

# Awakening

A Spaceforsoul publication

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## Showing up

*There is no sadder thing than to leave this world  
having never really shown up.*

*Carrie Newcomer*

The words are from a poem by the Quaker folk singer, song-writer, author and social activist, Carrie Newcomer, entitled 'Showing Up'. I find them deeply unsettling and challenging. What would it mean for me to 'really show up' in this life I am living? How often does the real me show up in my home life, in my work life, in my relationships with others and the world around me?

It is clear from her poem that for Carrie, showing up is about being true to the self that we were born to be and to the gifts we were born to offer to the world. Each of us, she says is utterly unique. Each of us has a story to tell, a song to sing to this wounded world in which we make our home. In her poem 'The Call', Oriah Mountain Dreamer echoes this when she speaks of the 'one word you are here to say with your whole being' and urges us to give ourselves completely to the saying of it. Mary Oliver echoes it in her poem 'The Summer Day' when she asks the question '...what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'

And John O'Donohue echoes it too when he writes in 'Benedictus' of 'the special form of life' that each of us is called to and of the transformation that occurs within us when we are able to find and follow our true calling:

*'It is such a relief and joy to find the calling that expresses and incarnates your spirit. When you find that you are doing what you love, what you were brought here to do, it makes for a rich and contented life. You have come into rhythm with your longing. Your work and action emerge naturally; you don't have to force yourself. Your energy is immediate. Your passion is clear and creative.'*

But how do we know what is ours to do? For some of us, finding our calling comes relatively easily and almost seems to unfold by itself. For others, it may be much more difficult to discern. For some of us, it will be the direction we follow for most of our lives; for others, it will change and evolve as we move through the stages of life. Howard Thurman, a 20th century author, philosopher, theologian and civil rights leader, believed that the question we need to ask ourselves at the outset is not 'What does the world need?' but 'What makes me come alive?' For it is when we are doing what we were born to do that we feel most fully alive, most fully ourselves, most fully at home in our lives.

Showing up requires taking a risk, stepping out of our comfort zone, facing the fear and doing it anyway. It requires that we begin to pay attention to what the Bushmen of South Africa call 'the tapping in our spirit' and to learn to trust this inner voice that calls us to become all that we have the potential to be.

'Spirituality', said John O'Donohue, 'is the art of homecoming' - a coming home not only to the Divine, but also to our true self. And it is in the journeying home that we will find the answer to the question, 'What is mine to do?'

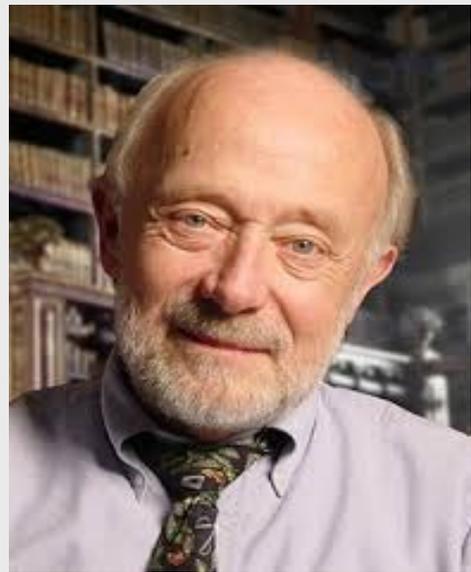
Kaitlyn Steele

*'Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.'*

*Parker Palmer  
From 'Let Your Life Speak'*

## Progressive voices: Marcus Borg

Marcus Borg was a world-renowned New Testament scholar and theologian. He has been described as 'a leading figure in his generation of Jesus scholars', as 'a breath of fresh air in the musty halls of Christian scholarship and biblical studies' and as a deeply spiritual man who delivered 'a radical message, but with a notably gentle demeanor.' As a fellow of the Jesus Seminar - a group of scholars examining the historical accuracy of the words and deeds attributed to Jesus - he was a leading figure in historical Jesus scholarship. He was also one of the most influential voices in progressive Christianity.



An Episcopalian priest, teacher and writer, Borg was the author of over 20 books in which he sought to enable people to return to 'the heart of Christianity', to 'embrace the God we never knew' of pantheism and to 'meet Jesus again for the first time'. In so doing, he opened up new avenues of thought and experience for those of us who are desperately seeking a re-visioning of the Christianity of our childhood.

Borg was born and brought up in a traditional Lutheran family in North Dakota.. Several of his uncles were Lutheran pastors and for many years, the local Lutheran church was the centre of his life. In his early teens, however, he began to have serious doubts about the existence of God, an experience he described as being 'filled with anxiety, guilt, and fear.' In later life, he came to understand this faith crisis as 'a collision between the modern worldview and my childhood faith.' His inability to overcome his doubt, no matter how hard he tried, was the source of considerable anguish and led him to see himself for a time as 'more of an unbeliever than a believer.'

Nevertheless, after high school, he chose to take his first degree at a Lutheran college before going on to study in a theological seminary in New York, taking with him 'a conventional but no longer deeply held understanding of the Christian faith'. These experiences opened his mind to other ways of thinking about the Bible, Jesus and Christian teachings that he had never come across before. They enabled him to let go of 'the sacred cows of inherited belief', but they did not resolve his faith crisis. He remained for some time yet 'a closet agnostic' who couldn't quite work out what to make of it all and even at times 'a closet atheist'.

It wasn't until his mid-thirties that he began to find his way back to faith. A number of powerful mystical experiences fundamentally changed his way of

understanding God, Jesus and Christianity. 'These experiences, besides being ecstatic, were for me *aha!* moments', he wrote. They were, as he described them, experiences of 'radical amazement', of 'transformed perception', of 'connectedness ... to what is', of 'sacred mystery'. For him, God was no longer just 'an article of belief'. Through his sacred experience, God had become real to him in a radically different way.

From this point onwards, Borg dedicated the rest of his life to the scholarly study of Jesus and to sharing the fruits of his own learning and experience with others through his teaching and writings. Having left the Lutheran church and spent some years 'in exile' outside the walls of the church altogether, he finally gravitated to the Episcopalian church in Portland in his early forties and later served there as Canon Theologian until he died in 2015.

Borg was a gifted writer who had the rare ability to clarify difficult theological ideas and issues in a way that made them accessible not only to fellow theologians and clergy, but to spiritual seekers from many different backgrounds and walks of life. On the day he died, he received an email from a young woman who wrote, 'Without Marcus, I wouldn't be able to call myself a Christian.' Many others could, I think, say the same thing.

*'The Christian life is not about pleasing God, the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. Spirituality is about this process: the opening of the heart to the God who is already here.'*

Marcus Borg

## Progressive perspectives: Re-imagining Jesus

Jesus, only Son of God, born of a virgin, risen from the dead, the only way to salvation, the promised messiah whose principal purpose in life was to die for our sins. This is the image of Jesus with which most of us will be familiar. It is, by and large, the image that is portrayed to us in our schools and churches. It is the image we encounter in Christian creeds and doctrines and in the New Testament language that seeks to define Jesus' identity and significance as the early Christian community came to understand it. Many Christians still see Jesus in this light and believe that Jesus both knew and taught these things about himself. In his book, 'The Heart of Christianity', Marcus Borg calls this 'the earlier paradigm' image of Jesus.

There is, however, another image of Jesus to which the average church-goer is never introduced. Borg calls this 'the emerging paradigm' image. The recent writings of progressive Jesus scholars and theologians such as Borg and John Shelby Spong in the States and Dave Tomlinson in the UK are helping us to meet Jesus again 'for the first time' as Borg put it in the title of his book about the historical Jesus. They are teaching us that there is another image of Jesus, another way of understanding his identity and significance, another set of lenses through which to see this extraordinary man of God who remains so central to the Christian faith.

Most of what we know about Jesus' life and teachings comes from the Bible and from a number of other writings that failed to make it into the New Testament such as the gospels of Thomas and Mary. But making sense of what we encounter in those ancient writings is far from easy. If we adopt a historical-metaphorical approach to reading the Bible as progressive theologians do, then we begin to see the gospels in another light. Instead of looking at them as a reliable historical account or biography of Jesus' life and teachings, we accept that not everything we read about Jesus in the Bible is historical fact and that not everything can be taken literally. The gospels are, as Borg puts it 'a mixture of historical memory and metaphorical narrative'.

They are also a mixture of two voices: the voice of Jesus and the voice of the early Christian community



trying to make sense of their experience of Jesus, both before and after his death. The voice of Jesus can be found in the earlier layers of the gospels. It tells us about 'the pre-Easter Jesus' as Borg put it. The pre-Easter Jesus is Jesus *before his death*, the Jesus of history, the flesh-and-blood Jesus, the Galilean Jew, the wandering rabbi, healer and mystic who challenged the political and religious establishment and suffered death at the hand of the Romans as a result.

The voice of the early Christian community, on the other hand, tells us about another Jesus, 'the post-Easter Jesus'. It tells us about how Jesus was seen and what he became *after his death*. This is the Jesus of the later gospel of John. It is the Jesus of the creeds, doctrine and liturgy that emerged many decades after his death. The challenge, and it is a considerable one, lies in learning how to discern which of the two voices we are hearing as we move from story to story, chapter to chapter, even verse to verse in the Bible.

So what does a historical-metaphorical reading of the gospels actually tell us about Jesus? The first thing to note is that they tell us very little about his birth and early life. In fact, many scholars argue that there are no historically reliable stories about Jesus before he reached the age of thirty. This is because the few accounts that we do have of his birth and early life often conflict, both with each other and with other external sources. What then of the adult Jesus? What we know with a high degree of probability is that Jesus was a wisdom teacher who used parables and short sayings to teach a radically subversive wisdom; that he was a social justice prophet who challenged the ruling elites and promoted a new and inspiring social vision; that he was the founder of a Jewish renewal movement which challenged existing social and religious

conventions and boundaries; and finally, that he was a Jewish mystic. Indeed, Jesus' subjective experiences of the reality of God were so frequent and so powerful and his relationship with God so intimate that he addressed God as 'Abba'.

The early paradigm image of Jesus claims, however, that he was far more than this. It claims that he was literally 'God made flesh', that he was as Dave Tomlinson puts it 'a God-Man' rather than a real human being. And it teaches that Jesus knew and taught this about himself. What then is the evidence for this claim?

Firstly, there are the stories of Jesus' miraculous birth which appear in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Christian tradition tells us that Jesus was born 'of a virgin', impregnated by the Holy Spirit of God. The overall consensus among many New Testament scholars is, however, that the stories of Jesus' birth and early childhood are not historical. They argue that they were in reality a blend of legend and myth, a symbolic narrative created by the early Christian community decades after Jesus' birth to validate his identity and significance.

They note that in the ancient world, stories of such extraordinary births were not uncommon. They also point out that there is no mention of the virgin birth in the earlier layers of the gospels or in the writings of Paul which pre-date all of the gospels. At the very least, this suggests that at the time they were written, the story was not widely known or that it was not regarded as having sufficient theological importance to include it.

Secondly, there is the language that is used in the New Testament to speak about Jesus - both the particular 'titles' he was given such as Son of God, Christ, Messiah, and Lord, and the so-called 'I am' sayings found in the later gospel of John in which Jesus is reported as speaking of himself as 'the

Light of the World', 'the Bread of Life', 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', 'the True Vine'.

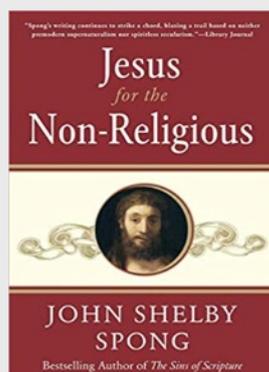
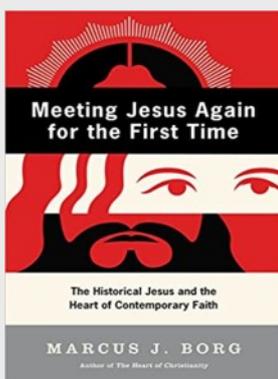
New Testament scholars have pointed out, however, that throughout Jewish history, all sorts of people were given the title 'son of God' including the Hebrew kings and other Jewish mystics and healers in Jesus' time. At that time, it was a way of describing someone who was seen as having an intimate relationship with God or as having been commissioned by God. It did not imply divinity.

They have also argued that it is almost certainly not the case that Jesus thought or said that he was *the only* 'son of God' or that the kind of language John used about him originated with Jesus himself. It is very clear from reading the first three gospels that the pre-Easter Jesus avoided labelling himself or giving himself exalted titles. Indeed, his preferred way of describing himself was as the 'son of man', a phrase that is generally translated as 'human being' and that underlines his humanity. Furthermore, Jesus always deflected attention from himself, pointing beyond himself to God. Indeed, Borg argues, his response to such New Testament language would most likely have been, 'It's not about me.'

He maintains that the language used about Jesus in the gospels is not the language of self-proclamation, but the language of metaphor. It is not, he says, the voice of Jesus but the voice of the early Christian community. It is their testimony to the Jesus who remained an experiential reality for many people after his death and to the significance this Jesus came to have in their lives. It is their testimony to the post-Easter Jesus, expressed through the rich language of metaphor.

Whichever paradigm image we choose to embrace, however, it is undoubtedly true that Jesus, whether son of God or son of Man, remains central to the Christian faith. We see God through Jesus the man. His wisdom reveals that we are one with the Divine, that we are in God and God is in us. His way of being in the world teaches us the Way of Love. His compassion softens our hearts. His passion for justice challenges us to 'be the change' the world so desperately needs.

Borg argues that Jesus is both 'a metaphor of God... the heart of God made flesh' and 'a sacrament of God, a means through whom the Spirit of God becomes present.' And as such, he remains a powerful transformational presence in the world nearly 2000 years after his death.





## Exploring spiritual practice: Walking a labyrinth

*'Very seldom do you come upon a space... when you may stop and simply be.  
Or wonder who, after all, you are.'*

*Ursula LeGuin*

The labyrinth is an ancient, universal spiritual symbol. It has been described as a form of sacred geometry, combining, as it does, the imagery of the circle, a universal symbol for unity and wholeness, with that of the spiral, a symbol of growth and change. It is not a form of maze as there is only one path. It leads you on a meandering, circuitous route to the centre of the labyrinth and back out again. There is no puzzle to be solved. There are no wrong turns, no dead ends or blind alleys. The way in is the way out.

Labyrinths have been found all over the world in many different cultures and civilizations from as far back as 2000 BC. They have been found carved in rock, stone, turf and hedges; in ceramics, clay tablets and coins; and in tiles and mosaics. They have also been found in paintings and manuscripts. The symbol can be found in virtually every religious tradition across the world. For example, the Kabbalah or Tree of Life found in Jewish mysticism is essentially an elongated labyrinth design and the Native American Hopi Medicine Wheel is also a form of labyrinth.

The labyrinth is in a sense a metaphor for what the poet, Rumi, called 'that long journey into yourself'. It is the spiritual journey which all of us have to make in order to connect with our innermost self or soul and then return to the world with a deeper understanding of who we are. It invites us into a journey of homecoming - a coming home to 'that self that one truly is' as the philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard once put it. In her book, 'Labyrinth: Landscape of the soul', Di Williams describes labyrinths as 'ancient pathways for the human spirit' and recognises that, 'To step into a labyrinth is a kind of homecoming.' Similarly, Lauren Artress sees the labyrinth as 'an ancient mystical tool' that helps us to prepare for the process of inner transformation. It enables us to achieve what she calls 'a shift in consciousness' as we move towards greater spiritual wholeness and maturity as human beings. It is a sacred pathway which has the potential to draw us gently but inexorably into the mysterious inner landscape of the soul if we will but let it. It re-connects us with 'the depth of our souls so we can remember who we are.'

### Labyrinth walking as a spiritual practice

The labyrinth has long been used as a meditation tool in a variety of spiritual traditions and walking the labyrinth is for many people an important form of spiritual practice. The experience of walking a labyrinth is different for everyone, says Artress, 'because each of us brings different raw material to the labyrinth.' Each labyrinth walk that we do will also be different as we come to it at different points in our journey and from a different place within ourselves.

The experience may bring us a space to be or reflect; a quietening of the mind; a sense of comfort, stillness or peace; a place of calm in the midst of difficult life transitions; a new insight or realisation; an awareness of our deepest meanings, desires, longings and motivations; a deeper sense of connection with our bodies, with our spiritual self, with the Divine or what is most sacred in our lives; a nourishing of the soul; or more rarely, a powerful peak or transformative experience. Sometimes, however, we may experience it as no more than a gentle, meditative walk.

### Some basic guidelines for walking a labyrinth

There are places all over the world where you can walk a full-sized labyrinth - for example, in churches, retreat centres, parks and gardens. Alternatively, you can build one yourself with stones or other objects, perhaps in a field or forest clearing or on a beach. Or you can purchase or create a smaller, portable labyrinth from paper, cloth or wood which you trace with your finger. There is a wide range of labyrinth designs, many of which you can find online.

There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth but it is often better to come to it without expectation or agenda but with an openness of heart, mind and spirit to whatever may emerge. Before you walk onto the path, take a minute or two to still yourself, letting yourself become aware of your breathing and of being in the present moment. Walk slowly and mindfully, focusing on one step at a time. Seek to focus inwards so that you are only peripherally aware of what is happening around you. If your mind is distracted or preoccupied, simply notice each thought and then leave it behind with the next physical step you take. Alternatively, try repeating a simple mantra as you walk.

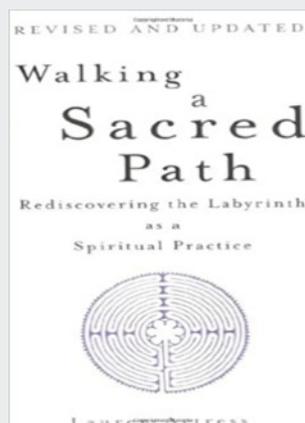
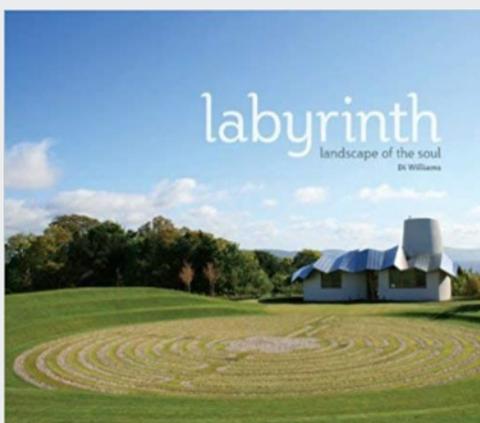
When you reach the centre of the labyrinth, stay there for a while, doing whatever you feel prompted to do. Stand, sit or lie down if there is enough room. Take time to be aware of your thoughts and feelings and to receive whatever there is for you in the moment. As you return from the centre, reflect on what it is you might take away from the experience.

### Some useful resources:

Lauren Artress (2006) 'Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the labyrinth as a spiritual practise.' Riverhead Books

Di Williams (2011) 'Labyrinth: Landscape of the soul.' Wild Goose Publications

The Labyrinth Resource Group at <https://labyrinthresourcegroup.org/resources/>

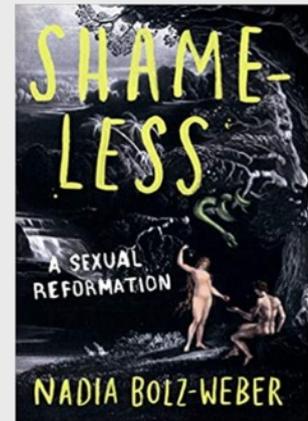


## Book Reviews

Shameless: A sexual reformation.

By Nadia Bolz-Weber (2019) Canterbury Press

A review by Meryl White



Be prepared to repent if you decide to read this book! The author aims to challenge Christian thinking on sexual ethics and encourage readers to think again. Nadia Bolz-Weber is founder and former pastor of House for All Sinner and Saints (HFASS), a Lutheran congregation in Denver U.S.A. On their website, HFASS describe themselves as ‘a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice – orientated, queer-inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient/future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination’.

With brutal honesty and robust integrity, the writer interrogates Christian teaching on sexual ethics. Her story telling is compelling as she unpacks the experiences of people who have been hurt and harmed by them. She charts inherited codes of practice and reviews Biblical foundations for these. The exegesis throws a different light on the Bible but always through the lens of Jesus’ life and teaching. In the opening chapter, readers are invited to “forge a new Christian sexual ethic’. Throughout the book the ‘thou shalt not’s’ are deconstructed and an alternative code of mutual respect, non-judgemental positive regard and human flourishing is suggested.

It was not easy reading. I identified with the teaching and indeed have taught it. I have also experienced the difficulties and pain caused, yet have not known how to teach it differently. This book could be a starting point for discussion on a new understanding of sexual ethics in church – a conversation which still needs to be had. The book finishes reflecting on the ‘lies of the accuser’, the words of shame on continual loop in the minds of many hurting people and those who cause hurt. The invitation is to hear the voice of God who, ‘calls forth our truest, most flawed and beautiful self’. The invocation is to change your mind.

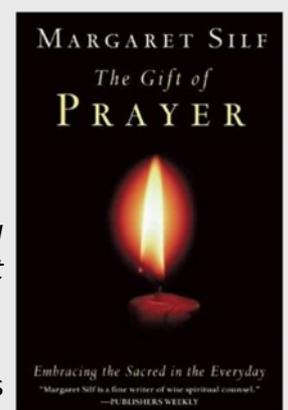
The Gift of Prayer: Embracing the Sacred in the everyday.

By Margaret Silf (2005) Bluebridge Books

A review by Kaitlyn Steele

*‘Prayer is a living relationship that can never be pinned down and analyzed; prayer is a breath of the soul that has passed before we can seize hold of it; prayer is a reaching out of all that is deepest within us towards all that lies infinitely beyond and around us.’*

This a treasure of a book. It is a wise and beautifully written collection of meditations which seek to explore the mystery of prayer. It draws both on ancient and contemporary practice and will speak to people of any faith or none. Silf writes in a beautiful poetic style which is gentle and compassionate and often moving. She addresses such questions as ‘What is prayer?’, ‘Why would I pray?’, ‘Who an I praying to?’ and ‘How do I pray?’ with simplicity and clarity and in a way that frees us to find our own way of drawing on the power of prayer to lead us more deeply into the Sacred.



Silf describes prayer as ‘a journey of discovery, an experience unique to each one of us, a personal relationship with the God beyond our understanding and the God who dwells in the core of our being’. For those of us on that journey, this book is in itself a gift.

## Art and soul



*'Hope' is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -*

*And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -*

*I've heard it in the chillest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.*

*Emily Dickinson*

*Artist: Kim Carey Inspired by Emily Dickinson's poem  
For more of Kim's artwork, see [kimmobleart](#) on Instagram*



*Photographer: Kaitlyn Steele Westonbirt Arboretum in Autumn*

*'Around me the trees stir in their leaves and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches. And they call again, "It's simple,"  
they say, "and you too have come into the world to do this,  
to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."*

*From 'When I walk among the trees' by Mary Oliver*