

PREFACE

In the late 1980s, I started giving lectures and workshops on prayer and the spiritual life. Though they were well received, it quickly became evident that the majority of people did not fully appreciate the images and language that were often bound to a different time, place, culture and theology. Some people found the teachings of the mystics old-fashioned, while others thought they catered to people living behind monastery walls, who did not have the daily challenge of raising children or working a nine-to-five job. In hindsight, the majority were right. We needed a contemporary way to talk about the spiritual insights of the past.

Before leaving for missionary activity in mainland China, I attended a ten-day centering prayer workshop under Abbot Thomas Keating at the Trappist monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. That experience planted seeds that would grow during my eleven and a half years in China. Those who know Keating's approach to the spiritual life will recognize his strong influence on my understanding of spiritual formation.

Soon after my return to the United States in early 2004, I was asked to give a workshop on the spiritual life at Quincy University

in Quincy, Illinois. This time I was intent on making the riches of the Christian spiritual tradition more accessible to the participants. That request gave rise to “Like the Air We Breathe: An Approach to the Spiritual Life,” a workshop I have since presented to hundreds of clergy, religious sisters and laity. Thanks to the encouragement of those participants and the kind offer of InterVarsity Press, I am now honored to present the content of that workshop in written form to a wider audience.

Coming Home to Your True Self uses a line once preached by Meister Eckhart, the great Dominican mystic of the fourteenth century, as an interpretive key to Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32). “God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk.” Combined with my understanding of the true self and the false self, it presents the spiritual journey as a return home. And home is the sacrament of the present moment. It is only in living right now, right here, that we discover our lives and this world awash in the grace of God. We can actually be loading the dishwasher or sitting in a board meeting and still experience what the great spiritual mystics discovered behind monastery walls.

The key points of this book are summarized in outline form in appendix C. After reading this book, a periodic review of this appendix can help keep the ideas alive and the challenges ongoing. Spiritual formation requires a daily and seasonal commitment.

A quick glance at the contents page and the appendix reveals that we are invited to a homecoming. We have lost our true selves and have gone on a wild-goose chase after false attractions that drive us into a pigpen in a foreign land. We need to come back home and be the people God created us to be.

This book, in discussing how guilt, prayer, penance, discernment, spiritual direction and the process of spiritual growth can

help us get back home, offers a contemporary approach to spiritual formation that translates the revered teachings of the past into the language of the twenty-first century. The questions at the end of each chapter are intended for personal reflection or interaction with a spiritual director or other spiritual friend. If you want to use the book with a group, you may want to adapt them to fit your needs.

You will meet many people in these pages whose names and personal details have been changed. Each has graciously agreed to allow me to share the story of God's grace in his or her life.

Heartfelt thanks to the staff of Mayslake Ministries in Westmont, Illinois, for tolerating all my monkeyshines, encouraging my ideas and giving me a place to hang my friar's hood. It's a real joy to collaborate with people who are committed to adult spiritual formation, the ancient practice of spiritual direction and the challenge of preaching the Word of God in and out of season.

I am grateful to the Franciscan friars of the Sacred Heart Province, living and deceased, as well as former friars, who have challenged me and loved me to this present moment in my life. The present moment is sacramental not only because of the love I find here but also because of the love that gets me here.

What can I say about my eldest sister, Bridget Haase, O.S.U., to whom this book is dedicated? She never winces when I ask her to read my gobbledygook. And I chuckle as she reminds me that English is, in fact, my first language. Sometimes, while writing, I forget that.

I am humbled by the generous foreword written by Dr. M. Robert Mulholland Jr. I heartily recommend his wonderful book *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*.

Special thanks to Fr. John Breslin, Deacon Bruce McElrath and

the entire congregation of St. Ailbe Catholic Church, Chicago. Located at the corner of Ninety-First Street and Stony Island Avenue, it's a place where "you can be whoever you want to be," as the pastor is fond of saying. But don't miss the point: anyone and everyone is welcomed. St. Ailbe's is truly a place that reflects the open arms of our loving God.

Thanks as well to LaVonne Neff, who read the original manuscript and offered helpful suggestions for the book's improvement.

And finally, I would like to thank Marilyn Stewart, a member of the board of directors of Mayslake Ministries, and Cindy Bunch, senior book editor at InterVarsity Press. They are the ones who initially thought that the words of a Franciscan priest might be helpful to another audience.

It is my prayer that all of us never grow weary of trying to come home to the sacrament of the present moment. For in the end, there's nowhere else to go. And more importantly, there is, in fact, nowhere else to be.

Albert Haase, O.F.M.

Feast of the Annunciation