



session one

WRITING THE TESTAMENT OUR HEARTS SPEAK

OPENING REFLECTION

PSALM 5:3–4

It is you whom I invoke, O Lord.
In the morning you hear me;
in the morning I offer you my prayer,
watching and waiting.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

From the moment of conception we received a mission—to awaken to the inexhaustibly interesting journey of being alive. Merton began writing journals as early as age sixteen. Writing became his truest path to finding the identity of his heart in God. Writing gave him his mission to be a birth canal for “life living itself” in him. For Merton, writing was his path “to live, to breathe, and even to pray.”

Twenty-nine years of Merton’s journals have been published in seven volumes. They are an extended metaphor for his readers of the meanderingly complex journey everyone’s life takes. His journals are an extended metaphor for the heights and depths we ourselves have traveled to where we sit now in this circle of communicants speaking out of their own lives. Our hearts and voices are living archives of the destinies

we have created; they are like journals we have written for God to read.

Whoever we have become is also a testimony of love in progress for our intimates and neighbors to read. We are extending to one another our personal “word” for the meaning we have forged by our acts of living and loving. Can we view our lives as chapters we are writing for inclusion in God’s Book of Life?

MERTON’S VOICE

FROM *A SEARCH FOR SOLITUDE*

Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich, full of inexhaustible interest, opening out into infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and praise. Beyond all and in all is God.

Perhaps the Book of Life, in the end, is the book of what one has lived and, if one has lived nothing, one is not in the Book of Life.

I have always wanted to write about everything. That does not mean to write a book that covers everything—which would be impossible. But a book in which everything can go. A book with a little of everything that creates itself out of everything. That has its own life. A faithful book. I no longer look at it as a “book.” (p. 45)

FROM *LEARNING TO LOVE*

The work of writing can be for me, or very close to, the simple job of being: by creative reflection and awareness to help life itself live in me . . . For to write is to

love, it is to inquire and to praise, or to confess, or to appeal. This testimony of love remains necessary. Not to reassure myself that I am ("I write therefore I am"), but simply to pay my debt to life, to the world, to others. To speak out with an open heart and say what seems to me to have meaning. The bad writing I have done has all been authoritarian, the declarations of musts, and the announcement of punishments. Bad because it implies a lack of love, good insofar as there may yet have been some love in it. The best stuff has been more straight confession and witness. (p. 371)

ANOTHER VOICE

IRA PROGOFF, *AT A JOURNAL WORKSHOP*

I used to lie awake wondering what the human race would do if all its sacred scriptures were destroyed. Finally one night the answer was given to me. It came as a simple practical statement spoken in everyday tones. We would, the voice said, simply draw new spiritual scriptures from the same great source out of which the old ones came.

In that moment I became aware of how vast and self-replenishing are the resources of the human spirit. The fires of Hitler could burn the sacred books, but they could not destroy the abiding depths out of which those scriptures had emerged. I heard also the words of the Polish rabbi chanting as he was being buried alive: "Green grass lives longer than Nebuchadnezzar." God's smallest creations will outlast the power of tyrants. And this is because, as Walt Whitman knew, the simple leaves of grass come from the same infinite, re-creative source as the depths of the human spirit, from

which the wisdom and the strength of civilization also come.

That understanding opened a new range of hope for me. Humankind would not be destroyed. No matter what foolish, destructive acts people would perpetrate on the physical level, new fountains of life would continue to rise from reservoirs deep within. Recognizing that there are indeed infinite dimensions to our universe, the immortality of life began to be a fact for me.

Soon another realization arose in me. If humankind has the power to draw additional spiritual scriptures out of the depth of itself, why do we have to wait for a tyrant to burn our Bibles before we let ourselves create further expressions of the spirit? If it is indeed true that each human soul contains a Bible within itself, may it not be that each person contains the possibility of new spiritual events and awareness taking place in his and her own experience? Perhaps there are new Bibles, many new Bibles, to be created as the sign of spiritual enfoldment among many persons in the modern era. It may indeed be that the creation of multiple spiritual scriptures, and especially the extension of old scriptures, is an event that needs to happen in our time as part of the further qualitative evolution of our species. (pp. 2-3)

REFLECT AND DIALOGUE

What images, words, or sentences in the readings most resonate with your life's experiences? In what ways do they connect with your life?

How is your life a word of encouragement or a cautionary tale for your neighbors? How is it both?

What elements in your life would you better understand if you viewed your life through the metaphor of writing a chapter in God's "Book of Life"?

How would you explain to a younger person that her life is "another Bible"?

CLOSING

Conclude with one of the meditations on pages 53–54 or with a period of quiet reflection.