



## Part Two

# Being Real About Life

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The popular wisdom is that the words “[holiness]” and “realism” don’t go together. Holy people, like poets, are dreamy and sentimental. Never get places on time.... Holy people are not of this world. [They are not real about life]. Their mind is always on higher things, including perhaps the old pie in the sky. ...

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My goal today is to overturn [these] false notions of holiness, for I believe that it surfaces in human beings precisely when we are being most realistic, most grounded, most down to earth. Holiness is never fussy or sentimental. Neither is a good poem; it’s ultimate realism. My evidence for this belief is that holiness endures, persistent as a weed through the depredations of all the ages, throughout all the terrors that we human beings can inflict on each other and have inflicted over our history on this earth. Holiness prevails, and poetry. Religion and poetry are among the most ancient of human activities, predating even agriculture. And battered as they are today by secular indifference or co-optation ... by legalism, fundamentalism, or terrorism, by right-thinking ideologies, [or] tyrants; religion and poetry are with us still, still witnessing to hope at the dawn of the 21st century. Both holiness and poetry [may seem] anachronistic, ... [but they are] peculiar forces with a life of their own in the face of the dog-eat-dog world we know too well, and as necessary as breath, giving us the hope that evil does not have the last word. ...

Featured  
Speakers  
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[Another] point about holy realism is that it is grounded in the present, in the real world, and especially not in our heads. We have in our society so many temptations to live in our heads. We’re constantly invited to live our lives through the carefully packaged lives of celebrities, even people who are famous only for performing some infamously stupid or vulgar act. We might imagine ourselves in the glossy magazine ads. Our lives would be centered on a purse or a pair of sandals. We see a dress in a store window lit as if it were an object of devotion in a church. Holy realism rejects these false images of the world and human life, and it reminds us of who we really are. ...

I believe that we need poets ... and we need religion to keep bringing us to our senses. I recently read a fine book by Garrett Keiser entitled *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin*, in which he suggests that the recent phenomenon of road rage in America is a good example of anger that results from our living in our heads, from our exaggerated subjectivity. Like many forms of quick trigger anger, road rage is ultimately, as Keiser says, “a loss of reality. Both the perceived offense and the response to it are completely out of proportion.” It’s ultimate narcissism, just one example in our culture where we could all use a good dose of humility and to sort of adopt what I think of as the ultimate Benedictine attitude, to say, “Well, who am I? I’m a mere mortal, like the person who just cut me off in traffic.” ...

**"When life confronts us with our limits, those who have lived with limits all their lives instruct most profoundly."**

**Belden Lane,  
The Solace of  
Fierce  
Landscapes**

Holy realism asserts that life does matter, how we live it matters. It's not willing to accept ... that the endless daily drudgery is all there is to life. Holy realism takes a stand for awe and wonder and beauty even in the midst of ordinary daily activities. That is asceticism to me, I think. In a prose piece, [poet] Kate Daniels ... writes of a burgeoning poem that she was forced to set aside, in a typical day of teaching, and couldn't get back to [that] night because her children and her husband were coming home and had to be fed. "Like me," she wrote, "they are tired and over stimulated. The events of the day are clamoring inside them. The good events want to be shouted out, the bad see the inside or are precipitously acted out in ferocious sibling wars. We have all come home to each other to be healed and hailed, to be soothed as a victim, chastised if a perpetrator, and morally realigned. But we are so tired and we lash out in irritation, frustration, anger." That sounds very familiar to me. In the midst of chaos in her kitchen, the children doing homework are littering the floor with paper scraps, the dog overturning the garbage pail, Kate Daniels takes a stand. "Try as I may, and I do, I have a hard time browning the ground turkey I'm planning to mix with canned spaghetti sauce for the glory of God. I try to find the poetry that exists even here. I know that God is here but in the chaos and the noise, I can't seem to find Him."

Now this is a woman who can find God in the midst of changing a diaper, so we know she's morally realigned and very strong. But now in that kitchen she feels bereft of any consolation. And I connect with that very much. I don't have children, but I have been a caregiver for my husband for about three or four years. And so I really do understand that you sense that God is there but you really can't find God. ... But even the fact that Kate Daniels or I am aware of the absence of God is a form of holy realism. We can have faith and hope that there is something better than the ordinary pains and frustrations of life. Holy realism is grounded defiantly in the daily chores of life. ...

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Our culture, of course, is overloaded with data. It's wanting in meaning. It tempts us to indifference and unhealthy detachment. We don't really want to pursue even our evil thoughts or our good thoughts to find out where they could lead. We get shortchanged. The ancient monks spoke of the temptation of ... indifference, not caring, as being tempted to look outside of one's cell to see if the other monks were up to anything. Our modern day equivalent may be turning on CNN. But the temptation is the same. And the result is also the same, not caring, indifference. The holy realist is aware of this and knows all too well that temptation to indifference, but he or she resists, asserting that life does have meaning, life is worth caring about, and how we live it matters. ...

Holy realism knows that life is worth living in any season. It counters that silly T-shirt I sometimes see: "Life is a bitch and then you die." Holy realism knows that life is both gift and struggle, and then we die, each one of us. And we can't begin to imagine the good things that God has in store for us then.

--Kathleen Norris

"We're always trying to see clearly, because what happens in life has a direct effect on us. Our usual motivation is to suppress the suffering and uncertainty that permeate everything ... clearly seeing reality is the best way to overcome suffering."  
Sakyok Mipham Rinpoche  
Shambhala Sun

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### Being real about darkness and struggle

When my niece Christina was a toddler, her mother worked as a stockbroker and financial planner. My brother, Christina's father, would drive her to day care in the morning and her mother would pick her up after work. And every day she brought Christina an orange, peeled so that the child could eat it on the way home. One day Christina was busying herself by playing Mommy's office on the front porch ... of our house in Honolulu. And I asked her what her mother did at work. Without hesitation and with a conviction that I relish to this day, she looked up at me and said, "She makes oranges."

And that is what God does, I think, making oranges and wind and the ocean and green leaves and everything else that constitutes our earthly home. As we come to know this God who gives us so much, a God of limitless compassion, we can find great mercy even in the midst of lamentation. And ... that marvelous phrase that 'the world is new every morning,' that comes in the middle of a lamentation. It comes after great lament, in fact.

--Kathleen Norris

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Most of us arrive at a sense of self ... only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free "travel packages" sold by the tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage--"a transformative journey to a scared center" full of hardship,

darkness and peril.

In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost --challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for the true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks. Disabused of our illusions by much travel and travail, we awaken one day to find that the sacred center is here and now--in every moment of the journey, everywhere in the world around us, and deep in our hearts.

But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. Darkness is not the whole of the story-- every pilgrimage has passages of loveliness and joy--but it is the part of the story left untold. When we escape the darkness and stumble into light, it is tempting to tell others that our hope never flagged, to deny those long nights that we spent cowering in fear.

The experience of darkness has been essential to my coming into selfhood, and telling the truth about that fact helps me stay in the light. But I want to tell the truth as well: many young people today journey in the dark, as the young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our lives. When I was young, there were few elders who were willing to talk about the darkness; most of them pretended that success was all that they had known. As the darkness began to descend on me in my early twenties, I thought that I had developed a unique and terminal case of failure. I did not realize that I had merely embarked on a journey toward joining the human race. --*Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, (Somerset, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1999) 17-19.*

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Darkness is the winter of the soul, the time when it seems nothing is growing. But winter, we know, is the fallow time of year. Winter is the time when the earth renews itself. And so it is with struggle. Unbeknownst to us, struggle is the call and the signal that we are about to renew ourselves. Whether we want to or not. ...

... Struggle is what forces us to attend to the greater things in life, to begin again when life is at its barest for us, to take the seeds of the past and give them new growth.

--Joan Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003) 38-40.*

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The process of struggle is the process of the internal redefinition of the self. ... When our expectations run aground of our reality, we begin to rethink the meaning and shape of our lives. We begin to rethink not just our past decisions but our very selves. It is a slow but determining deconstruction of the self so that the real person can be reborn in us, beyond the expectations of others, even beyond our own previously unassailable assumptions. ...

Struggle is always an invitation to a new life that, the longer it is resisted, the longer we fail to become who we are really meant to be.

--Joan Chittister

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For the most part, we live our lives trying to avoid the wilderness. We know intuitively that the wilderness will not offer peace and gentleness. Instead it will offer truth we would rather not face. We know that the wilderness will not let us off the hook--we will need to face ourselves squarely. Rather than being stripped bare, being left defenseless, raw and vulnerable, we choose instead to fill our lives with everything that has the potential of making us dead in the midst of life. And what is most tragic is that, most often, we are completely unaware that this is what we are doing. We fill our lives with busyness--television, surfing the net, friendships, shopping, reading, sex, eating and drinking. These are not bad in themselves, but they have an underbelly. They too easily become the dull routine of our days, our weeks, our months, our years. And then we wonder why our spiritual life feels flat, why we lack hopefulness, why we sense a 'dry as cardboard' callous over our souls. We wonder why we have no real compelling story to tell others. We wonder why our faith doesn't seem to touch our daily lives, and why holiness seems distant, and even unwelcome. We wonder why there's a disconnect between what we say and what we do, what we believe, and how we behave, what we judge in others

### Questions to Ponder Alone

What is the capacity for evil within my own being?

What are the lies I tell myself about myself?

What are some of the darkneses of my life that have been stepping stones leading me toward the light?

Who are the enemies in my life and how can I befriend them without being abused by them?

and want forgiven in ourselves. We wonder why life seems so routine, so regular, so restless. We wonder why we feel a lack of true meaning and purpose. We wonder why we're tired and stressed. We wonder why we are unable to know God, hear God, feel God's Spirit pulsing loudly and clearly in our souls. It is because we have allowed life to crowd out our intimacy with God. We have avoided being courageous and bold in grappling with those inner demons that threaten to squeeze life right out of us. We have avoided the desert.

We might wonder how we would even know if we were being driven to the desert and what we would do if we were being driven? I can tell you that if you are experiencing any of the symptoms I just spoke about, you are being driven into the desert. If you are longing to know God, longing to be made whole by God, longing to belong to God, longing to find what seems to be missing in the daily round of the rigors, rituals, routines, and responsibilities of life, then that is the spirit of God calling you to the desert.

There's a lovely verse--one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture, since I'm such a 'desert spirit' --from Hosea. God says, "I will allure her, and bring her into the desert wilderness, and there I will speak tenderly to her heart." The desert is fearful to be sure, but it is filled with grace.

I once did an 8-day silent private retreat and the design of the retreat included praying with Scripture passages for 5 hours every day. I had been feeling that my routines and constant stress were sapping my life away and leading me further and further away from God, and so I thought this intense kind of retreat would help me re-focus, and I could say at the end that I had done it. Kind of like someone who makes it through an Outward Bound experience.

But I'm a person of high-energy, and I like being in control of my own life. I like to know the when, where, how and with whom of what I'm doing. The thought of silence was not daunting to me. But the thought that I was going to have to sit still with Bible passages for five hours every day was so beyond my comfort zone that I decided to cancel the retreat. I also knew the verse from Hebrews that says that "the word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

In other words, I knew that five hours a day with Scripture was going to strip my heart and soul and I wasn't sure I was actually ready for that! So, I called the person who was to be my director for the retreat and explained that I simply couldn't do the retreat. After being questioned about why I thought I had to cancel, I said, "Well, truthfully, it's the praying with Scripture for five hours every day. How am I possibly going to be able to do it? The director said to me, **"You're not going to do it. God is."**

I went on the retreat. And though I was in a retreat center in the middle of Chicago, it was a desert wilderness for me. I was exposed to myself in a way that I had never been before. In that silent and isolated place in the middle of the city, I struggled, I rebelled, I prayed, I wept, and I came out of that retreat a changed woman. I had been lured to the desert and there God had spoken tenderly to my heart.

So when you are being driven into the desert - go. Go where you can be alone with God in the huge silence. Stop trying to fill your life with yet one more self-help technique to make life meaningful or bring sense into the chaos and stress. Instead, take yourself to that place of terror where you are exposed to yourself, where you must face the reality of your desire to be important, to have power and control, to be self-sufficient. Go to the desert to hear the Voice of God that brings you life again. Go to the desert so that you can be prepared for life outside the desert.

### Questions to Ponder with Others

How can everyday life be the canvas for holy living?

How can time, maturity, and the repetitive practice of daily life help us to become more fully human?

How can stability nurture holiness?  
How can a pilgrim lifestyle nurture holiness?

--from *Renee Miller*, ["Is the Desert Calling You"](#)

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**Being Real about evil**

Holy realism ... [also] witnesses to [the existence of] evil. And ... it can witness convincingly to evil precisely because it understands that enemies are real. That's anathema in America these days because we all want to be friends. At the extreme, this attitude can be summed up in a sign that I saw at a recent peace rally: "Saddam Loves You." Well, the evidence is that Saddam loves no one but himself, and even that is a dysfunctional relationship. Contrast that silly thing, "Saddam Loves You," with a passage from *Life Together*, which is a little book that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the Christian community in an underground seminary in Nazi Germany. He writes, "Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. And at the end, all his disciples deserted him. On the cross, he was utterly alone surrounded by mockers. So the Christian too belongs within the thick of foes." He [also] quotes some Luther: "The kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies, and who will not suffer this does not want to be of the kingdom of Christ. He wants to be among friends." Well, it's tricky, isn't it, to think of enemies. And of course, we all have to begin by saying the worst enemy is within. But I think we do also have important witness, both in the Scriptures and in poetry, to evil, to what enemies do. ...

What is a Christian to do when we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, commanded to love our enemies? There are situations in which making nice does no good and begins to do harm. As Garrett Keiser insists, anger, righteous anger in the Biblical sense, not selfish, self-aggrandizing anger, can break through denial and lead to the prayer of forgiveness that makes anger no longer necessary, [even] perhaps the concept of an enemy. But the question nags, how can I pray for my enemy? We need to be, first of all, suspicious of our own motives and keep a close watch on ourselves. "But if I truly love my neighbor as myself," Keiser insists, "I am not looking for victory but a radical change of heart. It is love that impels me to pray for my enemy while fully intending to do everything in my power to oppose him. I intend to prevent his abuse," he writes, "from destroying us both."

--Kathleen Norris

This Section  
in printable  
format.

For  
Deeper Study

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Surely evil cannot be any more vile than the face it showed during the holocaust. Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka stand as searing reminders of the depth of human corruption. As Elie Wiesel, another survivor of the holocaust, continually reminds us, such horror should never be forgotten. Any religion that cannot acknowledge such bitter fruits of human sin is not worth believing. For only if we admit the rank horror of evil can we hope for a God and a faith strong enough to redeem it.

-- Lee Ramsey, *Focus on Film, "The Pianist"*



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reader to view the  
pdf files.

## Process for Meditation and Psalm

### Process for Meditation

1. Take a few moments to be silent and center yourself in the presence of God.
2. Read the Psalm completely through once.
3. Read the Psalm again very slowly verse by verse, leaving at least one minute of silence between verses.
4. After going through the entire Psalm, sit in silence for 3- 5 minutes, asking God to feed your soul with the truths of the Psalm.
5. End the time with a short prayer of thanksgiving.

### Psalm 63:1-8

1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. NRSV

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## Being Real FEatured Speakers & Writers

### **Joan Chittister**

A widely published author, columnist and noted international lecturer, Joan D. Chittister, OSB, is executive director of Benetvision: A Resource and Research Center for Contemporary Spirituality located in Erie, Pennsylvania. A member and past prioress of the Benedictine sisters of Erie, she is past president of the conference of American Benedictine Prioresses. The most recent of her 26 books are *New Designs: An Anthology of Spiritual Vision* and *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. She has been a leading voice on Benedictine spirituality and practice for over 25 years.

**For more information please go to: <https://www.benetvision.org>**

### **David Dark**

David Dark has published articles and reviews in Prism magazine and Books & Culture. His book *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and other Pop Culture Icons* was published in 2002 by Brazos Press. Dark teaches English at Christ Presbyterian Academy in Nashville.

**For more information please go to: [David Dark Bio](#) and [David Dark's Website](#).**

### **Linda Douty**

Linda Douty currently serves as a book reviewer, teacher, retreat leader and individual spiritual director, sharing her personal experiences as well as knowledge gained at the The Academy for Spiritual Formation, *Bethel Bible Series*, SMU's Perkins School of Theology and the Shalom Institute of Spiritual Guidance. Douty is a regular presenter at the Center for Spiritual Growth in Memphis, Tennessee.

**For more information please go to: [Linda Douty Bio](#) and [Samaritan Counseling Center of the Mid-South](#).**

### **Laurence Freeman**

Father Freeman is a monk of the Monastery of Christ the King, Cockfosters, London. From the International Centre of the Christian Meditation Community in London, he now serves a worldwide network of 27 meditation centres and more than a thousand weekly meditation groups in 50 countries. He travels regularly in North and South America, Europe, Australia and Asia. He is involved in contemplative inter-religious dialogue and led The Way of Peace dialogue with the Dalai Lama. His six books include *Light Within*, *Selfless Self*, and *Jesus: The Teacher Within*.

**For more information please go to: [Medio Media](#) and [World Community for Christian Meditation](#).**

### **Micah D. Greenstein**

Named by *Memphis Magazine* as one of the city's most significant leaders, Rabbi Greenstein became Temple Israel's eighth Senior Rabbi on September 1, 2000, after serving Temple as Assistant and Associate Rabbi since 1991. Former

President of Memphis Ministers Association, he is a board member of the National Civil Rights Museum and faculty member of Memphis Theological Seminary.

**For more information please go to: [Micah Greenstein Bio](#) and [Temple Israel, Memphis, TN](#).**

### **William Kolb**

The Reverend Canon Kolb first came to Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, TN, in 1992, after 14 years as Rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Mamaroneck, New York. He returned in 2002 to head the Pastoral Care Program.

**For more information please go to: [William Kolb Bio](#) and [Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis, TN](#).**

### **Renée Miller**

Renée Miller is an Episcopal priest who splits her time between her home in the Arizona desert and her condo in downtown Memphis. She currently serves as an associate rector at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, TN, contributes regularly to [explorefaith.org](#), and serves as a team leader for [CREDO](#) (Clergy Reflection, Education, Discernment, Opportunity).

**For more information please go to: [Renée Miller Bio](#).**

### **Mark W. Muesse**

Mark W. Muesse is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. A native of Waco, Texas, Muesse received his B.A. summa cum laude in English from Baylor University. He completed his graduate work at Harvard University, where he received a Masters of Theological Studies from the Divinity School and the A.M. and Ph.D. in The Study of Religion from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

**For more information please go to: [Mark Muesse Bio](#).**

### **Kathleen Norris**

Kathleen Norris is a recipient of grants from the Guggenheim and Bush Foundations. Her personal narratives, essays, and poetry have been published in a wide range of anthologies, magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Magazine*. She has published five books of poetry, including *Little Girls in Church*, *How I Came to Drink My Grandmother's Piano*, and *The Year of Common Things*, and is author of the New York Times bestsellers *The Cloister Walk*, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, and *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

**For more information please go to: <http://www.barclayagency.com/norris.html>.**

### **Parker J. Palmer**

Parker Palmer is known for his work in education, spirituality and social change in institutions including schools, community organizations, primary, secondary and higher education, and business and corporations. He is author of six books, including *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (2000), and *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work Creativity and Caring* (1990).

**For more information please go to: [Parker Palmer Bio](#).**

### **Lee Ramsey**

Lee Ramsey is an ordained United Methodist pastor and is currently an associate professor of pastoral care and pastoral theology at Memphis Theological Seminary. He holds advanced degrees from Candler School of Theology and Vanderbilt University and is the author of *Care-full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community*.

**For more information please go to: [Lee Ramsey Bio](#).**

### **Phyllis Tickle**

As Contributing Editor in Religion for *Publishers Weekly*, the international journal

of the book industry, Phyllis Tickle is frequently quoted in sources like *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, *C-SPAN*, *PBS*, *BBC*, *VOA*, etc., Tickle is an authority on religion in America and a much sought-after lecturer on the subject. She is also author of some two dozen books, most of them about religion and spirituality, including *The Divine Hours*, a three-volume contemporary manual of prayer, *God-Talk in America*, and *The Shaping of a Life - A Spiritual Landscape*, a memoir of a life of prayer.

**For more information please go to: [Phyllis Tickle Bio](#) and [Phyllis Tickle's Website](#).**

### **Rowan Williams**

The Most Reverend Rowan Douglas Williams was selected to be the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury after serving as Bishop of Monmouth and Archbishop of Wales. Archbishop Williams has also served as a Dean of Clare College and Lecturer in Divinity at Cambridge University and as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University. He has published collections of articles, sermons and poetry and written or edited more than twenty books on the history of theology and spirituality, most recently *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (Co-edited with Geoffrey Rowell and Kenneth Stevenson), *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* and a volume of reflections called *Writing in the Dust*, about his personal experience of September 11, 2001.

**For more information please go to: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org>.**

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