



MICHAEL JOHN CUSICK

**SACRED
ATTACHMENT**

ESCAPING SPIRITUAL
EXHAUSTION *AND*
TRUSTING *IN* DIVINE LOVE



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Sacred Attachment* by Michael John Cusick

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com

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I

SPINNING

ESCAPING AND EXPERIENCING
GOD'S EMBRACE

*There are parts of life that can't be gotten out of, and I have had
to learn, here, that we are all, at the end, held somehow.*

TA-NEHISI COATES

A bitter cold Sunday morning and the seven Cusicks, including my four-year-old self, are crammed into our maroon Pontiac station wagon for the long ride to Carmel of the Holy Family, a Roman Catholic convent. My father's sister is a cloistered Carmelite nun. In the unspoken pecking order of Catholic religious vocations, life as a Carmelite is the military equivalent of becoming a Navy SEAL. Not for the faint of heart.

The Carmelites go all the way back to the fourteen hundreds. Like Saint Teresa of Ávila, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and Saint John of the Cross, they make vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience while choosing to withdraw from the world into a community devoted to contemplating the love and mystery of Christ.

Family visits to Carmel felt like Christmas morning—and Halloween, wrapped together and placed under the tree. There were smiles and laughter. But it also felt a little spooky because once inside the convent the nuns were restricted to greeting visitors from

behind the grille—a metal grid of bars preventing the nuns from having physical contact with the outside world. So when you’re four years old, no matter how much your parents explain about monastic vows and devotion to God, and you visit your aunt and a group of nuns behind bars, it still seems like you’re visiting a prison full of women dressed like penguins.

After the initial excitement we kids would get bored and play in another part of the visitation room. As my parents would visit with my aunt, Sister Anne, the other twenty or so nuns would wander in and out to say hello. More joy and laughter, but no matter what, the greetings were limited to a hand reaching through the bars of the grille.

My sister Colleen and I would sit cross-legged, rolling a ball back and forth between us, while my brother Jimmy hovered in the corner near the grille playing with his Hot Wheels collection. When my sister and I got bored, we would wander over to the corner and begin to play with Jimmy’s cars.

In the corner of the parlor was a cabinet mounted on the wall and level with a counter. My parents and all of us kids sat in the room on one side of the counter. On the other side of the grille the nuns had a counter of their own and would pull up chairs throughout the visit. Inside the cabinet was a metal cylinder that looked like a giant can of Campbell’s soup. The cylinder was set up on a lazy Susan allowing it to spin around so that visitors and nuns could pass food or gifts or other items back and forth.

I don’t remember what prompted my brother to do what he did that day. Jimmy was about ten then, six years older than me. I naturally looked to him for guidance and usually followed along with whatever crazy ideas he might present. So with the adults preoccupied in grown-up conversation, Jimmy lifted me up into the cabinet, set me on the lazy Susan, and closed the cabinet door. The next thing I remember was spinning around and around and around.

Immediately, I felt pulled between sheer childlike glee and unadulterated terror. Was this a game where I should be enjoying myself? Or was I too being sent behind bars for some heinous deed I didn't remember committing?

The spinning inside that cabinet seemed to last forever. Being spun around had always made me dizzy and nauseous, so I wanted Jimmy to stop me but couldn't mouth any words. Just when I hoped he had read my mind, the spinning stopped. I exhaled with a sense of relief as all three feet of me stood helpless in the dark.

Just then the doors opened. But instead of seeing Jimmy's face, Sister Anne leaned in and wrapped her arms around me. She wasn't anxious or alarmed, so neither was I.

Picture this: a group of women who will never bear their own children, who have extremely limited contact with outsiders, who have been set apart from their own relatives and siblings except for the infrequent touch of family and friends from behind the grille. Breaches in this protocol were not simply infrequent—I suspect they were unprecedented.

And by all accounts, unacceptable. After all, these nuns had taken vows to withdraw from the world. Here I was, a four-year-old kid in my devout Catholic family, and I was on the wrong side of the grille. *Behind bars with a dozen cloistered nuns.*

Even today as I recall this moment, I imagine bishops or cardinals or even the pope himself breaking into the room and catching me trespassing. In my mind their glasses are down on the tips of their noses like curmudgeonly English schoolmasters straight out of a Dickens novel.

It would take me many years to realize that my fear and anxiety about being on the wrong side and scrutinized by the religious authorities was a template for my understanding of God. If I crossed the line, God was like that displeased religious figure. If I broke the rules, God would surely break me.

But all of that fear washed away when I became aware of the joy and sense of welcome that surrounded me there. If we ambushed each other, it was an ambush of love. Sister Anne held me and ran her fingers through my hair and kissed my cheeks. This wasn't some grandmotherly cheek pinching in that patronizing kind of way. She simply took delight in who I was.

Next came Sister Jean Marie, my aunt's best friend and soulmate in the convent. Other nuns gathered around and hugged me. Sister Bernadette, born and raised in Slovakia, and who spoke with a lingering Slovakian accent, had a permanent smile on her face. Her hugs were so solid and strong, just one step short of crushing the wind out of me, but I felt so safe in her embrace, her maternal tenderness a welcome place for me to be four years old.

I don't recall which of the nuns suggested that we dance. A few small tables were pushed to the side, the nuns circled up, maybe four or five of them, and we began to sway. It started with "Ring around the Rosie" before progressing into another familiar favorite.

I still question whether we actually sang and did the hokey pokey, but the image of my preschool self dancing with a group of cloistered nuns makes me smile. Together we put our left hand in, and we put our left hand out. We put our right hand in and our right hand out. You know the rest of it: You put your whole self in, and you put your whole self out. You do the hokey pokey, and you turn yourself around.

And so, the reason my life changed that day is that from the moment of being placed into the cabinet in the container that would spin me around to the surprise of being welcomed into the arms of the nuns on the wrong side of the bars, I learned that's what it's all about.

What it's all about is an invitation to be held in loving connection. To participate in a dance where we are seen, soothed, safe, and secure. Seen as little children in our smallness and innocence.

Soothed by being held in the arms of someone stronger whose only concern is our well-being. Safe, even when we find ourselves in a container that feels disorienting and dangerous. In those moments of being seen, soothed, and safe, we also find an unexpected gift of being secure.

Looking back, I can interpret my life through that Carmel moment. That experience at the convent foreshadowed various movements of my life. The first movement, taking me into adulthood, involved that same sense of apprehension and hiding my shame. Next, I learned that life is like spinning in that cabinet, disorienting and uncertain, often confusing and unfamiliar. Finally, in recent years I have experienced the surprise of love, an awareness that when we are held and embraced securely, we somehow have everything we need no matter where we land. I realized that God delights in doing the unprecedented in order to bring us to childlike trust so that he can heal our hearts and restore our souls.

In the midst of these movements, however, I rarely saw their impact clearly.

LOVE HAS YOU

Before I was dropped into that cabinet, I was placed into another kind of container—my family of origin. In my case this was shaped by alcoholism, emotional and sexual abuse, generations of mental illness, and shame. You see, that same year of spinning was also when my father stopped drinking for the first time. The same year my uncle began touching me inappropriately. This inauspicious legacy often limited my ability to trust and to receive love. The raw, unrelenting pain in my heart left my soul numb and kept my mind looking for answers.

You likely inherited your own generational and familial challenges. Perhaps your family maintained an image of unity and bliss to those around you but fractured into anger and abuse behind

closed doors. Your parents or caregivers may have struggled with issues and addictions that hindered or incapacitated their ability to provide your basic needs, including those for attention, safety, and affirmation. You may have been forced to carry adult burdens rather than enjoy a carefree childhood.

Or perhaps your family loved and supported you well. You not only had all your basic necessities provided, but you also received emotional nourishment and parental security. And yet your story still took some turns—perhaps from choices you made or from choices others made—that now leave you confused, angry, hurt, anxious, fearful, or lonely. Regardless of your background and how you have gotten to this point, you know you want more than life has delivered so far.

So perhaps your fundamental question is similar to my own. For the last thirty years, the straightforward yet complex question shaping my life and work has remained more or less constant: How do human beings grow spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically? Basically, I want to know if people can change—if I can change—without compromising the deepest, truest part of ourselves.

Although the process is mysterious, I've concluded that, yes, we can be transformed. It's like knowing how a sailboat moves forward when wind fills the sails without knowing much about the wind. Or said another way, this transformation synchronizes with a rhythm deep within us, a rhythm I like to call God's own heartbeat.

Many people are often surprised to discover this rhythm deep within. The problem is that life itself can distract us from recognizing it. We cannot hear heaven's rhythm due to the whirl of daily life. We struggle to escape from our default addictions and pain-management systems, trying to make ourselves good enough to experience God's embrace.

But what if I told you that you *could* experience that rhythm? Learn that rhythm? Live to that rhythm? And what if I told you that

the rhythm is the same rhythm I discovered that day in the cabinet when I was only four years old?

That moment when the cabinet doors opened, I was brought into a welcoming circle of laughter, joy, and celebration. A circle of holiness. A circle of something wholly other, different from what I had ever known.

Love had me then, just as it has me now.

But how we get to this place is often a confusing and painful process. I recall the many clients, colleagues, friends, and acquaintances who have described their frustration, uncertainty, anger, fear, doubt, and ambivalence about spirituality, about having a personal faith.

Eileen, a campus minister at a major state university, was secretly exhausted by upholding her reputation for being “100 percent sold out for God.” Beneath the surface of her public role, she was deeply disappointed with singleness. Nobody knew she took antidepressants because she was too afraid of being judged for a lack of faith. And though she never brought it up with her male superiors, Eileen felt diminished and bound by her organization’s position on women in leadership.

Aaron was a Black believer who felt betrayed by the indifference his church showed in response to his experiences of racism and oppression. When he asked his pastor about starting a social justice task force to explore issues of race, Aaron was told that “a focus on social justice would minimize the proclamation of the gospel.” His pastor then suggested that Aaron consider joining the choir or volunteering to work with the youth.

In seventh grade, Devin, who grew up as a missionary kid in South America, was sent off to boarding school, where he was exposed to pornography and developed a pattern of compulsive masturbation, which resulted in him becoming sexually active at a young age and at every opportunity. Growing up in a rules-based

purity culture that set standards but gave little means of freedom, Devin loathed himself for his sexual sin and believed God loathed him even more.

Angelina lost her job at a prominent Christian high school in the South where she had been head of the science department. When a wealthy board member took issue with her teaching evolution, a coalition was formed to push her out for teaching “anti-biblical” views. She experienced the same kind of rejection as another client, Marco. After graduating from an evangelical seminary, he came out as gay. Suddenly he was ostracized from the faith community he had been a part of for years.

Each of these people found themselves in an unfamiliar place best described by my friend Maggie, who went through a parallel experience. “Just after graduating from a Christian college, I came to a fork in the road. I was either going to play the religious game I had known my whole life, or I was going to walk away from all that and see if my faith survived.”

Maybe you have stood at a similar crossroads.

Perhaps you’re there now.

Maybe you’ve broken the rules.

You can’t play the game any longer.

You’re dizzy from spinning but not sure where or if you will land.

You only know you long for a new direction.

If you have been on a similar merry-go-round of doubting, fearing, wondering, and worrying, it’s time for you to discover that your faith is more than what you believe. It’s meant to be a living, vibrant experience, just as real as my dance with the nuns. Come with me as we imagine together a way of being connected to ourselves—our bodies and our truest selves—as well as to God and to others. Let’s explore a story that has to be imagined to be believed.

So think of this book as a compass for walking forward on your spiritual path. Together, we will explore what I’ve learned along the

way as a licensed psychotherapist, as an ordained minister and spiritual director, and as a former professor. But mostly my guidance stems from my own struggle for a real-life relationship with God. I hope to give you a lens to see clearly, a language to engage with your own story and the stories of others, and practices for your continued passage.

There is another way of living out your faith.

There is another way of seeing the world.

There is another way that touches the deep hunger in you, honors your integrity, and ultimately gives you life from the inside out. Your heart and soul hunger for a God and a spirituality that is far better than what you've been told or experienced. And they won't let you settle for anything less.

BLESSING

May you open yourself to the child within.

May you let go of the shame that haunts you.

May you embrace your whole self—

body, mind, emotions, will, and spirit.

*May you open your heart to the reality of being held
in a divine embrace.*

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