Why Don’t You Just Meditate on Jesus?

I arrived at Georgetown College in 1969, just as the institution was seized by the rapid currents of social change sweeping the country. Woodstock, the three-day music festival in upstate New York that served as a cultural marker for my generation, occurred just a few days before new freshmen arrived at Georgetown for orientation. Later that same fall, several of my classmates would join 250,000 protestors in Washington, DC, for the largest antiwar demonstration to occur during the Vietnam War.

Georgetown College is a tiny Baptist liberal arts school located in the heart of Kentucky’s Bluegrass region. When my classmates and I arrived on campus that August, the college was still dedicated to producing gracious Southern ladies. Rules prescribed when and where women could wear slacks (never before 4:00 pm and not to dinner). Women could smoke only in certain rooms, mostly out of sight of the men. Tight curfews governed our comings and goings. Dancing and drinking were strictly forbidden on campus. Soon, however, the slacks ban fell, unenforceable as numbers of us arrived in class not just in slacks but in frayed
and patched jeans. The women who smoked refused to do so in confinement, and the smoking ban also withered away. While the administrators struggled to keep alcohol off campus, they failed to notice (and probably still wouldn’t have recognized) the marijuana spilling from car windows as local boys transported personal harvests from dad’s back forty into the dorms.

I quit going to church. God, if there was a God, surely wasn’t confined to church services. I had had enough of church. Now it was time to seek a life outside of what had become, for me, a stifling place. I was impatient with the relentless Baptist focus on dancing, drinking, and sex and its apparent obliviousness to or outright support of the immoral war being waged in Vietnam.

I reveled in my studies. Beginning with an English major, I soon added a major in communication and a minor in philosophy. I delighted in the hours spent reading literature or delving into English history. I joined the debate team, where I honed my research and reasoning skills.

As my world expanded, questions accumulated. Why would Jesus, the great liberator, want to keep women out of the pulpit? How could a moment in front of a preacher and a piece of paper from the state suddenly make sex between two people who loved each other acceptable in God’s eyes when the same act had been abhorrent to God a few moments earlier? Who or what was God? Did God exist? If so, where was my call? Why did my prayers echo inside my head but bring no clear answers?

In my philosophy of religion class, I was assigned to write a paper arguing either for or against the existence of God. Convinced that the existence of God could not be proven, I gamely launched into a paper arguing against. In the middle of the night, three-quarters of the way through my paper, I recognized its fundamental flaw. Just as God’s existence could not be logically proven, neither could God’s nonexistence. At that moment, it came to me, the uneasy position I would have to occupy either way. If no proof is possible in either case, then both God’s existence and nonexistence require a leap. Given those alternatives, my wavering faith seemed more sustainable to me than a belief in only that which we can see and touch. From doubt in God’s existence, I always found myself wandering back into belief; praying at moments of joy, sorrow, or uncertainty; singing hymns without having consciously thought
to sing; and sensing a spirit much greater than my own at large in the universe. I read in the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that faith, like gifts of healing or the ability to prophesy, was a gift of the spirit, one of many that Christians might receive. OK, then, I thought. When the spiritual gifts were being bestowed, faith was not one of which I was given an abundant portion, but in my own tentative, struggling way I continued to believe. “Lord I believe,” I prayed in the words of the anguished father in the gospel of Mark who asked Jesus to heal his son. “Help thou my unbelief.”

In the midst of all this intellectual growth and the active search for my own beliefs and values, I found myself living parallel lives—the one I was drawn to and the one I imagined my mother wanting for me. In Kentucky in 1969, a young woman’s adventures were expected to end early and at the altar. Like most girls growing up in that time and place, I was raised with the hope and expectation that at an early age I would find a good man, marry him, and raise a family.

Mother spun for us a fairy-tale version of her courtship and marriage. It took us years to figure out that Daddy wasn’t the next nearest thing to God, not only because he looked like the main attraction each Sunday at church, nor even because the whole town deferred to him, but because Mother’s eyes brightened whenever she talked about him.

She all but promised Jeannie and me a future with a similar pattern. Once we entered our gawky early adolescence, we began to grasp the full import of our family’s dancing prohibition and our location as the preacher’s daughters for our social life. The deadly effect of Brother Taylor’s job on our prospects became increasingly clear as we moved through high school. Jeannie and I often grew discouraged about our lack of boyfriends.

Mother’s optimism was unflagging. “Someday your prince will come,” she chirped. “Someday you’ll find the one.” We weren’t so sure. The song, and her confidence about our ultimate ability to attract Mr. Right, grew increasingly irritating as the years passed. We doubted that her experience, based as it was on a pioneer past, related to our lives in any way. But we had plenty of encouragement to fantasize about just such a turn of events. Marriage, happily-ever-after marriage, was pretty nearly the only path available for a woman who wanted to experience heaven on earth.
Within weeks of starting college, I began dating Mike. Soon I was wearing his fraternity pin, and then we became engaged. The young man I chose was the first one who showed any serious interest in me, a kind and gentle artist. He had played football in high school because his father’s love of the game and his own powerful build left him little choice. After games, he retreated to his attic bedroom, where he made art out of found and recycled objects. He could do one hundred push-ups without breaking a sweat. My parents were bound to approve, because he was a Baptist boy, the son of a deacon.

The first time Mike took me to a dance, he was on crutches and could only prop himself up and sway. This, for me, was the perfect gentle introduction for a girl who at eighteen had never danced, except with my sister in the living room. I liked Mike, not only because he was a tall, nice-looking young man with the most amazingly thick head of curly brown hair I had ever seen but also, and more important, because he made me laugh. He was sweet and low key, even passive. He would never push me around. When he told me he loved me and asked me to marry him, it seemed reason enough to do so. I suspect he seemed like a reasonable blend of those two tracks of my life. He shared my politics, helped develop my interest in rock music, and encouraged me in my studies, yet he never pressured me about my reluctance to have sex before marriage. He was a Baptist but only went to church when we visited his parents or mine. I convinced myself that he was the prince my mother had promised.

My fellow debaters were shocked when I told them I was engaged. They cautioned that I was too young and should date others. I got a sick feeling they might be right and returned from a debate trip ready to break it off. But I couldn’t do it. I thought he’d be too upset, and I didn’t want to disappoint everyone who was already busily helping us plan the wedding. In the end, I let myself be carried along by the current of his interest, the momentum of the wedding plans, my enjoyment of his company, and my own insecurity.

I was nineteen. Mother thought I was too young for marriage, but she didn’t say so. Her youngest brother had married a woman her parents had harshly disapproved of. The more they warned against her, the more determined he became to marry. The woman made his life a living mis-
ery. Mother, eager not to replay this painful script, resolved to say nothing, and so I married with my parents’ blessing.

Neither my husband nor I had real jobs or any clear notion of where we were headed. Like many of the men of our generation, Mike quit shaving and grew a great curly auburn beard. His hair curled to his shoulders. On the rare occasions when he wanted a trim, I cut his hair with sewing scissors. We lived in a tiny wooden box in married student housing. We drove an aged green VW Beetle. We talked vaguely about what we would do when college was over. Sometimes we drove around the countryside and imagined ourselves “going back to nature,” living on the land, since at the time that seemed to be the thing one did. I wrote poems and short stories and wondered whether I was a fledgling writer or just another English major who loved language. How was I to make use of myself in the world? What might be the contours of a meaningful life? In my heart, I still expected to be called, somehow, to something, somewhere, I knew not what.

My sister had left Georgetown College just as I arrived to live in New York City and study at the Fashion Institute of Technology. By the middle of my sophomore year, she was back at Georgetown, where she completed another semester before dropping out of school to set up housekeeping with one of the few campus hippies. During this time, she signed all her letters to our parents “Love and peace.” Mother wrote back, signing hers “Love and grief.”

In early 1972, my husband and I traveled to Mexico with a winter-term study group and came back with suitcases full of embroidered shirts and handwoven blankets. Along with the other students enrolled in this course, we took a Transcendental Meditation class. On visits to Somerset, we would postpone a midafternoon helping of homemade pie (because our stomachs needed to be empty) and retreat to a back bedroom to meditate for twenty minutes. “Why don’t you just meditate on Jesus?” Mother asked. Where, she no doubt wondered, was the daughter she had assumed was so much like her? I felt angry and embarrassed, impatient at the way our simple relaxation technique scared her. She suspected we were just one step away from joining a cult, perhaps a band of Hare Krishnas. Soon, she imagined, we would be standing at airports, our heads shaved, wearing tie-dyed shirts and shaking cups in the faces of
strangers. Behind my impatience, my heart ached at seeing the fear and sorrow and confusion welling up in her.

In February, Mother and Daddy led a group of travelers on a tour of foreign mission sites in Asia. The three-week trip took them to eighteen cities in twenty-one days and required them to cross the international dateline twice. Many of the mission sites brought them face-to-face with a disturbing level of poverty and need. The minority status of Christianity in these cultures and the prominence of Hinduism and Buddhism also troubled my parents, especially Mother. The pace of the trip was grueling.

When the two weary travelers disembarked in Louisville, Jeannie and her boyfriend and my young husband and I were at the airport to meet them. With the innocence of dearly beloved children, we arrived with utter confidence in ourselves as the best of all possible welcoming committees. We stood there at the gate in our bell-bottom jeans and T-shirts. I’m sure we were all quite clean, but our hair hung long and lank and the young men were a furry lot. Jeannie and I wore no bras and no makeup, but there was probably a dab of musk or patchouli behind each ear, causing each of us to smell faintly of incense or perhaps worse. Handmade earrings dangled from our pierced ears. Our jeans were faded and patched, the patches brightly colored and unapologetic.

In any outfit and with or without makeup, Jeannie was beautiful. She had a way of putting clothes together, and an elegance and grace in the way she wore them, that made even the most ordinary clothes look better. A fraction of an inch less than six feet tall in her bare feet, she had wavy light brown hair that reached nearly to her elbows. She had the strong chin and jaw and prominent cheekbones that show up across generations in the Taylor family, and she had great big, almost blue eyes. She waited at the gate with her arm draped casually over the shoulder of John, her shorter, potbellied, balding boyfriend, the one for whom she had dropped out of college to “live in sin.” Slightly more respectable on account of being married, Mike and I in no way conformed to what my parents would have considered proper attire for a young married couple. Seen everywhere now, in 1972 jeans and T-shirts were a generational and political marker.

Mother and Daddy stepped off the plane dressed in clothes they might have worn to church except for Mother’s walking shoes. Her poly-
ester suit traveled well. She clutched her large leather purse tightly under her arm. A travel bag hung over one shoulder. Daddy carried another bag, the camera, and the luggage claim checks. They greeted us through a blur of exhaustion. The smell of patchouli tangled with a faint scent of Tabu and the stale odors of the smoky, cramped airplane. Mother looked slightly disoriented and a shade wary. There was an awkwardness. “You must be tired,” I said, trying to find a safe name for the distance between us. She frowned.

“We’re worn out,” she said. “We just ran and ran the whole trip.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“It was a good trip,” Daddy said.

“But not one that gave us any rest,” Mother added. They both looked bone weary, but who wouldn’t be after such a long journey? Still, Daddy strode through the airport with his usual commanding style, organizing the other travelers and making sure all the right bags got into all the right hands.

Over the next five days, Mother never slept. At the end of that time, she was beside herself—exhausted, agitated, suspicious, and delusional. The psychiatrist Daddy contacted made arrangements to admit her to Our Lady of Peace, a Louisville hospital for the mentally ill.

At the time she was admitted, Mother knew something was dreadfully wrong. She told the examining doctor, “My motor is racing away inside of me and I cannot slow it down. I may look calm on the outside, but I’m feeling very, very uncomfortable inside myself.” She explained to the doctor that she was being tested by God, her husband, and the doctor. Her troubles had started, she believed, on the trip to Southeast Asia, where she got so tired she did not know what to do and became quite aggravated by the fact that she was not permitted to rest but was pressed and pushed to go all the time. Her husband’s work, she explained, was an added source of stress. The case history recorded by Dr. Hayes describes the shock she felt when she returned to Kentucky and our cheerful welcome. The report states that her daughters had adopted a “quasi-hippie way of life” with men who are “unkempt, unclean and not very appetizing to look at.” The shock of seeing us, she told the doctor, was more than she could emotionally bear.

When I read the doctor’s report, twenty-eight years after it was writ-
I felt as if I held in my hands at last tangible evidence of the fear shared by nearly all children of emotionally disturbed or mentally ill parents. I had made my mother crazy. I had done it. After all, wasn’t I always on hand just at the moment she cracked? Now here it was at last, written in the doctor’s own notes. She had taken one look at my sister and me in all our heedless glory and plunged off the deep end.

I know, of course, that I did not make my mother crazy. But deep in my heart I also know that I did. That we all did. That the whole family was a part of the web of need and demand that was sometimes more than her fragile self could bear. For years of my adult life, I had a recurrent dream about my mother. I dreamed that I had called her on the phone to tell her something about myself. But when she got on the line she was not the loving, welcoming mother I had expected. Instead, she would scream at me in fury until I finally managed to awaken, shaken, from the nightmare mother of my dreams. For me, her manic bouts were always, on a terrifying primal level, abandonments.

Although Mother was able to give the doctor accurate information about person, place and time, her state of mind was obviously precarious. The doctor noted “evidence of suspiciousness and some delusional material and the lack of clearly interpreting the data that is being discussed. There is a suspicion of some hallucinations.” The passive voice conceals the source of the suspicions, but I imagine they were shared by anyone who talked to her for long.

Mother was indeed delusional. One nurse was so kind and loving to her that Mother became convinced that this middle-aged black woman was actually me in disguise. She invited the nurse to sit in her lap, and, God bless her, that nurse sat right down and put her arms around Mother’s neck. The room, Mother knew, was bugged. She knew she was being tested by God, the hospital, the doctors. But at least some of the nurses were her buddies.

Mother remained in the hospital for thirty-five days. She turned fifty-one there. She celebrated her birthday without me, and I celebrated mine without her. I was sick with worry and fear. If mothers could fall through the air into insanity, then the world was a much more dangerous place than I had imagined. Somehow I had reached the age of twenty-one with a largely unexamined but profoundly American belief in progress. Life
was always, I had thought until that spring, unfolding into something more wonderful than what had gone before. Getting older and going to college had gotten me out of Somerset and so offered some limited support for this naive hypothesis. Mother had been noticeably sick for four years. But somehow, perhaps largely because of my adolescent self-absorption, I had thought she was gradually getting better. We were all, all of us, always getting better, smarter, stronger, growing up, moving forward, achieving goals. But now, my faith in a line of progress was shattered. There was no way I could believe that Mother was improving when she was locked in a hospital unable to tell the difference between me and a middle-aged black nurse. I plunged into a conviction that life not only didn’t get better and better every day but that it got worse.

We learned that Mother’s illness had a name: manic depression. Moving in the closest rhythm to hers that I could manage, I became depressed myself. I hummed hymns to myself, but they had lost the power to comfort. I prayed but doubted anyone was listening. If God wasn’t going to make my mother whole again, what good was God?

My mild-mannered and amiably passive husband became a source of irritation. Why didn’t he know anything? Why couldn’t he do anything? Why did I have to decide everything? As I lost the ability to make decisions myself, I came to feel as if I were adrift in a leaking boat. The kind, gentle, good-humored man in question had seemed to me a perfectly fine husband when I was feeling strong and in control and when my mother, not incidentally, was watching my back. Now I could no longer decide what I wanted to eat, where I wanted to eat it, or even, at times, why I should bother to eat at all. I could scarcely admit to myself that I was also beginning to have real doubts about my marriage, about my life, about God. Wouldn’t this be a good time for God to show up and start talking to me? I both longed for and didn’t expect such an event.

Vernon Mallow, my beloved world religion teacher at Georgetown College, understood my dilemma. In his survey of world religions he manifested a respect for the many faces and forms of the sacred that differed starkly from the bright, cold lines separating the saved from the damned in Southern Baptist theology. His kind eyes crinkled with a gentle smile as we talked, over endless cups of coffee, about what we did or didn’t, could or couldn’t, believe. He had the kind, warm countenance I
associated with people of deep faith, and yet he refused to tie that faith to a particular church’s creed. He and his wife had moved to the country and built the house they lived in with their own four hands. Lifelong Baptists, they quit going to church. Asked why, Dr. Mallow smilingly explained, “We’ve outgrown it.”

I thought I had, too. Organized religion had been and often remained on the wrong side of too many conflicts and issues. I decided God was bigger than any single church, or even any single religion, and couldn’t really be contained by these all too human institutions.

I both yearned for and could no longer bring myself to believe in a God who was the magic fix-it man in the sky. When my mother plunged into mental illness, I had to ask myself where God was, how God’s will could possibly be manifested through such heartbreak and pain, and why my prayers didn’t seem to change anything. These were aspects of an age-old question, of course: Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? I thought perhaps it would be easier to give up altogether on the notion of God. Except, of course, I couldn’t. Jesus was not so easy to shake. He had often been critical of organized religion. He kept showing up on the side of the folks at the margin, the ones the church and society deemed unworthy. I kept talking to him, all the while wondering if he was listening.

Mother gradually calmed down. As the racing slowed, she went through a period of incredible lucidity and said things to us that she would never have said without the falling away of boundaries that can characterize this illness. “Eldred needs to slow down and quit working so hard and spend more time with me,” she announced during one of my visits. “He needs to realize that Jesus Christ, not Eldred Taylor, came to save Somerset, Kentucky.” Astonished as I was to hear her say such a thing, I had to agree.

After more than a month, Mother came home. She spent the next ninety days on a powerful mix of antipsychotic medications.

Mother continued to cycle in and out of manic phases for the rest of her life. But the diagnosis and medications gradually liberated her from the most devastating results of these cycles. Anyone who knew her well could learn to recognize the speeding up into mania in its earliest stages. What felt at first like a fabulous burst of energy and creativity deteriorated
within a few days into anxiety, paranoia, and delusion. Daddy would implore her to start her medication as soon as the cycle began. For a decade, she stubbornly refused until the manic phase reached its disastrous height. In those first heady days, she was convinced she didn’t need or want the medicine, whose side effects included a thick-tongued sluggishness and slowness of thought that was the unpleasant opposite of the creative zest with which the manic phase announced itself. But gradually she accepted the fact that starting the medication could drastically shorten the duration of the mania.

Once she began to comply with her treatment, the illness ceased to incapacitate her. Over a twenty-five-year period, Daddy continued to chart each manic cycle. He had the records to prove that you could manage this illness if you paid careful attention and followed the rules.

“Deo fisus labora” was the motto of William Jewell, the college where my parents did most of their undergraduate work. “Trust in God and work.” It was a motto he lived by.