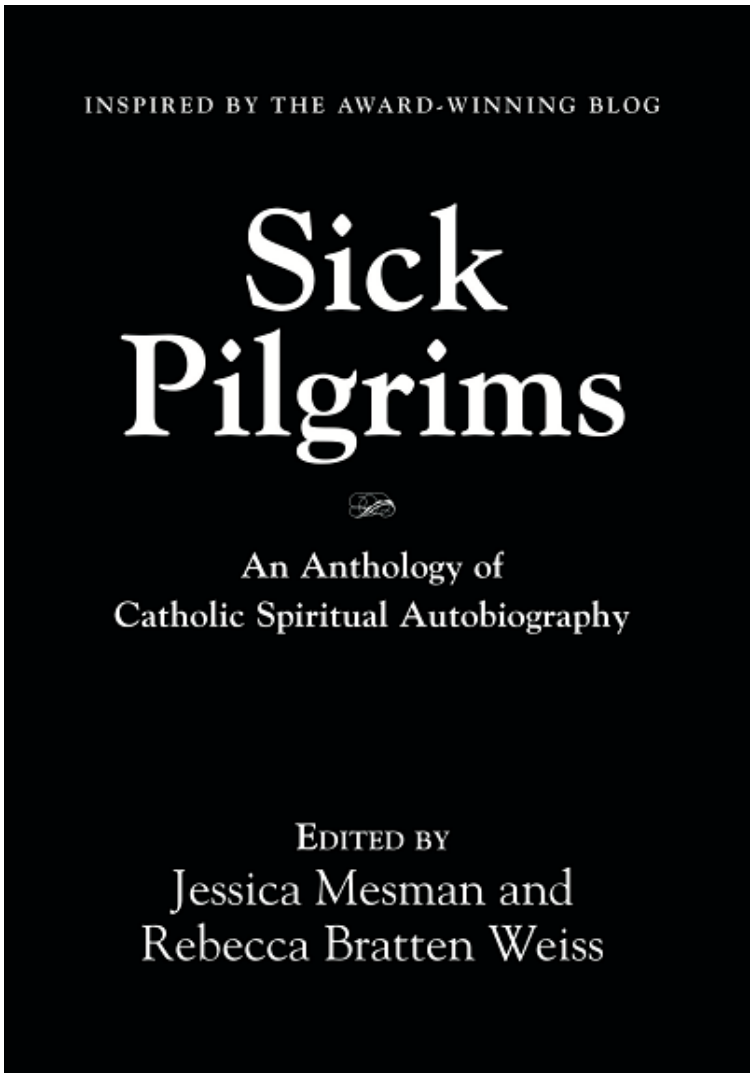

Sick Pilgrims is an anthology of essays by Catholic artists and writers and how their faith--or rebellion against it--changed their lives and their work.

Sick Pilgrims:
An anthology of Catholic Spiritual Autobiography
Edited by Jessica Mesman and Rebecca Bratten Weiss

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INSPIRED BY THE AWARD-WINNING BLOG

Sick Pilgrims

An Anthology of Catholic Spiritual Autobiography

EDITED BY
Jessica Mesman and
Rebecca Bratten Weiss

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Introduction
by Jessica Mesman

“Every branch of human knowledge, if traced up to its source and final principles, vanishes into mystery,” wrote the weird fiction writer, Arthur Machen. When I read Machen’s collected stories at the urging of a friend, I thought that quote pretty much summed up my faith.

I was born into the Catholic Church but spent much of my life exploring dark alleys and strange paths—other churches, philosophies, and fascinations—that either dead ended at despair or lead me back to where I started. Science. Politics. Art. The occult. Hedonism. Gnosticism. Protestantism. Paganism. They each frustrated me in turn. What might at first be thrilling ended up, as Walker Percy summed it up in *Lost in the Cosmos*, merely “disappointing.” When I did stumble into something that felt true and good, I’d begin to find it suspiciously familiar, like a tune I’d heard before, hummed in the cradle and lodged in the memory.

Oh, I’d realize. This is so… Catholic.

It all started in an Irish-themed pub in South Bend when I met an editor to talk about the possibility of working

together on a project. I was supposed to be pitching a book. The problem was, I was in the grip of a major depressive episode, and I wasn't much in the mood to write a book. Especially not a Catholic book. I didn't know how I felt about my religion anymore, or if I had a place in the Church at all.

So instead of pitching him a book I told him about how when I was a teenager I used to try to contact my mother, who died of cancer when I was 14, through Ouija boards and call-in psychics and past-life readings and even mirror divination, and that ultimately all this had led me back to the Catholic Church: I was looking for the dead. I wasn't kidding or trying to shock when I said dabbling in the occult had made me Catholic. It felt good to say it out loud. I'd tried just about everything under the sun to make contact with the unseen, and none of it had worked. To his credit, this guy didn't condemn me or try to evangelize me out of my story. He seemed to understand.

In that moment, the blog Sick Pilgrim was born. Because I knew there had to be others. People whose unconventional paths, losses, heartbreaks, and yearning for contact with divine mystery had led them to the doors of the Church and left them there, lonely, confused, and unsure of how to proceed.

I was born into Catholicism; in some ways, my return to the practice of the faith was a homecoming. I felt determined to reclaim what was rightfully mine. But what about those who didn't have the courage or the sheer brattiness or even the naivety to waltz in and claim a place at the table? Those who'd been turned off by politicized faith—which grew more so as the blog continued through Trump's election? Who is speaking up for those who can't agree with every Church teaching—especially the loudest proclaimed— but still find their hearts and souls and imaginations to be thoroughly, irreversibly Catholic? What about the other wounded travelers who didn't realize they weren't walking alone?

I asked my friend, artist Kate Plows, to design a logo based on the stick figure my young daughter and I had been drawing for years, since she'd become obsessed with the seasick travelers on the Mayflower. I'd grown to see him as my personal mascot, this little traveler with his misshapen hat and x's for eyes—bound for God in the end, however lost and battered he becomes on his journey. The colonialist implications weren't lost on me either. How do we move forward in a faith that has wreaked so much damage, death, and horror?

At first I thought the blog would be a virtual soap box, and I hoped a few curious bystanders might show up to watch. But it quickly became more of a pub. Others starting taking their turn at the mic. We told our stories—the true stories, the hard stories, the ones that you feel you probably shouldn't share in Church, at least not outside the confessional. We confessed our love for a faith we often found embarrassing. We excavated our unabashedly weird Catholic imaginations for mystery and magic. And as more and more pilgrims began to stumble in, we started propping each other up, linking arms and walking together. The blog grew into a community of writers and artists and thinkers and reluctant believers.

This book, we hope, will take you on a journey too. We're going to tell you the stories of how we've found ourselves, despite our tendencies to wander. Some of us were drawn deeper into the Church. Some of us were ultimately repelled by what we found. But we continue on in pursuit of the mystery of faith.

Just Going for a Walk
by Kristen Allen

“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,--who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going à la Sainte Terre," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the

meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea."

--Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

I have started fitness training for a pilgrimage. It's not something I can talk about with most of my friends (or relatives for that matter). They don't get it, and trying to make them understand just further convinces them that I am mad. They might not be wrong.

For as long as I can remember, I have been a walker, a saunterer, who loves to go out to the woods. When I was a little girl living in a rural town that was swiftly becoming a suburb, I spent countless hours in the wooded trails behind my house. There was wild blueberry picking in the summer and fort building in the fall. I wrote my first lyric poem, a worship song, really, out there in those woods during a snowfall. I still remember feeling I had actually come upon the Creator in the snow-muffled silence in the pine grove. It was a tangible presence that I have been seeking (and finding now and again) ever since.

To my child's mind, though, if I really needed to meet up with God, I had to ride my bike to Stony Brook, the Audubon preserve in town. I'd follow the familiar path to

the catwalk, then I'd scramble over some granite rocks to sit by the marsh on my "thinking rock." It never failed to help calm me, or to bring me clarity. It was there that God helped me get over more than a few fights with my brother, made me recognize that my mother was not unjust for grounding me this time, soothed my broken heart when that boy picked someone else to go to the dance with him. It was there, too, that God saved my life when I was a broken, desperate young woman. It was there that I came to rejoice in becoming a wife, then a mother. It was there that I mourned the loss of my father.

I was raised Catholic in the 1970s. My parents—and most of my friends' parents—felt compelled to give us the same religious foundation that they had. They were adamant about us receiving our sacraments. But with few exceptions (like the two Irish families with all those kids), our Catholic faith was not the driving force of our lives or community. There was no backlash at church when I started going to the youth group at my best friend's Baptist church, because they offered cooler things to do than our CYO did.

It was through that youth group that I attended my first sleep-away retreat at a Baptist camp. After three days of walking through the woods, I eagerly agreed to say a

salvation prayer with a perky Bible college co-ed who led the girls' sessions. I returned to camp for two weeks that summer. Then I came back as a staffer every summer for the next four years. It was there, working with special needs children and adults, that I learned the lessons about every person being God's beloved. It was there that I first met Black and Brown people. It was there that I learned (was allowed!) to read scripture on my own.

A few years ago, I returned to the camp for a reunion. I took a few moments alone to follow the trail to the log cabin chapel. The chapel was smaller and more pedestrian than I remember. Still, as I walked up the aisle to the simple altar area, sunbeams falling to the floor through the tall windows, I knew I was walking on holy ground. The Creator was still there, waiting for me.

But it is more complicated than that.

My freshman year in high school, on those same wooded trails behind my house, where I felt the manifest presence of God during a snowfall, I was raped by a classmate that I thought was my first boyfriend. During the attack, a special needs adult who lived with his elderly mother on the other side of the woods appeared, walking his dog, Tucker. My rapist continued. The man kept

walking, only stopping to shush his barking pup. My response to this failure to be saved by the man, his dog, or the Almighty, was to feel ashamed and humiliated to have been seen like this.

The classmate bragged about his conquest. Boys at school, on the bus, and in my neighborhood alternately taunted me or tried to hit on me, thinking they, too, could get some. The girls shunned me, except for the ones who were morbidly curious and asked me horrifying questions about the experience. They all believed the classmate, not considering for a minute that his story was grossly exaggerated, that the experience wasn't consensual, and that I was traumatized by it. The nuns in the hallway (oh, yeah, did I mention that I attended parochial school?) pursed their lips at me as I walked by. The kinder ones prayed for me under their breath.

The classmate's mother, concerned too late that her son and I were getting in over our heads, started planning family outings for us. My own mother, concerned that I was becoming a slut, sent her wild friend to talk to me about birth control and good decisions.

My summers at the Baptist camp were an escape from that. I spent my days and nights in the woods, where I sang the songs, and joined the prayer meetings, and

became the perky girl that led others through the salvation prayer. The Baptist God in the woods kept me busy and safe from horny, violent Catholic boys. The Baptist God didn't save me from unraveling, though.

Back at school, I fell into a group of friends—and a steady boyfriend—that were super nerdy. I sought them out because I wasn't afraid of them. We listened to ProgRock bands and played Dungeons & Dragons and wandered through the woods playing disc golf. This, too, kept me busy and safe. It didn't save me from unraveling, though. I learned years later that they sought me out because they, too, had heard the rumors and were hoping to get lucky.

I started college and again made friends with the (safe) nerds. We read science fiction books and went to Renaissance Fairs and smoked pot and dropped acid and wrote really awful poetry. I had sex. Lots of sex with lots of stupid boys. (Well, lots to me, who still wanted to believe in the Catholic God and the Baptist God and their rules-disguised-as-promises.)

I dropped out of college my senior year to follow the Grateful Dead. Well, actually, I was following a Dead Head who looked (to me) like Leonardo DiCaprio. I got pregnant.

On my thinking rock at Stony Brook, I wept and begged the Creator for help. When I went home, my parents told me that they would pay for the next semester of college if I didn't tell anyone and just made it all go away.

I was directed by a receptionist on the phone to go to a side street and come into a service entrance to the building to avoid the crowd of pro-life protestors. I sat in a waiting room filled with some young girls who looked like me and a few middle-aged women. This wasn't a clinic filled with desperate women forced to make an untenable choice between a life of poverty or chronic illness or disability or abuse and death. This was a room filled with privileged women who didn't want to admit to their mistakes.

I wept while I filled out the paperwork. I sobbed as I honestly listed the drugs I was using. I kept crying, silently, while holding the hand of a nurse, a stunning Black woman with aubergine hair.

I moved out of my parents' house and in with the Dead Head that night. I got stoned and stayed stoned for weeks on end. I had nightmares for months. I slid into a dangerous depression. It was a very dark time in my life.

But I was still going to church. I frequently attended Baptist church services with my local friends from camp. I attended mass at my Catholic parish. I taught CCD to third graders. I have a clear memory of a rare happy day in the midst of my deepening depression, out on the trails at a beautiful state park. I was wearing my favorite purple handkerchief skirt and a white eyelet peasant blouse. My saunter ended at a picnic table, where I pulled my CCD curriculum from my backpack to plan my lessons for the upcoming month.

I was a druggie living in sin after having an abortion. I had no business being in church. I surely had no business teaching children about faith. The day came when I was to bring my CCD students to meet with the priest for confession. The priest was a kind, thoughtful man who was good to the children and always seemed happy to see me. But I was convinced I'd be run out of the parish if he knew the truth about me. I felt sick. I brought my class to the fellowship hall in the basement, where he gently met with each child, face to face, to listen to their confessions and mete out simple acts of contrition. I could not believe that repentance would lead to forgiveness for me. I had done unforgiveable things. And so, I fled. After the last child was picked up or rode off on their bike, I went

back to my apartment, and I never returned to that parish again. I stopped going to any church anywhere.

On my thinking rock at Stony Brook a few months later, I confessed to the night that I had broken all ten commandments. I was preparing to commit suicide when an overwhelming feeling of being loved, despite my wretchedness, filled me. Where the Catholic God and the Baptist God failed me, the Forest God (by which I mean Actual God, the Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth) saved my life.

Slowly, I began to heal. I broke up with the Dead Head. I went back to school. I met a man with gorgeous brown eyes who was also a mess. We had a whirlwind courtship. After just a few months of casual dating, he came to my preschool class to create an ice carving of a swan to go with my reading of The Ugly Duckling. He drove me home from work and told me to pack a bag for the weekend. Then he took me to the airport and flew me to Montreal. It was February. It was cold. Really, really cold. Still, we walked all over that beautiful city.

Desperate to warm up, we ducked into the Basilica du Notre Dame. Not having grown up Catholic, he was stunned by how glorious it was. I was stunned to find God

there, welcoming us. While we warmed our hands at the back of the sanctuary, I asked God to make this man mine forever. We recently celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary.

When we returned from Montreal, we looked for a place to live together. He proposed. We discussed what, if any, kind of faith we would pass on to the children we already knew we wanted to have. We began church hunting.

He grew up in a military family attending whatever Protestant church on base was the least emotional. Catholic worship didn't make any sense to my fiancé. Besides, the child sexual abuse scandal had just broken in the Boston Globe. Neither of us wanted anything to do with that.

A co-worker invited us to her church. It was a non-denominational, Pentecostal congregation that met in a storefront. Neither of us trusted a storefront church, but we went to be polite. The pastor was young, married, and preached a sermon that seemed relevant to our lives. We stayed. For 21 years.

The storefront moved to a warehouse and, finally, to a 2,000 seat sanctuary that my husband and the other men of the expanding congregation cut out of the woods

and built with their own hands. I have a beautiful picture of my husband, in red flannel, jeans, and work boots, standing on a granite outcropping in the forest, arms uplifted as he prayed for the church and its people.

But the church became too big and too slick. It's not a bad church, far from it. The pastors and the elders are good people doing what they believe they are called to do. But it became too hard for me to be myself there—messy, complicated, not sure enough of the answers given in a five-part sermon series, asking too many questions. I needed to go for a walk.

A former Catholic high school PE teacher that I knew through her work managing her parish food pantry invited me to a retreat on 150 acres of woodlands, saltmarsh, meadow and ocean front. It was surrounded by conservation land. Just as I had as a teenager, I walked in the woods for three days and found myself meeting the Creator again. I've returned several times a year—on retreats or just to spend the day—for more than a decade now. The nun who ran the office, the priest who led the retreats, and a handful of Church Ladies have helped me rediscover so much of what I had lost of liturgy, sacrament, and faith-in-practice when I left the Catholic Church.

When the diocese could no longer maintain the facilities, and sold off the property last year, I wept. When I learned that the Massachusetts Audubon Society purchased the grounds, preserving the trails in perpetuity, I wept again. For me, it was never the chapel or the priests and nuns that made the place sacred. It was the grounds. That I am still able to return there to walk along the shore and marsh, tromp through the meadows and woods, means that I can still go there on retreat and know that I will be able to meet God.

There have been other walks that have been unexpected visitations from God for me—the dull, February day I walked the Cliffs of Moher with my father, just before his diagnosis; the warm spring day when I unwittingly found myself leading a group of high school students in the Remembrance Day procession through Kigali, Rwanda, with President Kagame and thousands of Rwandan genocide survivors; the Labor Day morning that I suddenly emerged from the deep woods to find myself at the peak of Bald Knob, the breathtaking view of Lake Winnipesaukee below me; my first trek along the trails at the Blackstone Gorge, where an otter swimming by was interrupted by the flight of a massive great blue heron.

The God who spoke the universe into existence met with me on all those walks.

When I became a grandmother, I was struck by the recognition that my grandson was a tangible bit of heaven in my arms. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of love that bent me low. It has been ten years since I have been a member of a church, but now that I am someone's Nana, I feel an obligation to get my spiritual life right. I am not sure how to fully articulate this. There is holiness and wisdom that I feel I am duty and love-bound to pass on.

I have not yet admitted this to anyone, but it pains me that he is not being raised up with a faith community around him. I worry that he is missing the blessings of the sacraments. I also cannot bear the idea of him going to a church that considers his gay uncles disordered, that teaches that women are not fit to preach or lead, that stands by as black and brown people are oppressed and killed. I cannot bear the thought of going back to church myself. I cannot ask my daughter to bring my grandson. But I still want him to know God.

So, on New Year's Eve, as my husband and I toasted our joy at our daughter's health and our grandson's birth, I resolved to go for a walk, a pilgrimage. I still am not sure if I intend to travel to the Holy Land, or to walk the Camino

de Santiago, or if I am just going to log many miles of walked steps in the woods at all the places that are holy ground to me. So I've begun to train my body and my mind to walk long distances over repeated days. When I head out the door, I always announce, "I'm just going for a walk." I always hope, though, that I'm going to church.

Sick Journey
by Marybeth Chuey Bishop

Sister Suzy begins the hymn on the organ, head tilted back, looking through the bottom of her glasses. Her hands shake with arthritis, curled over the keys; her whole body sways as she stomps on the dusty foot pedals. The tempo is all over the place, and every fourth or fifth note is off. But to my three-year-old self, this is the music of my soul. My pigtails bob as I slip out of the pew into the aisle and dance the only way I know how—like a Charlie Brown character. Left shoulder up and right shoulder down, then switch. Repeat. Dad smiles at me. Mom tries to snatch me back into the pew. Some of the nuns grin while others glare. But I am totally unselfconscious. I am home.

I was Catholic before I was born.

Rosemary was 39, Donald was 43, back when that was almost scandalous. They already had four kids (boys, the lot of them), all of which had been high-risk pregnancies. Mom stood a significant chance of injury or death. To top it off, she had just gone back to work and

contracted German measles (rubella) from a student. Friends, acquaintances, and even doctors suggested putting a stop to it, for everyone's sake. They said there was a 33% chance I'd be born dead, and another 33% chance that I'd have extreme birth defects.

It is Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—very late for a five-year-old to be awake. We are standing in the back of the church waiting for the music to end so we can process to the front, each of us carrying a statue for the manger scene. My brothers have shepherds and animals. Dad has Joseph, Mom has Mary. I have baby Jesus. I am dissatisfied with this, and ask Mom if we can trade. "My name is Mary, after all," I wheedle. She tells me that Jesus is the most important one: He's what Christmas is all about. "Then you should have him!" I say, trying to sound generous. I really want the Mary statue. She has such a glorious long blue veil and lovely eyes. I want to be that pretty someday. Soon the music ends and the procession begins. I am last, and I sulkily study the reflection of the twinkling lights in my patent leathers while I wait for a nun to give me the signal to proceed.

The resident priest at the convent where we attend Mass dies when I am five. His name was Father Lowney,

and he was a dear friend of my parents. The nuns cannot find another retired priest who is willing to live on the premises and say Mass for them every day, or even every Sunday, so they resort to “borrowing” a priest each week from Guest House. Guest House is an alcohol rehabilitation center specifically for priests, and once they reach a certain stage of their 12-step program they are allowed to leave the premises to say Mass. We happen to live halfway between the convent and Guest House, so we are usually recruited to pick up the priests and drop them back off.

I stand in the foyer holding Dad’s hand. I am seven, and Guest House reminds me of a castle. The ceiling of the foyer is vaulted with an elaborate crystal chandelier, and there is marble everywhere. I pretend I am a princess and Dad is a king when the priest we are waiting for breezes in and shakes Dad’s hand. Then he leans down to my level and shakes my hand. I like these priests. They are never too haughty to address me personally, even though I’m just a kid. They speak plainly. They talk a lot about their own mistakes. We get to Church and the priest goes to put on his vestments. I know they will be colorful, not like the nuns who wear all black and white, all day,

every day, with veils to cover their hair, even on Christmas. They look like so many penguins, bunched up for warmth. Sure enough, when Mass begins I see his robes are green and his stole is a vibrant combination of blues and greens and purples, like a peacock. He processes up to the altar, which stands in front of a huge mosaic of gold. The nuns who live here, who work here, who clean the altar, must stay down in the pews during Mass while the guest priest is clearly in charge in all his garish colors. My brothers serve as altar boys—I helped braid their bright green sashes. It is a position I will never be allowed to hold.

I don't know how old I am when I learn about abortion, but it is years and years earlier than I learn about sex. Abortion is the primary evil of our day, Mom says, because it takes the lives of the most innocent. There are people who believe it is just a bunch of cells and not a living human with a soul—a soul that Jesus loves. Mom spends many nights with her friends, planning how to save those lives.

It's a few months before the election—either 1980 or 1984, I'm not sure which. That would make me either 10

or 14. Mom and her two best friends—matriarchs of the only families I know with more kids than ours--have just dropped a bunch of us girls off at the church. We enter a large room in the parish hall that is set up as a phone bank, with long tables, a dozen telephones and call lists at each seat. We are instructed briefly how to call: dial the number, ask to speak to a registered voter, ask if they are Democrat, Republican, or Independent, and if they are pro-life or pro-choice. Record the answers. We are told we are saving babies. It is sticky in here, dim after briefly being in the blaring sun, and my long skinny legs stick out from my pink shorts. I sit down and make a few calls, until one lady sounds irate that I'm asking about her views. That is enough for me. We start chatting with each other instead, and end up chasing each other around the room in a tag-like game until someone's older sister comes in and yells at us to get back to work.

We go to church as a family every Sunday and every holy day, without fail, unless one of us is actively vomiting. All seven of us pile into the car (the youngest brother and I get to ride in the hatchback when we take the VW Bug) and drive right past our town's Catholic church because it's "too liberal." We drive to the next town to the north—

our rival town—where we all spill back out of the car like clowns at a circus. This is St. Mary's, a Dominican convent, run by the nuns who live here.

It is Good Friday. I am 14 or 15, small for my age. We have been here at the church for 2 hours already, with another hour left to go. I can hear the music faintly through the bathroom door. I am lying down in the stall with my forehead on the tile floor—a mishmash of blue and green squares and rectangles that I am trying to discern the pattern of. Concentrating on the floor helps me forget that I'm nauseous. It might be from fasting, or it might be from my period, which is so heavy that when I change my thick pad I fold up as much toilet paper as I think I can get away with taking and put it on top of the pad to make it that much thicker. I still sometimes leak through. I am always ashamed when this happens, feeling a vague sense of guilt even though when pressed I would say it isn't actually a sin. They are singing about sin in the chapel, but here on the floor I am just praying that no one comes into the bathroom, since the stall door ends a foot above the floor, allowing them to see me sprawled out like a rotisserie chicken.

My mom and her two friends organize a religion class for us kids away from the liberal church, a class that they run themselves. We are taught about sin, and we are taught to memorize prayers, and we learn about saints who have the stigmata. Mostly we talk about sin. The older sister of one of my classmates teaches us using the "milk bottle" method. She draws two milk bottles on the chalk board, and colors them in with chalk "milk" to symbolize grace. Then she names a few venial sins—lying to your parents, fighting with your brother, not paying attention at Mass—and with each one she wipes a tiny bit of milk out of the bottle on the left. Then she names a mortal sin—abortion—and she wipes the entire milk bottle on the right clean of all its milk. The only way to refill a bottle is to go to Confession with a priest.

I am nine, and I am a wretched sinner. I am certain I am the worst sinner that has ever existed. I haven't murdered anyone, or had an abortion—I don't even know what sex is. But I feel guilty all the time, mostly for thinking my brother's friends are cute, and I feel like I don't deserve to live. I know that wanting to die is also a sin—it might even be a mortal one. But I can't just kill myself; that's definitely a mortal sin, and I don't want to go to Hell. So I

make a deal with God. "Please, God, kill me in my sleep before I wake up. Definitely before I turn 10. If you don't kill me before I turn 10, I promise you I will become a nun. Probably a Dominican. Amen." Every night at bedtime I cover my head with the blanket to keep me safe from spiders and lightning, and I say this prayer.

On another religion class evening one of the moms teaches a girls-only lesson. She starts out soft, talking about make-up (take-away: lipstick is OK so that you look presentable, but don't paint your face like a clown). Then she moves on to sex. Not the mechanics of it, nor even the necessity of it. Just that it's a sin. "It is," she says, "always a sin, even in marriage—because anything that takes your mind off of God even for a second is a sin, and sex most certainly takes your mind off God." We all understand that sex before marriage wipes out all of the milk, and possibly the bottle as well. I have no idea what the boys are told.

It is the summer between my junior and senior years in college. I have just come home from my internship, and my parents are already asleep. I am enjoying sitting in the dark, quiet house, listening to the ducks on the water,

when my youngest brother comes home. "Hey," he says. "I've been meaning to talk to you." He sits next to me without turning a light on, and for a silent moment I wonder if I imagined what he said. "So, I'm wondering Mar, has anyone ever told you about condoms? Because, you know, I know that you and Brad are getting serious, and I just don't want anything to happen to you." I am grateful for the dark now, because I begin to cry. Brad and I are, in fact, secretly engaged, and we've been having sex for more than two years. I am on the pill. I know about condoms, but not because anyone taught me—Mom refused to sign the sex ed permission slip in high school, and the only thing she said about birth control was that it's a sin. And here in the age of Magic Johnson AIDS revelations, this "irresponsible" black sheep brother is the only one who ever thought to save my life.

As part of our pre-wedding classes we must take a class on Natural Family Planning, the only kind of birth control approved by the church. Due to time constraints, we take the class shortly after we are married. "Is it wet… or dry?" the instructor says for the twelfth time this evening. Later every couple in the class will imitate her cadence 'wet… or dry?' but for now we try not to gag as she explains how women are to check our vaginal mucus

daily to see if it's tacky or stretchy, and how we're supposed to take our temperature at exactly the same time every morning after a good night's sleep and then hand the thermometer to our husbands to record and chart. This is all to track our fertility so we can try to get pregnant—we are told that we should only use it to avoid pregnancy in the most extreme circumstances.

Our fourth child is a nursing 18-month-old who is failure to thrive and refuses to eat any real food. One of the older girls has autism, and when the baby was born she fell into a deep depression and was suicidal. Another child right now would put her, the baby, and me at risk. NFP is unreliable because I'm nursing and haven't started ovulating yet—but I could at any minute. Besides that, I'm on a medication to help keep me lactating for the baby, and the medicine is an abortifacient. My mother has recently told me that NOT having sex for an extended period of time is grounds for an annulment. Not that I'm in that position—Brad is understanding and patient—but we haven't been able to have sex for two years. When I try to explain this conundrum to a priest to ask his advice, I must first explain how ovulation works and the basics of NFP, because he doesn't know these things. He has no advice

for me. He says only, "I cannot lay a heavy burden on your back when I don't lift a finger to help bear it." It is not the clarity I sought, merely another piece of a puzzle.

At a family gathering I learn that Mom is no longer friends with the mom who taught us about sex being sinful, because she left her husband for another woman. As my brothers and I sit around the table late at night after my parents have gone to bed, preparing to play a board game, I ask, "What is the one thing you could do that would disappoint Mom and Dad the most?" Without hesitation several of them say, "Being gay."

I have been awake most of the night for several weeks running now, praying, trying to figure out what to do. "Please, God," I pray, "Make something good out of Sarah and Bec." Bec is my daughter's fiancée. And God answers—my heart opens to Bec, to Sarah as she fully is, to their love. I tell my parents about Sarah and Bec. They are not surprised, but they are upset. When I tell them that Bec will be traveling with us for our usual summer visit to both families, they say they are not sure they can have Sarah and Bec stay with them "in good conscience." They float several suggestions—we could just not bring Bec, we could have Sarah and Bec stay in a hotel… anything

short of us not coming at all. "We're coming to Michigan so Bec can meet family," I say, "and we're staying together, wherever we are welcome."

My parents move out of their house and into an "independent living" apartment. Dad's health quickly declines, particularly his mental health. He is not his usual kind, gregarious self. Their church friends come visit them and occasionally take them to Mass. Though there are other Catholics in the apartments, Mom seems unwilling to make new friends—she has been a member of Regnum Christi for years now, and these new people are not the "right" kind of Catholic. Dad shows signs of dementia, and begins to confess his sins repeatedly, several times a day, to Mom.

We visit Mom and Dad on a warm May day, to see how they're really doing. My brothers Paul and John and I bring Egg McMuffins with us at Mom's request, but Dad's sits untouched. He has his own agenda. Maybe we should interrupt him. But he's so earnest, so desperate to get these things out, and they buzz around the room, stinging us all in turn. His mind slides fluidly through time like the lake bluegill through seaweed, flashing blue and green,

here and then gone. He says he hopes to feel unburdened by the confessing, though it is clear from his watery eyes that he doesn't. Suddenly he gets a burst of energy, and says to no one in particular, "You should know that you're all going to Hell. There might be time for a few of you to turn it around, but for most of you it's too late." He lapses into silence; we are each left to ponder which category we fall into. Dad lifts his gnarled arthritic hands and lets them flop down hard on his knees, on the lap I used to sit on for story time. He says, "I just… don't know how to die." We tell him that it's all OK, that he is forgiven, that we love him still. But by the time we get the words out, he is staring at the grandfather clock. "Who will wind it?" he asks. "What will we do when the time runs out?"

Sarah and Bec come visit for Thanksgiving, and a few days after we put up the Christmas tree. On December 1, as we do every year, we start reading the Advent Books—tiny ornament books that slowly tell the story of Jesus' birth. When we finish reading the day's book, Sarah realizes that Bec doesn't know the story at all, so they go into the other room and Sarah explains the story, from annunciation to visitation to birth to wise men, in the gentlest, sweetest way I've ever heard the story told. For

the first time in years, the Incarnation feels new and exciting.

It is a cool, cloudy October afternoon. The newlyweds are all smiles outside the courthouse, Sarah looking fierce in her mohawk braid and Bec glowing through the veil they made. They snap pictures with each other, with each family, with the three of my brothers who were able to come witness. Mom is not here; she finds even short car rides painful since Dad died. It's not clear if she would have come otherwise. Suddenly Sarah dips Bec in a kiss. My brother Paul gapes and laughs; some of us clap. Strangers walking by the courthouse smile and wave and yell their congratulations.

Brad comes home to find me curled up in the rocking chair, crying. "I've been reading the Grand Jury report," I explain. "It's just so horrible. Some of the details…" I can't stop shaking. These are the people—the men—who told me I needed to use NFP or abstain for years. These are the men who say my daughter's marriage is "disordered." These are the men who laid down the laws that made me want to literally die before the age of 10. These are the men who insist no woman can preach the gospel during

a Catholic Mass. These perverted men. I am both longing to call my parents to commiserate, and grateful that they are not alive to witness such atrocities come to light.

It is August 15, the Feast of the Assumption, the day after the Grand Jury reports came out. A holy day of obligation. Part of me wants to spit in the eye of "obligation," but a bigger part wants to hear what the church has to say for itself. I take the boys, 11 and 8—they know nothing of what's happened, what's been happening for decades. The priest's homily is fairly short, but he looks shaken. He says he is disgusted, he understands that we are disgusted, he says there is no excuse. I trust this man, consider him a friend; even so I put arms protectively around the boys. In the car on the way home I try to make my voice sound casual. "You know, boys, that you don't have to accept touch from anyone, right? That no one has a right to touch you. No one. Not a teacher, not a priest, not the president or the pope. No one. OK?" They look confused, mumble something. I try not to start crying again.

It is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It occurs to me as the priest reads the gospel that I have never

heard Mary's fiat preached from the altar by a woman, because only the priest reads the gospel and priests are always men. I find myself longing to hear Mary's words preached by a woman, to hear them in the voices of every woman I know. I want to make a video of women from around the world reciting Mary's words.

The world is a changed place. The pandemic has kept us largely at home for more than 7 months now; we have not been to Mass in that amount of time. At the beginning we would watch a livestream of Mass from our parish, but as time went on we started doing the readings ourselves. The kids join in. We have a question-and-answer discussion instead of a homily. We all participate in the prayers of the faithful. I even read the gospel sometimes; my boys are hearing the gospel in a woman's voice. Brad laughs and says, "We may never go back."

I am home.

Belonging
by David Russell Mosley

I've always felt like a wanderer. Even as a child, I felt as though I never really belonged anywhere. Being adopted meant rejection as well as acceptance, homelessness and a home. When I was around a year old, my mother decided to give me up for adoption. The details around why are fuzzy. She had three other children from three different men. Both of my birth-parents struggled with addiction, which explains why all of my half-siblings found themselves not living with our mother on one occasion or another. In my case, the removal was permanent. My birth-father's parents found out from my caseworker that I was being put up for adoption, so they stepped in and swooped me up. They often kept me anyway, making sure I was bathed at least once a month. They loved me like a son and a grandson. In truth, I was spoiled. They were and are my parents, and they did the right thing in telling me early on that I was adopted. Unfortunately, it still meant that I often felt out of place.

All my new siblings, who had been my birth-father and aunt and uncles, were much older and not at home. This

meant I was raised as an only child despite having siblings everywhere. So I spent most of my time off in my own little world. I would converse with a whole cadre of people invisible to everyone, myself included, but who were always there, ready to listen. Mine was not a particularly Christian home, so I had no notion of angels or God really, not until I occasionally went to a Baptist church when I slept over at a friend's house. I enjoyed being an acolyte, lighting the candles and rushing to blow them out, but otherwise I paid little attention. Even during Sunday School, I would ask the teacher the rather precocious (and ultimately meaningless) question, "If God created everything, then who created God?"

My world was populated, instead, with the Greek gods, King Arthur, elves, and fairies. It got to a point where a boy in fourth grade made fun of me for my ardent belief in Zeus and Hera. I was in tears trying to defend myself. But this was the world I had created. Not feeling at home in the world observable by the senses, I delved deeper, looking for something more, something behind the trees, waiting for me to discover it.

My mother had read The Hobbit to me as a child and in elementary school I discovered The Chronicles of Narnia. These first sat alongside and then, in some ways,

began to replace my dedication to the gods of old. Here I discovered a hint of that something deeper I was looking for. Later, I read through The Lord of the Rings and constantly watched the old Rankin-Bass and Ralph Bakshi films. Now when I went into the woods, I hoped a faun or a dwarf might wander out in front of me.

By the end of Junior High, I had become a Christian. It seemed a natural move for someone like me. After all, I already believed in so many fantastic things, why not believe that God became man, and that he died for me? It was a small, non-denominational church that took me in. I attended all their events, began leading worship every now and again, and decided by the end of high school that I wanted to be a pastor. But even during all of this, I never quite felt at home. I asked questions and tried to understand, but there was still something missing.

In college I changed my major to youth ministry, and after a failed attempt at being a youth minister, changed again so I could go on to grad school to study theology. It was at this time I was first introduced to the medieval Irish saints. Names like Columba, Kevin, Patrick, Brigid, Brendan, and others were frequently on my lips. I read all the popular material I could get my hands on, which meant I had a very romantic view of medieval Irish

Christianity. But those foretastes of the truly otherworldly broke in upon me. Here was a stranger vision of Christianity than I had been shown up to this point. The Christianity I had entered was very modern. The Spirit worked primarily through Scripture and through convicting me of my sins, and while more miraculous things might be possible, they stayed mostly within the pages of Scripture. But here were men and women living 500 or more years after Christ doing miracles, showing up the druids, living with wolves, holding bird's nests in their hands until the eggs hatched. I was enchanted.

When I married a beautiful woman from New Hampshire, my love for her soon expanded to a love for New England as well. Illinois had never really felt like home, but New England, with its forests and small but more ancient mountains and coasts--this surely was the land of enchantment I was searching for. My bride and I felt determined we'd end up back there eventually, maybe even to plant a church. If we did, I was determined to carry with me some of these new ideas I was learning from the Irish saints.

I went to grad school determined either to work on C.S. Lewis or the Irish saints. Since I had been somewhat

bullied into doing a graduate degree in Church History, the medieval Irish won out. Sadly, I still did not feel at home, as few were interested in the questions I was. I learned that Celtic Christianity as I had called it up to that point was not the unified entity I had thought it was, staying as a cohesive whole from Patrick all the way to the Carmina Gadelica. Still, I held on to some of the enchantment that I found there and in the writings of Lewis and Tolkien. I delved deeper into both medieval and patristic theology, devouring the notions of the interconnectivity of all things and that humanity's destination was to be so united to God that we could call that unification a deification, one that allowed us to remain ourselves and yet also to be identified with Christ. But the wanderlust was on me still, and so I went on to study in England.

It was there, in England, that I first encountered real liturgy. I was moved by it, by the orderliness of it, the intentionality. It reminded me of the monastics and their view of time as being ordered toward eternity. One Advent, my wife and I and several of our friends went to a carol service at the Anglican minster in Southwell. The lights were off, and we all lit the candles we had been given. Even as I tried to keep the melting wax from

burning my hand, I was enamored with the beauty of this service as the young male voice rang out, “Once in royal David’s city…” That voice rings in my ears, even now. I fell in love with liturgy. I also fell in love with the land.

My own ancestry was largely from this island, and I hoped that maybe now I had found the home I’d been searching for. I’d already changed my research focus yet again, away from Columbanus, the Irish monk I had studied in grad school, to look at the role of human creativity in our deification, when I decided I should try to become a priest in the Church of England. Many supported this decision, and I thought I had found my calling. But it turned out not to be. A bad experience with the parish priest--and the discovery that we were pregnant not just with one child, as we had intended, but with twins--made us think that perhaps going home was the right call.

As I tried to finish up my PhD with two wonderful little boys who slept little and ate much, something unexpected happened. At 9 weeks old, my second-born, Edwyn, whose name means bliss-friend, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma. Lauren, my wife, had already lost a younger sister to a different form of cancer when they were both kids. Now, our son seemed to be sharing a

similar fate. Thankfully, this was not to be. There were no genetic links between the cancer Lauren's sister had had and Edwyn's. We were just that lucky.

We had to delay our return home so Edwyn could undergo chemotherapy. This worked out well in many ways because we had no idea how to parent, and having others, including my mother-in-law, with and around us insured that Theodore, my first born, my "Gift of God," received the care and attention he needed too while we were so often focused on his brother.

In between rounds of chemo, we were able to go back home—after living in the hospital for a month. But since we couldn't put our immune-compromised son on the bus to go to church, I started going to a thirty-minute, spoken Eucharist at the parish church in Beeston where we lived. I could walk there, attend the service, receive the sacraments that had become important to me as I studied theology more deeply, and return home in under an hour.

One Sunday morning on July 21, 2014, I was sitting in the nave of the parish church as the liturgy was being said. I found myself continually looking at the stained glass window at the back, as well as a relief of the Last Supper which was bookended by two angels. It made me think about how little we consider angels, or at least how

little I consider them. Again, in much of my upbringing we limited our knowledge of angels solely to the text of Scripture and often ended by saying, they're a bit of a mystery and Jesus is more important anyway. I remembered John Milbank's interview at Big Ideas from several years ago, in which he said:

> "I mean, I believe in all this fantastic stuff. I'm really bitterly opposed to this kind of disenchantment in the modern churches, including I think among most modern evangelicals. I mean recently in the Nottingham diocese they wanted to do a show about angels, and so the clergy – and this is a very evangelical diocese – sent around a circular saying, 'Is there anyone around who still believes in angels enough to talk about this?' Now, in my view this is scandalous. They shouldn't even be ordained if they can't give a cogent account of the angelic and its place in the divine economy."

As I thought about this and continued to participate in the liturgy, I found myself staring into the eyes of Christ at the top center of the window at the back of the nave.

I closed my eyes, and as often happens when we close our eyes after looking at something through which light was shining, the outlines of the window remained with me. This alone is a rather brilliant picture of what role angels and the saints play (as well as icons and stained-glass windows), they shine forth the light of God. Suddenly, with my eyes closed, the number of shadows began to multiply. I saw myself surrounded by these shadows and I knew that what I was being shown were the saints and angels that are always around us, always watching over, praying for us, and guiding us in Christ through the Holy Spirit to the Father. The vision, as shadowy as it was, was overwhelming in its majesty. My heart began to race; my chest felt as though there were something very heavy pressing down upon it. I nearly began to weep right there in the middle of the service.

This was the deeper reality, the home, I had been seeking all of my life. It was here, all around me, ever present, and I had been given the honor to sense it, to feel it all around me. I think I know now some of what Jacob must have felt when he saw angels ascending and descending, and I understood in a new way what Jesus meant when he said we would see them descending upon

him and ascending from him. But still, my journey was not over.

We moved back to the US and once again began attending the tradition we had come from. I felt the loss of liturgy, the loss of the sacraments. I became depressed, feeling once again outside, wandering, homeless. After a year of feeling this way, I decided to attend a local Catholic church, St. Patrick's in Nashua, New Hampshire. I went on my own, early in the morning, before going to the non-denominational church with my family. The pastor there was one in a long line of first or second-generation Irish-Americans who had served at this traditionally Irish Catholic parish. He was smart, quoting Augustine and Aquinas and commenting on the pitfalls of American politics left and right. Eventually, I sent him an email, saying I wanted to be received into the Church. That January, 2017, I began my confirmation classes and was confirmed that April. I finally felt at home.

The highs we experience on the mountaintops don't always stay with us. I soon learned that there were those who called themselves Catholic but hated Pope Francis, Vatican II, and often wanted to focus only on judgment and hatred for the foreigner and oppressed amongst us. I had come for sacraments, for that deeper reality I had

experienced three years earlier and found more strife and infighting. I thought I had left these behind in Protestantism. How very wrong I was.

I remain in the Catholic Church, despite its infighting, its coverups, its mistreatment of those on the margins. Why? I often ask myself the same question. Ultimately, I remain because I have hope that if people like me and people much better than me remain and teach and write and talk about these deeper realities, these creatures and beings who do the work set them by God the Father and by Christ and by the Holy Spirit, then maybe we can see some healing. I know, of course, that in this life we fight the long defeat. Ragnarök will come and all, as we know it, will be destroyed. There will be no lasting peace this side of the resurrection. But that too gives me hope. I know I can't win, but I can fight, and I can do so with that same host of angels and saints who surrounded me as I prayed for my son. I still wander, waiting for all things to be made new, but I feel less homeless now than I ever have before.

INSPIRED BY THE AWARD-WINNING BLOG

Sick Pilgrims

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Rebecca Bratten Weiss

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Introduction
by Jessica Mesman

“Every branch of human knowledge, if traced up to its source and final principles, vanishes into mystery,” wrote the weird fiction writer, Arthur Machen. When I read Machen’s collected stories at the urging of a friend, I thought that quote pretty much summed up my faith.

I was born into the Catholic Church but spent much of my life exploring dark alleys and strange paths—other churches, philosophies, and fascinations—that either dead ended at despair or lead me back to where I started. Science. Politics. Art. The occult. Hedonism. Gnosticism. Protestantism. Paganism. They each frustrated me in turn. What might at first be thrilling ended up, as Walker Percy summed it up in *Lost in the Cosmos*, merely “disappointing.” When I did stumble into something that felt true and good, I’d begin to find it suspiciously familiar, like a tune I’d heard before, hummed in the cradle and lodged in the memory.

Oh, I’d realize. This is so… Catholic.

It all started in an Irish-themed pub in South Bend when I met an editor to talk about the possibility of working

together on a project. I was supposed to be pitching a book. The problem was, I was in the grip of a major depressive episode, and I wasn't much in the mood to write a book. Especially not a Catholic book. I didn't know how I felt about my religion anymore, or if I had a place in the Church at all.

So instead of pitching him a book I told him about how when I was a teenager I used to try to contact my mother, who died of cancer when I was 14, through Ouija boards and call-in psychics and past-life readings and even mirror divination, and that ultimately all this had led me back to the Catholic Church: I was looking for the dead. I wasn't kidding or trying to shock when I said dabbling in the occult had made me Catholic. It felt good to say it out loud. I'd tried just about everything under the sun to make contact with the unseen, and none of it had worked. To his credit, this guy didn't condemn me or try to evangelize me out of my story. He seemed to understand.

In that moment, the blog Sick Pilgrim was born. Because I knew there had to be others. People whose unconventional paths, losses, heartbreaks, and yearning for contact with divine mystery had led them to the doors of the Church and left them there, lonely, confused, and unsure of how to proceed.

I was born into Catholicism; in some ways, my return to the practice of the faith was a homecoming. I felt determined to reclaim what was rightfully mine. But what about those who didn't have the courage or the sheer brattiness or even the naivety to waltz in and claim a place at the table? Those who'd been turned off by politicized faith—which grew more so as the blog continued through Trump's election? Who is speaking up for those who can't agree with every Church teaching—especially the loudest proclaimed— but still find their hearts and souls and imaginations to be thoroughly, irreversibly Catholic? What about the other wounded travelers who didn't realize they weren't walking alone?

I asked my friend, artist Kate Plows, to design a logo based on the stick figure my young daughter and I had been drawing for years, since she'd become obsessed with the seasick travelers on the Mayflower. I'd grown to see him as my personal mascot, this little traveler with his misshapen hat and x's for eyes—bound for God in the end, however lost and battered he becomes on his journey. The colonialist implications weren't lost on me either. How do we move forward in a faith that has wreaked so much damage, death, and horror?

At first I thought the blog would be a virtual soap box, and I hoped a few curious bystanders might show up to watch. But it quickly became more of a pub. Others starting taking their turn at the mic. We told our stories—the true stories, the hard stories, the ones that you feel you probably shouldn't share in Church, at least not outside the confessional. We confessed our love for a faith we often found embarrassing. We excavated our unabashedly weird Catholic imaginations for mystery and magic. And as more and more pilgrims began to stumble in, we started propping each other up, linking arms and walking together. The blog grew into a community of writers and artists and thinkers and reluctant believers.

This book, we hope, will take you on a journey too. We're going to tell you the stories of how we've found ourselves, despite our tendencies to wander. Some of us were drawn deeper into the Church. Some of us were ultimately repelled by what we found. But we continue on in pursuit of the mystery of faith.

Just Going for a Walk
by Kristen Allen

“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,--who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going à la Sainte Terre," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the

meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea."

--Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

I have started fitness training for a pilgrimage. It's not something I can talk about with most of my friends (or relatives for that matter). They don't get it, and trying to make them understand just further convinces them that I am mad. They might not be wrong.

For as long as I can remember, I have been a walker, a saunterer, who loves to go out to the woods. When I was a little girl living in a rural town that was swiftly becoming a suburb, I spent countless hours in the wooded trails behind my house. There was wild blueberry picking in the summer and fort building in the fall. I wrote my first lyric poem, a worship song, really, out there in those woods during a snowfall. I still remember feeling I had actually come upon the Creator in the snow-muffled silence in the pine grove. It was a tangible presence that I have been seeking (and finding now and again) ever since.

To my child's mind, though, if I really needed to meet up with God, I had to ride my bike to Stony Brook, the Audubon preserve in town. I'd follow the familiar path to

the catwalk, then I'd scramble over some granite rocks to sit by the marsh on my "thinking rock." It never failed to help calm me, or to bring me clarity. It was there that God helped me get over more than a few fights with my brother, made me recognize that my mother was not unjust for grounding me this time, soothed my broken heart when that boy picked someone else to go to the dance with him. It was there, too, that God saved my life when I was a broken, desperate young woman. It was there that I came to rejoice in becoming a wife, then a mother. It was there that I mourned the loss of my father.

I was raised Catholic in the 1970s. My parents—and most of my friends' parents—felt compelled to give us the same religious foundation that they had. They were adamant about us receiving our sacraments. But with few exceptions (like the two Irish families with all those kids), our Catholic faith was not the driving force of our lives or community. There was no backlash at church when I started going to the youth group at my best friend's Baptist church, because they offered cooler things to do than our CYO did.

It was through that youth group that I attended my first sleep-away retreat at a Baptist camp. After three days of walking through the woods, I eagerly agreed to say a

salvation prayer with a perky Bible college co-ed who led the girls' sessions. I returned to camp for two weeks that summer. Then I came back as a staffer every summer for the next four years. It was there, working with special needs children and adults, that I learned the lessons about every person being God's beloved. It was there that I first met Black and Brown people. It was there that I learned (was allowed!) to read scripture on my own.

A few years ago, I returned to the camp for a reunion. I took a few moments alone to follow the trail to the log cabin chapel. The chapel was smaller and more pedestrian than I remember. Still, as I walked up the aisle to the simple altar area, sunbeams falling to the floor through the tall windows, I knew I was walking on holy ground. The Creator was still there, waiting for me.

But it is more complicated than that.

My freshman year in high school, on those same wooded trails behind my house, where I felt the manifest presence of God during a snowfall, I was raped by a classmate that I thought was my first boyfriend. During the attack, a special needs adult who lived with his elderly mother on the other side of the woods appeared, walking his dog, Tucker. My rapist continued. The man kept

walking, only stopping to shush his barking pup. My response to this failure to be saved by the man, his dog, or the Almighty, was to feel ashamed and humiliated to have been seen like this.

The classmate bragged about his conquest. Boys at school, on the bus, and in my neighborhood alternately taunted me or tried to hit on me, thinking they, too, could get some. The girls shunned me, except for the ones who were morbidly curious and asked me horrifying questions about the experience. They all believed the classmate, not considering for a minute that his story was grossly exaggerated, that the experience wasn't consensual, and that I was traumatized by it. The nuns in the hallway (oh, yeah, did I mention that I attended parochial school?) pursed their lips at me as I walked by. The kinder ones prayed for me under their breath.

The classmate's mother, concerned too late that her son and I were getting in over our heads, started planning family outings for us. My own mother, concerned that I was becoming a slut, sent her wild friend to talk to me about birth control and good decisions.

My summers at the Baptist camp were an escape from that. I spent my days and nights in the woods, where I sang the songs, and joined the prayer meetings, and

became the perky girl that led others through the salvation prayer. The Baptist God in the woods kept me busy and safe from horny, violent Catholic boys. The Baptist God didn't save me from unraveling, though.

Back at school, I fell into a group of friends—and a steady boyfriend—that were super nerdy. I sought them out because I wasn't afraid of them. We listened to ProgRock bands and played Dungeons & Dragons and wandered through the woods playing disc golf. This, too, kept me busy and safe. It didn't save me from unraveling, though. I learned years later that they sought me out because they, too, had heard the rumors and were hoping to get lucky.

I started college and again made friends with the (safe) nerds. We read science fiction books and went to Renaissance Fairs and smoked pot and dropped acid and wrote really awful poetry. I had sex. Lots of sex with lots of stupid boys. (Well, lots to me, who still wanted to believe in the Catholic God and the Baptist God and their rules-disguised-as-promises.)

I dropped out of college my senior year to follow the Grateful Dead. Well, actually, I was following a Dead Head who looked (to me) like Leonardo DiCaprio. I got pregnant.

On my thinking rock at Stony Brook, I wept and begged the Creator for help. When I went home, my parents told me that they would pay for the next semester of college if I didn't tell anyone and just made it all go away.

I was directed by a receptionist on the phone to go to a side street and come into a service entrance to the building to avoid the crowd of pro-life protestors. I sat in a waiting room filled with some young girls who looked like me and a few middle-aged women. This wasn't a clinic filled with desperate women forced to make an untenable choice between a life of poverty or chronic illness or disability or abuse and death. This was a room filled with privileged women who didn't want to admit to their mistakes.

I wept while I filled out the paperwork. I sobbed as I honestly listed the drugs I was using. I kept crying, silently, while holding the hand of a nurse, a stunning Black woman with aubergine hair.

I moved out of my parents' house and in with the Dead Head that night. I got stoned and stayed stoned for weeks on end. I had nightmares for months. I slid into a dangerous depression. It was a very dark time in my life.

But I was still going to church. I frequently attended Baptist church services with my local friends from camp. I attended mass at my Catholic parish. I taught CCD to third graders. I have a clear memory of a rare happy day in the midst of my deepening depression, out on the trails at a beautiful state park. I was wearing my favorite purple handkerchief skirt and a white eyelet peasant blouse. My saunter ended at a picnic table, where I pulled my CCD curriculum from my backpack to plan my lessons for the upcoming month.

I was a druggie living in sin after having an abortion. I had no business being in church. I surely had no business teaching children about faith. The day came when I was to bring my CCD students to meet with the priest for confession. The priest was a kind, thoughtful man who was good to the children and always seemed happy to see me. But I was convinced I'd be run out of the parish if he knew the truth about me. I felt sick. I brought my class to the fellowship hall in the basement, where he gently met with each child, face to face, to listen to their confessions and mete out simple acts of contrition. I could not believe that repentance would lead to forgiveness for me. I had done unforgiveable things. And so, I fled. After the last child was picked up or rode off on their bike, I went

back to my apartment, and I never returned to that parish again. I stopped going to any church anywhere.

On my thinking rock at Stony Brook a few months later, I confessed to the night that I had broken all ten commandments. I was preparing to commit suicide when an overwhelming feeling of being loved, despite my wretchedness, filled me. Where the Catholic God and the Baptist God failed me, the Forest God (by which I mean Actual God, the Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth) saved my life.

Slowly, I began to heal. I broke up with the Dead Head. I went back to school. I met a man with gorgeous brown eyes who was also a mess. We had a whirlwind courtship. After just a few months of casual dating, he came to my preschool class to create an ice carving of a swan to go with my reading of The Ugly Duckling. He drove me home from work and told me to pack a bag for the weekend. Then he took me to the airport and flew me to Montreal. It was February. It was cold. Really, really cold. Still, we walked all over that beautiful city.

Desperate to warm up, we ducked into the Basilica du Notre Dame. Not having grown up Catholic, he was stunned by how glorious it was. I was stunned to find God

there, welcoming us. While we warmed our hands at the back of the sanctuary, I asked God to make this man mine forever. We recently celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary.

When we returned from Montreal, we looked for a place to live together. He proposed. We discussed what, if any, kind of faith we would pass on to the children we already knew we wanted to have. We began church hunting.

He grew up in a military family attending whatever Protestant church on base was the least emotional. Catholic worship didn't make any sense to my fiancé. Besides, the child sexual abuse scandal had just broken in the Boston Globe. Neither of us wanted anything to do with that.

A co-worker invited us to her church. It was a non-denominational, Pentecostal congregation that met in a storefront. Neither of us trusted a storefront church, but we went to be polite. The pastor was young, married, and preached a sermon that seemed relevant to our lives. We stayed. For 21 years.

The storefront moved to a warehouse and, finally, to a 2,000 seat sanctuary that my husband and the other men of the expanding congregation cut out of the woods

and built with their own hands. I have a beautiful picture of my husband, in red flannel, jeans, and work boots, standing on a granite outcropping in the forest, arms uplifted as he prayed for the church and its people.

But the church became too big and too slick. It's not a bad church, far from it. The pastors and the elders are good people doing what they believe they are called to do. But it became too hard for me to be myself there—messy, complicated, not sure enough of the answers given in a five-part sermon series, asking too many questions. I needed to go for a walk.

A former Catholic high school PE teacher that I knew through her work managing her parish food pantry invited me to a retreat on 150 acres of woodlands, saltmarsh, meadow and ocean front. It was surrounded by conservation land. Just as I had as a teenager, I walked in the woods for three days and found myself meeting the Creator again. I've returned several times a year—on retreats or just to spend the day—for more than a decade now. The nun who ran the office, the priest who led the retreats, and a handful of Church Ladies have helped me rediscover so much of what I had lost of liturgy, sacrament, and faith-in-practice when I left the Catholic Church.

When the diocese could no longer maintain the facilities, and sold off the property last year, I wept. When I learned that the Massachusetts Audubon Society purchased the grounds, preserving the trails in perpetuity, I wept again. For me, it was never the chapel or the priests and nuns that made the place sacred. It was the grounds. That I am still able to return there to walk along the shore and marsh, tromp through the meadows and woods, means that I can still go there on retreat and know that I will be able to meet God.

There have been other walks that have been unexpected visitations from God for me—the dull, February day I walked the Cliffs of Moher with my father, just before his diagnosis; the warm spring day when I unwittingly found myself leading a group of high school students in the Remembrance Day procession through Kigali, Rwanda, with President Kagame and thousands of Rwandan genocide survivors; the Labor Day morning that I suddenly emerged from the deep woods to find myself at the peak of Bald Knob, the breathtaking view of Lake Winnipesaukee below me; my first trek along the trails at the Blackstone Gorge, where an otter swimming by was interrupted by the flight of a massive great blue heron.

The God who spoke the universe into existence met with me on all those walks.

When I became a grandmother, I was struck by the recognition that my grandson was a tangible bit of heaven in my arms. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of love that bent me low. It has been ten years since I have been a member of a church, but now that I am someone's Nana, I feel an obligation to get my spiritual life right. I am not sure how to fully articulate this. There is holiness and wisdom that I feel I am duty and love-bound to pass on.

I have not yet admitted this to anyone, but it pains me that he is not being raised up with a faith community around him. I worry that he is missing the blessings of the sacraments. I also cannot bear the idea of him going to a church that considers his gay uncles disordered, that teaches that women are not fit to preach or lead, that stands by as black and brown people are oppressed and killed. I cannot bear the thought of going back to church myself. I cannot ask my daughter to bring my grandson. But I still want him to know God.

So, on New Year's Eve, as my husband and I toasted our joy at our daughter's health and our grandson's birth, I resolved to go for a walk, a pilgrimage. I still am not sure if I intend to travel to the Holy Land, or to walk the Camino

de Santiago, or if I am just going to log many miles of walked steps in the woods at all the places that are holy ground to me. So I've begun to train my body and my mind to walk long distances over repeated days. When I head out the door, I always announce, "I'm just going for a walk." I always hope, though, that I'm going to church.

Sick Journey
by Marybeth Chuey Bishop

Sister Suzy begins the hymn on the organ, head tilted back, looking through the bottom of her glasses. Her hands shake with arthritis, curled over the keys; her whole body sways as she stomps on the dusty foot pedals. The tempo is all over the place, and every fourth or fifth note is off. But to my three-year-old self, this is the music of my soul. My pigtails bob as I slip out of the pew into the aisle and dance the only way I know how—like a Charlie Brown character. Left shoulder up and right shoulder down, then switch. Repeat. Dad smiles at me. Mom tries to snatch me back into the pew. Some of the nuns grin while others glare. But I am totally unselfconscious. I am home.

I was Catholic before I was born.

Rosemary was 39, Donald was 43, back when that was almost scandalous. They already had four kids (boys, the lot of them), all of which had been high-risk pregnancies. Mom stood a significant chance of injury or death. To top it off, she had just gone back to work and

contracted German measles (rubella) from a student. Friends, acquaintances, and even doctors suggested putting a stop to it, for everyone's sake. They said there was a 33% chance I'd be born dead, and another 33% chance that I'd have extreme birth defects.

It is Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—very late for a five-year-old to be awake. We are standing in the back of the church waiting for the music to end so we can process to the front, each of us carrying a statue for the manger scene. My brothers have shepherds and animals. Dad has Joseph, Mom has Mary. I have baby Jesus. I am dissatisfied with this, and ask Mom if we can trade. "My name is Mary, after all," I wheedle. She tells me that Jesus is the most important one: He's what Christmas is all about. "Then you should have him!" I say, trying to sound generous. I really want the Mary statue. She has such a glorious long blue veil and lovely eyes. I want to be that pretty someday. Soon the music ends and the procession begins. I am last, and I sulkily study the reflection of the twinkling lights in my patent leathers while I wait for a nun to give me the signal to proceed.

The resident priest at the convent where we attend Mass dies when I am five. His name was Father Lowney,

and he was a dear friend of my parents. The nuns cannot find another retired priest who is willing to live on the premises and say Mass for them every day, or even every Sunday, so they resort to “borrowing” a priest each week from Guest House. Guest House is an alcohol rehabilitation center specifically for priests, and once they reach a certain stage of their 12-step program they are allowed to leave the premises to say Mass. We happen to live halfway between the convent and Guest House, so we are usually recruited to pick up the priests and drop them back off.

I stand in the foyer holding Dad’s hand. I am seven, and Guest House reminds me of a castle. The ceiling of the foyer is vaulted with an elaborate crystal chandelier, and there is marble everywhere. I pretend I am a princess and Dad is a king when the priest we are waiting for breezes in and shakes Dad’s hand. Then he leans down to my level and shakes my hand. I like these priests. They are never too haughty to address me personally, even though I’m just a kid. They speak plainly. They talk a lot about their own mistakes. We get to Church and the priest goes to put on his vestments. I know they will be colorful, not like the nuns who wear all black and white, all day,

every day, with veils to cover their hair, even on Christmas. They look like so many penguins, bunched up for warmth. Sure enough, when Mass begins I see his robes are green and his stole is a vibrant combination of blues and greens and purples, like a peacock. He processes up to the altar, which stands in front of a huge mosaic of gold. The nuns who live here, who work here, who clean the altar, must stay down in the pews during Mass while the guest priest is clearly in charge in all his garish colors. My brothers serve as altar boys—I helped braid their bright green sashes. It is a position I will never be allowed to hold.

I don't know how old I am when I learn about abortion, but it is years and years earlier than I learn about sex. Abortion is the primary evil of our day, Mom says, because it takes the lives of the most innocent. There are people who believe it is just a bunch of cells and not a living human with a soul—a soul that Jesus loves. Mom spends many nights with her friends, planning how to save those lives.

It's a few months before the election—either 1980 or 1984, I'm not sure which. That would make me either 10

or 14. Mom and her two best friends—matriarchs of the only families I know with more kids than ours--have just dropped a bunch of us girls off at the church. We enter a large room in the parish hall that is set up as a phone bank, with long tables, a dozen telephones and call lists at each seat. We are instructed briefly how to call: dial the number, ask to speak to a registered voter, ask if they are Democrat, Republican, or Independent, and if they are pro-life or pro-choice. Record the answers. We are told we are saving babies. It is sticky in here, dim after briefly being in the blaring sun, and my long skinny legs stick out from my pink shorts. I sit down and make a few calls, until one lady sounds irate that I'm asking about her views. That is enough for me. We start chatting with each other instead, and end up chasing each other around the room in a tag-like game until someone's older sister comes in and yells at us to get back to work.

We go to church as a family every Sunday and every holy day, without fail, unless one of us is actively vomiting. All seven of us pile into the car (the youngest brother and I get to ride in the hatchback when we take the VW Bug) and drive right past our town's Catholic church because it's "too liberal." We drive to the next town to the north—

our rival town—where we all spill back out of the car like clowns at a circus. This is St. Mary's, a Dominican convent, run by the nuns who live here.

It is Good Friday. I am 14 or 15, small for my age. We have been here at the church for 2 hours already, with another hour left to go. I can hear the music faintly through the bathroom door. I am lying down in the stall with my forehead on the tile floor—a mishmash of blue and green squares and rectangles that I am trying to discern the pattern of. Concentrating on the floor helps me forget that I'm nauseous. It might be from fasting, or it might be from my period, which is so heavy that when I change my thick pad I fold up as much toilet paper as I think I can get away with taking and put it on top of the pad to make it that much thicker. I still sometimes leak through. I am always ashamed when this happens, feeling a vague sense of guilt even though when pressed I would say it isn't actually a sin. They are singing about sin in the chapel, but here on the floor I am just praying that no one comes into the bathroom, since the stall door ends a foot above the floor, allowing them to see me sprawled out like a rotisserie chicken.

My mom and her two friends organize a religion class for us kids away from the liberal church, a class that they run themselves. We are taught about sin, and we are taught to memorize prayers, and we learn about saints who have the stigmata. Mostly we talk about sin. The older sister of one of my classmates teaches us using the "milk bottle" method. She draws two milk bottles on the chalk board, and colors them in with chalk "milk" to symbolize grace. Then she names a few venial sins—lying to your parents, fighting with your brother, not paying attention at Mass—and with each one she wipes a tiny bit of milk out of the bottle on the left. Then she names a mortal sin—abortion—and she wipes the entire milk bottle on the right clean of all its milk. The only way to refill a bottle is to go to Confession with a priest.

I am nine, and I am a wretched sinner. I am certain I am the worst sinner that has ever existed. I haven't murdered anyone, or had an abortion—I don't even know what sex is. But I feel guilty all the time, mostly for thinking my brother's friends are cute, and I feel like I don't deserve to live. I know that wanting to die is also a sin—it might even be a mortal one. But I can't just kill myself; that's definitely a mortal sin, and I don't want to go to Hell. So I

make a deal with God. "Please, God, kill me in my sleep before I wake up. Definitely before I turn 10. If you don't kill me before I turn 10, I promise you I will become a nun. Probably a Dominican. Amen." Every night at bedtime I cover my head with the blanket to keep me safe from spiders and lightning, and I say this prayer.

On another religion class evening one of the moms teaches a girls-only lesson. She starts out soft, talking about make-up (take-away: lipstick is OK so that you look presentable, but don't paint your face like a clown). Then she moves on to sex. Not the mechanics of it, nor even the necessity of it. Just that it's a sin. "It is," she says, "always a sin, even in marriage—because anything that takes your mind off of God even for a second is a sin, and sex most certainly takes your mind off God." We all understand that sex before marriage wipes out all of the milk, and possibly the bottle as well. I have no idea what the boys are told.

It is the summer between my junior and senior years in college. I have just come home from my internship, and my parents are already asleep. I am enjoying sitting in the dark, quiet house, listening to the ducks on the water,

when my youngest brother comes home. "Hey," he says. "I've been meaning to talk to you." He sits next to me without turning a light on, and for a silent moment I wonder if I imagined what he said. "So, I'm wondering Mar, has anyone ever told you about condoms? Because, you know, I know that you and Brad are getting serious, and I just don't want anything to happen to you." I am grateful for the dark now, because I begin to cry. Brad and I are, in fact, secretly engaged, and we've been having sex for more than two years. I am on the pill. I know about condoms, but not because anyone taught me—Mom refused to sign the sex ed permission slip in high school, and the only thing she said about birth control was that it's a sin. And here in the age of Magic Johnson AIDS revelations, this "irresponsible" black sheep brother is the only one who ever thought to save my life.

As part of our pre-wedding classes we must take a class on Natural Family Planning, the only kind of birth control approved by the church. Due to time constraints, we take the class shortly after we are married. "Is it wet… or dry?" the instructor says for the twelfth time this evening. Later every couple in the class will imitate her cadence 'wet… or dry?' but for now we try not to gag as she explains how women are to check our vaginal mucus

daily to see if it's tacky or stretchy, and how we're supposed to take our temperature at exactly the same time every morning after a good night's sleep and then hand the thermometer to our husbands to record and chart. This is all to track our fertility so we can try to get pregnant—we are told that we should only use it to avoid pregnancy in the most extreme circumstances.

Our fourth child is a nursing 18-month-old who is failure to thrive and refuses to eat any real food. One of the older girls has autism, and when the baby was born she fell into a deep depression and was suicidal. Another child right now would put her, the baby, and me at risk. NFP is unreliable because I'm nursing and haven't started ovulating yet—but I could at any minute. Besides that, I'm on a medication to help keep me lactating for the baby, and the medicine is an abortifacient. My mother has recently told me that NOT having sex for an extended period of time is grounds for an annulment. Not that I'm in that position—Brad is understanding and patient—but we haven't been able to have sex for two years. When I try to explain this conundrum to a priest to ask his advice, I must first explain how ovulation works and the basics of NFP, because he doesn't know these things. He has no advice

for me. He says only, "I cannot lay a heavy burden on your back when I don't lift a finger to help bear it." It is not the clarity I sought, merely another piece of a puzzle.

At a family gathering I learn that Mom is no longer friends with the mom who taught us about sex being sinful, because she left her husband for another woman. As my brothers and I sit around the table late at night after my parents have gone to bed, preparing to play a board game, I ask, "What is the one thing you could do that would disappoint Mom and Dad the most?" Without hesitation several of them say, "Being gay."

I have been awake most of the night for several weeks running now, praying, trying to figure out what to do. "Please, God," I pray, "Make something good out of Sarah and Bec." Bec is my daughter's fiancée. And God answers—my heart opens to Bec, to Sarah as she fully is, to their love. I tell my parents about Sarah and Bec. They are not surprised, but they are upset. When I tell them that Bec will be traveling with us for our usual summer visit to both families, they say they are not sure they can have Sarah and Bec stay with them "in good conscience." They float several suggestions—we could just not bring Bec, we could have Sarah and Bec stay in a hotel… anything

short of us not coming at all. "We're coming to Michigan so Bec can meet family," I say, "and we're staying together, wherever we are welcome."

My parents move out of their house and into an "independent living" apartment. Dad's health quickly declines, particularly his mental health. He is not his usual kind, gregarious self. Their church friends come visit them and occasionally take them to Mass. Though there are other Catholics in the apartments, Mom seems unwilling to make new friends—she has been a member of Regnum Christi for years now, and these new people are not the "right" kind of Catholic. Dad shows signs of dementia, and begins to confess his sins repeatedly, several times a day, to Mom.

We visit Mom and Dad on a warm May day, to see how they're really doing. My brothers Paul and John and I bring Egg McMuffins with us at Mom's request, but Dad's sits untouched. He has his own agenda. Maybe we should interrupt him. But he's so earnest, so desperate to get these things out, and they buzz around the room, stinging us all in turn. His mind slides fluidly through time like the lake bluegill through seaweed, flashing blue and green,

here and then gone. He says he hopes to feel unburdened by the confessing, though it is clear from his watery eyes that he doesn't. Suddenly he gets a burst of energy, and says to no one in particular, "You should know that you're all going to Hell. There might be time for a few of you to turn it around, but for most of you it's too late." He lapses into silence; we are each left to ponder which category we fall into. Dad lifts his gnarled arthritic hands and lets them flop down hard on his knees, on the lap I used to sit on for story time. He says, "I just… don't know how to die." We tell him that it's all OK, that he is forgiven, that we love him still. But by the time we get the words out, he is staring at the grandfather clock. "Who will wind it?" he asks. "What will we do when the time runs out?"

Sarah and Bec come visit for Thanksgiving, and a few days after we put up the Christmas tree. On December 1, as we do every year, we start reading the Advent Books—tiny ornament books that slowly tell the story of Jesus' birth. When we finish reading the day's book, Sarah realizes that Bec doesn't know the story at all, so they go into the other room and Sarah explains the story, from annunciation to visitation to birth to wise men, in the gentlest, sweetest way I've ever heard the story told. For

the first time in years, the Incarnation feels new and exciting.

It is a cool, cloudy October afternoon. The newlyweds are all smiles outside the courthouse, Sarah looking fierce in her mohawk braid and Bec glowing through the veil they made. They snap pictures with each other, with each family, with the three of my brothers who were able to come witness. Mom is not here; she finds even short car rides painful since Dad died. It's not clear if she would have come otherwise. Suddenly Sarah dips Bec in a kiss. My brother Paul gapes and laughs; some of us clap. Strangers walking by the courthouse smile and wave and yell their congratulations.

Brad comes home to find me curled up in the rocking chair, crying. "I've been reading the Grand Jury report," I explain. "It's just so horrible. Some of the details…" I can't stop shaking. These are the people—the men—who told me I needed to use NFP or abstain for years. These are the men who say my daughter's marriage is "disordered." These are the men who laid down the laws that made me want to literally die before the age of 10. These are the men who insist no woman can preach the gospel during

a Catholic Mass. These perverted men. I am both longing to call my parents to commiserate, and grateful that they are not alive to witness such atrocities come to light.

It is August 15, the Feast of the Assumption, the day after the Grand Jury reports came out. A holy day of obligation. Part of me wants to spit in the eye of "obligation," but a bigger part wants to hear what the church has to say for itself. I take the boys, 11 and 8—they know nothing of what's happened, what's been happening for decades. The priest's homily is fairly short, but he looks shaken. He says he is disgusted, he understands that we are disgusted, he says there is no excuse. I trust this man, consider him a friend; even so I put arms protectively around the boys. In the car on the way home I try to make my voice sound casual. "You know, boys, that you don't have to accept touch from anyone, right? That no one has a right to touch you. No one. Not a teacher, not a priest, not the president or the pope. No one. OK?" They look confused, mumble something. I try not to start crying again.

It is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It occurs to me as the priest reads the gospel that I have never

heard Mary's fiat preached from the altar by a woman, because only the priest reads the gospel and priests are always men. I find myself longing to hear Mary's words preached by a woman, to hear them in the voices of every woman I know. I want to make a video of women from around the world reciting Mary's words.

The world is a changed place. The pandemic has kept us largely at home for more than 7 months now; we have not been to Mass in that amount of time. At the beginning we would watch a livestream of Mass from our parish, but as time went on we started doing the readings ourselves. The kids join in. We have a question-and-answer discussion instead of a homily. We all participate in the prayers of the faithful. I even read the gospel sometimes; my boys are hearing the gospel in a woman's voice. Brad laughs and says, "We may never go back."

I am home.

Belonging
by David Russell Mosley

I've always felt like a wanderer. Even as a child, I felt as though I never really belonged anywhere. Being adopted meant rejection as well as acceptance, homelessness and a home. When I was around a year old, my mother decided to give me up for adoption. The details around why are fuzzy. She had three other children from three different men. Both of my birth-parents struggled with addiction, which explains why all of my half-siblings found themselves not living with our mother on one occasion or another. In my case, the removal was permanent. My birth-father's parents found out from my caseworker that I was being put up for adoption, so they stepped in and swooped me up. They often kept me anyway, making sure I was bathed at least once a month. They loved me like a son and a grandson. In truth, I was spoiled. They were and are my parents, and they did the right thing in telling me early on that I was adopted. Unfortunately, it still meant that I often felt out of place.

All my new siblings, who had been my birth-father and aunt and uncles, were much older and not at home. This

meant I was raised as an only child despite having siblings everywhere. So I spent most of my time off in my own little world. I would converse with a whole cadre of people invisible to everyone, myself included, but who were always there, ready to listen. Mine was not a particularly Christian home, so I had no notion of angels or God really, not until I occasionally went to a Baptist church when I slept over at a friend's house. I enjoyed being an acolyte, lighting the candles and rushing to blow them out, but otherwise I paid little attention. Even during Sunday School, I would ask the teacher the rather precocious (and ultimately meaningless) question, "If God created everything, then who created God?"

My world was populated, instead, with the Greek gods, King Arthur, elves, and fairies. It got to a point where a boy in fourth grade made fun of me for my ardent belief in Zeus and Hera. I was in tears trying to defend myself. But this was the world I had created. Not feeling at home in the world observable by the senses, I delved deeper, looking for something more, something behind the trees, waiting for me to discover it.

My mother had read The Hobbit to me as a child and in elementary school I discovered The Chronicles of Narnia. These first sat alongside and then, in some ways,

began to replace my dedication to the gods of old. Here I discovered a hint of that something deeper I was looking for. Later, I read through The Lord of the Rings and constantly watched the old Rankin-Bass and Ralph Bakshi films. Now when I went into the woods, I hoped a faun or a dwarf might wander out in front of me.

By the end of Junior High, I had become a Christian. It seemed a natural move for someone like me. After all, I already believed in so many fantastic things, why not believe that God became man, and that he died for me? It was a small, non-denominational church that took me in. I attended all their events, began leading worship every now and again, and decided by the end of high school that I wanted to be a pastor. But even during all of this, I never quite felt at home. I asked questions and tried to understand, but there was still something missing.

In college I changed my major to youth ministry, and after a failed attempt at being a youth minister, changed again so I could go on to grad school to study theology. It was at this time I was first introduced to the medieval Irish saints. Names like Columba, Kevin, Patrick, Brigid, Brendan, and others were frequently on my lips. I read all the popular material I could get my hands on, which meant I had a very romantic view of medieval Irish

Christianity. But those foretastes of the truly otherworldly broke in upon me. Here was a stranger vision of Christianity than I had been shown up to this point. The Christianity I had entered was very modern. The Spirit worked primarily through Scripture and through convicting me of my sins, and while more miraculous things might be possible, they stayed mostly within the pages of Scripture. But here were men and women living 500 or more years after Christ doing miracles, showing up the druids, living with wolves, holding bird's nests in their hands until the eggs hatched. I was enchanted.

When I married a beautiful woman from New Hampshire, my love for her soon expanded to a love for New England as well. Illinois had never really felt like home, but New England, with its forests and small but more ancient mountains and coasts--this surely was the land of enchantment I was searching for. My bride and I felt determined we'd end up back there eventually, maybe even to plant a church. If we did, I was determined to carry with me some of these new ideas I was learning from the Irish saints.

I went to grad school determined either to work on C.S. Lewis or the Irish saints. Since I had been somewhat

bullied into doing a graduate degree in Church History, the medieval Irish won out. Sadly, I still did not feel at home, as few were interested in the questions I was. I learned that Celtic Christianity as I had called it up to that point was not the unified entity I had thought it was, staying as a cohesive whole from Patrick all the way to the Carmina Gadelica. Still, I held on to some of the enchantment that I found there and in the writings of Lewis and Tolkien. I delved deeper into both medieval and patristic theology, devouring the notions of the interconnectivity of all things and that humanity's destination was to be so united to God that we could call that unification a deification, one that allowed us to remain ourselves and yet also to be identified with Christ. But the wanderlust was on me still, and so I went on to study in England.

It was there, in England, that I first encountered real liturgy. I was moved by it, by the orderliness of it, the intentionality. It reminded me of the monastics and their view of time as being ordered toward eternity. One Advent, my wife and I and several of our friends went to a carol service at the Anglican minster in Southwell. The lights were off, and we all lit the candles we had been given. Even as I tried to keep the melting wax from

burning my hand, I was enamored with the beauty of this service as the young male voice rang out, “Once in royal David’s city…” That voice rings in my ears, even now. I fell in love with liturgy. I also fell in love with the land.

My own ancestry was largely from this island, and I hoped that maybe now I had found the home I’d been searching for. I’d already changed my research focus yet again, away from Columbanus, the Irish monk I had studied in grad school, to look at the role of human creativity in our deification, when I decided I should try to become a priest in the Church of England. Many supported this decision, and I thought I had found my calling. But it turned out not to be. A bad experience with the parish priest--and the discovery that we were pregnant not just with one child, as we had intended, but with twins--made us think that perhaps going home was the right call.

As I tried to finish up my PhD with two wonderful little boys who slept little and ate much, something unexpected happened. At 9 weeks old, my second-born, Edwyn, whose name means bliss-friend, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma. Lauren, my wife, had already lost a younger sister to a different form of cancer when they were both kids. Now, our son seemed to be sharing a

similar fate. Thankfully, this was not to be. There were no genetic links between the cancer Lauren's sister had had and Edwyn's. We were just that lucky.

We had to delay our return home so Edwyn could undergo chemotherapy. This worked out well in many ways because we had no idea how to parent, and having others, including my mother-in-law, with and around us insured that Theodore, my first born, my "Gift of God," received the care and attention he needed too while we were so often focused on his brother.

In between rounds of chemo, we were able to go back home—after living in the hospital for a month. But since we couldn't put our immune-compromised son on the bus to go to church, I started going to a thirty-minute, spoken Eucharist at the parish church in Beeston where we lived. I could walk there, attend the service, receive the sacraments that had become important to me as I studied theology more deeply, and return home in under an hour.

One Sunday morning on July 21, 2014, I was sitting in the nave of the parish church as the liturgy was being said. I found myself continually looking at the stained glass window at the back, as well as a relief of the Last Supper which was bookended by two angels. It made me think about how little we consider angels, or at least how

little I consider them. Again, in much of my upbringing we limited our knowledge of angels solely to the text of Scripture and often ended by saying, they're a bit of a mystery and Jesus is more important anyway. I remembered John Milbank's interview at Big Ideas from several years ago, in which he said:

> "I mean, I believe in all this fantastic stuff. I'm really bitterly opposed to this kind of disenchantment in the modern churches, including I think among most modern evangelicals. I mean recently in the Nottingham diocese they wanted to do a show about angels, and so the clergy – and this is a very evangelical diocese – sent around a circular saying, 'Is there anyone around who still believes in angels enough to talk about this?' Now, in my view this is scandalous. They shouldn't even be ordained if they can't give a cogent account of the angelic and its place in the divine economy."

As I thought about this and continued to participate in the liturgy, I found myself staring into the eyes of Christ at the top center of the window at the back of the nave.

I closed my eyes, and as often happens when we close our eyes after looking at something through which light was shining, the outlines of the window remained with me. This alone is a rather brilliant picture of what role angels and the saints play (as well as icons and stained-glass windows), they shine forth the light of God. Suddenly, with my eyes closed, the number of shadows began to multiply. I saw myself surrounded by these shadows and I knew that what I was being shown were the saints and angels that are always around us, always watching over, praying for us, and guiding us in Christ through the Holy Spirit to the Father. The vision, as shadowy as it was, was overwhelming in its majesty. My heart began to race; my chest felt as though there were something very heavy pressing down upon it. I nearly began to weep right there in the middle of the service.

This was the deeper reality, the home, I had been seeking all of my life. It was here, all around me, ever present, and I had been given the honor to sense it, to feel it all around me. I think I know now some of what Jacob must have felt when he saw angels ascending and descending, and I understood in a new way what Jesus meant when he said we would see them descending upon

him and ascending from him. But still, my journey was not over.

We moved back to the US and once again began attending the tradition we had come from. I felt the loss of liturgy, the loss of the sacraments. I became depressed, feeling once again outside, wandering, homeless. After a year of feeling this way, I decided to attend a local Catholic church, St. Patrick's in Nashua, New Hampshire. I went on my own, early in the morning, before going to the non-denominational church with my family. The pastor there was one in a long line of first or second-generation Irish-Americans who had served at this traditionally Irish Catholic parish. He was smart, quoting Augustine and Aquinas and commenting on the pitfalls of American politics left and right. Eventually, I sent him an email, saying I wanted to be received into the Church. That January, 2017, I began my confirmation classes and was confirmed that April. I finally felt at home.

The highs we experience on the mountaintops don't always stay with us. I soon learned that there were those who called themselves Catholic but hated Pope Francis, Vatican II, and often wanted to focus only on judgment and hatred for the foreigner and oppressed amongst us. I had come for sacraments, for that deeper reality I had

experienced three years earlier and found more strife and infighting. I thought I had left these behind in Protestantism. How very wrong I was.

I remain in the Catholic Church, despite its infighting, its coverups, its mistreatment of those on the margins. Why? I often ask myself the same question. Ultimately, I remain because I have hope that if people like me and people much better than me remain and teach and write and talk about these deeper realities, these creatures and beings who do the work set them by God the Father and by Christ and by the Holy Spirit, then maybe we can see some healing. I know, of course, that in this life we fight the long defeat. Ragnarök will come and all, as we know it, will be destroyed. There will be no lasting peace this side of the resurrection. But that too gives me hope. I know I can't win, but I can fight, and I can do so with that same host of angels and saints who surrounded me as I prayed for my son. I still wander, waiting for all things to be made new, but I feel less homeless now than I ever have before.