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Life to the Whole Being

The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor

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Matthew Wickman

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For my students, 1 Peter 3:15

For Adam, once lost but a beacon long since

And for Kerry, Hadley, and Elena, always and everything

So, the next morning, I took a poetry anthology to my mom's small photocopy machine and copied a Cummings poem for him. I don't recall which one. What I remember is feeling irked by an expletive on the anthology's opposite page and carefully placing a blank strip of paper across part of the page to cover it up. I wanted to present a cleaner image. But as I handed Elder Packer the copy, my eye was not on the poem but on the blank spot, the gap I'd created. I was wondering, a little anxiously, whether this man who had been so kind to me, this servant of God, would notice it was there.

SEVEN

Holy Saturdays

I had come off the stand and was chatting with people filing out of the chapel when I ran into my friend Melinda. Warm and intelligent, successful in her career, valued in her ward—a beloved friend, neighbor, daughter, sister, and aunt—she also wears scars from emotional wounds and feels the ache of old spiritual questions. Recently, she had begun grieving the loss of her father.

I love talking with Melinda. More than her lively intelligence, it is her faith that moves me—tough and tested, open about its pain and uncertainties, and alert to inspiration and the myriad ways it shapes her habits and hopes. Relationships are precious to Melinda, so she rarely wastes time with empty conversation: ask her a question, you get a thoughtful reply. In response to my query, then, about how she was getting along in the wake of her father's death, she began describing some of the emotional and spiritual toll of recent events. As it happens, she had just returned from a visit to a sibling who was dealing with a life-threatening illness. Wiping at the corners of her eyes, she confessed to feeling that she seemed to be moving randomly through life, that as those closest to her were either dying or facing the prospect of death, she was ever more conscious of her relative rootlessness: no husband or children, nothing at home anchoring her

to the life she had built, and no clear legacy extending generationally beyond her once she is gone.

As I listened, complex feelings began forming; points and counterpoints rattled through my head. *No,* I silently protested, *Melinda's legacy is all around her in the many lives she touches, not least those of her nieces and nephews.* But then, *Yes,* I conceded, *what she's saying carries a ring of authenticity.* As I brooded on why that was, a second set of impressions began coalescing. *There is always such a good spirit about Melinda, perhaps because she feels some things so deeply, faces them so candidly. Christ seems to bear her up.* The thought to which this impression was tethered, however, was sobering: *Please, may we all prove so fortunate. Because we're all floating randomly through the universe. Nothing we know or love is permanent, at least not exactly in the way we know or love it. She speaks for all of us.*

The effect of this internal dialogue was all too familiar if also a little unsettling, triggering—the Spirit's rainbow arc of peaceful reassurance shimmering above a dark gray sea of mortal dread.

* * *

The last time I ever went trick or treating, I was fourteen and in ninth grade. I don't remember my costume or "costume"; dressing up wasn't the point, candy was. My friend's parents drove us to the neighborhood where they used to live; the area was less rural, and the houses were closer together, making for more doors per hour and a maximum sugar haul. They dropped us off at a small shopping center, telling us they'd meet us there at such-and-such a time. And off we went, dashing up and down streets, getting a few strange looks (we were tall and gangly and no longer "cute"; no one seemed delighted to see us when they opened their doors) but also, happily, heavy bags.

At some point, we decided we'd had enough and began meandering slowly back toward the village center meeting place. Down the street, a gang of four boys was walking in our direction. As they got closer, I could see they were a little older, a little bigger, all dressed

like death rockers, all mean-looking. They weren't trick or treating; they were on the prowl. And as they approached and sized us up, they began snickering. It's easy to see why: we were no longer little boys but were not yet "men" like them (at least, as I imagined they saw themselves); we must have looked ridiculous. Still, their mockery stung our fragile adolescent egos, and once they were about half a block behind us, my friend, John, turned and yelled at them. It was a nonsense word, a coinage about tackling invented by one of the guys on our freshman football team, someone so much better and stronger and cooler than we were. In our mouths, it was a kind of primal if pathetic assertion of dignity.

I'd been slinking down the street in shame and hadn't looked behind us when John sounded his barbaric yawp.[1] I did note that he seemed jittery when he turned back around but whatever: we were at the corner where the quiet neighborhood opened onto the multi-lane avenue, and as luck would have it, his parents were just driving past. They saw us and pulled over, saving us the extra half-mile trek to our meeting place. We climbed into the back seat of their car, and when I glanced out the window, I was startled to see the gang of death rockers standing on the corner and glaring, panting, right where we had just been. When John yelled, they must have come running back for us; had his parents not driven by right at that moment, these older teens would have beaten the living tar out of us.

I've thought about that incident numerous times over the years. It's a classic story of deliverance, of divine intervention in the teenage mode. What were the odds his parents pulled up right at that moment? A thousand to one? Ten thousand? More? They did not know where we were nor we them; cell phones did not exist, and we were earlier than we'd planned to be. Had his parents not been driving in the far right lane, they couldn't have pulled over, or if they'd come by thirty seconds later or pulled up a couple hundred feet up the street, we'd have been bloody pulps by the time we made it to the car. Time, place, circumstance—all was absolutely, almost unthinkably, miraculously impeccable.

But as I've reflected on that story, I've considered how frequently such miracles do *not* occur. People are not delivered; I am not delivered. We have the life beaten out of us by illness, unkindness, injustice, poverty, lack of opportunity, discrimination, disability, anxiety, depression, abuse, trauma, rejection, unfair obligations, unmet expectations, unwelcome desires, poor timing, addictive tendencies, character flaws, and so much more. Divine assistance arrives too late, if at all.

If John's parents had not shown up? Or all the times later in my life when, facing some daunting situation or other, no miracle saved me? When I was left to fend for myself? I've scuffled in those circumstances—we all do, I suppose. And sometimes we make it out okay. Just as often, though, we end up bloody, bruised, dazed—taking a beating and then wandering randomly, like Melinda described, not really knowing where we are but quite certain that whatever it was we came here for, it wasn't for this.

* * *

Where are we? And why? These are questions frequently posed by the twentieth-century Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. Some critics refer to Thomas as the poet of Holy Saturday, the day between Christ's crucifixion and the resurrection. This is when Christ "went and preached unto the spirits in prison" (1 Pet. 3:19), connoting in some Christian traditions elaborate theologies regarding Christ's union with the dead. More simply, Holy Saturday attests to "the reality of worldly suffering," to hopes dashed and not yet resolved through the glories of the resurrection. It is thus "the decisive day within the Christian narrative that confronts the believer with the full power of worldly suffering and its apparent victory over the powers of Good." In the Holy Saturday moments of our lives, we find ourselves wrestling "with divine silence and absence."[2] Divine silence can be deeply perplexing, and Holy Saturday evocatively captures its implications. Holy Saturday experiences are complex constructs of hope amid bereavement or delicate feelings of unextinguished promise amid bleak realities of pain, absence,

and loss. Such experiences complicate our faith, but they do not extinguish it entirely. Sometimes, even, there can be about them a kind of thrill, almost an ecstasy—because Holy Saturday is for believers, for those who hold to their convictions despite so many reasons to lose faith.

Thomas's poem "Kneeling" is about one such instance of betweenness, of toggling between competing feelings of mortal absence and divine presence. It is told from the perspective of a clergyman accustomed to seeking inspiration and finding he is not quite equal to it:

> Moments of great calm,
> Kneeling before an altar
> Of wood in a stone church
> In summer, waiting for the God
> To speak; the air a staircase
> For silence; the sun's light
> Ringing me, as though I acted
> A great role. And the audiences
> Still; all that close throng
> Of spirits waiting, as I,
> For the message.
> Prompt me, God;
> But not yet. When I speak,
> Though it be you who speak
> Through me, something is lost.
> The meaning is in the waiting.[3]

The location, a church, is one of inspiration, as is the impending activity—a sermon or prayer. But what impresses the speaker is something different about the setting, something that is not tangible as much as inflected by the memory of past spiritual experiences: "the air a staircase / For silence"; "the sun's light / Ringing me"; "all that close throng / Of spirits." These objects of attention are not really objects at all, not in the material sense; impressionistic in nature, they bear traces of moments in a church or in the process of delivering a sermon or prayer that previously moved the poet. And what he desires, what he awaits, is "the message," which is to say, to be moved once

again by some force of inspiration. For without that spiritual infusion, "something is lost. / The meaning is in the waiting."

That concluding line, highlighted in the poem by being the only one that forms a complete sentence, captures the poem's mood and idea. "The meaning is in the waiting," and so this is a poem about anticipation that some new impression, some new message, will come to the poet once again, as it has before. He has been changed, converted; and so, open to God, he awaits the Spirit that animates him, that animates all things: air, light, matter, speech.

These positive associations give the poem a happy, expectant feel. But behind this optimism are more sobering thoughts, Holy Saturday thoughts. For, as the poet confesses, "When I speak, / Though it be you who speak / Through me, something is lost": his transcriptions of the divine word distort it, obscure it, producing the wrong kind of silence—gaps in the sacred message. Is he even worthy, then, to receive what he awaits? If he does, how will he do it justice? So, his waiting involves trepidation. And perhaps, too, a small measure of dread. For, to be graced by inspiration is to risk being opened to God, changed by God in ways we cannot control. But then again, what if the inspiration he awaits, that we await, does not arrive? Or what if it does, but it still seems beyond us, such that its meaning becomes uncertain? How would we tell the difference between inspiration beyond our capacities and inspiration that never came at all? What if we were changed not by what touched us but by what failed us or we it? What if we were open but were simply left waiting? What if that waiting were all the "meaning" we ever had?

Melinda's description of random, rootless drifting through life—that is an experience of Holy Saturday. And all those times I have not been rescued by some miracle of deliverance—times when I've prayed but have been beaten up by life—those too are Holy Saturday experiences. All those friends, family members, and acquaintances who have found themselves struggling through crises great and small without answers or remedy, who wait on God without explanation or consolation—Holy Saturday disciples, all.

* * *

The scene is still imprinted so vividly on my memory, perhaps in part because it was so visually striking, at once beautiful and strange. It was well after midnight, and my friend Robert and I were walking along the long, wide beach outside the rundown shack I was renting with someone I'd met in our singles ward. I was twenty-one and in the middle of the school year I would spend at UC Irvine before transferring to BYU. Nobody else was on the beach and for good reason: not only was it deep at night, it was winter, a strong wind was blowing off the ocean, and storm clouds were moving in, alternately obscuring and framing a full moon. The play of light and shadow was haunting—the moonlit sands a faint neon blue, the ocean black and hissing.

Earlier in the evening, Robert and I had driven seventy-five miles south to San Diego to meet up with my girlfriend and one of her friends from the Latter-day Saint institute at UCSD.[4] It was a good time: good company, good conversation. But for me, the ulterior motive of having Robert along was to solicit his help as a therapist to diagnose my ailing relationship. And now, walking along the glowing, windswept beach, we were analyzing it. Robert was a wonderful if still amateur therapist—attentive and insightful, reassuring and provocative. A decade later, it turns out, he would formalize that gift in becoming a licensed, clinical psychologist specializing in couples counseling.

Gradually, however, the conversation began drifting to something Robert had brought up on the double date, seemingly out of the blue—how, before he had joined the Church at eighteen, he'd sexually experimented with men and women and how that experience had convinced him that homosexuality was counterfeit love, a devilish tool to turn hearts away from the things of God. It had caused a stir, Robert blurting it out forcefully from the back seat. He said it probably sounded harsh, but he knew, he'd been there. But now, as we walked and sat on the blue sands, he began softening that judgment.

No, he said, he had no more interest in dating men, but some of those former relationships were so alluring still in his memory; they had opened channels of feeling he did not wish to close, channels through which he felt more connected to himself and to God. These gentler words struck me as strange but true, so at odds with Robert's unsolicited confession and diatribe earlier that evening but so in keeping with the sensitivity that characterized him, a sensitivity reflected in the deep night's aura of moon and cloud, shadow and glow. We would return to the topic frequently over the next several months.

I would think about those early conversations three years later when we were both living in Utah and Robert was engaged to an amazing woman. He was so happy at first, then increasingly anxious, then agonized and falling apart. He began speaking angry words against the Church, then broke off the engagement, then burst out of the closet. Eventually, he married a male partner.

Other friends lived similar stories. One night, a new BYU roommate, Kent, a sensitive and intelligent soul who soon became my dearest friend, told me he needed to talk, that I seemed to be a good listener. We went to a buzzing Provo restaurant, and over ambient chatter, he told me he was gay and planned to leave the Church after graduation, if not before. Kent sometimes expressed rage at God, not over his sexuality but over the fate that had befallen his father, who had died of cancer while Kent had been serving his mission. His father was already gravely ill before Kent left for his mission, and some of his last memories of his father were of hearing him scream out in the night from pain. When his father died, Kent's mission president persuaded him to stay out on his mission and not attend the funeral, said that's what his father would want. Kent felt devastated in the aftermath of that decision and worse as time went by. These days, those memories fueled intense anger. I watched that anger flicker at moments on this night, during this conversation. But anyway, he said, casually returning to the main subject, he was curious: How much had Robert told me about his sexual experience with men?

A couple years later, when I was earning my master's degree in New York City, a guy moved into our ward and became a peripheral part of our social network. He was shy but friendly, dependable: I called him one evening to assist me when a ward member requested a priesthood blessing. On a couple later occasions, we caught dinner or movies. His manner was a little odd, detached but endearing; he emitted a kind of gentle longing, a fraternal melancholy—the personification of a lonely, self-effacing smile. After he moved, I learned he'd been in support groups trying to redirect his desires from men to women, still a common practice in the early 1990s.

These and other friendships opened my mind to what it means to come of age when some of our defining life experiences do not fit the orthodox religious mold, when the incomprehension of Holy Saturday extends indefinitely into the future, when God seems not to be where we expect him. I very much felt God's presence in or around the lives of these gay friends. I would often reflect on that late-night walk with Robert—on how my angsty need to talk about my relationship with my girlfriend almost caused me to miss the plaintive tone in his description of former boyfriends. That tone was so different from the stridency of his anti-gay zeal earlier in the evening. With the passage of time and the more I thought about that contrast, the more I believed that God had supported the young convert in his chaste resolutions—conversion is good, attempting a leap of faith is good—even as, later, he had abided with the gay man in his conflicted sadness and gradual process of self-understanding. I saw it as a gesture of healing and reassurance of love.

Discerning God's presence there in that later moment, though, was complicated. For, in my religious culture, especially during that era, it was easy to hear ecclesiastical echoes of the diatribe Robert had launched on our double date but harder to catch the pastoral response to the other side of his story, to those tones of longing sounding faintly on our walk along the beach. To that extent, it seemed at church that I was hearing so much more about what was *right* than what was *true*, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For truth, I was coming to

believe, is about more than clarity of doctrine. It's also about the particularity and intensity of our experience, about all those silent internal pressures and unforeseeable circumstances that shape our minds, our hearts, our spirits. Truth, it seems, is about discerning God's presence in unimaginable, seemingly random situations. It's about feeling the trace of God's Spirit in the lives of others—and, through it, coming to love others—even or especially when their experiences unsettle our sense of rightness. Rightness is loud and has all the answers; truth speaks quietly, a virtual whisper across the wind and waves.

* * *

Literature involves plenty of beautiful thinking and saying. But at its core, especially in the modern world, literature is often about a peculiar kind of experience: it's about all those places in God's universe that fall outside the scope of simple rightness, all those lives that don't fit their circumstances, their era, their own social and cosmic imaginaries. Literature is a space for pondering things we had not anticipated and do not know how to reconcile. Like Holy Saturday, literature brings figures of redemption, renewal, into conversation with the pain of randomness. For the failure to fit—the sense of being random—is not, or not only, about enduring. We often envision redemption as a perfection of present circumstances: bodies made whole, loved ones reunited, life's best moments extended into eternity. But for those who don't fit, redemption is not the answer, at least not imagined that way. For even if it arrived, it would not involve us—not as we imagine ourselves.

Us, not *them*—relatively few people face the same conflict as my gay Latter-day Saint friends, but virtually everyone accumulates experiences that spill over the rim of their religious understanding and splash into life's darkened corners. For my stalwart mother, for example, who faced the death of a young child with graceful heroism, to be reunited with her son would be ecstatically wonderful, but it alone would not erase the traumatic—and sanctifying—effects of all

those years of grief. Or again, I think of a moving talk I once heard a woman give about how she had left the Church in large part because of stinging life disappointments. When she returned, she said, it wasn't because she found answers or fulfillment, she simply missed the company of Church members, the casual inspiration of everyday life. The disappointments endured, unresolved and unanswered.

These parts of ourselves demand more than what the scriptures call restoration, in which corruption or fallenness is raised to incorruption or perfection (see Alma 41). They demand more, even, than to find enlightenment as to why things were as they were: why we suffered as we did. For our biggest questions don't lend themselves to cheap "a-ha!" epiphanies in which all is suddenly resolved. Many such questions may not seek explanations as much as remedy, like storm-torn vessels begging harbor. They need, we need, the kind of healing found in the extended presence of Christ. As part of that healing, we long to be heard, to lay our experiences before him. We want him to feel the wounds in *our* hands and feet, in *our* sides.

So it is that literature is born. A certain kind of literature anyway. Giving voice to such longing is the apparent vocation, the invocation, of the poet Christian Wiman. Having lived with the pain and disorientation of cancer (its disruption of the lives he was building as a husband, father, and poet), Wiman is familiar with what I am describing by way of a formative conversation with a friend on a beach late at night—that is, he has lived through experiences that are profoundly real, that are true, but that don't fit our conceptions of how things are supposed to be. He understands a life that doesn't "fit." Wiman takes inspiration here and finds his reason for (religious) being from Christ:

> I am a Christian because of that moment on the cross when Jesus, drinking the very dregs of human bitterness, cries out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* . . . I am a Christian because I understand that moment of Christ's passion to have meaning in my own life, and what it means is that the absolutely solitary and singular nature of extreme human pain is an illusion. . . . Christ's

> suffering shatters the iron walls around individual human suffering[.] Christ's compassion makes extreme human compassion—to the point of death, even—possible.[5]

Wiman appeals to a God of visceral feeling, a God less of transcendence than presence in our fallen circumstances—a God of experience who is real, who is *there*. As Wiman writes elsewhere, "You don't turn to God in a crisis because you are afraid, at least not primarily. You turn to God because, for once, all that background chatter in your brain, all that pandemonium of blab, ceases, and you can *hear*—and what some of us hear in those instances is a still, small voice."[6] To help us hear, even see God and God us—to bring us, collectively, life in the Spirit—is, for Wiman, the function of poetry.

His poem "Music Maybe" gives expression to this process whereby our sorrow is radicalized, becoming fuel for a richer life in the divine presence:

> Too many elegies elevating sadness
> to a kind of sad religion:
>
> one wants in the end just once to befriend
> one's own loneliness,
>
> to make the ache of inwardness—
>
> something,
> music maybe,
>
> or even just believing in it,
> and summer,
>
> and the long room alone
> where the child
>
> chances on a bee
> banging against the glass
>
> like an attack of happiness.[7]

Here, sadness sees (or wishes) itself converted into "an attack of happiness." But what also finds itself converted is religion, the "sad religion" of elegy becoming "something" else—"music maybe." This is what we see in the last part of the poem where the child "chances on a bee / banging against the glass," and we recognize in that image the jubilant energy of life, of summer personified in the small body of a buzzing dervish. The "*attack* of happiness" is not necessarily happy, certainly not for the disoriented bee, whose vitality is almost painful, "banging" as it does against a substance thicker and vaster and more durable than itself. But such intensity of feeling, even if tragic, is no longer "sadness"; it radiates life. And life is never more itself than when it renders us dizzy as we ricochet from one stage or experience to another—here, in the poem, from elegy to ecstasy; from "religion" to a kind of divine infusion of spiritual energy. Poetry is that infusion: it not only *represents* life, it *presents* it, generates new attachments and realizations through its catalytic language. It exudes a keen, almost painful joy, a kind of soul-splitting exultation.

The spirited work, or play, of Wiman's poem exemplifies one of his credos: "The task is not to 'believe' in a life beyond this one; the task is to perceive it. . . . No one ever believed in God before perceiving God."[8] God first, creed second; experience first, doctrinal explanation later. This is the order life demands; this is what I began discerning on that late-night walk on the beach with a good friend. Robert's religious convictions concerning the rightness and wrongness of sexuality sounded harsh, but they were, in their way, beautiful—the product of prayer and fasting and faith, of a bold experiment in conversion. They were born of love (for God) if also hatred (of self). To that extent, they were also at least a little confused, as he began attesting years later in anger (now declaring love for self if also still hatred, this time for the Church). Hatred and anger, even when expressed as a reflexive reaction to suffering, may inhabit corners of right and wrong, but they rarely inform truth. Truth we only find in a higher key: "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Wonderful metaphor, "God is love"—a poem unto itself. I worry sometimes that we distort it when we invoke it too casually, project our experience onto it too freely. The challenge, in Wiman's words, is not to "believe" in divine love but to perceive it. It's a task made more difficult by God's refusal to conform to our sense of rightness—to answer our prayers as we expect or give us what we need when we believe it most essential. God, it seems, loves us for who we are even as he moves us to continue to grow, to change; and change sometimes happens through the painful shedding of the selves we were and the views we held. Meanwhile, we fight for preservation, for fulfillment as we imagine it. And so, we try to intuit God's poetry in the apparent randomness of our circumstances or in the blows we suffer when there is no miraculous deliverance on life's street corners. We seek to discern God's love in the absence of what we typically call divine intervention.

* * *

At some point in my twenties, I grew tired of rightness but also felt that truth as God understood it was beyond me. And so, with friends like Robert, I became angry. And I was angry and therefore confused for a long time. I was angry on behalf of gay friends who felt they had no place in the Church; angry on behalf of *all* friends whose dreams of partnership and marriage and family were repeatedly disappointed and eventually extinguished (at least "in this life": a phrase I despised when used as consolation). I was angry on behalf of people whose lives were blighted by illness or accident, angry on behalf of those who felt shunned or who suffered injustice (and at those who perpetuated it even if unwittingly). I was angry on behalf of religious believers whose joy was dampened by chiding secularists and on behalf of secularists whose patience was taxed by believers' denials of cold reality. But I was not only angry "on behalf of," I was angry in my own circumstances—angry at my religion because of things I was learning as a student and then, later, at the disillusionment I felt in the profession of higher education (so much arrogance toward

religion, so little understanding of it). I was angry at the hurt that had accumulated from years of being single and then, later, at the burden I felt carrying traditional familial responsibilities (e.g., to "provide," so patriarchal). I was angry at issues I did not understand (like some of the messy details of Church history) or, later, felt I understood only too well (like the reflex habits of religious thinking and the delusions and prejudices it shelters). I was angry at those who spurned my faith tradition (*"Non, monsieur, ça ne m'intéresse pas"*) and then, later, at those who embraced it too enthusiastically, too naively. I was angry at the narrow bandwidth of religious "truth" or at its confusion of truth with rightness: the discourse I was hearing at church seemed so good at mimicking Robert's shallow screed on the double date but so poor at engaging the fuller version of his narrative, the one he shared later that night on the moonlit beach.

There were so many people around me, it seemed, who were so angry, and there are probably more now than there were then. How do we deal with that anger? How did I? Some people mitigate the toxic effects of their anger by sublimating it into political causes, and sometimes they level those causes against the Church. Taking up against the Church has never been my reflex—I have tended to hear God speak with me through the Church, not against it—though I certainly have my causes and nurse my hopes. But even when these causes and hopes, mine or others', strike me as wobbly, I can usually detect in them the flayed truth of personal suffering. And that always gives me pause.

If I gradually became more comfortable with not fitting, with the random drift of circumstances, this may be because I found myself taken with what I describe above as the poetry of faith—its poetry more than its politics: less the noisy construction of a godlier kingdom and the effort to make things fit than the graceful whisperings of God's Spirit through kingdoms that were already here. It was in listening more deeply that I experienced, in Wiman's words, those "attack[s] of happiness" that compelled my attention and revealed the divine presence across the gaps of my existence. Indeed, I found sometimes

that God converted these gaps into metaphors, transporting me from one state into another: sadness into joy, dogma into something like a sacred encounter. When things that didn't fit suddenly didn't need to; when they suddenly, strangely were deeply okay as they were; when I felt alone and defeated and then, out of nowhere, God seemed present and things felt ecstatically good and whole—that is what moved me.

It still does. In recent years, for example, I've experienced it through my younger daughter. When she was little, she would occasionally ask for priesthood blessings when she was ill. On one dramatic occasion, I returned home at night from a church meeting to find her writhing from severe stomach pain and begging for a blessing to heal her. I called a ward member, we administered to her, and my wife and I sat with her until she fell asleep. A couple hours later, she trotted into our bedroom and announced that she was feeling completely fine—a miracle in the life of a young child and, for our little family, an important story for a season. As the years passed, however, her (now chronic) illnesses grew more complex, the writhing more diverse and extended. Priesthood blessings alone were no longer sufficient—a painful metaphor, it seemed, of a child growing beyond my reach of influence. She began drifting and so did I as a parent; letting go, accepting suffering—not struggling to heal—became the order of the day. Letting things be became a theme across multiple areas of life: work, church, friendships, and more. But the answers to my prayers, I found, also grew in richness and intensity. The more I began reeling from life's blows, the more I would occasionally find myself overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence in the most random times and places, like the morning when I sat in despondency and began a prayer with the words "Well, I'm still here" and felt overcome with divine love or the evening when a powerful answer to prayer came to me as I walked down a long city block, the winter wind scraping tears of joy and gratitude across my cheeks.

It's the randomness of these experiences, actually, that means so much to me. It's in the randomness that I feel most acutely "attack[s] of happiness," all the more compelling because they occur outside any

framework of expectation, threading themselves through my existence despite the tatters in the life I keep weaving so unskillfully. The randomness matters because the divine visitations it invites do not fit, but they happen anyway. They are pure grace. And so, no, I do not know how to reassure Melinda in her sense of rootlessness, but I do feel Christ bearing her up. No, I do not know how best to make sense of the story Robert shared with me late that night on the beach (Why was he drawn away from those formative experiences and toward the Church? And why did he eventually recede back into them like the ebbing of the tide?), but I do feel the truth of his pain. No, I do not know exactly how to console any who have sought divine deliverance only to feel themselves abandoned and beaten by the bullies of everyday circumstance. I myself have experienced the miracle of such deliverance, and yet I have often felt God's love and presence more profoundly, more lastingly, when life has pummeled me to the earth.

I am grateful, deeply, for the doctrines, rituals, and benchmarks of my religion: they lend my life form. God works through them, again and again. But I believe he works outside them, too—or, perhaps better said, he reveals a religion that is larger than the set of meanings I routinely infer from it, a religion in which codes of conduct and frameworks of belief also yield something more than mere codes and frameworks. At their edges, and after the stridency of "the wind . . . the earthquake . . . [and] the fire" they can engender, I sometimes discern something different: "a still small voice" (1 Kgs. 19:11–12). I suppose I'm one for whom truth begins once my sense of rightness expends itself—in some cases, once it's beaten out of me. I then find myself standing a little more humbly alongside others in an attitude of prayer, pleading that God will see us on our Holy Saturdays, dazed but still waiting. Waiting on the Lord.

Chapter 7

1. Iconic phrase from Walt Whitman's classic long poem *Song of Myself*.
2. Richard McLauchlan, "R. S. Thomas: Poet of Holy Saturday," *The Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 976–985 (976, 977).
3. R. S. Thomas, "Kneeling," in *Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 199.
4. Institute is a Church organization for Latter-day Saints usually located on or near college campuses—a meeting place for instruction and social interaction.
5. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 155.
6. Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 68–69.
7. Christian Wiman, *Once in the West: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 22.
8. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 169.

Chapter 8

1. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1927), 128. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
2. Judith Wilt, "Steamboat Surfacing: Scott and the English Novelists," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35 (1981): 459–86 (477).
3. See chapter 2's discussion of the qualities associated with spirituality.
4. Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

Chapter 9

1. Bonnie D. Parkin, "Celebrating Covenants," April 1995 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/04/celebrating-covenants. Accessed January 12, 2021.
2. Barbara Thompson, "Cleave unto the Covenants," October 2011 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2011/10/cleave-unto-the-covenants. Accessed January 12, 2021.

3. I allude here to the famous, two-line 1913 poem "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough."
4. R. S. Thomas, "In a Country Church," in *Collected Poems*, 67.
5. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets* (Harvest, 1943), 14, ll. 42–43.

Chapter 10

1. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 101.
2. Wildman, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*, 217. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
3. "Grace, & the Spiritual Reach of Representation," *Religion and Literature* 49.2 (2017): 287–339 (303, 308).
4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Windhover," in *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 132, ll. 7–8. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
5. William Wordsworth, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," in *The Poems*, 2 vols., ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1977), 1:574–75.
6. Frohlich, "Spiritual Discipline," 65–78 (71).
7. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Laborers in the Vineyard," April 2012 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2012/04/the-laborers-in-the-vineyard. Accessed December 29, 2019.
8. Quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, "Teaching by the Spirit—'The Language of Inspiration,'" https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teaching-seminary-preservice-readings-religion-370-471-and-475/teaching-by-the-spirit-the-language-of-inspiration. Accessed December 30, 2019.

Chapter 11

1. Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 4.
2. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 16. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
3. Frohlich, "Spiritual Discipline," 65–78 (72). Subsequent references are cited in the text.