



THE WAY OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

SACRED COMPASS

J. BRENT BILL

Foreword by
RICHARD J. FOSTER



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DEDICATION

*To the Friends in Fellowship worship group
who walked with me and guided me as I wrote this book.*

Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment

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FOREWORD

I DO A GOOD DEAL OF HIKING: Leisure hiking. Trail hiking. Off-trail hiking. Wilderness hiking. Overnight hiking. Extended backpack hiking. And more. One piece of equipment that is always good to have along is a compass. Especially when I am “bushwhacking” off-trail in the high country of the Colorado Rockies.

I must admit to you that I have not graduated to a G.P.S. I resist it for some reason. Yes, I know, the technology of the G.P.S. makes it a far more accurate instrument. Still, I hold back. Perhaps it’s that when I’m in the wilderness I want to be as far away from high-tech gadgetry as possible. I will even take off my watch and leave it at home.

But a compass is different somehow. A compass is an old friend. Maybe it is because the compass connects me, if only in a small way, to centuries of travelers of all kinds. Then, too, a compass guides me . . . but not perfectly. For one thing, I am always having to make the adjustments between magnetic north and true north. Also, a compass does not give me the details of a G.P.S. There are still lots of unknowns and plenty of decisions to make. I rather like that. I like the mystery. I like the unexpectedness. I like the adventure.

All of that to say that I think the metaphor of a compass is a good one when we are considering our life's journey in relation to God. With skillful use of this metaphor, Brent Bill has written one of the finest books on discernment and Divine guidance that I have seen in a very long time.

And that is saying something. In general, I do not care for the many modern books out in the marketplace on "Divine guidance." I wish I didn't have to say it, but these books almost always degenerate into simplistic, rigid systems for discerning the will of God. Thankfully, *Sacred Compass* stands apart from these easy solutions to life's perplexities. Its openness and flexibility is true to the realities of the frequent twists and turns of everyday life.

Brent Bill is a Quaker, and he warmly embraces this tradition. But never in a sectarian way. Most of the great spiritual insights are "loanable," and so when Bill draws from his Quaker heritage he is doing so in the spirit of the catholicity of sharing. This is true even when he utilizes special Quaker phrases: "as way opens," "let your life speak," "never run ahead of your leading," and more. He unpacks this Quaker language in such a warm and loving way that regardless of our denominational tradition we all are drawn into the reality of which the language speaks. In addition, it is clear that Bill is also engaging with a whole host of Christian traditions and showing that they all share the composite likeness of godliness.

There are many things I like about *Sacred Compass*. Let me mention four.

First, in his writing somehow Brent Bill is able to create “space” for us to become quiet and listen to God. The writing submerges us into prayer and allows space for the Divine/human dialogue, Spirit to spirit. It is quite amazing really. Maybe it’s the author’s openness and ease with us as readers. Perhaps it’s the naturalness and grace that gives us permission to let go of our frantic ways. Maybe it’s the freedom from strict categories of expectation and performance. For example, in a section on “Seasons of Discernment” Bill teaches about “sensing” and “waiting” and “acting.” In the teaching he reminds us that we do not, “slavishly move from Sensing to Waiting to Acting, with each having clearly defined beginnings and endings. Instead, Waiting can lead back to Sensing or forward to Action. Likewise, Action can lead back to Sensing or Waiting. Often, the three are a synthesis of each other—a blend of Sensing and Waiting while Acting, for example. They flow one to another and back around.” It is this openness and flexibility that calms my frenzied spirit. It quiets me, settles me, thickens me.

Second, *Sacred Compass* bravely engages the harshness and dissonance we experience in life that often punches us hard in the gut. At times even threatening to deliver a knock-out blow. (And, dear reader, if you have not yet experienced these tough realities, believe me, you will.) My two favorite chapters are “West of Eden: What if the Way Takes us to Unexpected Places?” and “The Dark Path; What if You Lose Your Way?”

“West of Eden” helps us understand that Divine guidance can, very frankly, lead to things we would never imagine or want when we started out: our own death, for example. “The

Dark Path” reminds us that God is still with us when we have walked down foreign paths and gone other ways. Listen: “In the New Testament the word *lost* means simply that—‘lost.’ It doesn’t mean being doomed or damned for all eternity. It means that whatever is lost is in the wrong place; it’s not where it should be. This is true in all of Jesus’ parables (such as the one about the lost coin) and about people, too. Things and people are lost when they are not in the right place.”

Third, *Sacred Compass* is eminently practical. I don’t mean “practical” in the sense of giving exercises or tasks to do. It does do that to some extent, but that is not what I am referring to. No, I mean that the whole of the book is practical. It’s the ease in approaching the subject matter. It’s the anecdotal stories. It’s the small, seemingly off-handed comments that startle us into thinking in new directions. It’s all that, and more.

And finally, *Sacred Compass* is filled with such encouragement. There is no grit-our-teeth earnestness here. Divine guidance is ultimately life-giving and joy-filled. In reality the “sacred compass” is simply the Holy Spirit leading us to the face of a loving God. It is Jesus, the inner Teacher, showing us how to live fully, freely. Always there is a clear expectation that this life is genuinely possible. At one point Brent Bill says that we are discovering “a fresh and deeper way of living a God-directed life—a life that eschews simple spiritual solutions and invites us into the deepest, most soulful parts of our being.” And so we are.

Richard J. Foster



INTRODUCTION
THE HOLY DISCOVERY

A COMPASS, no matter what direction we turn, always points us to the north pole—a destination most of us (unless we're named Amundsen, Byrd, Peary, or Henson) will never reach in this lifetime. In that way, a compass makes a good metaphor for our spiritual lives and the work of discerning God's will for us.

Many times I wish God spoke as clearly and as obviously as Mapquest or Google Maps or a GPS. But God doesn't. Maybe that's because we don't navigate the life of faith via anything remotely resembling a GPS. Instead, the divine compass points us to our spiritual true north—the mind and love of God. Our sacred compass operates in our souls and calls us to life with God—life abundant and adventurous, even when we wish living was less of an adventure. The sacred compass leads us on a life of pilgrimage—a hike to wholeness and holiness.

In pointing us always to God, the compass helps us with our soul's deepest question, *What am I supposed to do with my life?* The question of how to live our lives especially presses on those of us who sense we are not merely humans trying to be spiritual, but are deeply spiritual beings endeavoring to live as fully human.

Every day begins with that “what” question. We wake up each morning with a cavalcade of choices before us—beginning with whether or not to get up. Things get more complicated from there. The very act of making a choice—any choice—shows us that our lives are more than our own. We belong to ourselves, but we also belong to others—our family, our neighbors, our pets, our coworkers. Most of all, we belong to God.

When I was in college, I encountered a group handing out little buff-colored booklets titled “The Four Spiritual Laws.” The first spiritual law was, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” The idea that God has a plan for us is not a novel concept. The Bible and the whole of Christian history are full of examples of people seeking to determine God’s will. In order to find God’s will, women and men of faith cast lots, set out fleeces, prayed, fasted, learned to listen to donkeys, went on retreats, climbed up cacti, and more. These days, bookstores are crammed full of titles about learning God’s will. Amazon.com alone offers more 38,000 books on the subject. While some of those books offer you five easy steps for discerning God’s direction for you, this book is not one of them. Uncovering God’s direction for us is not the five-easy-steps kind of simple.

Discovering spiritual direction is simple—but in an amazingly countercultural and counterintuitive way. It is about heeding the Holy Spirit. Learning to follow the divine compass means stopping and paying attention instead of looking for a magical

map with the shortest route highlighted in yellow. Learning what God wants of us means letting the Holy Spirit guide us into the deep places of our souls. We learn to look for God in those deep places and in all the places our lives take us.

When we travel through life attentive to the sacred compass, we find that God's direction changes us. We discover that spiritual discernment is about sensing the presence and call of God, and not just about making decisions. The process of following the sacred compass awakens us to a life of constant renewal of our hearts, minds, wills, and souls.

This renewal moves us deep into personal spiritual transformation. And as we change, we also change the lives of the people around us and, ultimately, the world. Such transformation is not accomplished by following a pre-published route mapped out in *The God's Will Guidebook*. Rather, true transformation happens when we let the map (and any idea of a map) flutter from our tight grasp and instead begin to use the sacred compass that God provides—the compass of the Holy Spirit's work within us.

THE SACRED COMPASS SHOWS US GOD'S DIRECTION

That inner compass tells us that we can know God's direction for us. I picked the seminary I attended partly because of its motto—"We hold that Christ's will can be known and obeyed." I found the thought that I could know God's will called to my

heart, and I don't think my heart is the only one that hears that call. When I surveyed some of my friends and readers, I found that almost 90 percent of them said that there was a time in their lives when they knew what God wanted them to do. Some of their experiences appear in this book. Their experiences of God's direction were as varied as the people I surveyed. While their God-encounters were unique, there were some similarities. Each of them said:

- ◆ they found it daunting to say that God led them
- ◆ their experience of divine direction was unmistakable
- ◆ their experience pointed them to God
- ◆ they were led to act

Writer Amy Frykholm's experience illustrates these aspects of God-encounter:

I'm very hesitant to say that "God wanted me to do something," and yet I have experienced times of extraordinary clarity when not only the direction that I should take seemed clear, but the workings of something beyond myself, the softening up of my whole self in order to accept a previously unacceptable direction, took place.

The most obvious example is a period when, after six years of graduate school, I abandoned the path clearly laid out for me toward an academic job and an academic life. Instead, after a long period of discernment that included

long conversations and long silences, a lot of tears, a lot of giving up of ego, it became clear to me that another, less logical path, was the better one.

One of my guides during this time was the Sufi poet Hafez, and especially his poem, “Some fill with each good rain,” and the lines: “There are different wells within your heart. Some fill with each good rain, Others are far too deep for that. In one well You have just a few precious cups of water, That ‘love’ is literally something of yourself, It can grow as slow as a diamond If it is lost.”

The path that I was on seemed determined to deplete those few cups of water, and I knew, with some deep part of myself, that I would need to find another path if I wanted to be renewed.

THE SACRED COMPASS LEADS US TO HOLY DISCOVERY

Following our sacred compass leads us to a place where we learn from God in the daily and in the lifelong. This place is one of seeking and sensing God. It is a place of divine direction and spiritual opportunity. Learning to follow the sacred compass means living in a constant state of discernment and obedience to God.

The divine compass asks us to travel by faith and put to use the various maps we’ve been given—maps such as the Bible, prayer, spiritual friends, and other faith practices. Our compass takes us to a fresh and deeper way of living a God-directed



life—a life that eschews simple spiritual solutions and invites us into the deepest, most soulful parts of our being.

Keeping our soul's eyes on the sacred compass leads us to the holy discovery that we can move through life with purpose and promise, even in those times when we may not sense with certainty what that purpose and promise are.

THE SACRED COMPASS COMPLEMENTS OUR UNIQUENESS

The sacred compass also shows us that the path of discernment is unique to each person. None of us follows the exact same paths as any other person. None of us has the exact same talents—or failings—as any other person. And God does not use us in the exact same way as any other person. There was only one Moses raised in Pharaoh's court, one Mary the mother of Jesus, one Martin Luther, one Julian of Norwich, and one you.

The sacred compass leads each of us to the life only we can live. Our compass calls us to use the gifts only we can give. In a grace-filled way, our compass invites us into a life of continuous experiences of God and of spiritual transformation. As we move toward divine guidance, we joyfully behold the face of a loving God gazing back at us.





AS WAY OPENS

Moving from Tourists to Pilgrims

WILL YOU BE COMING FOR DINNER TOMORROW?" one might ask. "I will, if way opens," a Quaker is likely to respond. Quakers, also known as Friends, have been known to drop "as way opens" into conversation as easily as other folks do "Hello" or "How're you doing?" It's almost become a cliché.

Yet, in spite of its colloquial use, we most often hear that phrase during deep discussions around important decisions. This saying speaks to the belief that God's revelation, even in daily life, continues for all who follow their sacred compass. God works within and around us, leading, guiding, and opening the way, sometimes when we least expect or feel it. The idea of being led and guided implies movement. If we're being led or guided then we must be being led or guided *somewhere*. The sacred compass shows us that we are on a pilgrimage to our spiritual true north—God.

As way opens implies a deep way of developing our spiritual insight, making major decisions, and planning. It is the condensed version of a longer phrase: "to proceed as way

opens.” There’s that movement again—but it is movement with a cautionary note. Proceed, yes, but *only* as way opens.

Counter to our lives of action, the sacred compass tells us to take time to wait for God’s guidance before moving ahead. Part of following way opening is learning to be less hasty—to take time to let the direction needle stop wobbling and point its way to God.

AS WAY OPENS IS A PILGRIMAGE

Way opening teaches us that the compass is about more than decision making. While we use its principles and tools to help make major life decisions—careers, life partners—and minor ones, a primary teaching of way opening is to base our movement on God’s timing. Decisions big and small are portions of our life of pilgrimage, but they are not the destination. Life with God is the destination.

Whom we marry or don’t, where we live or won’t, certainly factor into our life’s path. They influence its direction, but our journey continues no matter what decisions we make. That’s why we need to learn to see God at work within and around us. When we behold God present with us, we find that our lives are lives of pilgrimage and not of static spiritual sitting.

PILGRIMS LEARN FROM OTHER PILGRIMS

Growing up, my religious training was steeped in the Bible. Of particular interest to me, as a kid, were the stories of children in the Bible. One of my favorites was the story of Samuel. He was a boy in a time when (as the King James Version puts it) “the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.” Precious and open himself, Samuel heard God’s voice, obeyed it, and came to be known as “a prophet of the Lord.”

The idea that God could speak to a kid was pretty heady. Samuel’s story taught us to listen to God and for God. Mrs. Clark, our Sunday school teacher, assured us that if we did listen, and if we heard God’s voice and obeyed it, we would also be known for opening the vision of God and making God’s word precious.

The Bible is filled with examples of people—young and not-so-young—who sought God’s will. The early disciples looked for direction in replacing Judas. Joshua asked God about apportioning the land of Canaan to the people of Israel. Jesus, too, was an example of seeking God’s will: while praying in the Garden prior to his passion, he sought confirmation of God’s path for him: “And [Jesus] withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.’” Jesus’ path led to the cross, the grave,

and ultimately, resurrection. For Jesus, the way opened into our forgiveness and our healing.

Christian church history is also replete with stories of women and men in quest of God's direction for their lives. These range from the desert fathers to Thomas à Kempis to Mother Teresa to the person who sits next to me in the pew each Sunday morning.

One of my favorite stories is that of St. Ignatius. Born in Spain in the early fifteenth century, the young Ignatius was no model of sainthood. Ignatius was pompous and obsessed with desire to win glory on the battlefield. Rejecting his father's wish for him to become a priest, Ignatius went on military adventures. During one battle, a cannon ball shattered his leg. While recovering in Loyola, he asked for books about romance and chivalry. Instead, he received books on the love of Christ and the lives of the saints. While reading, he discovered that his old dreams of romance and adventure left him unsettled and unhappy. The saints, in contrast, seemed serene even in horrible circumstances. With a shift of spirit, he felt called to a higher life of devotion to God and later wrote *Spiritual Exercises*. Now considered a spiritual classic, his book uses a four-week, systematic review of our personal spiritual lives to train the soul. They are considered a pilates for piety.

Ignatius's idea of "soul conditioning" or "spiritual sit-ups" was not original. St. Paul hinted at that idea 1,400 years earlier, when he wrote to Timothy, "train yourself to be godly. For

physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things.” With this training in mind, Ignatius took Paul’s concept and turned it into a set of spiritual exercises that are still used to great effect today.

Recently, pastor and author Rick Warren has generated a new form of contemporary spiritual exercise around the themes of the purpose-driven life and forty days of purpose—all based on the tenet that a “healthy, balanced church helps develop changed lives—people who are driven by the five biblical purposes that God designed for every human life.” According to Warren, the five purposes for our lives are worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and missions. Millions of copies of his book *The Purpose-Driven Life* have been sold and thousands of churches have participated in a forty days of purpose campaign.

Men and women who find them helpful to their spiritual walk eagerly read books by Ignatius, Warren, and other spiritual explorers. We want to learn from others who have trod the pilgrim path. Their words enlighten, embolden, and beckon us onward. We often feel like we’re on our journey alone. Writings of fellow pilgrims remind us that, while our way is unique to us, there are many, ancient and modern, who have traveled with us. I’ve traveled with Ignatius, Thomas Kelly, Anne Lamott, and a host of others. How about you? Who would make your list of fellow pilgrims? Whose writing do you read for companionship on the way?

PILGRIMS ARE LED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

The concept of as way opens takes a different tack from either Ignatius or Warren. Instead of focusing on four-week spiritual exercises or forty-day programs, as way opens points us to the constant presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is our sacred compass; its role is to show us our way. Jesus said:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

This Gospel passage reminds us that God is with us on our pilgrimage—the indwelling Paraclete (a Greek word that is sometimes translated as “counselor”) accompanies us. God gives us the Paraclete to guide us into God’s truth. The Holy Spirit fulfills Christ’s promise that God will be with us forever as it works in our souls, teaching and guiding us. As way opens is about learning to pay attention to this Inner Teacher, our sacred compass. When we do so, we see God’s direction for our questions big and small, immediate and lifelong. We sense, through the work of the Paraclete, that God is always present

with us, guiding and directing our lives. We witness the work of our personal sacred compass.

The early Friends believed that the Inner Teacher spoke with a quiet voice heard in the soul, so they worshiped in silence. They sought souls still enough to hear the God who speaks in sacred silence. They weren't the first to hear God's voice in soulful stillness. After God directed the prophet Elijah to go stand on a mountain, he discovered that God was not in the earthquake, wind, or fire, but in the sound of "sheer silence":

"Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

God's voice is at times so deep and so holy that it may appear to be nothing but silence—unless, like Elijah, we pay heartfelt attention. Can you think of a time when you heard God in the stillness of your soul? How did you get to that place of quietness and listening? When we quiet our soul's busy-ness,

we hear the voice of the Inner Teacher showing us the way opening.

PILGRIMS CAN TAKE MANY PATHS

I grew up evangelical Quaker. We subscribed to the belief that “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” As such, we spent a lot of time, especially as teenagers, trying to determine what this plan was, especially about things such as where to go to college, whom to marry, and what career to go into.

Some of these decisions were easy—our church had already discerned some of God’s direction for our lives. In our case, the plan did not include smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, cursing, or dancing. If we went to college, we’d go to one of our church-affiliated schools. There were jobs we should take and others we couldn’t. Bartending was out of the question. Many careers had carefully delineated gender roles. Young men could be pastors; young women could be pastor’s wives. When we got married, we’d marry someone from our brand of Christianity, preferably someone from our local church. All of these guidelines were set up so that we could faithfully keep the first spiritual law and follow that wonderful plan God had for our lives.

And therein lies the rub—“*a* wonderful plan for your life.”
A. One plan. Notice I didn’t say wonderful *plans* for your life.

The implication was that God had just one plan, which also implied that you'd best spend a lot of time making sure you knew what that plan was so you didn't mess it up.

As I grew older, questions arose. This idea of a plan also implied that there was a sort of map for our lives. Such a map would have clear directions—just the way a road map showed the way to get from Pingree to Lake Williams, North Dakota, a thirty-five-mile straight shot on North Dakota State Road 36.

My life was far from a thirty-five-mile straight shot. There were no clear directions or maps from jobs I held (local church pastor, photocopier salesman, not-for-profit director, seminary instructor, and lumber salesman), my marital status (married, divorced, remarried), and my life experiences (among them, a friend's suicide). My life more closely resembled a map from Portland to West Bowdin, Maine, traveling craggy, winding roads, with many alternate routes.

As I grew contemplative in my faith, questions arose as to how any of the things I had done fit into “a” wonderful plan for my life. Learning to see life as way opens answered that question.

You might want to draw a “map” of your life. Take a blank sheet of paper and write down some the important moments of your life. Put the “high” moments in the upper half of the sheet, the “low” ones below. Has your life followed a straight line? Does it move easily from one to the next? Did the high or low moments provide places where you could have followed another or a new direction—or did they point you on the same way?

Our lives reinforce the truth of a verse from Proverbs—“In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” *Paths*—plural. The writer of Proverbs acknowledges that our lives don’t have just one path. We are offered many paths as we follow the sacred compass.

PILGRIMS LIVE WITH IMAGINATION AND SPIRIT

Following the sacred compass calls us to live with imagination and spirit because there is not just one way to go, and we have no set map to follow. Way opens uniquely for each person. Our way unfolds as we move through life. The Inner Teacher uses our life experiences to show the way opening before us. Look at the life map you drew earlier. As you look at the highs and lows and in-betweens, how did particular experiences open a way for you? Do you, upon reflection, see God using them to move you in a certain direction, or away from a certain direction?

That’s how spiritual direction works in John Irving’s novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Owen was a tiny, bizarre person with weirdly luminescent skin and the strangest, eeriest voice God ever gave anybody. Which is what Owen believed—that God *gave* him his stature, his voice, and all his other characteristics for a reason. Owen believed he was God’s instrument.

His best friend, John Wheelwright, was a much more normal kid (if there really is any such creature). Wheelwright doubted God, life, and Owen’s obsession with being God’s instrument—

until Owen's death—when he saw God's purposes clearly. The difference between the two boys was that for Owen, the idea that God called him led him to a place where he could see the way opening, but John needed almost his entire childhood and young adulthood to find the thread of grace weaving its way through his life.

John and Owen's different experiences of the way opening were not based on their suitability for sainthood. Neither would qualify—especially Owen, who seemed to flaunt every rule of holiness. He was impure, indecent, and unfit by most standards for any sort of holy adoration. Yet Owen Meany was a saint because he lived as if he believed that God was real and knowable and had a direction for everybody—even a tiny boy/man with a wrecked voice.

This comforts me. Like Meany, am I flawed, confused, and doing my best with God's help to live a life of spiritual substance and holy obedience. Owen's failings were, for the most part, failings of the flesh, not of faith. In that he has good company in the Bible—David and his lusty heart, Noah and falling-down drunkenness after docking the ark. David and Noah were people doing their best to follow God's direction. And they were chosen to do God's work. God is funny that way—choosing the goofiest and weakest of us to accomplish divine purposes. Because of the role they played in God's work, David and Noah stand as exemplars of our potential God-directedness. They encourage us to see that way opens for us

to follow God in the midst of life's messiness—including our self-made messiness.

Put your spiritual imagination to work: Why does God use you? What good qualities can you place at God's disposal? What quirks? Using our imagination and spirit enables us to see ourselves as pilgrims entrusted by God to do noble work.

PILGRIMS LEARN TO TRUST GOD

Trusting that God directs our paths teaches us to see the ways life opens. Our lives are filled with potential “a-ha” moments. Following our spiritual compass helps us see the “a-has.” Trusting God also allows us to be real and genuine and authentic people, because trust helps us be more aware of the circumstances through which we pass. We see our flaws and frailties, and can still embrace the fact that we are people who hunger after God and are instruments of God.

Owen Meany knew, and John Wheelwright learned, the essence of living in a state of attention to the way opening as urged by mystic Isaac Penington. Penington said:

Know what it is to walk in the path of life. . . . It is that which groans, and which mourns; that which is begotten of God in you. . . . The true knowledge of the way, with the walking in the way, is reserved for God's child, for God's traveller. Therefore . . . don't strive to be any more

than God has made you. Give God your will . . . and, sink down to the seed that God sows in the heart and let that grow in you.

I love the idea that “the true knowledge of the way, with the walking in the way, is reserved for God’s child, for God’s traveller.” As I look at my life, I see one of motion. Though firmly rooted in the Midwest, as an adult I’ve lived in sixteen houses in two states, held fifteen full- or part-time jobs, and owned too many cars. Your life may be less frenetic than mine, but I’m sure that as you look over your history you’ll see various movements in your life as well—careers, family, spiritual and physical changes. The movements all fit with the concept of way opening. Way opening implies motion; a moving along life’s pilgrim way. What a winsome discovery.

PILGRIMS SEE GOD IN THE DETAILS

Pilgrimage shows us that every experience is one of discovering how way opens through the details of daily life. In an old Steve Martin comedy shtick, Socrates’ faithful followers come with the news that he has been convicted of corrupting the youth of Athens and has been sentenced to drink hemlock, which he does—heroically and unafraid. When his followers ask him how he can face death so bravely, Socrates, played by Steve Martin, is startled. He asks what they mean. They’re

bewildered—doesn't he know that hemlock is poison? When they tell him, he's really upset. He proclaims, "It was always: 'Socrates, what is truth? Socrates, what is the nature of the good? Socrates, what should I order? Socrates, what are you having?' And not once did anyone ever say: 'Socrates, hemlock is poison!'" Aah, the details.

And yet that is where the will of God lies in our lives—in the details. What are some of the details that have revealed God to you?

- ◆ A smile?
- ◆ A tear?
- ◆ A scene from nature?
- ◆ A morsel of food?

God is at work in everything that shapes and moves and forms us. As Malcolm Muggeridge says:

Indeed, every true word ever uttered, every thought sincerely and lucidly entertained, every harmonious note sung or sounded, laughter flashing like lightning between the head and heart, human love in all its diversity binding together husbands and wives, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and making of all mankind one family and our earth their home; the earth itself with its colours and shapes and smells, and its setting

in a universe growing ever vaster and its basic components becoming ever more microscopic—seen with the eyes of Faith, it all adds up to a one-ness, an image of everlasting reality.

PILGRIMS TRAVEL TOGETHER

When we follow God's direction in our lives, we do not travel alone. Pilgrims travel in groups, giving each other strength. As spiritual pilgrims we are on this journey along with all of God's other children. Sometimes our paths converge. Other times they diverge. Regardless, we are not bereft of fellow travelers, other seekers of the Spirit. Traveling together and experiencing the joy of the journey are as much a part of pilgrimage as arriving at our destination. Camaraderie makes the trip special and gives strength in times of homesickness.

There is another way that we are not alone on our pilgrimage. This time, though, I am not talking about the other travelers who are making the journey with us. Rather, there is one with us who often goes unseen. Part of the role of heeding the sacred compass is to make sure that this one does not go unnoticed. God travels beside us, inside us, above us, around us, and watches over our souls. The Psalmist tells us:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From whence does my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,

who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved,
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade
on your right hand.
The sun shall not smite you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and for evermore.

This psalm reminds us that we are wrong if we think God's interest in us depends on our feeling that God is close by. God is our keeper—whether we feel God's care or not. When we say yes to God, we find ourselves in relationship. Love beckons us into love. We are called into relationship with one who cares for us so much that the hairs of our head are numbered (though in my case, that's not a very large number).

As we follow our sacred compass, we learn in deeper and deeper ways that God's care is steady and ongoing. We need not feel God's care to know it is working, any more than we

need to feel gravity to keep us from sailing off into space. The law of God's ever-watchful presence is as surely in operation as are the natural laws of the universe that we take for granted.

Living into an increasing understanding of God's ever-presence is how we can pray along with Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Merton's words show us that a life of honest prayer is part of following the way that opens. What is honest varies from time to time, depending on our circumstances. Honest prayer will include some basics—an admission that we feel lost and can't see the way, letting God know that we desire direction, asking for pure motives in following the way, and stating, by and in faith, that God is with us and we want God to be with us. Use

the details and circumstances of your life to shape your honest prayers. What ingredients would you combine to create an honest prayer for today? Are they different from what you would have used yesterday? If so, why? What does that teach you?

PILGRIMS ARE GRACED WITH GOD'S PRESENCE

God is with us, spreading grace over our lives. We, body and soul, are under the watchful eye of one who is ever vigilant. God cares for us more than we can know this side of heaven. While we are no freer from our share of life's disasters than anybody else is, we do have one with us who will never leave our side or end the loving watch over us.

The idea of life as a pilgrimage means that when we come to a fork in the road, we'll take it, as the great philosopher Yogi Berra said. We keep moving in trust. As we do so, we live into the reality that God speaks to us through every event of every day—every person we encounter, everything we do, and every moment we experience. As we follow our sacred compass, our job is to keep our ears, eyes, minds, and souls open to God so that we learn to perceive the ways our exterior experiences can influence our interior lives. God knows our circumstances. Some of us are blessed with set times of prayers and devotion; others are blessed with family and work obligations that fill every hour. Regardless, God speaks and guides us gently and according to our needs and situation.

Name some of the exterior things God uses to teach you. For me, God often uses things such as rides I take on my tractor or the people I watch around me when I walk downtown. My “tractor time” opens me up to an appreciation of God’s creative work; people watching reminds me that I am surrounded by God’s family even when, sometimes especially when, they don’t look like me.

Busy at work or sitting still in a cathedral, God is ever with us.

PILGRIMS KEEP MOVING

We are a traveling people. We decide whether we travel as tourists or pilgrims. Tourists leave their footprints as monuments, while a pilgrim’s footprints are a marker. William Faulkner said the difference between the two is that “a monument only says, ‘At least I got this far,’ while a footprint says, ‘This is where I was when I moved again.’” Our sacred compass keeps us moving again—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, but always with a traveling companion or companions, seen and unseen.

Seeing ourselves as pilgrims and our lives as a pilgrimage changes us. To be pilgrims means that we are people who spend our lives going somewhere—in our case, going to God. Deep in our souls, we realize that, as an old hymn says, this world is not our home, we are just a-passin’ through. To be a pilgrim is

to answer Jesus' call to be his disciples—to follow him on the spiritual road.

This idea of life as pilgrimage is countercultural. Eugene Peterson, in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, says that we live in a tourist society. We pass through life looking for attractive sights to visit and enjoyable experiences to partake of, and then we move on. As we move deeper into the life of the spirit, though, we grow into an understanding that faith is more than a tourist attraction. Faith is a journey. Sometimes faith is a slog. When we endeavor to walk the pilgrim path, we also discover that there is something in the attempt that makes life worth living. Faith stretches us. It deepens us. The grace of God enlarges our souls. We begin to live into the realization that God is with us through all of life—the ups, downs, and in-betweens—and we begin to relax into the comfort of that realization.

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Keeping to the touchstone of as way opens helps us to live more faithfully. We see that every path we've taken, every misstep we've made, every prayer we've uttered, whether it seemed to be answered or not, is part of our pilgrimage to the peace and fellowship and will of God. The sacred compass leads us on a pilgrimage toward divine life, love, and light. We put slavish servitude to step-by-step directions behind us and step boldly into the paths before us—confident that God welcomes our seeking, stumbling steps toward heaven.