



A Spiritual Autobiography
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It's not an uncommon question around Christians, "When did you become one?" Most of the time I reply, "Well, you tell me. I prayed a prayer I don't remember when I was 4 years old and accepted Jesus into my life. When I was 17, I realized deeply for the first time that there actually was a God and more to God than simply my parents' religion. When I was 20, I learned I was a sinner, actually. When I was 23, I learned that God wasn't lucky to have me on his team. And when I was 25, I learned that God loves me, actually. When I was 26, I gave my life to God utterly, and when I was 31, I gave my life to God utterly, again." And all this against the backdrop of being "chosen before the foundation of the world." (Eph 1.4)

Before a speaking engagement a couple of weeks ago, I was asked how I wanted to be introduced, and I said, "Really... no, really... nothing more than what Paul said in 1 Timothy 1.15, 'among sinners I am the foremost.'" And I meant it.

What I know is that God saved me and has saved me, and it has nothing to do with me and everything to do with his grace, and that I don't deserve it, and that I have found and keep growing into the wonder and glory that is Jesus Christ and will endeavor to do so as long as I breathe and with all my might, for his glory, my joy, the Kingdom of God, the salvation of others, and their formation.

*What I know echoes John in the desert, with a shout,
"He must increase, but I must decrease." (Jn 3.30)*

*What I know echoes Mary, with a whisper,
"Be it done to me according to thy word." (Lk 1.38)*

*What I know echoes St. Paul, with an awe that transcends words,
"It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2.20)*



Who chooses where they were born? And to whom? I'm so grateful to have been born into a strong Christian family, with parents who loved Jesus deeply and loved us as best as they knew how, and grew up for the most part in Wheaton, Illinois. While there are many ways that my faith has grown beyond that of my somewhat fundamentalist upbringing, what got deeply rooted in those formational years was a deep knowledge, and trust, of the Scriptures, an inability to escape the unique divinity of Jesus, and the stability that comes from knowing your parents' love.

High school in Wheaton was marked by great friendships, increasingly intense spiritual experiences, greater familiarity with my own sin, and a beginning love of being outdoors.

College in Minnesota continued that course and contained those elements, now with the marked addition of several key mentors and even deeper friendships which remain to this day, greater opportunity to encounter God deeply in solitude in nature that could kill you, a profoundly formative church experience, and singing sacred music in the choir which formed me more than I could have ever known. That enabled my first airplane ride in 1989, singing songs of God across the Soviet Union while it still was that, an experience (including visiting Auschwitz) that really shaped me on deep levels. It was in college that I fell in love with, and was affirmed in, and was pointed towards Christian ministry.

And so it was off to seminary on the north shore of Boston, and again deep friendships, and now even deeper mentors, and more beauty, hard hard study and very intense academics, and deepening my personal relationship and devotion to Jesus. It was here I discovered Jonathan Edwards resolution #6, "Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live."

And it was here that I discovered the city, and God's heart and vision for not only the city, but for the whole world, and **it felt like half of the Bible was opened up to me for the first time**. To that point my prayer, as a nature boy, had never been "God, don't send me to Africa." It was, "God, don't send me to the city!" I decided to make sure he wasn't by doing an 8-month urban internship back at my home church of Bethlehem Baptist in Minnesota. But instead, God lit my heart for

the city and its suburban parallels– to see the grace of God and the power of Jesus come to the places of great brokenness, to see the Kingdom come in places and to people who desperately need it, to see all that is compelling about Revelation’s vision of heaven happen on earth—and I was hooked. But the direction wasn’t clear, and my denominational affiliation less so.

No matter, those decisions could be delayed, for when I finished seminary I was awarded a post-graduate fellowship to do anything in the world that would make me a better preacher, literally anything. I chose to take a 16-month trip around the world– just me and my Father who loved me (I was beginning to learn) and was with me– and do things I’d always wanted to do, under the auspices of studying and experiencing Christian community, ministry to young adults, and ministry in inner-cities. It turned into working with heroin addicts in Amsterdam and homeless people in London, studying the Bible for two months in Israel, spending much time at L’Abri in Switzerland and South Korea, traveling overground and alone across India and then a month volunteering in the Home for the Dying at the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta with Mother Teresa, assisting with missionaries in Bangkok sharing the Gospel, working with lepers and church leaders in Nepal, and giving my life to God– really and again– at the top of a Himalayan mountain. And much more.

My life is unrecognizable without this global pilgrimage. It exposed me to poverty like I never knew existed and its extent, the ancientness and breadth and unity of the Christian tradition, the sacramental life, living when God is your only source, introduced me to people who opened up faith for me that I didn’t realize was possible, and led me to the deep deep conclusion that Jesus is not only true, he is uniquely true, and that, for real, Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. And I came back with the deep conviction that God loved me, and is always with me, is absolutely trustworthy, and that Christianity is true, against all other options, intellectually and spiritually.

By the end of that journey, having seen so much, I knew with crystal clarity what kind of Christian tradition I wanted to be in, I just didn’t know if it existed. I wanted to be in a Christian tradition (in some contrast to my upbringing) that:

- Upheld the authority of Scripture and submitted to it and
- Recognized the value of beauty in worship and
- Was open to mystery and
- Would allow me to ask real questions without being looked at with suspicion and
- Really believed that the church existed before 1517 and
- Would allow me to connect with and even submit to Christians in the majority world and
- Would allow me to be passionate about justice precisely because of the whole Bible.

I just described Anglicanism, though I didn't know it then.

But within a couple of months after returning to the United States, through a series of miraculous events, God led me like a laser beam to The Falls Church Episcopal outside of Washington, DC in 1996. I literally had never been in an Episcopal church before the first time I walked in and met John Yates. The way we'd been led together was clearly God, and our hearts were strangely knit together. From that very beginning, there was a strange sense of "what God has joined together..." until God would lead us apart. Two weeks later, I was hired as the Director of Outreach and Young Adult Ministry.

To create and lead and grow and pastor a community of young adults around the values of community, outreach, worship, and service— essentially a pastor of a church within a church— for six years remains a highlight of my ministry, as does the opportunity to take a church like The Falls Church and inspire and lead a beautiful congregation to the inner-city and around the world and into our local community in service. The Lord taught me so much, and knocked some edges off my arrogance and grew me in experience in the context of a loving community and leaders who believed me and tolerated me. **All is grace.**

Ordination to the priesthood would come later, but it would come, though it would take almost ten years. It can take a while for a Baptist to feel OK wearing robes and a collar, and even longer to submit, at least in my case! But when that time I came, I was ready and wanting, for four main reasons:

1. *I was ready to take up my role in the long history of God's church and serve her,*
2. *I wanted to dive as deeply into the Sacraments— and especially the Eucharist— as I could, and lead others to do the same,*
3. *It was very important to me personally to have one person on earth I would have to submit to, i.e. a bishop, and*
4. *Very simply and most importantly, I was called to it, unmistakably. I had to be obedient, and came to want it.*

So in 2005, I was ordained, in a way that clearly signaled my allegiance to orthodox Anglicanism, and more importantly, allegiance to Jesus Christ and his church and the Scripture.

More importantly in this season, though, I met and married Tara, in 2000 in a span of five months, another story fraught with miracle and the undeniability of God. We would go on to have, and do have, four children— Liam, Iona, Karis, and Maira. **Tara is my home**, my love, my shelter, my friend, my partner, a deep source of grace to me, my fellow risk-taker, an amazing woman in her own regard. No spiritual autobiography of me would be complete without Tara, God's greatest grace to me behind Jesus himself. I don't know what she's doing with me, but I'm so glad she is. We've been through good times of course, great times even, and also struggle and pain, loss and challenge and confusions along the way, and thus far have made it, and are stronger for it. There is no doubt that 17 years in, our marriage is as deep as it's ever been, and somehow the sweetness of it only seems to be deepening.

Because her adult life was formed by the realities of the world as mine had been already, we took a year together to minister around the world, this time in majority-world mega-cities, ministering to street kids and abandoned women in places like Lima, La Paz, Nairobi, Calcutta, Kathmandu, and others.

Tara and I came back wanting to give our lives to our deepest desire— seeing Jesus and his Kingdom come to the hurting, while in community with others. And we set off to plant a daughter church of The Falls Church that would come to be called St. Brendan's in the City in NE Washington, DC. St. Brendan's

would come to grow into– and still is– a beautiful and powerful witness to the presence of Christ.

Its earliest iteration, however, would be the source of my greatest personal disappointment and death of vision and death of self. But the fruit of that hard season would become a new commitment to personal discipleship to Christ and his teachings, and also one of my deepest and most treasured insights I’ve gained thus far, that **“God can do far more through us than we can for him.”** For all the good that it did for others– and I’m grateful so much good happened– this season represented for me personally an incalculably important season of the death of self, humbling, insights into the spiritual life I would have never gained otherwise and which have fired my life ever since, and ultimately utter submission to God, as best as I can. I wouldn’t trade this season for anything, though I would have never chosen it.

In that season I also responded to the call to become trained as a spiritual director and have been one since.

After 5 years of being Rector of St. Brendan’s, God surprised us by leading us to purchase a small farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and move there. It was almost as if God was saying, “Thank you, Bill, for your heart for the city and your efforts, but I know you and know where you and your family will thrive for your sake and the sake of others... create a place where people can encounter Me in the solace of nature.” And we did, and named it **Corhaven, “rest for the heart.”**

This enabled me to do two things: 1) to return to The Falls Church in 2009 as the Associate Rector and come back alongside John Yates and assist him in more strategic partnership than ever before, to return to this special spiritual family and rekindle important relationships and pastor there; 2) this move also enabled us to start the ministry of Coracle, a ministry of **“spiritual formation for Kingdom action,”** a structural repository for all that Tara and I are and all that we have to offer. Coracle incarnates our convictions. We do this so that others can live into who they in fact are, thrive, and offer themselves fully as well.

Looking back and over it all, today as I write, I bear witness. My spiritual autobiography leads me to bear witness to this...

God can do more through us than we can do for him.
God is ALWAYS present, always loving, always aware.
God is fundamentally Love, it's his nature, his orientation, and is true.
Our lives are his, and he knows best how to use us, and he is good.
The Kingdom of God is better than anything, and worth giving everything for.
Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of the Universe.
The spiritual life only goes deeper, if you're willing to go there.
This life can be very good, the next life is infinitely better, and worth orienting on.
Life with God is not only pilgrimage and journey, it is adventure, and thrilling.

There is no doubt more to say.....

Sometime in the early 2000s, I had occasion to write a poetic reflection on my life, and I finished with this, which I still stand by:

*Beauty has come into the room, Joy has swirled all around.
Love has been poured out, Wonder runs about unfettered.
In the heaven, the Great Dance; On earth, the Sacred Romance;
Longing is satisfied in Mystery; And all things move towards Glory.*

Rev. Bill Haley
AD 2017

[Influences along the way: In a spiritual autobiography, I'd be remiss if I didn't offer some thanks to those who have deeply shaped me intellectually and spiritually including but not limited to and in no order: Fr. James Orthmann, John Piper, NT Wright, CS Lewis, JRR Tolkien, Mother Teresa, Walter Cizek, Annie Dillard, Martin Luther King Jr, Jonathan Edwards, John Donne, John Perkins, Dallas Willard, John Yates, John Paul II, Tara Scherer Haley, Henri Nouwen, Gordon Cosby, Michael D. O'Brien, Scott Gibson, Johann Sebastian Bach, Bono, and Bruce Cockburn....there are others.]