

# DANTE'S ROAD



The Journey Home  
for the Modern Soul



MARC THOMAS SHAW

**Dante's Road:**  
**The Journey Home For The Modern Soul**

by Marc Thomas Shaw

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*To Soren*

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the many authors who influenced this book. In particular, Professor Thorpe, who himself has two excellent books in print: *Rapture of the Deep* and *Wisdom Sings the World*. The central books of his class must also be included here, given their deep and abiding influence: Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Czeslaw Milosz's poetry anthology *Book of Luminous Things*. In addition, Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* has been deeply influential, both personally and in providing some of the structure of the present work. The writings of Anthony De Mello, Father Thomas Keating and Father Richard Rohr have been influential throughout, both in introducing and affirming many of the ideas present. Also connected with these ideas is of course Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, as well as the work of Northrop Frye, James Frazer, Carl Jung and beyond that, of course, the myths themselves.

I must also acknowledge my many students over the years who helped hone my framing of questions and exercises, as well as the many friends and family members who walked through chapters or exercises and provided invaluable feedback. To my wife Karla, who provided valuable feedback at every step, and my son, Soren, who provided the motivation. Thank you!

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## Foreword

“The Christian faith is not about getting answers to your questions, but about being held by a love so great that those questions neither create terror nor shame.” This quote by an anonymous author was given to me by a pastor friend in Pittsburgh when I first entered the ministry and has hung on the fridge of my home ever since. It is a constant reminder to me of both the depth of God’s love and the brutal honesty God calls us to in this journey we call life. Never be afraid to sit in the question.

When I met Marc over lentil soup and red wine at an emerging Christian artist community in Los Angeles in 2005 shortly after I entered seminary, I had no idea that I would have the privilege of being his life partner through the ups and downs and ins and outs of the mysterious road of life and faith. Marc has always been a self-aware, at-ease philosopher of life, who can look past the surface of a person, situation, or text and see more, but his own journey with God and the shadows he has encountered, confronted, and released in himself have made him into what we call, in Christian circles, a truly centered being.

The journey this book takes you on in confrontation of your false self, befriending your pain and struggle, releasing without judgment, and coming to a place of acceptance of your true self which ultimately results in divine union, is not just an idea cooked up in a lab of ideals, it is the path of the Scriptures, the journey of the fathers and mothers that have gone before us, and the path

Marc has been on that I have been an intimate witness to. It is also a path that so few of us are willing to take in this scattered and shallow world. Few of us are willing to take it, but so many of us want the end result.

If you are longing for freedom within, if the external changes that so many self-help authors and speakers taut as “life-changing” aren’t working for you, if you believe that God wants more for your life than a drudgery of false attachments and compartmentalization, then I encourage you to dive deep into this book. Don’t rush through, as the process of change happens through the process itself.

There is no other person that I would trust more as a guide for this pilgrimage than Marc. I hope you experience what I have encountered through his wisdom and openness, as God meets you along the way.

Rev. Karla Shaw, Senior Pastor at Point Loma Community Presbyterian Church  
San Diego, 2018

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## A Personal Preface

In early 2014 I found myself half asleep in an auditorium on a college campus by the Pacific Ocean surrounded by a couple thousand cheering audience members trying to figure out what I was doing there. My two-year-old son had a cold and a fever that week. I hadn't gotten much sleep for several days and I was struggling to stay awake. My wife and I had bought a house and our real estate agent gave us a gift of two tickets to what was billed as a writer's conference.

Instead, this Storyline Conference held once a year and sponsored by author Donald Miller was intended to help inspire people to live better stories, with resources to help writers, bloggers, and marketers get going with their work. I was mindful of the fact that I wasn't a rabid fan. I wasn't a paying customer. I had been grandfathered into the show with gifted tickets. I was less a conference attendee and more a neutral observer.

But I was looking for some kind of inspiration. I'd been stuck about half way through a novel for years. The work had been a slog. It was a mock LA noir novel about a string of megachurch pastor murders. It was a train wreck. And worse: writing it wasn't any fun.

At the conference, writers came and went from the stage to tell their stories, interviewed by Miller himself. There were all kinds of speakers. Some whose work was genuinely inspiring and



some who didn't speak to me in the slightest. Depending on who came on stage a different little section of the audience burst out in wild cheers. As I took notes and sat with my thoughts and took another giant gulp of coffee, I realized something. I had been putting pressure on myself to write some great novel *seen through the eyes of someone else*. I wanted everyone I could think of to like it. But when it came down to it, I didn't particularly want to write the novel. I wanted some kind of mainstream literary appreciation. But here was writer after writer who had simply written from the gut about their own experience. And even if what they wrote wasn't for everyone, it resonated with *someone!* I started thinking. What would come about if I just wrote from the gut? What would be fun to write? What would be fun to read? What did I enjoy reading the most? And why?

My mind raced back to the first year of seminary when someone handed me a used copy of Julia Cameron's *Artist's Way*. This wasn't pointing out the flaws with society or religion or *the way we live now*. It was helpful. It was constructive. It was life-giving. This was the kind of thing I wanted to write. The help others grow, to experience transformation, to move toward wholeness.

What had inspired me were the great myths, the great poets, the great works from across the wisdom traditions, the teachings and practices of the mystics and contemplatives. These had helped me confront my own shadow and, to a great extent, experience healing and come out the other side. Profound healing and genuine transformation is possible. A life of vitality and fullness is actually available. Slowly but surely, I'd experienced the change myself.

At the same time, I saw those close to me struggling through life, stuck in arrested development, in addiction, ineffectiveness, immature patterns, failed marriages, lifeless careers, loneliness, depression, their lives so often lacking the vitality and fullness the great poets, mystics, and spiritual teachers speak of. Whether they called themselves Christian or not didn't seem to matter much. The patterns were largely the same. Short periods of satisfaction or achievement gave way to long stretches of struggle and suffering.

But how could I communicate something it took years of study and practice to get a handle on in some kind of accessible way? The writings of the poets, mystics, and contemplatives aren't exactly light reading and certainly not everyone's cup of tea, even for avid readers. I had wondered for a while about how to bridge this accessibility gap between my passions of poetry and myth and the people in my life caught in their everyday struggles.

I remembered a line from one of my mentors, a college literature professor. *We're lost. We're trying to get home.* One way to read the myths is as a road map of the soul's journey to God. The soul's journey *home*. In a flash I thought of Dante and his pilgrimage down through hell, up Mount Purgatory, and his flight into Paradise. Here was a model, a structure for the spiritual life, of the soul's journey home. These served as the foundation for the three sections of this book: the Downward Way, the Outward Way, and the Upward Gaze.

Guided by the wisdom of these ancient teachers, you are invited in this journey, invited to summon the courage it takes to do *soul work*, to look into the abyss, the areas you're afraid of and ask what is my hell and how do I move through it? What is my purgatory and what lesson do I need to come away with? What is my paradise and how do I get there? On this journey we move through our inner depths and wounds to fullness by sacrificing the ego, finding sacramental ways of living, and moving into sacred space.

The writing went quickly. It was as if I was given the next section to write from an external source as the pieces clicked into place. In reading and re-reading the poets and mystics both ancient and modern I realized this book was *transreligious*. It was not just for Christians looking to deepen their walk, but for anyone looking to access the deeper spiritual truths encoded in our very souls. These truths penetrate more deeply than any tribal affiliation. The experience of freedom, wholeness, and healing is not particular to any one tradition, but universally available. Though my own experience is largely within the Christian wisdom traditions and it is these I draw most heavily from.

As I began the final sections of the book I had a further transformational experience that confirmed my work even more deeply. In my own contemplative practice and reading I circled back through old wounds of my own and found again deep reservoirs of inner guilt, shame, and failure. In a profound experience of inner release I had an awakening experience into deep Oneness that lasted for about a week. It was a kind of inner transfiguration in which all concern, all self-consciousness was absolutely gone. There was nothing to fear. Nothing to achieve. Only deep acceptance. The fruits of this experience were an abiding joy and a much much deeper capacity for genuine selfless love. There was a surge of energy and an influx of grace that sustained me for months afterward. It is this state of complete at-one-ment, of being-at-home as the indwelling spirit that the great mystics and even Jesus himself invite us to. It's what he called the Kingdom. But he also had no illusions about how to get there. We have to walk down into the valley and confront the

wounds, to see the shadow and own it. To move through it. This is what it means to take up our cross and follow. It's the way of radical transformation and inner resurrection. What was dead now lives again.

I finished the first draft in a couple of months. Soon I received valuable feedback and encouragement from an author and the host of the Writer's Symposium by the Sea, Dean Nelson. I got valuable advice from a prominent literary agent. I was sitting down with a writer for Renovaré, an organization that provides resources for spiritual formation. An instructor for spiritual directors offered to serve as content advisor. I gave a workshop and found an editor within a matter of months. For someone like me who loves to second guess, these were much needed affirmations. The process of writing and bringing this book to publication have been like watching a flower come into bloom in spring. If it had never found a single reader it still would have been life-giving.

But this life is not meant to be hoarded. Spiritual lessons, like love, are enriched in the giving. I've only been granted the gift of walking the journey and mapping it out to offer it to you here. May the God who is ever present *within you* reveal new insights in the very depths of your own being as you journey through this book.

Peace and blessings on your journey.

—Marc Thomas Shaw,  
San Diego, May 2018

## Introduction

Something strange happened when I began to approach midlife. I looked around and saw family and friends in various states of distress. Some were going through divorce. Others going through deep depression. Some mourning broken relationships or lost family members, a meaningless job, a partner who committed suicide, the death of a parent. Whether they belonged to a faith tradition or not, the stories of suffering were similar. So many people seemed to be eking out an existence, getting by, living lives of frustration or boredom sprinkled with moments of fleeting pleasure to stave off despair. Some struggled to cling to a tattered faith, others to some semblance of hope. For so many around me, life seemed to be lacking vitality and purpose. Having undergone my own struggles and having had a profound awakening experience, I was searching for a way to communicate this so that others could benefit.

How do we go from feeling lost, self-conscious, addicted, fearful, and alone to connectedness, inner freedom, and lasting joy? How do we wake up? How do we move from death to life? What does it take to experience transformation? How do we get *home*? And how do we communicate the stages of this inner journey? The answer came from an unexpected place.

When someone at a faith gathering asked me what the most impactful books during my time in seminary had been, nothing from the class syllabus came to mind. It wasn't the writings of the saints or theologians. Instead I thought of two books I had read on my own time, one a book on getting unstuck creatively, *The Artist's Way*, and the other an epic poem from the medieval Christian

imagination, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Both were in some sense about the soul's journey home, and both helped me frame my spiritual journey, to both facilitate and make sense of my path to inner awakening. In fact, my love of ancient myths and literature as a map of the soul's journey home had been awakened in a college course. We read *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* not as relics from a distant past but as maps of the spiritual quest, the soul's journey home to God! I became so immersed in these works I had to dive back in to the reading first thing in the morning after I woke up. I was chasing Dante. It became spiritual food to start off the day, to get oriented and to continue the journey and to map out a way home.

As I continued on this journey I rediscovered the writings of the Christian mystics and modern teachers like Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Father Thomas Keating who reinterpret these ancient teachings for a modern audience using the language of Christian tradition, the mystics, the perennial tradition, and modern psychology. I began to see the connections. With a new framework, a new language, and fresh insights, I felt I was sitting on a treasure trove so many of those around me could use to experience breakthrough, and awaken a new sense of vitality. In a flash of insight I suddenly had a roadmap of the sacred journey made up of both ancient wisdom and personal experience accessible to modern readers, drawing on ancient myth, spirituality, and contemporary psychology to help shine a light on the path. We're lost. We're trying to get home. And there's a map, if only we have eyes to see it and ears to hear.

But most of us need a guide on the journey.

At the beginning of Dante's epic poem the pilgrim finds himself trapped. He wakes up lost in a dark wood filled with a sense of dread, alone and uncertain as to how he got there.

He makes his way to the edge of the dense forest and the early morning light gives him a ray of hope that he might escape. Immediately his upward way is blocked by three ferocious beasts: a spotted leopard, a ravenous lion, and a she-wolf. Despairing, he shrinks back down into the dark wood. He's lost.

This is how the story begins.

Like so many great works of myth and literature, in the beginning, the hero is lost. This is the central insight of the great writers and poets into the human condition as a whole.

*We're lost. We're trying to get home.*

This is where so many of us find ourselves. We hit particular points in our lives and realize we're disoriented, looking for a way out, for a sense of wholeness or fulfillment, only to find our way blocked by life circumstance, by addictive patterns, by fear.

*We're lost. We're trying to get home.*

Whether it's Homer's Odysseus stranded on an island, a struggling addict, or a young mother making her way through a bitter divorce, this sense of profound disorientation is a universal experience. How do we find our way? Where does healing come from? One powerful way to read ancient myths and the work of great poets is as a map of the soul's journey home. They help teach us how to navigate our lives toward a sense of meaning, communion, and wholeness.

## **The Divine Comedy**

Dante Alighieri's 13<sup>th</sup> century masterpiece the *Divine Comedy* maps out this territory through metaphor and allegory. In this epic poem, written in exile, Dante gives a picture of his own spiritual journey. Drawing on his immense learning, the poem touches on big issues like history and empire, justice and morality, education and learning, the role of art in our lives, cosmology, and theology, all filtered through a medieval Christian imagination. Most importantly for our purposes, though, the poem is an account of the soul's journey toward God, the soul's journey *home*.

As the poem begins, Dante wakes up in the dark wood three days before Easter Sunday in the year 1300. After being confronted by the three beasts who represent human vices of lust, pride, and greed, Dante falls back into the darkness of the forest in despair. But then something unexpected happens. He experiences a grace. A guide comes to him in the form of the classical poet Virgil, the poet of discipline and virtue. Virgil guides Dante down through nine circles of hell, where he learns the fate of those who've died in their various sins and vices, the lustful, the wrathful, the gluttonous, and so on. The people he meets along his way include historical, biblical, and mythical figures like Hercules and Medusa, Simon Magus, and Pope Boniface VIII. Finally, Dante sees Lucifer himself, trapped in ice at the bottom of hell, beating his wings and gnawing forever at the three traitors of church and empire – Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot. Having learned the lessons from his guide about the moral order at work in creation, Dante can finally leave this mythical hell. He climbs down the side of Lucifer's body, turns upside down, comes out into the clear air, and sees before him a steep slope leading up Mount Purgatory.

On this seven-story mountain the sinners go through a process of purification with tasks assigned to them because of distorted love and selfishness. Here, too, Dante has lessons to learn. As he begins his climb up the mountain, an angel etches three p's into the pilgrim's forehead – for *peccatum*, sin or wound. At each stage the brush of an angel's wing wipes one of the p's off the pilgrim's forehead until he is made fully clean. Finally, at the top of the mountain, Dante passes through a wall of fire and steps into the garden of Eden. His guide Virgil who represents virtue and reason can take him no farther.

Dante's childhood love, the beautiful and virtuous Beatrice becomes his new guide, taking him up on a journey through the ten spheres of Paradise. The highest spheres in Paradise are populated by contemplatives and mystics, who open themselves to the direct encounter with God. Finally, at the end of his journey Dante arrives at a rose of flame with Christ at the center, the faithful dispersed on the petals of the rose, angels like bees flying from soul to soul to minister. Based on a medieval imagination of the afterlife, the poem can be graphic in its depiction of suffering, but gives a moving portrait of the soul's journey toward God, the soul's journey *home*.

Most useful for us, the poem provides a framework for thinking about our spiritual lives. The spiritual path requires us to wake up, to move down through our personal hell of confusion, disorientation, and suffering, to see our own wounds. As many of the mystics recognize, we rise only through falling. To come to the land of love, we have to pass through the pains of death. We have to do the work of deep recognition. We have to confront the reality of our suffering, trace the roots of our harmful patterns, which are usually rooted in our woundedness. We need to see our reality as it is and accept it. This brings about a process of maturation. Understanding our *particular ego* patterns allows us to live in freedom and to cultivate compassion more deeply with others. It allows us to be more present and aware in the world moment to moment. It allows us to go about the work of service in the world. Understanding allows us a sober assessment of our strengths and weaknesses. It recognizes areas for growth and guides us toward a clear sense of purpose.

The next stage of maturation and identifying our work in the world is like climbing Mount Purgatory, as we become more and more refined in our goals, our self-understanding, and capacity to give. Even with the best of intentions, though, we find vestiges of the ego keeping us from our full flowering. This calls for the next stage of the spiritual journey, which is like Dante's journey through the realm of Paradise. Even if we recognize we are held in a perfect love, we continually submit ourselves to the refining process of that love. As we engage in learning, healthy community

and some form of contemplative practice, we learn to allow the divine therapy to take place. We learn to identify more and more with the divine love, and allow our false self or ego to dissolve more and more. We cultivate a disposition of openness, acceptance, presence, and love. This is the ongoing process of inner refinement. This is the sacred journey.

But before we can start the journey we have to recognize the truth of our situation, whether we're bored, or anxious, or addicted, or depressed.

*We're lost. We're trying to get home.*

This is where we begin.

## Theological and Historical Foundation

The spiritual journey outlined in this book harkens back to both the old myths, the ancient practice of pilgrimage, and Christian mystical theology. Whether traveling the Camino de Santiago or traveling to Graceland, what we're looking for is some experience of the transcendent. The outward journey is a means of inner transformation. This is a journey we take when we feel stuck, fragmented, out of touch with ourselves and with the divine. It situates us within a larger story. It gives us insight into the nature of reality and our role in the world. There are many tributaries from the Christian tradition running into this river.

It's in the story of Abraham, called forth by YHWH from the city of Ur to journey home to "the land that I shall show you."<sup>1</sup> It's in the story of Moses, wandering through the desert following the path toward the Promised Land. The Old Testament identifies three festivals, Passover, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths, during which the people were to collectively return to God.<sup>2</sup> These were pilgrimage festivals during which time the people were to return to Jerusalem to offer tithes and sacrifices, to reaffirm their identity as a people under God's covenant. In each case, pilgrimage involves expanded awareness, restoration, or a return to wholeness through ritual participation in the collective myth; it reaffirms a deeper identity beyond everyday social roles. Christ himself enters the wilderness to undergo his final preparations for ministry in the gospel account. He leaves the everyday norms behind and enters the liminal space of transformation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:1

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 16:16

<sup>3</sup> For a deeper treatment of transformation and liminal or "threshold" spaces, see Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*.



In the biblical stories there's a recurring pattern of revelations on the road. God reveals himself to Jacob on the road at Bethel.<sup>4</sup> Christ reveals himself to disciples on the road to Emmaus.<sup>5</sup> He reveals himself to Paul on the road to Damascus.<sup>6</sup> From the lives of the saints to the *Divine Comedy* to *Pilgrim's Progress*, the idea of pilgrimage and the image of the journey as a metaphor for the spiritual life has had a lasting hold on the imagination. *We're trying to get home.*

Another tributary flowing into this book and the treatment of contemplative practices as central to this journey is the tradition of mystical or *apophatic theology*. Christian tradition distinguishes between two main strands of theology: *kataphatic*, or affirming, and *apophatic*, or negative theology. Kataphatic theology is based on concept and images for God. It's been the dominant form of theological expression and teaching since the Enlightenment. It's in our sermons and worship songs. It's in our theology classrooms and Bible studies and books. It's positive and constructive. It affirms the attributes of God and forms a conceptual basis for the spiritual life. It organizes our understanding and situates us in relationship to God and community. It's the story we tell ourselves about who God is.

For contemplatives, though, this is only part of the picture. There is a further dimension to the spiritual life once we understand that our concepts, conditioning, and culture are inherently limited. We come to understand God is more than we can conceive of or put into words. Ultimately, God is mystery, to be experienced more than to be understood. This is the beginning of negative theology, a teaching that stretches back at least to early church fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius the Areopagite and flows through a great number of mystics and contemplatives over the centuries. We come to see that our understanding and therefore our practices and spiritual growth are limited by our cultural context and our unconscious assumptions. Like Dante trying to climb out of the forest we come up against our own limitations. But we are not trapped. Grace extends far beyond our limitations. From a contemplative, it's when we reach the end of ourselves that we are open to encounter the God who transcends the mental image we've built of Him. Rather, we encounter He Who Is. We do this by entering into silence. In doing so we go beyond the mind and let go of the concepts we cling to for a little while, allowing even our

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 28: 10-19

<sup>5</sup> Luke 24:13-32

<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:3-9

subconscious to be subjected to God's transforming presence. This is where transformation takes place.

For most of us, this search usually occurs in response to a crisis of faith or a deep encounter with suffering. Some part of us is deeply threatened. The old categories, the simplistic ways of thinking about life, identity, our journey, or even our ideas about God no longer hold and we move into deeper waters. When we are here, out of our depth, a new stage of maturity in the spiritual life begins. John of the Cross called this *The Night of Sense*, when the usual consolations we cling to dry up. When we move past our certainties and concepts we move into the contemplative space.

For the Eastern monks, a common form of contemplative prayer was called *hesychasm*, which translates as stillness, rest, or silence. Based on Christ's invitation in Matthew 6:6 to "enter the inner room, close the door and pray to the Father in secret," the hesychast rests silently for a direct experience of God. This tradition of resting silently in the presence of God is carried on today in practices like contemplative prayer or *Lectio Divina*, which we will touch on in more depth later in the book. As we grow in experience and depth of these kinds of practices, we move into greater intimacy with God, more and more open to the transforming Presence.<sup>7</sup>

The first step as we begin this journey is to encounter the reality of suffering, to realize the stakes of the game, of what can happen when we don't go through this process of transformation – we pass on our pain. Just as Dante walk downward through the nine circles of hell, grappling with the various torments he encounters, we will walk our own journey of the Downward Way, entering into the darkness of our own cave, exploring both the conscious and unconscious suffering we experience in the world, in our families, and in our own lives. Equipped with this deeper self-knowledge, we then move along the Outward Way, or into the world, experiencing a newfound sense of direction and orientation, just as Dante uses his climb up Mount Purgatory as an occasion to reflect on vocation and purpose. With a deeper understanding and gracious gaze toward our own faults, we have the freedom to change our relationship to the world around us, establishing healthy rhythms of rest, of play, of work, and a greater awareness for others and how we might serve them given our unique experiences and temperament. Finally, just as Dante learns from the divine Beatrice and the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux as he moves toward his final vision of God, we turn our gaze upwards, opening ourselves to the refining process of letting go, of deepening love, and of

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*. Rockport, MA: Element, 1992.

the transforming mystery as taught by the great mystics and contemplatives through the ages. But to begin our journey takes a sober assessment of where so many of us are in the here and now.

*We're lost. We're trying to get home.*

With the reflections and exercises in this book, I'm inviting you to kick off that journey, to get some guidance along the path, to get oriented and start out in the right direction, to get some spiritual food and guidance from some of the great teachers of the perennial and Christian traditions. I'm inviting you to join me for breakfast with Dante.

## Design

### The Weekly Reading

This book is designed with the working adult in mind. Starting with the reality of where most of us are today, I've included a short weekly reading that includes an imaginative or participative section to help visualize and experience the journey of transformation by walking the steps of the mythical journey. When you come to these sections, it may help to stop, take a breath, and even close your eyes once you've read through the description to imagine yourself in that space and to experience it in as much detail as possible.

As you go through the weekly reading, go ahead and underline, circle, copy down, whatever. Consume however you consume, but the material works best if you maintain this simple weekly rhythm. Think of one 20-minute stretch of free time you have to complete the week's reading and enter that below. Then, picture where you will most likely be during that time and write that in, too.

**I will read at:**

**Day** \_\_\_\_\_ **Start time** \_\_\_\_\_ **End time** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will be in:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Exercises

Congratulations, you've just finished your first spiritual exercise! That is, setting aside a time for reflection and spiritual exercise. Sounds too simple to be worthwhile? Far from it. Subtle but

intentional shifts can have long-lasting and far-reaching impact for our overall well-being and sense of purpose. At the end of each weekly reading, there will be a list of optional exercises to choose from. I recommend picking at least two or three, but pick what resonates with you at the time. Different people learn differently, and I have included different types of reflection and learning experiences to go with each week's reading, including writing, experiential learning, music, art, and poetry suggestions. Since the songs listed here are from my own mental playlist, I have also provided a personal playlist worksheet at the back, in case you would like to insert your own track listing to pair with each week's main theme. Since this book is intended to be used not just once, but perhaps several times the reader feels stuck over the course of their lives, it might be helpful to use the provided exercises the first time through, and provide your own songs once you have a feel for the process. Alternately, you can turn to the Appendix and fill in the songs that fit best for you with each topic. Make it work for you.

### **Small Group Discussion**

One of the most powerful ways we experience change is in community. Talking through our experiences and reflecting out loud to others consolidates our experiences and solidifies change in our identities. Through this process, you are reflecting on your story and giving it new shape and meaning. Our stories are meant to be told!

The groups should be intimate spaces, with around 3-5 members, although it can be more, if the members already have a high comfort level with each other.

Why so few? A small space is an intimate space, and what we don't want is contrived conversation. In American culture, especially among males, spaces for emotional honesty and vulnerability are very hard to come by. A small group setting with a few trusted intimates works best. Use your intuition here. If you don't have access to close confidants in your geographical area, think of a few people that you don't know well yet, but with whom you feel comfortable, or have a sense of possible connection. Another option, in our world of global connectedness, is to get together with people over the internet. This could even be a means of staying more closely connected with people you may have fallen out of touch with.

Even if you don't have the time or means to connect with a small group, I strongly recommend finding one close friend or partner with whom you can process your movement and experience verbally. This allows you to get feedback on some of your core issues from someone

else's perspective as you move through this landscape. In the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, it is Ariadne that holds the thread as the hero Theseus moves through the labyrinth to confront the monster. Consider who your Ariadne will be before you begin.

**Small Group Brainstorm:** List up to six people you would consider starting a group with

- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 3. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 5. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 6. _____ |

When and where might you be able to meet on a weekly basis?

Time \_\_\_\_\_ Place \_\_\_\_\_

With an understanding of who our travel partners will be, or whether ours will be a solitary journey, we can prepare for our journey. All we need is a sense of adventure and an openness to being transformed along the way. But first, to know where we're going, we'll need to get oriented.

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*If we don't learn to mythologize our lives, inevitably we will pathologize them. ~ Richard Rohr*

*We have not even to risk the adventure alone for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a God; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world. ~ Joseph Campbell*

## Part I:

# The Downward Way

We begin with a downward journey. A journey into self.

This part of the spiritual journey is about confronting some of the painful realities about the world and ourselves. Much of our lives are organized around protecting against such pain. In fact, neurochemically, this is exactly what our addictions provide: a temporary, manufactured means of pain management. And we all have our favorite protections, ranging from something as simple as a nostalgic clinging to the past to endless television consumption to drugs and sexual addictions. When we pay any attention to the shadow aspects of ourselves – whatever our particular hang-up is – we tend to feel shame. Or to work at resisting that shame and railing against an oppressive society, insisting on our freedom to be who we are. But ultimately, none of this lets us live out of freedom and vitality.

This process has become deeply entrenched in our society, and pain management is a huge source of profit. In the last twenty years alone, drug prescription has skyrocketed, with pharmaceuticals raking in higher profits than any other industry. Our society seemingly creates the

brokenness then offers a solution to it for a price. As Wendell Berry writes, “The modern urban-industrialized society is based on a series of radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and the earth. At each of these points of disconnection the collaboration of corporation, government, and expert sets up a profit-making enterprise that results in the further dismemberment and impoverishment of the Creation.”<sup>8</sup>

The great spiritual traditions teach that only in *facing* pain, through entering into our suffering, do we grow into spiritual maturity. When we turn and confront it, our suffering can become a means of transformation toward humility, compassion, and selfless love. In the Christian tradition, this is the Paschal Mystery, the refining transformation of suffering, from the Greek word for suffering, *pascho*. Uncovering our areas of suffering, especially in the context of community, provides a point of connection with others, and a means of deeper awareness of ourselves.

From a Jungian perspective, this is the process of facing, owning, and integrating the shadow, which allows us to become what Henri Nouwen calls a Wounded Healer, one who has examined their wounds, acknowledged them, and is then able to lead out of this vulnerability. This is how long-term, authentic community is built. We are invited to walk that same path of the Passion, facing the reality of cruelty inflicted upon the world and the wounds inflicted upon ourselves. Without identifying our own wound, articulating it, and moving toward wholeness, we become trapped by it. It defines us.

We are lost.

As author and Franciscan monk Richard Rohr puts it “If we do not transmute our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.” Toxic examples of people living primarily out of their wound are all around us. Billions of people living out of their wounds makes for the dangerous cocktail of our current world.

Part of moving toward spiritual maturity means making a conscious decision to grow. One way to do this is by undertaking what I’m calling “the mythical journey.” It’s the path through the wound to a new sense of identity and wholeness. The first steps necessarily take us downward and inward toward our core wound. It can be dark there. But first, we have to recognize we’re lost. We have to understand our situation. We have to *wake up*.

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<sup>8</sup> Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977. p. 136.

*The journey home begins when the soul leaves its state of union with God. Born into this world, we learn to look for our true being and find the way back to our Beloved. ~ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee*

*It is the business of each of us to try to arrive at wholeness and harmony: of mind within itself, of heart with mind, of action with heart – and the beginning of this journey is to see, and suffer, the fact that we are not now whole; that we are, as was Dante at the beginning of his journey, “lost in a Dark Wood.” ~ Martha Heyneman*

## Week 1

### Into the Cave

At the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, when Dante finds his path forward blocked by the three beasts, he slips back down into the dark of the forest. Immediately, he’s startled by an approaching figure he can only dimly make out. It turns out to be the classical poet Virgil, Dante’s guide through the first two stages of his journey. Virgil tells Dante he will never defeat the ravenous she-wolf of his own power. Going back that way, he’ll only be torn apart. To taste true freedom, he’ll have to take a different path. The downward path into darkness. He’ll have to enter the cave.

When Dante’s hears about the road ahead, of walking the downward way and confronting the reality of suffering, he turns pale with fear. He has to prepare himself for the journey ahead or what he calls *the inner war*. He’s not sure his mind, his intellect, his will, and his heart are prepared. Virgil reassures him this journey, though difficult, is ultimately a gift, a grace. Virgil has been sent by messengers from the heavenly realms to guide Dante through this journey of insight, revelation, of



self-understanding. Emboldened, Dante is willing to walk through the mouth of the cave with the inscription “abandon all hope, ye who enter here” and step into the enveloping dark.

### *Imagine*

You, too, have a journey to make as you make your way through this book. It's one of imaginative participation to open up this space internally. Some of us are intimately aware of our fears and hang-ups, our mental addictions. Others need more prompting to do some inner digging or to walk this inner path. It may be jarring to move into this space from the previous section, so my advice is to pause, and take breath when you come to the invitation to *Imagine*. So let me invite you to take a deep breath, and read on.

As your journey begins, you open your eyes to find yourself in a forest, head near the trunk of a tree, thick foliage swaying overhead. It grows light. For a moment, you have the sense of a memory just out of reach, the whisper of a fading song on the breeze. You sit up and blink and open your eyes and test the air with your nose. The forest behind you is dense and dark and to get oriented you walk toward a place where the light is breaking through a little. You find a small path there and follow it where it winds around a sheer rock face and opens into a small clearing at the mouth of a cave. You look in all directions, uncertain. There is no other path.

Feel the air dampen as you step closer to the cave. Feel the grass and dirt of the forest floor. Hear the crunch of dried leaves, twigs, and pine needles underfoot. See the moss and lichen on the jagged rock around the cave. It's dawn. We're tired. But we understand there's no way out but the way through. This is mythical space, inner space, resonant and alive. A dim light grows in the distance beyond the mountain overhead. What dangers wait for you in the cave? What inner change do you fear most? As you move inside, you leave behind the light of day, the sun, the clearly visible, the external. In the shadows, you become *disoriented*.

This downward journey, this descent into the underworld is a consistent pattern in the great world myths. The great heroes have to pass through the underworld to learn of their greater purpose, to learn the way home. In the Christian story, we are said to be born after the Fall from innocence and feel a longing or desire to return. We're born into exile, displaced wanderers. Once we wake up to our situation, the first step on the journey home is downward, into the cave.

For our purposes, the cave is about the recognition that something has to change. For addicts, the first step toward recovery is the recognition that, left to our own devices, our lives become unmanageable. And we all have our forms of addiction, even if it's just our habit thought patterns. The wisdom traditions teach that there's a death required. We need to die to our habitual ways of being, die to our normal understanding of who we are for change to occur, for healing to occur, for love to become possible. Our default identity, our false self wants its cravings and desires fulfilled. This is its way of controlling life and warding off fear. But we enter the cave out of the recognition that something has to change, our normal walls of self-protection may be effective, but they also keep life out. This week is about intentionally engaging in that process of going inward, of dying to our normal patterns of ego protection. Still, darkness means uncertainty. We don't know what we'll have to give up. We don't know what pain we'll have to face.

There can be many entry points into this first stage of the journey, when we recognize something has to change. It can be some kind of exposure. It can be the death of a loved one that causes us to question our faith or our fundamental worldview. It can be the loss of a job we deeply identified with. It can be the loss of a dream or a relationship that gives us a sense of meaning and purpose. There is usually some kind of destabilizing force that precedes this step, this entry point into the process of transformation.

Toward the end of my own time in seminary, I experienced a combination of deaths that led to deep disorientation. My parents had spent 16 years in the missions field in Europe. I had come to rely on twice-yearly trips home to reconnect with old friends, family, and familiar places, for a sense of intimate community and identity, to recharge, to go *home*. Most of my old friends had gradually moved away, and now my parents were coming back to America as well. I knew this place of safety and nurturing would no longer be there. Stateside, my own Masters program was ending. I was at a loss about next steps and deeply disoriented. Should I continue schooling or start paying off loans? If so, what kind of job should I look for? In what town? I asked for advice from friends and family but there were no easy answers. At the same time, my dad was struggling with health issues, and my mom reached out frequently to give updates and prayer requests. They were also in uncertain terrain now.

In the midst of that upheaval, I got a phone call. Four high school friends of mine had met up after finishing graduate school in law and social work. Three of them had been on my basketball team in high school, and we forged special bonds on trips around Europe. Two other friends of

mine were in town visiting to celebrate my own graduation. Another High School friend of ours called sobbing, hardly intelligible. “He just shot them. He just up and shot them.” she said, bursting into tears again. When she calmed down a little, she told us three of our friends from High School had been shot in a home invasion, two of them fatally. Stunned, we tried to place calls to find out what had happened. We raced through the vendors and street performers on Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade trying to find an internet café to see what we could learn. After some frantic searching, we read a police blotter about the triple murder from the night before – the attacker’s ex-girlfriend and mother of his child had been in the house with them. The two got into a heated argument. She was shot first, then our friends from High School. Three of the four had died. We sat in silence and disbelief, the café flooded with July sunlight.

During the ensuing period of grief, reflection, and mourning, I realized the extent to which I, too, had been shielded from death. I had confronted it in the abstract only. I had been taught by church and family that Christ triumphs over death. Later, death was a central theme in college literature studies. But this was death on the page, in classroom discussion. There’s a maxim in the humanities: *death is the mother of beauty*. In other words without loss, without finitude, we wouldn’t appreciate the beauty of transient things and relationships. Even this now seemed like a hollow abstraction. A triple homicide is certainly not the mother of beauty.

Living overseas I had missed every death in the family, every funeral, every period of mourning, and came to feel those losses only in the most general terms. Death wasn’t personal, just a story someone else told. And now all the deaths I had managed to avoid came flooding back. One grandparent from cancer. The other of Alzheimer’s. Another quietly in the VA hospital. And each time I couldn’t make the funeral for one reason or another. These sudden deaths of friends my age, just starting out, tragic, unexpected, and closer to home, opened up a space of grief. It became a period of attentiveness and acknowledgement, of the unmourned deaths in my own past, of family, but also of relationships, of lost opportunities, of identity. In the months that followed, I was also struck by the necessity of moving through this process, of cleansing from the past and making space for new life. Unprocessed deaths can spread us thin, still clinging to aspects of the past for meaning, purpose, and identity, our present still determined by old fears, old wounds. Moving into the cave means acknowledging and letting go.

Even as I honored my grief and the passing of friends, I recognized death has a valuable function in the spiritual life. From this perspective, death is not just an ending, but a new beginning.

It marks a transition from one state to another. Christ taught “unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” But it can take a difficult process to become more deeply aware of the things we need to let go of, the things we need to die to. Entering the cave means opening oneself to this refining process, to the necessity of death for spiritual growth. There is something even deeper within us that urges us along this path. And while there is certainly the difficult process of dying to ourselves, there is also a sense of returning to something much deeper.

The term *nostalgia* originally means “an acute longing for home.” Its Greek root, *nostos*, is the return home. This pattern is central to the poems and stories of the great heroes returning home from the Trojan War, like Odysseus. The epic poem of the ancient world Homer’s *Odyssey*, recounts the crafty Odysseus’s twenty-year journey home to his native island kingdom of Ithaca. This is the kind of journey we are setting out on, a return home. There seems to be a universal *longing* or desire for home underlying these myths.

The word *desire* itself has its roots in *de sidere*, or “from the stars.”<sup>9</sup> On his journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise in the Divine Comedy, the pilgrim Dante is constantly looking up at the stars, drawn to the heavens, *oriented* by them on his upward journey toward God.<sup>10</sup> This profound longing is what the various wisdom traditions call spiritual hunger and what the Eastern Christians called the movement toward *theosis*, or union with God, the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey. But first, we come to realize we’re disoriented. We have to enter the dark of the cave. This is what we find after waking up. This is the path set before us. And this is where we stand now in our journey. In front of a craggy mouth of rock. It’s dark and damp inside, jagged and uninviting. But to experience the inner transformation on offer from the myths to the mystics, we understand this is the path we have to walk.

For most of us, this terrain produces anxiety. The cave represents our internal space, and most of the time, this is something we’d rather avoid. We’ve come up with all manner of escapes from it. But as the myths tell us, to identify our True Self and achieve a sense of integration, we have to move through this foreboding darkness. We have to move through a kind of spiritual death. In

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Thorpe notes here the findings of contemporary science: that our physical bodies are essentially stardust, and that the stars are therefore, quite literally, home.

<sup>10</sup> In the highly ordered Aristotelian worldview, it is *desire* that keeps everything in motion, the spheres in their perfect celestial orbits moving according to their relationship to the Prime Mover. By Dante’s time, this was integrated into the Christian worldview, with human desire, properly aligned by the will, tending toward God, and if distorted, tending toward other things.

Matthew's gospel, Peter expresses hope that Christ not have to suffer and die. Christ responds "Get behind me, Satan!"<sup>11</sup> Commenting on this passage, author Henri Nouwen writes: "Living spiritually is made possible only through a direct, un-cushioned confrontation with the reality of death."<sup>12</sup> In story after story of saints in the Christian tradition, from the Desert fathers and Mothers to Ignatius and Francis of Assisi, there is a literal experience of the cave in which they confront this aspect of life, often following a point of conversion, signifying profound confrontation with the False Self. It is this territory into which we now move.

Moving into the cave and down through the underworld is central to many myths. The term for this descent or downward movement on the spiritual journey is *katabasis*. Unlike mere death, the descent into the underworld is *katabasis* only if it is followed by a *return* from the underworld. It's the downward way that implies the upward way, the death that anticipates a resurrection. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus himself has to travel through the underworld, confronting many shades from his past, to learn how to get home from the blind seer Tiresias. For Dante, whose footsteps we are loosely tracing in this book, the walk through hell in which he encounters figures from his own historical era, as well as from classical myth, and from the Bible, is the first part of the pilgrim's journey of discovery, which leads him back up Mount Purgatory and the heavenly spheres. In each case, the hero confronts the reality of death and suffering in the world, as well as within themselves, before achieving a sense of direction and renewal.

We fear the darkness. And rightfully so. It can undermine everything we cling to for comfort. We bring our devices for coping with this anxiety along with us. What we have to understand is that the real struggle is internal. This is an easy truth to gloss over, to parody, even. Since this hero's journey is a familiar pattern in film after film, the invitation to *journey inward* can become a well-worn cliché.<sup>13</sup> But in treating it as such, in never following the invitation to genuinely do so ourselves, we miss the opportunity for transformation.

What we fear in moving into the dark of the cave is the death we will find there. Death of identity, of sustaining relationships, of access to our means of comfort. Stripped of our ego

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 16:23

<sup>12</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Letters to Marc About Jesus*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998. 37.

<sup>13</sup> The pattern we recognize in these films is itself based on ancient world myths, catalogued and outlined by Joseph Campbell in "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," and applied by screenwriting teachers like Christopher Vogler in "The Writer's Journey" From mythopoeic stories like *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, and *Harry Potter* to more subtler uses, this pattern is ingrained in screenwriters, our modern mythmakers.

defenses, how will we fight the monsters waiting there for us? Without our usual weapons, our usual escape routes from pain, how will we engage with the world? What will we see and how will we cope with it? In a sense we are at a disadvantage over people in ages past when it comes to this process. We live largely disconnected from nature in urban and suburban developments, with artificial tree lines, artificial lawns, paved roads, air conditioning. The natural cycles out of which many of the myths grew have become distant. Our technology, though providing the benefits of comfort and longer lives, has both tamed and muffled nature and, by extension, what we can learn from it. The resulting loss of myth has removed more traditional rites of passage that provide a means of confronting darkness, overcoming it, and acquiring agency and full adulthood, the recognition of full membership in the tribe or community. Instead, in our society, adolescence can drag on well into adulthood with a sense of helplessness, passivity, and victimization often taking the place of full maturity.

The primal truth we learn upon entering the cave is this: *the world is full of profound suffering*. This is the essence of the Christian notion of the Fall. This is the realization that separates innocence from experience, childhood from adolescence. This is the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The essence of wisdom is in how we respond to this central truth. The first part of the spiritual journey is about confronting it fully.

Even though we are aware of this to some extent, Western society is organized around the exchange of money for alleviating our suffering. Marketers imply that if we buy the right products, we'll finally eliminate our insecurity, our shortcomings, our inconveniences; we can push death back. This is the false edifice on which many of us build our collective lives, upon which our social fabric rests. We participate in a system that increasingly pulls a veil over our eyes, affecting our awareness, our consciousness, our desires, and our orientation. It determines *what* we see and *how* we see. In increasingly sophisticated ways, our basest desires are being manipulated to some extent. In some cases we tacitly participate and this process has become an accepted part of daily lives.

To take the step into the cave, to move onwards and inwards in spite of the fear requires some sense of purpose, of desire for growth and movement in life. What we bring with us into the cave is our False Self, our ego. It is that which feels threatened. It is our superficial identity that gets us through daily life: our achievements, adornments, even our piety. It's the identity we develop early in childhood to survive. But it is mostly a fabrication, a construct, and it comes at a cost. Richard Rohr identifies several internal splits we make in creating our False Self: the split from our shadow,

allowing us to pretend to be our ideal self, the split of mind from body and soul, allowing us to hold ideals without living them, the split from death, and the split from others, allowing the illusion of superiority and status.<sup>14</sup>

Being transformed into full humanity and wisdom, according to the myths, requires giving ourselves over to a healthy form of death, one that removes our illusions and heals these disconnections. The first impulse in confronting our inner self, in confronting death, in confronting suffering, is to retreat into the safety of this False Self. Acting out of unconsciousness increases when the ego and its needs feel threatened; we trumpet our status and achievements. We fear the exposure and the vulnerability that are the prerequisites for change. But to experience growth, we have to keep walking.

### *Imagine*

Walk on. Feel the rock and sand underfoot. See the images flicker in the distance. What do we see up ahead? What will we have to confront here in the cave? We take a deep breath, understanding we will leave something behind, understanding we will not walk away unscathed, understanding we will not walk away *unchanged*.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Rohr. *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. New York : Crossroad Pub. Co., 2009.

## Week 1 Exercises: Waking Up

Select **at least two** exercises for this week:

1. **Honoring Deaths:** List the major deaths you've experienced in your life so far. Maybe of loved ones, a relationship, a major life change. Are there deaths in your life you have not processed or honored? If it's the death of someone close to you, consider writing them a letter of appreciation, or simply to say good-bye in your own way. Light a candle and say a prayer. Or go to a place where you shared an important experience with this person and reconnect. Take the opportunity to honor this passing in your own way.
2. **Life Chart:** List the following seven words on your page: work, family/friendships, creativity, exercise, play, and spirituality. Assign a percentage to each one, signifying how much time and energy you are able to devote to each in a given week. Is there an obvious imbalance? What would you like to change?
3. **Audio Divina:** Listen to a song that invokes waking up for you or dealing with personal pain. (My selection: *Comfortably Numb* by Dar Williams (cover)).
4. **Poetica Divina:** Find the poem *The Waking* by Theodore Roethke. Read it through at least twice. Read it out loud if you can. In your journal, describe how you've come to learn your most profound lessons. Were they from another person? An experience you had? How were you changed?
5. **Lectio Divina:** In *Lectio Divina* we want to have a direct encounter with a passage of Scripture. Rather than figuring out its meaning rationally, we let it speak to us here and now, engaging in Reading, Reflection, Response, and Rest, though this does not have to progress along each stage in a linear way. For this week, read Matthew 5:1-12 slowly. Read the passage a second time, stopping to focus on any word, phrase, image, or impression that resonates for you. Sit with the image or phrase and allow it to speak to you. Respond inwardly to the message. Then read the passage slowly a third time then rest in silence, being open to the unfolding of the passage in your heart.