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The Barefoot Way

A Faith Guide for Youth,
Young Adults, and the People
Who Walk with Them

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AN INVITATION



*Remove the sandals from your feet,
for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*
— Exodus 3:5

My name is Dori Baker. I live in southern Virginia, where I am surrounded by trees and rivers. I like to coax spinach and arrugula out of the ground and will drop almost anything to go kayaking. I have two teen-aged daughters and am an ordained United Methodist minister. I also teach seminary courses and write about youth, young adults, and faith. This book grows out of a passion I've had for over a dozen years: looking for God in unexpected places, starting with a fresh, true story from someone's life.

When someone trusts a small group of people enough to share a personal story, we can almost feel the presence of God entering the room, sitting with us for a spell, and wandering with our imaginations into the story. Sometimes I wish I'd warned my companions with God's words to Moses: "Take off your shoes!" (Exod. 3:5, paraphr.) because time and again even the simplest of stories can lead us to an awed awareness that we're standing on holy ground. The stories in these pages come from people among whom I've stood on holy ground in retreats,

seminary classrooms, churches, and interfaith workshops. Many of the writers have become my friends. The stories here are ones I hold close to my heart; I've kept in touch with the writers, and I've gotten their permission to share their stories with you. These stories reflect the places I've found myself over the past decade, which are mainline denominational churches and seminaries in which white people are still the majority. The stories here reflect that. I have included stories from African Americans and Asian Americans, but the careful reader will notice that a richer work would emerge from the inclusion of more nonwhite storytellers. For that reason, my story collecting goes on. As I continue to lead this process in places that are more reflective of the changing demographics of our nation and our religious worlds, I look forward to the emergence of a more intentionally inclusive collection.

If you discover a story of your own that you'd like to share, please do! You can send it to bakerdori@fteaders.org, and we will consider using it for future volumes.

I hope that this book encourages you to take off your shoes, kick off your flip-flops, or step out of your stilettos. May it remind you to touch the holy ground on which you stand.

Is This Book for You?

This book is written for you if one of your primary memories of childhood is the collapse of the World Trade Towers. You may be in college. You may be working or looking for work. You may be taking a year off school to volunteer, to earn money, or to travel to Africa. You may be still in high school, thinking about what you'd like to do with the rest of your life. Or you may be simply living through this moment, not too concerned about the future. But wherever you are on your journey, this book comes with a simple invitation. Carry it with you for twenty-one days.

What this book is not:

- It's not packed with good advice.
- It does not promise to have all the answers.
- It's not edible.

What it is:

- It's as packable as an iPod, weighing only about seven ounces.
- It's a way to spend ten minutes a day tending your soul.
- It's a guide to listening for your inner voice.
- It's a reminder that your inner voice is often your best guide, connecting you to God's whispers and nudges, confirmed through quiet moments or in conversation with others.

This little book asks big questions about living a life that matters. It does that one little story at a time. The stories come from people like you—people who have glimpsed God (or whatever word you use to describe the Holy) in simple, everyday moments. When shared with a friend or circle of friends, these glimpses may point toward who you are and who you are becoming. Some of the stories will make you smile. Some will move you to text an old friend. Some will remind you of your own life—a loss of a loved one, a major disappointment, a heartbreaking end to a relationship, or a victory on the soccer field. Their purpose is to awaken in you the idea that your life is not as separate as it sometimes feels but that it is actually quite radically connected to the world and the people around you.

This book is also for you if one of your primary memories of childhood is Watergate or World War II. If you are an adult (of any age) who cares about teenagers and young adults, you may play a more important role than you know

in the lives of young people, who face a lot of challenges in imagining a hope-filled future.

If you are a mentor, pastor, youth leader, parent or grandparent, this book can help you learn a simple, meditative practice for listening more intentionally to the young people in your midst. Young people need adults who don't have all the answers but are willing, like the poet Rainer Maria Rilke suggests, to "live the questions now" (*Letters to a Young Poet* [Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000]). Likewise, they need adults who are humble enough to remember, as

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theologian Howard Thurman suggests, that we all must take time to "listen for the sound of the genuine within us" (*The Spelman Messenger*, Summer 1980). Practicing the art of slowing down to listen to our lives is powerful at any stage of life. When we do so, we can begin to see the way our deeply felt values align with something new that wants to be born in the world. You may find your own passions reawakened as you explore this book alone or as you lead

a group of young people. Ideas for ways of using this book with different ages and types of groups appear at the end of this section; tips for facilitating groups appear in an appendix at the end of the book.

What This Book Is About

Imagine yourself as part of God's ever-evolving world. "God's ecology" is a way of talking about the multiple,

interconnected movements of God we can see working in and through the everyday realities of our life. Think of this book as a field guide to God's ecology. If you were walking a trail or kayaking a river near your home, you might carry with you a pocket-sized guide to help you identify the birds or plants you're likely to see. (If you're more of an urban hiker, think of the guide you would take through the streets of Barcelona or New Delhi, telling you where to direct your gaze to spot a Gaudí or where to find the best tandoori.) It helps you know what to look for and what to look at more closely once your attention's been grabbed.

In everyday life, each of us travels an inner landscape that intersects with our experiences in the world. Each inner landscape is unique, but when we share them, we discover common scenes. This field guide will help you track the landscape of your soul, pointing out scenes that might lead you to think, "Aha! I've been *there* before!" It will direct you toward places in the Bible and points of reference in Christian tradition as well as places where Christian beliefs find common ground with other faith traditions. It will point out places on the Web to learn more about ancient tools for faithful living that have been tested through the centuries and new ones emerging from creative souls traversing new territory. These will offer clues to help you reflect on the questions that matter about our place in God's world, such as

- What am I supposed to do with my life?
- What does God want of me?
- Which of my passions and gifts am I supposed to follow?
- What if what God seems to want of me is not what I want?
- Where do I look for signs that my life is on the right track?

- How do I find or create a community of others with whom to ask these questions?
- What do I do on the days when I can't remember what my passions and gifts are?
- Who is God? Who am I in God's eyes?

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Any of these questions might have been on the mind of young Moses that day when he was watching his father-in-law's sheep. He heard a voice telling him to take off *his* version of flip-flops, Nikes, Wal-labees, Uggs, or Toms. Moses didn't ignore that voice. He looked up. He saw a burning bush. And the rest is history:

Moses led a justice movement that reshaped God's story with humans and set the stage in so many ways for who Jesus Christ would reveal himself to be (Exod. 3:1–10).

How to Use This Book

Think about setting aside a certain time of the day to spend with this book. My sister keeps it in her bathroom and reads it while she's drying her hair. Maybe you will put it near your morning caffeine source or where you charge your phone: every time you drink or plug in can be a reminder to reconnect to your soul. It takes only a few minutes to step onto holy ground. When you come up from such a moment, you may find yourself more ready to respond to the ways God is bringing something new into the world through you.

In the following pages, you will find one person's real-life story for each day you use the book. The story-

tellers sometimes feel at home in their Christian tradition and sometimes at odds with it. They are sometimes trusting, sometimes doubtful. Some of the stories are funny. Some are tragic. Some of the stories are by people who are still in high school or middle school. Some are by adults, remembering back to their younger years. Many of these stories emerged from people who were on the path to becoming ministers—either ordained clergy, youth ministers, chaplains, or religious educators. But some of the storytellers are following different calls—to be involved in global peacemaking, for instance, or to dedicate their life to teaching, lab research, artistic expression, or social activism. Some of the storytellers are still in the middle of discerning their life’s direction. The process of reflecting on these small stories is a way of tending to the larger story of their lives as they are unfolding. This larger story is sometimes called a vocation or calling: it usually becomes clear slowly over time, rather than in a sudden flash of lightning (or a burning bush).

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The L.I.V.E. Method

Each of the stories here has been told before—when the storyteller shared it with a group using a four-step process called L.I.V.E. The acronym L.I.V.E. spells out four steps to guide a short time of reflection (if you’re alone) or conversation (if you’re in a group). The steps are described in the next section. After you read each story, you will find a series of questions to walk you through the steps of L.I.V.E. Then you’ll read what others gleaned from the same story.

Occasionally, there will be a day off. On these days, there is no story, because it is yours to write. Scan the inner landscape of your life experience. What is the story that pops into your mind? How would you tell it to a friend? Perhaps you'll use the space provided to write the story or draw a picture of it. Maybe you'll e-mail the story to a friend, tell it to a roommate, or share it with others who are reading this book with you. After recalling your story, you'll be guided through the steps of L.I.V.E. with it.

These four steps will help you remember a process of reflecting on the stories presented each day. Eventually, the steps can become second nature, and you may even come to think of them as ways of praying through life's everyday experiences. The L.I.V.E. process helps you seek direction from trusted others and to trust the inner voice of wisdom through which God speaks to you.

The L.I.V.E. Steps

The *L* reminds us to **LISTEN**. Breathe deeply, and allow yourself to be fully present to the story. Allow it to wash over you, as if you expect God to show up in it. Pay attention to the nuances, images, colors, smells, and sights in the

WHAT IS THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION?

Theological reflection describes the process of finding the overlap between our story and God's story. Through theological reflection, people discern the actions to which God may be calling them. Usually done in community, theological reflection is a hallmark of groups around the globe who have set out to change the world in order to make it a more faithful representation of God's *shalom* (the Hebrew word for God's vision of wholeness and peace).

story. Allow memories, feelings, and associations to come to mind as you enter the storyteller's world.

The *I* invites us to **IMMERSE** ourselves in the feelings the story evokes. As you identify feelings, name them. What emotions got stirred up in you? Talk about how the story made you feel: peaceful, afraid, excited, happy, nervous, anxious, joyful, blissful, frustrated, sad. A good way to uncover feelings is to pay attention to your body. Did your muscles tense? Did your eyes tear up? Did your breathing become shallow or speed up? These are signs that can lead to identifying your feelings, even if you can't quite put them into words. During this step, you may want to share a story from your own life that this story called to mind.

The *V* reminds us to **VIEW IT WIDER**: Take a step back from your feelings, and view the story wider, wondering about the images that grabbed you or the themes that seem central. What is this story about? How does this story remind you of God, either in your own faith tradition or from what you know about a different one? What story from the Bible, snippet of a sermon, or line from a song does it call to mind? Does it connect with a holy memory from your childhood, perhaps of a family gathering or another time when you felt completely and totally at home in the universe? Is there a Christian practice—such as welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, or offering praise—that it evokes? What does God look like to you as you ponder this story?

The *E* reminds us to **EXPLORE** actions and Aha! moments. Is there something about reflecting on this moment that you want to take forward with you into the day? Is there some action, small or large, you can imagine as a response to this story? Who does God want you to be in light of this story? The action might be as simple as naming an Aha! moment or declaring an intention, such as "I will look up to see the stars more often." Or it may be more

costly, such as “I will commit to repairing a relationship that’s broken,” or “I will pay closer attention to the plight of illegal immigrants.”

Now we’re ready to proceed. The next time you pick up this book, there will be a story waiting for you.

A Note to Mentors, Youth Workers, Pastors, or Parents

This book comes to you from Calling Congregations, a movement to support the creative young people God is calling to lead the church and change the world. We believe that young people are hungry to create lives of meaning. We also believe that adults, when invited, make wonderful companions to youth who are searching. Such companionship requires creating space in which people can gather to share their lives and reflect together on God’s often-mysterious presence. Out of such spaces might emerge

WHAT IS VOCATION?

Vocation is a word you’ll see a lot in this book. For some it means what they do for a living; for others it means a divine call to professional Christian service. As I use it, *vocation* is not limited to either of those extremes. Instead, it points to the cluster of activities that give one’s life purpose and meaning. I’ve written that “vocation is the practice through which people offer their lives in response to God’s call, amid a world in need” (Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on the Quest for Vocation* [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007], 8). I also like the way Walter Brueggemann says it: Vocation is “finding the purpose for your life that is part of the purposes of God” (“Covenanting as Human Vocation,” *Interpretation* 33, no. 2 [April 1979]: 126).

wisdom and creativity needed for humans to flourish and to create a more sustainable world.

Congregations are ideal places for these kinds of conversations to happen, but we don't always know how to ask deep questions or to dive into more meaningful conversations, especially across generations. This book is part of a larger approach called VocationCARE that helps congregations, campus ministries, and other organizations nurture the inner lives of leaders (for more information, see www.ftleaders.org). The CARE in VocationCARE is an acronym that stands for

Creating hospitable spaces for conversation
Asking self-awakening questions
Reflecting theologically together
Enacting next faithful steps

This book can be a helpful tool to groups using the entire VocationCARE approach, but it can also stand alone. It's for individuals, face-to-face groups, and online networks who want to engage in the practice of reflecting theologically on their emerging vocation, call, and purpose. I hope it will guide people to reflect on how *their* dreams overlap with *God's* dream for the world. Out of such reflection will flow action—works of justice, care, and compassion that just might renew the church and change the world.

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L.I.V.E. in Action

Over the past dozen years, I've shared this method with many different types of groups. Hearing specific ways others

are using the practice might inspire you. Here are some of the ways L.I.V.E. is in action:

- A college campus minister created a L.I.V.E. group in which students meet weekly with older members of a local congregation. After a few weeks of learning the method through stories provided here, they began to take turns doing L.I.V.E. with a story from their own lives.
- A church youth group reads a story from the book during the first fifteen minutes of their Sunday night gatherings and then practices L.I.V.E. out loud together. Individuals in the group use the book as daily devotional reading during the week.
- An interfaith group of urban teens wanted a way to learn more about one another's different traditions. After learning the method, they adapted it to welcome explicitly the diverse images of the Holy that arise from various world religions, using stories from their own lives when they gather for monthly meetings.
- A group of young people preparing to enter seminary used L.I.V.E. to structure a series of online chats. It helped them prepare for the transition into seminary, surrounded by a community of supportive friends who had begun to know one another more deeply.
- A Sunday school teacher used the book to begin a season of learning for middle school students. He called students during the week, asking them to tell him a story that would be used the following Sunday. Each time a Bible story arose during the conversation, they would look it up using a concordance.
- Many groups (of young adults, youth, and mixed ages) involved in volunteer service have used L.I.V.E. to guide reflection on their own experiences

when they gather to support one another's activism with prayer and contemplation. Likewise, a group of young adults who have chosen to live in intentional community use it at the end of the day to reflect upon their work among their inner-city neighbors.



DAY ONE



The Hummingbird

By Jason, age twenty-six, remembering an event from his middle-school years

I had spent most of this warm summer day helping my mother clean, which is not something any middle-school, adolescent boy wants to do. I managed to escape with the phantom excuse of needing to take a walk. Once outside, I surprised myself by in fact setting off on a walk. Barefoot. Two paths led from our house to my grandparents' home across the creek. I chose the longer path that led through the woods behind my house, over the creek, and around the goat lot to the back field.

I took these walks often by myself during my adolescence. In high school, when faced with a difficult situation, I would take this same path to a large tree stump that became the place where I prayed. At another time in my life, I would walk this path for hours—worried, scared, and uncertain as to why my father had prostate cancer. But this day, I went for a walk just to get away from my mother for a few hours.

As I walked, I came upon the first creek to cross. I jumped over, being careful of the barbed wire attached to an oak tree to the left. I continued my walk. My right foot was in the air about to land securely on the ground when a noise caught my attention.

I looked down, uncertain why, to where my right foot was about to land. There on the ground was a small hummingbird. Awkwardly sidestepping the bird at the last moment, I knelt down to get a better look. How often does one get to see a hummingbird up close?

When I knelt down, I noticed that a piece of string was wrapped around the hummingbird. Unable to untangle itself, the bird was frightened and struggling. I tried to help, but the bird would not stay still.

I scooped it up with a piece of bark, and it slowly began to calm down. I hurried along the path. I came out at the back field and began to pick up speed, being careful not to drop the hummingbird.

I reached my grandparents' house just as they, keys in hand, were getting into the car to leave. I showed them the hummingbird. My grandfather went into his shop and came back with a pair of scissors. I thought for sure the hummingbird in its extreme excitement would prevent my grandfather from cutting the string.

To my surprise, the hummingbird remained calm. My grandfather snipped the string, untangling it from the hummingbird's wing. The hummingbird flew away.

Practice L.I.V.E.

Take a deep breath and close your eyes for a moment or two. **LISTEN** to the responses this story calls forth in you.

Now **IMMERSE** yourself in how this story made you feel. Did your body tense during part of the story and relax at another? Jot down the full range of feelings the story

raised in you, from beginning to end. Of what stories from your own life did this story remind you? With whom or what in the story did you identify?

After you've sat for a few minutes with those feelings, begin to **VIEW IT WIDER**. Wonder where God is in the story. Is God at times like Jason, a youngster fleeing authority who is nonetheless attentive to a fellow creature in need? Is God the hummingbird, sometimes tangled up in discarded old meanings? What Bible stories or Christian practices does this story recall for you?

Finally, **EXPLORE** what there is about this story or the way it made you feel that you want to act on or continue pondering. What is there that helps you hear God speaking to your life today?

Take a moment to jot down answers to any of these questions and, especially, to remind yourself later of a story from your own life that this story called to mind.

What Others Experienced

When Jason shared this story with a group, childhood memories surfaced about special times spent with grandparents. A woman remembered the feeling of freedom she associates with being barefoot in the summertime. One man, who was feeling at odds with his faith tradition, identified with the trapped bird. He said he felt a small jolt of joy when the string was snipped.

As Jason and a few friends began to reflect about God in the story, Jesus' words "'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives'" (Luke 4:18) came to mind. Jason got excited. He vividly retold his memory of the exact moment of release when the string was snipped and the hummingbird was freed. "It was so amazing," he said. "I thought for sure the bird would freak out, but he allowed us to get close."

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN PRACTICE?

Christian practices are shared activities that, when woven together, form a faithful life. Christian practices have been embodied across the centuries and in different cultures, and many of them are now being reimagined for a new day. Prayer is a Christian practice, as is worshiping, feeding the hungry, caring for our bodies, caring for the earth, and providing hospitality. Christian practices “reflect and respond to God’s grace to us and to the world in Christ,” writes Dorothy C. Bass in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Seeking People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). For more information, go to www.practicingourfaith.org, or check out the book *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter (Nashville: Upper Room, 2002), 8.

As we came to the last step of L.I.V.E., Jason named a connection between this story, his desire to share it, and his call to be a part of God’s “release of captives,” which he imagines happening through his work as a youth minister. Another person in the group was struck by Jason’s attentiveness to a small, defenseless creature and was drawn to remember the book of Genesis, God’s creation of the world, and the Christian practice of caring for the earth and its creatures.