

## CHAPTER I

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# Introduction

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There's a graveyard in my house.

As in other graveyards, headstones mark the resting places of the dead. Some of these deaths go unnoticed; others are more dramatic. Yet the Great Equalizer plays no favorites. The final state is the same for all: dead.

This graveyard is the place where objects that once held a place of honor await the dreaded giveaway bag. The migration of these objects toward the bag begins when they remain on the floor too long. Live objects get picked up, but objects on life support remain on the floor. And if the object is stepped on without regret, you know its time draws nigh.

In light of the fact that dead objects were once honored and full of life, it's always a sad and ironic moment when I step on one of them. I always wonder what its fate will be. Will it find a new home? Should we sell it on eBay? On occasion, one of the dead objects piques my interest again. "Wow, I didn't know I still had this. Maybe I should resuscitate it."

In these moments, I often recall the day we bought a now-dead object. Someone in the family *really* wanted it—no, *needed* it. Often, it was a toy. Seeing the now-dead toy takes me back to a conversation in Aisle 7: "Dad, we really need this . . . oh, please Dad, we won't ask for anything else the rest of the year."

I counter, "What about all the other toys you had to have? You never play with *them* anymore."

Then comes the all-too-familiar reply: "This time will be different."

For a few days, weeks, or maybe even months, the object does hold up its end of the bargain—satisfaction is achieved. Things *are* different. However, in time the migration occurs. The

must-have takes its place alongside many other discarded objects of misdirected desire.

As I snap back to the present moment, I shake my head in disappointment that my sons let the must-have object die. But then I notice, right next to the deceased, a dead object of my own. Like father, like son. Like my boys, I'm on the *hunt* for people and things that will satisfy. How about you?

In an attempt to quench desire, we buy what we don't need, schmooze people we don't like, and create personas we hope will make us more powerful, more beautiful, or more . . . whatever. Yet many of these objects of desire end up in the graveyard. Why so many dead objects? What's going on here? What are we looking for?

We are, by nature, seekers.

This drive is at work in all of us. *We seek for what we do not possess*. We cannot deny this drive; nor should we. We all search for people, situations, and circumstances that will yield meaning and hope. We may not always be conscious of this search, but it is always at work within us, like breath. This need to seek motivates our decisions and animates our action. *What* we seek may distinguish us from each other. *That* we seek reveals we are part of the same human family.

Our common need to seek is an intentional part of our design. It is the centerpiece of our existence, placed in us by the Divine Mystery.\* It is a beacon, if you will, meant to lead us home—to the ultimate home that is God. The mystery of this home can never be explained, but it can be experienced here and now. Yet because this drive to seek is often skewed by our poor aim, we settle for objects that lose their appeal and die. When our

\*Divine Mystery is the name I will use often for God. I am in debt to Adrian van Kaam and Susan Muto for the designation.

desire to seek is aimed at the wrong things, it produces stuff for the giveaway bag. All this leads us to ask, "Toward what should we direct our desire to seek?" This is a question for a lifetime and one that animates each day of our existence.

## ~ Our Search for Home ~

The need to seek is connected to a desire to find our home, and our concern in the pages ahead is the continual search for God—in essence, a search for home. We will consider the everyday ways we can seek the Mystery and thereby cultivate a wise and wondrous spirituality. We will not be primarily interested in intellectual beliefs, doctrines, or religious systems.

Even your particular religion is not my concern. Like you, I have intellectual beliefs about the world and life. I have a strong affinity toward certain spiritual ideas and systems. My faith tradition is Christianity. I embrace it as the path home. Yet I have grown uncomfortable with the view that God cannot or will not work in a person's life until that person has embraced my tradition. My aim is not to impose a religion on you but to invite you to a wonder-filled journey toward home.

The journey to God is a continual and paradoxical journey of the spirit. On the one hand, our search leads us home. On the other, the fuel for the search comes from longings that remind us we have not yet arrived. Arrival is not the aim of the spiritual journey. It is the trek that matters most. This paradox exists because our home is not so much a place as it is a path—a *way* more than a *location*. If our home were a fixed location rather than a path, our fundamental drive to search would be negated, and that would violate our design as humans.

As we've seen, we interrupt our search when we pursue lesser things (which end up in the graveyard). But we can also thwart our

search when we seek for the sure thing or the sure answer. This kind of preoccupation for surety is a danger for people interested in a spiritual path. We dare not make our faith or our beliefs the final word of the journey, but simply a first step.

## ～ In Pursuit of Sure Things ～

Imagine a math teacher who stands at the front of his class, adjusts his pocket protector, and declares that he is not sure how to do the current lesson, but with the help of the students, answers *might* be discovered.

*How confident would you be?*

A surgeon, just prior to giving the patient anesthesia, announces, “I’m fuzzy on a few parts of this procedure, but I’ve seen it done twice.”

*How secure would you feel?*

A pilot, prior to takeoff, alerts the passengers that one of the engines has malfunctioned. “But hey,” the pilot continues, “we still have one that works.”

*What would you do next?*

A presidential hopeful proclaims a passion for our country’s ambiguity. With nervous hesitation, the candidate squeaks out, “I’m not sure what to do, but over the next four years I’ll give it my best shot.”

*How would you vote?*

Much of our world has been built on apparent certainty. We have low tolerance for haziness in our relationships, situations, or circumstances. We want to *know*; we want a sure thing; we feel as though finding a sure thing is a divine right. Now don’t get me wrong. The examples I’ve cited do require a kind of competence and confidence that is appropriate. The real trouble comes when our thirst for certainty permeates every area of life, particularly the

spiritual journey home. When we approach the spiritual path with the same solution-driven desire that marks so much of our lives, it inhibits our ability to travel the terrain of the soul.

The irony is that many have turned spirituality into a sure thing, devoid of any questions, doubts, or struggles. Christianity, in many circles, has become like a game show in which all the answers are given before any questions are asked. This does not resonate with the path of Jesus. The narratives about Jesus portray him as one who upset the confident and ignited a childlike wonder in those who could appreciate *not knowing*. The path of Jesus does not lead so much to assurance as to adventure and transformation. This is true of any authentic spiritual journey.

A spiritual life, therefore, is not so much about confidence in concepts that we believe, or even in a place we're headed, but rather about a path we walk and One who is present to the journey. To walk a spiritual path will not lead us to a smug security or a postponement of life until after death. It is a path lined with sacred doubt that pushes us deeper into the present moment. This way invites us to cultivate a seeker's heart that is so often devalued in an answer-driven world. Perhaps this is why we were created to seek. This kind of seeker's heart moves us into the environment of the unknown, where we can embrace the Mystery who does not desire to be explained but longs to be experienced.

## ~ The Search and Beliefs ~

In the pages ahead, I'll talk about the continual search for God and home and about the everyday ways we can seek God. But I am uneasy imposing my tradition on the mass of humanity (as if I could pull that off), so I want to be transparent about my own spiritual life and even wrestle with it in front of you. This desire

for transparency flows from an important principle that is essential to an exploration of the seeker's way: *A seeker admits the limits of particular belief systems and acknowledges that God is far bigger than any human being's conceptions.* This principle is essential, because it keeps the seeker humble and pliable along the way. Seekers are not afraid to simultaneously commit to and doubt their beliefs. That makes a seeker's beliefs both firm and supple. It's not that a seeker is without beliefs; rather, intellectual belief is not the center of faith but a necessary and unavoidable part of it. One who can embrace this paradox can walk the way of the seeker.

## ~ Longings That Move Us ~ onto the Seeker's Way

To seek for more than temporary satisfactions or sure answers requires that we understand the role that longings play in our spiritual journey. Longings are unmet desires that move us along, lead us by our heartstrings onto the path home. The longings of the heart initiate and propel us forward; they are the fuel that keeps the search alive in everyday life. In a very deep sense, longings are two-sided. On the one hand, a longing creates a desire to abandon something that no longer animates our life. On the other hand, a longing creates a desire to venture out toward something that will rekindle and reshape life in fresh ways.

*A longing places us between the letting go and the reaching out.*

It is best to think of longings as movements from something less desirable to something more desirable. The longing to lose weight, for example, often includes a frustration over our current body shape, as well as a hope for one that is leaner and more attractive. Longings are not simply "the hope for something better" but

the movement from the lesser to the better. The movement from too much body weight to a leaner body is where we find health. The same is true of the spiritual life. It takes both—the lesser and the better—to create true longing. It is in between what is and what could be that we live a spiritual life.

In this book, we will explore six particular longings that move us along the way of a spiritual life. Each puts us in an in-between place where we yearn to move into a more authentic expression of our lives. The six longings are these:

1. From answers to experience
2. From activity to meaning
3. From control to compost
4. From shadow to substance
5. From performance to expression
6. From segregation to community

Even though the left side of the longing is portrayed as the less desirable part, it doesn't mean that part of the longing is of no use to our search. If for no other reason, the left side of the longing reveals that we want more than that side can give. In that sense we need it. There are moments in life when the left side of the longing is necessary. Answers are at times very important to life. The spiritual path is not primarily nurtured by answers but by experience, not so much by surface activity as by meaning. It is also possible, as we make our way along the path, for the two sides of a longing to merge. In other words, our answers will eventually come out of our experience, and our activity will be infused with meaning. For most of us, the spiritual journey is first a linear movement from one side to the other and then an integration of both. We will keep both ideas in mind as we explore the longings.



## ~ Seekers Who Will Make ~ the Journey with Us

Along the way of our exploration, we will meet *seven seekers* who embody the spirit of the seeker's way. These are people contemporary to the times in which we live. My initial encounters with each of these seven people came through their writings. I was changed by their books, so I invited them to participate in this project. As I wrote the book, I spent time with each of them, listening to their life stories and their ideas about the spiritual journey. You will meet the seekers, one in each of the chapters devoted to exploring the longings.

Here's the order in which you will discover the longings and the seeker or seekers attached to that chapter:

<i>Longing</i>	<i>Seeker</i>
From Answers to Experience	Wayne Teasdale: Catholic monk who works in the field of inter-spirituality
From Activity to Meaning	Alan Jones: Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco
From Control to Compost	Philip Gulley and Jim Mulholland: Quaker pastors
From Shadow to Substance	Lauren Winner: Scholar and author whose writings are reaching a new generation of seekers
From Performance to Expression	Marcus Borg: Jesus scholar and visionary for twenty-first-century Christianity
From Segregation to Community	Joan Chittister: Benedictine nun with a passion for robust spirituality and authentic feminism

The beliefs of these seven seekers differ, as do their ages, gender, and passions. I do not hold them up for their beliefs or philosophies. My effort has been to show how each person you meet embodies the seeker's way in light of one of the six longings. I sought to remain true to the spirit of our interviews, yet the book is more than six interviews. It includes my ideas about the longings of a seeker. I believe the stories of the seven seekers illustrate and round out many of my thoughts, and I add to theirs as well. With this in mind, think of these seekers as contributing a wonderful texture to each chapter and bringing it alive through their insight and example.

A wonderful journey awaits us. The longings we'll explore will help us make this journey toward home with passion and humility. The longings are part of the path that supports you as you walk, so let each longing lead you to a more authentic expression of your spirituality and your life calling.

To the search!