

CROSSING THE WA



STEEL AND OF FAITH

Years after my dramatic, unlikely conversion
it seemed God had gone silent

BY BARBARA
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I gaze around the tiny room,
two chairs and a book shelf,

the sunlight streaming

through the windows.

Stillness is foreign to me,

a disquieting realization on this, my first day of a weeklong near-silent retreat. Susan Bowers Baker, a slip of a woman who is the spiritual director of the Jesuit Retreat Center in Wernersville, Pennsylvania, waits patiently.

I glance at my watch, then up at Susan. “Seven days,” I say. I tap my watch. Tap. Tap. Tap. “I have seven days to fix my relationship with Jesus.”

Susan laughs, and I give her a tentative grin, but when she sees my eyes welling, she falls silent.

“I think I’m having a spiritual crisis,” I confess, as a single, rebellious tear breaks free and rolls down my cheek.

For years I have been struggling with a slow-burning ennui that leaves me bored in prayer, jotting to-do lists as I sit in church, barely giving God a thought as I sprint from one story to another as a reporter for NPR. This malaise is all the more perplexing because of its historical contrast: 14 years earlier, at age 35, I had a surprising and dramatic conversion. At the time, I had thought I was past the age of surprises, and yet there I was, encountering a fellow named Jesus in the most visceral way, an experience that “strangely warmed” my heart long before I read John Wesley’s words. The honeymoon lingered for years: the rich, evocative times

of prayer, the minor and almost daily miracles, the sense that God was here, as I rode in a taxi or pulled out my notepad for an interview.

Now, as I sit in that chair in Susan’s spartan office, pausing for a moment in my frenetic life, I feel the silence of an empty soul. It seems to me that God has left the building.

When I was researching my most recent book, *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife*, I discovered surprising parallels between the spiritual journey and the psychological journey, particularly in the middle phase. The stereotypical midlife crisis—that existential fear of dying before you can realize your dreams, prompting the acquisition of a sporty convertible or trophy spouse—is rare. Psychologists say only 10 percent of people in midlife (roughly ages 40 to 65) suffer that crippling angst. The same, I believe, is true of spiritual crises: Having covered religion for NPR for a decade, I found that relatively few people jettison their faith and take up the banner of atheism.

But if midlife crisis is rare, midlife ennui—for

the mind as well as the soul—is almost universal. For the past 20 years, economists have surveyed people around the world and found that virtually everyone suffers a dip in happiness in middle age. Americans hit their nadir at roughly 45. Why? Our 40s and 50s bring unrelenting responsibilities: kids, aging parents, work, mortgages, college tuition. We sense that the pulse of life has slowed, the path grown more arduous, our options inexorably narrowed. The good news is that people generally grow more contented after their mid-50s, in a phenomenon called the “U-curve of happiness.”

My observation is that the spiritual journey follows a similar curve: from a dramatic honeymoon to a sepia middle passage to a centered, seasoned faith. Mid-faith ennui is not tied to chronological age but to spiritual maturity. If you have striven to know God for a decade or more, you are almost certain to cross a spiritual wasteland, which ranges from dryness and boredom to agony and abandonment.

Spiritual ennui is the crazy uncle of church life, an embarrassment rarely mentioned in the company of believers. In my search to understand and fix my own ennui, I talked with pastors and laypeople, theologians and spiritual writers, and fellow congregants in my own Restoration Anglican Church in Arlington, Virginia.

Drew Bond, a 46-year-old church vestry member, told me he sometimes stands in front of his bookshelf, hoping that one of those Christian books holds the cure for his spiritual flatness. “I open my Bible and I look at the verses that I highlighted or underlined, and I’m like, *Yep, read that. Read that before. Check. Check.* It just feels dead. I think: *Do I need to jump off a cliff for a Jesus moment?*”

We laugh in mutual recognition. The question is: Why does this happen?

Bruce Demarest, professor of spiritual formation at Denver Seminary and author of *Seasons of the Soul*, told me that some spiritual aridity is self-inflicted: We harbor unconfessed sins, we are seduced by the world and adopt its values, and we rush around too busy for God. Even a signature strength of adulthood—the competence and independence we develop by midlife—can lead to a lukewarm spirit. “You don’t need God for anything, huh?” a friend observed when I was complaining about my parched prayer life. “Your marriage is fine; your work is fine; your life is fine. What do you need God for?”

But let’s say you have not built a wall of sin or indifference between yourself and God, and still you feel no intimacy in prayer or flashes of inspiration. As 16th-century mystic John of the Cross observed, this dryness is for our own growth, an act of divine love. The psalmist knew that we thirst for

God only when we are parched (Pss. 42; 51; 143). We live on “the circumference of life,” says Demarest, “and God wants us to move from exterior things, external things, down to the depths of the heart.”

A few hours after confessing my anguish to Susan that warm September day, I lay down in the grass in the shadow of the Jesuit monastery, exhausted. I might have dozed. Suddenly it felt as if stones and rocks were falling all around me; the crash was deafening, then, silence. I tried to move but was pinned down. The thought arose: The House of Barb I had so carefully built over the years—containing my identity as a Christian, a wife and stepmother, an NPR reporter, a long-distance runner—had collapsed.

Soon I heard footsteps, off in the distance, then closer until they stopped above me. He began lifting off the stones and throwing them to the side. Slivers of light pierced the dark, and a voice, still faint, called out: *Hang on, Barb! I’m coming!* He frantically pulled off the debris, the weight of my doubts and betrayals being flung away, my compromises and cowardice, my successes and failures, my crushing need for approval, stone by stone, sin by sin, each painful memory wrenched off me. I saw hands, bloodied from the effort to free me; I heard a voice, ragged with exhaustion: *I’m here, hold on, I’ve got you.* I felt myself being lifted, limp as a ragdoll. He pulled me to my feet and held me. I was bruised and bloody and safe, a lost coin, lost sheep, lost girl.

It may have been a dream. Whatever it was, those moments lying on the grass at Wernersville ignited something akin to a second conversion. I powered along for months on the strength of that vision. Over the next seven years, I traveled through long stretches of spiritual flatness broken by small valleys of despair and peaks of inspired prayer and gratitude. During this time, I grasped another truth: I had to stop living for epiphanies and break my addiction to spiritual consolation—a palpable experience of God’s presence, one that draws us to him and others in love. Just as in marriage, there is something better than the honeymoon.

One day I was complaining about my spiritual flatness to writer Ronald Rolheiser, whose book *Sacred Fire* describes the mid-faith journey.

“I try another Bible study, I start another journal, I read a new book—nothing works,” I lamented. “I just can’t gin up my old enthusiasm.”

“You know why you can’t get it back?” Rolheiser asked, laughing. “Because you had it! It’s the same

reason why you can't get your teenage years back. You lived through them. That's the constant temptation. Doing the same thing is not going to work anymore because it has already done its work."

"I notice that often people want second and third and fourth conversions," I said.

"They want that feeling back," he replied. "That's also why a lot of people divorce and marry again. They want another honeymoon." Again, the near-erotic language of longing found in the Psalms suggests that this is an old temptation.

Rolheiser's comments also recall findings from the science of long-term marriage. The brains of couples in happy, 20-year marriages light up in the areas associated with reward, just as much as the brains of people who have just fallen in love.

Rather, within the bounds of ordinary days—whether figuring out carpool duty with your spouse, catching up on email, or kneeling before God—you can do small things that will bring a zing back into the most important relationships in life.

A few years ago, I took Jim's advice and began praying imaginatively, putting myself into the Gospel stories. When imaginative prayer became routine, I tried out guided meditation (I found an app called "Pray as you go"), then contemplative prayer (a disaster). I read spiritual classics and kept a journal.

Here I find Paul's parallels between the spiritual training of a Christian and the physical training of an athlete (1 Tim. 4:7–9; 1 Cor. 9:25) particularly helpful. Any endeavor—a hobby, a vocational skill—

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But there's a big difference: The brains of those in long marriages also light up in areas involving attachment; not so with the brains of the recently besotted. Instead, those lovesick brains surged in areas associated with anxiousness.

In other words, the day-in-day-out marital relationship brought joy without the frantic anxiousness. This also seems to describe people who have long walked with God. How do they do it? One finding is that couples who survive 20 years use plural pronouns: *we* and *us*. The unhappy couples, often heading for divorce, say *I* and *me*. Perhaps approaching God the same way—life as a joint endeavor, God and me, God working with and through me—holds a secret to spiritual joy as well.

The science of marriage offers another insight into reconnecting with Christ long after the honeymoon is over. Researchers at Stony Brook University in New York discovered that long-term couples who injected some novelty into their routines—going for a hike or taking a dance class instead of the usual dinner and a movie—became much happier with their marriage and their partner. Why? The brain craves novelty.

I was reminded of this when James Martin, today's best-known Jesuit and author of *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything*, told me how he counsels people suffering through a spiritual slump.

"Shake up your prayer routine," he says. "If you've been reading the Gospels, read the Psalms. If you've been praying in the morning, pray at night. Read a new spiritual author. Pray with music. Go outside and pray with nature."

James is not suggesting a squishy prayer life.

demands intention and variation. For example, when I began competitive cycling at age 54, I found I had to alternate between intervals, long rides, and hill workouts. Only this variation moved me beyond my natural talent. So, too, with variations in spiritual exercise.

Ian, a leader at and member of our church, tried several ways to overcome his own mid-faith ennui: Bible studies, books, even taking an intensive Christian discipleship course. Nothing worked. Maybe, he thought, he needed to adopt a spiritual discipline. Ian put the question to our pastor, David Hanke. David paused, then asked Ian how he enjoyed his relationship with his wife, Laura.

"We do things together," recalled Ian (who asked that his full name not be used due to the sensitivity of his work). "We remodeled a cabin together. We go to Nats [baseball] games. We work together. Our relationship is based around shared activity."

As Ian recalled it, David said, "Perhaps the way you relate best to Laura is the way you relate best to God."

Ian, who had started a nonprofit, realized that he saw God's fingerprints everywhere in his work: in the research, the missions accomplished, even in the fundraising. He added that his wife, a landscape designer, connects with God when her hands are in the dirt or she is gazing in wonder as the trees in their backyard sway in the wind.

This resonated with me. Two decades ago, I discovered Christ while writing a magazine article

about fast-growing churches, as I asked questions, listened to people's stories, and crafted a narrative—in other words, as I did what I do best. Often we believe we have to enter the closet to meet God, when in fact, he's already walked through the front door and is sitting at our desk firing up the laptop. He uses our strengths and passions to dissipate our dark night.

Carolyn Weimer gave her life to Jesus when she was four years old. But only twice in her 43 years has she felt God work in a supernatural way. She encountered the first "signpost" when she was down to her last few dollars in college and someone, anonymously, left an envelope with \$100 on her door. The second encounter happened two decades later, when she prayed about work and

But what if you invest in small groups and mix up your prayer routine and hunt for God's fingerprints in your work or hobbies and, after all that, you are still idling in neutral? The question haunted me. I turned to Elizabeth Fitch, my friend who is a trained spiritual director. Recently, Elizabeth had been plagued by something far worse than ennui: She was suffering from painful neurological symptoms that the doctors could not diagnose. She was left bedridden and was frightened—until she settled in her mind that God was in this "hellacious" pain as well.

"We want to feel good. But who knows. Maybe as I'm dealing with this illness, God is changing the terrain of my soul in a way he couldn't have if I were healthy," she says.

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the circumstances unfolded just as she had prayed.

"Most of my faith journey has been pretty dry," she told me, "I knew what I should believe. I've got the facts down. I've memorized huge swaths of Scripture. You know in your head what you think you believe, but you don't really see the evidence of it around you."

"Why did you continue?" I asked her. Here she made the best argument for Christian community I have yet heard. Every few months, she and her husband join a small group connected to her church (where small groups start anew three times a year). She noted that two signposts in 43 years may seem paltry.

"But then you think about being in a small group with 10 others, and maybe they have one or two signposts," she said. "You put those together, and there are a lot of signposts. The faith journey is not an alone thing. It is your own faith journey, but you have to work it out in community in order to see God at work consistently."

Both Scripture and new scientific research confirm this insight: Loneliness kills; friendship saves. Epidemiological studies show that isolation makes you more likely to be depressed or suffer a stroke or heart attack; it's the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Meanwhile, friends boost your immune system, help you stave off all manner of disease, and could extend your life. We are starting to learn why: As friends and communities help you navigate your problems and make you laugh, they literally alter your physiology. Why wouldn't God also use this system of friendship to help you navigate the valley of spiritual malaise?

The same is true of our aching feeling that God is absent.

"We keep referring to dryness as something we have to get out of. I'm not sure it is," Elizabeth says. "It's the American way: 'How do I fix this? Tell me what to do about this.' Maybe the answer is nothing. Maybe the answer is to keep your arms wide open."

Elizabeth's words recalled my conversation with Drew Bond, the fellow churchgoer who had experienced years of spiritual flatness. Why not just give up, I asked him?

"Give up on the faith journey of following Jesus?" he asked. "That would be a worse disaster. I did that in college, and it didn't work out so well."

Jesus' disciples said much the same thing. After many of his followers had left him, he asked his close friends if they were going to abandon him as well. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Peter responded. "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

"We just forget," Drew said. "Like the Israelites: One of the biggest mistakes they made is they forgot what captivity was like. So they complained about the bread, they complained about the desert, they complained about God giving them water from a rock, and they wanted to go back to captivity."

He paused, took a breath, and smiled.

"I don't want to go back to captivity."

CT

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