

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## The journey toward mature faith



Several books I've read recently have made me think again—for the jillionth time, it seems, and undoubtedly not the last—about the need to keep maturing in faith. I like to read about other Christians' spiritual journeys partly because they reassure me that questioning, reexamining our beliefs, and even doubting play vital roles in getting a clearer picture of God and following God's call more faithfully. Such accounts remind me, too, that the spiritual journey always includes not only exhilaration but also pain and frustration.



Unfortunately a lot of the pain and frustration comes from the injustice and other shortcomings we inevitably find in the church. We may wish the church were perfect (perfect as we define it, that is!), and even at times expect it to be perfect because it claims to be following Jesus. However, we have to face the fact that because the church is human as well as divine, it isn't perfect and won't ever be perfect. We're called anyway to keep nudging it (and ourselves) closer to the justice and love that Jesus taught and exemplified. When my courage and willingness to keep doing that are wavering, reading about others' journeys helps keep me going. In case it helps you too, I'm mentioning here some books I've recently liked.

## The spiritual journey today

An especially powerful description of the Christian spiritual journey that I've recently read is *Wrestling with God* (Relevant Books, 2003), by Austin, Texas, pastor Rick Diamond. He writes in terms especially chosen to reach nonchurchgoers, and mainly those in younger-than-baby-boom generations. However, he expertly



## Two pastors' journeys



United Methodist clergywoman Mary Cartledgehayes describes her spiritual journey in *Grace: A Memoir* (Crown, 2003). She tells about her call to ordained ministry and her experiences with seminary, the ordination process, her first pastorate, and the frustration of being in a field where many churchgoers and even other seminary students thought a woman—especially a rather unconventional one—didn't belong. She uses some "bad words" and mentions sexual feelings and experiences that some church members consider unmentionable or even unacceptable for clergy, but don't let this keep you from reading her book. It's one of the most compelling I've read in a long time.

So is *Wide Skies: Finding a Home in the West*, by Gary Holthaus (University of Arizona Press, 1997). At first glance this stunning book seems to be only an account of the author's travels in the western U.S., the people he found there, and his deep concern for the natural environment. It's much more than that. Holthaus also includes a striking account of a part of his personal spiritual journey that included rejection by the church. His writing is beautiful even when the story he tells is wrenching. For me this book is unforgettable.



The church's failure to pursue justice and show love is far from these books' main emphasis, but each of them reveals that failure. Holthaus was ousted from active ordained ministry because of divorce. Cartledgehayes has now left local-church ministry because she's no longer willing to put up with the anti-woman treatment she kept experiencing.

Accounts like these make me freshly aware of how the church discourages or even rejects talented, called, and committed Christians. We don't bad-mouth divorced people and oust them from the ordained ministry now as we did in the years when Holthaus was active in it. Cartledgehayes's experience, however, is quite recent, and many other clergywomen are leaving local-church ministry because of the same criticism she had to face. We also reject other qualified people God has called. Isn't it time to discontinue such tactics?



describes the journey in a way that readers of all ages are likely to find unusually potent. I'm far beyond the generation whose style he uses, so lots of his references to recent movies, TV shows, and pop music left me blank, but that didn't keep me from finding his book extremely compelling. He also makes good use of quotes from timeless literature that even I as a member of Diamond's grandparents' generation—the group he calls “bankers and community volunteers”—can recognize.



Diamond's use of capitalized masculine pronouns to refer to God throughout the book disappointed me, but he says this was the publisher's requirement, not his preference. This seems odd for a publisher that claims to be relevant and contemporary—but the book's strengths far outweigh this drawback.



Diamond writes about the familiar avenues to spiritual growth, but not in the familiar ways. Here's what he says about prayer. “I'm talking about prayer, the means by which, when we are willing to enter spirit space, we hear what the Spirit is doing, breathing, singing, saying, being. ... Something we mumble in church or before we eat isn't what I'm talking about. Something the preacher says before a session of Congress isn't it either. Prayer is not knowing—and just going into that place. ... But let's face it: Nobody really wants that very often. That's why we keep the DVD player on.”

### Jesus the culture-shattering rule breaker

Especially well done, I felt, were Diamond's retellings of well-known parables and Bible incidents. I also liked his descriptions of Jesus. “He isn't interested in anyone's rules or ideas. He is immoral in the very best sense of the word. ... Jesus broke every rule and moral code He could find. ... He did not behave.” His teachings and behavior? “Radical stuff. Culture-shattering,” Rick Diamond reminds us. “If Jesus' plans come true, no institution that is based on rules and regulations can remain standing.”



Diamond also emphasizes Jesus's refusal to expect everyone to follow exactly the same path, even his. “He committed ev-

ery kind of blasphemy. ... He believed that the ultimate blasphemy was to say you know the right answer.” When his disciples complained about people teaching in Jesus's name but in a different way, Jesus's response (as Rick Diamond paraphrases it) was “You're not the only ones with a connection to God. Leave other people alone. Lots of others besides you will be doing what my Father wants for the people of the world.”

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”  
—John 10:16

### Doing the impure things



Another author who reminds us of how unconventional Jesus was is Richard Rohr, in his book *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001). “Jesus consistently undoes historic religion,” Rohr points out, “by touching and consorting and doing the ‘impure’ things.”

Rohr assures us that real faith is radical and scary, so always rare. “Religious group-identity becomes its most common replacement. Then we don't have to find and live from a positive and loving place. We can just go to church.” In Rohr's view, what many of us do and think in church is quite different from what real Christianity is meant to be. As a result, “Christianity, for many,” Rohr observes, “has come to mean anti-intellectual, fanatically narrow-minded people. Christianity, for some, is neither faith nor reason—just reactive tribalism hiding behind the skirts of ‘Mother Church.’ ”

### A different view of “being saved”



As I've already mentioned in a recent *Connections*, I especially like how Rohr describes the uniqueness of Christianity, and the meaning of “being saved.” The idea that “being saved” means being guaranteed to go to a lovely place in the sky somewhere when you die, instead of being consigned forever to a horrible fiery place below, never has made any sense to me.

“The cross,” as Rohr understands its meaning, “was the price that Jesus paid for agreeing to live in a ‘mixed’ world that was both human and divine, bad and good, simultaneously broken and utterly

whole. He agreed to carry the mystery and not to demand perfection of God's creation or of God's creatures. He lived fully on the horns of the human dilemma and made it work for us. In fact, he said it is the 'only' way. It is in that sense only, that Christianity is the 'only' way to be saved."

### The cross became our company logo

In church we've usually been given a different view from that. "The cross," Rohr sees, "became our company logo more than something that we gazed upon and were transformed by." We confuse the pattern of cultural religious practices that we've gotten used to and thus have come to consider essential, with the real meaning and purpose of our religion.



That's a comfortable way. "The trouble," however, in Richard Rohr's opinion, "is that it feels so godly that much, if not most, religion is a belonging system more than a search for intimacy with God. The trouble is that the 'Founder of our Firm,' Jesus, emphasized none of these! He was not into tribal religion, groupthink, and loyalty tests. Much of the institutional Church is, however, and always has been. ... It holds us together, and that feels like salvation, even if it is a very deteriorated form of it."



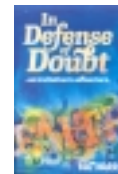
Seeing past that form and looking deeper is so threatening to a lot of us that we shy away from it. "Some fear all critical thinking," notices Rohr, "because they fear that the structures will collapse. You see this in so many of the neoconservatives who cannot tolerate any criticism of the Church, or the patriots and flag-worshippers of America." However, Rohr goes on to say, "There is such a thing as healthy criticism. People who love something have also earned the right to make it better and keep it true to

its deepest vision. ... When you recognize that you are an accomplice in the evil and also complicit in the good, and take responsibility for both, when you can use the language of 'we' and not 'them,' then ... your criticism is coming from love, not hate."



### Growth through spirals and uncertainties

An author for whom critical thinking has been vital to the spiritual journey is lay theologian Val Webb. To my delight I've recently discovered her and her book *In Defense of Doubt: An Invitation to Adventure* (Chalice, 1995). It's full of reassurances about the value of the spirals, nudges, and uncertainties of the Christian journey. She also includes a description of process theology that's clearer and less academic in style than any I've previously read, so I appreciated that part of her book too.



Val Webb emphasizes the difference between faith and belief. She sees faith as our response to experiencing another power. It is "a way of seeing, a consciousness of another dimension." In contrast, beliefs are "ideas, concepts, or propositions concerning a religious tradition, which are formalized from the experience of 'faith' and adopted by the individual or group."



Val Webb finds that "thousands of people in churches today, and even millions who have left, have suffered lifelong guilt, grief, and alienation because those who have claimed authority over them have named the doubting of that authority as sin or weakness." Rather than weakness or sin, however, in Webb's view, "doubts are signs of our own health." They're "nudges and hints, sometimes more like shoves or blast-offs, but always the way our attention is captured and our

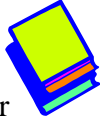
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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay 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.

minds expanded.” To Webb, “doubts are part of an ongoing process of faith, but the first step is the key—to accept that doubts are not negative but positive. The question church communities need to ask is, ‘How do we provide a space of safety where people can voice their struggles in public, and not be banished back into silence because of their doubts?’ ”

I loved Val Webb’s account of being helped by books, especially autobiographies. “To discover a book that mirrors our personal journey is liberation.” She emphasizes the influence of conversations, too. “Conversations can be alive or dead,” she finds, as I also do, and she



describes an urge I often feel. “Many times I long to interject some very personal or controversial statement into an exchange, to test where there is life in the dialogue ... ” However, she has felt, as I have, the pain of having openness misused. “To share doubts and open the heart only to receive incredulous stares leaves one feeling like a turtle lying on its back—helpless, vulnerable, exposed, and alone. ... In such a situation, however, the loser is not the one risking humanness, but the one afraid to.”

That’s what I try to risk by writing *Connections*, and what I hope readers risk with me by reading it.

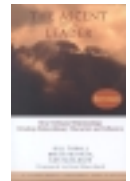
*Barbara*

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### Vulnerability—sometimes helpful, sometimes unhelpful?

The leader of a church organization recently asked me to read *The Ascent of a Leader*, by Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath (Jossey-Bass, 1999), which he and some colleagues were studying, and to tell him my reaction to it. Mostly it’s too corporation-oriented to suit me, but its discussion of being vulnerable to others is quite pertinent to the Christian journey.



“Vulnerability,” say these authors, “causes people to know your life is open to them. ... You will allow the cracks in your life to be not only seen but also filled as you receive their influence. This process expresses your integrity to others, and it helps sustain your integrity.” Many environments discourage vulnerability, however. The church often does. Transparency can look like vulnerability, the authors find, but many skillful leaders are only selectively transparent. They disclose only in times and ways they choose, to maintain control. That can be a good start but it’s not really being vulnerable.



What about being vulnerable to untrustworthy or harmful people? That’s what Jesus did. Should we always do it? If not, when?

Questions like these are tough but important ones for Christians to ask themselves.