

My Spiritual Biography: From Certainty to Trust

My journey has been a movement from certainty about God to trusting the God revealed in self-giving love, while learning to live faithfully with mystery, suffering, and unanswered questions.

When people ask about my faith, they are asking what I believe. Looking back over my life, though, the more interesting question is not what I believe but how I became the kind of Christian I am today.

We are all familiar with the concept of a horizon. From where I stand, due to the curvature of the earth, I can see up to a certain point, and past that everything is speculation rather than certainty, unless I have been there myself or heard the testimony of a trusted friend who has. That seems to me a fair description of theology. Much of what passes for confident God-talk is well-intentioned reasoning about things that lie over our horizon. There is a limit to what any of us can say with certainty about God, unless God chooses to reveal himself to us.

That is the humility I want to bring to what follows. This is not a theological system but a personal testimony, provisional like all my thinking about God. I have learned how to end my theological sentences with a comma rather than a full stop.

The journey has not been a straight line for me. It has been shaped by three movements: certainty, grief and trust.

Part One – Certainty

Like many new Christians, I was told that faith was about having the right answers. I expected theology to explain God, defend him against criticism and solve the difficult questions of life. If something did not make sense, there had to be an explanation. I admired confidence and clarity. Questions felt dangerous, because they seemed to threaten faith itself.

In those years I imagined the Christian life as a straight road. Study hard enough, believe faithfully enough, pray sincerely enough, and the road would grow clearer before me. Even then, though, there were hints that the reality was more complicated.

One of the first writers to unsettle me – in the best possible way – was the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. She was the catalyst who helped me find my way to faith. She insisted that truth mattered more than protecting our religious systems, and one passage has stayed with me:

It seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.

Simone Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography" in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd, 27.

Questions are not the enemy of faith. They can be one of God's gifts. Weil taught me that certainty and faith are not the same thing. But I had not yet learned the deeper lesson that life itself would teach me.

Part Two – Grief

My coming to faith had a catalyst, and so, later, did my keeping it. In both instances, this was Simone Weil.

When my wife Liz died in 2019, all the old certainties crumbled. I could see all the gaps where she would have made a difference and felt disappointed and let down by God. Prayer had failed and was like talking to myself in a dark room. Everything I thought I understood about God suddenly had to survive contact with harsh reality. There are questions that can be discussed in a seminar room, and there are questions that can only be asked beside a hospital bed or at a graveside. The problem of suffering (where was God?) had become personal for me.

That period coincided with Covid and the lockdowns, and with the writing of my master's dissertation on *Simone Weil's Soteriology in Relation to her Doctrine of Creation*. That was my attempt to work through the question where is God in a suffering world. Weil became much more to me than an interesting philosopher; she became a companion, and she showed me something that transformed the way I think about God.

The essential truth concerning God is that God is good *before* He is powerful.

Simone Weil, "Letter to a Priest," in *Simone Weil: Awaiting God*, trans. Bradley Jersak (Fresh Wind Press, 2012), 172.

The italics are mine. What Weil gave me was not an argument but a different way of seeing and the language to describe it, one that made room for the apparent absence of God in a world that had become unbearably painful. I have come to think that some experiences of divine absence can help to dismantle false images of God. If we want to know what God is like, we do not begin with omnipotence and power. We begin with Jesus and the Cross, with self-emptying love, and with the God who chooses to suffer alongside us.

That simple idea changed my perspective on suffering. It did not answer every question. It did something better: it changed the question I was asking. Instead of "Where is God?" I began to ask, "How is God present in suffering?"

Part Three – Trust

Looking back, I can see that grief did not destroy my faith in God, though it could have. It transformed it. I hold fewer certainties than I once did, but I have a deeper trust. I no longer believe that faith is the absence of doubt; I have come to think that the opposite of faith can be certainty, especially where our confidence is placed in an idea or a tradition rather than a Person.

That has worked its way into almost everything else. Prayer is less about persuading God to change the world than about allowing God to change me. Scripture is no longer a perfect answer book but a library of arguments, an extraordinary human witness

pointing us towards the living Word who is Jesus Christ. And the real test of our theology is not whether we are right; it is whether we are becoming more loving.

Theory is fine, but what about when the rubber hits the road? In August 2025 I was unexpectedly diagnosed with bowel cancer. I had no symptoms and the following February, after 12 weeks of chemo, I had major surgery, which seems to have gone well. Throughout, I found myself remarkably at peace with what was happening. I can see in retrospect how I had been prepared for this through journalling and listening prayer so that, when the storm came, trust was my anchor holding me secure.

Etty Hillesum, writing in the darkness of the Holocaust, commented that despite everything she could not hate, although she recognised the right to be morally indignant at the harm being done to herself and others.

I see no alternative, each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable.

Etty Hillesum, Diary entry for 23 September 1942. *An Interrupted Life*, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans, 180.

That has become one of my aspirations: to love the person in front of me, and to become someone whose faith produces compassion and concern for others.

It has changed how I understand the spiritual life. I no longer think of it as a straight road. It is much more like a labyrinth, full of twists and unexpected turns, where sometimes we seem to be walking away from the centre before discovering that we have been moving towards it all along. Progress includes reversals; loss and renewal are intertwined. The journey is less about accumulating answers than about becoming the sort of person who can live faithfully with mystery.

That is why mysticism has become increasingly important to me. Not because it offers secret knowledge or special experiences, but because it reminds us that God is encountered before God is explained. A genuinely free and vulnerable creation necessarily includes the possibility of loss, and non-coercive love does not abolish that vulnerability. Even when he seems hidden, God is never far from us.

Many spiritual writers describe moments where we glimpse something of the sacred in the world around us. Such moments cannot be controlled, or even fully described, but they deepen trust. I call them burning bush moments: they catch us unawares, often through nature, as we still ourselves enough to notice, and the ordinary reveals itself as something extraordinary.

This is not a rejection of tradition but an attempt to recover some of its deepest currents: contemplative, mystical, compassionate, and historically aware. Weil's word for what that current asks of us is attention - by this she meant something more demanding than concentration. She meant a kind of waiting and expectation, emptied of our own agenda, that lets the person or the moment in front of us be what it is rather than what we need it to be. She believed that,

“Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”

Simone Weil, “Attention and Will” in *Gravity and Grace*.

That is easier to admire than to practise, but it is the thread running through much of what I have said here: the prayer that changes me rather than the world, the test of whether I am becoming more loving, the stillness in which an everyday experience turns out to be a burning bush revelation.

What remains unresolved

Does this mean I now have all the answers? No. In some ways I have fewer than I once did.

I still wrestle with suffering, though I have gained some insight into it. I still wonder how a non-controlling God acts within creation, which leaves miracles, healing and prayer as open questions. About what lies beyond death I still hope more than I know: can human freedom resist divine love for ever, or does Love win?

And I still believe our theological statements should end with a comma rather than a full stop, leaving us open to further truth, correction, love and surprise from God.

Perhaps that is among the greatest gifts grief has given me: the humility to accept that I am loved and accepted just as I am. I no longer need to explain everything. I only need to remain faithful to the light I have been given. My faith has become simpler – and, I like to think, deeper and more real.

Conclusion

When I look back over my life, and especially the last seven years, what I see is a change in the image of God that has captured my heart. I have travelled from a God whose defining characteristic was power to one whose defining characteristic is unconditional, self-giving love: from certainty to trust, from answers to mystery, from defending God to following Christ.

My spiritual biography remains unfinished. There are still questions, and there is still mystery beyond the horizon. But faith, I have discovered, was never about possessing certainty. It is about learning, day by day, to trust the One whose love was revealed to us on a Cross.

And that, perhaps, is enough.

I will leave the last word to one of my favourite poets, Emily Dickinson, writing to her cousins in 1882 following the death of her mother:

We don't know where she is, though so many tell us.

I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker – that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is silence.

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