

Other Books In The “Listening” Trilogy

The Hitchhiking Diaries

In his twenties Roger hitchhiked throughout Latin America to learn if indigenous people already knew—before the missionaries—that God knew them and accepted them personally. He heard their stories in country after country. The entire time was a life-changing, extended adventure of walking with Jesus into the complete unknown. It set the course for Roger’s life of trusting Jesus and his certainty of God’s unconditional acceptance of us all. Each evening Roger wrote that day’s experiences, including verbatim conversations. These now have been edited only for clarity, so this is an honest record of Roger’s thoughts as a young man. His diary chronicles the slow radicalization of beginning to understand the poverty of those he loved in Latin America.

The Bible They Never Told Me About

Ray and Elsie Dewey raised their son to see differences as intriguing. Differences of ethnicity, religion, culture and nationality were fascinating and to be explored, never feared. So every prejudice he discovered within himself became a request for God to heal him. This open exploration challenged Roger’s view of the Bible. Brought up to trust it as God’s Word, he went to it for clarification when preachers claimed it promoted something he questioned from personal experience, especially about poor people and justice. He discovered that many who quote the Bible use invisible scissors to cut away huge parts they want to ignore or deny. He concludes that the “non-Christian” Jesus exemplifies a reality far more beautiful and transcendent than what we usually hear from Christianity’s apologists. Genuine spirituality is accessible to those lacking discipline and literacy skills or else God is not loving and just.

NO DELUSIONS



a faith filtered through the meanness
of this world



Roger Dewey

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*This book, our story,
is dedicated to Claire.
Engaged the first week,
married in ten,
and having shared thirty eight years
it still takes the two of us
to make one half-way decent person.*

I love you.

Through personal exploration I stumbled unknowingly into the rich truth that while we spend the first stage of life trying to build a secure container for our identity, we would be wise to spend the next thirty years seeking to be honest about our embarrassing incompetence. The growing awareness of our smallness and ordinariness eventually grants us freedom to enter the mysterious presence of God with the easy childlike assumption that of course we belong. In retrospect, these were the three phases of my life.

Roger Dewey

Introduction

Six years ago, when I felt a strong need for affirmation, I decided to fast from everything conceptual to try to listen more deliberately to Jesus. (But please, don't stop reading. I'm talking about a Jesus completely different from the religion that surrounds us in America.)

So I announced on Facebook that I would be out of circulation three months, and then it began. No computer or cellphone. No TV or radio. No books. And no music. Instead of these, all I did conceptually was to read the words of Jesus, listening to him over and over. As a child I had heard his stories in so many church services—far too many—that I thought of Jesus as my own personal friend. Back then I talked with him all the time. About everything. Seventy years ago God was awesome. But until six years ago I had never before marinated like this in Jesus' spirit. In the extended quiet and peace I was inviting the actual spirit of Jesus to soak into me. In the words of my alter ego, the Jewish Zen poet Leonard Cohen, I “listened so hard that it hurt.”

Today, of course, a huge percentage of Americans in their 20s and 30s loathe all religion. And I share their sense of its irrelevancy. I am surprised that so many nice people, people I love and admire, do not understand why this is, cannot see that they portray God as boring and vindictive. They cannot imagine that they are seen as having a rigid mindset, as being insecure and unloving, as never really listening but constantly searching for differences to prove that their way is superior.

Even if that God exists, it's irrelevant. That God is so repugnant that people separate themselves from all vestiges of it, including Jesus. If there is one spiritual thing they agree on, it's that the Christian God does not—as is advertised—love the whole world. I don't think it occurs to many that Jesus could actually be real, and certainly not that he is interested in sharing their lives. Despite the evidence of religion, my friends still pursue spirituality, but not in a boring sit-down-and-let-me-tell-you-the-truth way.

So why would I try now to contact the spirit of Jesus, or as I refer to him, the “non-Christian” Jesus? After a professional life of struggling against racism and injustice in churches, could I still hope that the awesome Jesus of my childhood might somehow be alive?

Welcome to my story.

BOOK ONE

EGO

1941-1980

We spend the first thirty years of our life building our ego, and then if we are wise we spend the next thirty years being embarrassed about our incompetence.

—Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation

Book One

I have a friend who grew up in a loving family and church, but as a young child cried herself to sleep many nights because the message got through that she was not good enough. The image of God she had received—never overtly stated, but buried in her church’s theology—was of a gruff and threatening old man who tossed into hell everyone who didn’t love him. Maybe you heard that one too.

I was more fortunate. As I’ve said, the message that got through to me as a kid was that Jesus wanted to be my companion. He liked me, the real me, not the ideal me the church preferred. So I talked with him like a friend.

Besides, there were not many others to talk to. I was an only child in a small village. There were only two kids my age within a mile and I disliked one of them. Outside my back door were the woods. I spent lots of time there alone. And I enjoyed it. My dad worked long hours to try to keep his stove store financially viable—on his death bed he actually apologized for working all the time. I told him he had nothing to apologize for; I knew the store required constant attention, and his work had put me through college, and besides, he was an incredibly loving man. He and mom had fed me on their love for other lands and cultures, and we had taken fabulous vacations that built my desire to explore. Never once had I doubted his love.

Later, when I was seventeen, my parents told me explicitly that even if someday everything in my life fell apart, and I did something horrible, like murdering someone, they still would love me just as much. And God would still love me too. And Jesus, they added, would never, ever abandon me.

You see why I thought Jesus was awesome? At the time I didn't realize how outrageously rare was this unconditional acceptance. But I was a teenager—so naturally I needed to test it. Life was unpredictable, and out of my control. How should I live? Could I really trust that my friend Jesus would stay with me, no matter what?

I read books that claimed belief in the supernatural was evidence of limited intelligence. So I decided to go someplace completely outside my comfort zone, someplace where I had no resources to count on, where I didn't even know the rules, to see if some force beyond myself would actually show up.

Without telling anyone, I went alone to New York City, specifically to sleep in Grand Central Station.

The police allowed me to sleep on one of the benches, and the next morning two men were waiting for me to wake up. They invited me to their place for breakfast, so I said "sure." This was the late fifties. I was not totally naïve, but no one I knew had ever mentioned homosexuality.

Aaron and Ronnie were kind and open. Their first question was what on earth I was doing there! They were astounded that I had come to New York specifically to learn if I could count on God. And they were tantalized by the thought that Jesus was actually right there in the room with us. That God was not angry with them. And I was curious about everything—about their lives, and how they discovered their orientation, and how people treated them. We talked for hours. That afternoon one of them started to come on to me. But the other said "No, leave him alone; he's an angel!"

That got me mad. "I'm no angel," I said. "I'm just like you guys. I need God as much as you do, and if God is here for me then God is here for you too." They found that hard to believe, given what they had heard from Christians. They were intrigued by the outlandish idea of walking through life with a supernatural Jesus.

They simply wanted, as we all do, to be accepted and affirmed, to belong, to have value. They just never imagined Jesus wanted that for them, too.

I have this wrenching memory of Ronnie—a Marine—standing in the middle of that room with his back to me, looking at the ceiling, his face turned so I couldn't see his struggle to contain his emotions. I think that was the first time he had heard “God loves you” from someone who obviously believed it.

But I wasn't there to explore ideas about homosexuality. I was exploring life and my parents' radical idea that all of us are totally accepted by a living Jesus, even with all our stuff. That day, so long ago, I began to wonder how religious people could feel so morally superior to others when Jesus says we are not. That day has comforted and challenged me ever since.

I think Aaron and Ronnie typify many of us. Five years ago I wrote a song about them, and us, to the evocative music of Leonard Cohen. I recorded my first CD, and I have sung their song in parks and sports bars around Boston. The lyrics are at the end of this book.

A tradition in our family was to invite international students to our home during school vacations. One of them fascinated us with descriptions of growing up in a West African Muslim village. At seventeen he wanted to know more of the mysteries of Allah than he had been told. For months he tried to open his mind and listen. And one day he felt a breakthrough, as though he had been noticed as an individual by some cosmic force, and affirmed, and given room to grow.

But his village did not believe Allah interacted with people. That was restricted to prophets, and everyone knew there could be no prophet after Muhammed. So they banished their son as a heretic! He wandered West Africa four years. Yet through all those bitter

days, this Something that was beyond his comprehension stayed with him. It gave him peace.

At one point he talked with a missionary, but the man rejected him because he believed God needed to speak through *him*. Later, when my friend heard more stories about Jesus, he began giving that name to the spirit who had touched him. Obviously it was a Jesus quite different from the Christianity that had excluded him. My friend's story would have a major impact on my life only a few years later.

I had begun to discover a more experiential image of God than I was being given in church. It seemed natural to try to live like those Bible characters. For instance, when I read of the boy Samuel who thought he heard God's voice and was told by his teacher to respond with "I am listening, God," I too began listening more intently. Those Jesus stories were not theologies to discuss but a way to become more aware of God's presence.

I wanted Jesus' words to shape the way I was living. Almost by accident, as I was building my approach to life, I was counting on more than my own limited inner resources. I was assuming that I could rely on the presence and resources of my friend Jesus.

More Tough Questions

In my college years, when I was studying architecture, I spent a summer in New Orleans to research my design thesis. At the time it meant little to me that the state of Louisiana was rigidly segregated.

Driving around the city, I came upon a four-story Baptist church with a gigantic neon Bible on the roof. I had never seen anything like that, so I stopped in. The pastor gave me a tour of their complex, and long story short, offered me a nearby house they owned, for the summer, rent free.

Two weeks later I was surprised when he asked me to be Master of Ceremonies for their sizable college group. He probably