

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Since this book is about coming to God when you have contempt for the cheesy notions people have of God, you have every reason to doubt every word I say. Surely I am a stalking horse for some church or persuasion. Surely my goal is to throw a bag over your head, zap away 30 precious IQ points, and trundle your zombified person off to some faith-based basement.

You would not be clever if you didn't have this suspicion.

So let me put my cards on the table and tell you a bit about myself. I am a business writer by trade, an agnostic profession. I have lived most of my adult life outside churches and such, saying, if anyone listened, I'm sure they were very nice, but not for me. I was lying. I had considerable hostility to the cultures of Christianity and Judaism. I thought they were boring and small-minded and lacked nuance. I thought the cultures were so bad that they ruined whatever truth they were built on.

My background, growing up in Ohio, was sort of religious and sort of not. We were not atheists in my family, not by a long shot. Atheism requires discipline, which my family largely lacked. We were passive but very mental people. Thinking, thinking, thinking.

Although I attended parochial school, and though we were nominally Catholic, my family was secular in outlook. My mother had a lifelong antipathy to tent-preaching, fire-breathing Protestants. My dad had a good Catholic mother and father, but in his own life he let it all slide. His big thing in life was that he was nobody's fool, so church was right out with him. I think he made us go to church to please his mother.

We sped through "grace" before supper if we remembered, but that was it, and it was a hurried, let's-get-to-the-spaghetti sort of affair. Did we really believe God was doing something to our food? Only in the remotest sense of "If we don't say this, and we're poisoned by the cole slaw, we're going to feel pretty stupid." We were hedging our bets, as rational families do.

One bad sign: we had a ton of *books* in our house. Way more than our neighbors had. Books – the wrong kinds of books -- are a strong indicator of cleverness. Again, that *word* ...

I spent my college and later years in a state of passionate perplexity, aware of the possibility of God, but enjoying myself fine without him. Looking back, I think he tried to call me several times, but in those days I liked leaving my phone off the hook. I had created a life of hiding places and defense mechanisms that protected me from the things I most feared. Like my father, I was nobody's fool but my own.

So I had no need for God, and thought people who did admit to such a need were a little weak. Their whole way of doing things seemed ... opiated. It wasn't as if they *thought* a lot about what they were doing; they just seemed to accept that Jesus was who the priests said he was. Their faith was more of a reflex, like gagging. Being Catholic (or Lutheran, or Jewish or whatever) was their autonomic response to Sunday and Saturday mornings. They accepted the idea, they got it, and they did their jobs well. But they didn't make it seem very inviting to those of us just outside the circle. The very thing that they "got" -- basically, shut up and kneel down -- I never seemed to get. Over the years, not getting it became a point of pride.

And yet, even in my worst moments, even while I rejected the game of religion, a part of me still longed to score a goal with God. It was a profound contradiction, to feel like someone was trying to talk to me, but -- to all appearances -- the voice was surrounded by razor wire. And the lurking suspicion that the person who strung the wire was me.

My friend, I remained that way for decades, dabbling in mystical literature, psychotropic drugs, and "comparative religion" but never doing much about it, convinced I did not belong with him because other people said so. The relevant question you must ask is, Was I alone in this messiness? I of course believe I was not, that there are myriad souls out there like me, caught between the superficials and externals of religion, and alienated by them ... but stuck, stuck, stuck in their hearts, by a profound stubbornness. Too interested to walk away, but too proud ... too scared ... and as I eventually learned, too *angry* ... to kneel down with knuckleheads.

If I am wrong, then it hardly matters. If that is the case, then no publisher has published this book, market research having weighed in against its viability, and you are hallucinating that you hold it in your hands. Worse than that, I am hallucinating that your hands exist, not to mention you yourself, and this is just another sad patch of solipsism (see Chapter X) on my part. Toss it on the pile!

But I don't think so. If I am right, my friend, and you are a wandering spirit like me, then you know what a crummy way it is to spend a life. Drawn to a deeper realm of meaning, but turned off by the customary route people take to it. Alienated by churches and by the whole idea of community and sharing and being "normal" -- yet dying to have a real conversation with another human soul, and if we are really likely, with the great God of the universe.

It is like a toothache of the heart, exquisite but awful, and what would you give to resolve that gnawing pain?

What you must give (he said morosely) is *up*. But that comes later. In the meantime, there's tons of positive stuff you can do.

Practically speaking, why should you give two hoots what I, Michael Finley, have to say? Am I like, a man of the cloth? (No.) Do I have credentialed, scholarly understanding of these matters? (No.) Have I led mobs of hitherto unreligious people off steep cliffs into the Arctic Ocean? (Sorry, no.)

My background is as a writer of books about team psychology, about the ways personality gets in the way of group dynamics. I once co-wrote a bestseller called *Why Teams Don't Work*. Business writing must be very down to earth in order to succeed, and that bodes well for writing for skeptics. Better, I am fascinated by the idea of how personality relates to spirituality. So I began porting what I learned about variety in human personality to the problems of faith and meaning.

Why were some people "naturals" at believing, and other people naturally drag their feet? And why is it that the "cleverest" people -- people you look to first for sensitivity, prescience, and thoughtfulness -- were the absolute worst at the simple act of hearing? Why are smart people so damn stupid?

Lo and behold, I discovered I was onto something. Not why teams don't work, but deeper down, why *we* don't work, why people don't live up to their potential, why otherwise effective people come up empty with the mystery of the universe.

Why some hear God as naturally as buttering toast, but for those of us who are well read and have tons to say about religion, it's like going to the dentist. A not very good dentist.

Credentials aside, I'm a man who has struggled his whole life with these issues of personality and spirituality -- basically, how to overcome the one in order to get to the other. Only recently have I pulled myself onto dry land on the other side of this sea.

Cards on the table, I will tell you that I pulled myself to a ravishing version of Christianity. But this is not so much a Christian book as a God book. It is about baby steps, that could lead in any direction that takes one to God. Some day I will write a specifically Christian book, but this looks backward instead of forward – backward to the struggle people like us have to get clear about God.

It's not much fun. If you do this right, you will cry long and hard before you will laugh. But I am a lucky fellow. I *know* what you may only suspect -- that God *is* calling you, and when you finally hear him, especially if he's been calling for like twenty years, you will be out of options. You will have to act.

And the least embarrassing first step you can take is an unthreatening chat with someone who's stood in the squeamish position you now occupy.

Having put my cards on the table, I now want to take some of them off again.

You see, the book in your hands is not the book I set out to write three years ago. Back then, I wanted to write a popular book that told people who were not naturally spiritual how to get the goodies of spirituality, without having to join anything or do anything humiliating. I used the code name “Spirituality for Dummies” to describe this project, because that was how I thought of it. A book of spiritual tricks newcomers could use to zap ahead of people who've been working hard at this problem all their lives.

When I began to put actual words to paper, I found I was terribly limited in what I could say. Sure, one could paste together a project with suggestions like “Burn incense,”

“Experience nature’s grandeur,” and “Walk a mile in the other guy’s moccasins,” and thus assemble a kind of religion-in-exile for the spiritually handicapped.

But what I was saying was so vapid, I couldn’t buy into it myself. I waited for inspiration to help me overcome this vapidness. But inspiration never came. Instead, I found myself subverted, mysteriously, by the very forces I set out to sidestep – the culture of the good. Did clever people really need an alternate, pain-free route to peace – a religion without religion? Or did they need reconciliation with all the people who cluster contentedly in churches and temples, and whom clever people feel hopelessly cut off from?

And underneath this relational problem with good people was a larger question: Who was this God person, and how interested was he in a bunch of annoying, estranged people figuring out shortcuts to him?

I realized, in a crushed sort of way, that my project had lost 98% of its commercial potential. God was not a Kwiky-Mart that a person could dash into in, grab a jug of milk, and dash out of again. There’s a reason why “church culture” is alien ground to clever people. It’s because clever people are damaged by their own self-involvement, and they need to get healthy and whole again.

No, a lengthier, more difficult journey was required – a true grieving and a true healing await us. There is no such thing as speed grieving. There are no shortcuts. There are no Get Out of Hell Free cards. We have to wade through it on our own dime.

And so this book morphed from a gee-whiz prescription for spiritual end-zone celebrations into what it is: a sober assessment of the traps and pitfalls clever people must negotiate in order to find peace and meaning in their lives.

It became, in fact, the opposite of a quickie read. It became an invitation – I too shudder at the word – to repent. In the deepest sense of the word, to restore.

Sorry there wasn’t a better way.