

A Personal Preface

In early 2014 I found myself half asleep in a college campus auditorium, surrounded by a couple thousand cheering audience members, while I tried to figure out what I was doing there. My two-year-old son had a cold and a fever, which meant I hadn't gotten much sleep for several days, and I was struggling to stay awake. But there I was at what I had expected to be a writer's conference.

Instead, this Storyline Conference, held once a year and sponsored by author Donald Miller, was intended to inspire people to *live* better stories, with resources to help writers, bloggers, and marketers get going with their work. Writers came and went from the stage to tell their stories, interviewed by Miller himself. Depending on who came on stage, a different little section of the audience burst out in wild cheers.

I wasn't a rabid fan of any of them, and I was only at the conference because someone had given my wife and me tickets to it—but I *was* looking for some kind of inspiration. I'd been stuck about halfway through a novel for years. The book was a train wreck. And worse: writing it wasn't any fun. Now, as I sat with my thoughts, gulping coffee, I realized something.

I had been putting pressure on myself to write a great novel *seen through the eyes of someone else*. I wanted pretty much everyone in the entire world to like it, but when it came right down to it, I didn't particularly want to write the novel; what I actually wanted was mainstream literary appreciation. But now I was listening to writer after writer who had simply written from the gut about their own experience. Even if what they wrote wasn't for everyone, it resonated with *someone!*

I began to wonder: What would happen if I were to write from my gut? What would be fun to write? What would be fun to read? What did I enjoy reading the most? And why?

The book that came to my mind was Julia Cameron's *Artist's Way*. This book doesn't point out the flaws with society or religion or the way we're living. Instead, it's helpful. It's constructive. It's life-giving. And I realized—*that's* the kind of thing I wanted to write.

Something that would help others grow, to experience transformation, to move toward wholeness.

My thoughts then turned to what had inspired me most in my life—the great myths, the great poets, the great works from across the wisdom traditions, the teachings and practices of the mystics and contemplatives. These all taught that profound healing and genuine transformation is possible. A life of vitality and fullness is actually available, and these stories, poems, and teachings had helped me confront my own shadow. Because of them, I had experienced healing and come out on the other side. Slowly but surely, I'd experienced for myself the change described by the mystics and ancient storytellers.

Meanwhile, I saw those close to me struggling through life, stuck in arrested development, in addiction, ineffectiveness, immature patterns, failed marriages, lifeless careers, loneliness, and depression. Their lives so often lacked the vitality and fullness described by the great poets, mystics, and spiritual teachers. Whether my friends and acquaintances called themselves Christian or not didn't seem to matter much, because the pattern in their lives was largely the same—short periods of satisfaction or achievement that gave way to long stretches of struggle and suffering.

I wanted to share my own journey with them, not because I thought I was better than they were, but because I knew this path was what they also needed. But how, I wondered, could I communicate something like this in an accessible way? The writings of the poets, mystics, and contemplatives aren't exactly light reading and certainly not everyone's cup of tea, even for avid readers. I had needed years of study and practice to get a handle on the message these writings carry.

My passion for poetry and myth seemed faraway from people caught in their everyday struggles. As I searched for a bridge to span this distance, I remembered a line one of my mentors, a college English professor, said when explaining a work of literature: *We're lost. We're trying to get home.* I realize now—that's what we all have in common. It's as true today for ordinary people living ordinary lives as it was for the world's great mythmakers and storytellers. And one way to read the myths is as a road map of the soul's journey to God. The soul's journey *home*.

Instantly, I thought of Dante and his pilgrimage down through Hell, up Mount Purgatory, and into Paradise. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante gives us a model of the soul's journey home. He lays out the path of the spiritual life—first down into the depths, then the climb upward, and finally the moment of vision when the spiritual world becomes real and present.

That moment, sitting in a conference I never would have attended if not for the chance gift of the tickets, was the seed of inspiration that grew into this book. Dante's *Divine Comedy* became the foundation for the three sections of this book: the Downward Way, the Outward Way, and the Upward Gaze.

As I worked on the book, I rediscovered the writings of the ancient Christian mystics as well as modern teachers like Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Father Thomas Keating, who reinterpret these ancient teachings for a modern audience using the language of both Christian tradition and modern psychology. New connections became evident to me, and from them I constructed a new framework. I had found a modern roadmap of the sacred journey to personal breakthrough and a life of vitality and meaning, a map that draws on ancient myth and spirituality, personal experience, and contemporary psychology.

The writing went quickly. It was as if I were being given each section from an external source as the pieces clicked into place. As I began the final sections of the book I had a further transformational experience that confirmed my work even more deeply.

In my personal contemplative practice and reading, I circled back through old wounds of my own, and there I found deep reservoirs of inner guilt, shame, and failure I had failed to drain in my previous soul work. In a profound experience of inner release, I had an awakening into deep Oneness that lasted for about a week. It was a kind of inner transfiguration in which all concern and anxiety, all self-consciousness, were absolutely gone. While I dwelled in that space, I knew there was nothing to fear. Nothing to achieve. Only deep acceptance. The fruits of this experience were an abiding joy and a much deeper capacity for genuine selfless love. I felt a surge of energy and an influx of grace that sustained me for months afterward.

This state of complete at-one-ment, of being-at-home with the indwelling Spirit, is what the great mystics experienced. This is also how Jesus lived during his time on earth; it's

what he called the Kingdom. But Jesus also had no illusions about how to reach this holy place in all its fullness. He knew he would have to face the ultimate sacrifice of his physical self, to descend into the valley, experience the wounds, and face the shadow—and then to own it and move through it. I believe this is what Jesus meant in the Gospel when he asked us to take up our cross and follow him on a way of radical transformation and inner resurrection. All that was dead within us will come to life once more.

As I pondered these ideas, reading and rereading the poets and mystics both ancient and modern, I realized this book is trans-religious. The message it carries is not only for Christians, though that is my personal background and my own experience is largely from Christian wisdom traditions. Instead, it is for anyone looking to access the deeper spiritual truths that are encoded in our very souls. These truths penetrate more deeply than any tribal affiliation. The pathway of freedom, wholeness, and healing is not particular to any one tradition, but universally available.

Guided by the wisdom of Dante and other ancient teachers, I invite you to take this journey. The road ahead will lead through your inner depths and wounds, to the sacrifice of the ego, and then on to fulfillment, the sacred space where you will find sacramental ways of living. It's not an easy journey. It takes courage to do soul work, to look into the abyss—the areas of your inner being you're afraid to face. I hope I can help you find the track that leads through this experience, but only you can answer the questions you'll face along the way:

What is my hell—and how do I move through it?

What is my purgatory—and what lessons do I need to learn there?

What is my paradise—and how do I get there?

The process of writing and bringing this book to publication has been like watching a flower come into bloom. If it never found a single reader, this unfurling would still have been life-giving—but the wisdom I have learned is not meant to be hoarded. Spiritual lessons, like love, are enriched in the giving, and I was granted the gift of walking the journey and mapping it so that I could in turn offer it to you.

May the Divine One who is ever present *within you* reveal new insights in the very depths of your own being as you journey through this book.

Peace and blessings,

*Marc Thomas Shaw
San Diego, May 2018*

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Opening the Gate

At the beginning of Dante's epic poem, the pilgrim wakes up lost in a dark wood, filled with a sense of dread, alone and uncertain as to how he got there. He makes his way to the edge of the dense forest, where the early morning light gives him a ray of hope that he might escape. Immediately, however, his upward way is blocked by three ferocious beasts: a spotted leopard, a ravenous lion, and a she-wolf. Despairing, he shrinks back down into the dark wood. He's still lost. This is how the story opens.

Like so many great works of myth and literature, in the beginning, the hero is lost. This is the central insight of the great writers and poets into the human condition as a whole:

We're lost. We're trying to get home.

This is where so many of us find ourselves. We hit particular points in our lives and realize we're disoriented, looking for a way out, for a sense of wholeness or fulfillment, only to find our way blocked by life circumstance, by addictive patterns, by fear.

We're lost. We're trying to get home.

Whether it's Homer's Odysseus stranded on an island, a struggling addict, or a young mother making her way through a bitter divorce, this sense of profound disorientation is a

universal experience. How do we find our way? Where does healing come from? One powerful way to read ancient myths and the work of great poets is as a map of the soul's journey home. They help teach us how to navigate our lives toward a sense of meaning, communion, and wholeness.

The Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century masterpiece the *Divine Comedy* maps out this territory through metaphor and allegory. In this epic poem, written while he was in exile, Dante gives a picture of his own spiritual journey. Drawing on his immense learning, he touches on big issues like history and empire, justice and morality, education and learning, the role of art in our lives, cosmology, and theology, all filtered through a medieval Christian imagination. Most important for our purposes, though, the poem is an account of the soul's journey toward God, the soul's journey *home*.

Dante—who is also the protagonist of the story—wakes up in the dark wood three days before Easter Sunday in the year 1300. After being confronted by the three beasts, which represent the human vices of lust, pride, and greed, Dante falls into despair. But then something unexpected happens. He experiences a grace. A guide comes to him in the form of the classical poet Virgil, the poet of discipline and virtue.

Virgil guides Dante down through nine circles of Hell, where he learns the fate of those who have died in their various sins and vices, the lustful, the wrathful, the gluttonous, and so on. The people he meets along his way include historical, biblical, and mythical figures, from Hercules and Medusa to Pope Boniface VIII. Finally, Dante sees Lucifer himself, trapped in ice at the bottom of Hell, beating his wings and gnawing forever at the three traitors of church and empire—Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot.

Having learned the lessons from his guide about the moral order at work in creation, Dante can finally leave this mythical hell. He climbs down the side of Lucifer's body, turns upside down, and comes out into the clear air. In front of him he sees the steep slope of Mount Purgatory.

On this seven-story mountain, people go through a process of purification with tasks assigned to them to correct their distorted loves and selfishness. Here, too, Dante has

lessons to learn. As he begins his climb up the mountain, an angel etches three P's into his forehead, which stand for *peccatum*, a sin or wound. At each stage of the climb, the brush of an angel's wing wipes one of the P's off the pilgrim's forehead until he is made fully clean. Finally, at the top of the mountain, Dante passes through a wall of fire and steps into the garden of Eden. His guide Virgil, who represents virtue and reason, can take him no farther.

Dante's childhood love, the beautiful and virtuous Beatrice becomes his new guide, taking him up on a journey through the ten spheres of Paradise. The highest spheres in Paradise are populated by contemplatives and mystics, who open themselves to the direct encounter with God. Finally, at the end of his journey Dante arrives at a rose of flame with Christ at the center, the faithful dispersed on the petals of the rose, angels like bees flying from soul to soul to minister. Based on a medieval imagination of the afterlife, the poem can be graphic in its depiction of suffering, but gives a moving portrait of the soul's journey toward God, the soul's journey *home*.

Most useful for us, the poem provides a framework for thinking about our spiritual lives. The spiritual path requires us to wake up, to move down through our personal hell of confusion, disorientation, and suffering, to see our own wounds. As many of the mystics recognize, we rise only through falling. To come to the land of love, we have to pass through the pains of death. We have to do the work of deep recognition. We have to confront the reality of our suffering, trace the roots of our harmful patterns, which usually grow out from our woundedness. We need to see our reality as it is and accept it. This brings about a process of maturation. Understanding our *particular* ego patterns allows us to live in freedom and to cultivate compassion more deeply with others. It allows us to be more present and aware in the world moment to moment. It allows us to go about the work of service in the world. Understanding allows us a sober assessment of our strengths and weaknesses. It recognizes areas for growth and guides us toward a clear sense of purpose.

The next stage of maturation and identifying our work in the world is like climbing Mount Purgatory, as we become more and more refined in our goals, our self-understanding, and capacity to give. Even with the best of intentions, though, we find vestiges of the ego keeping us from our full flowering. This calls for the next stage of the spiritual journey, which is like Dante's journey through the realm of Paradise. Even if we already recognize we are held in a perfect love, we continually submit ourselves to the refining process of that

love. As we engage in learning, healthy community and some form of contemplative practice, we learn to allow the Divine therapy to take place. We learn to identify more and more with Divine love, and allow our false self or ego to dissolve more and more. We cultivate a disposition of openness, acceptance, presence, and love. This is the ongoing process of inner refinement. This is the sacred journey.

But before we can start the journey we have to recognize the truth of our situation, whether we're bored, or anxious, or addicted, or depressed.

We're lost. We're trying to get home.

This is where we begin.

Theological and Historical Foundation

The spiritual journey outlined in this book harkens back to both the old myths, the ancient practice of pilgrimage, and Christian mystical theology. Whether traveling the Camino de Santiago or traveling to Graceland, we're looking for an experience of the transcendent. The outward journey is a means of inner transformation. This is a journey we take when we feel stuck, fragmented, out of touch with ourselves and with the Divine. It situates us within a larger story. It gives us insight into the nature of reality and our role in the world. There are many tributaries from the Christian tradition running into this river.

One of these tributaries is the story of Abraham, called forth by YHWH from the city of Ur to journey home to "the land that I shall show you."¹ Another is the story of Moses, wandering through the desert following the path toward the Promised Land. The Hebrew scriptures identify three festivals, Passover, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths, during which the people were collectively to return to God.² These were pilgrimage festivals during which time the people were to return to Jerusalem to offer tithes and sacrifices, to reaffirm their identity as a people under God's covenant. In each case, pilgrimage involved expanded awareness, restoration, or a return to wholeness through ritual participation in the collective myth; it reaffirmed a deeper identity beyond everyday social roles. Christ himself entered the wilderness to undergo his final preparations for ministry in

¹ Genesis 12:1

² Deuteronomy 16:16

the Gospel account. He left the everyday norms behind and entered the liminal space of transformation.³

Many biblical stories have a recurring motif of revelations on the road. God revealed himself to Jacob on the road at Bethel.⁴ Christ revealed himself to disciples on the road to Emmaus⁵ and to Paul on the road to Damascus.⁶ From the lives of the saints to the *Divine Comedy* to *Pilgrim's Progress*, the idea of pilgrimage and the image of the journey as a metaphor for the spiritual life has had a lasting hold on the imagination. *We're trying to get home.*

Yet another tributary flowing into this book and the treatment of contemplative practices as central to this journey is the tradition of mystical or *apophatic theology*. Christian tradition distinguishes between two main strands of theology: *kataphatic*, or affirming, and *apophatic*, or negative, theology. Kataphatic theology is based on concepts and images for God. It's been the dominant form of theological expression and teaching since the Enlightenment. We see it today in sermons and worship songs, as well as in theology classrooms and Bible studies and books. This theology is positive and constructive. It affirms the attributes of God and forms a conceptual basis for the spiritual life. At the same time, it organizes our understanding and situates us in relationship to God and community. It's a story we tell ourselves about who God is.

For contemplatives, though, this is only part of the picture. The spiritual life has a further dimension once we understand that our concepts, conditioning, and culture are inherently limited. We come to understand God is more than we can conceive of intellectually or put into words. Ultimately, God is Mystery, to be experienced more than to be understood. This is the beginning of negative theology, a teaching that stretches back at least to early church fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius the Areopagite, and flows through many mystics and contemplatives over the centuries. We come to see that our understanding and therefore our practices and spiritual growth are limited by our cultural context and our unconscious assumptions. Like Dante trying to climb out of the forest, through the apophatic viewpoint, we confront our own limitations.

³ For a deeper treatment of transformation and liminal or "threshold" spaces, see Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*.

⁴ Genesis 28: 10-19

⁵ Luke 24:13-32

⁶ Acts 9:3-9

But we are not trapped. Grace extends far beyond our limitations. From a contemplative, it's when we reach the end of ourselves that we are open to encounter the God who transcends the mental image we've built. Rather, we encounter the One Who Is, what the Hebrew scriptures call the I AM. We do this by entering into silence. In doing so we go beyond the mind and let go of the concepts we cling to for a little while, allowing even our subconscious to be subjected to God's transforming presence. This is where transformation takes place.

For many of us, this search usually occurs in response to a crisis of faith or a deep encounter with suffering. Some part of us is deeply threatened. The old categories, the simplistic ways of thinking about life, identity, our journey, or even our ideas about God no longer hold and we move into deeper waters. When we are here, out of our depth, a new stage of maturity in the spiritual life begins. John of the Cross called this *The Night of Sense*, when the usual consolations we cling to dry up. When we move past our certainties and concepts we move into the contemplative space.

For the Eastern monks, a common form of contemplative prayer was called *hesychasm*, which translates as stillness, rest, or silence. Based on Christ's invitation in Matthew 6:6 to "enter the inner room, close the door and pray to the Father in secret," the hesychast rests silently for a direct experience of God. This tradition of resting silently in the presence of God is carried on today in practices like contemplative prayer or *Lectio Divina*, which we will touch on in more depth later in the book. As we grow into deeper experience of these kinds of practices, we move into greater intimacy with God, more and more open to the transforming Presence.⁷

The first step as we begin this journey is to encounter the reality of suffering, to realize the stakes of the game, of what can happen when we don't go through this process of transformation: *we pass on our pain*. It will spread out from us to others, both those who are close to us, as well as those of whom we are less aware, yet whose lives we still influence. It will be our invisible inheritance to the next generation.

But we have another option. Just as Dante walks downward through the nine circles of hell, grappling with the various torments he encounters, we will walk our own journeys of

⁷ Thomas Keating. *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*. Rockport, MA: Element, 1992.

the Downward Way, entering into the darkness of our own caves, exploring both the conscious and unconscious suffering we experience in the world, in our families, and in our own lives. Equipped with this deeper self-knowledge, we then move along the Outward Way, or into the world, experiencing a newfound sense of direction and orientation, just as Dante uses his climb up Mount Purgatory as an occasion to reflect on vocation and purpose. With a deeper understanding and a clear-eyed but gracious gaze toward our own faults, we have the freedom to change our relationship to the world around us, establishing healthy rhythms of rest, of play, of work, and a greater awareness for others and how we might serve them, given our unique experiences and temperament.

Finally, just as Dante learns from the divine Beatrice and the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux as he moves toward his final vision of God, we turn our gaze upward, opening ourselves to the refining process of letting go, of deepening love, and of the transforming mystery as taught by the great mystics and contemplatives through the ages.

But to begin our journey takes a sober assessment of where so many of us are in the here and now. *We're lost. We're trying to get home.*

With the reflections and exercises in this book, I'm inviting you to enter the gateway into this journey. I want to offer you some guidance along the path, to help you get oriented and start out in the right direction. In this book, you'll find spiritual food and guidance from some of the great teachers of the perennial and Christian traditions. I'm inviting you to join me in walking Dante's Road, following in the footsteps he left behind in his account of the soul's journey.

Design

The Weekly Reading

This book is designed with the working adult in mind. Starting with the reality of where most of us are today, I've included a short weekly reading that includes an imaginative or participative section to help visualize and experience the journey of transformation by walking the steps of the mythical journey. When you come to these sections, it may help to stop, take a breath, and even close your eyes once you've read through the description to imagine yourself in that space and to experience it in as much detail as possible.

As you go through the weekly reading, go ahead and underline, circle, copy down, whatever. Consume however you consume, but the material works best if you maintain this simple weekly rhythm. Think of one twenty-minute stretch of free time you have to complete the week's reading and enter that below. Then, picture where you will most likely be during that time and write that in, too.

I will read at:
Day _____ **Start time** _____ **End time** _____

I will be in: _____

Exercises

Congratulations, you've just finished your first spiritual exercise! That is, setting aside a time for reflection and spiritual exercise. Sounds too simple to be worthwhile? Far from it. Subtle but intentional shifts can have long-lasting and far-reaching impact on our overall well-being and sense of purpose.

At the end of each weekly reading, there will be a list of optional exercises to choose from. I recommend picking at least two or three, but pick what resonates with you at the time. Different people learn differently, and I have included different types of reflection and learning experiences to go with each week's reading, including writing, experiential learning, music, art, and poetry suggestions. Since the songs listed here are from my own mental playlist, I have also provided a personal playlist worksheet at the back, in case you would like to insert your own track listing to pair with each week's main theme. Since this book is intended to be used not just once but perhaps several times, whenever the reader feels stuck over the course of their lives, it might be helpful to use the provided exercises the first time through, and provide your own songs once you have a feel for the process. Alternately, you can turn to the Appendix and fill in the songs that fit best for you with each topic. Make it work for you.

Small Group Discussion

One of the most powerful ways we experience change is in community. Talking through our experiences and reflecting out loud to others consolidates our experiences and solidifies change in our identities. Through this process, you are reflecting on your story and giving it new shape and meaning. Our stories are meant to be told!

The groups should be intimate spaces, with around three to five members, although it can be more, if the members already have a high comfort level with each other. Why so few? Because a small space is an intimate space, and what we don't want is contrived conversation. In American culture, especially among males, spaces for emotional honesty and vulnerability are very hard to come by. A small group setting with a few trusted intimates works best. Use your intuition here. If you don't have access to close confidants in your geographical area, think of a few people that you don't know well yet but with whom you feel comfortable or have a sense of possible connection. Another option in our world of global connectedness, is to get together with people over the Internet. This could even be a means of staying more closely connected with people with whom you may have fallen out of touch.

Even if you don't have the time or means to connect with a small group, I strongly recommend finding one close friend or partner with whom you can process your movement and experience verbally. This allows you to get feedback on some of your core issues from someone else's perspective as you move through this landscape. In the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, it is Ariadne who holds the guiding thread as the hero Theseus moves through the labyrinth to confront the monster. Consider who your Ariadne will be

before you begin.

Small Group Brainstorm: List up to six people you would consider starting a group with

1. _____ 3. _____

2. _____ 5. _____

3. _____ 6. _____

When and where might you be able to meet on a weekly basis?

Time _____ Place _____

With an understanding of who your travel partners will be, or whether yours will be a solitary journey, you can open the gate that leads to your journey. All you need is a sense of adventure and an openness to being transformed along the way. But first, to know where we're going, we'll need to get oriented.