

Diana Butler Bass on *Grounded*

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

November 11, 2015

In Chattanooga, I walk with steady steps over a pedestrian bridge that stretches over the Tennessee River, listening to the soft souls of my shoes keeping a rhythm against the worn wood. As my [Instagram account](#) can attest, almost every day, as long as my travel schedule allows, I'm drawn to river's rich beauty and horrifying history.

Aware of the lynchings, the Trail of Tears, and the freed person encampments, I listen for those voices in the past and my soul longs to make amends with them. I look at the river, which the city has been working to restore from their polluted state. Then I take comfort in how the sun dances on the waters, rocky ledges burst from the river's edge, and distant mountains roll. The landscape nourishes me, though I didn't know precisely why or how before I read Diana Butler Bass's [*Grounded*](#).

Unlike some of her past work, where Diana stands on the mountain, giving us a broad overview of spirituality in our current landscape, this intriguing and beautiful book invites us to participate deeply in God's work from the ground level. We stand beside her as she plays in the soil and walks along glistening rivers. We continue the conversation with her as she moves into the science of stewardship and the theology of presence. "I didn't want to write a book *about* spirituality. I wanted to write an invitation *to* spirituality," Diana said, "I wanted to show, not tell."

I spent some time with Diana in the last couple of days, talking about the book. I asked her how she came to write it, and she explained how she was keeping up with her demanding speaking schedule, speeding along from airports to hotel rooms. When she finally got home, it was a beautiful day. She joined her family in the backyard, slumped in a chair, with the sun beating down on her, she sighed, "I wish somebody would just ground me."

Richard, her husband, asked, "What grounds you anyway?"

Diana thought about it, and realized that writing grounded her.

Also, it felt like an important time in her life, the harvesting of middle age. She wanted to find all the places her ancestors farmed, so she began the quest of looking at family stories. Then her hungry curiosity kept spurring her. She wondered how the “what grounds you” question was connected with God and she wanted to explore it. Then the subject turned her to larger questions, about climate change and quantum physics. She delved into the data, facts, and research that pointed toward spirituality in culture.

The result is a profound and literary book, one that will be a touchstone in my thinking for years to come, as I imagine institutions, nature, and the presence of God.

My conversation with Diana ended with a blessing, of sorts. It was accidental and engaging, slipping out like a child’s prayer that suddenly provokes the sacred. And so I share Diana's words with you and with our Church:

“Let’s go dig in our lives. The focus of spirituality should always be now. Don’t get wrapped up in what might be, but what is. Live responsibly toward God.”

Amen.