

Tell Me Who You Go With and I'll Tell You WHO YOU ARE

Introduction

We Are All Becoming Someone

Have you ever noticed that some people stay with you long after they've left the room?

Not because they were loud.

Not because they were impressive.

Not because they had all the answers.

There was simply something about them.

Years may pass before you realize what it was.

They carried a certain steadiness.

They listened without rushing.

They didn't seem driven by the need to prove themselves.

Around them, you somehow became a little quieter, a little kinder, a little more yourself.

At the time, you probably couldn't have explained it.

You simply knew you enjoyed being near them.

I've come to believe that some of the most important things in life are caught long before they are taught; peace is one of them.

So is fear, joy, suspicion, hope... even despair.

These things have a way of moving from one life into another, often without a single word being spoken.

Perhaps that is why we instinctively tell our children to choose their friends carefully.

Not because friendship is dangerous, but because companionship is formative.

We become *like* what we repeatedly live nearby.

For years I thought that was all my father meant when he would say,

"Tell me who you go with, and I'll tell you who you are."

It sounded like practical wisdom; good advice, the kind of thing every parent says.

I nodded, agreed, and carried on.

Only much later did I begin to wonder if he had unknowingly said something much deeper.

Perhaps he wasn't talking primarily about the people we choose.

Perhaps he was talking about the presence we continually allow to shape us.

Life has a way of testing our assumptions.

Mine came through thousands of quiet conversations...

Hospital rooms; living rooms; hospice visits; funerals.

Long silences shared with people who knew they were nearing the end of their lives.

Something unexpected began to emerge.

When life becomes small enough, almost everything we spend our lives chasing quietly falls away.

Titles matter less; success matters less; arguments matter less...

What remains is astonishingly simple:

People remember how someone made them feel.

They remember who stayed, who listened, who wasn't afraid of silence...

Who carried peace when everything else seemed uncertain.

Presence outlives performance.

And once you begin seeing that, you start noticing it everywhere.

I've also noticed something else...

The people who shaped me most were rarely the people I expected.

Some were accomplished; many were not.

Some never stood behind a microphone or wrote a book.

Some simply possessed an unusual ability to remain present.

As a young man, two of my unexpected guides were ninety-two and ninety-six years old.

Neither would have considered themselves influential.

Yet I still carry them with me.

Not because I remember everything they said, but because I remember who they were.

Their steadiness became part of my own story before I ever realized I was learning from them.

That has caused me to wonder...

What if influence has very little to do with visibility?

What if the deepest teachers in our lives are often the quietest ones?

Years after my father spoke those words, I found myself reading an ancient sentence that seemed strangely familiar.

It wasn't looking for me, or perhaps it was.

It simply waited until I was ready to hear it.

It described two ordinary men.

They had no impressive credentials.

No recognized authority.

No religious status that would have earned anyone's respect.

Yet those watching them noticed something they couldn't explain.

They quietly said, *"These men had been with Jesus."*

I don't think they were commenting on where Peter and John had spent their afternoon.

I think they were recognizing what had slowly become true of them: Presence had become visible, and that simple observation raises a question that has followed me ever since:

Not... **What do you believe?**

Not... **What church do you attend?**

Not even... **How much do you know?**

But something far more personal:

Who—or what—is quietly shaping the person you are becoming?

That is the journey this book invites us to explore.

Not as an argument; not as a set of conclusions, but as a shared discovery.

Because I have a growing suspicion that faith is far gentler than many of us imagined.

Perhaps it has never been standing at the finish line waiting for us to arrive.

Perhaps it has been quietly walking beside us all along...

Waiting for us to notice.

Chapter 01 - We Don't Always Notice What Is Forming Us

There is an old saying that fish are the last to discover water.

Whether the saying is true hardly matters; the point does.

The things that surround us every day often become the things we notice least.

The tone of a home; the pace of a workplace.

The anxiety of the evening news; the kindness of a neighbor.

The conversations we replay in our minds.

The people we continually return to.

Most of us assume we are making independent choices.

Yet much of who we become is quietly shaped by the atmosphere we inhabit.

Formation is rarely dramatic, it is wonderfully ordinary.

Think about the aroma of fresh bread.

You don't have to eat it to know it's there.

Walk into the bakery for a few minutes and your clothes carry the fragrance with you.

Sit beside a campfire long enough and, hours later, someone will smile and say,

"You smell like smoke", no one is surprised.

That is simply what happens when we spend time near something.

Presence leaves a trace, perhaps people do as well.

Looking back over my own life, I can remember people whose influence far exceeded their words, at the time, I didn't know why.

They weren't necessarily the smartest people I had met.

They weren't always the most accomplished.

Some of them rarely spoke at all.

Yet whenever I left them, I found myself becoming just a little more patient.

A little less hurried, a little less afraid.

I couldn't explain it then. Today, I think I can.

They were sharing more than ideas; they were sharing themselves.

That realization has changed the way I think about influence.

We often imagine influence as something loud:

A stage, a microphone, a title, followers, recognition.

But perhaps the deepest influence happens almost invisibly.

Like roots beneath the soil.

Like sunlight slowly turning a seed toward the sky.

Like a river shaping stone, not through force, but through faithful presence.

Many years ago, I thought maturity meant collecting better answers.

Now I'm not so sure.

I wonder if maturity is less about accumulating information and more about becoming the kind of person who brings peace into a room.

Not because we've mastered life, but because life has slowly taught us where to live.

It is here that an ancient story begins to make fresh sense.

Two ordinary men stood before the most educated and respected leaders of their day.

Everything about the moment suggested they should have been intimidated.

Instead, something unexpected happened.

The observers became the ones who were unsettled.

Not because Peter and John were more educated.

Not because they were more persuasive.

Not because they held greater authority.

Something else had captured everyone's attention.

The account simply says,

"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished..."

Then comes one of the most beautiful observations in all of Scripture.

"...and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

I have read those words countless times.

For years, I assumed the remarkable part of the sentence was that Peter and John had once walked with Jesus.

Now I wonder if the remarkable part is something else entirely:

Someone noticed; *presence* had become visible.

Perhaps that is always how love works.

It quietly shapes us until one day someone else notices before we do.

Not perfection; not certainty; not religious achievement.

Simply a different way of being human.

Before we continue, I want to invite you to pause.

Not to answer a question, just to notice.

Who are the people whose presence leaves you feeling more alive?

Who leaves you quieter? Kinder? More patient? More hopeful?

Perhaps those are the people who have been teaching you all along.

And perhaps the greatest teachers are rarely the ones who try to teach.

Notice this week:

Pay attention to how you feel after spending time with different people.

Don't judge them—or yourself, simply notice what each presence awakens in you.

Carry this with you:

Presence always leaves more behind than words.

Chapter 02 - Some Things Can Only Be Seen Indirectly

There are certain things we never actually see.

We have never seen the wind.

We have only watched leaves surrender to it.

We have never seen gravity; only the quiet certainty with which everything falls.

We have never seen love; only the way someone's face softens when another enters the room.

Some realities are known by their effects, not by direct observation.

Perhaps Presence belongs in that category.

Years ago, while sitting with a family whose husband and father was dying, very little was said.

There wasn't much left to say, the room had already heard every medical explanation.

Every hopeful possibility had been exhausted.

Words had become strangely unnecessary.

So, we simply sat together. Minutes passed. Maybe longer.

No one seemed interested in filling the silence.

Later, one of the family members quietly said, *"Thank you for being here."*

I've often wondered about those words; I hadn't solved anything.

I hadn't offered remarkable wisdom; I hadn't changed the outcome.

Why did my being there matter?

Perhaps because, in life's deepest moments, people are not looking for explanations, they are looking for someone who is not afraid to remain.

Remaining has become an undervalued gift.

We celebrate achievement; we reward productivity; we admire speed.

But love has always seemed strangely unhurried, it lingers, it listens,

It refuses to measure the value of a moment by how efficient it was.

Perhaps this is why some people change us without ever trying to.

They remain long enough for our souls to remember what peace feels like.

I have noticed something else...

When someone carries genuine peace, it rarely announces itself.

It doesn't compete for attention; it doesn't need recognition.

Peace simply creates space, it allows everyone else to breathe.

You can almost feel the room exhale.

Perhaps you've known someone like that.

Maybe a grandparent, a teacher, a nurse, a neighbor.

Someone whose greatest gift wasn't what they accomplished.

It was who everyone became while they were nearby.

Only recently have I begun reading an old story differently.

Two ordinary men stood before people who possessed every credential that mattered:

Education, position, authority, approval...

Everything suggested the educated men should have recognized superior arguments.

Instead, they recognized something much harder to explain,

they noticed courage, not loud courage, not defiant courage.

a settled courage, the kind that no longer needs to prove itself.

Then comes one of the quietest observations in Scripture:

"They took note that these men had been with Jesus."

Notice what the text does not say...

It doesn't say Peter and John were trying to imitate Jesus.

It doesn't say they quoted Him perfectly.

It doesn't even say they convinced everyone.

It simply says that someone noticed they had been near Him.

That sentence has begun changing the way I understand spiritual growth.

Perhaps becoming isn't mostly about trying harder.

Perhaps becoming is what naturally happens when we remain near love long enough.

There is an old piece of iron lying beside a magnet.

If left there long enough something remarkable happens.

The iron slowly begins behaving differently.

Not because it decided to.

Not because it attended a seminar.

Not because it was commanded to change.

Simply because it remained close.

I sometimes wonder if the human soul works more like that than we realize.

This thought has quietly changed the way I pray.

Less asking... More noticing.

Less striving... More remaining.

Less trying to become someone...

More learning to live near the One who already is.

Perhaps transformation has always been less mechanical than relational.

Less like building... More like growing.

Sit With This...

Think of someone whose presence has made you feel more fully yourself.

Don't analyze why; don't explain it, simply remember.

Sometimes remembering is the first step toward recognizing what has been shaping us all along.

Chapter 03 - The Stories We Live Inside

Long before we choose what we believe, we begin believing stories.

Most of them are never spoken aloud.

Some are handed to us by our families.

Others arrive through disappointment.

Some are born from success.

Others from heartbreak.

Little by little, they become the quiet narrators of our lives.

Eventually, we stop hearing them because they sound so much like our own voice.

A child reaches for a parent, the parent smiles.

Something beautiful is learned: *"I am welcome."*

Another child reaches; no one notices.

A different story quietly begins: *"Perhaps I'm on my own."*

Neither child chose those conclusions.

The stories simply settled into the architecture of their world.

As adults, we imagine we make decisions with our minds.

I wonder if we make most of them from stories we no longer remember learning.

Stories about worth, success, failure, God, stories even about ourselves.

Every story whispers an answer to the same question: *"Who am I?"*

Hospice has taught me something unexpected.

As life draws toward its close, very few people ask, *"Was I successful enough?"*

Instead they ask questions that sound remarkably different:

"Did I love well?" "Did my life matter?" "Was I enough?"

Those questions have probably been with them for decades.

They've simply become impossible to ignore.

I sometimes wonder if the deepest suffering in the human soul isn't pain, it is mistaken identity, living faithfully inside a story that was never true.

Not because anyone intended harm.

Not because someone deliberately deceived us.

But because fear has a remarkable ability to shrink the horizon.

Shame narrows our vision.

Loss convinces us that one chapter is the whole book.

Little by little, we begin calling the prison "home."

Then something unexpected happens.

Someone believes in us before we believe in ourselves.

Someone remains when everyone else leaves.

Someone forgives what we thought was unforgivable.

Someone sees beauty where we see only brokenness.

A different story quietly enters the room...

...not demanding... not arguing... Simply waiting.

Truth has always been remarkably patient.

Perhaps this is why genuine love feels so disruptive.

Love doesn't merely comfort us, it challenges the stories we've mistaken for reality.

Love gently asks, *"What if there is more to you than you've been told?"*

The older I become, the less I think transformation is about acquiring a new identity.

Perhaps it is the slow and joyful recognition of the one that has always been waiting beneath the noise.

Like an old painting hidden beneath centuries of dust.

The beauty wasn't created the day it was cleaned... it was revealed.

I cannot help wondering if this is why the life of Jesus continues to draw people...

Even those who have little interest in religion.

Jesus seemed to meet people beneath the stories they believed about themselves.

To the woman burdened by shame, He spoke dignity.

To the fisherman who doubted himself, He saw a shepherd.

To the tax collector everyone else despised, He offered a meal instead of a lecture.

Again and again, He seemed less interested in fixing people than in reminding them who they truly were.

Perhaps that is why so many walked away feeling as though they had somehow been found.

Maybe that is what grace feels like.

Not permission to remain asleep, but the gentle awakening from a dream that was never telling the whole truth.

Not becoming someone else.

Finally recognizing the One who has never stopped calling your name.

Sit With This...

What story about yourself have you accepted without ever asking where it came from?

Don't rush to answer.

Sometimes the first story to loosen its grip is the one we didn't realize we were living inside.

Chapter 04 - The Atmosphere We Carry

Before a single word is spoken, something has already entered the room.

We've all experienced it:

A meeting begins, and tension is already sitting at the table.

A family gathers, and laughter seems to arrive before anyone does.

You visit someone's home for the first time and, within moments, you feel strangely at ease, or strangely guarded. Nothing has been explained, yet something has already been communicated.

Perhaps every person carries an atmosphere.

Atmospheres are difficult to describe:

You cannot hold one in your hands; you cannot weigh it.

There is no instrument that measures peace.

No scale that quantifies kindness.

No photograph that captures trust.

Yet we know when they are present.

Just as surely as we know when they are absent.

Think about the people who have shaped your life.

Perhaps you remember very little of what they said.

But you remember how you felt when you were with them: safe, curious, accepted, seen... **or perhaps...** afraid, small, never quite enough...

Long after conversations fade, atmosphere remains.

Hospice has taught me that people rarely remember perfect sentences.

People remember presence.

Families have often said to me,

"I don't remember exactly what you said that day..."

Then they pause, *"But I remember how peaceful the room felt."*

That has always humbled me.

Because I know the peace wasn't something I manufactured.

It was something I had first received.

Perhaps peace is less something we produce than something we learn to carry.

There is an old saying that we become what we repeatedly behold.

I have wondered if the same is true of atmosphere.

Whatever we continually live near eventually begins living within us.

Stay near criticism long enough, and criticism begins sounding like your own thoughts.

Remain in fear, and the imagination slowly forgets how to hope.

Live in competition, and every relationship quietly becomes a comparison.

But remain near genuine love... remain near mercy... remain near joy...

And something equally mysterious begins happening.

The heart starts speaking a different language.

This may explain something I have noticed throughout my life.

The wisest people I have known seldom worked hard to appear wise.

The kindest people rarely announced their kindness.

The most peaceful people never seemed preoccupied with being peaceful.

They simply lived from somewhere deeper.

Fruit never strains to convince anyone that it belongs to the tree.

It simply reveals the life of the tree.

Perhaps the atmosphere we carry reveals the life we have been living within.

When I was younger, I believed maturity meant having better answers.

Today, I am less certain.

I think maturity may be measured by something quieter.

Can another person breathe more freely because they have been with me?

Do people leave my presence carrying more hope than when they arrived?

Have I become someone who enlarges another person's soul... or someone who unknowingly asks them to become smaller?

Those questions have become more important to me than winning arguments.

There is a remarkable detail hidden throughout the Gospels.

People were not only drawn to what Jesus taught; they were drawn to Him.

Children were unafraid to come near Him.

Those burdened by shame found themselves lingering in His company.

The weary somehow rested before they understood everything He was saying.

It makes me wonder if the first sermon Jesus ever preached was not spoken from a hillside...

Perhaps it was preached through the atmosphere He carried.

Before He explained the kingdom... People experienced it.

What if this is the quiet invitation waiting beneath Acts 4?

The religious leaders did not say, *"These men have mastered His theology."*

They said, *"These men have been with Jesus."*

Something familiar had entered the room.

Not a doctrine. Not a technique.

An atmosphere: Courage, Peace, Freedom, Love without anxiety.

It was recognizable because they had seen it before.

Maybe this is how the Kingdom continues to arrive.

Not first through louder voices, but through quieter lives.

Not through people trying to appear extraordinary.

But through ordinary people whose lives have become hospitable to Love.

The world is not starving only for information.

It is aching for an atmosphere where hearts can unfold without fear.

Perhaps that is the fragrance of Christ Paul later described—not perfume to be admired from a distance...

But the quiet evidence that someone has spent time where Love dwells.

Sit With This...

Think about the people who feel safest to you.

Don't ask what they know; ask what they carry.

Then ask yourself a gentler question:

What atmosphere do I leave behind when I walk out of a room?

Not to judge yourself; simply to notice.

Because whatever fills the heart has a way of filling the room.

Chapter 05 - The Well We Keep Returning To

There is a difference between drawing water... and becoming a well.

At first, we don't notice the distinction.

We spend much of our lives moving from one source to another.

One conversation encourages us, another disappoints us.

A success lifts our spirits; a failure drains them.

Approval becomes water; *achievement* becomes water.

Recognition becomes water, and without realizing it, we spend our days carrying empty buckets.

...Always searching for the next place to fill them.

Then, every so often, we meet someone different.

They are not untouched by sorrow; they know disappointment.

They have buried dreams; they have carried grief.

Yet something within them remains strangely undisturbed...

Not untouched... Anchored.

They do not seem to live from what happens around them.

They live from somewhere deeper.

I've met people like this in hospice.

You might expect them to be the caregivers.

Sometimes they are.

More often, they are the ones who are dying.

There have been moments when I entered a room expecting to bring comfort...

only to leave having received it.

How does that happen?

How can someone whose body is failing somehow strengthen the people standing beside the bed?

Perhaps because life is measured by a different kind of strength than we imagined.

I remember sitting beside a man whose words had become few.

The room was quiet; the machines spoke more often than he did.

After a long silence, he looked toward his family, then he smiled.

Not the smile of someone pretending everything was fine.

The smile of someone who had stopped negotiating with reality.

Peace had become larger than fear.

No sermon was preached that afternoon, yet everyone in the room learned something.

It has taken me years to realize that peace cannot be borrowed for very long.

Eventually, every borrowed source runs dry:

Applause fades, certainty wavers, health changes, people leave...

Even our own understanding grows and changes with time.

If everything we depend upon can disappear...

...where does lasting peace come from?

Perhaps that question has always mattered more than its answer.

Because the question itself begins turning us toward the well.

Jesus once spoke to a woman beside an ordinary well.

At first, the conversation sounded like it was about water, it wasn't; it was about thirst, not the thirst of the body...

The quieter thirst we spend our lives trying to satisfy.

The longing to belong, to rest, to stop proving ourselves, to finally come home.

I wonder if we have misunderstood thirst.

Perhaps thirst isn't evidence that something is wrong with us.

Perhaps it is evidence that we were created for communion.

Every thirst points toward a source.

The tragedy is not that we thirst.

The tragedy is how often we drink from places that cannot sustain us.

The people who have most deeply shaped my life all seem to share one quiet characteristic.

They stopped living reactively.

They no longer rose and fell with every compliment or criticism.

Their joy wasn't fragile; their kindness wasn't conditional.

Their hope wasn't dependent upon circumstances cooperating.

It was as though they had discovered an underground river.

Something invisible; something constant.

Perhaps that is what Acts 4 has been whispering all along.

The courage of Peter and John wasn't manufactured in the moment.

Courage rarely is, it flowed from somewhere.

When the religious leaders said, "*They have been with Jesus,*"

perhaps they weren't identifying where Peter and John had gone.

Perhaps they had recognized the source from which they now lived.

I have begun wondering if the deepest question isn't, "*Who are you?*"

Nor even, "*Who have you been with?*"

Perhaps the deepest question is, "**From what well do you draw your life?**"

Because eventually... whatever nourishes us... becomes visible.

Sit With This...

When life becomes difficult... where do you instinctively go?

Not where you think you should go, but where do you actually go?

We all have a well; some leave us thirsty.

Others quietly teach us that Living Water is less something we possess than Someone who patiently invites us to return.

Chapter 06 - Learning to Remain

There is a quiet difference between visiting a place... and living there.

Most of us know the feeling.

We have walked through beautiful gardens while traveling.

We have stood beside oceans whose names we no longer remember.

We have watched sunsets that took our breath away.

For a moment, we belonged to the beauty... then we left.

The memory remained; the life did not.

There are people who treat peace the same way.

They visit it:

A quiet *weekend*;

A meaningful *retreat*;

A beautiful *song*;

A moment of *prayer*.

For a little while, everything feels clear.... then Monday arrives...

The *traffic* returns;

The *phone* rings;

The *diagnosis* comes;

The *argument* begins.

And peace feels as though it packed its bags and went home.

Perhaps peace was never meant to be a place we visit.

Perhaps it was meant to become our address.

When I was younger, I imagined spiritual growth as climbing.

One step, then another.

Always *reaching*;

Always *improving*;

Always *hoping*

I was making progress.

The older I become, the less that image helps me.

Life doesn't always feel like climbing...

Sometimes it feels like sitting beside a hospital bed.

Sometimes it feels like waiting.

Sometimes it feels like holding the hand of someone you cannot save. Sometimes it feels like learning that love has work to do even when nothing can be fixed.

Perhaps growth isn't always upward; perhaps it is inward.

There is a tree not far from where I often walk.

I have passed it in every season.

Winter leaves this tree looking almost lifeless; its branches seem empty...

Its strength hidden... then spring arrives.

Without hurry...

Without announcement...

Life quietly appears...

The tree never seems anxious about becoming itself.

It simply remains where its roots have always been.

I wonder how much of our exhaustion comes from confusing movement with life.

We are always moving:

Learning.

Achieving.

Recovering.

Planning.

Improving.

Yet the soul seems to ask a different question...

Not, *"How far have you traveled?"*

But, *"Where have you been living?"*

Jesus used a simple word. *"Remain."*

Not because He lacked stronger language.

Perhaps because no stronger language was needed:

Remain,

Stay,

Make your home here,

Live from this place.

It is one of the gentlest invitations in all of Scripture.

There is no urgency in it;

No threat,

No performance,

Only an open door.

I have begun to think that remaining is less about holding onto God...

and more about discovering that God has never let go of us.

Like a child asleep in the back seat of a car.

The child may awaken unsure of where the journey has gone.

The father has never once forgotten.

Love has been carrying the child all along.

Perhaps we spend too much energy trying to hold onto the One whose hands have never loosened their grip.

The people I most admire have one thing in common.

They have stopped dividing life into sacred and ordinary:

Making coffee...

Watching birds...

Holding a friend's tears...

Walking quietly...

Reading...

Laughing...

Sitting beside someone who has no words.

Somehow all of it has become holy, not because the moments changed...

But because their awareness did.

Perhaps that is what "*remaining*" finally becomes...

Not escaping the world... Seeing it differently.

Finding that the Eternal has been quietly waiting in ordinary moments all along:

A kitchen table;

A hospice room;

A garden path;

A child's laughter;

A shared silence.

The holy has never needed dramatic entrances,

It has always preferred to arrive unnoticed.

The more I read the Gospels, the more I notice how often Jesus slowed down.

He noticed interruptions.

He paused for conversations others hurried past.

He ate meals that seemed unimportant.

He lingered with people who had nothing to offer Him.

Perhaps remaining always looks unproductive to a hurried world.

Yet almost everything beautiful grows slowly.

There is a strange freedom that comes when we stop asking,

"How can I find God?" and begin asking,

"Where has Love already been waiting for me today?"

The first question assumes distance;

The second assumes Presence.

Those are very different worlds.

Sit With This...

What if nothing extraordinary needs to happen today?

What if today is already full of quiet invitations?

Before this day ends...

Notice one ordinary moment that asks nothing of you except your attention.

Remain there, in that “ordinary moment” for a little while.

You may discover that Love was waiting before you arrived.

Chapter 07 - The Life That Cannot Be Manufactured

There are some things that simply cannot be forced.

You cannot command a flower to bloom.

You cannot hurry the sunrise.

You cannot pull fruit from a branch before its season.

Life has never responded well to pressure... it unfolds.

We live in a world that rewards production.

Goals are measured.

Progress is charted.

Results are celebrated.

From childhood we quietly learn that effort earns approval.

It is a useful lesson in many parts of life.

It is a dangerous lesson when carried into the soul.

Somewhere along the way, many of us begin treating God as another achievement.

Read more.

Pray more.

Serve more.

Know more.

Do more.

The invitations may be sincere.

Yet beneath them lives an exhausting question: *"Have I done enough?"*

I have sat beside too many dying people not to question that voice.

Near the end of life, no one asks whether they attended enough meetings.

No one wonders if they accumulated enough titles.

The questions become beautifully simple:

"Did I love?"

"Did I receive love?"

"Did I allow myself to be known?"

Perhaps those questions were the truest ones all along.

A vineyard teaches something that classrooms cannot.

The branch never struggles to convince the vine that it belongs.

It doesn't negotiate its place.

It doesn't earn the sap flowing through it.

It simply remains connected.

Everything else follows.

For years I misunderstood fruit.

I thought fruit was proof of effort.

Now I wonder if fruit is simply the evidence of shared life.

The apple tells us nothing about the branch's determination.

It tells us everything about the life flowing through it.

Perhaps we have spent too much of our lives trying to become better branches.

Jesus never seemed preoccupied with that.

He spoke instead of remaining in the vine.

He kept returning to relationship.

To communion.

To shared life.

I think that is why children understand grace more quickly than adults.

Children know how to receive.

Adults know how to calculate.

We measure.

Compare.

Earn.

Protect.

Children simply climb into a Father's lap...

Without wondering whether they deserve to be there.

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, many of us exchanged trust for performance.

The older I become, the more I believe the spiritual life is not primarily about becoming impressive.

It is about becoming available.

Available to joy.

Available to compassion.

Available to interruption.

Available to wonder.

Available to Love.

Availability may be one of the purest forms of faith.

There is a quiet freedom in discovering that the deepest work of God rarely feels like striving.

A tree does not awaken every morning anxious about producing shade.

A river does not rehearse how to flow.

Light does not struggle to shine.

Each simply participates in the life it has been given.

Perhaps the soul was never meant to be different.

The courage that astonished the religious leaders in Acts was not manufactured, it was received.

Peter and John had not attended a seminar on boldness.

They had lived in the company of Love...

Until fear no longer held the final word.

That kind of courage cannot be imitated, it can only be shared.

Perhaps this is the quiet mystery of the Christian life.

Not that we learn to live for Christ, but that, little by little...

His life becomes visible through ours.

Not as *imitation*... As *participation*.

Not as *performance*... As *communion*.

Not because we have become *extraordinary*...

But because ordinary people have discovered an extraordinary Love that quietly refuses to let them go.

Sit With This...

Think of one area of your life where you have been trying very hard.

Now ask yourself a gentler question.

What if this is something to receive before it is something to achieve?

Don't answer too quickly.

Sometimes the soul needs permission to stop striving before it remembers how to rest.

Chapter 08 - When the Eyes of the Heart Begin to Open

There is a remarkable difference between looking... and seeing.

We can pass the same tree every morning without ever noticing the way sunlight finds its branches.

We can drive the same road for years and miss the small stream quietly flowing beneath the bridge.

Familiarity has a curious way of making beauty invisible.

Not because beauty has disappeared.

Because we have stopped expecting to find it.

Perhaps the same is true of people.

We become accustomed to names...

Faces.

Occupations.

Appearances.

Successes.

Failures.

Soon we begin seeing labels instead of lives.

We no longer meet a person.

We meet our conclusions about them.

I wonder how often this happens with ourselves.

We look into a mirror and see accomplishments...

Regrets.

Aging.

Mistakes.

The opinions of others.

Rarely do we see the quiet dignity that has been there all along.

Perhaps the hardest face to see clearly is our own.

Years ago, I met a woman whose husband was nearing the end of his life.

She apologized because she was crying...

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I should be stronger."

I remember wondering...

Who taught her that tears were weakness?

Who convinced her that love should look composed?

As I watched her hold her husband's hand,

I didn't see weakness,

I saw courage wearing tears.

How different our lives might become if we learned to see beneath appearances.

Anger may be protecting *fear*.

Silence may be carrying *grief*.

Control may be hiding *uncertainty*.

Confidence may be covering *loneliness*.

Kindness may be the fruit of *suffering* no one else ever noticed.

Every person is more than the moment in which we meet them.

The older I become, the more I believe that wisdom begins with refusing to reduce people.

No one is their worst day.

No one is their greatest success.

No one is the label placed upon them.

Every human being is a story still unfolding.

This may explain something that has always fascinated me about Jesus.

He seemed almost incapable of seeing people only as they appeared.

Others saw a tax collector... He saw a future friend.

Others saw a fisherman... He saw someone who would strengthen others.

Others saw a woman surrounded by shame... He saw someone still worthy of dignity.

Again and again, He looked past the obvious without ever ignoring the real.

Love has extraordinary eyesight.

Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote,

"From now on, we regard no one according to the flesh."

No one, *"from a worldly point of view."*

For years I read those words as theology.

Now they feel like an invitation.

An invitation to see beneath fear.

Beneath failure.

Beneath reputation.

To meet people where Love has always known them.

Seeing this way changes more than relationships.

It changes the person who is seeing...

Judgment begins losing its grip.

Curiosity quietly takes its place.

Compassion grows.

Listening deepens.

Patience becomes possible.

Not because people have become easier to love...
Because we have begun seeing them differently.
There is a quiet miracle hidden in every genuine encounter.
For a few moments...
Someone is no longer an interruption.
Or a problem.
Or a stranger.
They become a mystery.
And mysteries are never conquered.
They are received.
Perhaps this is why Presence matters so deeply.
Presence slows us enough to notice.
And noticing is often the first act of love.

Sit With This...

Think of someone you find difficult to understand.
Don't try to solve them.
Simply ask yourself,

What part of their story might I not be seeing?

Sometimes compassion begins, not with an answer...
but with a different way of looking.

Chapter 09 - The Quiet Revolution

Not every revolution begins with noise.

Some begin with a whisper.

A single thought.

A moment of forgiveness.

A decision to remain kind when bitterness would seem easier.

The deepest changes in history often begin where almost no one is looking.

Perhaps the same is true of the human heart.

We tend to imagine transformation as dramatic.

Lightning.

Mountaintops.

Turning points.

Those moments certainly exist.

But most of life is lived somewhere else.

It is lived in ordinary Tuesdays.

At kitchen tables.

In hospital rooms.

On long drives home.

While washing dishes.

While waiting for a phone call.

The soul is usually formed in places history never records.

I have often wondered why Jesus spent so much of His life in ordinary places.

Most of His days were not marked by miracles.

They were marked by meals.

Walks.

Conversations.

Listening.

Children.

Friends.

Interruptions.

If we removed those ordinary moments from the Gospels, very little would remain.

Perhaps that is the miracle.

The Eternal One was never in a hurry to escape the ordinary.

He filled it...

That's Presence.

There is a quiet temptation in every generation.

To believe that significance belongs somewhere else.

In another city.

Another career.

Another season.

Another life.

Yet love has an unusual habit of beginning exactly where our feet are planted.

Not someday... Today.

Not somewhere else... Here.

Hospice has taught me that extraordinary moments rarely announce themselves.

A daughter brushing her mother's hair one last time.

A husband whispering, "Thank you."

A grandson climbing into bed beside his grandfather without saying a word.

No audience.

No applause.

Yet something eternal is happening.

Love is becoming visible.

Perhaps heaven is not only a destination.

Perhaps it is every moment in which love is given room to breathe.

Every act of mercy.

Every unnecessary kindness.

Every forgiveness that interrupts the cycle of pain.

Every quiet "yes" to compassion.

These moments rarely make headlines.

Yet they quietly change the world.

The older I become, the less interested I am in impressive lives.

I find myself drawn instead to faithful ones:

People who show up.

People who listen.

People who remain.

People who make others feel seen.

The world has never had a shortage of remarkable personalities.

It has always needed more faithful presence.

I wonder if this is what Jesus meant when He called His followers light.

Light never argues with darkness... It simply appears.

It doesn't force itself upon a room... It quietly reveals what was hidden.

Perhaps we spend too much energy trying to defeat darkness...

when we were always invited to become light.

The religious leaders saw courage in Peter and John.

I wonder what everyone else saw...

Did children feel safe near them?

Did strangers find hope in their company?

Did grieving people discover they were not alone?

Scripture doesn't answer those questions.

Life does.

Because we have all met people whose lives quietly made us believe that goodness is still possible.

Maybe that is the quiet revolution.

Not changing the whole world in a single moment.

But refusing to let fear determine the atmosphere we leave behind.

Refusing to let resentment become our native language.

Refusing to believe that love is naïve.

Every act of genuine love pushes back the borders of despair.

Not loudly... Faithfully.

The Kingdom, I think, grows this way.

Not like an empire.

Like a garden.

Slowly.

Patiently.

Almost unnoticed.

Until one day, someone pauses... looks around...

and realizes that everything has become greener.

Sit With This...

Who made your world gentler?

Not by changing your circumstances...

but simply by the way they lived.

Now ask yourself one quiet question.

Who might experience that same gift through me today?

Not through something extraordinary.

Simply through my presence.

Chapter 10 - The Face We Almost Missed

There is something mysterious about recognition.

Sometimes we are looking directly at someone... and still fail to see them.

It happens more often than we realize.

We become so accustomed to familiarity that wonder quietly slips away.

The extraordinary stands before us dressed in ordinary clothes.

I have often wondered why so many stories in Scripture involve delayed recognition.

A gardener who is mistaken for someone else.

Travelers walking beside a stranger.

A voice heard before it is recognized.

Eyes opened only after bread is broken.

It seems that Love is rarely hidden by distance.

More often, it is hidden by expectation.

We keep looking for the remarkable... while heaven quietly arrives disguised as the familiar.

Perhaps that is why we overlook so much beauty.

We expect revelation to interrupt life.

Instead... it illuminates it.

The kitchen table becomes an altar.

A shared meal becomes communion.

A hospital room becomes sacred ground.

A quiet conversation becomes holy.

Nothing has changed...

Everything has changed.

The older I become, the more convinced I am that God has never struggled to be present...

It is we who have struggled to notice.

Not because we are inattentive people.

Because life has taught us to hurry.

We rush past the ordinary in search of the spectacular.

Meanwhile... the Eternal patiently waits inside the ordinary.

Hospice has given me countless moments like this.

A daughter gently combing her father's hair.

A husband falling asleep while holding his wife's hand.

A nurse adjusting a blanket with such tenderness that no one else in the room even notices.

Nothing dramatic happens, yet something eternal becomes visible.

Love has taken on flesh again.

Perhaps that is the continuing mystery of the Incarnation.

It did not end in Bethlehem.

Nor at the empty tomb.

The life of Christ continues wherever Love becomes visible...

Where mercy interrupts judgment.

Where forgiveness overcomes resentment.

Where hope quietly refuses to surrender.

The Word continues becoming flesh...

not because humanity replaces Christ...

but because His life is freely shared with those who remain in Him.

This changes the way we see one another.

No longer as interruptions.

No longer as categories.

No longer as enemies.

Every face becomes a *place* where dignity waits to be discovered.

Every *conversation* becomes an opportunity to honor what fear has often hidden.

Every *stranger* becomes someone carrying a story we have not yet been invited to hear.

There was a time when I believed spiritual maturity meant seeing more clearly where people were wrong.

Now I wonder if maturity looks almost the opposite.

Seeing more clearly what Love has never stopped believing about them.

Not denying brokenness.

Not pretending suffering isn't real.

But refusing to let either become the deepest truth about another human being.

Perhaps this is why Jesus looked at people so differently.

He never ignored the wound.

He simply refused to mistake the wound for the person.

He spoke beneath shame.

Beneath fear.

Beneath failure.

He addressed our identity that had never been erased...

Beloved.

Deeply loved.

Deeply valued.

Highly Prized.

I wonder if that is what true vision always does.

Then I remember the words that first began this journey.

"They took note that these men had been with Jesus."

At first, I thought those words were about Peter and John.

Now I think they are about recognition.

The religious leaders recognized a familiar atmosphere.

A familiar way of *seeing*.

A familiar way of *loving*.

A familiar *freedom*.

Not because Peter and John had become copies of Jesus.

Because His life had become visible in theirs.

Perhaps that is the invitation waiting for every one of us.

Not to become someone impressive.

Not to become someone admired.

But to become so quietly at home in Love...

that others begin recognizing its fragrance before they ever hear its name.

Sit With This...

Today... before you try to change anything... simply notice.

Notice the face in front of you.

Notice the kindness that almost went unseen.

Notice the ordinary moment asking for your attention.

Perhaps recognition begins there.

Not by finding God in extraordinary places...

but by discovering that He has never stopped meeting us in ordinary ones.

Chapter 11 - Becoming a Place Where Others Can Rest

There is a quiet kindness in the shade of a tree...

It asks nothing.

It proves nothing.

It simply stands where it has learned to stand, and because of that, weary people find relief.

The tree never announces its generosity.

It simply offers what it has become.

I wonder if human lives can become like that:

Not famous.

Not extraordinary.

Simply restful.

The kind of presence that lowers another person's shoulders.

The kind of conversation that reminds someone they don't have to pretend.

The kind of silence that doesn't feel empty.

The older I become, the less I admire people who have all the answers.

I find myself drawn to those who have become safe.

Safe enough to tell the truth.

Safe enough to admit uncertainty.

Safe enough to listen without needing to rescue.

Safe enough to love without controlling.

Perhaps safety is one of Love's most beautiful languages.

Hospice has been my greatest classroom.

Not because it taught me about dying.

Because it taught me about living.

I have watched people who had every reason to become bitter... choose gratitude.

I have watched families discover forgiveness with only hours remaining.

I have watched tears become prayers without anyone speaking.

And I have learned something I never expected.

Peace is contagious.

So is fear.

So is hope.

We are always giving something away.

That realization has changed the questions I ask myself.

Not... *"Was I persuasive?"*

Not... *"Was I impressive?"*

But... *"Did someone breathe a little easier because I was here?"*

That question has become enough.

When Jesus said, *"Come to Me... and I will give you rest,"*

Perhaps He was doing more than making a promise.

Perhaps He was revealing the atmosphere of God:

Not pressure... Rest.

Not anxiety... Rest.

Not performance... Rest.

Those who remained with Jesus slowly began carrying that same atmosphere.

Perhaps that is why people kept coming back.

Not because every question had been answered.

But because their souls had finally found room to exhale.

There are people whose names history will never remember.

They never stood behind pulpits.

Never wrote books.

Never led movements.

Yet generations have been changed because they quietly became places where love could rest.

A grandmother.

A neighbor.

A teacher.

A nurse.

A friend.

The Kingdom has always grown through people like these.

Perhaps greatness has never been measured by influence.

Perhaps it has always been measured by hospitality.

Not the hospitality of beautiful homes...

The hospitality of beautiful hearts.

The ability to welcome another person without first asking them to become someone else.

This, I think, is the hidden beauty of Acts 4.

The courage of Peter and John was not borrowed confidence.

It was the natural fragrance of lives that had lived near Love.

You can almost imagine people leaving their company thinking,

"I don't know exactly what happened..."

"But I feel less afraid than I did before."

Maybe that is all any of us are really called to become.

Not experts.

Not celebrities.

Not heroes.

Just ordinary people who have learned to carry an extraordinary welcome.

Sit With This...

Think about someone who has always felt like home to you.

What made them that way?

Now don't try to imitate them.

Instead,

...simply ask,

What has Love been patiently growing in me?

Trees do not all give the same shade.

Every life has its own gift.

Perhaps yours has been quietly growing all along.

Chapter 12 - Tell Me Who You Go With...

There are some sentences that stay with us for a lifetime.

Not because they are profound.

Because they are true.

My father used to say, *"Tell me who you go with... and I'll tell you who you are."*

When I was younger, I thought he was talking about influence.

The friends we choose.

The company we keep.

The values we absorb.

He wasn't wrong.

But I now believe he was speaking a deeper truth than either of us understood.

We all become like something.

The question has never been *if*... Only *what*.

Some become shaped by fear.

Others by success or disappointment.

Some spend years becoming their wounds.

Others become their achievements.

Still others become the expectations placed upon them by people who never truly knew them.

Whether we notice it or not... we are always being formed.

When the religious leaders looked at Peter and John, they noticed something unusual.

Not polished arguments.

Not religious credentials.

Not impressive résumés.

They noticed courage.

Then they reached the only conclusion that made sense to them.

"These men have been with Jesus."

I have lived with those words for many years.

The older I become, the more beautiful they become.

Because they suggest that the deepest realities of our lives are visible.

Not perfectly... but unmistakably.

People may forget what we believe.

They may forget what we accomplish.

They may even forget what we say.

But they rarely forget how they felt after being with us.

That is a sobering thought... and a hopeful one.

Throughout this journey, we have spoken about stories.

About atmosphere.

About wells.

About trees.

About gardens.

About remaining.

About re-hydrated hearts.

All of them have been pointing toward one simple discovery.

Life is shared.

We become participants in whatever we continually receive.

Perhaps that is why love cannot be faked...

Kindness borrowed for a moment eventually grows tired.

Patience performed eventually becomes strained.

Peace rehearsed eventually reveals its effort.

Only shared life endures.

Only communion quietly becomes character.

I have spent much of my life walking the hallways of hospitals and homes.

I have stood beside beds where words became unnecessary.

I have watched tears speak more honestly than sermons.

I have seen frightened people become peaceful.

And peaceful people become teachers.

Not because they intended to teach.

Because life had become visible within them.

Some of my greatest instructors never stood behind a pulpit.

They lay in hospital beds.

They whispered gratitude while everything around them suggested despair.

They reminded me that the soul is capable of carrying a light no darkness can extinguish.

Perhaps that is the quiet miracle of the Christian life.

Not that ordinary people become extraordinary.

But that ordinary people become transparent.

Transparent enough that Love can be seen through them.

Transparent enough that mercy becomes believable.

Transparent enough that hope no longer sounds naïve.

Transparent enough that another human being quietly says,

"I don't know why... but I feel more alive."

Maybe that has always been the invitation.

Not to become famous.

Not to become admired.

Not even to become successful.

Simply to become available.

Available to Love.

Available to wonder.

Available to interruption.

Available to compassion.

Available to the quiet work of grace.

If this journey has given you anything, I hope it has not been new ideas.

Ideas eventually fade.

I hope it has given you new eyes.

Eyes that notice what hurry overlooks.

Eyes that recognize dignity before difference.

Eyes that see Christ not only in sacred spaces...

but in kitchens...

gardens...

hospital rooms...

shared meals...

tearful embraces...

and ordinary Tuesdays.

Because that is where I have found Him, The Presence, most often.

One day, perhaps someone will leave your presence unable to remember everything you said.

But they may remember that hope felt possible again.

That fear loosened its grip.

That they laughed more easily.

That silence felt safe.

That tears no longer needed apology.

They may never know why.

Neither may you...

And perhaps that is exactly as it should be.

The Book of Acts never tells us that Peter and John tried to convince people they had been with Jesus.

They didn't need to.

Life spoke first.

It always does.

So now...

allow me to borrow my father's words one final time:

Tell me who you go with... and I'll tell you who you are.

But after this journey...

I think I would gently add one more sentence.

Tell me who leaves your presence with more hope than when they arrived...

...and together we'll discover who has been walking with you.

Sit With This...

As you close this book...

don't ask, *"What should I do now?"*

Instead, ask something quieter. **Who am I becoming?**

Then...

Go sit with someone who is lonely.

Listen before speaking.

Forgive before defending.

Notice before judging.

Wonder before explaining.

Remain before rushing.

Love before everything else.

The rest... will quietly follow.

Epilogue - The Beginning

Every journey reaches a place where maps are no longer helpful.

There comes a moment when the road beneath your feet matters more than the pages behind you.

Perhaps this is that moment.

You will wake tomorrow to the same home.

The same work.

The same relationships.

The same ordinary world.

And yet... perhaps nothing is the same.

Because once the heart has learned to notice, it cannot return to living unnoticed.

Once Love has re-hydrated the soul, even deserts begin to whisper of hidden springs.

Once you have recognized the quiet companionship of Christ, you begin discovering Him everywhere.

Not because He suddenly arrived.

Because your eyes have slowly learned to see.

So don't try to remember every chapter.

Remember to notice.

Notice the person no one else sees.

Notice the beauty that asks for nothing.

Notice the interruption that may be an invitation.

Notice the ordinary places where heaven refuses to stop appearing.

The journey was never meant to end with this book.

It was always meant to continue through your life.

Walk slowly.

Love generously.

Remain deeply.

And should someone, years from now, quietly say of you,

"There was something different about them..."

May it never be because you tried to appear remarkable.

May it simply be because... **you had been with Jesus.**

There comes a moment when every journey quietly asks to become a life.

Books are like that.

We close the cover.

We place them back on a shelf.

The words remain behind.

Or so it seems.

The best books refuse to stay on the page.

They become the way we notice a sunrise.

The way we listen to a friend.

The way we sit beside someone who is grieving.

The way we answer an unexpected question.

Eventually, we realize we are no longer remembering the book.

The book has begun remembering us.

Perhaps this journey has never really been about Peter and John.

Nor has it been primarily about courage.

Or atmosphere.

Or even Presence.

Perhaps it has always been about Love finding a home within ordinary people.

Not extraordinary people... Ordinary ones:

People who become a little slower to judge.

...A little quicker to forgive.

...A little more willing to remain.

...A little less afraid of silence.

...A little more attentive to beauty.

These are not small things.

They are how the Kingdom quietly enters the world.

If someone were to ask me today, *"What does it mean to be with Jesus?"*

I'm not sure I would begin with doctrine.

I think I would tell them about Nurse Angie who straightened a blanket as though she were dressing a king.

I'd tell them about the husband who refused to let go of his wife's hand.

I'd tell them about the child who climbed into a grandfather's bed without speaking.

I'd tell them about the hospice room where tears became holy because no one tried to stop them.

I'd tell them about my father, who used to say,

"Tell me who you go with, and I'll tell you who you are."

Because I think he understood something long before I did.

We become the company we keep.

Perhaps that is why this journey began with a question and now ends with another.

Who have you become while walking through these pages?

Not what have you learned; Not what have you decided.

Instead,

Who have you become?

Are you noticing more?

Listening more deeply?

Holding people more gently?

Has wonder returned?

Have your eyes become softer?

Has your heart become less hurried?

If so... then perhaps these pages have already fulfilled their purpose.

There is one final thought I would leave with you.

Do not try to carry this book into the world.

Carry the Presence that gave birth to it.

Books eventually become worn.

Ideas evolve.

Language changes.

Love does not.

Love remains.

And wherever Love remains... Christ, The Presence is never far away.

One day, perhaps years from now, someone may leave a conversation with you and never remember exactly what was said.

They may forget the stories.

The quotations.

Even the Scriptures.

But they may remember that, somehow... they breathed a little easier.

They felt less alone.

More fully seen.

More fully alive.

If that happens... the journey continues.

*Because in the end...
the greatest evidence that we have been with Jesus
may not be found in the words we leave behind.
It may be found in the lives that quietly
begin to bloom
after we have gone.*

A Blessing for the Journey

May your eyes never lose their wonder.

May your heart remain soft enough to be interrupted by love.
May you never become so certain that you stop listening...
...or so hurried that you stop noticing.
May every table become a place of communion.
May every stranger remind you that no life is ordinary.
May every season—even those marked by grief—
...teach you that roots often grow deepest where no one can see.
May you become the kind of person whose presence feels like shade on a hot
afternoon,
...like rain on thirsty ground...
...like a lamp quietly left burning in the window for someone trying to find their
way home.
And when people leave your company, may they not be impressed by you.
May they simply discover, perhaps without even knowing why...
that hope seems a little more believable...
that love feels a little closer...
that life seems a little more alive.
And perhaps, somewhere in the quiet of their own heart...
they will remember the words that began this journey.
"Tell me who you go with... and I'll tell you who you are."

**...And perhaps Heaven will whisper, "Tell Me who you have become... and
I'll tell you who has been walking with you."**