A book that has transformed my life of faith

For the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we asked writers to choose one formative book and tell us about it.

by various authors

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In his preface to the 1545 Latin edition of his works, Martin Luther describes what scholars would later call his "tower experience," the moment when he read Romans 1:17—"the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'"—in a way that transformed his view of God. In view of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation observed this month, we asked writers to tell us about a book that has changed their life of faith.

In December 1992, my friend John Inge gave me *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, by Keith Johnstone. I'd recently started a Ph.D. on virtue ethics, narrative, and the church, and Inge said, "You might want to look at this."

As I read, I laughed out loud at the anecdotes and proposals. But I also smiled deep down inside because I quickly realized that the kind of improvising Johnstone wrote about was exactly what I was coming to understand about my dissertation—and about my life. Like a chemist seeing a thrilling bubble in a laboratory, I straightaway knew I'd hit on a breakthrough in my field. The trouble was that I couldn't work out if my field was theology, ethics, ministry, or mission; and in all of them, I was nobody.

Twenty-five years later, my book *Improvisation*, published in 2004, is going into its second edition. I seldom take Johnstone's book off the shelf these days because I've more or less memorized it. Like other treasures (I think of Woody Allen's stand-up routine or Nina Simone's throaty songs) it's been ingested to the point of entering my bloodstream. If you were to ask me where Johnstone's book has been more influential—my devotional life or my relationships, my ministry in the church or my mission in the kingdom, my academic reputation or my pastoral practice—I couldn't tell you. All of the above. God improvises on my life by reincorporating the discarded and despised elements of my past and by overaccepting the challenging events of my present and future. All I have to do is trust, and stop saying no. As Johnstone says (and I quote here from memory): "Those who like to say yes are rewarded by the adventures they have. Those who like to say no are rewarded by the safety they attain."

—**Samuel Wells**

Every few years I absorb some tome that revolutionizes or refines my thinking. But one book saved my life. At the age of 22 I experienced the first of two profound

suicidal depressions. Because I had no language for mental illness I thought that I had lost my faith. Not only had God absconded, but I lost faith that even the floor would hold firm beneath my feet when I got out of bed. I encountered what depressives know as an unsettling distortion of time and space. I clung to the idea that I'd lost God. I felt like a body without a soul and could not live with what felt like acute physical pain permeating my being.

One day, during the summer of meticulously planning my death, I stood in a Norwich, England, bookshop near a wire rack of books. An unseen hand took mine and drew me toward a book, a turquoise and white Penguin paperback. Weird. How could I not buy it? I paid my £1,7½ and opened it during a train ride across the Norfolk fens. While I read, my insides lit up with a fire I thought I'd lost forever. The book's subject imprinted on me like a baby duck on its mother, its content a matter of life and death.

It was *The Autobiography of Saint Teresa of Ávila*, a 16th-century memoir of prayer written with conversational frankness, humor, and charm. The author spoke to me from Ávila, Spain, from a span of over four centuries, but seemed as familiar as an old friend. But what did she mean by prayer? That question led not only to the canon of Christian mystical writers but to the chasms, landscapes, voids, riches, and worlds within worlds of exploration that became my own life's work of praying.

—**Suzanne Guthrie**

The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India, by Rodger Kamenetz, entered my life at exactly the right time. The book chronicles the pilgrimage of a group of Jewish leaders who visit His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsalla. My mentor, Brother Wayne Teasdale, who was close to His Holiness, arranged for my friend Kevin and me to have an audience with him. I read Kamenetz's book in the guest house of the Tibetan government in exile during the days before my precious moments in the presence of a spiritual master.

I loved the Kamenetz book for its poetry and its honesty. I loved the descriptions of the different kinds of Jews who went on the trip (from secular to Orthodox to JuBu—Jewish Buddhist), the tensions between them (how far can a Jew become involved in the rituals of another religion?), and the stories of how encountering a leader from a different faith tradition can help you learn more about your own. I

loved Kamenetz's anecdotes about the students who learn from spiritual masters, not just rituals and texts but also how to properly tie their shoes. These stories crystallized for me the deep truth that religion is about the quality with which we do the small things. And I loved how Kamenetz wrote about the big things—the belief in angels, the emptiness out of which the universe was born, the challenge of maintaining a community's continuity in exile.

I read the book in my early twenties, a time in my life when I was asking the same questions that Kamenetz poses in the book. I was also forming the initial idea of Interfaith Youth Core in my mind in those days. *The Jew in the Lotus* not only helped me form my own religious identity by learning about the journeys of others, it played a key role in how I shaped IFYC so that it might do the same for others.

—**Eboo Patel**

Grace Lee Boggs died on October 5, 2015, in her beloved Detroit, Michigan, at the age of 100. That day I came across a quote of hers that has haunted me to this day: "The most radical thing I ever did was to stay put." The quote led me to the book Boggs wrote when she was 96, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*.

Boggs was part of the Black Power movement in Detroit with her autoworker and activist husband, Jimmy Boggs. She lived through the rise and fall of industrial Detroit and in her nineties was part of building a "New Detroit" alongside teens and young adults. I've always said that Marx cribbed his best material from Jesus, so it's no surprise that a former Trotskyite's book reconnects me to my faith in a season when it would be easy to give up hope. Boggs reminds us that our historic heroes are not trapped in amber and by embracing their complexity, we can do our own work better. She reinjects imagination, creativity, and life into the way we understand education. She shows us how to create a community built from the bottom up instead of from the top down.

Much of the failure of faith communities is our failure of imagination, our lack of faith that God can create miracles with us and through us, right where we are. In my rapidly gentrifying city of Oakland, California, it's hard for me to believe that we can really build a community that holds all of God's children, God's kin-dom here on earth as it is in heaven. But Grace Lee Boggs reminded me to stay put, imagine

bigger, and see God in my own community.

—**Sandhya Rani Jha**

An out-of-print ethnography of elderly Jews has remained the anchor of my library for decades. The dog-eared paperback is the book I most often lend to friends, a book whose basic humanity is always relevant and in these times especially necessary.

Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days: A Triumph of Continuity and Culture among Jewish Old People in an Urban Ghetto* is based on anthropology fieldwork she undertook at a senior center in Venice, California, where she listened to a tapestry of stories of elderly Jews nearing the end of their lives. Former immigrants from Eastern Europe who had been mostly abandoned by their assimilated children, their voices are reflective, exuberant, and honest.

The voices of Myerhoff's feisty subjects give the book its transformative power. Shmuel the Filosofe emerges as the author's teacher, critic, and guide. A Socialist, agnostic, and former tailor whose sensibility is shaped by Jewish tradition, he explains how intention informed his trade: "The tailor is connected to the one who wears the coat and he should not forget it." He sums up his theology: "What it is I don't know. You will have to take it in your own way." Reflecting on the meaning of her own work, Myerhoff quotes Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: "When one speaks to one's fellows, there arises a simple light and a returning light."

Myerhoff died in 1985 and her subjects are long gone, yet their wise and boisterous voices have much to teach us. In a time when so-called wisdom is delivered in tiny boxes on our screens and personal narratives are often reduced to marketable snippets, *Number Our Days* reminds us that a meaningful life is woven with stories and that generous, compassionate listening may be the most sacred act of all.

—**Amy Gottlieb**

Although I was baptized and confirmed in a Lutheran parish, I learned very little about Martin Luther. We memorized his Small Catechism, but sermons and Sunday school classes rarely mentioned the Reformer. He appeared only once a year at the

joint Reformation services held in my town. As a result, I entered seminary with a conception of Christianity that in my view still prevails in American religion: Jesus is savior, to be sure, but there's an equal or greater emphasis on keeping the Ten Commandments and other biblical decrees. In practice, religion is easily reduced to a personal morality that becomes the criterion for judging what person or church is genuinely Christian. Leviticus 20:13 too often trumps John 3:16.

In seminary, however, it took only one month to turn that view of Christianity on its head. While reading the Greek text of Galatians, I learned that Martin Luther had lectured on Paul's letter and that an English version of the lectures was available. I decided to read Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* (delivered in 1531 and published in 1535) as my fellow students and I worked through the Greek text.

What I found was this: "It is a marvelous thing and unknown to the world to teach Christians to ignore the law. . . . If you do not direct your thoughts to grace as if there were no law but as though there was nothing but grace, you cannot be saved." As I read further, I learned there is a place for law and morality in Luther's theology and especially for love of neighbor. They, however, never subvert God's grace. Today I value this insight more than ever because I, like others, have failed to live a perfect life and count on that grace alone.

—**Scott Hendrix**

I am no longer sure when I first came across Helen Waddell's *The Desert Fathers* —nor indeed how. It was first published in 1936. The copy I own is a rather battered hardback reissue from the 1950s. I grew up in a house full of books and with free access to all of them, but I cannot imagine either of my parents having much interest in the hermits. Did I steal it when I left home? Did I buy it secondhand as a student? I cannot imagine why I would have done either. Nonetheless, it has always been in my bookcase—and somewhere, sometime I must have read it. Because when, in the 1990s, I started to get seriously interested in silence and solitude, I knew it was there. I sought it out, I reread it, I learned a lot from it. And I still do.

It is an odd little book in some ways. When Waddell translated the ancient texts, they were almost unheard of in the West. She selected from the voluminous material and added some "extras," like some of Cassian's reflections on desert spirituality. Her introduction to the book makes clear that she was a bit defensive: the idea of

solitude needed defending. Waddell never comments—no one does—that although the hermits were famous for their silence, most of the material is things they said (the “sayings,” as they are called). Yet from this book I initially came to see that solitude, silence, and the whole eremitical experience does not lead to the grumpy glorification of suffering nor to harsh judgments, but rather to a startling humility, self-irony, deep generosity, and joy. Waddell encouraged me to give it a go—and 20 years later, sipped at very regularly, to keep on going.

—**Sara Maitland**

Reading Robin Wall Kimmerer’s exquisitely crafted *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* is like being reintroduced to a world you thought you knew but perhaps didn’t. A trained botanist and member of the Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer says, “the language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar.” This error has rendered our world dead by breaking it up into isolated bits. What we need, instead, is to learn the language of animacy, a language more heavily populated by verbs than nouns. Imagine how the feel of the world would change if we thought of things like trees not as objects but rather as dynamic sites through which the power of life continually unfolds. Would we still think of our world as a stockpile of resources or commodities? A “grammar of animacy” alerts us to the power of life pulsing through all things, knitting them into a vast, dynamic community of life. It is a way of speaking that draws us into the world, making it less likely that we will think of ourselves as separate from, or even masters over, others.

Braiding Sweetgrass challenges the grammar and forms of thought that have structured my faith and my thinking. Now I read scripture differently. I notice that the old prejudice against pagan animism has distorted how we understand God’s world and God’s action in it. I wonder how Christian life would have to change if we believed God to be present to every creature as the divine power and love animating them from within. I wonder how the body of Christ would need to change if we believed the community of life to extend beyond people to include all the life that God loves.

—**Norman Wirzba**

Fr. Walter Ciszek, SJ (1904–1984), a Pennsylvania native, was so mulishly incorrigible in his youth that his father once asked the police to put him in reform school. Instead, Ciszek developed a burning desire to be a Jesuit priest. He was ordained in 1937 and developed a passionate call to serve in communist Russia. After making his way there with permission of his order, he was arrested on the phony charge of being a Vatican spy and held for five years in solitary confinement.

In *He Leadeth Me*, Ciszek tells of praying that the Holy Spirit would provide a clever retort to put his interrogators smartly in their place. Instead, in one particularly grueling session, he finally broke and numbly signed page after page of a trumped-up confession. Back in his cell that night, he was devastated. He, who had prided himself on his strength, had been broken. It struck with the force of revelation: for all his prayer and self-discipline, he had still been relying largely on his own will. (What follower of Christ can fail to relate?) The episode was a “purgatory” that left him “cleansed to the bone” and marked a turning point after which he abandoned himself completely to God’s will.

Subsequently sentenced to 15 years in Siberia, he describes secretly celebrating the Eucharist during lunch break with his fellow believers: “These men would actually fast all day long and do exhausting physical labor without a bite to eat since dinner the evening before, just to be able to receive the Holy Eucharist—that was how much the Sacrament meant to them in this otherwise God-forsaken place.” (Contemplate that scenario the next time you’re tempted to complain about a boring homily!)

Ciszek was released in 1955, and in 1963 he returned to the United States. His spirit was intact, but he admitted: “In many ways, I am almost a stranger.” *He Leadeth Me* is a gripping call to persevere, no matter the cost.

—**Heather King**