

INTRODUCTION

Stretching Our Awareness of God

Missy Buchanan

On most days I wake up when it is still dark outside. Instinctively I turn over and fully extend my legs and arms, flexing my stiff muscles as I toss back the covers. Oftentimes I give an audible groan. My aging joints are tight from hours of inactivity, so I sit up on the side of the bed, arch my back and do a few neck rolls before hobbling bare-foot to the kitchen.

Not yet ready for the glare of overhead lights, I turn on a small, single-bulb lamp. The aroma of coffee fills the kitchen within minutes, and soon I cradle a mug and head to the back porch. Shrouded by pre-dawn shadows, I sink into a cushy chair and wait for the sun to peek through the native oak trees behind my cottage.

Now that I am a widow, I sit alone in the serenity of a world not yet fully awake. It is a bittersweet reminder that grief intertwines with joy on this life journey. I sip my favorite coffee blend and let my mind wander through random things on my to-do list and names on my mental prayer list.

I take a series of deep breaths and slowly exhale while listening to the sounds of the newborn day.

Before my coffee cup is empty, I begin to do some ankle rolls and knee flexes to loosen my joints. I point my toes and pull them up, feeling the tightened muscles ease with every repetition. By the time the sun is fully up, my legs and feet are more flexible than before, and I am ready for a morning walk.

Recently I heard retired United Methodist Bishop Lawson Bryan give a one-word summary of the ministry of Jesus: *stretch*. Bishop Bryan reminded us of familiar Bible stories in which Jesus encourages all who could hear to stretch their understanding of who God is and what it means to be faithful.

Jesus has dinner with dishonest tax collectors and sinners. *Stretch*. He touches lepers whom religious leaders label unclean. *Stretch*. In the bright midday sun, he asks for water from a Samaritan woman whom others shun. *Stretch*. Repeatedly Jesus challenges the religious practices and cultural norms of the day. He awakens the hearers to fresh insight about who God is and how to respond to God's bountiful love and grace.

Bishop Bryan's one-word message is a powerful reminder to me that spiritual growth requires daily stretching of my heart and mind. Think about elite Olympic athletes on television doing stretching exercises moments before they step onto the world stage to compete. Even at the peak of their athletic careers, they physically stretch to increase both blood flow and oxygen throughout their bodies. Similarly, stretching our faith muscles revives our flexibility, strengthens our relationship with God, and gives us renewed energy.

When we become complacent about the importance of stretching, our thoughts and beliefs are prone to becoming rigid like muscles and joints after a night of inactivity. Our vision of who God is becomes too small. Our openness to God's miracles in ordinary life shrinks. Our faith becomes dry and stale. Soon we barely notice God's activity in the busyness of our days.

Where I Found God Today is a unique opportunity to purposely flex our spiritual muscles and expand our ability to see God at work in our midst. The personal narratives shared by fellow sojourners from many different places and backgrounds challenge us to embrace a heightened awareness of God's presence in daily routine. Some of the narratives will prompt a smile, while others might bring tears to our eyes. Each devotion will challenge us to look around and pay closer attention to God as we move through everyday life.

There are stories of finding God in unexpected places—a barn, the dairy aisle, a well-loved chair. There are inspiring stories of holy moments experienced watching paragliders, confronting a smelly bag of compost, or driving on a crowded freeway. Some narratives bring us face-to-face with death, divorce, and grief. Others stir warm, nostalgic feelings and point us to God in the pages of a dog-eared cookbook or in a mysterious box of miniature furniture. There are tales about the majestic beauty found in nature and gritty accounts of fractured relationships and broken hearts. Like a new box of crayons, the writings in *Where I Found God Today* display a colorful array of emotions and complexities of the human

condition. Each devotion uniquely inspires us to cultivate our sensitivity to God's presence in the details of life.

My early morning routine reminds me that stretching, both physically and spiritually, is key to growing toward spiritual maturity. Taking a cue from those Olympic athletes, I recognize that stretching will promote my well-being and reduce the risk of injury in the future. Stretching spiritually prepares me for the race ahead, keeping me pliable and teachable. As I train my eyes to seek God's presence in the everyday moments, I gain resilience and reason to trust God with the unknowns of the future.

Tomorrow morning when I wake up, I will once again be stiff from hours of inactivity. I will do the repetitions of knee flexes and ankle rolls to make my body more limber. I will also listen for God's still, quiet voice speaking words of encouragement or challenge into the dawn. Inspired by those who dared to share their stories, I will be attentive to God's presence. At the end of the day, I will ask an important question: where did I find God today?

At the End of the Tunnel

You can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

—1 PETER 2:9 (NLT)

I hit the snooze button, then rolled over on the sofa. Nine minutes passed quickly. My hand pounded the top of my 1980s clock radio until it found the snooze button again. If I didn't get up soon, I'd be late for my \$6.25-per-hour newspaper job. I just wasn't ready to face the internal, infernal game of twenty questions.

Will I need a third job?

Will I make it in this world?

What purpose am I serving—working two jobs just to collapse and do it all over again?

I was in my early twenties and already so tired. I had moved to Phoenix armed only with ambition and a single suitcase packed with clothes. Now here I was, sleeping on my sister's sofa and barely able to pay for insurance on the car I relied on to get to work. The day before, I ordered water when I joined my newsroom colleagues for lunch. My friend C.J. nudged her "leftover" taco toward me and I put my sunglasses on—the big ones that covered my tears—and hungrily accepted.

Isn't there more to life?

Should I just admit failure and move back home?

I dressed for work. The upside of crashing at my sister's apartment was free rent. The downside was she lived nearly

an hour from my newsroom. You'd think the commute would help me clear my head, but it only reminded me that the knocking and grinding sounds in my 1986 Nissan Pulsar needed attention.

I grabbed my briefcase, ran out the door, and mindlessly drove down the I-17 freeway in Phoenix. Soon, I'd change freeways and reach my favorite part of the drive—a 3,000-foot stretch of I-10 that runs underneath downtown Phoenix. Locals call it the Deck Park Tunnel. I don't know why I loved that part of the drive so much. Maybe it was because for a 30-second span every morning, the metropolitan whoosh of speeding cars drowned out the knocking and grinding of my own insecurities.

This morning was different. As I approached the tunnel, I noticed—maybe for the first time—the skyscrapers, urban neighborhoods, and cars all around me. All filled with people. A lot of them probably as tired as me.

“God, if you're real, I think your heart must really beat for all these people who are down here trying to make their way,” I said out loud.

And just like that, everything went dark. My eyes fought to adjust to the dim, yellow-toned lights that snaked across the ceiling of the tunnel. I sensed, with an unnameable certainty, that God was inviting me to think about more than just me and my needs. He was telling me that life was going to be real dark if I continued to live without Him. And as I drove toward

the literal light at the end of the tunnel, I understood God was inviting me into the light of His love.

The intense desert sun is always a little blinding upon reentry from the tunnel into daylight. But that morning it was different. The light was enticing, not blinding. The mountain peak on my left glimmered in the morning sunrise. I made a mental note to return there and climb it after work.

I clocked in at work, where an internal mix of adrenaline, nervous energy, and anticipation distracted me from my daily newsroom clerking tasks. I sensed things shifting. Hope was breaking down the doubts that the journalist-skeptic in me had about God.

I clocked out, climbed that mountain that had glimmered in the morning sunrise, and gave my life to Christ.

Today, even if the I-10 is loaded with traffic, I go out of my way to drive through the Deck Park Tunnel. It's much more than a freeway connector that gets me where I'm going. It's the connector between my life before I knew God and 30 years since. It's the place where God firmly pulled my attention away from myself and toward Him on an otherwise routine Tuesday—a physical landmark of the life-changing moment God invited me out of darkness and into His glorious light.

—*Laurie Davies*

WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

Have you ever had a time when God asked for your full attention? It may even be the day you first stepped out in faith. Where were you? Visit that place, or someplace similar, and let yourself travel back in memory to that moment. Thank God for drawing you out of the darkness and into the light of His love.

Between the Blue Mountain Shadows

*Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but
in the multitude of counselors there is safety.*

—PROVERBS 11:14 (NKJV)

The day was perfect for hiking, sunny, with a welcome crispness in the air. The trail contained a smorgasbord of cactus: barrel, prickly pear, cholla, and the iconic saguaro. But it was Weaver’s Needle—a thousand-foot spire that rose out of the desert floor like a skyscraper—that grabbed my attention.

As we hiked, we talked about a proposed change at the church where my husband, Kevin, serves as the associate pastor. The decision to include tables in the sanctuary for seating was not popular with the older generation. On the other hand, the younger attenders embraced the change as a way to facilitate conversation and community. The simmering tension affected everyone.

“Look at that view,” I announced as we rounded the final switchback. Weaver’s Needle loomed in front of us, impossible to miss.

“But look behind you,” Kevin exclaimed.

I turned around. Layers of distant mountains framed the desert in stunning blue shadows. Cobalt. Navy. Sapphire.

I had been so focused on the Needle, I had neglected to keep an eye on the beauty behind me. The realization shifted

something inside me regarding our church situation. We needed to listen to the concerns—and the wisdom—of our seniors *and* the younger generation before we moved forward with a decision. Despite the tensions, discussions about the seating had already produced constructive ideas to make the experience more inclusive. If we kept talking, more would come.

God used the blue mountain shadows to remind me of the wisdom I could gain when observing the view from all directions.

—*Lynne Hartke*

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**WHAT WILL YOU FIND?**  
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The next time you are faced with a different viewpoint, practice listening intently rather than focusing on how you are going to respond. Make eye contact. If you don't understand, ask questions in a kind way. What is the wisdom that God wants you to hear in this situation? What is the middle way He might want you to walk?

Hearing an Elk Bugle

*Whether you turn to the right or to the left,
your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying,
“This is the way; walk in it.”*

—ISAIAH 30:21 (NIV)

Some sounds on this planet stick with you, perhaps even becoming part of you. For me, one of those is an elk bugling in autumn.

Each fall, my family and I make many trips up to the Rocky Mountains to hear the eerie, ethereal call of the bull elk. Their unique call has marked many memories while camping, hiking, and exploring wilderness areas. But on this particular September day, as we drove at dusk around Rocky Mountain National Park listening for the elk, I was distracted. That week, I'd received news that my grandmother's health was failing, and she was expected to pass away soon. I struggled in my spirit with whether to fly and see her. Of course I wanted to, but the logistics around traveling were complicated. The decision hung heavy in my mind, shrouded with tension.

What should I do, God? I prayed silently. Should I go?

At that moment, an elk bugled, loud and clear.

Hearing that sound, surrounded by Rocky Mountain summits aglow in the sunset, I knew I had my answer. The same God who'd carved these mountains and canyons, the One who gave the elk its voice, and the One who'd wonderfully

made my grandmother was the same One who would work out every detail for me to go and say my goodbyes.

A couple of days later, I walked up to my grandmother's bedside. In a rare moment of clarity, she grasped my hand with all her strength, peered with foggy eyes into my own, and spoke my name with a smile.

When I need clarity, I know I need to go out in nature. God will push past doubts and hesitancy and plant an answer in my spirit, guiding me to where I need to be.

—*Eryn Lynum*

WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

Are you struggling with a question or decision?

Go on a walk. Think about something in the world around you that has a special significance—an animal, a plant, an object, a sound. Ask God to reveal Himself through His spirit and creation. Tune your attention to the world around you and see what He says.

On a Boat at Night

In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

—JOHN 1:4-5 (NRSVUE)

Night fell as my commercial fishing boat, *Surprise*, left the harbor and began its run for San Miguel Island 98 miles away.

Nighttime nautical navigation is not a problem if you have a decent marine radar. The *Surprise*, however, had a well-earned reputation for living up to her name. Somewhere about the 80-mile mark, our radar gave up the ghost. To add insult to injury, the seas had gotten pretty rough. I could make out the glow of white water topping the big rollers in our running lights.

Cuyler Harbor, our target destination, was a pinprick on the chart, and still a long way away. I held my compass bearing and prayed we wouldn't be moved too far off course by the wind and waves.

Then, cresting a big swell, I saw something—the tiniest flicker. Far away but dead ahead. Another vessel already tucked into the anchorage for the night. At least I hoped. I let out a long breath and steered for that tiny glow.

As we got closer, I navigated by ear, waves crashing rocks as we inched through the harbor mouth toward another boat

with—sure enough—that glorious little light shining bright atop his mast.

I felt God with me during that entire trip, saw Him in that tiny light in the distance. Ever since, the memory has stuck with me, a lesson I've never forgotten: No matter how dark and rough life's sea, there is a light ahead—Jesus guiding and beckoning. What a comfort to know that one day I will sail into His presence. I'll drop anchor in that safest of harbors. All this world's suffering and stress will be forgotten.

I will rest as a new sun rises on a glorious and eternal day.

—*Buck Storm*

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**WHAT WILL YOU FIND?**  
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Go outside in the dark at night. Try to find somewhere far from artificial lights, where there are no obvious signs to guide you. How does it feel? Have you ever felt that way—disoriented, even scared, by the forces trying to pull you off track? Look inside yourself, to the light of God's love within you, and breathe. Trust the light that never wavers, and the One who has the power to calm the seas.