

NOBODY CRIES WHEN WE DIE

**God,
Community,
and Surviving
to Adulthood**

Patrick B. Reyes

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For Grandma and all those who bury los inocentes.

Series Foreword

Cultivating Faithful, Wise and Courageous Leaders for the Church and Academy

Welcome to a conversation at the intersection of young adults, faith, and leadership. The Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) is a leadership incubator that inspires diverse young people to make a difference in the world through Christian communities. This series, published in partnership with Chalice Press, re-imagines Christian leadership and creates innovative approaches to ministry and scholarship from diverse contexts.

These books are written by and for a growing network of:

- Partners seeking to cultivate the Christian leaders, pastors, and theological educators needed to renew and respond to a changing church.
- Young leaders exploring alternative paths to ministry and following traditional ways of serving the common good —both inside and beyond “the walls” of the church and theological academy.
- Christian leaders developing new ways to awaken the search for meaning and purpose in young adults who are inspired to shape the future.
- Members of faith communities creating innovative solutions to address the needs of their congregations, institutions, and the broader community.

This series offers an opportunity to discover what FTE is learning, widen the circle of conversation, and share ideas FTE believes are necessary for faith communities to shape a more hopeful future. Authors’ expressed ideas and opinions in this series are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of FTE.

Thank you for joining us!

Dori Baker, Series Editor

Stephen Lewis, FTE President

Chapter 4

In the Wilderness

But I had survived my formative world and all its trappings...
Time to start a revolution, or I could wind up in rags, sleeping
on heating grates, permanently retired to the dreamworlds I
had conjured up since childhood.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle*

Part of growing into our vocation is recognizing that call to life and living into it. Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that living into one's values is also living into our own survival narratives and to begin dreaming about the work ahead. I have said repeatedly throughout this text that vocational discernment is about learning to hear the cry for us to live. God also provides guides in sacred texts. There is something sacred about this call, something grounded in our tradition. Study of the texts grounds us in the wisdom of our tradition, but this must be done alongside the stories of our ancestors. The biblical text must continue to live and walk alongside our ancestors, our elders, us, and the next generation. As Orlando Espín notes, it is "traditioning" the next generation to know the histories, theologies, and traditions of the past, so that we may communally create a new future (1997).

By turning to a biblical story with characters who are dispossessed, oppressed, survivors, and are called by God into new life, we view through a window this call to life. For many of the abused and forsaken, this is the first glimpse we see of life out of the mud. Connecting the biblical story with one's personal narrative teaches us to listen to how

God calls us into new being. We also learn through the scripture that these calls are not always accepted or heard by our communities. Though the world, society, and some in our own communities may not accept our call to life, there are those who hear God's call to life. They are the beloved who opened my heart to the theological insights provided by scripture. Without my grandma, the Christian Brothers, my father, my friends and the roots of my experience, I would not have heard the call to life. But here I am. In order for me to open up to these learnings, I needed to hear the cry for life from my ancestors.

Those who call us to new life have also survived. We who are called to transmit the traditions of survival are also typically the ones who tell the stories of life; we are called to call others to life. However, our world does not allow enough room for our ancestors to walk freely among us. Those with their own stories of survival and caring for the next generation often are lost, forgotten, or buried—lost because colonial histories have acted violently on our histories, erasing our bodies from history, or lost because their stories were not viewed in such a way as to reflected their beauty, their courage, and their own strength to survive their times. So often, the stories of our ancestors are treated as mere side characters or plots to the dominant narratives. I admit in my own storytelling above that people such as my grandma interjected themselves in my life and saved me from certain death. My grandma's longer story and family heritage inform the stories about her supporting me in times of need. Without her survival, without her own support narrative, there is no walking up to that man's house. She got the courage from a lifetime of experience and learning how to avoid certain death, while still courageously looking death in the eye. Without that deep history, she would not have continued to support me in my studies. She would not have known how powerful were the long hugs during which we didn't have to say anything about what we were feeling in our souls, because she had survived deep pains and was passing the wisdom of survival from one generation to the next.

My grandma descended from holy people, or at least that is how my father tells the story. Her ancestors lived and worked the Central Valley, long before the Spanish arrived; some were there when it was still Mexico, some going to and from present-day Mexico. She was one of many children of shepherds and farmworkers. They would travel wherever the harvest was or where the grass would grow for the sheep. From California to Mexico, they lived and worked off the land.

My grandma descended from holy people, or at least that is how my father tells the story.

This migratory pattern was how she and her family survived. As the youngest of her family, everyone wanted to keep her safe from the hard life of farm labor. She was supposed to have “soft hands,” as my great aunt used to say, another angel I know who is looking over us.

She met my grandpa, who had come from Mexico to Texas to California with his father and siblings. He told me his mother had died young, and that she was a native woman. He didn’t remember much of his childhood, except that his father would gather all of his children in a cart and walk them to the potato fields, where they would sit and play all day and wait for him to finish work. Grandpa would tell endless stories about times in the field. His dad also later worked on the railroads. I have a small pocket watch from his time working at the railroad company, which has been passed on from generation to generation. The watch represents a parent’s attempt to make the new generation’s life a little better than the last. My grandpa didn’t talk much about his father working that job, perhaps because sitting under the blazing sun is far more memorable than his dad leaving for the day to work at the rail yard.

My grandpa was several years older than my grandma. I remember asking why they got married. She said she liked the way he danced. He was a charming, good-looking, fair-skinned Mexican man. He served in the army both as a bugler and as a driver to a major whose name escapes me. He remembered his time in the service as the first time the “white guy told him to wait in the car.” When he returned home from his military service, he found work at the local bar. On a bartender’s salary, he managed for a number of years to provide enough income to have at least twelve people living under the same two-bedroom roof.

I came to love him very much, but there are traumas buried deep inside the house in which my father grew up that I will never fully know.

He was also an abusive drunk, an admission he made to me very early in my time living with my grandparents. I came to love him very much, but there are traumas buried deep inside the house in which my father grew up that I will never fully know. I only know what

my grandpa and, to some extent, my father would tell me. This is what I mean by saying that we didn’t have to tell Grandma our pain. She had multiple markers on her body as well. She knew how to survive and how to ensure the survival her children.

My grandma grew up in poverty with a large family. She raised a large family with an abusive alcoholic in a small two-bedroom house,

feeding anyone who came through her doors. She was the keystone of the family. She held all the pieces together. I lived with Grandma and Grandpa years after the event with that little girl. I stayed in their extra bedroom working for my uncle's drywall and metal framing company. It was long hours in the Bakersfield heat, working for just \$8 an hour. But they let me live there for free and fed me. I loved living with them because every day I would go to work early in the morning, come back exhausted from the day, and as soon as I had had a shower, my grandma would be waiting to give me a hug and ask how the day had gone. These moments with her were the most precious moments of my life. I tried to return the favor by cleaning the kitchen every night. I wanted to return the love they had given me, but didn't have a whole lot of practical skills at this age. This was most noticeable during work.

I worked with a man who had lived a harder life than me and would remind me of it daily. Andy was a sixty-year-old Basque-Mexican man who hung sheet rock and metal lath, who had been to prison twice, was missing all of his front teeth, lived in a small trailer, and abused his body with alcohol and other drugs. He was understandably bitter about the way life emerged for him. I would tell my grandparents about his pains or I would tell them about how Andy, from this place of hurt, would act out and try and fight me while we worked together. One day in particular he pulled the scaffold out from under me, because he wanted to tell me I was doing a bad job and it was the fastest way to get me down. When I stood up to him after I hit the ground, he took off his tool belt and said he was ready to fight.

I remembered Grandma telling me about two or three weeks into the job that I needed to be nice to him, he probably needed someone to talk to. So I told him I wasn't going to fight him, walked off around the corner with him following me, cussing me out, and telling me what a lousy person I was. I climbed into the car as fast as I could, locking the door behind me. He banged on the window for me to come out and fight him. He eventually just left the job site and came back the next day—upset, but apologetic.

"Patrick, I am sorry." He said.

"Don't worry about it."

"No, really. I am sorry. I think you might be the only person who listens or puts up with me. I am sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Want to come to my trailer for lunch?" This scared me a bit, given that he had just tried to fight me the day before.

Still, I accepted: "Sure."

I went to his trailer for lunch and he told me his life story. He talked about how one day he was working on a high rise and fell, but a friend caught him. They were working on the thirtieth story. He said had it not been for that man, he would have died.

"You know. I think sometimes people know how to catch us," he said.

"Yeah."

You have to be aware of your own strength before you just reach out on a high rise and catch someone when they are falling. You have to know who you are and what you are capable of. You also just have to survive the moment.

"No, really. You have to be aware of your own strength before you just reach out on a high rise and catch someone when they are falling. You have to know who you are and what you are capable of. You also just have to survive the moment." We sat in his trailer in silence after this moment, each eating fruit and the small sandwiches he had made, reflecting on the wisdom in this moment.

I developed a close bond with Andy. I don't know if it was because I would not confront him about his anger or engage him during a rant. I think it was more because I was genuinely curious about his life. The summer only got better as he opened up more and more. He told me stories about his marriage and about his children and how proud he was of them. He told me how his brother stole most of his money after the first time he went to prison. He invited me to his trailer to see the trinkets he had collected while overseas, and told me again how the friend had saved his life while working on the high rise. He asked me to tell him about the books I was reading or about what I wanted to study in school. He didn't think people studied to become priests, but that I would be a good one if I wanted to do that. When he passed away, I didn't remember the anger, I simply remembered his stories. He taught me that we have to know our strength and catch someone who is falling.

My grandma knew these conversations took their toll on me. I would come home and share how I hadn't said a word the entire day or that Andy whacked the living hell out of me with a piece of framing again—his usual form of telling me I had made a bad cut or had messed something up. But she always told me, "Paciencia, mijo." Yet it wasn't just *this* man's pains for which my grandma wanted me to care. While

she cooked dinner—her tortillas still fill my stomach just thinking about them—I would head out to the front porch with Grandpa. He would be sitting on the front porch smoking his Pall Mall non-filtered cigarettes. If he wasn't smoking, it meant he was out of cigarettes and he would send me to the corner store to buy more for him. I would sit there and watch traffic and people go by the house. He would yell at people, "*¿Que paso, pendejo?*" I would laugh at their responses to this little, old, decrepit Mexican on a porch. As trust was built through this nightly ritual, our conversations turned, just as had happened with Andy.

The first time they did, he talked about driving home drunk from work one day. There is a large hill on my grandparents' street that swoops down and to the left, ending with my grandparents' house on the right hand side of the road. He was driving his car and he crested the top of the hill to start coming down and to the left. He had passed out at the wheel. The car crashed in the yard across the street from our house and sent him flying into the adjacent yard. He survived without any serious injuries. He had driven home drunk, he said, more times than he could remember, and that was why he didn't drink anymore. As he told the story, he reflected on waking up in the neighbor's yard—mainly, he said, because he couldn't remember anything else. He talked about how he didn't know to whom to apologize or whether anyone would forgive him. He felt he had done so much wrong he didn't know how to make any of it right. Then, he put his cigarette out and we just sat there. Most nights unfolded something like this.

For about two more months, we went out to the porch and he would talk about things he did. Confessions before death, I suppose. He talked about the abuse he had inflicted on his family. He talked about the abuse he had suffered as a kid. He talked about his childhood and what his own father had to do to ensure his family's survival. He said he didn't know how to talk to my father. He knew that my grandma would take the kids out for drives for hours on end when he would be in a drunken fit, and that sometimes they would stay out all night. Or, he told me about the times when he wouldn't even come home. He cried when he told me that he knew my father hid under the bed from him when he came home. "Don't ever be that kind of papi. Keep reading your books," he would tell me as he stared out at the traffic.

I often wonder what interventions my grandpa needed. Who called this man to life? I also thought about my father: Who called him to life? As I pondered this question, I would begin to seethe. These were conditions, addictions, abuses, that were largely out of my family's

These were conditions, addictions, abuses, that were largely out of my family's control. How could anyone survive and imagine a better life while dealing with these struggles?

control. How could anyone survive and imagine a better life while dealing with these struggles? I remember one night after hearing all these confessions, I was tired and sad for my grandma, my father, my aunts, my uncles. Bear in mind, this is after my grandma had already called me to new life and

ensured my survival, and was once again providing a house full of love for me when I was mostly lost.

We were sitting at the table and I had just heard another long story of abuse. I looked at my grandpa, who was sitting there eating his plate of meat, corn, beans, and tortilla. I was angry. I was angry that I knew that by saying out loud what he had done he was feeling some relief from what he had put my family through. "Grandpa," I said, "Don't just smile! Say sorry to Grandma for all that stuff you've been telling me." He looked up, not confused one bit by the demand, and apologized. Upset by how unsatisfying the apology was, I took my food into the backyard and finished my meal so they could talk alone. I am not sure what they talked about, but they never called me back into the house.

God's call is a call to life that transfers from generation to generation. Virgilio Elizondo wrote that the "Mexican-American historical odyssey can be seen as a passage through three phases," the first being survival. The phases also include development efforts including becoming part of U.S. society and "*moviminetos de liberación*" (Elizondo 2010, 19). While all three are currently happening in our communities, I believe that all three are happening simultaneously. This vocational call to life in my own family certainly could be read as a quest for survival, then a struggle to find our place in society, followed ultimately by realizing our own liberation. However, as Delores Williams reminds us, survival is an act of liberation. In many ways, for those who are the sons and

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daughters of the disinherited, our lives are one long act of survival. Our communities are not negotiating these phases singularly, but are actively redefining what it means to survive, thrive, and define our own realities. God's call is active in every part of our personal and communal discernment.

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