

INTRODUCTION

Proceed with Caution

If you're looking for a book to challenge your thinking, want to see heresy in action, are interested in finding a definition of *Christ* that works for you, or are curious about the thoughts of an eighty-five-year-old Episcopal priest who has gone through hell and back, then this book may interest you—especially the part where a fire engine broadsides him on his motorcycle.

However, if you don't want anyone to mess with your thinking, refuse to disagree with what your church tells you, long to live in the fourth century, believe that NoOneUpThere wrote the Bible and that Jesus rose from the dead, this book could be dangerous—but I'd still love for you to read it.

When I went to seminary almost sixty years ago, most of the ideas in this book were not even ideas yet. I was not aware of new, exciting approaches to studying God, Jesus, Paul, or the newly found eighteen gospels. In this book, I want to give you a bird's-eye view of how much has drastically changed over the past six decades. In my seminary days, we learned that Paul wrote fourteen of the letters in the New Testament. Today we know he wrote only seven of them. In 1957, we studied only the four gospels instead of the twenty-two we know of now, and the idea of a historical Jesus didn't exist.

I begin this book with my unusual faith journey from childhood to my ninth decade. I then offer a unique and controversial perspective on twenty church-related subjects and introduce you to a bunch of Jesuses, including the real one, who packs an earthshaking message that sometimes gets lost in all the felonious dogma and doctrine of the church. I suggest that the birth narrative and

resurrection are powerful metaphors and discuss how we should prepare for death. Finally, I share some ideas about how to mend the institutional church, which I see as broken.

Bil's Dictionary

Every person has his or her own vocabulary. Here's mine, so you can better understand my story.

agape: The Greek word for the highest form of love. Agape is unconditional and totally accepting of everyone. Chapter 5 goes into some detail on this subject.

Annie: The woman to whom I have been married since June 17, 1961. She gave birth to our three daughters, Gretchen (54), Heidi (52), and Alison (50), and is still my best friend who enjoys doing everything with me except watching sports and *Lockup* on television. She likes to be called Anne, but after all these years, she is Annie to me.

apostle: One who is sent. (See also *disciple*.)

Brad Allen: A very important friend whom you will meet and get to know throughout my book.

Dead Sea Scrolls: Ancient Jewish writings discovered in 1947 in a cave near the Dead Sea and thought to be written by the Essenes (an apocalyptic group that existed at the time of Jesus). They are sometimes confused with the Nag Hammadi Library, ancient Gnostic writings that were discovered in 1945 by a Bedouin in the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi.

disciple: One who is taught. (See also *apostle*.)

Docetism: One who believes that Jesus appeared human but was really God and only pretended that the nails in his hands and feet hurt.

Father Tom Schutter: A man to whom this book was dedicated.

Tom became a close friend when I heard that he was using my books to teach some of his classes. He was very progressive, loved Bishop John Spong's material, and was a true pastor. I was honored to be one of the three speakers at his "Celebration of Life" service, attended by over two thousand people. On the way home from that celebration, I told Annie that I needed to write a book honoring him. Here it is.

fundamentalist: One who reads the Bible literally, loves the book of Revelation, preaches fire-and-brimstone sermons, and uses lots of threats.

Gnostic: Pertaining to the belief that the divine had become wrapped up in evil forces and the only way to understand it was by acquiring secret knowledge (gnosis).

Hellenism: The spread of Greek culture and language throughout the Mediterranean, starting around the time of Alexander the Great, that heavily influenced the early church.

IUCC: Irvine United Congregational Church, which welcomes all people regardless of where they are on their life's journey, reaches out to hurting folks all over the world, provides trained listeners to help anyone going through life's challenges, and openly discusses everything. IUCC even lets me hang around. I bet Jesus would like IUCC. (See also *Open and Affirming*.)

Jesus Seminar: A group within the Westar Institute of two hundred-plus scholars, called fellows, from all over the world who meet regularly to discuss all aspects of religion from a scholarly point of view. The seminar was started in 1985 by Robert Funk and other prominent scholars. I am a huge fan, read the group's materials, attend some of their conferences, and find them a breath of fresh air in an antiquated system.

Jewish Jesus: Jesus was a Jew his whole life. He did not start the Christian church and would have had no idea what the word *Christian* meant. All his early Followers were Jewish, as was Paul. I repeat this ad nauseam in my books because too many still believe Jesus was Christian.

Lake of Galilee: Also known as the Sea of Galilee, Lake of Gennesaret (or Geneseret), Lake of Chinnereth, Lake of Tiberias, Lake of Tabariyeh, or Lake of Tarichaea. A lake in northern Palestine that is thirteen miles long and eight miles wide. It has now been fished out, but in its heyday, it was very important to the Romans, the Herodians, and Jesus.

Messiah: Hebrew word meaning “the anointed one.” In Greek, it’s *Christos*, from which we have gotten the word *Christ*. (*Christ* is not Jesus’s last name, but some people use it as a cuss word.)

midrash: In Judaism, the art of interpreting the written as well as the oral Torah. To understand the deeper meaning of the New Testament gospels, one must use the art of midrash.

Nag Hammadi Library: A collection of about fifty texts discovered in 1945 by a Bedouin in the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi. These writings are sometimes confused with the Dead Sea Scrolls.

NoOneUpThere: My term for a theistic god who doesn’t exist, especially in the twenty-first century, when most people know better but won’t admit it. When we get rid of NoOneUpThere, the message of Jesus starts to make even greater sense.

Open and Affirming (or O&A): A designation given to churches, institutions, and synagogues that accept all people wherever they are on life’s journey. Unfortunately, most churches have lists, some very long, of those who aren’t acceptable in their club. Lists are the work of the devil, who doesn’t exist.

rector: In the Anglican Communion, the person in charge of a church, hired by a vestry or board of directors, who has a great deal of authority—too much, in my opinion.

St. Mattress: A very popular church where one doesn't even have to get out of bed to attend. Some folks call it St. Sack's.

Sunday school theology: A belief that goes something like this: God is a white man who lives up in heaven, runs the world, judges all and then sends them to hell, wrote the King James English Bible, sent his only son down to be murdered for you, listens to and answers prayers, and hates sex. His son is divine and white, started Christianity, was the first Christian, performed unbelievable miracles, started the church, wrote *The Book of Common Prayer*, and then ascended like a rocket to heaven (he is still orbiting) and sent down a ghost. His last name is Christ, and he disapproves of those who are not heterosexual or anyone who isn't perfect. Sound familiar?

Torah: A Hebrew word meaning “guidance or direction” that later became the basis for Jewish law, or the Law of God as given to Moses. It includes the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Westar Institute: See *Jesus Seminar*.

Wisdom comes with age. But sometimes age comes alone.

—Unknown

My Unique Faith Journey

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

—Kent M. Keith, “Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments”

I suspect all people feel their life journey and faith journey is unique because every human being is unique. There can be no “one size fits all.” My faith journey explains where I am today—a long way from where I started this journey on October 28, 1932.

I was born in Detroit, the second child and only son of an Episcopal clergyman and a schoolteacher. I was baptized when I was three weeks old, whether I wanted to be or not. I can’t remember a thing about it. My mother said I was a good kid. When I was four, our family moved to Philadelphia, where my father had accepted the position of rector at a dying church that needed a resurrection.

My father was a flamboyant, outspoken, controversial clergyman who packed his church every Sunday. He was my childhood hero, and as much as I wanted to emulate him, I was totally overwhelmed by the idea of preaching two or three sermons weekly. One of my favorite childhood games was “church,” where I was the minister, usually doing some serious preaching to a nonexistent congregation.

The Church

Dad’s church was the most important part of my childhood and adolescent life. However, Sunday school was so boring that I dropped out at eleven years old. In the sixth grade I was sent to a

private Episcopal boys' day school because I was not doing much in my predominantly black public school.

The new school, the Episcopal Academy, had chapel every day and sacred studies once a week, both of which I found extremely boring except when Dad spoke in chapel. He upset everything, but the students loved him. Most of the other speakers were snoozers. I was a flop at everything at prep school except going to Saturday detention, at which I excelled because of my big mouth and “forgetting” to do all my homework. In 1950, I barely graduated from prep school, ranking fifty-fifth out of a class of fifty-seven.

Church, not school, was the center of my life. I loved Christ Church and St. Michael's in Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was an acolyte—a youth group participant and leader, a gofer for Dad, and a helper to anyone who needed assistance. When I was fourteen I was awarded a special cross for my devotion and loyalty to the church.

My Wake-Up Call

After high school I went to Kenyon College, in Gambier, Ohio, founded by an Episcopal bishop in 1824. It was an all-men's school then with less than five hundred students. My higher education started slow. Studying got in the way of partying, and I almost flunked out at the end of the first semester of my sophomore year. The Korean War was heating up at that time, and draft boards were looking for my kind. They needed gun fodder.

That caught my attention very quickly, especially after a disastrous party weekend and the dean's alerting me that I had three Fs and a D going into finals, six weeks away. That sobered me up. I had to choose: buckle down or be gun fodder. I buckled down that afternoon—truly buckled down.

Long story short, six weeks later I managed to eke out three Cs and one D, and the dean was impressed. He never thought I could do it. This was a great wake-up call.

I then became rather successful at college—in academics, on the sports field, and in leadership roles. However, my faith took a nosedive. Chapel was boring, the Bible was packed with lies, only weaklings went to church and I didn't need it—or so I thought. So I said bye-bye to God, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, and church and hello to the Marine Corps.

I Found Religion Again—in the Marines

I had no idea what I wanted to do after college, and going into the ministry was way, way in the back of my mind. My lacrosse coach, a highly decorated World War II vet, convinced me that joining the Corps would be a good way to mature and learn new life skills. I heeded his advice and received more than I had bargained for. I had a “reconversion” experience.

In my first week of boot camp, I was drilling the platoon I was in and forgot a command, which resulted in my marching the forty-four men into a chain-link fence. Once the platoon sergeant had pulled the platoon out and lined up the men, he approached me, nose to nose, and said, “Aulenbach, you ain't got no more brains than an ant!” I thought that expression was very funny and laughed.

Bad idea! The drill sergeant thought I was laughing *at* him, not *with* him, and thereafter he made my life miserable every day for the twelve weeks of boot camp. Every Friday he would flunk me out of officer training and on Saturday the review committee would send me back to his platoon. When we had only a week to go, Sarge flunked me out one more time. Ten of us misfits spent five grueling days with five heavily decorated World War II officers who were our officers review team. We were tested in every way.

The night before “D(ecision) day” I went to the slop chute (enlisted men's club) before I hit the sack. Walking home, I saw the chapel, went in, and sat in a pew. Suddenly I had this unbelievable calming that suggested, “Whatever happens, you have your faith

and the tools to make anything work for good.” No voices, images, or hocus-pocus—just peace. That night I slept like a baby.

The next day, I realized that I had thrown the baby (God, Jesus) out with the bathwater (the church). Bad mistake! In the morning, I stood before the members of the review team. They were tough on me and made the decision that I would not be commissioned and would spend the next two years as Private Aulenbach. Oh well. I knew that I had the tools to make “Private” work.

When I went into an office to get my new orders to be a private, the phone rang. The corporal who answered it said, “Are you Aulenbach? Return immediately to the review team.”

I hurried back to the room, wondering why I was called back. I was invited in and told, “Aulenbach, you have followed your orders exactly as commanded. You will be commissioned a second lieutenant tomorrow.” It was a good day for me and my faith.

Officers School went well. When I graduated, I was given orders to report to Camp Pendleton in California. From there I received orders to go to Hawai‘i, not Korea, to be a tank officer at Kaneohe Marine Corps Air Base.

My Unusual Call to the Ministry

In the Marines, I never missed a Sunday of church unless I was on maneuvers. I went to a little Episcopal church where I met my friend Brad Allen.

I had a great time being a marine, traveling all over the Pacific basin. At one Marine Corps function, I met the Episcopal Bishop of Hawai‘i. He invited me to lunch, where he asked me about my going into the ministry. I confessed that it was way in the back of my mind. He then said, “If you ever decide to give it a try, I’m happy to help you.”

Although I enjoyed being a marine and seemed to be reasonably successful at it, I had a feeling deep down inside that this was

My Unique Faith Journey

not what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I was much more interested in helping people than killing them.

Then it happened—I had my calling. I was the executive officer of a motor-transport outfit at the time, and our base was scheduled for an inspection by inspectors general from Marine Corps headquarters in Washington, DC. The inspector arrived two hours early, catching my troops in the middle of preparing the vehicles, facilities, and themselves. Obviously, we did not look at all like the squared-away outfit we were. Even though the inspector seemed to understand that there must have been a scheduling mistake, he immediately went to the battalion colonel and told him what a mess my outfit was. The colonel chewed me out for a situation that was beyond my control. All of a sudden, I had a powerful feeling that I needed to be in seminary.

When the colonel finished his tirade, I told him that when I left his office, I was going to make a phone call to get out of the Marines and go to seminary. He couldn't believe I had the nerve to tell him that—and neither could I. I called the bishop and said, "Bishop, I just had my calling to go to seminary." I told him the story. The bishop, who had been in Hawai'i since 1941, knew every high-ranking officer in all branches of the military in the islands. He must have immediately called a Marine Corps bigwig because within ten days I had orders to report to Terminal Island, San Francisco, and be discharged. The bishop also called the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, and I was accepted as a junior (a first-year student in seminary) for the fall semester.

On the first day of seminary, much to my great surprise, there was my Marine Corps buddy Brad.

When classes began, the first thing the professors did was rip apart all our Sunday school theology and start to lay a new and more solid foundation. At first, it was a bit frightening. My head

was being crammed with new knowledge and ideas, and I loved the experience. I knew my life was changing for the better. I felt that I had found a stable rudder on the ship of life. I just had to learn how to use it in my daily living. That was going to take time.

My Motorcycle

In my second year of seminary, life couldn't have been more exciting. But I was not prepared for how radically my reality was about to change.

On a beautiful Friday afternoon in October, Brad and I hopped on our motorcycles to go to Tilden Park, above Berkeley. About two blocks from the seminary, a fire truck answering a call for a brush fire hit us both broadside. Brad was killed instantly, and I ended up with a badly broken lower right leg and all sorts of other relatively minor injuries.

Although my own injuries and Brad's death altered the course of my life, one of the biggest theological bombs happened the next day when a professor-priest from the seminary came to pay me a visit. He was an internationally known prayer tycoon—a strange man, aloof, mysterious, and in my humble opinion, not authentic. He even admitted to praying for over three thousand people a day by quickly flipping through a Rolodex while saying a “cover-all-bases” prayer. I found this very strange—still do.

When this priest visited me, I was really groggy—my right leg up in sling, a huge bandage on my right thigh where the brake handle had dug in and ripped out a chunk of flesh, my right hand in a cast—and he said to me, “*You and Brad must have done something terrible to deserve this.*”

I couldn't believe it. His words were like another fire truck running me over, but I had enough presence of mind to order him out of the room and tell him to never come back. I didn't want anything to do with a god who would kill an outstanding man like

My Unique Faith Journey

Brad. I came to the conclusion that such a god does not exist. I was then faced with the challenge of figuring out who God is.

My accident led to several other life-changing experiences. The first had to do with my stay at the hospital. The doctors told me I would have to be in a hospital bed for two months, which meant I would lose my GI Bill of Rights benefits and have to drop out of seminary with no place to live, no work, no money, and a rather nebulous future. But when another Episcopal priest came to visit me, I shared my dilemma. He asked me how long I wanted to stay. I said, "One week." He replied that 90 percent of healing takes place in the mind with positive, creative thinking. I really liked that concept.

When my orthopedic physician came into my room later that afternoon, I told him that I could stay only a week. He said, "There's no way you can leave here in a week," and reminded me that he could never consider discharging me until I was eating and all my systems were working. Ugh! Who likes hospital food?

Some friends from seminary came to visit me and agreed to help by bringing me appetizing food. They returned later that evening with a small tenderloin steak, peas, and mashed potatoes along with a small jar labeled "apple jelly." I thought that was weird until I discovered it was filled with white wine. They continued providing these dinners with apple jelly for the next few nights. The doctor noticed that my condition was improving and told me that he'd consider letting me leave once I mastered crutches and promised to visit his office every day.

I quickly learned to walk with crutches and was released from the hospital after ten days. I became a firm believer that 90 percent of all healing is in our heads. I also realized that life, on a daily basis, is terminal, so I had better live it to the fullest.

The second life-changing experience after my accident happened when it was time to remove my leg cast almost nine months

after the accident. The doctor took off the cast, but my leg was as thin as a pencil and not ready to be walked on. So, after a few days, my leg went back into the cast for another three months, which meant that I would have to stay in Berkeley for the summer. That sounded boring until one of my professors suggested doing a study entitled “The Old Testament’s Influence on the Gospels.” It was a fascinating study and would prove to be a game-changer in my life. Then to help add to a great summer, I made trips to the wine country, went to Seals Stadium to watch Willie Mays, and had fun with a UC Berkeley coed.

To graduate from seminary and to be ordained, I, like every student, had to take two sets of examinations: one administered by the seminary to see if I had been properly brainwashed in the Episcopal tradition and the other administered by my diocese to see if I was ready to be ordained. I did well on both exams because I had learned that I needed to tell examiners what they wanted to hear, not what I truly believed. Had I shared my true beliefs with them, I suspect that I never would have graduated or been ordained. Unfortunately, this attitude keeps the institutional church stagnant.

I had reservations about some of the dogma and doctrine to which I was committing, but I attributed them to my youth and thought that as I aged in the ministry, my questions would all fall into place. Not true! They became bigger.

Another Life-Changing Experience

After I graduated and was ordained, I spent the summer of 1960 in Europe discovering “history” and coeds. When I arrived in Rome, I wanted to see Pope John XXIII, a hero of mine. He was bringing the Roman Catholic church into the twentieth century with his forward-thinking message of unity across denominations. I found a phone number for the papal office (it was very easy to do back in 1960), called it, and explained that I was an American Episcopal

pastor who greatly admired the pope. The receptionist told me, in English, that the pope was at the summer palace, Castle Gondolfa, about eighty kilometers outside of Rome. However, she would be happy to give me a letter allowing me to have an audience with the pope along with a small number of other visitors. I jumped at the opportunity, picked up my ticket, and drove to the Castle.

I can still see and feel the presence of holiness as John XXIII came into the room, carried on a pallet on the shoulders of four men. Some one hundred other folks were gathered. People started clapping, whistling, and cheering as John went around the room greeting people. He blessed a clergy collar I had, and I was able to take this “holiness” back home with me.

Although I was still a neophyte in the clergy business, I felt that what was happening in Christianity was the coming of the Kingdom of God, on earth. Churches were being built. People filled them. Christians were talking with each other and learning to work together. Biblical criticism was encouraged in progressive seminaries and churches. Seminaries were full of men (no women yet) who were eager to help bring on the Kingdom. Liturgies were translated into the vernacular, women were being considered for ordination, and churches and clergy had a great deal of influence on society and politics. I was excited to be part of the church’s future.

The Church—with Pay

When I began my ministry in Hawai‘i, my first assignment was to serve as assistant rector in a large, affluent suburban parish. My main job was to guide 350 teenagers who belonged to that congregation, and I was eager to get on with my life’s work.

The first rector I worked under, John Morrett, was a very spiritual man who had lived through the Bataan Death March and Japanese concentration camps, which he attributed to his deep faith. He was a great teacher on how to be a pastor, even though he

sent me to the bishop after my first sermon because he perceived it as erroneous theology. The bishop sided with me, but he made me promise not to tell the rector. I had been on the job for only three weeks and already I was in trouble, a pattern often repeated.

Most clergy coming out of seminary are assigned youth work and consider it a form of torture that one must go through if one is going to learn to be a clergyman or advance in the church hierarchy. It was hard to find an Episcopal clergyperson who really enjoyed it.

I loved it and had a tremendous experience. One of my favorite activities was to take one hundred or so youth out to our church camp on a Friday afternoon after school and give them a weekend of sitting around campfires, singing, learning about the faith, eating great camp food, swimming, and playing but hardly getting any sleep.

It was here that I developed a teaching program called Jesus Alive in an attempt to counterbalance the then popular idea that perhaps God is dead. It was here that I stopped using the word *God* because I too wanted the theistic one, NoOneUpThere, to be “dead.” I began using the word *Creation* instead. For me, the word *God* carried a great deal of negative, erroneous luggage. The concept of Creation fit the bill. Creation is not an outside force that makes decisions about all of us on earth—it is an active and continuous force that permeates every facet of the universe. Even though it can seem destructive at times, like during hurricanes or earthquakes, Creation embodies a sense of orderliness. *Higher Power* is also a good phrase for this concept, one often used by people recovering from addiction, but *Creation* is still my operative word for what most others call God.

I wasn't just exploring the idea of God and Creation in my early years in Hawai'i; I also started to develop an image of Jesus as fully human, a down-to-earth man with all the strengths and weaknesses of every other human. This picture was much more attractive

to me than some of the strange-looking Jesuses I discuss in chapter 3. I felt like a traitor to the Episcopal church and my ordination vows but knew I was on the right track. I knew that the twentieth-century church needed a historical human Jesus.

Then something happened! A week after I arrived in Hawai‘i, I had my first date with Annie, the new kindergarten teacher at the parish’s parochial school. She was single and beautiful and had a wonderful smile—still does. The following June we were married at our church, and fifty-six years later, I can assure you that was one of my greatest decisions. But marriage can change one’s daily theology as two individuals struggle to become one yet maintain their individuality. It is also a great opportunity to practice agape love.

Off to France

During my trip to Europe after seminary, I fell in love with the French city of Strasbourg, on the northeastern French-German border. Some distant relatives lived there and were very kind to me. I knew that I wanted to return there someday, somehow. In my first summer as a priest, I innocently wrote a letter to the dean of the protestant theological seminary in Strasbourg, asking if the school offered any doctoral degrees in theology. I was discouraged when I received a poorly mimeographed response in French, a language I couldn’t read, speak, or understand.

Then came a life-changing letter from the dean of the seminary in Strasbourg. He had never had an Episcopal or Anglican priest in the seminary and wanted to offer me a full scholarship to attend the University of Strasbourg to work on a *doctorate en science religieuse* (doctorate in religious science). I could hardly believe it. A year later, off we went—Annie, our nine-month-old daughter, Gretchen; and I—to live in Strasbourg and start a new chapter in our lives.

The title of my thesis to be was “The Influence of the Old Testament on the Birth Narrative in the Gospel of Matthew.” Sound

familiar? This was very similar to the project that I had started when I had to spend the summer in Berkeley. My tutor, Dr. Trocme, loved the title and the idea. One day early in the process of my working on the thesis, he whispered to me, “Never preach or teach this. You’ll be excommunicated.” I felt like a real heretic. What would that trial be like? It sounded fun!

While in France, Annie and I decided to grow our family. She became pregnant again, but this time she experienced problems from the beginning. The French doctors had no good answers—only silly solutions from the Middle Ages—so Annie felt that we needed to return to the United States and see an American doctor. By this time, all my coursework at Strasbourg was finished, but we had to leave before I could defend my thesis and earn my doctorate. We moved from Strasbourg, a sophisticated community where life began at 8:00 p.m., to Wailuku, Maui, an agrarian community where life ended at 8:00 p.m. Unfortunately, Annie and I found no solution to the problems with her pregnancy in the United States either. The baby was due in early December, but in mid-January, Annie was still scrubbing floors and washing windows to try to induce labor. Then on January 20, 1965, our second daughter, Heidi, decided it was time to join the real world.

It’s Not Fair!

At 4:00 a.m., our little girl emerged looking shriveled, underweight, and overcooked. She was covered with red dots and had a mature cataract on her right eye, another eye issue called a nystagmus, a heart murmur, and more hidden medical challenges that we would discover later, such as severe deafness, epilepsy, and mild cerebral palsy.

Many people believe that NoOneUpThere would purposefully give these afflictions to an innocent baby to punish Annie and me for some misdeed in our past. One person even told us that we

were being blessed because we were such wonderful parents and should have the pleasure of raising such a child. When I heard this, I wanted to puke.

Fortunately, I had dealt with a similar issue after the motorcycle accident. I already knew that NoOneUpThere was not orchestrating anything—this is just life, with all its imperfections. We cannot accept life to the fullest until we accept the fact that bad stuff happens no matter what church, temple, or mosque we attend or don't attend. Our responsibility is to learn to deal creatively with these challenges. This book shares tools for doing that.

Heidi is now a high-functioning fifty-two-year-old college graduate, living independently in Seattle, with a good job and a very full life. Please don't feel sorry for her or us. Having Heidi in our lives has been a tremendous growing experience for our family and many who know her. We like to tell people that Heidi's only handicap is that people call her handicapped. She is deaf and legally blind but quick to explain that she is not handicapped but simply has limitations like every other human being.

Another Lemon

A year after Heidi was born, Annie and I decided that I would resign from my parish so that we could move back to Honolulu to provide Heidi with the many services she needed. My rising career in the Episcopal church would be in jeopardy, but Heidi's future was more important than my career.

The new rector of the church where I had started my ministry needed a youth director—the group of 350 that I had left in 1963 had dwindled to 40 young people in just three years. I enjoyed working with teenagers, and although many clergy would consider this transfer a demotion, I gladly accepted the position, providing that I could have *carte blanche* to create innovative youth programs. Within two years, some 2,500 teens were involved in a large variety

of programs, including worship, choirs, bands, theater, sports, and even a coffeehouse.

Everything was going well until our theater program decided to perform an anti-Vietnam War play. Even though the rector had given me *carte blanche*, he forbade the performance of the play at his church. However, a liberal Congregational church offering sanctuary to soldiers who went AWOL to protest the war asked me if we could perform the play for them in downtown Honolulu.

Our play was well received, but the next morning at 7:00 a.m., the rector found me as I was cleaning the toilets in the youth center (our maintenance man had called in sick), accused me of disobeying his orders, and said, “You’re fired! You have thirty days to move you and your family out of the church-provided housing and buy your own car.”

I am still working on this one: I was fired from a church, a Christian church, because I was against war. On top of that, the rector had the audacity to treat me and my family as if we were criminals. He made certain that we were totally isolated and told the congregation a lie about why I was leaving.

Many years later, I received a letter from the rector asking for forgiveness. He confessed that he fired me because he was threatened by my success and all the national publicity I had received. A year after he fired me, the youth program at his church had dwindled to under forty—less than the number of members I started with.

Two hours after I was fired, I called the bishop’s office and told him what had happened. He replied, “Good! I just hired you to work on my staff.”

For the next seven years, I developed a series of ministries with the bishop—who appointed me diocesan youth director—including a shelter for runaway youth, Hale Kipa, a program that is still going strong all over the Islands; a free medical clinic for people without medical insurance or with drug addiction; and a lobbying

group for deaf and blind people in Hawai'i. I was also appointed vicar of a dying church in one of the Hawaiian homesteads. At the bishop's request, I began running all the church camps on the Islands and flew to the Marshall Islands once a month to operate a small Episcopal mission on Kwajalein.

In 1974, Annie and I decided we needed to move to Southern California to further Heidi's education. The school we chose was referred to as mainstream because Heidi would have classes with hearing children for part of the day and also classes specifically geared toward students with hearing impairments. Now Heidi would get to live in the real world, which can be rather cruel for people with challenges, rather than the sheltered environment we found at Hawai'i School for the Deaf and Blind.

Things were looking up for my family, but I was looking at a different picture. At forty-three years of age, I had invested my adult life in the Episcopal church for eighteen years. I had been innovative, creative, and hardworking. (But the bishop in Los Angeles, without even looking at my résumé, said he was not interested in interviewing me.)

Fortunately, right after I was fired, I realized that I needed a backup vocation, so I enrolled in the University of Hawai'i to earn my master's degree in social work and urban and regional planning. Smart move!

“What Color Is Your Parachute?”

Let me back up a bit. In Hawai'i, consultants would come from all over the world to “consult,” especially when they were having a cold winter where they lived. One of these consultants was Dick Bolles, who was the Episcopal church's national director of college work. Dick loved to come to Hawai'i when it was freezing in New York City, consult with some of the colleges for a few days, and then head to the beach. Dick had written a book, *What Color Is Your*

Parachute? It was about a different way to find a job. I bought his book and worked through the exercises.

I flew to San Francisco for a five-day conference Dick was holding. After three days of classroom work, on the fourth day we practiced our new skills and had to make an appointment to interview the CEO of any company we chose. The next day, we learned that a third of the class had been offered a job by the boss they interviewed. Obviously, the system worked.

The Church—without Pay

Once we had arrived in Santa Ana, California, and unpacked, I started my job search by paying a courtesy call to the bishop of Los Angeles. His secretary said the bishop could see me in a few weeks for ten minutes. I thought, “I have to drive four hours for a ten-minute visit?” When I arrived, I was ushered into the “throne room” for a very superficial chat. The bishop was pleasant, but at the end of ten minutes his secretary walked in and said his next appointment was waiting. With that, the bishop stood, put his hand out to shake mine, and said, “Good luck in finding a secular job, and don’t let me catch you hanging around any sacristies,” insinuating that he didn’t want me to look for jobs in any of his churches behind his back. I couldn’t believe what he had said to me. I remember walking down a major street in Los Angeles with tears streaming down my face, wondering what I had done to deserve that treatment from a bishop.

I continued my search, poring over the help-wanted ads in the newspaper every day. I had never applied for a job before—the Marines and the church simply assigned me. Then one day, I saw a fascinating job advertised by a nearby city, La Mirada, that wanted someone to plan and develop a human services delivery system. With a master’s degree in social work and regional and urban planning, this was right up my alley. Although I was brand new to

California, had never worked in government, and had no local references, I decided to apply. My faith constantly gives me the courage to creatively face all the challenges thrown my way.

This job position demanded a Dick Bolles approach, so I called and tried to make an appointment with the city manager to talk about working in city government. His secretary immediately replied that he was extremely busy looking over two hundred applications for a new job position. That meant it was time for plan B.

A few days later, dressed in my coat and tie, I drove to the La Mirada city hall, went into the lobby, and waited for the perfect opportunity. I watched as an official-looking man entered the lobby, and the receptionist greeted him: “Hello, Mr. Klug.” There he was—the city manager. I had to pounce, so I marched over to Mr. Klug, introduced myself, and said that I had just moved from Hawai‘i to Santa Ana. I shared that I wanted to get into human services in city government and wondered if he could spare half an hour to offer some suggestions.

Hawai‘i was the magic word—he and his wife loved the Islands. He said, “Yes, I have some time. Please come into my office and let’s chat.” It worked! Once in his office, I kept firing questions at him so he would talk about himself and Hawai‘i—for an hour and a half. At the end, he said, “You ought to apply for this job.”

Thank you, Dick Bolles. *Parachute* worked.

After three weeks, I called the city and was told that now there were over four hundred applications and the final decision would be delayed by two or three weeks. That meant I had to take another job I had been offered, but six weeks into the new job, La Mirada city hall called to schedule an interview. I was offered the job during my interview and resigned from the job I had taken in the meantime.

My new job was great—it paid well and challenged my creativity. But after three years, I was becoming bored with my work. I had taken the development of human services as far as it could

go for a small city. I had to face the reality that I'm great at creating and developing ideas, but maintaining them isn't challenging enough.

For three months, I worked with a headhunter who suggested that I start my own company. At first, I worried that my educational background gave me no foundation for starting or maintaining a business, but I finally realized that I'm at my best when my creativity is challenged and I'm not held back by rules, procedures, caution, and procrastination.

I started thinking about what kind of business I could start. It had to be different, it had to use all my gifts and skills, and it had to be challenging.

People Helpers, Inc.

At that time, the state of California, as well as the country, was going through financial hard times, and La Mirada was a city that kept its staff small and contracted almost all services—police, fire, and maintenance work—to outside agencies. I suggested to the city manager that I could save the city about a third of what it paid me if it contracted me to run its human services. He jumped on the idea immediately, and People Helpers, Inc., became a legal California corporation. I was the president and Annie the vice president.

I secured additional contracts in human services, recreational services, and the new wave of childcare services provided before and after school. When I didn't know enough or have enough experience, I asked young, creative, like-minded people to join the company. People Helpers developed into a million-dollar corporation with contracts spread throughout the Los Angeles basin, employing some 125 people.

Starting a business was risky, but I am ever so grateful that my faith gives me the fearlessness to try new ventures and then use my creativity to make them happen.

Not Again!

Life was good. I had a flourishing business and a nice home, Heidi was doing well, and our other two daughters were settled in, so on the weekends I had time to do some fill-in church work. Then, in 1982, our parish had to do some quick reorganization. The rector had been caught in sexually inappropriate behavior and he had to leave in a hurry. The church now needed a part-time fill-in priest to run the Sunday school, develop adult programs, assist with conducting worship, and preach. I was offered and accepted the position.

My preaching was provocative but not too provocative. I had my detractors, but for the most part, people appreciated my energy. (Creativity always attracts naysayers.)

After eighteen months, the search committee found a new rector, whose credentials were outstanding. He had a doctorate, had written a book, was a good preacher and an excellent organizer, and loved doing pastoral work—or at least that's what his résumé said.

Within a few months, however, people started complaining to me about him. At first, I just listened. But people kept saying the same thing, so I decided to go to him, and in the privacy of his office, behind a closed door, I shared, very respectfully, what I was hearing. He didn't like it and treated me as the enemy for the next year.

Six days before Christmas in 1988, he called me into his office and fired me. Not good timing! I decided to go on vacation over the holidays, and when I returned I learned that a movement had started to get rid of the rector. He was gone in six months.

However, the bishop of Los Angeles felt sorry for this man, now jobless, and invited him to work at the diocesan headquarters. Being at the hub of operations, my old "boss" was able to spread unbelievable lies about what had happened. He told people that I had masterminded the whole sequence of events and was secretly funding it. Quite a few clergy bought into his story. To make matters worse, four Episcopal churches, including the one we were

attending, told me that I was no longer welcome. One clergy person ordered me out of his office using language that would make a Marine Corps drill sergeant blush.

We Transfer Our Membership to St. Mattress

Annie and I decided to join another church. It's a very popular one and has many more members than the institutional church. Its name: St. Mattress or St. Sack's. At such a church, one stays in bed on Sunday mornings, reads the newspaper (scripture), drinks coffee, eats freshly baked muffins (communion), watches *Religion & Ethics News Weekly* on television (sermon), and then goes for a long walk (prayers). It was a great experience, but we missed being part of a faith-based community.

During this time, I became involved in the Orange County Interfaith Coalition, where I could rub elbows with Native Americans, Mormons, Muslims, Friends, Baha'is, and people of other Christian denominations, including some fundamentalists. We all shared a love and concern for our fellow human beings, no matter what our faith base was. This was an eye-opening great experience.

Annie and I started looking for a church that was open and affirming to all. Then we found our place at a nearby Episcopal church. Over a period of three years, the rector invited me to teach an adult class, assist with the Eucharist, preach, be the chaplain for the children's Sunday school, and finally, take over the pastoral responsibilities. I accepted each time but became concerned when I realized that the rector would come to the office about nine o'clock and immediately go downstairs to a tiny office and lock himself in there until about two o'clock. This seemed to be his daily routine, and for this he received a rather large salary.

One Monday morning, the rector was late for a staff meeting. Finally, he came storming in, saying rather loudly that he hated this job, with some expletives thrown in. Then I caught wind of

another incident in which the rector had physically pushed a vestry person in the midst of a heated discussion. This situation was getting out of hand. I felt it was my duty to speak to one of the diocesan bishops about the rector, but the bishop told me that it was none of my business.

I'd had enough! I tendered my resignation and went back to St. Mattress.

Annie and I had become "church damaged." For fifty years, the institutional church had tried to beat the life out of me. I was still a committed Follower of Jesus, but I found it increasingly difficult to be one within the institutional church.

Total Masochists: We Go Back to Church

I turned my energy toward meditating daily, reading challenging books on theology, and completing my second book, *What's Love Got to Do with It? "Everything!" Says Jesus*. The book showed great growth in my faith since my first book, but it didn't do well in the marketplace. I couldn't find anyone who would review it, which was the key to moving on to the next step in the publishing world.

In the process of marketing my book, I called a pastor whom I had known since the early 1990s when I was cochair of the Orange County Interfaith Coalition. He asked me where we were going to church, and I gave him my standard reply: "St. Mattress." He understood.

He suggested that I try his previous church, Irvine United Congregational Church (IUCC). It was probably not as progressive as I was, but it certainly had many features that I might find attractive: the pastor was an excellent preacher, the congregation was designated "Open and Affirming," there were no creeds, communion was open to all, the church had a great choir and music, people were not afraid to ask hard questions and expect good answers, and it wasn't that far away from where we lived.

As comfortable as St. Mattress was, we decided to try IUCC. Our first Sunday was a bit uncomfortable, with an unfamiliar liturgy, different hymns, and nothing but strangers, but the preacher was excellent. (He is gay with a longtime partner.) This is the church of the future—diverse and open to all “no matter where you are in your life’s journey.” We joined IUCC, and nine years later we are still members.

I know that my theology is still a bit avant-garde, even to a progressive church like IUCC, so I try to be gentle in sharing it. I now feel most comfortable with IUCC’s informal liturgy and have accepted some leadership roles there. Although I have come a long way since my early days in the Episcopal church, I still have lots of growing to do.

Many years ago, Bishop Spong—one of my favorite humanists, teachers, and role models—included this piece by David Keighley, an English Anglican priest, in his weekly newsletter:

Leaving Home

I’m off!

I must leave the political and ethical compromises that have corrupted the faith of my Jesus.

I must leave the stifling theology, the patriarchal structures.

I must leave the enduring prejudices based on our God-given humanity, the colour of my skin, my gender or how my sexual orientation is practiced.

I must leave the mentality that encourages anyone to think that our doctrines are unchangeable.

I must leave the belief of those who insist that our sacred texts are without error.

I must leave the God of miracle and magic.

My Unique Faith Journey

I must leave the promises of certainty, the illusion of possessing the true faith.

I must leave behind the claims of being the recipient of an unchallengeable revelation.

I must leave the neurotic religious desire to know that I am right, and to play at being God.

I must leave the claim that every pathway to God is second-rate, that fellow Hindu searchers in India, Buddhists in China and Tibet, Muslims in the Middle East and the Jews of Israel are inadequate.

I must leave the pathway that tells me that all other directions will get me lost.

I must leave the certain claim that my Jesus is the only way to God for everyone.

I must leave the Church, my home.

I must leave behind my familiar creeds and faith-symbols.

I can no longer stay in an unlivable space.

I must move to a place where I can once again sing the Lord's song.

I must move to where my faith-tradition can be revived and live on.

I must move to a place where children don't tell me what I believe is unbelievable but tell me they can believe what I believe.

I must move to a place where they are not playing at moving the deck chairs on the decks of an ecclesiastical Titanic.

I can never leave the God experience.

I can never walk away from the doorway into the divine that I believe I have found in the one I call the Christ and acknowledge as "my Lord."

I must move to dangerous and religiously threatening places.

Cramming for the Finals

I must move to where there is no theism, but still God.

I'm off! But to where, God only knows.¹

I meditate on this piece every Friday morning because it helps motivate me in my continuing faith journey. Our earth and the universe have made great strides since I came into it in 1932. Unfortunately, the church has not. I want it to because it has great tools as found in Jesus's message and agape love.

*Don't be afraid to think differently from the people
around you. Be afraid of what will be lost because you were
afraid to think, rethink and think again of ways to make
what is now necessary, real.*

—Sister Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Way*