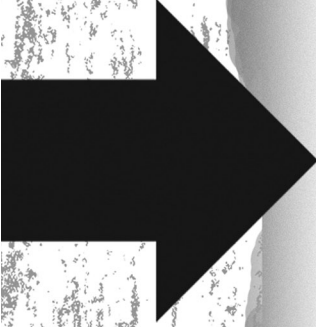




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PASSION PLAY



When I was growing up, my family had its own Sunday morning rituals: my dad played golf, and my sister and I watched TV while eating my mom's french toast triangles. (Decades before french toast sticks became a heart-stopping favorite on the Burger King menu, my mom had perfected the technique of frying batter-dipped Wonder Bread in the Fry Daddy.) In the winter, my sister and I had to eat quickly so we could make it to our bowling league on time.

This combination of TV, bowling, and deep-fried bread made Sunday mornings the second-best day of the week—second because nothing could outdo Saturdays with their promise of AWA Professional Wrestling. Most kids in Minnesota knew about Saturday morning wrestling on TV, but for the blessed few of us who lived in Golden Valley, just two miles from the Channel 9 studios, Saturday mornings meant hopping on our Huffy Thunder Roads to see Vern Gagne, Hulk Hogan, The Crusher, and the High Flyers in action and within spitting distance. Between the ringside seats and my mom's french toast triangles, my weekends were plenty full even without church. I had no idea other people spent their weekend mornings in their best clothes, sitting still, and eating tiny pieces of unleavened bread. It wasn't that I chose not to go to church. I didn't have church on my radar and never thought about it. I literally didn't know what I was missing.

Even though I had no Christian framework, I did have thoughts about and even faith in God. I'm not sure where this awareness of God came from, but it ran deep. I didn't know the story of God, yet I had a gut-level understanding that God was involved and active in the world and wanted





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people to join in that activity. I remember watching the movie *Billy Jack* as a twelve-year-old and thinking, *Now that's what God must be into*. Before I had any usable vision of Jesus, I saw Billy Jack as God's worker.

He was a half-Native American, half-Caucasian Vietnam vet with a black belt in karate, riding a motorcycle, living in the desert, and coming with fist and feet to the aid of native people who were

being oppressed by "the man." Defending the powerless—and looking wicked cool doing it. Now there's a picture of God's



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agenda for the world that grabbed me. I wanted to be part of that agenda. I wanted to be the guy bringing justice, righting wrongs, protecting the weak.

The Billy Jack image of God hung in there and gave me some tangible picture of a possible life with God. But it also gave me the impression that God wasn't someone to mess with. So I made a deal with God: "If I don't hurt, kill, or rape anyone, then you won't utterly destroy me. OK?" I took God's silence as implicit agreement. My prayer wasn't very sophisticated, but it helped me feel like I was doing something to get my life in line with God.

This God was absolutely real for me. I had a big American flag hanging over the headboard of my bed. On those nights when I came home under the influence of some chemical, which was fairly common, I wouldn't let myself look at the flag. It just seemed unpatriotic and wrong. But





I would always pray my little prayer. I believed that God was near and approachable and didn't care what shape I was in.

Still, it wasn't enough. I knew that something wasn't quite right. There was a disconnect between who I was and who I wanted to be, but I couldn't figure out what it was or what to do about it. I sometimes wondered if it would have been better to not think about God at all than to know of God but feel so out of sync with God. I was lost. There was something out there, something I knew I wanted to find, but I couldn't even name what it was, much less make my way toward it.



In fourth grade, my buddy Charlie Lyons and I joined the Boy Scouts. Before the abrupt end to Troop 176 (brought on when our troop leader was charged with stealing the money we had raised through our Christmas wreath sale), we would take weekend trips during which we were taught to navigate our way through the forest, look for and leave clues, and use a compass and the stars as guides to keep us from getting lost. I never could figure out what we were doing in the woods. Not being much of a camper, I figured that the best way to not get lost in the woods was to stay out of them in the first place. Still, we scouts, even though we lived in urban Minneapolis, apparently needed to know these survival skills. So I earned my merit badges and learned all the tricks to track my way through the trees.

Life-tracking skills were another story. I didn't have a compass for life. I didn't have the tools I needed to trek through the forest of my confusion and fear. What I did have was the potential and ability to not just get lost but to stay lost.

I wasn't the only one wandering in this particular forest. Steve and I were best friends growing up, and he was equally





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unversed in Christianity. We lived in the Village Terrace apartments and shared the kind of unsupervised, we-run-the-show childhood that seems to be the birthright of apartment complex kids. Steve had a really hard go of it. His mom left the family when he was five, and his dad was hooked into all sorts of addictions. When we were thirteen, Steve was forcibly removed from his dad's care and placed in a foster home. Two years later, when Steve moved back in with his dad, it was clear to all of us at the Village that he had been "born again."

Steve carried a big Bible everywhere he went and talked constantly about Jesus. Steve's Jesus talk didn't make much sense to me. (My knowledge of Jesus started and stopped with John Lennon talking about being crucified like Jesus in "The Ballad of John and Yoko" and Bobby Bare's song "Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goalposts of Life.") But even I could tell that Steve, who had been the craziest kid I knew, had changed. Instead of being up for whatever destructive plan the rest of the apartment kids came up with, Steve was the guy hanging out his apartment window, yelling at us to stop doing whatever sinful thing it was we were about to do.

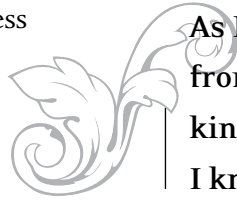
The spring of my junior year in high school, Steve asked me if I wanted to go with him to something called "The Passion Play." I thought the old Steve had returned. I mean, when a sixteen-year-old guy hears there's a play about passion going on downtown, well, let's just say I wasn't expecting it to be about Jesus. I agreed to go, and on Friday night, April 1, 1983, we hopped in my car, cranked up the John Lennon, and headed downtown.

We settled into the front row of the balcony of an old theater that had been turned into a church. The place had a strange smell to it—it smelled like old paper, old clothes, old



people. The worn velvet seat creaked as I peered over the balcony railing to the stage below. As people filed into the rows of seats on the main floor, I sensed the excitement building in theater. It all felt so foreign to me. I had no idea what it was all about, and yet I couldn't wait to see what might happen.

The lights went down and the play started. As I watched the scenes from Jesus' life, I had this kind of *déjà vu* moment: I knew this story. The events themselves were new to me, but they had a strange familiarity to them—the kindness of Jesus, the loneliness of seeming abandonment, God standing with the weak.



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Then they got to the resurrection. Now there was a twist I didn't see coming. I had no idea something could trump the unbelievable and startling "Father forgive them" line Jesus screamed from the cross. But then Jesus came back and something inside me burst open with hope.

This was what I had longed for, what I'd needed to be true. There was God alongside the tortured and beaten Jesus. There was God on the side of people, bringing about goodness even in the midst of horror, betrayal, and struggle. There was God inviting people to join in the redemption of it all. There was God outdoing my vigilante, Billy Jack faith with something far better.

Sitting in my creaky seat, leaning over the railing, I felt my soul wake up. This was the story that was deeply planted in me. This was the completion of the story of God that had been in me from childhood. It was a bright, clear marker that



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I knew could set me on a path toward . . . something. I sat in that smelly theater, surrounded by strangers, and knew I was home.

At the end of the production (which in a sort of cheesy but endearing way included Jesus flying up to the rafters for the ascension and then just hanging out on the catwalk), a man took the stage and starting talking. I wasn't listening to him; I was too distracted by what was happening inside me. I clicked into his instructions just as he invited those who were interested in learning more about this story to come backstage. I made eye contact with Steve, and he got up and started walking with me. As we moved toward the stage, I told God, *If this is truly your story, I will give myself to it for the next three months*, which seemed like plenty of time—I mean, that was all the way into summer! In many ways that awkward little prayer on April Fool's Day marked the beginning of my Christianity.

I had every intention of making the story I had just seen the navigational system of my life. I was going to live the Jesus way. I didn't know what that would mean, but I knew that whatever had just happened to me, it would change everything.