

Preface

FOR CENTURIES, SPIRITUAL SEEKERS HAVE PROFITED FROM reading accounts of people's spiritual journeys. Well-known examples include Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*, Teresa of Avila's *Story of Her Life*, Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, and M. K. Gandhi's *Story of My Life*. Reading spiritual autobiographies has provided me with light for my own journey and has helped me correct course when I have veered off the path.

For several decades remarkable spiritual masters—both contemporary and from the distant past—have come into my path. These masters have provided me with reliable and wise guidance for the spiritual journey. One purpose of this book is to share how these masters and mentors have provided me with inspiration and direction and how they may help readers of this book. A second objective is to analyze and compare two paths that have most influenced my life: the Christian and the Vedic tradition from ancient India.

When I completed the book, another theme emerged—"Divine Providence"—which refers to Divine interventions in the course of our spiritual growth. These interventions are manifestations of "grace," the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it and to sanctify it.

I hope that my story and reflections will support those already on a spiritual journey and encourage skeptics and non-believers to take a gamble on God.

1

Beginnings

Family ▶

IN 1949 I WAS BORN IN ALAMEDA, CALIFORNIA, THE ONLY island city in the San Francisco Bay and an architect's paradise. Alameda boasts about three thousand Victorian-era homes from the late 1800s, as well as plenty of gorgeous examples of other styles: Tudor-Revival, Mission Revival, Italianate, and bayside villas.

If you stroll down the tree-lined streets of Alameda today, you can see that the town has not changed much from one hundred years ago, the time when many of the houses were built. The island was then known as the City of Homes and Beaches.¹ For the first four years of my life, I was raised in a large, handsome Tudor Revival house that my maternal grandparents, John and Mabel Thoeni, bought in 1934 in the middle of the Great Depression for \$14,000. They owned the most popular bakery on the island, the Bonaire. My grandfather died when I was four. Although I was only a young child, I remember him with great fondness. He used to take me on rides in his 1940 Buick along the Alameda Gold Coast to gaze at the bay and the bayside villas.

My parents, Pat and Margie Joyce, married young and didn't have much money, so we shared my grandparents' home along with my uncle, Dave Thoeni, and my great-grandmother, Anna Helena Culver (Gran Gran), who was born in 1868 in Benicia, the capitol of California from 1853 to 1854. I spent my early

1. *Alameda Magazine*, January-February, 2008 (Internet search).

years listening enthusiastically to her stories of the distant past. It amazed me to think that she was born just three years after the end of the Civil War. She died at the age of ninety-three when I was eleven. I was blessed with all these terrific babysitters, including my dad's sister, Catherine Ann Joyce, who was only eleven when I was born. She would beg my parents to schedule date nights so she could take care of me. When I was seven, she married Jerry Schoenbachler and they eventually had four children. But during my first years of life, I was happily the recipient of her early maternal instincts.

My Uncle Dave was a genius who graduated from the University of California at Berkeley and later worked at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory; he became an inventor of cutting-edge instruments for eye treatments. Prior to his impressive professional career, he built hot-rods and motorcycles. When I was about three years old, he used to put me on the handlebars of his motorcycle and take me on exhilarating trips around Alameda. My parents would have been horrified had they known! But I'm glad they never knew because Uncle Dave provided me with some of the most exciting experiences of my early life.

Although she did not live with us, my mother's sister, Catherine Jeanne Thoeni, enriched my early life. She joined the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in 1942 and took the name of Sister Catherine Irene. In those days, the sisters were allowed to visit their homes only once a year, although we could visit them monthly in their convents. I remember her home visits vividly. She was very loving and a lot of fun. She was quite a fine pianist and would play the piano for me. I was enthralled watching her play. She inspired me to start inventing melodies on the piano, a habit that led me to beg for piano lessons at the age of eight. My parents did not have sufficient income to pay for the lessons, so my grandmother offered to pay—which she did every month until I entered high school.

In 1952 my brother Brian came along. My parents bought a small postwar house across the street from Edison Elementary School, which I attended through fourth grade. In many ways my early life in Alameda was idyllic. Lots of kids lived nearby, and we rode our bikes to the many parks and beaches without fear. At the same time, our family faced a major challenge. My parents and I noticed that Brian began to exhibit

bruises. My parents took him for tests and discovered that he had hemophilia (a blood clotting disorder). Whenever he played too hard or had a fall, he would bleed internally. Throughout his childhood, our parents often had to take him to Children's Hospital in Oakland for blood transfusions followed by days of recovery in the hospital. His condition contributed to a very deep bond between me and Brian. Witnessing his periodic suffering elicited heartfelt empathy in me and led me to take on the role of protector.

Despite his physical affliction, Brian developed a great sense of humor and exhibited brilliance. Throughout his eight years at St. Philip Neri School, he received the annual scholarship merit pin given to the best student in the class. He was also an impressive artist and a natural athlete despite the limitations of hemophilia.

In 1960 we moved to a large shingle Craftsman home built in 1909 in a turn-of-the century neighborhood near the east shore. Brian and I were used to a small three-bedroom, one-bath house. Our new home was two stories with a full basement where our parents set up ping-pong and pool tables. They also gave us the big master bedroom and placed there a large play-table for our board games. To our further delight they designated the adjacent bedroom as our "playroom" which had a spacious walk-in closet where we stored our toys, games, and mountains of comic books. Brian and I could not believe our good fortune—nor could the many friends who regularly came over to share in our windfall.

Even though Brian was three and a half years younger than I, we became the best of friends. We played lots of ping pong and board games together, and every night before bed I would read him Hardy Boys novels and other kids' adventure stories. We also developed a spiritual relationship when I trained him to be an altar boy. For me it was a special joy to serve Mass with Brian.

The new house was ideally situated. Our parish church, St. Philip Neri, was a block away. My grandparents' house was a six blocks' walk. Half a block up the street was Lincoln School, a large public middle school that I entered in fifth grade.

One day the fifth grade teacher, Miss Milligan, invited us to tell the class what we wanted to be when we grew up. One by one, each student shared his or her dream. When it was my turn to speak, a few students

murmured “Oh, we know Kevin wants to be a doctor.” Since first grade I had told people that I wanted to be a doctor, inspired by Brian’s frequent trips to the hospital.

In response to Miss Milligan’s question, I responded “When I grow up, I would like to be a doctor or [long pause] a priest.” A collective gasp erupted from most of my classmates. In that public school where Catholics were a minority, my Protestant and Jewish classmates were shocked by my statement. Immediately they began peppering me with comments such as, “But you always said you wanted to be a doctor! Priests can’t get married! You won’t be able to have a family!” I was so taken aback by their intense disapproval that I decided then and there that I would keep my desire to become a priest private for the foreseeable future.

What motivated eleven-year-old Kevin Joyce to seriously consider becoming a Catholic priest? The answer has much to do with my family, my religious formation, and an extraordinary experience of the Divine when I was seven years old.

My family was strongly Catholic. We attended Sunday Mass every week even though we usually arrived at the last minute (my parents liked to sleep in on Sundays). We prayed a blessing at every meal and had religious images displayed around the house. Contributing further to our Catholic identity, my dad worked as athletic director of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) for the Archdiocese of San Francisco from 1958 to 1974. His work brought him into contact with priests from all over the Bay Area, and I was intrigued by his priest stories, such as his story about visiting Father John Heaney, chaplain of Sacred Heart High School in San Francisco. Both men were fine athletes, and one day they were challenged by students to engage in a wrestling match. My dad took off his tie and Father Heaney took off his clerical collar. The two of them proceeded to duke it out on the wrestling mat. My dad told me many other entertaining stories about the priests he worked with in CYO. These accounts led me to see the priesthood as a happy, “normal” life in which a man could make a difference in the lives of young people.

My dad’s CYO job brought him into contact with the Golden State Warriors and the San Francisco Giants. Periodically, the Warriors asked my dad to provide water boys. My brother and I eagerly volunteered for the job, along with a bunch of our friends. Those were the days of the

Warriors' first "dream team." It was a thrill to bring water to legends such as Wilt Chamberlain, Al Attles, Nate Thurmond, and Guy Rodgers.

Being involved with the Church also provided opportunities for exciting experiences with the Giants. Once a year the Giants' organization hosted the CYO youth at Candlestick Park. My dad organized the event and had access to the Giants' dugout. One of the most amazing moments in our young lives was to accompany my dad to the dugout and shake hands with great stars like Willie Mays, Orlando Cepeda, and Willie McCovey.

Other key influences in my spiritual formation included the example of my parents' care for my often-infirm brother. Brian missed up to thirty days of school each year because of internal bleeding episodes—some of which required hospitalization. Mom would spend hours with Brian during his hospitalizations even though she was working part-time for an insurance company. During those hospitalizations, my dad would always stop at the hospital on his way home from work and play cards with Brian. Once Dad even arranged for Willie Mays to visit Brian—an unbelievable thrill for Brian, who was a huge Giants fan.

My mom served as Den Mother for my Cub Scout den and made my friends feel more than welcome in our home. She also introduced me to the world of classical music, which had a major impact on my future avocation as a musician. When I was about five years old, she invited me to listen to a recording of Arthur Rubinstein playing two Beethoven piano sonatas—the "Pathétique" and the "Appassionata." I was mesmerized by their beauty and power, and I began to listen to classical music in earnest. Once I began taking piano lessons at the age of eight I never stopped playing.

My mom was a columnist for the local newspaper, the *Alameda Times Star*. The paper offered complimentary issues to new residents of Alameda. She interviewed new residents by phone gleaning grist for vignettes with the hope that they would become subscribers. The den where she worked at home was soon wallpapered by copies of her column. Later she was promoted by the editor to write feature stories.

My Irish-born paternal grandmother, Delia Joyce (Nana), was a catechist in her Oakland parish. She died when I was seven years old, but by then she had strongly impacted my religious sensibilities. Periodically