

RETHINKING LIFE



Embracing the
Sacredness
of Every Person

S H A N E C L A I B O R N E

Author of *Irresistible Revolution*

ZONDERVAN

Rethinking Life

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Introduction

An Invitation to Love Life

I grew up in the heart of the Bible Belt, in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. I fell in love with Jesus there. Sunday school, youth group, Young Life, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (I wasn't even really an athlete)—I did it all. I am a child of the church. My grandparents were Southern Baptists, but Mom and I found a home among the Methodists. Before long, I wanted some of the Holy Ghost fire and the miracles and wonders of the Pentecostals, so I joined the charismatic movement. When that got a little funky, I leaned into the deep roots of Catholicism for a while. I guess you could say I'm a bit of a spiritual mutt, but all of it shaped who I am today.

My political and social imagination was also shaped by the culture wars of the 1980s. I helped lead the See You at the Pole campaign, where high school students gathered at their school's flagpole to pray for our nation before heading into classes. I was ready to go to jail if they (whoever "they" were) told us we couldn't pray in public school.

As my theology grew over the years, I learned to appreciate the treasures of many different traditions of Christianity, to savor the meat and spit out the bones. I also began to see some of the church's blind spots—both the theological ones and the practical ones—particularly when it came to our value for life.

I passionately embraced the label "pro-life," but my concept of what it meant to be pro-life revolved almost entirely around ending abortion. Ending abortion was as fundamental to my faith as being

baptized or taking communion. I did not believe you could really be a Christian and not take a stand against the horror of abortion.

I distinctly remember learning to debate and loving the thrill of trying to argue someone into the ground. I can even recall, like it was yesterday, making the case in my twelfth-grade English class that abortion is murder and murderers deserve the death penalty, so why aren't we arresting abortion doctors and putting them on trial? I had all the Bible verses that I thought made the case crystal clear. I even thought about becoming a lawyer.

But my crystal-clear case started to crack a little bit when I realized I was justifying one form of violence (the death penalty) as punishment for another (abortion). And it wasn't too long before I began to see more contradictions, both in the church and in myself. For example, while I was learning to defend my faith with Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ*, I was also learning to defend guns, war, and the death penalty. The more I leaned into Jesus, read the Gospels, and reflected on the Sermon on the Mount, the more conflicted I felt about many of my political positions.

I began to realize that it would be more accurate for those of us who consider ourselves pro-life to call ourselves "pro-birth" or "anti-abortion." Sometimes we have been more concerned with life before birth than life after birth. It is a strange thing to live in a world where we can be pro-military, pro-guns, pro-executions, and still say we are pro-life so long as we stand against abortion. But, alas, that is where we find ourselves.

When I think back to those years in high school when abortion consumed so much of my energy, I realize that I had lots of ideologies, but few if any relationships with people whose lives were impacted by those ideologies. Ideologies alone don't require much of us, and mine hadn't required much of me.

I had a lot to say about abortion, but eventually it occurred to me that I couldn't think of a single person I knew who had actually had an abortion, or at least anyone who felt comfortable telling me

about it. In retrospect, this is understandable since I had said out loud that I thought abortion doctors deserved the death penalty. As is too often the case, I was good at talking about issues, but not as good about having compassion for the people directly affected by the issues. Sometimes our theology or our political opinions become an obstacle to love rather than a conduit of love. And that is a problem.

We cannot talk about issues while avoiding the people who are affected by them. We cannot talk *at* each other; we must talk *with* each other.

A Lovely Question

This book is not just about issues. It is about people. It is about asking, What does love require of us? Ideologies do not demand much of us, but relationships do. “What does love require of us?” is a lovely question because it is a call to action.

Asking that question changed everything for me because what love required of me was more than a saying on a bumper sticker, a T-shirt, or a yard sign. It required proximity and relationships. It required drawing near and leaning in to those who had been impacted by the issues. In our neighborhood in North Philadelphia, gun violence is more than statistics; it has names and stories and tears. We have murals and memorials on nearly every corner to honor the lives lost to guns. Gun violence is about the three-year-old hit with a stray bullet on Malta Street. It’s about the mother who collapsed onto the sidewalk when she got news her little boy had been killed. To me, gun violence is so much more than talking points because it affects neighbors whom I love. That’s why I’m inviting you to join me in asking this question about every issue: What does love require of us?

It’s the same with the death penalty. For me, the death penalty is not just a political issue, it’s a reality that nearly took the life of Derrick Jamison, one of my close friends who was sentenced to die for a crime

he had nothing to do with. He spent two decades on death row, had six execution dates, and was hours from execution when he was finally proved innocent. Listening to Derrick describe what it was like to watch his friends—more than fifty of them—be killed by the state, one by one, and to constantly wonder whether he would be next, does something to you. When you hear a mother say that the first time she kissed her son in thirty years was *after* his execution because they were not allowed to have contact visits, it does something to you.

When I think about war, it is no longer something I pontificate about in an abstract sense. It is about the children I held in the Al Monzer Pediatric Hospital in Baghdad. Their bodies were riddled with fragments from bombs dropped on them by the US during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I'm still willing to talk about "just-war theory" with people who care about that, but what changed my heart was not just losing an argument, it was seeing the devastation of war firsthand. I became convinced that love doesn't do that to people.

What has changed me over the years is not slogans or rallying cries but listening to my immigrant neighbors, visiting refugee camps, sleeping on dirt floors, and biking along the US-Mexico border to talk with refugees and asylum seekers. These are the things—or to be accurate, these are the *people* who have caused me to wrestle with the question, What does love require of us? What does love require of *me*?

I am still a work in progress, and I don't pretend to have answers to all of the questions that will arise in the pages that follow, but this I know for certain: Being in proximity makes a difference. Relationships make issues real and complicated and personal. Relationships move us from ideology to compassion. We can't love our neighbors if we don't know them. And once we are proximate, love requires us to take action, to stand up for life in tangible ways.

Pro-Life for the Whole of Life

Back when I was trying to sort out the contradictions of what it means to be pro-life, I eventually bumped into this idea of a “consistent ethic of life,” the conviction that all of life—from womb to tomb—matters. To have a consistent ethic of life is to be comprehensive in our advocacy for life and to refuse to think of issues in isolation from each other. It is a fundamental conviction that every person is sacred and made in the image of God. It requires pursuing whatever allows people to flourish and fighting everything that crushes life. That means that all these difficult issues—the military, guns, racism, the death penalty, poverty, and abortion—are connected, and we need a moral framework that integrates them. That’s what it means to be pro-life for the whole of life.

For some, a consistent ethic of life is nothing new. Catholics have used the language of a “seamless garment” woven of all the issues. For centuries, Anabaptist Christians have maintained a commitment to life and a passion for nonviolence. The early Christians, as we will see, had a consistent ethic of life. They were a force to be reckoned with, speaking out against every manifestation of violence in their society. They spoke against war, domestic violence, capital punishment, and they spoke against abortion. They even spoke out against gladiator games, a popular form of entertainment in the Roman Empire and one of the particular ways our human infatuation with violence expressed itself in their culture.

Christianity’s first three centuries were strikingly and wonderfully pro-life in the best and most encompassing sense of the word. And today, this idea of a consistent life ethic is resonating with a whole new generation that has grown tired of death in all of its ugly manifestations.

I want to invite us to love bigger, to extend the same passion that many of us have for one issue to all of the issues. We’ll be building a broad, firm foundation that helps us be advocates for life

comprehensively, without exceptions. We won't minimize the conversation about abortion, which we will address. Instead, we'll situate that conversation within an expansive, passionate ethic of life that includes other issues. We care about issues because behind the issues are real people.

I must confess that I wish some of my conservative friends cared as much about life after birth as they do life before birth. And I wish some of my progressive friends saw abortion not just as a rights issue but also as a life issue, a moral issue. Then we might do a better job at reducing the number of abortions.

So this is a book about life. And it's a book about love. We are asking the most important question of all: What does it look like to love God with our whole heart and mind and strength, and to love people as ourselves—without exceptions?

My primary ambition is not to reclaim the pro-life label. Instead, my hope is that you and I will embrace a robust ethic of life. I want this deep, heartfelt conviction that every person matters to God to impact how we think—theologically, politically, socially, morally—about a whole range of issues.

So let's get to it. This book is divided into three parts. Part 1 helps us build a foundation for a better ethic of life by looking to Scripture, Jesus, and the early Christians for inspiration. Part 2 is an honest look at where the foundation for life began to crack over the centuries. And I'll warn you, this part of the book is pretty heavy and heartbreaking, but the truth sets us free. So we'll take a closer look at the Crusades, slavery, colonization, and other ways Christians and the church have failed to be champions of life. Finally, in part 3, we'll explore what it will take to repair the cracks in the foundation of our ethic of life and how we can be a force for life and for love in the world. All along the way, we'll be asking, What does love require of us?

It's time to rethink how precious life is so we can reclaim the sacredness of every human being.

CHAPTER 1

Life Is Good

Our goal is to develop a comprehensive, all-encompassing ethic of life that compels us to be champions of life, to cherish life, and to defend it passionately. To do that, we need a foundation on which we can build, and one we can keep coming back to. And where better to start than at the beginning, with creation itself?

Here's how it all began, according to Genesis, the first book of the Bible. God took dirt and breathed life into it to make humanity. God created life and it was good.

It was good. That's the refrain in Genesis 1 as God creates the world.

Over and over, like the chorus of a song, the Bible says, "It was good."

God created the water. And it was good.

God created land and plants and trees and mountains and beaches. And it was good.

God created the moon and the sun and the stars in the sky. And it was good.

God created birds and fish and monkeys and butterflies and elephants and seahorses and the duck-billed platypus! And it was good.

Then God created humans in God's own image. And God saw all that had been made and declared it *very* good. After that sixth day, when God made the first human beings and looked at the whole of creation in all its wonder, that's when we get the addition of "very."

God's creation wasn't just good, it was *real* good. God was pumped. God was absolutely stoked.

And still is.

The Wonder Gap

Not many people are going to argue with the fact that life is good, but life is more than just good, it's miraculous! And yet we tend to lose a sense of wonder at the miracle of it all. That's why I love being around kids. They still have that sense of wonder.

Not long ago, I got a wonder wake-up call that started with a knock on my door. And it wasn't just any knock, it was the frantic kind, the pounding kind, what some of the kids on my block call the "cop knock." As I ran downstairs, I assumed there must have been an accident, a shooting, someone hit by a car, something bad. I took a deep breath to prepare myself for whatever might be next and opened the door. Standing there was eight-year-old Tysean, one of the neighborhood kids I've known since he was born. He grabbed my hand and began dragging me down the block. At this point, I could tell by his grin that it wasn't something bad, not a shooting or a car wreck. But what was it?

"You've got to see this," he said, pulling me like a dog on a leash. When we had gone about a hundred feet down the block, he pointed into the community garden. "What is that?" he asked. It was the first time he'd ever seen a firefly.

I thought for a moment and said the only thing I knew to say: "That was a really great day for God. God decided to make a bug whose butt glows in the dark."

Author Paul Hawken notes that Ralph Waldo Emerson once considered what we would do if the stars came out only once every thousand years. Commenting on Emerson's reflections, Hawken writes, "No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would

become religious overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead, the stars come out every night, and we watch television.”¹ Or maybe today we miss it all because we are watching Netflix or scrolling through our socials.

One of my friends is an astronomer named Dr. David Bradstreet. Before he was a friend, he was my astronomy professor at Eastern University. He wrote a whole book about the heavens titled *Star Struck: Seeing the Creator in the Wonders of Our Cosmos*. He starts by sharing how excited he was as a child every time he saw the stars. As he got older, he decided to study astronomy and eventually became one of the leading astronomers in the country. He even has a comet named after him. When you have a comet named after you, that’s beyond legit. Dr. Bradstreet is retired now, but he has never lost that sense of childlike wonder.

Some folks might suggest that the more you study the science of life, the less miraculous and wonder-full it seems. I know Christians who are scared of astronomy, fearful it might distract from the biblical narrative of creation. Others even see faith and science as opposing forces. But for Dr. Bradstreet, studying the science of creation has only increased his sense of wonder, deepened his faith, and further convinced him that there is a magnificent creator behind it all. All through his book, he drops spectacular facts, like the fact that the tail of Halley’s comet is sixty million miles long.² Or check this one out: every second, the sun converts four million tons of material into energy, the equivalent of ten billion nuclear bombs.³ Fortunately, the sun is the perfect distance away and all that heat loses at least a third of its radiant energy in the eight-minute journey it takes to reach the

1. Paul Hawken, “Healing or Stealing? The Best Commencement Address Ever,” *A Sense of Wonder: The World’s Best Writers on the Sacred, the Profane, and the Ordinary*, ed. Brian Doyle (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 191.

2. Dr. David Bradstreet and Steve Rabey, *Star Struck: Seeing the Creator in the Wonders of Our Cosmos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 19.

3. Bradstreet and Rabey, *Star Struck*, 83.

earth.⁴ If the earth were any closer to the sun, we'd burn up. If the earth were any farther away, we'd freeze.

Okay, one more. Every day, the divinely constructed and scientifically sound protective shield around the earth—the atmosphere—saves us from being hit by one hundred tons of small rocks and other pieces of space debris that would otherwise destroy the earth.⁵ Amazing! Sometimes we miss the fact that life itself is a miracle. It may very well take more faith to believe that all of this life “just happens” than it does to believe that there is a divine creator behind it all.

Dr. Bradstreet has helped me appreciate Scriptures like this one: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of [God’s] hands” (Ps. 19:1). And yet one of the questions Dr. Bradstreet raises is this: As the heavens cry out the glory of God, is anyone listening? He notes that some of his atheist peers in the scientific community have a deeper sense of wonder and awe about the universe than many of his Christian friends who are not scientists. He calls it the “wonder gap.”⁶

Too many of us have a wonder gap when it comes to the miracle of life in the natural world. That’s a problem because the more out of touch we are with the earth and the creatures of the earth, the easier it is to devalue or even destroy life.⁷ When we are no longer awed by

4. To be exact, it takes 8.3 minutes to get here, traveling 186,000 miles a second over 93 trillion miles. Which also means, if the sun stopped shining, it would take us 8.3 minutes to know that. The next closest star, Alpha Centauri, is so far away that it takes 4.3 years for its light to reach us over that 25-trillion-mile distance. *Whoa*. Bradstreet and Rabey, *Star Struck*, 249.

5. I could go on and on about the wonders I learned from Dr. Bradstreet in *Star Struck*. For example, did you know there are nineteen essential factors that not only make life on earth unique and miraculous but also provide the precise conditions for life to be possible at all? I won’t go through all nineteen, but they are pretty spectacular. For example, the alignment of the earth’s poles is off by exactly 23.5 degrees, creating the earth’s tilt on its axis. That minor detail is why we have seasons and climates. Without the tilt, we would either burn up or freeze to death. The fact that the earth is 75 percent water is also clutch. Life on earth is possible because we have roughly 352,670,000,000,000,000,000 gallons of it, and because some of it evaporates and flows back to the earth as rain. The sun is just one of 100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars. There are 200 billion stars in the Milky Way alone. But get this: in addition to ours, there are 200 billion more galaxies in the universe. The conditions for life on this little planet are truly a miracle. It makes you feel small and extremely special all at the same time. Bradstreet and Rabey, *Star Struck*, 58, 207.

6. Bradstreet and Rabey, *Star Struck*, 43.

7. Sometimes it’s not even intentional destruction but a subtler apathy about things such as climate change. For example, did you know that the temperature of sand determines the sex of sea turtles?

the miracle of creation, it gets harder to believe in the goodness and beauty of life—and the good and beautiful creator behind it all. That’s why gazing at fireflies and sunsets is a holy and spiritual practice. It not only fills us with wonder but also strengthens our foundation for life.

One of the ways we can bridge the wonder gap is by studying and contemplating how truly marvelous the world is. I’ve learned a lot about this from my wife, Katie Jo, who is one of the greatest nature lovers I’ve ever met. At one point, we had a spider who lived in the corner of the school-bus-turned-tiny-house we lived in for two years. When I went to remove it, she told me the spider’s name was Gladys and we needed to keep her because she ate the bad bugs, like stink bugs and mosquitos, so she was now a pet. Later, Gladys got pregnant and I finally talked Katie into putting her outside. Spiders can have up to a thousand babies, and that is too many pets for a tiny house.

Katie doesn’t have a wonder gap. She’s always telling me nature facts. For example, that the male seahorse is the one that gives birth. And that a hummingbird’s heart beats more than 1,200 times a minute and its wings flap sixty to eighty times a second. Katie is an aspiring beekeeper, and she taught me that bees have five eyes and that one hive can house around fifty thousand bees. Oh, and get this: the bees visit five million flowers to make one pint of honey. That makes you appreciate your honey, eh?

She’s always marveling at how the octopus changes color or that there is a flamingo that makes its nest out of salt. She just told me starlings can learn multiple bird languages or song patterns and speak them. And here’s a pigeon fact, which is important to know since pigeons can be challenging to love for those of us who live in the urban world. Even though they aren’t mammals, pigeons apparently

That means that because the sand has become warmer from climate change, male turtles have become almost extinct. More than 90 percent of the newborn turtles on the Great Barrier Reef are now female, which means the survival of the species is in grave danger. “Over 90% of Turtles Born Female Due to Climate Change,” World Wild Fund for Nature, January 8, 2018, [wwf_panda.org/wwf_news/?320295/90%2Dpercent%2Dfemale%2Dturtles](http://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?320295/90%2Dpercent%2Dfemale%2Dturtles).

have a milk reservoir in their crop—a section of the lower esophagus. Their “crop milk” contains antioxidants to keep their little ones from dying. Those are just a few Katie Jo wonder facts for you.

One of the wonders of the natural world that always amazes me is the complex emotional lives of animals. Did you ever see that viral video of the mother whale circling and crying out over her dead calf? Whales mourn, loudly and visibly, when another whale dies. How wild is that?

I was also amazed at a video taken at an elephant refuge, where a lot of old circus elephants are taken when they are rescued from abuse. The video shows a new arrival running up to another elephant and the two ecstatically wrapping their trunks around each other in an elephant hug of sorts. Refuge staffers later discovered that the two elephants had been in a circus together years before. How about that?

We need to recapture the childlike sense of wonder that kids so often have, because our lives are bound up with the beauty and flourishing of the natural world. We also need to pay attention to it because creation itself has a lot to teach us about who God is. The apostle Paul wrote, “Ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God” (Rom. 1:20 NLT).

And when it comes to having a foundation for life, one of the most important things we can learn about God is revealed within the miraculous diversity of life.

The Miraculous Diversity of Life

Did you know that there are roughly ten million forms of life on the planet? Among other things, that includes more than 300,000 different plants, 1.25 million animals, 900,000 insects, 10,000 birds,

and 8,000 reptiles.⁸ Those numbers are even more astounding when you consider that 95 percent of the species that have ever existed on earth are now extinct. More specifically, one in eight birds, one in four mammals, and one in three amphibious creatures are now extinct. And we lose about one hundred species a day, which is twenty-seven thousand per year. Fortunately, we also discover several thousand new species of living creatures every year.

I learned a lot about the incredible diversity of life on earth when I visited my friend Claudio Oliver in Brazil. Claudio is part theologian, part veterinarian, and 100 percent nuts. He reminds me of the character Doc from *Back to the Future*—eccentric, wild, and full of passion and curiosity. When I visited, he woke me up at 5:00 a.m. and took me on an all-day adventure to show me what life is like running an urban homestead. We fed the rabbits, one of which would be dinner. We traded eggs for the milk of a neighbor's cow. We went to the shopping mall, as Claudio denounced the evils of capitalism, to pick up used coffee grounds from the food court for his worm compost. Then he took me to the holy of holies, the “gene bank” where he is helping preserve endangered species of chickens.

“Do you know how many kinds of chickens are there?” he asked. Naturally, I started rattling them off like Bubba rattled off kinds of shrimp in *Forrest Gump*. “Well, there is fried chicken. There's teriyaki chicken. Barbeque chicken. Chicken kababs.”

“No, no!” Claudio belted out with a laugh. “How many *types* of chickens?”

I had no idea, so I kept going. “Chicken curry. Sweet and sour chicken. . . .”

And then he told me that there are more than four hundred kinds of chickens—species of chickens, that is. Heck, he added, there are also forty thousand different kinds of rice. And apparently twenty-nine thousand different fish. Then Claudio got on his biodiversity soapbox

8. I keep learning all the time. I just watched a documentary that said the three-toed sloth has eighty different species that live in its fur. Crazy!

and brought it all home: “Monoculture is diabolical. Diversity is *divine*.” He smiled and kept saying it louder and louder. “Monoculture is diabolical, but diversity is divine!”

Diversity is divine.

And diversity isn’t limited to plants and animals. Did you know that human beings speak more than seven thousand living languages in the nearly two hundred countries of the world?⁹ Not to mention that each human being has a unique fingerprint. Each of us also has our own DNA that is distinct from the other eight billion people on the planet.¹⁰

If my friend Claudio’s theory sounds a bit out there to you, let me take you on a little Bible adventure to unpack this idea of monoculture and diversity. Think back to the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel, one of the first major projects of human beings (Genesis 11). As the story goes, the whole human race was the same. There was one language, one culture, and the people were pretty impressed with themselves. They began an ambitious building project to bridge the heavens and the earth—the Tower of Babel. But God was not impressed. God scattered the people and had them speak different languages. Diversity was the way forward.

Flash forward to Pentecost in the New Testament, which is described in Acts 2. It is interesting to see what happens when the Holy Spirit falls on believers in the young church as they are gathered together in one room. The writer goes to great lengths to emphasize how diverse the people were. They were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, and Arabs; they were residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya near Cyrene, and Rome (Acts 2:9–11).

When the Holy Spirit falls on them, the people begin to speak in “other tongues.” We often think of this event as when they got filled

9. “How Many Languages Are There in the World?” Ethnologue, www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages.

10. “Current World Population,” Worldometer, www.worldometers.info/world-population/.

with the Holy Ghost fire and things got rowdy. While that's true, and they were in fact accused of having "too much wine," it's also true that we sometimes overlook the real miracle in this event. As they heard the gospel proclaimed, each one "heard their own language being spoken" (v. 6). Despite their diversity, they were "one in heart and mind" and began to share possessions radically, holding all things in common (4:32).

As we look at the juxtaposition of the Babel story and Pentecost, something is strikingly clear. Unity is not uniformity. Oneness is not sameness. This is the key difference between what happened at Babel and what happened at Pentecost. Babel is about the power of a monoculture—people impressed with themselves and the possibilities of uniformity. Pentecost is about the power of God to bring people together across all that divides them. Unity exists most powerfully when there is diversity. And the more diverse we are, the stronger we are when we unite, and the more clearly we see God's power at work to reconcile us.

Diversity is divine. Every human being is a reflection of God. And when we are surrounded by monoculture, by people who all look like us, we miss out not only on the full experience of God's wonderful and miraculous creation but also on who God is. To have a consistent ethic of life is to be awed by life in all its diversity and complexity. That's why I'm known to say from time to time, "If our community is all white, something's not quite right." And the same can be said of monoculture anywhere—it limits our vision, our perspective, our appreciation of the bigness of God's love for all people. We are all a reflection of God, and we are all made from the same dirt.

Breathing Life into Dirt

Dirt is an interesting contrast to the color-full, wonder-full creatures God made. And perhaps that is part of the point. God makes beautiful

things out of dirt. And God continues to bring new life out of the compost of Christendom. There's a whole sermon there for sure, but we don't have time for that one right now.

The word *human* comes from the Latin *humus*, which literally means "dirt." It's also where we get the word for the chickpea side dish called hummus, which, some people contend, does look and taste a little like dirt. The *humus* of humanity hearkens back to the fact that God took dirt and breathed life into it to make us. It is also why on Ash Wednesday we remember the dirt from which we were made and the dirt to which we shall return. God sculpted human life from the raw material of creation itself. God made beautiful things out of dirt and continues to do so today. Maybe you've heard that Gungor song "Beautiful Things," which talks about how God makes beautiful things out of dust, and God makes beautiful things out of us. (I'm humming it now as I write.)

Adam, the name given to the first human being, comes from the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means "earth" or "the ground." Adam was made from the earth. And the name Eve simply means "life."¹¹ Isn't that beautiful? Life was made from the dirt as God breathed into it. The fact that we are all made from the dirt means none of us should think too highly of ourselves. But the fact that we are also made in the image of God means that none of us should think too lowly of ourselves either.

There is a fascinating lesson from the rabbis of old that explores another aspect of God's breath.¹² The rabbis suggest that the mysterious word for God in the Hebrew scriptures, YAHWEH, can actually be translated as "breath." The Hebrew word doesn't have vowels; vowels were added later to help the word make sense because YHWH is an

11. Don't read too much into the fact that Adam, the man, is dirt, and Eve, the woman, is life. I think it's enough to recognize that we are all equally fallen and equally holy. Maybe that's part of the point. As reformer Martin Luther put it, we all have a sinner and a saint at war within us, and each day, each moment, we get to choose which we will be. Just as original sin is a part of the story, so is original innocence. Good stuff comes from dirt. New life comes even out of compost.

12. To learn more about this, see Rabbi Arthur Waskow, "Why YAH/YHWH," The Shalom Center, April 14, 2004, <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/why-yahywh>.

odd word. But the rabbis suggest that this is part of the point. In the Hebrew alphabet, the vowels represent breathing sounds.

God is more glorious than we can wrap our heads around and doesn't need a name. That's why when Moses asks for God's name, God says, "I AM" or "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14). God's response can also be translated "I am becoming who I am becoming." In similar fashion, YHWH has that reverent, mystical, transcendent quality that addressing God warrants. But here's the cool part: the rabbis suggest that YHWH is the sound of breath. Even as you listen to your breathing you can easily think of inhaling "YAH" and exhaling "WEH." On several occasions, I've been present when my friend Richard Rohr has led a group in a lovely prayer doing exactly that—breathing in YAH and breathing out WEH.

What if, just as God breathed life into the dirt, everything that has breath is praising God simply by existing, by breathing in and breathing out?¹³ That is exactly what Scripture says: "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD" (Ps. 150:6). Jesus even said that if we don't praise God, the breathless rocks will cry out (Luke 19:40).

My friend Jason Gray is a musician who wrote a beautiful song about the breath of God called "The Sound of Our Breathing." When he introduces the song in a concert, he reflects on how wonderful it is to imagine that we are designed to say God's name simply by breathing in and out, which means that none of us can go very long without calling upon the name of the Lord. When babies are born, are they taking their first breath or are they calling out the name of the Lord? Do we die when we breathe our last breath, or are we no longer alive because the name of God is no longer on our lips?

Here are a few of Jason's lyrics.

13. This is all consistent with traditional rabbinical teaching, which is that life begins at our first breath, something I had a fascinating conversation about with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. I know it raises a potentially contentious issue about when life begins. We won't get into that here, but we will explore it in chapter 12. Just giving you a heads-up. For now, the point is to simply ponder the connection between breath and life, and God's breath giving us life.

Everybody draws their very first breath
With Your name upon their lips
Every one of us is born of dust
But come alive with heaven's kiss. . . .
So breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in
Breathe out. . . .
'Cause the name of God
Is the sound of our breathing

The deep conviction that life is good matters. Not only is life good, it is holy and wonder-full. It is a gift from God. Losing a sense of wonder and gratitude may be the first sign of a crack in a firm foundation for life. So protect your childlike wonder.

Creation is amazing. And the most sacred, beautiful thing God ever made is us. As incredible as all the creatures are, nothing is more sacred than human beings. Looking into the eyes of another person gives us one of our clearest glimpses of God. And the closest we can get to killing God is to kill or crush a child of God. Every single one of us bears the image of our creator. That's what we'll explore next.

RETHINKING LIFE

- When recently have you had an experience that snapped you out of the wonder gap, a moment in which you felt a sense of awe at the gift of life or the beauty of creation? What shifted in you as a result?
- What are some of the ways you routinely see God's fingerprint on creation? List some of your favorite animals, plants, or people. Or maybe draw a picture of a place in which you have felt God's presence.

- How do you respond to Claudio Oliver's statement: "Monoculture is diabolical. Diversity is *divine*"? In what ways, if any, have you found this to be true in your experience?
- On a scale of one to ten, how would you characterize the diversity of your life and relationships right now? Consider factors such as race, culture, gender identity, age, language, sexual orientation, family status, income, and religion/spirituality. On the following continuum, circle the number that best describes your response.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

My life and relationships are
a monoculture.

My life and relationships
are diverse.

- In what areas is your life characterized primarily by monoculture? Who would you say is on the outside of that monoculture? In what ways could your monoculture limit your vision, your perspective, or your appreciation of God's love for all people?
- In what areas is your life characterized primarily by diversity? Who is included in that diversity? In what ways has diversity expanded your vision, your perspective, or your appreciation of God's love for all people?