



WAKE UP to WONDER

22 Invitations to Amazement in the Everyday

KAREN WRIGHT MARSH



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in the Everyday**

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*An additional miracle, as everything is additional:
the unthinkable
is thinkable.*

—*Wisława Szymborska*

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INVITATION TO WONDER

Once upon a time, I aspired to a successful, worthy life through spiritual regimens, diligent labors, “good choices”—all powered by a stubborn confidence in the future I presumed God had mapped out for me. Somewhere (Sunday school?) I’d gotten the idea that right belief, right intentions, and right discipline would deliver personal achievement, an adoring family, robust health, wealth, and the added bonus of inner equanimity. And so I sailed forth.

My oh my, have I ever been humbled.

Ambitious systems? Lofty goals? Assurances of a dogged faith have not held up as expected. I’ve been chastened by garden-variety heartbreak, the wear and tear of ordinary life, the messiness of trying to love actual people. Recent global events have brought me face-to-face with my human precarity and often drive me to fear and loneliness. Forces that are beyond my control—climate, politics, technology, economics, science, culture—overwhelm comprehension.

Still, I haven’t given up on the spiritual life; in fact, I need a steady inner grounding more than ever. In my questing, I’ve come around to unexpected answers.

At some point, I had a revelation. It was nothing profound, really, but it caused a lasting change in me. I realized this: I do not need to find and follow the perfect *plan*. (What a relief!) What I

truly need is *people* I can follow—older sisters, brothers, mentors, spiritual friends who have been this way before.

In my search for people over plans, I've found my way to faithful Christian women and men from across centuries and cultures, each with challenges all their own yet very much like mine. Their varied stories are thrilling, heartening, extreme, bizarre, even unremarkable. For all their flaws and eccentricities, they discover, or in some cases blunder into, a spirituality of amazement and encounter God's presence shimmering everywhere.

Afflicted by deep melancholy, the reformer Martin Luther found relief in singing. Cast out as an accursed Brahmin widow, India's Pandita Ramabai discovered dignity and purpose in the pages of the Bible. As a boy, Patrick of Ireland, that saint now celebrated with green beer and shamrocks, endured enslavement by a savage warlord yet returned to the place of his suffering out of compassion for the Irish people. Civil rights pastor-philosopher Howard Thurman suffered racism at the hands of white American Christians yet found deep rest in the liberating, loving religion of Jesus. The lifelong activist Dorothy Day cherished her escapes to the beach.

I've become a collector of stories and a curator of historical Christian practices reframed for the everyday, inspired by the host of ancient wisdom figures who mentor me in the ways of wholeness. In a world where "religion" is associated with burdensome dogma, judgmental attitudes, and blind faith, these persistent believers disarm with a spirituality of discovery, attention, even freedom.

You and I are in a fragile, unsettled moment, aren't we? You may have experienced inherited doctrine and a presumed religiosity that have failed to reach your tenderest places. Can we dare to imagine a new way of living now—to navigate the world with an empathy, kindness, and hope we've never known before?

This is what I long to share: the infusions of meaning, purpose, grace, attention, and amazement granted by the sinner-saints of

the Christian faith whose enduring wisdom and words ground me every day.

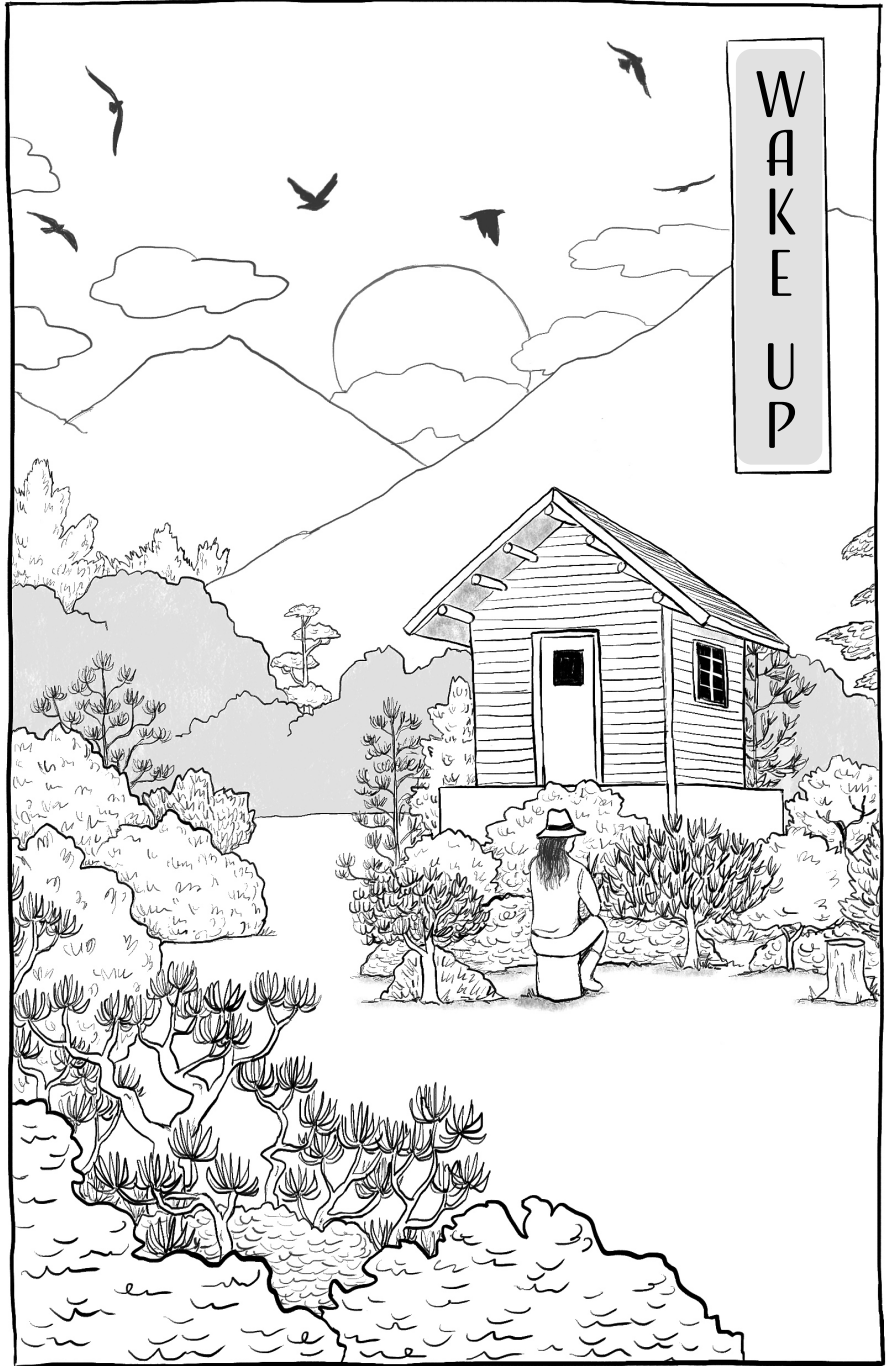
I invite you to come along as I tell stories of the guides who show me the way, or rather, the multiplicity of ways, to live a centered, abundant life of prayer and action, insights and habits. They just may intrigue you too simply by being who they were and doing what they did.

I hope you'll dip into the personal practices and spiritual disciplines I offer as invitations. The invitations are borrowed from research reported by scientists, ancient habits and devotional traditions, methods advanced by mindfulness and wellness experts, beauty from poets, and plain old common sense from folks who live life well.

Guess what? Invitations are not rules; they are not systems! They are prompts, overtures, welcomes. So take all the freedom you want as you flip through this book. Read a story here, try out a prompt there, scribble a note, make a sketch, then take a nap. Read deeply if you like—or skip ahead and come back later.

As you make your way through, you're sure to meet generous, wise teachers who have glimpsed the transcendent. They notice the tiny quotidian miracles hidden right underfoot. They teach that life is a creative work in progress, a long-term project in which patience is required. They are saints of amazement who hold out fragments of the Life that is life. They beckon you too to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

This is life. Fragile. Surprising. Blessed. And you're invited.



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When I found I had crossed that line [to freedom], I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.

—Harriet Tubman (1822–1913),
Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman

You and I inhabit a universe of extra-ordinary marvels both massive and miniature. So why the sense that I live life dimly and with a divided heart, passing by, unaware, the commonplace gifts that appear along the path? Why am I too distracted or fearful to experience the nourishment, the salvation, to be found in the crumbs of life?

Presence is what we are all hungering for, aren't we? Real presence! Could it be that you and I have simply never learned to be present with quality to God, to others, to ourselves, and to all created things?¹ To bring our attention to unfolding moments?

In the first portion of this book, you will meet five spiritual guides who, each in their own way, call us to wake up. *Wake up, wake up!* Tiny miracles are to be found everywhere, they say: in a bite of sun-ripened peach, the languorous stretch after a nap, the buzz of a melody, a deep cleansing breath, the self-revelation that emerges when a pen is put to paper. Look within and without and you just may encounter God, beside you in the world, in the glory over everything.

Pay attention. You stand on holy ground.



PUT PEN TO PAPER

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN (1932–1996)

It was an early September Saturday, the first day of Henri Nouwen's sabbatical. He sat down in the little apartment that would be his temporary home and cracked open a brand-new journal. Upon his arrival in Ontario that day, his hosts had invited Henri to "just relax" at the beginning of this "empty year." "Just sleep, eat, and do what you want to do," Hans and Margaret had said before leaving him to himself.¹

Relax? That had never been Henri's style. Over his sixty-two years, Henri had been ordained as a Catholic priest; earned academic degrees; taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard; written more than forty books; traveled and preached; lived among the poor in South America; and served in communities of care where he lived alongside people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Henri's close friends had long worried over the frenetic, emotionally intense eighteen-hour workdays that pushed him into episodes of nervous exhaustion and collapse. This time around they'd written him a no-nonsense letter, a "sabbatical mandate" ordering him to say no to all work except writing.

Now faced with an empty journal page, Henri admitted to a flood of feelings. "I am excited and anxious, hopeful and fearful, tired and full of desire to do a thousand things," his first journal entry reads. "I feel strange! Very happy and very scared at the

same time. I have always dreamt about a whole year without appointments, meetings, lectures, travels, letters and phone calls, a year completely open to let something radically new happen. But can I do it?" he asks himself. "Can I let go of all the things that make me feel useful and significant? I realize that I am quite addicted to being busy and am experiencing a bit of withdrawal anxiety."²

Henri Nouwen followed a lifelong practice of personal writing. He made some volumes public: his accounts of months at a Trappist monastery, a sojourn through Bolivia and Peru, his participation in the L'Arche community. He kept a "secret" journal through a particularly dark, despairing, and lonely time. Thanks to his willingness to put his feelings on the page and his generosity in sharing them, we've received a rich legacy of recorded human experience. Nouwen's journal from this final sabbatical period is a gift to workaholics everywhere: one restless man's honest reckoning with his varied emotions. We read along as he rejoices in his new freedom yet has to nail himself to his chair whenever wild impulses drive him to get busy—busy with anything at all. We hear him admit that he is left without excuses and resigned "to embark on a new journey and to trust that all will be well."³ Alone in his secluded room, Henri determines to fight with the angel of God and ask for a new blessing.⁴

Henri J. M. Nouwen was and is beloved around the world. With uncommon honesty, this self-identified "wounded healer" was open with his own brokenness, for he believed that his psychological wounds, physical limitations, and emotional needs could be a conduit of grace and healing. Pain was not something to be hidden away. "I am convinced that it is possible to live the wounds of the past not as gaping abysses that cannot be filled . . . but as gateways to new life."⁵

To his readers, Nouwen is a trustworthy guide through the shadows of self-rejection and into the daylight of God's love; he's a fellow pilgrim who could offer assurances like this: "You

are facing a real spiritual battle. But do not be afraid. You are not alone. . . . Remember, you are held safe. You are loved. You are protected. You are in communion with God.”⁶ Over and over, Henri offers variations of the same glad message, the same good news: you and I are the beloved of God from eternity to eternity. This is who we are whether we feel it or not.

And so—in what would turn out to be his final year of life—Henri started his sabbatical days with breakfast and morning prayer, sometimes Eucharist with neighbors, and then he retreated to his third-floor apartment to write, a candle burning nearby. The entries in the beautiful cloth-bound journal, written in long hand, are confessional in classic Nouwen style. “My unconscious certainly has not gone on sabbatical yet!” he begins, in an account of chaotic dreams of missed meetings, angry people, and unanswered letters. Upon waking to a silent room, he can only laugh and pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”⁷

He writes that his prayers, which he calls the bridge between his unconscious and conscious life, feel “dead as a rock.”⁸ What an extraordinary priest it is who can confess that, instead of being full of spiritual fire after all these years, he doesn’t feel much of anything when he prays. And yet Nouwen responds to tumultuous emotions, tangled visions, and dry prayers with the inquisitiveness of an open heart. What are the darkness and the dryness about? What do they call me to? he wonders. “My wild, unruly dreams will probably keep reminding me of the great spiritual work ahead of me. But I trust that it is not just I who have to do the work. The Spirit of God joins my spirit and will guide me as I move into this blessed time.”⁹

TRUTH UNDER THE TAPE



I found the journal, with its brown leatherette cover and the words “My Diary” in gold script, in a box of stuff from middle school, under the Camp Sandy Cove photos, a broken locket, and faded report cards. My name is inscribed inside, a child’s flourished attempt at elegant handwriting: Karen Elizabeth Wright. The first pages are filled with uninspired accounts of homework, a class field trip to the Crayola factory, a minor mishap at Sunday school, chicken for dinner, a Friday night watching *The Brady Bunch* at Barbara’s house. Long before the thirty-one days of January are done, the entries trail off, nothing more than a phrase, maybe two. Rainy today. Social studies project due. Dog threw up.

Then I find a curious mound on the page for February 12: multiple layers of paper, each layer sealed down with tape, one on top of another. And on the top layer? The words “DO NOT OPEN. OR ELSE.” Finally, something worth reading? I peel off one piece of the decades-old tape and then another until I’m three layers down. “I hate Dan Wright,” I read. (Dan Wright being my younger brother, the second in our tribe of five kids.) Another scrap of paper, another piece of tape, and my writing, “I hate Daniel Burton Wright.” Then “I hate DBW.” “I hate Daniel B. Wright.” Variations of his name multiply the force of my anger, an anger papered and taped over, a feeling so dangerous to my adolescent self that I’d been careful to seal it away from the eyes of any present or future reader who might come upon that little brown diary. A reader who would surely judge me should they ever know the rage in my young heart.

Frankly, I hesitate to recount this story, knowing that the very same Daniel Burton Wright will likely read this and learn that, as a sixth grader, I once fiercely hated him on a particular February afternoon. My twinge of shame points to just how far I still have to go in this journey toward vulnerability. The evidence is right there in yellowed paper and curling tape: the twelve-year-old me quite

literally buried her bad, sad, guilty, and wrathful emotions, and the grown-up me does not find laying them bare so easy either.

How unlike that girl is Henri Nouwen, who was so very open about his shadow self—those parts of him that a more protected person (me) might deny or hide out of shame. By the time he was in his sixties, he knew that his private journal would be read some day, by friends and probably by thousands of strangers, and still he wrote sentences like these: “My whole being seemed to be invaded by fear. No peace, no rest, just plain fear: fear of mental breakdown, fear of living the wrong life.” Nouwen writes of other feelings too: “It is a wonderful sensation. It is the sensation of belonging.” He writes of hope: “I don’t know how God is going to fulfill his promises, but I know that he will, and therefore I can . . . know and trust that the deepest desires of my being will be fulfilled.”¹⁰ Feelings, feelings, and more feelings, all over each page.

For careful people like me, Nouwen bravely shows the way toward exposing one’s true emotions—to one’s self, first of all. He teaches the restorative power of journaling, where anything and everything can come to the surface and into the light. More than a few times I’ve resolved to keep a daily written account, knowing in my head that it is a healthy practice, but I haven’t followed through, citing the weak excuse that there’s no safe place to hide a diary and my precious privacy from “curious” others.

Today I wonder, too, if I simply haven’t felt comfortable with the experimentation, the messiness, the confusion of naming my struggles for myself, long before I’ve dared to speak them out before others. Henri doesn’t judge. You have been wounded in many ways, Nouwen tells me, and your wounds are deep. “Many tears still need to be shed. But do not be afraid. The simple fact that you are more aware of your wounds shows that you have sufficient strength to face them.”¹¹ I sense Henri next to me here in the solitude of my room as I turn to another entry in that old diary, as I unstick another fragment of tape, as I pick up a pen to write a new and braver page.

TRY THIS



Ready to put pen to paper right now? Choose among these prompts or follow your own idea. There are no rules in this book!

Get It Down

Journaling is one of the more effective acts of self-care and, happily, one of the cheapest. Naming emotions and acknowledging tough and traumatic events, as Nouwen did in his own journals, can have a demonstrably positive effect. Scientific studies have shown the cascading benefits of journaling, ranging from increased mindfulness, memory, and communication skills to better sleep, a stronger immune system, more self-confidence, and a higher IQ.¹²

Even a one-time fifteen- to thirty-minute session of focused journal writing has demonstrable advantages. Why not try it for yourself today? Aim for writing that is strictly stream of consciousness; just get your thoughts and feelings out onto the page, without worrying about your topic or whether it will all make sense.

These journal pages are not meant to be art or argument, and they are certainly not intended for anyone else. Write on paper or tap on your laptop. Channel a bit of Henri, who said, “I have promised [to write down], as honestly and directly as possible, what is happening within and around me.”¹³ After you’ve written freely, notice how you feel. Has anything shifted?

Fill Your Emotional Toolbox

Many of us think of our emotions in primary colors—basic ones like happy, sad, angry, or surprised—if we think of them at all. But it can be useful to name our emotions with a bit more specificity and nuance. Identifying and differentiating our emotions

is a skill, one we can practice and improve to the good of our overall emotional and mental health.¹⁴

Here's an exercise to get you thinking and writing as you put pen to paper. Brainstorm as many emotions as you can think of: negative, positive, and beyond. (There's an online list of 271 emotions if you need inspiration.)¹⁵ I've written a few to get you started. Next time a feeling arises, stay curious and think of your list. Can you give your emotion its particular, nuanced name?

Emotions List

Astonished	Alarmed	Apprehensive
Content	Distracted	Expectant

Dig Deeper

Whatever I will “feel,” it is important that I keep making inner choices of faithfulness . . . less dependent on fleeting emotions and more rooted in lasting commitments.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey*

Henri Nouwen was moved by powerful feelings, yet here he speaks to the importance of lasting commitments and practiced choices. (He also adds, “My body and soul might need an immense amount of discipline to catch up with this wisdom!”¹⁶)

What is your own personal style? Your inner tendencies toward emotion, discipline, and commitment? Ask yourself:

- Can I think of a time when strong emotions got in the way of what I believe to be true about myself, others, or God?
- Can I think of a time when my discipline or commitments kept me from experiencing important feelings?
- Is there one “lasting commitment” that is especially important to me?
- Is there any “inner choice of faithfulness,” however small, that I might enact today?