

# INTRODUCTION TO THE 2017 EDITION



## Processional

### A WRITER'S COTTAGE

*Alexandria, Virginia, 2017*

A plaque hangs above my desk: “Tell Your Story.”

Those words serve as a daily invitation to a spiritual practice.

Telling a story involves honest reflection on our spiritual struggles. The new edition of this book asked me to revisit my life's trials and joys. In some ways, my story has not changed very much over the decades. I am, and remain to be, a restless soul coming to terms with loss, doubt, fear, and rejection as well as seeking my place in the universe and rediscovering the meaning and purpose of life. Through it all, there has been a shining mystery, a light of wonder and awe, always drawing me and driving me toward new levels of compassion, insight, and connection with that which dances right beyond the horizon.

Two decades ago, I had just published my doctoral dissertation on Episcopal Church history. In the 1990s, through a surprising set of circumstances, I wound up writing a weekly column on religion and culture for the *New York Times* syndicate, a feature that appeared in print newspapers across the United States. Readers



requested a book. But what to write? Popular history? Theological advice? After reading Kathleen Norris's *Cloister Walk*, however, I knew: I wanted to write a spiritual memoir. As I mulled over this possibility, a good friend said, "You don't want to do that now, when you are forty. You won't have enough to say and you haven't lived long enough to figure out what it means."

Her advice seems quaint now. Ours has become an age of public confessional writing, especially in blogs. It seems every person with access to a computer has written or is writing a memoir. We live in a culture where few thoughts go unsaid, few circumstances remain private, few doubts are held close. Words surround us; it can seem as if everyone is sharing the most intimate details of life every minute of every day to audiences both small and large.

When I wrote *Strength for the Journey*, there were few blogs. There was barely an internet and few people had the privilege—and its corresponding responsibility—of sharing a private story in a public venue. Yet spiritual memoir was gaining popularity in those days—beautiful works of literary nonfiction by writers like Norris, but Annie Dillard and Fredrick Buechner as well. Spiritual memoir seemed the right genre. I wanted to write like them.

But I took my friend's comment seriously: What did it mean to be forty at the turn of the millennium, and to share the story of a contemporary life and its encounter with the ancient wisdom of Jesus and the church? For the first twenty years of my adult life, I had been a churchgoer, an unlikely choice for a young adult in the late twentieth century. It was never an easy choice, however. Like Jacob, I wrestled with Christian community, as if it were a wounding angel. Mine was neither a story of finding church and writing about it with honeymoon wonder nor a tale of leaving church in anger or pain. No, mine was a story of two decades of being in community with human beings who were trying to be faithful and who



often failed miserably in the process—and how those failures intertwined with my own failures, questions, doubts, and sins. And that is what I decided to write about—me, God, the church. Three characters, moving from city to city as nomads and trying to find a life together.

One of my favorite early twentieth-century Episcopal writers, Vida Dutton Scudder, an English professor at Wellesley College and the founder of a lay religious order, wrote two autobiographies, twenty years apart. The second is much more honest than the first. I am not saying that *Strength for the Journey* is dishonest. But I do think my friend was right. It is more than possible to be too young to write a good memoir. “Telling Your Story” is a complex thing, involving a level of experience and reflection that I was only touching on as I entered my fortieth year. “Telling Your Story” is not blabbing or spewing; the art of spiritual memoir is listening to the heartbeat of one’s life with and in God, reflecting on that deeply, describing it in such a way as to invite others to cherish and recognize their own life-giving paths. There were things I intuited and did not say outright. There were things I wanted to say but was constrained by being nice. There were things I did not know because people either lied to me or because no one knew them at the time. There is a sense of incompleteness about this book because I was, in certain ways, as naïve as the *fin de siècle* in which it was written.

*Strength for the Journey* was mailed (yes, I said “mailed”) to my editor in San Francisco on September 10, 2001; since then I have written eight more books. Many of the themes and insights of those later works are found in some incipient form in this book, especially my passion for personal spiritual experience, the importance of practice, a deep awareness of history and tradition, and a concern that communities of faith be transformative, engaged in justice, and



spiritually vibrant for the sake of the world. But what is missing in *Strength* (and what shows up with increasing urgency in the later books) is September 11, 2001, and its fear, grief, and rawness. And, of course, what is also missing is what has happened since in global affairs and American politics, and the near-utter failure of churches to come to grips with violence, racism, economic inequality, and social privilege. We have desperately wanted everything to go back to “normal,” without recognizing how “normal” did not work on behalf of God’s love and justice. We talk a good game about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, but I have grown increasingly alarmed that we—white, mainline church people, that is—mostly comfort the comfortable and afflict those who are already afflicted. These days, my soul is pained by what I experience in majority white churches. My friends tell me my work has taken a prophetic turn.

I do not know if the turn is prophetic, but I do know that in the almost twenty years since writing *Strength*, the situation for most mainline churches, like the ones I write about in this book, has grown dire. Although there are still amazing stories of numerical growth and congregational vibrancy and tender tales of small-scale love and transformation, the overall story is one of loss of prestige and membership. This loss is found not just in mainline churches: almost all majority-white Protestant denominations and Catholic congregations—whether liberal or conservative—are losing adherents and influence at a historic rate, a shift that is now well documented. We keep trying to fix things. We keep seeking the next shiny savior of the church. We keep waiting for the kids to come back. Fixing, seeking, waiting. Honestly, we are in a sort of spiritual exile. By the waters of Babylon, we are weeping. We do not really know what to do. We find it difficult to admit it.



If, when one is forty, one tempers hard news in favor of the good, then when one nears sixty, saying what is true is all that matters. I have not become a curmudgeon, thinking that the church's best days are behind. No, I have become far more realistic and hopeful about faith. My fellow writer and friend, Marcus Borg, used to remind me that faith was about "seeing widely." The eyes of faith do not fixate on what is immediately in front of us but learn to see softly, to include the periphery of the Spirit, to sense a wide field of grace and God's intention that surround us all.

Spiritual memoir should not be an act of nostalgia—Ah! The good old days! Instead, spiritual memoir gives us the opportunity to retrace our steps, to uncover and rediscover God's presence in the whole of the journey, and, by doing so, opens new paths ahead. *Strength for the Journey* has always been a memoir of "us," not just me. In offering these words to the world again, I hope we can see where we have been that we might have more joy and courage to keep walking and keep waking up. That we all might see the edges of the Spirit at work in our own lives, our communities, and the world.

I hope that in telling my story, I might have told a bit of yours. The invitation stands wide open: Tell Your Story.