

## BECOMING BULLETPROOF

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one  
who calls you to account for the hope that is within  
you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

—1 Peter 3:15b–16a

“You’re a false prophet, ma’am, leading your flock to hell!”

At least the protester had manners as he spewed his vitriol at me. It was a beautiful spring day, and we had just wrapped up the groundbreaking ceremony for our new church building in Columbia, South Carolina, where I serve as associate pastor. The older, bearded protester had been accompanied by a younger man who I would have mistaken for a crunchy granola peace protester were it not for his sign proclaiming God’s hatred for “sodomites.” They had made such a ruckus during our groundbreaking ceremony that I stepped away long enough to call the police—who never showed up.

His verbal attack came as I walked back to my car after the service. I found him and his companion between me and my car after I had hugged the last members of our congregation and sent them on their way. As I approached the pair, I mulled over what to do.

Should I say something? Should I simply nod as I passed? Should I try to engage them in conversation?

I opted for a simple “God bless you, gentlemen. Have a great evening.”

It was enough to set him off. The older man began yelling, and I’m pretty sure not one word, except for *ma’am*, was polite. Yet beyond his accusing me of being a false prophet, I honestly don’t remember any more of what he said. I was too busy being

amazed at how unfazed I was by his words. They zinged past me like bullets. I could hear them whizzing by, none of them ever quite finding their mark. The ones that did seem to make contact made no impression; the sharply pointed words bounced off me like bullets bounced off Superman.

If his attack had come even just a few months earlier, I would have turned on my heel and been nose to nose with him in a heartbeat—giving as good as I got, arguing my point with fervor, and using everything in me to refute his angry words. But in that moment, as his anger blasted out at me, I realized I had reached the goal I had been striving for over the past few years. I had developed a bulletproof faith.

Finally, I had a faith that could take any abuse heaped upon it and still remain strong, a faith that did not need to argue for its survival. This bulletproof faith didn't flinch when others disagreed or condemned it. This faith was grounded in my experience and knowledge of God, not anyone else's opinion about God. I felt like I had finally found the holy grail of spirituality—a faith that could withstand the bullets of condemnation and criticism.

Instead of arguing with the protester, I smiled as I walked to my car where my partner waited with open arms and a warm kiss. We walked arm in arm to the car, the harsh words growing fainter in the distance.

## **Victories and Defeats**

This was just one of the many victories I've celebrated over the years as I have solidified my bulletproof faith. Along with the victories, however, come setbacks, and they should certainly be expected. Attacks on our faith from strangers are just that—the opinion of strangers, which in the long run don't matter very much. Attacks from other quarters, like our church or our family, however, may put a chink in our armor, piercing a still unguarded place in our faith of which we weren't fully aware. Even today

I struggle to heal those weak parts of my faith, especially when attacks come from those closest to me (like family). So I want you to know that as you embark on your own journey to make your faith bulletproof, don't expect overnight results and don't expect that you'll survive every attack intact. The good news is that when a bullet finds an unprotected spot and pierces your heart, you can learn from the experience, heal the vulnerable spot, and become even stronger in your faith. This book is intended to help you identify the areas where the slings and arrows of the world can still penetrate and to give you the tools you need to shield those weak places so that future attacks bounce right off.

A lot of people challenge my faith because I am a lesbian. They tell me I am a false Christian and am inevitably bound for hell because *they* object, for whatever reason, to one portion of my life—my sexual orientation. Those challenges led me to do many things, including founding *Whosoever*, the first online magazine for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians. Those challenges also led me to the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where I received a master of theological studies degree, which led eventually to ordained ministry. It also led me to develop a workshop on spiritual self-defense that I presented at many conferences attended by GLBT Christians. Those challenges planted the seed for this book after participants kept telling me how much they got out of the workshop.

This book is focused on helping the GLBT community develop a bulletproof faith. But I think anyone who is feeling alienated from the church in this time of growing fundamentalism will find something of value here, and you are invited to join us on this journey.

What this book will not do, however, is go deep into the scriptures used against GLBT people of faith. Many wonderful and insightful books have been written on this subject; I provide a list of them at the end of this book. I highly recommend choosing a few of these books and familiarizing yourself with this material. To develop a bulletproof faith, it is essential that

you study this material closely so that when someone attacks you with one of the so-called clobber passages,<sup>1</sup> you'll be in a position to respond—if only in your own mind—with reasons why these passages do *not* condemn GLBT people. I cannot overstate the importance of knowing this material. *Whosoever's* "Bible and Homosexuality" section is the most visited part of our site. I have even received letters from people who hang their entire decision on whether or not to accept their sexual orientation as God's gift on the interpretation of these passages. This is important knowledge to acquire as we journey toward a bulletproof faith.

Because it is imperative to a bulletproof faith to make peace with the Bible, I will be addressing the history and context of the Bible itself. Examining the Bible in its proper historical and critical perspective reveals that we have nothing to fear from it. Instead, we find in its pages much joy and affirmation as GLBT people of faith. Reclaiming the Bible, making it our friend, an ally that strengthens instead of weakens our authentic self, is essential to bulletproofing our faith.

This book will provide you with specific tools you can use on your bulletproofing quest, but it doesn't lay out all the answers to attacks or arguments. Why? Because the answers you seek when your faith is challenged are to be found deep inside of you. In a sense, you already know the answers to these attacks and arguments.

The goal of this book, then, is to help you uncover the hidden knowledge buried within you—the internal security of knowing that makes your faith bulletproof when under attack.

The heart of spiritual self-defense is to learn how to shift focus from *defense* to *self*. I define *defense* as the outward actions we take when arguments or attacks come—the words we use, the way we say them, and the forcefulness of our arguments. I define *self* as that true place where God resides in all of us, or as Steven Pressfield calls it in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, our "authentic swing."<sup>2</sup>

Pressfield's book, and the subsequent movie of the same name, tells the story of a troubled golfer from Savannah,

Georgia, who is invited to take part in an exhibition game in 1931 that features two more accomplished golfers. Rannulph Junah is accompanied by his mysterious caddie, Bagger Vance. The main plot revolves around the golf match, but the book is not really about golf. Instead, it is about uncovering and delving into the authentic self that lives deep within. Throughout the book, Vance leads a hesitant Junah on the path of self-discovery by tutoring him not so much on the finer points of golf as on the finer points of a life lived in authenticity. "Each of us possesses, inside ourselves, one true Authentic Swing that is ours alone," Vance tells Junah.<sup>3</sup> But it must be coaxed from the unconscious into self-awareness and finally to enlightenment. This is the path we are called to take if we are to develop a bulletproof faith.

### **You've Got Hate Mail!**

Following is an example of the type of hate messages that have landed in my e-mail inbox over the years. I have combined some typical phrases that crop up most often in hate mail. These are clichés we've heard over and over again, including "love the sinner, hate the sin," "you weren't born that way," "stop justifying your lifestyle with the Bible," and the contention that AIDS is a punishment from God for being gay. Read this composite hate message, and make note of your gut reactions. Then I'd like you to write a response to this e-mail. We'll revisit it at the end of the book:

As a Christian, God tells me not to judge others. I love the sinner and hate the sin, but you're wrong to believe that God made you gay. These are lies from the enemy, straight from the pit of hell. You are SO going straight to Hell, you ignorant, misguided, perverted misfit! Not only for choosing this abomination of a lifestyle, but for trying

to promote it through the very book it flies  
in the face of. You make me and God want to  
vomit! AIDS is a cure!

When I founded *Whosoever* in 1996, I was immediately beset by hate mail—the kind I’ve just presented and much worse. Threats of death—wishes for my swift descent into hell—arrived in my mailbox daily. It was unnerving, to say the least.

Every single time I’d open up a piece of mail, my heart would pound. I would get lightheaded. I would get angry as I read the words of condemnation that spilled from the keyboards of men and women who professed to be followers of Christ. More often than not, I responded with the same level of vitriol. I defended myself by lashing back—by calling them names, by questioning the sincerity of their faith, by lowering myself to their level. I was attacked, and I fought back. I saw absolutely nothing wrong with that behavior.

Then I read a very interesting passage in my Bible, the one that opened this chapter: “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is within you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15b–16a).

Gentleness and reverence? You’ve got to be kidding! Not a single attacker has shown *me* any gentleness or reverence. It’s been a steady stream of hatred, vitriol, cruelty, threats, and just plain rudeness! Why should I reward insolence with “gentleness and reverence”?

It took a long time for me to come to understand why we should indeed follow Peter’s sage advice. Consistently responding to attacks, no matter how devastating, with gentleness and reverence is the only way to approach spiritual self-defense.

## **Don’t Commit Spiritual Suicide**

When I first wrote on the idea of spiritual self-defense in 1998 in an issue of *Whosoever*, I compared my approach to that of the martial art of aikido. In aikido, there are no offensive moves—you

cannot attack someone with aikido; you can only react to someone attacking you. That does not mean that aikido is not a deadly martial art. You can indeed kill an attacker who continues to come at you.

While I do not recommend that you challenge anyone to a “battle to the death,” I do want to impress on you just how seriously we must take the art of spiritual self-defense. We must recognize that there are attackers out there who wish to see us dead—and if not physically, at least spiritually. We must learn to defend ourselves no matter what—our spiritual, physical, and mental health depends on it.

If we fail at spiritual self-defense, however, it will not be because the other person “beat” us or “won” the argument. It will be simply because we surrendered and tossed up our hands in defeat. The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard wrote in *Works of Love* that there is no such thing as a spiritual murder. “Certainly no violent assaulter can murder an immortal spirit,” he writes. “Spiritually, suicide is the only possible death.”<sup>4</sup>

The bullets of others can wound us deeply, but we are the only ones who can put the final, fatal bullet into the heart of our faith. We see it in the GLBT community all the time. We see it in “ex-gay” movements that tell us we can change and then blame our lack of faith when the change ultimately fails. We see it in mainstream churches where we’re told it’s OK for us to sit in the pew but we’re not good enough to be ordained or to hold leadership positions because surely God would not call someone like us. We are led into spiritual suicide. We give up, reasoning, “Well, if the church doesn’t want me, then I don’t want the church.”

I followed this path myself when I was sixteen. If God hated me because I was a lesbian, fine, I could hate God just as easily. I killed my own spirit. I pushed it out, alienated it, and turned my back on God. The good news is that our spirit is immortal—and able to be resurrected. It is my desire that your faith finds resurrection in these pages and tools to revitalize that faith.

## Training Not to Fight

One of the things that always irritated me about learning aikido is that all the instructors focused on the outside actions one takes in defense and not the inside actions one must take for oneself. Aikido, like any martial art, can be very effective if you know only the outward motions. But it becomes a way of life, a more effective mode of being, when you focus just as much attention—or more—on the inside, or what is called *chi*.

Without *chi*, one cannot attain a true balance between the inner world and the outer world. In the movie *The Karate Kid*, this balance is highlighted in the differences between how Mr. Miyagi trains Daniel and how the more militant karate instructor trains his kids. Miyagi teaches Daniel such seemingly meaningless chores as waxing his cars and painting his fence. Daniel is learning the right moves, but he's also building his skill from the inside, finding his center, his *chi*.

In one scene, Daniel, upset at the outward power and bravado of the other karate kids, questions Miyagi's methods. Like all young people, he's certain that the aged Miyagi has never faced the kinds of problems he's facing, so he asks Miyagi if he fought when he was young. Miyagi assures him that he fought a lot when he was younger and was always scared because he hated fighting. That puzzles Daniel. He wonders how a master of a martial art could hate fighting. For Miyagi, however, training in karate is not about training to fight. Instead, as Daniel finally figures out, you train so you won't have to fight.

We do not train in spiritual self-defense so that we can get in the ring and show off our skill. Instead, we train, we learn, we find that balance within ourselves for one reason only: so that we don't have to fight.

When I began seminary in 1998, I went with one purpose: to learn how to fight. I wanted to learn everything I could about the history of Christianity, about the Bible and theology, so that I could respond to those who told me I could not be both a



lesbian and a Christian. I wanted answers. I wanted to have the skill to fight—to show off what I had learned and most of all to win each and every battle.

At the end of my seminary career, I was required to write a paper integrating my experiences in school. My dean told me it would be good to write about what brought me to seminary. What questions did I have when I arrived, and what answers did I have at the end of my seminary career?

“I came here to learn how to answer those who told me I couldn’t be both gay and Christian,” I said.

“Well, what’s your answer?” he asked.

Like Daniel, I thought for a minute before saying, “I don’t have to answer them.”

I had arrived at an amazing place. I did all this training, spoiling for a fight. Yet in the end, I realized that my training was done so that I would never have to fight. My training taught me that it is not the outside, where the arguments take place, that should be my focus, but rather inside, where the arguments are settled once and for all. What my training taught me is that I had put the wrong emphasis on self-defense. Instead of *defense*, I needed to focus on *self*. Only then could my faith become bulletproof.

At the heart of a bulletproof faith (regardless of one’s gender, one’s sexual identity, or any socially constructed difference humans invent) is a divine assurance that we are worthy of God’s love, care, and blessing. We need not do anything special to deserve God’s grace. We need to trust that God believes we are special for no other reason than because we are here. Our very existence proves our worthiness. God has created all things, even things that certain other of his creatures may shun or marginalize.

Any messages telling us we are unworthy or unloved are, simply put, lies.

“We easily hear an inner voice calling us evil, bad, rotten, worthless, useless, doomed to sickness and death,” wrote Henri

Nouwen in *Life of the Beloved*. “Isn’t it easier for us to believe that we are cursed than that we are blessed? Still I say to you, as the Beloved [Child] of God, you are blessed. Good words are being spoken about you—words that tell the truth. The curses—noisy, boisterous, loud-mouthed as they may be—do not tell the truth. They are lies; lies easy to believe, but lies nevertheless.”<sup>5</sup>

It is my hope that by the end of this book, you will have not only the tools you need to develop your own bulletproof faith but also the unshakable knowledge that you are a beloved, blessed child of God, which is of course what you are.

---

### **Spiritual Survival Tips**

1. Developing a bulletproof faith is a process, long and non-linear. It may involve taking one step forward and two steps back. There will always be chinks in your armor that will need repair. Stay vigilant.
  2. Trust the inner voice that guides you. If you do, you’ll discover you know how to defend your faith already. Know that your inner voice is God revealed in your authentic self. Trust that voice above all others.
  3. Respond to any and all attacks with gentleness and reverence. Resist the temptation to respond with the same viciousness with which you are attacked. Show love to everyone you meet.
  4. Resist the temptation to let the opinion of others lead you to spiritual suicide. No attack, no matter how violent or severe, can kill your faith. Only you have the power to kill your faith.
  5. Do not seek a bulletproof faith so that you can flaunt your strength or to try to defeat others in battle. Instead, seek to become bulletproof so that you no longer feel the need to fight.
-