

“All speech is labored. There is nothing one can say....There is nothing new under the sun.”

---Ecclesiastes

“Read a little. Meditate more. Think of God always.” ---Parhamansa Yogananda

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In 1984, I was voted “Most Unforgettable” by my graduating high school class located in Pittsford, NY a rather affluent suburb of Rochester. The town was full of attitude, lacking in kindness. 34 years later I am not so sure I see this superlative as a compliment, but rather as an offhanded way of pointing out my “otherness” and ushering me to the margins, the edges, to the fringe. By the age of 17 I was being clearly directed by my peers and elders alike to what St. Paul called “the ends of the Earth.” In retrospect, I can see how I earned the title and the social position by becoming an active alcoholic at age 14 and a chain-smoking, wise-cracking outlaw philosopher following my sister's suicide in 1980. I was 13 years old when she died. Un-grieved grief calloused my heart and froze my soul into what could at best be called the bleakest and most extreme agnosticism if not outright cynical atheism.

Despite excellent academic standing, I had no desire to attend university. Before setting foot on any campus, I had dubbed universities in general as “brick and mortar diploma mills,” and most adults as “banal caricatures of themselves.” A hardcore, if a bit obsessed, Bruce Springsteen fan since age 12, I had my heart set on working at an only dreamed-of diner somewhere in Oklahoma waiting tables and playing guitar in a white-washed railroad shack. This was a path that had grit. It had soul. It had heart. I chickened out in the end, and headed to the University at Albany where I majored in alcoholism and minored in general malaise and dissidence. I was generally clueless about life in general, more so than the average twenty-something and a strident loner to boot. My stance as an outsider, coupled by a less than despairing outlook deepened and led me to a suicide attempt in February of my senior year,

although my name appeared steadily on the Dean's list and my involvement in committees, clubs and the campus paper were extensive. Albany, New York is a city self-designated as a closet of sorts--- one in which I stored my skeletons and a very few dusty gems of hard-earned and easily-lost wisdom. It is a closet in which I hid and rattled until 'coming out' in 2014 when I married Amy Chaney in a feverish elopement in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Due to her patience and love, and a shared faith in love and mercy, we are still married today and each morning we convene for coffee, conversation and meditation.

Ironically, the 1988 suicide attempt (my one and only) was accompanied by my first palpable spiritual experience (one of many.) An unusual and primary encounter with the Divine, both in timing and in nature. Voices were heard; visions were beheld. Most distinctly, I recall a spark of blue light emanating from my self-inflicted wounds, scars of which I wear as a sort of spiritual triptych to this day. The pain that initiates such self-destruction is enormous, and the burdensome sense of guilt left in its wake is haunting and chilling. The amount of effort it took to rebuild the trust of others and myself was Herculean. As an attempt survivor, and the survivor of two familial suicides (both gunshot wounds to the head) I have had the humble opportunity to minister to and to sponsor others in similar dire straits and depths of unspeakable grief and confusion. From survivor to thriver. From disaster victim to wellness volunteer. Led by the Holy Spirit from dawn to dusk on a day by day basis, I try to lay my cards down slowly, plaything them as they are dealt. "Not so fast" is a tag of mine these days.

At this point, it is critical to refer to the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. I sobered up in AA in 1996, and remain sober to this day. The eight intervening years between the attempt and sobriety were an extended "dark night of the soul," during which there were encounters of God and some marrow-deep reckonings that eventually led me to what I pray is permanent sobriety and recovery. After nine years of walking through the revolving doors of multiple mental institutions and homeless shelters, I have not reentered them since my sobriety date and pray that I never darken their

doorways again, although I realize that is not guaranteed.

I took my first step in Alcoholics Anonymous in a bar in the North Country of New York State in a Holiday Inn in Ogdensburg, NY. I was sharing a bottle of tequila with yet another stranger, a fellow barfly; someone who drank just like me. He made a toast, saying, "Here's from one alcoholic to another." Blam! A moment of clarity within my blurred consciousness bolted me into 20/20 drunken vision. I thought, "Wow, I'm an alcoholic just like my dad." Waking up the next morning, I was very, very hungover, and through the mental fog the thought of suicide arose sharply, quickly replaced by a second thought---of AA and of hope. (The Big Book had been nestled between the DSM-V and "Man and His Symbols" on a beloved psychiatrist's shelf many years earlier.) In a way, the man at the bar who shared his tequila with me was my first sponsor! The face of God can appear in the strangest places if you look at it right.

For example, an AA friend, Mark M. requested that I bring communion to him to share together just before an AA meeting on Easter Sunday as he was unable to attend Mass that day. When I arrived, standing with him was our pal, "Graveyard Tom," who had the name because he slept in the cemetery, unable to stay sober longer than a few days. I "just happened" to have three communion wafers with me instead of the two Father thought he'd given me. I shared with Mark; Mark shared with me, and when Graveyard Tom held up the host, looked in my eyes and said, "Body of Christ, Karen," the tears rolled down my cheeks, as they do writing this now.

Although my spirituality has a powerful mystical side to it (however reluctant I may be to claim and cultivate that) I would have perished long ago without the love of my fellows in AA and my fellow travelers on the spiritual path, many of whom I have known for twenty or thirty years. Many of them were also psychiatrists, therapists, nurses, police officers, counselors and former patients. The relational aspect of the spiritual life has been the most difficult for me as a class-A isolator, a social and emotional anorexic and a mini-monk without a monastery. "When the student is ready the teacher

appears.” But as my dear friend Lance Pigeon says, “You are like reconstituted toast, Karen. You've been burned too many times.” Sometimes a good teacher is hard to find.

Isha Das (Craig Bullock) was my first spiritual director. He is the director of the Assisi Institute in Rochester, NY and he initiated me into the path of Kriya Yoga on February 9, 2014. Kriya Yoga is a meditative path of Raja Yoga brought to the West by the guru Parhamansa Yogananda and summons one within, to the Interior Life in order to detect the Presence of God. Yogananda's book “Autobiography of a Yogi” is a spiritual classic, and it is said that one receives Yogananda's blessing simply by reading it. Isha Das has taught me much about patience, containment and commitment and continues to inspire me today. He has instructed many and brought many to God. He is, to me, a modern day saint, a householder on the Path of Light.

I would have to say that my current spiritual director, Steve Moore (a Haden alum), has sort of “gotten me” better than anyone else. He is a former Jesuit priest, currently an Episcopal priest in Marcellus, NY and Doctor of Psychology at the state hospital in Syracuse. He is pursuing a doctorate at my alma mater, Colgate Divinity School in Rochester. According to Steve, I am “spiritually finished,” a moniker I at first resisted. The day he offered me this as a spiritual outpost on my journey, it felt as if I'd received an ordination of sorts, and he explained this being 'spiritually finished' as a term the Jesuits use before formal ordination, the conviction that the journey is always “between you and God.” He tells me that as directors we “swim in troubled waters,” and counsels me to remain calm and heart-centered. I have been an ardent seeker on the spiritual path for many, many years. Steve is helping me to see the worth in this effort and my worthiness as a seeker with gifts the world can use.

I am praying to be of service in the world of recovery. I love working with other alcoholics and I think I have a gift for it. In Appendix II of the Big Book of AA, there is a difference drawn between a spiritual experience and a spiritual awakening. A spiritual awakening is more of a dawning, a gentle

and gradual realization of Divine Presence in one's life or circumstance. A spiritual experience is frequently of the “bright light” variety—a flash of lightning, brief and bright and thunderous. Divine Light was actually my first “Higher Power.” Long before I entered AA or even knew I was an alcoholic, I had spiritual experiences in which light took on a cosmic, universal and divine proportion for me with scientific as well as spiritual relevance. From quanta to consciousness, Divine Light has resurfaced again and again metaphorically, poetically and palpably to signify the presence of a Living God personal to me and universal among us.

In addition to Light, Holy Sound (and its absence) has also been a facet of God for me. My first call was to music. As a young pianist, I accompanied our school choruses, competed at the Eastman School of Music and earned the PTA Award for Musical Accomplishment in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I can easily say that music has been a daily staple for my entire adult life. Chanting the psalms at the Abbey of the Genesee, performing satsang with my yoga community at the Assisi Institute, reading my own poetry and that of others and enjoying extended periods of inner and outer silence in meditation and contemplation are all methods and means by which I am enabled to hear whispers from the Eternal Choir. (Bruce Springsteen still makes the grade, though---every time! And his work has deepened and ripened over time into spiritual crooning and gospel rockers.)

My love of language, English and French; Latin and Greek, points to a relationship with Sound and its absence, which have made my own breath a creative medium for me. I have often preached that God is as close to us as our own breath, and I have often been fascinated by the translation of 'spiritus' as breath or wind. Even while reading poetry or psalms, the Gospels or any sacred scripture silently to myself I sense the quiet muscle movements in chest, mouth, larynx and throat as expressions of God's Word moving through me somatically. I've never mastered the art and craft of Lectio Divina, but have always been drawn to its mystique and promise. Also, I am currently in the process of

smashing a self- and societally-created myth of the “starving artist.” Theo-poetics and Taize' worship have always drawn me in, and almost all of my best work has flown through me from the Unknown Realms.

My encounters with God have not always been so singular or so esoteric. Some were liturgical and communal. As an infant, I was never baptized, although my three of my older siblings received a baptism in the Presbyterian Church. When my family was vacationing with our pastor, Reverend Higgins and his family in Boothbay, Maine I was told of this oversight. I was nine years old and was determined that I would indeed be baptized. When I was 38 years old and eight years sober I received a Protestant baptism at a charismatic Catholic church in Rochester, NY called Spiritus Christi. Still in existence, Spiritus Christi has since the 1990s welcomed female priests, honored same sex unions and drew national attention as a church in schism from Rome. A renegade priest from that parish, and a dear friend, Fr. Jim Callan urged me to pursue the spiritual path as a 'creative contemplative.' Spiritus Christi was a perfect venue for baptism for someone named “Most Unforgettable” by their senior class! As a seminarian, after deep discernment and a very dark night of the soul during the week of Lent in 2007, I made the decision to convert to Roman Catholicism to deepen my connection with Christ and all of the saints and martyrs and to join the global Church. I also felt that Spiritus Christi had become too much of a 'cult of personality,' although the staff and parish were my first church family, and I owe them a great deal of love and respect. I try to pass along the hospitality, generosity and spirit of inclusivity they offered me as an outsider coming in from the cold. The parable of the Prodigal comes to mind here. Everyone was always welcome at Spiritus Christi, even a former atheistic heretic such as myself.

Hailing from Pittsford, NY the elitist suburb in which I found myself marginalized at such an early age, I was shocked to find myself in 1989 (literally and figuratively) homeless and shoeless on the streets of Newark, NJ and later New York City. At one point, leaving Newark on a PATH

train, I had an experience like passing through a prismatic veil into a dark, new world I never knew existed and never want to visit again. Having quietly and neatly excused myself from society and social demands, I slipped in between angels and demons alike and discovered not only the sometimes dubious kindness of strangers, but also the mercy and grace of God.. A feeling had been haunting me for years that there was more to life than the 9-5 grind, raising kids I did not want, or pursuing education for the too-educated, hiding out in the paper chase. So, I lit out for the territories,, as Twain once penned. Crossing into the time zone of homelessness one year and three months to the day after the attempted suicide was when I was really cornered, forced into considering something greater than myself as a Director, a Protector, a Savior. I was willing to see the Light.

I had been without shelter, without a mailing address in New York City for several weeks in May/June of 1989 when from nowhere I heard a voice chiming in my head. First time resonance. A mantra downloaded from the Divine Cloud. Simple enough: "Paul Bales. Corinth, Vermont." Repetitive, musical, comforting. So the hitchhiking began. And so did a sort of transcendent bliss. A sort of existential freedom I had been craving for decades.

I had been preoccupied with hitchhiking for a few weeks prior to leaving Albany for Newark seeking counsel from another misguided friend. "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," a book of science fiction by Douglas Adams (which I've never read, except for the first page which contains phone numbers of top agencies like the CIA, the FBI, the White House, the Vatican.) I used the phone numbers later, defiantly and much to my detriment. Also inspiring was "The Pros and Cons of Hitchhiking." an album by Roger Waters. So who was Paul Bales? Why Corinth, Vermont? If you're not willing to be a little deviant, a little creative, its hard to survive sometimes.

Paul Bales was a gentleman, a word used very intentionally, whom I met at a party earlier that year in Albany. I made a conscious decision to trust him, so when his name sang its way into my consciousness and I was in a jam up, I listened...and I followed. I had trusted him because he had two

dogs he took very good care of and because he had lived all of the Lower 48 in his white VW van, which he repaired himself as needed. Totally off the grid. I began hitchhiking to Corinth, Vermont. No phone number. No address. After 4 days with my thumb extended and more than one possibility of returning to Albany, I found myself on the cusp of transformation. I was willing to become my true self. I was willing to be free.

I finally found Corinth –as well as the gifts of faith, hope, grace and an innate gift of spiritual healing and mystical connection. When I arrived at Corinth, I queried at the post office about Paul. Yes, they did indeed know him. His address, however was not a matter of public record. Lots of hills in Vermont, so I picked one and started climbing. Arriving at the top I found a small and memorable cabin with a bright red door. (The same door about which I had dreamed exactly a week before leaving Albany.) I did not knock. I simply opened the door and there was Paul Bales sitting in an old, overstuffed armchair reading “A Course in Miracles.” I don't know who was more surprised. My dingy “false self” surfaced and began evaporating in that moment.

Paul told me later in the week that “A Course in Miracles” was the only book I'd ever really need to read to find God. “A Course in Miracles” is a psycho-spiritual bible of the 'New Age,' a volume allegedly channelled through a Jewish psychiatrist in the Voice and words of the Holy Spirit. Odd and unbelievable as this may sound, the Course (a fond name for the book) guided me to a higher metaphysical plane over a few years of on-and-off study, most notably under the guidance of Robert Perry, a Course scholar and philosopher of world renown. My main takeaway as a Course student was the need for universal love and forgiveness and the shattering of some illusory aspects of reality. The Course is a regular staple at New Thought churches such as Unity, of which I was a member for a brief time with my spouse.

It is clear that my spiritual life has been broad and varied, as have the relationships within it, both with institutions and individuals. A few of these relationships were more helpful, formative and

memorable than the others. As a sponsor, I have had the privilege of leading more than twenty men and women through the Twelve Steps of AA and other fellowships like it, and as a sponsee I have been humbled by the wisdom of those coming before me on this rich path.

At present, I am recovering from a traumatic brain injury acquired in a series of accidents in 2017. These accidents sort of “cracked open my consciousness,” and gave me plenty of time to dedicate to prayer, meditation and study and to approach God (and receive Him) in a new Way. This was a turning point for me, and I surrendered my will to the care of God at a level deeper than ever before. I dedicated my entire morning to prayer---aligned with two major prayer ministries. The Circle of Atonement was one, and the Ananda Prayer ministry was the other. The first rooted in the Course, the second in Kriya Yoga. I garnered prayer requests from all over the world. The Divine Blessing contained within the nuances of the concussion lingers today, as though the subtleties of Spirit snuck into my body, mind and soul without my knowing, but with a hearty welcome. Divine Mother continues to hold me in a loving and safe embrace, one breath at a time.

This self-established prayer ministry returned me to my practice of spiritual healing, largely rooted in Reiki (I am a certified Reiki Master Teacher) and gifts of intuition and Jungian Tarot divination; mediumship and other forms of “reading,” or “channeling.” As I write this, I am more certain than ever that God is using me in this lifetime to be part of a greater solution, that all I have been through is being “composted” into usable material in the form of love and healing and hope. “The channel is blessed by what passes through it,” as Yogananda was known to say.

I have been exposed to a variety of spiritual paths, religious institutions and philosophical and intellectual schools of thought throughout my life., both in seminary and through self-study. I am a spiritual polymath who is hard to pin down at times. My roots are firmly planted in Scripture and in the path of a neuro-creative Christian with an eye and ear for the contemplative, the natural, the mystical and the prophetic. My belief is in Emmanuel---God living and moving among us. As a

student of theology, my background and training are in Process and Catholic theologies. Because of my diverse interests, my creativity, and my tendency to isolate, as well as to wander, my practices have been on the monastic side and have been misunderstood at times as fear, rebellion arrogance or hostility.

One of the disciplines I hope to develop is to tap into the weekly Catholic lectionary and compose a homily of my own either weekly or bi-weekly. I'd like to post these homilies on You Tube and/or in a blog. As a gender-fluid woman married to another woman, my presence in the pulpit is less than welcome. I attend a Roman Catholic church in Syracuse, NY called All Saints Church (November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966 is my date of birth.) The priest at All Saints is an openly gay man and openly in recovery. Great church for an outlaw like me. Nonetheless, as Lance said so well: “reconstituted toast.” He also pointed out not long ago that God, like everything else in the world, has been co-opted by powers and dominions that most likely do not have my best interests at heart. Smile pretty. Watch your back.

I'm hoping that my experiences at the Haden Institute and my interactions with a trusted and trusting mentor will distill some of these “spirits” into a balm not-too-overpowering for directees, clients, colleagues and fellow seekers. The one belief—the only belief—that really holds all of this together for me is that nothing happens in God's world by mistake. Nothing. And that when I am sincere about being of maximum service to God and to my fellow travelers, only good can come to pass.