

## HOLIER THAN GOD

*The intolerance that has spread over the world with the advent of Christianity is one of its most curious features.<sup>1</sup>*

—BERTRAND RUSSELL IN *WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN*

It doesn't take a genius to see that religious people tend to be more narrow than broad. History tells that story, and if Bertrand Russell was right, people who practice the Christian religion are among the worst offenders. He's certainly not alone in that opinion, ask around.

Instead of expanding our capacity for life, joy, and mystery, religion generally shrinks it. As systematic theologies grow, the sense of wonder dies. Religious thinkers find ways to solve the puzzles, contradictions, and uncertainties—they figure God out. Ideas and words replace encounters with God. The history of the Creator pursuing his lost creation down the corridors of time to perform a death-defying rescue gets trivialized into God's little instruction book for a happy life. *Mystery? No thanks, we've got proof! Faith? Not necessary, we have certainty!*

Of course you do.

### WHO'S IT GONNA BE?

This is not the only time this has happened. Jesus was constantly in the face of a group of Jewish fundamentalists called the Pharisees—the *Separated Ones*. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Pharisees originated within Jewish culture in the four hundred years between Malachi and



Matthew. They claimed their teachers were the only ones who truly understood the Bible and, therefore, the only ones who really understood G-D. So they were strict about pretty much everything—especially the Jewish *Sabbath*.

Sabbath means *rest* and, from the beginning, the Sabbath was first and foremost God's own celebration of his creative work. Here's part of the story in Genesis:

*God looked over everything he had made,  
it was so good, so very good!*

*It was evening, it was morning—*

*Day Six.*

*Heaven and Earth were finished,  
down to the last detail.*

*By the seventh day*

*God had finished his work.*

*On the seventh day*

*he rested from all his work.*

*God blessed the seventh day.*

*He made it a Holy Day*

*Because on that day he rested from his work,  
all the creating God had done.<sup>2</sup>*

The first time the word *Sabbath* appears in the Bible is in the story of the *manna* God sent to feed his people in the desert (how they got there is an amazing tale that begins in Genesis 37 and continues through Exodus). Just so you know, they were in the habit of counting their days from sunset to sunset for reasons that are not entirely clear. Anyway, five mornings a week (Sunday through Thursday), the

people gathered a sweet, white, flaky substance that appeared overnight on the desert floor, took it home, and made bread from it. They called the substance *manna* (which means, comically, "what-is-it?"). On Friday mornings they collected enough for two days. On Saturday there was no manna on the ground because it was a day for rest—a holy Sabbath to God.<sup>3</sup>

The Sabbath became a celebration of God's faithfulness, a weekly exercise in doing nothing for a whole day in order to affirm that God provides for his people, even when they're wandering in the desert. The Sabbath was an act of worship and thanksgiving and faith.

When Moses declared God's Law to the people, one of the commandments went like this:

*Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to GOD, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days GOD made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them, he rested on the seventh day. Therefore GOD blessed the Sabbath day; he set it apart as a holy day.<sup>4</sup>*

Resting from the preoccupation with making and maintaining a living was a reality check: Someone's in control and it isn't any of us, okay? So just relax and stop trying to run the world.

Time passes, God is faithful, people do dumb stuff anyway, and Exodus 31 ups the stakes by quite a bit:



GOD spoke to Moses: "Tell the Israelites, 'Above all, keep my Sabbaths, the sign between me and you, generation after generation, to keep the knowledge alive that I am the GOD who makes you holy. Keep the Sabbath, it's holy to you. Whoever profanes it will most certainly be put to death. Whoever works on it will be excommunicated from the people. There are six days for work but the seventh day is Sabbath, pure rest, holy to GOD. Anyone who works on the Sabbath will most certainly be put to death.'"<sup>5</sup>

That's serious business. Had there been much water in the desert, a lot of it would have flowed under the bridge between the first command to rest in Exodus 16 and this stern restatement of the concept in Exodus 31. It's as if God were saying, "Let me make myself perfectly clear: The Sabbath is a regular sign of your intentions toward me. You can only worship one of us—you or me? What's it gonna be? Will you acknowledge me as your provider, or do you plan to grab the credit for yourself? Are you going to trust me or yourself? I really mean this. Take your time, I'll wait for your answer till, say, Friday at sundown."

### HISSEY FITS

Fast forward to the prophet Isaiah, who speaks of the Sabbath as "a day of joy."

*If you watch your step on the Sabbath  
and don't use my holy day for personal advantage,  
If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,  
GOD's holy day as a celebration,  
If you honor it by refusing "business as usual,"  
making money, running here and there—  
Then you'll be free to enjoy GOD!*<sup>6</sup>

Not bad. Fasting and mourning were forbidden on the Sabbath. Fancy clothes were the uniform of the day, and joyous music was the soundtrack. And the celebration spilled out of the temple and into peoples' homes. The Sabbath was (and still is) the big event in orthodox Jewish homes—so much so that the Sabbath is considered the foundation of the tight family structure that characterized orthodox Jews through the centuries. Every member of the family was to be present for the Sabbath meal along with invited guests—especially poor people, aliens, and travelers.<sup>7</sup>

The Sabbath celebration started at sundown on Friday with the mother of the family lighting the ceremonial candles. Then the father, after saying grace over a cup of wine, laid his hand on the head of each of his children and blessed them with a personal prayer. The Sabbath celebration turned Jewish homes into little sanctuaries where the parents were the priests and the family table was the altar. It was a beautiful thing.

Sadly, the horrors of the Babylonian exile<sup>8</sup> prompted a segment of Jewish leaders to flip out on the subject of God's laws. After all, it was the nation's disobedience that made God mad enough to send them into slavery in Babylon. So it only made sense to get compulsive about avoiding anything that might possibly be construed as the tiniest bit disobedient, right?

This segment, who came to be called Pharisees, lost sight of the Sabbath's primary meaning. They hijacked the Day of God's Rest and turned it into a set of cold, legalistic requirements—mainly *thou-shalt-nots*. They ended up with a false image of God as the eternal, small-minded bookkeeper who is only happy when people pay close attention to things like how many steps a person is allowed to walk on the Sabbath. In their hands, religion became a weapon to intimidate and enslave rather than liberate and empower. Jewish believers were



instructed to focus their attention not so much on worshipping and trusting God as on showing how good they were by not going to work on the Sabbath.

Their teaching was a betrayal of God's kindness. T. S. Eliot put his finger on it:

*The last temptation is the greatest treason:  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.<sup>9</sup>*

The joyful celebration of God's creation and faithfulness disappeared in a cloud of legalism. The means became the end. Rest became work. God's reliability was replaced by human responsibility for rules that have nothing to do with resting in God's amazing kindness.

And then, in the fullness of time, Jesus was born. And everything changed.

Jesus was not impressed with the Pharisees' Sabbath—not impressed at all—which just launched them into murderous hissy fits.

### A FLEXIBLE HEART

Everything changed when Jesus came among us. But not everything stayed changed. The word *pharisee* became synonymous with *hypocrite* and—hard to believe—Christian faith mutated into Christian religion and grew its own crop of Pharisees, though they would never, ever call themselves that for obvious reasons.

Here's the funny thing: History tells us it's not whores, thieves, and pagans who find it most difficult to turn from self-reliance; it's devoutly religious Pharisees who feel they have nothing to turn from. A little

goodness goes a long way toward separating a self-righteous man from God's tender mercies. It's always been like this.

### ***A little goodness goes a long way toward separating a self-righteous man from God's tender mercies.***

Pharisees invest heavily in religious gestures, rituals, methods, and techniques. "Do it just this way," they tell their followers and breed supposedly holy disciples who are judgmental, mechanical, lifeless, afraid, and as intolerant of others as they (secretly) are of themselves. They're violent people, the very opposite of holiness and love. Jesus did not die at the hands of muggers, rapists, or thugs. He fell into the well-scrubbed hands of deeply religious, totally respectable members of society.

*One Sabbath, Jesus was strolling with his disciples through a field of ripe grain. Hungry, the disciples were pulling off the heads of grain and munching on them. Some Pharisees reported them to Jesus: "Your disciples are breaking the Sabbath rules!"*

*Jesus said, "Really? Didn't you ever read what David and his companions did when they were hungry, how they entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat? And didn't you ever read in God's Law that priests carrying out their Temple duties break Sabbath rules all the time and it's not held against them?"*

*"There is far more at stake here than religion. If you had any idea what this Scripture meant—'I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual'—you wouldn't be nitpicking like this. The Son of Man is no lackey to the Sabbath, he's in charge."<sup>10</sup>*

The stakes are not small here. The Pharisees insist on the overriding importance of the rule of law. The dignity and needs of human beings



are irrelevant. And here is Jesus, insisting law is not an end in itself but the means to an end: Obeying God expresses our love for God and our neighbors, so any religious act that stands in the way of true love stands in the way of the true God. "I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual."

The Pharisees did not take this news well.

*When Jesus left the field, he entered their meeting place. There was a man there with a crippled hand. They said to Jesus, "Is it legal to heal on the Sabbath?" They were baiting him.*

*He replied, "Is there a person here who, finding one of your lambs fallen into a ravine, wouldn't, even though it was a Sabbath, pull it out? Surely kindness to people is as legal as kindness to animals!" Then he said to the man, "Hold out your hand." He held it out and it was healed. The Pharisees walked out furious, sputtering about how they were going to ruin Jesus.<sup>11</sup>*

People like that don't like to be challenged. They take it personally, but they act and talk as if it were God they were defending. Jesus put them (as he always puts The Poser) in a bad spot. He'd already said he came to fulfill the Law, not destroy it. Now he made it obvious that, as far as he was concerned, the Pharisees' laws were not the same as God's Law at all.

The Pharisees' spirit lives today in those who use religion to control and humiliate others, entangling them in spools of religious red tape, watching them struggle with impossible demands and overwhelming guilt but failing to point them to the God who gives manna to the hungry and rest to the weary. The person who recently hung the

"Homosexuals are not welcome" sign on a Western church is not much different from the one who posted the "No dogs or niggers!" sign in a southern thrift store in the 1940s. Both are saying they're better than someone else for whom Jesus died. This is not the way of Jesus who, by the way, is on the record about preferring a flexible heart.

## NO HUGGING

"Whoever in history has put the law, the regulation, the tradition ahead of the suffering person," Eugene Kennedy claims, "stands in the same field of grain [as the Pharisees] smugly making the same accusation against the innocent."<sup>12</sup> Do you have any idea how many lives have been ruined in the name of narrow-minded, intolerant religiosity? Me either. But we know the Pharisee's specialty in every age is blaming, accusing, and guilt-tripping others. This is his signature, his most reliable response to anyone who doesn't toe the line.

On my way to a funeral one day, I drove over a bridge observing the 55-miles-per-hour limit. When I spotted a sign ahead restoring the speed limit to 65, I quickly accelerated to 70 and was abruptly flagged down by a policeman. The officer was black. I explained that I was hurrying to a funeral. He listened with indifference, checked my license, and wrote me a stiff speeding ticket. In my mind I immediately accused him of racism and vindictiveness, and blamed him for my late arrival at the church.

Omagosh! What just happened there? My sleepy inner Pharisee woke up and announced he was alive and well.

Shifting blame is a defensive substitute for honest self-examination. Heaven forbid I should look for personal growth in response to my failure. *No way*, The Poser advises; *it's somebody else's fault*. We end up like



the characters on *Seinfeld*, whose creators determined there would be no hugging and no learning. Period.

***Shifting blame is a defensive substitute for honest self-examination.***

**AN IMPOSSIBLE BURDEN**

The attitude of the Pharisee—then and now—is that keeping the Law obligates God. The Pharisee isn't looking for any favors; he just wants what's coming to him because he earned it. Jesus turns that upside down. Being accepted, captivated, and loved by God comes first, and that's what motivates the disciple to live out the law of love. "First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first."<sup>13</sup>

Suppose a child has never experienced any love from her parents. One day she meets another little girl whose parents shower her with affection. The first child says to herself: "I want to be loved like that too. I'm going to do whatever it takes to earn the love of my mother and father." So to gain the affection of her parents, she brushes her teeth, makes her bed, smiles, minds her manners, never whines or cries, never expresses a need, and learns to conceal her negative feelings.

This is the way of Pharisees. They follow the Law flawlessly in order to provoke God's love. Where necessary, they rewrite the Law to emphasize things they weren't planning to do anyway: No Dancing Allowed; No Smoking; No Drinking. Or things they prefer: Commitment to Church Programs Equals Commitment to God; Voting (*Write Your Political Affiliation Here*) Is What Jesus Would Do. Their image of God locks them into a theology of working in exchange for approval from on high. If God is the meticulous bookkeeper, eager to find fault with anybody and everybody, the Pharisee must pursue a

lifestyle that minimizes mistakes. Then, on Judgment Day, he can present God with a perfect slate and God will be bound to accept it.

What an impossible burden! The ordeal of making oneself presentable to a distant, perfectionist God is exhausting. Legalists can never live up to the expectations they project on God because, as Kennedy reminds us, "There will always be a new law, and with it a new interpretation, a fresh hair to be split by the keenest ecclesiastical razor."<sup>14</sup> This is one way new churches, denominations, and Christian organizations are born: Two Pharisees face off and realize this town ain't big enough for both of them.

The Pharisee within is the religious face of The Poser, who always feels uneasy about his relationship with God. The compulsion to feel safe with God fuels a neurotic desire for perfection and an endless moralistic self-evaluation that makes it impossible to experience acceptance. The Poser lives under a cloud of personal failure, poor self-esteem, anxiety, fear, and depression. Other than that, it's all good. Just ask him.

***The Pharisee within is the religious face of The Poser, who always feels uneasy about his relationship with God.***

The Pharisee overpowers my true self whenever I choose appearance over reality, whenever I am afraid of God, whenever I surrender control of my soul to a list of rules rather than risk the uncertainty of living in union with Jesus whom I cannot see or hear.

**DON'T BE LIKE ME**

"If I have a message to my contemporaries," Thomas Merton said, "it is surely this: be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, . . . but at all costs avoid one thing: 'success.'"<sup>15</sup>



Of course Merton was referring to the cult of success, the Pharisee's fascination with honor and power, the ceaseless drive to improve The Poser's image. On the other hand, when false humility snuffs the pleasure of honest achievement and snubs genuine compliments, I become proud of my humility, alienated from real people, and The Poser rides again!

My resident Pharisee's act is never more flagrant than when I claim the high moral ground over racists, bigots, and homophobes, when I nod approvingly as the preacher trashes unbelievers, liberals, new agers, and everybody else outside the fold; when I cheer the pastor's self-confident condemnation of Hollywood movies, commercial television, the Swimsuit Issue, and all things hip-hop. I know an easy target when I see one.

Yet my library is filled with biblical commentaries and theology books. I attend church regularly and pray daily. I have a crucifix in my home and a cross in my pocket. My life is completely formed and permeated by religion. I abstain from meat on Friday. I give money to Christian organizations. I am an evangelist devoted to God and church.

*"You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You keep meticulous account books, tithing on every nickel and dime you get, but on the meat of God's Law, things like fairness and compassion and commitment—the absolute basics!—you carelessly take it or leave it. Careful bookkeeping is commendable, but the basics are required. Do you have any idea how silly you look, writing a life story that's wrong from start to finish, nitpicking over commas and semicolons?"*

*"You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You burnish the surface of your cups and bowls so*

*they sparkle in the sun, while the insides are maggoty with your greed and gluttony. Stupid Pharisee! Scour the insides, and then the gleaming surface will mean something.*

*"You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You're like manicured grave plots, grass clipped and the flowers bright, but six feet down it's all rotting bones and worm-eaten flesh. People look at you and think you're saints, but beneath the skin you're total frauds."<sup>16</sup>*

That would be me Jesus is describing. Left to myself, that would be me.

In the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Man, the Pharisee stands in the temple and prays: "Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income."<sup>17</sup>

His prayer reveals the two telltale flaws of the Pharisee. First, he is very conscious of his personal holiness. He prays in order to compare himself favorably to others, not to admit any failure or need. His fault is he believes he's faultless. There's no one he admires more. His second flaw is related to the first: the Pharisee despises others. He judges and condemns others because he's convinced he's better than they are. He's a self-righteous man who unrighteously condemns others.

In Jesus' story, the Pharisee pardons himself but is condemned by God. And the tax man condemns himself but is pardoned by God. It's a cautionary tale. One guy says, "Be like me, kids." The other guy is so humiliated by his failure he can't even make eye contact. "Don't be like me," he says in a teary whisper. And the Storyteller, with a knowing look, nods toward the tax man and mouths the words, "Be like him."



I was at a prayer meeting where a man in his mid-sixties said: "I just want to thank God that I have nothing to repent of today." His wife groaned. What he meant was he had not embezzled, blasphemed, fornicated, or recently fractured any of the Ten Commandments. He had kept himself from drunkenness, sexual irresponsibility, and outright idolatry, but he had not yet broken through to what Paul calls the inner freedom of the children of God.

We can't grow deep if we ignore the tension between the inner Pharisee, who is holier than God if you judge by who sticks closest to the rules, and Abba's Child, whose only hope of holiness comes from God's mercy. They're both in there. We get to choose which we'll nurture to full strength.

#### **ARE YOU FEELING THIS?**

In contrast to the Pharisee's perception of God and religion, the biblical writers look at the gospel like a child who has never experienced anything but love. She does her best because she is loved, and when she fails, the fear that her parents might stop loving her never enters her mind. They may disapprove of her behavior and they will certainly help her learn and grow and do better, but their love does not depend on her performance.

If the Pharisee is the religious face of The Poser, Abba's Child is the religious face of the true self. For the Pharisee, the emphasis is always on personal effort and achievement. Abba's Child rests and delights in the relentless tenderness of God.

Here's what Therese of Lisieux said about remaining a little child before the good God:

*It is recognizing one's nothingness, expecting everything from the good God, just as a little child expects everything from its father, it is not getting anxious about anything, not trying to make one's fortune. . . . Being little is also not attributing to oneself the virtues that one practices, as if one believed oneself capable of achieving something, but recognizing that the good God puts this treasure into the hands of his little child for it to make use of it whenever it needs to, but it is always the good God's treasure. Finally it is never being disheartened by one's faults, because children often fall, but they are too little to do themselves much harm.<sup>18</sup>*

Good parents love a little one before that child makes a mark on the world. A loving mother never holds up her infant to a visiting neighbor with the words, "This is my daughter. She's going to be a lawyer." So the secure child's accomplishments later in life are not an effort to gain acceptance and approval. They are the rich overflow of being loved.

Abba's Child is aware of her feelings and uninhibited about expressing them; the Pharisee edits every emotion with an automated response. The question is not whether I am an introvert or an extrovert. The issue is whether I choose to feel or crush my genuine emotions. John Powell said if he wrote the epitaph on his parents' tombstone, he would have been compelled to write, sadly: "Here lie two people who never knew one another." To open yourself to another person, to stop lying about your loneliness and fear, to be honest about what you love, to tell others how much they mean to you—this openness is the triumph of Abba's Child over the Pharisee.

***Abba's Child is aware of her feelings and uninhibited about expressing them.***



To ignore, repress, or dismiss our feelings is to fail to listen to the stirrings of the Spirit within our emotional life.<sup>19</sup> Jesus listened. In John's gospel we see Jesus wracked by the deepest emotions over the death of a friend (see 11:33). In Matthew we see his anger erupt: "Frauds! Isaiah's prophecy of you hit the bull's-eye: These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it" (15:7-9). He felt deeply for ordinary people: "When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). Jesus expresses grief and frustration in Luke 19:41; irritation in Mark 14:6; frustration in Matthew 17:17; extraordinary sensitivity in Luke 8:46; outrage in John 2:16. And Luke records this brief encounter:

*Not long after that, Jesus went to the village Nain. His disciples were with him, along with quite a large crowd. As they approached the village gate, they met a funeral procession—a woman's only son was being carried out for burial. And the mother was a widow. When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, "Don't cry." Then he went over and touched the coffin. The pallbearers stopped. He said, "Young man, I tell you: Get up." The dead son sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother.<sup>20</sup>*

Do you think the widow's son would have been resuscitated if Jesus had repressed his heartbreak?

We have spread so many coats of whitewash over the historical Jesus that we scarcely see the glow of his presence anymore. Jesus is a man in a way that we have forgotten men can be: truthful, blunt, emotional, nonmanipulative, sensitive, compassionate—so liberated that he

did not feel it unmanly to cry; so secure he could engage anyone head-on and deal with them right where they were. Underneath all our cover-up, the gospel portrait of the beloved child of Abba is a man exquisitely in touch with his emotions and uninhibited in expressing them.

### SPIRITUAL FRIGHT MASKS

Did you ever hear a woman say, "I just need a few minutes to put on my face?" A Pharisee must wear his or her religious face at all times. The Pharisee's appetite for attention and admiration compels him to always present an inspiring image and avoid the risk of mistakes and missteps. Uncensored emotions spell big trouble for the Pharisee.

This is a problem. Emotions are our most direct experience of where we are in the moment. Feelings can be reliable or misleading—I've been startled by people who meant me no harm: the feeling was real but the threat was not. Feelings simply reflect what's going on inside us. We don't have to act on every emotion—in fact we shouldn't—but it's important to acknowledge and consider every emotion. What we do with our feelings determines whether we live honestly or falsely. When balanced with faith-formed intelligence, our emotions become important signals that inform our choices. Denying, displacing, and crushing feelings never helps anyone (except maybe the person in deep emotional shock who involuntarily shuts down rather than melting down).

The Pharisee in my head has devised a way to camouflage my emotions and gut my true self through a clever maneuver called "spiritualizing." Spiritualizing shields me from unwanted feelings—anger, fear, guilt—by tap dancing into religious generalizations that don't really mean anything.



I once wanted to say to a bigot, "If you don't cool it, I'm going to choke you and hang you as an ornament on my Christmas tree." These are unwelcome feelings for a man of the cloth. So, instead of speaking up, I reasoned to myself: "God has led this unenlightened brother into my life, and his obnoxious manner is no doubt due to some childhood trauma. I must love him in spite of everything." (Who could argue with that? If bigots hate blacks, and I hate bigots, what's the difference?) But the plain truth is, I covered up my feelings with holy-sounding nonsense. I divorced my true self and responded like a disembodied phantom (which is to say, as if I weren't there at all).

I've done it a thousand times. When a friend said, "I really don't like you anymore. You never listen to me and always make me feel inferior," I didn't grieve. I turned quickly from my heartache and concluded, "This is God's way of testing me." When money is scarce and I feel anxious, I remind myself: "Jesus said, 'don't be anxious about tomorrow,' so this little setback is just his way of finding out what I am made of." That's spiritualizing. It doesn't face the plain fact that my friendship is broken and it's my job to see if we can fix it together. Or the plain fact that I live in a world where work sometimes goes away and unexpected expenses arrive unannounced, and it's my job to surrender my anxiety to the God who cares for me. Scarcity and broken relationships aren't about God finding out what I'm made of—God knows what I'm made of—it's the other way around. In or out of friendship, in scarcity or abundance or just enough, my life is about finding out what God is made of.

If I'm not honest with myself, why in the world would I be honest with you? It's an ugly customer, this spiritualizing. It wears a thousand faces, every one of which intends to scare a little child back into hiding.

## ***If I'm not honest with myself, why in the world would I be honest with you?***

### **LABEL-GAZING**

When my wife was a child in the tiny hamlet of Columbia, Louisiana (population 900), her weekend playmate was a little girl named Bertha Bee, the daughter of a black housekeeper named Ollie. Together, Bertha Bee and Roslyn played dolls, made mud pies by the lake, ate cookies, shared their dreams, and built castles in Spain. One Saturday Bertha Bee stopped coming to play. She never returned. Roslyn knew she wasn't sick, injured, or dead because Ollie would have told her. So Roslyn, nine years old, asked her father why Bertha Bee didn't come to play anymore. She never forgot his reply: "It is no longer appropriate," he said.

The face a child wears is her own, and her eyes looking out on the world don't strain to see labels: black-white, Catholic-Protestant, Asian-Latino, gay-straight, liberal-conservative. Label-gazing is learned behavior. Labels create impressions. This person is wealthy, that one is on welfare. This woman is brilliant, that one is dim-witted. One man is attractive, another homely. Impressions form images that become fixed ideas that harden into prejudice. Prejudice captures us in the prison of what-seems-to-be.

Anthony DeMello said, "If you are prejudiced, you will see that person from the eye of that prejudice. In other words, you will cease to see this person as a person."<sup>21</sup> That's how the Pharisee sees everyone, including himself. His life is all about the labels. Which gets him off the hook for listening, caring, feeling, acting for the good of another person.



**FIGHT THE POWER**

*The disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who gets the highest rank in God's kingdom?"*

*For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, "I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me."<sup>22</sup>*

In the competitive game of one-upmanship, Jesus' disciples were driven by the desire for importance—they wanted to be somebody. According to John Shea, "Every time this ambition surfaces, Jesus places a child in their midst or talks about a child."<sup>23</sup> Jesus doesn't seem to care much for ambition.

The power games the Pharisee plays are meant to dominate people and increase his power through manipulation, control, and passive aggression. His life becomes a series of calculated moves and counter moves. The Pharisee develops a finely tuned social radar to detect and avoid people and situations that might threaten his authority.

This one-upmanship prevents the free exchange of ideas and introduces a spirit of competition that is alien to the unselfconscious child. Anthony DeMello observed, "The first quality that strikes one when one looks into the eyes of a child is its innocence; its lovely inability to lie or wear a mask or pretend to be anything other than what it is."<sup>24</sup>

A truly talented Pharisee can bully people and make them like it for quite a while—it's really very impressive. But the devouring Pharisee who grabs power, collects disciples, acquires knowledge, achieves status, and dominates his little world also grows fearful if an innocent underling swipes the spotlight, cynical when feedback is negative, paranoid when threatened, aggressive when challenged, and dramatic when defeated. Caught up in the power game, he lives with considerable evidence of success on the outside, but a desolate, unloving, anxiety-ridden hollowness on the inside.

The true self preserves childlike innocence through a deliberate awareness of his core identity. He refuses to be contaminated by peers whose lives, Anthony DeMello says, "are spent not in living but in courting applause and admiration; not in blissfully being themselves but in neurotically comparing and competing, striving for those empty things called success and fame even if they can be attained only at the expense of defeating, humiliating, destroying their neighbors."<sup>25</sup> The true self must fight the power with innocence or be overwhelmed by hollow deceit.

**INTO THE FULLNESS**

In this age of immense sophistication, achievement, and jaded sensibilities, the rediscovery of childhood is an engaging concept. That said, I admit I don't know you. Maybe you don't need to rediscover your inner child because she isn't lost. I hope that's true. But I doubt it. Ernest Hemingway had a character say, "The world breaks everyone," and, of course, he was right.<sup>26</sup> Sooner or later—usually sooner—we all do the wrong thing, or fail to do the right thing knowing good and well what we ought to do. And that's when we join the rest of the world in that sinking feeling that it's not supposed to be like this. The Doors singer



Jim Morrison's biography put it another way: it's called *No One Here Gets Out Alive*.

So if not today, then soon you'll need to recapture the little child you were for a few months or a few years, and you'll find with the rest of us that it's impossible to get back there without help. Innocence is a condition William McNamara claims "can only be enjoyed by unspoiled children, uncanonized saints, undistinguished sages and unemployed clowns."<sup>27</sup> Which are you?

Until we reclaim our lost child we have no inner sense of self, and gradually The Poser becomes who we really think we are. Psychologists and spiritual writers emphasize getting to know the inner child as best we can and embracing him or her as a lovable and precious part of ourselves. The positive qualities of the child—openness, trusting dependence, playfulness, simplicity, sensitivity to feelings—keep us open to fresh ideas, risky commitments, the surprises of the Spirit, and adventurous growth. The unselfconsciousness of the child keeps us from gloomy introspection, endless self-analysis, and the fatal self-absorption of spiritual perfectionism.

But we can't stop with returning home to our inner child. As Jeff Imbach noted, "If the inner child is all that is found inside, it still leaves one isolated and alone. There is no final intimacy within if all that we are reclaiming is ourselves."<sup>28</sup> Seeking the inner child on our spiritual journey, we discover innocence lost, but we also find what Jean Gill called "the child in shadow."<sup>29</sup> The shadow child is undisciplined and potentially dangerous, self-absorbed and self-willed, mischievous and capable of hurting a puppy or another child. When the prophet said, "A little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6), that's not who he had in mind.

Much of the shadow side of my childhood was riddled with fear. I was afraid of my parents, the church, the dark, and myself. In her novel *Saint Maybe*, Anne Tyler described Ian Bedloe like this:

*It seemed that only Ian knew how these children felt: how scary they found every waking minute. Why, being a child at all was scary! Wasn't that what grown-ups' nightmares often reflected—the nightmare of running but getting nowhere, the nightmare of the test you hadn't studied for or the play you hadn't rehearsed? Powerlessness, outsidership. Murmurs over your head about something everyone knows but you.*<sup>30</sup>

Rediscovering the inner child is not an end in itself but a doorway into the depths of our union with the God who makes himself at home in us; it's a sinking down into the fullness of the Abba experience, into the vivid awareness that my inner child is Abba's Child, held fast by him, both in light and in shadow.

***Rediscovering the inner child is not an end in itself but a doorway into the depths of our union with the God who makes himself at home in us.***

Frederick Buechner gets the last word:

*We are children, perhaps, at the very moment when we know that it is as children that God loves us—not because we have deserved his love and not in spite of our undeserving, not because we try and not because we recognize the futility of our trying, but simply because he has chosen to love us. We are children because he is our father, and all our efforts, fruitful and fruitless, to do good,*



*to speak truth, to understand, are the efforts of children who, for all their precocity, are children still in that before we loved him, he loved us, as children, through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>31</sup>*



## CHAPTER SIX RESURRECTION

For centuries Christians have celebrated Easter with a greeting in which one says, "He is risen," and the other replies, "He is risen indeed!" My friend once received an alternate greeting from an old guy who wasn't paying much attention. My friend smiled and said, "He is risen!" The old man replied, "Fine thanks, and you?"

Even on Easter Sunday, people have other things on their minds. No problem; there are places to go, things to be done. But think about it a moment: He was crucified, dead, and buried. And now he is risen. Is there anything this can possibly leave untouched?

There's a story about the writer G. K. Chesterton, whose conversion to Christian faith caused quite a stir in Great Britain at a time when smart people (and Chesterton was brilliant) weren't supposed to believe. So he's standing on a street corner in London when he's approached by a newspaper reporter. "Sir, I understand that you recently became a Christian," the reporter says. "May I ask you one question?"

"Certainly," says Chesterton.

"If the risen Christ suddenly appeared at this very moment and stood behind you," the reporter inquires, "what would you do?"

And Chesterton looks the reporter square in the eye and replies, "He is."