

PRAISE FOR. . . A Path Revealed
*How Hope, Love, and Joy Found Us Deep
In A Maze Called Alzheimer's*

“A moving account of one man’s journey from a conventional faith to a stunningly real relationship with God, this spiritual memoir will linger in your imagination long after you have finished reading it. It describes the author’s path through the desert of his beloved wife’s slow descent into Alzheimer’s disease for more than sixteen years. *A Path Revealed* is an intimate meditation on how one man was shown how to love and trust God in the midst of devastating loss.”

—DEBORAH VAN DEUSEN HUNSINGER, PhD, Charlotte W. Newcombe Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her most recent book, *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel and Pastoral Care*, was awarded the 2015 Book of the Year by the Academy of Parish Clergy.

“Carlen Maddux and his wife, Martha, visited with me for a week’s retreat shortly after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. The story Carlen tells is an amazing journey. It would require that Carlen be willing to risk, to set aside the blocks of disbelief and distrust, to open his mind and heart to possibilities he’d never have imagined.

“Carlen is a good, clear writer. His choice of words is precise, his images effective. Everything about this story rings true, authentic, intimate, and experiential.”

—SR. ELAINE M. PREVALLET, SI, retreat director with the Sisters of Loretto in Kentucky. She is the author of three books, including *Making the Shift: Seeing Faith Through a New Lens*.

“This book is a solid core of hope within a tale of seeming woe. Almost everyone knows someone who suffers from Alzheimer’s, or who loves someone who suffers from Alzheimer’s. Carlen Maddux spent seventeen years in that chronic crucible of one step forward, three steps back.

He’s come through it—and without letting his true love go. How was this possible? Carlen’s odyssey is a trip that one man has made. Yet without knowing it, he has made it for us all. It’s an emotional journey, a geographical journey, a medical journey, and a spiritual journey.”

—THE REV. DR. PAUL F.M. ZAHL, Episcopal minister, is author or co-author of ten books, including *Grace in Practice* and *PZ’s Panopticon*, and producer of the popular *PZ’s Podcasts* at <http://www.mbird.com/tag/pzs-podcast/>.

“At age 50, Martha Maddux was visited by the surprising, upending presence of one of life’s most dreaded diseases. Surely we—all of us—would dread facing and embarking on a similar heart-wrenching wilderness pilgrimage. But should we have to, our broken places will be made stronger along the precarious way, through the compassionate and vulnerable witness of Martha and her family’s ministry to us, and its compelling honesty and spiritual depth which urge us to walk with thanksgiving ‘into the deep we call God.’”

—REV. DR. DEAN K. THOMPSON, President and Professor of Ministry Emeritus, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Scripture tells us that hope does not disappoint because of the love of God. Carlen Maddux’s compelling book, *A Path Revealed*, reaches out beyond crisis to the unbounded hope, love, and joy of the Lord. It does not disappoint. Maddux’s fine work connects the dots of a spiritual journey, and inspires us to reach higher.”

—GREG O’BRIEN, diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s, describes his experience in his riveting, first-person account *On Pluto: Inside the Mind of Alzheimer’s*. His book has won the 2015 Beverly Hills International Book Award for Medicine, the 2015 International Book Award for *Psychology Today’s* “Health,” and is an Eric Hoffer International Book Award finalist.

“The reader who travels with Carlen into the mysterious depths of human life, human tragedy, and human relationships will be led to reflect, to ponder, and to expand. Carlen is a strong writer. He invites us to share—to share his journey, to share his discovery of how his search led his mind and soul beyond problem-solving into acceptance, peace, celebration, and gratitude.”

—REV. DR. ARTHUR ROSS III, pastor emeritus of White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, and former chair of the board of trustees at Union Presbyterian Seminary.

A PATH REVEALED



Martha Cooper Maddux



CARLEN MADDUX

A PATH REVEALED

HOW HOPE, LOVE, AND JOY

FOUND US

DEEP IN A MAZE

CALLED **ALZHEIMER'S**



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

2016 First printing

A Path Revealed: How Hope, Love, and Joy Found Us Deep in a Maze Called Alzheimer's

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ISBN 978-1-61261-784-8

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Maddux, Carlen, author.

Title: A path revealed : how hope, love, and joy found us deep in a maze called Alzheimer's / by Carlen Maddux.

Description: Brewster MA : Paraclete Press Inc., 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016022327 | ISBN 9781612617848 (trade paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Alzheimer's disease--Religious aspects--Christianity. |

Alzheimer's disease--Patients--Religious life. | Alzheimer's

disease--Patients--Care. | Maddux, Martha Cooper, -2014. | Maddux, Carlen.

Classification: LCC BV4910.6.A55 M33 2016 | DDC 248.8/6196831--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016022327>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

To our children,
David, Rachel, and Kathryn,
and their families

For Martha and her legacy

In appreciation of my family,
my late parents, Margaret and Dave,
my late sister, Alice, and
my brother, Bob, and his family

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FOREWORD

A foreword is sort of a blessing or stamp of approval to assure prospective readers that the author offers a voice worth hearing. That is why Carlen Maddux invited me, as a longtime friend, a former pastor to him and his family, and a discussion partner as this book emerged, to accept this assignment. I gladly agreed. Carlen and his family have been treasured friends since the mid-1980s, a friendship that has persisted for twenty years beyond the time I left his community and moved to another state.

The Carlen I know and respect is the “real thing”—a solid person of inquiring faith for all of his adult life, a former college athlete, an intelligent and respected businessman and community leader, and a father, husband, and friend. Over a seventeen-year period, I witnessed Carlen in a new role: caregiver to an incurably ill wife, Martha, whom he loved deeply and with whom he enjoyed life. That role confronted Carlen with his limitations, his failings, and his accumulated pain. Such confrontations are often inescapable in this life. When they occur, some people grow up; others grow down. In

this book, Carlen tells a memorable story of growing up. I have followed the story with great sadness and great admiration, from its very beginning.

The theme of Carlen's story is captured by a small piece of needlepoint another friend made for me forty-plus years ago. Mounted in an oval frame, with a small owl in the lower corner, the sampler reads, "Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved."

Carlen tells of his wife's tragic journey through Alzheimer's. Soon after learning of the diagnosis, Carlen began an intense effort to solve the problem created by the disease. Could it be treated in any way? When the search for that answer reached a dead end, he was faced with another question: how could he understand this tragedy, making sense out of a senseless event? That journey also proved impossible. As Carlen's story unfolds, readers are led away from problem-solving into mystery and into discovering the power that embracing mystery can bring to this human experience.

Carlen's journey not only takes us to monasteries, hospital rooms, and Australia, but also leads us into the dark depths of family dysfunction, a reality in Carlen's and Martha's lives. The journey creates new relationships between Carlen and his children, and with Martha and her parents. The journey leads into Carlen's soul; we join him in discovering the ways a life of faith includes radically new understandings of that treasured, sacred word.

The reader who travels with Carlen into the mysterious depths of human life, human tragedy, and human relationships will be led to reflect, to ponder, and to expand. Carlen is a strong writer.

One of his strengths is that, as he tells this story, his words invite us into conversation. His style invites dialogue between reader and author. Carlen does not seek to convince others of anything, certainly not anything that could be called “religious.” Rather, he invites us to share—to share his journey and his discovery of how his search led his mind and soul beyond problem-solving into acceptance, peace, celebration, and gratitude.

As you read this book, reflect on the difference between being smart and being wise. When Carlen began the journey, people who knew him would quickly classify him as being smart. When the book concludes, Carlen is wiser, and his readers have been given the opportunity to grow in wisdom as well. Wisdom is a spiritual attribute, one that emerges through experience, reflection, dialogue, debate, revelation, and resolution—not resolution as in solving a math problem, but resolution as it occurs in poetry, music, or prayer.

My one-word response to this book is gratitude—gratitude for Martha’s life, gratitude for Carlen’s love toward Martha, gratitude for Carlen’s journey and skillful retelling of that journey. Gratitude and wisdom are the gifts I predict readers will receive from this book.

Therefore, I urge those of you who are reading this foreword now to move into the maze and the mystery that is Carlen’s story, which may also lead you into deeper reflection on the maze and mystery of your own story.

Rev. Dr. Arthur Ross III
Winter 2015



REV. DR. ARTHUR ROSS III is an ordained minister who served churches in New York, Florida, and North Carolina. Dr. Ross is pastor emeritus of White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, retiring in 2009 after fifteen years there. He is the former chair of the board of trustees at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and he continues to be involved in a variety of national and international ministries.

PROLOGUE

A NIGHTMARE LAID BARE

In a life of wholeness we may face brokenness and endure woundedness, but our suffering will not be meaningless. Meaningless suffering is soul-destroying.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu,
*Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes
All the Difference*

I had a recurring nightmare as a boy. I dreamed I was riding a bike when I slammed into an invisible wall. I always survived this crash without injury. But after waking up in a cold sweat, I was left asking these questions: Why can't I see the wall? Can someone show me how to avoid that wall? Why am I feeling so lonely?

These were much the same questions I asked when my wife Martha ran headlong into an invisible wall called Alzheimer's. She was diagnosed with this disease in 1997 at age fifty. I didn't

see the wall up ahead. Neither did Martha. We never expected it; we never had a clue. And never had we felt so abandoned and alone. Little did I realize how dramatically our life together was about to change.

The story I'm telling is about a young family's sudden shift from a comfortable, middle-class American life into an alien world shaped and defined by this insidious disease. Though we were forced to face this disease, our story isn't just about Alzheimer's. You or a loved one may be staring at your own crisis—cancer, stroke, job loss, diabetes, heart attack, home foreclosure—you name it. Regardless of the crisis, the potential for emotional and psychological upheaval—alienation, depression, fear, anxiety attacks, a cold numbness—is much the same for victim and family, for care-receiver and caregiver.

But this is not a story about hopelessness. Rather, our story traces a different path that emerged during our family's darkest hours, a path that we did not foresee. Encouraged by a Protestant minister and friend, just after the diagnosis, Martha and I drove from our home in Florida to visit a Catholic nun in Kentucky. This path first appeared among the hills and back roads there.

As we were drawn into this twisting journey, I scrambled for answers. In the months and years that followed, I devoured scores of books, flew halfway around the world to Australia, spent dozens of weekends at a monastery near our home, and found myself all alone one week in Thomas Merton's cabin. In my search I discovered a place far more real than any crisis. I think Martha did too, for this path eventually led us to a ground that transcends any debilitating disease. How it emerged is still a mystery to me.

Perhaps the answer can be found in the statement, “Seek and you will find.”

In telling our story, I must speak in Christian terms and images because that’s the faith and tradition I grew up with, carried into adulthood, and, after a long drought, embraced. In doing this I’m not denying another’s spiritual heritage. Our story is not about scoring theological points. It’s about trying to survive, about finding what works and what doesn’t as we move through a dark, inscrutable maze. It’s about stepping outside our comfort zone to reach anything that holds fast and true. Words do matter. But the truth behind the words matters more.

Some people are just not into spiritual issues. I get that. I’ve been there too, even though I considered myself Christian. So if you’re not, you may want to put this book down now because this is where it’s heading—into the spiritual. The names God and Jesus Christ are overused today, and are often abused for manipulative reasons, so any sane person might pause before invoking them out in the public square. Yet here’s my dilemma: I can’t tell our story without calling on their names, often in the most intimate of ways.

A Search Begins

Before I get too far into our story, I need to share with you who Martha was during the first twenty-five years of our marriage, before she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Two traits describe her best: passionate and confident. She loved our three children and her many friends. She loved politics and the numerous civic involvements in which she took a leadership role, especially

when she worked with disenfranchised children and families. But Martha was not all work. She loved to dance and play tennis and do almost anything outdoors. And through all these endeavors, she loved her God.

Not long after we moved to St. Petersburg in 1975 and our first child, David, was born, Martha helped manage the local campaign for Jimmy Carter's first presidential run. She soon co-managed a first-time state legislative campaign for a friend who subsequently rose to be Florida's Speaker of the House. She worked with another friend who won a seat on our city council. And Martha worked locally on Lawton Chiles's successful bid for governor of Florida. Martha also was elected to St. Petersburg's city council, serving six years in the 1980s. That council made a number of controversial, big-dollar decisions, the ramifications of which are still felt today—in a significantly good way, I think. Meantime, I was intent on getting into the newspaper business and finally landed a job with the award-winning *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*), where I worked for several years as a journalist before leaving to launch my regional business magazine.

When we got the news that Martha had Alzheimer's, my reporter instincts kicked in. Neither she nor I was used to encountering problems with no solutions. So I ran down a lot of rabbit trails looking for answers to one question: is there any way to get out of this Alzheimer's thing?

Some of these trails proved helpful while others led nowhere. Sometimes I hit a wall and broke through it. Other times I hit a wall and broke my heart. In reporting our story, I describe events that have occurred over seventeen years, from the time of Martha's

diagnosis until her death. Yet, unlike a traditional journalist, I also report on events that arose within the subterranean reaches of my heart and mind.

From Journal to Book

This book almost didn't happen. Early on, Rev. Lacy Harwell, a mentor and friend to both Martha and me, wrote on a Christmas card: "Have you considered keeping a journal? It could be of great value to others. As I ponder your notes to me, I feel like a student in a post-grad seminar on love and care. Whatever else you are doing, you are instructing me." I already had begun a journal, but Lacy's urging cemented my commitment, which resulted in fourteen volumes written through the first decade of Martha's illness. This journal gathered dust for five or six years until I decided to crack it open and piece together our story. As I reread it, I thought to myself: *Oh, this is raw*. Old wounds reopened on almost every page as I was reminded of the slow, relentless march of Alzheimer's. *I don't know if I can tell this story*, I thought. I finally started thinking about all we went through and decided our story was worth telling.

If you tease apart the threads, you'll see experiences that brim with bitterness, frustration, rage, guilt, fear, and futility. But you should also see and feel relief, humor, joy, mercy, trust, healing, and gratitude. Our story told here is gleaned from memories, journal entries, epiphanies, poems, prayers, and songs that reveal our family's spirit, splintered and broken—and then recollected and reshaped into a wholeness we could not have imagined.



As I share our story, I must refer to Alzheimer's disease and describe its impact on our family. However, with all due respect to Dr. Alois Alzheimer, who identified this specific dementia a century ago, the name of this disease doesn't deserve the respect conferred by its capitalization. Therefore, from this point forward I will refer to it as . . . *alzheimer's*.

I also need to make one more thing very clear: While we walked along this spiritual path that unfolded before Martha and me, we stayed in close communication with Martha's neurologist. We went to all of Martha's scheduled appointments. Martha took all the medications he prescribed, primarily for the symptoms of *alzheimer's* and for the seizures that occurred later. We enrolled Martha in an experimental program that he supervised, but which proved unsuccessful. I consider our relationship with Martha's neurologist to have been professional and empathetic, and vital to what we were trying to do.

PART ONE



MARTHA, ME,
AND THE
MONASTICS

ONE

(HEART) BREAKING NEWS

For the thing that I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.

—Job 3:25

Our World Is Shaken

September 23, 1997. The date is seared in my mind. That day we were scheduled for a follow-up visit with the doctor who had run some tests on my wife, Martha. Two months earlier, Martha had gone alone for those tests, but she had walked out of the doctor's office before even meeting with him. "I got tired of waiting," she said. That was it, no other explanation—end of subject.

The previous eighteen months had been tough on Martha. She had run for Florida's state legislature as a favored candidate and lost. Then there was the car accident, in which she bumped

her head. And other stressful issues related to her health—first a D&C, then two detached retinas. Weird things.

Martha grew lethargic following that political loss, which was so unlike her. Her energy level always was twice mine. Her style had been to bounce back and leap forward. She thought fast, moved fast, laughed loud, and then asked, “What’s next?” Rarely was there a dull moment, and if there was, Martha made sure it didn’t last long. But now she was checking off fewer items from her long list of things to do. And I heard her laughing less and less on the phone with her buddies.

So in the summer of 1997, nine months after that election loss, the children and I wanted to get to the bottom of her listless attitude. Martha did too. But then, she didn’t. I went with her for the rescheduled appointment in early September. The neurologist had set up a series of tests that day—memory, psychological, and neurological, plus blood work.

“Forgetfulness could be due to one of several short-term conditions,” the doctor told us. *That sounds encouraging*, I thought.

These tests were designed to screen for various possibilities—amnesia, depression, brain infection, and exhaustion. But I also thought it could be much worse, and I suspected Martha did too.

The next couple of weeks crept at a snail’s pace as we awaited the test results. We tried to act busy—I at the magazine and Martha around the house and spending time with her friends. I can’t remember looking into Martha’s eyes during those two long weeks. I was afraid of what I might find.

Finally, the day for the follow-up appointment arrived. At the medical clinic, Martha and I took the elevator up a couple of

floors to the neurologist's office. "Hi, this is Martha Maddux, and I'm her husband," I said to the attendant at the front desk. "We're here for my wife's test results." Martha normally would have been fully capable of speaking for herself, but this long wait had taken its toll.

We sat holding hands and whispering to each other, talking about anything that helped relieve the tension. I gazed around the office, which was little different from any other doctor's office. After several long minutes, the attendant looked our way and said, "Ms. Maddux." We went to the window together, still holding hands. "I'm sorry, but the doctor had an emergency and was called away. One of his associates will be meeting with you, and he's ready to see you."

I paused, disconcerted by this news. Martha and I had warmed to the neurologist at our first appointment, and we expected to see him again. My eyes connected long enough with Martha's to see her concern. But we had little time to react as the attendant directed us straightaway into the associate's office.

This doctor, rather stiff and formal, invited us in and immediately sat behind his big desk while waving us to seats opposite him. I don't remember if we even shook hands or said hello. Social skills apparently weren't a priority for him. He could have been a perfect stand-in for Mr. Spock on *Star Trek*.

Could this be starting off any worse? I wondered.

I found out soon enough. With no introduction, the doctor looked straight at Martha and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but it appears likely that you have early onset alzheimer's disease." His voice was calm, ice-cold calm. His words were harsh beyond belief, freezing our hearts and minds.

With this pronouncement, Martha and I looked at each other in pained bewilderment. Her blue eyes instantly dulled as her confident bearing crumbled. She seemed to have retreated into her shadow. Me? Who knows where I went. Maybe into Dante's fifth circle of hell. Our world wasn't turned upside down. It was imploding before our eyes.

"Are you sure—alzheimer's?" I asked, desperate. "Surely there's some mistake."

"No, there's no mistake," said the doctor, who then started to explain the technical processes and probabilities behind the testing procedures.

As though we care, I thought. Just get us out of here. This can't be happening to Martha. Isn't this disease something you worry about when you get old? Martha had turned fifty only twenty days earlier, the same day that I had turned fifty-two.

We slipped out of the doctor's office confused and dazed, hand clutching hand, two shadows fleeing. Making our way home, a silent fury of questions was unleashed within me, one piled up on the other: *Why was Martha hit with this? She's bright, she's engaging, and she's a go-getter. How do we tell our children? How will they handle this? What will Martha's family think? Her friends? Who can we turn to for answers? Are there any answers? Oh God—help!*

Martha and I felt trapped in a dark place with no way out. The medical community says alzheimer's is a degenerative disease of the brain that has no known cause or cure. Yet after recovering from the initial shock, my first instinct was to prove the doctors wrong.

I must have read a hundred books, pamphlets, or articles in short order. And anything I felt Martha could learn from, I

shared with her. Probably the best book we read together was *Alzheimer's Disease: Frequently Asked Questions* by Frena Gray-Davidson, a professional caregiver. I quickly learned from her that my number-one priority as Martha's caregiver, if I wanted to be useful for the long haul, was to take care of myself. Easier said than done, I discovered, for the verdict we'd been handed was ugly and fatalistic, consuming all my energy and attention. We were two flies caught in a spider's web, ready to be picked apart piece by piece.

Shocks, Aftershocks, and More Shocks

Prior to this, our lives had begun orbiting into something of a sweet spot. Martha and I had been married twenty-five years. Our three kids were approaching young adulthood without any of us showing too many scars. So we had more time for pursuits other than parenting. Martha had always enjoyed her civic activities, including her time on our city council. She was known for her direct questions and comments; in fact, she was too pointed at times, critics said. Martha turned out to be the swing vote on one of the city's most controversial issues ever—whether to build a \$100 million baseball stadium when they had no major league team to fill it. It's now home to the Tampa Bay Rays.

Martha and I had run into plenty of roadblocks in our endeavors, and we stumbled through our share of mistakes. Through them all, though, we were able to recover. But this diagnosis overwhelmed me. I could see no way around it, over it, or through it. I wanted to ignore this crisis but couldn't. Everywhere we turned this thing called alzheimer's shadowed us.

It even followed us onto the tennis courts, where we had always enjoyed playing together. As she had been in most things, Martha was competitive in tennis. But now her smart forehand shots had lost their zing. Her hustle in covering the court was turning into a shuffle. No longer did she want to keep score and win. “Let’s just hit,” she said.

At my work, our regional business magazine was enjoying a measure of success as it expanded in a competitive media market. But I couldn’t focus on the business at hand. I sifted through my in-basket, glanced at the day’s deposit, signed checks, made a few calls, and scanned my ten-page to-do list before setting it aside. *Time to go home*, I said, walking away from my desk. As for trying to manage and grow the magazine that I’d started thirteen years earlier, I now let our publisher worry about that.

We began to review our commitments. “Carlen,” Martha said and hesitated. “Carlen . . . do you think I should resign?” She was chair of the Juvenile Welfare Board, a county agency that worked with a large number of service organizations for children and families. I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t want to pull the rug out from under her. We laid out the pros and cons and any encroaching limitations for handling that job.

“I guess I’d better tell Jim and see what he thinks,” Martha whispered. A tear wet her cheek. Jim Mills was the board’s executive director. When they talked, the two decided it was best for her to step down as chair while remaining on the board. That decision, though thoughtfully made, still hurt Martha deeply.

This and many other incidences made me realize that the initial shock from the diagnosis was only the first of many. A disease like alzheimer’s—or any other devastating crisis—precipitates a whole

series of aftershocks, both immediate and long-term. Some people may describe such shocks as emotional and psychological. But that's only partly true. These shocks affected us at a much deeper level, down in a murky realm we call spiritual—threatening to destroy the very core of our existence.

I tried my best to be Martha's anchor. This crisis forced both of us to slow down. It also forced me to be attentive. Before we married, I remember well the time Martha asked me the color of her eyes, and I didn't know. *Oops*. That forced me to be more attentive, but nothing like this crisis did. We started doing more activities together and talking more with each other. And we began to appreciate each other in ways that we'd never realized before.

It's better to be lost together than alone, I decided.

Both Martha and I grew up in Protestant Christian families. We invited Jesus into our lives as our personal Lord and Savior. We were baptized, we took Communion, and we went to church regularly. Yet church was one activity among many in our busy lives. In the days following the diagnosis, Martha and I doubled down on our faith. We prayed and read the Bible together in a way that we'd rarely done. But as we did, I found the words of Scripture to be drier than the paper they were written on. Prayers froze on my lips. And Sunday worship was a mere rind of itself, any juice long squeezed out. All I could do was cry or stare into space. Martha too.

An anxious stream of chatter arose within me: *Where's God in all this? Where's the love? Where's the help? Where's the protection?* In some deep, inarticulate place I began to feel that Martha and I were not loved by God; that he didn't care about our devastating

dilemma. And I was too afraid of God to voice that out loud, or to call him out on it. I began to wonder, *If my faith is no good in a crisis like this, then what good is my faith?* I soon discovered that the faith I had built over a lifetime was pretty thin gruel.

A JOURNAL BEGINS

The journal I started shortly after Martha's diagnosis became a gathering place for the information, thoughts, feelings, questions, and observations that were hurtling at me from all angles. I soon realized it also could help me keep our children informed about what was going on and what I was thinking. They needed to know that I was, like them, hurt and confused with few if any answers, but still searching. These are excerpts from my first frantic entries in September 1997.

Our world is turned upside down. On October 7 we'll become part of an experimental study our doctor is participating in. Drug "L" is thought to retard, if not stop, a.d.'s progress.

Martha and I are sharing prayers, crying more than praying.

Martha does NOT want to tell the family yet. I agree. Not until we've absorbed the shock and begun to move in a more positive direction.

I'm seeing a distancing by Kathryn. She doesn't know why her mommie can't think straight or remember. As a result, she writes off Martha's opinions, orders, etc. She

needs to know about the diagnosis sooner than either David or Rachel since she's here day-in, day-out.

Martha needs comfort; support; leadership and direction; stress relief; a better understanding of Alzheimer's; a strong, trusting relationship with our doctor; spiritual counseling; love, hope, and more of God in her life.

I need time, a focus, support, a better understanding of a.d., a stronger relationship with Jesus. De-stress, decompress.



TWO

TWO PROTESTANTS IN A CATHOLIC MOTHERHOUSE

You must stop examining spiritual truths like dry bones!
You must break open the bones and take in the
life-giving marrow.

—Sadhu Sundar Singh,
Essential Writings

A Question of Willingness

Early in our marriage, before children and between jobs, Martha and I flipped our car on the Alaska Highway. Driving on what must have been the longest gravel road in the world, Martha lost control on a curve with an oil tanker fast approaching. The truck passed, our left tires dropped off the edge of the gravel embankment, and our car performed a perfect

midair flip before landing on its roof. *Smack!* Neither of us was injured, suffering not even a scratch as we hung upside down suspended by our seat belts. Her shoulder-length brown hair was dangling straight down, blond highlights and all. We looked at each other wide-eyed, then released our seat belts and slipped out the windows.

Martha's diagnosis felt much the same. Our lives were suspended upside down and shaken. However, we could see no window to slip out to safety. That's why, three weeks after the diagnosis, we found ourselves driving up to Kentucky to visit a Catholic nun we'd never heard of before.

We decided to go at the urging of Rev. Lacy Harwell, our mentor. We had called him soon after the news. He was the Presbyterian minister in St. Petersburg who married us, baptized two of our children, and was Martha's longtime friend. He listened to our story with a focus I'd seen in only a handful of other people. Lacy's whole body was zeroed in on everything we said and felt. The three of us sat downstairs in our living room, Martha and I on a couch and Lacy on a chair opposite. At Martha's request, I described to Lacy what we knew, and she filled in the details that she felt like sharing. A calm soon descended on us all. Lacy's shoulders sagged, and tears crept down the face of this big bear of a man whom I'd never seen cry. I swapped seats with Lacy and let these two friends hug.

Then he told us about his friend and confidant Sr. Elaine Prevallet. "A number of my friends faced with a serious crisis have gone to visit Elaine," Lacy said in a tone so hushed that I could hardly hear him. His voice usually boomed with a rich South Carolina drawl. "I've never met another person with Elaine's gift

of discernment. I don't know where your visit might lead, but it would be worth your time and effort."

A couple of weeks and eight hundred miles later, Martha and I showed up at Sr. Elaine's doorstep, not knowing what to expect but hoping desperately to find help. Sr. Elaine was the spiritual director for the retreat center of the Sisters of Loretto, an hour or so south of Louisville. As we approached the entrance to the motherhouse, we passed the half a dozen storefronts that make up the village of Nerinx. Down the road from the Sisters of Loretto is a provider of a different sort of spirit, the Maker's Mark bourbon distillery.

We arrived late in the afternoon, and Sr. Elaine showed us our room and where we would eat. Neither she nor her sisters wore the traditional habit of my stereotyped nun, but just regular street clothes and work clothes. Founded a couple of hundred years ago, Loretto is a community of nuns devoted to education, social justice, and women's issues. The sisters take their religious vows seriously, but unquestioned submission is not numbered among those commitments. These women were vital, independent thinkers.

My first, and lasting, impression of Sr. Elaine was of her eyes. I can't tell you their color, but I do know they are dark and penetrating. Penetrating not in a "Let me find out all your secrets" sort of way, but in a kind, deeply comforting sense. The peace and trust Sr. Elaine conveyed was clear from the start. Her eyes danced with humor and compassion. Her presence in our lives offered a welcome refuge from the worry and uncertainty churning within Martha and me.

We quickly fell into a routine. In the mornings, we spent an hour talking with Sr. Elaine. The rest of the day we either walked

or stayed in our room. The Loretto motherhouse is set on an eight-hundred-acre farm, with plenty of room for Martha and me to wander and talk. The trees were ablaze with their October colors. For hours on end, we sat on a bench by a pond, holding hands, discussing our conversations with Sr. Elaine, fighting back tears, wondering how best to tell our children. Although we'd shared the news with Kathryn, our teenager at home, we had yet to tell David or Rachel, who were away at college.

During our week's visit, Martha and I had conversations along two tracks. One was sorting through information from the give-and-take with Sr. Elaine. The other arose out of Martha's desperate desire to answer correctly the questions given to her when she was tested for alzheimer's. We had an upcoming appointment with a second neurologist, and Martha wanted to be ready. She was intent on proving the doctor's diagnosis wrong. And so was I. Such questions were based less on prep work and more on general awareness, yet if Martha wanted to study for these questions, I didn't want to discourage her. Her confidence had suffered enough. So in the privacy of our room, Martha had me quiz her: Who's the President of the United States? When's your birthday? What's today's date? And then there was that arithmetic question that had stumped Martha: start at 100 and subtract by seven, giving the numbers in descending order. Martha had reached ninety-three and could go no further. Because she seemed unable to work out the formula in her mind, Martha wanted to memorize the answer: *100, 93, 86, 79, 72*, and so on.

All this memory work went slowly. Three steps forward, two back; two steps forward, one back. Nonetheless, Martha progressed. She began to get more questions right than wrong. I

don't remember how far down the arithmetic scale she got, but she went well beyond ninety-three. However, if we took a break for more than two days, the results of the memory work evaporated. Martha insisted on starting over. And so we did. But it felt like trying to plow through a parched, sunbaked field.

During our early conversations with Sr. Elaine, she listened to our fears and grief, asking a question here and there. She projected a confident humility, like a practical and perceptive mother. Her graying hair was pulled back, framing a face that easily shifted from an expression of compassion to one full of wit and laughter. Her voice had a quiet, gracious authority that could call out your bluff.

Sr. Elaine gently yet firmly began to point out a trait she saw in both Martha and me, of which neither of us had been aware. "You might want to explore the difference between *willfulness* and *willingness*," she said. Sr. Elaine only hinted at what she was thinking and then referred us to a book in their small library called *Will and Spirit* by Gerald G. May, MD. The book was no help; apparently my entrenched mind-set kept me from understanding the author's message.

Our comfortable, middle-class background didn't seem much different from those of our friends and peers. We were busy raising a young family while working hard to succeed in our chosen fields. Politics and running a small, growing business are by definition willful enterprises. *So what's wrong with that?* I wondered. I tried to understand this distinction drawn by Sr. Elaine, but to no avail. My questioning did little but churn up waves of anxiety.

Martha and the Monk

Halfway through our visit, I mentioned to Sr. Elaine my budding interest in Thomas Merton and his insights into meditation. A social activist and prolific writer, Merton had lived at the nearby Abbey of Gethsemani for three decades until his untimely death in 1968.

Sr. Elaine suggested we attend Gethsemani's evening Compline service. It's the last of several daily prayer services. She also said we might want to stay afterward for the short talk usually given by Fr. Matthew Kelly. He had been a close friend of Merton's, Sr. Elaine said. That raised the level of my curiosity several more notches. Martha said she was willing to go, but I could tell she was reluctant as the slightest change in place and people was becoming an issue.

On a late Tuesday afternoon, we drove the dozen or so miles to Gethsemani, winding through the rolling countryside marked by its bright, wooded hills, or *knobs*, as they're called there. From afar, the monastery's tiled roofs, white walls, and fortresslike compound reminded me of a medieval castle or cathedral. Several buildings outlined the horizon, but one in the middle towered above the others. *That must be the sanctuary*, I thought when seeing it.

Inside the church, the ceiling towered three stories above. Guests sat toward the front entrance while the monks, in their black-and-white robes, slipped silently into the center of the narrow nave and took their designated seats—half on one side and half on the other, facing each other. I found the newness of it all intriguing—new to me, that is.

When the brothers bowed in prayer, we bowed. When Scriptures were read, we listened. When the monks chanted the Psalms back and forth from one side to the other, we tried to sing. But the trappings of the place attracted me more than the service. *So this is where Thomas Merton worshiped*, I thought, with a trace of childish awe. *I wonder where he sat*. I then remembered a story Merton told regarding their rule of silence. Trappist practices and vows are among the strictest of Catholic monastic orders. To communicate without breaking their silence, Merton and a handful of comrades had developed something akin to a Morse code—a *tap-tap-tap* here and a quick *tap-tap* there. As I sat in the pew, I had to catch myself from laughing out loud at the whimsical scene playing out in my mind.

After the service, Martha and I walked out the front entrance, immediately turning left into a smaller room along with a couple dozen other folks this night. Fr. Matthew Kelty shuffled in and began to talk. I was instantly drawn to him and his message while wondering about Martha's reaction. I never knew with whom she would feel comfortable, given her current state of mind. After his homily, Martha and I and the other guests remained seated while Fr. Matthew slipped out.

On our drive along the dark country road back to Loretto, Martha surprised me when I asked her how she liked the service. "I want to go back," she said without hesitation. Thus we did the next evening. The following excerpt from my journal gives an added sense of why Martha and I were drawn to Fr. Matthew.

OCTOBER 22, 1997

He's one of the most incisive Christian pundits I've heard. He riveted his audience with a swift opening round of poetry and Scripture, followed by off-the-cuff comments and a side dish of wisecracks. His spontaneous delivery, frumpish appearance, and crusty confidence announced we were in the presence of a curmudgeon, a South Boston Irish one at that. Fr. Matthew, who's in his early eighties, is grounded in a robust faith and a passion for poetry. I've encountered few others who have his way with words. His humor strikes dead center—not to destroy, only to provoke. At the end of his homily, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

After his homily the second night, Fr. Matthew again exited behind us, but he didn't get five steps before Martha bolted from her seat and walked straight up to him. The two spoke briefly, and then as Fr. Matthew continued to make his way to the door, Martha turned back to join me. A smile played across her lips; her eyes were bright with excitement.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"I told him about my alzheimer's," she said.

"And . . . ?"

"And he said, 'Come and see me tomorrow at two-thirty.'"

On Thursday, then, we drove for the third consecutive day along the now-familiar road to Gethsemani. We went to the library, where Fr. Matthew was waiting. His stooped shoulders

and lined face gave him an air of worldly weariness, yet his faint smile and red cheeks, almost elfin-like, showed no sense of despair.

His dark eyes greeted us kindly. “Hello, Martha. This must be your husband.”

Martha smiled shyly and looked my way.

“Hello, Fr. Matthew. I’m Carlen,” I said as we shook hands.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” he said. “Perhaps it would be all right, Carlen, if Martha and I spoke alone? Would you be willing to leave us for an hour?”

His request caught me off guard, for I’d expected the three of us to talk together. I quickly looked at Martha, and she easily nodded *yes*. I was okay with that as long as she was. They walked into his office, and I wondered, *What am I going to do now?*

Gethsemani conveys a sense of mystery. It’s one of the oldest monasteries in the United States, and the first one I’d visited. As I explored the grounds, a delicious irony occurred to this kid from a family of religious teetotalers: while the monastery is grounded in disciplines of silence, work, and prayer, it is much better known for its bourbon-soaked fudges and fruitcakes.

After an hour of poking my head in and out of buildings, gazing at a cemetery in search of Merton’s gravesite, and just sitting quietly, I returned to the library where Martha and Fr. Matthew were waiting. The following journal entry recounts the visit.

OCTOBER 23, 1997

There in the library, Fr. Matthew told Martha and me that suffering and illness offer no easy answer for why they occur. “This is now a spiritual journey,” he said.

“Don’t go bitter; draw on faith’s deepest strength. Drink deep from God’s well; it’s his gift.”

He looked straight into Martha’s eyes. “You came calling on me,” he said. “You are now one of us. So from now on, you are in my prayer.”

He suggested that when Martha returned home she set aside a time for silence away from the house, in a favorite church or solitary spot. He also told Martha to take one of the abbey’s Psalters and use it as a devotional. The Psalter is the book of Psalms set to music akin to a Gregorian chant.

After Fr. Matthew left, Martha had difficulty explaining to me all that was said during their private conversation. But I could tell that whatever it was, it was meaningful. For the first time in weeks, Martha’s face appeared relaxed. She carried herself with an air of confidence, as though she were saying, “I know something that you don’t.” Her eyes were as clear and blue as I’ve ever seen. Martha called Fr. Matthew “my new friend.”

Martha and I had only seen Gethsemani at night before that day, and it was a pretty, fall afternoon, so we decided to walk. Across the road were woods, part of the monastery’s two thousand acres. High on a knob to the left stood a large white cross, its massive arms open wide. *A welcome sign maybe, inviting us or anyone else who feels abandoned?*

On reaching the woods’ edge, we saw a path and took it. There was nothing unique about this path; what was different

was Martha—she was bouncing along the path with a confidence I thought I would never see again. At times she led; other times she stopped to inspect a rock or a wildflower. And with every sun-speckled step, the autumn leaves seemed brighter than usual, while the rocks and roots and wood ferns expressed a quiet joy that I'd not experienced on a walk before or since.

The woods were thick enough that, despite the bright afternoon sun, the trail was dark as we walked it. At the top of the knob, the woods opened onto a sunlit cow pasture, rich and green. There were no cows this day, only three or four deer gathered in the distance. We looked at them, and the deer looked at us. Then they turned back to face each other as though they were holding some council meeting. We turned back down the path. When we reached bottom, Martha stepped down to a dry creek bed. She picked up three small stones that fit into her palm. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit," we said as Martha folded her fingers over the stones. We walked back to our car and drove to Loretto.

Two days after that walk in Gethsemani, and after Martha's visit with Fr. Matthew, we left Sr. Elaine and the Loretto community for home. During one of our last conversations, Sr. Elaine suggested that we check out alternative forms of medicine and that we look further into the practice of meditation. We had come to Loretto frightened and disheartened; we left feeling more secure. We had come confused; we left more focused. We had come unsure what to do or where to go; we left sensing a path opening before us. The chaos within us was subsiding. I was still anxious about Martha's condition, but my anxiety was greatly reduced, as Martha's also appeared to be.

We both felt we had guides we could call on in Fr. Matthew and Sr. Elaine. As we parted, Sr. Elaine spoke these last words to us: “Your main calling at this time is to trust that you belong to God and not to yourselves. And to deepen your love for God and between yourselves.”

We should be able to do that, I remember thinking.

