

“Lord have mercy—I needed *BETTER*. I needed Melvin’s imagination, wisdom, commitment to grace, and the seriousness and playfulness with which he approaches God, scripture and love. The only way forward for people of light is to wake up to our faith as a unifying source of light and healing. In *BETTER*, Melvin shows us the way.”

—Glennon Doyle Melton, author of *Love Warrior* and founder of Momastery.com and Together Rising

“Melvin Bray’s *BETTER* deserves your time and attention. It will introduce you to the wisdom of one of the most delightful and insightful moral and spiritual educators I’ve ever met. It will help you read the Bible in a fresh and desperately needed way. And it will equip you to become a better teller of better stories to build a better world.”

—Brian D. McLaren, author/activist

“Bray positions *BETTER* as an escape route for persons living under religious oppression. He masterfully recalibrates the tension between faith and formation. He captures the cadence of culture and argues that knowing how to survive doesn’t make us better. Bray has his finger on the pulse of the fate awaiting [faith] communities that refuse to re-imagine their story. *BETTER* is the sparkplug needed to ignite any beloved community to bend toward justice.”

—K. Edwin Bryant, author of *Paul and the Rise of the Slave*

“A breath of fresh air for people suffocating under rigid, compassionless faith traditions that marginalize Grace, Justice, and Compassion. The world is in need of better stories, a better way, and a new lens to see an old story. In an age of fear, racial anxiety, and xenophobia we need this radical epistle of love more than ever to reroute the course of our beloved yet static institutions. Bravo! This is the book I have praying for.”

—Otis Moss III, Trinity United Church of Christ (Chicago), author of *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World*

“For those frustrated by the way our faith stories have been held captive by fundamentalism and toxic religiosity, Melvin Bray calls us to compost rotting ideology into life-giving spirituality. His effective retelling of faith narratives move us into *better* ways of living in Beloved Community. Read this book and be equipped, inspired, and challenged to go tell better stories in your community!”

—Cindy Wang Brandt, author of *Outside In: Ten Christian Voices We Can’t Ignore*, Patheos blogger at *Unfundamentalist Parenting*

# BETTER

## WAKING UP TO WHO WE COULD BE

MELVIN BRAY

Foreword by Brittney Cooper



**chalice  
press**

Saint Louis, Missouri

An imprint of Christian Board of Publication

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**ChalicePress.com**

Print ISBN 9780827203082

EPUB ISBN 9780827203099

EPDF ISBN 9780827203105

# Contents

Foreword by Brittney Cooper	vii
Featured Artists	xi
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. Better Stories	9
2. An Inkling about Equity	27
3. Suspicions Concerning Other People's Stories	43
4. Premonitions Regarding Identity	67
5. A Sense of Ownership	89
6. Notions of Privilege	103
7. Ideas Concerning Plenty	119
8. Inclinations Toward Liberation	133
9. Feelings about Heritage	151
10. Better World	161

To my mom, who taught me to question.

To my dad, who taught me to tell stories.

To my wife, who tells me I can.

To my children, for whom I strive for BETTER.

I also dedicate this project to those like me who live with the restless intuition that BETTER is possible and labor to be a part of it. Also, to those who've been harmed by hostile faith stories.

## Foreword

**By Brittney Cooper**

"This is my story." Those are the beginning words of the chorus to one of my favorite hymns, "Blessed Assurance." When we come together in collective worship to sing this song, Christians are supposed to walk away believing that our faith lies in our investment in a *singular* story. As a rule, Christians are supposed to be invested in telling the *same* story, the *same* way, every time. A little creativity is welcomed in the sermonic moment, but too much deviation gets folks' undies in a bunch. Words like "heresy" and "blasphemy" begin floating in the word clouds above the heads of people of faith, if anyone dares to try to tell the story anew.

How many of us have been hustled into the church equivalent of the principal's office or pulled to the side and scolded by a persnickety lady with a dog-eared Bible because we asked one too many questions in Sunday School or Bible Study? For so many of us, *this is our story*. Our story has been about giving up surety and certainty to find the blessing in our questions. What if the true foretaste of glory comes at the moment that we let go of everything we thought we knew? What if it comes when we ask the questions we have really been wanting to ask, but feared asking? It seemed to be that way for Sarah, mother of the skeptical, when she asked, "Shall I have pleasure?" It seemed to be that way for suffering Job, when he begged, "Why have you made me your target?" It was even that way for Jesus, when he finally gave in and asked, "My God, why have you left me here among these terrible people without any help?"

Surely that is a question that some of you have wanted to ask at one time or another. Surely you have asked God where your help was coming from. I know I have. And frankly, if one more person tells me, "the Bible is clear," they might get a tongue-lashing that would impress even the once rogue Apostle Peter.

Melvin Bray's *BETTER: Waking Up to Who We Could Be* has arrived to help us. He challenges us to imagine the stories—our personal stories, our collective stories, and our national stories—differently. Bray's book gives us the agency to come to the stories that have anchored us with fresh eyes and all the questions we have. Stories of faith and possibility are meant to free us, not to hold us hostage. We can hold onto our stories without letting our stories have a death grip on us.

Author Brian McLaren has written about how the Bible is a kind of library, a collection of stories that invite our engagement. Melvin Bray shows up here as the beloved, contrarian, radical librarian, who helps you move through the space finding all the great stories and hidden gems you never expected to see. *BETTER* offers fresh tools

to help people of faith (or not of faith, for that matter) read and tell better the stories that shape us, first and foremost by reminding us, that our stories should always be in service of building beloved community and never about excluding people from it.

For a radical feminist, Southern, country, Black girl professor like me, the story has to be told differently in order for me to see myself in it, because our collective and national stories were intentionally told for so long to exclude people like me. But I can see myself in Bray's telling in chapter 2 the story of the Syrophenician woman who trades barbs with Jesus because he had something she needed. I hear her snarky "boy bye," when Jesus tries to dismiss her. By being able to tell the story differently, in what Bray calls a COMPOSTable way, by opening up to the possibility that the women in Jesus's community challenged him and questioned him, a story of the faithful emerges that embraces and encourages the curious and skeptical ones among us. That's fresh air—good news—for women like me for sure!

Bray's book is unique, too, because it takes on topics that even progressive Christians handle in a clunky manner. In our communities of radical Jesus lovers, we have gotten progressively better at rejecting homophobia, embracing queer folks, and creating a theological discourse that acknowledges the import and value of LGBTQIA people in our communities. To be clear, there is no Christianity without queer folks, who have always been among us. In the Black Christian churches from which I come, we have always relied on the ministry and worship labor of people whose silence we demanded when it came to their intimate lives. Those are hard truths that progressive Christians of all stripes are getting better at telling.

But race is a different matter entirely. Sometimes I wonder if all the progressive Christians are white. This whiteness is overwhelming when I read the books of my faves, and those books deal well with questions of queer identity, gender politics, and the problem of poverty, while struggling to take on the question of racism. Bray doesn't let progressive Christianity off the hook on matters of race. He assumes that his Blackness has a place in the story, that acknowledging the myriad ways it shows up can make the stories of beloved community better. But he does intuitively understand something that really matters—that for so many who want our faith stories to be better, there isn't an absence of interest, but rather a lack of tools.

This book is chock-full of tools and models for reimagining that allow us to go back to our sacred stories and see them differently. Each chapter sparked and inspired me to turn again to texts that have long frustrated me, to recognize that I have agency too. I can put my sanctified thinking cap on and seek different kinds of possibilities in the texts before me. We all can.

What I love most about this book is its invitation to a kind of courageous curiosity. Sometimes it's hard to admit to ourselves that the old ways of telling the story just don't do it for us anymore. We are tired of stories that vilify, condemn, and exclude.

We are tired of using “God’s love” as a weapon to corral and punish everyone who doesn’t resolve the story the way we think they should. We are tired of stories that cram us into boxes rather than pull us out of them.

We want to be better, but we don’t always know how to get better. In these distressing times, I often beg for answers. But then I remember that to get better answers, I have to ask better questions. The promise of this book is in the reminder that if we will turn our attention again to the stories that we love, better is available to us.

Brittney Cooper

Rutgers University

Crunk Feminist Collective

Author of *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*

SAMPLE Not for distribution



## Featured Artists

It was important to me to include art in *BETTER* that not only corroborates what's written, but that also expands, interrogates, or challenges the ideas put forth. As such, the images in the book are less often illustrative of what is being said in the paragraphs where they are found; instead they are allusive, meant to spark imagination and generate fresh intuitions.

The following two photographers answered the call to share their art and passion for a more just, beautiful, and virtue-filled world with this project. I am tremendously happy to feature their work and point you toward the causes that matter to them so you can support them as well.

**Nikole Lim** is the Cofounder and International Director of Freely in Hope, a nonprofit organization seeking to restore dignity with survivors of sexual violence by providing educational opportunities and platforms for women to fulfill their dreams. From documenting a widow with leprosy in the jungles of Vietnam to providing scholarships for survivors of sexual violence in Zambia, furthering social justice through the arts has been a vital part of Nikole's vocational journey. By using film and photography, Nikole shifts paradigms on how stories are told, platforming voices of the oppressed—sharing stories of immense beauty arising out of seemingly broken situations. Find more of her work at <http://www.nikolelim.com>.



**Carlton Mackey** is an artist and scholar. He is an adjunct professor of Film and Media Studies at Emory University and serves as the Director of the Ethics & the Arts Program and Associate Director of the Ethics and Servant Leadership (EASL) Program at the Emory University Center for Ethics. Mackey is the creator of BEAUTIFUL IN EVERY SHADE,<sup>TM</sup> a signature brand and grassroots empowerment movement about transcending colonized beauty standards to liberate and celebrate what is beautiful in every human being. Three projects of BEAUTIFUL IN EVERY SHADE are 50



Shades of Black, Typical American Families, and Black Men Smile. Find more of his work at <http://carltonmackey.com>.

**Special thanks** to the other artists who made their work available to this project as well, either knowingly or through creative commons copyright. You are appreciated for the better you give us eyes and hearts to see in the world.

## Acknowledgments

This project would not exist had it not been for the encouragement and countless hours of conversation with my spouse, partner for life, Leslie Watson Bray, clarifying how we want to show up in the world together.

It would not exist were it not for my children, Jaya, Kari and Melvin IV, giving their daddy the time and mental space to create, while always daring to interrupt just often enough to keep us both reminded exactly where priority lies.

The project would be so much less were it not for the invaluable insight of Tashion Macon (strut AGENCY, Atlanta and Los Angeles), brand guru, friend, and fellow dreamer. The book itself would be a meandering mess (I have a lot of thoughts about everything) were it not for the watchful eye, ear, and talent of my editor, Olivia M. Cloud. And I would be remiss not to mention Chalice Press, in particular Steve Knight and Brad Lyons, for taking a risk on all the various ways I wanted to change existing norms.

You may start reading and get the impression that I read and watch broadly. While that's somewhat true, I learned from an old Georgia organic farmer-friend, Skip Glover, "you can't read everything," no matter how much you'd like to. However, what I have sought to develop over the years is the spiritual discipline of listening broadly (those who truly know me know how much of a struggle that can be). Any success I have had in the practice of listening has led to a network of trusted sources and friendships whose sundry and disparate experiences with art, philosophy and spirituality, ethics, meaning, and ideas, I drew upon in the completion of this endeavor. So I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge public intellectuals and journalists like Brittney Cooper, Melissa Harris Perry, Michel Martin and Krista Tippett, whose work has done so much to introduce me to new voices. I also want to express appreciation to friends like David Lamotte, Anthony Smith, Jimmy McGee, Eliacin Rosario-Cruz, Brian Ammons, Troy Bronsink, Mike Morrell, Julie Clawson, Brian McLaren, Patrick Shevlin, Juliette Kaplan, Eugene Russell, Kathy Khang, Lisa Anderson, Michael Wright, Stephen Lewis, and many others for commending and being resonant voices to me that I could engage while completing this project.

In addition to the work of greats like Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Martin Luther King Jr., el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, and Vincent Harding, there are so many others whose influence on my heart and mind lie just beneath the surface of legal obligation to attribution, but without whom I would never have arrived here. As such, I especially would like to acknowledge the works of Howard Thurman, Chief Si'ahl (Seattle), Malcolm Gladwell, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Alice Walker, whose thoughts undergird the original premise of the book.

**xiv BETTER**

Furthermore, I owe an ineffable debt of gratitude to anyone who has shared even a fleeting moment of this life journey with me, names too numerable to mention. Because of you, I am incalculably BETTER.

## Introduction

By the time these pages open to the light of day, the experience that birthed them will be at least five years old. One of the challenges of traditional publishing is that it takes so long to bring an idea to print. So honestly, I'm not even sure I still believe all the same things now that I did then.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I hope I don't—which is partly why this book isn't about belief (uncritical certainty) so much as it is about faith (humble confidence) in the power of story to lead us into more *and more* beautiful ways of being human.<sup>2</sup>

Despite my theologically conservative upbringing, I eventually gave up on the notion of unassailable religious certitude, because for all our certainty, we've made a royal mess of things. Set aside for a moment all the wars waged and the lives lost on every inhabited continent in the name of religion, which itself trumps nearly all possible arguments in favor of religion. Start simply with the ignorance religion can so often promote, the unwillingness to entertain new experience or additional information. Move from there to the deep materialism that religion outwardly reviles, yet often hypocritically identifies as a sign of divine favor. Consider, too, the alienation and oppression that arise from dividing the world into a chosen "us" and a wretched "them," which brings us back to this business of waging physical, cultural, psychological, economic, and ecological war on all we consider unlike ourselves. When our sense of right and wrong is so self-serving, what are we—and, perhaps more importantly, our children—left to believe about public morality, economic stability, political integrity, personal safety, legal "legitimacy" of residency, and financial decency in America?

My first notion was to title this book *Deconstructing Our Myths*, but over time that seemed to put the focus on the wrong part of the exercise. Anyone who grows must, over time, deconstruct the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual scaffolding upon which they have hung their intuitions regarding how things were, are, and should be. I was able to challenge and deconstruct much of my own, having spent several years in nourishing journey alongside faithful friends. Then on some bright, crisp morn in early 2011,<sup>3</sup> I woke up to the realization that "I'm done deconstructing (at least for the moment)." And although story

<sup>1</sup> One example of such evolution can be seen between chapters 3 and 8.

<sup>2</sup> Author Brian McLaren does some very important work on the difference between faith and belief in his book *A New Kind of Christianity* (Jossey Bass, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Why are epiphanic moments so often recalled as happening in the morning?

already mattered a great deal to me, at that point it seemed even more significant as a means of finding a way forward.

This book is about story as story, not story as illustration. These stories bear within themselves the seeds of their own deconstruction—that is to say, they aren't told like they are the one true interpretation of faith. If you walk away from the sacred myths shared herein with intuitions that are different from those I highlight, then the book has still served its purpose.

I work with story primarily for the sake of my children and all the youth with whom I've interacted over the years as a parent, teacher, and mentor. It matters tremendously to me how I pass along faith to my children. I don't mind that my children will have baggage in their faith development; everyone does. But I'll be damned if they'll end up with *my* baggage. No, literally. If there is something worthy of damnation (which seems to be such a common element in many of the old tellings of faith stories), bequeathing all one's hang-ups to one's progeny sounds like as good a reason to damn someone as any. Is there any more certain way to cripple a generation? To avoid crippling our children, it seems to me one has to begin the deep work of unpacking personal baggage, examining what's in those suitcases and steamer trunks and recognize what has been the compelling factor in carrying these accoutrements this far. The hope is that over time we'll learn how to lay some of that crap down and learn to travel light. I remember reading once about being light in the world . . .

I have heard more than once over the past few years that story is rising to prominence, specifically because people are seeking ways to re-enchant their world. Far be it from me to attempt to re-enchant scripture or the world of which it speaks. However, this is my humble attempt to polish away much of the dross that has obscured from us a world already deeply enchanted, if we only find the eyes to see it.

What I am arguing for is reimagining the way we tell our faith stories—which for me, a follower of Jesus, is the biblical narrative—so that they point to beloved community and beyond. Reimagining, as I use the term, is affirmative critique and adaptive reuse rooted in deep appreciation for the best intuitions of those who came before us. It's an attempt to improve upon, not reject, the past, as I'm not sure one can reimagine out of disdain. So it is saying that, although I may differ with Martin Luther King Jr., preferring a more *active*<sup>4</sup> nonviolent resistance, I wouldn't,

<sup>4</sup> I just think that, if you actively have your foot on my neck, we can't continue in rational conversation until that is rectified, even if that means I have to grab your foot and put you on your butt. As long as you're standing over me it's not a conversation between persons who perceive one another as equals. There's no need to converse about your foot on my neck: that just needs to be remedied.

as many did in the 1950s (including my own grandmother), negatively characterize him as a misguided agitator.

It's also my getting almost to the end of a theology degree and deciding I needed to see if God could be bigger than my tradition. It's having the LGBTQIA kids at my first full-time teaching assignment befriend me long before I was open-and-affirming.<sup>5</sup> It's even hearing then sixty-something year old comedian and activist Dick Gregory explain how he came to terms with his daughter dating a white boy by realizing that he had devoted his life to shaping a world in which young people judged one another by the content of their character, rather than by the color of their skin.<sup>6</sup> I had to die to all these ways of being in order to imagine new possibilities. Where I am now isn't detached from my former self but rather a reimagined version of self.

Reimagining, as I define it, is not the same as just making shit up, finding our own way, or setting our own course. If you think about making things up as sour milk, then reimagining is more analogous to making cheese. Yet, no one calls a cheese maker a heretic, nor those who love cheese blasphemers of milk.<sup>7</sup> Reimagining is actually an attempt to delve more faithfully into the deep wisdom, the best intuitions of our traditions, rather than to extrapolate old metaphors further—creating our own interpretations of previous interpretations (vegan cheese). Attempts to create pop faith stories, symbols, rituals, and celebrations seem to amount to little more than this.

Reimagining is more than mere praise for the sentiment of William Ernest Henley's "Invictus." It doesn't automatically make you "the master of [your] fate . . . the Captain of [your] soul." Reimagining, as espoused herein, is an intergenerational and communal process.<sup>8</sup> It starts with a common point of reference and expounds upon a shared sense of virtue. It's the story of us, not just the story of me.

For Christians, that common point of reference might be the Fruit of the Spirit or the Sermon on the Mount or any of the many other cardinal virtues found in Judeo-Christian scripture. "The fruit of the Spirit [of the Jesus way]," the Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Galatia, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>9</sup>

Or it might be the words Jesus spoke to a crowd gathered by the Sea of Galilee, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love

<sup>5</sup> Language associated with Christian spaces that are "open" to (i.e., safe) and "affirming" of (i.e., promoting the God-given dignity of) LGBTQIA individuals and their families.

<sup>6</sup> Which helped me to resolve my last hang-ups regarding interracial dating.

<sup>7</sup> Although, my wife says, people into vegan "cheese" are proudly heretics and blasphemers of all things dairy.

<sup>8</sup> Life experience has taught me that there are few, if any, original thoughts. And I have become increasingly suspicious of ideas that some elder cannot see the veracity in or of innovations that seek to sever all ties with what came before it. The seeds of the future are found in the past. Even the intuitions espoused in this book are more reclamation than revelation.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV

## 4 BETTER

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:43-44 NRSV

your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Philippians 4:8 KJV

The message Paul wrote to Philippi is a common point of reference as well: “whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”<sup>11</sup>

Other positive traditions, even irreligious traditions like Humanism, articulate the necessity of this type of ethic in a pluralistic world. I would suggest it is because reimagining is embedded in this type of community and/or shared tradition that it has credibility.

Some may question whether reimagining is the best approach to having better stories. Why not instead start from scratch? They might advocate creating a new, perhaps religiously neutral, mythology through which to communicate our best intuitions. It’s an idea.

Take *Star Wars*, for example, a worldwide cinematic phenomenon that spans generations and transcends cultures. Strangely enough, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas, the man religious fanatics once called a Satanist and a corrupter of spiritual imagination, said in a 1980s interview with Bill Moyer that the imagery from his stories shouldn’t serve as substitutes for the richness of religious tradition. Rather, he had hoped that his talk of “The Force” and his ability to capture on-screen the hero’s adventure and the epic struggle between good and evil would encourage viewers back into their various spiritual traditions.

Religious fundamentalists need not fear. There is little threat of *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* or other mythological movies destroying our religious institutions any time soon. Scripture isn’t going anywhere as a primary influence in the lives of a significant portion of the people on this planet. With only about a billion or so of the estimated seven billion people in the world identifying as irreligious, the value of faith mythology is still intact for now.

<sup>12</sup> “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population,” a report based on the *American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. Available at <https://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/publications/2008-2/aris-2008-summary-report/>.

There is, however, some evidence that “no religion” is the fastest growing religious status in the United States.<sup>12</sup> This does not surprise me. In fact, I would argue that continuing to tell stories of faith in the same way is to guarantee they’ll be largely discredited as broken certainties of a former time. By reimagining our stories of faith, however, we preserve their value for posterity.



This book is about how to pass faith along to our kids and to others in ways that remain valued, relevant, and useful. In case you've missed it, gone are the days of holding uncritically to what one's parents held as truth. Young people arriving at adulthood may very well abandon the faith of their fathers and mothers. However, if it is not too audacious of me, I think it safe to say that if parents and mentors practice the storytelling demonstrated in this book, they will be more effective at passing along a faith that will be received by future generations. Therefore, a major audience for this book is parents and mentors who know the value of faith, yet recognize that their progeny may not hold faith on the same terms.

This book is not for folks who've figured it all out. If your religious certainty is working for you and yours, by all means, stick with it. Far be it from me to call into question anything life-giving for anyone. If you are fundamentally or foundationally committed to an old-time religion or to the contemporized expression of similar core principles, this book likely will only annoy you and perhaps feel like smoke masquerading as fresh air.<sup>13</sup>

However, if you're like so many for whom uncritical certitude is no longer working and you don't know why or what to do about it. If you've seen that while your certainties may privilege you and folk like you just fine, others pay a pretty high cost in maintenance of your privilege and you want to do something to rectify that. Then *BETTER* should feel like oxygen in your lungs.

Whatever your rationale for reading, I hope *BETTER* sparks meaning-filled conversation for you and your faith (or non-faith) community. If so, please make a point of letting me hear about it.

<sup>13</sup> Although I do appreciate the purchase!

# Expository Arc for *BETTER: Waking Up to Who We Could Be*

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## CHAPTER 1

The relational challenges of society reflect the way we've interpreted our sacred myths over time. The COMPOST methodology helps us reimagine these world-changing stories in both the present and the future.

### ch 1

MLK's metaphor of beloved community is one of the most prominent modern examples of how good story can change the world for the better. His work inspires us to reengage sacred myth to find what it can teach us about living more beautiful, just and virtue-filled lives.

## CHAPTER 2

The story of the Syrophenician woman's encounter with Jesus demonstrates that no sacred myth can be reduced to one eternally salient point.

### ch 2

Beloved community champions the human dignity of all.

## CHAPTER 3

The stories of Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate that the protagonists of sacred myths aren't always meant to be emulated, and with certain thematic arcs stretching for generations, we have to see the ripple effects of "hero's" actions before we can judge their value.

### ch 3

Beloved community lets others tell their own story.

## CHAPTER 4

The story of Esther demonstrates sacred mythology isn't culturally intuitive for 21st century post-modern gentiles. So we have to take time to understand the context of any story if we are going to be able to derive credible meaning from it.

### ch 4

Beloved community accepts others for how they choose to identify, even as that identity varies across situations.

## CHAPTER 5

The story of Ruth and Hagar demonstrates that ancient culture and the understanding of virtue found therein is far from static, and it quite unmistakably evolves over time.

### ch 5

Beloved community finally shares ownership of the good being created.

***BETTER develops two complementary lines of thought simultaneously as illustrated below:***

(a) there are more beautiful, more just, more virtue-filled ways to interpret the biblical narrative;

(b) doing so gives us more beautiful, more just, more virtue-filled ways of being in the world.

**CHAPTER 6**

The story of Zacchaeus demonstrates that, even when the goal is to tell stories that COMPOST, not every telling of every sacred myth will have all the elements.

**ch 6**

Beloved community leverages privilege on behalf of others.

**CHAPTER 7**

The story of David demonstrates sacred myths are not stories that happened once, but stories that happen time and time again. Stories that COMPOST acknowledge patterns, even when they are at odds with Western cultural norms.

**ch 7**

Beloved community makes room for others.

**CHAPTER 8**

The story of the woman who washed Jesus's feet offers opportunity to make narrative amends to those historically oppressed by poor tellings of our sacred myths. The COMPOST process, not just COMPOST attributes, moves us in the direction of much needed reparations.

**ch 8**

Beloved community seeks liberation, not progress, transformation, not just reform.

**CHAPTER 9**

The story of Moses's journey back to Egypt demonstrates that each generation has to find its own devotion to the stories and rituals of their faith.

**ch 9**

Beloved community honors the past by improving on it.

**CHAPTER 10**

While the COMPOST methodology doesn't offer us new certainty, it does give us ears to apprehend fresh intuitions each time we re-tell our sacred myths.

**ch 10**

Beloved community is possible. However, the arc of the moral universe doesn't bend itself toward justice. We have to bend it, through our telling of better stories and our building of a better world.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Better Stories

Shortly after the Supreme Court of the United States 2015 decision to uphold marriage equality as constitutional, a former student of mine posted an affirmation of his faith on Facebook that went something like:

To my LGBTQ friends, I don't think of you any less because of my growing faith in Jesus and my belief in the teachings of my church. You are human, just like me. Jesus wants me to love ALL people, no matter their walk of life.

Nonetheless, I believe marriage is between a man and a woman and that Satan is attacking that structure. To be honest, I view homosexuality as the Bible defines it—a sin. Yes, there are A LOT of sinful acts I commit daily. This is me making a stand on what is truth as I understand it. I am in no position to condemn anyone, but I do have the right to express my belief.

If knowing this you can't remain friends with me, I'll respect your decision. No hard feelings.

My first reaction was to wonder: How had the story of God been imparted during his formative years that caused this young adult to think of faith as something to be held over and against others? My lament doubled upon reading the comments of yet another young adult who concurred with my former student, rationalizing her refusal to attend, and thus “condone,” her sister's upcoming nuptials to a same-sex partner.

Having grown up in the same fundamentalist tradition as these two, I was not befuddled by the theology, nor by the way it was being positioned.

**When children grow up to mimic their parents' hostility toward others, it's often ten times worse, because their actions are that much further removed from the rationale and context that birthed the stories they parrot.**

As carefully as I could, so as to not come off as condescending, I shared with the growing number of supportive commentators that in the majority of stories handed down to us Jesus takes an opposite tact. The only exceptions were during his dealings with intransigent and exploitative religio-political leaders. In fact, the accusations deemed most damning in the biblical account are that Jesus consorted with sinners, thus colluding with the devil.

<sup>1</sup> *The Usual Suspects* (MGM, 1995). Most memorable line: "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

I pressed this point about *the actual Jesus story* across several comments until, in grand Keyser Söze<sup>1</sup> fashion, the young woman intent on snubbing her sister in the name of God dismissed me with the retort: "Satan's greatest weapon is man's ignorance of God's Word."

That social media exchange dismays me on multiple levels, primarily because it uses story—in this instance, the story of God—to justify the oppression of another. Story is the most powerful, yet seemingly innocuous, cultural force on the planet.

There are countless examples of how story is used as a weapon against others. For instance, in the nearly one hundred years since the women's suffrage movement began in the United States, working women more often than we care to admit hit a glass ceiling as they seek to advance their careers, yet we beguile ourselves with stories of "level playing fields." Furthermore, even as the number of female-headed households increases, women take home 72 cents or less for every dollar a man makes doing the same job, but we delude ourselves with tales of "equal opportunity." Four decades after *Roe v. Wade*, women encounter restrictions on contraception, the defunding of women's health initiatives, the redefinition of rape, and the erosion of protections from intimate partner violence. These misogynist policies come at the whim of predominantly male legislative bodies, while many insist there is no gender bias in our laws. Moreover, as our daughters, mothers, sisters, aunts, and nieces rise in school, in the

workplace, and especially the military, so do incidents of sexual assault. Still the story so often told, particularly in conservative faith spaces, is that the outrage committed had something to do with what a woman was wearing or doing.

However, the open hostility in our stories isn't just toward women.



Although it's been nearly fifty years since Martin Luther King Jr. and his contemporaries shamed overt racism underground, people of color continue to be suspected, arrested, charged, tried, sentenced, and incarcerated at rates that far exceed that of whites for the same crimes. We've been taught to regard these atrocities as "law and order." People of color still lose their lives at the hands of white privilege, based on erroneous assumptions about race. But society works hard to account for it, reaching for inadequate legal designations like "justifiable use of force" or "stand your ground." White border citizens take up arms to repel the migration of destitute minors to our brown south, while ignoring hundreds of miles of unpoliced border to our white north, and the farce we tell is of an unbiased interest in "homeland security."

Nonetheless, stories of such cruelty don't restrict themselves to people of color. Employers that actively solicit government benefits paid for by all taxpayers hire, fire, or deny employment benefits based on sexual orientation or gender expression, justifying their actions as "religious liberty." To give such employers legal cover, across the country conservative state lawmakers vote into law regressive and openly discriminatory laws and have the audacity to name their legislation, "Religious Freedom Restoration Acts." Landlords evict or deny housing to LGBTQIA persons (particularly elders and youth) and call it "protecting property values." Meanwhile, in our schools and neighborhoods, bullies make life a living hell for LGBTQIA kids (particularly transgender and gender nonconforming), pushing many of them to consider taking their own lives. Yet these heinous actions are dismissed as "kids will be kids."

These narratives of oppression haunt us at every turn, as if they are somehow innate parts of the human condition. As if they aren't relational problems seeking relational responses. They reveal a fundamental disconnect between ourselves and others—"us" versus "them"—someone wanting to deny the full humanity of another, while often cloaking that desire in words of religion, faith, and good intent. There must be reasons these disconnects persist despite our best lip service and well wishing to the contrary.

*What if the world that persists—with all its racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, religious hatred, and ecological*

<sup>2</sup> Not to mention poverty, militarism, consolidated wealth, food insecurity, water shortage, barriers to education, and so on—all of which are often justified by popular expressions of religion.

<sup>3</sup> See his magnum opus, *There is a River* (Mariner Books, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> “[Unedited] Vincent Harding with Krista Tippett,” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, February 4, 2011, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/civility-history-and-hope/79>.

*disregard*<sup>2</sup>—*is exactly the world we’ve storied into existence with the hostile faith stories we tell?*

What is story but a language bridge for conveying ideas from one person or generation to the next? Each of the narratives of oppression cited above contains specific language to communicate particular ideas about whom we value and whom we don’t; what we accept and what we won’t. How is that not story? It has all the essentials: character, setting, conflict, and plot.

The late civil rights luminary and historian Vincent Harding, who was uniquely gifted at preserving narrative history,<sup>3</sup> suggests,

[Story] is the way human community has developed over the millennia. . . . Storytellers bring the history of the experience, of the people, of the group, so that those who are new will know where they came from and what their own possibilities and directions might be. My own sense is that there is something deeply built into us that needs story itself. That story is a source of nurture. That we cannot become really true human beings—for ourselves and for each other—without story.<sup>4</sup>

### Of Myth and Men

Of course, Harding isn’t talking about everyday news reports, tall tales, or children’s books, although they play their part. He’s talking about those widely known cultural narratives into which nations and ethnicities and religions invest their strongest convictions about the world and their place in it. Literature teachers refer to such stories as myth (which doesn’t mean “lie,” as many presume). These myths take the form of prose and poetry, song and film, art and ritual passed on from old to young, teacher to student, friend to neighbor. They become the stories around which we organize the thinking and the doing of our daily lives.

Consider, for example, some well-known Christian mythology. Doesn’t the story of Adam and Eve *as often recalled* teach us that heterosexual relationships are normative? And doesn’t that same story, along with the overwhelming gender bias of the Judeo-Christian scriptures *suggest* that men are first and better suited to lead? Likewise, doesn’t the story of Noah and the Ark *as often told* to children teach that some deserve to live and some

just don't? Doesn't David and Goliath as *generally remembered* affirm that people who worship the "one true God" are meant to rule? C'mon, even if the curse of Cain or Ham as told by racist slaveholders is a crock,<sup>5</sup> doesn't the subjugation of specific people groups and the ignoring of others throughout the stories contained in the Hebrew Bible as *commonly recounted* at least imply that God is not uncomfortable with privileging some over others based on ethnicity or nationality? Sure they do!

No matter how much I love these stories, I've got to admit the truth. We've all seen them used in exactly these ways. I've personally used them in exactly these ways, and it shames me, because these stories were my refuge when I needed protection from that kind of assault on my own fragile sense of personhood growing up. When peers and adults used to pick on me for being too proper or too smart for my own good, these were the stories that assured me I mattered too.

Like the story of Ishmael thrown from the home of his father Abraham—the so-called Father of the Faithful—to die with his single mother in the desert. God doesn't reject Ishmael and his mom just because his father's wife, Sarah, treats him poorly, and his father can't muster enough courage to face the problem. God fulfills God's promise to make of Abraham's progeny a great nation through whom the earth would be blessed. The first step was helping Ishmael's mom find water in the desert to save their lives and later making a way for both his family and half-brother Isaac's family to come together and prosper in peace (Arabs and Jews) for the good of all those around them. Such stories spoke to me for so many reasons. But then, I turned around and learned to use them to deny others equal assurance.

Notwithstanding, my experience and that of many others who gained encouragement from the biblical narrative suggests the problem isn't our stories; but rather, the way we tell them. Which is to say, the way we interpret them. If you think about it, the sacred mythologies of diverse traditions have, more than any other human artifact, preserved for us a sense that better is possible. There is no richer treasure trove of virtue and wisdom, charity and solidarity, social change and cultural advancement than our sacred myths. Even at times when our houses of worship, our schools, our families, governments, corporations, and media—the institutions that have over the years fancied themselves the

<sup>5</sup> Be reminded at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse\\_and\\_mark\\_of\\_Cain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_and_mark_of_Cain) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse\\_of\\_Ham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_Ham).



keepers of our stories—have fallen into corruption, the stories themselves spoke of better.

Yet no herald can hold a message eternally untarnished. So too, the common telling of our sacred myths has evolved in some good and not-so-good ways. Even when we can't, often our children spot the corruption. They recognize misogyny in our faith stories—and homophobia and xenophobia and classism and tribalism and other forms of lunacy. And many of them are calling bullshit on these lies, as perpetuated at home, at school, at church, and on the airways by politicians and others. There's nothing beautiful or sensible or sacred about these ways of being in the world, and the fact that many kids have figured this out should be a source of great hope.

**“America’s seismic demographic shift is upending life in our suburbs, cities and our popular culture. So why are we still clinging to the same stories to make sense of these changes?”**  
 ~Gene Demby, blogger

Sadly, some young people still don't see these hostile ways of being in the world as the lunacy they are. Perhaps that, more than anything, should scare us into moving toward something better. When children grow up to mimic their parents' hostility toward others, it's often intensified because their actions are that much further removed from the rationale and context that birthed the stories they parrot. They become voters who elect civic leaders who, after witnessing an attack carried out by French, Belgian, and Syrian nationals, espouse restricting the free movement of only Syrians as an appropriate response. Then they become indignant when someone cries “racism,” because they don't know how to live with integrity against radicalism in all its forms, including their own.

Sociologist and film critic Gareth Higgins, describes the need for stories that better interpret the best of our faith traditions this way:

We live at a time when much of institutional [religion, particularly my own faith tradition] Christianity, deserves a reputation for, at best, ignoring the real concerns facing most people; and at worst being complicit in perpetuating a system stacked against the poor, the sick, the marginalized, those who suffer. . . . [People of faith] cannot hope to be the kind of culture-shaping [influence] we aim to be unless we clearly articulate the vision of a new/old kind of [faith] that has captured our hearts... We live in a cultural context where words and images

matter—as the very currency of human relationships is so influenced, if not now dominated, by words and images (email, Twitter, Facebook; not to mention sermons, lyrics, film scripts, Banksy’s art, Obama’s campaign posters, and so on). That context demands that we state clearly—with words and images, as well as in our practices—[the hope we hold for a better world].<sup>6</sup>

If we storied ourselves into the way things are, there must be a way to story ourselves out of it. And that’s exactly what people are doing. Tom’s Shoes donates a pair of shoes to someone who can’t afford them every time someone who can afford them buys a pair. Charity Water puts 100 percent of public donations toward clean water projects, by challenging deep-pocket private donors to back their operations costs. Hip Hop Public Health is getting grandparents and parents to seek medical treatment by using hip hop to educate kids on the signs of developing health issues. The City of Salt Lake is impacting homelessness by giving people homes. They’ve figured out it only costs \$11,000 per year to set a homeless person up with an apartment and a social worker, whereas they were spending \$16,670 per person annually on ER visits and jail stays. We all know stories that claim these things couldn’t be done, but people are doing them successfully. Since religion wouldn’t stand up and live out the true meaning of its creed, the people involved in these projects, whether persons of faith or not, have stepped up to tell better stories.

The stories of Tom’s Shoes, Charity Water, Hip Hop Public Health, and Salt Lake City bridge a supposedly irreconcilable divide woven into our dominant narratives—the divide between haves and have-nots, the divide between profit and purpose, the divide between possible and impossible. These folk didn’t wait for religious institutions to get their act together, but that doesn’t mean there is no room for people of faith. Who better to come alongside and scale these better ways of being in the world than people of faith who have thousands of years of experience telling life-changing stories?

Now don’t get it twisted. I recognize that at the moment religious institutions have little credibility as promoters of virtue. It is often religious institutions that promote the injustices recalled at the



<sup>6</sup> Original write-up about the rationale for a Wild Goose Festival, featured on the festival’s website 2011-2014.

**“Storytellers bring the history of the experience, of the people, of the group, so that those who are new will know where they came from and what their own possibilities and directions might be.”**

beginning of this chapter. Nonetheless, faith is the lens through which many people like myself recognize that things are not as they ought to be. Faith gives me hope and a sense of direction for how to move toward the better world I believe is possible. Faith similarly informs the sensibilities of more than half of the seven billion people on the planet. That's 5.5 billion people with the sense that there is an Absolute in the universe with definite designs on a life worth living. There has to be a way to leverage that positive belief for the good of all. People of faith stand in a long line—generations—of people who have labored to live more justly, more virtuously, more beautifully, albeit imperfectly. With so much internal and external motivation, if people of faith can't tell more beautiful stories, who can?

When we revisit the sacred myths of our various traditions, we can yet hear whispers of a deep virtue and even critique that belies the unflinching pro-us-and-our-way-of-life messages we most often take from them. We find persons responding to a call to move beyond personal comfort into a place that brings greater comfort to others. We see ordinary people questing for possibilities that won't exist unless that specific character brings them into being. And if we're astute, we realize such mythic heroism is still possible today. Though handed down for millennia, our faith stories are now ours to tell and live, and we can choose to tell them in new and living ways.

### **Man of the Century**

Reimagining our sacred myths is exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. was doing when, in response to a deeply religious white America that was by and large convinced that its treatment of Negroes honored their Christian faith stories, began to speak of a beloved community. King adopted the language from early twentieth-century philosopher/theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The words *beloved community* do not appear in Christian sacred text, but King began to see it as the tangible communal and *political* end to what the stories of Christian scripture, particularly the stories of Jesus, intimated about living nonviolently.

The King Center website documents:

As early as 1956, Dr. King spoke of The Beloved Community as the end goal of nonviolent boycotts. As he said in a speech at a victory rally following the

announcement of a favorable U.S. Supreme Court Decision desegregating the seats on Montgomery's busses, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men."<sup>7</sup>

King's use of images like "beloved community" captured onlookers' imaginations and catapulted him onto a world stage. Who in their right minds wouldn't want to belong to the world about which King dreamed? I know when I heard it, I wanted to. You mean to tell me that there is a way to be in the world that people of goodwill in all their glorious differences—the fifty-two-year-old Caucasian banker, the twenty-five-year-old indigenous entrepreneur, the seventeen-year-old transgender Asian American homeschooler, the thirty-three-year-old Latino immigrant soldier and I—could connect with each other and together rewrite the stories of oppression in the world? Sign me up!

King would later express, "[Beloved community is] the aftermath of nonviolence. . . so that when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the [formerly] oppressed and the [former] oppressor."<sup>8</sup> "I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek. . . . That objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community."<sup>9</sup>

King began to tell a better story. In beloved community, the story of Adam and Eve is not a story of exclusion and bias, but rather of the radical inclusion of all God's good creation.<sup>10</sup> In beloved community, the story of Noah and his ark is not the story of God's destruction of sinners, but rather of God's saving grace to all creation.<sup>11</sup> In beloved community, the story of David and Goliath is not about God facilitating the triumph of a favorite few over all others, but instead about the historically marginalized and undervalued finding honor in society as well.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," speech given December 3, 1956, in Montgomery, Alabama, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>.

<sup>8</sup> Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi, March 22, 1959.

<sup>9</sup> July 13, 1966 article in *The Christian Century* magazine.

<sup>10</sup> Check out my take on the Adam and Eve Saga—<http://findourselves.blogspot.com/search/label/Adam%20and%20Eve>.

<sup>11</sup> Hear my take on the Noah Saga—<http://findourselves.blogspot.com/search/label/Noah>.

**"Discrediting old myths without finding new ones to replace them erodes the basis for common action that once bound those who believed into a public body, capable of acting together."  
~William H. McNeill, historian**

<sup>12</sup> See chapter 8.

<sup>13</sup> Check out Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> *Faith Forward*, ed. Dave Csinos and Melvin Bray (Kelowna, British Columbia: Wood Lake, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> *The Hero's Journey: The World of Joseph Campbell*, 1987, David Kennard and Janelle Balnicke, directors..

<sup>16</sup> After modernity or after colonization. A way of being in the world different from, yet informed by, what came before it.

King was undoubtedly ahead of his time, and America despised him for it—first by killing him, then by trying to dismiss his genius, then going further by attempting to domesticate or misappropriate his legacy.<sup>12</sup>

Vast numbers of people are waking up to the damage our lesser stories have done to the world and are seeking a script that makes beloved community possible. But you can't wake up to something nearly sixty years after the fact and expect nothing to have changed. Conditions on the ground and in our psyches aren't the same as they were in 1956. There are things we know now that we couldn't know then about our individual and collective selves—the systems and structures of empire in which we intra- and inter-relate, the histories of movements to transform those systems and the lengths to which supremacy will go to maintain itself within whatever iteration of the system comes into being. Beloved community can still be our chosen image of political justice, and sacred myths like David and Goliath can still inspire social change,<sup>13</sup> but our understanding of those metaphors and myths must expand.

As I've noted in previous writing,<sup>14</sup> mythologist Joseph Campbell (the scholar whose ideas inspired the modern myth *Star Wars*) suggests that if our metaphors and myths are to continue to fulfill their vital functions as time passes, they must continually evolve. Metaphors and myths that haven't progressed simply do not address the realities of contemporary life. It's like looking at a very old map of where you currently live. The map may not have on it your home or half the places you go on a regular basis. The map isn't wrong per se, but it is not very useful in helping you orient yourself. Even if you were to recognize a landmark or two as you looked at the map, you'd have to constantly explain to yourself where that landmark is in relation to other places you know. "A mythological image that has to be explained to the brain is not working."<sup>15</sup>

What is necessary to make a mythological image such as beloved community or Adam and Eve or Noah and the ark work for our post-modern/post-colonial<sup>16</sup> brains are not a mere updating of the imagery employed, which we often find in "contemporary churches," but also an acknowledgment, if only tacit, of what we know better since the image was first employed. All too often we try to use old images to justify or idealize "the way things were," ignoring that the "good ol' days" weren't so good for everyone.

Take, for example, the traditional imagery of the subservience of women to men. Whereas gender equity still may have been up for debate among civil rights leaders in the 1960s, we now know there's no room for inequality in beloved community. Failure to acknowledge this truth undermines one's credibility. To speak of "traditional family values" as those taught by the Bible in ancient times minimizes the damage done in the name of those values and flies in the face of all the progress that's been made since.

A look back into the biblical narrative will reveal stories wherein traditional values were subverted in favor of a beloved community that enfranchised everyone regardless of gender. The mythological image itself then becomes more recognizable to our post-colonial brains, and we have reason to be interested in what else the story may have to say. It's not that the world has no use for faith stories that challenge our predispositions; it simply has no use for faith stories that set us back.

Beloved community is a beautiful hope and an important corrective on the telos of our faith stories. But like many mythological images before it, beloved community (and all the tangible, affirmative tactics and vision associated with it) can also be co-opted, corrupted, or rendered useless over time. What is needed is not just better language that speaks of a more worthy end, but a better way to preserve and create new meaning on our journey toward that end.

Nature's way of doing this is called composting. As a part of the life cycle, the organic remnants of that which is no longer alive and vital is broken down into its constituent parts and used as nutrient for the next generative organism emerging. This is the way life continues: That Which Is gives its life to make way for That Which Is Becoming. The only organics that don't regenerate into nourishment for what is coming next are those that become petrified and serve only as windows into the past, rather than vital contributors to the present.

There are some stories, myths that do the same (e.g., the stoning of adulterous women in the Bible or speaking of communities of

**"The Bible cannot go unchallenged in so far as the role it has played in legitimating the dehumanization of people of African [and other] ancestry in general and the sexual exploitation of women of African [and other] ancestry in particular. It cannot be understood as some universal, transcendent, timeless force to which world readers in the name of being pious and faithful followers must meekly submit. It must be understood as a politically and socially drenched text invested in ordering relations between people, legitimating some viewpoints, and delegitimizing other viewpoints."**

**~Renita Weems, womanist scholar**



faith as if they were conquering armies). Joseph Campbell would often refer to these as “petrifacts.”

What if we discern other ways to tell faith stories—even those we’ve begun to tell through a beloved community lens—so that the specific interpretations, forms, and metaphors used don’t become calcified in our imaginations? Wouldn’t the world be better if each of us took the time to find better ways of holding our faith stories in it?

### **Psycho-Degradable Stories**

A masterful storyteller and friend Russell Rathbun once set out with me to see if we could identify the elements of stories that are life-giving to our imaginations for a time, yet easily “psycho-degrade” when they are no longer useful. We called them “stories that compost.”

We concluded that stories that COMPOST:

**Confess far more than they proscribe.** Have you ever noticed how much religion is about what will happen, should happen or is happening with people other than ourselves? It seems to me that proscriptions about others are far more likely to fester into *petrifacts* than our confessions about ourselves, because when we speak about ourselves we never want to leave the story at its low point. We are always anxious to tell the rest.

**Put Opposing forces in dynamic with each other.** There is a tendency in the telling of religious stories to reduce them to, “There was mess. God came. Whomever lived happily ever after. The end.” We know, however, that’s not the way life is. There’s a lot of doubt and loss and uncertainty with which we have to reckon—God or not. So why not tell stories full of the dialectical tension of life? Why make an idol out of our particular understanding of God—especially when theists know that an encounter with the true and living God seldom resolves tension; more often than not God’s interference heightens it.

**Have the Meekness to admit other interpretations—even in the midst of telling the story.** I’ve found that the best way to start to get at this is to begin to pepper one’s storytelling with phrases like “maybe,” “perhaps,” “on the other hand,” “as best I understand,” “as far as I can tell,” “one way of looking at it might be,” “the way the story has been handed down to us.” By moving

away from absolute proclamations, we make room for others to have something to say too.

**Pose questions more than answers.** Conceptually, faith (humble confidence) is more analogous to questions than to answers. Questions create relationship because they draw people into conversation, setting them on a journey together. Questions drive us toward people we may have never otherwise engaged. If we let them, questions move us away from antagonism to care for one another.

**Nurture Others-interestedness.** Have you ever wondered why the virtues lauded by most faith traditions are so very communal? Either they seek the good of others or foster an environment that can't wait to be shared. Even Christian imagery like "Fruit of the Spirit" calls to mind the fact that trees share their fruit; otherwise, the fruit spoils. This is what makes a faith story a story of faith: humble confidence in the mystery that though virtue costs our all, instead of diminishing us, fills our lives with an overflowing richness.

**Choose Susceptibility to harm.** Someone obviously thought they could improve on the Jesus story (the biblical narrative leading up to it and the narrative flowing from it) by recasting it as the grand and glorious triumph of good over evil. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on!"<sup>17</sup> Whereas I get the need to rally the weary, there is nothing about the Jesus story that is this triumphal. It is a story fraught with vulnerability that subverts the triumphant; and that's where its power lies.

**Treat Tradition as a living word—a bell that is ringing, not a bell that has rung.** A tradition cannot be alive and not change. So then, by their nature, COMPOSTable stories are filled with grace and resurrection—unafraid to converse (not engage in parallel monologuing) with that which heretofore had not been encountered.

Once we identified the types of stories that sustain life, we then wanted to discover if others also found it helpful to recount their sacred myths in this way. We took groups through a reading of a common scripture narrative with these six simple instructions:

<sup>17</sup> Julia Howe, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," 1861.



1. Read the passage for what it says and doesn't say.
2. How have you traditionally heard this story told?
3. List three things you love about the passage as you are now reading it.
4. List three things that have bugged you about the story itself or the way the story is typically recounted.
5. Articulate three questions that come to mind when you think of this story.
6. Now, select one thing from each of the three preceding categories, and use them to reimagine the story keeping in mind the seven attributes of stories that COMPOST.

For the purpose of this book, which is *to show how reimagining our faith stories reshapes our way of being in the world*, I will add a seventh step: "What intuitions arise from our telling of the story that point us toward beloved community?" In each chapter I'll name what I smell. It's perfectly okay if you smell something totally different. The goal isn't unanimity; but rather, to tell stories that celebrate our current best intuitions until we develop better ones.

When told this way, our reimagined faith stories bear within themselves the seeds of their own deconstruction—that is to say they aren't told as if they are the one true and eternal interpretation. The credibility of usefulness within a specific context is sufficient, particularly if we are ready to admit that, even taking the most favorable view, we are simply doing the best we can with what we know at the moment. The essential part is that, instead of mistaking our interpretive intuitions for the virtues they help us imperfectly make sense of, we should insist the intuitions derived from our storytelling always affirm the virtues that gave rise to them (love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, meekness, self-control, courage, and so on). And when the imperfections of our intuitions become more pronounced than the beauty of the virtue they're supposed to teach us, let's give ourselves and others, especially our children, permission to reimagine anew.<sup>18</sup>

So then, the story of Adam and Eve isn't just about the radical inclusion of all God's good creation in honor of our hopes for beloved community. The story is about any and every generative interpretation that can be found that helps meet the needs of the present without compromising our capacity for interpreting the story in more beautiful, more just, and more virtue-filled ways in the future.

<sup>18</sup> *Faith Forward*, ed. Dave Csinos and Melvin Bray (CopperHouse, 2013).

## Last Rights

People of religious upbringing may have inhibitions about playing (in the best sense of the word) with sacred text this way. Freedom to embrace reimagining as a viable recourse may be linked to a few realizations. The first is something Rathbun said the first time we facilitated together: “You can’t break scripture. And you shouldn’t be afraid to. It’s not ‘precious.’” Shocking, I know, but let it settle in. Scripture is not a thing to be coveted and possessed, like Gollum lusting over the One Ring in *Lord of the Rings*. It doesn’t need our protection. It is only the story of people just like us trying to figure it all out. In fact, this idea of reimagining our sacred myths is as old as religion itself.<sup>19</sup> Any way scripture can be used to help us find our way forward is valid.

Secondly, there is no neutral telling of any story. As US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor famously posited during her confirmation hearing, we—and our stories—are products of our unique personal experiences. Snow White’s “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” is not innocuous.<sup>20</sup> It affirms certain things many people of European descent want their children to believe about themselves. Unfortunately, it also condemns, even if inadvertently, all who do not neatly fit into the limited categories it establishes for what is “fair,” especially when told within a culture that is insistent on maintaining those categories. So what happens when the story of Mary, mother of Jesus, has been recast to resemble Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, or Cinderella? What do we mistakenly sanctify that we shouldn’t? What do we universally incriminate that we mustn’t? Might I suggest it is far and away time to renew our minds with honest images of those we pronounce as heroes of our faith and the times in which they lived?

Thirdly, we can’t do any worse to our faith traditions or our world than already has been done. As I read to my three children from the series and authors with which I grew up, I found myself in the awkward position of trying to rewrite on the fly the inane triumphalism that infects the stories that brought me to faith—stories like Israel’s needlessly hostile and self-righteous conquest of the Canaanites and the expectation of many Christians that Jesus’s Second Coming will somehow more resemble a similar triumph over all other religions rather than the peace and goodwill

“The system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This . . . means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.”

~Ella Baker,  
community organizer

<sup>19</sup> Within Judaism, in addition to gleaning metaphors from other faiths (see chapter 10), reimagining has taken other forms, for instance, by spawning new interpretive traditions (for example, Midrash and Targum). Within Christianity, although we don’t always think of them as such, each Christian denomination is, in effect, an alternate interpretive tradition. In the first split, the upstart Catholic interpretive tradition broke away from the Orthodox tradition. Approximately five hundred years later, the Catholic Church split over who was the rightful pope, the one in France or the one in Rome. Then about five hundred years later, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, and the Protestant Reform interpretive tradition was born. There have been several lesser denominational splinterings among Protestants since, but if we remain true to form, according to author Phyllis Tickle, it’s about time for us to clean out our theological attic once again.