggle.

I think the experience of losing your faith, or of having lost it, is an experience that in the long run belongs to faith; or at least it can belong to faith if faith is still valuable to you, and it must be or you would not have written me about this.

I don't know how the kind of faith required of a Christian living today can be at all if it is not grounded on this experience that you are having right now of unbelief. Peter said, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." It is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospels, and I think it is the foundation prayer of faith.

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A friend once wrote to the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and asked him to tell him how he could believe. He must have expected a long philosophical answer. Hopkins wrote back, “Give alms.” Perhaps he was trying to say that God is to be experienced in Charity (in the sense of love for the divine image in human beings). Don’t get so entangled with intellectual difficulties that you fail to look for God in this way.

Faith is what you have in the absence of knowledge... and that absence doesn’t bother me because I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of heaven and earth. You can’t fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories.

If you want your faith, you have to work for it. It is a gift, but for very few is it a gift given without any demand for time devoted to its cultivation... Even in the life of a Christian, faith rises and falls like the tides of an invisible sea. It’s there, even when he can’t see it or feel it, if he wants it to be there.

Alice, a friend, recently shared similar thoughts with me:

I grew up believing in a personal God, a God who heard me when I asked him to bless mommy and daddy, my younger brother, and me. I believed God cared for me, would protect me from harm, and loved me even though I sinned. When I prayed, I asked for forgiveness as well as for guidance and blessings.

When I had a struggle with a friend, I asked for God’s help. When wondering where to attend college, I sought God’s guidance. I also learned to praise him for all he had done for me, for the blessings of friends and family, for food

and shelter. Talking to God was a daily necessity for me. I always prayed before going to bed each night.

What would disrupt this lifetime pattern of devotion? What would make me have to reconsider prayer and its meaning in my life?

My relationship with God suddenly was thrown into turmoil. A four-year-old boy I and hundreds of others had been praying for, died. This boy had had a malignant tumor the size of a baseball in the side of his neck. He underwent surgeries, radiation, and severe chemotherapy. I was certain within my spirit that this boy would be cured and live. His cancer never spread. Kids with the same cancer in worse stages had lived. And we had God, whom we trusted to heal him.

In the end, the cancer did not kill him; it was the treatment that weakened his body and immune system so that he was susceptible to a staph infection. The infection caused him to go into septic shock, and after days of being in intensive care he died in my arms. This boy was my son, Daniel.

What good is prayer anyway? This became the ringing question in my mind. I had prayed before for a lot less significant things than the life of a precious child and had seen these petitions answered. But now, how could I ask for anything again when all paled in comparison to the life of my son?

I am still on this journey of seeking. My heart is filled with many emotions. I feel anger at some church groups who make it seem like God can be rubbed like a good-luck charm and will perform in any way the Christian prays. I doubt the sincerity of people who make it seem that because they prayed, God responded as they desired. The focus here is often on the ones who prayed and not on the all-powerful God who answered.

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

I study the Scriptures on prayer, and the more I read and ponder, the more I wonder if the average Christian really knows much about prayer at all. Perhaps to be in communion with God means to be still before him and meditate on who he is, instead of thinking that prayer is coming to him in a huff with all our requests.

Perhaps for now, prayer for me is looking up in the dark starry night or at the rising sun and pouring forth my simple yet heartfelt words: God, you are there, you are sovereign, you are immortal. I am here, confused, broken, saddened, and extremely mortal. And for your unchanging love, I am thankful.

Though Alice and her husband David held on to the goodness of God after their son's death, there are many for whom such an experience might end with the complete shipwreck of their faith. In a sense, this is not surprising. Sometimes life is like the back of a tapestry where all we can see are the tangled ends on the side facing us, and we must trust that God sees the beauty and purpose on the other.

