THRESHOLD OF DISCOVERY

A FIELD GUIDE TO SPIRITUALITY IN MIDLIFE

L. ROGER OWENS

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For
Simeon, Silas, and Mary Clare

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Contents

Introduction.....*v*

TRAIL ONE: Facing Death and Change.....*1*

TRAIL TWO: Asking, "Who Am I Now?".....*17*

TRAIL THREE: Finding Fruitfulness in the Second Half.....*31*

TRAIL FOUR: Learning to Pay Attention Anew.....*45*

TRAIL FIVE: Confronting Midlife Fears.....*59*

TRAIL SIX: Raising Vocational Questions.....*69*

TRAIL SEVEN: Hearing the Sounds of Silence.....*79*

TRAIL EIGHT: Finding Freedom within a Frame, Part One.....*95*

TRAIL NINE: Looking for God.....*109*

TRAIL TEN: Finding Freedom within a Frame, Part Two.....*119*

TRAIL ELEVEN: Heeding the Call of Community.....*131*

TRAIL TWELVE: Experiencing God, Following God.....*151*

TRAIL THIRTEEN: Saying Three Last Words.....*165*

Questions for Reflection and Discussion.....*177*

Author's Notes.....*181*

Introduction

I knew I was standing on the threshold of midlife.

You know it when you're there—the way you forget the name of an acquaintance you haven't seen in two months; the way you walk into the kitchen and forget what you came for—into the bedroom, into the bathroom, into the basement and forget why you're there; the way the white hairs on your head purchase more real estate each day; the way your sixth-grade son, who stands almost as tall as you, can rattle off names of apps you've never heard of like you used to be able to recite the starting lineup of the 1984 division-winning Chicago Cubs.

The way your friends from graduate school start getting divorced, or start getting cancer, and you start checking more frequently the spots on your stomach to see if the edges change, become uneven. The way you begin to fear you might lose this beautiful life you've been given—death, tragedy seem ever more possible—and *at the same time* you begin to fear that this beautiful life you've been given might actually be the one you're stuck with.

I knew I was on the threshold of midlife; my fortieth birthday was just two months away. It never occurred to me that it might also be a threshold of discovery. But that's exactly the phrase Sister Anna used, and I immediately warmed to it.

We were talking about my feet, at least I was—not the typical subject of conversation with a spiritual director. But it had not been a typical season in my life. Until recently my feet had never hurt. But that week, as my dad used to say, "My dogs were barking." None of my shoes were comfortable anymore. One Tuesday I stood teaching for two and a half hours and my arches and heels burned. I sat on the sofa in my office, pulled of my Gold Toe socks, massaged my feet, and hoped a student wouldn't walk in. I also made a plan, because I had to teach again that night.

I went hunting for new shoes before my evening class. I skipped all the places I usually shopped—any store in a strip mall; any store where I could see stacked shoe boxes and had to fetch my own; any store where the clerks knew little about shoes and less about feet; any store with the words "famous" or "show" in the name—and I drove straight to the shoe store recommended by a man thirty years older than I: Little's Shoes in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, an old, family owned store just a few miles from where I teach.

A clerk greeted me at the door, and I offered a précis of my problem. He led me to the men's section and said he knew what I needed. He was surprisingly empathic. "I've been working here since high school twenty-five years ago," he said. "I think I can help you."

He brought out two styles in two different brands, laced a pair and put them on my feet. I walked, I skipped, I jumped a little. My dogs stopped barking. I happily spent twice as much as I've ever paid for dress shoes.

I wore those shoes in Sister Anna's office that day, but the story about my feet was a circuitous way to deeper issues. My newly aching feet accompanied other changes, shifts along the fault lines of my soul. As at sundown, when a familiar place begins to look strange, unfamiliar—that inviting shade tree now ominous in the twilight—so the lighting on the landscape of my spirit had been changing, imperceptibly at first, until it began to look like a place I'd never been before.

First, I noticed: words—how the old, religious words, faithful, trustworthy words, the words that comprised the hymns I loved to sing, the words I had said and explained and illustrated in so many sermons, words I wrote about in a theology dissertation—church, sin, incarnation, Trinity, atonement, resurrection, salvation, faith—these words began to leach their meaning. My confidence in them waned. I noticed it in my preaching and lecturing. I continued to utter them but felt inauthentic. And I noticed it as I listened to sermons—in the seminary chapel, in my home congregation. The language of my religion began to sound like the adults in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

When Sister Anna asked how I experienced God, I had no ready answer.

When she asked about my image of God, I had nothing to say.

My faith, it seemed, was being reduced, but I didn't know yet if it would end up like a red wine reduction sauce, reduced to its essence, its greatest intensity; or, like a boiling pot of water left on the stove, reduced to nothing at all.

I wondered aloud if I might be entering a dark night of the soul.

That's when Sister Anna spoke: "It sounds less to me like a dark night, and more like a threshold of discovery."

Threshold of discovery.

I remembered something psychiatrist and spiritual guide Gerald May had written: "When the spiritual life feels so uprooted, it can be almost impossible to believe—or even consider—that what's really going on is a graceful process of liberation—a letting go of old limiting habits, to make room for a fresh openness to love." In other words, a threshold of discovery.

That's the phrase that stuck with me, sticks with me still, the phrase that convinced me to stop imagining another life and consider the reality of this God-haunted one as I enter midlife's uprooting.

The one that eventually compelled me to buy a walking stick and take forty hikes.

The drama of turning forty is a cultural artifice—the "over-the-hill" birthday cards, "R.I.P." yard signs. Why not thirty-eight, or forty-two?

For my fortieth birthday party we invited a few families we knew from church for dinner and games. Only one family followed the cultural script. The box they gave me was large and taped together. When I opened it, I saw why it had to be so large—it had to fit a cane, silver with a big curved handle, nursing-home style. *Ah, the fortieth birthday gag gifts*: a bag of prunes, a package of sugar-free Werther's candies, an oversized pill box with the days of the week marked in enormous letters. Each gift said, "Now you are *old*." We all laughed, and my kids fought over the pill box.

Turning forty might be a time to laugh as a healthy response in a culture hypersensitive to age, but in Scripture the number forty has a more serious resonance.

The Israelites crossed a threshold, the Red Sea. Freedom was their possession, their new *modus operandi*. But they didn't know how to live freely; they could not remember their ancestors who had lived in freedom before a Pharaoh arose who knew not Joseph. Bondage had been their lot. They had their own discoveries to make. They had to discover their identity as a people: who they were without the Egyptians to tell them they were nothing but cheap labor. They also had to discover who this God was who freed them now that they did not have the violent lords of Egypt ruling them. Sometimes they felt it might be better to retrace their steps, preferring the certainties of bondage over the vagaries of freedom.

For forty years they practiced being a free people in this liminal space, this threshold. Many times they faltered. A whole generation died. At one point they decided it wasn't for them, that God couldn't be trusted, so they made for themselves another god and said, "*This* is the god who brought us out of Egypt!"

Since then, the number forty has signified the trials of transition, the ache of self-discovery, the turmoil of finding and abandoning comfortable images of God, of following a God you can never pin down. Forty years in the wilderness: a threshold of discovery minus the romance, minus the allure. Painful discovery.

I wonder if these forty years were on Jesus's mind when he, on the threshold of his short-lived mission in the world, was driven into the wilderness for forty days. The Israelites, through the Red Sea; Jesus, through baptism in the Jordan; both, into the wilderness after the water.

I can close my eyes and picture the scene of the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, but in my imagination the Spirit morphs into a screeching hawk and chases him into the wilderness where for forty days he followed the pattern established for God's people: he had to discover who he was and whether this God who called him by name and imbued his life with purpose was trustworthy, and whether he had it in him to trust. A voice from heaven told Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." Being told that is one thing; knowing it in the body's fleshy heart and the soul's mysterious depths—that's quite another.

That kind of knowing requires *forty*.

If it was true for God's people, true for Jesus, why shouldn't it be true for us? Why wouldn't we come to a threshold in our lives, like midlife, when the focus on establishing and proving ourselves changes, when the "dreams of fame and fortune," as Frederick Buechner calls them, are set to one side long enough for us to romp around in the reality of our lives and wrestle with the questions our four-decade pursuit of whatever we've been pursuing hasn't left room for?

As I approached this threshold I began to realize that I wanted to explore it, to step into this new territory with a degree of intentionality. These currents of change—of fear and hope and doubt and pain—I didn't want to ignore them or escape them. I wanted to explore. I didn't want the gentle Spirit to have to drive its talons into my shoulders and drag me across. I wanted to walk into forty and beyond slowly, with eyes wide open.

I had the idea on a walk at Beechwood Farms, an Audubon nature reserve three miles from our home.

During the summer we'd come here to pick up our weekly share of local farm produce. Dillner Farms, twenty miles north of where we live, designates the park as a pick-up spot, so we drove over each Tuesday, never sure what we were going to get, hoping for strawberries and not kohlrabi.

This time it was the day after Thanksgiving, unseasonably warm, and twenty days before my fortieth birthday. Other families like ours were seizing the opportunity to burn the calories from that second (in my case, third) piece of pumpkin pie and make space for leftovers that evening. After about an hour—after the kids had started complaining, pleading to *finally* go to the play area, and after the birds had taken their late morning break from singing and foraging—I had the thought: *I will take forty walks here in the year after I turn forty to mark this threshold-crossing into midlife*.

As I ruminated on this unbidden gift of an idea, it became a plan, something I needed to do. I would take these forty walks. I would observe the changes—the

barren winter into the verdant spring, the spring into the lush summer, the summer into the polychromatic fall—and notice the changing seasons of my own soul at the same time—places of barrenness, places where the mind and soul felt stripped like the leaves of fall, places where a new faith or vocational yearnings were beginning to bud. Instead of trying to escape these changes of body and soul, like some do during a so-called midlife crisis, I would watch them, interrogate them, understand them. I would take these walks to make the discoveries that were still mine to make.

These walks, I thought, would become a chance for me to look in and up and down and around and ask God, "What are you up to in my life, and are you really where that famous breastplate of St. Patrick says you are, even though I don't always feel you there: before me, behind me, in the mouths of those who speak to me, in the eyes of those who see me? And what difference does it make, anyway?"

I would walk my way into midlife. But I would do it only three miles from home.

Others have done it differently, more adventurously. Elizabeth Gilbert ate, prayed, and loved her way around the world in her thirties. Bill Bryson walked the Appalachian Trail and gave us the gift of *A Walk in the Woods*. The biblical character known as the prodigal son—he had to have been about forty, right?—asked his father for his share of the inheritance and squandered it on riotous living, as the story goes.

But I've never been adventurous; most of my time spent walking in nature had been on a golf course until I sold my clubs a decade ago. And also, these adventures can feel like attempts to escape, or at least avoid. And some people might need that. Who hasn't felt the urge toward escape?

So I would escape about once a week, or so, into these meadows and woods, these hills and the valleys, so close they are practically in my backyard. I would never walk so far that I could forget I have commitments and responsibilities and obligations that comprise the fabric of my life; never so far that I could forget the joys and fears and anxieties that help make me who I am; never so far that I could forget these kids who don't say, "Bye," as I walk out the door because their noses are aimed at a screen and their ears are clogged by earbuds. Never so far that I wouldn't sometimes be able to bring them along, or bring my wife along, or invite a friend.

The prodigal son went into a far country and there discovered himself. I was going to stay closer to home.

Because I suspected that staying close would be key to discovering a spirituality for midlife. I wouldn't do it by going someplace new and bold, but by revisiting the familiar again and again, by staying in the backyard of my own life. After all, my life is the one thing I cannot escape. Even when I try, it always comes with me, this

life. If I was going to cross this threshold well—and the crossing can take twenty years, they say—I suspected staying close to home might be key.

And this: if there was one thing I still believed with something close to the certainty of faith, it was that God is not somewhere else. So three miles away would be as good as three thousand.

One more reason: I could spare the expense of walking the Appalachian Trail or the Camino de Santiago, with all that expensive gear. I only needed one thing. I already had a pair of Rockports, grandfatherly-looking walking shoes I bought shortly after my new dress shoes, and a Tilley, a hat that matched my wife's, which we bought on our honeymoon thirteen years ago. But I didn't have a walking stick. If Moses needed a staff for his forty, so would I.

So two days after Christmas and two weeks after my fortieth birthday, I drove to the shop at the Audubon center. The walking sticks huddled in an umbrella stand just inside the door near the thirty-percent-off Christmas kitsch. I tried them all. I leaned on them, compared their weights and lengths, tested their textures against the palm of my hand. I put aside the one with the broken compass on the top, the arrow always pointing to the "S." I certainly hoped I wouldn't need the one with the animal-track identification guide tacked to it. If I ever needed to distinguish between a cougar print and a bear track, I would just go home.

The clerk sensed my growing decision paralysis. "I've always liked the hickory ones," he said—the very one I was holding. It was plenty tall, just the right length for me to put both hands on the top and rest my chin on my hands. It was the right staff to support me, to rest my weight against. To part Harts Run, perhaps, if it ever should exceed its banks.

You think about these things: what you need with you to walk into midlife with a changing faith and an aching body and an elusive God. And you acquire a staff, something to lean on. Maybe you also need insight, the stories of someone who has explored this territory—reflections and investigations that can be your companion as you make your way into the backyard of your own life at its midpoint and get to know it better, maybe for the first time. Surely many of your concerns will be the same, the slopes and the valleys to explore will be similar: the inevitability of death; slow, ineluctable change; questions about faith and identity and God; a shifting sense of vocation; the longing to make a difference; boredom and ennui; the bane and blessing of relationships. How we live into these themes, and how they differ from the way we experienced them in the first half of our lives—that's what makes up the spirituality of midlife.

That's what this book is about: these overarching themes, explored in one particular year and through the life of one particular forty-year-old who took forty walks to reflect on them and make his discoveries so that you can take this book with you as you step across your threshold or continue your own exploration. So that along with your walking stick—whatever or whoever that happens to be in your life—you will have these stories to lean on.

It's January 1, 2:50 in the afternoon. It's cold, Pittsburgh cold, even in an El Niño year. I'm wearing the thermal underwear I bought on sale at the mall last March, jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and the winter jacket I picked up in October for five dollars at the Presbyterian Church harvest fair. I'm wearing a cap that makes me look like my grandfather, only mine has hidden earflaps that I can deploy to protect my ears from the wind chill. I'm wearing leather gloves. I'm holding my staff. I'm about to walk out.

Mary Clare, our six-year-old, is having a breakdown, a kindergarten hangover, unrecovered from a late New Year's Eve and too much sparkling grape juice. She's screaming, "I don't want you to go." But I'm going. As much as I hate to leave my wife, Ginger, with tired, whining kids, I announced yesterday my plan to take this walk. I kiss Mary Clare on the cheek and tell her I'll be back soon.

The door slams behind me, and the crying is muted by the seals of the exterior door and the winter wind rushing past my uncovered ears. I listen to the classical station on the short drive, winding down two curvy miles of Fairview Road, and I can feel myself relaxing. I am looking forward to this.

The first thing I see when I pull into the gravel drive is something I don't expect: other people. I didn't know about something called the First Day Hike. I didn't know that some American Hiking Society had given it a name and convinces thousands of people to walk tens of thousands of miles on New Year's Day each year. If I had known I might have waited until January 2, not wanting to be part of a fad.

But on January 1, I don't know this, so I wonder, *Are all of these people turning forty?*

— TRAIL ONE —

Facing Death and Change

I rebel against death, yet I know that
it is how I face death's inevitability
that is going to make me less or more fully alive.

–Madeleine L'Engle

Suppose we speak of the death of a cloud.
You look up in the sky and don't see
your beloved cloud anymore, and you cry,
"O my beloved cloud, you are no longer there.
How can I survive without you?" And you weep.

–Thich Nhat Hanh

WALK 1

I Tell You a Great Mystery

This gift-giving opened palm of a place, it didn't ask me what I wanted to receive on my first walk, what gift besides maids-a-milking I wished for on this Eighth Day of Christmas. If it had, I might have chosen a different image to notice, an alternate koan to contemplate, to circle in my mind as my feet stumble along this still unfamiliar terrain. Maybe I should have started in May, when nature's hands would have held out to me rainbows, bluebirds, butterflies, and other assorted wonders of spring.

But not on this day. Today it asks me to begin with the end in mind. It gives me a gift it will take some time to fully unwrap. On the other hand: Why not? Why not step into the threshold with this difficult mystery in mind?

As I park, I see two perky couples are getting out of an SUV. A double-date aura hangs about them, a flirtatious manner as they skip to the playground, radiating youthful energy. *No, they are not turning forty*, I think. *They are half my age.*

I consult my map and start along the same route my family took when we were here after Thanksgiving: past the shop and the education center on the left, to the entrance of the Upper Fields trail, which will lead me to the Spring Hollow trail. I notice the brown brush ranged along the path. Since there is no snow, I can see how leaves still cover the ground. The green grass on Upper Fields transitions to gravelly dirt as the trail inclines. A few red honeysuckle berries hang on an otherwise bare bush.

As the path turns upward, a mystery: at shoulder height to my right, a red length of yarn, a few inches long, dangles from a branch. Another one hangs fifteen yards ahead, and another after that. These did not grow here; someone tied them on purpose, and I can't imagine why.

Near the top of the first short incline, I pass beneath a dead tree that has snapped six feet from the ground and fallen above the path, lodging itself in the forked trunk of a tree on the other side, just high enough for me to walk under without ducking. The splinters, rough and sharp at the break, rise like stalagmites from the trunk where the gray-brown bark has fallen off, exposing the pale wood.

As I inspect the tree my field of vision widens, and I see what I have not registered

until now—signs of death all around me: dozens more like this toppled tree, fallen this way and that like the dead on a battlefield; barren ground beneath my feet; brown leaves, cloaking the frozen earth like a pall; denuded trees, vulnerable, exposed; the deep silence of winter. All of it contrasts sharply with the *joie de vivre* of the couples I saw when I arrived, as if to say, *It all comes to an end. It doesn't last, not the energy of youth, not life itself.* The varied and vivid shades of life fade into the mundane tones of death. It can come with a sudden, brittle break, as with the tree, or with the slow loss of chlorophyll in the leaves. And what part of creation is immune to this process?

"The heavens tell the glory of God and the earth declares God's handiwork," says Psalm 8. But today creation seems to be declaring something else, what another psalm affirms: "As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower in the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more."

As I continue, I can't shake the image of the tree or the lesson of the psalm. I wonder if I am uncovering the gift I am to receive on my first walk. Is the beginning of midlife too soon to ponder these things—death and decay in general, and also the inevitability of my own?

"Thanks," I mutter under my breath, not sure if I mean it. Maybe those maids-a-milking would have been better. But I realize I am primed to see these things, more ready than I might have expected.

A few days ago Ginger and I lingered at the dinner table while the kids played in the family room. Usually we all leave the table at the same time, the kids to take their plates to the kitchen, Ginger to put away leftovers, and I to my dishwashing post. But not that night.

"I can't believe she's dead," Ginger said, almost inaudibly. "And I can't imagine what Susan's going through."

Ginger grew up with Susan. They went to high school together, served on youth mission trips together, sang in the same choirs. Ginger had just learned that Susan's twelve-year-old daughter had died of leukemia.

Ginger said she couldn't imagine, but, of course, we could imagine: the clothes in the laundry basket that would never be worn again; the laundry basket that would sit there for months until a gentle friend or relative convinced her it was time; the unmade bed; the way the grocery bill would be a little less each month, and there would be no need to remember to buy Captain Crunch, a favorite cereal; the way she would avoid the cereal aisle altogether. We *could* imagine, and that's what broke our hearts. We sat silently, listening to the giggles of our children and aching for a mother who would hear giggles now only in her memory.

Yes, I have been prepared to notice these things.

For the past couple of months two students have been coming to my office every other week for their independent study. We have been studying the themes of grief and lament in Christian memoir. Along with books that have become classics, like *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis and *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff, we read Madeleine L'Engle's memoir, *Two-Part Invention*, that weaves the story of her meeting her husband, Hugh, with the last months of his life as he succumbed to cancer. I also required the students to read novelist Ann Hood's memoir *Comfort*, the account of her and her family's grief after her five-year-old daughter died suddenly from a virulent form of strep.

"If this book does not make you weep," I warned my students, "I'll wonder if you're human."

Hood's is not a Christian memoir, but I wanted my students, who are preparing to be pastors, to see how she describes her and her husband's visits with pastors and rabbis as they sought comfort in their grief. "Foolishly, I believed that clergypeople might hold the answers I screamed to God for every night. . . . But I saw how their eyes drifted toward the clocks on their walls, and when an hour had passed, they assured us time would heal and sent us on our miserable way." I wanted my students to hear her words, to feel her indictment of our work.

And to appreciate her discovery. Three years after her daughter's death, she writes, "Our loss still filled our home, every corner of it. It still filled us. Time doesn't heal, I had learned, it just keeps moving. And it takes us with it."

And now, I wonder, is she alluding to that hymn, the one I know we'll sing on the first Sunday of the New Year, the truth of which even a middle-aged doubter can't question, however much he might want to avoid it?

> *Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away;*
> *They fly forgotten, as a dream, dies at the opening day.*

The prayer request in worship the Sunday before Christmas also made me think of this hymn. "Pray for the family of Frank Thompson," Laura said, and I saw a few nods of recognition as she filled in the details. Frank was coaching his daughter's basketball practice when he collapsed on the court and died instantly of a heart attack, with his daughter watching; Frank was forty-two.

Time doesn't heal. It just keeps moving. And it takes us with it.

The invitation to consider the inevitable is all around us, but we have so much else to think about that we push these thoughts away, repress them as thoroughly as we can.

Until a walk in the woods opens your eyes to what you've been hiding from, been defended against for decades. Until a snapped-off tree invites you to face the fact of mortality.

Upper Fields meets Spring Hollow a hundred yards beyond the fallen tree. Spring Hollow slopes into a valley after it passes between two stately chestnut oaks a yard apart, sentries guarding the entrance to the valley below. A rapid descent with three switchback curves, and I'm in the valley heading back in the direction of the parking lot.

Eventually I arrive at Harts Run. This still-trickling stream testifies to the above-average temperatures of this winter. I hear the water sluicing beneath the footbridge, rolling under me and down into the valley toward the road that takes its name from this trickle: Harts Run Road.

Living water—that's what some streams of Christianity would call this, those that insist baptisms be performed in flowing water. No dunk tank or swimming pool or still-as-ice lake, but rippling, living water. There's not enough water here to submerge a new convert, though plenty for a Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal sprinkling. Watching it, I recall that Jesus told a woman at a well that living water would spring forth from her soul. Here is a source of life for birds, squirrels, chipmunks—who knows what else. For the deer that pant for flowing streams just like this one.

My prayer book has the minister say at some point in a funeral, "In the midst of life, we are in death," as if those gathered need the reminder. And that seems to be the lesson being impressed on me as I stand here above the stream: in the midst of life, indeed, we are in death, *so stop avoiding it*. After all, I have just walked through a valley of death—the fallen trees, like a community of dead comrades; the not-yet-decomposed leaves; the gray winter sky blanketing me like a shroud. But when the clouds break briefly and I see the flashing of daylight in the stream's mini-waves, it occurs to me the opposite is true as well: in the midst of death, we are in life.

Spring Hollow leads me out of the valley. A few sharp turns, some panting as I climb, and I'm back on level ground. The path widens and straightens, and at the end, though I can't see it yet, is the play area to which the perky couples bounded, flaunting their youthfulness.

As I walk in that direction, behold!, a snippet of red yarn tied to a twig. But not yarn alone this time; from the yarn dangles a pine cone. *Of course—mystery solved.* In my mind I can see a kindergarten class here on a field trip, twenty bundles of energy huddled around tables in the activity room, gluing bits of yarn onto pine

cones, then messily dabbing peanut butter onto each scale, and pressing birdseed into the peanut butter: kid-made birdfeeders.

"You are helping the birds survive the winter," I imagine the activity director saying, "because it's hard for them to find food when it's snowy." These kids are agents of life, kids for whom it's too soon to contemplate the braided mystery:

> *In the midst of life, we are in death.*
> *In the midst of death, we are in life.*

But at forty, it's not too soon for me.

Some mysteries are easier to solve than others. And some mysteries are not meant to be solved but inhabited. "Behold, I tell you a great mystery," the apostle Paul wrote as he tried to make sense of the sting of death and the power of resurrection. I wonder, as I walk past the pavilion by the pond, now able to see the playground and the parking lot just past it, if the simple Christian narrative many of us have adopted—life, death, heaven, with its confident assurance of the immortality of the soul—shields us from what seems to be the necessary task of exploring this mystery: death in life, life in death, woven inseparably together, the two, part of God's story, part of the story of this place, part of creation's story from very close to the beginning.

And, I'm beginning to see, part of my story as well.