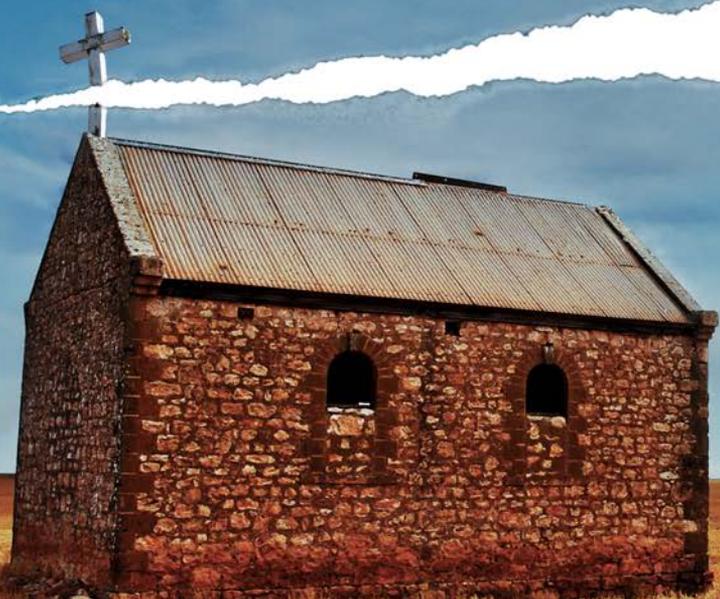


USED TO GO TO CHURCH

RETHINKING GOD ON THE
FRONTLINE OF LIFE'S TRAGEDIES



NICK VLEISIDES

FIRST RESPONDER CHAPLAIN

ENDORSEMENTS FOR

USED TO GO TO CHURCH

“I cannot say how profoundly comforting and rewarding it is to read someone who is not theorizing about the problem of suffering. An author who ‘sits with you’ in the traumas and tragedies of life—and does not ‘leave the room’ with religious platitudes. Real, raw, gritty—and life-giving. If you have experienced or been near intense loss, I recommend this book for you.”

– **Dr. Bruce McNicol**, Co-author, *The Cure* and *The Ascent of a Leader*, Co-founder, Trueface

“If you think you need to be in church every Sunday to restore your faith in God, think again. Nick’s lifelong devotion to God combined with his work as a first responder chaplain make his spiritual observations compelling and challenging. He gives us an understanding of how God works in times of tragedy, helping us to better process and heal following such horrific events.”

– **William Enquist**, Global President, Medical Device Company

“*Used to Go to Church* was a great read and seeks to answer a lot of the questions surrounding why we sometimes leave the church. Exploring answers to why over time, we become more skeptical about what we learned in the Church. I found it a great read that allowed me to think introspectively about my own path of starting off with faith, leaving the church and ultimately coming back to my faith even stronger than before. *Used to Go to Church* provides real and practical examples of why God and his message are important in our daily lives.”

– **Allan Shields**, Chief of Police

“This book is real, gritty and the author understands grief with no canned Sunday School answers. A must read for anyone who has ever experienced a crushing life trauma, heartache or disappointment that shakes you to your core. Nick will challenge you, because in doing so, the Lord will use his words to change you.

I learned something about myself and about my Savior in reading *Used to Go to Church*. The Lord is calling us back to Him.

I see now, He was with me in moments of personal crisis and isolation. He was with me in my tears, depression and it was his unseen hand that lovingly and patiently led me out of the spiritual darkness. When I felt most alone, it was his unseen presence that kept me alive and gave me hope. His mercies and faithfulness are new every day.”

– **Steve Wisniewski**, former 13-year All-Pro NFL Player, LA / Oakland Raiders 1989-2001

“Reading through *Used to Go to Church* is one of the most excruciating—and rewarding—experiences of my life. Nick’s ability to capture a scene, an emotion—a swirl of conflicting emotions, and all the questions, all the agony that accompanies that kinds of crises that he describes with such excruciating immediacy, intimacy and accuracy—is a gift that makes me want to run away and hide. And yet, at the same time, wakes me up and sends me in the direction of people in pain. It’s almost too much, because it’s too real. But it is the world that firefighters, police officers and paramedics, as well as many schoolteachers, counselors, coaches and pastors know well. And so do you, if your eyes and ears and heart are open.

This isn’t theory, this is reality. This isn’t stained glass religion, this is faith in action—faith that goes down, gets bloody, discovers humanity at such a deep level, and encounters the God who shows up when we need what only God can provide: grace (the grace to be present without offering easy answers), strength (the strength to be vulnerable) and hope (that is willing to wait for the surprise of kindness that heals).

Nick is a wizened, experienced chaplain, a man’s man, who remains open and honest, in a childlike way, and full of wonder at the intersection of suffering and love, of tragedy and miracle. He does not flinch in the telling nor rush to define or summarize all that he witnesses. But it seems he never fails to discover the sacred in the midst of the sadness, the fears and the temptation to despair. This is what he does, what he shares in this book, what he believes, almost defiantly, why he is a follower of Jesus, and what he calls people of faith to recognize and faithfully, compassionately practice. Don’t miss this adventure—the invitation to read about it, learn to care about it, and eventually live into this beautiful, practical spirituality.”

– **Doug Stevens**, Author of *Christ Incognito*

“I have known Nick my entire life. We went to kindergarten through high school together and remain close as brothers to this day. Upon reading his book, *Used to Go to Church*, I realized that I somehow missed the complete depth of my good friend. He has been called by God to perform the most difficult task anyone can be asked to do and has accepted this charge. His experiences are uniquely personal and truly inspirational. The spiritual insight gained from reading this book will challenge you and stay with you forever!”

– **Bill Springman**, MLB Player Development Coach

“This book is an easy engaging read that accurately shares the journey of an experienced Fire and Law enforcement Chaplain. Throughout his journey there is a tremendous amount of experience shared that is honest, authentic, and transparent. The real stories contained in this book share years of highs and lows and many lessons learned. The stories contained in this book describe many real emotional tragedies and the process the Chaplain used to professionally and compassionately work through them. Each chapter will encourage the reader provoking deep and personal spiritual thoughts. The book could potentially change one’s perspective on their personal trials and tribulations, it did for me.”

– **Brian Helmick**, Fire Chief

“Much of Nick’s life work has been about building a bridge between how people experience ‘the God of the church’ as being irrelevant and the God they long to believe in when unimaginable tragedy and hardship enters their lives. It is a bridge built in the crucible of hundreds of unspeakable tragedies and grace-filled moments Nick has experienced in his years as first responder chaplain, as together with officers and firefighters, they meet with people in the moment of their worst nightmares.

With astonishing vulnerability, Nick shares with us his own faith journey as he wrestles with God around his own questions of ‘why?’, is present to people in their loss, cares for first responders in their own trauma, and navigates the realities of PTSD in his own life. It is not a book offering answers to hard questions; it is about believing in a God who also knows suffering and is not afraid to accompany us in ours.

This book will open your eyes to a reality lived around us each day: the trauma of personal and community tragedy *and* God’s presence, grace and love, often made available to us through people like Nick. It has definitely opened my eyes and my heart.”

– **Patti Pierce**, Founder of WellSpring: A Resource for Christian Spiritual Formation

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After working alongside first responders—firefighters, officers, deputies, nurses, doctors—for many years I must give them a shout out and thank them for being an inspiration to me in ways that have helped me stay the course as a first responder chaplain without going nuts! They are amazing people who occasionally (which is too often) see things that no human being was ever intended to witness. You can not do this kind of work without it taking a bite out of your soul. I am so proud to work alongside these extraordinary human beings!

Thank you to all those of you who shared a most a sacred, precious time with me as a chaplain on scenes where a loved one of yours unexpectedly died. You have taught me much about what counts in life and revealed to me how love expresses itself in all kinds of relationships. I especially wish to dedicate this book to the many parents of young men and women, yes, even of boys and girls who took their own lives. My heart goes out to you and there is a part of me which is broken after experiencing first hand your unspeakable grief. But my life is much more real because of meeting you. May God give you peace.

My wife, Heidi, and my three adult children, Trent, Noelle and Trevor have endured watching a husband and father change over the years. Like most first responders I too have seen my heart of emotions become guarded and have experienced a sort of withdrawal from important relationships at times. It is hard to explain, but ask any

family member of a cop, firefighter or ER nurse and they will tell you how they see their loved one as “not the same guy (or gal) they first married.” Without my family to keep me honest and real, I would be lost. Thank you. I love you all so much!

Finally, I wish to thank author and friend Jim Palmer who I met after reading his book, *Divine Nobodies*. When I told him I was writing a book he asked to see the manuscript and immediately saw great potential in the impact it could have. He was gracious to offer feedback and input on the manuscript, and his encouragement was an invaluable part of the process of completing this book. Jim is a fellow soul, and we share a mutual desire and resolve to be instruments of love, hope, peace, compassion, and courage in the world.

FOREWORD

Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, “Suffering is a chance you take by the fact of being alive.” People sometimes question the existence or character of God because of suffering in the world and the tragedies that inevitably befall our lives. However, we should at least acknowledge that God informed us that the human journey would be volatile, including such trials and tribulations as loss, disease, death, and heartbreaking experiences that make us weep. Lest we think that God has unfairly singled us out with hardship, few human beings will ever experience the psychological and physical suffering Jesus endured.

If there is anyone with reason to walk away from God on account of suffering, it would be Nick Vleisides. Frequently Nick is thrust into a world of heartbreak, tragedy, and some of the most gruesome scenes of death. For nearly 25 years Nick has been called to grim scenes, including a 13-year-old suicide, pool drowning of a toddler, domestic violence, homicide, gruesome vehicle accidents, deadly plane crash, suicides too many to count, and numerous teenage overdoses.

Nick is a first responder chaplain, which means he is called into horrific scenarios of death and loss, for the purpose of providing psychological, emotional and spiritual support to those affected by these tragedies. It was the 15-year-old boy’s dad who found him hanging from a rope in his room. The toddler’s mother pulled her little girl out of the backyard pool, but it was too late. Those who fled for their lives from the Paradise Fire in Northern California. There were people to

notify that their loved ones had perished in a fire, and parents whose children would not be returning home from school. It was Nick's job to tell them, comfort them, be a human being of compassion and empathy and guide them through the initial steps of trauma recovery and processing their grief. On a regular basis, he sees the unbearable grief of others in those first few minutes of reckoning.

The work of a first responder chaplain also involves supporting other first responders such as paramedics, EMTs, police officers, firefighters, and rescuers, who are often traumatized by their direct involvement in gruesome scenes of death and loss of life. Nick was instrumental in starting the peer support teams for his fire and police departments. For every death on the scene of a fire there is a firefighter who feels some responsibility. For every unsuccessful attempt to revive a victim, there is a paramedic who feels a sense of failure. Police officers can never unsee the grim scene of a child run over by a car. Nick's role as a first responder chaplain is to be a source of understanding and support for these brave men and women.

The word "chaplain" in Nick's job title evokes the subject of God, and immerses him in the hurt, anger, betrayal and disillusionment people often feel toward God in the face of catastrophic loss. "How could God take my little girl?" "Why would God let my son die like this?" "Where is God?" These are a few of the desperate questions often asked of Nick in the moments of a person's greatest heartache and sorrow.

Despite Nick's theological background and years as a pastor before his career as a first responder chaplain, he discovered that questions about the meaning of tragedy and suffering, and where to find God in it, are not worked out with seminary answers or well-intended statements from church people like, "Your son is in a better place now", "God wanted her home" or "God will never give you more than you can handle".

Outside of Christian subculture in his work as a first responder chaplain, Nick found a discomfiting disconnect between the church world of pop worship songs like “God is good all the time” and the realities of tragedy and suffering like school shootings and teen suicide. A recurrent response he received from those left behind at these scenes of overwhelming loss when he introduced himself as a chaplain was, “I used to go to church.” Nick wondered if the pat answers and bumper-sticker theology of Churchianity contributed to this, as well as the failure of the church to be real about the struggles and hardships of the human journey, and wrestling with God’s place in them.

If you are looking for easy and feel-good answers or bulletproof theological explanations to resolve the question of God and suffering on paper, this is not the book for you. And if you are expecting to be comforted by hearing what you have always been told in Church about such things, you may be displeased and perhaps even offended. But if you are interested in reading a story about one human being’s journey to make sense of life and God on the frontlines of life’s greatest tragedies, you will not be disappointed.

Nick’s honesty and humanity in telling his story is moving. The world of first responders he shows is striking. The experiences he recounts are gripping.

The life and spiritual insights he shares are profound. Throughout the book you will be given perspectives that you have likely never contemplated and will be invited to consider God in ways that perhaps you never have. Whether you are religious or non-religious, Christian or agnostic, church-goer or church-leaver, the person who is starting with page one of *Used to Go to Church* will not be the same person who finishes the last sentence.

— **Jim Palmer**, Author of *Notes from (Over) the Edge*, and *Inner Anarchy*

INTRODUCTION

After graduating from college two of my best hometown buddies had joined the volunteer fire department in the town where we all grew up. Boys of my generation had fantasies of becoming professional athletes, movie stars, police officers, soldiers, or firefighters. We dreamed of becoming famous or heroic. GI Joe boys we were!

I could not resist the temptation to live out a childhood desire to be a firefighter. At the time I was student teaching and trained to become a Reserve Firefighter for the city of San Clemente in Southern California. Technically it was a volunteer role, but we were paid a small stipend each time we responded to a fire alarm. It was a rewarding experience and I considered it a possible career track if I did not stick with teaching.

Meanwhile, I was volunteering as a youth worker at my church and the youth pastor, Ken, was a major influence in my life. After a year and a half of being a Reserve Firefighter and a semester into paramedic training, Ken asked me to join him in a move up to Oregon to start a teen wilderness adventure camp. For several summers before we had organized camping and water-skiing trips for our own youth group, but Ken now wanted to take it a step further and start his own camping ministry.

I agonized over the decision but felt like it was an opportunity and a calling I could not pass up. Being a firefighter had left a deep mark upon me, but I felt a calling from God to outdoor ministry. I packed

my bags and left San Clemente and moved to Portland with Ken and his family.

The next three years were vigorous and electrifying. We established Creative Camping Ministries and organized dozens of summer outdoor wilderness camps for youth groups throughout the region. During the school year I taught junior high school at a public school while we would lead several weekend retreats during the year for various church groups.

I will always look back on this experience with fond memories. Our camps coaxed teenagers out of their everyday routine and pre-occupations, unplugged them from all their devices, and created an atmosphere where we formed meaningful relationships and had conversations about life that truly mattered. Setting up camp, cooking on an open fire, water skiing, competitions, skits, impactful speakers, and sharing, forged bonds and changed lives.

But after three years it became increasingly difficult to raise the financial resources to keep the operation viable. We had little choice; it was not possible to continue. We celebrated our victories, lamented our stalemate, and began considering what was next in our lives.

The gratification of being a spiritual influence in the lives of these teenagers compelled me to seriously consider going into full-time ministry. I decided to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at Fuller Seminary back in Southern California. Upon graduating I was offered the Youth Pastor position at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto where I cut my teeth in ministry. The church was known for teaching “New Covenant” theology, which emphasizes the love, grace and empowerment of God as the framework for living the Christian life, as opposed to “Old Covenant” mindset that stipulates that obedience to religious rules, rites and regulations are necessary to remain in good standing with God.

I have seen too many Christians, including myself, living according to the Old Covenant mentality—a performance-based relationship with God, constantly striving to earn and maintain God’s approval and blessing. Jesus invited people weary of religion to come to him for rest, replenishment and renewal, and yet our churches are filled with people who feel exhausted, self-contempt and emptiness inside. Though Jesus said that following him would show one how to live freely and lightly, people in the pew often feel weighed down and shackled by their Churchianity. Many of them eventually leave church and their faith altogether.

My years as Youth Pastor at Peninsula Bible Church laid the spiritual foundation for my grace-based relationship with God and my approach to ministry as a pastor. I learned to walk in that freedom, security and lightness of spirit Jesus spoke of and saw my ministry as inviting others into that same life. It was at Peninsula that I met Heidi, married, and started a family. In a few short years we became a family of four. To this day I am partial toward the gratification and gravity of ministry to adolescents and teens. I also realized it was not realistic to provide for my growing family on a youth pastor salary.

After nearly a decade in Palo Alto I accepted a call to serve a church in Austin, Texas as Associate Pastor. Over the years I held a special place in my heart for first responders. I would remember my dream to become a firefighter and felt regret on occasion that I had not persisted on that path. But low and behold at my church in Austin I discovered that several men were volunteer firefighters. After a number of months of recruiting me, I was convinced to join them at the CE-Bar Volunteer Fire Department, Travis County Fire District #12.

Soon after joining I proposed to the fire chief, Buddy, that we needed a chaplain. It is no secret that firefighters have a dangerous job. They often help people on the worst day of their life. The scenarios can sometimes be gruesome and involve loss of life. During my service as

a volunteer firefighter in Austin, there was a fire where two children died. The emotional toll it takes is intense. As you can imagine with any fire department, over time, there are seriously injured or line of duty deaths which impact firefighter families. I discussed with Buddy that I would be willing to be a “pastor” to our fire department, offering support, grief counseling, and to be someone that our firefighters could talk to when they were struggling. I became the department’s first chaplain.

Completing my Emergency Medical Technician training, I spent nearly eight years in Austin responding to fires and emergency medical calls as a firefighter, EMT, and chaplain. I quickly learned that the need for a fire and first responder chaplain was not only to offer support, comfort and counseling to personnel and their families, but to civilians on the scene where there is tragedy and death. Church pastor by day, firefighter and first responder by night; whether it was teaching behind a pulpit in church or hanging off the back of a fire engine speeding to a fire, it was all God’s work to me. Over the years, I responded to countless emergencies involving tragedy and suffering as a chaplain, as well as a few close calls myself, escaping death in the line of duty fighting fires.

My years in Austin were some of the best of my life and our family continued to grow, Heidi giving birth to our third child. I knew the next step in my ministerial career was to be a Senior Pastor, and that opportunity came back in California. I was contacted about the Senior Pastor position of a church community in the East Bay of San Francisco. After a couple visits, they made an offer. I accepted. It did not take long for me to jump into the world of chaplaincy once again. I joined the ranks as a volunteer chaplain in our local East Bay fire district and county sheriff’s office. This immersed me in the world of law enforcement chaplaincy work. I was trained in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), designed to minimize the impact of a

traumatic event and to aid in psychological and emotional recovery for law enforcement professionals. The spectrum of duties for a law enforcement chaplain include law enforcement family support, death notifications, community care, and various responsibilities including possible hostage negotiation situations.

It was not lost on me that I was straddling two vocational tracks, a ministerial career and chaplaincy work, which progressively became more difficult to juggle. The church board noticed this as well, and occasionally we discussed it and a few of them expressed concern. After six years of serving the church I was asked to choose. Though I loved the people and had given the best of me in being their pastor, my heart was in the chaplaincy work. Many years prior I had walked away from my dream to be a fulltime firefighter to become a minister. But the work of a first responder chaplain would allow me to do both.

The church board and I agreed that it was the best choice for me and the church. Resigning as a church pastor, even in the best of situations, is painful and difficult. I felt tremendous stress. Yes, I wanted to pursue chaplaincy work, but it was not like I had a job waiting for me. Most chaplain positions are volunteer roles and seldom paid. Meanwhile, I still had a mortgage and a family of five to provide for.

There were some bleak and disheartening days as we struggled to determine what was next. I experienced a deep depression and saw no path forward. There is not an abundance of jobs for a guy with a seminary degree who needs to generate enough income for a family of five, not to mention the matter of health insurance. What I most wanted to do was continue pursuing my chaplaincy work, but it would not provide an income or benefits. I felt hopelessly stuck. You might say this was my “dark night of the soul,” in which I wrestled with God about what seemed to be an impossible predicament and the uncertainty of our future.

When trials and hardships come into our lives, we often feel desperation and wish for divine or miraculous intervention to rescue us out of it. But I have often found that God's grace includes finding our way forward through more common means. For me it began with the unwavering support and confidence of my wife. We also had some close and devoted friends who walked with us through this season of turbulent transition. I cleared my head and began wondering about the possibility of starting a non-profit agency through which I could receive financial support for my role as a chaplain in the community. Turns out, a friend of mine knew someone in Southern California who several years earlier had done exactly that—he had started a non-profit organization to serve a police and fire department as a chaplain.

My friend put me in touch with him and we immediately hit it off. He offered to allow me to use his non-profit to initially raise supporters. That was my path forward. Over a hundred people I contacted throughout the US including Portland, San Francisco Bay Area, Austin, and Southern California were eager to support my work as a chaplain, and they recruited others to do the same. All this came together just three months after resigning as pastor of the church. If that does not qualify as “divine intervention,” I am not sure what does. That network of supporters has grown and continued to this day.

We often hear how “God works in mysterious ways” but it also comes in very ordinary ways—an unwavering spouse, caring friends, an unexpected development, and the willingness to break out of your comfort zone to actualize a new possibility. Sometimes we are on the receiving end of these small graces and godsend; sometimes we are these to others.

Working alongside police officers, firefighters, and paramedics, as a first responder chaplain now for over 20 years, I have often found myself thrust into people's worst possible nightmares and tragedies. My hope is always, in some way, to be a grace or godsend in moments

of catastrophic despair and suffering. However, like all first responders, this work takes a heavy toll. I was not prepared to witness such anguish and heartache when I first began my work as a chaplain back in 1998. I had no idea what I was getting into like most cops and firefighters who enter their careers with a noble aspiration to serve the community but along the way encounter evil, murder, suicide, tragedy, carnage and lives destroyed by drugs, alcohol and crime.

During this journey something greater than the mark of sorrow, grief and dismay this work leaves upon you, has happened inside me. My faith has been challenged, confronted, tested, defied, gutted, ransacked, pushed to the brink, and turned upside down; only to become more real, more human, more durable, more whole, more courageous, more hopeful, more loving and more liberating.

I want to show you how all that happened. Let us take a ride. I want you to come with me on the actual scenes of my work as a first responder chaplain. You need to see what I saw, hear what I heard, feel what I felt, cry like I cried, doubt where I doubted, believe where I believed, and hope where I found hope. You cannot exactly experience what I did, I know, but I can bring you into my experiences as a chaplain where we share similar struggles of doubt, heartache, unbelief, and the search for hope and meaning in a world of hardship and suffering. As a warning, this journey is not for the faint of heart.

Etched on my memory is the occasion when an officer and I had to give a death notification to the parents of a seventeen-year-old boy who lived only a few blocks away. The boy was tragically killed on impact in a single car accident a mile from his home. He was the same age and a school mate of my daughter, both of whom were to start their senior year of high school the next morning.

I met the officer at the hospital where the body had been transported. Without knowing any specifics about the fatality, the officer and I entered the room where this boy was laying on a gurney. He

had been cleaned up and a sheet covered him up to his shoulders. I took one look at his face and immediately recognized him. It was dear, sweet Robert who lived around the corner from us. The same Robert I watched as a little boy, play in the park next to our house. The same Robert who walked to middle school with my daughter. The same Robert who religiously practiced free throws in his driveway with his dad.

Grief-stricken, I muttered to the officer that I knew this boy. Now we had to go to his home and inform his parents what every mother and father hopes they never have to hear. A sick feeling of despair sank to the pit of my stomach as it began to dawn on me how the whole community would be devastated.

Officer Rollins and I drove to Robert's home around 9:30 pm—a warm August night on the eve of the boy's high school senior year. The short ten-minute drive to their home was hell. There are dark moments when a chaplain can feel deep-seated doubt and disbelief—questioning that you chose this work, doubting that it makes any difference, shaken that such cruel tragedies happen, and disbelief that a good and all-powerful God would find this okay. I could not stand the thought of breaking this heartbreaking news to the mother and father. A sense of panic was setting in. My wife, only a block away from Robert's home, had gone to bed early because of a busy morning. Being a warm evening, she had all the bedroom windows open.

Pulling up to the home, the parents saw our patrol car through their living room window and raced outside, having spent the last hour distressed by their son not returning home. Mom and dad were frantic, and hysteria set in before we could say a word. They demanded to know what happened and refused to go back into the house as we first suggested.

Standing in their front yard on this warm August night I told them that their son was killed. It was unbearable to see their reaction. I

sometimes still hear the mother's screams in nightmares that jar me awake at night. She wailed so violently that my wife at home, in bed, a block away was startled from her sleep. They were screams the entire neighborhood heard. Inside I was undone by the despair and heartache I was witnessing.

Later in the evening, officer Rollins, who also had a teenager daughter, told me that for the first time in his 15-year career he almost threw up from the emotional trauma of seeing these two parents reacting to the tragic news. Most people are sensitized to tragedy and death, which are the top headlines and trending stories, and depicted countless times in films and television. But what gets lost on a screen is the humanity of the moment when people's hearts and lives are shattered by the unbearable loss of someone they love deeply. Words cannot describe the feelings of heartrending anguish people experience at times of significant loss.

Being up close and personal to so many horrific and gruesome tragedies has been costly. Throughout the years I have consulted therapists about having symptoms of PTSD. Intrusive memories, trouble sleeping, emotional numbness, depression, feelings of guilt—these are some of the realities I, and virtually all first responders, experience. Rather than shoving down the volatility of emotions first responders feel, it is critical they have an outlet to share their stories, express their thoughts and feelings and process their traumatic experiences. Writing this book, which has involved reliving many harrowing occasions, was not always easy. But telling these stories and sharing my heart have been cathartic and therapeutic.

You might be wondering how God fits into all this. My faith and relationship with God have not protected me from the suffering, sorrow, and heartache of the human experience. It did not protect Jesus either. Jesus himself tasted the depths of mental anguish, emotional distress, and physical trauma in ways few of us every will. He also met

others in their suffering. Jesus did not theologize people's losses and tragedies, he entered into it in a spirit of solidarity, empathy, compassion, and love. In one of the most poignant episodes in the Bible when Jesus arrives on the scene of another's heartache and grief, his response is described in two words: "Jesus wept."

In my view, Jesus is a model for the work and ministry of a first responder chaplain. He did not come to people as the fix-it guy and answer man. He did not cite bible verses or hold a prayer service. Jesus simply came alongside people in their suffering and offered himself— his presence and understanding, his tenderness and humanity, his mercy and solidarity. There is something between living in denial and being swallowed whole by the pain and suffering of human existence, and Jesus lived there. I understand now that my calling as a first responder chaplain is learning to live there, as Jesus did.

The subject of God, almost, always comes up in the midst and aftermath of a tragic event. Over the years there are two things that have stood out to me, which ultimately led to my writing this book. The first is how much people need a power greater than themselves to face the volatile, distressing, and agonizing realities of human existence. Sometimes life is too much. Our tribulations eclipse our ability to cope, feel hope, bounce back and overcome life's misfortunes, calamities, heartbreaks, and sorrows. In our darkest, weakest and most vulnerable moments in life when we feel pillaged and powerless, we need help from a transcendent and trustworthy source that will see us through.

What has secondly stood out to me, is how many people doubt that the God they learned in church would qualify for the job. The title of this book, *Used to Go to Church*, is based upon the countless times that people have responded to my inquiry about their faith with, "I used to go to church." Through further inquiry I would learn that their former church experience left them in a spiritual no-man's-land.

On the one hand, they did not want to write off God categorically. But on the other hand, the “God” they learned in church seemed irrelevant, arcane, exacting, beyond belief, and even absurd. There is no shortage of people in the world like this, maybe you are one of them.

I understand. During those years when I was juggling being a pastor and a community chaplain, I began feeling cognitive dissonance between the theological answers I confidently proclaimed at church, and the unanswerable suffering I was thrust into each time I was dispatched to a traumatic scene. Too often my theological and doctrinal explanations did not seem to add up to much in the face of tragic loss.

My conception of God and faith has been recast in the crucible of human hardship. This book is that story. G. K. Chesterton wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it’s been found difficult and left untried.” True faith is not belief in God *in spite of* life’s tragedies and the weighty questions they evoke for which we do not have good answers. Rather, true faith is knowing that it is precisely at our darkest and most tragic moments, that there *is* something greater than ourselves.

A “God” proclaimed to be powerful in worship songs and church sermons but helpless or absent in the carnage of human suffering is no God at all. True faith is not the absence of doubt; it is not suppressing the normal volatility of emotions we feel in the face of loss; it is not a religious stoicism that hides behind bible verses and pat theological answers. True faith does not even rule out feeling forgotten and abandoned, even by God. Jesus felt all the above. True faith is knowing that there *is* something greater than ourselves, even greater than all our doubts, disbelief, and feelings in those moments.

I have been given the gift of several friends whom I have known since childhood, which I count as one of my life’s greatest treasures. One of those friends, Jeff, is truly closer than a brother. Early in the

writing of this book, I asked Jeff to critique the first few draft chapters I had completed. He gladly agreed and a few days later he sent me an email with his feedback.

In his email, he wrote that the chapters were “a little too real for me.” Jeff’s middle son of three boys tragically took his own life in 2012 at the age of 20. As you might imagine, he and his wife Karon suffered many dark moments of grief and heartache. Losing a child to suicide is perhaps the most devastating loss a person could endure. Reading my chapters gave voice to the struggle he has had in trying to make peace with the death of his son, and square it with his belief in God.

Jeff shared in his email that the people who would most be drawn to my book are those desperate for something that I will not be able to offer—an answer to their suffering. Answers to questions like: Why? Why me? Why this? He wrote, “No one wants to get to the end of a book only to hear the same old reply common from most Christians... ‘in the end, I don’t know why we suffer’, or something along those lines.”

He continued, “The difficult part is, once you have described all these horrific circumstances, how are you going to answer the unanswerable? This, to me, is the challenge you face in authoring a book like this. If there is no ‘answer’ to all the tragedy you describe, how will you ever hope to encourage folks to have faith in God? I realize that you have a whole lot more to write but I would encourage you to try and steer away early on in the book from implying that you are leading up to an ‘answer’ about suffering. For me, God never explained my loss and still has not. I waited for Him and I demanded an explanation for a long time. It still has not come. I realize now it never will.”

Jeff was right. I do not have all the answers. It is a difficult pill to swallow for a guy with an MDiv and the former pastor who never

met a problem I could not explain with proper theology, carefully exegeted from the original Hebrew or Greek. I took to heart the advice he offered. As Jeff warned, you will be disappointed if you are expecting airtight theological answers to the many heartrending questions that any reasonable person would ask about God in the face of catastrophic loss, bottomless grief, and a heart torn in two. It was not my aim to write such a book. Many such books attempting this feat have already been written. Heck, if C.S. Lewis in *The Problem Pain* did not explain suffering suitably, I surely cannot.

This book is not about me trying to explain suffering. What you are about to read is my story. It is my story of coming to terms with God and faith in moments and situations ripe for doubt and unbelief. The last several years my spiritual growth has not been the byproduct of bible studies, prayer services and accountability groups, but from what I have experienced and learned at the scenes of life's most out of the box circumstances.

In his email, Jeff reminded me that I led the memorial service for his son, JV. In my remarks, I did not try to explain the death of his son, put some theological spin on it, or even soften the blow of its impact on Jeff and Karon, and the entire community. There are no tidy homilies for a young person who takes their own life. What I most remember about my words was squarely facing the sorrow and heartache of this tragic loss, and an appeal to all in attendance to earnestly be expressions of love, grace, tenderheartedness, support and hope to one another. Jeff said that my words that day did not dispel the anguish and heartache of the tragic loss of his son, but they sparked a flicker of hope that there was something beyond, something deeper, something greater than his unanswered questions and suffering. God is either love, or He is not.

Rosanne Cash wrote, "Loss is the great unifier, the terrible club to which we all eventually belong." Maybe you purchased this book

because you are seeking peace and healing from your own loss, grief, and sorrow. Perhaps you are a firefighter, police officer or paramedic who shows up every day to scenes of trauma, death and devastation. Maybe you have lost faith in God because of your own heartbreaks and tragedies, or the human suffering and carnage you see strewn across each morning's news headlines. You may be someone who could not accept the God you found in church, or perhaps you were even deeply damaged and wounded by your involvement in organized religion. Whatever compelled you to pick up this book, I hope my story stirs new faith that you are not alone, that suffering does not render the human journey meaningless, and that there is something greater than any inventive theological explanation could provide.

CHAPTER 1

DOES GOD MATTER?

In the time it takes to drive from our house to the gym where I work out, about ten minutes, there is one suicide in the US. I am guessing most people are not thinking this as they drive to the gym. I do. Some of the most heartbreaking situations I have walked into as a first responder chaplain have been suicides. Like 3912 Acklen Drive, on September 14th at 1:27 pm.

Thirty minutes before I arrived, a father found his twenty-year-old son hanging in the garage. He cut him down, called 911 and started CPR. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for those 15-24 in age.

I pulled up in front of the house and before exiting my car, noticed what a nice upper middle-class neighborhood I was in. After days of rain, it was a gorgeous day—blue skies, warmth of the mid-day sun, and cleansed air. A person would feel invigorated on a day like this. But tragedies can happen on any day, even sunny and exquisite days. I was sitting in front of a house which behind the front door was a family's most harrowing nightmare.

When my phone rang twenty minutes earlier, and saw it was our police dispatch calling, I knew there was a fatality involved but had no further details. My heart always sinks knowing there is a death. A police dispatch call almost always means a sudden or tragic death. In a sense, every death is a tragic death, sudden or not, expected or

untimely. But what happened at 3912 Acklen Drive is the kind of death that loved ones never recover from. It is the kind of death that would make a person lose faith in everything, including and especially God.

A police officer on the scene walked over to my car to inform me of the details. Inside the home there were three individuals, a 20-year-old boy who had hung himself, his father who dialed 911 after finding him, and the boy's younger sister.

Making my way to the front door, I felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of despair I knew was inside, and the inconceivable task of somehow offering something meaningful. As a first responder chaplain, there is a sense in which you know that you will fail in every situation. In times of deep suffering what people want, you are not capable of giving. What do they want? For it all to go away. The Breton Fisherman's Prayer, which I have on a plaque, is the best chaplain's prayer I know, "O God, the sea is so great, and my boat is so small."

Standing on the front porch, I am conflicted. Part of me wants to turn back around, submit my resignation as a chaplain, be done, and never have to do this again. But another part of me knows this is not just a job, it is a calling. Deep down I know that walking through that front door is why I am here in this world. Some days a blessing and other days a curse—my life's work is being an expression of solace, solidarity, and support in the moments of another human being's greatest tragedy.

All first responders have a specific role to play at a heartrending scene like this—patrol officers, firefighters, paramedics, and coroner. As a police and fire chaplain, my role is to offer comfort and guide them through the first few hours of shock and grief. Most people equate the term 'chaplain' with some form of clergy person. They see you as a representative of God, which means you either have answers or faith that you can impart to them to help mitigate their pain.

To be honest, after 20 years of responding to calls such as this one, I have discovered that my own faith has been shaken and I have been forced to reconsider what faith really means. I know that there are few, if any words, that will alleviate the anguish of a father who just found his son's lifeless body hanging from a rope. I wonder to myself if God is going to really matter here today. How's that for the steadfast and unflinching ambassador of the Most High???

After a couple knocks, the front door slowly opened and before me stood a distraught middle-aged man of slight build. There is something almost sacred about that moment when you first encounter another human being, in their suffering. He could barely lift his head to make eye contact but when he did, he visually noted the embroidered police badge on my polo shirt. As I stepped inside, he then caught the word 'Chaplain' also embroidered on my shirt, which he spoke aloud, and then stuttering in a weak and trembling voice, said, "We need a clergy person."

He quickly asked, "Can we do last rites?" Last rites are prayers and pastoral words given shortly before death, but not for the already deceased. But this is not the time to quibble over sacraments. Just thirty minutes ago, this father found his twenty-year-old son hanging from a noose in their garage.

Upon discovering his son, the father cut him down, called 911 and started CPR. There are few images in a man's life, if any, which could be more tortuous than your young son's lifeless body hanging before you. There is no delete option for that mental photograph which will haunt this father for the remainder of his life.

He was too late to stop or rescue his son, and the boy was well past the point of being revived. The paramedics who arrived on scene at once pronounced him deceased. These are the worst kind of calls for firefighters and paramedics who are wired and trained to rescue people

and save lives. When they come to a scene like this where nothing can be done, they feel powerless and can even take it as a failure.

First responders, many being mothers and fathers themselves, always feel a primal emotional attachment with parents who lose children. This was clearly the case in this traumatic death in which the father was hemorrhaging with hysteria and inconsolable grief. The police officers and firefighters quickly realized that a chaplain was needed.

The officers remained on scene to carry out an investigation while the firefighters and paramedics were packing up to leave. Departing a scene like this is vexing for every first responder. You just do not walk away, unaffected. Some first responders wish they could stay and comfort the loved ones. I have seen many firefighters and officers who are very chaplain-like on scenes such as this. Others cannot escape fast enough—not because they do not care, but because they care too much. They can't bear watching the suffering of the loved ones who remain among the living. Most won't admit or even realize a bite has been taken out of their soul.

Like some of my comrades, I showed up that day not only as a first responder but as a dad. When I learned there was a twenty-year-old who committed suicide at his parent's home, I was reticent to respond. I had a twenty-year-old son at home on winter break from college who had been struggling with anxiety and depression his first semester away. I have never declined to go on a call but for the first time, I seriously considered it when the dispatcher informed me, we had a 10-56 (the ten-code for suicide) involving a 20-year-old male.

After a few minutes assessing the situation I asked one of our officers to dispatch one of our female chaplains to the scene to tend to the young man's eighteen-year-old sister at home taking all this in. Looking back I needed a colleague to be a source of strength for me too. The mother had been notified as she was driving out of town to

visit a relative, and instantly turned around. I could not imagine that drive home, carrying the heartbreaking news that her son was dead.

The paramedics had left, and several officers were still on the scene, one of them relaying information to the county coroner who was on his way. The father was pacing back and forth talking to himself in a state of emotional trauma, and uncertain about what to do next. I offered to pray over the young man in lieu of last rites, and he asked if we could wait until the mother arrived.

One of the first ways I engage with a person as a chaplain, where the death of a loved one is involved, is to initiate a simple conversation. Acute emotional trauma can quickly spiral, and gently drawing the person into a connection helps stabilize them so they can survive and cope the brunt of shock that hits them.

Since he had mentioned “last rites,” I assumed he must be a religious person, most likely Catholic. After expressing my condolences and intent to support him, I asked if he was Catholic. He responded, “Yes, but we don’t attend church anymore.”

Over the years of my service as a chaplain, if I have heard that response once, I’ve heard it a thousand times when inquiring about a person’s faith or religious affiliation. It does not leave you with much to decipher about where they stand with respect to their belief in God. The world is filled with church leavers—people who stop attending church or are no longer actively involved in organized religion. Some of them abandon belief in God altogether, most pursue spirituality on different terms. There is a growing number of people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and also those who speak of a Christ-centered spirituality but who do not attend church.

What a person believes about God in moments of despair and deep human suffering, matters. It matters in terms of whether you believe there is a power greater than yourself to strengthen you in times of fragility, exhaustion, and collapse. It matters as a basis for hope in the

face of devastating loss, and the assurance there is meaning to life that transcends human tragedy.

What a person believes about God matters with respect to how one understands death and what happens after you die. It matters with regard to believing that there is a pathway one can follow to withstand tragedy, overcome hardship, grieve loss, and heal from heartache. Beliefs about God can be the difference between someone feeling alone and abandoned in an impersonal and random universe that is callously grinding forward, or feeling a connection with everything in existence, characterized by deep feelings of love and destiny.

I had no idea what this father believed about God. My experience with the countless people who have told me they “used to go to church” is that they do not entirely know. Typically, the fact that they left church means that the God they learned there did not add up or square with real life and did not make any real difference in their lives. For many people, the idea of God does not appear on their radar again until hardship or tragedy strikes, like that fateful day at 3912 Acklen Drive.

As the father opened up, he shared that his son had dropped out of college due to anxiety and depression. Just months before this boy’s suicide, my own son nearly dropped the same university for similar reasons. I also learned that this young man’s sister was also a classmate of my son at this college. I learned that this young man was a gamer who played online video games at night and slept during the day. In my own home I struggled with the same issues regarding my son. Often when I am at a heartrending scene as a first responder chaplain I am thinking, this could be me: my tragedy, my loss, my heartache, and in this case, my son.

When the mother arrived, another tidal wave of grief erupted. Mom, dad, and daughter embraced and wept a sorrow so tortuous that it required steely resolve not to lose it myself.

The father asked if I would pray over his son, who was laying on the garage floor with a yellow ground cloth draped over his lifeless body, revealing only his face. We all gathered around his body, while three police officers and the deputy coroner looked on.

As a chaplain, most people are expecting that I will somehow interject religion into the circumstances. Every situation is different, but the goal is never to shoehorn God into a tragic scene. I see my role as being a human expression of God's comfort, empathy, caring and love. That was the whole point of Jesus, wasn't it? He was called "Immanuel" meaning, "God with us." My calling as a chaplain is to embody that truth at every scene of suffering—God is not in heaven or the never-lands of the universe observing from a distance; God is present, God is real, God matters—right here and right now.

I knelt at the head of their boy and for a few moments studied his face. I was not going to rush this precious sacred moment. Then I made eye contact with mom and dad and said that their request to pray over their son implied to me they had some belief in God. I shared that my particular belief was that we are never separated from God—not in our darkest moments of suffering or even in death.

This is why God matters.

I looked back down at the boy and placed one of my hands on his forehead. In that moment, I was not just Nick the chaplain. I was Nick the father. I was not just Nick, the clergyman encouraging faith. I was Nick, the human being who needed faith. I was not just a witness to the tears of grief of others, I was shedding them myself. Did God matter to Nick?

In a garage, at 3912 Acklen Drive, a heartsick family, three police officers and a coroner—that was church. No pulpit or PowerPoint, no

band or multi-media, no bells and spells, no lectionary or liturgy, no icons or incense, but real church.

One of the most significant existential questions is: Does God exist? My question is a bit more practical: Does God matter? Many people are hesitant to conclusively say there is no God, but they do not have a good answer to the “So What” question. So what, if God exists? They went to church, they practiced religion, they listened to sermons, they gave their money, they read their Bible, but for what?

More and more people are skeptical of what that learned about God in church. They wonder: Did God really ask Abraham to kill his own son as a sign of devotion? Would God command genocidal warfare in order to secure his honor? Will God always protect and prosper those who obey the Bible’s commandments? Would a loving God really condemn the bulk of the human race to eternal conscious torment in hell?

Too often God matters to people because they fear God or they are striving to earn God’s favor through their religious devotion. Is that the deal? Does God only matter because he punches your ticket to heaven or because he knows who’s been naughty or nice, and blesses them accordingly?

But why is it in moments of tragedy, heartache, and loss that a person who has not given much thought to God for years will suddenly become cognizant of God? This father left church years ago and yet the first thing that came to his mind when we interacted was his desire for me to pray over his son.

In life’s bleakest moments, we long to know there is something greater than ourselves—greater than our sorrow, greater than our loss, greater than our heartbreak, greater than our suffering. Sadness, grief, pain, and anguish is one way our deepest awareness signals to us that our experience of reality is not yet complete.

Where there is darkness, we long for light. When we are broken, we cry out for healing. In our despair, we search for hope. When we buckle in heartache to our knees, we need a reason to get back up. In those moments when what we love most is ripped away from us, we want to believe there is still a reason to go on.

This is why God matters. God is the completion of the incompleteness of life, which we most feel as human beings in moments of suffering. There are many different beliefs, conceptions, understandings, theories, teachings about who and what God is. But one thing everyone agrees on: if God exists, God is whole, absolute, complete, illimitable, unconfined, all-encompassing, and infinite.

God matters because life is not complete without God. I do not necessarily mean the “God” many people learned in church. I mean God as the ultimate and highest reality in the universe—the alpha and omega, the first word and the last word, the now and the not yet, the imminent and the transcendent. This description is not some poetic theological statement for a Sunday sermon. It is the basis for having peace, joy, hope, strength, faith, courage, meaning, well-being, and contentment in a world of tragedy, heartache, sadness, and suffering.

God matters because without God you are only living half of life. The light in the darkness, healing in our brokenness, hope in our despair, and our reason to get back up and go on, is based upon something we know intuitively deep within us—there is something more, something greater, something beyond the hardship of the moment.

When life is going well, we are less aware of the incomplete reality of our lives and feel little need for help. But when tragedy strikes, we are painfully confronted by the unpredictability, fragility, and cruelties of the human experience. Those are the moments we feel a need for something greater than ourselves. As a first responder chaplain, I

feel my greatest contribution is to represent and be an expression of the light, hope, strength, and faith that is always available to every human being, even if their pain and suffering in the moment blinds them to it.

The coroner determines the circumstances, manner, and cause of sudden deaths where an attending physician is not able to ascertain this information. A coroner also makes an inquiry and does an autopsy in cases of deaths resulting from homicide, suicide, certain accidents, and when deaths are unattended. Once the forensic examination of the body is completed by the coroner, a family has 72-hours to arrange to have the body transported.

This was the next conversation I had with the mother and father at the scene. Part of my role as a chaplain is to compassionately inform and aid people in addressing the necessary practical matters in tragic circumstances. I explained to them the process and helped them make arrangements. I always leave my card and let people know I am someone they can call for support. I give them materials about additional mental health resources such as grief counseling, and contact information for funeral details.

But even with all that, I am always conflicted when it is time for me to leave a scene as traumatic as this. In the car drive home, I found myself in the same spot where I began. Did I make a difference? Was it enough? Will this family get through this? How does one ever recover from the suicide of their child? "O God, the sea is so great and my boat is so small."

Then the thought occurred to me. If God matters because God makes all things complete, then I can have faith and confidence in something greater than myself at that scene. Not just that scene, but every scene. And not just the hardships, tragedies, and suffering of others, but my own. Not just at 3912 Acklen Drive, but at my home and life. Not just that dad, but this dad. And not just me, but you.

And even as long and difficult a road it will be for this family as they process their loss, heartache and grief, there will be something greater still.

There will be the rest of the story.

The complete story. The God one.

CHAPTER 2

WITHOUT A TRACE

Last year there were 424,066 cases of missing children in the US. In my state of California, we have the second highest number of Amber alerts. Missing children cases are sometimes runaways, others are abductions or kidnappings. Some have happy endings, some do not. Some children are found and returned home; others vanish without a trace.

One evening while under the sink, failing to unclog our garbage disposal, my phone on the counter began buzzing. I called Heidi to hand me my phone, it was my friend Rick. In a voice of desperation, he explained he was at Don's home, a mutual friend, because Don's 15-year-old daughter was missing. She had gone to school that morning like any other day, but never returned home. Rick urged me to come over.

The first 48 hours after a child has gone missing are the most critical for a case, and every minute is agonizing for the parents who wait in fear and helplessness. I threw on my chaplain uniform and headed out.

DAY ONE

I was acquainted with Don and his family. They lived just five minutes from our home. Years ago, our two youngest boys had played on the

same soccer team when I was head coach. Don volunteered to be my assistant, and we enjoyed a fun season with our sons. We did not see each other much after that, except the occasional coming and going of dropping off or picking up the boys from one another's home.

Don's oldest daughter, Annie, who was 15, had not returned home from school that afternoon. Annie was a classmate of my daughter's, born in the same hospital, four days apart. There are pros and cons to being a chaplain on scenes where you personally know the people involved. On the one hand, it is helpful because there's trust and rapport already established. The challenge lies in the difficulty of letting these traumatic scenarios go when you personally know the people affected.

Already gathered at the home was a large contingent of the county Sheriff's search and rescue team who were assembling and staging in preparation to begin a neighborhood search. Our search and rescue team is the largest and one of the best trained in the state of California. They are often called upon to assist in searches all over the region.

As a part of my chaplain role, it is common for me to be called upon to meet the search and rescue team when they return from a search after discovering a deceased victim. I joined the team after the Tubbs Fire of 2017, at the time, the most destructive wildfire in California history. The fire burned 36,810 acres and 22 people were killed in Sonoma County by the fire. We went through hundreds of burned down homes searching for any sign of human remains.

Search and rescue teams always have high hopes to find their missing subject alive and for some it is devastating to have the search result in death. Every missing person case is top priority but when it involves a child it is all hands on deck.

When I arrived, there was a throng of people gathered in and around the home. Numerous law enforcement officers were present, including the town police chief who came to show his support. Other

family members and close friends had come to sit with the family. I had to navigate my way through the front yard and made my way inside the house, and found Don and his wife, Joan, in the kitchen talking to the Incident Commander of the search and rescue team.

These conversations with law enforcement officers can be agonizing as they try to determine if the missing person is a victim of foul play, injured or suffering a medical emergency, or a runaway. The necessary questions asked of parents of a missing child can be torturing. Few parents will believe their child would run away.

We all had high hopes that Don's little girl, Annie, would be found. The first decision is establishing a search area. This is typically a circle based on the last place the missing person was seen, which in this case was Annie's school. As the search progresses, that point will change—for example, if an article of clothing is found along a trail. A hasty search team is typically the first to be deployed. Their job is to pair up and move quickly. The goal is to scan high-probability areas and end the search as soon as possible. Time is of the essence with missing children.

Behind the initial search team, a grid search team moves slower and more methodically, combing the area with a long line of volunteers. Grid searchers typically find clues that help more experienced professionals find the missing person.

As each minute passed, Don and Joan became more distressed. There is no chaplain manual that tells you what to do in a missing persons case, or any tragic situation for that matter. There are basic chaplain guidelines and best practices, but in the end, you are on your own when you are at a scene. You rely upon your experience, discernment, and intuition.

My initial mindset with Don and Joan was to be a stabilizing presence, which was easier to achieve because we already knew each other personally. For parents with a missing child, hanging on to your

sanity one minute at a time is a tall order. Often it involves irrational thoughts. Parents of missing children are prone to blame themselves. You never know the timeline for a search and rescue operation. They can be days, even weeks or longer.

A ground team of close to 100 search and rescue professionals and volunteers were canvassing the area where Annie had been last seen. The first hours of any incident are often stressful and confusing. The information is often vague, incomplete, and often contradictory. Initial updates about Annie indicated there had been no leads or clues found. Each update was a devastating blow to Don and Joan. For the parents of a missing child, every excruciating minute feels like an eternity. The hourly chime of their wall clock felt ominous.

The late-night hours surrendered to the sunrise, and there was no Annie.

DAY TWO

By the next morning, the Bay Area news media had picked up the story, and all the San Francisco area news stations were putting up pictures of this sweet pony-tailed 15-year-old girl from Danville who was missing. A hotline number was set up for anyone who might have any relevant information. A Missing Person Flyer was widely posted in the Bay Area and public places in and around the search area.

After the report of a missing person is taken, the subject of the search is entered into the National Crime Information Center computer, which gives law enforcement professionals access to investigative databases to gather important information about the search subject such as cell phone location information, social media accounts, and surveillance camera footage. A Child Is Missing, Inc. (ACIM) is a non-profit organization, which has a missing child alert program

and recovery center that assists law enforcement agencies nationwide in the early search and recovery of missing children.

Don and Joan's emotional strain became more unbearable as each hour passed. They had been without sleep or food for eighteen hours straight. I encouraged them to eat and at least take a nap in order to maintain their strength. With the promise that they would immediately be informed if any new developments were reported, they agreed. They decided to take turns, Joan would nap first while Don ate and then Joan would eat and Don sleep. I decided to go home myself, at least for a few hours.

It was near impossible to sleep, thinking about Annie. Parents know of the sick panicked feeling you get when you lose a child somewhere even if just for a few minutes. I will never forget a vacation trip when we were shopping at a gift store up in the Sierra mountains. Our three children at the time were young, including Trevor, our 2-year-old. Heidi and I wandered around the store with Heidi's mother while we left Trevor with his 6-year-old sister and 8-year-old brother in a small designated play area inside the store.

After about ten minutes we were ready to leave and when we went back to the play area Trevor was gone. His siblings had no clue where he went. It was not a big scare initially until we discovered he was not inside the store. Heidi was on the verge of panic mode, and I ran out of the door and began searching all the stores up and down the strip mall. No Trevor, and no one said they had seen a toddler wandering around. I scanned the parking lot, and just at that moment I saw an old creepy white van pulling out of a parking space and speeding off. Have you ever noticed it is always a white van?!

I knew too much as a first responder chaplain not to be alarmed. There are 1,500 child kidnappings each year. About 250 of them are classified as a "stranger abduction", also known as a "non-family abduction", which is the result of a stranger taking or luring a child.

90% of children abducted by strangers make it home safe and sound. But at that moment in the parking lot, I could only think of those 10% of the cases where the children do not.

My panic button had most definitely been pushed, as I convinced myself that Trevor was in that van. I yelled for Heidi as I was contemplating some sort of Tom Cruise impromptu move to chase down the van. Unfortunately, there were no motorcycles or helicopters anywhere in sight. Right then I heard Heidi call from the parking lot where our van was located (our non-creepy Chevy Astro van), “We found him!!” The little bugger had walked out of the store and was huddled on the other side of our van out of our sight the whole time. Phew!

Lying in bed, my mind drifted back to little Annie, and Don and Joan. And God.

I taught people in church that God is good and all-powerful. We would sing songs titled “God is Good All the Time” and lyrics that proclaimed, “God will make a way where there seems to be no way.” But what about the missing children who are never rescued or found dead. Is God “good” then? Why didn’t God “make a way” for those innocent children? Will the parents of these children think of God as good and all-powerful? Should they? Would I have, if the circumstances with Trevor had turned out tragically different?

Every scene I show up at as a first responder defies the tidy theological explanations I once confidently preached to others as a church pastor.

There is a rather obscure book and story in the Old Testament of the Bible, the Book of Ruth. The story is about a woman named Naomi who is forced by famine to move her family from their homeland and seek refuge in a nearby but unknown country. Suddenly and tragically, the woman’s husband dies and a few years later her two children also die, leaving Naomi alone, destitute, and fearful in a foreign

land. Ruth, who is Naomi's now-widowed daughter-in-law, vows to look after and care for Naomi. The biblical writer of the story uses the Hebrew word 'hesed' (lovingkindness) to describe Ruth's commitment to Naomi, which is a term typically used to describe God.

Speaking of God, he is conspicuously absent in the story. The bottom falls out of Naomi's life and God is nowhere to be found. The biblical writer does not offer any explanation of this random and harrowing tragedy with respect to God. Nothing! This story never really made any sense to me and I cannot remember ever giving a sermon about it. But then one day it hit me. God was not absent in the story. God was Ruth. The love, mercy, goodness, strength, kindness, and loyalty of God showed up in, as, and through Ruth. I realized God never promised that our human journey would be absent of suffering. God never guaranteed that at all times that journey would even make sense. God never stipulated that there would always be a sufficient explanation.

God only promised to show up.

It was useless trying to sleep at home, with Annie on my mind. I decided to call over to one of the police officers I knew over at Don's house to see if there were any new updates. Regrettably, there were not. Day two was over. No Annie.

DAY THREE

As I greeted Don and Joan the next morning, I noted the desperate and exhausted look upon their faces. It was now the third day that Annie had gone missing, and there was no sign or clue of her whereabouts. The grim possibility of foul play and her death was bearing down upon them with each passing hour. Television news stations continued following the story and showed Annie's picture on every newscast.

The situations that police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and SAR (Search and Rescue) teams are faced with are inherently difficult, stressful, and traumatic. Many situations involve gruesome scenes of death. These individuals often provide emotional as well as physical support to traumatized survivors. Although they have received specialized training for this kind of work, beneath their uniform, badge, and gear, they are human beings and are affected by these tragic incidents. PTSD, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and divorce are the mental health collateral damage that occurs. First responders, including police officers and firefighters, are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.

Missing children cases are often the most traumatizing. You get attached to the people involved. As a parent yourself, as many first responders are, you suffer right alongside them. You are vested in the desired outcome, hoping against all hope that the child will be returned home.

My work as a chaplain is a deep commitment to supporting these brave men and women who sacrifice themselves to save others, and aid those in need and crisis. As a former firefighter myself, I understand the emotional toll it takes. There are many barriers that often prevent first responders from receiving the mental health support they need. Denial, stigma on the job, fear of job loss, financial concerns, and access to treatment are some of the obstacles. I view my role as the first line of defense. As a first responder chaplain I try to build a good rapport with these men and women and let them know I am available to talk if they are struggling. One of the most important contributions I can make is to help them take the necessary steps to receive proper mental health support and services.

Everyone was keeping an optimistic spirit about Annie. And then mid-afternoon, word came in that Annie had been sighted. Security cameras had caught her image arriving at a BART subway station in

San Francisco, 25 miles from Danville. Cameras also captured her getting on a train car with her bicycle, headed into the city.

This information raised more questions than it answered. Should it be taken as good news or grim news? It appeared Annie was alone. Why would she travel to San Francisco by herself without telling anyone?

There was a shift of focus in the investigation, and suddenly Don and Joan were being asked about the recent mental state of Annie. Had she had a conflict at home or school? Did she seem down or depressed lately? Had she ever spoken about being bullied? Is there a reason she would have run away from home? Each question got more agonizing to answer. It had to be considered. Could it be possible that she was headed to the Golden Gate Bridge?

The Golden Gate Bridge is the second-most used suicide site in the world. Since the bridge's opening in 1937, there have been more than 1,700 confirmed suicides and 300 unconfirmed. The fatality rate of jumping is over 98%. A number of measures are in place to discourage people from jumping, including telephone hotlines and patrols by emergency personnel and bridge workers. On average, the Bridge Patrol or the California Highway Patrol stops someone from jumping every two or three days.

A few hours later, Don and Joan received the devastating and heart-breaking news; Annie's bicycle was found parked and locked to a bike rack at the Golden Gate Bridge. A homeland security camera located under the bridge captured the image of her falling from the bridge.

Annie's death was classified as a suicide. Her body was never found. Gone, without a trace.

DAY 12

A parent never fully "recovers" from the traumatic death of their child, especially a suicide. Shock, denial, guilt, regret, anger, and depression

are a normal part of their grief. “Oh God, the sea is so great and my boat is so small.”

I have learned a few lessons about the grieving process. There is no timeline. Every person’s grieving process is unique to them; it cannot be planned, forced, condensed, or bypassed. There is no “life hack” for grief. Shakespeare wrote, “To weep is to make less the depth of grief.” As a chaplain, I am often simply creating a space for another human to feel what they feel, to inhabit their heartache and suffering, and release it in the presence of another human being who cares.

I learned another lesson. There is no answer. The twelfth day after the news of Annie’s death, I was having coffee with Don. I wanted to check in with him to see how he and Joan were doing. And that is when he asked me the question, “Why did God let this happen?”

Annie’s death left many questions for which there will never be a sufficient answer. Perhaps Don’s specific question about God was the most troubling. Was God being “good” and “all-powerful” when Annie plunged to her death? What could the suicide of a 15-year-old girl possibly accomplish in the infinite wisdom and plan of God?

I was uncertain about what Don did or did not believe about God. I inquired into his religious background, to which he responded, “I used to go to church.” He shared he had grown up Catholic, attended parochial schools, but found little use for religion when he came of age. Despite having no active involvement in organized religion, his most pressing question about Annie’s death was related to God, “Why did God let this happen?”

Like Naomi’s tragedy, God seemed cruelly absent and silent. What frustrated me about that biblical story was the same frustration with Annie’s death. God was nowhere to be found. At the very moment of desperation, he was needed most, the situation you would think a merciful and caring God would most act, it was like he vanished

without a trace. No divine intervention. No miracle. No explanation. Nothing.

I could not give Don an answer. Years ago, as a pastor, I had an answer for everything. I sometimes wonder if this is the reason so many people leave church. Everyone dresses up, puts on a happy smile, speak Chistianese, act like they have it together, and pretend to know all the answers. I think people eventually see through this make-believe world. It does not square with the realities of life in the real world, lacks credibility and of little use.

Maybe the evidence that God is real, good, and all-powerful is not that God spares us from tragedy, heartache and suffering. Maybe it's that he shows up in it. And maybe not through miraculous intervention but the lovingkindness and solidarity we give to one another. Maybe you and I are God to one another... in the real world. I believe that.

We sat. We wept. We mourned. We embraced. We parted.

Later that night at home, Heidi asked how Don and Joan were doing. I shared a little about my visit with Don. Heidi mentioned that she had read something earlier in the day that said the name 'Annie' means grace.

That is the number one requirement of a first responder chaplain—the grace to admit that you do not have all the answers and the grace to show up in the absence of them.

CHAPTER 3

I DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR THIS

Martin Luther wrote, “Every man must do two things alone; he must do his own believing and his own dying.”

He is right, and he is not. Of course, it is true that every human being's death is an individual, lone, and unshared occurrence. No one can die for you. No one dies with you. There will come a moment when the biological functions that sustain you as a living being will cease. Only you will experience that moment for yourself. That does not mean every person dies unaccompanied when that time comes. If you are fortunate, perhaps your last moments on earth are spent surrounded by those you love.

Typically, a person cannot choose when or how they die. Mark did not expect to die on the side of the road that fateful May evening. Nor did he expect to die in the arms of a stranger. But he did. And that stranger was me.

The fire dispatch call came out on my Motorola two-way radio as a “Priority 2” incident. Priority 3 is walking wounded; Priority 2 is moderate to serious injury or illness, but not life-threatening; Priority

1 is life-threatening. I have had more Priority 1 scenarios that I care to remember. I will take a Priority 2 or 3 any day.

It was a Saturday night when my brother, Leo, and wife, Perla, were visiting us in Austin. Being a volunteer firefighter and EMT for our local fire department meant we were permitted to respond to calls in our own personal vehicles. I was given a siren and red light to pop on my car roof whenever I was dispatched to a medical or fire emergency. On this particular night we were all together watching a movie at our home when my fire department radio blasted an alarm for a Code 3, Priority 2 incident, involving a cyclist. Code 3 means use lights and siren, and as mentioned, Priority 2 indicates non-life-threatening injury.

Austin, home to Lance Armstrong, is known as a cycling city. Even with the numerous bike lanes, occasionally there is a cycling incident when someone is injured. Thankfully, the one I was called to respond to was not serious. Since it was not a life-threatening situation, I thought it would be cool to have Leo and Perla come along. Afterall, who gets to take their family on a Code 3 drive with lights and sirens? It was likely a common injury associated with a fall. No big deal.

Speeding down Bee Cave Road, lights flashing and siren screaming, the sun had set, and darkness had settled in. A quarter mile from the incident, I could see there were multiple emergency vehicles. Not what I expected for a Priority 2.

As we came to a stop near the scene, a firefighter was tending to a young man lying in the middle of the roadway. I cautioned my family to stay in the car until I checked things out. Grabbing my medic bag, I ran to join the firefighter tending to this distressed and agitated cyclist, his mangled bike next to him. Typically, you try not to move a victim until paramedics arrive.

I also noticed on the side of the road an old 70's Chevy El Camino truck, which was missing one of its side decorative metal bars. It was

obviously the vehicle involved in the collision. As we began to assess the victim, I heard the distinct sound of chopper blades in the distance. Sheriff's deputies were in the streets stopping traffic; Austin's Life Flight helicopter had been called in. An additional firetruck and paramedic ambulance came flashing and howling.

This was no Priority 2!

The subject was a 24-year-old male named Mark. He had been riding down Bee Cave Road when the El Camino drifted into the bike lane and struck him. He was lying face down in his cycling gear, groaning. I suspected he broke his collarbone, an excruciating injury. The firefighter and I decided to gently roll the young man over to further assess his condition. As we turned him, a metal bar protruding from his torso became visible, which the firefighter had not noticed until then.

The driver sideswiped the cyclist and he was instantly impaled with the decorative spear-like bar, which had detached from the side of the low-profile truck. He had been knocked to the ground with a metal bar extruding from his chest, fighting for his life.

Two paramedics hustled over from their ambulance and instructed me to hold the young man still while they inserted an IV into his arm. Now pitch dark outside, the deafening helicopter hovered above this perilous scene with its floodlights beaming down upon us. Sirens, lights, shouting, chaos, trauma; what started as a fairly routine call had turned into a MASH unit. This is not what I meant for my family to witness. I was so absorbed in this triage at hand that I had forgotten they were even there.

A good friend of mine, Kevin, who followed in my footsteps as a volunteer firefighter and only a few weeks on the job, arrived on the scene and was asked to hold the IV bag while myself and the paramedics tried to stabilize the young man. Suddenly, the young man was seized by hysteria, screaming, and choking, "I can't breathe!"

Oxygen was being ripped from his lungs. Mark had gone into respiratory arrest, which possibly meant he was also in cardiac arrest. With the metal bar speared in his chest, he was drowning from internal bleeding.

The Life Flight helicopter landed a few yards away. The young man was stretched across my lap, fighting, and gasping for every breath. I exhorted him, "Stay with us, Mark! Hang in there! We're going to get you out of here!" He was quickly losing the battle. We began CPR, and heard the orders, "Hot load! Hot load!" which meant we were going to attempt to load Mark on the helicopter while it was still running and rotors spinning. "Don't die on me, Mark! Hang in there! We're gonna take a ride!"

But Mark could hold on no longer. There was no more fight left in him. We did everything we could, but it was too little and too late. Lights flashing, sirens screaming, chopper blades thrumming, voices shouting, Mark died in my arms in the middle of the road on that Saturday night in May. Face to face, as he laid in my lap, I watched him relinquish his life. Breath by labored breath, I escorted Mark to his end.

I have been asked several times what it's like to watch someone die. In traumatic cases of a violent death such as this, it is vexing. Cradling and watching Mark's last gasps for life is a scene that has been seared in my memory. I will never be able to expunge his voice and words from my consciousness, "I can't breathe!"

Lying in the street, with this young man's lifeless body in my arms, I felt an icy numbness coursing through my veins. I was gutted, and shut my eyes in physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. Everything stopped. The world fell deafeningly quiet, and empty, and heavy, and cruel. Somewhere in the distance there was a world happening, while I was free-falling into an abyss of anguish.

154,000 people in our world die every day. That is 110 people every minute. We all know that every human being born into the world, dies. None of us are unclear about this fundamental fact of human existence. But when someone we love dies; we feel utterly unprepared for it. It happens to everyone, and yet when death rips from our lives a person we love, we feel robbed, assailed, and forsaken. We look for someone or something to blame. But who? Robbed by life? Forsaken by God? Swindled by the universe? As a chaplain for many years I have at times blamed myself. Maybe if I had gotten to Mark five minutes sooner, maybe if I had done more, maybe if I had taken a different measure, maybe if I could have better stabilized his hysteria, maybe if..."

I knew virtually nothing about Mark. Was this lifeless body in my lap someone's father, someone's son, someone's husband, someone's brother? We grieve deeply when we lose a person who matters to us but holding Mark in those moments it hit me that every human being matters. Each of those 154,000 human beings who died today, matter.

As a chaplain, I do not traffic in "answers." Instead, I have learned to make peace with the world as it is and have faith that it means more than the way it appears and feels in any given moment. There is a lot I do not and never will understand about life, existence, and the human journey, but there are a few things I know that are true of every person alive, including you the reader. You matter. You have a life. You will die. You do not know when. These facts are reason enough to hold your life and every life, reverently, compassionately, and spartanly. Greek philosopher Seneca wrote, "Begin at once to live, and count each separate day as a separate life." Maybe the gift that comes with death, is we learn to love life more.

"Nick! Nick, you okay?," I felt a hand on my shoulder. The paramedic jolted me back to reality—sweat, blood, lights, sirens, police radios, chopper blades, shouting. They removed Mark from my

lap, lifted him onto a gurney, and carted him away. Then he was gone. Gone from the scene. Gone from the earth. Gone!

In the chaos, I looked up at my friend Kevin, a newbie firefighter, who was standing above me in his firefighter bunker gear. Kevin had turned his life around after spending seven years in one of the most violent prisons in Texas. He was tough as nails. But I will never forget the chilling look on his face and what he said, “I didn’t sign up for this!”

Kevin’s words had particular meaning to our work as first responders. No one chooses to be a first responder because we want to witness or be a part of someone else’s tragedy or death. We do this because we want to rescue, save, and protect people, and come to their aid in moments of dire need. It is not in our mind to tend to a person for whom death is certain, but to exhaust every possibility to prevent their death. We did everything we could to save Mark, but rather than avert his death, we watched him die. Kevin’s words were true, we didn’t sign up for this.

But there was something deeper in his words that each of us can identify with. It speaks to the reality of the human situation. When we experience a tragic loss or have our hearts broken, when we are struck down by hardship or catastrophe, when we suffer rejection or betrayal, when our lives are reduced to a pile of rubble or our dreams dashed to the ground, when the world feels cruel, heartless and indifferent, in times of darkness, hopelessness or despair, a voice cries out from deep within us, “I didn’t sign up for this!” Life can be beautiful, rapturous, blissful, and transcendent. But there are also I-didn’t-sign-up-for-this moments. For every chaplain call I respond to, there is someone having one of those moments.

The truth is, I *did* sign up for this. I knew full well that being a first responder chaplain meant tragedy, trauma, and death. The whole point of being a chaplain is coming alongside people with comfort,

compassion, and support in those very moments. It does not mean I like the fact that people are stricken by loss, heartache, and suffering, but I signed up to stand with them in those times.

I see the worst of human suffering on a regular basis. I have no illusions about how fragile, precarious, and perilous the human predicament can be. Yet every morning, I get up ready to do it all over again. One day I realized that I *did* sign-up for this, I enlisted in another day of life, another day of being human, another day in a world that is both beautiful and tragic. A lot of it I do not like and most of it I cannot explain, but I am choosing it. I am a card-carrying member of a long line of the human species, who have been signing up for this since the beginning of time.

It occurred to me one day that the choice to sign up is God. That maybe God is the primal will to live. Today 154,000 people will die: it could be me, could be you, could be your child, spouse, parent, or best friend. Yet, each of us starts over again every day, in spite of all we know, against all we know. Why?

E.E. Cummings wrote, “Unbeing dead isn’t being alive.” What is the “being alive” part that is distinctly more than simply being “undead”? There is something within us that is more than the activity of our lungs in breathing and the functioning of our arteries to pump blood. There is a part of us that wills to love, have compassion, act courageously, experience beauty, be kindhearted, find meaning, live nobly, become ourselves fully, know belonging, taste transcendence. What is *that* part—the part that signs up for life where a young man pedals out of his driveway on a carefree May evening, never to make it back home again?

There came a point in my life when I stopped being disappointed with God about all the world’s terrible tragedies and hardships, including those in my own life, that made no sense and defied any reasonable explanation. Instead, I started finding God in my desire to walk

into that world each day and be fully alive with love, compassion, and courage. My life changed when I realized that God was not making me do this, but I wanted to myself. I want to be alive. Not just undead but truly and fully alive.

The helicopter was lifting off, and Kevin helped me to my feet. We were both spent. Amidst the lights and sirens, I reached out to give him a hug. There is a unique and unbreakable bond you feel with those who choose to do this work. As we stood there, I spotted Heidi and the family down the street. In all the chaos, I had completely forgotten they were there. Sweat and blood on my face, Heidi's eyes welled up in tears as I walked toward her. I came undone, standing there in the middle of Bee Cave Road.

I do not know what will kill me first—the beauty of this world or the sorrow of it. There is a bliss that no amount of ache can steal away. And there is an ache that no amount of bliss can rescue you from. The deal is both the beauty, and the sorrow. It is what it means to be fully alive. You are supposed to feel both the bliss and the ache. Life is not supposed to make sense; it is supposed to make you more fully human.

A person could ask why God allows suffering in our world. But we could also ask why we would choose to keep living in it. People often think of God with the former question, and never give any thought to God with the latter one.

Martin Luther did not quite cover all the bases. Yes, there are the two things he said we do alone—we do our own believing and we do our own dying. There is a third. We do our own living.

That is what we signed up for.

CHAPTER 4

B-E-L-I-E-V-E

Human beings believe things.

We have beliefs about weighty matters like the meaning of life and what is beyond the grave. We have beliefs about lesser issues like who makes the best pizza, or which smartphone is superior, iPhone or Android. We do not give a second thought to some of our beliefs. The sun rising tomorrow is never in question, we just believe it will rise.

A belief is an acceptance that something exists or is true. Belief normally implies the absence of doubt. I believe I will one day die. I am certain of it. At some point in time there will be a termination of all my biological functions that sustain me as a living organism. I have plenty of evidence to substantiate my belief.

There may not be factual certainty that something is true, but that does not stop a person from believing it. Contrary to popular belief, if you are hit by a penny dropped from the Empire State Building it will not kill you. Lightning does strike the same place twice and many more times than that. Despite the National Enquirer, there is no proof that Elvis is still alive, notwithstanding the recent citing at a Dairy Queen outside Memphis. And of course, there is the five-second rule—if you drop food on the floor and pick it up within five seconds it is safe to eat. However, research shows that salmonella can survive on the floor for weeks. I suggest you follow the no-second rule.

Our beliefs shape and determine our experience of life and the world. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, “A man sees in the world what he carries in his heart.” If you believe something is true, whether it really is or not, it is true for you. For centuries people believed the world was flat and feared the possibility of falling off the edge of the earth into an abyss of nothingness. A person is governed, and often limited by the beliefs he or she chooses.

One of the most prevailing beliefs a person has is their belief about God. What one believes about God can determine what a person thinks about themselves, the purpose and meaning of life, and what happens when you die. A belief about God can engender fear, shame, and bigotry, or inspire love, peace, beauty, and compassion.

Did it ever occur to you that you can choose your beliefs about God? Chances are that you did not choose the beliefs about God you have right now, but learned or inherited them from your family, culture, or religious background. Setting aside different beliefs about God across the spectrum of the world’s religions, within Christianity itself there are thousands of denominations worldwide that believe different things about God.

What do you believe about God? What factors influenced your beliefs? Are your beliefs about God consciously and deliberately chosen, or did you inherit them from others?

These questions hit me in a way they never had before when I noticed atop a fireplace mantle—in separate big brass letters—the spelled-out word “B-E-L-I-E-V-E.”

Living in Austin, one early morning a couple of weeks before Christmas, while having breakfast with friends, my pager buzzed. It read: “Priority 1 Cardiac Arrest. Chaplain needed. 331 Sycamore Avenue.” Taking a few final gulps of coffee, I excused myself and promptly headed to the address.

A cardiac arrest rarely ends with a “save.” When the chaplain is dispatched, it usually means a death has occurred, and they need me to console the family. As much as I see my chaplaincy work as a calling for moments just like this, a part of me would rather be anywhere else on the planet besides a place of death and grief.

Chaplain calls are full of emotion for everyone involved. The focus is on those at the scene who are fresh in anguish and despair. Meanwhile, the chaplain must keep a check on his or her own emotions, which is not always easy to do given the disturbing situations we often encounter. Even with all our training and experience, chaplains are still human beings, and it is impossible to check our emotions at the door. I assumed this call involved an adult, most likely an older male which is a common cardiac arrest scenario in the early mornings.

My assumption was wrong.

Typically, when called by dispatch, I ask, “What is the age? Male or female? Nature of the death? Who is at the residence?” Those are the most pertinent questions for me. But in this case, I did not ask.

I cannot ever remember a scene as eerie as this one. Pulling up to the house, there was a sea of flashing lights from police and sheriff cars, firetruck, and ambulance. But despite all these emergency vehicles, you could hear a pin drop. Outside the house there was a haunting hush and an unsettling stillness.

The fire chief came out the front door, and as he approached me, I asked, “What do we have?” A grim expression filled his face, and he said in a low and somber tone, “This is a bad one, Nick. The Osborne family. A 10-year-old boy died suddenly from an unknown cause. His mother and father, along with two younger sisters, are inside the home. It’s not good.”

My heart sank. The death of a child is always the most intense and disturbing. I braced myself as I stepped through the open front door. How people display severe grief varies. You never know what to

expect. The scene of every tragedy feels like holy ground. The personal space where a person is cracked open by catastrophic loss is one in which you tread lightly, respectfully, and humbly.

The first thing that caught my eye was the sight of a mother draped over the body of her son laying in the middle of the living room floor. As a first responder chaplain of twenty-one years, there is a part of every tragic scene that becomes a part of me, usually in the form of images like this. At the most inopportune times—sitting at a stop light, at a dinner party, the middle of the night—these snapshots will intrude upon my mind.

The house was full of police officers, sheriff's deputies, firefighters, and paramedics, all standing around the perimeter of the room and into the kitchen with looks of unbelief written on their faces. They had tried their best to revive the young boy but to no avail. Grief and despair were the outcomes through no fault of their own, but that does not mitigate some measure of remorse they feel for failing to resuscitate the young boy.

Everyone looks in my direction as the paramedic steps over to brief me on who is who and what happened. I can see the relief in the eyes of the first responders that someone "official" had arrived to deal with the distraught parents.

I stood motionless, uncertain how to begin a dialogue with a mother who is hemorrhaging with heartache and undone with grief, laying over her son. Who am I to even consider interrupting this? Searching the room for the father, someone points out that he is down the hall making phone calls. For the moment he is preoccupied with the task of communicating with relatives, but I can hear his anguish as he explains this nightmare to loved ones. The agony in his voice pierces the whole house.

Over the years, I have learned to fight the urge to interject myself into a situation, and patiently wait for an opportunity to be

meaningfully present. As a chaplain, you must be attentive to what is occurring in the moment. I was not sensing it was time to interrupt the grieving mother and continued scouting the room, noticing the pictures hanging on the walls and the Christmas decorations.

After a few minutes, the mother turned her head in the direction where I was standing, and we made eye contact. I moved closer to introduce myself, reverently bending down on one knee beside her on the floor. For the first time, the boy came into my full view. I studied his face, his features, his pale soft skin, his wavy blonde hair. For a moment I saw my son, Trenton, in the boy's face. They looked to be about the same age, and the resemblance was chilling. There are moments when it hits you that the same tragedies that strike others every day could just as likely be yours.

I reached out and gently placed my hand on the mother's shoulder and introduced myself, "Mrs. Osborne, my name is Nick, and I am the chaplain for our police and fire department. I am sorry about your son." She could hardly respond as she looked up with swollen, tear-filled eyes, grimacing with anguish. I have seen this look far too many times that I care to remember.

There is no script for a first responder chaplain. You go with your intuition. At that moment I feel an openness to lay down on the floor next to her son. She says, "I don't know what to do? What do I do?" Letting her question sink in, I respond, "Right now you are doing what you need to do. Just be here on the floor close to your son." She protests, "How can I go on? I can't do this. My sweet Ian. Why? This can't be real."

Gently stroking my hand through her son's blonde hair, I said, "Ian is such a handsome boy." I slowly reclined on my side next to him, while she laid on his other side. With his body between us, I could see both his face and hers, as she kissed his forehead and tears of heartbreak dropped from her cheeks onto his. I eventually broke the

silence by asking her a few questions about her son, their family, and the two younger girls.

Laying on the floor as we talked, I noticed on the fireplace mantle—in separate big brass letters—he spelled-out word “B-E-L-I-E-V-E.” It is such a common word; a simple verb, which means to accept or have confidence in something as true. The word felt discomfoting as it towered above the scene on the floor. “Believe what?” I thought to myself. Was this a religious family who believed in God? Was it a Christmastime sentiment for the children; the anticipation of Santa’s goodies on Christmas morning? And what was the relevance of this word for a mother grieving the death of her son?

After a while consoling mom, I got up and searched for the father. Tending to his two younger daughters in their back bedroom was serving as a temporary distraction from the acute pangs of emotional pain. I poked my head in the door and introduced myself to him. After some friendly banter with the girls, he and I stepped out to talk.

People have different reactions when I introduce myself as a chaplain; they are mostly appreciative, knowing I intend to offer comfort and emotional support. Likely, they will also think of me as a member of the clergy, which could either be positive or negative, depending upon their religious background and experience.

One way I have found to build trust with a person in a traumatic situation is to offer my support in practical ways. I asked the father if there was something specific I could help them with right away. He needed help sorting out what would happen next. The mother overheard our conversation and came over. I delicately explained that the medical examiner would arrive within the hour to take the boy’s body downtown for examination. Following this, the body would be released to a funeral home.

There is typically great distress for the family when the medical examiner arrives. The separation of the body from the home is an

unforgiving moment for the family and often an unbearable scene to watch. I did my best to prepare them to say their goodbyes, knowing that the removal of the body will reignite the volatility of their loss and heartache. Everyone on the scene was on edge, bracing themselves for what was coming. When the medical examiner arrives, the first responders will typically leave. Everyone, except me.

When the medical examiner pulled up to the house, I encouraged the parents to spend a final few moments with their deceased son, and then tend to their two younger girls. It is torturous for a parent to watch their child zipped up in a body bag and taken away. I do my best to prevent this situation but do not always succeed. Even for a seasoned chaplain like myself, it is a traumatic ordeal. By the time the medical examiner was finished, friends and extended family members had arrived to offer their emotional support. The mother and father did not see the examination and the removal of the boy's body, but when they re-entered the room and their son was no longer there, the floodgates of grief burst wide open.

With their friends and family members present, it was time for me to consider how to depart the scene. You never leave a situation feeling like your work is done or that things are "okay" enough for you to go. Losing a child is not "okay." It will not be "okay" tomorrow or the day after that. It will not be "okay" next week or next month. It will not be "okay," ever.

I had a conversation with the Osborne's to say my goodbyes. Giving them my card, I assured them that they could call me at any time. I promised to follow-up with them, which I did over the next several days and weeks. You cannot help but become personally invested in these tragedies. Having been there several hours, I began to build a meaningful connection with both mom and dad. There is an intimate bond that is forged in the crucible of suffering. I felt particularly

attached to this traumatic event, being a father myself of a son the same age as Ian.

The theology I learned in seminary and preached in church often falls short in the tragedies I encounter as a first responder chaplain. A safe distance removed from the suffering of the world, I sliced and diced the hardships of life into the theological categories of God's "perfect will," and God's "permissive will." God's "perfect will" is God's perfect plan for each of us and the entire created order. It is a reality of goodness, harmony, peace, and joy, and the absence of all evil and suffering. The Bible depicts or represents this state of being in descriptions such as the Garden of Eden and Heaven. There is also God's "permissive will," which is what God is willing to allow in the short-term before this perfect scenario emerges. God's "permissive will" means that an all-powerful God chooses not to prevent or intervene amidst life's hardships and suffering.

Suppose I had tried to explain this concept to the Osborne's as some sort of defense of God and faith, in light of the death of their son. Most parents will not have to bury their children, so why was Ian's death on God's "permissive will" list? Let me ask you, if you could have prevented Ian's death, would you have? Or would you have allowed it? Would you be okay with God "permitting" the loss of your child?

While we are at it, we would have to add to God's permissible list, every horrific, heartbreaking, traumatic incident I have ever been called to as a first responder chaplain. Further still, consider what other horrors are on God's "permissive will" list: Holocaust; 9/11; Rwandan genocide; human trafficking; starvation; war; slavery; child abuse; teen suicide, to name but a few. Would a God of love, goodness, mercy, protection, and justice, sign-off on the Holocaust an okay thing to happen?

See the problem here?

Those block letters displayed across the mantle in the Osborne home, confront me: B-E-L-I-E-V-E.

Believe what?

What is a heartbroken mother swathed over the body of her dead ten-year-old son supposed to believe? Should she have faith in a God who saw fit to have the death of her son on his permissible list? Should she be afraid for what else she loves that made it on the list? There is a Bible verse that states that God will not give you more than you are capable of enduring. Seriously? Is it necessary for God to test the theory to this degree? Is that what a merciful and loving God would do?

When I got back to the house, Heidi was on the phone discussing plans with her sister who was coming to celebrate the Christmas holiday at our home. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table to return a few emails. One of my firefighter friends had emailed me about getting a group of guys together to attend an Oakland Raiders game. As I was scouting out their home game dates, I peered over the top of my laptop screen and my eyes caught a wood pallet sign Heidi had hung on the front room wall for Christmas. The sign had the word “Immanuel” stenciled across it.

For a few moments I pondered this word. It is used in the Bible in association with the birth of Jesus. The twenty-third verse in the first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel reads, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us.’” God with us.

Too often, the traditional view of God comes off feeling like God is a superhuman being somewhere over the rainbow and off yonder in the neverlands, managing the cosmic affairs of the universe. Two common beliefs about God that I view as false and detrimental, is that God is somewhere up in the sky and we are separate from him. God was pleased to accept the term “Immanuel” for a name to reveal the truth that God is with us where we are, and there is no separation.

I have studied the Bible that my Christianity is based upon, and I cannot find any place where God says that our human journey will be or should be absent of hardship, adversity, tragedy, loss, and suffering. To the contrary, God tells us that our lifetime on earth will include difficulty. The hardship, difficulty and suffering that Jesus himself experienced is evidence of this fact. Saint Paul, who authored the bulk of the New Testament, endured many severe trials and tribulations.

Rather than some cosmic deity up in the sky somewhere, dispassionately seeing human suffering as a function of his permissive will, God joins the human journey in the flesh as Jesus and he is not spared this same suffering. Too often, Christianity makes the story of God about how he is going to save us from the world but overlooks the story of how he joins us in it. “Immanuel” does not mean “God distant from us,” “God separated from us,” “God looking down upon us” or “God insulating us.” No, Immanuel means, “God WITH us.”

Jesus often proclaimed, “The kingdom of God has come.” People looked around, taking note of all the hardships of the world and their own difficulties, and said they could see no such kingdom. To which Jesus responded, they were looking in the wrong place. He told them they had to look within themselves to find the kingdom of God. Jesus said, you find the love, goodness, grace, compassion, strength, and peace of God inside yourself. In other words, God is not only “with us, God is “within” us.

Did you realize that any God you find inside a church you brought in yourself? Likewise, I know that God is present at every scene before I ever arrive. And I know that I am an expression of the life of God within me through my work as first responder chaplain.

Charles Dickens’ novella, *A Christmas Carol*, is a classic Christmas story. But I am also reminded of his other well-known book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, which opens with these words, “It was the best of times,

it was the worst of times...” That about sums up the human journey, don’t you think?

Ian was a gift to the Osborne family for ten years—it was the best of times. His life was tragically cut short—it was the worst of times. The joy of his life does not spare them the heartache of his death. But their tragic loss will never diminish the happiness of the time they had together. God was there for all of it, both the joy and the grief.

A couple of days following Ian’s death, I received a phone call one evening from Mr. Osborne. He apologized for ringing late, but I assured him he could contact me at any time, day, or night. He explained he had a request to make of me. He asked me to officiate Ian’s memorial service the following week. I was deeply touched by his petition and accepted.

Over a thousand classmates and community friends attended Ian’s memorial service. It was one of the most heartrending and beautiful occasions I have ever experienced. I was moved by what this young boy meant to so many people in the short life he had lived.

In my remarks at the service, I shared about the word B-E-L-I-E-V-E, spelled out across the mantle in the Osborne home. Each of us experiences suffering, hardship, and loss in life. It may not be the death of a child; it could be the end of a marriage, a serious health issue, financial misfortune, depression, addiction, injustice, loneliness, rejection, or the loss of a loved one. In moments like these, what do we believe about ourselves, about life, about God?

What if we believed that God is not watching us from somewhere in the sky above, but he is with us in every moment. Rather than believing that God could never understand our pain and suffering, what if we believed he endured it all himself. What if we stopped thinking that we find God within the four walls of a church, but we find him inside ourselves.

I am not trying to tell you what to believe about God. I am asking you to consider the possibility that to “believe” may not be the assurance that God will spare you of suffering but knowing that God walks with you through it. To “believe” may not mean expecting divine intervention from on high when we struggle, but expressing that kingdom of compassion, empathy, solidarity, and tenderness within ourselves, to one another in moments of grief, heartache, and suffering.

The most important questions about God are not answered in creeds or sorted out in elaborate theological constructions. People are often searching for answers outside themselves, but maybe the answers we most want, and need are within us. Those answers may not be clear all at once, and we have to live ourselves into them. Maybe this is what it means to B-E-L-I-E-V-E.

CHAPTER 5

THROWN INTO THE FIRE

Religion at its worst induces the fear of God. The Book of Revelation conjures up images of sinners being “thrown into the lake of fire.” Hellfire preaching uses the fear of eternal torture in the flames of Hell to manipulate non-believers to convert to Christianity. I was once a church pastor myself. Rather than being the hellfire preacher, I was the one thrown into the fire... literally.

On one of my first Sundays as a pastor in Austin, Texas I preached a sermon which included a story of fighting a fierce structure fire when I was a young man serving as a reserve firefighter. Several men in the congregation who were volunteer firefighters for the local fire district approached me after the sermon with an invitation to attend a meeting hoping I would consider becoming a volunteer again. I resisted for six months after their repeated attempts to lure me to a meeting. I finally gave in and agreed to go just to “check it out.”

After the meeting, the fire chief put on a full-court press to coax me into joining the department. He presented me with a whole set of brand-new firefighting gear—boots, pants, jacket, helmet, gloves, as well as a pager and radio. It worked.

My next hairbrained idea was stealthily putting on all my firefighter gear in the garage when I got home that evening and bursting through the back-door yelling, “Firefighter dad is home! I’ve come to

rescue you!” My children were toddlers and you should have seen the look on their faces. I scooped them both up, one in each arm, as if I was rescuing them yelling, “I’ll save you!!” It was hilarious!

Heidi was not amused.

With a dumbfounded look written across her face, she said, “Really, Nick?” She reminded me that I was over 40, had a bad back, and calmly suggested that perhaps it was time to grow up. Later that night she asked, “So, what do you do if the radio goes off and there is a call?” Hmmm. Good question. I had not thought it through that far yet. I answered, “I don’t know. They didn’t say.”

The very next night just after dark we were standing in the kitchen and the fire radio sounded an alert. A voice came over the radio, “CE-Bar Fire and Rescue, respond to a structure fire!” Heidi looked at me and asked, “What are you going to do?” I thought about it for a second and said, “I’m now a firefighter! I’m going!”

I jumped into my Ford Taurus and headed to the location. I was not sure what I was going to do when I got there. I had not quite thought it through that far yet.

The ominous glow of a large residential structure fire lit up the nighttime sky a mile away from the scene. As I came within a few blocks of the raging inferno I found a place to park in the neighborhood and suited up in my new firefighter gear. Residents crowded the street watching the fire, as I trotted through them toward the blaze.

There are around 1,216,600 firefighters serving in 27,228 fire departments nationwide and responding to emergencies from 58,150 fire stations. Of those firefighters, 31% are career firefighters and 69% are volunteers. A Fire department responds to a fire every 23 seconds throughout the United States. Firefighters experience a steady onslaught of trauma and intense human emotion. Perilous flames, collapsing buildings, the anguish of burn victims, explosions, automobile accidents, suicide attempts, and even terrorist attacks. Such

harrowing events come with the territory of first responders. On average, firefighters will work 10, 24-hour shifts per month. Firefighters do not get holidays off.

There are six known classes of fires. Some include gases, liquids, metals, and oils. Each one requires a different approach and it is up to the firefighters to decipher which type of fire they are dealing with. After subduing the flames, firefighters are tasked with finding the cause. They discover the starting point of a fire by using their knowledge of fire and deductive skills. They use their scientific knowledge of chemistry, physics, and engineering to deduce where and when a fire started. Besides pinpointing the origin, firefighters can also determine if a fire occurred by accident or arson.

First responders risk their lives daily to serve the public. Many times, their risks and sacrifices go unnoticed and unappreciated. A firefighter never knows for sure if he or she will return to their family at the end of a shift. In a moment, a firefighter's life may be in grave danger, but they endure this for us. Usually an unsung hero, a firefighter may be of any color or ethnic background, male or female, but each one serves us every day. John F. Kennedy said, "All men are created equal, then a few become firemen."

It only takes half a minute for a small flame to turn into a full-blown life-threatening fire. Take a stovetop incident, since cooking fires account for almost half of all home fires. A few seconds is all it takes for a pot or pan to boil over the rim, spilling flammable oil-laden contents directly onto the cooking flame or red-hot electric burner. In a few hundredths of a second grease or other fatty substances ignite into flames.

Within seconds of a flame-up, fire easily spreads. Splattered grease or oil residue on a dirty stovetop will ignite, causing flames to travel across the range. Oil residue on cooking utensils also catch fire, and other combustibles like paper towels, paper or cardboard packaging,

and dry dish towels nearby will begin to smolder or burn. As the fire grows higher and hotter, more flammable objects and furnishings will ignite from spreading flames, including wooden cabinets and countertops, wallpaper, hanging baskets, and curtains. With the fire moving beyond the stovetop and other areas beginning to burn, a denser plume of scorching air and smoke rises and spreads across the ceiling.

In just a few minutes, the heat from a room fire can reach 1100 degrees Fahrenheit. As this happens, flashover occurs. Everything in the room bursts into flames—wood dining table, wood and upholstered chairs, cookbooks, curtains, and wall decorations. The oxygen in the room is virtually sucked out; glass windows shatter. Balls of fire and flames shoot out windows and doorways. The upstairs fills with thick, hot, noxious smoke and the stairwell is impassable. When you have flashover in a room, temperatures can reach up to 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit—now, all of the other rooms in the house are severely at risk.

After making it to the front of the burning home, it took me a few moments to absorb the scene. Several dozen firefighters were working frantically to suppress the raging fire that was engulfing the home. Multiple fire departments were active on the scene. It has been classified a “mutual aid” operation, which is an agreement among emergency responders to lend assistance across jurisdictional boundaries. It was chaos. I stood there frozen, not sure how to enter the fray. Just then a captain a few feet away pointed at me and yelled out, “You! Get a SCBA on, and follow these three, mount an offensive on the bravo side.” A SCBA is an abbreviation for a *self-contained breathing apparatus*, a device worn by rescue workers and firefighters to provide breathable air in an IDLH—*immediately dangerous to life or health atmosphere*.

When we got to the bravo or left side of the house, a firefighter inside yelled out, “Need refills now!” Their air cylinders were depleted

and had to be refilled. I was charged with this task and jumped into action. For thirty minutes I furiously refilled canisters and ran them back.

It took five fire departments from three counties to knock down all visible fire, but the house was a total loss. With refilled air tanks, we transitioned to “overhaul and salvage,” which is walking through a house making sure there are no hidden fires or hot spots while trying to salvage anything of value. Protecting property is a responsibility of firefighters. Property can be irreplaceable or of high sentimental value. In some cases, contents can be more valuable than the structure itself. As I walked through the smoldering house, I recovered a few shattered and melted picture frames from the rubble, with photographs of what looked to be a mother and father, and three young children. As devastating as this fire was in terms of property damage, the fact that there was no loss of life or injuries was a victory.

Heidi greeted me in the driveway when I returned home. I stepped out of the car, still in my firefighter gear, covered in soot and grime. She stood stoically and glared at me. After brushing myself off, I looked at her and said mischievously, “I checked it out.” Trying to contain it, a smile forced its way across her face, which was one part, I should beat you with a stick right now, and one part, I can’t not love you.

After a long hot shower, I related the entire account to Heidi over a bowl of beef and barley stew. There was danger, risk, and peril involved in fighting this fire, but there was also courage, camaraderie, and a sense of transcendent purpose and greater good involved. This is why so many little boys and girls dream of being a firefighter. There is a noble, heroic, gutsy, hallowed, and lion-hearted essence to it.

I do not remember a whole lot from my college psychology class, but the concept of an archetype stuck with me. An archetype is a pattern of behavior that becomes a prototype that we associate with

a particular symbol or kind of person. They are typically recurring motifs in literature, art, and film. For example, “the sage” is a well-known archetype. Yoda, the Oracle, Gandalf, Mr. Miyagi fit the sage archetype.

Another archetype, which is in the mind of every young boy or girl who wants to be a firefighter, is the archetype of the hero. The hero braves danger, risk, adversity, and foe to carry out a good feat, save the day, and rescue people in distress. Think Batman, Odysseus, and Joan of Arc. The typical hero is called into a risky mission. They enter an unknown world of mysteries and dangers, and must overcome trials, tribulations, adversities, and foes along the way. These battles target upon the hero’s fears, worries, and doubts. The hero trusts in themselves and their cause, and courageously press forward. The mission is accomplished, and the hero returns home a transformed person.

The firefighter fits this archetype as the ‘everyman’ hero. We do not leap over buildings in a single bound or fly over buildings in a cape, we run into buildings that are ablaze, imperiling our lives to rescue another.

Kids and adults alike, we all cherish a hero. Not only do we love and adore heroes, but each of us also wants to be a hero. Stories of courage and bravery rouse something deeply rooted within us. We imagine ourselves with the courage to champion a great cause, brave obstacles, and danger to win a grand victory, and return home a changed and transformed person. Heroic stories remind us of who we are and wish we could be. We feel we are meant to be heroes. Comic book writer, Grant Morrison, wrote, “We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us. We can analyze them out of existence, kill them, ban them, mock them, and still they return, patiently reminding us of who we are and what we wish we could be.”

In the Bible, the eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews honors those who lived their lives heroically. I have never been on a scene

as a first responder chaplain that was more gruesome than the scenarios this chapter describes. It includes people who were: “tortured”, “flogged”, “chained and imprisoned”, “thrown into fire”, “stoned”, “sawed in two”, “killed by the sword”, “destitute, persecuted and mistreated”, “wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.”

Why were they treated this way? Because they were unwilling to compromise their faith, conviction, and purpose in life. Their faith, conviction, and purpose were greater than any hardship, adversity, foe, or suffering. And for this, the writer of the Book of Hebrews said this about these heroes, “...the world was not worthy of them.”

Sometimes the world feels like a burning building. Our lives can feel like being thrown into a fire. We have a few options here. We can blame and be angry with God. We can spiral down into the abyss of trying to figure out why it is happening. We can despair that life is void of all meaning, goodness, mercy, and purpose. We can become bitter, resentful, and jaded.

But there is another option. We can courageously choose to lean into our hardships and refuse to be defeated by our suffering. We can persevere in trust, believe, and hope, in the face of adversity and tragedy. We can valiantly choose to get back up after we have been knocked down, for the fifth time. We can choose to live another day or another hour, even when life feels dark and desperate. That is a hero.

Have you ever noticed that our finest moments often follow our darkest ones? 9/11 was one of the most devastating, deadliest, and despairing moments in our nation’s history. Firefighters I wish I knew lost their lives or were severely injured. 343 firefighters, including a chaplain, perished in the line of duty. Firefighter Michael F. Cammarata was only 22. William M. Feehan was 72.

Mychal Fallon Judge was the chaplain to the New York City Fire Department, who lost his life. 3,000 people attended Judge's funeral Mass on September 15, 2001, at St. Francis of Assisi Church, which was presided over by Cardinal Edward Egan, the Archbishop of New York. In an interview in 1992, Mychal Judge said, "I wonder what my last hour will be. Will it be trying to help someone, trying to save a life?"

But following that dark moment in our nation's history, was one of our brightest. Our love, compassion, faith, courage, humanity, solidarity, fortitude, generosity, kindness, beauty, tenderness, resolve, and nobility were on display. In the face of 9/11 we became wounded healers, one to another. I believe Mychal Judge and many others who gave and lost their lives in that tragedy would have made the Hebrews chapter 11 list.

You know who else would make the list? Candace Lightner, who founded Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD), after her 13-year-old daughter, Cari, was killed by a drunk driver. So would Richard Miles. He was wrongly convicted of a murder he did not commit and spent 15 years in prison before he was proven to be innocent. After prison he became the founder of Miles of Freedom, a non-profit organization that aids and supports individuals returning home from prison and their families. Our world is filled with everyday heroes who endure, overcome, and transcend heartache, injustice, and hardship.

You and I both know there will be hardship, adversity, loss, injustice, and affliction in this world. Each of us will be thrown into the fire of grief, heartache, and despair. None of us are exempt. But tragedies are turned into triumphs, beauty is made from ashes, hope rises from the rubble, and our moments of deepest transformation are forged in the crucible of suffering.

As the writer of Hebrews said, the world is not worthy of people like this, which means that the highest expression of what it means

to be human is when we heroically lean into our darkest moments and transformed by them. You do not have to fight fires, be faster than a speeding bullet, or see your name in a news headline to be a hero. You do not need special gear, a position, or a title, or be on some epic mission. A hero is simply someone who keeps going, keeps trusting, keeps believing, and keeps living. Christopher Reeve wrote, “A Hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”

Maybe “faith” is not the assurance that our lives will always make sense or that God will even make sense but putting one foot in front of the other when faith doesn’t.

Here’s to all the people who...

were told they were incurably bad, broken, defective and inadequate;

endured abuse and the absence of love, affirmation, validation, approval and acceptance;

have walked through personal hell multiple times;

were made to feel they were stupid, ugly and useless;

are thinking for themselves and following their truth and convictions in the face of rejection, disapproval and judgment;

wake up most days, feeling like the deck is stacked against them with insurmountable obstacles on their path;

are responsible to earn an income, raise kids and make life work without the help of a spouse or partner;

are seldom on the receiving end but never stop being kind, thoughtful and generous...

USED TO GO TO CHURCH

...and still here,

still pressing forward,

still putting one foot in front of the other,

still being a person of love, kindness and goodwill.

Thank you for being you. Thank you for persevering. Thank you for your heart. Thank you for being an inspiration to others who wonder if or how they will get through.

You are my hero.

For more information about Nick Vleisides,
or to contact him for speaking engagements,
please visit *www.CommunityChaplainResources.org*



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**"IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED OR BEEN NEAR INTENSE
LOSS, I RECOMMEND THIS BOOK FOR YOU."**

DR. BRUCE MCNICOL

CO-AUTHOR, *THE CURE* AND *THE ASCENT OF A LEADER*, CO-FOUNDER, TRUEFACE

Life can often be brutal, unjust, and fraught with emotional trauma. As a first responder chaplain for over 23 years, Nick Vleisides has experienced countless scenes of unbearable grief and pain. When asking the brokenhearted, "Do you have a faith to help you through?" the response in some form is almost always, "Well, we *used to* go to church."

Blending first-hand accounts of tragedy with opportunity for raw self-examination and reflection, Vleisides delves into the realm of spirituality and belief amid loss and despair. For the "spiritual but not religious," who want to pursue God outside the walls of organized religion, *Used to Go to Church* is an invitation to rethink faith and open up to a life centered on grace, mercy, and love.



Nick Vleisides serves as a first responder chaplain with law enforcement and the fire service in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area. While a pastor for 8 years in Austin, Texas, he served as a volunteer Firefighter/EMT and became the chaplain for his fire department. In 2011, after 23 years he left church ministry and established Community Chaplain Resources. Since then, he has devoted himself to chaplaincy working with officers, deputies, firefighters, and community members. He is married to Heidi and they have three adult children.

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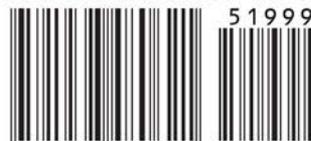
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