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**Everything is
Spiritual**

**Who We Are and
What We're Doing Here**

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ROB BELL



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Think of the big moves you have already made, from a single cell to a human being. Stay light-footed, and keep moving.

—Rumi

My grandma kept cash in her bra.

I'd ask her for a twenty, and she'd reach in there, pull out a wad, and say,
Will a ten and two fives do?

When I was in high school in the mid-'80s I used to visit her on her farm. We lived in Okemos, a suburb of Lansing, the state capital in the center of Michigan. I'd drive our Oldsmobile out into the country to her old brick farmhouse, which was surrounded by barns and pastures and fields. I'd park in the driveway and then her dog, Gunner, would circle the car, peeing on all four tires. She'd often make dinner, and then afterward we'd sit on her porch in white wicker chairs.

I remember the wind, how it would blow across the fields and in among the barns and move the chimes hanging from the eaves on that porch. Sometimes we'd talk, other times we'd sit for long periods in silence. I was in that tenuous space between being a boy and being a man, trying to sort out who I was and where I was headed, surrounded by all the dramas and insanities of high school.

Everything around me was ranked. There were the best students and the best athletes and the coolest kids who got invited to all the right parties. Everywhere I turned there was someone better. Someone smarter, faster, more tuned in to those ambiguous codes that sort out who gets it and who doesn't. I lived with this perpetual ache that I was a half step behind, haunted by those questions:

Do I have what it takes?

Will I ever find my place?

Am I good enough?

But then I'd sit there in one of those wicker chairs and those questions would temporarily fade away, and I'd listen to that wind, and in those

moments in that place everything was all was right even if it wasn't.

I experienced a wordlessness there on that porch, a sublime state of grace in which the presence of another communicates a world of truth without any sentences or statements.

Sometimes my grandma would tell me about the great love of her life, her first husband, Preston, my dad's father. Preston served on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific Ocean in World War II. The day he came home from the war he walked in the house, greeted his family, dropped off his bags, and then left the house to find a job, which he went to first thing the next morning. The stories she told about Preston were like that one—full of action and purpose. This wasn't a man who sat around waiting for things to happen. He'd gotten cancer during the war, and he died when he was thirty-four.

According to my dad no one told him and his brother, Douglas, about the seriousness of their dad's illness. One day my dad's uncle came by and told him he had to take him somewhere. My dad got in the back seat of his uncle's car, saw his cousin sitting there, and asked,
Where are we going?

His cousin replied,
Your dad died. We're going to the funeral home.

When they arrived at the funeral home, my dad was told that he wasn't allowed to cry because they were happy that his dad was now in heaven.

My dad was eight at the time, his brother, Douglas, was six.

When my dad was seventeen, he and his brother were involved in an accident. Douglas was critically injured, and an ambulance came to get him. My grandma got in the ambulance with him as it left for the hospital, leaving my dad at the scene. The next morning he learned that his brother had died, and then at the funeral he was told,
You aren't going to shed any tears, because we're happy that Douglas is in heaven.

My grandma's name was Eileen,
my dad's name is Rob,
and from an early age I could feel the history between them.

Love, yes.

Loyalty, absolutely.

But also a certain lingering melancholy, a muted grief hovering in the air
between them. They didn't come from a culture where you talk about your
pain, the dominant messages they picked up were more along the lines of

Be good

Keep moving

Follow the rules

and

Trust that this is all some sort of divine plan.

So they did.

They'd experienced unspeakable loss, together, and it had bonded them to
each other, but it was a bond forever tinged with loss.

I picked up on all that muted grief floating in the air between my grandma
and dad, and from an early age I just wanted to make them laugh.

That's what I remember.

I made her laugh.

I made him laugh.

If I could get them laughing so hard they were in tears,
I knew I'd done something.

Eileen eventually remarried, around the time my parents married. Her new
husband was a farmer.

He was a good man,

but not really there.

He'd checked out a long time ago.

Eileen and I would sit on that porch and listen to the wind while he sat in
his chair in the house and watched television.

There she was,
way out on that farm,
with a man who spent most of his days in that chair.

And then I'd show up, bursting in with all my angst and ache and curiosity
and laughs.

Into that quiet farmhouse.

Into that lifeless marriage.

I see what was going on there,
what we were to each other.

She wasn't an effusive person, but I knew she believed in me. I needed that.
She didn't go on about it. It was a quiet conviction. But I knew.

And then when I was twenty-one I was teaching water-skiing at a camp in
northern Wisconsin. On Sunday mornings, they held a chapel service
outdoors in a grove of pine trees for everybody who worked at the camp.

One week the people who ran the camp asked if anyone wanted to give the
talk that coming Sunday. I volunteered. This wasn't something I'd ever
done before. Messages, sermons, teachings, spiritual talks—there are a
number of different words for it—that was all new to me.

You stand up in front of a group of people and you say something helpful or
inspiring or profound about God and life and death and how to live?

How does a person do that?

Where do you even start?

And yet something within me was curious: *What would it be like to try
that?*

And then Sunday came. I wore a maroon shirt with swordfish printed all
over it and Birkenstock sandals. As soon as I walked up in front of those
people sitting on those benches made of logs, I took off my sandals before I
started talking because I had this sense that the ground had shifted beneath
my feet and I was on sacred ground and my life was never going to be the
same again.

It was that clear.

It was terrifying and thrilling, and it felt like coming home.

And I loved it. Immediately.

Like everything in my life up to that moment had been leading to *this*.

I had heard people give messages and teachings and sermons over the years. I usually didn't find them that compelling. But this, this SPIRITUAL TALK THING I had stumbled into—this was part guerrilla theater and part performance art and part recovery meeting and part poetry and part subversive rhetoric. I was captivated.

This is what I'm going to do with my life, I decided.

Several years after that, my grandma and I ended up living near each other, and we started having lunch together every Friday. We did that for the last ten years of her life.

She was there when I started my first job as a pastor, listening to me give those first talks. I was driven to explore this art form and take it places it hadn't been before, and I threw myself into it, with her somewhere in the audience.

She witnessed so many of those early bombs. All those frenetic bursts and flying attempts at inspiring people. The flamethrower. The giant pile of dirt. The time I brought out all those live animals to make a point about something, and they began defecating all over the stage. The time I dressed up like a sheriff to illustrate something but I didn't explain adequately enough why I was dressed up like a sheriff, so much so that at the end of the sermon someone in the audience asked,

Why are you dressed up like a sheriff?

I was so humiliated.

Standing up there sweating in that itchy, pale brown uniform, feeling that hot shame of failure, wondering,

Who do I think I am to be doing this? Am I wasting my time?

Eileen saw it all.

I don't know how much she understood what I was trying to do, but she showed up every time I was speaking. Even when she stopped driving, her ninety-two-year-old friend Helene—who still drove—would bring her.

She'd sit there and beam.

My dad, he has very few positive memories of his father, Preston, before he died. He remembers a letter that Preston sent to his parents, complaining to them about the behavior of my dad and his brother. He remembers a man who acted like his sons were a disruption in his life.

But Eileen, she idolized Preston.

She told me, *He was too good for this world.*

That's why he was taken away so young, was her explanation for his early death.

And then I'm there,
right there in the midst of those two,
giving those talks.
And laughing.

Their losses shaped me. I never met Preston or Douglas, and yet they've been present in my life from the beginning.

Their
absence
has been a form of
presence.

And that presence in absence tuned my ear to the pains and paradoxes of life. Whatever the formula or explanation or guarantee someone was giving, I always sensed things were more complicated than that, more tenuous, more mysterious—I wonder how much of that stems from the trauma Eileen and my dad had endured that still flowed in the family blood. My blood. I intuitively picked up on the inherent frailty and absurdity of this experience we're all having here, how quickly it can turn dark and tragic and crush your heart. I was surrounded by love and support, but what I knew from the story I had entered into was that all of it can be taken away in an instant.

However solid life may appear,

it's also very, very fragile.

And then my wife, Kristen, and I had our first child. We named him Robert Holmes Bell the Third. We call him Trace—*three* is *tres* in Spanish. There's this moment when we're there in the hospital and we introduce our new boy to my dad.

Robert Senior, meet Robert the Third.

I can feel the generations in that moment, like something is continuing, like I'm part of some great chain that extends way beyond me.

I would sit there for hours next to his crib, staring at him, filled with so much love for this little baby who doesn't really do much of anything. It's intoxicating, this love that goes one way. He doesn't have to do anything and I'm absolutely transfixed. I have this sense all those hours watching him sleep that he's here to teach me something.

And then when our second son is born in April of 2000 there's this moment when I introduce my dad to his newest grandson.

Dad, this is *Preston Douglas Bell*.

I watch my dad's face as I say those two names together

Preston,

Douglas ...

his father,

his brother,

all that past,

all that loss,

suddenly, swiftly brought into our midst,

right there in that hospital room.

I want it all there in that room,

I want it all coming back,

I want to see his face as I say those names.

It's like it's all looping back in on itself,

these multiple generations of souls,
all mingling and interacting.

Eileen was asked by her parents each night when she went to bed,
What did you do today to earn your keep?

I had heard that story growing up, but it was just that: a story. Until I began to struggle. I had this engine I couldn't turn off, this insatiable drive leading me to push myself way beyond what I could sustainably handle. Work, work, work. *Whatever you do just keep going, stay a step ahead of the ache.*

In my first job as a pastor one of my responsibilities was doing weddings. One Saturday I conducted three wedding ceremonies. For three different couples, in three different locations. I think about that now and I laugh. Apparently when the second couple asked about that particular date, instead of saying,

I'm sorry, I'm already doing a wedding that day

I said,

What time do you have in mind?

That story perfectly encapsulates how I didn't know how to step back, how to pause, how to turn the engine off. I just kept at it, pushing myself relentlessly. Taking on more and more and more. I would do a teaching on Wednesday night. And then another one on Saturday night. And then another one on Sunday morning. And then often another one on Sunday night. I did this for years. It was like I was trying to earn something that remained unearnable.

Eventually I crashed.

I burned out.

I was just so exhausted.

I ended up in the fetal position on the floor of my office, numb, wondering where it all went wrong.

I started looking for answers. And it's there, in that quest, that I began to see this larger story unfolding across multiple generations.

I recalled that story about Eileen being asked,
What have you done today to earn your keep?

I saw this generational lack of grace.

Love, yes.

But also this soul-crushing need to prove and earn and accomplish.

What do you do with the pain of life?

You keep moving, keep accomplishing, keep striving. Whatever you do, don't be lazy. Don't appear to be coasting. And whatever happens, stay a step ahead of the pain. Keep it buried. Keep it down.

My dad used to tell me,

You can find a lot of people who are smarter than me, but you'll never find someone who's worked harder.

As a kid, that sounded so impressive. My dad was already larger than life to me, and words like those made him loom even larger.

But when things began to fall apart for me and I went back into the heart of those messages I'd picked up over the years, I started to see what else was lurking in there. It was like this message had gotten imprinted on my cells:
Whatever you do keep going, because if you slow down and actually feel it all, who knows where that might lead?

Through the help of a number of guides over a number of years, I begin to see a new way to be, one rooted in the enduring truth:

There's nothing to prove.

I see this chain of souls,

from one generation to the next,

I see what I've been handed,

I see what I can set down.

I see what I don't have to carry around anymore.

I continually notice how much I'm learning from my boys. To love them as they find their way in the world is to see myself, finding my way. I see
me

in

them

and how beautiful and refining all that angst and exploration was. They help me embrace every last little bit of my history. I see that it was all part of it. All that wondering and wandering. They show me that it was all good, even when it wasn't.

I come across an old newspaper clipping that I hadn't ever seen. It's an article about Eileen and how she was traveling around in the early '60s speaking to various groups about nutrition and consumer goods. She was on the radio, she did interviews.

She did?

As a single mom she built a career as a traveling speaker in the '60s?

She never said anything about that.

What else have I missed?

Eileen and I were born fifty years apart.

From her mother to my daughter will cover the end of the 1800s to the beginning of the 2100s.

Preston died twenty years before I was born,
which was fifty years before our Preston was born.

I remember going to visit Eileen on August 22, 2008. We knew she was close to the end, but I wasn't prepared for what I experienced when we entered her room.

She was there on the bed,

but she wasn't there.

She was present, taking long, slow breaths,
but the part of her that made her, *her* was absent.

Like she'd already left.

I froze.

You know someone you love is going to die,
but then the day comes and nothing prepares you for *that*.

I stood there, not knowing what to do.

Kristen walked right over to her bed,
sat down next her,
held her hands, and then leaned in close over Eileen's heart, saying in the
most calming voice,
*We're here, and we can see that you're leaving us, and we want you to know
how much we love you and how great these years have been with you, and
now we're letting you go ...*

It was as moving as it sounds.
Eileen died a few hours later,
on my birthday.

I give the eulogy at Eileen's funeral. Afterward we gather at the Bell family
burial plots in the town of Williamston. We drop flowers on her casket after
it's lowered into the earth. We say a prayer. Eileen's sister, Maxine, sits in
the front row, repeatedly mumbling under her breath,

We had so many secrets, we had so many secrets ...

They did?

The memorial is over, and everybody is making their way back to the cars
until it's just my dad and me, standing there side by side over the open
grave. He's quiet for a while, and then he turns to me and says,
*There are some things I want to tell you about what happened when my dad
died and when my brother died.*

I knew it.

I knew there was more.

Shortly after that he gathers the family together and he pulls out a stack of
photos. I haven't seen these pictures before. Pictures of him with his father,
pictures of him with his brother. He describes in detail what it was like to
stand there while the ambulance drove away. I'd heard bits and pieces over
the years, but not from him, and never the whole story. He relives the few
memories he has of his father. He shows us a picture of him and his brother
in a boat on the river near their house.

He finishes and then he says,
Now, there are no more secrets.
He looks around at all of us.
He pauses.
And then he cries.
It's the first time I've ever seen my father cry.

In that moment he becomes a miracle to me.

I see how easily he could have taken another path. Despair. Hopelessness.
The pain could have broken him.

But it didn't.
He channeled all that into a nuclear drive to work and achieve and serve the greater good and be the father to me and my sister, Ruth, and my brother, Jon, that he never had.

As I sit there witnessing his tears for the first time, I see how all that order and structure and success and striving and law—my dad was a judge for forty-four years—and religion and rules and everything else I chafed against from time to time, I see how it helped him. I see what it was for him, how it gave his life form and direction. I see the abyss he was determined to climb out of. I see where the sheer intensity of all that output came from. I gain a more expanded sense of the scale of this story that I'm a part of as it's been unfolding across the years.

My hearts breaks in that moment, in a good way. There's something miraculous about all of it that comes crashing down on me. Not just him, and the path he took, but my own existence.

I'm here.
What a wondrous fact.
We're all here.
What an astonishing phenomenon.

And that farmhouse with the porch that Eileen and I used to sit on when I visited her? That's the house my parents were living in *when I was*

conceived.

And then our daughter, Violet,
who's middle name is

Eileen

is with me at Starbucks just before I start writing this book, and when they
ask for the name on the order she says,

Eileen.

★ ★ ★

**I tell you all this about where I come from and who I come from
because you're like me.**

We come from somewhere.

We come from somebody. Some *bodies*.

We're born into something.

It's already in motion.

Like a play and we stumbled onto the stage somewhere in the middle of the
second act.

A child is like a blank slate?

No.

Our lives are loaded from the beginning with history and drama and love
and wounds and tragedy and hope. I'm mysterious enough to myself, let
alone the ones I come from, let alone all the people I'm constantly
encountering with your own hopes and fears and histories and mysteries, let
alone this floating ball of rock we call home that's hurtling through space at
67,000 miles per hour.

There is something infinite about all of it.

We never stop learning who we are and how we've been shaped by the
people and places we come from.

Our hearts and minds and memories are endlessly explorable, there's more
than enough to discover for one lifetime.

And that's just us.

If we move beyond ourselves,