"We read books to nourish our capacity to think, to reason, to know, to discern, to remember. The best writing engages the whole of us: heart, mind, body and emotions in an integrated fashion."

—Liz Hoare, from *Twelve Great Spiritual Writers*[1]

Introduction
A World of Wonders

It was an odd book that, viewed in hindsight, provided the early spark for a life spent in vocational work with words: An unassuming autobiography written by a Russian woman who was on a search for the American father she had never known, published during the latter decades of Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States.

If memory serves me correctly, I saw the book's author, Victoria Fyodorova, interviewed on the television news program *Good Morning America* in 1979, then hosted by Joan Lunden and David Hartman. Whatever program created my awareness of the book, with certainty I can say that my attention was *immediately* arrested. Something about her life captured my interest, perhaps the vivid details of interesting people and places in her country of origin, which I'd known through US media and public-school textbooks only as a menacing enemy. Or it may have been her search for her American father, whom the book would suggest had never known of his Russian daughter born in 1946. As quickly as I could, I picked up the book at the nearest library some 15 miles from my home and devoured it like a morning bowl of Cap'n Crunch breakfast cereal. It was as if a whole new world—Moscow,

Petrograd, Ukraine, Siberia—was opened to my sheltered North American mind in a profound way, and I sensed for the first time that books were not simply something to be picked up as required by teachers and quickly set aside during the school year, but rather, were portals to a broad world of wonders, people, ideas, places, and stories.

The book was titled *The Admiral's Daughter* and was published in 1979 by a company called Delacorte Press, whose office was at 1 Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza in New York. That address would become significant to me just a few years later when I encountered the book *Markings*, an enduring spiritual classic written by Dag Hammarskjöld, a former secretary-general of the United Nations, published posthumously in 1964. In time, *Markings* would become a touchstone in my reading as a spiritual discipline, returned to again and again for nourishment, insight, reflection, and companionship, especially in seasons of grief and doubt.

But at the time, it was Fyodorova, her search for her father, the setting in an unfamiliar country, and pages of geopolitical intrigue that captured my imagination. Until encountering *The Admiral's Daughter,* my reading life outside of required schoolwork consisted almost entirely of sports pages in daily newspapers, brief biographies of sports legends such as Jackie Robinson, Lou Gehrig, and Henry Aaron, and the Sunday morning *Indianapolis Star*'s comics page featuring *Peanuts*, *Beetle Bailey*, and *Snuffy Smith*.

From that moment in 1979 to the present day, I have metaphorically "traveled" around the world and met thousands of interesting people, encountered remarkably divergent ideas and perspectives, and had windows on the world unlocked and thrown wide open through a life committed to reading as a spiritual discipline.

And I have been tutored in the spiritual life through the wonder of books.

"We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own," C. S. Lewis wrote in the epilogue of his classic work *Experiment in Criticism*. "We are not content to be Leibnitzian monads. We demand

windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors. One of the things we feel after reading a great work is 'I have got out'. Or from another point of view, 'I have got in'; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside."[2]

Oh, the joy of "getting out," and "getting in" through the engagement with literature, old and new.

"Has it ever occurred to you that the acts of reading and meditation resemble each other in many ways?" Nancy M. Malone asks in *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading.* "Both are usually done alone, in silence and physical stillness, our attention focused."[3]

Indeed it has occurred to me. And perhaps it has for you, as well.

Throughout more than 40 years of work in the world of wonders that is the reading, writing, publishing, and selling of books across many Christian traditions, literary genres, and publishing formats, I have come to see the act of reading as a decidedly spiritual discipline, not unlike meditation, prayer, silence and solitude, and fasting. And not just the reading of the Bible—short passages of Scripture quietly, reflectively, and repeatedly in *lectio divina* fashion, which is more commonly understood as a spiritual discipline. Reading across all genres and in all the seasons of our life can prompt growth, change, and connection to God, our neighbors, and to other people. In reading our world is expanded, our minds are challenged, our hearts are attuned to the still small voice of a God who is there and continues to speak through Scripture, yes, but also through the ideas and imaginations and stories of other people who are created in the image of God and who wrestle with many of the same questions we do and who harbor many of the same dreams.

Similarly, reading to children or grandchildren plants seeds of wonder in their rapidly expanding hearts and minds, nurtures their imaginations, and models a life of curiosity that serves them well throughout their lives.

The writer Richard J. Foster first introduced me to the practice of spiritual disciplines when in 1978 he published *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, a work that has become a beloved classic in the field. He wrote that "the disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves, the spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's means of grace."[4] Foster's chapter on the discipline of study incorporated thoughts on reading books that will form something of a foundation for what follows, but we will explore genres that go well beyond what he highlighted those many years ago—as he would no doubt wish for us to do.

Some writers wisely suggest caution about labeling as a "spiritual discipline" anything that the Bible does not explicitly give that designation to. Donald S. Whitney, whose book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* was formative for me when it was published in the early 1990s and remains so to this day, would be one such person. He suggested that the disciplines he wanted to guide readers into were those "practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ" and which are "habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times."[5]

And yet even Whitney, in a later book titled *Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed,* featured poignant instruction on reading books—even if only one page a day—as a discipline in our Christian journey. In an interview the author and pastor J. K. Jones, another admirer of Whitney's work, asserted that "any practice that causes me to love God more and my neighbor, while bringing me into God's presence where God does the necessary transformative work, is a spiritual discipline." I could not agree more.

What I am suggesting in these pages is to approach our reading life with the same spirit of joy, expectation, and discipline that we do others that Scripture is quite clear about, such as prayer, fasting, solitude, and confession, among others.

Reading as a spiritual discipline requires the same posture that other disciplines ask of us: an open heart, attentiveness, repetition, intentionality, and an invitation to God for God to speak into our life as we practice the discipline—and an expectation that in God's grace and mercy and goodness, God will speak, and our lives will be transformed. It's reading between the lines of the text in what we read, as the late Eugene Peterson suggests in his book *Take and Read*. And importantly, reading as a spiritual discipline is wisely understood, like fasting, meditation, prayer, solitude, and silence, to be life-giving and not yet another "should on ourselves," in the words of the late spirituality writer Brennan Manning.

In this book, you will be met wherever you are on the spectrum of readership—whether prolific or only the occasional as time permits, whether a long-term practitioner or merely an aspiring one—and you'll be invited on a journey to see the ways in which reading deepens, sharpens, and widens our faith, our awareness of the needs around us, and our connection to God. You will glean practical suggestions for finding the world of wonders waiting for you through the practice of reading as a spiritual discipline.

Our journey will take us through a variety of genres including fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. We will consider the reasons that drinking water from not only deep but also diverse wells serves us well in our spiritual journey and our understanding of the experiences and perspectives of others. We'll discover ways to read Scripture as part of this spiritual discipline. And we will look at reading through the seasons of our lives.

Additionally, at the end of each chapter you'll find short vignettes from well-established authors and dedicated readers who illuminate that chapter's content with their own insights. It's my hope that you will find these voices to be additional light upon your path of spiritual reading.

World of Wonders is not an academic book, but reading as a spiritual discipline *does* ask something of us all. It asks for deep, consistent reading, reflecting, and responding. And I believe there is a payoff for us in that.

In an essay titled "Good Reading: Is Digital Culture Reducing Our Ability to Think deeply?," the Wheaton College (Illinois) scholar Mark Talbot suggests that "we can't speed read our way to intellectual, moral, and spiritual depth. The rhythm of deep reading involves looking down at the text to understand and then looking up to reflect. With scripture's aid, this kind of life can help orient (us) regarding some of the moral, political, and spiritual conundrums of our day."[6]

I believe in the power of books to transform lives, to open windows on the world, to fire our imaginations, and to help us be more faithful Christ followers. I believe in the power of books to bridge differences, foster understanding, and offer hope and healing. I have seen it in the lives of others and witnessed it in my own life. But if we are honest, we are increasingly pulled in other directions: technology, work demands, recreational interests, scrolling and swiping on our phones and tablets, and more. According to a Pew Research study released in 2022, 75 percent of the American population had read at least one book the prior year and the average person (the median) had read just four. As a writer and a former publisher, I wish those numbers were higher than they are, and in some countries (France, Spain, Canada, and South Korea), the numbers are, indeed, much higher. But whether you characteristically read one, four, or scores of books annually, there is something for you to ponder in these pages. And, I hope, there are words of encouragement to you, as well.

When it comes to the value of reading books, bestselling essayist Anne Lamott has it right. In her book *Bird by Bird,* Lamott says that "for some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort you and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die."[7]

So come along and join me as we look at a world of wonders opened to us through committing to—or continuing—a life of reading as a spiritual discipline. There is much to savor as we walk

together with voices from the past, the present, and the future. At the end of each chapter, I offer an annotated list of books that connect to the theme of the content you have just read. Containing voices both contemporary and classic, the books in each chapter's list are among those that have had an imprint on my life as a reader, and perhaps have had (or could have) on yours, as well. Take those lists as a starting (not ending) point as you open a world of wonders through reading as a spiritual discipline.

—Jeff Crosby
September 2024

Part I
Laying the Foundations

"What Camus is saying is that there is reason to be hopeful, that man must understand his condition and must struggle, fight, and rebel against the absurdity of life."

—Jacques Pépin, in his essay on Albert Camus in *The Book That Changed My Life*[1]

Chapter One
Why Read At All?

I never asked for her name, *and I wish I had*. I never saw her again, *and I'd hoped I would.*

It was a cool autumn Saturday morning in the university community where my wife and I operated a bookstore in the early years of my career working in the world of words. A woman was browsing the store's literature section with her back to me. As I approached to ask her if I could be of help she turned, and I saw two deeply blackened eyes staring back at me. Other seemingly fresh abrasions were clearly visible on both of her cheeks. I also saw tears in her eyes as she asked, "Do you have Albert Camus's *The Stranger* or *The Plague*?"

Although I knew of the French-Algerian novelist and moral philosopher's work from reading his books as an undergraduate just a few years prior to my encounter with this young woman, Camus's works were not among those I devoted shelf space to. After responding with the words no bookseller wants to utter—"No, I'm sorry, we do not but we could order them for you"—I asked the young woman, who I presumed to be an Indiana University student, "Are you okay? You seem to have been hurt."

She deflected my question and instead proceeded to speak with restrained emotion about the absurdity of life, the fallenness and hopelessness of the world—all themes that Camus powerfully addressed in his novels in the 1940s and 50s, including the two she was searching for.

I will never know what had happened to that woman, but I do know that in the midst of whatever trauma and pain she had encountered she made her way to a bookstore seeking in the pages of books what she believed were either answers to, comfort for, or validation of her experience in the world.

And she was not alone then in doing so. Nor are we today when we seek similar outcomes from our reading.

Why We Read

In his book *How to Read and Why,* Yale University humanities professor Harold Bloom offers a candid and sober answer to his question (and ours in this chapter).

> "You can read merely to pass the time, or you can read with an overt urgency, but eventually you will read against the clock. Bible readers, those who search the Bible for themselves, perhaps exemplify the urgency more plainly than readers of Shakespeare, yet the quest is the same," Bloom states. "One of the uses of reading is to prepare ourselves for change, and the final change alas is universal."[2]

All of us read for many different reasons in different seasons of our lives. Sometimes we are searching for escape. At other times we are looking for answers to a vexing question or to find consolation in the midst of crushing grief. Some days we are looking for help in raising a child or, later in life, caring for aging parents whose health is rapidly declining and presenting to our families profound issues we had hoped to avoid—or didn't think about at all until forced to do so. We read the Bible as a means of understanding the way of Jesus,

or in the hope of finding guardrails to avoid in our home the type of chaotic life we grew up with in our families of origin or, conversely, to understand what made our families "work" so we can replicate that. We read to solve problems, or to persuade other people of our point of view or, on our good days, to understand the way other people see the world. We read to our children and grandchildren and, if we are lucky, they will read to us one day if we can no longer manage the task ourselves. We read to be what the journalist David Brooks in his book *How to Know a Person* calls a "good conversationalist." That is, to be someone who "is a master of fostering a two-way exchange."[3]

"Books draw us deeply into the lives of others, showing us the world through someone else's eyes, page after page," Anne Bogel writes in *I'd Rather Be Reading.* "They take us to new and exciting places while meeting us right where we are, whisking us away to walk by the Seine or through a Saharan desert or down a Manhattan sidewalk. Books provide a safe space to encounter new and unfamiliar situations, to practice living in unfamiliar environments, to test-drive encounters with new people and new experiences."[4]

In the 1993 film *Shadowlands,* an adaptation of a script originally written as a play that focused on the relationship of C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman, the actor Anthony Hopkins (as the Oxford professor Lewis) greets his new student, Chadwick, in his tutoring room. As he first lights and then quickly begins to puff on his pipe, he makes a statement.

"We read to know we are not alone," the Lewis character says. And then he poses a question to the young Chadwick: "Do you think that's so?"

Chadwick replies, "Well, I hadn't thought about it like that before, sir." After a brief pause, Lewis succinctly responds, "No, nor did I."

It's a lovely and memorable encounter in the film containing words—"we read to know we're not alone"—that are now affixed to greeting cards, printed on posters, and emblazoned on coffee mugs with Lewis's name attached despite the fact there is no evidence that Lewis ever made that *precise* statement in his books or lectures.

Nonetheless, I have come to believe that what the actor Hopkins said in his role as Lewis is true. Reading helps us have a sense of belonging, understanding, companionship. A sense of being known. That has certainly been true for me. Some of the richest conversations I have throughout each year, whether with my wife, a close friend, or a new business partner, are built around the question, "Tell me what you're reading that you're highly recommending and why?" and the common response of reciprocity, "And what about you?"

We also read, I believe, to know that God is there, is not silent, is speaking to us through the *logos*, the Word—and through words. This is not something peculiar to the West, or to my own context. It is, I believe, something like a universal reality.

Reading Around the World

I recently attended an exhibit of more than 100 profoundly moving images taken by the famed photographer Steve McCurry. He may be best known for his 1984 portraiture of the green-eyed Afghan girl Sharbat Gula in a refugee camp outside Peshawar, Pakistan, in the midst of the Soviet Union's invasion of her home country. That image was among those gathered at the Loyola University Museum of Art in Chicago for the ICONS exhibit. As I suspected, it was riveting to come face-to-face with the image of Gula and her piercing green eyes in the photo that initially graced the June 1985 cover of *National Geographic* accompanying a story titled "Along Afghanistan's War-Torn Frontier." Other images of people and places from around the world—Syria, India, Madagascar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar—and closer to home, including the September 11, 2001, devastation around New York City's World Trade Center towers, graced the walls of several galleries in the museum. The images told stories of war, resilience, suffering, hope, family and cultures. But there was another aspect of ICONS that I didn't expect to see.

A homage to the beauty, allure, and practice of reading around the world.

In room after room of the gallery, McCurry's photos captured images of people reading in the midst of rubble and work and want and play. Sacred texts of the religions of the world spread out before readers on the ground, eyes attentively fixed on the pages. Newspapers being read on the trunk of a taxicab in Mumbai, or on the platform of a train station in Kolkata. One of the most striking images showed a young man sitting on a large stone reading a paperback book, his back propped up against a massive elephant curled around the stone like a pillow.

What was it about reading around the world that captured the eyes and trained the lens of the famed photographer Steve McCurry?

"Reading is a serious matter, but readers are seldom lonely or bored, because reading is a refuge and an enlightenment," writes Paul Theroux in the foreword to a collection of McCurry's images in the book *Steve McCurry: On Reading*. "This wisdom is sometimes visible. It seems to me that there is always something luminous in the face of a person in the act of reading."[5]

The Singer, His Song and Impact

I have no idea whether or not there was luminosity on my face on the day I first encountered the Christian book that set me on the course of working in writing, bookselling, and publishing. But I can imagine there was.

More than 40 summers ago when I joined my soon-to-be-wife, Cindy, for her family's vacation in the north woods of Wisconsin, I took along a slim, oddly shaped book she or perhaps her mother had given me, titled *The Singer*. It was written by Calvin Miller, a man I'd never heard of, and it had mesmerizing sketches scattered through its pages, which added a mysterious, evocative texture to the poetic prose. Together the words and images drew me in, captivating my attention to an unusual degree.

As the aging blue Chevy van rumbled its way north for hours on end through the Midwestern farmlands of the United States, I read

Miller's retelling of the Christ of the Gospel of Matthew, written in the narrative tradition of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, two writers I *had* heard of but whose works I had not yet read. That would come later, influenced no doubt by the impact and enjoyment of *The Singer* and its sequels, *The Song* and *the Finale*.

When I opened the cover of *The Singer* on that summer morning as our journey began, I found the opening words were situated not in the customary location but rather on the bottom left-hand side of the page, with type set in a manner not like a work of prose but rather like poetry:

> For most who live,
> hell is never knowing
> who they are.
> The Singer knew and
> knowing was his torment.

Calvin Miller had me hooked from line one of *The Singer.*

My reading tastes in that summer of 1982 were decidedly tilted toward twentieth-century history and biography, spurred on by the encounter a few years prior with *The Admiral's Daughter*. Literature of the imaginative and the biblical varieties was not yet on my radar to a significant degree.

The Singer changed that. It also changed my life. It cultivated in me a passion for books, for reading, and for sharing with others the delight of knowing and being known through the power of words. It also served as an inspiration to attempt to write myself.

Years later, Calvin Miller would serve on a panel I moderated at a bookselling event in New York City on "The Power of Story," and a friendship was born. The final time I saw him was in February of 2009 at a café in Dallas, Texas. I had invited him to come for a book industry conference to promote an anniversary edition of *The Singer.* We talked about our respective lives and hopes, our families of origin and our relationships with our fathers, which contained (as most do) a mixture of sadness and joy. But most of our talk centered

on the surprising impact of the book he authored—the impact on him, on me, on readers worldwide. I could sense in his voice and his countenance the deep gratitude he carried in his heart.

The musician and author Michael Card spoke for many readers of *The Singer* when for its 25th anniversary edition he wrote, "*The Singer* was not simply a book for me. It was an event. It was the first demonstration in our time that the gospel could be newly presented to the world at the level of the imagination."[6]

Reading in Our Modern Day

What is *your* story? What book has had that kind of impact on your life? As you reflect on your engagement with ideas and people and wonders through the written word, what stands out to you? Has your practice of reading grown or shrunk over time? Or does it simply ebb and flow like the tides? Has it changed in the digital world we all now live in?

Sven Birkerts writes in his influential book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, "Fewer and fewer people, it seems, have the leisure or the inclination to undertake (serious reading). And true reading is hard. Unless we are practiced, we do not just crack the covers and slip into an alternate world. We do not get swept up as readily as we might be by the big-screen excitements of film. But if we do read perseveringly we make available to ourselves, in a most portable form, an ulterior existence. We hold in our hands a way to cut against the momentum of the times."[7]

Birkerts's assertion is true for our reading life as a whole, including reading sacred texts and contemporary books that offer a light on our path as we pursue a life of faith. But the reading of books is not the primary point. Even some of the most notorious tyrants of modern history were said to have been voracious readers. It is a *changed* life that is the point. It is the outflow of wisdom, kindness, beauty, truth, goodness, compassion, and patience that is the point. The late Eugene Peterson would call this *spiritual reading.*

"Reading is an immense gift, but only if the words are assimilated, taken into the soul—eaten, chewed, gnawed, received in unhurried delight," Peterson writes. "Words of men and women long dead, or separated by miles and/or years, come off the page and enter our lives freshly and precisely, conveying truth and beauty and goodness, words that God's Spirit has used and uses to breathe life into our souls."[8]

Wherever you are on the spectrum of readers, from those of us who carry multiple books with us at all times in our travel bags to others of us who pick up one only occasionally, recognize the act of reading for what it is: an immense gift, one to which we can devote some measure of time, attentiveness, curiosity, and wonder. May the pages to come deepen your commitment, and may they lead you down rabbit trails of new books, authors, and subjects for your future reading.

On Reading as a Spiritual Discipline

> Reading is such a spiritual discipline for me that I find it difficult to speak on behalf of others regarding the why and how. The why for me in reading is centered on the selflessness of the act. I admit I read to grow in my field of study, to deepen my life's roots, to know that I am not alone, but I fundamentally read to get outside of myself. Reading un-self's me. It is a James 1:19 exercise: "Quick to hear, slow to speak . . ." As for the question of how, I simply give reading priority in my life. I read in small patches of time, ten or 15 minutes here and there, but I also read in large plots of time, a half day here, a whole day there.[9]
>
> **J. K. Jones**, author of *Reading With God in Mind* and *A Soul's House: A Primer for Spiritual Formation*

Why Read At All?

12 Recommended Books on the Reading Life

Below is a list of twelve books that offer insight, inspiration, and practical guidance on the importance and practice of reading. Even if you are already a committed reader, you'll find much to savor. And if you are at the beginning of this journey with the world of wonder found in books, you'll find delightful traveling companions.

- *Reading for the Love of God*, by Jessica Hooten Wilson
- *Reading with God in Mind*, by J. K. Jones
- *Why We Read*, by Shannon Reed
- *Walking a Literary Labyrinth*, by Nancy M. Malone
- *A Book Lover's Guide to Great Reading*, by Terry Glaspey
- *The Gutenberg Elegies*, by Sven Birkerts
- *Reading for the Common Good*, by C. Christopher Smith
- *On Reading Well*, by Karen Swallow Prior
- *Reading with Deeper Eyes*, by William H. Willimon
- *12 Great Spiritual Writers*, by Liz Hoare
- *The Reading Life: The Joy of Seeing New Worlds Through Others' Eyes*, by C. S. Lewis
- *Reality and the Vision*, edited by Philip Yancey