

Prologue: A Religious Autobiography

*In this personal reflection from *Life Abundant* (2001), Sallie McFague gives us a glimpse into her own religious and theological development up to the period just prior to her retirement from Vanderbilt Divinity School. Listening carefully, readers will hear the four “conversion experiences” described here echoed in the twenty-plus selections that follow this prologue. As such, just as “A Trial Run” (ch. 1, below) set the stage for her book *Speaking in Parables*, this essay anticipates the themes and ideas to be explored in this volume.*

Source: 2001:3–14

For many years I have taught a course on religious autobiography; it was the first course I taught, and I am still teaching it. Why? Because I am very interested in people who try to live their faith, who have what I would call a “working theology,” a set of deeply held beliefs that actually function in their personal and public lives. Augustine, John Woolman, Sojourner Truth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King Jr. are a few of these people. Each of them struggled to discern God’s action in and through their lives and then to express that reality in everything they did. Their theologies became embodied in themselves; as disciples of Christ they became mini-incarnations of God’s love. We call such people “saints,” reflections of God, images of God with us in the flesh. They are intimations of what it means to be “fully alive,” living life from, toward, and with God. They are examples to the rest of us of what a Christlike life is. They fascinate because in them we see God and the human in intimate connection, human lives showing forth different facets of divine power and love.

While it may seem outrageous to suggest, I believe each of us is called to this vocation, the vocation of sainthood. Each Christian is asked to examine his or her life with the goal of discerning the action of God in it and then to express God’s power and love in everything. Each of us is expected to have a working theology, one that makes a difference in how we conduct our personal lives and how we act at professional and public levels. Becoming a mature

Christian means internalizing one's beliefs so that they are evident in whatever one says or does. Made in the image of God, humans are called to grow into that image more fully—to become “like God,” which for Christians means becoming like Christ, following Christ. And following Christ means following One who, like us, was flesh and bones, of the earth, earthy. It means that Christian saints focus on God's work of helping to make all of us, every creature on the planet, fully alive. Christian sainthood is, it appears, a very mundane—a worldly, earthly—business.

For all the years I have been teaching the course in religious autobiography, it never occurred to me to write my own. Actually, I wasn't ready. I believe I might be now. I want to see how a few beliefs which I now hold undeniably can function as a working theology for the ecological and justice crises facing our planet in the twenty-first century. A bare-bones theology, a few beliefs carefully thought through and actually functioning at personal and public levels, may be more significant than a comprehensive, systematic, but loosely embraced theology. What is one prepared to live? What beliefs are livable; that is, what beliefs will support the flourishing of life?

I want to use my own history as a case study for other Christians who are also trying to integrate their beliefs and their actions at the deepest level, who are trying to be whole, mature Christians functioning effectively in the twenty-first century on planet earth. The story I will share will be brief, narrow, and focused. It is meant as a pedagogical tool for others and hence will ignore all kinds of personal data (family, schooling, relationships, etc.), which undoubtedly in a full autobiography would be relevant but will be passed over here.

I have had four “conversions,” four experiences of such importance that they changed my thinking about God and my behavior. The first, which came in two stages, occurred when I was around seven years old. One day while walking home from school the thought came to me that some day I would not be here; I would not exist. Christmas would come, and I would not be around to celebrate it; even more shocking, my birthday would occur, and I would not be present. It was not an experience of death—and the fear of it; rather, it was an experience of non-being: I simply would not exist. For months, indeed years, I could not get this thought out of my mind; I was fascinated and terrified by it. Eventually, it began to turn into a sense of wonder that I *was* alive—and so were myriad other creatures. Over decades this wonder has stayed with me, growing stronger and deeper until now I believe that one of the most profound religious emotions is wonder at and gratitude for life in all its incredible shapes, colors, and sizes. Along with Annie Dillard I now exclaim, “My God what a world.

There is no accounting for one second of it,” and along with Alice Walker I notice the color purple in fields when I pass by.¹ That early experience of non-being has eventuated into praise to God for all beings fully alive.

The second stage of my seventh-year conversion occurred one day when the teacher asked the class, “What name will you write more than any other in your life?” Being an eager student, I immediately raised my hand to answer. Fortunately, the teacher did not call on me; had she done so, I would have been red with embarrassment. The correct answer was, of course, one’s own name, but I was going to answer, “God.” That incident stayed with me as I gradually discerned its meaning. I have decided I was not wrong: “God” is the name beneath, with, and in each of our names. As I have come to realize that we all live and move and have our being in God, the names of each person, species, creature, and element are superimposed over God’s name. God *is* reality; God is the source of the reality of each of us. Pantheism—seeing the world as *in* God—puts God’s “name” first, but each of our names are included and preserved in their distinctiveness within the divine reality. My early experience of God’s name as primary, the experience of divine transcendence and preeminence, would stay with me and grow.

It lay dormant, however, during my teenage years growing up in Boston as a member of a conventional Episcopal church. At most, God was the Great Moralizer, the upholder of proper appearances and conduct. My second conversion occurred at college while reading Karl Barth’s *Commentary on Romans*. Suddenly the transcendence of God took on a whole new meaning for me. I began to have a glimmer of what the word “God” meant. My boxed-in, comfortable, tribal notion of God was split wide open and like a cold, bracing mountain wind, the awesome presence of the divine brushed my life. That evening I walked home from the library in a daze; I had seen something I would never forget: that God is God and nothing else is. My teacher and mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr, would call it “radical monotheism,” and Paul Tillich described it as the Protestant Principle. It is Christianity in its “Protestant” or prophetic mode and a necessary component, I believe, of any theology. For years, however, it would keep me from recognizing and growing into my early sense of wonder at life and its grounding in God (the “Catholic” side that every theology also must have). It created a dualism in my belief and actions that sent me on a long detour, a detour in which the world was not *in* God and God was not *with* the world. The child’s love of nature was set aside for the budding theologian’s dedication to the transcendent—and distant—God.

Eventually, I found a way back (or one was given to me, as I now see it). The way back was through nature—I became a hiker. I did not find God in

nature, but I found a sense of belonging, of being the “proper size” in the forest. Whenever I got on a trail, I immediately had a sense of proportion, of fitting in, of being neither too big, nor too small, but “just right” in relation to the trees above me, the bushes and flowers beside me, and the earth under my feet. I felt *in* nature; it surrounded me; I was part of it. It felt like coming home. After many years, this experience on the trail came to symbolize how we (all of us creatures) fit into God’s world, each with space and a place. What had been an experience of overwhelming and distant transcendence became one of equally awesome but now immanent and intimate transcendence. God’s magnificence, God’s preeminence, God’s “Godness” was manifest *in and through and with* the earth and all its creatures. I learned this first through nature; eventually, I would see it as what Christians call “incarnation”—God with us here and now for the flourishing of all living beings. Nature can seduce us with its beauty and right order to love and glorify God. This is the way it happened to me.

My third conversion occurred when I was teaching theology at a divinity school. I had several books published and was progressing nicely up the career ladder. There was just one problem: most of my theology was still in my head. It wasn’t bad theology; in fact, it was pretty good. It just didn’t actually function in my life and I didn’t hold to my beliefs with much fervor. I was a theologian but I didn’t have a vocation. However, around 1980 I read an essay by another theologian, Gordon Kaufman, in which he claimed that, given the nuclear and ecological crises facing our planet, theology could no longer proceed with business as usual. It must deconstruct and reconstruct its central symbols—God, Christ, human being—from within this new context.² What would Christians say about God and the world if they took the planetary ecological situation as our interpretive lens? How different would Christian faith be if the well-being of human beings were not the only criterion? What would Christianity look like from a cosmological rather than just an anthropocentric perspective?

I believed that Kaufman was dead right. I revamped my teaching and research agendas in this direction and settled down to learning something about cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecological science—about which I knew nothing. It has been a deeply instructive exercise, given me some “ecological literacy,” and shown me the tiny niche that my work can fill for the planetary agenda. It also refashioned my sense of who we are in the scheme of things. My sense on the hiking trail that we humans fit into nature, can feel comfortable in our proper place, was confirmed by my readings. We do indeed fit here, but not at the top of the heap as we have supposed. Rather, we fit as one species among millions of others on which we depend for the air we breathe and the food we eat and for whom we are increasingly responsible. What I learned about our

place in the scheme of things has become central to my belief that a paradigm shift in our consumer lifestyle will be critical to our well-being as well as our planet's.

This third conversion, while intellectual and theological, was certainly vocational as well. I believed that teaching and writing books that attempt to help people, especially Christians, shift from an anthropocentric to a cosmological paradigm—a way of being in the world that supports the flourishing of all life—is a form of activism. I saw it as a way in which my beliefs, which were increasingly becoming more defined and deeply held, could be embodied. I believed that this kind of work was a form of Christian activism.

But there was still a piece missing. That piece was me. I have always been intrigued by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's comment that he began as a theologian, became a Christian, and finally grew into a "contemporary."³ I think what he meant was that he started as an academic Christian, became a practicing Christian, and finally became an embodied, "present" one. In other words, God finally became daily and immediate to him; God's presence was the *milieu*, the "world" within which he lived when imprisoned during World War II. Certainly from his letters one gains the sense of a man whose faith became immediate, present, and functional in the daily horrors and infrequent joys of prison life. He had no use for the distant, metaphysical God of his own past nor the God-of-the-gaps invoked by prisoners during air raids. Rather, for him God was the incarnate Christ, present with him in his suffering during interrogations by the Nazi officials, but also present when he could sit in the sun, watch an anthill, or eat a piece of fruit. The embodied, present God accompanied Bonhoeffer in his daily life, whatever that life brought. This God had gradually been fashioning Bonhoeffer in the divine image, into an embodied, present Christian who lived his faith.

My fourth conversion has been something like Bonhoeffer's sense of becoming contemporary with God. Finally, after years of talking *about* God (what theologians are paid to do!), I am becoming acquainted *with* God. This conversion has occurred quite deliberately: I engaged a spiritual director and have undertaken a daily pattern of meditation. I am doing what is called "practicing the presence of God," setting aside time for relating to God. To say that it has been instructive would be a gross understatement; it has been revelatory. Revelation, as I now see it, is God's loving self-disclosure, and that is what I have experienced. I am meeting *God* and God is *love*. How outrageous as well as platitudinous that sounds! I can scarcely believe I am writing it, let alone intending to publish it. Why am I doing so? Simply because it is true; it is what has happened, is happening, to me.

Let me back up and try to flesh this out a little. When I was young I recall hearing the grown-ups whispering in the kitchen on holidays—usually the women preparing dinner. I was convinced that they were talking about things that mattered, what life was all about, how everything fit together. I could not have articulated it that way then, but I recall from a very early age having a sense of the mystery of things and my ignorance about all of it. I wanted to find out; I thought the whispering women were talking about it (I am sure now they were talking about things never discussed openly in the 1940s—cancer, divorce, mental illness, unwanted babies, etc.). Gradually, over the decades separating my six-year-old self from my sixty-plus-year-old self, the mystery has been revealed to me—or so it seems, at least. I quote from an entry in my journal: “I feel as though I finally understand what life is about. It is, quite simply, acknowledging how things are—living in the truth. And the truth is that God is the source and sustainer of everything.” Since I have undertaken the daily practice of prayer, I have gradually felt my center, the center of my being, shifting from myself to God. From the burdensome task of trying to ground myself in myself, I have let go and allowed God to become the One in and for whom I live.

I hasten to add two qualifications. First, I am a newcomer to living in this reality—I know little about it except the undeniable belief that it *is* reality, mine and that of everything else. Second, trying to live in God’s reality in no way detracts from *my* reality; in fact, it enhances and fulfills it. I feel more “me” than at any other time in my life. I am also more aware of the distinctiveness and concrete particularity of other things: faces are more luminous, the color purple in fields is brighter.

The overwhelming emotion that I have experienced from this revelation of the mystery of things—from meeting God and knowing that God is love—is similar to Ebenezer Scrooge’s on Christmas Day. He kicked up his heels, exclaiming, “I didn’t miss it after all!” I feel this way. In the sixth decade of my life I have been invited on a new journey, which seems like a great adventure, perhaps the greatest adventure of which human beings are capable.

SOME REFLECTIONS

Several things have already become clear to me about this journey. It becomes immediately evident that one learns as much about oneself and the world as one does about God. In prayer a reversal occurs; we do not talk about God and the world but begin to see ourselves and the world in God. We begin to see human life and the world from the divine perspective, from a broader and more

inclusive point of view than we are otherwise capable of holding. We begin to recognize who we are in the scheme of things from the perspective of the Creator and Redeemer of everything that is. We are no longer the center (the definition of sin); we know God is the Center (a definition of salvation).

Another thing that is becoming clear to me is that God is always available; the problem is, we are not. Whereas I used to think God was distant (because transcendent), now I realize that God is “ubiquitous,” an old, quaint way of saying that God is everywhere all the time. As I become aware of God’s presence in my life, I realize that there is nothing special about this—I am not special to be experiencing God’s presence and it is not remarkable for God to be present. God is available all the time to everyone and everything. *We* have to become conscious of God’s presence. At one level, it is no different from any important relationship: one has to pay attention to the other, listen, and be open. To say God is always present is simply to acknowledge that God is reality, the breath, the life, the power, the love beneath, above, around, and in everything. This is divine transcendence *immanently* experienced; it is the magnificence and awesomeness of God *with us*.

This brings me to a further insight from “the neophyte’s notebook.” It is alright to be excessive: one can’t love God *too much*. It’s a relief to finally find the proper object of insatiable desire. Augustine and Thomas were right: our hearts are restless until they rest in God, and we were made to know and enjoy God forever. One doesn’t have to hold back; the *sanctus* is the proper primary prayer; we were made to glorify God—and it feels good to do so. But once again, it is not an either/or—God or the world. The incarnation has taken on a whole new meaning for me: it means God is forever and truly the God with and for the flesh, the earth, the world. Many of the saints who speak about loving God know that it is easier to love God than the neighbor. Hence, the best test, as Teresa of Avila shrewdly suggests, is to stick with the neighbor: “And be certain that the more advanced you see you are in love for your neighbor the more advanced you will be in the love of God.”⁴ The briefest of my credos, then, might be: “We live to give God glory by loving the world and everything in it.”

Third, this adventure is showing me how deeply interconnected are the active and contemplative dimensions of the Christian life. I learned this first from teaching the religious autobiography course: all the people we read were social activists. None of them were hermits or New Agers, interested only in their own individual spiritual development. On the contrary, they knew they had to be deeply rooted in God in order to do their justice work in the world. Dorothy Day could never have lasted decades in New York’s Bowery

ministering to the homeless, the alcoholics, and the destitute without a deep spiritual life. Like Bonhoeffer's God, Day's was immediate, present, and functional—the power that guided and sustained her. We misinterpret God's love when we think it is merely for our comfort or even our spiritual growth. If the saints give us a lesson, it is that God's presence in our lives should turn us into workers for an alternative world.

Finally, these initial reflections have suggested to me that working for an alternative world is a prime directive for Christian living. Do I mean another, supernatural world? Does practicing the presence of God mean leaving this world as so much Christian asceticism and fundamentalism advocate? By no means (as the incarnation insists), but it does mean trying to live *differently* in our one and only world. My reflections coalesce around this point: what I have learned about who God is, who we are, and where we fit into the scheme of things tells me that the one thing needful in a theology for twenty-first-century North American middle-class Christians is an alternative view of the abundant life from that of our consumer culture. *Life Abundant* is about this reconstruction. We will take as our context for revisioning theology the well being of our planet and all its creatures, seeing that project against the deterioration of nature and the injustice to poor people that the religion of our time—consumerism—is bringing about. If one believes that “the glory of God is all creatures fully alive,” then our current worldview and its lifestyle are wrong. It is more than that: it is sinful and evil, for it is contrary to God's will for creation.

This sounds like a universal and universalizing project. Actually, it isn't. I will be interpreting this problem and its alternative through a narrow lens: the little bit I know, the few beliefs I hold undeniably. For many years I have been aware that most good (coherent, interesting, plausible) theology grows from a central insight—one possible, deeply held, and thoroughly embodied statement about God and the world. A few examples: for Paul it was being made righteous by God through Christ; for John it was the Word made flesh; for Thomas it was the nature/supernature relationship; for Schleiermacher it was the feeling of absolute dependence; for Barth it was the radical transcendence of God; for the liberation theologians it is the preferential option for the poor. None of these is wrong, but all of them are partial. There is no such thing as a complete theology; there are only piecemeal theologies, the best efforts of human beings to state what they have found to be undeniable through their experience of God and as members of the Christian community. It is as if a tiny bit of God is available to each creature, whatever aspect of God that creature needs and can absorb. Most of us cannot absorb very much of the infinite Divine Being. At

most we might come to reflect a smidgen of it in our thinking and actions. No one has ever seen God, so what more can we expect? But a tiny bit is enough; that is, enough if it is deeply held, well understood, and carefully argued—and if it is open to the many other bits from other Christians as we all struggle to discern God’s will for our world.

As I come to the end of these reflections on my religious journey, I will try to summarize them at the level closest to my experience. . . . [H]ere I want to suggest the heart of my theology, the core that informs the whole.

We live and move and have our being in God. God is closer to us (to every iota of creation) than we are to ourselves. God is the breath of our breath, the love with which we love, the power that sustains our work. When we become aware of God, who is the Alpha and Omega, as the source and goal of everything and of all life, love, and power, then we become channels for these realities, both in our own lives and for others. We become available to be “saved” (restored to health and happiness) and to help “save” others. Salvation means living in God’s presence, in imitation of divine love for the world. Each of us can love only a tiny fragment of the earth, but that is our task.

I am slowly learning to live and think and act within the divine *milieu*. I sense the world (and myself) becoming ordered by that gracious Presence. I am beginning to see things within that Light and everything seems different. Things are neither chaotic nor ordered in relation to me and my wants. Everything is ordered by God and in relation to God. Reality “makes sense,” not according to worldly standards (nor mine), but in terms of the love that created everything and wants it to flourish. Ecologically, theologically, and personally it makes sense: the world is characterized by radical relationality ordered by and to the Power in the universe, who is love. It is the reality in which all are to live together in community to glorify God and to share with each other. Such reality has order and harmony; the disorder and confusion come when we fail to acknowledge this order and try to reorder things around ourselves.

From my growing acquaintance with God has come confirmation of my earliest religious experiences: gratitude for life and glory to God. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said that from the time he was a child he had two passions: a passion for the world and a passion for God, and his lifelong goal was to bring these two together.⁵ I think my journey has been similar: the “Catholic” sacramental appreciation of the world joined with the “Protestant” prophetic witness to divine transcendence. The key to their unity, of course, is the incarnation which, in its profound simplicity, means “God with us,” God with the world and the world within God. The incarnation, it seems to me, is not merely or solely about Jesus. It is more radical than that, although for Christians Jesus is

the paradigm of both God with us and the world within God. The incarnation reveals God as *always* with us and our being *defined* as within God. The incarnation is the solution to the “two worlds problem”: the problem of how to love God and the world. There is only one world, a world that God loves. Since God loves it, we not only *can* but *should*. In fact, loving the world (not God alone), or rather, loving God *through* loving the world, is the Christian way.

The above paragraphs are a summary of my most deeply held beliefs. This theological core has implications for Christian discipleship in twenty-first-century North America. The Christian way (according to this view) inevitably leads to an understanding of salvation as deification, becoming like God. Made in God’s image, we are to grow into that reality by doing what God does: love the world. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God because he did that fully—his mind, heart, and will were one with God’s love for the world. We see this in his ministry to the outcast, oppressed, and sick as well as in his death on a cross in defiance of the powers of greed, hatred, and domination. But we also are called to this vocation: Christian discipleship is loving the world. As we see in the story of Jesus and the stories of the saints (all Christians who try to do this), it is not easy or pleasant. While appreciating the color purple is one dimension of passion for the world, identifying with its sufferings is another.

Such identification is, I believe, increasingly essential for favored North American Christians who, along with other Westerners, are experiencing the highest level of the “good life” that any human beings ever have. The context in which we experience this consumer abundance, however, is one of a widening gap between the well-off and the poor of the world, as well as an increasing deterioration of the “resources” (the natural world) that fund our abundance. We cannot, in good conscience, “love the world”—its snowcapped mountains and panda bears—while at the same time destroying it and allowing our less well-off sisters and brothers to sink into deeper poverty. Hence, I believe Christian discipleship for twenty-first-century North American Christians means “cruciform living,” an alternative notion of the abundant life, which will involve a philosophy of “enoughness,” limitations on energy use, and sacrifice for the sake of others. For us privileged Christians a “cross-shaped” life will not be primarily what Christ does for us, but what we can do for others. We do not need so much to accept Christ’s sacrifice for our sins as we need to repent of a major sin—our silent complicity in the impoverishment of others and the degradation of the planet. In Charles Birch’s pithy statement: “The rich must live more simply, so that the poor may simply live.”⁶ While not all North American Christians are “rich,” most of us are avid consumers, and few Christian churches have suggested alternative visions of abundant living. We

should be doing so. Christians have the obligation not just to live differently themselves, but to recommend an alternative to the paradigm of unlimited consumption. Can an alternative life be good, be abundant? I believe it can be but only within God's ordering of reality, in which right relations (what is good for the planet) becomes our standard.

Since the world, according to the incarnation, is where God dwells, it is God's "house," and we should abide by God's house rules. The house rules for the whole earth are right relations among all creatures, relations governed in basic ways by economics. What God's house rules are—in terms of ecological and economic imperatives—is one of the major tasks of Christian discernment. I am suggesting that the context within which North American Christians should undertake such discernment is a cruciform one: the recognition that a *different* way of living in the world is called for rather than the dominant consumer model.

Notes

1. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 269; Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square, 1978), 178.
2. Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).
3. Eberhard Bethge, "Turning Points in Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought," in Peter Vorkink, ed., *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 79.
4. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist, 1979), 100.
5. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War*, trans. Rene Hague (London: Collins, 1968), 14.
6. Charles Birch, Nairobi World Council of Churches Assembly, 1975.