

*Arms Outstretched:
Our Mother of Wisdom and Love*

A Memoir by Sister Margaret



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How God Animates My Life

I have come to the conclusion that God has manifested Herself in my life via my parents. My parents modeled for me a very deep faith in God. My brothers and I went to Catholic schools through college, but the faith we inherited was distinct from the vehicles that humans use to express a particular set of beliefs. In our tradition, it was the Catholic Church. My parents were children of immigrants, and, as such, inherited earlier beliefs and traditions, including belief in God and the teachings and ritual of Catholicism. Important among these was God's bounty and presence in our lives, in our community, especially our family, the need to reach out to other folks with whatever skills and resources we had whenever they needed it. And that probably comes up from living through hard times where people survived because others were willing to share the little bit of meager food and shelter that they had. There was also an emphasis on ritualizing your beliefs—that is to say, your faith had to be somehow expressed outwardly and in a group within the community. And so church comes in there to serve this purpose. But I can't emphasize too much the distinction that I have come to believe between having a deep faith and sort of displaying and ritualizing that faith through a specific church--in my case the Catholic Church.

My parents made it a point to be grateful for God's gifts and, by extension, anyone's gifts. I can remember virtually the next day after Christmas or a birthday the recipient sat down at the kitchen table with notepaper and wrote a note to grandma, my aunts and uncles or whoever it happened to be to express gratitude for remembering her and that kind of thing. That's a small thing but I was thinking about how it really was a specific manifestation of the only thing human beings can do to really thank God—to thank each other because we all come from the same source. And then—this is a big one for me, it has become bigger since I've gotten older, thought about it, prayed and studied it—there's respect for the environment. My parents didn't talk too much about the cosmos as they do today. But my mother came from a farming family and my dad from a small rural community, and between them we had gardens even before WWII when gardens became popular. We had a victory garden, rose bushes and, of course, family dogs.

I think today when I see people who brutalize animals it almost makes me sick to my stomach because they all have a spark of the Creator in them; they are sustained like you and me. My parents never talked that way, but I've come to believe that they've provided me with the kind of model that respects nature and encourages responsibility.

I mentioned the importance of ritual: religious ritual, familial ritual and also social ritual. My father really believed in the law and democracy. Believe me, when we came up to voting age there was no skipping. I mean, if he had to he would lead us up to the booth by the hand and make us vote. He believed that you didn't have any right to say anything unless you were fully involved in citizenship rituals as well. There was respect for the truth. When I was growing up the one thing that I remember that my parents were absolutely adamant about was never lying to

them. They'd say, if you step out of line or you do something off base, no matter what, tell us the truth because it's going to be a lot easier on you and the family. And that included the truth about people. If you don't have anything to say about a situation that you believe to be true, don't say it. You don't know, you can be making judgments about people that are all wrong. We were encouraged to keep learning and developing experience that came from positive interactions. That's where my idea of God came from--through my parents. They were in their own way expressing what I think now was the God in them. I think that the four of us, in our own ways, were able to build on that. Not only God was working through our parents, but I've come to believe God's spark was in them.

Everything in God's Design Matters

God is in everything, in the cosmos, in everything appropriate to its place in the universe. It's an intricate balance of creation that was put into motion. But unlike a lot of people, I don't think that the God I understand interferes in that design. For example, our systematic abuse of the environment and the air we breathe is not godlike. And even when praying for a family member who is seriously ill, our prayer is that what is to happen in the natural order happens. If the body is somehow able to cure itself with aid, then that's wonderful and God's will. If the person is close to death, I don't think God is going to say, "Oh yes, Margaret, your mother is much too precious to die; I'm going to change that." I don't think that happens; I don't think you can change a design that has been there from the beginning of time as we understand it. It has been changing and evolving, and I think that the time we appear as human beings is late in the game and we now have our chance to leave our mark. And I don't think that the God I understand-- designer, creator, author-- is going to interfere.

I think all those times I prayed a friend would get better but they didn't must be measured with all those times God didn't fail me; it was just the natural order of things. I have seen deaths of friends of mine that have spawned a family reconciliation after a split of 30 years. I've seen good come out of that, even with the death of a friend.

The garage door in the backyard of our building is recessed about 2 or 3 inches from the frame of the garage. And it's a favorite place for the spiders. Usually a spider web forms in the corner, and we brush it away. Well, I watched a spider assaulted one day by a bird, killing to take the spider web to build a nest for the spring. The God who designed it all makes everything sacred.

Native Americans and most indigenous people would kill a bear or a deer, eat the meat, make clothes out of the hide and coverings against cold nights. They ritualized the kill with an apology to the animal for what was necessary. They recognized it as a sacred thing. "Thank you for the sacrifice." They recognized the dignity of the Creator and the creature. To bless it and to believe that you are blessed is important. I don't think that's just mere superstition. Until all too recently, Native Americans were written off as primitive people; ironically, health practices and medicines from these "primitives" are supplying our medicines and being taken seriously.

We had family dogs my whole life. I do think we learned a lot of respect from these creatures, and no one can tell me that those dogs won't be in heaven. You go into nursing homes

with people who never get out of their wheelchairs, but when these dogs visit the people come alive. Dogs have souls appropriate to where they are in the evolutionary chain. We had a sister who lived in her family's farmhouse, and leased some land around to a farmer. She was out riding one day in a farm machine with her dog when it tipped over and pinned her under it. As she told it, her dog barked and whined and howled for at least 24 hours. When the farmer appeared in the distance, the dog ran to him, back to the trapped sister, and back again until the man followed and rescued her.

The Mothering God

We were not only given a mind to reason, but we were given a will to use what we reason. A reasonable person would say, "I should really not poison the river; I shouldn't do that because it's not right, because people are dependent on it." I think as human beings we have the will to be what we were intended to be and to pass that along to this generation and to the next generation. But of course we can misuse that. That is the downside of free will.

I was raised with the father image of God. Part of it was from reading. It started there. Part of it was associating with colleagues at the college where I worked, particularly because we were a small group—so artists, office staff, theologians, sociologists and administrators linked regularly. It was more of a family of academics rather than a large institution where you're fortunate if your department has some sort of unity and enjoy one another. So a lot of my learning came from colleagues. We talked about the new theology, the new cosmology as far back as 1980, and it occurred to me to ponder the "father image" of God. A lot of writing by feminists appeared—like Mary Daly. She went through hell on earth, mostly because she wouldn't let men in her classes to help them experience what it was like for women. There was more to recover from my Irish ancestors and the matriarchal culture that dominated Ireland and other ancient cultures all those many centuries ago.

I was very interested when I saw the movie *Avatar*. People expressed surprise that the wisdom figure was the woman, the mother, despite the fact that the father was still alive and doing well. But the history of so many ancient cultures alerts readers today to the fact that the woman was the wisdom figure while the man provided sustenance to the tribe or community and took care of the borders. They had a natural breakdown of roles, but she was the wisdom figure. And so, anthropologists began to look at those cultures and how systematically women's roles were suppressed as the patriarchy developed. The Catholic Church, in which we were educated at least as children, was no different. Mary Magdalene, now thought by historians to be Jesus' best friend, not only was cast aside, but made a whore. A prostitute was needed to contrast with the Blessed Virgin.

It was these kinds of things in the 70's and into the 80's that made me think. We, of course, are bound by our language, and English is a language that is either/or. We don't have all the nuances of the French and other languages. Images of God, for me, mix gender roles as the dominant culture understands it. A mother—a "she"—with her hands outstretched to welcome, embrace and care for all the children, small and otherwise, is my image of God. That's what God does. I use "She" to reference God as a result. And I believe that the mothering God inspires us and our family members and friends who have died as spiritual forces.

God's Operation in Our Lives

I will never forget an experience that I had with a student. I felt so bad for her and I was totally inadequate to deal with her personal situation. She was in my class, and I think she wanted an extension on a paper. She said that her family was going through a very hard time; her parents had split up and her mother wasn't taking it well. She had three younger siblings, and she was running this household to help her mother and trying to keep up course work. And I thought, "My God, child, I don't even know how you're able to get on the bus and come to campus!" We continued the session, and I cannot remember what I said to her until she repeated it to me about eight or nine years later at a college reunion. Whether my words or not, what she repeated was what she needed to hear. But even interpreted through her words and eyes, I could not believe that I had said that. Where did that come from? Nothing in my experience would have prompted me to say what she repeated; yet it is something that she took away that prompted her to remember it all those many years later. I do believe that, whether a deceased loved one—like my parents--or a guardian angel or a friend, there is that spiritual activity in the world. The older you live, the more often you have experiences of that kind. I do believe that, if you're open to God's spirit, then it happens.

I wrote recently a statement for an archdiocesan committee. I said that I come from a very strong Catholic tradition, and I look at young people and they have basically relegated the Catholic Church as an institution to the archive. I believe this. They come to family functions, they attend first communions, marriages, confirmations, and funerals, and they can be summoned to do so by their mothers. Then they leave the ritual to go to the family dinner and the church is put back into the archives. They want to ritualize those events as a family, but once that's done it's done. These are young people who are in various ways involved in social responsibility and social action. Is this an incredible thing to happen? When bishops and clergymen, officials of the Church, stand up on the pulpit and tell them that family members, friends, colleagues and their business associates are unworthy to come into this church or come to communion, that's completely unacceptable to them and to me. This is arrogance beyond comprehension in the church full of sinners. We're all sinners one way or another.

So the official church is losing that generation. I've gone to parish masses on various occasions and the preaching has no relevance to their lives. It barely has relevance to my life. But people ritualize. They want the experience of something transcendent besides the gossip in the office or the teacher that's so boring you can barely keep your eyes open, or the friend that betrayed you in some way. We need something with a semblance of transcendence. I'm not finding it. Honestly, it almost takes a family event to get me to go to mass. I look over the congregation, and find even the older generation seemingly uninterested in the sermon. I'm sure their thoughts are elsewhere. "What am I going to serve at dinner?" or "How am I going to handle this business situation?" "I must make an appointment for the baby's checkup." It makes me so sad. People really want to believe in something transcendent, whatever name you call it, whatever name that person might give it.

How God Has Spoken to Me

I'm not certain of any time when God has spoken to me except in the guise of my parents or dear friends. There is one such time I remember when God spoke very clearly through my parents. I had come home from high school and said, "I decided that I am going to be a sister." I

don't think I even knew what particular orders there were. My parents were absolutely stunned. My mother had an aunt who was a cloistered nun and a cousin who was a seminarian, and my dad had a first cousin who was a diocesan priest and went on to be a pastor. Nonetheless, my folks kind of looked at one another. Almost as a chorus they said, "No you're not" and I said, "Yes" and they said, "No you're not." I had never really had "no" thrown at me. I said, "Why not?" "Because you're not ready." And I don't know, I don't remember a lot of the rest of the conversation, or if there was even a conversation after that. But I do know they were right.

I would never have stayed if I had gone in after high school, I would never have lasted—like, perhaps, many of the other women who entered the sisterhood with me. I was not mature enough to make that decision. My parents understood this. Now, I don't know if it was kind of a personal interest on their part—I was the only daughter. Anyway, I went on to college, had a good time at it and then graduated and worked a while. But during all those years there was such a feeling of nagging always in the back of my mind. During college and I looked at all those women who were teaching us, and I wasn't even thinking about the religious dimension at all. I was thinking about the Ph.D.s and the education speeches at all those conferences, testifying at city council, writing books. What they were saying made so much sense to me in terms of what I came to believe later on in life. I just thought I had to be like those people. Finally, I couldn't do anything except say, OK, I'm going to give the life of a sister a try.

Now I do believe that the fact my parents said "No, not now," was inspired, but by the time I was in my twenties what could they say and they knew that. So I was in a position to make my own decisions and I did. And that's the only time that I can actually say God nagged me. Not even the nuns themselves invited me to join them. Now that I think about it, maybe I should've been worried about that. They never even invited me! But that's the only time I can remember consciously thinking, this is really God's voice speaking or some spirit friend through which She spoke.

Probably the other time too was in the late 60's or early 70's, when so many friends of mine were leaving the community. But staying the course proved right for me. That might have been a time when God's spirit was pushing me along a little bit. I've never regretted staying. In fact, I've had a wonderful life in every way imaginable way, except a family, being married.

When I Haven't Heard God's Voice

You know, I can't really say that I haven't heard God's voice. The closest thing is maybe when my mother had a serious stroke and hospital people kept bringing her food. But she couldn't eat and wouldn't eat ever again. I resented the fact that the hospital was not helping me face the inevitable. Two of my brothers resided elsewhere: one was on the east coast, and the other abroad, each scrambling to join me. My local brother came to the door of the hospital room and fainted; he couldn't bear to see her that way. Mom lingered for two or three days. For much of that time I sat at her bedside and felt pretty desolate. It was the only time, you might say, I felt really alone. I felt the mothering God forgot about me. Some weeks later I did tell my youngest brother, "Well, I always kind of thought males were the weaker sex, and you confirmed it."

Mercifully, the death of a loved one has its own kind of ritual for those who grieve. In my case, the details of my parents' funerals are lost; people say things about those events and I don't remember them at all. I think you go into kind of a state where you shut down, because it's almost too much. I was relieved actually that my mother wasn't just going on in that state because there was nothing they could do for her. I was glad she left us, for her sake. And she chose her own time to leave—I truly believe that—when I was not there to see her draw her last breath. The mother of a longtime friend of mine, who was dying of cancer, did the same thing. Day after day, family members sat at her bedside, relieved occasionally by friends who took over the round-the-clock watch to give a daughter some rest time. One morning, the dying woman's daughter went to the front window to see whether the doctor had arrived. In that brief interval her mother decided it was time to go. But she was not alone in that moment: God and the spirits of departed family members were there to help her on the way. Just at the time you slip out for a second, your loved one slips away. We're not with her, but she's not alone.

Final Thoughts

Though I am far from an expert in this matter, there are some important ideas to focus your life. Get to know yourself. Re-know yourself. I don't mean from a scientific point of view, but from an intuitive point of view. Get to know who you are and what you stand for and realize that you are animated by God. Whatever that transcendent being is, you are animated by it. Keep growing, evaluating and re-forming yourself as your wisdom increases. Your options are to act accordingly, to take care of yourself, to value loyalty and good will, to take care of others who are in need and to take care of the environment.

I think one metaphor for me is drawn from a line spoken cynically: there are some people who know what they want and just take it. Take the water issue in the Midwest, where companies pay big bucks to farmers for rights to waterways for their companies. They are intruders, farmers are greedy and local people suffer. That's not God operating.

I think there are many ways to know and appreciate ourselves and re-evaluate our views and practices from time to time. This takes a healthy perspective, however. One of my bad habits is that everything has to be perfect, I have to be perfect. I knock over something, instead of saying, it's an accident, you would think I committed some kind of heinous crime. I mean, that's irrational and personality driven and somehow or other I have to say to myself, come on, it's irrational. Uttering 4-letter words disturbs you and anyone listening to you. But I do think that's where the fundamental values are: to re-evaluate and re-develop the ones you prize and to re-scrutinize the ones that are kind of iffy. I think it's important for people to realize that they are walking around animated by God's spirit to be better than they are, to be healthier in soul and body and mind.

We all know that the mind and the body pretty much work together, and I think that we have to get so we understand that the spirit of God is in me and is in you. I think that's the most important thing and that's the life I work because we're constantly being challenged to review, to take inventory. You get to my age--and believe me it's a real and compelling thing--you say to yourself, "No, I don't think I'll do that even if it's something I've always liked to do." Some things I am not able to do anymore, but others empower me to assist others through simple questions: "Is there any other way I can help in your situation?" or "can I make those phone calls to save you time?" I think that's a positive move and a good attitude to develop as one ages.

However limited our own scope, we have made somebody more comfortable, we have improved ourselves, and, chances are, we have made our world a better place.