

O V E R 3 0 0 , 0 0 0 S O L D

*foreword by Jon Foreman of Switchfoot*

BRENNAN MANNING



*Abba's child*

*the cry of the heart for intimate belonging*

his is the story of the prodigal  
son. It should really be called  
Running father  
to watch every  
his boy to return  
boy who had repented  
so badly and finally  
in he saw him from a long way  
his father ran to him and  
and, and kissed him. Luke



*Abba's Child* is not a book—it's a love letter. Brennan's words wrap you in God's love and lullaby you to sleep in the warmth of his grace. After reading this book, I wanted to race into my father's arms and jump into his lap, giggling, "I'm home, Daddy, I'm home."

**MICHAEL YACONELLI**

Author of *Dangerous Wonder*

The writing of Brennan Manning reaches out, grabs us, and pulls us in. *Abba's Child* is a book that leaps from the tower of theory and plunges deeply into the stuff of life, the stuff that each of us grapples with on a daily basis. Facing our own reality is painful, traumatic, and ultimately redemptive, as Brennan Manning so artfully illustrates.

**DEVLIN DONALDSON**

The Vista Grande Company

Honest. Genuine. Creative. God hungry. These words surface when I think of the writings of Brennan Manning. Read him for yourself—you'll see what I mean!

**MAX LUCADO**

*New York Times* bestselling author

With prophetic zeal, Brennan speaks to our heart's deepest longing and manages to keep the focus on the One who meets it. Hearing, really hearing, this message—that we "belong"—has and will continue to revolutionize lives.

**DR. LARRY CRABB**

Founder, NewWay Ministries

B R E N N A N M A N N I N G

*Abba's child*

*the cry of the heart for intimate belonging*

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*Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*

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## *Contents*

Acknowledgments *ix*

Foreword by Jon Foreman *xi*

Preface to the 2015 Edition by John Blase *xiii*

Preface to the 2002 Edition by Brennan Manning *xv*

A Word Before *xix*

1. Come Out of Hiding *1*
2. The Impostor *15*
3. The Beloved *31*
4. Abba's Child *43*
5. The Pharisee and the Child *59*
6. Present Risenness *79*
7. The Recovery of Passion *97*
8. Fortitude and Fantasy *115*
9. The Rabbi's Heartbeat *131*

Internalizing the Book: Guide for Group Study *149*

Notes *157*

About the Author *165*

## Foreword

*To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.*

WHEN I FIRST READ *ABBA'S CHILD*, these words from E. E. Cummings introduced the preface. This quote and the book that followed spoke to me deeply. In *Abba's Child*, Manning calls attention to a battle for identity that's fought nearly every hour of every day of our lives—a war that's almost completely unacknowledged and yet of extreme importance. Who am I? What is my place in the world? As humans, we are always looking for our true identity against the noisy backdrop of our time. Am I defined by my occupation? My preferences? My passions? My true identity cannot be defined for me. Even the most meaningful moments in politics or music are still not enough to anchor me. And yet as I struggle to define myself in this world, my identity can never come from within. My actions, my art, even my beliefs—all of these need to be rooted in soil other than myself.

And so we begin the solitary journey toward discovering our unique identity. Manning employs a chorus of wise voices who reassure me that though this road may be a lonely one, it is not mine to walk alone. Spiritual giants who have passed this way before have left guideposts along the way, reminding me that I cannot be defined by ever-changing seasons around me, nor can I be guided only by the voices within. Rather, my identity must continue to be found in the love of my Creator Himself. I am loved. Deeply loved. And when I let that love define who I am, I am suddenly free to be myself.

In my songs I'm always looking for light. I'm looking for a window

or a mirror—something to frame my experience here on the planet in a new way that allows me to see the truth. Why am I always looking for these windows and doors? Because my ears become deaf, my eyes become blind. I desperately need new ways of looking at the world and at myself. I have a friend who is a visual artist. He defines “the artist” not as someone who creates beauty but as someone who looks for it. And to that end I would say a good songwriter does the same thing: hoping for more than just a new chorus, longing to be free from the same old patterns, to be transformed by the renewing of the mind moment by moment, day by day.

There are far too many voices within my head telling me to quit, telling me to abandon, to find an easier way, to ignore the pain, or to choke it down. To find a book with a host of other voices singing back was a joy. When I first read *Abba's Child* a few years back, I had to write a song in response. So I wrote a tune called “Against the Voices,” directly inspired by the words of Manning, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, E. E. Cummings, Julian of Norwich, and the host of others whom Brennan Manning employs.

If this is your first time reading this book, I'm honored to introduce you to it. I pray that Brennan Manning and the timeless voices of the other thinkers quoted within this book might offer you hope. May they remind you that you are loved by the Father-Creator Himself. May they sing and speak into your life against the voices that tell you otherwise.

*Jon Foreman, lead singer for Switchfoot*

JANUARY 2015, CARDIFF-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

## Preface to the 2015 Edition

*Keep practicing until it lives inside you;  
then it will seem foolishly easy  
to the unpracticed.*

— BILL HOLM, “FRIED CHICKEN IN ICELAND”

PARENTS WITH MULTIPLE CHILDREN say they love all their children equally, just differently. That’s true, and maybe not true. I believe some parents have favorites—they just do. And I believe the favorites know who they are.

When it comes to the books written by my friend Brennan Manning, it would be tempting to say “I love them all, just differently.” But that’s not true. I have a favorite—*Abba’s Child*. It was the first of his books I read, my introduction to the ragamuffin man, and maybe that’s why it means so much to me—you know, “first love” and all that. Then again, my affection for this book may have to do with the fact that after reading all of his books multiple times, and having the privilege of personally working with him on a handful of his final manuscripts, including cowriting his memoir, I believe the words in this book reveal his heart. They are the *summa* of Brennan Manning. I realize that’s a bold statement, but there you have it.

Most writers have a central theme, and all their writings are usually some variation on that theme. While some might say Brennan’s theme is the grace of God, I would disagree: It is letting yourself be loved by God. In one of our final conversations, I asked, “Brennan, are you letting God love you?” His reply was classic Brennan: “I’m trying.” That’s why I

began this preface with those words from the late Bill Holm—because letting God love him was something Brennan “kept practicing” throughout his years. What may have appeared “foolishly easy” to those who knew him from the distance of books was far from it. He kept practicing until the very end.

You’ll read of “the impostor” in these pages, probably the chapter generating the most discussion since *Abba’s Child* was published in 1994. Even now, in the autumn of 2014, that chapter is worth the price of admission. The impostor still runs amok today, aided and abetted by the online-Facebook-Twitter-Instagrammy lives we live.

*The impostor prompts us to attach importance to what has no importance, clothing with a false glitter what is least substantial and turning us away from what is real. The false self causes us to live in a world of delusion. . . . The impostor demands to be noticed. His craving for compliments energizes his futile quest for carnal satisfaction. His bandages are his identity. Appearances are everything.*

See what I mean? Good grief. Please don’t hear me saying the Internet is the culprit here. But the Internet does speed things up, presenting lightning-fast challenges to acceptance and approval and suppression and emotional honesty, just to name a few. If the game of pretense and deception used to be at a gallop, we now play at warp speed. Into this rushing stream, Brennan’s plea is evergreen: Live by grace and not by performance. In other words—let God love you. And should you see me out and about somewhere and ask me how I’m personally doing with that, I would answer as my friend so often did: I’m trying.

—John Blase

SEPTEMBER 15, 2014

## *Preface to the 2002 Edition*

*To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.*

— E. E. CUMMINGS

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF *Abba's Child* in 1994, there have been more comments on "The Impostor" than all the other chapters combined. Well, the impostor continues to reappear in new and devilish disguises. The slick, sick, and sinister impersonator of my true self stalks me even in my sleep. His latest stratagem is to capitalize on my "senior moments," blocking any memory of whether I gobbled my anti-depressant and vitamin pills earlier this morning.

Cunning and crafty, this radical poseur of my egocentric desires exploits my temporary amnesia to make me forget that everything I am is grace, that on my own I cannot receive it, for even receiving it is a gift—that is, the grace to grasp grace is grace. Instead of being non-plussed at the extravagance of God's love, in place of heartfelt gratitude for the sheer and unearned abundance of His gifts, a shameless sense of satisfaction about my accomplishments and a secure feeling of spiritual superiority invade my heart. The impostor is baffling, sly, and seductive. He persuades me to forsake my true self, Abba's beloved child, and, as Cummings notes, become "everybody else."

My greatest difficulty these past years has been bringing the impostor into the presence of Jesus. I am still inclined to flagellate the false self, to beat him mercilessly for self-centeredness, to get disheartened,

discouraged, and decide that my alleged spiritual life is merely self-deception and fantasy.

Self-flagellation has a personal history with me. When I was twenty-three years old and a novice in the Franciscan Order in Washington, D.C., the order practiced an ancient spiritual discipline on the Friday nights of Lent. A designated cleric stood flat-footed beside the stairwell on the first floor, slowly and loudly reciting Psalm 51 in Latin. *Miserere me, Domine, secundum misericordiam, tuam . . .*

Meanwhile, the rest of us entered our cells on the second floor clutching a noose-shaped instrument of torture measuring twelve inches long; it was coiled telephone wire. Throughout the duration of the psalm, we whipped our backs and buttocks to extinguish the fire of lust. I flailed away with such reckless abandon that I raised blood blisters on my back.

The following day in the showers, a cleric took one look at my bludgeoned body and reported my condition to the novice master, who reprimanded me for my intemperate zeal. Truth to tell, I was trying desperately to make myself pleasing to God.

Not so with Brother Dismas, who lived in the cell adjacent to mine. I listened as he scourged himself so savagely I feared for both his health and his sanity. I risked a peek through his cracked door: With a bemused smile and a cigarette in his left hand, he was whacking the wall—*thwack, thwack, thwack*. My response? I pitied the poor wretch and returned to my cell with an insufferable sense of spiritual superiority.

Flagellation is not healthy for either the body or the soul.

The impostor must be called out of hiding and presented to Jesus, or feelings of hopelessness, confusion, shame, and failure will stalk us from dawn to dusk. Writing *Abba's Child* was a profound spiritual experience for me, and I wish to share one last reflection. Certain truths can be spoken only from the well of exaggeration. In trying to describe the transcendent mystery of Abba's love, I employed a plethora of adjectives such as infinite, outlandish, mind-bending, ineffable, and

incomprehensible. Put them all together and they are still inadequate for one simple reason: *Mystery is spoiled by a word.*

Finally, my old and now retired spiritual director, Larry Hein, who wrote this blessing—“May all your expectations be frustrated, may all your plans be thwarted, may all your desires be withered into nothingness, that you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child and sing and dance in the love of God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit”—has come up with another one:

*Today on planet Earth, may you experience the wonder and beauty of yourself as Abba’s Child and temple of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

—*Brennan Manning*

2002

## *A Word Before*

ON FEBRUARY 8, 1956, in a little chapel in Loretto, Pennsylvania, I was ambushed by Jesus of Nazareth. The road I've traveled these last thirty-eight years is pockmarked by disastrous victories and magnificent defeats, soul-diminishing successes and life-enhancing failures. Seasons of fidelity and betrayal, periods of consolation and desolation, zeal and apathy, are not unknown to me. And there have been times . . .

when the felt presence of God was more real to me than the chair  
I am sitting on;  
when the Word ricocheted like broken-backed lightning in every  
corner of my soul;  
when a storm of desire carried me to places I had never visited.

*And* there have been other times . . .

when I identified with the words of Mae West: "I used to be Snow  
White—but I drifted";  
when the Word was as stale as old ice cream and as bland as tame  
sausage;  
when the fire in my belly flickered and died;  
when I mistook dried-up enthusiasm for gray-haired wisdom;  
when I dismissed youthful idealism as mere naïveté;  
when I preferred cheap slivers of glass to the pearl of great price.

If you relate to any of these experiences, you might want to browse through this book and pause to reclaim your core identity as Abba's Child.

—*Brennan Manning*

## Come Out of Hiding

IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S short story *The Turkey*,<sup>1</sup> the antihero and principal protagonist is a little boy named Ruller. He has a poor self-image because nothing he turns his hand to seems to work. At night in bed he overhears his parents analyzing him. "Ruller's an unusual one," his father says. "Why does he always play by himself?" And his mother answers, "How am I to know?"

One day in the woods Ruller spots a wild and wounded turkey and sets off in hot pursuit. "Oh, if only I can catch it," he cries. He will catch it, even if he has to run it out of state. He sees himself triumphantly marching through the front door of his house with the turkey slung over his shoulder and the whole family screaming, "Look at Ruller with that wild turkey! Ruller, where did you get that turkey?"

"Oh, I caught it in the woods. Maybe you would like me to catch you one sometime."

But then the thought flashes across his mind, *God will probably make me chase that damn turkey all afternoon for nothing*. He knows he shouldn't think that way about God—yet that's the way he feels. If that's the way he feels, can he help it? He wonders if he is unusual.

Ruller finally captures the turkey when it rolls over dead from a previous gunshot wound. He hoists it on his shoulders and begins his

messianic march back through the center of town. He remembers the things he had thought before he got the bird. They were pretty bad, he guesses. He figures God has stopped him before it's too late. He should be very thankful. "Thank You, God," he says. "Much obliged to You. This turkey must weigh ten pounds. You were mighty generous."

*Maybe getting the turkey was a sign*, he thinks. Maybe God wants him to be a preacher. He thinks of Bing Crosby and Spencer Tracy as he enters town with the turkey slung over his shoulder. He wants to do something for God, but he doesn't know what. If anybody were playing the accordion on the street today, he would give them his dime. It is the only dime he has, but he would give it to them.

He wishes he would see somebody begging. Suddenly he prays, "Lord, send me a beggar. Send me one before I get home." God has put the turkey here. Surely God will send him a beggar. He knows for a fact God will send him one. Because he is an unusual child, he interests God. "Please, one right now—" And the minute he says it, an old beggar woman heads straight toward him. His heart stomps up and down in his chest. He springs at the woman, shouting, "Here, here," thrusts the dime into her hand, and dashes on without looking back.

Slowly his heart calms, and he begins to feel a new feeling—like being happy and embarrassed at the same time. Maybe, he thinks, he will give all his money to her. He feels as if the ground does not need to be under him any longer.

Ruller notices a group of country boys shuffling behind him. He turns around and asks generously, "Y'all wanna see this turkey?"

They stare at him. "Where did ya get that turkey?"

"I found it in the woods. I chased it dead. See, it's been shot under the wing."

"Lemme see it," one boy says. Ruller hands him the turkey. The turkey's head flies into his face as the country boy slings it up in the air and over his own shoulder and turns. The others turn with him and saunter away.

They are a quarter of a mile away before Ruller moves. Finally they are so far away he can't even see them anymore. Then he creeps toward home. He walks for a bit and then, noticing it is dark, suddenly begins to run. And Flannery O'Connor's exquisite tale ends with these words: "He ran faster and faster, and as he turned up the road to his house, his heart was running as fast as his legs and he was certain that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch."

In Ruller many of us Christians stand revealed, naked, exposed. Our God, it seems, is One who benevolently gives turkeys and capriciously takes them away. When He gives them, it signals His interest in and pleasure with us. We feel close to God and are spurred to generosity. When He takes them away, it signals His displeasure and rejection. We feel cast off by God. He is fickle, unpredictable, whimsical. He builds us up only to let us down. He remembers our past sins and retaliates by snatching the turkeys of health, wealth, inner peace, progeny, empire, success, and joy.

And so we unwittingly project onto God our own attitudes and feelings toward ourselves. As Blaise Pascal wrote, "God made man in his own image and man returned the compliment." Thus, if we feel hateful toward ourselves, we assume that God feels hateful toward us.

But we cannot assume that He feels about us the way we feel about ourselves—unless we love ourselves compassionately, intensely, and freely. In human form Jesus revealed to us what God is like. He exposed our projections for the idolatry they are and gave us the way to become free of them. It takes a profound conversion to accept that God is relentlessly tender and compassionate toward us just as we are—not in spite of our sins and faults (that would not be total acceptance), but with them. Though God does not condone or sanction evil, He does not withhold His love because there is evil in us.

Because of how we feel about ourselves, it's sometimes difficult to believe this. As numerous Christian authors, wiser and more insightful

than I, have said: We cannot accept love from another human being when we do not love ourselves, much less accept that God could possibly love us.

One night a friend asked his handicapped son, "Daniel, when you see Jesus looking at you, what do you see in His eyes?"

After a pause, the boy replied, "His eyes are filled with tears, Dad."

"Why, Dan?"

An even longer pause. "Because He is sad."

"And why is He sad?"

Daniel stared at the floor. When at last he looked up, his eyes glistened with tears. "Because I'm afraid."

The sorrow of God lies in our fear of Him, our fear of life, and our fear of ourselves. He anguishes over our self-absorption and self-sufficiency. Richard Foster wrote, "Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence."<sup>2</sup>

God's sorrow lies in our refusal to approach Him when we have sinned and failed. A "slip" for an alcoholic is a terrifying experience. The obsession of the mind and body with booze returns with the wild fury of a sudden storm in springtime. When the person sobers up, he or she is devastated. When I relapsed, I had two options: yield once again to guilt, fear, and depression—or rush into the arms of my heavenly Father; choose to live as a victim of my disease—or choose to trust in Abba's immutable love.

It is one thing to feel loved by God when our life is together and all our support systems are in place. Then self-acceptance is relatively easy. We may even claim that we are coming to like ourselves. When we are strong, on top, in control, and as the Celts say, "in fine form," a sense of security crystallizes.

But what happens when life falls through the cracks? What happens

when we sin and fail, when our dreams shatter, when our investments crash, when we are regarded with suspicion? What happens when we come face-to-face with the human condition?

Ask any who have just gone through a separation or divorce. Are they together now? Is their sense of security intact? Do they have a strong sense of self-worth? Do they still feel like beloved children? Or does God love them only in their “goodness” and not in their poverty and brokenness as well? Nicholas Harnan wrote,

*This [brokenness] is what needs to be accepted. Unfortunately, this is what we tend to reject. Here the seeds of a corrosive self-hatred take root. This painful vulnerability is the characteristic feature of our humanity that most needs to be embraced in order to restore our human condition to a healed state.*<sup>3</sup>

The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich said, “Our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair because they fall often and grievously; for our falling does not hinder him in loving us.”<sup>4</sup> Our skepticism and timidity keep us from belief and acceptance; however, we don’t hate God, but we hate ourselves. Yet the spiritual life begins with the acceptance of our wounded self.

Seek out a true contemplative—not a person who hears angelic voices and has fiery visions of the cherubim, but the person who encounters God with naked trust. What will that man or woman tell you? Thomas Merton responds, “Surrender your poverty and acknowledge your nothingness to the Lord. Whether you understand it or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and compassion which are like nothing you have ever found in a book or heard in a sermon.”<sup>5</sup>

God calls us to stop hiding and come openly to Him. God is the father who ran to His prodigal son when he came limping home. God weeps over us when shame and self-hatred immobilize us. Yet as soon as we lose

our nerve about ourselves, we take cover. Adam and Eve hid, and we all, in one way or another, have used them as role models. Why? Because we do not like what we see. It is uncomfortable—intolerable—to confront our true selves. Simon Tugwell, in his book *The Beatitudes*, explains.

*And so, like runaway slaves, we either flee our own reality or manufacture a false self which is mostly admirable, mildly prepossessing, and superficially happy. We hide what we know or feel ourselves to be (which we assume to be unacceptable and unlovable) behind some kind of appearance which we hope will be more pleasing. We hide behind pretty faces which we put on for the benefit of our public. And in time we may even come to forget that we are hiding, and think that our assumed pretty face is what we really look like.<sup>6</sup>*

But God loves who we really are—whether we like it or not. God calls us, as He did Adam, to come out of hiding. No amount of spiritual makeup can render us more presentable to Him. As Merton said, “We never make this real, serious return to the center of our own nothingness before God. Hence we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with him.”<sup>7</sup> His love, which called us into existence, calls us to come out of self-hatred and to step into His truth. “Come to me *now*,” Jesus says. “Acknowledge and accept who I want to be for you: a Savior of boundless compassion, infinite patience, unbearable forgiveness, and love that keeps no score of wrongs. Quit projecting onto Me your own feelings about yourself. At this moment your life is a bruised reed, and I will not crush it; a smoldering wick, and I will not quench it. *You are in a safe place.*”

One of the most shocking contradictions in the American church is the intense dislike many disciples of Jesus have for themselves. They are more displeased with their own shortcomings than they would ever dream of being with someone else's. They are sick of their own mediocrity and disgusted by their own inconsistency. David Seamands wrote,

*Many Christians . . . find themselves defeated by the most powerful psychological weapon that Satan uses against Christians. This weapon has the effectiveness of a deadly missile. Its name? Low self-esteem. Satan's greatest psychological weapon is a gut-level feeling of inferiority, inadequacy, and low self-worth. This feeling shackles many Christians, in spite of wonderful spiritual experiences . . . and knowledge of God's Word. Although they understand their position as sons and daughters of God, they are tied up in knots, bound by a terrible feeling of inferiority, and chained to a deep sense of worthlessness.<sup>8</sup>*

The story is often told of a man who made an appointment with the famous psychologist Carl Jung to get help for chronic depression. Jung told him to reduce his fourteen-hour workday to eight, go directly home, and spend the evenings in his study, quiet and all alone. The depressed man went to his study each night, shut the door, read a little Hermann Hesse or Thomas Mann, played a few Chopin études or some Mozart. After weeks of this, he returned to Jung, complaining that he could see no improvement. On learning how the man had spent his time, Jung said, "But you didn't understand. I didn't want you to be with Hesse or Mann or Chopin or Mozart. I wanted you to be completely alone." The man looked terrified and exclaimed, "I can't think of any worse company." Jung replied, "Yet this is the self you inflict on other people fourteen hours a day"<sup>9</sup> (and, Jung might have added, the self you inflict on yourself).

In my experience, self-hatred is the dominant malaise crippling Christians and stifling their growth in the Holy Spirit. The melancholy spirit of Chekhov's plays—"You live badly, my friends"—haunts the American Christian conscience. Negative voices from our family of origin ("You will never amount to anything"), moralizing from the church, and pressure to be successful transform expectant pilgrims en route to the heavenly Jerusalem into a dispirited traveling troupe of brooding Hamlets and frightened Rullers. Alcoholism, workaholism, mounting

addictive behaviors, and the escalating suicide rate reflect the magnitude of the problem. Henri Nouwen observed,

*Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, "Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody." . . . [My dark side says,] I am no good . . . I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.<sup>10</sup> [emphasis added]*

We learn to be gentle with ourselves by experiencing the intimate, heartfelt compassion of Jesus. To the extent that we allow the relentless tenderness of Jesus to invade the citadel of self, we are freed from dyspepsia toward ourselves. Christ wants us to alter our attitude toward ourselves and take sides with Him against our own self-evaluation.

In the summer of 1992, I took a significant step on my inward journey. For twenty days I lived in a remote cabin in the Colorado Rockies and made a retreat, combining therapy, silence, and solitude. Early each morning, I met with a psychologist who guided me in awakening repressed memories and feelings from childhood. The remainder of each day I spent alone in the cabin without television, radio, or reading material of any kind.

As the days passed, I realized that I had not been able to *feel* anything since I was eight years old. A traumatic experience with my mother at

that time shut down my memory for the next nine years and my feelings for the next five decades.

When I was eight, the impostor, or false self, was born as a defense against pain. The impostor within whispered, *Brennan, don't ever be your real self anymore, because nobody likes you as you are. Invent a new self that everybody will admire and nobody will know.* So I became a good boy—polite, well mannered, unobtrusive, and deferential. I studied hard, scored excellent grades, won a scholarship in high school, and was stalked every waking moment by the terror of abandonment and the sense that nobody was there for me.

I learned that perfect performance brought the recognition and approval I desperately sought. I orbited into an unfeeling zone to keep fear and shame at a safe distance. As my therapist remarked, “All these years there has been a steel trapdoor covering your emotions and denying you access to them.” Meanwhile, the impostor I presented for public inspection was nonchalant and carefree.

The great divorce between my head and my heart endured throughout my ministry. For eighteen years I proclaimed the good news of God’s passionate, unconditional love—utterly convicted in my head but not feeling it in my heart. I never felt loved. A scene in the movie *Postcards from the Edge* says it all. A Hollywood film star (Meryl Streep) is told by her director (Gene Hackman) what a wonderful life she has had and how any woman would envy what she has accomplished. Streep answers, “Yes, I know. But you know what? I can’t feel any of my life. I’ve never been able to feel my life and all those good things.”

On the tenth day of my mountain retreat, my tears erupted into sobbing. As Mary Michael O’Shaughnessy liked to say, “Often breakdowns lead to breakthroughs.” (Much of my callousness and invulnerability has come from my refusal to mourn the loss of a soft word and a tender embrace.) Blessed are those who weep and mourn.

As I drained the cup of grief, a remarkable thing happened: In the distance I heard music and dancing. I was the prodigal son limping

home—not a spectator but a participant. The impostor faded, and I was in touch with my true self as the returned child of God. My yearning for praise and affirmation receded.

It used to be that I never felt safe with myself unless I was performing flawlessly. My desire to be perfect had transcended my desire for God. Tyrannized by an all-or-nothing mentality, I interpreted weakness as mediocrity and inconsistency as a loss of nerve. I dismissed compassion and self-acceptance as inappropriate responses. My jaded perception of personal failure and inadequacy led to a loss of self-esteem, triggering episodes of mild depression and heavy anxiety.

Unwittingly I had projected onto God my feelings about myself. I felt safe with Him only when I saw myself as noble, generous, and loving, without scars, fears, or tears—*perfect!* Good grief.

But on that radiant morning in a cabin hidden deep in the Colorado Rockies, I came out of hiding. Jesus removed the shroud of perfectionist performance, and now forgiven and free, I ran home. For I knew that I *knew* Someone was there for me. Gripped in the depth of my soul, tears streaming down my cheeks, I internalized and finally felt all the words I had written and spoken about stubborn, unrelenting Love. That morning I understood that the words were but straw compared to the Reality. I leaped from simply being the teacher of God's love to becoming Abba's delight. I said good-bye to feeling frightened and said *shalom* to feeling safe. What does it mean to feel you are in a safe place? That same afternoon I wrote this in my journal:

*To feel safe is to stop living in my head and sink down into my heart and feel liked and accepted . . . not having to hide anymore and distract myself with books, television, movies, ice cream, shallow conversation . . . staying in the present moment and not escaping into the past or projecting into the future, alert and attentive to the now . . . feeling relaxed and not nervous or jittery . . . no need to impress or dazzle others or draw attention to myself. . . un-self-conscious, a new way of being with myself,*

*a new way of being in the world . . . calm, unafraid, no anxiety about what's going to happen next . . . loved and valued . . . just being together as an end in itself.*

But yes, writing about such an experience risks the invention of a new impostor wearing a glossier disguise. I am reminded of the sobering words of Teresa of Avila: “Such experiences are given to the weaker brothers and sisters to fortify their flagging faith.” Even attribution to “the grace of God” can be subtle self-aggrandizement because the phrase has virtually become a Christian cliché.

Thomas Merton, the most sought-after spiritual guide of our time, said one day to a fellow monk, “If I make anything out of the fact that I am Thomas Merton, I am dead. . . . And if you make anything out of the fact that you are in charge of the pig barn . . . you are dead.” Merton’s solution? “Quit keeping score altogether and surrender ourselves with all our sinfulness to God who sees neither the score nor the scorekeeper but only his child redeemed by Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

More than six hundred years ago, Julian of Norwich seized this truth with stunning simplicity when she wrote, “Some of us believe that God is almighty and can do everything; and that he is all-wise and may do everything; but that he is all-love and will do everything—there we draw back. As I see it, this ignorance is the greatest of all hindrances to God’s lovers.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet there is more. Ponder these words of the apostle Paul: “The things which are done in secret are things that people are ashamed even to speak of; but anything exposed by the light will be *illuminated and anything illuminated turns into light*” (Ephesians 5:12-14, emphasis added).

God not only forgives and forgets our shameful deeds but even turns their darkness into light. All things work together for those who love God, “even,” Augustine of Hippo added, “our sins.”

Thornton Wilder's one-act play *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, based on John 5:1-4, dramatizes the power of the pool of Bethesda to heal whenever an angel stirred its waters. A physician comes periodically to the pool hoping to be the first in line and longing to be healed of his melancholy. The angel finally appears but blocks the physician just as he is ready to step into the water. The angel tells the physician to draw back, for this moment is not for him. The physician pleads for help in a broken voice, but the angel insists that healing is not intended for him.

The dialogue continues—and then comes the prophetic word from the angel: “Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve. Draw back.”

Later, the man who enters the pool first and is healed rejoices in his good fortune. Turning to the physician, he says: “Come with me first, an hour only, to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I—I do not understand him, and only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour . . . my daughter since her child has died, sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us.”<sup>13</sup>

Christians who remain in hiding continue to live the lie. We deny the reality of our sin. In a futile attempt to erase our past, we deprive the community of our healing gift. If we conceal our wounds out of fear and shame, our inner darkness can neither be illuminated nor become a light for others. We cling to our bad feelings and beat ourselves with the past when what we should do is let go. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, guilt is an idol. But when we dare to live as forgiven men and women, we join the wounded healers and draw closer to Jesus.

Henri Nouwen has explored this theme with depth and sensitivity in his classic work *The Wounded Healer*. He tells the story of a rabbi who asked the prophet Elijah when the Messiah would come. Elijah

replied that the rabbi should ask the Messiah directly and that he would find Him sitting at the gates of the city. “How shall I know Him?” the rabbi asked. Elijah replied, “He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, ‘Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.’”<sup>14</sup>

The Suffering Servant of Isaiah recognizes His wounds, lets them show, and makes them available to the community as a source of healing.

*The Wounded Healer* implies that grace and healing are communicated through the vulnerability of men and women who have been fractured and heartbroken by life. In Love’s service, only wounded soldiers can serve.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a community of wounded healers. Psychiatrist James Knight wrote,

*These persons have had their lives laid bare and pushed to the brink of destruction by alcoholism and its accompanying problems. When these persons arise from the ashes of the hellfire of addictive bondage, they have an understanding, sensitivity, and willingness to enter into and maintain healing encounters with their fellow alcoholics. In this encounter they cannot and will not permit themselves to forget their brokenness and vulnerability. Their wounds are acknowledged, accepted, and kept visible. Further, their wounds are used to illuminate and stabilize their own lives while they work to bring the healing of sobriety to their alcoholic brothers and sisters, and sometimes to their sons and daughters. The effectiveness of AA’s members in the care and treatment of their fellow alcoholics is one of the great success stories of our time, and graphically illustrates the power of wounds, when used creatively, to lighten the burden of pain and suffering.<sup>15</sup> [emphasis added]*

Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters to a Young Poet*, explained the efficacy of his own gift: “Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness and remains far behind yours. Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those words.”<sup>16</sup> Rilke’s own wounds of pain and sadness made him aware of his inner poverty and created an emptiness that became the free space into which Christ could pour His healing power. Here was an echo of the cry of Paul: “I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

My own journey has taught me that only when I feel safe with God do I feel safe with myself. To trust the Abba who *ran* to His wayward son and never asked any questions enables us to trust ourselves at the core.

The decision to come out of hiding is our initiation rite into the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. It brings its own reward. We stand in the Truth that sets us free and live out of the Reality that makes us whole.

On the list of the ten best books I have read in my lifetime is Georges Bernanos’s *Diary of a Country Priest*. Since his ordination, the curate had struggled with doubt, fear, anxiety, and insecurity. His last entry in his diary reads, “It’s all over now. The strange mistrust I had of myself, of my own being, has flown, I believe for ever. That conflict is done. . . . I am reconciled to myself, to the poor, poor shell of me. How easy it is to hate oneself! True grace is to forget. Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity—as one would love any of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ.”<sup>17</sup>