

## INTRODUCTION



This is a book about staying put and paying attention. In a culture that is characterized by unprecedented mobility and speed, I am convinced that the most important thing most of us can do to grow spiritually is to stay in the place where we are. I am not advocating a stubborn provincialism or harking back to a time before the Internet and the automobile when “things were simpler” and “life was easier.” Nor am I denying that God called Abraham, saying, “Go . . .” or that Jesus left his disciples with roughly the same marching orders. But I am convinced that both our use of new technologies and our faithful response to God’s call depend on something more fundamental—a rootedness that most of us sense we are missing in our hurry to keep up amid constant change. I believe we need to recover the wisdom of stability.

Maybe this book is little more than a confession of my own need. I was raised in Christian churches by people who loved me well, charged to go out there and make a difference in the world, and given some of the best resources and training available for the task. I showed the *Jesus* film in the African bush, helped build schools for AIDS orphans,

dug latrines in the Dominican Republic, played with kids from the barrios of Venezuela, built houses in Honduras, and tutored kids in Philadelphia's inner city. A citizen of God's kingdom, I tried to put my American passport to work for good in the world. But racking up all those frequent flyer miles for Jesus, I felt lonely. I wanted to share God's love with others, but wasn't sure where to experience it myself.

Hung over from all that travel, I stumbled into a little intentional community of Christians who were trying to love one another and their neighbors. It wasn't easy . . . and it showed. But I saw something compelling in that little group's experiment with faith: they had given themselves to God and one another in a particular place. They saw one another's junk, and they could talk about it. In all the ordinariness of everyday life, they knew what it meant to need forgiveness and to receive it. In short, they were learning to love one another. God's love became real for me in that place. I caught a glimpse of what I had been looking for.

Like the blind man who received his sight in the Gospels, I looked around to see my world again as if for the first time. I reread the Bible and saw in it God's plan to redeem the world through a gathered people. Paul's letters came alive to me as I imagined him leading a network of community organizers, convinced that they were part of the most important movement the world had ever known. When I turned to church history, I felt that same energy in monastic writings. Christians had a pretty mixed record when it came to living out the kingdom Jesus proclaimed, but

the monastic movements seemed to have kept the dream alive. I fell in love with the desert mothers and fathers, with Benedict and Francis and Lady Julian and Teresa of Avila. Here was a movement of which I wanted to be a part.

And I was not alone. This God movement was a living tradition, and the gift I had glimpsed in one little community was alive and well in other places, albeit under the radar of mainstream Christianity. My wife, Leah, introduced me to that first community, beginning a journey that we've shared ever since. We traveled to Iraq together at the beginning of the second Gulf War, taking our cue from the example of Francis, who crossed the lines and sat with the Muslims during the fifth Crusade. In Iraq we met others on similar paths, representing a host of communities we had not known before. Inspired by the hospitality of Iraqis at a place called Rutba, we returned home to find a community called Rutba House in the Walltown neighborhood of Durham, North Carolina. We did not know at the time that *rutba* means "order" in Arabic. But we did sense already that we were caught up in a "new monasticism," guided by the same power that stirred the early church and all those witnesses through the centuries.

We did not know what we were doing when we started Rutba House. We only knew that we had seen a glimpse of what God's love looks like and that we had to respond. I do not write in praise of ignorance; I know too well the pain of our mistakes. But I also know that awareness of our ignorance sent us searching for fellow travelers and listening to ancient

voices. Stumbling to find our way as a community, we happened upon the wisdom of stability.

In short, stability's wisdom insists that spiritual growth depends on human beings rooting ourselves in a place on earth with other creatures. Most modern (or postmodern) people get uncomfortable when talking about commitment and stability. We worry that vows like stability can be dangerous. I was relieved to learn from the monastic tradition that people who have promised stability also worry about its dangers. (If you're especially worried about the potential pitfalls of stability, you might want to read chapter 5 first.) Still, teachers ancient and contemporary challenged us to stay put. We have tried to listen to them. This book is an attempt to say what we have learned.

Staying, we all know, is not the norm in our mobile culture. A great deal of money is spent each day to create desires in each of us that can never be fulfilled. I suspect that much of our restlessness is a return on this investment. Mobility has a large marketing budget. While I don't imagine that I can outdo Madison Avenue, I do believe stability has a power to sell itself. If you bought this book, I hope you'll consider it a down payment on the fulfillment of your truest desire for wholeness. If you received it as a gift or borrowed it from a friend, all the better. The wisdom in these pages was all passed on to me free of charge. My work (which I've done the best I know how) was arranging the words.

Books like this one are written to persuade, and I'm of the conviction that an author ought to be frank about what he

or she wants from a reader. So I'll say this from the start: I hope to reprogram your default setting. As participants in a mobile culture, our default is to move. God embraces our broken world, and I have no doubt that God can use our movement for good. But I am convinced that we lose something essential to our existence as creatures if we do not recognize our fundamental need for stability. Trees can be transplanted, often with magnificent results. But their default is to stay.

Should you ever leave the place where you are? I don't know. But I trust we are able to best discern the call of God in the company of friends when we are rooted in the life-giving wisdom of stability.



# 1

## FOUNDATION WORK



The house I live in was built in 1910, when Walltown was just becoming a neighborhood. It must have been a fine place then. Perched on a hill opposite the neighborhood church, its ten-foot ceilings with a second floor above would have exhibited spaciousness in stark contrast to the shotgun houses that lined most of these streets. In a place where black folks still accuse “uppity” neighbors of pretension by calling them “two-story Negroes,” a house like this one sticks out. Someone decided to shoot the moon when they built this place.

But the house is old now, and it shows. We moved in just after a large extended family had finished using the place as a staging ground for their drug business. Such activity (and the lack of care that generally accompanies it) takes a toll on a place and its people. Most of the house’s previous residents are gone now—buried, locked away in prison, or moved without a forwarding address. The house slouches like an old couch you might find at a yard sale—not finished,

exactly, but irreparably marked by a history. The cracks in the plaster, mostly covered by caulking and paint now, suggest that the foundation is not precisely where it used to be. Over the years, things have shifted.

The instability I see in the walls of the structure I call home is troubling. They point me to foundation issues that need attention. But the cracked walls and crooked doorjambs also serve as a sign of the times, reminding me of the stability that all creation longs for in a culture of constant change. As long as the ground beneath us doesn't move, we humans tend to overlook the support structures that make life itself possible. But when we see a crack or, worse, feel a tremor, we're often dumbfounded. "When the foundations are being destroyed," the psalmist asks in a moment of desperation, "what can the righteous do?"

If these walls could talk, I can imagine them joining their voices with the psalmist. Together they might say to us, "Listen, we have some foundation issues that need attention."

By all accounts, we are living at the beginning of the twenty-first century in a time of unprecedented change. To get my head around just how much has changed in the past century, I sometimes think about my great-granny's life. Raised on a farm in southwest Virginia in the early 1900s, she refused to ever fly in an airplane, insisting that the only way one of those things was going to kill her was if it fell out of the sky and hit her on the head. In the relatively short span of the nine decades she lived through during the twentieth century, Granny saw the world transformed from a place where her

mother sent her on a day's walk to carry chickens to market, to a world in which she watched her grandchildren go around the globe and back, sometimes within a week. Small wonder that she couldn't take it all in.

I think, too, about the change I have seen since Granny died. One summer in the late nineties, I spent a couple of months living with missionaries in rural Zimbabwe. While there, I wrote a letter to Granny and put it in the mail. My family joked that I almost beat the letter home.

Hardly more than a decade later, a normal day for me includes e-mailing a friend in Iraq, speaking with a coworker in Brazil via the Internet, and teleconferencing with people in six different time zones. Not only have we now collapsed the travel time between almost any two places in the world to less than a day, but also we have made it possible for anyone to be virtually anywhere almost any time. The speed at which all of this has happened is dizzying.

Most of the time we celebrate these advances, rightly noting the many ways they stimulate creativity and invigorate culture. To stop changing is to die, we note. We challenge ourselves to keep up with the latest in technology and push the limits of human potential. But constant shifting also takes its toll, as I'm reminded when I contemplate the cracks in the plaster of our old home. Foundations matter, these walls seem to say. Experts in their various fields are beginning to agree.

Take the ecologists, for example. They worry that the historically unprecedented change of the past hundred years has shaken the foundations of the environment that sustains

human life. At the same time, many psychologists suggest that the multitasking of our information age is leading to a dangerous form of distraction, dulling the analytical functions of our brains that allow us to make good decisions. As I write in the midst of the global financial crisis that first hit headlines in 2008, the airwaves are filled with nearly constant commentary about fundamental economic uncertainty. Their fingers always on the pulse of our collective fears, marketing firms know we are desperate for something solid to hold on to. “What does over 100 years of *stability* bring to a relationship?” asks a quarter-page ad in the *New York Times*. “In today’s ever-changing economy,” it advises, “you need a bank you can trust.”

Like children stumbling off a merry-go-round, Americans are grasping for something to anchor our lives in a sea of constant change. According to an Associated Press report from April 24, 2009, the number of Americans on the move has declined sharply in recent years, reaching the lowest percentage since the government began tracking mobility patterns just after the Second World War. Both recreational and business travel are down as families and businesses cut back to weather tough economic times.

Add to these trends the social movements—both conservative and progressive—that have emerged in response to a fundamental sense of uncertainty in our culture. From homeschool parents who want to keep their kids closer to their moral center, to the Slow Food movement that wants to shorten the distance between where food is grown and

where it is eaten, people are beginning to stand their ground against the tides of mobility. “Staying is the new going,” a friend quips. In the midst of the storm that rages about us, there is a movement toward stability.

But if there are trends leading us to question and even resist the more disastrous side effects of our hypermobile culture, they may only serve to confirm the degree to which we are desperately habituated in an unstable way of life. Even our movements to address the evident crisis, notes poet and agrarian Wendell Berry, almost always fail to be radical enough. “They deal with single issues or single solutions, as if to assure themselves that they will not be radical enough.”

Though reactionary movements may be right in their analysis that something is broken and needs our attention, they fall short because they so often fail to address the root problem. They never get to the foundational issues, we might say. “The outward harmony that we desire between our economy and the world,” writes Berry, “depends finally upon an inward harmony between our own hearts and the originating spirit that is the life of all creatures. . . . We can grow good wheat and make good bread only if we understand that we do not live by bread alone.”

When I follow the cracks in my plaster to their source, I find a foundation beneath our house in need of repair. In a similar way, if we follow our longings for harmony and community to their root, we uncover a fundamental human need. Our desire for some place on earth to plant our feet in troubled times points us to the deeper yearnings of the

human heart—to a spiritual need for stability that may well be built into us.

Whether you attribute this longing for stability to nature or nurture, it's hard to ignore its power, especially during those times in our personal and communal lives when we feel like we need something solid to hold on to. I know getting married triggered a nesting instinct in me, tempering my desire to travel the world and spurring me on toward some semblance of a real job. Ask any pastor in the United States when their church has been the most crowded since the turn of the millennium, and barring a tragedy that touched their specific community, the most likely answer is, "The Sunday after September 11, 2001." Whether we're facing a significant life change or a sudden tragedy, our instinct in times of change is to reach for something stable.

The great Wisdom Literature of almost every culture testifies to our need for stability. "Are you able to keep your wandering soul still and to insert it in unity and never to abandon this unity?" asked one of the sages of ancient China, Lao-tzu, in the seventh century BC. "Without passing your own door, you can know the world. Without looking through the window, you can see the road to heaven. The farther you go, the less you know." Deep down in our bones, we seem to know that rapid change and constant motion are hazards to our spiritual health. Humans long for the simplicity of a life that blossoms into its fullness by becoming rooted in a place. However much we test our limits, we hope the hidden ground beneath all things is solid as a rock.

If our contemporary culture does not readily acknowledge how perpetual motion can dumb down our souls, we do maintain at least the memory that a faithful journey will always lead us back to where we started from, opening our eyes to the potential of a place that we were not able to see before we left it. It takes a trip to Oz for Dorothy to say and say again, "There's no place like home." Even when it is reduced to sentimental nostalgia, the sentiment has power because our longings point us homeward.

For the Christian tradition, the heart's true home is a life rooted in the love of God. Like Lao-tzu and Dorothy both, Christian wisdom about stability points us toward the true peace that is possible when our spirits are stilled and our feet are planted in a place we know to be holy ground. When we get this stability of heart deep down inside of us, real growth begins to happen.

The trouble, all the saints insist, is that we cannot find stability within ourselves alone. The heart is like a vast ocean without a bottom. Seekers may plumb its depths and achieve incredible insight into the human condition. We may even, like a lifeboat adrift at sea, understand our desperate need for something solid to give us our bearings. But left to ourselves, we simply float. Without something greater than ourselves to ground our existence, our fragmented lives easily become like a grand old house on a poor foundation. No matter how good we are at covering the cracks, something fundamental is still missing.

## *The House of God*

If stability is indeed a foundation for the life of faith, we might expect to learn something about what it looks like from the great fathers of our tradition. Jacob is right at the heart of the story of God's people. Indeed, he is the father from whom all the children of Israel descend. But if you were to search the scriptures and traditions of all the world's great religions, you'd be hard pressed to find a *worse* model of stability than Jacob.

In the Genesis account, Jacob flees his parents' home after he swindles his older brother, Esau, out of his birthright, first by exploiting Esau's hunger and taking his inheritance in exchange for a bowl of lentils, then by taking advantage of their father's blindness and stealing the blessing that was due to Esau as the firstborn son. Running for his life, Jacob is not sure where he's going next, only that he cannot stay home. A fugitive, he lies down on a stone under the cover of night to catch a little sleep before morning light.

This is when God intervenes in Jacob's story. In a dream, Jacob sees a ladder, planted firmly on earth, extending into heaven. Angels scurry up and down its rungs, bridging the divide between God and humanity. Beside where Jacob lies, if only for a few hours of stolen sleep, God stands with his feet on the ground to say, "the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring."

There it is: stability as pure gift. God meets Jacob when he is a homeless scoundrel on the run and says, "I love you. I

want you. I will make this a place for you, and I will meet you here.”

The heart’s true home—the foundation we long for—is a life rooted in the love of God. But this love is always God’s mercy directed toward us before it is our response of trusting love. God offers us stability in the only thing that cannot fail—God’s faithfulness itself.

But the promise is not enough to make Jacob stay put. Come morning, he’s on the road again. Still, Jacob cannot deny the importance of this place. “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it,” Jacob exclaims on waking from his dream. “This is none other than the house of God,” he exclaims, “and this is the gate of heaven.”

Eventually Jacob will be called Israel—one who contends with God—because he doesn’t settle down easily with the God who reaches out to him in love. As people whose impulses are shaped by an epoch of hypermobility, we may indeed find a true father in Jacob. We are, after all, a people on the run, propelled forward both by the ambition that keeps our eyes on the horizon and the broken relationships that we keep trying to leave behind. If God showed up where we stop to catch a breather in the midst of all this hurry, we too might be surprised. We do not, for the most part, have a sense that we stand on holy ground.

But God intervenes. Our race to the next thing is interrupted by an invitation to stay and dwell in the house of God. This is the incredible thing: despite the cracks that run like fault lines through our lives, pointing to a foundation in

desperate need of repair, God meets us in the place where we are. In the midst of our spiritual strivings, when we know enough to know that something is wrong but do not have the capacity within ourselves to make it right, God shows up. Stability is indeed possible, *but only as a gift.*

The fractures in our lives and in our world suggest a problem at the very foundation of the world that we call home. At our best, we can see and name the ways the world around us is broken. We cry out against injustice, ache for community, and long for divisions to somehow be reconciled. We scramble for stability, even in a world of constant change, trying to shore up our foundations even as we stumble to stay on the run.

But however far we wander from the stability we were made for, children of Israel remember that our true home is in the house of God. The Psalms are replete with expressions of our longing to accept the invitation to come home to life with God. “I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house,” we say. The Twenty-third Psalm, famous for its assurance that God will take care of us, ends with the hope that “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” Indeed, the lowest place in the house of God is better than a life of apparent luxury lived somewhere else. “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.”

The house of God is our greatest hope, the true home toward which all our strivings point us. Yet here it is in the foundation story of Israel, a gift offered to a wandering

scoundrel. Stability does not depend on our ability to shore up crumbling foundations in the midst of change and confusion. Rather, it rests on the character of One who promises to love us where we are. Faith is a response to that love, rooting us in the reality of a God who is faithful.

### *A Way of Life with God*

The practice of stability is the means by which God's house becomes our home. The word *home* comes from a root meaning "the place where one lies," an image that evokes the memory of Jacob lying on the dirt from which he had been made in the beginning, resting in the house of God even before he'd come to know it as his home. Without the gift of God's presence in the place where we are, stability is only an ideal for humans to aspire to—the unachievable goal of spirits whose reach must exceed their grasp. So the ground of stability is always God's grace. But the stability God invites us into is a practice that entails a way of life. To dwell in the house of God is to be transformed into people who know the ways and means of God.

The New Testament's epistle to the Ephesians says, "You are . . . members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple unto the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God." In a world of constant change,

we are given a firm foundation—a tradition of “apostles and prophets” who have rooted their lives in the life of God, with God in human flesh as the chief cornerstone. The promise of God’s faithfulness is concrete—as real as people who have walked where we walk, stood where we stand, breathed the air that keeps us alive.

If the promise that grounds our stability is earthy, so too is the practice of living it out. We are “built together spiritually” in the words of Ephesians, but we ought not think that “spiritual” here suggests anything less concrete than the flesh-and-blood life of Jesus walking and talking with the apostles. Life in the house of God is life with other people who are every bit as broken and messed up as we are. We learn to dwell with God by learning the practices of hospitality, listening, forgiveness, and reconciliation—the daily tasks of life with other people. Stability in Christ is always stability in community.

Perhaps no one knows this better than those who promise themselves to a specific community of real people for life. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote that “the real secret of monastic stability is, then, the total acceptance of God’s plan by which the monk realizes himself to be inserted into the mystery of Christ through this particular family and no other.” Monks vow stability when they join a community, living as visible signs of the truth Ephesians stresses for every person caught up in God’s story: already made from the stuff of earth, we are being refashioned into a dwelling place for God, each of us supporting one another like bricks in a wall.

In Merton's words again, we have been "destined from all eternity to bring one another closer to [God] by our love, our patience, our forbearance, and our efforts at mutual understanding." We grow up into a life with God, built on a firm foundation, as we learn to dwell in a place with particular people. We take on the savor of God's love as we become one with the walls. In God's house, that means finding ourselves in one another.

### *Stability in Community*

We find the stability we were made for as we come home to life with God in community with other people. This is our true home. But settling in isn't easy.

Will told me the story of relocating his family to be part of a church that takes community seriously. After a year in the new location, he met with one of his pastors to talk about how things were going. Life was good, Will reflected, and he was grateful for the welcome that he and his family had received at the new church. But he wasn't sure that he was experiencing the community he had expected. Frankly, Will had hoped for more.

The pastor listened to his misgivings, then asked how long Will and his family had been there. "About a year," he replied.

"Then I guess you've got about a year's worth of community," his pastor said matter-of-factly. "Stay another year and you'll have two years' worth. Stay thirty and you might find some of what you're looking for."

Our hunger for “community” may be the clearest contemporary expression of the heart’s yearning for its true home. Despite cell phones and social networks that create the possibility for almost constant contact with the people we love, most of us feel alienated from our neighbors and unsure of where we belong. We ache with desire for true community, yet all of our social habits push us to seek what we’re longing for somewhere else.

If we stand back and look at ourselves from a distance, we can see the paradox: the same restlessness that sends us searching for community also keeps us from settling down wherever we are. From a distance, it’s almost funny. But when I’m actually living my life in real time, trying to pay attention to the person in front of me while fighting the temptation to think about the other things I might be doing if I weren’t having this conversation, I’m not laughing. Instead, I feel as though I’m being subjected to the medieval torture of having a horse tied to each of my limbs and spurred to run in opposite directions.

In the midst of such turmoil, who wouldn’t want a little stability? Like soldiers who’ve been on the front lines for back-to-back tours, we are sensitized to our basic human desire for stability by the extreme lack of it in a hypermobile culture. But in an economy of limitless growth that depends on the continual creation of unfulfilled desire, stability’s wisdom, like anything else, can be reduced to a commodity that does not satisfy the spirit but only sends us rushing off in search of greater insight and understanding somewhere