

Sample Chapters

Ordinary Mysteries

Reflections on Faith, Doubt and Meaning

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INTRODUCTION

We are misreading the times. The error is understandable. In the post-enlightenment era, humans tend to measure life through concrete external and visible realities. By this measure, the declining levels of participation in various forms of institutional religion indicate a decrease in our valuing of the sacred.

But that would miss a movement in the other direction. Despite the trends of reduced church attendance, we are witnessing a dramatic uptick in fascination with the many ways the transcendent finds its way into our lives. The growth of such activities as forest bathing, tarot card readings, dream groups, psychedelics, prayer, and meditation suggests the times may indeed be more “spiritual than secular” after all.

The reflections in this book endeavor to tell that alternative narrative. At the heart, you’ll sense a yearning on my part to recover a symbolic, poetic, and imaginative approach to the Christian faith. This is not the faith of my childhood. I was shaped by a loving family with no interest in institutional religion. Through a long circuitous route, in my early twenties, I found myself on the north side of Mount Pinos, the center of the universe to indigenous Chumash people, at a summer camp run by Lutherans. As water poured over my head, surrounded by newfound friends, I experienced Christ, not so much as a personal savior but as

a companion, guide, and instigator. From that point on, we've been wrestling through this life.

Confounded by many of the ways the church has filtered the religion of this first-century rabbi, I've probed the teachings and doctrines. For over four decades, I've openly expressed my doubts and wonders, like a modern-day Thomas, the patron saint of all who wonder. At times, I became despondent and considered walking away, but I stayed. These essays might best be considered journal entries on some epic voyage.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, I had a dream that included all the imagery ripe with mythic and symbolic significance. I walked into an overgrown city park with crumbling ruins and decaying statues of Greek and Roman-era marble, but a stairway led to an underground chamber where a congregation gathered for worship. As I entered the cave, a man and a woman welcomed me and said, "This is not a church where you will find answers, though there are answers along the way."

In her book *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, Ann Ulanov writes, "This central questioning of God is one of the ways we reach most directly to God."¹ What you'll find in the following pages are not so much answers as questions to be lived.

While I've placed the essays in an order designed to help the reader move from an introduction of the ideas to more specific concepts, you can pick up any essay and read. The first section, *Exploring Ordinary Mysteries*, introduces the book's overall theme, namely that we live in a

world far more mysterious than we may have been led to believe. The second section, *Toward a Symbolic Christianity*, tackles specific teachings from the Christian faith and presents a symbolic or imaginative way of understanding it. The third section, *Practicing a Symbolic Life*, provides examples of how my explored themes might manifest in one's daily life.

Many of these essays were originally written and published in my newsletter, "The Notebooks of James Hazelwood." Under the guidance and feedback from many readers and the persistence of my editor, Janna Evermeyer, I've updated them for clarity and readability.

If you are interested, I've prepared a study guide with reflection questions, which can be used for a small group discussion or individually for personal reflections. You can find that, as well as more of my writing, at my website www.jameshazelwood.net

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1. Ann & Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: Westminster John Know Press, 1982), 48.

Chapter One

WE ARE CITIZENS OF TWO REALMS

We do not leave the shore of the known in search of adventure or suspense or because of the failure of reason to answer our questions. We sail because our mind is like a fantastic seashell, and when applying our ear to its lips we hear a perpetual murmur from the waves beyond the shore. Citizens of two realms, we all must sustain a dual allegiance: we sense the ineffable in one realm, we name and exploit reality in another.

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) was an American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century. As a professor of Jewish studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, he was noted for presenting prophetic and mystical aspects of his religion, Heschel authored numerous books and was deeply involved in the civil rights movement. He argued that spiritual encounters with the divine are fundamental to human life.¹

The quote above comes from his book *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. This is essentially a treatise on how human beings can

understand God. While recognizing a difference between humanity and the divine, Heschel suggests that encounters with the Holy are a part of human experience. The book explores the problems of doubt and faith and the human yearning for spirituality. While distinctively Jewish in its theological frame, the book has much to offer the contemporary seeker, whether of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or any other faith tradition. Even the agnostics among us, who are many, would appreciate Heschel's writings, for he is far more universal than one might suppose.

I'm particularly attracted to that last sentence from the opening epigraph: "Citizens of two realms, we all must sustain a dual allegiance . . ." Heschel seems to be suggesting that we humans live in two realities that are of equal value. This idea is very much in keeping with the writings of the great wisdom traditions as well as in the field of depth psychology. While most of us today are very much aware of a realm of paychecks, grocery stores, and automobiles, we also have an intuitive sense that there is something else.

That "something else" is difficult to describe, so we often do not even talk about it. Yet, given an opportunity and a safe environment, I have found people willing and eager to share their encounters with the sacred realm. Years ago, I preached an unusual sermon while visiting Trinity Lutheran Church in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. The homily consisted of four stories of encounters by people who experienced something out of the ordinary. In conversations with congregation members after the worship service, an older man described a time in his late twenties when he heard a voice caution his over-obsession with his career. That encounter, which he described as holy, changed his entire approach to his family. "I vowed to spend more time with my wife and children," he said. "In fifty years since that voice spoke to me, I've never regretted that decision." I also learned

that he had never told anyone about that experience.

Increasingly, I hear stories like this from people. They had something unusual happen, but they never told anyone. It's as if that old joke rings true: Why is it when someone says they talk to God, we call it prayer, but if they say God talked to them, we call it crazy? That has been a prevailing attitude in our society for a long time, but it's beginning to change. More people are coming forward with their stories of an experience in this other realm.

Dr. Andrew Root is an American theologian who has written extensively about ministry in the context of secular society. He outlines the gradual cultural shift from the sacred to the secular over the last five hundred years and makes the case obvious to many that we no longer live in a fully sacred cultural framework. Today, our experience of life is guided by the rational and the scientific. One example that illustrates this shift: If your child got sick in the 1400s, you thought it to be an attack of the devil or demons and you sought out a healer, shaman, or priest. In a spirit-infused age, you turned to prayer and ritual for healing. If your child is sick today, you take them to a medical doctor. While we welcome the prayers of clergy and friends, it's unlikely that you will rely on faith alone.

Dr. Root points out that we are grateful for the many advantages of living in a secular worldview. For example, antibiotics, indoor plumbing, food safety, and transportation make our lives safer, longer, and more comfortable. I'll be honest. I like living in this secular scientific worldview. I'm writing this on a computer that allows me to edit easily in a heated room, following a breakfast that was easily procured. Life is good in the secular world.

Yet, has the secular gone too far? Have we so emphasized rationality that we

have pushed away from the sacred? This brings us to the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, an early founder of modern psychology along with Sigmund Freud. Jung parted ways with Freud primarily over the latter's insistence that all neurosis is about repressed sexuality. Jung then set about a lifelong project that focused on our need for a spiritual dimension. While there is much in his *Collected Works* about psychology, we can find much about his efforts to help the modern world discover a new way of accessing the sacred. Unfortunately, Jung was misunderstood in his lifetime; today, his work receives a more favorable audience.

Jung often wrote of his efforts to give modern people a new sense of the sacred. One example comes from a book he published just a few years before his death.

This is not to say that Christianity is finished. I am, on the contrary, convinced that it is not Christianity, but our conception and interpretation of it, that has become antiquated in the face of the present world situation. The Christian symbol is a living thing that carries in itself the seeds of further development.²

—C. G. Jung

Jung, like Heschel, advocated that we all must find a way to live in two realms and hold a dual allegiance. Our society has neglected the realm of wonder, mystery, spirit, the Holy; call it what you wish. Instead, we have become one-sided in valuing only the world we can see, touch, and taste. Another way to think of it is our emphasis on the five senses to the neglect of the sixth sense, the power of intuitive perception. This causes us to be

heavily materialist in our orientation. I use the word materialist because it describes our orientation toward concrete, tangible things, an emphasis that pairs well with consumer capitalism.

I'm deeply concerned about this imbalance. If Heschel and Jung are correct, and we do indeed live in two realms, yet increasingly ignore or deny the realm of mystery, wonder, and God, where will that lead us? I fear that an exclusively materialist worldview either leaves people bereft of meaning or find meaning only in the acquisition of more stuff. I'm not against the comforts of modern life, but almost anyone with enough life experience recognizes that more stuff, new stuff, and bigger stuff do not lead to fulfillment.

Much of what you'll read in these essays will circumambulate these ideas. "Man cannot live a meaningless life," wrote Jung.³ Today, we are engaged in multiple activities that seem to be distracting and self-destructive. I can't help but wonder if this is rooted in our need to regain a balance between the two realms in which we live.

Throughout human history, we have found meaning when our individual lives are connected to a larger story. We have evidence from the earliest cave paintings and burials that we hominids had a concept of the afterlife, the realm of mystery, the "larger story." That larger story is a realm beyond the day-to-day of life. The good news is that we have multiple ways at our disposal to re-engage with that realm. The long history of wisdom traditions points us to many options. These essays will be practical as well as poetic and philosophical. In the coming chapters, I intend to amplify opportunities to rekindle meaning and connection with God. Through story, cinema, dreams, the arts, meditation, folktales, and such, I'll describe ways people can connect with the larger story of life.

I'll leave you with a delightful reading from William Stafford.

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow.

It goes among things that change.

But it doesn't change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.

You have to explain about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can't get lost.

Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die: and you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread.⁴

1. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abraham-Joshua-Heschel>
2. C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953-), 10:541.
3. Edward F. Edinger, *The New God-Image: A Study of Jung's Key Letters Concerning the Evolution of the Western God-Image* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, c1996), 49. Jung was a man of the 19th and early 20th centuries, so he uses the terms *man* or *mankind* to refer to human beings. I acknowledge this fault in his language which should be rewritten *human beings cannot live a meaningless life*. However, I will quote him in these notebooks as the original text records his writings.
4. William Stafford, *Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, c2014), 7.

Chapter Two

WE NEED SYMBOLIC INTELLIGENCE

You've heard of IQ, short for intelligence quotient. The IQ test is considered to be a flawed instrument, widely used to measure one's smarts. (Say "smaahts" with a Boston accent.) I recall being administered the IQ test in 7th grade. My parents never told me the results. Should I be worried? In the 1990s, Daniel Goleman developed his theory of EI, short for emotional intelligence, sometimes referred to as emotional quotient (EQ). EI is often defined as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and handle emotions. Those with a high level of emotional intelligence can identify how they and others are feeling, use emotional information to guide their thinking and behavior, differentiate between different emotions, and adapt their own emotions in response to different situations and environments.

These are essential elements in our society, but we also need symbolic intelligence. I did a quick internet search to see if this exists yet, and all I could find were references to symbolic artificial intelligence, a form of computer processing seeking to mimic human use of symbols. That's not what I'm referencing. I'm referring to our human capacity to understand

reality through symbols and metaphors. A symbol is a representation that conveys a meaning beyond what we can consciously see or feel. It could be a visible image, like a sign or an object, or even a word. Symbols allow us to interpret and connect ideas, objects, and relationships that would otherwise appear disconnected.

Symbolic intelligence is the ability, or openness, to engage with sacred texts, religious icons, or holy spaces with an attitude of wonder, curiosity, and willingness. The function is to be intellectually, emotionally, and physically moved by the encounter. In other words, it's about more than just gaining logical information. It's about entering an experience of the numinous. As Jason Smith writes in *Religious but Not Religious*, "The symbol is something to be lived with, not possessed, something to be contemplated, not studied; something to be nurtured, not mined for treasures. Our attitude needs to be one of discovery and not interrogation, of love and not merely logic."¹

I traveled to Jerusalem, Palestine, Israel, and the Holy Land several years ago. During the tour, our group heard a constant refrain from the guide: this might have been where Jesus did or said such and such. After several of these, a fellow traveler pulled me aside and said, "I came all this way, and no one seems to know anything. All this *might* have been the place stuff bugs me. What's the point of the trip?" We spent several days discussing his dismay. I attempted to help him see the land, ancient buildings, and the stories we read as windows into a beautiful world. I described that world as the intersection of the external reality of people and things with the internal landscape of his soul. What happens at that intersection is the place where the symbols of the faith come to life. He struggled with this idea until years later, when he had a dream of walking along the Sea of Galilee. His experience of the dream and the time in waking life when he

walked near that sea began to open him up to a symbolic approach to life.

Symbols of transformation are an important part of psychological and spiritual growth, development and maturation, particularly in times of profound transition, threshold, crises and change. Jungian psychology asserts that mental concepts and processes alone often fail to grasp psychological and spiritual realities as a whole, so our psyche is often driven to use symbols, images and metaphors. This is because they speak to our whole person—to our mind, heart, senses, memories, body, experiences and imagination—and have the capacity to engage us more fully than mental concepts alone.²

—Julienne McLean

The Hebrew Bible contains the well-known story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If we read this passage literally, we'd view it as a historically accurate reporting of an event complete with a literal garden, a real live serpent, and two human beings five feet seven inches tall. Huh? How far do we want to go down this road of literalism? What color are their eyes, their skin, and what size shoes? Does the snake talk? In what language? Hebrew, Aramaic, or Norwegian? I hope that few people understand this story as a literal description of an actual historical event.

But what if we read this story with symbolic intelligence? We could take time to explore so much in this story, but let's look at the setting, which is a garden. The garden represents a sacred space in almost all cultures worldwide, uniting the conscious and unconscious worlds. In other words,

the garden is the area where this world and the spiritual world meet to create fertility and new life. But anyone growing a garden knows it's also an untamed space. One is constantly dealing with weeds, insects, and interlopers. If we do not continue to tend a garden, it quickly returns to a wilderness place. Exploring the symbolic approach to this story yields much more than mere information.

My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally. They knew what they were doing; we don't.³

—John Dominic Crossan

The term “symbol” has its roots in the ancient Greek word *symballein*, meaning “thrown together.” We can think of the conscious and the unconscious as two circles; symbols incorporate elements from both realms, unifying them when experienced. Symbols appear powerful to us because they evoke ideas that come from a mysterious source—which we refer to as “the unconscious.”

Symbols can help us discover aspects of ourselves and our world. Look for symbols wherever you go. You'll find them everywhere.

The fountains in our cities evoke ancient springs of renewal. The cross at the top of a church brings up the symbolism of the crucifixion and also the place where the vertical and horizontal, and also heaven and earth, meet. Wedding rings

made of gold and diamonds promise union forever. Apples, so common in advertisement, remind us of health and youth but also of The Tree of Good and Evil in the Bible. In a negative form it appears as the poisoned apple of the witch in fairy tales, or it simply indicates bad or rotten character. Fast cars evoke speed and wealth. The independence of the house cat can become a symbol for an inner aspect of someone's personality. *Anything becomes a symbol when it has some hidden quality that moves us in some way.* A sunset may just be the ending of the day or imagined as the myth of the hero travelling with the sun into the underworld. The world becomes magical when you begin looking for symbols!

—The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS)

We live in a time when the cognitive, logical, and literal have dominated our approach to most of life. This has enabled great things to happen. We have antibiotics, prepared foods, and insulated homes as benefits of this approach. I'm not disparaging rational thought processes. However, the pendulum has swung so far in one direction that we risk abandoning the sacred, the mystery and wonder of life. Fortunately, we are entering a time when symbolic thinking is returning, not with pre-Enlightenment naïveté, but in a new way that incorporates the knowledge we've gained from our modern development of depth psychology, anthropology, and the study of myth. Despite all our progress in modern society, people long for encounters in nature, meditation opportunities, or ways to be creative. Reclaiming a symbolic approach to ancient wisdom can help in these times.

Religious stories are to civilizations what dreams are to individuals. They are symbolically encoded messages from the depths of the human soul. Just as it would be inadvisable to interpret our dreams literally, in which case we would get into all sorts of trouble with the real world and human relationships, so we miss the inner meaning of scriptures by unimaginative readings. They are only loosely related to “reality” as we understand it. They demand reflection, contemplation, and an understanding of symbolic language. If we bring imagination and knowledge to bear on religious stories they can come to life in unexpected ways. At the same time, this metaphorical turn brings with it the advantage that religion loses its arrogant and absolutist sting, allowing us to combat the violence and discord to which literalism gives rise.⁴

- David Tacey

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1. Jason E. Smith, *Religious but Not Religious: Living a Symbolic Life* (Asheville, NC: Chiron Publications, 2019), 42.
 2. <http://www.contemplativespirituality.org/media/jmtalk150313.pdf>
 3. John Dominic Crossan, *Who is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, c1996), 79.
 4. David J. Tacey, *Religion as Metaphor: Beyond Literal Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

Chapter Twenty-Six

WE ARE LINKED TO THE INFINITE

*W*e are lived by powers we pretend to understand.

—W.H. Auden

Have you ever had an experience where you sensed you were in the presence of God?

I'm guessing the answer might be yes, but perhaps you've never thought that your experience was spiritual. These are unexplained encounters, and involve phenomena that run counter to our everyday life experience. Some people have wildly bizarre encounters with the Holy while others have more ordinary events, and still others may have had some sort of "thing" happen that they believe they cannot share with anyone. I'm convinced almost everyone has had some type of encounter, but some may be reluctant to describe the experience.

The American psychologist William James discusses this idea in his classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He distinguishes between primary religious encounters, direct personal experiences, and secondary religion, which involves teachings about the faith or organizational aspects.

Most of what happens in American church life today is secondary religion—information, analysis, and description. When I preach or teach on a Scripture passage or describe a theological concept, I am practicing secondary religion. It's secondary because it's about the religious experience.

Primary religion is the direct experience of the Holy, such as encounters with phenomena, hauntings, or numinous creatures, conversations with angels, or experiences of gentle calm. Those encounters can be mountain-top experiences or subtle reminders of the blessing of being alive. They can be out in nature, inside your living room, or around the corner from your place of work.

The quote above is from the poem “In Memory of Ernst Toller” by W. H. Auden.¹ The line “We are lived by powers we pretend to understand” has a broader application to the two realms I wrote about in the first chapter of this book. Auden captures in just a few words the profound truth that humans are influenced by forces beyond our rational, conscious, and materialist perspectives.

Auden's words suggest that something other than our rational ego-centered mind influences our thoughts and actions. Namely, there is a presence among us, within us, and around us. We could give many names to this presence, but I'll focus here on its spiritual significance. We encounter glimpses of this presence throughout our lives—a feeling, an intuition, perhaps a vision, or even a voice. For example, in my book *Everyday Spirituality*, I describe the experience of David, a struggling alcoholic, who “saw” a nurse at the foot of his bed as he recovered in a hospital.

The next day, David was transferred from NBC television in New York City to a small affiliate in Kalamazoo, Michigan. There, for several years, he worked in local radio sales and continued to drink. As many an alcoholic will attest, he was possessed. He could not stop. Over time he made several attempts at a rehab and Alcoholics Anonymous—and also had multiple close calls with death.

It all came to a head one night, when David consumed so much alcohol that he had to be hospitalized. But to this day he has no recollection of how he got to the hospital.

One evening, David awoke to the presence of a nurse at the foot of his bed. He saw a large African American woman dressed in a white uniform, like the traditional nurse's uniform, including the white cap that was a staple of the uniform in a previous era. She looked at him and said: "What are you doing with your life?"

The next morning as the sunlight came into his hospital room, he asked the attendant if he could speak to the nurse. "I'm the on-duty nurse, sir," said the small, slight, older white woman.

"No, I mean the other nurse. The one who was here last night."

"*I am* the night duty nurse, sir. I'm the only one who's been on this floor all night."²

What did my friend David see? Was it an alcohol-induced hallucination? Was it an angelic being? Was it a dream? Was it a messenger? Was it an unseen power, as Auden would suggest?

Australian philosopher David Tacey recently defined spirituality as “The power of eternity yearning to be in time,” echoing William Blake’s “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” This line comes from Blake’s masterpiece *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. I contend that people in our time seek the eternal. We yearn for encounters with the infinite because it helps give our lives a sense of meaning and purpose.³

The expansive interest in astrology and yoga can be understood as a desire to encounter mystery, wonder, and the infinite. Empirical forms of religious experience are on the rise in Buddhism and Hinduism, emphasizing meditation. In the Christian tradition, we see this in the global increase of Pentecostalism, focusing on a direct encounter with the divine. I recall a visit years ago to a Vineyard Movement worship service that featured a wide range of people speaking in tongues, rolling on the floor, and dancing in the aisles. A recent article in the *New York Times* by Ruth Graham described new alternatives to traditional church baptisms, including baptisms in the ocean, in horse troughs, even in hot tubs. When asked to describe the motivation behind the trend, “We live in an age where people like experiences,” said Mark Clifton, pastor of Linwood Baptist Church in Kansas. “It’s not that it looks better, but it feels better. It feels more authentic. It feels more real.”⁴ One could easily argue that this trend is gimmicky, but my point in highlighting it here is to illustrate the desire for an experiential religion.

The advertising industry has also watched this growth. Products and experiences are marketed to us with a clear message: Satisfying your personal desires is the ultimate fulfillment—just buy this product, vacation, or automobile. Perhaps this explains what surveys consistently reveal: the number one recreational activity for Americans is shopping. We seek our recreation and re-creation in the acquisition of goods and services.

But many late-modern people find acquisition of things to be inadequate for living a whole and meaningful life. We long for something more profound.

How can we humans, living in a digital age, rediscover and reconnect with God? I offer the following as possibilities. Of course, there are likely other ways, but I'll focus on five ways we connect with the spiritual realm.

The Arts: I consider music, painting, sculpture, dance, and drama to be among creative expressions that have a sacred quality. My wife often describes singing as her spiritual discipline. It feeds her and gives her great joy, but it also somehow connects her with something deeper. My brother is an artist in the San Francisco area. Through various print imaginings, he reveals insight into both ancient and contemporary events. A friend just took up pottery, and another has returned to her love of dance. "I don't care if I look like a fool. I'm feeling a spirit alive in me while I move," she said.

Relationships: I'm thinking of the long-lasting relationships we have with significant people in our lives. Through these, we learn more about ourselves than in any classroom, book, or therapeutic exchange. Is God present in that life of loving relations? I think so. The Greeks had three words for love. In Sanskrit, there are over one hundred words for love, yet in English, we rely on modifiers to help us explain love. Romantic love is different than brotherly love. Erotic love is not the same as compassionate love. What we experience in those first few weeks and months of a romantic relationship evolves after ten years, thirty years, or longer. We grow and change as individuals and in relationships. If God is Love, as the Bible says, our lifelong experience of evolving love is a spiritual encounter.

First Corinthians 13 contains a well-known passage about love, frequently

read at weddings. It even made it into a scene in the 2005 movie *Wedding Crashers*. When read at a wedding ceremony, this passage reminds us of the romantic aspects of love. But when I heard it read at the funeral of an eighty-three-year-old man by his granddaughter, I wept. Love took on an entirely different significance. It spoke of resilience and endurance, compassion, and gentleness in ways I had not considered. A piece of Scripture that had become rather lifeless for me, as one who has attended hundreds of weddings, suddenly leaped off the page and pierced my heart.

Love is patient, love is kind, It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking,

it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrong.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

—I Corinthians 13:4–8

Nature: A walk in the woods, a swim in the lake, a bike ride along a country road. What is it about the natural world that opens us up to the sacred? Perhaps more than any other practice, people report mystical encounters taking place in the natural world. We now have scientific evidence of the benefit of simply being outside for twenty minutes. But before all the neuroscience, humans lived in the environment of trees, rivers, and open plains. As late-modern people in a technological age, we forget that we are animals, and our roots are in the natural world. The history of religion in the world contains stories of people encountering God in the created world—in a burning bush, underneath a Bodhi Tree, in the river Jordan, or in a desert cave. Are you looking for a way to connect with God? Take a walk outside.

Dreams: Dreams provide opportunities to experience a sacred realm and possibly an avenue to the soul. One author called them God's forgotten language, while another wrote of dreams as unopened letters from God.⁵ The parade of night visions that cross our awareness while we sleep allows us to experience the Holy. I look forward to each night as I hit the pillow, and often ask myself, *What will the dream maker show me tonight?* Next to my bed sits a small journal where I can record my dreams. They come to us without charge . . . a symbol of the ongoing gift of grace from God. It is in dreaming that we enter a world of mystery and wonder. While some comment that they do not recall their dreams, and others write them off as insignificant, there is ample evidence of the healing and meaning of dreams.

Most dreams are representations of what goes on inside the dreamer. Dreams usually speak of the evolution of forces inside us, the conflicts of values and viewpoints there, the different unconscious energy systems that are trying to be heard, trying to find their way into our conscious lives.⁶

Robert A. Johnson

Prayer/Meditation: While words can shape our experiences, I fear they can also cover up the direct encounter with the Holy. I've read beautiful prayers for decades, but not one can match the experience of the sacred. Our meetings with the numinous are ineffable. So often, when we hear the word *prayer*, we think of written or spoken prayers. Sadly, many prayers seem to be telling God what we want, need, desire. Is it possible that a healthy relationship with the divine involves a two-way conversation.

But prayer should not be something we seek to perfect, as the poet Mary Oliver reminds us in this line from her poem "Praying."

*... this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.*⁷

I've illustrated a few practical ways we can seek out the numinous, but let's be clear that it is more often the case that God finds us, rather than us finding God. Therefore, the Holy often surprises us in its appearance. But we can put ourselves in a place of awareness and openness.

1. W. H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (New York: Random House, 1967), 143.
2. James Hazelwood, *Everyday Spirituality* (South Kingstown, RI: Hazelwood Media, 2019), 217.
3. Tacey, 15.
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by James Hazelwood

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About the author

James Hazelwood serves as the Bishop of the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the author of *Everyday Spirituality* and *Weird Wisdom for the Second Half of Life*. He studied at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In the 1990s, he studied with Dr. Edwin Friedman's Family System Process Seminars and at the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in New York. He completed his training in spiritual direction in the Christian mythical traditional and Jungian psychology at the Monastery of Mt Carmel in Niagara, Ontario, Canada, and the Haden Institute. Currently, he is researching the application of Carl Jung's Depth Psychology to coaching and dreamwork through the Jung Platform. Cycling, gardening, and grandparenting round out his spare time. He has succeeded and failed at stand-up comedy.

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