

## EXCERPT



### ***The Way Up Is Down*** *Becoming Yourself by Forgetting Yourself*

July 14, 2020 | \$22, 192 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4674-0

For writer, pastor, and activist Marlena Graves, formation and justice always intertwine on the path to a balanced life of both action and contemplation. Drawing on the rich traditions of Eastern and Western Christian saints, she describes the process of emptying herself that allows her to move upward toward God and become the true self that God calls her to.

## **“I despaired over the hand I was dealt.”**

None of us knows what we don't know unless our eyes are opened. My first revelation was the cafeteria lunch ticket. It was on display for all to see when I handed it to the lunch lady. No way to be discrete. Its bright color marked me as eligible for a free lunch.

Sometimes sheer embarrassment over being known as poor kept me from eating lunch. My free lunch ticket: a stigma. Of course, if I were really hungry and knew I'd return home to an empty refrigerator when I stepped off of the school bus, I swallowed my pride and presented the lunch ticket.

Upon returning from Puerto Rico in fifth grade, someone derogatorily asked, “Are you black?” Until then, I didn't know I looked different from others. Now, as a bleached out biracial Puerto Rican, I am *blanquita*. Then, I was darker. As a child and teenager, I didn't know I had an accent until my best friend's mother told me I did. Now, I am told I have no accent.

However, it was as an employee at a Christian college that I became acutely aware of the economic, cultural, and racial disparity in my environments. It was at the Christian college that I learned how underprivileged I was.

After Brenda Salter-McNeil, a thought leader in the area of racial reconciliation, led a large room full of people in an activity dubbed the “Race Race,” everything made sense. The starting line was masking tape laid down across the middle of an all-purpose classroom. Dr. Salter-McNeil asked a series of questions like: Did you go to summer camps? Did your parents attend college? Did you qualify for free and reduced lunches? Are you a woman? and Are you an ethnic minority? Our answers determined whether we took steps forward or backwards.

At the end of fifty questions, I was at the back of the room with one of my best friends, an African American woman. Almost dead last. Way behind the starting line, not to mention the finish line.

When everyone turned to see who was last, I stood there humiliated. This time my answers to the questions, not my lunch ticket, exposed me as a *have not*. Until then I had no idea how underprivileged I was. I thought I was doing well. However, even though my ethnicity, gender, and economic status of my family of origin were not under my control, they affected everything. I can't escape the facts of my life even with lunch money and a refrigerator full of groceries. I was born into last place or nearly last place. Even with the privileges I have now, I'll never be able to catch up with those who started ahead of me. That day, I discovered that even with my education and ability to think, fundamentally, I was still on society's and the American church's bottom of the pecking-order. I was a bottom dweller.

Growing up and even into my adulthood, I despaired over the hand I was dealt. I often begged God to explain why the cards were stacked against me as a Hispanic-Latina woman born into a poor family that was plagued by the effects of mental illness. I used to despair a lot, but not as much anymore. Yes, there are instances like the hotel room.



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**Marlena Graves** is a writer and adjunct professor. Marlena holds an MDiv from Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, New York, and is a graduate of the Renovaré Institute. She has been a bylined writer for *Christianity Today*, *(in)courage*, *womenleaders.com*, and *Our Daily Bread*, and she is also the author of *A Beautiful Disaster*. She lives with her husband and three daughters in Toledo, Ohio.

Though I am haunted by the effects of generational poverty, though I may have been born on the lowest rung in America, in many ways I am rich.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:3 (KJV). People like me and my kind may be deemed poor and stupid and not worthy of a second glance. Animals. Not worthy to be anybody’s teacher. But if your poverty and my poverty and deprivation (whatever form poverty takes in our lives) produce in us poverty of spirit, if our humiliations produce in us humility and dependence on God, then we shall be exalted now—in our lives with God—and in the life to come.

When I remember what is true, instead of obsessing about nontruth or the hierarchies and idols associated with money, power, and fame, I can rejoice.

I am bidding farewell to worldly status. Along with Mary and Jesus, I am throwing my lot in with others who by the world’s standards are disinherited and found at the bottom of all the hierarchies. Because I’ve found that God turns our hierarchies and our worldly values on their heads. It is only in our poverty and our intentional renunciation of worldly status seeking—in emptying ourselves of those ambitions—that we are ever open to being filled to the brim with grace. We cannot become full of God’s life when we are chasing status, recognition, and honor from the world or the Christian culture—that only leads us to outer darkness. Like Jesus, we are to seek the lowest place and figure out exactly what that means for our particular lives. So, with Mary I marvel and sing:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.  
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:46-53 ESV)*

If we humble ourselves by seeking the lowest place, we will be exalted. God will fill those of us who are hungry and empty and poor with good things as we look to him to feed us and fill us.

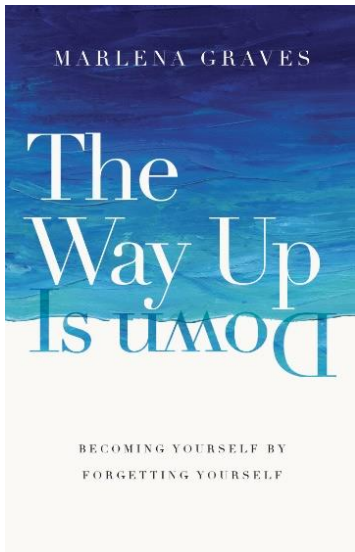
—Adapted from chapter two, “Down Low with Jesus”



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## ENDORSEMENTS



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## **“The Way Up Is Down will reset your moral compass.”**

“I know of no one who cares less for the superficial ‘worries of this life’ (Mt 13:22) than Marlena Graves. She is a voice calling out in our generation, beckoning us to a vision of Christ that has nearly been drowned out by the rise of self-help pseudo-Christianity. And this book? This book is her heart on paper. If you want to sit under a spiritual giant, and if you want to remember just what kind of freedom we are called to in Christ, do not miss this message.”

—Sharon Hodde Miller, author of *Nice: Why We Love to Be Liked and How God Calls Us to More*

“It is a rare and sacred gift for a writer to serve her raw heart—tender and salted with tears—to nourish the world. *The Way Up Is Down* is a profound act of Christlike service. Honest, poignant, and lyrical, this is a book that shows what it tells. It’s unforgettable, incisive, and deeply needed.”

—Paul J. Pastor, author of *The Face of the Deep*, *The Listening Day*, and *Palau: A Life on Fire*

“When conversations about discipleship or living into the kingdom of God seem heady and out of reach, I turn to writers like Marlena whose feet are firmly on the ground. She gives us a path to walk and practices to embody our big hopes and dreams about the upside-down ways of Jesus. If you’ve ever wondered how the last will be first (and what that even means for someone with privilege), Marlena is a faithful companion and guide to you. She is bold and pastoral—a rare combination—and best of all, she is the real deal. She has never lost sight of the people for whom this gospel is such good news, and in her words there is an invitation for all of us.”

—Sarah Bessey, author of *Miracles and Other Reasonable Things* and *Jesus Feminist*

“In an age marked by the idols of power, wealth, and prestige—in the church no less than in the culture—comes a quiet voice to remind us that God gives grace to the humble, and the meek will inherit the earth. Marlena Graves doesn’t just write about these biblical truths—she lives them. *The Way Up Is Down* will reset your moral compass, clear your vision of the cultural dust, and direct you back to the only one who can make your paths straight.”

—Karen Swallow Prior, author of *On Reading Well* and *Fierce Convictions*

“Marlena Graves’s *The Way Up Is Down* is a tour de force. Crackling with the electricity of Spirit, witty, tender, wise, vulnerable, gorgeously written—it’s futuristic in what it brings together. Yet we read it with the deep knowing that ancient truths are being cracked open here. Both theologically robust and pulsing with life, alternately humble and deeply challenging, this is the kind of fresh, bold, prophetic, and pastoral witness we desperately need right now. The truth of the downward path of Jesus—his way of descent—is articulated with revelatory clarity.”

—Jonathan Martin, author of *How to Survive a Shipwreck*, pastor of the Table in Oklahoma City



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