



the empty bell

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**Rebecca:**  
**A Father's Journey from**  
**Grief to Gratitude**  
*selections*

by Robert A. Jonas  
Introduction by Henri J.M. Nouwen

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## Foreword By Henri J.M. Nouwen

It fills me with much joy and gratitude to be invited by Robert Jonas to write the foreword to his book *Rebecca*. It is a long, beautiful, and still deepening friendship that connects me with Jonas, as he likes to be called, and to this book.

I will never forget my first encounter with Jonas. In 1984 he approached me after a talk I gave at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Cambridge. He told me that he had been touched by my passionate love of Jesus. "You gave me permission," he said, "to be enthusiastic, excited, and even exuberant about the spiritual life." For Jonas, who was just finishing his doctoral work in education and psychology at Harvard University, that was something quite new and unusual. He wondered if I would be his spiritual director.

I still remember his radiant eyes, full of lively intelligence, kindness and hope. Although I was flattered to be invited to be his spiritual director, I suggested that instead we meet as friends. I said, "I don't know who should direct whom, but I certainly would love to get to know you." This first enlightening meeting led to many more. We talked a lot, prayed often, shared many meals, celebrated the Eucharist together frequently and became intimate friends without any secrets from one another.

After this first year of friendship our lives radically changed. Jonas became engaged to Margaret. They married and had their son Samuel. I left Harvard where I had been teaching, joined L'Arche, a worldwide network of communities for people with mental disabilities, and moved first to France and from there to Canada.

During these years our friendship became broader and deeper. We visited each other in many places, and while I came to know his family, he came to know my community. Soon we began offering retreats and workshops together. While I spoke passionately about Jesus and his message, Jonas brought a dispassionate serenity and contemplative mood with his Japanese bamboo flute, the shakuhachi. Perhaps we found a way to model a good spiritual rhythm of fervent words and singing, and silent presence. We found ourselves in Providence, R.I., Hartford, Connecticut, New York City and various places in the Toronto area, playing the "empty" flute and speaking the Word with much joy.

But then Rebecca was born, lived three hours and forty-four minutes, and died. Suddenly our friendship became a well of enormous grief. Suddenly our joy was penetrated by immense sorrow. Suddenly our long travels together brought us to a place of crucifixion. Suddenly our eyes so full of smiles and laughter were filled with tears. Suddenly our animated theological discussions fell away into silent, prayerful presence with one another.

Jonas and Margaret had been waiting full of expectation and hope for Rebecca. They so much wanted to have a second child, they so much desired a daughter, they so much hoped for a sister for Sam. Then one early morning they carried in their arms a tiny, lovely girl that could only live for a few hours--a little flash of light in the darkness, come and gone but leaving behind an indelible memory, sharp and painful, precious and beautiful. The three hours and forty-four minutes of Rebecca's life transformed all that Jonas and Margaret had lived before and would live thereafter. It was like the passing of God, splendid and terrifying.

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As the weeks and months passed after Rebecca's death, Jonas could gradually ask himself: "Why was she here? Why was she given to us for a short while? Why did this happen to us?" As I listened to his questions I realized that they were not questions that came out of despair. They were questions of vocation: "To what is God calling me?"

For many years Jonas had been a psychotherapist, teacher and retreat leader. But he also wanted to be a writer. He loved poetry and always wondered if ever he would be able to share his deepest self in the written word. But it had remained a dream, a vague desire, an unrealistic aspiration. One day, as we sat together, talking about Rebecca, I said: "Maybe Rebecca came to invite you to write something simple. Not a dissertation, but rather a story, a story about her. It's as if you have seen an angel of God and you must write." Jonas knew immediately that I spoke the truth for him. Other friends encouraged him, and so he began to write. Perhaps Rebecca had visited him to bring a new vocation--to speak with courageous vulnerability about the love of a grieving father.

Gradually Jonas started to see that his little, most fragile Rebecca, who was not even able to open her eyes, had been given to him and Margaret to give them a glimpse of God's grace. Gradually it dawned on him that Rebecca had come to reveal the mystery that the value of life is not dependent on the hours, days or years it is lived, nor on the number of people to which it is connected, nor on the impact it has on human history. He realized that the value of life is life itself and that the few hours of Rebecca's life were as worthy to be loved as the many hours of the lives of Beethoven, Chagall, Gandhi, and indeed Jesus.

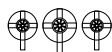
It seemed to Jonas that a story had been given to him to tell, and today, several years later, the book is written. It is Jonas' book. It is also Rebecca's book. It is a book about grief, but also about gratitude, about anger, but also about hope, about fear but also about love, about loss but also about gain, about powerlessness but also about power, about time but also about eternity. It is a book about hospital rooms, but also about the universe. It is a book about being human, but also about being divine.

As you read this book, you can choose to read it as a senseless attempt of a father trying desperately to give meaning to a meaningless human event: the death of a prematurely born baby. But you can also choose to read it as a witness to the mystery that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God in Christ is drawing all creation into God's transforming, eternal Presence.

If you make the second choice, this book can give birth within you to a hope beyond all hopes and a love beyond all loves.

I am so glad this book is here. It proclaims the mystery of life by weaving a tapestry of spiritual wisdom, integrating insights from psychotherapy and prayer, Christianity and Buddhism, medieval mysticism and contemporary spirituality. Rebecca is at the center. She is Jonas' teacher in it all.

This book has given both Margaret and Jonas a new parenthood, it has given me an invaluable knowledge of the gift of friendship in joy and sorrow, and it will give Sam, when he is old enough to read it, a sister he will never forget. But most of all it is a gift for those who will read it and be enabled by it to choose to live life, not as a curse but as a blessing.



## Chapter 6 - Reclaiming a Christian Life

### Conversations With Meister Eckhart

#### *On Time*

The Eckhart lecture was coming up October 15. Throughout August and September I read his sermons with great anticipation. Fresh, surprising metaphors about the spiritual life abounded in his work and gave me a sense of hope:

*We are all meant to give birth to God. . . . We are mothers of God!. . . . The eyes with which I see God are the eyes with which God sees me.*

In my estimation, Eckhart is a spiritual genius. And yet, near the end of his life, in the 1320s, Eckhart was condemned by his peers and superiors in the church. What a mistake! Rather than conveying the image of a wild heretic, Eckhart's German sermons impart a tangible sense of an ordinary person with extraordinary mystical gifts. In my grief, the intelligence, artistry, grace, humor, and loving-kindness of Eckhart's presence slowly coalesced as an inner voice with whom I was in dialogue. He was another absent friend, like Rebecca. In fearful moments of self-consciousness I was confounded by this "relationship."

"Look," an inner voice rebuked me, "this guy is dead and his theology is dated. Get off it." A Vipassana-like voice chimed in, "Your thoughts about him are simply thoughts. Let them pass." But my heart longed for Eckhart's words and presence, and I began to trust his brotherly advice. My usual notion of time--that the past is gone forever, and the future not yet here--seemed irrelevant.

Eckhart, too, walked a path of grief, singing his absolute assurances that no matter how bad we felt, God was near:

*No one may say at any time that he is apart from God, either because of his faults, or infirmities or anything else. . . . At all times, consider that God is near you, for great harm comes of feeling God is distant. Let a person go away or come back: God never leaves.*

According to Eckhart, when we participate in God's life, our ordinary sense of time is transcended. "Yes, Yes!" I blurted out as I digested his vision of a beyond that is entirely within. He wrote,

I have already said often; there is a power in the mind which touches neither time nor flesh: it emanates from the spirit and remains in the spirit and is totally spiritual. . . . Indeed, the now in which God made the first person, and the now in which the last person is to perish, and the now in which I am speaking are all equal in God and are nothing but one sole and same now. . . . God dwells in a single now which is in all time and unceasingly new.

Reading Eckhart was like talking with a good friend who immediately understands one's craziest

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thoughts. I was so excited to know that someone else felt the way I did about God's eternal Presence, but I wondered if we really did agree. For me, the emotions and my body were doorways to the infinite. Did Eckhart value human emotion? For me, grace often arose in the mix of some intense emotion and my longing for God. Often, in the rushing intensity of fear, grief, or joy, I stumbled into the field of grace. Then the world seemed as if it were absolutely new. For me, this sense of newness was an essential characteristic of grace. St. Paul once declared, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). And in Revelation (21:5), God says, "See, I am making all things new." Eckhart agreed with gusto! Once he declared that "only God's action is new," as if to say that God's action is the absolute standard of what "new" really is. When we stand in God, we stand in Newness itself.

Gradually, the newness of Now, the availability of my emotions, and God's presence were becoming simultaneous within me. I noticed that intense emotion often signaled the proximity of some liminal territory where my usual conceptual labels for people, places and events refused to stick anywhere. Everything became unknown and I became unknown to myself. Then I felt myself to be in the presence of a great, compassionate mystery. Perhaps this is what the Buddhists call suchness. Everything is what it is, everything stepping forward in its own particular beauty, connected to everything else in the living and dying flux of being. Rebecca and the grief of her loss brought me into such territory again and again.

I was learning that in the threshold moments, in the liminal ground between mundane existence and the Now-Presence, time is broken open. Rebecca lived and died back there in sequential time, but through the spiritual dimension of memory, she is always being born and dying right now. The same is true for my mother and great grandparents, their ancestors and all my descendants. It's true for everyone. Each of us lives in a timeless milieu of ancestors and descendants. In the heart's time, the absence of our mentors, families, and other loved ones is another form of their presence. In God, everyone and everything is present. Eckhart knew that experience, and I loved him for the courage to name and value it.

### *On Detachment: West and East*

All my training in Eastern and Western paths of self-knowing came to focus on Meister Eckhart. I was learning to trust him as a Christ-bearer, but I struggled with his counsel about grief, not only for myself but also for all those clients and friends who sought my guidance. Did Eckhart see any sacred value in the unpleasantness of deep emotions? At first his advice struck me as confusing and unhelpful. He seemed to emphasize emotional distance rather than intimate, passionate living.

*If the spirit could attain formlessness, and be without all accidents, it would take on God's properties. . . . And those who have attained this complete detachment are so carried into eternity that no transient thing can move them.*

*True detachment is nothing else than for the spirit to stand as immovable against whatever may chance to it of joy and sorrow, honor, shame, and disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a little breath of wind. This immovable detachment brings a person into the greatest equality with God.*

Such quotes were a good example of why Japanese Zen writers assumed a kinship with Eckhart. They too seemed to identify emotional detachment as a spiritual practice and virtue. One venerable Zen Master, Dokyo Etan (1642-1721), said:

*The one who practices meditation without interruption, even though he may be in a street teeming with violence and murder, even though he may enter a room filled with wailing and mourning. . . is not distracted or troubled by minutiae, but conscientiously fixes his mind on his koan, proceeds single-mindedly and does not lose ground.*

In fact, I had met Buddhist teachers for whom any emotion is an indication of primitive, unenlightened experience, or a sign that one is unwholesomely attached. I was interested in the philosophical similarities between East and West, but I most wanted help from these teachers, especially Eckhart. What did he actually do with his feelings? Did he feel emotional empathy? Was Eckhart sitting back, criticizing me for causing my own suffering? Should I be a single-minded “mountain of lead”? Part of me was attracted to this idea. Being emotionally detached wouldn’t hurt so much. But how was this detachment different from our Western “Marlboro man,” who was merely out of touch with his feelings? How was Eckhart’s detachment different from the worldview of the Stoics or the ancient Gnostics, who located spiritual life completely in the intellect? Did his detachment indicate hatred of the body and intimacy? Should I allow myself to miss Rebecca and cry, or should I try to transcend the feelings through meditation, prayer, and work?

Eckhart’s voice seemed to counsel, “Remain detached from your feelings.” But the late-twentieth-century psychotherapist in me retorted, “Detachment is isolating--a suppression and denial of emotion and the connectedness it brings. Feel your grief fully now. It will resolve itself in wellness and deeper levels of intimacy.” The pastoral counselor in me chimed in, “Yes. There’s something divine in your suffering. Eckhart himself said that we are all meant to give birth to God. Do you think that is a calm, emotionally detached process? You have seen a woman in labor. It’s painful, hard work and it requires incredible concentration. Your emotional and spiritual distress are like contractions. Let yourself go into the waves of feeling and wait for the birth. Don’t try to control the process. Let the contractions do the work.” Whom should I believe? Out of sheer respect for his genius, I wanted to believe Eckhart. But his voice seemed to echo many early Christian mystics such as Evagrius (345-399 C.E.) who counseled that passions are a sickness of the soul.

I contrasted the ancient Christian and Buddhist teachings of emotional “immovability” with my firsthand training in zazen. Zen Master George Bowman had taught me not to reject feelings but to become more intimate with them, even the unpleasant ones. As if my awareness were a mirror, I was to reflect the emotion perfectly, not to add anything to it and not to escape into a mere concept of it. I must match it one for one, to become it. If there is grief, then be grief, completely. When I could do this, I sometimes felt complete clarity and peace. But Eckhart and Bowman seemed to contradict each other. Should I ignore my feelings, step aside from them, look at them, mirror them, transcend them, analyze them, feel them, or be them? I was confused.

One thing seemed clear: Grief was teaching me that deep feeling is simultaneously personal and universal. When I surrendered into the feeling completely, as George Bowman suggested, I often found others. The depths of my personal grief always opened into the presence of others who were grieving, and finally into Grief itself. Sometimes it seemed as if there was only one Grief. I

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wondered, How is it that emotions can be entirely private, and yet connect us so intimately to all others and to creation as a whole? Was this insight a Christian addition to my Buddhist meditations? I soon realized that finding something universal in one's own experience is indeed a valid and valued insight in Zen.

In the Zen enlightenment experience one finds the universe within oneself, thus becoming what Zen Master Akizuki Ryomin calls the "transindividual individual." Moving in a stream of ever-fresh awareness and total presence, all separation between self and others is overcome. The suffering and joy of others become our own. I began to understand that Buddhist "detachment" does not necessarily indicate a lack of emotional experience. In fact, the emphasis is on being entirely awake in every experience, and being every emotion fully. The goal is to let down all inner barriers to our direct experience, surrendering to our emotions--and to the emotions of others too--more deeply. Detachment means that our ego is no longer the center of things, controlling things for its defensive purposes. I was learning that Zen detachment meant going exactly where the grief took me, no more, no less. The principle I carried within me from Zen was this: "Just this. Don't add anything."

With the help of Buddhist mentors I had glimpsed insight into "emptiness" (shunyata) and had seen for myself that all things, including my self, are composite. This insight helped me to have more patience with the many voices that seemed to be calling for attention within me. I was realizing that Buddhist detachment is an insight into how one's personal "I" is not a fixed thing or place within oneself but rather something dynamic and mysterious. If we sit still long enough, we soon see that our selves are composed of not-self elements--memories, the voices of our parents and mentors, cultural myths, personal plans, fears, inclinations, habits, and recurring and surprisingly new thoughts and feelings. Sometimes we can glimpse the truth of Walt Whitman's poetic insight:

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then, I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

We, in our very selves, are not any one thing, but many. One's self is a vast reservoir of complex and paradoxical emotions, all of which link us in intimate ways to others. For Zen practitioners, enlightenment is the direct realization of this inward, interrelated "emptiness."

Some of my Christian friends thought that Buddhism counseled a "negative" or nihilistic attitude toward the world. In fact, this opinion came to the surface most dramatically in 1994, as I was writing this book, when Pope John Paul II dismissed Buddhism as essentially opposed to Christianity. He wrote that Buddhism teaches that the world is "bad" and that enlightenment is a matter of becoming "indifferent" to the world. The pope's opinion left me sad and angry, for my experience of Buddhist meditation and of Buddhist teachers is very different. For most of them, insight into "emptiness" is a kind of fullness, a fullness that comes from allowing the world to be just what it is. From my Tibetan Buddhist friends in particular, I had learned that compassion is one face of emptiness. In the light of Buddhist wisdom, one sees that "all human beings are intimately related, and one's own self and the selves of others are bound inseparably to one another." My Tibetan friends had taught me the Tonglen practice of giving and receiving, in which

*we take on, through compassion, all the various mental and physical sufferings of all*

*beings: their fear, frustration, pain, anger, guilt, bitterness, doubt, and rage, and we give them, through love, all our happiness, and well-being, peace of mind, healing, and fulfillment.*

Was this Tonglen so different from Jesus' sharing completely in the joys and sufferings of his friends? Now it is true that I had received guidance from some Buddhist teachers who saw emotional experience in a more solipsistic way, as entirely one's own private experience and responsibility. Some of them did indeed speak about inner experience as if it were entirely divorced from the external world and from an ultimate and essential connection to relationship, society and action. But gradually I became more trusting of those Buddhist mentors who emphasized our deep connectedness to one another and viewed emotion as an important element in it. With their help, I gradually began to understand that emotion per se is not the problem, but rather our relation to emotion. Many of us are driven by our emotions. We are too often unaware of their origins and how to manage them in a way that is consistent with our values. The best Buddhist practices show us how to be intimate with our feelings without losing ourselves in them, all the while remaining completely, positively related to the world and one's social commitments. I was confident that Jesus and Eckhart would affirm these Buddhist values.

When we lose what we love most--our jobs, loved ones, possessions and even our identities--we are humbled and naked before God. Then, when the floor of our personal grief breaks open into the universal, we instantly see that everyone has lost or is losing something or someone who is dear and precious. No one is exempt. In such moments of clear insight, we find the grief-stricken ones, the murderers, the joyous dancers, the liberators, and the hopeless, homeless ones within ourselves. If we undergo our emotions with attention, we can know these universal human territories intimately and with a clarity that comes only from direct experience. The dimension of universality is not merely a nice philosophical notion. Medieval Christian mystics such as William of St. Thierry (twelfth century C.E.) conceived of the human person as a microcosm of the universe. To know oneself experientially in God was to know something universal--human nature itself--made in the image of God. In scripture, that essential connectedness is called the Body of Christ.

For me, Rebecca's baptism just moments before her death exemplified the existential bridge from private to universal suffering. That water, flesh, and blood blessing fell like a stone into a still lake, sending out ripples of grace through Rebecca to everyone, and from everyone to her, from and to the heart of all creation in God. My fingertips became God's. Rebecca's forehead became mine. Her forehead became Sam's, Christy's, Marg's, Mom's, Dad's, my great grandparents' and the forehead of each of my innumerable, invisible ancestors and descendants. My tears were theirs and God's as well in the Now of God which Eckhart so prized. Why didn't Eckhart see that emotions, rather than being a threat and an attachment, could be the milieu of the cosmic Now? I wondered how to convince him.

Gradually I became aware that I was talking to Eckhart sub-vocally as I read his work. I argued that when we suffer "in Christ," we open ourselves to Unconditional Love--not as an abstract principle but as a Presence that comes right into our private suffering and feels it with us. I wondered if Eckhart would agree that this ever-present Presence is what the Incarnation is all about! We each have a cross to bear, and sometimes the pain is excruciating. And yet, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light," says Jesus, forever (Matthew 11:30).

In the months after Rebecca's death, I met a few other parents who had experienced their loss in



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this deeply Christian way. When they surrendered into the grief, they felt as if they were participating in the Body of Christ. One woman told me that, in being accompanied by Christ, she had been born again with him, and that he too was being born again with her. Is this what Eckhart meant when he said that the Son is always being born? Our suffering and transfiguration are Christ's, and Christ's are ours. Those who follow their suffering in this way become Christ-bearers for one another. I was beginning to see that in both Christian and Buddhist practice, true suffering is not a private pain but rather a transpersonal, interdependent experience.

I pushed the point in my inner dialogue with Eckhart. We agreed that one could be sentimental, self-pitying, and attached to various feelings. We also agreed that sometimes one can be more effective in work if emotions are repressed or sublimated. I know artists who, in their personal lives, don't look like emotional people, but their creations are filled with passion and evoke a passionate response in others. And I have several relatives who are surgeons. Quite often their well-deserved reputations as brilliant healers depend on their passionless objectivity. Deep passion can sometimes 'disappear' into a great work of art.

Still, I didn't believe Eckhart took seriously the spiritual, interpersonal, and social damage that results when people are, in an unhealthy way, emotionally detached. Interviews with adolescent killers in Boston reveal kids who have shut off their feelings, their empathic emotional connectors. They can shoot someone in the head, then go out and have a Coke with friends. As I was finishing this book, a bomb blast tore apart the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. One hundred sixty-eight adults and children were killed. The accused murderer, Timothy McVeigh, was shown pictures of the young victims. He had no emotional reaction. One of the policemen who was there reported, "[There was] nothing. Zero reaction from that son of a bitch. This guy is a stone."

The only way I could imagine not mourning so deeply was not to love so much. But could I love less? The poet Robert Burns (1759-96) expressed the dilemma in a poem called "Ae Fond Kiss":

*Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!  
Ae farewell, and then forever!  
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee  
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee. . . .*

*Had we never lov'd sae kindly,  
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,  
Never met--or never parted--  
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.*

Broken-heartedness seemed to come with the territory of living and loving fully. Of course, my arguments with Eckhart also indicated warring voices within myself. What good was it to love others deeply, knowing that they would eventually die? What good was grief? Better to deny the mysteries of interpersonal longing and love. Perhaps the champions of apatheia (Greek, for a contemplative state of mind that completely transcends both everyday emotions and deep passions) such as Evagrius, Eckhart, and Dokyo Etan were right. Better to sit by the river unperturbed and watch the emotions go by, like boats.

In spite of my uncertainty about whose advice to trust, I found myself siding with those Christian

mystics who put an ultimate value on the “suffering” of love. They saw it as a high form of suffering, often citing the Song of Songs in Hebrew scripture as the fundamental model for the soul’s relationship with God. In the spiritual tradition of the Song, one cherishes the soul’s “wound of love,” as the joyful/sorrowful result of true intimacy. God is the soul’s Beloved, and the soul is God’s Beloved. In this tradition, the problem is not undergoing emotional pain as such, but rather clinging to the private, self-pitying suffering that refuses to surrender itself to the Beloved, and thus to the universal Great Suffering, in God. In this tradition, detachment is not an imperious severing of emotional connectedness but rather a gradual surrender of all those worldly, ego loves and small emotions which hinder our complete intimacy with the Beloved.

### *Discovering the God Within*

**I**n moments of despair, I wondered if all my questions about life, death, love and grief were meaningless. A cold, dark voice counseled, “Sure, you loved Rebecca. Your love feels as if it were the final truth, as if nothing could be stronger. But hope is deceptive and illusory. You will die, and that’s it, period. People’s personal love dies with them. Everything disappears without a trace. Feel your feelings or don’t feel them, it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters.”

Another inner voice took up the challenge. “Wrong. Authentic love really participates in something greater, something that lives eternally. If we keep loving, right through death’s doorway, new life springs up. But we must hold nothing back. To love in the presence of death is to cultivate divine humus, the ground that brings new life. And the ground is God, ever new. God brings all things into existence and receives them when they pass out of existence. Get out, Death! You have no power here anymore. You, death and You meaninglessness, are the ultimate illusions!”

Another sympathetic voice, echoing the mystic Thomas Merton, suggested that meaninglessness shouldn’t be considered an enemy at all. Merton once wrote, “I cannot discover my ‘meaning’ if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness!” My soul had become a spiritual tennis court of Great Voices.

The competitive struggle among these archetypal voices brought me back to the Bible. Jesus was a passionate person. He was touched by the death of Lazarus. He was deeply moved in his love for John and for the criminals on the neighboring crosses. He had said “I am deeply grieved” (Matthew 26:38). Did Eckhart imagine that Jesus was cool as a cucumber when they drove the nails through his hands? I didn’t think so. Wasn’t the whole point of the Incarnation that the Great, Unfathomable Mystery became our human loneliness, joy, forsakenness, and suffering? God was not an Unmoved Mover, but an intimate participant. God felt it all, exactly as we can feel it. Eckhart said that in Jesus, only the “outer man” suffered. But was Jesus merely pretending to be human--a heresy called docetism which the early church condemned? Was my medieval Dominican friend a docetist? I told him, quite frankly, “Maybe your teaching should have been condemned!”

Eckhart’s preference for dispassionate detachment fit with his view of God in scripture. The mystery of the Godhead was totally transcendent, hidden from our experience, especially our emotional experience, by a cloud of unknowing. No one had ever seen or touched the face of God. I agreed with Eckhart’s assessment. As soon as someone says he is certain about what and who God is, that person is almost always an ideologue, attached more to his idea than to God. God is always greater. But Jesus also said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Didn’t the Incarnation show

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us what cannot be seen and give us knowledge of what cannot be known? Didn't God experience and communicate the full essence of God's Being and Subjectivity in the human Jesus (and therefore, by participation, in every human being), or did God hold something back?

Some Christians believe that God gave full divinity to Jesus, but not to anyone else. Eckhart and I agreed that this view is not what Jesus intended. People wanted to make him an earthly king, but he told them no. Jesus, speaking out of an "I" that was totally one with God, gave himself unreservedly to others. His oneness with God was not going to be a spiritual possession that separated him from anyone else. In the Gospel of John (chapter 17), Jesus says of those who love him,

*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. . . . The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. . . . 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*

Jesus' "I" was completely interdependent. There was a vast "we" within his "I." I reasoned that if God empties God's Self totally into the historical Jesus, then through him, God empties God's Self into every historical person, including me and Rebecca. Jesus wanted us to know that the universal "we" of love and compassion is within everyone's "I." When Jesus says "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:3) it is the "I" of Abba who speaks, the "I" whose love falls on everyone equally, like sun and rain.

"That is the whole point of John's Gospel!" I shouted out loud, as I argued to those imaginary Christian friends who emphasize Jesus' perfection and our sinfulness. I sensed that Eckhart was in agreement. Since, and because of, the Incarnation, every finite thing, person, image, memory, and emotion is made transparent to God, as something actually alive in, and expressive of, God. Individual people and their thoughts, senses, and emotions can be alive with God's holy presence!

I explained to Eckhart that I didn't mean to belittle his view of detachment. After all, I too had glimpsed an equanimity of mind and heart which left the depths of the soul undisturbed. But I knew that many of us suppress and reject some emotions as "unspiritual" even before we thoroughly discern their origin or meaning. For example, as a Lutheran, I grew up in the shadow of the traditional seven deadly sins, according to which all anger was unChristian. Consequently, I often didn't feel anger even when it was appropriate, and I didn't express it when it was needed. Now it seemed clear to me that the peace that came from judging and suppressing my real emotions was illusory, and I didn't want to repeat that mistake. Now, I was looking for God in my ordinary experience, not "out there" on the clouds.

Luckily, there is another stream of Christian reflection which supported my search. It is exemplified by some of Thomas Aquinas's comments. He wrote in his *Summa Theologica* that anger in itself is not morally wrong. Anger is a complex passion, he said, composed of many emotional currents. One of those currents is a perception of injustice. Anger can be a sign that some injustice is afoot. Anger itself can have the energy and intention of righting a wrong.

Of course anger can be misused, to push others away, to blame them or to do violence to them. As I reflected on my emotional life in the months after Rebecca's death, I regretted moments in my life

when I hurt others with my anger, and, where I could, I asked others for their forgiveness. But I tried to remember that anger itself was not the culprit. In Aquinas's view, anger and all the passions are a necessary part of the Christian life when they are directed toward God. In giving them over to God, God comes into our human emotions, enlightening them from within, making them His/Her own. I thought Aquinas's distinctions were good ones. The quality of my anger when I was blaming a poky driver on the highway was decidedly different from the anger that arose when I shook my fist to God about the injustice of Rebecca's brief life. The latter was somehow larger and connecting, rather than isolating. Sometimes, it seemed as if God too was shaking God's fist--as a gesture of love and solidarity--within me.

### *The Spiritual Practice of Detachment*

Eckhart's teachings became like a prism to me, giving off different colors of the spiritual rainbow, depending on where I stood. In the end I read Eckhart's words on detachment as a reminder to sit on my meditation bench, to play the flute, and to pray each day no matter what. Spiritual detachment meant "attachment" to God as Mystery and Love. While instructive and motivating, emotions were also ephemeral, coming and going, moment to moment. I needed a strong, stable, inner reference point for my life. In the regular morning silence dedicated to God, strong emotions often integrated themselves around an invisible center. I didn't have to "get a handle" on them, figure them out, repress them, express them in exorbitant ritualistic ways or arrange them in a cognitive hierarchy of value. I simply put my forehead to the ground and asked for God's love and mercy.

The steady love of God and peace of Christ awaited me, no matter what particular mood or thought happened to be passing through. I recalled the principle I had learned in the Grand Canyon: "It doesn't matter what you think. God's love is always shining in you, in nature and in others, moment to moment. Your thoughts cannot make it happen or save you." Jesus had said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I give you a peace the world cannot give" (John 14). The reception of that peace does not depend on our thoughts.

Sometimes, as I sat on my prayer cushion in the early mornings, I received that peace. I began to trust that the deep emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, were not mere sentimentality but healing waters of life, coursing through my body, drawing me closer to God. These realizations helped me to reframe Eckhart's idea of detachment. Eckhart thought God's peace was an infinitely reliable, invisible "place" within. He called God's home in the soul, the "Aristocrat." Perhaps he meant that the "Aristocrat" was so interiorly transcendent and so infinitely faithful and trustworthy that it was, as Aristotle had said, the Unmoved Mover in us, like a totally trustworthy king. God would continue to be the ground of goodness, love, mercy and justice in us, no matter what. And, if we had faith, nothing in this cosmos could separate us from the love of God. God's face was always turned toward us. Stated in this way, I saw that there was no incompatibility between the Unmoved God and Christ, between Aristotle's God and the passionate God of Hebrew/Christian scripture. Unmoved did not mean emotionally disconnected, but rather the steadiness that one finds in a trustworthy, empathic friend.

Eckhart spoke of an outer and an inner person. He said the inner person was always undisturbed, in God. But how could there be such different intensities of feeling between the inner and the outer person? Where was the boundary, and how could one find the proper ground of detachment? His

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notion seemed to require an impossibly subtle distinction.

I was, therefore, delighted in his elegant, poetic solution. For him, the inner place of detachment is like

*a door, opening and shutting on a hinge. I compare the planks on the outside of the door with the outer man, but the hinge with the inner man. As the door opens and shuts, the outside planks move backwards and forwards, but the hinge remains immovable in one place, and the opening and shutting does not affect it.*

This image seems right to me. Within the soul, there lies an undisturbed, invisible turning radius. One can be very close to God in this dynamic stillness, even in the midst of everyday events and passions. This deep, still hinge of Presence is uncontrollable from the vantage point of the ego. Its center is in God in us, and yet the Spirit “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8). To know where it is blowing, we must listen closely. Then we are able to swing with the invisible, sacred hinge of Mystery within. Whether that Great Mystery that is God is affected by our personal suffering and joy is a question which itself resides within the Mystery.

### *When Eckhart Himself Appears*

Gradually, Eckhart’s presence became more real and intimate. We preached to one another, shouted at one another, hugged one another, and wrote each other notes. Was I crazy to believe that my imagination might be a doorway into something transcendent? Was I crazy to believe I might receive spiritual guidance from someone who had been dead for six and a half centuries? Were the moments of spiritual connectedness with others only an imaginary game? Maybe. And yet, somehow, I could not not believe that Eckhart’s presence was real. I was getting a feel for his personality. I actually felt guilty when I thought I wasn’t being fair about his lack of trust in emotions, and I wanted to apologize. When I laughed at his jokes, there was a certain “withness” in the laughing, as if he were there enjoying it too. In my self-doubt, I consulted a trusted Tibetan Buddhist monk. Had he ever had transtemporal experiences like this, about deceased teachers in his lineage? “Oh, yes,” he replied. “Great harm comes when we think we are alone.”

I told him, “That sounds like something Eckhart would have said,” and I felt assured.

One day, as I took my daily walk in the woods, I challenged Eckhart directly on his view of emotions. Seeking to connect with my psychological language, he accused me of “repetition-compulsion.” Couldn’t I think of something else to talk about? In my prayerful imagination, we laughed heartily as we faced one another and shook each other’s shoulders with aggression and delight. The playful intensity of our wrestling reminded me of Sam and me, when we pretended we were bucks, butting our heads together on the living room floor and falling off imaginary cliffs.

Merely reading Eckhart for information was missing the point. On the level of theological information, Eckhart was a confusing jumble of contradictions. He could be read as just another Neoplatonic philosopher who believed in a stoic, other-worldly detachment, a detachment he had once described as a virtue higher than love! (I thought that was a particularly dumb thing for him to say, and I told him so. “Ultimately, there’s no difference between them,” I said). But Eckhart’s writing was more poetry than prose, more like Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* than some marching band’s

rendition of Onward Christian Soldiers. One read him for the music, not the facts, trusting that there is sometimes more truth in an aria well sung than in a creed precisely parroted.

“Look,” Eckhart once said, turning to me with his soft and wild eyes, “The teaching on detachment isn’t meant to be a defense against our emotional life but simply a giving in to it, ‘without a why.’ I agree with you. Deep grief and joy connect us emotionally to other beings and to nature, beneath our thinking and our ‘whys.’ Too often, we add another layer of unnecessary judgments and comparisons, about ourselves, others, and God. This extra layer of intellectual reaction to our emotions separates us from God. When we detach ourselves from the illusion of intellectual control and empty ourselves into God, we find ourselves riding on a continuously running river of grief and infinite love at the heart of it all.”

“I never meant to say we shouldn’t grieve,” Eckhart went on. “In fact, I meant that when we let go into God, we are, in a sense, always grieving. Our personal and momentary griefs and loves are doorways into grieving and loving that has no beginning and no end. I’ve heard you say it to yourself: Our small grief becomes God’s Grief. Likewise, if we experience a truly just motive or a truly just act, we should know that we have come into union with Justice itself, as it is in God. When we practice justice without self-consciousness, we manifest infinite Justice working through us. Even more, then we are Justice. The same goes for Mercy, Truth, Love, and Forgiveness. They are God’s. They are God.”

I laughed my agreement. Eckhart could be outrageous, but I felt he was trustworthy. He had used the twentieth-century Freudian ideas of “repetition compulsion” and “defense,” to help me understand his views. I sensed Eckhart’s agreement that if we surrendered our concepts about the world, and instead experienced it directly, we found infinite opportunities for love and mourning. In these assumptions he sounded exactly like my Zen teachers, for whom direct experience, moment to moment, was everything. Eckhart had never met a Buddhist, but he did not seem surprised to learn of their teachings. “After all,” he offered, in one of our trans-temporal conversations, “In all my sermons I spoke as a Christian friar, yes, but I spoke about universal human experience. Anyone who lives into the Great Silence ‘without a why’ must discover Justice, Beauty, Truth, and Equanimity. Buddhists, like us Christians, are human beings first. ‘God gives to all things alike and as they proceed from God they are alike.’”

And what about mourning, I wanted to know. Eckhart agreed with my psychotherapeutic assumption that grieving was necessary for wholeness as a human being. “But for Christians,” he continued, “there is the added dimension of the cross. We don’t know what a human being is without reference to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Son. We understand what suffering is, by reference to the Son who is always being born, always being crucified, in us.”

“You remind me of my friend Henri Nouwen,” I replied. “Henri says that what happened to Jesus is happening now, to us. He says the Holy Spirit is descending to each of us, announcing that we too are God’s beloved sons and daughters. He says that we too are tempted as Jesus was tempted, called to minister to others just as Jesus was, called to the cross as he was and finally called into a resurrected life, just as he was. Sometimes I think even Rebecca has gone through that whole spiritual drama. She too was called to minister, and she did.”

I told Eckhart that many Christians today are responding to Nouwen’s work and his, because they both speak optimistically about human persons and our destiny to experience God directly. “Perhaps one day I will meet him, and perhaps he would agree that there is something more,” Eckhart

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interrupted. “It is not only that I become optimistic. In reality, the optimism is not my own, but God’s. Even I am not my own, but God’s, just as you are learning Rebecca is not your own, but God’s. Without God, we are nothing. When we know this, we are within God’s knowing and love and we become just what God is.”

I smiled. “This is where you got into trouble with the Roman hierarchy, isn’t it? Didn’t you imply that we are God? Certainly, I am not God, you are not God, Rebecca isn’t God. Right?”

“You are looking in the wrong place for answers, my friend,” replied Eckhart with an answering smile. We both knew quite well the opportunities for ego-aggrandizement when one assumes any kind of equality with God. “I can only repeat to you something said by Augustine in the fifth century. ‘Whatever a person loves, a person is. If he loves a stone, he is a stone; if he loves a human being, he is a human being. If he loves God--I dare speak no further. If I were to say that he was then God, you might stone me. But I refer you to scripture.’”

I laughed, appreciating his humor and his easy manner.

Eckhart continued, “What I mean is that if you join yourself nakedly to God in loving, you become unformed, and then informed and transformed in the divine uniformity in which you are one with God. But you must stay within, where the Son is being born in you. Rebecca has brought you to that place of eternal birth and death. When you are one with God, you bring forth all creatures and by being one with him, you bring happiness to all creatures.”

Eckhart told me that true joy and peace come about only if we go straight into the heart of God, naked and totally dependent on the One who declares we are loved, no matter what. We Christians say that the eternal expression of the invisible Godhead is made visible in Jesus. Jesus was a historical person, but when he walked, spoke, ate, slept, and healed, something eternal walked, spoke, ate, slept and healed. It wasn’t merely Jesus’ human self or ego doing all these things. This insight prompted me to add, “Many Christians reject your advice because you seem to make us equal to Jesus. They say you. . .”

“Stop!” Eckhart interjected. “I grow weary of the accusations. Look deeper, for yourself. Jesus told his disciples, ‘I call you friends’ (John 15:13-15). He told them, ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. . . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete’ (John 15: 9,11). Nowhere does Jesus say, what I have you cannot have, what I am, you cannot be. He doesn’t say, ‘I’ve got my joy, you get yours.’”

Had I detected some anger in Eckhart’s voice? I couldn’t blame him. After all, when he was accused of heresy, he always maintained he loved the church and that his words had been taken out of context. His anger didn’t seem vindictive to me. It was not merely an expression of his frustration at not being understood. Maybe he was giving me a lesson in how to be passionate and yet detached. His deep feeling brought me into that field of grace again. I felt the impact of Eckhart’s “Stop” as a wake-up call, like Jesus turning over the tables of the temple money changers (John 2: 13ff.).

Eckhart saw that many Christians are sleep-walking, rightly seeing God in Jesus but missing God in themselves. Jesus never asked to be idealized or idolized. Jesus himself always pointed to the faith of those who were healed, rather than to his own miraculous powers. Jesus himself always pointed to “Abba” (roughly equivalent to our “Daddy”) as being the source of everything he said and did. He was like a pure stained-glass window, transmitting God’s Light to us and showing us how to be transmitters of the Light for ourselves and others. Eckhart wanted everyone to know that Jesus never said he was the sole owner of the Light. God’s life is given to everyone equally, and we should expect

to see it in all things evenly.

“In the end we must give away everything,” said Eckhart. “You are learning this great lesson from Rebecca. Someday you must give away all your belongings, your friends and family, and finally your life. That is inevitable. Someday you must even give away scripture and any images you may have of Jesus or God. At a certain point in the spiritual journey, we must ‘let go of God, for God’s sake.’ Eventually, words, images, thoughts and all sensory experience fall away. Then you will see the Mystery face to face, and the one in you who sees God will be God.”

I imagined sitting by a New England riverbank on a warm fall day to talk with my friend Eckhart. He agreed that too much had been made of his emphasis on the cognitive intellect. Cognition was too often aligned with the selfish ego, always comparing and judging itself in relation to others, always concerned with winning and losing. With a smile, he told me, “To let one’s thinking emerge as part of our giving birth to Christ in our soul, now that is a sweet joy. Then, thinking becomes thanking.” I thought of Heidegger’s *Das Denken dankt*. Heidegger discovered that some of the earliest Greek thinkers wrote from a being-state of utter astonishment at existence. Their words arose directly out of the astonishment and expressed it with thanks. Thinking, being, thanking, and words were perfectly integrated. Eckhart knew my heart. Looking out onto the river, our smiles became one with the water, clouds, and sky.

“Both my Buddhist and my Christian teachers said I should let go of thinking,” I said, hoping to please him with an agreeable insight. “Maybe,” he replied, as he dropped down to the ground, making circles in the dirt with his finger. After some silence, he added, “There’s nothing wrong with thinking. Thinking connects us to others, just as emotions do. It is true, much of our thinking is habitual fantasy, but at other times, thought is an icon, a transfiguration, or the foretaste of service. We must stay awake to know the difference.” Suddenly I realized that I had myself just recently come to that same insight. It was as if he knew what I was thinking before I really had grasped it.

“Okay,” I finally said after considering Eckhart’s words, “so our thinking, our mundane sensations and feelings, moment to moment, are like stained-glass windows within us, transmitting God’s light?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Eckhart nodding his approval in silence.

“And, when you speak of joy, you mean it, right? That is, it is a joy you can feel, not some mountain of lead detachment. Right?”

As if knowing how deeply I had struggled with his words on detachment, Eckhart reached to touch my arm and whispered, “God is peace itself and beyond peace. I have often said this. But I tell you something else. God takes delight in giving himself away to everyone and to the cosmos, equally. His pleasure is as great, to take a simile, as that of a horse, let loose to run over a green heath, to gallop as a horse will as fast as he can over the greensward--for this is a horse’s pleasure and expresses his nature. It is so with God.’ The heart of God is dancing ecstasy, and knowing everything simultaneously, in love.”

A tear came to my eye. I felt deeply touched and honored to be in the company of this great man. After several moments of prayerful communion, I said, “That’s the sort of knowing we’re meant to have, right? There is a big difference between having information about someone and knowing someone intimately, in love. There is more personal involvement, empathy and commitment when we know and love someone. I can feel in my body how much I love Rebecca, Sam, Christy, Margaret, and others. It’s not a matter of thinking about them in a certain way. In loving them, they are in me, and participating in God’s love.”



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“Yes,” replied Eckhart. “That going-beyondness is in you, and in Rebecca too. In that place you are everyone and everyone is you. Sin is the impulse to separate yourself from others, to make them not-you and not-God. Getting information about God or someone is a poor substitute for meeting them face to face. Information objectifies what we are knowing, setting it outside our sphere of intimacy and care. Oh yes, some information, some objective knowledge, is useful, but we need to watch our motives for seeking it. Is our motive sin or service? We sin when we make others different from us and pull them down from their ascent to the universal in God. Sin is making ourselves, others, and God smaller than we really are, according to our own tiny ideas and projections. In our true nature, in God, we do not sin. The love coming from God takes us beyond our ideas about God, into the heart of the Mystery we dare not diminish. There is always more.”

We fell into the waiting silence. And then I knew that through Rebecca I had glimpsed that Mystery and the love that perfects everything. “But,” I added, “there is something unsettled in my feelings about my daughter Christy. I’m afraid that we will never reconcile.” After Rebecca’s death, Christy didn’t want the closeness with me that I wanted to have with her, and it hurt. The future path of our relationship disappeared into an ominous darkness. Examining a blade of grass in his hand, Eckhart replied, “The light is still shining there. Even when there are clouds, the light is always shining. Maybe your stained glass needs a washing.” He smiled, looked upward and then at me out of the corner of his eye. “I think a good, cleansing rain will come. Try a little detachment.”

Smiling in the warmth of our friendship I replied, “I’m always grieving, you know. I usually don’t feel spiritually detached. My only relief is a sudden clarity I sometimes get when I walk down a city street and see how ruthlessly judgmental I often am. Usually I am in a semiconscious state, half alive, putting people into categories. I’m either better or worse than someone else. But since Rebecca appeared, in special moments, I see beneath the surface to the lines of worry and sorrow on people’s faces. A few look contented, at peace with life. But in the bodies and faces of many others, I see the constricted breathing, and distracted, darting eyes of fear, or the manic, strained backs and overexcited eyes of greed. I see the bent shoulders of someone who is broken by life. Something in me reaches out to them, touching them as I touched Rebecca, in love and compassion. I want to bless them all, and to receive their blessing.”

“What are you feeling now?” Eckhart wanted to know.

I thought this was funny, Eckhart asking me about my feelings. “I’m not sure how to describe it. Some combination of perfect love and grief, as if all of creation is yearning and groaning. It’s good. Usually I’m too distracted by the constant blare of the media and the tree full of monkeys that is my mind.” We laughed.

What a pleasure it was, to share such intimacy with my friend Eckhart. I had never known anyone who could listen so clearly and deeply. He nodded and smiled as I told him how Rebecca made it easier to stop and say hello to people I had never met, easier to listen to their stories, easier to understand their pain, easier to offer some compassion. Eckhart and I sat for hours, speaking occasionally, but mostly looking out over the water. Sitting in the light with him was to share in that eternal place where, as he always said, “this and that” disappears: that place where he and I, the river and the boats, the canyon and the mountain, the clouds and the sky, Rebecca and Jesus, are one. In those precious moments by the river, I saw that heaven was a time already here, but not yet.

## *Henri's Visit*

When Henri said he would come to visit in late September if I wanted, I was in one of my “everything-is-fine” moods. I said yes, but privately I thought his visit wouldn’t make much difference.

I thought about Henri’s idea that this loss was an opportunity to be closer to God. Did I really want to be reminded of that? I realized that my tendency to be emotionally self-subsistent was also true in my relationship with God. Twenty-five years ago, in my first college course on Religion, the professor had described one strain of American deism as a theology of “God-in-the-gaps.” God had made the world and then stepped out of it, letting it run like a well-ordered clock. Since the Enlightenment, many of us only turned to God in special emergencies, or to bridge temporary gaps in our understanding or in our hope for progress. I was embarrassed to acknowledge that I had treated both God and my friends that way. They were too often “friends-in-the-gaps.” If I weren’t totally falling apart, I would not confess my vulnerabilities to them.

When at last Henri did walk in our door, I was able to acknowledge how much I needed him. He reminded me of times I had given him emotional support. Now, he said, it was my turn. A couple of years before he had been struck by a pickup truck. He had almost died, and now he felt as if he had nothing to lose. “A deep sense of trust in God came to me when I lay there at the threshold,” said Henri. I hoped some of his faith could rub off on me.

Henri stayed the whole day and into the next afternoon. We established ourselves in different parts of house--the kitchen, my office, the living room, the back porch--talking about life, God, death, friendship, and Jesus. He understood the fear and the desire to escape from the unpleasantness of grieving. And he also affirmed my desperate need to stay close to Rebecca. “Rebecca is showing you something of God’s vulnerability. She is as close to God as Jesus is,” he said.

I told Henri about a Lakota Sioux friend at the Buddhist-Christian conference who whispered something important to me two days after Rebecca’s death. The friend and I were at an ecumenical, East-West service. I told him I was learning from Rebecca. He leaned over and said, “Yes, she can be your teacher.” This made sense to Henri, too. Rebecca was a channel of Jesus’ grace coming to me. I had held her and now she was with God. I had come that close to God!

As we talked I suddenly remembered the story in Daniel where King Nebuchadnezzar ordered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Later, the king was astonished to see them walking, unhurt, in the midst of the fire. In the face of such a majestic display of God’s power, Nebuchadnezzar made a dramatic decree: “Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way” (Daniel 3:19ff.). Those who spoke against God were within me, and I needed a passionate, fiery God who could deliver me from myself. There was a Nebuchadnezzar in me, standing up for the love of God, shaking my fist in the air and denouncing any temptation to meaninglessness and despair. I knew Henri stood up for that God, too. Henri offered an involved, empathic, and intimate God, like a father who would protect his children. Henri’s presence reminded me of who I really am: the one whose German Lutheran grandmother taught him to speak by memorizing Christian prayers, the one who always carried in his soul the image of Jesus protecting the lost sheep.

Henri empathized with my realization that life was more terrible than I thought. “That attitude is not

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entirely a bad thing,” he replied. “Life is so painful when we love, but there is a way to stay close to the reality of it. If we stay close to each other and open to God’s love, forgiveness, and mercy, then we can bear these things.” “You know,” I replied, “I’ve heard you say those things before, but I can hear you much more clearly after this death. Death is like a black worm in the middle of the apple, munching away at the meaning and the desire to live.” Henri nodded, and I continued, “But you’re right. My salvation is to know that Jesus is there, even in the worm, even in the Nothing.”

How true, I thought. The worm was in Jesus and he died. But Jesus was also in the worm. Jesus lived through and beyond the threshold of nothingness.

From Henri I took in a new depth of believing in myself, in love, in friendship, in God and in the process of something important unfolding. I told him about my struggles with Eckhart, especially in the realm of “detachment” and “letting go.” He instantly understood that “surrendering” was not so much something I did as it was something I accepted. Rebecca was torn from us, and it was our work to live fully into that brokenness.

“If you can accept this death, right there in you, brokenness is a gift,” Henri offered. Henri understood that the reality of death is too much to bear, but only from its midst, its “too-muchness,” does Jesus’ life and death make sense.

At dinner, Henri, Marg, and I had the giggles. As Sam played with his toy horses in the living room, the three of us adults sat around the kitchen table telling funny stories. The following morning Henri joined in our family’s Sunday morning activities. In his final few hours with us, he sat with Marg out on the back porch while I took Sam. Then, while Sam napped, the three of us reflected on Rebecca’s death together. His message was clear and consistent. Rebecca’s death was taking us both to a new important level of spiritual closeness with God. God was revealing God’s Self to us in her death.

Finally, Henri led us in the Eucharist in the living room. After he had gone, Marg and I felt rejuvenated by his loving presence and friendship. For me, his visit was pivotal. Henri’s faith had given me the courage to step over the line, more fully into my Christian life.

