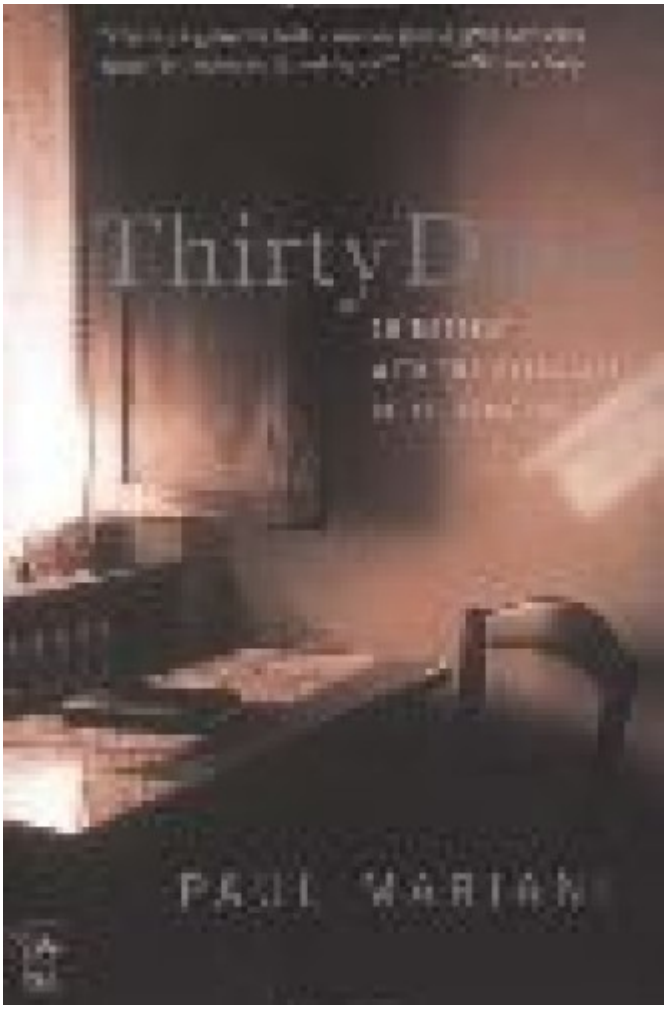
Taking it personally

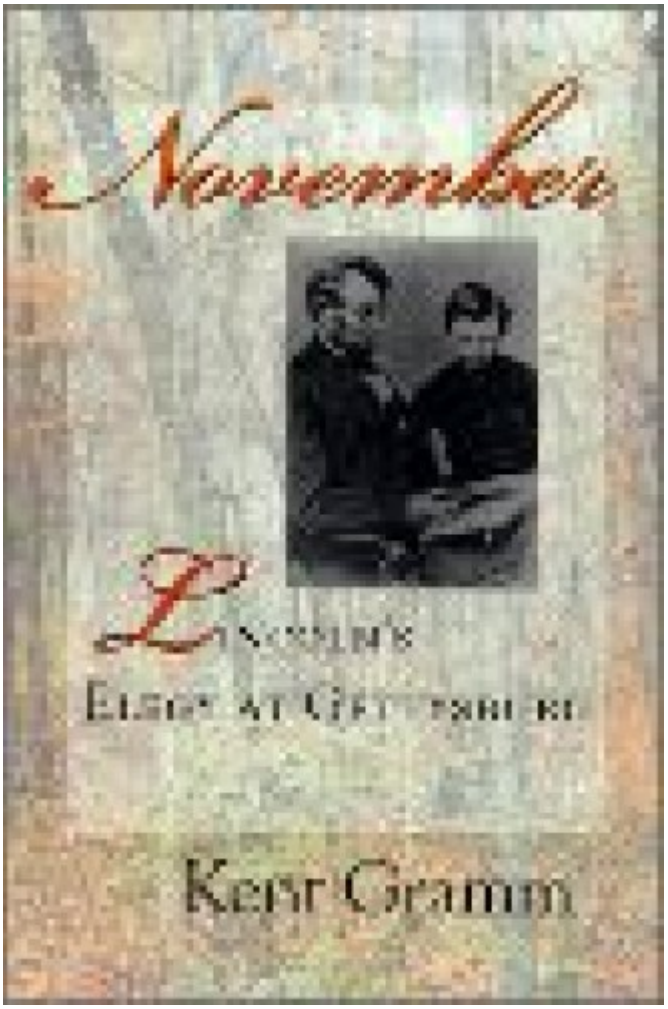
By Trudy Bush in the April 24, 2002 issue

In Review



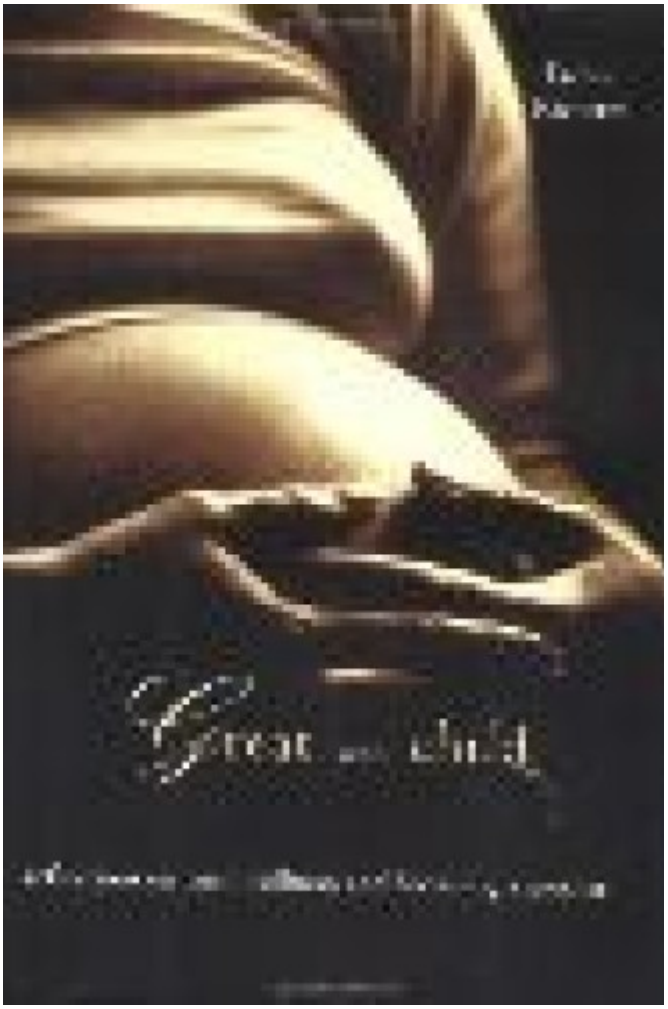
Thirty Days: On Retreat with the Exercises of St. Ignatius

Paul Mariani
Viking Compass



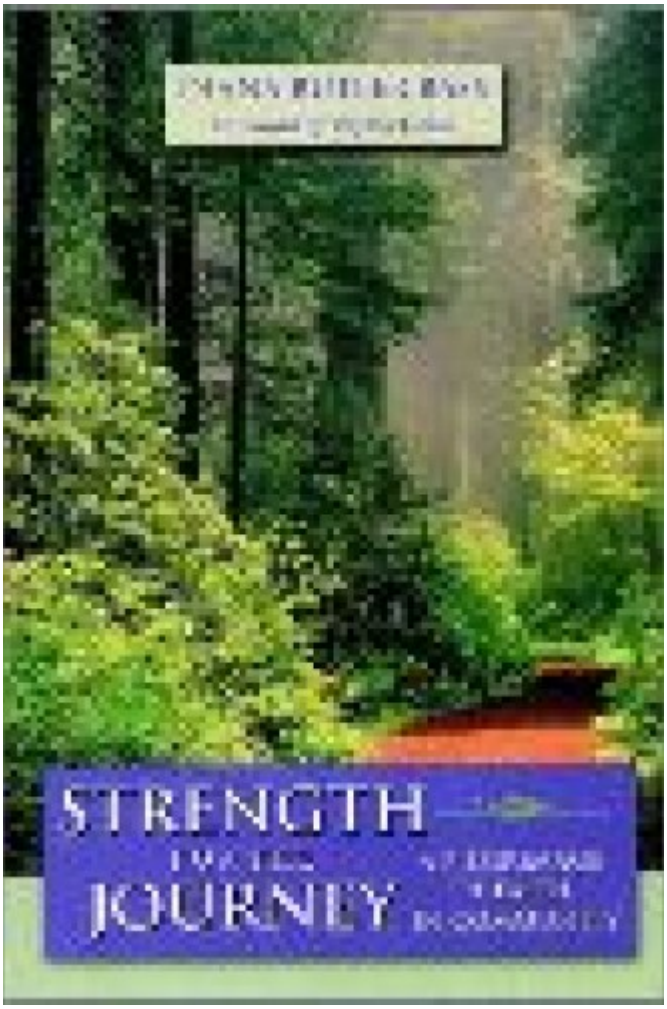
November: Lincoln's Elegy at Gettysburg

Kent Gramm
Indiana University Press



Great with Child: Reflections on Faith, Fullness, and Becoming a Mother

Debra Rienstra
Tarcher Putnam



Strength for the Journey

Diana Butler Bass
Jossey-Bass

In medieval England, spring was the time to set out on pilgrimage. As the earth turned green and the air warmed, renewing people's energy and also engendering a certain dreaminess and introspection, it seemed time to clean house, to put things in order mentally and spiritually, or to set out on a journey.

Perhaps a similar impulse guided me this spring to these four books about spiritual journeys. One of these journeys takes 30 days—the time needed to complete St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. One is tied to the days of November, the month in which Abraham Lincoln prepared and delivered his Gettysburg Address. Another follows the first two years of a child's life as experienced by his mother. The fourth charts a woman's churchgoing experience in eight congregations.

Paul Mariani is a perfect guide to one of the great Christian spiritual traditions. A critically acclaimed poet who has written biographies of William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, John Berryman and Robert Lowell, Mariani is skilled at examining and imaginatively reconstructing lives. He writes with grace and depth, even if he often feels as if writing “seems rather like gathering my experiences in a colander, only to see the fullness of things flow out through the gap between the worlds.” Former professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, he now teaches at Boston College. The decision to leave one university for the other is one of the issues that propelled him to undertake a 30-day silent retreat at the Jesuit-run Gonzaga Retreat House on Eastern Point, just outside Gloucester, Massachusetts.

For many Protestant readers, the intensity and prescribed order of the *Spiritual Exercises* may take some getting used to. The first week focuses on sin, collective and personal. The goal is to empty the disordered self so as to make room for God. This is designed to prepare the seeker for the path of the second week—“to follow Christ in love and to share in his saving mission.” The third week is devoted to meditation on Christ’s passion, and the final week to the resurrection.

Mariani brings to these meditations his guilt over a particular sin—he is haunted by the long-ago affair that led him briefly to walk out on his wife and sons. Though he has rebuilt his relationship with his wife, he realizes that he will carry to his death the expression of shock and disbelief on his youngest son’s face when he announced that he was leaving the family. He wrestles also with his pride, and with various sins of omission and commission, finally finding release during a prayer in which he asks for forgiveness and for the welfare of those he has hurt.

As he moves deeper into the *Spiritual Exercises*, through boredom and frightening dreams—of suffocating, drowning, or choking on his own blood—Mariani finds helpers: his spiritual director, with whom he meets each morning; a history of the Jesuits; the life of St. Ignatius; the works of the great Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins; Raymond Brown’s *Introduction to the New Testament*; the winter landscape; memories of things his friends have said and written; and, above all, his family. Gradually the frightening images fade, replaced by a sense of God’s love and care for him.

In the middle of the book Mariani reaches his dark night of the soul. He has a sense of being stuck, of being unable to move on to full surrender to God. Drawing on *The Divine Comedy*, he remembers that Dante himself says that “he had to be lowered

or lifted to the next level of the journey if he was going to make any further progress.” Mariani realizes that he, too, must wait patiently to be lifted by God’s grace, that “however bright and independent I might think I was, there were certain spiritual realities I could not get at by any human ladder.”

As he goes into the third week, it’s obvious that Mariani has become more focused. He concentrates more on the Gospels themselves, bringing in fewer additional helps and talking less about himself. His spiritual director calls him to consider his own place in the gospel story. “And what about the washing of the feet? Did you [in your meditations] let Jesus do that for you?” In a moving passage, Mariani imagines himself in that story, allowing Jesus to wash his foot scarred by a childhood accident.

A recurring question for Mariani is the one Jesus put to his disciples:“Who do you say that I am?” But Mariani concludes that an even more important question is “Who does God think I am?” After all, he wouldn’t be on this retreat if he didn’t think Jesus was central to his existence, that “He is in fact the Son of God, and therefore intimately God.”

Later, Mariani decides that he had been asking a biographer’s question. He had been trying to discover who the real Jesus is. “But the mistake is to fully equate the real Jesus with the historical Jesus, a figure who can only be recovered—like any of us—to one degree or another.” Writing biographies has taught him that “in trying to reconstruct a life, the best we can do is to create a necessary fiction.” There is another Jesus, “the Christ of the Resurrection, transformed and transforming, the one who acts upon me and remakes the questioner, the pilgrim, the seeker. It is this Jesus I have spent these past weeks trying to approach.” And Mariani is, at the most unexpected moments, touched and transformed by this Jesus.

Mariani’s report underscores both how much of the spiritual journey must be traveled alone and how essential spiritual guides and community are to the journey. Mariani’s daily meetings with his spiritual director and communal partaking of the Eucharist grounded him in his exhilarating but often frightening exploration.

Kent Gramm had no such visible support in his month-long pilgrimage to the Gettysburg battlefield. His companions were a rich company of texts and ghosts—poems like John Milton’s “Lycidas” and John Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”; the spirits of his family, especially his dead parents; and above all his personal heroes, most notably Lincoln. Gramm goes to Gettysburg to

mourn, to reflect and to find hope. In the middle of *November*, like a clear, illuminated space at the center of a labyrinth, is Gramm's phrase-by-phrase explication of the Gettysburg Address, which he sees as a profoundly religious document.

For Gramm, November is an elegiac month, the month when his father and mother died and when many of his heroes—the World War I poet Wilfred Owen, John F. Kennedy, C. S. Lewis—died. As he wanders around the battlefield, recording the weather, describing the scenery, determining the exact place where Lincoln delivered the address, he reflects on historical, personal and scholarly concerns. "The month begins with things that perish," he writes. "But ultimately, November is a journey of hope, as was Lincoln's journey to Gettysburg. So too I will journey to Gettysburg in these pages. Like Lincoln's fellow citizens, I go there to assuage personal griefs, to find answers; and I hope, for me as for them, that my personal sorrows become a vehicle for larger answers and a larger purpose."

In part, Gramm's focus is war, from the Civil War to the cold war, and the heroes associated with those struggles. But among the book's most moving parts are Gramm's meditations on the lives of his parents. The marked unhappiness of these two mismatched people makes it difficult for him to lean on their example, but he does draw hope from their compassion and their faithfulness to their ideals, to their forebears, to their visions of the good life and to their only child.

Gramm is convinced that "the rights we believe in have no reality apart from the God we rely on. There can be no 'unalienable rights' unless we are endowed with them by a God in whom we trust." But he has no easy answers as to the nature of that God. In his chapter on C. S. Lewis, one of the highlights of the book, he finds Lewis's apologetic works facile and shallow compared to Lewis's final book, written after the death of his wife. Schooled by grief, Lewis comes to understand that God cannot so easily be explained and understood through the intellect as he had once thought; God is inscrutable and mysterious, his goodness not so easily comprehended by human beings. "His book is in part a probing, grieving elegy for his wife, just as Owen's work is an outraged elegy for the pale, betrayed dead, and Lincoln's is a political elegy for those who willingly make their sacrifices," Gramm writes. These writers of elegies all try to change the world, and offer hope, even as they mourn.

Debra Rienstra's journey takes place at home. She writes about the intimate process of creating a baby and then bringing that child safely through his first year of life. As she and her husband think about having a third child—they decide it will be their last—Rienstra begins to keep a journal of her experiences and reflections. Despite the exhausting work of caring for two young children while pregnant with a third and continuing to function as a college professor, she disciplines herself to write each day, even if only for 15 minutes. The result is not a hodgepodge of journal entries but a polished meditation on the body, on creativity and change, on the relations between men and women, and on our relationship with God.

As Rienstra considers the fears that trouble her mind and populate her dreams during the early months of her pregnancy, one of the purposes of the book becomes clear. "I can make sense of this overflow of fear psychologically, but I don't know what to do with it spiritually," she writes. "If this is all a matter of hormone levels, then does that mean that hormones influence the state of our souls, tipping the delicate balances of fear and trust? As far as I know, this question represents completely unexplored theological territory." She would like theology to catch up to women's reality, and hopes her book will present one of the most important aspects of that reality honestly and well.

The experience of pregnancy leads Rienstra to a wide-ranging consideration of sensory pleasure and desire. She calls especially on Julian of Norwich, who celebrated the body and its processes as part of the good work of God. The issue of whether she and her husband should find out their baby's gender before it is born leads her to reflect on destiny, determinism and free will. The most painful part of the book is Rienstra's account of the long period of troubled sleep and insomnia during her child's first year, culminating in a period of deep depression. With help from doctors, sleep researchers and spiritual mentors, including St. Augustine, she finds her way back to health. Learning to keep the Sabbath as a day of spiritual and bodily refreshment plays a considerable role in her recovery.

The danger with any book that grows out of a personal journal is that it will express the trivial aspects of the self. Rienstra's *Great with Child* does not entirely escape this pitfall, but on the whole she is an admirable and wise companion.

Diana Butler Bass succeeds perhaps best of these four writers in combining a personal story with a broader concern. Though classified as spiritual autobiography, her book is really more church history—or such a skillful amalgam of the two that

through it one learns church history in a particularly pleasant and memorable way. A historian, Bass recounts and analyses the changes through which mainline Protestantism has gone during the past 30 years by telling of her own involvement with eight Episcopal congregations in various parts of the country.

Each chapter begins with an account of the stage in her life that brought her to a particular congregation, provides a history of that congregation and its development during the time she was part of it, and then places this experience in the context of recent church history. It's a particularly effective method for explaining the baby-boom spiritual seekers, among whom Bass numbers herself; the conflicts and changes facing local congregations; and the larger history of the church.

Bass's journey takes her from the establishment Methodist church of her childhood—liberal, undemanding and dull—toward the fervent nondenominational evangelicalism of her teens, to the Episcopal congregations of her adulthood. She sees her spiritual journey as "not all that unusual." It fits the baby-boomer pattern: "A person grew up in a particular religious tradition, but that tradition failed to answer significant questions during the college years. As a result, he or she rejected organized religion. Finally, after finding a modicum of personal fulfillment through work or family, the person still feels oddly dissatisfied. So he or she returns to religion . . . and discovers that spirituality is the way to deeper meaning and inner fulfillment. These seekers, sometimes dubbed returnees, have been credited with spurring much of the current interest in spirituality. They are filling American pews, retreat centers, and seminaries once again." In Bass's case, however, she never really left the church; she undertook a journey within it.

Bass's assessment of contemporary mainline Protestantism is very positive. She thinks developments in liturgy and theological pluralism and a renewed emphasis on nourishing spirtuality have revitalized and energized the church. She notes that these changes created conflicts between the generations in the churches she attended, but believes the battles were worth it.

Though I have been only an armchair traveler, going on retreat with Mariani made the salvation story come alive for me in a new way. Gramm offered signs of hope during days darkened by the unrelenting news of violence and oppression in Israel and Palestine. Rienstra helped me relive some of the most important experiences of my own life and to prepare for the birth of a grandchild. And Bass brought me back again to the mainline churches, my spiritual home, with a new understanding and appreciation.