



# Introduction

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## Navigating through Life in the River of Grace

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Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. . . . On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.

—**Ezekiel 47:9, 12**

I love the sound of water. Rushing. Lapping. Dripping. So does my husband. We have two small fountains on our deck just so we can hear that lapping sound. At night along with the crickets and locusts, we can hear the water gurgling in a rhythmic flow. Water has always been important to me in all its forms: bath, pool, pond, river, ocean.

Water has taught me many things. I've learned about trust by allowing the current to carry me. It has cultivated a shared harmony between my husband and me. It's shown me that I can ride the rapids and emerge shaken but standing. For those who pay attention to water, it offers a continual flow of lessons.

My appreciation of the gift and lessons of water began years ago, during a season of losses. That was when my husband suggested we purchase a kayak. Our then new home was in a region of many rivers and ponds, including a boat landing just five minutes from our house. We tested canoes and kayaks, and the minute I sank into the seat of the kayak I knew this was where I belonged. It put me as close to the water as I could get. I could run my hands through it and even dip my toes. My husband and I bought a tandem kayak, and it changed our lives.

It's interesting how something so ordinary can reveal such profound spiritual lessons. In our trips together I noticed the increased harmony between us. I was aware of being filled with deep peace that would linger long after the trip. The quiet allowed me to take in what was around me, most especially how the current carried us to new and wonderful places. I began to equate that current of the river with God's grace. Sometimes we would let the flow do the work for us, especially if we needed a rest from paddling. But we could also work *with* the current *through* our synchronized paddling to arrive sooner at the agreed destination. Along the way I could take in the sights, smells, and sensations of splashing water, warm breezes, and the greenery and sweet fragrances of the summer season, all of which filled me with a sense of well-being. These tactile experiences provided a powerful metaphor, demonstrating that the current of God's grace promised the same thing for my life if I but worked in partnership with him, trusted that I would be carried, and believed that I was meant to be brought to a better place. Kayaking taught me to look for and appreciate the smallest of details in God's creation: the color of the water, the flowers along the shore, the curve of the branches of a tree, the great blue heron standing in majestic splendor. If all I cared about was getting to my final destination, I would miss out on the best part, which

was the journey itself. The message became clear: if I don't plant myself in the present moment, remaining alert to all of those lessons and small blessings God provides along the way, I will miss much of what he intends to give me. I came to discover that those small blessings were in abundance and would continue to multiply, not only when the journey was easy, but also when it became difficult and frightening. The river of grace is in constant motion, and only when I submit to that motion will I discover the many blessings that lie in the present moment. The longer I am in the river, the richer my life becomes.

In the last ten years I have known great losses, some expected, some not. Each loss, however, seemed to create a new inlet to the river. The river, after all, is not a straight line. New tributaries open, each with a strong current beckoning me into a new adventure. One of the first lessons of the river was in seeing obedience to God not as onerous "do nots" but as exhilarating "dos"! As I learned to be carried by grace, I began to sense invitations to a better way of being. As my trust grew, I allowed God to take me into those tricky currents, trying things that once seemed "crazy" and "foolish." The more I allowed myself to be carried, the more I learned how to say yes to life. As a result, my faith grew stronger, my joy and gratitude deeper. For the first time in my life, I learned how to dream.

The flow of the river of grace is not always peaceful; it takes trust to hang on when the whitewater moments hit. In the last ten years I have been carried off by the rapids, slammed into rocks, and plummeted over waterfalls; I came out bloodied and chastened, yet wiser and stronger. Embedded in those struggles is the belief that God would provide resting places along the shore and docks to offload my burdens. The difficult passages became the means of a loving Father to mold, shape, and transform me; they taught me that I am indeed a beloved daughter of God.

These stories are also about understanding the nature of the current and letting the river of grace fill and change me. When we face losses, we are given a different kind of clarity. As a result, I have learned to leave a good portion of my life behind, separating from people and parts of myself I once thought vital to my being. I've discovered joy for the first time even in the midst of sorrow. And an exhilarating rebirth of creativity has taken place. I've lost much, but gained so much in the process. Gratitude is replacing bitterness; it is fueling that joy.

This concept of a continuous, living flow of grace is new to me despite being raised Catholic. Although faith had been important to me as a child growing up in the Church, it dried up during my twenties and thirties. I filled the emptiness with ambition, throwing my energy into pursuing a career. I became self-absorbed, sullen, and frustrated. My faith dissolved into a quagmire of doubts except for one saving grace: a persistent gut feeling that the Eucharist was special. That vague yet strong feeling kept me going to Mass during those years until a conversion experience in my late thirties brought me back home to a living, breathing faith.

The seeds of faith were planted during my childhood. In those days the Mass was said in Latin and I did not understand a word of it. Yet when I received Communion I found myself thinking of concrete images that reinforced in my mind and heart that this wafer was special, even if it did taste like cardboard. I'd picture the foyer of my house with its hardwood floor scrubbed clean and made shiny. Or I'd imagine a rosebush growing in my heart. Those images represented a child's understanding of being made clean when we go to Mass (the clean and shiny floor) and that something beautiful grows within us when we receive the Body of Christ (as in the rosebush).

Imaginings of everyday material things planted a love of the Eucharist within me that gave me something to hold on to during my crisis of faith. It was a foreshadowing of how kayaking on the river would provide the concrete metaphor for God's grace. The physical things of this world—water and rivers, wafers, chalices filled with wine, shiny floors and growing rosebushes—are provided by God as a starting point, guiding us into the mystery and transformation of the spiritual life.

April 22, 2010, not only marked the day I lost my mother; it was also the day I began to find my authentic self. It started with a series of simple yeses on the river of grace:

- Yes to being an orphan as both of my parents were gone.
- Yes to accepting another sort of death, the loss of my singing voice and service to the Church as a cantor.
- Yes to saying good-bye to my old life as a professional musician.
- Yes to visiting a homebound woman each week to bring her Communion just two weeks after losing my mother.
- Yes to immersing myself in an old love, the life and works of Louisa May Alcott, and to blogging and engaging in new communities.
- Yes to teaching high school CCD even though I was terrified of teenagers.
- Yes to accepting, eventually, my new vocation from God as a writer.

It was loss that immersed me into the watery flow of God's spirit and led me downstream. It was loss that drenched me in grace and blessings, which multiplied with each subsequent yes. Obedience changed from that oppressive no to a freeing

yes, leading to growth, acceptance, and new adventures, to a transformation of loss.

This book shares the lessons of the journey, the passage from grief to joy, from confusion to insight, and from bitterness to deep gratitude. It is also a book that provides help: “Flow Lessons”—practical and creative ways to review the process, plus navigational tools for those white-water times. There are additional resources on my website, [beasone.org](http://beasone.org); click on the tab “Flow Lessons.” All of the Flow Lessons include prayerful exercises that will take spiritual concepts and relate them to something concrete in our everyday lives in order to facilitate greater understanding. If we think of the wafer as being the material form of the Eucharist, as something we can see, touch, and eat, we can have a starting point for contemplating its deep spiritual mystery. You will have an opportunity to test drive such an exercise at the end of this preface.

We are surrounded with such tactile examples in our own churches and within the Mass, whether it be the beautiful art that adorns the walls and windows, the priestly vestments and their symbolic colors signaling a particular liturgical season, the aroma of incense, the sounds of music, the handshakes, hugs, and kisses exchanged during the Sign of Peace, or the taste and texture of the bread and wine. These and more act as guides—entry points into spiritual mysteries. My hope is that you can experience your own epiphanies of God’s grace, as I did from my childhood memories of the Eucharist and kayaking on the river.

While there are numerous books dealing with grief, its stages and process, this one presents a new dimension with its promise of creative transformation, something that is meant for all of us. The story of a journey of losses may also be a story that puts a kayak on the river as a first step toward the discovery and realization of the creative life. Acknowledging the creativity

within us is a form of spiritual awakening as we take things that already exist and make something new from them.

The artistic life is fraught with land mines of the ego, self-absorption, and the emotions. It requires solitude, creating a delicate balancing act especially for women who are wives and mothers. Creative women I know have found it difficult to fully embrace their vocations as artists, whether it is in art, music, writing, and so on, because of the false notion that it is “selfish” to indulge in self-expression. By placing our creativity into God’s care and trusting his vision as each loss unfolds, we become free to express the creative vocation for his service, becoming true to ourselves in the process.

Many of us believe we have no capacity for creativity because we lack talent in the fine arts. Although I do have some of that talent, I believe it to be merely a tool for the more basic purpose of creating something new by combining elements that already exist. The Holy Spirit is the example, hovering over the waters, as depicted in Genesis, in preparation for the creation of the world. The Spirit of God used the formless earth to create light, sky, land, vegetation, and animals. He drew from the existing dust to create man; woman was created from a rib inside of the man. Something new was created from what already existed. We are called to do the same in every little action in our lives. I hope to show through this book how each of us can discover that creativity that God has planted within us.

Consider this book as shared spiritual lessons and wisdom, where a friend shares with another friend how her faith got her through tough times and had her life transformed in amazing ways. I am a big believer in being part of a community where we encourage and help others. By sharing pieces of my story, I hope that you will discover a place, a haven, to enter in where

you can explore your own stories and processes. Faith-sharing among friends helps to provide that safe haven.

Beginning with the metaphor of a river as the means by which one is guided and immersed in the spiritual life, I share spiritual lessons learned from the various losses I experienced and the transformation that resulted from my consenting to travel down that river of grace. My hope is that your experience in the “river” is transformative, informative, and Spirit filled, despite—and sometimes because of—the white waters.

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## Flow Lesson 1

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### **Digesting the Eucharist**

*Materials needed: pen or pencil and paper, food, your imagination*

Pick a quiet place in your home to do this exercise, and make sure you can sit still comfortably for several minutes. To begin, take a moment to be still with God. If you are having trouble with noise in your mind from the cares of the day, close your eyes and imagine a tree in winter filled with screeching birds. The tree is dense with these birds, and the noise is unbearable. Now watch as each bird flies away. Attach a thought or care to that flying bird and bid it adieu. Do this until the tree is entirely empty of birds and it is quiet.

After a few moments of quiet, go to the kitchen and fix yourself something to eat that is both nutritious and something you really like. As you prepare your food, say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for that food and for the privilege of eating it in his presence.

Return with your food to the place you designated for this exercise and examine it carefully. Write down a few descriptive

phrases about the food, noting its color, smell, and texture. Now take a bite and chew slowly, thinking about how the food tastes, what it feels like in your mouth, and what you enjoy about that food. Write down phrases that pop into your mind.

When you finish your meal, think about where food goes after you eat it, how it travels to your stomach, is digested, and then is circulated throughout your body via your bloodstream. As you are thinking about that, consider how you are feeling: Do you feel energized and satisfied after eating? Does it give you what you need to carry on with your day? Write down your impressions, and then put your piece of paper in a prominent place so you will remember to take it with you the next time you go to Mass. Ask God to take what you have written and plant it on your heart for when you receive Communion.

During Mass take out that piece of paper and read it *before* you receive the Eucharist. Now consider the Eucharist in the same way you considered the food you ate during your meditation. Be mindful of the texture of the wafer as you receive it and notice how you eat it: Do you chew it or let it dissolve? Think about why you eat it in that way and how it makes you feel. If you also receive the wine, do you hold the wafer in your mouth and wait to consume it until you drink the wine? How does the wine add to the experience?

When you get back to your place, think about the wafer and the wine being digested, soon to be coursing through your veins. What symbols come to mind, if any? How will the Eucharist nourish you, both spiritually and physically? Believing that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ, how does it make you feel to know it is now present within your body? Does it increase your sense of intimacy with Jesus?

When you get home from Mass, take a few moments to write down your impressions of receiving Communion, and

compare notes. Ask God to continue to offer insight, opening the eyes of your mind to new ideas and possibilities.

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# Chapter 1—Discovering the Flow of Grace

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## What God Taught Me through My Kayak

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**A**t first I resisted the idea of purchasing a kayak. We were in a time of loss—debt—and money was tight. But my husband, Rich, wore me down. We both loved the water, and it was a way to discover our central Massachusetts town and surrounding towns. He found a used tandem kayak (it seats two) at a good price and drove four hours to neighboring New Hampshire to pick it up. A boat landing was right down the street, and so we set sail. Right away I knew this new hobby was going to have a positive impact on our lives.

Rich and I have enjoyed a happy, lifelong relationship. We dated in high school and married just out of college. We shared the same values about life, particularly when it came to our faith, but when it got down to doing things together, we came up short. The kayak solved that problem.

From the moment we stepped into the boat, we noticed a harmony between us. Usually competitive with each other, we instead worked in partnership. We took many leisurely trips, appreciating the natural landscape on the quieter ponds while admiring all the beautiful waterfront properties on the larger

lakes. Sometimes we'd talk, but often we just paddled along, enjoying our time together in silence.

I took such pleasure in kayaking that I began to daydream about it. Sitting as close to the water as I could . . . sunshine on my face . . . lush, sweet-smelling greenery . . . dragging my hands through the warm, clear water . . . splashing it on my hot feet . . . drifting downstream, letting the current carry me . . . taking time just to be . . .

My daydreams seemed to be suggesting that the concrete experience of the water contained something deeper, a metaphor, a bridge of understanding to the spiritual life: What if I allowed God to be that current that carried me? That current, I realized, was *grace*. Grace had always been there, but I had never before acknowledged it. Sometimes the flow of grace was gentle yet persistent, while at other times it swirled with great power as it carried me through difficult times over waterfalls and through chaotic whirlpools. Even when I was swept under by this river of grace, I was protected and changed.

Putting that kayak in the river in 2007 occurred at a time when peace was much needed. We had experienced turbulence over the last several years, and fear had become my constant companion. In reflecting on the peace encountered in the boat and connecting it to grace, I realized that we had also known of the power of grace during that turbulence.

Consigning the experience of the kayak to grace was not unlike the connection I had made as a child between a "clean floor" and receiving the Eucharist. Obviously something of my religious education had sunken in: intuitively I understood that attending Mass and taking Communion cleansed me of my lesser sins. In both cases my imagination helped me to associate a familiar image with a deep spiritual mystery.

Kayaking acted as a *catalyst*, opening my mind to something that God wanted to reveal to me, just as my imagining a “clean floor” prompted an innate appreciation of the Eucharist. Why did such images and memories prompt such a strong and lasting reaction?

Perhaps as you read this, there may be concrete images in your memory that prompt a strong, positive reaction. Maybe that memory provokes a sudden wave of nostalgia. Perhaps as you think it over, that image leads you further, to some kind of truth. Smells are often great catalysts (such as the scent of perfume or a flower, reminding you of incense and thus God’s lingering presence). The common element that I detect in these catalysts is a *love* of something. Love of the peace and harmony that kayaking provided. Love of having a “clean floor” (meaning a life put back in order) by receiving Communion. Because thinking on these things evoked pleasant feelings, I spent time reflecting on them to relive those feelings. Somewhere along the way, that love led me to God.

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## Flow Lesson 2

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### **What Is Your Spiritual Catalyst?**

*Materials needed: pen or pencil and paper, your memories*

Take a moment to be still with God, taking several long and deep breaths and listening as you breathe. In and out, in and out. Be conscious of the rhythm of the breathing. As you breathe in, whisper the name of Jesus; as you breathe out, whisper, “Be with me.” Do this for several moments until you feel quiet and still.

Next, take a piece of paper and fold it vertically in half so that you have two columns. Now recall one memory, object, or