

Prologue

In the basement, tucked away among scores of old photos, is a rumpled sepia image of a six-year-old me, proudly beholding a turtle in a cardboard box (see p. 137). I'm wearing a baseball cap over pigtails, and a pair of shorts, no shirt, my face fixed in contemplation. If I were kneeling beside a bed, head bowed before a cross or a picture of Jesus, you'd assume I was praying. In this book, I will be telling you how I have spiraled back round to those early days when something in me knew that the turtle was a sacred creature. Indeed, the old photo reminds me today that, once upon a time, I knelt on the ground and prayed to the Spirit who greeted me in her small, tough, scarred, shelled body. Hello, God.

I always feared I was crazy. Note the past tense. Not that I know today that I'm not; I just no longer fear it. A sweet gift of aging is perspective. The accumulation of time can help frame our lives. We can become clearer and more confident and move beyond caring much about some things, like how our adversaries may regard us, as we care more about other things—doing what we can to help raise up younger folks to take care of one another, themselves, and the whole created earth and its many varied creatures, human and other. The younger ones increasingly become our love and our legacy.

What we say, or refuse to say, about God and the world can matter a great deal to us as we get older, and perhaps also to those who are coming along behind us on the journey. But our presentations—on paper or virtual pages, Facebook or blogs, fading photos or airbrushed portraits—are never entirely the right, much less the only, words or images that might do some justice to ourselves, the world, and the elusive Spirit swirling around and among us. Much as we may think we know, try hard as we may to remember, our offerings of truth are always partial and fragmented. Still, we must speak or write or otherwise let people know what we believe. We stay silent at the expense of not only our souls—where the Sacred stirs within us and within our communities—but also the strength and well-being of our societies and the whole earth.

Because so much is at stake, we do indeed need to speak or write, preach or sing, paint or compose, or somehow express what we value,

what we honestly think about what is going on around us and within us. With this in mind, I decided early in my seventieth year that it was time to write another book, as much for the younger folk, my nephews, nieces, and their generation, as anyone else. But whoever you may be, whatever your age or identity, your religious affiliation, if any, or your politics, I am writing to you.

This book will tell you how I, one small human on planet earth, have experienced the Sacred, or God, or Spirit, and what I've come to believe over the years. I will be telling you how my mind has changed, and how it has not. I'm not out to proselytize or convince you, but to merely recount and describe my adventures over seventy years with "something" that moves and pushes and yearns through us, and with us, and beyond us, connecting our lives—yours and mine—not only with each other in ways that can be noticed through eyes of faith but also in ways that we cannot, I truly believe, fully imagine.

I see the Spirit in the turtle at whom I worshipfully gazed as a child, but not until I looked at the crumpled up photo recently did I notice the shadow of the photographer, which became for me another image of God—the power who produces the picture yet whose presence often goes undetected. And then, of course, there are the trees and the ground. A whole book could be written about that one photograph. Even so, the photograph images a tiny fraction of how much God there is in every frame of life and, from another perspective, how much creatureliness—human and other—there is in God.

So this book is about God and turtles and kids. It is about strong spiritual, social, and political efforts to transform and heal the wounds of racism and sexism, economic inequality and environmental distress, and rigid definitions of gender. It's about a Father God and His only Son who have played both protective and damaging roles in my life and in the lives of other people and creatures throughout the history of the church and world. It's a book about the tenacious, wicked, woman-denying, sexually out of control, shape of patriarchal religion to this day, a violent state of affairs that has driven millions of strong women beyond the bounds of organized religion.

This is a book about women's ordination and "coming out." It is about godding (a word I adapted decades ago from the works of Paul Tillich and Mary Daly). It's about godding through the love and power

of good parenting and great teachers. It's about the "power of the erotic and the love of God" on a collision course with God the Father and Jesus Christ, as traditionally constructed by church fathers. It's about Jesus-Liberator, simultaneously angry and compassionate, bringing down structures of oppression and leading movements for liberation close to home and around the world.

This is a book about transformative spiritual friendship and relational mutuality at many levels of our life together. The book is about horses as priests, an image that surprised my friend Tom, an Episcopal bishop, when I told him about the Sacred Power meeting me through my deepening relationship with my mare, "Red." It's about the spirits in the hills of western North Carolina, where I hope to spend my last years here on this bruised, brave earth. The book is about the music I have always enjoyed as backdrop and sometimes foreground to the days of my life that have been best.

It's about many things, this book, but mainly about God.

By God, I do not mean a far off deity who creates us and then leaves us on our own. I do not refer to a paternalistic or maternalistic God who oversees us like a parent or a bishop. I most definitely am not thinking of a traditionally "Christian" God, to whom we are taught to look up and pray for particular blessings because we either do or, more often, do not deserve His blessings.

By God, I mean our power for generating right, or mutual, relation, a theme I explored some thirty-five years ago in my doctoral dissertation, which was published in 1982 as *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*.¹

After forty years of ministry as a proudly "irregular" Episcopal priest and more than thirty as a Christian feminist theologian, teaching various liberation and systematic theologies—some interesting, some compelling, some boring—I am no longer much concerned with academic theologies. I retired from that world in 2005 and have been glad to leave that work to communities of sister and brother academics, who will publish, debate, and teach their scholarship to each new generation of students.

But "theology" is not simply an academic discipline and it need not be inaccessible to everyone except scholars in religion. When I was getting my PhD in theology at Union Theological Seminary in New

York City in the late 1970s, my savvy academic advisor Tom F. Driver said something to me that shaped my work as a theologian. Exhausted from reading the books of academic theologians, mainly white European men, day and night, week upon week, I made an appointment to meet with Tom Driver. I was discouraged. There was so much I didn't know, so many men and so little time. "I will never know all of this!" I sighed. "I'll never be able to learn what all of these men thought!" I handed him a list of about a hundred theologians whose names had appeared in the footnotes of the books I'd been reading. Tom took the list, looked it over, smiled, and handed the list back to me with a question, "Who are these people?" This was Tom's cryptic, lighthearted way of helping me relax. He was letting me know that I need not worry about such academic trivia; after all, even he had no idea who these men on my list were.

And so, I am happy to say that, more than ten years after my retirement as a professor, I am still a theologian from the tips of my toes, to borrow an expression from my wonderful horse-loving pal and sister theologian Gretchen Grimshaw. I enjoy thinking about God. I am energized by critical thinking, and I aspire to approach theology honestly, respectfully, intelligently and, from moment to moment, whimsically. I do better when I take neither my notions about "God" nor myself too seriously—and neither as absolute, or final.

There was a woman whose name I don't remember but whose words have never left me. She was a member of St. Clement's Episcopal Church in New York City's Times Square where I did my field work as a seminarian at Union Theological Seminary in the early 1970s. She and I were discussing the creed and our difficulties with it. The woman said, "The only faith statement I can truthfully make is, 'I believe in God'—and I can only say that in sign language."

It's more or less true that there's no such thing as a new idea about God or anything else, so I don't assume that anything in these pages is either new or entirely mine. In fact, one of the basic themes you will encounter here is the centrality of our relation, connection, and mutuality to any experience or understanding we may have of the Sacred, or of life itself. One of the implications of a relational theology is that all that we are, all that we do, and all that we think is connected and, therefore, relative to everything else. No one, no idea, no thing, stands alone, on

its own, ever. This is as true of God and Jesus as it is of you and me and our ideas.

“In the beginning is relation.”² Jewish social mystic Martin Buber’s simple observation holds the clue to everything. The source of our very being, our human being, our creature being, is relation. Our bodies and those of planets and stars begin in relation. There is no thing outside of relation to every thing else. This means that we are relatives—I and thou, you and me—like it or not. You are my cousin, my mother, my brother, whether we share gender or racial or ethnic or religious or ideological or species identities. Love me, fear me, welcome me, hate me, give me life or death. You have the power, and so do I, through our relation.

Readers familiar with identity politics,³ in which the particularity of our race, gender, or ethnicity matters to our worldview, may wonder how this fits with our radical relationality, in which no dimension of who we are stands alone, on its own, apart from others. Like so much in life, it’s a both-and, not an either-or. That I am a woman matters a great deal, to me and to many. It always has, always will. That I am a woman matters not one whit apart from everything else that I am and apart from others. These statements are equally true.

Two of the people with whom, in the course of my life, I have most consciously and explicitly explored “mutual relation” as a theological foundation and ethical imperative have died—my beloved Bev, with whom I shared vigorous academic explorations in the late 1960s, and a life journey together beginning in the early 1980s; and Sister Angela, who joined me on a spiritual quest in the early 1990s. You will meet them both in these pages. Each is in some mystical realm a co-author to what I am writing.

My third companion in wrestling intellectually through the meanings, challenges, and politics of mutuality has been Janet Surrey, a “spiritual friend.”⁴ Jan and I met in 1987. At the time I was teaching feminist liberation theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Jan was a clinical psychologist on the staff of McLean Hospital in neighboring Belmont. Almost immediately, we realized each other’s passion for mutuality and admitted that each of us was discouraged by the dearth of mutual relation in our respective professional realms. In fact each of us had been fantasizing about switching

fields of inquiry, Jan moving into theology, me into psychology. “No!” each of us warned the other. “Don’t do that!” We quickly disabused each other of any romantic notions we had about the other’s profession.

In the past ten years, Jan has become an insight dialogue dharma instructor. Over thirty years, she has also become one of my most cherished friends and a sister sojourner in seeking to build mutuality wherever we can in life. As a draft of this book was nearing completion in the summer of 2015, Jan and I went hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains in celebration of our seventieth birthdays. Over five days we hiked, sat together in meditation, ate simply, pondered the state of the world in the immediate aftermath of the Charleston massacre, listened to President Obama’s inspired eulogy at shooting victim Rev. Clementa Pinckney’s funeral, and talked a lot about aging and loss. We shared grief and sorrow, and we also found a great deal of gratitude and peace together. Our shared “obsession” with mutuality, as Jan herself has written, has drawn us both about as deeply as humans can go into thinking about what I, as a Christian, would call God—the Spirit that I have long believed is our power for generating right, or mutual, relation in all arenas of our life together in this world.

As we hiked, I told Jan about my horse Red’s message to me from the great beyond—Red died in 2013: “Lift up your feet!” Red tells me every morning as I begin the day. As we hiked on, Jan added, “Yes—lift, move, place.” Lift up your feet. Move them. Place them. A way of relating to the earth. A way of relating to one another. A simple mantra. Lift. Move. Place. The way to walk the path we’re on, making mutuality as we go.

As we walk the path, we come eventually to see more clearly, as if from a mountain peak: we see ourselves together. We see that we really are one family of earth-creatures. We notice the Spirit weaving among us, binding us together. We realize that, in the beginning and in the end, what we do as characters here on earth makes little or no difference, because God is God, and Life is Life, and Life includes Death, and Death precedes Life. And so on we go, sisters and brothers, in relation to one another and everything else, now and forever more. Blessed be.

But please do not take the preceding paragraph out of context and contend that I am suggesting in this book that the shape of our lives doesn’t matter. Because it does. What we do with our lives—lifting,

moving, placing our feet—makes all the difference in the world to those who live with us on planet earth, humans and other creatures, and what we do with our lives matters to us, how we experience and understand the value and meanings of our own lives. What we do matters more than we can possibly imagine because each of us so deeply yearns for love—to love and to be loved, to experience the joys and happiness of right, mutual relation, here on earth while we are here.

Indeed, the Creator may be weaving all of our lives—past present future—together, somehow forgiving and transforming the damages we have done into what She eternally yearns for Her creation to be. And perhaps, in the Wisdom of God, everything we call “good” and everything we call “evil” is truly and radically relative, so fundamentally in relation are our lives and deaths to all that has been and all that will be. God’s glorious ways of weaving our lives together, in all the goodness and the evil that we do in this world, is beyond our capacities to even imagine, much less know. But we are responsible to do everything we can to treat one another, and ourselves, as beloved sisters and brothers who were born to share this time and space. The evil done in our fear and greed may not have the last word in God’s eternal realm, but too often it is the last awful act, word, or image experienced by human beings and other creatures in this world.

So here and now, we have a task—to help give shape and voice to the Sacred, Her wisdom and Her compassion, Her love and Her liberation, so that we creatures can more fully enjoy and celebrate Her presence and Her movement in our midst, whoever and wherever we are today.

Books are linear in shape, moving from beginning to end, much like we usually think of ourselves creeping along in chronological time. With this in mind, I urge you not to imagine that the perspectives in this book, or the theological images, or the stories themselves, which are told more or less in chronological order, can be appreciated or understood fully in chronological order. Everything that is important in this book, if read in the spirit in which I offer it, should burst out of chronological time into *kairos*, or God’s time, which I explore more fully in part one.

If you read this book from beginning to end, which is a good way to read it, please do not be confined to its linear shape or to the literal

meanings of any of its words. If there is some truth here, it should slip off the page into your voices and dreams and songs, and weave its way into the fabrics of your lives and of our life together, its meanings evolving as it thrives and eventually dies, giving way to deeper or other truths.

THE TRINITY AND THE SHAPE OF THIS BOOK

For many Christians, the Trinity makes little sense. It is a tradition passed on to us via the historic creeds such as the Nicene (325/381 CE) and Athanasian (probably late fourth century CE).⁵ Especially among Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and the more “catholic” Protestant communions such as the Anglican/Episcopal and Lutheran, belief in the Trinity is assumed to be essential to the faith, but the doctrine is obscured by abstraction. Sometimes referred to theologically as a formula, the doctrine of the Trinity surely defies most Christians’ best abilities to reason or imagine: God is Father, Son, and Spirit—three in one, one in three, and that is that.

But that is not simply that. What on earth could possibly have given rise to such an elusive piece of theology? As a doctrine of faith and a liturgical centerpiece, the Trinity is emblematic of the alienation from the institutional church of many of Jesus’s most loving friends.

But there is an important intuition in this particular Christian teaching. Despite its obscure philosophical origins, it has been, from the beginning, a metaphor for an intuition of the relationality at the heart of God. However abstract, the Trinity is an image of relation—the relationality of all that is good and wise, beautiful, and true.

It is an image of God rooted in an intuition of relation—the same intuition that the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber would explore two millennia later in *I and Thou*. The Trinity represents the connectedness of all that is Sacred.

Along these lines, Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential theologians in Christian history, described the Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son.⁶

This is metaphor, poetry, imagination—but why “Father and Son”? Why not “Mother and Child”? Why not “Creator and Creation”? Why not simply “I and Thou”? Why is Christianity rooted in the iconic patriarchal relationship?

Why, indeed. The doctrine of the Trinity images a Father-Son relationship because Christian theology, from its beginning, has been androcentric, male-centered, at its core. It would not have occurred to the fathers of Christianity—or their Hebrew forebears—to conceptualize God in any way other than masculine. Insofar as these theologians were attempting to stay true to Scripture, their personal and relational images of God were profoundly patriarchal. The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated by churchmen and philosophers who could only imagine God as a reflection of their maleness, which was, and is, the basis of patriarchy itself. Any other images—especially those affirming strong women or femaleness as sacred or virtuous—were unthinkable to early church fathers, and so too to most Christian men and women up to the present.

Nonetheless, the primary impulse behind the Trinity has been radically relational all along. Despite its male-dominated origins and history and its static formulation—Father, Son, Spirit—something in the doctrine of the Trinity pushes, always pushes, beyond the doctrine itself and beyond all doctrines. This “something” is the relational character of God, the movement of the Sacred to connect, the energy of the Spirit to reach beyond itself toward the other, the irrepressibility of the power of God, or Love, to expand and forever move us into new places in which we are likely to be uncomfortable, all the more so if we are wed to static, unchanging experiences and images of God.

This book is shaped around the primary intuition or impulse behind the doctrine of the Trinity—the radical relationality of God, which calls, lures, pushes, urges us beyond where we are now, and who we are now, toward that for which we are never fully prepared. Basic to my evolving faith is that the most deeply healing and fully liberating energies of Christianity, and of all religions, spin us beyond doctrine into emerging opportunities for spiritual yearning and ever-deepening gratitude.

In this spirit, parts one and two attempt to illustrate how my experiences and understandings of God as Father and Son have affected, both positively and negatively, my life and those of others in the world. Part three is an effort to describe the Spirit bursting through our lives, spiritualities, and theologies—and carrying us beyond our comfort zones, beyond familiar ground, beyond organized religion, and most assuredly beyond the theological and liturgical authority of Christianity’s Trinity.

Does this mean that I have “left the church”? This question follows me around in my work among Christians, and I am happy to answer it. I seldom “go to church” because I have become weary of the patriarchal shape of liturgy and mainstream Christian theology even in relatively liberal, justice-loving denominations like the Episcopal Church. Attending church usually wears me down and depresses my own best energies. So I seek to find or build community, essential as a relational basis for life itself. I find community wherever I can, sometimes through Christian churches and other religious organizations, but often through the NAACP, the Democratic Party, and with other writers, horse people, musicians, friends and neighbors, Christians and others, who yearn and work for a more justice-loving society and world. Whatever the context and community, I am still a Jesus-person, an older white woman who loves the story of the man from Nazareth whom I experience as a brother and friend, and whose sacred Spirit does indeed “walk and talk” with me, as the old hymn affirms.

I am shaping this book in a loosely sketched chronological order and employing Trinitarian images because a rather traditionally shaped—although liberal, feminist, LGBTQ, and liberationist—Christian faith has provided the basis for much of my life personally and professionally. It has been interesting to study my own life, as well as aspects of the world and God, through the lenses of the Trinity. As you move along through these pages, perhaps you will be able to connect your life experiences with mine and catch glimpses of the Sacred as She shapes our lives in relation to the world around us.

Part one is a bittersweet exploration of my early years, the childhood years, in which I found meaning in relation to God as Father. I do not mean that Jesus and the Spirit were absent from the first thirty years of my life any more than that the experience of God as Father or Mother or Parent has played no role in the last four decades. My faith is rooted in an ever-deepening belief that the relationality of God has permeated my life and the life of the world, from beginning to end. Part one is intended both to tell stories about God that correspond, roughly and imprecisely, to my own childhood and young adulthood, and to challenge the patriarchal authority projected onto God as “Father” for over two millennia of Christian history. I am suggesting in this book, and especially in part one, that the image of God as Father is steeped in

our childhood as a human race and as Christians. I am hoping not to be harsh, but I do believe that we humans need to grow up.

Part two presents some images of Incarnation. As a Christian doctrine, “incarnation” historically has referred either solely or primarily to the Incarnation—the in-flesh-ment—of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth. For many decades, I have focused my own theological work on helping expand our understandings of incarnation so as to include all humans and other creatures, each and all of us bearers of God and able “to god”—to participate in the ongoing movement of God in making right, mutual relation throughout the whole creation. In part two, I offer thirteen images of incarnation, snapshots of how I have experienced God as embodied in people, movements, events, and creation itself.

Part three is intended to illuminate the movement of the Spirit, who is bursting open many categories and assumptions that have shaped our lives and grounded the work of theologians and religious leaders. The Spirit is never finished with us, even when we die. Part three is meant to suggest the ongoing, eternal movement of God the Spirit through and beyond the cosmos as we know it (or imagine we do). Part three has been a challenge to write—more truthfully to *stop* writing—because just when I’ve been ready to turn this manuscript in for publication, something else happens in the world, the nation, or my own life, that illuminates what, I believe, the Spirit is moving us to do, or not to do, at this time in our life together.

At the beginning of each of the three parts is a brief theological reflection on the Trinity—Father, Son, Spirit. Those who wish not to be bothered with thinking about the Trinity can easily skip these introductory pieces and move on. Those who share my curiosity about how the Christian Trinity has come into being and what differences, for better and worse, it has made in the lives of Christians over two millennia might want to read the pages at the beginning of each part.

About this book and the 2016 election in the United States: I finished the first draft in late summer 2015 and *She Flies On* was accepted that fall for publication in 2017. This gave me time to take care of editing and notes and to revise the manuscript. What I could not have anticipated was the terrifying, turbulent character of the presidential race, its debates and primaries beginning just about the time I

submitted the first draft to the publisher. Much less had I imagined the results of the election.

Interestingly, Trump's election notwithstanding, something had become apparent to me as I set out in the fall 2016 to revise the early draft: without much revision at all, part three already explored a number of the most important issues and disturbing dynamics being unleashed in the 2016 presidential race as well as down-ticket competitions. I had only to add a few words here and there to reflect the current—and ongoing—state of our life together in this nation and world and in our local communities. These dynamics, their roots and significance, infuse the shape and substance of the book in its entirety, not only part three.

She Flies On reflects the relational character of God as I have experienced Her dynamic spiritual movement. Traditional Christian theology refers to the basis of this sacred dynamic relational movement as the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit. This book tells you why, over the years, this androcentric language has seemed to me increasingly small, restrictive, and oppressive not only to women and girls, but also to men and boys, and to the Creator and Her glorious creation.