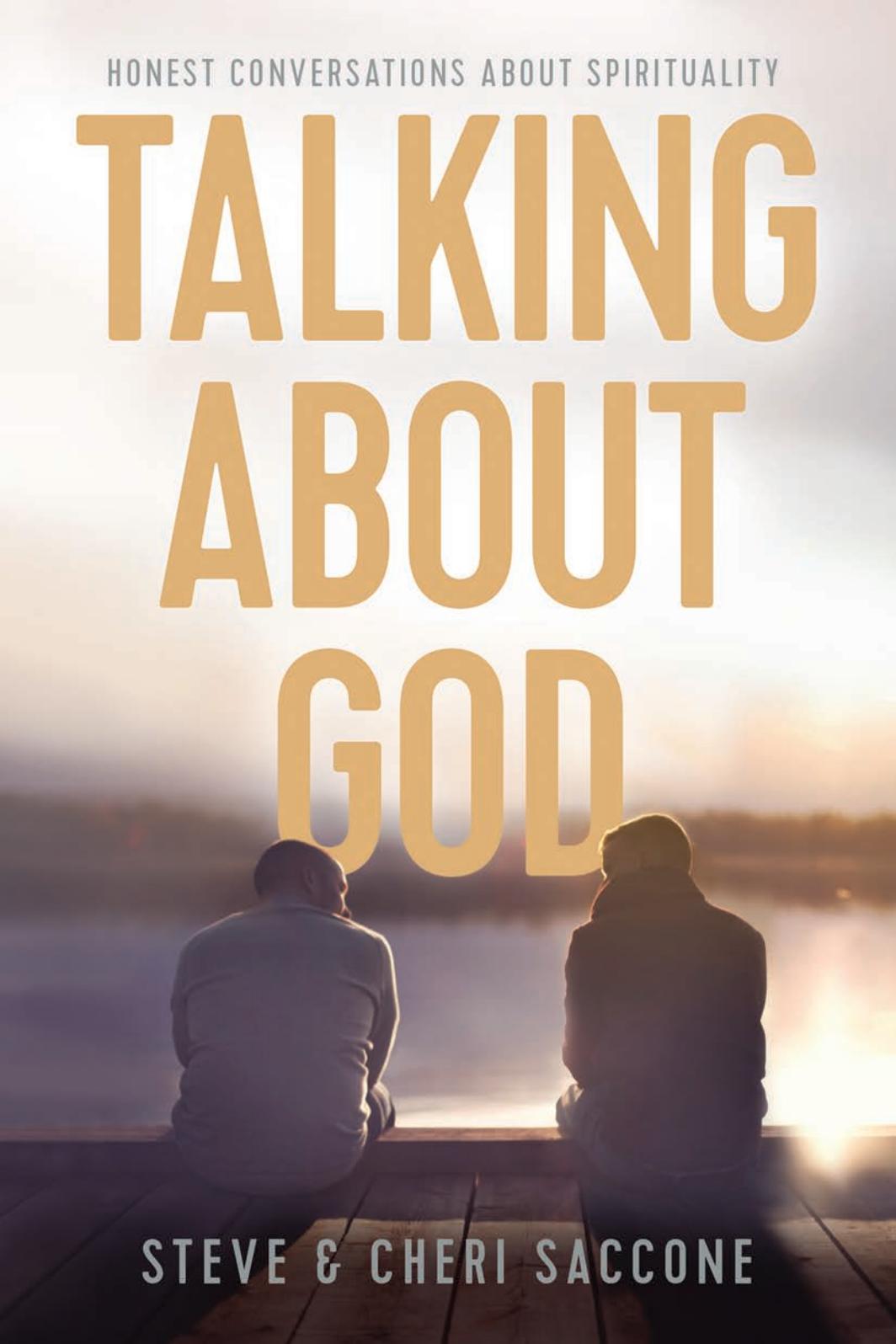


HONEST CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SPIRITUALITY

TALKING ABOUT GOD

The background of the cover features a serene sunset scene. Two individuals are seen from behind, sitting on a wooden dock that extends into a calm body of water. The sun is low on the horizon to the right, creating a bright, golden glow that reflects on the water and silhouettes the figures. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

STEVE & CHERI SACCONI

Talking about God is a déjà vu experience. You will find yourself thinking, *I just had this conversation with someone!* This is why this book is so important; it is so vividly real and not theoretical. You can now avoid the “I wish I had read this before and had some ways to respond” experiences—because Steve and Cheri show how to respond to and converse about questions that come up in today’s world.

DAN KIMBALL

Author of *Adventures in Churchland: Finding Jesus in the Mess of Organized Religion* and lead pastor of Vintage Faith Church, Santa Cruz, CA

I’ve known Steve and Cheri for more than twenty years and have watched them live out what you will read on these pages. Through six unique narratives, they remind us that “sharing our faith” has never been about power or rightness, but rather about a reflection of Jesus that moves us toward honest and caring engagement. I hope these stories will inspire and educate you as they have for me.

NANCY ORTBERG

Author of *Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands: Lessons in Non-Linear Leadership*

My friend Steve and his wife, Cheri, have written one of the most refreshing, thought-provoking, insightful, and practical books about building genuine relationships with people far from God that I’ve ever read. In a world that is polarized and hostile when addressing topics such as sexuality, politics, morality, and religion, this book provides fresh wisdom and practical tools. It will help you break down the barriers and build authentic friendships with

those whose worldview could not be more different from your own. I highly recommend it!

CHIP INGRAM

Teaching pastor of Living on the Edge and author of *Why I Believe*

I have several reasons to love this book. First, it's honest. Steve and Cheri gain authenticity through their transparency in dealing with difficult subjects. Second, the power of story is unleashed: In their conversations with people about their life journeys, we find ourselves having conversations with ourselves and with God about our own pilgrimage. "What would I have said and done?" and "How would I have reacted?" inevitably lead us to discover something about our own beliefs and attitudes. Finally, I appreciate that this couple still understands who really is the Main Character in everyone's plot.

REGGIE MCNEAL

Leadership consultant and author of *A Work of Heart* and *Kingdom Come*

I wish I had had friends like Steve and Cheri to patiently listen and speak grace and wisdom into my life as I journeyed toward Christ. The precious and sensitive conversations that they share in *Talking about God* are at once heartwarming and a road map for the posture and care that Christians have the privilege of offering to spiritual seekers. I love this book, and I'm learning! When is volume 2 coming out?

CAESAR KALINOWSKI

Author of *The Gospel Primer*, *Transformed*, and *Bigger Gospel*

HONEST CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SPIRITUALITY

TALKING ABOUT GOD

STEVE & CHERI SACCONI

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While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: *We Come in Peace* ix

A CONVERSATION WITH JEN: *Narrated by Cheri*

CHAPTER ONE: Not Feelin' It 3

CHAPTER TWO: Resurrected Regrets 17

CHAPTER THREE: Turning the Page 27

A CONVERSATION WITH YASH: *Narrated by Steve*

CHAPTER FOUR: Where Do I Belong? 39

CHAPTER FIVE: Which God Will I Follow? 53

A CONVERSATION WITH LACEY: *Narrated by Cheri*

CHAPTER SIX: Coffee, Art, and Spirituality 65

CHAPTER SEVEN: I Once Was Lost . . . 85

A CONVERSATION WITH JAKE: *Narrated by Steve*

CHAPTER EIGHT: God at a Distance 95

CHAPTER NINE: Breaking Free 103

A CONVERSATION WITH MAYA: *Narrated by Cheri*

CHAPTER TEN: Unexpected Friends 121

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Taking Off the Mask 139

A CONVERSATION WITH ERIC: *Narrated by Steve*

CHAPTER TWELVE: I Love Jesus But . . . 159

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Wrestling with God 171

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Who Do I Listen To? 187

Afterword 199

Acknowledgments 205

Discussion Questions 207

Notes 209

About the Authors 211

INTRODUCTION

We Come in Peace

YOU MIGHT BE FAMILIAR with the old *Star Trek* episodes in which Captain Kirk would encounter unknown life-forms on new planets and declare, “We come in peace!” Sometimes I think this declaration should be a mandatory starting point when engaging in spiritual conversations.

We come in peace.

It often feels as if completely different worlds are colliding when two people with opposing viewpoints encounter each other. There seem to be two reflexive instincts: (1) to protect one’s own territory and (2) to dominate the other’s territory. Even the best of us, those who truly mean well, can’t help but be caught up in this pull toward claiming and protecting spiritual, religious, philosophical, and even sometimes political territory. As followers of Jesus, how do we hold on to our convictions and cherished beliefs while giving other people the space to hold on to their own as well? And even more complicated than that, how do we spread the message of the hope we have, the Good News, without dishonoring, belittling, or insulting people in the process?

The collision of opposing worldviews involves uncomfortable elements that are nearly impossible to eliminate. There is anxiety. There is self-protection. There is tension. There is fear. There is pride. There is defensiveness. There is vulnerability. When we enter spiritual conversations saying sincerely, “We come in peace,” we are not attempting to remove all discomfort. Rather, we are trying to add something. We are adding honor. We are giving understanding. We are seeing the whole instead of the pieces. And mostly we are giving dignity.

Dignity can be defined as “bearing, conduct, or speech indicative of self-respect or appreciation of the formality or gravity of an occasion or situation.”¹

The word *gravity* stands out. When we recognize the gravity of a situation, we inevitably treat it (or, in this case, persons of varying beliefs) with greater respect and deference. Offering platitudes and being condescending, rude, superficial, disingenuous, frivolous, ignorant, and unaware are unthinkable approaches or attitudes when we appreciate the gravity involved. Basically, dignity says, “This is a big deal, and we know it.”

Another definition of *dignity* is “worthiness.”² This word strikes a deep chord as well. We treat something that (or someone whom) we deem worthy as special, valuable, even extraordinary. The eyes of the heart look at the object of worthiness and proclaim, “You mean something to me, and I genuinely see you!”

If there’s a time when dignity should be front and center, it’s when we’re talking about God. We Christ followers talk much about love when it comes to showing and spreading our

faith, as we should. But what does love really look like? Love looks a lot like dignity. It recognizes the gravity of a person. It recognizes the worthiness of a person. And it is truly genuine.

Like many followers of Christ, Cheri and I have compassion for those who are spiritually adrift or searching for something more. We have a heart for people who are exploring spiritual things and are trying to find answers to the bigger questions of life. We have spent many years (and tears) walking with others on their journey to discover Truth. We met in our early twenties, and it didn't take long for our lives to merge around one common passion: ministry. Not in a vocational sense but in the truest sense of the word—to serve. We both feel drawn to help people who have already decided to follow Jesus Christ and who seek to deepen their faith. And we love helping people who are seeking to know God find their faith.

We realized early on, though, that we were just as in need of guidance, support, and challenge as anyone else. Even more, we recognized that if we weren't vulnerable, open, and genuine with others in this pursuit of spiritual growth, we stripped ourselves of the right to ask for these very same qualities in others. Interdependent growth requires an authenticity on both sides. People cannot lead others where they have not gone. And they ought not ask others to do what they are not willing to do themselves. So often, we as Christ followers ask people who are far from God to do what we who are close to God are not able or willing to do—to be authentic, vulnerable, and emotionally honest.

This concept was significant, and still is, to spiritual formation. If it were not for this commitment to upholding emotional

honesty, the conversations we share in this book would never have taken place.

What do we mean by “emotional honesty”? Emotional honesty is being willing to face the difficult and sometimes ugly inner realities, the inconsistencies in our lives, our painful pasts and painful presents; being open even when we fear rejection; and telling the truth about ourselves even when it directly contradicts who we wish we were. You know, all the fun stuff.

There’s a great line from one of Cheri’s favorite books, *Absolute Truths* by Susan Howatch. A perceptive spiritual director is attempting to coax something out of his young protégé and eventually calls him out: “You’re saying the words you want me to hear, but I hear the words you can’t bring yourself to say!”³ Emotional honesty says the words we can hardly bring ourselves to say out loud. It’s like pushing a verbal boulder uphill until it finally reaches the top and simply falls in its own heaviness.



Cheri and I never really put certain values into words, but we gradually solidified them throughout the years as life’s pressures and realities pressed down on us. These values emerged in the form of three continuous applications: (1) joining hands with the spiritually adrift on their journey toward Christ, (2) giving dignity to all people, and (3) being emotionally honest. So, when we say that we “come in peace,” we

- recognize that life is a journey and we are fellow pilgrims on this journey;

- are aware that all people who God puts in our path are special and deserve to be treated with worthiness;
- realize that spiritual conversations are intended to be dialogues, not monologues; and
- are committed to being authentic and vulnerable along the way.

Cheri and I don't believe these values are meant for only some people to adhere to. We believe these values are meant for *all* people. These are principles worth holding on to, and they are strong enough to withstand the storms of life and relationships. If you're anything like us and have a longing to talk about God in a way that not only brings Him glory but also brings others dignity, this is the book for you.

Formulas can often be helpful in life. But the Good News was never intended to be shared in a formulaic way. When engaging in spiritual conversations, there are no formulas guaranteed to produce success, but certain qualities *are* guaranteed to create a gracious and always honest space for the light of Jesus to sweep in. Whether people choose to embrace that light is unpredictable and quite literally out of one's control. But the part one does have control over is so significant in its simplicity it can almost be missed.

What you are about to read are real conversations with real people about a real God. We changed the names and some other details to protect people's privacy, but the important parts are all true. We share these honest exchanges because we want you to simply absorb the stories and struggles—struggles that

so many others are also facing. We want you to be able to really *hear* their voices and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you as He speaks through them. We believe these people's struggles with God and their quest for truth have an enduring ripple effect that can help others. And we want you to be able to reflect on how you would engage in these interactions if *you* were the one sitting on the other side of that proverbial table. Talking about God is one of the most profoundly important things we can do in this life besides actually living out our faith in God. Delving into these real conversations, which go in unpredictable yet God-directed places, provides a unique opportunity to help you successfully talk about God to others.



Even though this is not a formula-driven book, there are some dos and don'ts we learned the hard way.

FIRST, SOME DON'TS:

- Don't just merely show up. Show up and engage.
- Don't just merely throw truth at someone's soul like darts aimed at a bull's-eye on a dartboard. Instead, help that person find where God is already speaking to him or her and explore that through dialogue.
- Don't ignore or avoid difficult truths.
- Don't pretend as if you've got it all together or that you never have doubts or questions.
- Don't invade or apply forced persuasion.

- Don't shame and speak in condescending fashion.
(This one is a biggie.)

HOWEVER,

- Don't indiscriminately accept and celebrate anything and everything someone believes, or lives out, in the name of grace.
- Don't give the impression that God is okay with things that dishonor His holiness.
- Don't stop when the conversation gets too hard or complicated or tense.
- Don't jump ship from the relationship when someone's spiritual pace is not fast enough for your tastes.
- Don't minimize the person's pain or struggles.
- Don't play therapist and demand vulnerability from him or her while not exposing your weaknesses as well—meet the individual on equal ground.
- Don't speak over, or for, the person.
- Don't hold back humble honesty and appropriate truth telling.
- Don't force it either.
- And don't forget about grace, gentleness, compassion, and respect.

NOW FOR SOME DOS:

- Do bring humanity back to conversations.
- Do look for genuine points of connection and reinforce those places.

TALKING ABOUT GOD

- Do ask questions. Lots and lots of questions.
- Do listen more. Again, please listen more.
- Do validate the person's experiences as meaningful change agents in his or her life.
- Do admit when you don't know the answers to questions he or she is asking.
- Do laugh together. Laughter builds affection and bonding, and it breaks down walls of resistance.
- Do pray before, during, and after the conversations. Basically, pray without ceasing.
- Do seek to understand before you seek to be understood.
- Do be patient—always—while you trust in the work of God. It will be obvious when you're rushing or unwilling to go at his or her pace.
- Do relax a little. God's got you . . . and the individual you are talking with.
- Do think dialogue, not monologue.
- Do be open about your beliefs and unafraid to share your spiritual experiences as well.
- Do show empathy, not pity.
- Do trust that the Holy Spirit is already at work in the person and that you are riding on the wave between him (or her) and God, not creating it. (This one is more abstract.)
- Do be intentional without being domineering.
- Do be passionate without being pushy.
- And to top it off, do be you. *The real you.*

In the pages ahead we hope you see not only the complexities and struggles in these conversations but also the victories and the breakthroughs. God never said this life or relationships would be easy. But He did say they would be worth it. So, let's keep fighting for the life worth living as we journey with one another toward the Light.

A black and white photograph of a long wooden table in a cafe. In the foreground, two coffee cups on saucers are placed on the table. The background shows a bright, out-of-focus interior with large windows and chairs. The text is overlaid on the image.

— A —
**CONVERSATION
WITH JEN**

Narrated by Cheri

Chapter One

NOT FEELIN' IT

WHERE IS IT WRITTEN that two women have to have this talk at a coffee shop?

Seems like a rule. If you're going to have a serious session of soul talk, you take it to a neighborhood café. I don't know why, but there's no time to wonder about it right now.

Today's "Jesus over Java" conversation is with a young woman named Jen.

And to be honest, I'm a little nervous about this meeting.

Nerves come with the territory, of course, but I do know Jen is somewhat cynical. And while I recognize that the skeptical tone is, to some extent, the voice of our age, I'd rather just talk straight up, without the extra dab of attitude.

But that's not something you can say in a conversation like this one.

We take people as they are, don't we?

There's a kind of spiritual geography to these encounters. I'm on one side of the table, with my worldview. Jen, or whoever, is on the opposite side. Between us is a frontier—represented by the table—over which we dialogue and negotiate. If I push too far over to her side and am too aggressive, too propositional, then she begins to build a wall. She goes on the defensive.

On the other hand, if I hang too far back in my world with my “live and let live” tendencies, no real questions will be raised. There will be no chance of spiritual transformation. I do have a way of wimping out, of pouring on so much unconditional acceptance that I obscure what Jesus asks every one of us: *What is the ultimate truth? And will you orient your heart toward it no matter the cost?* Whether we are willing to lean into this or not, as human beings, we can't escape sensing Jesus' pressing questions within us.

The table doesn't come with a grid, like a football field. I have to be incredibly sensitive to my location on that frontier—between pushy and passive. And love and sincerity should count for something. In the frontier between us, we hope to find some common ground on which there can be true communication. And from there, I hope and pray that I can point beyond the two of us, beyond the room, beyond the physical world to a realm where faith begins.

And that little defense mechanism called *cynicism* can really block the view.

I think about other questions too. (It's strange where the mind will go in these moments.) I ponder, for example, the questions of free will and persuasion. The idea is for my friend to say at some point, "I choose to leave the old life behind and start a new life under the reign of God." But my friend can and may decline that choice. Instinctively I will continue to reason and persuade. But again, where is the line that once crossed means it's time to punt? When is it fourth down . . . when I must acknowledge God has given me many gifts but not the ability to change another's mind?

As followers of Jesus, another gift we haven't received is access to the end result. We speak, we reason, we share, we pray, and then we leave it to God. Sometimes it's the hardest moment of faith, simply trusting that soul to heaven.

As I climb into my car, my head is spinning with nothing but ideas. Now I'm supposed to add some high-grade caffeine to that?

I sit for a moment with my hands on the wheel, then look at my hands and slowly pull them away. *You take charge, Lord. Let me rest in the knowledge that You've got this. Help me do my simple part, which is to love my friend and trust in Your Spirit.*

I'm thinking of Jen again as I turn the key in the ignition. She's what we like to call a "spiritual explorer." She isn't a follower of Christ but is open for discussion of the subject. That's what she's been doing in a six-week group that has been meeting to explore our faith. And that's what she's agreed to do with me today.

Jen knows about the radical things Jesus claims for Himself

and the equally radical ways He calls people to live. What else do I know about her? She has a tendency toward cynicism, but she is also thoughtful and respectful. The conventional wisdom is that she enjoys batting it all around, but she's nowhere close to considering a serious commitment.

But the group leader disagrees. He watches Jen and feels that there's more going on, that beneath her outward appearance—the little jokes, skepticism, “just here for the ride” act—there is a true, questing soul wanting to hear answers she can take hold of and trust. Going to a group was one thing; saying yes to a meeting with me, to go a little deeper, is something else entirely. Until she says no, it's wise to pursue the possibility of yes.

I talk to God, asking for wisdom to find the stance that's just right for this dialogue. I ask Him to help me be myself rather than some cosmic sales representative.

Prayer helps, but it's impossible not to feel a little antsy. If I didn't, I wouldn't be taking seriously what's on the line here. This is a child of God who stands at a place of profound deliberation. It's a huge calling for me. And even as much as God does the heavy lifting, it doesn't mean I can't screw things up. The stakes are so high, and if I didn't acknowledge that, I would be spiritually reckless.

At this point the little voice inside says, *Fine, but why keep stimulating your fears? Why set up camp in the field of doubt? Go home or go courageously. Take the leap or take a U-turn. If you choose faith, then use faith. It's as simple as that.*

I feel my right foot pressing down the gas pedal just a bit more.

When I arrive, Jen is waiting at a table, nursing a welcoming smile and an espresso. I grab my own beverage, sit down, make some polite conversation, and momentarily consider a little joke or something as a transition sentence—such as my observation about soul talk in coffee shops. But that would sound a little facile, a little rehearsed. Instead, I just relax and say, “Tell me about you. Why do you think you’ve come to this place?”

“You mean the coffee shop?”

I laugh. “No—well, that too! But mainly I mean this moment. This curiosity about Jesus that you’ve expressed.”

Her body language reads *relaxed*, which is a good sign. It suggests I must appear relaxed too. Tension is infectious. I want Jen to see I’m not going to slam her with a King James Bible and demand the sinner’s prayer right here in front of the baked-goods display.

“Oh man,” she replies. “Where do I begin?”

And the story unfolds. As always, I’m amazed by the complexity of people and their stories. It’s easy to look at people, apply simplistic labels, then find each is a “label” unto himself or herself.

“I grew up Buddhist, but I’d call us ‘cultural Buddhists.’ We didn’t make a big deal out of religion. As far as I was concerned, it was a nice belief system that didn’t get in the way of my life. I was cool with it but just not attached to it.

“However, as I grew older, I began to understand the real religion in our house was something else entirely. It was called Success. I was maybe three when my mom and dad started in about education, being career minded, getting somewhere in

the world—all those kinds of things. If I wanted to please my folks, I needed to get perfect grades and be successful in every activity. That was what counted in life.

“And we did that—my brothers and sisters and me. We succeeded, so we were happy and our parents were happy. But when you scraped off the veneer of Buddhism, achievement was the true ideal.”

I say, “I get the impression it didn’t stay that way. At least for you, or we wouldn’t be having this conversation, right? What broke down so that you were no longer happy?”

She pauses, wrinkles her brow. “Hmm. I wouldn’t say anything broke down, really.”

Well, there it is: my first mistake. I was probably on the right track but at the wrong time. Why couldn’t I just let her story unfold and see where she led me? Note to self: *Don’t rush the process.*

“I actually had an awesome life,” she explains. “I had lots of friends, lots of fun. Maybe *too* much fun sometimes.” We both smile.

“I loved college. *Loved* it. I sailed through academically, and the honors and accolades just kept coming. Then one day I met Alex.” She fixes me with her eyes in a way that says, *Here’s the turning point.*

“And?”

“When we first met, I wasn’t really into him in *that* way. He was persistent, you know? Really pursued me, and it was flattering. We got to be good friends, and all the while I kept telling him this was all I was open for. But he wouldn’t give

up. And I guess his determination wore me down. After about a year of being 'just friends,' I realized I was in love with him."

"I guess you could know for certain his love was real by that time."

"Exactly. It had been like he could love me without receiving anything in return. I still don't get how that works. I mean, I could never love someone who didn't return my feelings. Alex is probably the best human being I know."

"*Know*, present tense. So, are you guys still going strong?"

"Yes, we are! Two years on and I can't imagine my life without him. And that's different for me. For so long I was sure I didn't need a man in my life. I kept life simple, and it worked. Now I realize that without Alex, life would be empty."

She stops to sip her drink, and I realize we've come to an important place.

"So, it sounds like a happy ending to me," I say. "But at some point, you joined a group to explore an alternate view of life. How do we connect the dots?"

Jen isn't completely comfortable yet, but I get the sense she is ready to open up about what has led her to this place. She is here because she *wants* to be here. I may or may not be reading her right, but asking thoughtful questions can never lead me wrong.

"The answer is . . . Alex. Again. For the longest time I had no idea he had any kind of religious belief. Every Sunday he'd take off somewhere, and I won't say he was secretive, but he simply never talked about it. I was curious—where was he going? Months later, he told me that, of all places, it was

church. It was shocking. I would've had an easier time believing him if he said he had been taking knitting lessons.

"Not that it was a huge deal. But up to that point, if you can believe this, I'd barely known a practicing Christian. And now I was joined at the hip with one!"

"So you're dating this guy, and you must feel like you know him deep down, and then you find out he has these core beliefs he never shared. I'm curious how you felt about that."

(Me? I'd be *furious*! But this isn't about me.)

"Well, I'd say surprised. Confused. Not mad or emotional. I mean, why would I be? He had a faith that wasn't pushy or obnoxious. I respected that. It was his thing, and he didn't need my approval or participation in it, or anyone else's. Cool. But it made me want to know more about this belief inside him. So I actually asked if he'd take me to church."

Every Christian's dream, and the guy wasn't even trying for it. As far as I knew, anyway.

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Sure.' And that's how I ended up here at your church."

"So, as they say, how would you rate your experience?"

"Very, very good. No complaints. The people are all nice, and the pastor is always interesting in his talks."

She stops, takes another sip of her coffee, and waits for another question.

"So you're fine with the people and the topics. What about Jesus Himself? What are your thoughts there?"

She simply gazes at me. For the first time in the conversation,

she has nothing to say. So if she can't write me an essay, I'll give her multiple choice.

"Has it been . . . strange? Intriguing? Moving? Or none of the above?"

"Cheri, that's the problem! I like so much about Christian religion—I really do. But I just don't *feel* anything when I'm at church."

"Hmm. So you don't really find an emotional component. Let's think about other places and how you relate emotionally. Do you have those feelings when you're off by yourself somewhere, when no one is looking? That's the time when a lot of us sort through our emotions. Sometimes that's the place where we understand our feelings best."

Jen squints, looks upward, and considers this.

"No, not really."

"Okay, then. You don't feel what you don't feel. And emotions are important. The question is, Why have you kept on with your exploration of God and of faith when you haven't really felt anything to validate it?"

I feel I've asked a key question. Jen looks off in the distance for a moment.

"Well, I guess it's because of Alex. He says he wants to marry me, but he can't or won't unless I come to a genuine belief in Christianity. I told him I'm okay with his attending church. I'll even go with him and enjoy it. But he says this isn't enough—that I have to really *believe*."

I can't help but think that Alex stinks. So he figures it's okay to date a girl for a year without sharing his faith, but

then, all of a sudden, she's informed she has to believe or leave? There must have been a better way for him to handle this. Of course he's being wise in refusing to marry a non-believer, but why bring her along this far if that issue was only going to become a bigger deal?

I'm pretty upset with this guy so I have to watch what I say. What a mess!

"That has to be tough," I reflect. "You fall in love with this guy who has loved you so deeply, so unconditionally, only to come to a deadlock because of a line in the sand you can't cross with personal integrity. I would think this would be one area where you would have some of those feelings we've been talking about."

"Yeah. It's been hard for me because I don't get it. We really love each other, and we're great together— isn't that enough? I'm ready to move in with him and go to the next level. You know—like test-driving a car before you buy it, right?"

Odd, but suddenly Jen seems as though she's the one selling something to me. She says this in passing, as if it's no big deal. But her statement is loaded with hazardous thinking. Here is one of those places where I have to abandon being passive.

"Do you really want my opinion on that? Because if those are just rhetorical questions, I won't impose my thoughts."

She raises her eyebrows. "No, I'd like to hear what you think."

Here we go.

"Well, the first question is of being together without sharing a faith. There's so much to say there. I can see how it seems

love is enough, especially since it has gone so perfectly up to now. But a lot of things will lie ahead in life, and I believe I can speak for Alex on this one. Faith is the thread that runs through every big decision, every plan, every important idea. It's the point around which everything else for him revolves. And you can see why the two of you would need to be revolving around the same sun, so to speak."

She looks confused. I'm not surprised—I've been down this road with people more times than I care to count. But I still don't understand why this is confusing to others. How does the hugeness of faith in an intimate relationship not register with *so many* people out there? *Lord, help me show Jen why You make such a difference, why You make all the difference!*

I continue, "Jen, as an example among many, Steve and I have an autistic son, and adapting to his diagnosis has been one of the hardest things we have ever gone through in our lives. Our perfectly sweet, normally developing baby suddenly began to vanish before our eyes at eighteen months old. A few years have passed, and it feels sometimes that our boy is hidden behind a neurological wall we can't penetrate."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. The thing is, my husband and I face this hardship with our faith. It's just what we do. If he didn't share my faith, we might as well be in two different places. Our hearts and minds couldn't be tied together through this struggle the way they are."

Jen has a look of horror—as if she's watching a car head toward a cliff, but she's helpless to stop it.

“Without our faith, a thing this big might well have torn us apart. Instead, it has done the opposite. There have been late nights of tears, endless prayers, sharing our ideas about what God may be doing through this. Now if I turned to Steve to share both my suffering and my faith, and he could only nod without comprehension, I just couldn’t handle it. There are times when love *isn’t* enough. It finally comes down to core beliefs, no matter how strongly you commit to each other. Because, realize it or not, you’re each revolving around something—an idea, a belief, a person. If it’s not the same sun, you fall into eclipse with each other.”

I can only hope I’ve said that well. My impression is that she is transparent and appreciates me laying it on the line. But I have been careful to be as compassionate and non-confrontational as possible.

Jen thinks for a moment and says, “I understand. But there’s still the issue of living together before marriage. For me, it seems unwise to jump into something you haven’t carefully tested—to leap before you look. Isn’t it just common sense to find out in advance how we do under the same roof?”

I’m not a fan of this idea, but plenty of other people are.

“I’d ask you this question: Would you say you and Alex spend most of your time together? Or are the two of you living mostly separate lives, maybe getting together a couple of times a week?”

“The second one.”

“I think that’s the true key. It’s not so much about a roof and a bed. The real issue is the everyday journey of life together.

When my husband and I were dating, we were together every day. We went to church together, worked side by side in the same ministries, had the same friends, and were basically part of each other's family. If we weren't in the same place, we were on the phone talking to each other. At the end of the day, we went to our separate addresses, but overall, life was a shared thing for us. After two years of dating, we got married. I can remember having your question: *What if there's some deep, dark secret that will only now come out?* To be honest, the transition was seamless. We didn't need a 'test drive' because we knew each other so well by that time. We knew we were compatible even on really bad days, when we were really down or exhausted, not just on the good days."

She smiles. "That makes sense, actually. I'll have to give it a little more thought."

I turn a corner in the conversation. "Let's get back to you and what brought us together. Is there anything else on your mind? What I'm hearing is that you feel you are at an impasse with Alex on the issue of faith. I really feel for you, but I don't know what I have to offer beyond that. Whatever you'd like to talk about, though, I'm here to listen."

At this point I'm thinking we're more or less done. It feels like the average length for this type of conversation. We've talked about the issues she's raised, but I think this is one of those situations where something's gotta give.

But I'm wrong. The conversation takes another twist.