



**LOSING YOUR**

**FAITH,**

**FINDING YOUR**

**SOUL**

The passage to new life when old beliefs die

**David Robert Anderson**

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**A Guide to Rebirth When Old Beliefs Die**

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**CONVERGENT**

Excerpted from *Finding Your Soul, Losing Your Faith* by David Anderson  
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LOSING YOUR FAITH, FINDING YOUR SOUL  
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*For Pam*



O lady, you in whom my hope gains strength. . . , in all the things that I have seen, I recognize the grace and benefit that I, depending upon your power and goodness, have received.

—Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*,  
Canto XXXI

I often want to say to people, “You have neat, tight expectations of what life ought to give you, but you won’t get it. That isn’t what life does. Life does not accommodate you, it shatters you. It is meant to, and it couldn’t do it better. Every seed destroys its container or else there would be no fruition.”

—Florida Scott-Maxwell, *The Measure of My Days*

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## Soul Honey

Last night, as I was sleeping,  
I dreamt—marvelous error!—  
that I had a beehive  
here inside my heart.  
And that the golden bees  
were making white combs  
and sweet honey  
from my old failures.

—Antonio Machado, translated by Robert Bly

Let me tell you a secret. There is a beehive there in your heart, and the golden bees are dying to make white combs and the sweet honey of ecstasy and fulfillment for you. But those bees need nectar to make their soul honey. They need your old failures, something to work with. They need tears and regret, grief and bitter loss. Anger is great for this honey. So is the special shame and humiliation that comes when our failures go public. Depression, for these golden bees, is the finest nectar.

You don't have to do anything exactly for these white combs to form in your heart. You just have to leave it alone. Remember watching chicks hatch? The teacher had to practically tie your hands behind your back. You wanted to "help" each chick break the shell and emerge into life.

It takes wisdom to understand this paradox: you must be present to your own rebirth and consent to its happening in every moment, but the work of the soul is to stand down in the presence of God, to trust what is happening even though you are worried about the outcome and want nothing more than to jump in and control everything. Just so, the redeeming bees will do their slow and quiet work with your old failures, making in the darkness of their bodies your own sweet salvation. As long as you can leave them alone, trust them, let it happen.

But that is nearly impossible, especially in the early stages of life. Then, unless we have experienced some early loss—an accident that alters our lives, a sickness that robs us of the assumed immortality of youth, or some mistake with awful consequences—we cannot admit to any failures. Frightening emotions like anger and resentment are quickly stuffed in the dark caves tunneling off from the heart. Failures are merely the things we have not yet fixed (and we *will* fix them all). Tears are only for the drying. In our early years it can hardly be otherwise. We are consumed with creating a self, an identity, finding that one magic person, chasing security and success, mastering the world. None of that comes to pass if you just “let it happen.” By God, you *make* it happen, and failure is not an option.

For most of us, this is where our early “faith” rests: in the whole system of reward and punishment that promises happiness and blessing to those who work hard, believe the right things, play by the rules, and help others in need. “God” is the one who superintends the whole system and guarantees its just deserts both here and hereafter. Even people who aren’t religious buy into this system. Whether they call it fate, karma, kismet, or the laws of the universe, it’s the same idea. We spend our early years believing in the system until it fails us, usually somewhere about midlife.

It happens to everyone, though its full realization may not dawn for years. “God” was supposed to remember the sacrifices you made.

He was supposed to save your marriage, protect your job, heal your son. Faced with such disappointment, many retreat into denial because it is too frightening to renegotiate “God.” They revise a few key beliefs or assumptions, just enough to keep the old thing going, avoid acknowledging a total loss.

The irony is, those breakdowns and failures are God’s repeated attempts to offer us grace and mercy, a new way of being. Mostly, though, we are grace-resistant, too good for mercy. We double down on that old muscular faith and stand our ground.

Yet God is relentless, infiltrating our lives through the very cracks and gashes we are frantic to repair, to plaster over. “The world breaks everyone,” Hemingway could see, “and afterwards many are strong at the broken places.”<sup>1</sup>

All it takes is one inkling of the divine paradox, that we are saved by our losses, and the whole field reverses. Some strange mystery is at work here, a power you did not invoke and cannot comprehend. Your only job, the most difficult you have ever attempted, is to keep saying yes. The bees of heaven are circling. Let them come.

A black and white photograph of crumpled paper. A dark, thick line is drawn across the paper, forming a large, irregular loop that starts at the top left, goes right, then down, then left, and then up, ending at the bottom right. The text is centered on the paper.

PART 1

**THE GOOD-BYE GATE**

# Ariadne's Thread

After a time, Christian reached the Wicket Gate, and over it was written, "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

—John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

In the winter of my fortieth year I was sitting in a doctor's office, squirming to get back to work. I was a very busy pastor, only there to get some meds for my strep throat and get back in the game.

A wise, old nurse popped a thermometer in my mouth. "Let me get your blood pressure," she muttered. I took off my coat and rolled up my left sleeve. The cuff wheezed and crimped my bicep as I stared at the white wall. "What's your usual blood pressure?" the nurse asked me. I didn't know. I'd had my blood pressure taken for years; no one had ever given me a reading. "Well, it's high," she said. "150 over 102." The numbers might as well have been a blowout NBA game. They meant nothing to me, but I could tell immediately that something was wrong.

"I want you to see the doctor, Reverend."

My doctor was kind and upbeat, but after taking my pressure for himself, he had to deliver the news. This was nothing to flirt with. Hypertension was like plugging a 110-watt body into a 220 socket. "Leading cause of stroke." He used words like "heart failure," "aneurysm," and "renal failure." And my numbers were way over the top.

I went home with a prescription for Prinivil. The little blue pill brought my blood pressure down from the danger zone, but it was not the medicine for what really ailed me. What I most needed was to relax, stop working sixteen-hour days, pull back a bit on the throttle. But no doctor could script that, only I could. And I was not ready. Things were going too well. The small church I had begun to lead four years before was now a rapidly growing congregation. Attendance was up. Giving was up. It was growing faster than I could manage, and we had called the first assistant clergy in the church's 120-year history.

Every Sunday the ushers were setting up folding chairs in the aisles, and we knew we had to do something. We were planning a capital campaign to build a new church more than double the size, enlarge the parish hall, add Sunday school classrooms, and build a parking lot. A minister's dreams are made of this stuff. I was a "success." Over the next two years we completed the building plans and raised close to two million dollars. That spring we were lining up building permits and preparing to break ground in the fall. But it all went up in smoke.

At 10:00 p.m. on a Mother's Day night the phone beside my bed rang. There was a fire at the church. I jumped into my jeans and then into the car. When I crested the hill on Route 263, still a mile from the church, the sky was all orange. I groaned as if someone had punched me in the belly.

That night, along with scores of parishioners who had heard the news, I stood on the porch of the house next door and watched it all burn down. The school, the parish hall with its leaded windows and wood-beamed ceilings, and finally the church, built of Pennsylvania fieldstone in 1876. It was all gone now—my life's work. But it got worse. Two days later, federal ATF officials informed me that the fire had been deliberately set. This wasn't just a terrible tragedy; it was a horrible, senseless crime. I fancied myself the victor, but I did not

know how to be the victim. I was forty-two years old, approaching the pinnacle of my career, and someone with a gas can and a match had destroyed everything.

This was not what I deserved, not what I was promised. I was emotionally exhausted and spiritually pissed. In public of course I was strong and dependable. I preached about forgiving the arsonist. I told people God would only use this to make us better, stronger, more compassionate. But in my lonely moments I was foul, angry. The whole thing was a stupid outrage. A few months later my mother died, and at that point I slid into depression.

The fire that night had been more than a church fire—it was a funeral pyre. What had gone up in tall columns of smoke were my sense of who I was, the sure promise of life, my reliable faith, my comforting hope—all of it gone. Well, most of it. At the peak of my life, when I expected to be strongest in faith, I was weakest. I was losing it. I thought I was finished.

I didn't know it then, but what I thought was an end was in fact a beginning, and a promising one. Gradually, I realized that what was happening to me was universal. One way or another everyone comes to this pyre, loses the familiar old, and gropes for a way forward. That strange and remarkable passage is what I want to share in the pages ahead.



This is a book for people whose faith has failed them. It's for people who used to believe. People who still pretend to believe, who are still teaching their kids to believe, still going to church. Or not. It is for people who have felt spiritually numb for years, their faith snuffed out right along with the candle of innocence.

This is a book for people who've walked to the front of a church to surrender their lives to God, maybe more than once. People whose

prayers used to be answered (at least most of the time). People who have known Jesus in their hearts for years but wonder now whether he was only a figment of their childhood imagination. Their fixed theological views don't seem so fixed anymore.

I write this for men and women who've lived long enough to hit a few brick walls. For some, I've discovered, that collision comes early. Maybe for you it was at university, or the early years of building a career or raising a family. Maybe a person or an event outside your control tipped you into the suffering years too soon—stole away your comfortable certitudes and left you to contemplate cold, hard reality long before your peers.

Or maybe this is you: You've got a job but haven't made it to the top yet, and it's pretty clear you're never going to. You have a house; it used to be your "dream house," but now the dream looks scuffed and slightly dated. You have a husband or a wife and children, but they all pretty much go their separate ways in the morning. Everyone's stressed. Your marriage is on autopilot, and you're too tired to have sex. You've worked hard, been responsible, saved for college. You took the kids to church until they started playing hockey and soccer on Sunday mornings. You believe in something eternal, but it seems a million miles from where you live. Any faith you had seems powerless before the problems you face and the questions that haunt you in the night. You've hit some crisis that calls into question the whole way you've been living your life. You need to slay a big dragon, and you know you're going to need something more than your old go-to faith.

The paradox that crisscrosses adult faith is that all the liabilities of aging now become your chief assets. Only people who have faltered, lost a step, suffered and died a little are ready for the divine life that cannot be earned or grasped but can only be received as a gift. Right now, all you need to be in line for that gift is a willingness, like Noah, to sail away from the old world—recognize you can't hold on to what's passing away—and trust that God is leading you to a place



you cannot yet envision. That's why this first passage is the Good-Bye Gate.

But this is not a book to take away your faith. It is a tract that meets you down at the soul's Lost Luggage counter, to show you how a renewed and deeper faith grows precisely through loss and disillusionment.

For twenty years as a pastor I've had a privileged role as a spiritual guide for men and women trying their best to live lives of faith, lives of depth and meaning. I've been there from birth to death and everything in between. There are always seasons of joy and triumph—I love those times of course, but it's no secret that these are not the spiritual hot spots. I've learned the hard way that moments of confusion and grief are.

When people are slogging through the Slough of Despond or enduring the Dark Night of the Soul, I've been invited to sit with them, listen, offer advice and support. Maybe they sought me out because they sensed that my being a pastor had not shielded me from the changes and chances of life.

So I've found myself sitting with women who wanted another baby because they felt their lives had no purpose once their kids were all in school. With men at the peak of their powers who had been cashiered at work, who bounced like a pinball between rage, indignation, and depression. With couples facing a child's autism or a teenager's drug charges.

Their words echoed my own: "This is not what I expected." "This isn't right." "How could this happen to me?"

Like most pastors or therapists, I look back now and wonder what I could possibly have said to these poor people when I was lost in the same maze with no idea, really, how to find the way home.

It's been a few years. I'm in my midfifties now, and while I don't claim to have arrived, I have learned a few things about this trek. Because I now speak and write about faith lost and found, more people

ask me for guidance when they feel lost. If there's even a little receptivity, I invite people to lean into the pain. What are the *spiritual* dimensions of this crisis? When you're done fidgeting with the levers of the time machine and it's clear there's no going back, what are you going to do? What if failure, disruption, and endless changes are part of the divine plan? What if the life you're trying desperately to turn around is in fact dragging you assward through the knothole of glory? What if the mess you're trying to clean up is actually God's masterpiece of nonrepresentational art, bricolaged from all the adventures and ordeals of your life? (And yes, that red is blood.)

Over the years I've worked with many people who have lost their old faith—sometimes in heartbreaking ways—and finally found their souls. Almost all of them got pushed into this backhanded blessing. They didn't get there by being especially good or virtuous. They fell. They got fired. They got sick, or someone they love got sick. They drank themselves into some abyss. They lost a lot of money. The sheriff served them with papers.

For others the fall is more like a long slide. The career plateaus, the children fail to turn out well, collagen dissolves, a herniated disk cripples the signature golf swing. The golden boy fades to brass, and the prom queen falls from grace. It's a gradual descent, but the effect is the same. They're lost. Everything they believed in, the landmarks they steered by, are gone. After that they have to find a new way to live, but how do they do that? Nearly everyone is clueless. Actually, it's worse than that.

Let me explain.

For most people, the eclipse of an old life presents only one challenge: how to get it back. If you come to me or to a therapist, you're looking for help in fixing what's broken, solving the problem, and getting life back to normal. That's a legitimate response in our youth. But those of us who've passed the meridian of life need a push. Can you locate your soul at the bottom of this morass? If the old version of

you doesn't work anymore, who are you really? If success has failed you, what actually brings happiness and fulfillment? If what you thought was ultimate turns out to be transient, what's truly eternal? If the poles of your world have been reversed, and the way up is the way down, where do you even start?

Instinctively, many people turn to their faith. And what they dredge up is a huge disappointment. It's usually some relic of adolescence or the ascendant years of early adulthood. Some people gave up on religion and faith soon after those early years. Others have been more or less faithful and still end up completely bollixed.

Early-stage faith is always about polishing the apple for God's desk. It's all about achievement—religious or spiritual performance (being good, helping others, qualifying for heaven), but achievement all the same—which is why it fits perfectly with the first half of life but becomes a serious liability in the second. When you need something to access the realm of mystery and inner power, you reach for your faith and come up with a memory box filled with old beliefs, bromides, rules, and rituals. There's nothing exactly wrong with any of it, except that now it seems antique, sentimental, useless.

Plenty of people have sat in my office, or in the coffee shop where I meet most seekers, and opened that old box. Some feel helpless, others embarrassed. This is when I have to deliver the news: as painful as it is to file for spiritual bankruptcy, it's just the ticket. Adult faith begins with a great big ugly death. You move through this first passage, the Good-Bye Gate. Have a good cry and let's move on.

"Wait just a blessed minute!" comes the retort. "Where do I go from here? *How* do I go from here? If spirituality isn't about being good or doing the right things, if it can't protect me from pain and loss, improve my life, and help me solve my problems, what's the point?"

A suspicious look often follows. "Since I was a kid, people like you—pastors, priests, people in collars and robes—have been telling me that religion is all about being a better person, accepting Jesus,

believing the Bible. If I believed in God and tried to be the sort of person God wanted me to be, I'd be happy in this life and find heaven in the next." They don't usually finish the thought, but the look says: "So where do you come off telling me it's all bunkum?"

How do you tell people that everything they've ever believed is important, necessary and—now—behind them? I have often wished I could reach for a guidebook, a map of the soul, to give to people sitting there so lost.



Two summers ago my wife, Pam, and I went hiking in Vermont. We bought a book that detailed scores of beautiful trails in the area and then laced up our boots. We started with the easiest path, but after the first week we were physically ready for steeper, more rugged climbs. What was not quite so ready was our sense of orientation. The more challenging trails were hardly worn, far less traveled, often obscured by undergrowth. Unlike on the comfy paths, we found no friendly printed signs with arrows. All we had were the trail map and infrequent blazes. Many blazes were weathered and disappeared into the mottle of tree bark. You could get lost, and we did.

Once we wandered so far off the trail that we ended up in the backyard of a small cottage on the edge of the woods. A helpful woman showed us how to get back to the trail. We learned on those advanced hikes how to internalize the directions and landmarks from the trail map. We developed an eye for blazes and a sense of the intervals between them—when to expect the next one.

That's what I want to give people who are lost midfaith—a simple map with directions for exactly *this* section of the trail, detailing major landmarks and tricky turns you're certain to miss without help. No one gave me that map. I was a minister, and yet I wasn't prepared when my steadfast faith buckled beneath me. Half the stuff I had

been peddling from the pulpit was true in theory, but I didn't really know what it meant.

When Jesus said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it,"<sup>1</sup> I pretended to get it, but I didn't—not really. Other, less circumspect people lost things, not me. Especially not my life. But after the turbulent years of my early forties, I sensed that my life had somehow gone lost (even if I hadn't set out to lose it), and I had to know the secret of those cryptic words.

I picked up a few books on the stages of faith development and was heartened to discover that my predicament was universal. As psychologist James Hillman says, "A symptom suffers most when it doesn't know where it belongs."<sup>2</sup> I wasn't alone. What was happening to me was part of a predictable pattern of human development. Knowing that universal pattern is like having a map of your life—with an *X* that says, "You are here."

Of all the books I read on the topic, the one that changed my outlook was James Fowler's classic *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. I was fascinated by the progression of every stage, from infancy to childhood, from adolescence to the many incarnations of adulthood. But what "spoke to my condition," as the Quakers say, was the midlife breakdown that happened like clockwork. In the lifelong progression of faith, this was the big megillah—and I was in it. What I was experiencing was a systemic collapse. If what I was reading was true, however, it wasn't my fault. In good time, it happens to everybody.

Every human being is equipped from birth with an operating system. It's the basic system that tells you who you are, how to behave, what is good and true and beautiful, how to be a success, how to be happy. No one ever says, "Pardon me while I transfer a few files into your operating system." You're not even aware the system exists. It runs in the background and makes everything else possible, but no

one mentions it, just as no one says, “Now I am breathing,” or “Now my cerebral cortex is engaging.” This operating system serves most of us very well in our early, formative years.

The problem is, this software has a fatal virus. It is programmed to guide us to our peak powers and then to crash. At some point in our lives, what has always worked doesn’t anymore. It is as if a curtain is pulled back, and what was always just whirring quietly in the background is now revealed. It *is* a system. And it’s broken. We call it *Convention*. The beautiful irony is, it cannot be named or even seen until it crashes.

That’s where I was at forty. Maybe that’s where you are now at twenty-eight or forty or sixty-two. Improbably, this turns out to be the golden moment.



According to Fowler and the many other prophets of human development, recognizing the pervasive power of that conventional system is key to spiritual growth.<sup>3</sup> We have to recognize it, escape it, transcend it. That is the task of maturity. There are stages before and stages after, but this is the big one.

In earlier years, the transitions flow almost naturally. But getting beyond *Convention* is like escaping the hideous tractor beam in *Star Trek*. For that we need help.

As I came to understand this, whenever I looked at the adults in my congregation—not to mention my friends, my colleagues, the characters in nearly every book and movie—I found myself concluding, “They’re all stuck in *Convention*.” I saw a lot of pain and confusion, a lot of resentment and bitterness. Some tried to keep up religious appearances with a disciplined program of denial; others went cool and cynical. Some were still clinging to the beautiful memories of past faith, which can sometimes be relived but with weaker and weaker

claims to reality. If I could help people recognize what was happening—translate the psychological and theological into the terms of everyday life—I might be able to help people escape the conventional trap and find the path to redemption and happiness.

Here I offer six passages that lead the way out of the old, dying form of your faith and into what is new, mysterious, and alive. Beginning with the Good-Bye Gate—the moment when conventional faith breaks down—these passages are designed to lead you through what is often a confusing labyrinth.

This ancient myth may help to illumine the path.

When Theseus volunteers to kill the Minotaur, and so spare the poor Athenian children who will otherwise be fed to this awful beast, he has two problems: killing the half-bull half-man (no small task), and finding his way back. The Minotaur crouches at the center of a vast maze on the isle of Crete. Even if Theseus can find his way to the center of the maze and manage to slay the beast, he will not be able to find his way out. It is Ariadne who comes to Theseus's aid. She gives him a ball of thread, which he ties to the entrance door and unwinds as he twists his way to the center. After dispatching the Minotaur, he follows the thread and winds his way out of the labyrinth.

That is what I have set out to do here. The six passages of this book require something like Ariadne's thread. These are the natural pathways of the soul, six passages every man and woman must make on the way to a mature, adult soul. Yet they lead through confusing and difficult terrain, where the road home is counterintuitive: the right way is often the one that appears wrong. You need a lead to follow.

Like the Cretan labyrinth, these six passages are not a linear progression. Different people will make these moves in different orders; nevertheless, each passage is threaded to another. Finding your way through one opening gives you the wisdom to choose well at the next intersection. What you learn in one passage will help you take other important steps along the way.

Negotiating each passage requires a level of honesty, courage, and trust available only to those who have come to the end of themselves—and then found a small opening, a light, and a way forward. That is why this whole endeavor is cloaked in paradox: our losses turn out to be necessary—and as such, gifts. It's not easy to acknowledge defeat, the end of our best-laid plans, but we are never given a new life until we have released the old one. That pattern of losing-to-find, emptying-to-be-filled, dying-to-be-reborn is the promise that sings through every passage, along every mile of this pilgrimage.

I hope you'll think of me as your Ariadne, offering you a skein of thread, a slender guiding strand, a filament of hope that enables you to turn a corner and keep going when everything in your head is crying, "Go back!"

This ball I hold is woven of many strands. Years of my own experience and that of the men and women I've counseled, together with threads of Merton and Jung, Oliver and Eliot and Dillard. Stories of faith, hope, and love that others have told me along the way, tales of losses that became precious, endings that birthed beginnings. I've collected them like bits of string, woven them together and wound them one by one over the years. They are what inspire and delight me, the only things that keep me going.

Here, take this thread. You'll need it for the passage that awaits.