

SEEDS OF FAITH

Practices to Grow a Healthy Spiritual Life

J E R E M Y L A N G F O R D



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Dedication

For my children—Tyler Joseph, Caitlin Marie, and Colin Daniel

Seeds of Faith: Practices to Grow a Healthy Spiritual Life

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INTRODUCTION SEEDS OF FAITH

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.

—Thomas Merton

If you're reading this line, you're at least intrigued by the title of this book. Perhaps you're a seasoned seeker who recognizes echoes of Thomas Merton's classic book *New Seeds of Contemplation* and you wonder what's in store for you here. Or, maybe you're just beginning to nurture your spiritual life and are looking for reflections and practices that will help you on your way. Wherever you are on your faith journey—welcome. I hope you find this book a useful companion.

Let me say up front that this book is not about gardening or written for gardeners. Nor is it a how-to guide for living a spiritual life.

Rather, it draws on gardening as a metaphor to explore how God works in our lives. As Merton's quote above suggests, God is like a gardener who uses every moment and every event to plant something of spiritual significance in our lives. The better prepared we are to receive these "seeds of faith" and help them grow in our lives, the more we come to know God's love, to accept ourselves for who we are, to love others, and to enjoy the gift of life. And, in turn, the better able we are to share the seeds and fruits of faith with others. This book offers reflections and practices that help us prepare the soil of our lives to receive and nurture God's seeds of faith.

The Sower and the Seeds of Faith

The concept of God as a gardener is nothing new. The book of Genesis tells us that God "planted a garden in Eden," and strolled through creation "at the time of the evening breeze." Later in the Bible, the Gospel of Matthew includes a parable

that portrays God as a sower who spreads the seeds of the Word far and wide in the hopes that they will take root in our lives.

This parable of the sower and the seed provides a helpful metaphor for understanding God and our response to God in the life of faith. And because it provides the structure of this book, I invite you to read and reflect on it using a practice that you can apply to each chapter of this book:

-
- *Take a moment to gather yourself. Even if you're reading these words on the bus or in a noisy coffee shop, try to quiet your inner world.*
 - *Clear your mind of to-do lists and worries. Remind yourself that you are in God's presence.*
 - *Read through the selected passage slowly, paying careful attention to images, feelings, and thoughts that come to mind.*
 - *If you are able, underline or write down in a notebook words and concepts that strike you; otherwise, try to hold them in your memory.*
 - *When you finish reading the passage, pause—closing your eyes if you find that helpful—and reflect on what the words and entire passage mean to you, your personal history, your faith.*
 - *Remember: This exercise is not about simply completing a task. The point is to recognize God's Word and your response to it. Ask God for the grace to be receptive to insight and meaning. Share your thoughts and feelings with God.*
 - *Close with a prayer, such as the Our Father.*

Now, begin your reading of the parable of the sower and the seed:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on the rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

Rich in metaphor and meaning, this parable raises many questions:

- *Who is the sower?*
- *What kind of seeds did he sow?*
- *Why did so many of the seeds fall on infertile earth?*
- *What qualifies as fertile soil?*
- *What was the yield, and how significant is a hundredfold yield?*
- *How can we “hear” and interpret this story for our own lives and spiritual practice?*

Like us, the disciples want to know why Jesus speaks in parables. Jesus explains, “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’” In other words, Jesus wants us to lean in and listen hard to what he is trying to teach us about God and ourselves. The practices in this book are meant to help us have eyes to see and ears to hear God at work in our lives.

In his explanation of the parable, Jesus reveals that God is the sower, the Word is the seed, and we are the different types of soil. We’re like the footpath if we hear the Word, but don’t understand it and allow the evil one to snatch it away. We’re like the rocky ground if we receive the Word with initial enthusiasm, but fail to let it take root in our lives, especially in times of trial, and thus allow it to die. We’re like the thorny ground if we hear the Word, but let the cares of the world and the lure of personal gain choke it out. Finally, we’re like the fertile soil if we hear the Word, understand it, and let it take root in our lives such that it bears fruit and yields a thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or hundredfold.

We can look at this parable from a different vantage point by asking: What if *we* are the seed? What if God sows us into the world?

If so, other questions arise:

- *What kind of seed are we, and what kind should we be?*
- *If we could choose, which type of soil would we land on?*
- *How well do we understand God the Gardener’s plan for us?*
- *How do we fit into the larger garden of creation?*
- *What does the yield of our lives look like?*
- *Do we help other seeds in the garden grow, or do we choke them out?*

The purpose of this book is to transform these questions into practices that help us live our faith in nurturing ways on a daily basis. The goal is to be both recipients of the seeds of faith and sowers who plant the Word of God as far and wide as possible through our words and deeds.

Soul Gardening: Seeds, Roots, and Branches

To borrow a phrase from my minister-gardener friend, Terry Hershey, this book is about the practice of “soul gardening.” Any good gardener is disciplined and knows the practices of stewardship that are most essential to growing a beautiful and fruitful garden. The results speak for themselves. Likewise, any good soul gardener is disciplined about the practices that nurture the seeds of faith so that they grow into a deeply rooted connection with God. The fruits of this garden are freedom, joy, peace, hope, love, and service, which spring forth in the life of a soul gardener.

As spiritual writers such as Richard Foster and Dallas Willard have revealed so well, the Christian tradition is a treasure trove of spiritual disciplines that help us to receive God’s gifts of life and grace, and to grow into the people God calls us to be—what Thomas Merton and C.S. Lewis refer to as our “true selves.” Without being a how-to manual, this book offers reflections and practices for germinating the seeds of faith in our lives and cultivating a healthy spiritual life. These practices are grounded in Scripture, Christian tradition, and everyday experiences.

Because stories are a powerful vehicle for illustrating a point or moving the spirit, I include stories from my own life

and the lives of friends and family whenever they are helpful. While the chapters of this book can be read in any order, they're grouped loosely into three sections that stem from the parable of the sower and build upon each other: Seeds, Roots, and Branches.

The first section, Seeds, may surprise some because in addition to practices such as living fully in the moment, spiritual seeking, solitude, and friendship, it also includes the practice of doubt. Doubt is an essential aspect of faith from Job to Jesus to Augustine to—as many have been surprised to learn—Mother Teresa. Quite simply, doubt is human, and it makes no sense to talk about faith in a way that is disconnected from human experience. This section, then, offers practices to help us mine everyday life for meaning and experiences of God that are the seeds of a deeper faith.

Unlike many spiritual books, this one doesn't presume anything about your faith except that you're interested in exploring it openly and honestly. Early chapters ask you to take stock of where you are on your faith journey, and invite you to walk further down that path.

The second section, Roots, offers practices to help us encourage the seeds of faith, however small they may be, to take root and grow in our lives. These practices include meditation, prayer, worship, spiritual direction, and celebration.

The third section, Branches, offers practices—such as love, vocation, forgiveness, and service—that help us put our faith into action, to be sowers of the Good News. James tells us that “a faith without works is dead,” so the healthy faith strives to love, serve, heal, and spread joy. In this section we see more

clearly that the heartbeat of Christianity is love and service to others, especially those in the greatest need.

How to Use This Book

It's been said that you haven't read a book once until you've read it twice. Therefore, I encourage you to read this book once straight through (in as few sittings as possible) to get an overall sense of the practices presented here, just as you would scan a garden to appreciate what it has to offer. It will be especially helpful for you to flag the chapters on solitude, meditation, and prayer (chapters 6, 9, and 10, respectively), as they describe the foundational spiritual disciplines you will return to again and again in the life of faith.

On your second read-through, read slowly and intentionally, paying particular attention to each idea as you would the individual flowers in a garden. The very act of reading and reflecting on the content of this book is a spiritual practice that is in tune with other practices such as seeking, study, spiritual exercise, and spiritual reading. Remember, the practice we used for reflecting on and praying with the parable of the sower and the seed can be used with each chapter of this book.

You may wish to read this book on your own, or perhaps with friends and fellow seekers. On your second read-through, read the chapters in any order you prefer, depending on what catches your eye in the garden.

As a final suggestion, you might read and reflect on one chapter per week. You could begin each week by reading and thinking about the recommended practice. Then set aside ten

to fifteen minutes each day—perhaps just after waking in the morning, or just before you go to bed—to implement that practice in your life. You could also use the examination of conscience practice described in chapter 14 as a daily exercise, preferably just before you go to bed, to complement your reading of the book.

Our lives are filled with practices that influence how we eat, sleep, work, raise our kids, spend our free time, and live our lives. It's a simple fact that if we eat well and exercise regularly, we'll be healthier and have more energy for the many people and tasks that demand our attention. The same is true in the spiritual life. If we nourish and exercise our souls through prayer and service, worship and community, we're more inclined to be in tune with God and the joys of life. It is my prayer that the practices in this book help you recognize what God the Gardener is doing in your soul, so that you may have life, and have it abundantly.

ONE SEEDS

Two years ago, I was saying as I planted seeds in the garden, "I must believe in these seeds, that they fall into the earth and grow into flowers and radishes and beans." It is a miracle to me because I do not understand it. The very fact that they use glib technical phrases does not make it any less a miracle, and a miracle we all accept. Then why not accept God's miracles?

—Dorothy Day

Introduction

This first section begins at the beginning, by asking you to reflect on where you are in your faith journey. Each reflection and practice mines life for experiences that might serve as seeds of a faith waiting to take root and push through the surface. The chapters also explore Jesus' life and the Christian tradition for witness and wisdom to help us. Even the most spiritually mature among us benefit from asking anew life's basic questions and reexamining the answers we've come to live by.

Let me begin with a story: While waiting in line to pay for my wife's birthday gift, I spied something called "Lavender in a Bag." Liz loves lavender, so I had to get it. The directions were simple—place the seeds from the seed pouch into the bag containing soil, and add water.

Our son Tyler, then two-and-a-half, was fascinated by this gift. "What is it, a bag of dirt?" he wondered aloud.

We thought about it for a minute. "Well, yes and no."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The seeds and dirt in this bag represent how everything in the whole world works."

His big green eyes lit up.

"Just as you need food and love and care, so do these seeds. If we put them in the soil and water them, over time a plant will grow. Eventually the plant will sprout pretty flowers that smell nice."

"I like flowers," he said before peppering us with questions.

When he'd exhausted our knowledge of the natural world,

we explained that each day he could peek inside the bag to see what was happening.

For the first week, Tyler checked the bag every day to find only dirt. He was disappointed, but he held out hope that something would happen.

And something did. When he peeked into the bag on the eighth day, he was thrilled to see small sprouts pushing their way through the soil. Each day thereafter the lavender plants continued to grow, and so did Tyler's enthusiasm.

Driving to work each morning after checking on the lavender plants with my son, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and clarity. It was good to see my son so excited by nature and to be able to teach him. It was nice to remember my own wonder as a child, experiencing things for the first time. And it was important to be reminded that at its base, life is as simple as seeds, soil, nutrition, sunshine, and growth.

Then, one day, Tyler asked, "Where did the seeds go?"

Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed asks us the same question: where have the seeds of God's Word gone once they've met the soil of our lives? The odds that they're flourishing are not good: They may have fallen on the outskirts of our hearts only to be snatched away by those who think faith is silly. Or perhaps they landed on rocky ground that allowed them to grow for a while, but just wasn't deep enough for roots to take hold. Or perhaps they were choked out by the thorns of our desires for things such as fame or fortune.

But maybe, just maybe, the seeds were able to take root in our souls and are bearing fruit in our lives. The practices in this section are geared toward helping us learn how to recognize

the seeds of faith that God sows everywhere and learn how to nurture them to take root in our lives.

For some, talk of God as a sower who spreads seeds of faith is familiar, even exciting. But for many people it's just metaphorical language that has nothing to do with reality. To ground our discussion in the first section of this book, let's be concrete by exploring some of life's big questions: Who are you? Why are you here? What gets you out of bed in the morning? What do you *really* want in life? What do you think about when you're alone? Who are your friends, and what do they mean to you?

All this section, indeed, this book, asks of you is an openness to recognizing these questions and your responses to them as seeds of faith—in God, yourself, and others.

Spiritual wisdom to consider as you identify the seeds of faith in your life:

Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

—Henry David Thoreau

If seeds in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses, what might not the heart of man become in its long journey toward the stars?

—G.K. Chesterton

I Who Am I? The Practice of *Spirit*-uality

Many spiritual traditions and practices begin with a single question: Who am I? The question is a persistent and intimate companion. The search for our essence, our identity, is fundamental; it is as necessary for individuals as for nations, tribes, races, and spiritual communities. Who am I? Am I spirit or flesh? Am I sacred or secular? Am I irrevocably shaped by the circumstances of my personal history, or am I still free to move and grow, to uncover a new and brighter path? Am I fragile or am I strong, am I broken or am I whole? When I listen deeply to my inner life, what do I hear? What is the substance of my soul, the core of my being? What is my true nature?

—Wayne Muller

REFLECTION

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama, she set in motion a civil rights movement that eventually led to the end of institutionalized segregation in the South. It was 1955, and Montgomery laws required African-Americans to pay their fare to the driver, then get off the bus and reboard through the back door. Sometimes the bus driver would take off before the person could reboard. African-Americans also had to give up their seats to white passengers if the bus was full. On that cold December evening, a forty-two-year-old Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat based solely on the color of her skin. “I did not get on the bus to get arrested,” she later said. “I got on the bus to go home.”

Imagine if Rosa Parks had been unsure of who she was, if she didn’t have a strong sense of herself. She wouldn’t have been able to expose the segregation laws for what they were—unjust. And she surely wouldn’t have inspired countless others to be courageous enough to stand up for what’s right. But Ms. Parks knew who she was, and her legacy lives on.

What adjectives come to mind when you stop and ask yourself, “Who am I?” What feelings surface?

Underneath all the adjectives that we use to describe ourselves and all the feelings that go with those descriptions lies our true nature, the spirit that animates us and makes us who we are. It’s easy to get so caught up in life, family, and work that we put our heads down and plough through each day. In some ways, we become actors. But deep inside, we know who we truly are.

Naming our unique spirit is an essential part of living a healthy life and growing as a person.

Naming our spirit tells us what kind of spirituality we practice on a daily basis. Some may object to this notion on the grounds that spirituality belongs to the realm of faith and religion. But spirituality (with a small *s*) is fundamental to being human and is not reliant upon faith or religion. Each one of us has a spirit, an essence, a fire in the belly, a driving force that makes us who we are. The “uality” in the word *spirituality* refers to the way we express the “spirit” that makes us who we are. If our spirit is one of anger, then our lived spirituality—the way we shape and harness our spirit—is to look for reasons to be angry and people at whom to be angry. If our spirit is one of peace, then our lived spirituality is to take things in stride and do our best to maintain balance and perspective. And so on.

In his popular book *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser puts it this way:

Spirituality is not about serenely picking or rationally choosing certain spiritual activities like going to church, praying or meditating, reading spiritual books, or setting off on some explicit spiritual quest. It is far more basic than that. Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality. . . . Spirituality is more about whether or not we can go to sleep at night than about whether or not we go to church. It is about being integrated or falling apart, about being within community or being lonely, about

being in harmony with Mother Earth or being alienated from her.

The human spirit is fueled by fundamental questions common to everyone: Why am I here? Who am I? Where am I going? What do I love? What should I do with my life? How do I become the person I want to be?

Spirituality—tending to our spirit—has to do with asking these questions at various stages in our lives. When we search beyond ourselves to better understand why we are here and what we are to do with our lives, our spirituality takes on a religious dimension and becomes Spirituality with a capital S. Belief and religious practice are ultimately about tapping into the Spirit, the Source of Life, who speaks to our spirits and shapes our understanding of what it means to live with meaning and purpose.

Spirituality with a capital S centers on our human experience of God and finds its expression in religious traditions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Christian spirituality centers on the lived encounter with Jesus Christ in the Spirit. In this sense, Christian spirituality is concerned not so much with the doctrines of Christianity as with the ways those teachings shape us as individuals and members of society. Through the Incarnation, the central mystery of Christianity, Christ became human like us so that we might become divine like him.

The promise of Christianity is that if we dig beneath our accomplishments and failures, doubts and beliefs, we find that our essential nature is whole and unbroken, as God intended it to be. If we tap into it, we experience a harmony with ourselves

and with the world. We gain the courage to be who we really are—made in the image and likeness of God, the Light of the World. And we live our lives more fully in touch with our true purpose.

Thomas Merton said, “There is in all visible things . . . a hidden wholeness.” The crucial decision we all must make is whether to live out of this hidden wholeness or to continue living lives that are fragmented and inauthentic.

PRACTICE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Anais Nin famously said, “We don’t see the world *as it is*, we see it as *we are*.”

Who we are shapes how we perceive everything. Our unique spirit expresses itself in a lived spirituality that determines how we see and relate to the people and situations in our lives.

- *Begin your practice by setting aside some quiet time to reread the quotation at the beginning of this chapter and ponder the questions it raises.*
 - *Make a list of adjectives and qualities that describe who you are, what you care about, what values you hold most dear. Describe your spirit—what makes you, you?*
 - *Reflect on how you see the world and interact with others. If you find it helpful, do this exercise with someone you trust, saying aloud who you are and noticing how you feel as you describe yourself.*
-

Our spirits are not set in stone. The beauty of being human is that we are free to make choices about who we are and how we want to live. We can change. We can aspire to be our best selves. We can engage in spiritual disciplines that help shape our spirits to be fully alive.

- *Throughout the course of a day, ask yourself, “Who am I?” When you awake and get ready for your day, ask this question. When you interact with coworkers, eat your meals, read the newspaper, exercise, plop down on the couch, go to bed, ask yourself this question. Who are you when you first awake? Who are you when you interact with family and coworkers? Who are you in each task, each moment? Are you the leader, the follower, the person just trying to skate by? Are you frustrated and angry, or are you happy and at peace?*
- *Next ask yourself how you feel each time you identify who you are in a given situation. Are you content with your role? Are you embarrassed by your actions? Do you feel authentically yourself in each situation?*
- *Spend a day noticing the ways in which who you are and how you feel about yourself change. Which descriptions and feelings best represent who you are on the deepest level?*
- *Next ask yourself, “Who am I when I’m relaxed, on vacation, enjoying a ballgame, reading, exercising, playing with the kids?” How different are you when you’re doing something you thoroughly enjoy, as opposed to when you’re in the workaday routine? What might you do to bring the aspects of your most free self into the times in your life when you feel most trapped by routine and monotony?*

Finally, reflect on the following quotation from Marianne Williamson's book *A Return to Love*:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

- *What, if anything, holds you back from being your true, best self?*
- *In the final analysis, what do you want the meaning of your life to have been?*



2 Why Believe? The Practice of Doubt

Doubt has inspired religion in every age: from Plato, to Augustine, to Descartes, to Pascal, religion has defined itself through doubt's questions. Of course, this extends up to today.

—Jennifer Michael Hecht

REFLECTION

Every year I doubt they'll come up. They were a gift—two bags of an assortment of plant bulbs that produce crocuses, tulips, daffodils, and alyssum in stages throughout the spring and early summer. We planted them seven years ago in the impossibly hard, root-laden earth at the base of the trees that line our walkway. We don't take care of them the way real

gardeners should. And so each spring I think they can't have the energy to force their way through the ground one more time. And every spring, I am wrong.

I don't want to doubt, but I do. I doubt a lot of things—myself, my career, my loved ones, institutions, God. About the only thing I don't doubt is doubt itself. It dwells in every human heart and takes on many forms, from the seeker to the skeptic, the scientist to the preacher.

Is doubt such a bad thing?

It can be if we let doubt paralyze or diminish us. In its worst forms, doubt fuels fear and cynicism. It convinces us that life is meaningless and that rather than moving closer to our dreams and goals, we are merely marching to our graves. It turns us into cynics—naysayers who scoff at dreams and shoot down enthusiasm. We stand with Shakespeare's Macbeth, who lamented:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
and then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Since the dawning of human consciousness we have looked into the sky and wondered why we are here and what the purpose of our lives is. In our darkest moments, we see ourselves as mere accidents coming from nothing, living for no real reason, and heading back toward nothing. We race to our scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and theologians

for explanations and direction. We construct theories and philosophies to comfort and protect us, but we are all swallowed by the shadows at some time or another.

Yet, as paradoxical as it may seem, doubt is a seed of faith. It is essential to the very nature of being human and to belief. Doubt is healthy. It forces us to ask, to think, to seek. It's healthy to doubt our faith and have faith in our doubt.

In the early Middle Ages, religious thinkers began to acknowledge doubt as a central component of belief. Belief is hard, they reasoned, and religion must be a means for us to overcome, even harness, doubts that might otherwise destroy faith.

Since then, Christianity has focused on the stories of doubt that are fundamental to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. For example, God promises the aged Abraham and Sarah that they will bear a son, and Sarah doubts. Eventually she does believe, and when her child is born she names him Isaac, which means "may God laugh." Job is tested to the outer reaches of human limits, and he doubts and questions God. Eventually he admits that he cannot possibly understand or judge God's ways, and God restores Job's fortunes twofold. As the Roman authorities seek to apprehend Jesus, his chief disciple, Peter, denies even knowing him. When Jesus is crucified, his disciples lock themselves away in fear, and doubt all that they have seen and been taught. When the resurrected Jesus appears to the dejected disciples on the road to Emmaus, their eyes are blinded by doubt and they do not recognize him.

But it is Jesus' own doubt that is most striking. After celebrating the Passover meal, Jesus asks a few of his disciples

to keep watch while he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. In a profound moment of self-doubt, he turns to Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and tells them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” The Gospel of Matthew then tells us, “Going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’” Jesus asks three times if he really must be crucified, and each time he checks on his companions. Each time, he finds them sleeping. He is alone.

At first, Jesus rebukes them, but eventually he tells them to get their rest. Soon thereafter Judas, whose own doubt leads to the ultimate betrayal, identifies Jesus to the authorities by kissing him on the cheek. Jesus goes calmly with the soldiers, and Judas is so overwhelmed with shame that he takes his own life.

Having carried the instrument of his death to Golgotha, Jesus is nailed to the cross and left to die by crucifixion. This time he doubts God’s loyalty when he cries out in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

On the surface, the Christian story is nothing short of absurd. God sent his only Son to redeem the world. But that Son doubted himself and his purpose, was rejected by the very people he came to save, and eventually died an excruciating death on a cross as a blasphemer.

And yet, it is Jesus the doubter who, as the Christ of faith, understands our own doubt better than we do ourselves. Take, for example, the story of Thomas. When the resurrected Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas was not with them.

Upon hearing his friends' story of having seen Jesus, he was incredulous: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week after the resurrected Jesus appeared to them, the disciples, including Thomas, were all together in a locked house when Jesus "came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'"

The good news is that while Jesus praises those who believe in him without having seen, he invites the greatest of doubters to seek the evidence we need so that our doubt does not slip into disbelief.

PRACTICE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

As a discipline, naming and facing our doubts from time to time is a key step toward spiritual growth. We all doubt at times in our lives. What we do with and because of our doubt is what really matters.

- *Imagine yourself in the scene as the disciples tell Thomas of their encounter with the risen Christ. If you put yourself in Thomas's shoes, how would you react? Would you believe your friends' story, or would you still need to see and touch the risen Christ for yourself? Even if you believed your friends, would you still touch Jesus' side?*
- *Alone or with a partner, reflect on what you most doubt and why. Do you doubt yourself? Do you doubt that your*

life has meaning and purpose? Do you doubt the intentions and integrity of others? Do you doubt institutional religion? God's existence? Or that we are made to be happy?

- *Now, reflect on how your doubts affect the way you live your life. Do they cause you to live timidly? Do they drive you to cynicism? Do your doubts prompt you to probe more deeply into the reasons for and meaning behind the events of life? Do they help you live more intentionally and richly? Do they help you enjoy your convictions more because they don't come easily?*
- *When you have finished exploring basic doubts and how they may affect the way you live, ask yourself which of your doubts are the strongest. Are there any that you wish to overcome? What might you do to rid yourself of any doubts that get in the way of living a healthy, happy life?*
- *How does Jesus' compassion for and willingness to help those who doubt speak to your life today? In what ways can your faith help you face your doubts and free you to be your best self?*



3 Awareness

The Practice of Seeking

Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry asleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence.

—Anthony de Mello, SJ

REFLECTION

Awareness is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, we humans are able to appreciate life more fully than any other creature. We savor nice weather, conversations with friends, good meals, moments of peaceful solitude, helping others, being loved. We seek meaning and try to make the most out of life.

On the other hand, we are always aware that life is short and filled with struggles and suffering. For some, this awareness leads to despair and a desire to numb the senses. As de Mello's quote above suggests, most people don't recognize that the disciplines they practice on a daily basis deaden their senses and keep them focused on the mundane rather than the extraordinary. Nothing could be more harmful to the faith life.

To help us realize why awareness is such a powerful seed of faith, the great Christian thinker C.S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*. In the story, Screwtape is a senior devil from a highly organized and technologically savvy hell who writes letters instructing his junior demon nephew, Wormwood, how to patiently win over a young man's soul. The first and most important of Screwtape's letters instructs Wormwood to keep his "patient's" focus on daily life and nothing more.

Distractions are easy, Screwtape says, because humans "find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes." He cautions, however, that trying to plant ideas and arguments in his patient's head is a bad idea:

By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favor, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experiences. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it "real life" and don't let him ask what he means by "real."

Don't you sometimes feel like you're losing a battle with forces that conspire to keep your focus away from what really matters in life? I, for one, buy into the promise that technology and various gadgets will make my life more organized and efficient, but in the end I still don't have time for quiet reflection. When I'm not checking off to-do list items on my "personal digital assistant," I'm writing and reading e-mail, taking detours on the Web as flashing buttons tempt me to "click here," talking on my cell phone, listening to my MP3 player, attending meetings. All the while I am bombarded with ads for more gadgets and products I (probably) don't need. My most recent stab at resisting the pervasive consumer culture was to hook up a digital video recorder to my television so I can fast-forward through commercials. But advertisers are already a step ahead with product placements on the sets of popular shows and signs against the backstops of our favorite ballparks. They've even printed their ads on the shells of the eggs we buy at the supermarket for our hurried morning breakfasts!

All of the noise and chaos of my daily life drowns out the whispers of my soul as it seeks meaning. It even drowns out spirit, doubt, and wonder.

Screwtape smiles. His work is easy.

And yet. And yet, grace enters my life and makes sure I am awake. A loved one dies or faces a serious illness. My children laugh so hard they can barely breathe. My wife and I support each other through tough times and enjoy quiet evenings and long walks together. I am surprised by someone else's care. And I wonder: Are we really all alone in this universe, or is there a God? Can we tap into ultimate reality and find true meaning?