

Unexpected Presence

Twelve Surprising Encounters
with the Divine Spirit

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PUBLICATIONS

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DEDICATION

*For my mom and dad and brothers,
who have taught
and continue to teach me
that love,
above all,
as well as after all,
makes a difference.*

*For my children,
who by their presence
expand the boundaries of love.*

*For my wife, Mary,
who by her presence
reminds me time and time again
what it means to love well.*

Introduction

Expectations are one thing. We all have them, and without them we would not get very far in life. There is something comforting about routine: rising each morning knowing what to expect during the day, coming home, evening rituals, bedtimes, beginning over again the next day.

But we can also get stuck in the expected, so much so that we miss the divine presence, right in the midst of our fragile, limited, ordinary, mortal existence.

What do we miss?

- If you were to ask educator and author **Fred Hang** (“Had I Missed Her”), he might answer, “A lot.” In his story of his encounter with Babe, a homeless woman and intercessor of sorts, Fred is reminded of a basic truth of all spirituality —

that we are all connected, sometimes in the most unusual ways, to one another but also to God's eternal (that is, never had a beginning and will never have an end) love. Experiencing the unexpected, as Fred shows, begins with the ability to listen to what at first is hidden.

- For Congregation of the Holy Cross Father **Patrick Hannon** (“Bathed in Melancholy”), the listening begins with a voice telling him to “Get up and go.” And so he does. He travels to Ireland under the guise of doing a silent retreat, but instead he learns another basic truth of all spirituality — that we are never alone.
- During one lonely Holy Week, pastoral administrator of a parish in western New York **Charlotte Bruney** (“In the Shadows”) shares her encounters while serving as a chaplain in a busy trauma care center. As a self-confessed Holy Week junkie, Charlotte is pulled out of her typical routine and decides to keep a journal of a Holy Week she was unable to celebrate in the way she would have chosen.
- The inimitable writer and religious educator **Alice Camille** (“Tell the Story”), wonderful storyteller that she is, shares a time in her life when she made the life-altering decision to leave church work. Burned out from the taxing routine, she takes a job working in an incense factory. No irony intended (perhaps). She advances quickly through the ranks but at the same time finds among the workers, from a Vietnam vet to several Chinese immigrants and the wildcard Troy, God's unexpected presence and a new meaning of beauty.

- **Kathleen McGrory** (“Working Women”), while doing research in Paris for her doctoral dissertation, finds that her grant funds have run low and rents a room in the low-rent district among the working ladies of the night. It is there that she glimpses a broader view of the church, a whisper, if you will, of the voice of the poor among us.
- Lawyer for the poor and powerless, **Bill Spielberger** (“The St. Matthew Passion”) meets the divine spirit in the most unlikely of places: his own brain. After suffering a major stroke he feels inexplicably drawn to “The St. Matthew Passion” as recorded by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Sir George Solti. He listens to it hour after hour, day after day, and it somehow rebuilds his scrambled mind. Then he discovers why.

The last five essays in this book turn to the world of family — that equally exhausting and exhilarating milieu from which we all originate.

- **Donald Paglia** (“The Weightiness of Parenthood”) comes home from a busy day at the Family Life Office (no irony here, either) and realizes that the last thing he wants to do is listen to his six children go on and on with their bickering and then have to assume responsibility for putting his youngest through his nighttime routine, including reading him a story. There just does not seem to be time enough to get a grip, and slowly the responsibilities of being a dad begin to press down upon him. Until he encounters the unexpected presence.

- **Greg Pierce** (“You Will Remember This”), erstwhile publisher and enthusiastic parent, sees his fatherly responsibilities in a new light when a family trip involving an Easter sunrise service at the Grand Canyon takes an unexpected turn. Cold, tired, perched on the edge of a dark hole whose bottom they have yet to see, the four — father and three pre-teen children — huddle for safety waiting for the sun to come up and instead experience illumination of another sort.
- Massachusetts’ native, recent college grad, and writer **Katie Walsh** (“At the Turnaround”) wonders about her absent dad, a missing presence in her life since birth. She reflects on how the baggage we carry — those memories and objects that cleave to our lives and we think we know because of their proximity — holds within it truths that have eluded us. What is required, she concludes, is to see that baggage from a new and usually unexpected perspective.
- **Kathleen Parulski** (“Hovering around the Borders”), a former newspaper publisher and bookbinder/mixed media book artist, recalls her relationship with her father-in-law and his reassuring presence, repeatedly, through her own trials and tribulations as a young mother and wife. It is only during his final days and while doing a reading from John’s Gospel during his funeral Mass that she arrives at an appreciation of a special human being.
- **Patrick Cassidy** (“Pop’s Diagnosis”), a Jesuit Volunteer Corps program coordinator in Baltimore and resident in an intentional community there, remembers his grandfather, affec-

tionately called Pop, as Pop's days are eclipsed by the dementia that accompanied his final years. Even then, in watching Pop's decline, Pat is able to look past off-putting appearances and see God's handiwork unfold.

- It is also from the sometimes messy family milieu that I share my own story ("Love's Presence"). As a father and teacher I now know that sometimes what is on the surface of someone or something limits our ability to see what is underneath that surface. As a teenager, I learned something about my father that has enabled me to separate what is significant from what is only a fleeting distraction, and that is the story I tell. By doing this, I do not mean to dismiss behaviors that are destructive but only to point out that they can be tied to greater, often unexpected, truths in our midst.

These dozen stories, I think, link or unite each of the authors and, I hope, each of our readers in the loving embrace of the greater story within which we all live — sometimes aware of our part, mostly unaware, always open to the divine spirit that permeates our world.

God's is a living presence — residing, beckoning, whispering among us. These stories help capture those often surprising encounters. Thanks for reading them.

David Fortier
Bristol, Connecticut
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Love's Presence

by David M. Fortier

When I was seventeen, I was angry and confused, waiting to lash out at anyone or anything as the opportunity presented itself. If you were one of my teachers or a coach or a classmate, however, you would have seen a different me. I was popular, a good student, a fine athlete, a poet, and a class leader.

To accompany me in this teen-induced madness, about two days before my 17th birthday I was about to find out that my father was not my birth father. My father, the man who raised me and whom I considered my dad (and still do even though he died over a dozen years ago), was a difficult man with an overabundance of problems. If there was ever anyone who set himself up for abuse it was him. Figuratively speaking, he wore a big bold red and black bull's-eye in the center of his chest, and I was armed with a quiver full of razor-sharp arrows.

His list of infractions included drinking, rough treatment of my mother and my brothers (he had stopped hitting me at some point, which left me with a type of survivor's guilt), and barely making ends meet. What money he did make he gambled away. He was a spectacle in public, and now I was to learn he was not

even my father.

How could this have happened to me? It had never crossed my mind that he was not my dad, but now I was thinking that he did not have to be in my life at all. But I was not sure that is what I wanted.

The voice interceded, “And what did you ever want?”

Simply to be loved and accepted, I answered.

I was to learn this was the same thing that my father fought for daily: to be loved and accepted.

But I did not learn this just yet.



Up to that point, I thought that I had found love and acceptance through my success in sports and school. But my junior year began as a train wreck and looked to be heading toward another. I decided to play football again after a debilitating knee injury my freshman year. As a once sought-after athlete, I was left to wonder if I would ever be able to live up to my own expectations on the football field but especially on the basketball court — or to be clear, to live up to “their” expectations, “their” being the underlying principle.

Now that I think of it, throughout high school, starting with freshman year, I had been a mess, period. In psychology class, however, I read Rollo May’s *Love and Will* and Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*. I liked the world of ideas. The big question was whether love was something a person willed to happen or whether it was more something that just happened to you: more of a science than an art or more of an art than a science? I always took things one step further than my teachers asked and devoted

time to the study of love. This study brought me to Plato's dialogues, and — as someone who had been raised a Catholic but who no longer considered himself one — to the New Testament and to Jesus whom at the time I had relegated to the large group of philosophers and thinkers rather than a divine singularity.

Jesus was the one who kept pressing me with the question: Who do you want to be? What kind of person do you want to become? What is love?

Typically, weekends during the school year meant one thing — meeting at Johnny B's house and heading off to a party or sticking around playing cards until *Saturday Night Live* came on. This weekend, at the tail end of February, was the weekend of my seventeenth birthday and ended our February vacation, but our plans did not change. Basketball practice that Saturday was followed by a few phone calls and an agreement to meet at Johnny B's house.



This night, however, when I asked to borrow the family car, my mother asked if she could drop me off. That was fine with me. As the oldest of five boys, I knew enough to pick my battles over all kinds of things, but especially over the car, because I did not want to lose the privilege.

The weather, if I recall correctly, was cold and rainy. There was snow on the ground, but the rain came and melted most of it. The car held the humidity and fogged up the windows. Maybe the wipers were on, because it was drizzling out.

We parked outside Johnny B's. I leaned over to give Mom a kiss on the cheek as I usually did and began to open the car door.

She held onto my arm.

As if on cue, I closed the door and leaned back into the seat.

“David,” she said, “you know I love you very much and I would never do anything to hurt you.”

“Of course,” I said.

She shushed me.

“Sometimes things happen in life that you don’t have control over and, before you know it, what is done is done. And even though it wasn’t the smartest thing to do, something wonderful comes from it. And that makes things all worthwhile.”

I watched the windshield. Tiny droplets of water streaked the glass as one after another cut through the condensation. I knew enough to sit still and listen.

“You know that your father loves you very much,” she said. Her fingers gripped my arm. “He would not do anything to hurt you.”

I took a deep breath. Mom knew the truth about Dad’s abuse of her and her boys. But what she said was completely, totally, insanely unexpected: “David, your father is not your father. I mean he is your father, but I did not have you with him.”

She went on to say that they were going to tell me when the time was right, but they could not wait any longer because my dad’s mom, my grandmother, had decided to say something because she was upset with my mother and father. When my mother heard this, she decided she did not want this news to come from anyone but her.

After this point in the conversation, Mom could have been speaking Chinese and I would not have heard it. It wasn’t that I was not listening. It was because the ground had shifted under me. Her words shattered my world.

I now finally understood why I was so physically different from my brothers. I was bigger boned and grew faster, hitting six feet tall by freshman year. The other boys were still just creeping above five feet as freshmen. And yet the differences were not only physical. I needed time to mull things over; my siblings acted precipitously. I tended towards my books and writing; they followed pursuits that eventually led to alcohol, drugs, and gambling.

Now I knew why. We had different genes.



Even then, I knew Dad was an alcoholic. He was at times abusive. When I was around 15 and unusually strong for my age, I had to pull him away from an altercation with my mother. That was one of the most difficult things I had ever done in my life, not because it was physically taxing (although my dad was a physical creature, a former professional boxer) but because of the mental anguish I felt having to confront him in all his fatherly hugeness.

*Epiphany after epiphany
raged through me as Mom
continued to talk.*

Epiphany after epiphany raged through me as Mom continued to talk. This is why I am like I am, I thought to myself. Thought piled upon thought, and a rage that bordered on madness roiled in me.

And then the voice spoke.

It asked that I look at the man who raised me and, possibly

for the first time, consider who he really was: He was the man who raised me, but he did not have to.

This was the man who loved my mother enough to take her in, knowing she was pregnant, and take me in too. He could have walked away, like my birth father. How could that guy, whom I had never known, who had never been around for my mother or me, ever be considered my father?

My father was the one who raised me, despite all his faults, and he would always be my “real” father.

Sitting there in the car, I seemed to see my father for the first time — a truly defective human being who had been there for my mother at a time when having a child out of wedlock was a terrible scandal and embarrassment. Dad had somehow been able to work through this societal taboo and see Mom for the wonderful person she is.

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for the first time.*

I think that was what made the difference in how I reacted to this “news.” I had no doubt that my father’s way of reacting to my mom’s shame had been a gift of love — to her and to me. Since I was so young and confused at the

time, the sudden realization of this gift of love broke open a new territory within me and within my father.

While I was thinking all this, my mother had continued talking. Maybe it was in Chinese!

I took her hand.

“Mom,” I told her, “you don’t have to worry. Dad will always be my father. He does not have anything to worry about.”

“Are you sure?” she said. “He said if you wanted him to he would leave.”

“No, everything is fine.”

I kissed her cheek again.

“I’ll get a ride home,” I told her and shut the door behind me.

I watched as our monstrous luminous green Mercury Grand Marque negotiated through the slush, driven away by a woman who had finally disclosed her biggest secret to the son it affected the most.

I stood on the sidewalk for a while, though, because I was shaking.

The rest of the evening I was somewhere else.

I suppose if I were a drinker I might have gotten drunk.

I suppose if I smoked pot I might have gotten high.

But I did neither. I was simply lost in deep thought.

Absolutely nothing earth-shattering happened, except that I found a new source of hope. I could not take credit for it, but I still needed to act on love’s unexpected presence.



When I finally confronted my father, it happened this way.

My brothers were gathered around him. My mother stood off in the background. I hugged each of my brothers and told them that I loved them. I turned to my father.

He was seated in the ragged recliner, his chair decorated with burn holes from the cigarette ashes that dropped down while he was dosing evenings, most times in an alcohol stupor, while the rest of us tiptoed around not wishing to make a sound to disturb him. He was sunk down in the chair, and I suddenly realized I

held his future in my hands. So did he. A word either way could bring him totally down or raise him up.

“Dad,” I said, “You have been my father all these years, you will always be my father. You are my father now. I love you.”

He was a hard man, but I watched the tears well up in his eyes and then begin to fall. I watched as he tried to stifle a cry, but his chest heaved and he let it out.

“You have been my dad, you are, and you always will be,” I said again. And then we hugged.



After this revelation about my birth, my dad eventually got his legs under him and resumed being a father, except — and I do not think this is my imagination — he was kinder and smarter and more forgiving with my mother, and with my brothers, and with me.

As for me, my epiphany about his freely given love for my mom in her hour of darkness allowed me to love him ever since. It was then, at the tender age of seventeen, that I began to understand that God is a loving Presence, always accessible, even when seemingly hidden.