



PREVIEW COPY

(through Chapter 2)

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www.sacredintersections.net

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Starting Point

There is a game I sometimes play. Often, I do it while waiting alone in a busy environment—an airport lounge, a crowded freeway, an auditorium before a concert. I take notice of someone else sitting nearby or walking past. Then I reflect on the fact there were countless decisions, experiences, and circumstances that brought that person to be in proximity with me at that moment, in that place. And then I consider that it was not only his own decisions and experiences that brought him here, but the decisions and experiences of his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents—multiple generations back to the beginning of time. All those factors brought him to this very moment in time, here, next to me. I marvel at the complexity of it all. Where he is at that precise point in time is the culmination of a very long story, and now his story is intersecting with my story and all its intricacies.

Mind boggling.

Should we just write it off to chance, this intersection of our stories? Or, is it possible that there is more to it if we just pay attention?

Sometimes, I stop the game there, and it ends up feeling like a purely random encounter. But sometimes I go further. And when I do, it becomes much more enjoyable. As I use the opportunity to appreciate and validate that person, it is no longer just a game. It becomes a sacred intersection.

Preface

This book is an invitation to a way of being.

In today's world, you don't have to look far to observe ways of being that don't seem to be working. Many of us feel like our lives are fragmented. Fear is often behind our decisions. Strained personal relationships are all too common. Global economic pressures bring out the worst in us. At a time when we need each other more, we seem to be less available—and less and less humane. Hope and joy are on the wane and cynicism on the rise, sadly evidenced by soaring drug abuse and suicide rates, especially among the young.

Our political institutions aren't providing the answers. Neither, would it seem, are our religious institutions. God is largely out of the conversation except when it's convenient to use him as a political pawn or for judgmental manipulation.

There is a way forward that can be different from all that. A way of being that is restorative and relational. A way of being that can reintegrate your life and put you back in connection with God, other people, and the rest of creation. A way of being that will make your life more enjoyable and more meaningful.

I invite you to take your time as you read about it in this book. Ponder it. Though the chapters are short, take the time to absorb and live out each chapter's ideas before moving on to the next one. Add your own stories to the ones written here, and in that way become a co-author with me in your unique living version of the book. And if you would like to share any of those stories, you can do so at www.sacredintersections.net.

Each chapter can stand alone, but there is an intended flow. I start with how sacred intersections play out for us as individuals and then move toward how they can be shared in community. One way of learning to live these ideas out in community is to work through the book, one chapter at a time, with a group of friends. There is a guide for further reflection and discussion available on the website.

My hope is that in these pages you will discover some new questions and some fresh insights that will help you understand your own life story and enjoy more fully how it intersects with others' stories.

one: **Mystery** [the gift of sacred intersections]

The longer I live the more I appreciate things that are profound, things I can't fully understand. At the heart of my appreciation is the freedom that comes from realizing there is much that is beyond me and many things I am unable to comprehend.

I can't fully explain why I am awestruck by snow-capped mountain peaks or enraptured by good jazz or melted by the laughter of a child. I don't fully know why I feel such satisfaction helping someone who is in need or why it feels so good to arrive home after a long trip. These things are mysterious to me, but that mystery only enhances my experience of them.

Admitting the mystery is a step of humility, which pushes me toward gratitude—the acknowledgement that what I have at that moment has been given to me. When I experience mystery in that way, I experience God in the midst of it.

Sensing God in the beauty and majesty of nature or the arts is nothing new. In fact, it's a pretty universal human experience.

Lately, however, I've been equally awestruck by the mystery of intersections. And experiencing that awe mostly depends on my own attitude and posture. When I allow myself to consider just how mysterious it truly is when I have an encounter with another human being, something happens: the encounter takes on a whole new level of meaning.

When I pause to think about the overwhelming complexity of choices and events that led to that moment of our two stories intersecting, I become more sensitized to the other person. I notice things I wouldn't otherwise notice. I'm more curious about how he or she arrived at this moment. I'm more willing to engage in conversation. I listen better and comprehend more. I'm more able to enjoy the uniqueness of the other person.

And it just feels sacred. Like a gift from God.

I recently met my good friend Thom for an after-work drink. He brought along another friend, a man who was an immigrant. Though I had briefly met this man before, I hadn't spent enough time with him to have bridged the culture gap I sensed between us.

As we sat down, Thom asked the man to tell us the story of how he had come to be in the US. He was somewhat reluctant to begin, but with a little coaxing he launched into it. We sat spellbound as he told the story of being drafted into the military in his home country and subsequently being forced to carry out actions in a neighboring country that he knew

were unjust. He went AWOL and escaped on a refugee boat, drifting for weeks at sea and finally landing in a refugee camp in yet another country. With little hope and no plan of getting out, he simply tried to make the best of it. The average time people spent there was about three months, but he was there over a year. Then, because he had shown some kindness to a single mother in the camp, when she was able to make her way into the United States, she took it upon herself to make the connections that led to his being able to get into the U.S. as well. He is now a successful entrepreneur, married with kids.

I could tell it was a story he had not told often. I felt honored to hear it and had a newfound respect for him. Suddenly the cultural distance between us seemed much less.

Amazingly, Thom, who had initiated the whole conversation, then remarked how there was an overlap between this man's story and his own. Thom's family had lived in the same country where the refugee camp was. While he was still in elementary school, they were forced to leave the country for religious/political reasons and moved to the United States. Both of his parents took on jobs that were well beneath their level back home, working long hours just to make ends meet. He recounted the challenges of those early years—the difficulty of adapting into a new context, the pain of not being accepted and being bullied. He talked of resenting his parents in his youth, but also of how as he moved into adulthood he gained a deep appreciation for the sacrifices they had made for him to have a better life.

This, too, was a story I had never heard before—and from someone I considered a good friend! To my shame, I had simply never inquired about it.

I sat there, basking in the feeling that this was a sacred place to be. I felt grateful and savored the moment.

It was a happy hour that lived up to its name.

Everybody has a story. Most of the time, I just don't pay attention to it.

two: **Occupied** [living in the moment]

Intersections are tricky places. More accidents happen in intersections than anywhere else on the road. You have to pay attention or you can get yourself into trouble. Generally, it's a good idea to slow down when entering one.

I'm one of those people who are habitually preoccupied. Even though it has been about 20 years since I was a professor, I still get accused of being an absent-minded one. I can very easily go along on a thought trail for an extended period of time with virtually no awareness of what's going on around me. (For some reason, my wife doesn't seem to like it when I do this and it's her words that are going on around me.)

Preoccupied. When you break the word into its two halves, you get *pre* and *occupied*—in other words, being occupied with something before you need to be. Doing so takes you out of the moment you're in, and the simple reality is that the moment you're in is the only reality that actually is. (Spend some time chewing on that one.)

You get the same net effect from being “post-occupied”—overly dwelling on the past in wistful fantasies or regretful “if only...” scenarios.

I recently added a standing item to my to-do list: “Be occupied.” It serves as a reminder to me to live in the moment. To be aware. And to slow down in the intersections.

It's a difficult habit to develop, slowing down in the sacred intersections—those places where your story intersects with someone else's. There are so many easy, entertaining diversions that can occupy our attention; an iPod and headphones can be just the ticket to avoid any awareness. And, there are so many things to worry about: job or school stress, family pressures, financial concerns, health issues, environmental crises, wars. It's hard not to be preoccupied with it all. And then there's simple busyness, too often worn as a badge of honor in our culture. Saying yes to too many things and then scurrying around to get it all done is a sure-fire way to miss the sacredness of intersections.

But when I'm occupied with the moment I'm in—aware of what's going on around me, attuned to the stories I'm intersecting with, curious about those stories, willing to look past my initial judgments and assumptions and engage with those stories—then I begin to be aware of the sacredness of it all.

And I begin to lose myself, in the best sense of the phrase, my focus no longer solely on me.

At that point, it is not necessary to actually interact with those I encounter. Circumstances don't always allow for that. But I can turn my heart toward the people I come across. I can silently wish them well and pray for them. I can hope that whatever is burdening them would be eased. I can hope that they will find things to celebrate and enjoy. I can pray that God will guide them and bless them. It can all happen in a very short time.

I believe that such prayers can make a direct difference for someone. But even if they didn't make a direct difference, I'm convinced that my prayers would make an indirect difference, because when I pray for someone, it makes *me* different. And when I'm in a better place, it makes the world a better place. And that, ultimately, is good for those I'm praying for.

It is in that moment of turning my heart toward the other person that the intersection turns sacred, that I sense God in it, that I am changed. And I begin to find myself even as I lose myself.

Sometimes circumstances allow for interaction at the intersection. Maybe it's just a genuine smile that reflects your well wishes for the other person at that moment. If you have slowed down at the intersection enough, you might notice an opportunity to perform a simple act of kindness—holding a door open, allowing someone who is arriving at the same time to get in the grocery checkout line first, or helping someone lift a carry-on bag into the overhead compartment. Perhaps a more significant and demanding act of service is in order if you are able. Kindness played out, whether smaller or larger, is visible proof to others and to yourself that you are living in the sacredness of the intersection.

Oftentimes a conversation happens at the intersection. A kind word can have much the same effect as a kind act. Both invite the other person to slow down in the intersection with you. It's amazing how an open, caring posture can take you past small talk and into storytelling. And it's at that level—when you get to listen to the story of the other—that the sacredness comes alive, even if time only allows for a small piece of their story.

The best way to move the conversation to the storytelling level is to ask a good open-ended question. Here are a couple of my favorites, as obvious as they are:

To get it started:

I'm curious; what's your story? How did you come to be here today?

To keep it going:

Can you tell me more about that?

And then, listen.* Really listen. Turn off your assumptions and judgments. Stay attentive. Listen for their joys. Listen for their sorrows. Try to feel what they're feeling and reflect it back to them. Don't seek to fix, just seek to understand. And, if invited to, share something of your story as well.

Enjoy the process of entering someone else's story. Pay attention to the wonder and privilege of it. Be grateful. You're on sacred ground.

Part of what makes it feel sacred is that there's risk involved. When a person shares her story she puts herself on display, and in so doing, she gives power to the hearer. She cannot control how that power will be used.

The hearer can receive it as a gift, expressing gratitude, affirmation, encouragement, and care. Or the hearer can use it to discount, judge, tear down, and harm her.

When we slow down at an intersection, with a heart at peace and a heart that is for the other person, then we are in the place to use that power well. We can honor the sacredness of the moment and use it for the other's benefit.

My wife Linda and I recently attended a wedding. During the reception, I ran into Susanne, an acquaintance who was going through a divorce. I don't know her well and hadn't seen her in months, but in that moment my heart felt for her so I genuinely asked, "How are you doing?" Immediately, her eyes welled up with tears as she recounted a bit about the season she was in. "It's funny," she said, "that I'm being so emotional about it. We're pretty much done with the whole process now. I haven't cried in months. Thanks so much for asking and for listening. It's just nice to know that there are people who care." My simple act of asking a sincere question elicited a response that was helpful for her—and a privilege for me. It was sacred intersection.

Molly, another acquaintance, was standing there listening in. She, too, must have felt the sacredness of it, because she went on to tell much of her own life story, including some details that she would have normally kept confidential. The level of trust that was evident in my conversation with Susanne gave her the confidence to share openly. It was an example to me of how slowing down in an intersection can cause others to slow down with you.

* I feel like such a hypocrite writing about listening. I truly am not good at it. My mind constantly wanders. But, perhaps the up side of that is that since I know I'm not good at it, I have had to think more about it than a more natural listener would.

Slowing down, living in the moment, and listening to others—these actions don't come naturally. In fact, more often than not, the natural impetus is just the opposite. And as we'll see in the next chapter, it's all about our propensity for categories.

Chapter 3: Categories [from judging to love]

Chapter 4: Familiarity [trust, honesty, grace]

Chapter 5: Crashes [blame and forgiveness]

Chapter 6: Anticipation [life as a treasure hunt]

Chapter 7: Vocation [integrating your whole world]

Chapter 8: Community [purposeful unity with diversity]

Chapter 9: Reflection [connecting it all back to God]