CHAPTER 1

The Restless Season

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant,
and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather
stones together; a time to embrace,
and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep,
and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war,
and a time for peace.
—Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

As the sage of Ecclesiastes said, there is, indeed, a time for everything. But chances are that if you've picked up this book, the time you find yourself in is one of transition. Divorce, loss of a job, an empty nest, a move across the country, loss of a loved one, a chronic illness, and any number of other transitions all share something in common: they dump us—sometimes rather unceremoniously—flat into an unsettled time, a restless season.

After dealing with the shock and the overwhelming grief, after friends and family have stopped asking so often how you are, when you find yourself someplace that feels unfamiliar, that's the beginning of a journey in what often feels like desert space—a time when the heart is restless and unsettled, when the empty horizon seems to stretch out endlessly, leading nowhere, and resources seem scarce.

In my own times of transition, I've found that there are lots of resources for dealing with the initial shock or movement or sorrow that begins a transitional time in life. That doesn't make the time any easier, nor do all those resources make living through the time any easier. It doesn't even seem to matter whether the transition is forced on us or we choose it. In all cases, something happens to bring about an ending in our life—one that forces us to reevaluate and probably to grow in some new direction. When those transitions hit, friends and loved ones are often willing to stay with us and help. Colleagues and those around us know that something is wrong, and the world, in general, tends to cut us a little slack. William Bridges, the author of the popular and helpful book, *Transitions,*[1] calls this first stage "the ending." The final stage of his three-step exploration of transitions is "the new

beginning"—the time, way down the road, when we've figured out where we want to head or feel compelled to go.

In between the ending and the beginning is a long stretch of time, often the most difficult piece of the journey. Bridges dubs this "neutral time"; I find it anything but that. The word *neutral* implies that not a whole lot is happening, and although decisions aren't being made quickly and not much gets resolved from day to day, all kinds of things are happening. To me, transitions are more like the time the Israelites spent wandering in the desert—empty, extreme in its emotional temperatures, confusing to navigate, and hard to wait out. They're also unavoidable. There's no such thing as a quick and easy transition from the shock of some change that we seek or that is thrust upon us and whatever new beginning lies ahead. Just as the cold of the winter months creates conditions that help spring flowers bloom gloriously, so the conditions of time spent in the desert work their way into the soul and, if we let them, the time spent there brings forth new life.

The restlessness of transitions, though it feels lousy—even outright crushing—at times, is like the growing pains of adolescence. It's a sign that the heart and mind and soul are alive and kicking, looking for more, asking questions. This time between the first stages of grief or mourning and the discovery of Canaan—the place to which God guides us—is far from neutral. It's more than an endurance contest. Often it's lonely or frustrating, or both. Anthropologists call it "liminal time"—the kind of time between one stage of life and the next. In some cultures, for instance, boys go out into the wilderness by themselves on a vision quest or some other established ritual, and when they come back they are now considered to be men. That time in the wilderness is liminal time—the time between here and there, when we're not really sure anymore who or where we are or where we're going. Desert time is painful, but it's also alive with creative potential.

The story is told of Henry Ford, the founder of the first American automobile-manufacturing company, who hired an efficiency expert to go through his plant and make recommendations about improving operations. The efficiency expert found that the factory worked pretty well and had high praise for Ford, except in one area. There was, apparently, a man who routinely sat with his feet up on his desk, thinking. The efficiency expert thought the man was wasting time, but Ford promptly corrected him. "That man once had an idea that earned us a fortune. At the time, I believe his feet were exactly where they are now."[2] In the middle stage of transition it often looks as if we are doing nothing; sometimes it even feels as if we're doing nothing. But the reality is that creative stuff is happening, and what we have to do during this time is to settle into the nothingness and see what comes of all of it.

O Lord Jesus Christ, who art the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we pray Thee suffer us not to stray from Thee who are the Way; nor to distrust Thee who are the Truth, nor to rest in any other thing than Thee, who are the Life. Teach us by the Holy Spirit what to believe, what to do, and where to take our rest. We ask it for Thy own name's sake.

—Erasmus

Does that mean that God inflicts change on us to force growth? Is this some cosmic version of tough love? I don't think so. I'm willing to acknowledge, along with Job, that I wasn't there when God created everything and that I don't really know how or why things work as they do. There are some mysteries in this life, like the Divine Mystery Itself, which I call God, that I don't expect to understand on this side of the grave, at least not completely. But that said, my sense is that God calls me beloved, and the One who loves me does not wish

misery on me. That One who loves me loves you, too, and has no desire to see you suffer either.

But stuff happens in this world. Germs and genes leave people ill, sometimes deathly ill. Human affections shift or change over time and disrupt relationships. Companies transfer workers, or we choose to move to far-flung parts of the country or the world and communities get disrupted. People and nations declare war on one another and find all kinds of other ways to hurt each other. Earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes do their damage.

Good stuff happens, too. Children are born, bringing great changes into their parents' lives. Graduations propel people forward. Two people who love one another get married. Someone gets a promotion. Spring comes again each year, and flowers start bursting out all over. God watches all of this and uses whatever happens as an invitation to us to co-create with him.[3] God has hopes and desires for this world, and for each of us, but they're just that—hopes and desires, not edicts. God watches all that happens and celebrates or weeps with us, as the situation demands, but the Holy One has also given us free will and respects the decisions we feel compelled to make. God helps us find the way forward, whatever happens.

In a marvelous book, *The Hopeful Heart,* priest and writer John Claypool explores the three ways that God, who loves us deeply, gives us the hope we need to help us move forward. The first is that sometimes God provides a miracle, which isn't as far-fetched or unusual as we like to think, says Claypool. The fact that we were born at all, that we continue to walk and breathe on this earth day after day, is a miracle in and of itself. The third way that God works with us is to give us the gift of endurance, the ability to bear whatever we must bear for as long as necessary. But this book focuses on Claypool's second way that God provides us with graceful help. The second is that God collaborates with us. As Claypool says, "God moves alongside us and invites us to join

forces with him in bringing about a solution to our difficulties. Our identity as co-creators becomes a reality when this happens. We are offered the opportunity of combining our skills, insights, and energies with those of God to resolve our problems."[4] In the midst of transition, God invites us to listen to our hearts and attend to God's movements—to collaborate as we find our way forward in life.

There are times in the midst of any transition when we're too tired, too weary, or too weak to participate in the collaborative process, or when it's just not time for our active participation. In the early stages of labor, for instance, a woman has to breathe through the contractions and wait until it is time for her to do something more. That's not to say that the breathing and waiting, and resisting doing anything else, isn't hard work. It is! The Israelites in the desert found it most difficult to just wait and breathe and avoid pushing. But this is the time for trusting that God holds us and guides us, and to rest, as much as possible, in that knowledge.

Holy God, loving Father, of the world everlasting,

Grant me to have of Thee this living prayer;

Lighten my understanding, kindle my will, begin my doing,

Incite my love, strengthen my weakness, enfold my desire.

—Alexander Carmichael

But there comes a time, and in labor it is called "the transition," when it is time to push, to get very involved in moving the process forward. There is a stage in the midst of most journeys when we have the energy, the alertness, the desire, when our hearts are so restless that we're ready to be involved in the conversation and the choices, when there is energy enough to recognize that God wants to collaborate with us

and to begin to listen and respond. It is my deepest hope that this book will help you become more aware of those opportunities and find ways to respond instead of experiencing the desert as an endurance contest and nothing more.

"Look well to the growing edge!" counsels twentieth-century priest and writer Howard Thurman in his poem, "The Growing Edge."

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born:
The fruit ripens on the tree;
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth
Against the time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms,
green fruit.
Such is the growing edge!
It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung,
The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.
This is the basis of hope in moments of despair,
The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And men have lost their reason; the source of confidence
When worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.
The birth of a child—life's most dramatic answer to death—
This is the Growing Edge incarnate,
Look well to the growing edge![5]
—Howard Thurman

"Looking to the growing edge" sounds nice, of course, but it is extraordinarily hard work. I don't know about you, but if my world should crash and my dreams whiten into ash, my first inclination would be one of great frustration, fear, and sorrow. I would not be jumping up and down for joy because I thought God was inviting me into something new. It's so important to do the work of grieving, which comes with all transitions, not just the unhappy ones. Even a new and exciting opportunity brings with it loss—loss of freedom, loss of good friends or community, radical changes in the schedule, and demands on one's life. Grieving the losses, even when there's something new to celebrate, but especially when the loss is the predominant theme in your life, is crucial, and it takes time. This isn't a book primarily about that grieving or mourning stage. This book is for the time after you've gotten past the initial shock of change, when you find yourself, as the Israelites did, on a long desert journey to a place you can't yet name. Looking for the growing edge is an activity best engaged in while walking the desert's long stretches of hot, dry sand, rather than in the midst of deep grieving. Like the lichen and shrubs and spruce, everything has to grow in its own time.

The transition process is a little like a story that Catholic priest and collector of stories Anthony De Mello tells about an unnamed man:

> He was becoming blind by degrees. He fought it with every means in his power. When medicine no longer served to fight it, he fought it with his emotions. It took courage to say to him, "I suggest you learn to love your blindness."
>
> It was a struggle. He refused to have anything to do with it in the beginning. And when he eventually brought himself to speak to his blindness his words were bitter. But he kept on speaking and the words slowly changed into words of resignation and tolerance and acceptance . . . and, one

> day, very much to his own surprise, they became words of friendliness . . . and love. Then came the day when he was able to put his arm around his blindness and say, "I love you." That was the day I saw him smile again.[6]

This book is a guide to the journey that begins when you reach the place where, like the blind man, you are ready to start talking to your transition, even if all you have to offer are bitter words. As De Mello's story highlights, you can bring whatever emotions you're feeling along with you on the journey. It doesn't matter if you're headed into the desert angry, resigned, frightened, or full of other emotions. God understands, accepts, and can work with whatever you're carrying around with you right now. Start from where you are, not from where you're not.

Following Your Heart

One of the Desert Fathers (men who lived devout monastic lives in the desert in the third and fourth centuries after Christ) told the story of a man who wanted to know how he should live.

> A brother questioned an old man saying, "What good work should I do so that I may live?" The old man said, "God knows what is good. I have heard it said that one of the Fathers asked Abba Nisterus the Great, the friend of Abba Anthony, and said to him, 'What good work is there that I could do?' He said to him, "Are not all actions equal? Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. David was humble, and God was with him. Elias loved interior peace and God was with him. So, do whatever you see your soul desires according to God and guard your heart."[7]

Though it can be hard to hear what your soul is trying to tell you while you're in transition, especially at its most restless and arid, the work of the desert time is learning to listen to your heart. That's what I hope we can explore together in this book. This is the time to let your heart's desires speak to you—not completely unfettered, of course. I'll talk about some safeguards to employ when you seek to listen to what your heart is saying. But more often than not, people fail to listen to what their hearts most deeply desire. Those messages from the heart get dismissed as fanciful, impractical, or impossible. But it is through the heart that God often speaks to us and invites us on the journey that will eventually bring us to Canaan.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire

To work, and speak, and think for Thee;

Still let me guard the holy fire

And stir up Thy gift in me.

—Charles Wesley

For the ancient Hebrew people, the heart was something more than just a physical organ of the body. The heart was the place from which everything important emanated. Physical health, emotions, spirituality, and intellect all began in the heart. A *restless heart,* using the ancient Hebrew sense of the word, then, means that all aspects of our being feel restless. We experience that restlessness physically, emotionally, spiritually, and even intellectually in the midst of transition, just as the Israelites did in the ancient stories that fill Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. And like the Israelites, we want the restlessness—the discomforts of the desert—to end, sooner rather than later. The work of transition is about learning to listen patiently to the restlessness in our hearts—our bodies, minds, and souls—and to live with it long enough to get to know its name,

and to discover if, through it, God is inviting us to some kind of promised land.

It is this understanding of the heart, as the whole of our being, that leaves me with anxiety about some of the language used to explain the process of leaving behind some aspect of life and moving into a new one. Various writers—be they spiritual leaders, psychologists, or others—talk about the need to (at best) leave behind and (at worst) kill off the old or false self. I struggle with the idea that there *is* an old or false self. We may have a self or self-image that is culturally conditioned, as some have said,[8] but I have a hard time believing that the self I was years ago, before some important changes in my life, was a false one. It was the self I needed to be at that time, and God loved me just as I was. It is more helpful, I find, to think of myself as someone who is becoming more and more of what God hopes and desires for me as I learn to listen more deeply, and as I become more willing to be open to God's transforming love. That doesn't make the younger Debra false, just less developed. And the experiences of those earlier years were important. They taught me key lessons and helped me learn to see and hear with my heart today. God willing, the experiences of the person I am now will do the same for the person I am becoming.

God be in my head,
and in my understanding.
God be in my eyes,
and in my looking;
God be in my mouth,
and in my speaking;
God be in my heart,
and in my thinking.

ANONYMOUS (C. 1514)

The whole issue of "dying to ourselves" in the process of growing in Christian faith and in living through transitional times

also deserves careful questioning. Contemporary scholars have begun to understand that this particular image may be more helpful to some than to others who seek to grow in loving God. The image of "dying to self," for instance, may be far more helpful to men than to women. "Not only is psychology affected by a male bias, but also religion," write the authors of *Healing the Eight Stages of Life.*

> Many assumptions are based on male experience. For example, men who have been raised to compete with and dominate others may understandably perceive sin as pride. This male view of sin as pride has become central to Christian spirituality; the remedy is seen as "dying to self."[9]

Many women, on the other hand, have been raised to put the needs of others before their own and to ignore their own deepest desires. Asking them to die to those desires and needs even more proves enormously detrimental, impeding spiritual growth and connection with God.

More male-biased language fills the pages of the Bible. In the story of the Israelites' transition from Egypt to Canaan, the people stubbornly refuse to enter Canaan the first time they get there, and God condemns them to wander in the desert for forty more years until the generation that defied God has died. It's pretty simple to translate that story as being about killing off the old self or (more passively) letting the old self die so that the newer, truer self can enter Canaan. And if that language works for you and helps you understand how to get through desert times, then go ahead and use it.

But if that kind of language gets in your way and makes you want to give up altogether, here's different imagery. The journey for the Israelites was about learning how to stop being slaves and become, more fully, the people of God. Journeys through desert times are similar: they require that we move from being wherever

we are today to a place of even deeper connection with God. That doesn't necessarily involve leaving behind every aspect of who we have been. Rather, it is about the transformation of what we have been into what we will be, much as the caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. As Sue Monk Kidd, contemporary spirituality writer and novelist, writes:

> The life of the spirit is never static. We're born on one level, only to find some new struggle toward wholeness gestating within. That's the sacred intent of life, of God—to move us continuously toward growth, toward recovering all that is lost and orphaned within us and restoring the divine image imprinted on our soul. And rarely do significant shifts come without a sense of our being lost in dark woods. . . .[10]

Kidd's words—"a sense of our being lost"—are important. We have the sense that we are lost many times, but God hasn't lost track of us. God has hopes and desires for us and knows where we are at any point in time. The hard part for us is trusting that eventually we'll get a sense of God's guidance so that we no longer feel quite so lost.

Learning to trust in God's ongoing guidance is a little like the story of the atheist who fell off a cliff but managed to catch hold of a small branch that kept him from falling to his death. Not knowing what else to do, he shouted for God. No answer. He shouted again: "God, if you actually exist, save me, and I'll tell everyone else about you." At first all he heard was more silence, but then a voice from the heavens said quietly: "That's what they all say when they need my help." The atheist protested: "I really mean it, God. I believe in you now. Just save me and you'll see what good I'll do in your name." God agreed to save the man. "Just let go of the branch, and I'll save you," God replied. "You must be out of your mind," shouted the man. "Save me without my having to let go of this branch."

O supreme and unapproachable light! O whole and blessed truth. How far you are from me, who am so near to you! Everywhere you are wholly present, yet I do not see you. In you I move, and in you I have my being, and cannot come to you; you are within me, and around me, and I do not feel you.

—Anselm

God does guide our transitions but not always the way we have in mind. We sometimes even think this guidance is crazy or impossible. The stories found in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are full of people who alternately clung to God and thought God crazy or irrational, and those stories form a backdrop to this book. More often than not, those stories are held up as ones about the Israelites' (and ours, by extension) obedience and disobedience to God's law, and there's a lot to say about that in those narratives. But they are also stories about the difficulty of living in transition—the in-between times.

In the Israelites' struggle to live in the desert without knowing where they were headed, when they would get there, and what the new land would be like, I see my own struggles with transitional times. It's not hard to identify with their frustrations and their pigheadedness. The stories found in these scriptures are stories about God's continuing efforts to grow the people out of slavery and into their identity as people of God. In much the same way, without the same particulars, our own transitions are always about becoming more deeply the person God sees in us. And so the

Clothe me, clothe me with yourself, eternal truth, so that I may live this early life with true obedience, and with the light of your most holy faith.

—Catherine of Siena

stories of the Israelites and their long journey from Egypt to Canaan are our stories as well. If you haven't read Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy recently, you may well find a quick review of them enlightening.

In using these narratives as part of this book's backbone, however, I need to remind you and myself that these stories aren't blueprints for living in transition. They weren't written to be a "transition manual" and can't be read as self-help books. The stories found there are enormously instructive and even comforting for those who are exploring the restlessness of desert times, but the stories can be stretched too thin in trying to make them fit the transitions in the lives of twenty-first-century people.

In the pages that follow, I offer suggestions based on my own studies and experiences about understanding transitions as creative processes rather than endurance contests. There are so many different kinds of transitions, and we each come to them with different expectations and needs, so not everything in the following chapters will be useful to all people at all times. I've included a variety of spiritual practices to help you explore some of the ideas in the book, as well as prayers that speak to the issues you may be facing. Use what's helpful to you in the midst of your own transition, and don't worry about trying to use everything in the book. Pay attention as well to suggestions that seem to call to you and to ideas that really bother you. Sometimes the very things that frighten or repel are just what we need to pay attention to at the moment. But use your own good sense in deciding what, from all the material in this book, is helpful to you in the midst of your particular transition.

Praying and Journaling in the Desert

When I am writing a book—a process that has a lot in common with transitions—I find it helpful to keep a journal of my thoughts. I recommend that you keep a transitions journal as you travel through your own desert. The journal isn't a diary in the traditional sense. There are no rules about how often to write or what to put in it. Keeping a journal is just a way to record random thoughts, musings, hopes, miseries, desires, or anything else that comes to you. The journal I've kept while writing this book is full of random ideas, written down as they came to me. I didn't end up using all of them, but it was fascinating to review what I'd written over eighteen months as I was finishing the book. I discovered thoughts I'd lost track of, some of which were still important and others that seemed less so. A transition journal of your own will help you in the same way and give you something to look back at, as you gain some perspective on the journey you're embarked on.

Any kind of journal will do, but I'd recommend one that is easy to write in. Something spiral-bound, or one that lays flat without your having to hold it down forcibly is best. There are lots of decorative and expressive journals on the market, and you may find the perfect one for you. The journal that seemed to find me as I contemplated this book had a wonderful quote about growing more like ourselves as we grow older, and the journal practically jumped into my hands as the perfect one for this book. If you can't find one that suits you, create your own. Decorate it however it suits you, using crayons or paints, fabric, or whatever you like. This is your journal, your companion for the journey; throughout the book, I'll make suggestions about things to think about and record in it. Use the exercises if you find them helpful, but don't limit yourself to my suggestions. Write anything that seems pertinent to you in your transitions journal. You never know what thoughts and ideas will rise to the surface as you travel along.

This book is also full of prayers that may be helpful along the way. In the midst of transition, sometimes the words we need just won't come. There are times, many of them, when just sitting quietly with God, saying nothing, is just exactly what you'll need to do, and far be it from me to ever discourage anyone from just sitting companionably with God. It's some of the best medicine I know. But if you're searching for words and can't find ones of your own that seem to fit, I've included a selection of prayers that speak to the fears, joys, and restlessness of transitional times.

God, my Source of Strength:
A season is turning in my life
Calling me to make ready:
Walk with me, I pray.
This unmapped course lies divided ahead
Urging careful determination:
Walk with me, I pray.
The gate has swung open and everything's loose
Bidding that someone be left behind:
Walk with me, I pray.
Until the turbulent waters clear
I reach for your mercy
And pray for wisdom:
Walk with me, I pray.[11]

—Keri Wehlander

Praying often comes naturally during transitions. In good times, it's easy to forget about God, but when the path is difficult we're more aware of wanting and needing God's presence. Try to take time for prayer on a regular basis, even if it's just a few minutes a day. Your prayers don't have to be complicated. Just talk to God, and don't worry about whether or not your prayers sound well-put-together or elegant. God doesn't care about that. Just communicate with God in any way that works

best for you. It may be sitting quietly for a while. Or taking a walk and letting your mind and heart pray and listen. Gardening, cleaning the house, or anything else that helps you clear your mind to talk with God and to listen is great. Pay attention to any resistance you have to praying during this time of transition. See if you can decipher what that's about, and use your journal to reflect on your experience.

Prayer isn't magic. It won't always be comforting to pray, though it's unlikely that it will never offer comfort. Prayer isn't about convincing God to do what you want the Holy One to do. It's about talking through your restlessness, your fears, your joys, and your hopes, and listening for God's response. And in the midst of transition, it is often about simply learning to seek God's guidance, even in the dark.