

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## Food for the journey— favorite books



After hearing me speak recently about books that had furnished food for my spiritual journey, a *Connections* reader asked me for a list of the books that had been most important to me. I thought I could simply send him the 1995 *Connections* that was such a list. However, I found that some books on it seemed less important now, some I'd left off seemed more important, and some recent ones now belonged on the list, so here's my updated version of it.



## God's nudges toward change

The books that have meant most to me have been mainly in three general areas in which I've continually found God nudging me to grow.



### 1 Understanding the Bible and Christianity

#### • Seeing the influence of history and culture

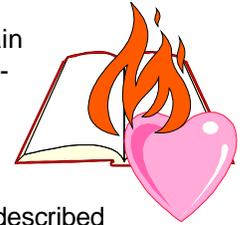
*Situation Ethics*, by Joseph Fletcher, was a life-changing eye-opener for me when I first read it more than thirty years ago. It showed me for the first time the difference between Jesus' law of love and the many culture-based rules that people mistakenly call God's rules. It showed me a way to make sense of biblical statements that I felt couldn't possibly be rules for all situations and all time, but that I'd never heard acknowledged as anything else. *Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson, published about the same time, affected me similarly.



Every opinion of these books that I heard when they were new called them mistaken and sinful, but I couldn't believe they were. For me they made sense of scriptures and Christian beliefs that had never made sense before, but I didn't admit that then. I

## Reading under the eye of God

Reading has been my main route to God. I often find God-given insight coming through a book, even if it's not one that is considered religious.



Many centuries ago a monk described this powerful experience. He was referring to the meditative reading of scripture, but for me, what he describes can happen during other kinds of reading too. "We read under the eye of God," he said, "until the heart is touched and leaps to flame."

## Many kinds of books can light a fire

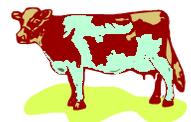


I read a lot, and I read a wide variety of books and articles. Some are fiction and some are nonfiction. Their styles range from popular to scholarly. Their theological positions cover a wide range. Considering many viewpoints helps me clarify my own. It helps me develop a stronger and more mature faith.

I especially like to read people's views and personal stories in their own words. I find that reading only a summary or analysis, especially if it's written by an opponent, can give a distorted picture.

## Lay the bones aside

I hope you'll do with my list what Morton Kelsey asked of the readers of one his books, *Reaching: The Journey to Fulfillment*. "The reader should approach this book as a grazing cow approaches a pasture," Kelsey suggests, "munching here and there, savoring what is pleasing and tasty. The cow does not get upset or annoyed at what is distasteful or even dangerous; she just passes it by."



Author Douglas Steere gave similar advice. "I use the same rule for reading as for eating fish," he said. "Eat the fish, and lay the bones aside." But I find that what feels prickly at first, making me think it's a bone, sometimes turns out to be nourishing fish when I re-examine it later. Thus it's important to merely lay the prickly parts aside instead of trashing them immediately.



assumed that when my views differed from “every-one” else’s I must be wrong, so I’d better keep quiet. After rereading these two brave books recently, however, I still appreciate them, and I admit it now.



In recent years John Shelby Spong’s books have helped me see the God who transcends history and culture. I’ve loved Spong’s *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and *A New Christianity for a New World*. Marcus Borg’s books have also helped, most recently his *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*.

*Dirt Greed & Sex*, by L. William Countryman, helped me see why some biblical statements about sexual behavior aren’t likely to be rules for all people and all time. And *We Were Baptized Too*, by Marilyn Bennett Alexander and James Preston, helped by showing me the pain that homosexual Christians needlessly experience when the church relies on culture-bound rules instead of God’s law of love.



• **Understanding symbolic language**

*Ego and Archetype*, by Edward F. Edinger, explained a lot for me. So did *The Kingdom Within: A Study of the Inner Meaning of Jesus’ Sayings*, by John Sanford, an Episcopal priest and Jungian analyst. These books helped me see how symbols and metaphors convey meaning, not only in scripture and religious rituals and doctrine but similarly in dreams and the visual arts. I saw, too, that symbols often have similar meanings in many different religions and cultures.

• **Getting a clearer picture of Jesus**

*Jesus: A New Vision* and other books by Marcus Borg, and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, by John Dominic Crossan, have shown me views of Jesus that I’ve found more convincing than those I’ve usually seen at church. *Icons of American Protestantism* and *Visual Piety*, by David Morgan, helped me understand the powerful messages—sometimes untrue and thus harmful—that visual portrayals of Jesus give us.



• **Looking at the larger picture**

*The Divine Milieu* and *The Phenomenon of Man*, by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, caused light bulbs to turn on in my mind when I first read them.

## 2 Understanding myself and others



• **Recognizing how language and customs put women down, even in the church**

*Women of a Certain Age*, by Lillian B. Rubin, was wrenching for me when I first read it, in 1979. It helped me realize that I didn’t have to limit myself to the few roles I’d seen as the only acceptable ones for women. *A Room of One’s Own*, by Virginia Woolf, a tiny 1929 book, also was unforgettable. And *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, by Margaret R. Miles, was powerful, intriguing, and eye-opening. It shows how religious art and customs, like advertising, often portray women in harmful ways.



*Jesus According to a Woman* and *Jesus and the Freed Woman*, by Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, helped me start to see that Jesus didn’t accept the limits his culture put on women.

*In Whose Image?: God and Gender*, by Jann Aldredge Clanton, helped me see how using only masculine words for God harms women. So did *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*, by Sandra M. Schneiders, and *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, by Sallie McFague.

• **Discovering gifts and appreciating diversity**

*Please Understand Me*, by David Keirse and Marilyn Bates, about personality types, was a lifesaver for me. It made me aware that being who I really am is okay, even though in some ways it’s different from most other people. It also helped me recognize and appreciate others’ gifts. (There’s a newer version, *Please Understand Me II*, but I don’t like it quite as well.)

*Generations*, by William Strauss and Neil Howe, and *New Rules*, by Daniel Yankelovich, are no longer current but they helped me see some reasons for differing viewpoints.



*Stages of Faith*, by James Fowler, presents a view of faith development that some people now reject, but to me it was a great help in seeing some reasons for

church members' understanding and acting on their beliefs in such a wide variety of ways.

*Babette's Feast*, a long short story or short novel by Isak Dinesen, is the only fiction I'm including in this list. It's the heart-rending story of a woman who for many years had no opportunity to use her main gifts and talents, and then found them unappreciated when the opportunity finally arrived. This



poignant story brought home to me the importance of discovering one's main gifts and calling, and of finding uses, encouragement, and appreciation for them.

• **Growing in faith**

*Shaped by the Word*, by M. Robert Mulholland, an Asbury Seminary professor, was powerful for me when I heard him present its contents in the Academy for Spiritual Formation. So was *The Hunger of the Heart*, by Episcopal priest Ron Del Bene.

*A Testament of Devotion*, by Thomas Kelly, an American Quaker, is one of my most cherished books. I especially love his description of "kindred souls knit together," who "suddenly loom large, step forward in our attention as men and women whom we now know to the depths" because "we discern that their lives are already down within that Center which has found us."



• **Risking the pain that change brings**

I can't even describe how wrenching but valuable I found *Going Home*, by Methodist clergyman Robert A. Raines. I doubted that all the changes he made in his life were wise, and I knew they wouldn't be right for me, but his willingness to make changes that he felt God was calling him to make was inspir-

ing. I've felt similarly about the more recent autobiography *Here I Stand*, by John Shelby Spong.



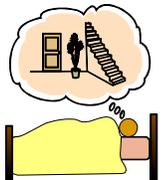
*Necessary Losses*, by Judith Viorst, and *Making Peace with Your Parents*, by Harold H. Bloomfield and Leonard

Felder, helped me see the need to start relating to my parents as an adult rather than as a permanent child. These books also helped me summon the courage to make long-needed but painful changes.

• **Recognizing God's guidance**

Understanding some of my dreams showed me a way that God was speaking but I hadn't previously recognized, despite the many biblical accounts of God giving guidance through dreams.

*Dreams, God's Forgotten Language*, by John Sanford, and *Dreams: A Way to Listen to God*, by Morton T. Kelsey, were invaluable to me.



• **Being open with myself and others**



*Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?*, by John Powell, a Catholic priest, is a tiny book that I found life-changing.

### 3 Looking at the church and acknowledging the need for change

• **Focusing on purpose and commitment**

*The Edge of Adventure*, by Keith Miller and Bruce Larson, first motivated me to seek a more meaningful personal faith and to work for change in the church. Following it and similarly influential were *Call to Commitment* and *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, by Elizabeth O'Connor. So were *The Company of the Committed* and *The Incendiary Fellowship*, by Elton Trueblood, and *The Emerging Church*, by Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne.

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

In more recent years, *The Once and Future Church*, by Loren B. Mead; *The Paralysis of Mainstream Protestant Leadership*, by J. Edward Carothers; and *Dying Church, Living God*, by Chuck Meyer, have reinforced my determination to work for changes I feel the church urgently needs to make.

• **Recognizing God's call for justice**

*Naming the Powers, Unmasking the Powers, Engaging the Powers*, and *The Powers that Be*, the last of which is essentially an easier-to-read abridged version of the previous three, all by Walter Wink, have helped me recognize what Wink calls "the domina-

tion system," which opposes the justice God wants. It's a system that God evidently wants the church to oppose, but that the church often helps to stay in power instead.



**A piece of myself**

That's my list. To me it seems like a piece of myself. So does the list of scriptures below. I offer them in the hope that they'll furnish food for someone else's journey too.

*Barbara*

(Most books on this list no longer available in the edition I first read are available as reissues or from resale booksellers.)

**Favorite Bible passages**

There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. ... When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free ..."  
—Luke 13:11-12

I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"  
—Isaiah 6:8

I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.  
—Esther 4:16



Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?  
—Matthew 15:2

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us.  
—Romans 12:6



Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...  
—Romans 12:2

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
—Isaiah 43:18-19

Oh, that someone among you would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain!  
—Malachi 1:10