

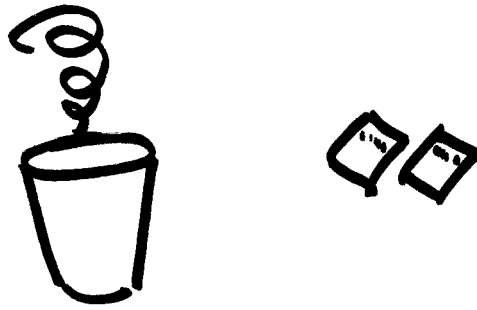
*Now—here is my secret:*

*I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.*

Douglas Coupland, *Life After God*

*When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables...”*

Mark 4: 10-11



Everyone seems to have some kind of opinion about Jesus.

I once told a secretary in the Office of Athletics at Yale University that I was a “follower of Jesus.”

“That is beautiful,” she said. “That’s really so beautiful!” Her name was Betty and she glowed at me like I was a living saint. And then she went back to work. It was my first week of a part-time job, and for a moment I didn’t know if I was off to a good or bad start.

The next morning she brought me three gifts: a lottery ticket and my horoscope clipped out of the paper and a cup of thick sweet coffee. “These are lucky numbers,” she whispered. “They came to me last night in a dream.”

When I asked her to explain the connection to Jesus she giggled, “Oh, I believe all that stuff—you know, horoscopes, Bhudda, Tarot cards, interpreting dreams, Jesus—I just believe it all. I’m a believer.” After that we took our coffee breaks together and often talked about Jesus. And every so often, for the semester I worked there she showed up with two lottery tickets with those lucky numbers on them—one for each of us. Sadly enough we never won.

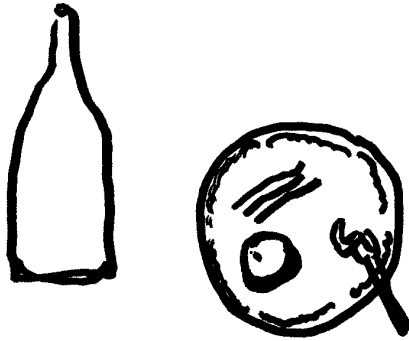


In the dorms, few people seemed quite so open-minded about Jesus. Once in while my friends and I talked about him over dinner in Saybrook dining hall. A guy who lived across the hall from me said he was more interested in finding “a way of life” than a religion. And Jesus was out of the question because he was Jewish. One of my roommates said he was on a “spiritual search” but wasn’t really expecting or even hoping to find “truth” or “the truth”. He described his journey as an adventure of exploring a mysterious path in a dark forest—and any more light would take away from the experience. One of my friends held Jesus responsible for 20 centuries of sexism and homophobia.

Not long after she said that, two ‘evangelists’ set up in front of the library and put on a show, yelling and wagging bony fingers, calling people “sex-fiends” and “masturbating fornicators.” I tried to laugh with everybody else, but really, I almost threw up.

I’m a Christian, but believe me, sometimes the whole thing seems just too bizarre. I used to watch a TV preacher on cable, late at night. He smoked cigars, had a wispy, straggly beard, freckles, and spoke in non-sequiturs. Occasionally the program would cut to scenes of horses frolicking around a corral while he asked listeners to send donations.

He, at least, was amusing compared to the robots that hand out tracts on street corners. Or the nuns that slap children’s fingers with rulers. The whole subculture borders on ludicrous. Parents who coax religion down their children’s’ throats like canned spinach. Depressed, miserable pastors who still insist on telling other people how to live their lives. It doesn’t surprise me that a lot of people are permanently soured on any kind of organized religion. I once sat next to a businessman on a plane who seemed to think that Jesus had invented the Republican party.



Occasionally someone is fascinated. I recently attended a lavish, formal dinner honoring my brother and several other graduates from a surgical residency program. Since he was expected to hobnob around for most of the evening I sat next to his date who interrogated me with questions about what I do.

“I’m working for a group called InterVarsity,” I told her.

“So what does that involve?”

“It’s... well, it’s like being a missionary to college students.”

“Really!” She paused just long enough for me to swallow my shrimp and skewer a couple green beans on my fork. “So how in the world do you do that?”

“Well...” Somewhere in our conversation I mentioned how much I liked Jesus’ stories.

“You’re talking about the parables, right?” Obviously, she knew more about Jesus than she had let on.

“Uh...yes.” I said, waving for some more rolls.

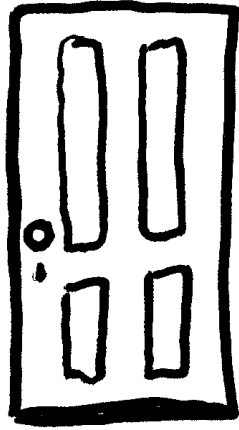
“So what do you like about them?” she demanded.

At that point I abandoned my filet mignon and started talking.

I do love Jesus’ stories. They fascinate me. Most are simple and disarmingly short—not like any sermon I’ve ever heard in church. His characters are enormously entertaining. There’s usually some outrageous twist. And a few are basically twisted—not at all what you’d expect a religious teacher to be talking about. Every time I reflect on one of them, something new jumps out at me. Occasionally, I try to imagine being Jesus putting one of them together—practicing the dialogue, playing with the plot; lying awake in bed at night trying out a new ending. He couldn’t have written them without a smile on his face. They were at least compelling enough to make him the most sought after dinner guest in 1st century Palestine. I was just getting going when she interrupted.

“Well, let me ask you this: If Jesus wanted people to understand what he was teaching, then why was he so secretive? Why hide his meaning in a parable. If what he had to say could really make such a big a difference in people’s lives, why make people work so hard to figure it out. Isn’t that kind of cruel? ”

I had no chance to answer. The host was at the podium and everybody started clapping. The lights dimmed and witty introductions made. Eventually plaques were awarded and pictures taken. Each chief resident made a speech. We emptied our wine bottle and the waiters filled our coffee cups. An enormous blueberry, macadamia-nut tart dripping with whipped cream almost miraculously appeared in front of me. I wasn’t quite finished when the last speech ended and my brother led us in a bolt for the door. I’m still thinking about an answer to her question.



Near the beginning of Jesus three years of the public life, a tremendous crowd came together at the edge of a lake. They pushed, shoved, clawed—desperate to get close to this person who had a reputation for healing the sick. The crowd was so huge that Jesus climbed into a little fishing boat and rowed out a little ways. Instead of making a getaway he sat down and started to teach. It was a smart idea—sound carries well over water, so he the entire crowd could hear him. And he told them a story about a farmer planting crops.

As far as Jesus’ stories go, it’s not exactly a heart-thumper. He tells about a farmer who flings seeds out into his field. The seeds land in various locations with various results. Those that land on the hard path become birdseed. The ones that land in the rocks or thorns make a fine start, but eventually die. Those that land in the good soil eventually produce a harvest. The story can be read out loud in less than a minute. It sounds like good material for a children’s encyclopedia.

The crowd is obviously underwhelmed. This is not the sermon they expected to hear from a miracle worker. The pushing and shoving stopped. Farmers trudged back to their fields to get back to work. People suddenly remembered some crucial thing they needed to do. Mark, who narrates the account, goes on to describe Jesus as “alone.” The word attempts to capture either the crowd’s reaction or how Jesus felt, because it’s not literally true. He makes it clear that a few friends and stragglers stuck around.

“Could you explain your story to us?” they ask him.

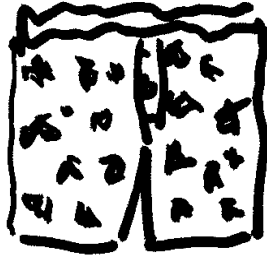
And this, I believe, is the twist in the story. Jesus’ reaction seems even more puzzling than his choice of sermon. When I imagine the scene, I wonder if he whispered mysteriously or exploded with enthusiasm: “You’ve got it!—YES! YES! You have the secret to the kingdom.”

*What secret? What kingdom?* They simply poked their nose into his privacy and Jesus reacts as though the ground has opened up and they’ve landed in a spiritual goldmine. The scene strikes me as funny. He acts like they’ve won the lottery, when they don’t remember buying a ticket.

What sets these people apart from the dispersed crowd? What do they have that is different? They heard exactly the same story. The “secret” can’t be the interpretation of the story because Jesus hasn’t explained it yet. It can’t be what most religious people seem to think is all important—having all the answers—because the people Jesus congratulates are the only ones confused enough to ask a question. Jesus seems to think that a cosmically important event takes place when someone opens their mouth and asks a question. So perhaps the way to get the secret is to be confused enough to ask questions.

And what is the secret? Clearly, Jesus wants something more than simply having people understand the meaning of his stories. Making the correct interpretation would not be enough—it could even be misleading. His stories are not puzzles to figure out or maps to be read. They are more like a door that leads from the outside to the inside.

The only other thing the questioners have that the crowd doesn’t (besides confusion) is Jesus himself. They are standing face to face with him. And he’s thrilled about it.



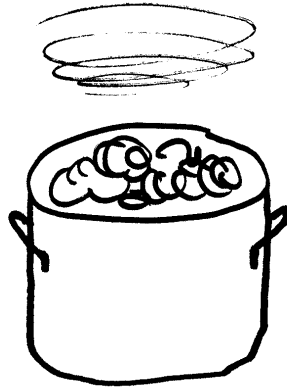
One night near the end of my first semester at Yale, the undergraduate social committee booked U2 to play on campus at Woolesy auditorium. Bono worked the crowd into a wild, thrashing frenzy, eventually leaping off the stage into the audience. I couldn't tell you about it first-hand because I spent the evening in the library despairing over a calculus problem. My friend Toby, who's brother was in a punk band in London, had urged me to go with him. He kept saying "these guys are going to be big"—but I hadn't heard of them and was stressed about passing a test.

I think perhaps my initial stupidity helped fuel a devotion to that band for years afterwards. But missing that concert at Woolesy was not my biggest regret that semester—it was sleeping past noon the next day. My friend Toby somehow managed to hook up with Bono and the Edge. They didn't want to do laundry so he took them to buy underwear. Toby took them to Co-op to buy boxer shorts, while I lay in bed until noon, miserably attempting to deny the impending doom of my calculus final.

By some miracle, I got a B- in that calculus course. But if I had the chance to live my life over again, I would happily flunk that class just to be part of that underwear shopping expedition.

Bono and Jesus certainly have some things in common. And both of them said things that are quite perplexing. But I would doubt Bono likes it very much when strangers barge into his private life to question him about the subtleties of his lyrics (As far as I know, Toby didn't even try.) But I think Jesus would have loved it. I don't believe he cruelly hid the truth about God behind confusing stories. The story about the seeds and the secret tells me that he made them confusing for a good reason. The spiritual confusion he creates in his stories has a specific purpose—it's an invitation into intimacy, into a relationship with him. He wants people to get to know him—to talk to him, to stick around after the meeting and be with him.

To put it another way, you might say that without intimacy there is no such thing as truth. Confusion then, is an invitation to intimacy.

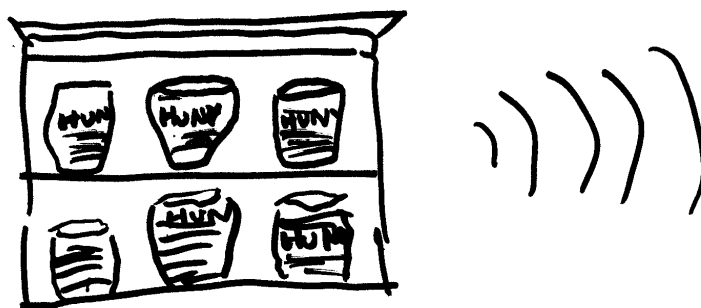


The greatest source of confusion in my life has not been the weirdness of other Christians. (Actually I'm not sure they're—I guess I should say "we're"—any weirder than other people, but their particular brand of religious weirdness certainly makes them stand out.) My real confusion comes from the inside out. Usually it's hidden, but there are moments when it foams up, out of the depths of my longings, like froth on a pot of boiling spaghetti. Longings that are hard to put in words and are often contradictory. Longings to connect with people. Longings to be free from pain. Longings to make my life count for something. Longings to fill up the emptiness. My heart, I'm discovering, has the gravitational force of a black hole: a loneliness that seems alive, with a life of its own, willing—like a giant vacuum cleaner—to suck inward anything or anybody that might dull the raw edge of it for a while. My heart sometimes calls this "love." And yet, even as the inward suck takes control, I hear the whispering truth: that this new thing I "love" will never satisfy. Worse yet, should I manage to engulf it, it will be destroyed and only serve to enlarge the emptiness inside.

I have desires to have my most hidden thoughts known, and sheer terror at the thought of such exposure. I long to experience a God who says he loves me.

Growing up in a Baptist church, my inner thoughts about myself and God were disturbing. To make matters worse, my Sunday School teachers usually dished out answers in black and white. Answers usually boiled down to "read the Bible and pray." I felt like I should have everything figured out and spent a lot of effort trying to cover up my confusion. There was hardly any place for that kind of desperation in the church. I never imagined that there was anything good about it.

College and campus life simply offered a hundred new reasons to be confused about God and thousand new ways to find temporary satisfaction. Looking back on it, I think I spent much of my time in college waging war against the confusion by keeping busy, and stressing about how much I had to do.



One of my favorite childhood stories tells how Winnie the Pooh finds his way home by allowing his honey pots to call to his hungry, rumbling stomach. Could it be true that our deepest longings—the rumblings of our stomach—are the rumblings of our souls? Often my longings are a source of tremendous embarrassment to me. They threaten me with hopelessness. They reveal my hidden confusion about who I am and this crazy world I live in. I am all too eager to drown them out by listening to other voices and chasing other things. And yet, I've come to believe that these rumblings will also help me hear the voice of God calling me home. Given enough time or room, they eventually erupt in groans of confusion. And the confusion helps me turn to God with my questions.

I like the idea that Jesus liked questions. I'm so used to thinking that religious people hate them—they bristle and their faces turn stern. And yet Jesus seems to invite us to bring on our hardest. Questions didn't threaten him at all. When it comes to his stories he even claims some measure of responsibility for our confusion. He wanted them to sound confusing enough to get us into a dialogue, directly with him. And he promises that when we go directly to him we will be handed a cosmic secret.

This book will simply explore several of Jesus stories—they are some of my favorites. Most of them seem aimed at unearthing the longings that trouble our hearts. All of them contain an invitation to encounter God. I won't attempt to interpret the stories in depth, or tie them all together. Mostly I'm interested in what they have to do with God and my life. Maybe they will have something to do with God and your life too. That—you will have to decide.

I'll put this out there before you go any further—for me it's not a secret any longer. I've thought about this a lot, and even though I hate to admit it and I've at least come to this conclusion: I can no longer make it alone. In my life, I desperately need God.