Exploring the Work of a Master Memoirist, Novelist, Theologian, and Preacher

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Foreword by Makoto Fujimura

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# *THE SACRED JOURNEY*: THE UNIVERSAL PARTICULAR

In 1992, Frederick Buechner and Maya Angelou appeared together for a series of lectures sponsored by the Trinity Institute. Buechner opened, telling about his upper-class, Ivy League childhood that was disrupted by his father's suicide. Next the emcee introduced Angelou, noting that she couldn't be more different from Buechner. Not only was she an African American woman, but her roots in abject poverty in the deep South would make her story a far cry from the one they had just heard. As he said this, Angelou shook her head from side to side. When she reached the microphone, she said that he was wrong, noting, "I have exactly the same story to tell as Frederick Buechner."[1]

Buechner was delighted, because her words affirmed one of his core convictions, stated in the preface of *The Sacred Journey*: "The story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all."[2] Each of us has a particular story—and the particular elements of Buechner's story couldn't be more different from the particular elements of Angelou's. But what elements of each particular story are true for all

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of us? Truly telling our human experiences make particular stories universal because, as the old saying puts it, what goes deepest to the heart goes widest to the world.

The power of "story" has become so ubiquitous the term is almost a cliché. But our stories are significant: stories serve as both windows to see the world through and mirrors in which we see ourselves. They function for good or for ill. "We are our stories," Rebecca Solnit writes, "stories that can be both prison and the crowbar to break open the door of that prison."[3] Stories feed what the poet Wallace Stevens called "the necessary angel" of imagination,[4] and sharing our story safely has life-giving, life-changing, and life-saving capacity.

Spiritual memoirs aren't new; perhaps the first was Augustine's *Confessions*, written some 1,600 years ago. But lately the number of story-driven spiritual memoirs has increased exponentially. Maybe they are a result of the narcissism of our age, when so many of us seem to live our lives publicly through social media. But is there more going on? The same technological advances that make it possible to live on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have made the world staggeringly complex. We find help navigating our way through life's challenges via the open and honest sharing of others. Great memoirs, like great novels, become equipment for living.

Spiritual memoirs feel necessary in this cultural moment, and Frederick Buechner is the godfather of today's spiritual memoir movement. He first opened the ground in 1982 with *The Sacred Journey*. The novelist Reynolds Price, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called the book "a beautifully successful experiment."[5] No one would call a spiritual memoir an "experiment" today. Buechner was a forerunner, and he stands as an inspirational source for many of today's practitioners of the art. The spiritual memoirist Anne Lamott calls him "America's most important living theologian"

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and "a brilliant, lovely religious thinker with a great sense of humor, and a first class writer."[6]

*The Sacred Journey* started an avalanche. It was different from autobiographies of the time—it focused on Buechner's internal spiritual development instead of external accomplishments. If Buechner had written it as a typical memoir of the time, it would have been about his development as a writer and would have culminated with the stunning success of his novel *A Long Day's Dying* in 1950, when Buechner was only twenty-three. Instead, the focus of *The Sacred Journey* is on the events that led to Buechner's embrace of Christianity (which was not predictable, since he'd grown up in a family that had no real interest in church or matters of faith) and enrollment in seminary when he was twenty-seven.

As we explore *The Sacred Journey*, I'll include many of the particulars of Buechner's biography contained in the book while contemplating the deeper, universal truths of those particulars. I've also added some additional biographical information that helps shed light on Buechner's development.

The book's first line echoes a line used a dozen years earlier in Buechner's *The Alphabet of Grace* that suggests in essence all theology, like all fiction, is autobiographical.[7] It's a point that makes some theologians bristle because it smacks of subjectivity. (Others hear John Calvin's assertion that there is no knowledge of God without knowledge of self.)[8]

As Anne Lamott says, Buechner is a theologian, but he does not structure his thoughts or writing like a typical theologian. He does not put forth a series of propositional truths, and he deals more in doubt than certainty. What matters most is the experience of God's

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presence, not the objective proof of God's existence; Buechner contends in several places that presence, not proof, is the miracle we're after. This is a cornerstone of his theology. Revelation is personal: if God speaks at all, he speaks into our personal lives, and all systems of theology start first as personal experience.

Since God's Word is spoken into our lives, his Word is always an incarnate Word subject to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. This makes it a risky business to interpret the meaning of life events, to think we know what God is up to and what he might be saying to us. Yet Buechner believes there are connections that run through the seemingly random occurrences of our lives; he believes patterns emerge and meaning is suggested when we pay attention and listen to our lives. The issue isn't so much what happens but what matters. What meaning do we make of it? As Buechner lays this out in the preface of *The Sacred Journey*, he raises the question of what God might be saying through a good person's suicide, foreshadowing the key event on which this book (and in many ways his life) will turn. Although suicide references abound in Buechner's work, *The Sacred Journey* is the first of his books that plainly tells the story of that fateful day in Essex Falls, New Jersey, in November 1936, when Buechner's father sat on the running board of an automobile and breathed in the carbon monoxide that killed him. It's not a stretch to say Buechner's life and career have been a quest to understand the meaning of that event and to understand where God was when the unthinkable happened. At least one possible answer comes through in *The Sacred Journey*: although Buechner was far from God at that point in his young life, the healing that came immediately after that traumatic event was pure gift, eventually raising the thought inside Buechner that if there was a gift, then a giver was also implied. Buechner does not believe God orchestrated the event but also doesn't believe God

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was absent. Buechner's assertion is that somehow, even when things seem bleakest, God's grace is still an active force in our lives and world.

Carl Frederick Buechner was born into privilege in New York City on July 11, 1926. There was wealth in the family, particularly from his paternal great-grandfather, Hermann Balthazar Scharmann, a brewer and real estate magnate. The first section of *The Sacred Journey* is titled "Once Below a Time," borrowing the phrase from Dylan Thomas, and "below time" becomes a way of describing that childhood experience of existence when time is something measured "by its content rather than its duration."[9] During this almost magical early part of his life, there is no particular narrative to be told, no events that need relaying to move the action forward. Buechner was a sensitive, bookish child, prone to spending as much time in the fantasy land of Oz as in the frequently difficult reality of his home, where his parents often argued loudly. He provides memorable descriptions of the people who filled his life, and because his family moved almost every year, it was these people rather than a house or location that constituted his true home.

The giants of his childhood were his two grandmothers. Grandmother Buechner, who lived with her husband in an apartment twelve floors above Park Avenue, was a large woman who comes off in the book as a bit of a blunt instrument as she controls the family purse strings and freely shares her opinions. Buechner's maternal grandmother, Antoinette Golay Kuhn, whom he nicknamed Naya, stands tallest in this book and in Buechner's formation. Naya is a person teeming with sophistication, imagination, and energy, a life force, and a wonderful storyteller. It is fair to surmise she was a primary source of Buechner's own great imagination: "She loved

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Chesterfield cigarettes and the novels of Jean Ingelow and a daiquiri before dinner and crossword puzzles and she spoke the English language with a wit and eloquence and style that I have never heard surpassed."[10] Loosely Unitarian, it would be Naya to whom Buechner would dedicate his first novel, and Naya whom he would write into that novel as an old woman named Maroo. Naya would return as a muse throughout Buechner's writing career.

Far less light is shed on either Buechner's mother or father in *The Sacred Journey*. Writing some forty-five years after his father's suicide, Buechner's memories of his father are inconsistent. He writes that he can no longer remember what his father looked like, and when he works to bring his father back, he remembers more what others have said about him than his own recollections. He'd heard that his father was kind and gentle, a strong swimmer, and a good dancer. His father had befriended Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald when they were students at Princeton, and although he was from an elite family, he struggled to make it in business—any business—after college. His lack of success was complicated by the Great Depression, but not entirely so. He went in for foolish get-rich-quick schemes, and he also had more than economic troubles. There were big problems when his parents started drinking cocktails—and they drank a lot of cocktails. Fights and strong accusations followed (most of this is left out of *The Sacred Journey*). Buechner's father moved from job to job, and for the first fourteen years of his life, the Buechners moved often, trying to find the right place and right job for his father.

Buechner's mother, Katherine, was still alive when *The Sacred Journey* was published. He mostly leaves her out of this account of his life. She could be wonderful and difficult, and more light is shed on her and Buechner's childhood in *Telling Secrets* and *The Wizard's Tide*, published after her death. In *The Wizard's Tide* he describes

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navigating his childhood as "a little like piling toothpicks on top of a bottle. If you weren't very careful about the way you did it, the whole works would fall apart and go tumbling."[11] He captures the dysfunction in his family of origin plainly in *Telling Secrets*:

> If somebody had asked me as a little boy of eight or nine, say, what my secrets were, I wonder if I would have thought to list among them a father who at parties drank himself into a self I could hardly recognize as my father, and a mother who in her rage could say such wild and scathing things to him that it made the very earth shake beneath my feet when I heard them, and a two-and-a-half years younger brother who for weeks at a time would refuse to get out of bed because bed, I suspect, was the only place he knew in the whole world where he felt safe.[12]

Neither parent had religious inclinations, and Buechner and his brother, Jamie, were raised in an almost completely secular, nonreligious environment. Buechner's spiritual imagination was fed instead through books—he spent the year of 1933, when the family was living in Washington, DC, almost entirely in bed with a series of respiratory illnesses, and he writes that he lived more in the Land of Oz than the United States of America during that year.[13] He was especially enchanted by the ebullient King Rinkitink, found in the tenth Oz book, a man practically as wide across was he was tall, who appeared foolish on the surface but would be the right person to have around when things went badly. And things did go badly frequently, not only in Oz but also in the Buechner home.

One story briefly mentioned in *The Sacred Journey* and given a longer treatment in *The Wizard's Tide* illustrates the disturbing family dynamics. An eight- or nine-year-old Freddy had gone to bed when his mother came into his bedroom, handed him the family car keys, and told him not to give them to his father. A short while later, his

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intoxicated father appeared and begged his young son for the keys. Buechner pulled his covers up over his head and buried the clenched fist holding the keys under a pillow while his father sat on the room's other twin bed pleading for the keys. The covers and pillow sufficed that night—he didn't give his father the keys—but they couldn't protect Buechner from the pain that was coming.

One autumn day in 1936, ten-year-old Fred and his nearly eight-year-old brother, Jamie, had woken early and excitedly because their parents were going to take them to a football game that afternoon. Fred and Jamie were passing the early morning hours playing with a roulette wheel. I assume the roulette wheel is factual instead of a literary device because what happened that morning is beyond chance and marks the moment when Buechner's "once below a time" childhood ended. Their father had looked in on the boys for a moment before going downstairs and starting the family car in the closed garage. He sat down on the running board and let the fumes kill him. Buechner's vivid memory is of hearing shouts, going to a window, and seeing his father on the ground while his grandmother and mother pumped his legs in a frantic effort to revive him.

Although the events that morning would shape and form Buechner immeasurably, what happened first in the wake of the death of Buechner's father was more grace than grief. The immediate impact of the suicide was peace. The fighting subsided with the removal of his depressed, alcoholic father. (Labels like "depressed" and "alcoholic" help explain Buechner's father's struggles, but they also diminish his humanity—*The Wizard's Tide* provides a fuller picture.) Within a few weeks the family moved halfway across the ocean to Bermuda, an Oz-like fantasy land of tropical flowers, horse-drawn carriages, and bicycles.

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Grandmother Buechner, who financed the adventure, was against it, stating that the family ought to stay and face reality. Instead Buechner, his mother, and his brother escaped to a sort of garden of Eden. Although further memoirs make clear that the family's dysfunction continued following his father's suicide, the immediate impact of going to Bermuda was restorative. They may have been escaping reality, but sometimes that's what is necessary. Sometimes resolving to do it yourself prevents something gracious from being done for you. As Buechner put it, "The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from."[14]

Two of the primary themes of Buechner's writing find their genesis here. The suicide of his father is the great pain that Buechner would become such a wise steward of. The journey would take decades, but the path of discovery of how one not only survives but thrives following a traumatic experience of overwhelming pain begins here. He will learn that stoicism cannot lead to a deeper place because of all it shuts out. Writing about his pain became a way to deal with it, and Buechner's writing about his pain has that universal particularity about it that has blessed countless people. Early in the summer of 2018, following the suicides of celebrities Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released statistics showing that American suicide rates had risen 30 percent over the past two decades. Buechner's writing is timelier than ever.

Second, Buechner's conviction that God is paradoxically at work even (or especially) through the worst that happens also starts here. The gospel, as he will come to understand it, is both tragedy and comedy. I already mentioned the question, "What is God saying through a good person's suicide?," which Buechner raises in the

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introduction to *The Sacred Journey.* Shortly after that, he asks, "What about sin itself as a means of grace?"[15] As he reflects (or listens), Buechner sees over and over that grace is paradoxical—what is meant for evil is used by God for good (Gen 50:20). There is joy at the deepest heart of things. And it isn't just events—Buechner sees this paradox expressed in people too. Beginning in the 1970s, the dynamic tension of characters who are simultaneously great saints and great sinners dominates Buechner's fiction, beginning with Leo Bebb and carrying through to St. Godric, St. Brendan, and the Bible's Jacob. Writing about sinner-saints carried Buechner through the most productive decades of his career. He often cites Graham Greene's whisky priest from *The Power and the Glory* as his inspiration, but I wonder if the whisky priest would speak to Buechner so tangibly, or if Buechner would have even written his greatest novels, had he not been marked by such pain from childhood.

Bermuda was a fantasy land for Buechner, but the approach of World War II meant an evacuation of American citizens in that part of the British Commonwealth and ended the adventure. Soon Buechner was sent to boarding school at Lawrenceville, New Jersey, in the fall of 1940.

There were many father figures at Lawrenceville, among them a magnificent English teacher who helped Buechner appreciate words as things unto themselves. He saw how words carry power and energy and creative force. Worlds were opened as he read the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which would become the model for Buechner's novel *The Storm* almost six decades later. When Buechner received a coveted 100 percent grade on a writing assignment, he knew he wanted to be a writer.

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As an adolescent, Buechner first aspired to become a poet. Lawrenceville published its own student literary magazine called *The Lit*, and the issues from the early 1940s are filled with poems and short essays by Buechner (trying out names such as "C. F. Buechner, III" and "C. Frederick Buechner") along with James Merrill, who would become a lifelong friend and to whom Buechner would dedicate both his 1952 novel *The Seasons' Difference* and *On the Road with the Archangel* forty-five years later. Also a child of privilege (his father was the Merrill of Merrill Lynch), Jimmy Merrill would have a distinguished career as a poet and win the literary prizes—the Pulitzer and the National Book Award—that evaded Buechner.

Gazing through copies of *The Lit* today is an exercise in nostalgic irony; the pages feature advertisements with sports stars like Ben Hogan and Joe DiMaggio hawking cigarettes, alongside stylized offerings from its aspiring authors. (The faculty advisor was Gerrish Thurber, who would be a great friend for many years and to whom Buechner would dedicate his 1970 novel *The Entrance to Porlock.*) It's not unusual to find Christian references in Buechner's earliest writing; one poem from the early 1940s, for example, has a line about that pale Jew who died upon a hill and did no wrong, but Buechner downplays it, saying his motive for putting Jesus in so many of those early poems was for effect, to give the poems "some sort of aura or authority that I was afraid they lacked, to suggest that I was a much more substantial and fancier poet than I secretly believed myself to be."[16]

In the June 1942 issue Buechner published a short story called "Monkey See," in which a monkey with a razor in his hand imitates his master, who had just made a slashing motion across his throat. The monkey accidently kills himself. It is notable that this vignette, written by a then fifteen-year-old Buechner, would be included in his first novel, *A Long Day's Dying*, and be the first of several suicide

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references in Buechner's work. Indeed, there will be so many suicide references in Buechner's work that finding them is like spotting Alfred Hitchcock's cameo in his films—you just have to pay attention.

Buechner graduated from Lawrenceville in the spring of 1943. He moved from there to Princeton University, and his time at Princeton was interrupted by an undistinguished two-year stint in the army. During his first year at Princeton, his father's brother, Thomas Buechner, committed suicide, filling Buechner with fear that suicide was a generational curse, handed down genetically, and that he was as doomed as his father and uncle had been.

While at Princeton, Buechner experienced his first significant success as a writer, publishing a poem called "The Fat Man's Prescription" in the November 1946 issue of the prestigious *Poetry* magazine. Despite this success, his literary ambitions began to widen beyond poetry to fiction. He knew he wanted to write, but he wasn't entirely sure why or what he had to say. He took his classes more seriously than in his time before the army, and during his senior year he began working in earnest on *A Long Day's Dying.* After graduation in 1948, an appointment to join the faculty at Lawrenceville followed.

There is a gap in the memoir here, as Buechner writes little in *The Sacred Journey* about his work as an English teacher and assistant housemaster at Lawrenceville. More information comes later: a short essay titled "Fathers and Teachers" in 2008 in *The Yellow Leaves* fills in some of the gap as it relates stories of several Lawrenceville teachers who would become Buechner's colleagues and friends. *The Eyes of the Heart*, Buechner's final memoir, includes stories about the summer immediately following graduation from Princeton and before Lawrenceville, when Buechner and Jimmy Merrill lived together on Georgetown Island off the coast of Maine.

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Buechner was working on his novel *A Long Day's Dying* and Merrill on his *First Poems.* No mention is made in *The Sacred Journey* about how Buechner managed to receive a contract for his first novel, and passing mention is made of a rejected marriage proposal when Buechner was twenty. Graduating from Princeton, moving to Lawrenceville—these are the headlines, but Buechner's concern is the "beyond time" moments instead, the moments in retrospect when he sees God moving him along.

*A Long Day's Dying* was published in January 1950 by the New York publishing house Alfred A. Knopf. (Knopf would publish Buechner's first three novels.) Dedicated "To Naya with love and wonder," the book was a startling success. The January 9 issue of *Time*, the January 16 issue of *Newsweek*, and the January 30 issue of *Life* all featured articles hailing the twenty-three-year-old as a brilliant young talent. Reading the novel today leaves me wondering about the literary tastes of 1950; it was indeed a different world. The novel is dense, written in a modernist style that focuses on the main characters' inability to connect with each other. Buechner was compared to Henry James and Marcel Proust at the time, although today he says that he'd prefer his early novels be treated as juvenilia: "I knew so little about almost anything when I wrote them. . . . More importantly I hadn't yet found my own true voice as a writer."[17]

Another gap in the memoir follows: Buechner took a one-year leave from Lawrenceville following the success of his first novel and traveled to Europe, where he had several adventures not mentioned in *The Sacred Journey.* Because his father's cousin was married to the American ambassador to Great Britain, Buechner rubbed shoulders with royalty (including Princess Margaret) and various celebrities such as Frank Sinatra and Peter Lawford. Jimmy Merrill was also in Europe, on the Spanish island of Mallorca, and Buechner journeyed

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to see him. He also stopped in Paris to meet the Bohemian figure Alice B. Toklas and saw Pope Pius XII conduct mass at St. Peter's in Rome on Christmas Eve. All of this is found in a chapter of *The Yellow Leaves* called "Wunderjahr," along with insight into the new novel Buechner was working on in Europe, *The Seasons' Difference.*

Few people are alive today who have followed Buechner's career since the days of *A Long Day's Dying* and *The Seasons' Difference.* Most contemporary readers discover him as a religious writer and are surprised to learn of his early literary success. What must it have felt like to have that sort of recognition and adulation at such a young age? What was it like to have Leonard Bernstein call your novel "a literary triumph" or suggest that you collaborate on an opera libretto?[18] Literature isn't gymnastics, after all, and premature publishing has its risks. Many writers don't hit their stride until they have lived four or five decades. In many ways, Buechner's career followed this arc; despite the early success, he readily admits he didn't find his voice until the Bebb books, and *Godric*, his greatest novel, was published thirty years after *A Long Day's Dying.* But the early, unanticipated success did happen, and it left its mark. In *The Sacred Journey* he writes, "From that day to this I have been driven as a writer, and to a degree as a human being too, to write something, do something, be something to justify the fluke of that early and for the most part undeserved success."[19]

*The Seasons' Difference* was as big a disappointment as *A Long Day's Dying* had been a success. Written in a similar modernist style, *The Seasons' Difference* is so unappreciated Buechner doesn't even refer to it by name in *The Sacred Journey.* In *The Yellow Leaves*, Buechner called it "the most unsuccessful book I have ever written and deservedly so."[20] He wonders in *The Yellow Leaves* (at the age of eighty-two) what might have happened to his career if he'd been able to

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produce the Bebb novels as follow up to *A Long Day's Dying*—would his star have risen the way that contemporaries and acquaintances Truman Capote's, Norman Mailer's, and Gore Vidal's did? Literary fame may have, over time, hurt each of their careers; after the brief rush of acclaim in 1950 following *A Long Day's Dying*, the distraction of great fame would not be a problem Buechner would face.

*The New Yorker* review called *The Seasons' Difference* "high flown nonsense."[21] *The New Yorker* had not given a particularly strong review of *A Long Day's Dying* either, saying Buechner had "a knack for spraying his scenes with either poetry or Williams Aqua Velva."[22] These words got under Buechner's skin—he would mention them in *The Alphabet of Grace* twenty years later. His "revenge" was to write a short story in a Salinger-esque *New Yorker* style, perhaps to prove that if he wanted to write like that, he could easily do it. The short story "The Tiger" (the only short story of Buechner's career) appeared in *The New Yorker* in November 1953 and would go on to win an O. Henry Award. Ironically, "The Tiger" holds up much better than Buechner's early novels, and although Buechner never anthologized it, its central image—of the man inside the Princeton mascot suit not being a real tiger—foreshadowed the "Who are they really?" questions surrounding characters such as Leo Bebb, Godric, and the Bible's Jacob.

Nothing about "The Tiger" or Buechner's frustration with *The New Yorker* is included in *The Sacred Journey*. Instead of following his literary path, the focus is more on the development of Buechner's faith, and he shares vignettes of other events in those years that moved him toward Christianity. A minister asks him to lunch, and though the minister seemed to stumble over his purpose, he asked Buechner if he'd ever considered using his talents for the sake of the church. A weekend visit to a monastery was disappointing because the monk Buechner had come to see was unavailable. Buechner also

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relays this story in *The Alphabet of Grace*, where he says, "This father I had come to see had gone into retreat and could see nobody—a tendency, I might add, that all my fathers seem to have had in common."[23] At the end of the weekend, the one available monk asked Buechner if he would like to make confession. Embarrassed, Buechner said yes and blurted out a few things. The monk then asked if Buechner would like to receive his blessing, and after giving the blessing, he said, "You have a long way to go."[24]

Earlier in the book, in the section on his years at Princeton, Buechner quotes a poem he'd written while in school there that ends, "I found myself, and that was everything."[25] He adds that if anyone had asked him then what or who that self was, he would have had no idea how to answer. An emptiness comes through—he knows the words of the old monk were true, he indeed had a long way to go. But he didn't know how to get there. Something was missing, but he couldn't name it. "In a world that has explained him away," he said in a sermon in the early 1960s, "God speaks to us most clearly through his silence, his absence, so that we know him best through our missing him."[26]

The universal particular is in play again: writing a bestseller at twenty-three is unique, but feeling a deep longing and awareness that there has to be something more, Someone more, is universal.

Buechner left the faculty of Lawrenceville in 1953 and moved to Manhattan to dedicate his energy to writing. The existential crisis created by his second novel's failure combined with the geographical coincidence (or was it providence?) of living in an apartment close to the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church led Buechner to start attending. George Buttrick, the preacher, was one of the great homileticians of the mid-twentieth century.

One Sunday in 1953, Buttrick compared Jesus' refusal of a crown from Satan in the wilderness to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth,

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which the whole world seemingly had watched in June of that year. Buttrick noted that Jesus is a king anyway because he is crowned over and over in the hearts of believers in confession, tears, and great laughter.

Reflecting on that sermon later, Buechner wrote, "It was the phrase *great laughter* that did it. . . . It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along, which I had only just then stumbled upon."[27] Sitting in church that Sunday, something happened inside the promising young novelist: "At the phrase *great laughter*, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face."[28] Over the years, Buechner struggled to name exactly what happened that morning in Buttrick's church. He rejects most of the typical language we hear describing religious conversion: to "become a Christian" makes it sound like an accomplishment, and "born again," in his estimation, says both too much and too little. He had been moving in the direction of Christianity for years, and on this morning he crossed a threshold. (There is good theology here: conversion is best understood as a combination of process and event.)[29]

Buechner's first awkward attempt to explain what had happened came immediately; he had dinner that afternoon with his Grandmother Buechner, who seemed bemused and pleased when he tried to articulate what had just happened to him. Feeling he needed to do something, Buechner visited Buttrick in his office a few days later to explain what had happened and ask if he should attend seminary. Buttrick at first thought seminary sounded a little extreme and offered other options for studying the faith, but eventually, perhaps recognizing the immense potential for the kingdom

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of God in front of him, Buttrick took Buechner in his car and drove north to 120th and Broadway, where Buechner enrolled in Union Theological Seminary. The first leg of Buechner's sacred journey had reached its culmination.

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