

\*Living a whole life

attentively...

together...in the

real world...for

the good of all...

in response to God

## I\* An Invitation

Dorothy C. Bass

I see in the rising generation a passionate yearning to live in a way that is good for our endangered planet, life-giving to others, and attentive to the presence of God. *On Our Way* is a response to this yearning. It is offered by a group of authors who belong to the diverse, imperfect, amazing community that has gathered around Jesus Christ across the centuries. Humbly, hopefully, these writers wrestle with questions of how to live alert to the needs of the contemporary world and drawing on the deep wisdom of scripture and Christian tradition. Together, their chapters guide readers into the heart of discipleship: love of God and neighbor embodied in an ongoing way of life.

Wrestling with questions about how to live your life is part of being human. Where are you heading, and why, and with whom? Such questions are not reserved for people in a certain historical period or stage of life, but they are especially urgent—and especially difficult to answer—for those coming of age in the early twenty-first century. In today's world we all find ourselves overwhelmed with information but often moving too fast to seek wisdom. We are aware of massive problems but often disheartened about our ability to address them. As members of a growing, mobile, and religiously diverse global population, we are denied easy certainty. Amid

“Wrestling with questions about how to live  
your life is part of being human.”

widespread social and cultural change, we are given both the freedom and the burden of choice in many areas of life.

The years following high school, college, or graduate school provide crucial opportunities for considering your life as a whole. In modern industrial and postindustrial societies, those coming into adulthood generally are expected to develop vocational and personal commitments more or less on their own. So at a certain point in life, off you go, down one road or another, making more and more decisions on your own about money, relationships, what to study, what work to do, and how to respond to war, racism, poverty, violence, sickness, and need. Questions about how to spend your one, God-given life become more insistent—and also more important, because how you live will have consequences not just for yourself but also for the world.

*On Our Way* invites you to explore a way of life that takes shape in response to the active presence of God in and for the world. We sometimes call this a way of life abundant, remembering the proclamation that Jesus came into the world to bring not just life but life that is abundant (John 10:10). All who embrace this way are joined to Jesus and to the community of Jesus’ disciples across the ages. Rooted in ancient wisdom while also moving toward the future, this way of life overflows with God’s justice, mercy, and love—not only for the sake of those who believe but for the good of all.

### \*Exploring a Way of Life Abundant

Rather than considering this whole way of life at once, our focus will be on a number of practices that give it substance and shape. Attention to practices is helpful because it makes a way of life, which is a very big thing, more visible and more open to engagement, criticism, and transformation. Noticing, understanding, and living specific practices require us to see and do things that are of immense importance to the way of life in and for the world to which people of faith are called.

In the pages ahead, authors who have found themselves called to this way of life delve deeply into twelve practices that have been and continue to be important aspects of Christian life. Other practices could also be included, to be sure, but this set covers a wide enough swath of experience to show how practices can serve and strengthen a whole way of life. Each of these practices addresses fundamental needs that appear in every life and every society—the need to learn, for example, or to gain material sustenance, know another person intimately, care for the earth, or encounter strangers without harm. These are things that all people—not just those who are Christian—do, so basic are they to who we are as human beings. What has been important to Christians over time—and what we now long for in our own day—is to do these things in ways that embody God’s justice and compassion for all.

Practices come to fruition in the lives of real people in the real world. Therefore Susan Briehl and I selected authors who bring personal passion and unique life experience to each of the practices under consideration. These authors, who come from a variety of backgrounds and Christian denominations, are people of inspiring commitment and deep insight, and it is a privilege to bring what they have written to print. These authors also bring profound awareness of how challenging these practices and the way of life to which they belong can be. The life to which Christ has called them is abundant, but it is not easy. Even while sharing vivid examples of how these practices have helped life to flourish through the centuries and in the present day, they never overlook their difficulty. These practices have been neglected, thwarted, and abused in the past, and those who join in them continue to struggle, stumble, and fail today. Those who desire to live these practices in our own time will need to do so not with optimistic idealism, but with hopeful realism.

All the practices in this book bring us to places of risky engagement where the pain of the world and awareness of our own shortcomings will pierce our hearts. Though they are for our whole lives, when we join in these practices it becomes impossible to ignore just how not-whole we and our world actually are. Practicing peacemaking, for instance, we come face to face with the hatreds and grievances that foster violence, enmity, and war—including ugly passions we might not have recognized within ourselves. In the midst of this practice and the others, our preconceptions, our

sense of righteousness, and even our bodies may shatter to pieces. Suffering—that of others, our own, and even the pain of a wounded creation—will be unavoidable. Again and again, this way of life passes through the valley of the shadow of death. Yet these same places can become sites of communion with God, other people, and creation, sites where God's *shalom* erupts into the world.

Because of our special concern for those who are coming of age today, Susan and I also selected authors who care deeply for men and women in their twenties, and we urged them to give special attention to the shape of Christian practices during this stage of life. At the same time, the entire team that created *On Our Way* insists that practices such as these are for our whole lives. We need to embrace them, as we are able, whether we are five, twenty-five, or ninety years old—as the authors, aged from twenty-four well into our fifties, try to do ourselves. These practices are also for our whole lives in that they touch every aspect of personal and social experience, from sexual intimacy to global economic justice.

### \*Finding Your Way Through This Book

To embrace a way of life abundant requires us to be *attentive*. No one can live this way in isolation from others; life abundant depends upon and arises within life *together*. It does not lead into a fantasy future or purely spiritual realm, but *into the real world*. There, Christians practice these practices not for our own sake but *for the good of all*, and not by our own power or vision but *in response to God*, whose own grace and call provide this way of life.

This summary provides a map through the territory ahead. *On Our Way* is divided into sections that highlight these five characteristics of the way of life we aim to portray. In a sense, any division into sections is somewhat artificial, since *every* practice requires attention and is lived together in the real world, for the good of all and in response to God. Indeed, the practices are inextricably interwoven at every turn: walk down the path of one practice, and you'll soon discover that it intersects with all the others.

Practice doing justice; see how this impacts the practice of making a good living, and be summoned to know and love your neighbors of other faiths. Discern God's call regarding what you will do with your life, and find yourself immersed in studying Christ and the world. Share your life with friends, and get together to sing your life to God with all the breath in your God-given body. No practice can exist alone, even though each practice does emphasize a specific dimension of the whole.

**\*ATTENTIVE** To live attentively in the midst of countless distractions is an immensely challenging and highly countercultural stance. The two practices in the first section—study and discerning God's call—demand our attentiveness, and at the same time they foster within us a greater capacity to be attentive. Focusing on things that really matter requires us to resist powerful pressures and unexamined assumptions—a potentially dangerous act that can unearth insights and questions that lead us beyond the boundaries of certainty. The Christian practice of study, Matthew Myer Boulton shows, includes unlearning as well as learning, and doubt as well as belief. His chapter invites disciples (students) of Jesus (the rabbi, or teacher)—many of whom are also students in higher education—into the work and the wonder of honest learning, especially the learning that comes from ongoing attention to the Bible and to the “book” of nature. In the subsequent chapter, Jennifer Grant Haworth explores the practice of discerning God's call, especially in times of uncertainty about one's direction in life. By telling the stories of those who have struggled to find a vocation, offering disciplines of prayer and conversation that foster attentiveness, and urging attention to the needs of the world, she invites readers to listen for God's call to them.

“The practices are inextricably interwoven at every turn: walk down the path of one practice, and you'll soon discover that it intersects with all the others.”

**\*TOGETHER** When we are called by God, we are also called into community with one another. To be with others in a truthful and life-giving way—sharing time and place, worry and support, trust and meaning—is a fundamental need of every human being, from the dependency of early childhood through every stage of life. The three chapters in this section explore various dimensions of life together. In his chapter on living as community, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove describes the surprising, exasperating, and joyful reality of the Christian community in which he lives, placing it in the context of God’s own communal being as Trinity and the church’s enduring call to become one body, the body of Christ in and for the world. In no other way than through community can the loneliness each of us has experienced be addressed, and only in community with others can risky and compassionate practices for the sake of justice,

concrete historical situations shaped by distinctive social, economic, and cultural forces. The practices in the third section of *On Our Way* highlight the concrete character of Christian practices. Dan Spencer, an ethicist and environmentalist in Montana who sometimes calls himself a “geologist,” helps us to recognize the practice of creation care as one that is grounded in scripture and crucial to faithful living. Through this practice, we honor and respond to God’s sacramental presence in the material world, and we grow in love for all our neighbors, both humankind and otherkind. In the subsequent chapter, an ethicist takes a realistic view of need, desire, and money in the rapidly changing global economy. By considering personal, community, and global economics as interrelated dimensions of a single Christian practice, Douglas Hicks challenges us to renewed and responsible living that serves the good of all.

Finally, Evelyn Parker explores a practice that touches each of us intimately and that also empowers us to touch one another with care and respect: honoring the body, the Christian practice that reflects God’s affirmation of our amazing, fragile, finite embodiment. Evelyn begins by telling of her tender care of her dying father and concludes with reflections on exercise and rest; between these bookends, she also ponders the brokenness of this practice in some churches as she reflects on HIV/AIDS and racism. This practice, like all the others, takes place in the real world, with all its brokenness and sin.

**\*FOR THE GOOD OF ALL** The three practices in the fourth section directly address the reality of brokenness and sin in today’s violent, divided world. Christian practices, far from being the isolated and isolating activities of an exclusive community, are given to Christian people so that we

“When we are called by God, we are also called into community with one another.”

compassion, and peace be sustained. In the following chapter, Stephanie Paulsell probes friendship and intimacy. Here risk and vulnerability are powerful forces—but so is trust when it emerges within relationships that are honest, attentive, and reverent. Both Jonathan and Stephanie discover wisdom about community and friendship in the writings of friends and lovers from the ancient and medieval world; our practices, they help us to see, are enriched by continuity with the practices of our ancestors in faith.

The third practice in this section, singing our lives to God, explores music as a form of communal abundance on both Saturday night and Sunday morning. Here Tony Alonso, a musician and composer who serves a university’s worshipping community, shows how our singing is connected to the music of all creation and to the testimony of the people of God across the ages.

**\*IN THE REAL WORLD** Christian practices are not ethereal and ideal but fleshy and imperfect. For good and for ill, they come to life in

“Christian practices are given to Christian people so that we might become light and yeast—beacons and agents of God’s justice, mercy, and love for all.”

might become light and yeast—beacons and agents of God’s justice, mercy, and love for all. Scott Alexander, a Catholic whose life’s work is to raise up Catholic leaders with a deep respect for Islam and a profound love of Muslim peoples, provides a compelling account of a practice that should be of urgent concern to all contemporary Christians: knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths. In the following chapter, Mary Emily Briehl Duba explores peacemaking and nonviolence, another practice that is desperately needed in our war-torn world. Through inspiring accounts of peacemakers in scripture and history, and through thoroughly realistic accounts of the tough decisions that face contemporary peacemakers, including herself, she challenges readers to reflect far more deeply than most of us have done on Jesus’ affirmation of those who make peace.

Doing justice, the practice explored in the final chapter in this section, is set forth by Joyce Hollyday, who calls our attention to the prophets of ancient Israel and to the struggles of those who work for justice in South Africa, the United States, and elsewhere. All three of these authors have strong personal commitments to the practices of which they write; these chapters are passionate, authentic, and well informed. Their accounts of the practices that enable them to live for the good of those they may never know personally—those who are oppressed or marginalized, those from whom their own communities are estranged, those whom many of their peers see as enemies—challenge us all.

\*IN RESPONSE TO GOD Finally, Susan Briehl writes of living in the presence of God. Her chapter probes the profound mystery of this way of abundant life: its reliance on God. As Susan explores this practice, every other practice also appears, for as channels of God’s love to us and to all, all Christian practices are rooted here. In poetry and prose, she depicts a God-given way of life that is attentive both to natural wonders and to

humankind’s suffering and sin; that gathers us together with ancient singers and contemporary street people; that leads into a world so real that doubt and death are not denied; and that turns us outward, from self-concern toward all the world. This way of life is nourished by scripture, prayer, and the communal worship of God.

I am grateful to all the authors for the riches they have spread before us. As you read the chapters in this book, I hope that you will also explore at first hand the practices and the way of life they comprise. Find others who also yearn for abundant life with God and others; and share your questions, and your life, with them. You can do this by becoming part of the ongoing community that has been pondering such questions for millennia and living out its answers through a way of life abundant—the church, which exists near you as a Christian congregation. It will not be perfect, and neither will you. But you will be on your way, by the grace of God.

“ . . . the profound mystery of this way of abundant life: its reliance on God.”