

Beyond inertia

by [David Dawson](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life.

By David F. Ford. Baker, 201 pp.

I am busy these days, so I'd just like to be able to sit down, write a straightforward review of David Ford's book, and be done with it. But I can't. This book has already begun to interfere with my life. It may even end up costing me real money. That check for the Kosovo relief effort I am now writing in my mind keeps getting outrageously larger. I worry that I might actually put it in the mail.

Sure, I see the pictures of the refugees in nearly every morning's newspaper, but until I read this deceptively simple little book, those people still hadn't entered all that far into my privileged "inner community," the little group of psychological intimates whose faces (and opinions, reactions and circumstances) I actually pay attention to. Why are they gaining entry now?

Ford suggests early in the book that I should make Jesus the central person in the community of my heart. I'm tempted just to file that suggestion away with all those saccharine Jesus-and-my-heart hymns that are my least favorite in the Methodist hymnal. But Ford is not about to make things so easy. In his vision, the Jesus in my heart is busy looking not just on me (which is what lots of those hymns seem to think he's doing) but on all sorts of other people, especially the "marginalized" or the "to us, disagreeable people." Ford wants me to see that to let Jesus in automatically means letting all those others in—and then having to pay attention to their plight.

A mere 20 pages into Ford's book and I can see that letting Jesus into my heart is just going to end up getting me overwhelmed by all "those to whom his gaze, words, and actions direct us." Who knows where Jesus will look, or where his gaze will lead those compelled to look where he looks?

I had thought a book with the user-friendly word "spiritual" in the title would not be getting so Christian so quickly and using up so much space talking about Jesus. This is clearly no way to get a secure foothold in the "Spirituality and Self-Help" section of the bookstore. In retrospect, I see I was easily taken in by the opening pages that

echoed all the ways we are being overwhelmed—from genocide in Kosovo, to high school murders in Colorado, to the deluge of our computerized information age, to the unceasing blandishments of advertisers, to the commodification of virtually everything. Little did I suspect that Ford would soon be suggesting that the key to my ability to cope with all these overwhelmings would be to open myself up to yet another overwhelming—the overwhelming love of God in Christ for the world.

I have to admit, though, that every time Ford works the discussion back around to Jesus, Jesus turns out to make unexpected sense. This is remarkable not only because books on Christian spirituality often present the most unremarkable things about Jesus, but also because Ford doesn't really say new things about Jesus. Rather, he says the same old things—but not in the same old ways. He frames the gospel message in ways that dovetail with his uncannily perceptive accounts of our modern, messed-up (but potentially promising) lives.

In addition, because he is humble enough (despite being Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, which is surely, to theologians, a form of temptation) not to translate traditional Christian reflection on Jesus into trendy theoretical or scholarly jargon, Ford makes us listen with new ears to just those features of the old Jesus story that are most germane to our lives. "Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear," so the song goes. Well, Ford not only tells the Jesus story we want to hear; at the same time, he tells another story that explains why we fail to realize that it is Jesus we want to hear about.

Ford is right: like everyone else, I am obsessed with various desires. I desire a comfortable life. I desire to be well regarded. I desire to protect and provide for my children. I desire to excel in my profession. And if I don't keep my head on straight, pretty soon I may desire a Volvo wagon. But Ford changes the starting point: the first thing to get straight is that I am already desired by God. Desired by God? Who could believe that? The creator of All That Is desires *me*? God desires you?

And our response, he suggests, should be to desire what God desires. That's what Jesus did: "His obedience is in recognizing that he himself is God's desire and that everything else in his life should be in tune with the desires of God." "In desiring God," Ford writes, "we find the long term shape of our life." Most of the time, I am perfectly happy shaping my own life, thank you. I don't want to *find* the shape of my life—I just want to *shape* it. I desire not what God desires but what I desire, which I often interpret (we live, after all, in the Age of Interpretation, not the Age of

Obedience) as what God desires.

Of course, just because I manage to ignore God's desire for me—and therefore can easily replace God's desires with my own—doesn't mean I'm not a good person. Or don't want to be. But if I sense that I am not yet really good, how do I become good? Once again, Ford turns the issue around: the question is not, How do I become virtuous? but, How will I respond to what God has already done, to what God has given me and forgiven me? The response that leads to virtue, Ford writes, is to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by what God has done for us and how God has forgiven us—"so that we can be wholeheartedly for God and for other people."

Once again, it is Jesus who enacts this love and this response: "Jesus' power is marked by taking complete responsibility on himself and by trusting God completely at the same time." His trust is validated by his resurrection and is made efficacious for others in the gift of the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit is this power formed around the cross, and the root activity of all Christian life is calling out, 'Come, Holy Spirit!' The trust is that God will always give sufficient power for what he wants done: the loving we are called to do this minute."

Of course, this is very distressing, for now I learn that my own moral inertia can be overturned at any moment. There's nothing necessary or inevitable about it. But there's a lot about that inertia I really like. And as Ford carefully points out, we all have our own unique ways of "balancing" our desires and God's, of constricting our potential openness to God's overwhelming by accommodating it to the constraints of our busy, urgent everyday lives. One simply has to be . . . prudent. No wonder I find it convenient to think of reasons why the resurrection of Jesus seems so . . . excessive.

To have one's life shaped by the power of the resurrection will not keep one from evil, suffering and death. Ford anticipates the paralyzing ultimatum many of us deliver to the universe in order to justify remaining as we are: if evil, suffering and death don't get the last word, then let's have a counterexample. If the world is not some mere concatenation of atoms, blindly swirling off to no purpose—a world in which high schoolers gun down classmates and teachers and countries torture, murder and expel those who are different—then let's see a sign of another kind of world. We challenge God to work a little magic, or at least to deal with this situation.

But the Christian tradition, writes Ford, doesn't offer that sort of response. Instead, the response of Christian faith to suffering and evil "might be summed up as trust in healing without magic." And this healing comes only by way of the healer's own wounding: Jesus "faced the fact that . . . healing can only be offered by those who embody it, whatever the cost. So he in his own life embodied it and paid the cost with his life." The validity and efficaciousness of that cost was followed by the ultimate overwhelming of the resurrection and the new kind of life it realized.

That, suggests Ford, should be the overwhelming—with its vision and foretaste of the kingdom of God—that shapes all our other overwhelmings, with which our daily lives are otherwise devoted to coping. It is an overwhelming that is, at this moment, available to all who would open themselves to it.

There is, of course, a threat here, which many of us will recognize at once: there is a cost to be paid, and it will be paid with one's life. That sounds as though it means "my life." But maybe what I think is my life isn't my real—that is to say, my properly shaped—life at all. Then the threat is actually a promise. "Here," writes Ford, "is one of the most basic alternatives anyone can face. Some believe the universe to be a brute fact ruled by chance. The most radical alternative belief is that it is created by love for love and it (together with ourselves) is in fact being loved now."

With its subtle interweaving of biblical narratives and the poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail, Ford's book is powerful and compelling testimony to that radical alternative belief—to a vision of promised joy, feasting and hospitality—and to the difference it might make if we allowed it to shape our lives. Throughout this book, Ford's description of the complexities and overwhelmings of contemporary life are unfailingly on target, and the bridge that he builds between those descriptions and the articulation of the Christian gospel is one that readers who know their lives need reshaping will be drawn into crossing.

There is no way to anticipate just what this book might be for you. As Ford observes, each reader will have to discover those particular paragraphs and phrases that speak to the restlessness of his or her own heart. I can say, though, that reading *The Shape of Living* has—against considerable odds (the Old Adam in me is alive and kicking)—made its Christian vision of human flourishing more of an actual possibility for me than it was before I began to read the book. *The Shape of Living* is like a friend's invitation to a dinner at which you encounter some unexpected guests and hope for some life-shaping consequence. By all means, accept.