

Chapter 1

Excuse Me, You're Stepping on My God

For some reason, I felt like getting up. This isn't my typical early-Sunday feeling but that morning instead of bringing in the plump newspaper for a browse, I entered our dark family room, located the remote, and turned on the TV. During the first seven seconds, only sound emerged. A man was speaking - shouting, actually. His voice rose and fell as the screen's thousands of red, blue, and yellow pixels summoned the image of a televangelist

Never before had I actually watched this show. The speaker paced the platform like a caged cat in a sleek blue suit, stalking and prancing, rumbling and wooing. With majestic emotion he told how "government and the media" collaborate in one evil conspiracy. He equated God's interests with America's interests, knew precisely God's plans and desires - the most intricate, God-smudged blueprints, the throbbing heart of life's great pulse - and claimed that everything happens "according to God's will." He carried God in his pocket.

At first I was merely amazed by the vastness of his narrowness. Slowly, though, my anger began to bubble. The sermon crawled with glittering generalities and yawning inaccuracies, quotations ripped from their context, opposing views clustered and characterized in the vilest light. Was his cause so good that he could behave so badly?

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Following a crescendo summary, the preacher delivered an eyes-scrunched prayer that seemed directed toward the viewing audience. A moment after the “Amen,” numbers galloped across the screen: “Call 1-800...” Send money to “this address” to receive your “free gift” Visa, Discover, and MasterCard logos appeared. An announcer with a voice like dark syrup supplied details. The speaker returned to personally urge viewers to “give abundantly and be blessed abundantly.” In conclusion, he looked out and with polished sincerity appealed that “the Lord would come right now into your heart.”

It was at this point that a surprising conviction hit me. Even if you’re right about what you’re saying, even if everything you say is true, I thought, I don’t want it.

I flicked off the set. The screen flashed and spat black.

Colors.

As I sit in darkness in Griffith Park Planetarium in Los Angeles, that’s what stuns me first. Kaleidoscopic magentas. Cool blues. Flaming oranges and stark whites. Jade and aqua, crimson and candlelight, dazzling colors wash in gauzy waves across the canvas of the universe.

Numbers.

More than 100 billion galaxies spiral in the void. The sky is thick with light, like dipping a toothbrush in white paint and thumbing the bristles over black velvet. Hold out a dime at arm’s length: the coin covers 15 million stars in our Milky Way alone.

Some scientists estimate that a sun explodes with each tick of the clock. Infant stars, wrapped in linens of dust and gas, are born just as often. One tablespoonful of a neutron

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star would weigh about 5 trillion pounds on earth. “In the universe,” writes Lao Tzu, “the difficult things are done as if they were easy.”

Vastness.

Light travels 186,000 miles each second. At that speed a bullet rockets around Earth and grazes your ear seven times (ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch) in less than a second. The sun’s light reaches us in 8.3 light-minutes. Neptune is about seven light-hours away. Andromeda, our closest spiral galaxy, is 2.2 million light-years away and stretches 100,000 light-years from edge to edge.

Gulp.

The lights come on, and I’m suddenly aware that my mouth hangs open. Leaving the planetarium, I pass the huge Foucault pendulum rocking from the lobby ceiling, monitoring our planet’s predictable rotation. A car squeals out of the parking lot. Stepping outside, I stare straight up and drink in the whirling night. “The stars,” observes Brennan Manning, “call us out of ourselves.”

Then my thoughts turn to something truly wondrous. Those intergalactic views are only half the picture. Have you visited the Monsanto exhibit at the original Disneyland? There we’re led to feel that we’re shrinking to infinitesimal proportions - smaller, smaller, smaller. At one point an enormous human eye blinks at us through a microscope. Eventually we shrink into the center of an atom with its orbiting electrons and surging nucleus. In marvelous terror a voice cries out, “Dare I go on?” Some scientists claim we could go on, traveling deeper and deeper into the nucleus and its constituents. They also say that if you could harness and

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convert the energy, you could power your house for a day using the atoms in the period at the end of this sentence. The ink on an 8-by-11-inch sheet of paper would power 150,000 days, more than 400 years.

Who are we to think we can comprehend a trillionth part of this incredible power? How could anyone possibly know what animates galaxies and pulsates within each atom? In the polluted wake of some televangelists we may feel reticent to speak, worrying that the vastness of our narrowness will become apparent, but in every people group on earth the topic comes up. In French this power is called Dieu. In German it's Gott. In Spanish, Dios. In Hebrew it is Elohim. For Hindus it is Brahman. For Muslims, Allah. In another arena, the power is referred to as Essence, Universal Mind, Life Force.

In this book the power is called God. To many people - millions, probably - for myriad reasons "God" carries unpleasant associations. But a word is simply a symbol, not the object itself. By any other name a rose would smell as sweet, and by any other name God would still be, in Anselm's words, "That than which no greater can be conceived."

As a young child I attended Bethel Congregational Church, where every worship service Mr. Blakeslee, the organist, sat front and center behind a soft burgundy curtain. I could glimpse only the back of his bald, pale head. Somehow with my small eyes and ears watching and listening each week, I came to connect Mr. Blakeslee with God. God played unseen music with hidden hands and a mysterious face. Was He smiling or scowling? I had no clue. If I had

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chanced a guess based on the music, He would be minor-chord prone, majestic, gloomy, and loud.

For many of us who have carried similar images into adulthood, God remains inscrutable and distant. Is a grin playing on the lips, a tear moving, a glint of anger flashing? We try to discern the face of the player by the music, but all we know is the back of a bald head. We are also curious: What is this musician like away from the instrument and the score? Gentle? Petty? Vindictive? Fun-loving?

My friend Kim is thoughtful, fun, responsible, and skeptical. She's a believing unbeliever, one who believes in a God but who doesn't believe everything people say about God. At one time she "followed God," but too many things about that God didn't make sense, so she scrapped the whole idea. We talked last summer on the back of a houseboat one night when the Milky Way actually looked milky, and Kim questioned why any God would allow little children to suffer, and why God isn't more visible. After hearing about what she doesn't believe in, I asked her what she does believe in, at the core of her being.

"I guess I believe in Christian values," she said sheepishly, and we both laughed.

"That seems a bit strange," I suggested, "to believe in those values but not in the Being who established them."

"I just don't see another way around it right now," she admitted.

This book is about falling in love with God, and it's mostly for people like Kim. If you're an "unbeliever" who yearns for a God who is more than televangelists and traditional religion are communicating - indeed, more than

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anyone could communicate - this book is for you. Frederick Buechner points out, “Many an atheist is a believer without knowing it, just as many a believer is an atheist without knowing it. You can sincerely believe there is no God and act as if there is. You can sincerely believe there is a God and live as though there isn’t”

If you’re a “believer” who feels squeezed and drained by a religious existence of deep weariness, unending frustration, and blasted hopes, to the point where even if your religion is “right” you don’t know if you want it, this book is also for you.

Step one

Let’s admit something from the start we cannot know God.

Agnostics contend we cannot know God. Often they say this because of God’s transcendent nature, as caterpillars cannot know humans. Caterpillars can experience humans. They can crawl fuzzily up our fingers and forearms and swivel their heads quizzically, but they cannot know us because we transcend them.

But let’s admit we don’t know even the people we live with. How deeply does a husband know his wife? How much do we know our parents, our children, our friends? The more we know, the more we suspect that we know very little. Like the six blind men of Indostan “reading” a Braille elephant, we know in part at best. The wonder is that even when we cannot know fully, we can love wholeheartedly. That which we do know - the kernel of a person that makes a person - we love. We believe Forrest Gump when he proclaims, “I’m not

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a smart man, but I know what love is.” We can and we do love the unfathomable.

Our search for understanding God can produce only more confusion. When Life magazine asked forty-nine obscure and famous people the ultimate question “Why are we here?” Garrison Keillor replied, “To know and to serve God, of course, is why we’re here, a clear truth that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard.” To their credit, many agnostics don’t wish to strap God to any human framework. They maintain that any limitation we place on God is illusory; any claim to “know God” seems arrogant and naive. We are too feeble, too finite.

A short story describes beings in a distant galaxy whose home planet is warmed by multiple suns. Night never falls. While life in this sphere is fine enough, a terrible mystery consumes the thoughts of all inhabitants. Every six hundred years the suns align in one monstrous eclipse, plunging the planet for a few hours into total darkness, and each time this happens, according to historical records, nearly all the inhabitants are wiped out. What is it about the darkness that proves fatal?

At last the moment of the eclipse arrives, and the inhabitants witness a startling sight. They see, for the first time, stars. Thousands upon thousands of shimmering stars. The vision sends them over the edge to insanity or to suicide. Why? Because suddenly they comprehend their true insignificance in the universe. They are a microscopic speck in a chartless ocean, a whimper in a hurricane, an M&M in the Milky Way.

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The agnostic view does take into account our puny proportions and humble perspective when compared to God. However, agnosticism can actually end up limiting God. For it is true: we cannot know God... unless God chooses to be known. In prematurely ending that sentence, the agnostic view steps on God by restricting this option. Can our knowledge of God be objectively measured? Not really. But neither can we objectively measure truth, hope, or compassion.

Imagine a young man interviewing for a high-paying job with a major corporation. He slides through two interviews, shuffles past the formidable executive secretary, and finds himself face-to-face with the founder, owner, and CEO of the corporation. After exchanging pleasantries, the young man speaks his mind.

“I know you’re in control here,” he offers generously, “so I want you to know something. You can do anything you like!”

“Oh...um...thanks,” the owner manages to say.

“Unless,” the young man continues, “you want to communicate personally with me or with any of your employees. That, of course, is impossible.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, you can’t do that. You’re too far above us. We can’t appreciate you for all that you truly are.”

At this point the owner assures the young man that he won’t have to concern himself further with the prospect, and she escorts him to the door.

It’s possible to hold mistaken assumptions about the “owner,” isn’t it? If an Owner God decides to communicate

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with us, who are we to deny that privilege? We can't enable caterpillars to know or love us, but (this is an important point) we aren't God. We created neither caterpillar nor cosmos. Moreover, humans can comprehend infinitely more than caterpillars. As we explore later, God finds ingenious ways to interact with us.

Even with the best intentions, by denying God's ability or desire to communicate with us, we "step on" God.

Step two

I enjoy running. That's when I do my best thinking, away from the madding crowd. At least I think I do. When my family lived one mile from Pismo Beach, California, I would run three mornings a week. Stepping out my front door, I'd pad down the hills of Brighton Avenue, circle a fence that confined a snarling dog, dodge through some firs, cut over the railroad tracks, zip across Highway 1, and be on the beach. Easy.

Once there, I felt as if I could run for hours. The wide white sand lay flat and firm, giving gently to my strides. The early morning fog would be lifting against the hills, the seagulls gliding and calling, the moist air suffused with salt and seaweed. Ahead of me sandpipers raced the spreading foam, their skinny legs a blur. Often I passed people on the beach - lovers walking hand in hand, another runner, a solitary soul thinking deeply, arms crossed, head down, and no matter who it was, I always called out, "Morning!" Nearly always I received a somewhat surprised smile and a greeting in return.

One morning a man didn't return my greeting. He stood alone, hidden in a heavy coat and gloves, but different from

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most beach walkers. He was inhaling a cigarette and listening intently to his headphones, swinging a metal detector across the sand like the sightless wield a white cane. I called out "Morning!" and waved. He never noticed.

I understood his not wanting to hear or see the gasping, dripping man plodding by, but in hearing only his headphones he was missing the rhythmic roar of the surf and the squawking gulls. Looking only at his feet, he lost the splendor of the sandpipers and the lifting fog. With his coat and mind tightly buttoned, he could not appreciate invigorating sensations all around him. He could never find with Shakespeare "tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones and good in everything."

Too often we are like that man, swinging into God's revelations and not perceiving them. As Job confesses, "He passes by me, and I see him not" If we listen merely for life's metallic beeping, how can God get through? Our frantic society's beeps - the financial pressures of the long, green madness and 1:15 appointments and advertising blitzes and bizarre relationship problems and every last honking hurry - can overwhelm us.¹ We lose the ability to make sense. We lose the ability to perceive. 1. Poet e. e. cummings refers to "this busy monstermanunkind."

We step on God when we become so busy and bothered that we do not discern that God is here.

Step three

It's another misty morning, another run. Approaching me on the far side of the street walks a raven-haired wisp of a girl, about eleven years old, carrying a pink lunch bag and three books.

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“Morning!” I call to her, and I smile.

Her response isn't one I'm used to. Lowering her eyes, her body tenses and she quickens her pace. She's clearly afraid.

Of course, she's right. Someone has taught her well: Don't talk to strangers. But I'm angry as I move beyond her. No, not at her. I'm angry with the people who took away an eleven-year-old girl's freedom to smile without fear and sing out, “Good morning!” I'm incensed with those who by their hideous actions spawned an epidemic of distrust

Let's switch scenes. I'm talking with someone I know - he's a friend. During the course of our easy conversation I mention the word God. Instantly his face stiffens, his eyes glaze over. It's obvious he wants no part of this discussion. His expression clearly tells me, Let's forget about that, OK?

And at once our freedom has been pinched. Our liberty to go beyond the banalities of bad weather, ball scores, and inevitable air disasters has been stepped on. We can't explore the meaning of life with candor and good humor in a nonthreatening atmosphere. We just can't. The possibility is gone. Vanished.

That scene is replayed on this planet a thousand times a day. I'm angry with those who bred this discomfort, this reluctance bordering on abhorrence. Who caused these responses?

Mostly, religious people caused them.

Let me be clear in defining what I mean here by “religious people.” I mean slippery, pushy evangelists attempting to cram others into their view of salvation. Deliver us from them.

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I mean careful churchgoers who care more about raising money than about raising literacy rates. Those who “disdain the world” but crave its publicity. Those behind vanilla smiles who see no relevance in healing a poisoned environment, or in developing better housing for the poor, or in upholding the rights and dignity of minorities.

I mean those who deny the true power of God and instead use church as a social coffee club, where the elite meet to greet I mean those who distort and manhandle the Bible to the point where onlookers give up trying to make any sense of it

I mean religious entertainers, including many neighborhood pulpit-pounders, with their embarrassing, superficial antics. I mean those whose worship is all froth, and those whose worship is as flat as road kill at rush hour. I mean hate-and pride-filled fanatics, from Belfast to Bosnia to the West Bank, who pulverize one another in the name of God.

I mean those who want to look good, and who look the other way if someone else doesn't I mean those who claim that the God of colors and numbers and vastness in the universe gets wrathful if a teenage girl wears too much makeup. I could go on. You know what I mean.

Of course, religionists don't own a corner on bad behavior.

(If you have trouble believing this, just pick up today's newspaper.) Unfortunately, however, religionists' actions are often connected to God. All of us at some time are embarrassed by our connections, whether our workplace, our political party, our country, our race, our favorite athletes or

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musicians, our family. In our more lucid moments, we don't simply write these connections off. We understand that reality and the ideal don't often mesh. But with so many things in the world poised to go wrong, we're looking for connections that bring lasting peace of mind.

How I wish I could adequately communicate this: God's seekers are turned off to "religion" more than anybody. "Religion" robs me of being able to talk with friends and relatives about my greatest love, my God. That's why, to a Christian God-seeker, it makes no sense to hear that someone isn't interested in God because she's "turned off by religion."

According to a recent Gallup poll, people today are increasingly more interested in spiritual things. I found this to be true when walking through Chicago's O'Hare Airport with the book *God: A Biography* tucked under my arm. While I stood in lines, travelers craned their necks to read the dust jacket, commenting on the fascinating nature of the concept. People today are interested in God. They are wary and weary of religionists. We step on God when we reduce God to a prepackaged agenda, to a set of religious precepts easily held and manipulated.

It is possible to step on the limitless God of the universe to the place where not only can God not be found, but nobody's even looking.