

Endless Beginnings

Faith is not a thing which one “loses”; we merely cease to shape our lives by it.

▶ GEORGES BERNANOS

Some thirty years ago, I read a small book by Teilhard de Chardin called *How I Believe*. I remember being in shock when I read this admission from Chardin: “Certain though I am—and ever more certain—that I must press on in life as though Christ awaited me at the term of the universe, at the same time I feel no special assurance of the existence of Christ....As much as anyone, I imagine, I walk in the shadows of faith.”

“In the shadows of faith!” How those words struck me. They expressed exactly where I so often found myself, not in the noon-day sun of faith but in the shadows. I had been through a divorce, and I was raising and supporting my six children as a single parent. True, I would say I was not really a parent alone because I believed the Lord God was my partner and would not abandon me. But sometimes, when my emotions would get more dominant than my reasoning, I would feel totally alone.

My ex-husband had always taken long vacations by himself, telling me that the care and feeding of the children was my problem, not his, and sometimes I would sarcastically feel that my Godly partner was doing the same thing! But then God always had a way of putting me soundly in my place, letting me know he had not abandoned me at all. At these times my faith would break out of the shadows and I would know again, as Tolstoy put it, that “Faith is the force whereby we live.”

I was asked once to give a keynote address on the topic “the faith journey.” This stopped me in my tracks. That was it: we really are on a journey when it comes to faith. And this journey comes complete with detours and potholes, danger from others, narrow turns, winding roads, missing signs, and deceptive billboards along the way. We also make a lot of stops, requiring new starts if we are going to get back on this important journey. It became clear to me that not only I but most people get lost sometimes along this faith journey. And when this happens, all we can do—unless we choose to give up our faith—is begin again.

I started to liken these endless beginnings to my jumpy starts and stops each spring when I would get an annual burst of yearning to get my dormant muscles into shape. Every form of exercise would have great appeal for me and my fantasies would begin. I could see myself jogging, walking two miles a day, skipping rope every morning, and getting on with yoga exercises. But my planned spring ritual would always fail, and it was not too difficult to figure out why. It was because my scenario was unrealistic. The one good thing that always came out of this process was that I would try again regularly to get into some kind of fitness training. I called myself a “marathon beginner.”

When I considered my new beginnings each year for a personal spring shape-up, I would always find a corollary on the spiritual level. I had to admit that I was a marathon beginner on that level too. (Comparing my spiritual progress with my physical training was not an original thought on my part. I stole it from Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, who wrote a program called the Spiritual Exercises to help people on the journey to God.)

I remember confiding my miserable failures at shaping-up, both physically and spiritually, to a priest. He surprised me by confiding that he, too, had never gotten past the “warm-up” stage in following the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, which he described as the saint’s training manual for making it successfully to “the better world.” He pointed out, however, that he never rested on his failures, but always picked up and began again. He attributed this to, “in a word, my dear, faith.”

As I grew older and became more aware of the faults and limitations in myself and in my world, I often remembered his use of the warm-up metaphor. It made me less self-deprecating when I could admit that I can at least keep myself at the warm-up stage in my training for heaven.

This revelation unfolded slowly, and was something of a shock to me. In my very young days, before I knew anything about the obstacles I would meet on my faith journey, I had set out to be a spiritual Olympic athlete. I determined that I would never choose money over principles, lash out at my children in anger, give in to temptation, be vain about my appearance, say no to those who needed me, and on and on. Needless to say, my record here has been one of regularly failing but beginning again.

As the years pass, the realization of imperfections in me and in the world have become clearer. Like the earth, I have my dry spells and my wet ones, my cold spells and my warm ones, my verdant times and withered ones, my growing seasons and harvests, my hurricanes and tempests, my dark nights and my days in the sun. I like to have my bed warmed by an electric blanket, discuss poverty over a full meal, sleep when I am tired, and read under the sun with a cool drink by my side. Still, I try to make people around me comfortable, recognizing the fun and absurdity in human existence, laughing with people, loving and praying with them—doing all of this while lightly grasping the goods of the earth in one hand and tightly grasping God’s hand with the other. And sadly, I still falter, because neither I nor anyone else on the faith journey “has it made.” We all fail; we all have to begin again.

Even after all these years, I am still in training, still doing warm-

ups, tripping over reality, stumbling into human weakness, breaking down into selfishness, losing my grip now and then on what this life is all about. Yet I have not given up. I fail and get up and try again. I am a marathon beginner, still in the race. And this, I have come to understand, is the bottom line of faith—to never say, I give up, I’ve had enough, I can’t take it, I can’t make it.

God’s VIPs

It is not hard to understand why we are always in danger of dropping out of the race. Our God can be confusing. God’s ways are not such that we never again have to wonder who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. The faith journey does not have road maps, only a kind of wireless messaging that sometimes sounds like a lot of static. Our challenge is well stated by the great philosopher and writer Malcolm Muggeridge, a convert to the Catholic faith, who said: “Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message.” Unfortunately, the message often gets blocked because we lose touch with our own importance, and this makes it hard to believe God wants to communicate with us.

Some twenty years ago, I was reminded what each of us means to God. At that point in my life, I felt my work and my parenting defined me, not my inheritance as God’s child. One Sunday morning, I happened to catch a television program on problems facing the Catholic Church. The late Bishop Francis Mugavero of Brooklyn was answering questions about how church teachings were being confronted by the difficult issues of birth control, married clergy, women priests, gay Catholics, and remarried and divorced Catholics. In all his answers, this truly saintly man managed to inject a firm, loving, pastoral comment. Bishop Mugavero said that no matter what questions or difficulties come up, we were still talking about the very human people who make up the Church. He explained that he always emphasized to all his people, “In the eyes of God, everyone is a VIP.”

The idea that each one of us is a Very Important Person to God was not original or new even back then. Yet when the Bishop spoke

these words I felt as if I was hearing something terribly important for the first time. After several days of reflecting on his comment, I understood why I had been so affected by his statement. I had simply not thought of my individual importance to God for a long time. Frankly, I believe few of us give much thought to this.

Most of what we hear and do is not geared toward making us conscious of our individual importance and divine origin. Our culture, our world, our society has come to be characterized by bigness, speed, power. We can feel a bit like Lilliputians in a gigantic whirl where almost everything is spoken of in big numbers. Most of the time we appear to be only a small part of a moving whole, with the success of the big institution, the big industry, the big company the all important goal.

The bigger our world and our frame of reference, the more we appear to diminish. We become small, and in our time, being small is easily equated with insignificance. How can we, the small ones, be important when everything around us sends out the disturbing message that when you talk billions, you are also talking obsolescence and expendability? Here's an example: people today are not fired, as it was formerly called, but downsized. What a terrible word to apply to human beings, more proof we live in a world that shrinks the less "useful" to an ever smaller size.

When Bishop Mugavero said "In the eyes of God, everyone is a VIP," he turned me on. It was exactly what I needed to hear that day, that small is potent and is God's way of confounding the big and the mighty. We have divine evidence of this. There is the visible proof of our uniqueness in our faces, our personalities, our voices, our expression of thoughts. Our fingerprints are an extraordinary, personal signature, duplicated by no other living person. Tinier yet are the genes in our cells which program each of us to be absolutely different from every other living creature. To confound the mighty even further, God has created the mysterious microscopic world where, if left uncontrolled, single-celled creatures could fell nations by disease; where particles of atoms, seen only by the most perfected microscopes, contain secrets of the physical creation of the universe and of energy itself.

When you think of it, God really went overboard in giving us the message that small is potent. He knew, no doubt, that as the world grew into a giant, individuals could easily get lost in the bigness. Thus, God put in some controls to remind us that importance has nothing to do with size. The world may engulf us with its enormity and make us feel insignificant; but neither Madison Avenue nor Congress nor kings and sheiks can give us fingerprints. These come from God and are only one reminder that we are each one of a kind, so important that we rate this stamp of uniqueness.

Bishop Mugavero gave me an incredible gift that Sunday morning, one which made me stop in my busy tracks and get back on to my faith journey. With this joyful beginning I sang about how the world may make bigger and better technologies and institutions, but only God creates VIPs.

Yet we can't always find something inspiring like this to keep us solidly moving ahead on our faith journey. So many things can sidetrack us. One especially is the failure to see the riches God has given us and to trust that he made us to one day populate heaven. Nathaniel Hawthorne wanted us to see that "Our Creator would never have made such lovely days and have given us the deep hearts to enjoy them, above and beyond all thought, unless we were meant to be immortal."

Detours ahead

A bad trap to fall into is the "poor me" syndrome, where we fall off the faith journey and nurture self-pity like a second skin. Self-pity can happen to all of us now and then. Something triggers a disturbance inside us and all of a sudden we find ourselves concentrating on our deprivations. We mourn for what we don't have or for what we have lost, instead of exalting in what we do have.

Basic to our nature as human beings is the desire not just to have, but to have more. And so some people are chronic complainers, mired in self-pity, because they do not have what they think is enough. They suffer from a constant condition of subjective poverty. No one denies that objective poverty exists, where people have no shoes or running water, where they have shabby homes, scant

food, poor education, and no health care. But subjective poverty is different. It is relative. It means feeling poor in relationship to others, feeling deprived because we don't have what someone else has, be it money, fame, good looks or good health.

We are poor proportionate to our expectation of what we think we should have, expectations which are determined by what is available to or possessed by others and not ourselves. When we concentrate on what we perceive are our deprivations, and don't bounce back to a balanced position by looking at all we have, then we can fall into self-pity, a hideous trap. I recall what Francis de Sales wrote, that the truly rich person is the one who is content with his possessions, not looking over his shoulder to see what other persons have and making comparisons.

Why is it so important not to fall into self-pity? That's easy to figure out. If we can't realize how rich we are simply because we are God's VIPs, we will have trouble staying on the faith journey because we are too busy focusing on ourselves.

Another detour that is all too common on our faith journey comes with setbacks, the times when the smooth ride gets bumpy or downright destructive, when our hopeful expectations get dashed to pieces. Once in a while we may have a week that makes us wonder if there is something to the belief that the stars temporarily rough us up!

I have had many of those weeks. Case in point: some years back, I attended a memorial service for a dear friend who had died at the age of ninety-two. After the service, I was the last one to leave the assembly hall. When I got to the parking lot, I found the rear of my car badly damaged. It was a classic case of hit-and-run. I knew right then and there that for the next few days I would be spending a lot of time getting the car repaired. But that was just the beginning of the week's problems.

In my job as executive editor of a weekly newspaper, I had been putting a lot of energy into hiring an assistant. The leading candidate for the job was a woman I knew to be a most capable newswoman. I made her a good offer, but to my dismay, she declined. I was back to square one in my search for a good work-

er. Then, to make matters worse, a coworker came back from vacation on crutches! I ended up working almost double time because with his injury, he couldn't put in the required hours.

One day during this dreadful week, in a frenzy over pressures to meet deadline, I ran out at lunchtime through pouring rain to grab a bite to eat. The driveway was wet and slippery. Being distracted and in a hurry, I slipped and fell, badly hurting my knees.

Well, the week went on like that. A coworker who was into astrology told me something about Pluto entering one of my houses—whatever that means. She warned me I would be in for a rough ride for the next three months. Thanks a lot. "Find a solid stake and hang on to it," she advised. I was happy that I wasn't a believer in Pluto's power.

Since I have always tried to rely on Christ-centered assistance to help me deal with trouble, I put aside the "bad stars" theory and uttered my usual prayer: I believe, Lord, but help my unbelief. Soon after, I started to see things in a different light. I realized that while it is normal to be upset over misfortune, sometimes we exaggerate our losses because they have messed up our expectations. For example, I had the expectation that I would leave the memorial service and have a peaceful, productive day; that the woman I liked would take the job I offered and make my life easier; that my coworker would come back from vacation refreshed and raring to go, not laid up with crutches; that I would go out and get lunch, not injured knees.

Most of us spend a fair amount of time and effort in planning our lives. We go about this with a kind of certainty that if step one is done, step two will follow. And if we plot or design a set of directions, our life will unfold neatly with the loose ends fitting into slots A and B. To convince us further that planning will make our lives go smoothly, we get advice from feel-good writers who challenge us to "take charge of your life" and "pull your own strings."

Yet we know that for all our planning, more segments of our lives go awry than we would like. The "best laid plans of mice and men" often get blitzed by happenings beyond our control—witness my very bad week. That is not to say it doesn't make sense to

plan. Of course it does. It is both sensible and essential. But our expectations should include flexibility, tolerance, and adaptability for the inevitable times when rain falls on our parade. If we stay on the faith journey, the patience and the blueprints for mapping out our lives are there to discover in the life and words of Jesus.

Signs and scenery

There is always beautiful scenery along the faith journey, though sometimes we are so busy looking the other way that we fail to notice it. Recently, I was remembering some of the wonderful times when something I experienced made my faith soar like a crescendo in a great piece of music.

One of these touching moments happened years ago when my daughter Margee, then four years old, was very sick with a fever. My son Frank, who was two and a half, was quite upset that his sister couldn't play with him. I explained that she was sick, which made it hard for her to have the energy for play, hoping he could understand this. The next thing I saw gripped my heart. Frank had gone to his bedroom and gotten his blanket, the one he was so attached to that he wouldn't even surrender it to the washing machine. He went to his sister and placed his blanket over her, and I heard him say, "Now Margee, you'll get better." Did I have to wonder who had given this child the grace to have such empathy for his sister that he would share with her the one thing that sometimes seemed to be his very lifeline? Oh no. This was one of the times when God was very near, and my faith got an energy boost.

One of my grandchildren, Sophia, gave me another great lesson in faith. When she was six, Sophia asked her mother an interesting question. She wanted to know if she had been at her mother and father's wedding. My daughter Mary smiled and said, "No, Sophia. You weren't born yet." Sophia was quiet for a moment, then firmly corrected her mother. "Yes I was," she said. "I just hadn't shown up yet." Theologians tell us we have existed from all eternity in the mind of God. Sophia, of course, hadn't consulted with any of them. I think she had her own hotline to the Holy Spirit, and she sure revved up my faith that day.

I saw God quite clearly in a very unexpected place, on a bus in New York City, a place that has a reputation for being rough, crime-ridden, and uncaring. But this day, I saw a slice of life that made me believe goodness is stronger than meanness in people. It started when a physically disabled passenger got up to get off at his stop and dropped his transfer. With great difficulty, he tried to bend to pick it up. Immediately, three people stooped to help. The man managed a smile which said thank you.

On this same bus ride, I noticed an old woman sitting across from me who looked very grouchy. A smile never crossed her face. But when she got up to leave, she handed the bus driver a piece of candy. She told him she had heard him coughing and wanted to give him something to help his throat. I felt humbled. I hadn't even noticed the driver was coughing, but the woman I thought looked grouchy had noticed. She gave me a lesson in kindness.

Then a woman got on the bus and seated herself next to me. She started talking, saying she had just turned eighty, and that she was "a miracle." I thought, "Oh boy, I've got a live one here." How arrogant we can be sometimes. She went on to tell me that she had come to New York from Puerto Rico some forty years ago and had had a very rough life. She had nearly died from cancer, but her prayers and faith had saved her. By now I was listening. She gave me good advice about staying healthy and happy. Her formula: eat right, exercise, never give up, love other people, and stay faithful to God.

I wasn't just on a bus that day. I was on my faith journey, and had learned much about how we can see a world full of faith in action—if only we open our eyes and our hearts.

Sometimes the simpler the story, the greater the impact. I once saw a man and his wife in a garden where there were blueberry bushes. His wife was sitting on a bench while he picked berries. I watched as he separated the berries, all the very plump, ripe, sweetest ones going into one bowl, and the small ones in another. He brought the first bowl to his wife, and I'll never forget how he smiled at her, saying "These are the sweetest ones." He sat and ate the small ones. It was a simple deed of love but monumental, for this man had brought God into the garden.

I found another simple story that made me see God in a letter written by Walter Griffiths to the *Long Island Catholic* newspaper. Griffiths told of how he was doing some cast fishing one day. Next to him was a younger man, also cast fishing, whose line caught onto a large swan. The bird was upside down and clearly very frightened. The young man jumped off the dock into about three feet of water and started to reel in the swan. "He proceeded to gently pat the swan in the area of its head....To my surprise, the bird completely calmed down. This was really something to witness," wrote Mr. Griffiths. He continued,

The man very methodically started to unwind the line while very gently talking and patting the bird. At the same time that the bird was freed, his tail was wagging. The young man was coming back to the dock when he turned around, went back to the bird, and whispered a few words and a few more pats to insure confidence....If the man had been wearing a white robe I would have thought it was God on the beach...for he did perform in God's light and Goodness.

Griffiths then asks, "Do you see God and goodness in people?" That is a question we should always ask ourselves. We might be surprised at how often the answer would be "yes." The world is full of people who are, as Fr. Robert Barron expresses it, "God's dialogue partners—participating in his work of creation" to bring to light how "God passionately loves the world that flows from him." We see faith every time we encounter God's goodness in others, the sign of a mysterious promise and power beyond us. These signs are given us, I believe, to help assure us that the anguish and sorrows which seem built into life are, in the long run, incidental to the perfect joy set aside for us and for which we were made.

Yet the question always comes back: why do bad things happen?—with an accent on "why?" Books have been written to help us understand this question, usually pointing out that this is not God's doing but simply the way things are in life. As for why God allows this, I don't have precise answers. I like to quote what a preacher named Joseph Hall once said: "I leave God's secrets to

himself. It is happy for me that he makes me one of his court and not of his council."

One thing I have learned is that you cannot be faint of heart on the faith journey. You have to be passionate; the lukewarm never make it. You need soul and muscle strength to keep getting up and starting again when you hit the plaguing doubts. You need a passionate yearning to see the fun, the beauty, and the joy that are always there along the way.

There is a hunger in the human heart and spirit that cannot be filled by the products, the toys, the talk of this world. No matter how much we fight it, unless a person has hardened his or her heart into rock, the yearning periodically wells in us for something larger than ourselves—for a life made whole. This is the goal of faith. Alfred Lord Tennyson expressed that wholeness with these words:

Whatever ways my days decline
I felt and feel, though left alone
His being working in mine own,
The footsteps of his life in mine.

Looking back over decades of setbacks along my faith journey, followed by endless beginnings, I know now that it shouldn't take a genius to figure out why we hit the bumps and pits along the way. If everything were easy, we would never get to find out what powers we have or learn how to use them. If we never got uncomfortable, we would probably never ask for God, question what life means, or yearn for paradise. Setbacks can bear a gift for us. They can get us moving out of a comfort zone that would keep us locked into an ultimately deadly immaturity, blocking our connection to the God who made us VIPs.