Chapter 1

CONTEMPLATING IN CHAOS

I have a vivid memory of a scene in *Shadowlands,* a film about the renowned theologian C. S. Lewis. He sits alone in his quiet study, thinking, praying, and perhaps developing the theology that has had such an impact on many Christians. Then his housekeeper arrives with tea and asks him if he needs anything.

This scene is not an especially important or memorable part of the film, which tells the poignant story of the love and bereavement Lewis experienced late in life. But it stayed with me because it planted a question I've lived with ever since: Do we know more about Christian faith as those like Lewis experienced it and wrote about it—in the quiet sanctum of a study, needs secured, free from the immediate demands of others—than about the faith experienced by parents and those who care for children?

Consider this scene next to the opening frames of the film *Parenthood.* Credits roll as a mom and dad inch their way from a baseball game to the family van, juggling, dropping, and picking up kids, souvenirs, bags, and other paraphernalia. The father, played by Steve Martin, is determined to be a better parent than his own father, who, as he has just reminisced, didn't even bother with things like baseball games. His father had simply dropped him off at the ballpark and paid an attendant to watch him.

In spite of this character's resolve to be a good parent, however, the scene also shows how hard it is, as the oldest son starts singing a

ditty about diarrhea on the hot, sweaty ride home and the parents exchange a look of hopeful, despairing resignation. *Parenthood* depicts the entanglement of being a parent and being a child, having parents and having children, across several generations. Even the perks of middle-class suburban life cannot allay bedlam, comically yet honestly depicted.

When people think of the spiritual life, they typically picture silence, uninterrupted and serene—a pastor's study, a cloister walk, a monk's cell. Thinking of parenting, by contrast, they imagine noise and complication, dirty diapers, sleepless nights, phone calls from teachers, endless to-do lists, teen rooms strewn with stuff, and backseat pandemonium. By and large, these portraits are accurate. The life of faith requires focused attention that comes most easily when one is least distracted, while caring for children is one of the most intrusive, disorienting occupations around, requiring triage upon triage of decision and response. Can one pursue a "spiritual" life in the midst of such regular, nitty-gritty, on-the-alert demands?

Spirituality on the Inside

The Western world has a long history of saying no. One extreme example is Jerome, a fourth-century advocate for monastic life. Like many Latin authors of Roman antiquity, he deemed procreation and the love of children undesirable. He didn't have anything against children per se but rather shunned child rearing for one primary reason: children are a big roadblock on the highway to heaven.

Even those early church leaders who were relatively sympathetic to marriage and family accepted them as a concession to human weakness and sexual desire rather than as a valuable way to live a faithful life. In the Greek context of early Christianity, marriage and children, like other temporal concerns, were thought of as a potential trap for the soul, which ancients understood as yearning for the unchanging immaterial world of beauty and truth. Patristic treatises on the virtues of virginity offer detailed lists of the horrors and tribulations of domesticity—the risks and discomforts of infertility, pregnancy, and childbirth; the drudgery of domestic work; the conflict and

violence of the homestead; and anxiety about infidelity, servants, and family members' deaths.

These early church theologians do not have a uniform outlook on marriage and procreation by any means. Although Jerome tended to see them as the baneful result of humankind's fall into sin, Augustine believed instead that the family was part of God's original, good creation and thus a part of God's plan for people from the beginning. Other leading thinkers, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose, fell somewhere in between. But they all agreed on one thing: family life is inferior to the celibate life of religious heroes and saints. Only lesser mortals (of whom there are many, to be sure) settle for it. If these folks could only learn its hardships prior to the experience, Gregory remarks, "then what a crowd of deserters would run from marriage into the virgin life."

Few people today would flock to celibacy as an alternative to family drudgery. But this legacy of what constitutes the authentic life of faith still seeps into our outlook more than we realize. Several years ago, at a consultation with a group of systematic theologians working on Christian practices and theology, one well-regarded scholar who is particularly interested in the contemplative tradition offhandedly remarked to the rest of us that after the birth of her first child her "discipline of prayer" became impossible. She gave it up.

Like many parents, this scholar gazes with envy over the shoulders of what seem to be our "more spiritual brethren," people refreshed by long retreats uninterrupted by the nagging demands of others. Are these not, many of us ask ourselves, the "true 'spiritual athletes' whose disciplined life of prayer brings them daily closer to God?" Guidance from priests and pastors often affirms this "received" or traditional view. When a young, exhausted Anglican mother found her devotional life in disarray after the birth of her child, Janet Martin Soskice reports, the mother received this advice from three priests: "The first told her that if the baby woke at 6:00 A.M., she should rise at 5:00 A.M. for a quiet hour of prayer. The second asked if her husband could not arrange to come home early from work three times a week so that she could get to a Mass. This advice proved threatening to life and marriage. The third told her,

'Relax and just look after your baby. The rest of the Church is praying for you.' "

Anyone who has had children knows how difficult the first suggestion really is (as if babies keep a regular schedule and parents have energy to get up an hour ahead of them). Most contemporary parents also know how much the second idea—negotiating for more child-free time, much less time for prayer—can disrupt and even tear apart relationships of those who jointly care for children. The third suggestion was clearly meant to comfort and uphold the importance of the church community's pledge in baptism or baby dedication to pray and care for children and parents. But the remark also implies that the faith life of a busy parent must simply be put on hold. They are "Christians on idle," taking some years off from their faith life while others seek God on their behalf.

Not too long after I joined the ranks of those encumbered with young children, a news article caught my eye. It proclaimed the benefits of a "new" technique called "centering prayer," revived by the Catholic monk Thomas Keating—one more development in a rejuvenated interest in spirituality and monastic practice over the last few decades. The article said in part that the "search for God starts by entering a room, the private inner room of the soul. . . . There, a person finds God waiting, beyond the noise, beeps and defeats of life 'outside.' " Beyond the noise, beeps, and defeats of life outside? One finds God on the inside? So the common tradition of prayer and faith seem to assume.

Thomas Merton, a well-known twentieth-century Catholic monk and mystic, profoundly revitalized this view. His compelling journey from a tumultuous youth to life in one of the more austere monastic orders, the Trappists (a journey recounted in his books, published in many languages, reprinted frequently, and bought by millions) gave this kind of meditative spirituality new visibility and appeal. Even though Merton himself combined strict ascetic discipline with political action on race, peace, and civil rights, his writings often assumed a conflict between the internal and the external, as if one always needed to dig deeper within to find the real self before God. "Contemplation is not and cannot be a function of this external self," this "superficial 'I' . . . that works in the world," says Merton in one

of his most widely read books. It is the "work of the 'deep self,' " an awakening to God's mystery within the "depths."

Psychologists writing during Merton's lifetime, such as Carl Rogers and Carl Jung, proposed the same idea from another angle. One must peel off the outer layers of the "false self" or the "persona," like an onion, to reach the authentic core at the center. Some truth does lie in this advice to question our external attachments and strip the mask that hides our flawed motivations. But this spatial perception of inner over outer, higher over lower, which is woven through so much spiritual and psychological advice, also ends up demeaning the external, the bodily, the earthy, and the material and obscuring their actual connection to our real self and our authentic spirituality. "Certain active types," Merton even argues, "are not disposed to contemplation and never come to it except with great difficulty." Well, this would seem to exclude many parents and children.

Before my husband, Mark, and I became parents, we co-led an adult class on prayer in a small, mostly working-class congregation. We used a classic text by Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*. The slender volume is designed around daily readings and, like many books, suggests setting aside time to pray at regular intervals. This might require getting up earlier, starting work later, or cutting lunch short.

Such instruction seems simple enough. Yet most of the adults in the class balked. They had kids and jobs. Repeatedly, they had tried and failed. They were too tired in the morning, too tired at night, and too overwhelmed in the hours between. They were already cutting corners. At that time Mark and I were without kids; we pressed these good church folk to persist. Now we look back and laugh at our slightly pretentious naïveté and confidence that *we* at least knew how to make space for prayer in *our* busy lives.

These folks were simply trying to adapt a pattern of faith that is deeply embedded in Western society to the incompatible pattern of their physical, material life with children, partner, and domicile. The embedded pattern simply does not fit the contour of most people's lives today.

"Few of the great remembered pray-ers of our tradition were married. Few had children," notes church historian Wendy Wright.

But this is not all. Many of the esteemed champions of the faith tradition modeled an entire way of life at odds with the life of these church members. They pursued God through the "silence and solitude of a hermit's cell or the mobility of unattached apostolic life." They sought to extend love "to all dispassionately" rather than to particular persons. Indeed, they "radically cut ties with families" and forbade pursuit and satisfaction of sexual desire and bodily need. Ardent devotion to God required transcending the body, voluntary poverty, and pilgrimage far beyond the bond and boundary of home.

Here lies a wholly distinct pattern for the Christian life—whom and how to love, how to work, where to live, how to care for the body, how to spend one's money. Has anyone ever outlined so clearly and carefully an alternative to this traditional view that has comparable weight, integrity, and cohesiveness? A huge gulf lies between this pattern and daily life for most of us—marriage, children, and passionate attachment to specific people; immersion in bodily, sexual activity; commitment to one location; ownership and care of material possessions; and the daily grind of making a living and maintaining a home.

Ambivalence about the family as a place of faith goes as far back as Christian scripture itself. In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus himself disclaims his own biological family and proclaims a new family of believers, not related by birth but by commitment to doing God's will (Matthew 13:55; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21; all scriptural citations are NRSV unless otherwise specified). Certainly these passages are meant to challenge the extended family clan and the authority it wielded rather than dismiss marriage and procreation themselves. Other passages, such as Elizabeth and Mary greeting motherhood with joy, or Jesus blessing wedding wine, forbidding divorce, and welcoming children, indicate high regard for the bonds of marriage and the love of children.

Nonetheless, Jesus' own model of discipleship and that of his first followers planted seeds of unrest. He was, after all, single and without children, and he asked those who followed him to leave their family. The Apostle Paul never married or had children and thought the imminence of God's kingdom advised accepting whatever situation one found oneself in. Even Paul's identification of the early Chris-

tian community as the new "household of God" subtly shifted the locus of faith from the hearth and family as the center of religious practice to new extrafamilial relationships within the church. In many cases, the early church did precisely what Jesus predicted: set brother against brother, father against child, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Matthew 10:21, 35–36; Luke 12:52–53). These characteristics, mixed with the otherworldly leanings of Greek philosophy, made development of a Christian theology of family faith difficult, right up to our time.

Christian perception of faith as something that happens outside ordinary time and within formal religious institutions, or within the private confines of one's individual soul, still pervades Western society. This is true despite recent popular movements and publications affirming everyday spirituality, and despite long-standing movements within Christian history that have encouraged integration of faith into daily life. Some of these movements are receiving renewed attention today, as growing interest in Ignatian and Benedictine spirituality demonstrates. Ignatius of Loyola was the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuits, a religious society that combines contemplation with action designed to change the world, and Benedict of Nyssa was a fifth-century monastic who created an order that balanced prayer and daily work. Today thousands still belong to these religious orders and many more benefit from retreats, books, and other instruction in these distinctive spiritual paths. Efforts to disseminate these traditions more widely are an important corrective to the understanding of faith that continues to shape many church members, texts on spirituality, and my colleague who thought having kids disrupted her faith.

By and large, however, twentieth-century theologians continue to look past the sheer messiness of daily family life. Similarly, disregard for the material basis of life continues to frustrate contemporary believers' efforts to embrace their faith daily. Bias against "outward" forms of spirituality, as enacted by the body in the midst of family and community, marginalizes many Christians. Limiting spirituality to the "inner" life and restricting theology to the life of the mind ends up excluding a huge portion of life from both faith and theology.

Spirituality on the Outside

I now recognize a moment of awakening, when I began to have serious doubts about this way of understanding the life of faith. In a quintessential act of multitasking over a decade ago, I sat in the bathroom, watching two of my young sons in the tub *and* reading *The Way of the Heart,* Catholic priest Henri Nouwen's book about spirituality. I was reading his meditation on the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* because I'd assigned it in a ministry class and wanted to enliven my own practice of faith.

Drawing on one of the Desert Fathers, Abba Arsenius, Nouwen (a twentieth-century priest and spiritual leader) names solitude, silence, and prayer as the three means to love of God. Flee, be silent, and pray. "The words *flee, be silent* and *pray* summarize the spirituality of the desert . . . 'these are the sources of sinlessness,' says Arsenius." Solitude with God frees us from compulsive conformity to the world's standards and propels us toward compassion. Silence reorients the heart. Silence and solitude are paths to God.

No doubt there were many times when I wanted to flee motherhood, or at least some of its daily duties, over the months and years. But I couldn't—at least not to the extent Nouwen implied. There were also times when I yearned for silence, most often when I had other work to do, or as the day waned, infants turned inconsolable, and I tired. When silence came, I appreciated it but was far too spent to use it to fulfill what felt like more obligations of pious devotion. With three children under six and a full-time teaching job, silence and solitude were rare. But without solitude or silence, could I ever experience God?

My youngest son's babbling drew me from my reading to babble back, and another thought crystallized. Why were silence and solitude so absolutely crucial to spiritual growth? Although helpful and important, were they sufficient unto themselves? I looked up from Nouwen's lines about the danger of wordiness to witness one of my sons, not much over a year old, playing with words.

I watched as he grasped the power of language. As with most young children, water fascinated him, and he held a cup, poured water,

tried to connect his utterance not only to these objects—"cup," "wa wa"—but also to voice more elusive thoughts and feelings about the joy of pouring ("oooh") or the frustration of having me pull the plug ("aghhh," "no!"). Words opened up worlds for him. They became a source of self-knowledge, meaning, relationship, and, dare I forget, power (here is one reason we fear the day toddlers learn to use the word *no*). They allowed him to begin to conceptualize different orders of reflection and gave him the authority to name and share his experience. Certainly "words lead to sin," as the Desert Fathers say, and silence "keeps us pilgrims" and reminds us of our fleeting nature. But silence can also lead to sin or stagnation and words can build a home.

Words traded back and forth, words mimicked, words slowly stitched into whole sentences. Recently, while cleaning out the attic, I ran across a note on my oldest son's first full sentence: "Mommy come pick me up after work," a life-saving sentence for him that I probably wrote down with mixed feelings about leaving him to go to work. Words in books, rhyming Dr. Seuss words, *Good Night Moon,* and books with only one or two words per page, picture books without words for which we made up stories. Words shared around the dinner table, words sung by heart on Mark's lap with guitar about Casey Jones the railroad engineer, words rejoicing in worship, words debating language for God, words spilled in anger, words recanted. Words with holy potential. The Word as the holy itself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

All these words made up the essential warp and woof of our daily life in those days and now, just as essential to faith as any period of solitude and silence. Such words had the potential to breathe life into our lives. None of the words were God, but all could potentially invoke the Word "with God." Piled one on the next, they worked to weave together convictions and convey tradition, story, song, and prayer. They confirmed the place of conversation alongside silence and connection alongside solitude as vital components of a faithful life.

I did not then and do not now want to rule out silence or solitude as part of the Christian life, or of any life. Indeed, I have a job that requires large amounts of both. I pursued my particular vocation

partly because of these built-in qualities and my need for them. To write this book, I even had to ask my husband to take his laptop out of our shared study and find another place to (as I said not too nicely) "tap, tap, tap." Silence and solitude have their place.

I simply want to widen the circle of faith for the sake of children and parents. Millions of other parents must have also asked how to live a life of faith when silence and solitude are rare. I know that I am not the first to raise this. I join a centuries-old search in the Christian tradition for similar streams of thought, bubbling up in Ignatius, Benedict, and beyond. I am, however, among a smaller number who have wondered about the life of faith in direct relationship to children and those who care for them.

Widening the Circle of Faith

We give birth and raise the young. We seek God. Why has loyalty to the former, such a potentially rich source of spiritual inspiration, seemed to impede, derail, and compete with the latter? How might we sustain and adjudicate both these fundamental human needs? Perhaps we are now at a juncture where we have means not available before to take up this question once again and find fresh solutions.

More than two decades ago, Ernest Boyer, a lay Catholic minister and father of three sons, had a pivotal experience like my own. He sat in frustration while listening to a lecture at Harvard Divinity School on the Desert Fathers. Although tempted by the image of solitary prayer commended by the speaker, who made points similar to the ones I read in Nouwen's book, Boyer was also troubled. At the conclusion, he approached the speaker and asked (with a smile), "Is there child care in the desert?"

Boyer indicts the Roman Catholic Church for standing so insistently in the "shadow of the monastery." Catholicism certainly places a high value on the family. But this emphasis is often undermined by the Church's tradition of celibacy and male-only priesthood. Not surprisingly, married women, as Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson points out, are few in number among canonized saints. The closer one

is to the life of the family, it seems, the farther from God and the less accessible one's priestly gift.

Few religious traditions escape the tension between family and religious life, and most have explored ingenious ways to deal with it. Catholics themselves have attempted to mediate the hierarchy of celibate spirituality over spirituality of the home by identifying the family as a "domestic church," a small-scale model of the Church itself, an idea that goes back to the fourth century and that has enjoyed resurgence in the past two decades. Jews in eighteen-century Eastern Europe separated spiritual practice along gender lines, with religious study reserved for men and care of family the obligation of women. Hinduism regulates the problem chronologically, dividing the life cycle into four periods devoted to various concerns and with a special stage of "householding" for rearing children. Seventeenth-century Puritans sanctioned the home as a "little church" but then elevated the father to the role of pastor, nearer to God than others—with all the potentially destructive and even violent consequences of this equation.

As this indicates, these patterns of the past were often based on gender hierarchy and inequity. As a result, they cannot adequately address the question of how to combine faith and family today without considerable modification. Changes in women and men's roles in family and public, as well as the pressure of raising children in contemporary society, mean that we need fresh perspectives.

Now more people share responsibility for family and work in ever new ways—single and divorced mothers and fathers, grandparents caring for grandchildren, blended families, partners and spouses with two careers. More theologians, women and men alike, challenge previous hierarchies of soul over body, culture over nature, reason over emotion, and men over women and children. Perhaps now, with more people seeking God at the busy crossroad of parenthood, we can also challenge the hierarchy of inner over outer and begin to ask how to live faithfully amid noise and distraction.

My own pursuit of a more satisfactory answer has arisen gradually. Several years ago, a ministerial colleague told me that she had used my book *Also a Mother* to facilitate a church retreat on spirituality. I was surprised. The book does make rather dramatic claims—

that utterly physical acts of birth and care can be a powerful spiritual catalyst, that walking "according to the pace of children" can deepen faith, and that children have much to teach adults about the life of faith. But spiritual guidance was not in the forefront of my mind. It has only dawned on me slowly that I was then and am still now caught up in a much larger historical and cultural debate about the nature of faith, contemplation, chaos, and children.

Living on a Slack Line

Yesterday I took a break to follow my oldest son outside, where he had set up something called a "slack line," a flat, brilliant red webbing tied (low—only a few feet off the ground) like a tightrope between two trees. He wanted me to watch him as he practiced walking on it. It looks easy. It's not. He can take several steps and is working on turning around. I can't even stand up on it. Muscles matter, although it's not all muscle.

Holding the tension between silence and words, solitude and company is something like this: hard to sustain, a resounding pleasure when one succeeds. No wonder many Christians either hop off the slack line toward silence and solitude or give up altogether.

I write on a slack line that runs through the center of our home. My desk sits in a living room converted to a study, smack dab in the middle of family solace and bedlam. Sitting here writing, I can hear the phone, the dryer buzzer, interrupting questions ("Do you know where . . . ?"), and lots else (did I mention my oldest son plays drums?). I've become good at abiding through all this, choosing what to ignore and when to respond. But in neither realm am I at my best.

Drawn into the rhythm of meals, laundry, and kids' schedules, work goes poorly. I sometimes return to home life in a daze, like a sleepwalker, not really hearing my sons or my husband, or, as one of my colleagues did during a major project, making hamburgers to cook for breakfast ("Mom—it's *breakfast*"). At least my sons no longer run through my office chasing each other, although tomorrow could prove me wrong.

At certain overwhelming moments, I consider changing my mind about this strategy. But all in all, I am placing my bets on what I might learn from trying to walk this particular slack line. I do indeed get "more done" when no one is around. But this is only true if measured in the literal (and limited) sense of work produced, and not in the sense of wisdom gained and life deepened.

This particular arrangement is not for everybody. I recently read a lovely poetic book by a friend about the "art of faith and family." In the time-honored pattern of many writers, he retreats from the urban fray to a prairie farm to compose at a geographical distance from his family. He incorporates wonderful journal entries, fresh with insight spawned by the antics and wisdom of his three young children, jotted down right in the middle of it all. Yet I could not help but wonder how the book might have been different had he written at home. Maybe it wouldn't have happened at all. This is the hazard. But as it is, one of his pressing concerns—how to steady oneself in dual careers, multiple children, and escalating expectations—is somewhat defused. When he looks up, he sees birds, lilies, and spiders, not domestic debris, dirty dishes, and runny noses, or a time clock, phone messages, and a stack of deskwork.

My friend in the prairie henhouse suggests how hard it is to attain attention, not to mention artistic production or prayer, without fleeing. It may be that for him leaving home isn't fleeing at all. Rather, he says his time away is less "a retreat from my family than a journey back to them." This solitary reflective time is necessary to his ongoing ability to attend to faith in family.

When I once commented to a senior woman colleague about how hard it was to get my work done, she encouraged me to do what she did: get away for six weeks. Of course, when I told my husband, he just laughed. Exactly how were we going to do that? When would he get his turn? Hadn't I already had an unfair amount of time away on work trips? And so forth. But both of these folks illustrate that a key for faith and chaos lies in finding one's own necessary pattern for balancing, one's own particular slack line between solitude and connection.

Widening the circle of faith for the sake of children and parents means balancing profound silence and fruitful words, potent solitude

and invigorating company. A fine balance. A precarious balance. Perhaps this is partly what makes faith, as William James said, "strenuous."

Redeeming Martha

Learning to walk the slack line of faith is a step in the right direction. Each person does have to find a particular way through the chaos of life. But widening the circle of faith for children and those who care for them requires more than individual dexterity. I am actually suggesting a deeper transformation. We must get off the slack line and back on the ground. This means changing our minds about Martha and what she has stood for.

Women as a group have probably worried more over the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 than over any other five verses of the Bible. When Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha, Mary sits at his feet and listens while Martha is "distracted by her many tasks" (Luke 10:40a). When Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to help with the work, Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled by many things; one thing is needful" (Luke 10:41 RSV).

Many women identify acutely with Martha and despair over their domestic unfaithfulness. A long history of biblical interpretation has indeed esteemed Mary as the model of faithful attentiveness and peace, able to put aside dinner preparation and cleaning to appreciate Jesus fully. Even bible commentary simply presumes that Jesus' approval of Mary stands in contrast with his disapproval of "Martha's unneeded acts of hospitality (the more usual woman's role)."

Not surprisingly, women long for a "Mary heart in a Martha world," as one recent popular book is entitled. Mary has it all. Martha is equated with everything in the world that distracts us—daily chores, life's demands. Few escape feeling ashamed and guilty right alongside Martha before Jesus, responsible for and worried about so much.

Other New Testament passages seem to reinforce this. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on," Jesus tells his disciples (Luke 12:22 RSV). "Do not be anxious about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34 RSV). Although few

in number, these passages are heavy in influence. They do remind us to put aside petty obsessive worry and "seek first God's kingdom," a central imperative of Christian faith. But over the long haul, the tradition has also interpreted them to mean that anxiety about material needs and desires itself is bad. In theological language, this anxiety is proof that we are fallen.

Years ago, as an anxious graduate student, I was considerably relieved to read the words of the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich to the contrary. In those days, I saw no constructive place for anxiety. First I felt anxious about my life; then I felt bad that I felt anxious. Tillich helped me understand just how foolish this was.

Following his nineteenth-century inspiration, Søren Kierkegaard, Tillich insists that anxiety precedes the human fall into sin. In other words, it is part of our creation as human, what he calls the "ontological nature of being," not a distortion of our nature. It is not inherently bad or a problem in itself. Feeling bad about feeling anxious simply compounds distress unnecessarily and unfairly.

Certainly anxiety can become what psychologists call "neurotic." Jesus sought to allay anxiety that grows out of unfaith or distrust in God's love. Both Christian conviction and psychology help us notice when distorted, excessive, or faithless worry contribute to our distress. But some anxiety is natural, normal, and a needed part of life.

Anxiety moved me forward to undertake the creative work needed to finish a graduate paper and get through exams. It accompanied me as I ventured out with my yet-to-be husband for dinner. It foreshadowed the birth of each child. It is part of what is helping me finish this book. In instances such as these at least, I am not anxious because I am bad or flawed, but sometimes because I have love, hope, and desire for my work or for another person. For such possible goods, it is indeed proper to be anxious. In such instances, anxiety is a sign of faith, not faithlessness.

Likewise, Martha is not the epitome of unfaithfulness. In her concern about her work, she solicits and prepares for God's grace. It is not, in fact, entirely self-evident that Jesus rebukes her. Or so argues the thirteenth-century Dominican theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart.

Those who want to redeem Martha today have an unusual ally in Eckhart. In his sermon on the Lukan passage, he praises her. She is worried about Mary, he says, because Martha has "lived long and well" and "living gives the most valuable kind of knowledge" about God. Mary, she fears, has mistaken enjoyment for genuine faith at work. One can imagine another scene untold where Jesus says as much to Mary.

So Jesus is not chastising Martha at all, according to Eckhart. That he calls her name twice is itself an indication of his blessing and her "perfection" or completeness. Our "work in time," just as Martha's activity and service, can indeed bring us as close to God as the "most sublime thing that can happen to us, except for seeing God" in God's "pure nature." When Jesus says Martha has many cares, he means she is "so grounded in being that her activity did not hinder her. Work and activity led her to eternal happiness." She only wants the same for Mary.

Redeeming Chaos

This summer, I worshiped in a sanctuary that had a sign on the wall in big bold print, "May the Spirit of God Disturb You." These words were posted to honor Gertrude Lundholm, a Lutheran woman who deeply shaped and inspired all generations in the community and who had died only the week before. During Eucharist, she would pass the peace in just this way. "May the Spirit of God disturb you," she'd say as she embraced her neighbor.

What did Lundholm mean? "Many Christians," she told a friend, "seem to think that the peace of God is just about their own internal peace of mind, as if being a Christian is kind of like being on a kind of tranquilizer. But God intends to stir us up . . . to make us notice new things, to keep us from being complacent." She came by this conviction rightfully. Martin Luther himself said faith is a "lively, reckless confidence" in God's grace. But "we Christians like the part about confidence so much," she observes, "that we often overlook the part about being lively and reckless." Sometimes God's peace brings rest.

But sometimes it turns our world upside down, makes chaos of all our plans, and challenges the limited horizons of our self-built lives.

"As hectic as life and work may be," argues Gabriel Fackre (a Protestant theologian and industrial mission pastor who served churches in a steel mill town and a growing suburb for eight years), one finds a peace with God different from that of cloister and cell. Rather than "contemplative union," the "missioner looks for God . . . in the swirling currents of time" and all its material demands. He proposes the churning "River of God" as a better image of faith and ministry than the still, silent "waters of Siloe," the ideal of spirituality defined by Merton.

"Merton's vocation and counsel stand in radical contrast," Fackre believes, "to what the Protestant missioner is and does." In place of vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty, one bears responsibility for endless decisions, negotiates complex long-term intimate relationships, and balances material need, money, and its just use. Yet this "foaming stream of livingness" with "people moving, people building, people tearing down, people drifting, people fighting, people forgotten" is "God's river." In essence, life's busyness is not an utterly secular wasteland. Faith and meaning can emerge *in* the mess.

We do not like the feeling of chaos. We like to think we're in control, contained, ordered. We fear disorder within and dirt, dust, and debris without, perhaps because they subtly remind us of the very fragile, transitory, dependent reality of our own created lives. We often associate chaos with violence and evil.

These associations are well warranted, of course. Seeing faith as something that arises in the midst of chaos is risky. Chaos is not always so promising. There are aspects of chaos that are evil and destructive. The chaos of war, violence, holocaust, and natural disaster comes immediately to mind. Children raised in complete chaos suffer and fail. Complete chaos is not good for anyone.

Not surprisingly, therefore, distrust of chaos runs deep. It even colors how creation itself has been understood and misunderstood. When we read the creation story in the Book of Genesis, we often focus on the first verse, where "God created the heavens and the

earth," and skip right past the mysterious second verse: The earth "was a formless void" covered by darkness over which God's spirit or "wind" sweeps. The long history of biblical interpretation has also largely ignored this verse, insisting instead that God creates the world out of nothing—*creatio ex nihilo.* But chaos was there from the beginning, before the beginning, as part of the beginning.

We need to recover the "lost chaos of creation," *creatio ex profundis,* creation out of "the deep," argues Catherine Keller, a theologian who has been trying for a long time to promote a more sympathetic reading of chaos. Doctrines of creation that claim God created out of absolute nothingness (creatio ex nihilo) distort the original narrative. In Genesis 1:2, God moves over the "face of the deep" and actually creates amid chaos. In place of the usual opposition between chaos and cosmos, she argues for a more wondrous oscillation—what she calls a "chaosmos." Her ultimate goal is to foster a fragile peace among us all that is predicated on warmer acceptance of chaos. Perhaps if we can recover the lost chaos of creation, she says, we can live "more creatively with the inner and outer chaos—the uncertainty, unpredictability, turbulence, and complexity of our lives."

Recent explorations in physics support this rehabilitation. The universe is not governed by inexorable laws that order things from the smallest particle to the most distant planet, as we once thought. Instead, chaos theory suggests a universe teetering on the edge of chaos and order. Order emerges only spontaneously as a result of infinitesimally small uncertainties in a complex interrelationship between motions. Disorder is the baseline and the rule, order the exception. It is the "precondition," remarks a scholar of science and religion, Ian Barbour, for order.

Ultimately, redeeming Martha and rethinking anxiety, peace, and chaos changes our understanding of God. God is no longer an all-powerful, unchanging Lord in the sky. Instead we glimpse a more puzzling, raging, weeping, shouting, pleading, disruptive, disturbing, and even evolving God, moving within the deep, appearing in unexpected and unplanned places, and sometimes even coming to us as the "Discomforter" as well as the Comforter. God bestows peace not as a promise of perfect serenity or an end to chaos, anxiety, and strife but

as a source of strength in turmoil. This is good news for those caught up in the many divergent tugs of family, children, and work.

Redeeming the Waking, Walking Routine

Some Christians have endorsed exemplary models of prayer as a way to counteract the dissipation common to domestic life. One model is "breath prayer," an ancient discipline that involves multiple repetitions of a phrase short enough to be spoken in one breath ("Jesus is Lord") from the earliest creed of the church, for example, or a phrase from the Psalms. Others turn to a discipline suggested by Brother Lawrence three centuries ago, in which the person "practices the presence of God" throughout the day regardless of external circumstances. Despite his menial household work as a lay brother in the Carmelite order—cooking, washing dishes, cleaning hallways—Brother Lawrence managed to reach a point where work was no different from prayer. "In the noise and clatter of my kitchen," he says, "I possess God as tranquilly as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament." Nouwen also recommended a kind of unceasing prayer for those who "are not monks and do not live in the desert." Some African Americans carry over into daily life the "tarrying" of worship, a similar practice of lingering in conversation with God, saying over and over words of praise, thanksgiving, or confession. Howard Thurman believes such prayer anchors social engagement and creates an "island of peace" within oneself, and within the island a "temple" where God dwells.

As helpful as all these aids to prayer are, however, they still require an interior focus of mind, will, and heart that one can rarely find in family life. They call for a kind of stepping outside of one's routine, or for bringing something that is outside one's routine—God, spirituality, tranquility—into it. One participates in these disciplines "despite" or "regardless" of the chaos. They still assume one meets God in a quiet inner space.

What I am trying to describe, instead, is a wisdom that somehow emerges in the chaos itself, stops us dead in our tracks, and

heightens our awareness. I am talking about a way of life that embraces the whole of family living in all its beauty and misery rather than about individual acts of devotion, as important as they are to sustaining the whole. In other words, I am not trying to recommend a better way to pray. I am suggesting that faith takes shape in the concrete activities of day-to-day.

I want to redeem the waking, walking, buzzing routine itself. In saying this, I do not mean that our everyday busyness will make us righteous or earn us salvation; not even our "good works" can do this. Nor am I implying that we can get this routine into perfect working order. Rather, I want to insist that grace is active not only when we're passive and quiescent or tranquil and mindful but also when we are deeply involved in the activities of childhood and parenthood themselves. People respond powerfully to Brother Lawrence precisely because he seems to suggest that our actions themselves might become prayer.

Practicing the presence of God. I like that. It is close to what this entire book is about, but in a particular way. This book is about practicing the presence of God not through a prayer discipline that sustains a peaceful inner life but rather through practices that invoke, evoke, and form faith in our outward lives. We already participate in such practices in the varied contexts where children and adults live together: playing, working, eating, talking, learning, fighting, making up, arriving, departing, and otherwise making a home. Out of this great hubbub, I select a few that come a bit more easily for me than others: sanctifying the ordinary, pondering, taking children seriously, giving to others and oneself, doing justice, playing, reading, and blessing and letting go. These are the practices I invite you to consider with me in the chapters ahead.