

My spiritual journey

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Introduction

Bill:

This is a recording of Chad Heilig sharing his spiritual journey with Atlanta Friends Meeting on Sunday, June 1, 2025. He was introduced by Mary Ann.

[Note: The [Atlanta Friends Meeting](#) has a standing tradition of sharing and recording these oral histories the first Sunday of each month, as described in the *Friends Journal* in 2013 ([Telling stories of our spiritual journeys](#)) and again in 2023 ([What we can say now](#)).]

Mary Ann:

Welcome, everyone. I look forward to these Sundays, our story telling. I read a sentence in a book this week in reading [Wondering Stars by Tommy Orange](#), which is a wonderful story. And there's a line that said, "Stories ... take [us] away and bring [us] back better made." And I think it applies to what we're doing here, hearing stories of spiritual journeys. Everybody tells me it helps them to do their own story, and I certainly have found that true. And then I think it helps us as a community to hear each other's stories and bring us back better made as a community. So this morning Chad Heilig has agreed to offer his story. When I saw Chad in meeting—Was it 2 months ago or so? —when I went to meet him because he had introduced himself as a newcomer and then told me he had been here before and he remembered me and Bill. Anyway, welcome back. And so as we usually do, we'll center and get ready to listen when you're ready.

Chad:

Let me start by thanking Mary Ann for the invitation. And just to prove the point, I said some things back to Mary Ann and Bill that they knew they had said at some point, even if you didn't remember that it was the year 2001. And I'll get there. I will because it's an important part of this story. And I told Mary Ann this morning I went over my notes, and every time I think of 1 thing, 2 more things come to mind. I'm going to try to be real but disciplined enough to respect the time that we have. Also as I went over my notes, I felt like parts of me didn't come through that I wanted to come through. So I added a section to Mary Ann's questions: What are my current hobbies and interests? And they might come through anyway. So I'll just start.

Early experiences

Just to give you context, I'll mention that I was born in 1969, but I'm going to start a little later than birth. When I was in elementary school, I lived in Davie, Florida, which is near Fort Lauderdale, before the civilization continued to encroach on the Everglades. My parents were in charismatic circles in the United Methodist Church. And I don't have enough specific memory. They definitely believed in gifts. My mother identified her gift as exhortation, which I still carry with me, and my father was called a "deacon". The air quotes only mean that's what he was called, not that I doubt it. It wasn't the sort of outward expression that we might associate with some charismatic movements, like speaking in tongues or certain physical manifestations. Again, not that they're—it's just that's not the brand that they followed. And I, as a precocious, burgeoning intellectual kid, memorized large swaths of the Bible, including, for example—I still remember huge chunks of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:3–17. I'm not going to quote them for you.

Middle school years

I have an older sister who's about 2 years older, a younger brother who's about 2 years younger, and another younger sister who's about 11 years younger. The 3 of us who were within a few years of each other were brought up in that church and fairly active. We became even more active when our parents started becoming less active. And so I was extremely active in middle school, to the point that I remember things like playing handbells. I don't know what to do with that now as a memory, but it's who I was. I participated in the youth group. I took a particular shine to contemporary Christian music, which now I have a very hard time listening to, mostly because it doesn't speak to me the way that it did when I was a kid. And I remember—but I regret to say I don't have any notes of—delivering youth sermons, like, in front of the whole congregation standing at the lectern, or pulpit. One where I was talking about the movie *Superman* and Icarus. I have only these bits and pieces. I don't know what to say.

And I listened to some fundamentalist radio show. This is a pivotal part of this story in 2 ways, because this was when I started coming of age in the sense of, you know, right at middle school, started to realize who I might be in the world. And what this guy [on the radio] was saying didn't sound right to me. But pieces of it still sounded right to me. In particular, the way that he talked about AIDS was—again, this was the mid 80s, right? So it was particularly galling. I have a summary later that pivotal moments and maybe 2 pieces of scripture that I'm going to quote, but this one was pivotal in a way that I hadn't appreciated as much until I started writing this again—writing these memories. This is from Psalm 91 and I'll just read 4 verses [1-2, 5-6, NRSV]:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust." ...
You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

OK, so I was 12 years old, maybe. And this spoke to me. It didn't mean that I was immune from what became known as HIV; it meant that I didn't have to fear—that I could enter into that. And I didn't know what to do with that. I don't think I knew anyone with HIV. We didn't call it HIV in those years. It was still HTLV-III or LAV. I'll remain disciplined enough not to go on that tangent. It was part of me, so I realized who I was. I mean, I wasn't out yet as a gay kid. That wasn't as available to us in the mid 80s, early 80s actually, but it is an important piece that I have resurfaced.

Then later I wrote this poem. It's very short, so I want to quote it because it also captures how I reimagined that kind of fundamentalist-motivated awakening. It goes:

You love the God you worship
enough to help him succeed.
They call you a fanatic
because you take God's need
and mold it to your desire.
But you don't seem to know
that the Spirit doesn't need a fan
to tell it where to blow.

I meant to give some sensitivity warning. I will occasionally use gendered language because I'm quoting from the past. OK, so that sort of sets the stage and that was like I said, one of the early pivotal points. And I'm going to, in fairly quick succession, and unpack a little bit later, just a sequence of events. So I'm following Mary Ann's questions. This is the part about changing, growing, turning points, and influence all mashed together.

High school years: moving north, math nerd

So I grew up in South Florida, as I mentioned, not far from the Everglades. When I was 15, we moved from South Florida to North Florida. Now, my older sister had finished high school, my younger brother hadn't started high school, and here I was right in between, being uprooted from the only thing I ever knew. And I imbued it with all sorts of significance and the meaning of my suffering. And I remember: We had a poured concrete driveway, and we were preparing to sell the house. I had a sledgehammer, and I destroyed that driveway, because that's what we were going to do. This was on purpose. It wasn't an act of rebellion, but it was definitely a constructive act of destruction. My parents knew this, and they let me work it out that way. I also know this is the first time that I said anything to my older sister or a friend that I was moving away from that I thought I might be gay. 15 years old.

So the summer of 1986, I'd lived in North Florida for about a year. I spent 8 weeks at the Student Science Training Program [at the University of Florida] with other math and science nerds and continued to develop a sense of self-awareness as teenager (then I was 16). And then I graduated [from high school] at what now is a relatively young age. I was 17; now kids graduate at 18 or 19.

Undergraduate years: AIDS action, urban ministry

And I started my undergraduate career at University of Florida, and I joke now that I was a math major since grade one. In the first grade, I told Mrs Gillis that I was either going to be a basketball player, an artist, or a mathematician. I don't play basketball, and I'm not good at art. I didn't declare my major [yet], but I'd been doing math forever.

I was active, actually very active, at the University United Methodist Church. But even apart from that, as a precocious 17-year-old, I got involved with the new program at University of Florida as an AIDS peer educator. This is where that Psalm 91 piece stayed with me.

Also, I learned to read. My older sister brags that she taught me to read when I was 3 years old. I learned *again* to read when I took a New Testament class at the University of Florida my very first semester. At that time, University of Florida had only 39,000 students. This was from a former Jesuit priest on the New Testament, and I learned how to read a text closely. It was with a mix of people, some people, you know, came out of Christian traditions, and were really challenged by this. We have a friend who is now a dean at a Presbyterian seminary in Texas who likes to say, "I get paid to mess with your Jesus." And I imagine this ex-Jesuit priest saying something similar. I found that it liberated me in some ways.

Even then I wasn't active in a community until after that semester. The beginning of the next semester, I went to a service at a Hillel House. Now I don't have any Jewish roots at all, but one of my good friends, the first one that I told I might be gay, I think her presence in my life might have motivated me in part. And I just knew that I wanted to get active with the Methodist Church, again because that's what I grew up in. I became so active that I was in a residential program for a year. They called it the Upper Room. And I participated in both the chancel choir and the college choir.

In the summer of 1989, at 19 years of age, I participated in—I don't know what they called it, but this was under part of the United Methodist Church that was based in New York City [[General Board of Global Ministries](#)]. It was an internship program, and I was based at the Urban Ministry in Birmingham, Alabama, where we primarily ran a food pantry and cleaned up houses, basically scraped and painted houses of people who couldn't do that for themselves. And this continued a sort of development of self-awareness. I did things that I look back on, such as I helped unload an 18-wheeler full of potatoes and remembered how dirty I got doing that and yet how fulfilling it was to do that. Now, I'm not going to go out and seek out an opportunity to unload more potatoes. I haven't in the intervening years, but it was meaningful. And I came to know myself in other ways that I will skim the surface right now.

At the end of that summer, I actually came out to my parents. This was difficult, and it remained so for 4 more years. My father was, to me, unexpectedly open. I had memories before this, of how he would say he would always love me, and I didn't doubt that. And I don't doubt that my mother would always love me. But her reaction was more pained. To the point that it reinforced some of my sense of shame that has taken, you know, time to figure out how to put away, including that she asked me never to work with kids. You know, I was 19 and had already done some of that. I don't believe her [perspective], but I do carry that with me still. Then the next summer, I went back to that student science training program, now as a counselor. So these are, you know, 16 year olds, not like young kids.

Graduate school years: partner, father's death

And here's another pivotal piece. Somewhere in my fourth year as an undergraduate, whereas I thought I was going to pursue a Master of Divinity at Candler School of Theology; I had already visited it and knew people through the University United Methodist Church who had gone that path. I decided not to go that way, and it had a lot to do with not being willing to fight the church. My sense of wanting to serve didn't include reengineering the system, and so I worked with my mentor at the time to identify what I wanted to do with grad school. I wanted to do math, statistics, or computer science. I couldn't explain to you how I chose statistics. Then I went to University of California, Berkeley, for my doctorate and continued to be active in the Wesley Foundation there.

I'm going to glide over lots of details, but in 1993, 2 pivotal things happened in this order: In August, I met the person who would become my partner and spouse. He lived in Atlanta at the time when I was visiting my older sister, but we bonded. There's a huge story as all couples who've been together for decades have, and he eventually moved to California within months. The other thing that happened was in November of 1993, my father died. I was 20-something years old, and he was 47. The year that I was 47 was a really tough year. I'm past that year now, but *man*. I remember 3 of my grandparents dying, all around the year 1980, but this [my father's death] was a special introduction to grief. And, you know, in the years since, I've come to realize not only is the experience of grief itself important, but it's never the same for me. It's never expected. I've had at least a couple unexpected experiences of grief in the last few years alone. Like, oh, I got this, I know how to do this and like, no, all I got is being able to look at it and say, OK, sit, here we are. And now, having been here [at Atlanta Friends Meeting] again for a few months, I have a different sense of what it means to sit and wait. I'll get to that.

In 1996, my partner now spouse, his name is Guy, we celebrated a covenant service with about 75 of our colleagues. Hewas active in the Baptist Church. He went to a Baptist Church in San Francisco where he was a director of a nonprofit. I was active in the Methodist Church. Our officiants were a mixed-gender couple who were Baptists. The space was a Methodist space. The theme was Mardi Gras because Guy is Cajun. And we wrote all of our own stuff. And so now, for example, as Charles is talking

about writing his vows, I want to inundate him with my whole story. But I have managed to spare him that so far. (Oh, here's video!) It has to be his story.

Adulthood

Entering the workforce to serve

In 1997, I completed my degree, moved to Atlanta. When my father died, I shifted; well, I wanted the work in statistics to feel more meaningful to me than econometrics, so I shifted toward public health. At the advice of someone in the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, I took an epidemiology class. When I moved to Atlanta, I didn't have a job. I became a contractor at CDC [the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)] with the intention of being CDC-adjacent. The piece I failed to include here was, when I shifted from a Master of Divinity to a doctorate in statistics, this is the second of my central personal themes: *service*. How do I go from something that felt to me like an obvious sense of service, in ordained ministry, to something that requires reinventing my own sense of service, maybe over and over again. I'll come back to what that means. But my intention in being in public health and being a public servant at a federal agency has been service. I also started going to the United Methodist Church in downtown Atlanta. Then in early 1998, I gave up church for Lent and haven't been back in many years. It's true. I stopped going at once.

And then in 2000, I actually became a federal employee. Somehow as I was writing my notes, I left out all the details in the middle of what I did as a federal employee. I'll mention a few of those in a second.

Atlanta Friends Meeting, round 1

But let me keep with the change/ growth/ turning points/ influence. (This is me interpreting in this moment.) I have [now] separated myself a little bit from my work, which is a third of my struggles. So in the year 2001, I came here [to Atlanta Friends Meeting]. I don't remember exactly when I started. I don't remember *why* I do remember Bill and Mary Ann, as I have relayed to them a couple of times, and 1 or 2 other people. I'll get to the things that impressed me. But in September 2001, the first of 2 terroristic things happened in the United States: That was the World Trade Center towers were felled, and in October, although this is getting ahead of the story a tiny bit, was anthrax. And in this Meeting, for reasons I understand well, there was so much anger and anguish and I just, I stopped coming. What I don't know now is why I didn't try talking to anybody about it. This isn't a matter of grief; it's just puzzlement.

Mother's death, legalized marriage

Then in 2013, I'm jumping ahead years, my mother died. So this is one of those instances where, you know, you think, OK, I've experienced grief. I've gone through counseling. I have intellectual and emotional categories to put this under. Nope. When my father died, I was in California, and I had the luxury and grace with people around me to be able to stay with my mother for a couple of months, even though I was in the middle of grad school. But I still felt sort of disconnected geographically. When my mother died, I just felt more connected to my siblings—my older sister, younger brother, and younger sister. And the other pivotal thing that happened (here's another theme that I didn't expect): August 2013, 20 years from the day that we met, my spouse and I actually legally wed, thanks to the first of 2 Supreme Court decisions.

Overidentification with work

Then jumping ahead a couple of years, in 2017 or 2018 (I could pin this down if I checked the documentary record)[It was 2017], I had an anxiety attack at work. Being at CDC, there are a lot of physicians around. I'm like, does this mean that I'm dying? The answer was no. I was just having an anxiety attack. But it was real, and I went to talk therapy through a pastoral counseling service that doesn't exist anymore. And this is where I was diagnosed with anxiety disorder with attachment, but more importantly, to the point, I overidentified with work. I was so identified with work that, when I wanted to find a way to think about my life outside of work, there was no life outside work. That was another moment when I knew that I wanted to develop relationships and community outside CDC, but I didn't think to come back here [AFM]. Again, puzzlement, not shame.

Career focus, redux

So jumping again another several years: This year [2025], early March, I was invited to take early retirement. I'd been at CDC as a federal employee for 25 years. Circumstances are such that that was a very appealing choice. More than that, for me personally, more favorable than if I'd waited till the end of next year, which was my original plan. And I don't take for granted what that circumstance means for other people who had the option but couldn't exercise it or didn't have the option.

So let me summarize 2 things. One is the career focus. This will tell you a little bit about what the work was that meant something to me, even though I elided, went right over all of it. I started out in the Division of Reproductive Health working on women's health and HIV. My spouse and I both appreciated the sort of activist element of that—really believing in, because at that time he was working in an AIDS service organization. This was a little bit of both of our shared history. And I started getting involved in clinical trials. Here's another theme that I knew was there: In 2001, I joined an institutional review board, which is a standing committee—CDC at the time had 7—that reviews human research for determining whether it adequately protects the rights and welfare of participants in human research. Here's another text that I once had memorized, and will spare you, but I had the regulation memorized. I was involved in ethics, regulation, and policy for a couple of years, and again clinical trials. Then, in 2007, I had the chance to go back into working with trials directly. I was in tuberculosis for 7 years and branched out from trials to other work, where 2 of the projects I worked on actually directly informed World Health Organization guidelines, which is probably the 1 isolated achievement that I could recognize, even though my body of work is more, you know, woven throughout things that other people have done. It's a very collaborative, mission-oriented organization, but that's something I did. And then after that was at a couple of centers in more of a leadership role.

Another point that I haven't unpacked, but will, is I became very involved in mentoring. I started mentoring right away as a federal employee in 2000, and then when I was in tuberculosis [the Division of Tuberculosis Elimination] starting in 2007, I began working one-on-one with master's students, doctoral students, postdoctoral, eventually undergraduate. For years, they didn't have a background in methodology. Recall that my PhD is in statistics. And it was really rewarding to work with people who, not *because* they didn't have that background but *didn't* have that background and did good things with data. And I came to believe that the driver for doing good things with data isn't the technical background. It's wanting to do good things with data. So this will be issue number 4 when I summarize later.

Turning points and returning back

So here are the summary turning points:

1. *Psalm 91 as an AIDS peer educator* and active at University United Methodist Church.
2. Another point I didn't make is that at that time, out of my extended family, only my older sister had been to college, at least going back a couple generations. So I was the second person to go into higher education, and then my sister got a master's degree. (I did not do this to compete with her.) I'm the first person to get a doctorate. Second turning point, the *decision to pursue a PhD in statistics and try to figure out "What does it mean to serve?"*. My friends and family have been steeped in religious education: My elder sister got a Master of Divinity at Candler. My spouse got a Master of Divinity at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (before it became fundamentalist). My sister's spouse has a Master of Divinity. The point is, this milieu is familiar and comfortable to me.
3. And as a federal employee trying to *figure out where learning fits in, and doing*. And it came [around] to talk about learners and doers. But the motivating event of having this anxiety attack and figuring out what is my identity, how can I have work that's *motivated by service* and see this as part of myself, but see myself apart from work, don't have an answer for that. But I do have that question distilled.

Led (back) to Atlanta Friends Meeting

So now what led me to the Friends Meeting? And specifically the Atlanta Friends Meeting? I've shared a little bit of that with you: I don't know, but I do know it led me away as I described. It was the anger and the anguish around the World Trade Centers. I understand that great anguish. It's not like I was offended or repulsed by it. I just I think I didn't know what to do with it. I'll add that just a couple months later, I went to a weekend retreat at Pendle Hill, so Quakerdom stayed with me. This was on bioethics in health and policy, led by Jim Childress, also a Quaker himself, but towering figure in biomedical ethics and research ethics.

And I'm clear on what's led me back. I'm not clear on the timing. Again, I'm not trying to defend or explain it. I'm just saying I don't know. But I came back to build community and to be intentional. Maybe I didn't want to come, I'm not saying this week, but maybe, you know one of these weeks. I'm not sure I want to go, but I have remain committed to showing up. I have 4 personal testimonies I'll get to in a moment. I think that they don't have an acronym yet. I'll get to those in a moment. But as I've been putting these together, as I've been here for the past few months, I've wondered why did I not think to come back earlier? I don't know, but that helps me to remain focused on wanting to be here. Also to remain focused on wading in. I'm not jumping in; I'm being very intentional about not jumping in. "We need volunteers." OK, I'll get to that one day. Actually, I talked to Derek last week. We might have identified a thing for me to do, but I'm not jumping in—easing—like organizing books and files? It's weird.

Support

What do I feel supported by? Well, some of the things that impressed me in 2001, I've been paying careful attention to listening here, *unity over anonymity unanimity*. (I'm sorry. I was looking at Mary Ann and then I got my words wrong.) Mary Ann said something about that in 2001, and it stayed with me. I have talked to people at CDC about the decision-making and deliberative process among the Friends and what it means to have a sense of a meeting. Even if we have to hold a vote, what does it mean to

have a sense of a meeting? How can consensus be oppressive? That's just stayed with me. So I'm open to it again now. *Silence and waiting*. I have spent hours over the past couple of weeks reading about waiting. How can you wait actively? This isn't new with me, but I'm resisting getting too much, right now, into reading about how other how other people have related it to theological thinking. But I was impressed by the reading couple of months ago about the 4 doors [*Four Doors to Meeting for Worship* by William Taber], which I think we're going to be looking at again in a month, that worship doesn't start or end, it's that I enter into it, we enter into worship. This is very consistent with my sense of God and who God is. That I'll get to. Then the *service orientation*, the way that people in this meeting are oriented to service comes through immediately and clearly. I don't have to be a part of all of those pieces of service, but I am a part of a community in which people serve in many different ways. That means something to me. And looking at the [Quaker] testimonies, *equality* and *simplicity* especially resonate with me and, for example, with equality, the notion of many gifts and one spirit.

Struggle

Here are some things I struggle with. This is a little bit of a moment of confession, because here I am vulnerable and newish, renew-ish: *the Light*. This [Chad makes gesture while speaking] isn't coming through an audio recording, but I chafe at the last 10 minutes of meeting, because that particular metaphor doesn't work very well for me. I thought, Where does this come from? George Fox. OK. Right there from the beginning and, you know, I appreciate, respect, even love the roots in scripture and there it is too. I'm not, I don't think I'm trying to intellectualize this, but sometimes there's comfort in darkness and pain in light. What would I want to say instead of "holding in the light"? Anything I come up with isn't perfect, but I just want to name it. Maybe if there's time for discussion.

And then the other sort of thing I struggle with here, and this is one of the things I cited back to Bill 2 weeks ago. When I was here in 2001, I was really impressed by the assertion that friends didn't abolish the clergy, they abolished the laity. And this is consistent with other Reform movements over the centuries, like Baptists before the 70s, the priesthood of all believers. But in that, how do we, how do I as an individual person, and how do I and we as a community, *discern norms*? How do you measure integrity? How do you discern—I don't know what the words are; I don't think it's authority—but not everything is true. And how do those get teased apart? And I also have a little bit of concern—and this is not a criticism of people who want to draw from multiple traditions—about syncretism, which can be an undisciplined melding of various disciplines, makes me uncomfortable. Nonetheless, why I am here rather than, say, Unitarian Universalist, where syncretism is more accepted and sometimes pursued.

What I believe

My Christian roots are important to me, but I'm not going to stand here with a Christian testimony and altar call. So my current belief in areas for discernment, this is where I'll come to my 4 personal testimonies.

Grace: testimony I

So the connection to Christian roots, even nods to Wesleyan thought. I grew up in the Methodist Church. It's there. As I was reading to prepare for this morning, I thought prevenient grace was a Wesleyan concept; it predates Wesley, but he wrote about it. The idea that *grace* is open to us, whether we're open to it, before we're aware of grace. This has resonated with me since the concept came to me [as a younger learner], and yet it's not always top of mind. And whenever it comes back [to mind], it

feels like it itself is an act of grace. Also, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: scripture, reason, tradition, experience; it gives primacy to scripture. I might frame that differently, but there it is. The role of grace: So grace is one of my first 4 [personal testimonies]. It's freely offered, not deserved. It's a source of, or related to, continuing revelation, which is part of Quaker experience. It's sometimes, maybe usually, surprising. I mean, maybe that's how you know it's grace, is that it surprises you. And it's not always mediated, but sometimes it's facilitated. And I wrote a note in the margin this morning that this is an important part of grace. It's present regardless of guilt or shame or grief. So here's a quotation from Wesley: "prevenient grace elicits the first who wished to please God, the first dawn of line light concerning [God's] will."

Presence: testimony 2

Second of my personal testimonies is *presence*. This means the presence of God. This means my presence. Not necessarily my physical presence. I went to my niece's graduation yesterday, commencement ceremony. She graduated high school, Gainesville, Florida. Drove down Friday, came back yesterday. This stadium, it held like 3000 or 4000 people who were there for 440 grads. And it was more compact than the economy section of an airplane. I couldn't do it. My knees couldn't do it, so I sat out in the lobby, but I was still present. I wasn't *there*. I didn't see her take the [diploma].

The Valentine's Day massacre at CDC, when in the morning we got notice that they were going to send notes to, at that time they said, 1200 people, that they had till the end of the day to get their stuff. I had my spouse drive me to the office, because I didn't know if I would be able to get there without—I didn't know if I'd be able to get there safely. It turns out nobody showed up because nobody got a notice that day, just one of various bits of evidence of the intentional trauma [to the federal workforce]. Nonetheless, I was present for my peers and my supervisor. I didn't know going in that I was going to be present for my supervisor, but I did think of it as a ministry of presence.

Showing up here at 10:00 AM, or 9:45 as I like to do—one of the reasons I don't always come to adult religious education, because you end at 9:50 and I want to get there at 9:45—is presence.

Waiting and becoming

So the last 2 of my 4 [personal testimonies] are *service* and *learning*. I've talked about service. I've hinted at learning. So I'll come back to those again a little bit.

The mystery of active waiting as a form of worship. In fact, as I've been reading about waiting, I've been thinking maybe there doesn't have too much difference between the notion of waiting and worship. Now waiting at the DMV might not be the same kind of waiting. That doesn't mean it has to be so very different.

Theisms

OK, now I'm going to throw in some sesquipedalian, larger, concepts. So talking about grace, one of the things I have believed fundamentally, since I can remember formulating this belief, is that God is everywhere present. And here's another bit of scripture: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." [Romans 8:38-39]

And I've come to believe if I were going to give myself 2 words, and these are maybe a little bit rebellious. One is *panentheism*. My formula for panentheism is "The world is God's body." One reason that we're never separate from God is because we're in God. It's not that far from the Quaker formulation of that of God and everyone, because there is that of God in everything. [The second word

is] *nontheism*. Now this is little weird and paradoxical: I'm not an atheist, but I am a nontheist, because, although I do believe in God, I'm not sure how important it is for the world that any one person does or doesn't. I don't think it's important to God, whoever God is or whatever God is. And I say this not to be rebellious, but to be liberated from the constraint of a label that says here's who God is and what you have to believe. Here's who God is and what I believe, but I don't prescribe that for someone else. That said, I still come back to: How do we discern norms and what's true? I don't have an answer for that. I love process theology, thought, and philosophy. It is one of the more abstract versions of philosophy and theology that I've read, so I'm not going to subject you to their whole vocabulary, but it's super consistent with this notion of *becoming* and the world being God's body.

Service and learning: testimonies 3 and 4

And I told you about *learning* and *doing*. As I was putting together my notes, I realized learning is a form of becoming, and doing is a form of becoming. And I don't think I'm being artificial in bringing these together. For me, as a largely, but not exclusively, intellectually driven person—acquiring, receiving and producing knowledge or ways that I demonstrate or facilitate learning and doing—I'm going to give you my secular credo. On the surface, it sounds like it doesn't have anything to do with spirituality. But I changed my mind as I wrote these, and I brought my *manifesto* [Chad lays stack of printed copies of the manifesto on the table] in case anyone wants copies:

Everyone who wants to do good things with data should have the intellectual support to do so. In turn, they must proceed with rigor and stand behind their work.

I've called this a *credo*. It's what I believe, since 2015 when I first formulated it. (I think the first time I wrote it out quite like that was a little bit later—2016. And I have a *20,000 word essay* to back this up that I can share. It's available on the Internet.) But it resonates with my spiritual thinking and notion of service more than I had given myself credit for until I was putting these together. For example, in my experience at CDC, I saw that people were sort of amused and motivated by the new and innovative. Well, innovation helps us to expand the set of tools that we have available to us, but sometimes what we really need to do is a thing that's already open to us. And I formulated that as: We have to remain rooted in history but not unduly constrained by it. Which feels to me like very consistent with Quaker thinking of continuing revelation. We have a history. I didn't mention I was super impressed in 2001 by how much Quakers respect, love, and maybe occasionally idolize their history, which I think is true of any movement that has a lot of history. Being rooted in history is so vital to building on the history. One of the answers to myself now, of how do we discern norms, is by measuring against history and how we grow from history.

Miscellany

Just a couple of things about me [that I haven't mentioned], and then I'll open to discussion. I enjoy recreational programming. I don't really know anybody else who does this. Python is my computer programming language of choice these days. I like working with data. That shouldn't be a surprise. There's a reason I kept doing it for so many years. I enjoy organizing files and books (which might be the reason that Derek was "ha!"). I really enjoy tracing the history of ideas. I think that if I had gone the direction of ordained ministry, I would be caught up in exegesis all the time. I've been doing some exegesis recently of a chapter in the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Who would have thought that you could do exegesis of a book from the early 20th century that was written in French. [Chad points to himself.] This guy. And my last point: I have collected and listened to late

medieval and early Renaissance plainchant and polyphonic choral music. The theology is really traditional, Tridentine ordinary mass theology. The gender, like, it was all written for men's voices. But this is the emergence from monophonic singing—where everybody is on the same melody, there might still be a chord, but they're on the same melody—to multiple melodies. Not contrapuntal just yet. It was a way, I believe, for those composers, without instrumentation, in the chapel to follow the constrained form of the mass, and the Psalms and Lamentations, in an expressive way. And that expression under constraint just fascinates me. And so this is mostly what I listen to.

Discussion

Let me pause here and note that, first of all, we have about 5 minutes and second again to thank you for listening. I appreciate the nods and the smiles. I didn't see any shaking heads, but I could cope with it, if there were. And let me yield the floor.

Sally:

Did you ever think of becoming a librarian?

Chad:

I think I can do library without being a librarian, so this is something that I think Derek and I will explore together in a month or 2. I'm not being facetious in this: I think you can be a librarian without being a librarian. I think you can be a Quaker without being a Quaker. I think as long as I respect what it is that the practice and craft want to bring. So, yes.

So if part of what you're asking is what do I do with my second career? I want to teach. I didn't tell you that, but it shouldn't surprise you. But I want to teach. And because retirement happened at least a year and a half earlier than expected, I haven't spent the time laying the foundation for that that I would have. So I don't know yet what that looks like. I've been turned down on my first application, but that gives me the time to wade into life after a CDC career.

Bert:

Thank you. I have a question. I grew up in the Methodist Church and was active in the Wesley Foundation, but one thing I thought of as being a Quaker that connects me with Wesley is that, you know, his spiritual experience of having his heart strangely warmed. Also I guess I appreciate that he never started a new religion. Even, like Jesus, he didn't start a new religion. He stuck with the church. But other people started something. But have you thought? Did that that thing about its heart strangely warm touch you in any way?

Chad:

Let me repeat for the recording. This is Bert talking about his own experience with Wesleyan tradition and mentioning the story—was it at Asbury? [Correcton: Aldersgate]—where his heart, John Wesley's heart, was strangely warmed? And yet Wesley himself never identified as starting a new religion. The Methodist movement branched off from Anglican, but that wasn't his intention. Now that you remind me of that, yes, but it's not something that came to me as I was preparing my notes.

One thing I did write down and forgot to mention: I learned from my older sister, who is our family genealogist, my great-to-the-9th-power grandfather was William Edmondson, who brought Quakerism to North Carolina, beating (it wasn't a competition) George Fox by a few months. So apparently I have

Quaker roots in the Carolinas. Maybe there's been a sort of genetic intertwining of Wesleyan and Friend history. I don't really know. But the idea that our experience of the divine doesn't have to be mediated through someone else, which was in principle Luther's motivation for drafting 95 theses. Although I think that he was being a rebel more than just carrying out the revelation. The reason that the traditions that I grew up in can stay with me in an affirming way, I think, has a lot to do with what you're saying, or even if that particular story—I was smiling a little bit, because there's a really cute comic series that interprets many of the mainline denominations through cartoons of pigs. One is the pig's heart being strangely warmed while it's on a spit. So whenever I hear that story [about Wesley's heart]. I do believe, and I believe that Friends believe, that we can bring whimsy to our experience of the divine. I don't know how true that is of every person or sect's experience, but if there's no place for whimsy, there's probably no place for me.

Larry:

Yes, just one question. I was interested in the idea of a nontheist being more religious or closer to religion than a theist. In other words, I always think that if we, believe that, whatever we call God is everywhere or is in everything, any effort to try and limit God by our verbal, our mental, processes is somewhat improper. And it's also interesting that you know, when they when they look at biblical literacy that the atheists and agnostics come up highest in biblical literacy and followed by Jews of course, and then Mormons third. So you have some interesting parallel contradictions.

Chad:

Well, 3 quick points: (1) The 2 mathematicians who wrote *Principia Mathematica*: Alfred North Whitehead was the progenitor of process philosophy (I don't know that he set out to create a basis for a new or reframing of theology), and Bertrand Russell was an atheist who has helped me to think about mysticism and the relation between different ways of knowing. (2) And John Shelby Spong, I think he is deceased [in 2021], was an Anglican bishop who was one of the early lights for me in being able to love God, but be liberated by some from some of the ways that others have constrained an understanding of God. And he talked about nontheism. (3) And I've recently had lunch with Zane who started here a few weeks ago (but isn't here this week because he gets to spend time with his sister). And I'm like, OK, well, if you're thinking about your past (and he's talked about how he grew up in fundamentalism), then maybe you might want to experience some authors. But maybe Spong is a little too far, too fast.

But again, for me it's not the idea that there is no God, because I'm not an atheist, I'm not even agnostic because I believe, I just don't believe it's important to name it as a *sine qua non*, a thing that has to be true for someone. And so it's a bit of a paradox. And as an intellectual who values the role of science and judgment, and yet discernment and wisdom, wherever that comes from, having categories for thinking about, describing those experiences that are numinous, that connect liminal, that connect us to something outside ourselves, is super important. Other intellectual people come up with other ways, other people who use modes of experience besides cerebral find yet different ways of naming that. I appreciate your word "improper", you might have noticed that I had a sort of a facial reaction to it, because we don't have anything but words. Yeah, we have nonverbal but, but we're limited in just the ways we can express anyway. So it's all we have. There have to be ways that are proper to express that sense of knowing. What I agree is improper is to claim that the ways that I'm binding up God are the ways that you have to bind up God. That is, I would attest, I would testify, is improper.

Mary Ann:

Thank you so much, Chad.