CHAPTER ONE

Something More

Transcendence

YOU HAVE SET YOUR GLORY ABOVE THE HEAVENS.
—Psalm 8:1

There must be something more. More than the material universe with its frenetic subatomic particles and unfathomably vast, cold space. More than the pines whispering to the stolid mountains. More than the morning commute, the coffee in paper cups, the lady at the newsstand, the half-lies we tell to get by. More than the evening news routine of crime and war, embroidered with empty banter and car advertisements. More than our fragments of longing, our tattered and fleeting gladness.

In simple dailiness something more whispers to us. We hear it in the jaunty fretting of the chickadee at the feeder, see it in the creases around an old woman's eyes or in the sunlight warming the curves of a vase—wherever ordinary things become luminous. And in the joy that bursts out the edges of life, something more cries out, as the newborn the moment after birth, or the apple blossoms fallen like confetti in modest celebration of spring, or the symphonies and sonatas and all the genius of art. And in our desolations, something more roars. At the graveside of the child, the scene of the accident, the arenas of war. In all our tableaus of anguish, when our hearts crack or our civilizations, in the blackness between the jagged edges, we perceive this something more. For many of us, the suspicion that there is something more is the beginning of faith.

Such a delicate beginning. Do we perceive it? We are not always sure. We live in the wake of a distrustful age. In the West at least, we have learned to regard with skepticism any sense of that which is beyond, any sort of reality we cannot see and touch and measure. Such skepticism is nothing new; every age has its own form of it. But

with the magnificent rise of science, industry, and technology in the last several centuries, skepticism found its legs and strutted about with great arrogance. Skepticism is still fashionable, if somewhat chastened, and it finds expression these days in the form of a kind of melancholy aesthetic commitment. Because I teach literature for a living, I'm most familiar with the beautiful, hopeless novels, the poems full of absence, the essays with glitter on the surface and sadness at the core. In literature, song, film, and many other domains, this fashionable angle on the world pays homage to the enduring human spirit, acknowledges the mysteries of existence—but remains ironic. In other words, it wishes there were something more but, in an attempt to be heroic and relentlessly honest, ruefully concludes that there is not. Much of our art and public discourse throws a kiss of admiration to transcendence as a concept or psychological phenomenon, but it is a kiss of betrayal: "You are lovely," we say to transcendence, "but you are not really there." A devastating rejection.

Skepticism may earn nods of agreement at parties, but perhaps, like me, you have suspected that it is a needless heroism. Ultimately skepticism capitulates to the cold universe as the end of the question and resolves merely to suffer it in style. It may seem brave to lean your body against the subzero winds of the cosmos in chic little chiffon scarves, but why? Must cold be the truth, and the means to warmth merely an illusion? Perhaps the hat, the boots, the very long coat hanging in the vestibule are also real and exactly your size. Those who endure Minnesota winters know enough to muss their hair with a big, warm hat, no matter how silly or unfashionable it seems. To believe there is indeed something more is to admit that the wise thing in this existence is to put on the available gear.

Asking Why

Collective wisdom is not always true, but it's certainly worth pondering. And some notion of a transcendent reality appears everywhere in every age. The very recent phenomenon sometimes called scientific naturalism or scientism is among the few exceptions. Put together Eastern thought and Western thought, northern and southern thought, jungle, desert, whatever variety of thought; and what emerges

from the sweep of it all is the recognition that human beings have a physical, a psychological, and a spiritual nature. We participate in a material world, in the world of our individual perceptions and mind, and in the something more. There is plenty of argument about what the nature of that transcendent reality might be. But for now let's define transcendence as some dimension of existence that is not contained within the material world or within the human mind, collective or individual. This dimension of what it is may be intertwined with the other two, but it is not the same thing. In short, *something* exists beyond space dust and brains.

When you give your assent to intimations of a dimension of existence exceeding both the material and the human mind, you place yourself in agreement with all the great wisdom traditions of history.[1] You choose not to shrug resignedly at the whispers, the cries, and the roars but instead to admit that some of your experiences cannot be truly explored or explained unless you say yes to the something more.

Perhaps you are a woman who has studied all the pregnancy books thoroughly, followed every detail of conception, fetal development, and labor equipped with well-researched information. But when through pain and ecstasy you push that strange, slippery creature out of your body and you look into his eyes, you meet a new being altogether, a presence, a consciousness. And you know this is a mystery that all your information can only lap against like little waves.

Or maybe you are a graduate student, completely committed to science, who has spent years of your life peering at instruments in labs and scribbling equations into notebooks. You used to be rather arrogant about scientific method and about empiricism; but now that you have worked with some of the best people in your field, you are beginning to realize that the cutting edge of science is where knowledge is not most powerful but most humble. Why is there something rather than nothing? How did the universe achieve the exact density necessary for existence as we know it? Why are things this way and not some other way? You love science and the pursuit of knowledge as much as ever. But you now believe that the very questions science by definition cannot answer are the most, well, beautiful.

Or perhaps you were once a young girl who loved to visit the zoo. You loved the giraffe with his handsome spots and his rhythmically swaying tower of a neck; the elephant poking around with her

preposterous nose; the lion shaking his mane and licking his enormous paws; the otter making her quick, lithe undulations through the water. You read the placards with their cheerful comments on the evolutionary usefulness of this and that physical adaptation. But you wondered. Is the penguin's waddle merely useful? His black-and-white tuxedo? And the stunning amber color of the owl's eyes? Why are all the animals so funny and gorgeous? And you knew that somehow, in this world, it's not all about getting through the next day or the next eon. At the center of nature's utility you found, most naturally, delight.

Perhaps you have lived less than twenty years, but already certain peculiar things have fallen into place for you in ways no one could have engineered. A stranger said something to you unknowingly that steered you away from danger or toward something you love. A little incident here, a feeling there. Could there be some design to all this, some purpose?

Or perhaps you are a man still living in the shadow of your father's death, still picturing his body in the coffin, emaciated from the cancer and looking fake anyway with the makeup and the sewn-shut lips. It was not him at all. You feel a profound separation from your father now but also a heavy, dusky love. Although you have never thought much about it all before, having been busy making your own place in the world, now you have questions. Why should you insist that this ordinary man's life has some value beyond the slender perimeters of his first breath and his last? Why should you long for an existence after death, if there is no such thing? What good would such a longing serve?

Human personality, the incredibly intricate structures of the universe, the delights of other living creatures, odd sequences of events, the profound connections between people that urge us to protest death and insist that such an obvious and common thing simply cannot be right: let us grant that these are realities that require explanation beyond a usefulness for survival or the bizarre sparklings of our neurons. Maybe it's other things for you—a Mahler symphony that seems to press your heart into your throat; the ocean's ancient, ceaseless roar; the frescoes on the ceiling of St. Peter's; the way your two-year-old lays her head on your shoulder. Maybe it's the simple observation—this is what seals it for me—that human beings can feel wonder and love and ask why.

Spiritual but Not Religious

If we are willing to agree that a transcendent reality exists and that human beings can, one way or another, perceive it, then we find ourselves in the position of trying to name this reality. Is there an impersonal life force? A God? Many gods? If you go so far as to concede the existence of a personal deity, you are still faced with many alternatives. Some have the force of major religious traditions behind them: Allah of Islam, the God of the Jews, the Trinitarian God of Christians, the variety of Hindu deities. Other possibilities, with less force of the masses behind them, are nonetheless available. There is probably a Web site, for example, for worshipers of the Egyptian sun-god Ra. We are keenly aware in our age of a colorful marketplace of explanations, a kind of worldview bazaar. Somehow we have to cope with this confusion.

One mode of coping these days is to call oneself spiritual but not religious. I've heard this formula so often that I was actually pleased when my friend Jeff, a self-defined "indifferent, agnostic Jew," wrote me a letter in which he admitted, "I've grown comfortable with the idea that I'm just not a very spiritual person." *How refreshing,* I thought, *to hear from someone who's not insisting how spiritual he is!*

"Spiritual but not religious" often means that a person acknowledges a transcendent dimension to existence but prefers to keep its nature undefined, nebulous, and usually impersonal. A very understandable impulse. The options for defining transcendent realities are maddeningly diverse. More ominously, no one can deny that firm convictions can be dangerous. We have looked over our shoulders at the landscape of the previous century, at the charred trenches, smashed buildings, shattered bodies, at the gaping, smoking holes in the foundations of modernist optimism about human nature and progress. We are suffering from collective traumatic stress disorder. We know only too well that the lust for power, when combined with convictions about race, forms of government—and yes, religion—creates the most lethal alchemy on earth. Never mind that the Stalins, Hitlers, and Husseins of the last century followed Nietzsche as their prophet more than anyone else. They draped themselves with some other ideology to cover their arrogant nihilism, so that we are now quite suspicious of drapes.

So to be spiritual but not religious seems the humane, peace-loving thing to do. It doesn't quite follow that the antidote for bad convictions is to have very few or very fuzzy or very contradictory ones. But the desires behind nonreligious spirituality are among the noblest humanity has to offer: peaceful coexistence, personal bliss, human well-being (and often animal and tree well-being too). On a more individual level, indefinite beliefs about the transcendent avoid the troubles of a God with personality. The minute you move from a life force to a personal God, you are dealing with an other who could potentially make demands on you that you would rather not conform to, like giving up sex or giving away money or explaining to people that you routinely talk to invisible beings. Better to meditate rather than pray, mix beliefs as they seem pleasant and helpful to your own happiness, keep your options open, and stick with what works. It's a gesture of humility to say, "I mean, it's true for *me*." It may also be an admission of defeat.

Somewhere along the line, we all make two choices. The first is to decide whether some perceptions of a transcendent God are closer to the truth than others or not. Perhaps, you might propose, all notions of the transcendent are equally far from an astoundingly incomprehensible truth. In that case you could indeed say that all religions lead to God or are equally mistaken about God. The other viable possibility is this: no matter how astoundingly incomprehensible the truth, some notions represent a more accurate perception than others. I live by this latter option, because it seems to me that the minute you grant any notion of truth at all, it follows as a matter of human dignity that we ought to pursue this truth as ardently as we can. Perhaps we will stumble; perhaps we are limited in our perceptions; but we ought to try. After all, we live by various notions of truth whether we attend to them or not; better therefore to attend. If this makes sense, then the questions that follow are the most difficult yet: Which beliefs come the closest to the truth? How do we weigh different beliefs against one another?

Ladders and Leaps

When C. S. Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* in the middle of the last century, he made his argument for the Christian faith as the best account of the truth by beginning with universal moral law and reasoning his

way from there, with ingenious congeniality, to Christian doctrine. The only drawback of this strategy today is that reason has since suffered some bruising blows. We have lost confidence in reason as the all-in-one tool of truth. Excessive optimism that reason, science, technology, and capitalism could at last solve humanity's age-old problems was exploded by the great wars and other moral disasters of the twentieth century. Reason, we have had to concede, is neither the social savior nor the ultimate arbiter that the West has believed it to be. And only rarely has reason been the path to religious faith.

Reason must be satisfied, nevertheless, in order for faith to endure. As the medieval European allegorists might put it, Reason is a beautiful and imperious figure. She wears a crown. One of the last century's greatest philosophers, Alvin Plantinga, who has taught for many years at the University of Notre Dame, has spent much of his career thinking and writing about knowledge and belief. In his recent works, he demonstrates with utmost philosophical rigor that belief in God is rationally warranted: that it is as "properly basic" to believe in God as it is to believe that other minds exist, that we can remember events, or that our senses can provide reliable information under the right circumstances. He has provided such a convincing case for the rationality of theism in general and Christianity in particular that even his secular colleagues have had to relinquish the "knockout punch of the sheerly logical objection" to belief.[2]

Still, although rationality can be compatible with belief in a God, rational structures do not typically get a person from no faith to faith, like a ladder. One gets to this kind of belief through other means. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard pointed out, one reaches faith by a leap. For some it is a little hop, and for some it is a gigantic death-defying half-flight. For some a leap is not the right metaphor at all, and faith feels more like a repeated turning or stepping or even just a leaning. But something other than reason nudges a person in that faith direction. One great advantage, then, in our coming to terms with transcendent reality these days is that reason is less of an obsession. We are more ready to give equal or even superior weight to particular experience over complex latticeworks of reason.

Lewis himself did not come to the Christian faith through reason, although he came as close as anyone by the rational road. I think he understood that rational argumentation functions mostly as a brush-clearing exercise, removing branches and stumps to make a space for

belief to grow or to free a belief already planted for further growth. Those little nudges in the faith direction come instead by experience. I use the word here to mean an individual's alchemy of perceptions, understanding, and memory. We are always trying to find names for our experiences and build an understanding of them; and to do this we depend on hearing how other people describe their experiences, on their witness to what they have seen and heard. We change our ways of thinking and living when something awakens us to experiences we have had but not understood, when something finally gives a name to our experiences that fits so well it sticks. Other people witness to their own experiences of the transcendent; we have a swirl of these accounts in our heads; and we keep trying to grasp some of these possible explanations and test whether they fit our own experiences of the transcendent. When events and perceptions accumulate and certain names for describing those experiences keep sticking, a shape begins to emerge; and our jumble of understanding slowly transforms into faith.

Getting a Grip

For me the most compelling body of witness has always pointed to the Christian faith. The stories of people who have come to believe in Jesus, whether in an extraordinary encounter or an ordinary journey, are the ones that consistently cover *what is* with names that stick.

The Bible is the primary source of such stories. I have avoided quoting the Bible so far because it can be an authoritative text only once you have acknowledged the possibility of God. But even before we consider the particular nature of its authority, it is helpful to think of the Bible as an enormous, messy, glorious body of witness. "Strange things happened to us," say the voices in the Bible. "We did not choose this truth; we did not even know what was happening to us. But God gripped us, and we're telling you about it to help you make sense of what is happening to you." The writer of the Gospel of John concludes his description of the life and work of Jesus with such a declaration (21:24): "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. And we know that his testimony is true." The Bible as Christians have put it together, from the first book of

creation and patriarchs (Genesis) to the last book of apocalyptic vision (Revelation) claims to tell one continuous story in which a great many people encounter the same God. The Old Testament describes a variety of people facing extraordinary experiences with this God: Moses at the burning bush, Hannah praying for a child in the temple, the prophet Isaiah and the seraphim before the throne of God. The figures of the New Testament believe that their experience of Jesus is a new (but not completely unprepared-for) revelation of this same God: Mary and the angel Gabriel, the writers of the gospel accounts, the Jewish legal scholar Paul and the blinding light arresting him on the road to Damascus.

Beyond the pages of the Bible emerge the stories of people since the time of the New Testament whose dramatic experiences of the transcendent fit the explanations of the Christian faith. French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal with his vision of God so ineffable he could only describe it by scribbling on a slip of paper a few words—"fire," "tears of joy," "Jesus Christ."[3] The twelfth-century abbess and composer Hildegard of Bingen and her visions. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who after agonizing for years over whether or not he was right with God, one day in Aldersgate, London, felt his "heart strangely warmed."[4] Famous people and ordinary people throughout the centuries and today—the tide of their stories rises in all their drama and dailiness and variety. Their stories cannot easily be dismissed.

I have been speaking of religious belief as if it were a choice one makes quietly and reasonably, like selecting A rather than B on a multiple choice test or croutons rather than cottage cheese at the salad bar. But listening to people's stories suggests that the Christian faith is not first about a set of beliefs carefully chosen but about encounters with a divine person. People explain that something happened to them, whether they wanted it or not, and they were helpless to deny its reality. God, they say, has gripped them.

My friend Paul Willis, a poet and English professor, describes his coming to faith beginning with a Sunday school lesson taught by his mother in the basement of a Baptist church in Oregon. She explained to the first and second graders, using cardboard hearts as visual aids, that we all have black hearts but that Jesus will give us a white heart if we ask. For some reason this explanation took hold in Paul, and later,

in the quiet of his own room, he asked Jesus to perform this operation, "sort of like repainting a bedroom." Within a few weeks, he had made a public statement of his faith in his church and was baptized. But a couple of years later, at the age of nine, he found himself restless with hunger and longing for something more. One day after church, he climbed the stairs to the balcony, praying obsessively, and upon entering the sanctuary, he recalls, "I walked into a presence that had been there, I was quite sure, all along. It was quiet, powerful, good, and deep. It was a presence that included me, and all things around me. . . . They [these things] were not different, but more themselves, more what they had been all along, richly sustained, transfigured in their everyday best."[5] The experience lasted only a few moments. But Paul attributes to these extraordinary moments the first surrender of his whole being to the reality and goodness of God. His church upbringing had captured his imagination, and his intellect had assented to the faith. But here Paul encountered the person of God for the first time, encircling him with an irresistible presence.

Some people testify to dramatic mystical experiences. Others describe events that seem mundane, almost unimpressive. In the famous account of his conversion in his fourth-century autobiography, *Confessions,* for example, Augustine of Hippo describes his desperate state of torment, shame, and desire. After all his years of searching for the truth, he had finally concluded that Christianity was the way. Yet he could not quite give up his sin, his "one-time mistresses" figurative and literal. Lust was his particular weakness, and he knew he was helpless unless God gave him the strength to live a new kind of life. One day, while in a flood of tears, he heard a child chanting, "Take and read, take and read." He opened the Scriptures randomly and landed on Romans 13:13—not an especially inspirational verse on its own, but it seemed to Augustine to speak directly to him: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences." He read that one verse, and suddenly his whole world shifted. He wrote: "I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away."[6] That small, improbable event altered the trajectory of Augustine's life. From

there he became a bishop, helped shepherd the Christian church through the internal controversies and external turmoil of the Roman empire's demise, and wrote the many volumes that made him one of Christianity's greatest theologians.

Not all people who have such encounters with God desire them, however. Patron saint of the reluctant is Paul on the road to Damascus, whose story is recorded in the New Testament book of Acts. Paul, whose name was Saul at the time, knew all about God, was trained as a scholar of Jewish law, and thought he had his affairs with God completely sorted out. Going about his business of maintaining the Jewish religious power structures one day by persecuting a little upstart sect of Jesus-followers, Saul was knocked flat on his face and heard Jesus himself calling his name and offering particular instructions: "This is Jesus speaking. Why are you persecuting me? Stop it, because I have work for you to do" (see Acts 9:1–19 and Galatians 1:11–24). Saul reeled from this experience for several years before sorting things out, unlearning many things he thought he knew, and beginning his new life as a Christian missionary named Paul.

A good contemporary example of the unwelcome encounter comes from writer Anne Lamott. In her spiritual memoir, *Traveling Mercies,* she writes that in her lowest hour of misery and fear and loneliness and literal bleeding, she "became aware" of someone with her, and "knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus." This was no mystical moment of peace and comfort. On the contrary, she writes: "I was appalled." Later, she describes this person pursuing her "as if a little cat was following me."[7] This went on for about a week, with Lamott resisting in every way she knew how, until finally she swore her surrender, in both senses of the word *swore.*

My friend Sean is an example of someone for whom a dramatic experience, while not in the least mystical, eventually became a turning point. One morning in 1997 when Sean had arrived early at the office in lower Manhattan where he buys and sells coffee beans, a man came into the office and held him up at gunpoint. He duct-taped Sean's hands behind his back, duct-taped his mouth, and forced him to lie facedown on the floor. The incident lasted maybe twenty minutes, during which time Sean thought very practical, mundane thoughts such as *I'm glad I have a lot of cash on me so this guy will be satisfied and go away.* Meanwhile, the bigger picture took hold of him, and amid

his terror he thought: *I only want to see my wife and daughter again* and *What does my life mean, anyway?* and *I need to get myself right with God*. Before that morning Sean had a few scraps of Catholicism left over from his youth, a nominally religious upbringing that impinged on his life only in the form of occasional good-natured ribbing with his Presbyterian wife. But he began to understand his early morning terror as someone, maybe a transcendent someone, giving him a rather vigorous shake. This small shift in thought became the starting point of a spiritual journey that led him to new convictions about God and a new identity as part of a Christian community.

Swept into Meaning

Some who believe can mark a dramatic moment when vague perceptions of the transcendent or beliefs that seemed plausible but somehow cold gave way to what had to be described as an encounter with an other, a divine person, Jesus, God. Others of us experience moments that seem unremarkable on the surface but still carry with them an unmistakable sense of God. "I just felt this presence," a person might say. Or "I had this overwhelming feeling that Someone was there with me, at my sister's bedside as she died, and I felt such peace." For many people belief is the sum they make of a lot of little experiences: strong suspicion about small coincidences, the experience of beauty, the love of friends and family, and other loose pieces. Some experiences of God are deeply desired and prepared for with years of study, consideration, and formation. Others come as a complete shock, and their full significance can only be understood much later.

As odd and varied as they are, accounts of such experiences tend to raise scornful responses among those who have never had them. Some might assert that experiences of God are just indigestion or hormones or the power of the human imagination and that we *call* them an encounter with God only because that's what we have been taught to call them. Culture or upbringing or both give the person in question some God-language, and that in turn manufactures the experience. To support this argument, one might point to certain styles of Christian storytelling in which everyone's encounter with God sounds exactly like the next person's. In certain kinds of churches, one might

hear many speeches that sound much like this: "And then I was convicted of my sin, and I took Jesus into my heart, and now I have a peace that passes understanding." A skeptic might wonder whether these people are encountering God or just repeating a conventional formula.

Alternatively one might say that the transcendent is so ineffable as to support many descriptions, all of which are equally valid and equally inadequate. People of other faiths have experiences of God too, and they use their own language to describe them. The Muslim girl who perceives the presence of a deity in the universe, for example, is going to describe this with words she knows. Not Ra or Kali but Allah. She's going to give this other a name that her religion provides. The little Baptist boy is, of course, going to understand his experience of God based on his Sunday school lessons. So what's to say that Paul Willis is more accurate in his perception of God than the Muslim girl?

There is a long, sometimes noble, and sometimes ugly tradition of debate concerning which religious faith best describes truth. People have considered which belief system produces the best results—the "by their fruits ye shall know them" argument. Or which one has gathered the most adherents—the vote of the masses argument. Or which has produced the most poignant art—the aesthetic argument. Or which one obtains the most logically coherent belief system or requires the least number of crazy, nonempirical beliefs—the rational dignity argument. These debates are not by any means worthless, and they often help people settle their questions. Yet all of these methods break down at some point and fail to yield an absolutely irresistible conclusion.

Doubtless we can understand our experiences of the transcendent only with the tools of language we have been given, and we are prone to misperceptions. But it does not follow that the transcendent is only a construction of language or that all descriptions are equally (in)adequate. Any notion of a divine being requires at least this premise in the mix: if God does not show himself somehow, we cannot know him. God must come to us. Acknowledging this puts in quite a different light the two main explanations these days for the way people find meaning and purpose. Some say human beings *discover* meaning; but this implies that our perceptions, on their own, are sufficient to that task. Some say we merely *construct* meaning; but this

implies that nothing exists outside our minds or, if it does, that we cannot possibly perceive such existence. One view attributes too much to our perceptive powers, the other too little. Neither squares with the experience of religious adherents of every religion from ancient varieties of paganism to all modern major religions. Perhaps the best way to describe it is to say that God reveals. It's not that we discover or construct meaning but that we are swept up in meaning as it blows by us—or through us. We need only be willing. And we become lighter and more susceptible when we have heard the witness of others.

Both the variety and the continuity of transcendent experiences are attributable to a living person who acts independently of our desires and understanding but who also works within our desires and understanding. Heaven and earth reach toward each other, you might say. We are helpless in our clouded perceptions of the transcendent: God is very great and must accommodate to our limited understanding in order to reveal to us. We can desire this, which is certainly an advantage, or not desire it. We can understand it well or mistake it. We can describe it poetically or with conventional formulas. (That there would be conventional formulas is not surprising: it reflects commonalities in the way God acts as much as our difficulty in finding words to describe those actions.) But in response to all this confusion, I can only find a way to live when I concede that one way of describing God-experience approaches the full and true nature of God more closely than another way.

Blinding Lights and Dark Mirrors

We must be gentle with one another's experiences of God and our accounts of these experiences. We can never fully defend them. All of us who believe have our own reasons for coming to the faith we own and for staying there. I will tell you in the chapters that follow some of my own reasons for staying in the Christian faith. However, I admit here and now that language is not entirely up to the task of describing transcendence fully. Words often fumble; and even when language reaches the extent of its powers, it falls short. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the best contemporary American preachers, likes to describe language as a deck of fifty-two cards. We can play many games with

the cards in our efforts to describe God, but in the end we still have only fifty-two cards.[8] Dante, the great medieval Italian poet of mystical vision, routinely complained about the limitations of language:

> But oh how much my words miss my conception,
> which is itself so far from what I saw
> that to call it feeble would be rank deception![9]

Mystics of all religions profess that the transcendent one is beyond our capacity to perceive fully. God is far greater than our doctrines, our imagination, our poetry, our most mystical experiences. As Paul, even after the blinding light of the Damascus road, put it: "We see through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV). As much as I love Christian theology and believe in its hold on truth, I know that even the best theology is still an approximation, limited by our smallness in every sense.

It's all right to be small. We do not all have to be mystics, catching palpable visions of infinity. Most of us just need to answer that question: What are we? We need to find a way to go on that makes sense. One of my favorite hymns expresses this longing that rises in humility from our not-knowing:

> I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
> No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
> No angel visitant, no opening skies;
> But take the dimness of my soul away.[10]

What will give us the light to relieve our dimness? Not only on some rarefied plane of perception but here on the ground? That's where the real test is. We cannot understand it all, but what can we understand that will be enough?

Some people seem to fear that committing to a certain set of beliefs requires giving up too much of the world's diversity and appeal. I have found that once I come into the light of Christian faith, it is not so much that all else is taken from me but that all things are returned to their truest, best nature. With Christ at the center, all things hold together. The world comes alive again, and the delights of nature speak a language of praise. The suffering of all creation is no

longer a mere illusion or a brittle fact or a slide to despair but is occupied with the presence of Jesus and becomes pliable to hope. As for the poignant beauties of human existence so sadly caressed in the art of our age, I can love them the more tenderly for the sake of the one who sustains their existence despite it all. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable yields up in the light of Christ its true origin and purpose.

To convince you of all this, I am helpless. That is the work of the Spirit. I can only point to the threshold of light, with so many before and beside me, and say: come in.