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Fred Cavaiani, psychologist, marriage and family therapist, spiritual director

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Dick Hauser, SJ
Assistant to the President for Mission
Professor Emeritus of Theology
Creighton University Jesuit Community

“Through this book, Fr. Owens fulfills his goal of providing a rich and comprehensive description of our spiritual journey toward divinization; that is, transformation into God. A seasoned and respected spiritual director and teacher, he draws upon his profound understanding of the spiritual legacies of Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, and Teilhard de Chardin to guide us through the joys and challenges of the spiritual life. Anyone, priest, religious, and member of the laity, looking for a roadmap for their spiritual journey, will find it here.”

Patricia Cooney Hathaway
Professor of Spirituality and Systematic Theology
Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Michigan
Author of *Weaving Faith and Experience:
A Woman’s Perspective*

"More Than You Could Ever Imagine is a wise and reliable guidebook to our shared human destiny: the 'great unfolding of our lives, our Passover journey into God' (8). Jesuit Bernie Owens accompanies us step by step through the life-process of gradual 'divinization,' individually and communally, in response to God's surpassing graciousness and love. The author shows a remarkable gift for presenting profound spiritual insights and deep theological truths in accessible and appealing language, using images and experiences from everyday life. Deeply rooted in the Scriptures and the insights of the Spanish mystics Ignatius, Teresa, and John of the Cross, yet thoroughly contemporary, this book should appeal to many readers, and includes reflection questions at the end of each chapter to facilitate group discussion."

Steven Payne, OCD
Principal of Tangaza University College,
Nairobi, Africa

More Than You Could Ever Imagine

On Our Becoming Divine

Bernie Owens, SJ



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To my parents

John Christopher and Bernice Marie Owens

To my friends

Dave Asselin, SJ, and Jules Toner, SJ

To my mentor

Michael J. Buckley, SJ

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INTRODUCTION

“Abba . . . Ah-bah! . . . AAAhh-baahh!!” A child’s insistent voice sounded just outside my nighttime door. I was trying to fall asleep on a hot August night in Tiberias, Israel, near the shores of the Lake of Galilee, when I was brought to full attention by this voice. Soon steps sounded down the stairs, then some muted voices, and finally quiet. But I could not get back to sleep for quite some time. I was in tears, haunted by that child’s calling. It had struck a deep chord in my spirit. I knew this is the respectful and sometimes affectionate way in which Jews and many Arabs, whether they are children or adults, address their fathers. I knew from my studies of the Christian Scriptures how powerful that name was for Jesus.

A number of thoughts ran through my mind: how Jesus spoke that name so openly and upset many with what seemed to them to be a much too familiar—almost blasphemous—way of addressing God, and then great wonder about this child calling out for his or her father in that moment. I wanted to meet the child, if at all possible. As unlikely as that possibility seemed, I was hoping to meet the child because I was quite curious about meeting present-day Jews who speak the same words that Jesus spoke, at least this word that meant so much to him. But deeper than that, I wanted to meet up with this little one because in some vague sense I had a hunch that this child—in its crying out—was like my own self and that to meet the child would be,

just maybe, an opportunity to discover something important in myself.

The next morning, after breakfast, while on my way back to my room I had the happy fortune of meeting the father and child along with two older brothers. The child was a girl about three years old. She and her family had come from the city of Haifa to vacation that week at the lake. The father spoke very good English and wore the traditional Jewish yamaka or skullcap on the top of his head.¹ The two brothers, one about twelve years old and the other seven or eight, looked curiously at me, a tall American, but remained silent, obviously hesitant about their ability to speak English.

The little girl's manner amazed me. She chose to hide behind her father's legs and peek out at me from time to time while holding on to the smallest finger of one of her daddy's hands. For me the gestures of her holding her father's little finger while numerous times peeking out at me and pulling back were unforgettable. I remarked to myself, "O, my God, there I am; there we all are!" This little child had shown me something so true about my own self, and, I believe, about each one of us.

I was touched to see the security and trust she felt with her father. For her he was safe; he was someone she knew and could trust. He was her Abba. And I? I was entirely an unknown, very "other," almost a head taller than her father, and speaking a language she did not recognize. In one moment she was curious and would peek out from behind. In the next moment it was too much for her and she would pull back, letting her father completely block my view. If my eyes caught hers, she would immediately pull back, even if I smiled. This happened some six to eight times during our conversation. She was so beautiful, so human, so real. I wondered whether this is how all of us experience each other too much of the time. But I was more taken with how her manner seemed to be the usual way in which we relate to God.

After I said my good-bye and made sure I said good-bye to this shy little one, my thoughts went back a number of times to

this touching encounter. The memory of that first night of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land still rings with this little girl's cry to her Abba, a respectful, even affectionate call for her father's help. As a visitor to the Lake of Galilee in 1996, I had been moved to recall how powerful, for Jesus, was that one word, Abba. Throughout the rest of the pilgrimage and for weeks thereafter I would ponder what I had experienced, thanks to this child.

My reflections gathered around how all of us, whether child or adult, seek the assurance and security of a reliable love. We want to be able to hold on, to be anchored by what is imaged in the littlest finger of the father. We need to be touched, so to speak, to be welcomed and cared for. Most fundamentally, we long to be known and loved for who we are and then eventually to give ourselves to some love that genuinely values us. We may adopt a way of life that for the most part hides this foundational reality from ourselves. Yet it is branded in our souls and will make itself known in various ways. Powerfully this "fingerprint" of the Creator in our depths will remind us of where we have come from and what life is about.

The demeanor of this little girl said to me that these needs had been met in her, at least for the moment and to the degree that she was capable of receiving. But like us all, she would eventually have to leave her place of security, peek out, and not pull back at what was coming next in her life if she were to live at all. Like us all, she would have to choose over and over to trust the love of her divine Abba and move out to meet the world and risk loving in the face of the challenges of each day.

The lives of each of us are one great unfolding, similar to a rose plant that begins as a humble and fragile bare root. The plant has to receive adequate sun and go through stages of first manifesting tender shoots, then stronger, thicker branches, leaves, and eventually its buds. It will have to be fertilized, watered regularly, freed from weeds and insects, and also pruned. Over time, it will develop into a large bush with abundant blossoms, displaying beauty and giving delight to those who gaze at them. It is this final state of our development that

I especially want to address in this book. What we are to become, in Christ, is far more than we could ever ask for or imagine. A glimpse of this has moved innumerable hearts to an abiding sense of awe and praise of God. A description of this glorious destiny and fullness to come, however, requires our looking at the most important spiritual experiences that lead up to such a climax; these experiences are critical to our unfolding. By considering them in the context of the entire spiritual journey, we will more fully appreciate the final outcome of this wondrous process.

Perhaps the most fitting metaphor for my describing this transformation process we undergo is the Passover. The Passover is the controlling motif used in the Bible to tell the story of the Hebrew-Israelites' liberation from slavery and their coming into a new promised land. It images their own unfolding as they come alive to who they are as a people; it contains so many stories of individual Israelites growing into their inheritance as sons and daughters of God and finding the meaning and joy of their lives in serving God.

The story of our Passover or unfolding starts long before we are conceived. It begins with God forming a covenant with Abraham and the Hebrew people,² later with Moses and King David,³ and intensifies during the times of the Jewish prophets, the psalmist writer, and wisdom authors.⁴ Finally, it reaches its climax in Jesus, especially during the last hours of his life. As though to reveal the longings of God to give himself to us, the Gospel of St. Luke quotes Jesus at the Last Supper: "It is with desire that I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (22:15).⁵

To say "with desire have I desired" is a very Jewish way of expressing what lies deep within. Jesus is revealing the depths of God as well as of his own Heart when he says this. He speaks these words while knowing he is soon to die; they come from a part of himself that matters most to him, what is most true and beautiful in himself. They are spoken to anyone of us willing to

listen; he is inviting us to make a journey with him, a Passover into God, and become all we can be.

What might this Passover look like? Very briefly, if we say yes to this invitation, it will involve God and ourselves first getting to know each other, and then becoming good friends and sharing together our joys and struggles. In time, if we keep saying yes, the relationship will open out into a deeper love for each other. Finally, if we continue to grow in love, we will be moved to invest everything in a communion characterized by total mutuality. It will be a complete giving of each to the other, for time and eternity. We will have “passed over” into the life and Heart of God and know a fullness and joy beyond all our expectations or hopes.

The marvelous story of our Passover is a process of our passing over from fear and shame, from self-centered thinking and from choices that lead to loneliness and death—to a freedom to live with hope and peace for something much more fulfilling and enlivening than what our egos propose. Egos tend toward pride and envy, greed and lust, hatred and self-centeredness. God’s invitation, however, is an offer to live differently; it is an opportunity to discover the life-giving world of relationships with God, neighbor, and our true self. From the depths of God, who is Gracious Mystery,⁶ Jesus speaks to anyone willing to accept and trust this unparalleled gift that every human being is seeking, so often in all the wrong places. It is a gift much richer than we could ever anticipate. Maybe this is why so many people, even some Christians, find it too good to be true, too extreme to be credible what God promises us as the meaning and fulfillment of our life. In the face of much skepticism and cynicism, the gospels, the letters of St. Paul, and especially the Christian mystics proclaim this gift as nothing less than the Heart of God—pierced, opened, and given completely to anyone willing to receive. They proclaim a new life for us, a transformed self, a new being that becomes divine.

Love that goes to these lengths to love us, to be this vulnerable, to suffer so much, to be pierced and completely given, can

frighten us. We can be afraid of where this kind of love would take us and what it would cost and ask from us in return. Yet it is a gentle love, always respectful, never forcing, and so patient in waiting for our response right up to the end of our life. Coming from God's depths, such love longs to give itself completely. To accept this humble but frequently issued invitation is to begin a journey meant to lead someday to God and ourselves sharing fully in an eternal Passover meal and relating as equals.

In Jesus God promises in our lives a transformation so great that at the end of the process we will know as God knows and love as God loves. We will perceive and relish all of creation as God sees and enjoys it. We will "feel" as God "feels," rejoicing in whatever God rejoices in. We will be so transformed in Christ that we will give ourselves to God as totally as God gives himself to us. In essence, this is what it means to say we will become divine, living the life of God as God lives it.

Is this too much to believe, too good to be true? And just what does it all mean and how could such ever happen? Surely, this vision and promise of God is beyond anything we might imagine. Yet the Christian Scriptures and mystics declare without any hesitation that this is our destiny, our ultimate treasure, the "pearl of great price" waiting for us to discover and claim for our own (Matt 13:46). The Christian mystics, like some in other religions, are always talking about God's life in us. They are in one way or another stunned and held with great awe, sometimes trembling at what they see to be our destiny. They have glimpsed the ineffable with the eye of their heart, just as the apostles Peter, James, and John did on Mount Tabor when they witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Overwhelmed with awe and forced to their knees by the brilliant manifestation of his divine nature, they nevertheless knew in some sense that the same transformation and transfiguration process was to happen to them someday in God's providence. They knew that they too would radiate with this same powerful love from the center of their being.⁷ They

had glimpsed something of the amazing future that awaits anyone who will trust and go with this process of passing over into God.

In Jesus the One who is Gracious Mystery becomes one of us and experiences what it is like to be human in all our glory and pain. In laying down his life he gives us his own Heart and invites us, when we are ready, to give him our own hearts. What an exchange this is, his Heart for our own! In doing so he creates within us the capacity to live fully the life of God and, at the same time, to be the fullness of who we are, of all we are being created to be.

This process involves our being purified in heart and enlightened with new knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. We get stretched far beyond our initial abilities and awarenesses. We are weaned from our fears, from having to be too cautious and choosing to hide or cover up at times. We are coaxed beyond our habits of peeking out at life with our frightened child's eyes from behind our titles and possessions. We are freed more and more to trust life, to trust ourselves as good and as loved. While before we were clinging to the little finger of what we had let become our god, over time we come to know the One whom now we stay close to, not with anxiety but with trust, with love, gratitude, and inner peace. Our spirit and the actions of our soul undergo, then, a remarkable deepening and likening to God. By the end of this process we realize our God-given potential and beauty in being divinized, the fullness of what God promises us.

It is with desire that God has desired each of us to know what he knows and to love as he loves, to taste and savor life as he does, with the joy that is his. This gesture can be imaged in terms of a heavenly meal that God is readying us to share in. He prepares us throughout our lives and even beyond until we are fully transformed. When that great and final day comes, Christ Jesus will hand over to God all of us, his brothers and sisters and the rest of creation, so that "God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). God

will have finally gathered us, his family, into one . . . into the Christ, at the banquet table of eternal life. What a day that will be!

Thanks to our having been converted in heart and mind and experiencing a radical change of values and priorities (Phil 3:7-14); thanks to our having been freed from living from many desires that conflict, divide, and scatter our souls; thanks now to our being freed to live from our center and always seek “the one thing necessary” (see Luke 10:38-42), we will find emerging in our hearts a single-focused longing. It will echo the longings of Jesus expressed at the first Eucharist. We, individually and as a human race, will say in return, “It is with desire that we have desired to eat this Passover with you. We too long for this deepest of communions and a complete giving of ourselves to you.”

Thanks to this wondrous transformation we undergo during our Passover journey, we will be empowered to love as we were loved at that first Eucharist. Thanks to the gift of God declared in 2 Peter 1:4 (we will “share in the divine nature”) and celebrated in this too often forgotten saying of the Fathers of the church—“*the Divine became human so that the human may become Divine*”—our God-given potentials and deepest hopes will be realized. In an astonishing way we will become what Eucharist is, poured out completely for God and for all creation, forever and ever. We will become what we receive, the Body and Blood of Christ.



This book maps out the main experiences and describes many of the rich blessings we are given during this great unfolding of our lives, our Passover journey into God. Themes of the Bible highlight God’s works in these experiences, especially those presented in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.⁸ The last two chapters attempt to give some description of what we will become, what we will “look like,” so to speak, at the end

of our journey, both individually and as a human race. For this I rely especially upon the teachings of St. Paul, the writings of St. John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Carmelite poet and mystic, and those of the twentieth-century Jesuit priest-scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I must also credit my dear friend and mentor Jules Toner, a fellow Jesuit and great teacher of discernment. His insights on friendship and communion have proven to be very helpful when reflecting on life for those in the communion of saints.

What I am addressing is what I consider among the most important and beautiful themes of Christian theology and spirituality, namely, our being divinized. This has been a central theme of the liturgies and theologies of the Eastern church from the earliest centuries of Christianity, but hardly as much in the Western church. It seems that in the West the cultural changes wrought through the Renaissance and especially of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement led to a heavy, unbalanced emphasis on what is rational and empirical, along with a loss of interest in the more mystical dimensions of the spiritual life. Only in more recent times has the theme of divinization regained significant interest in the West. It is a topic that has always captivated my wonder and has often stirred me deeply during prayer, also when I am teaching and conversing with friends. My study of the spirituality of divinization has confirmed my intuition of how this same process unfolds even in the lives of many who are not baptized Christians. It dismays me that so few Christians ever hear about this central and exciting teaching; or if they do, the topic is scarcely developed for them with any depth.

My hope is that this book will present with significant depth the theme of divinization and major pieces of the process leading to it. May it deepen your sense of wonder at how sacred and beautiful is the journey we are all making, baptized Christians and others as well. With this purpose in mind I have tried to use language friendly to the layperson and to those who are not

scholars and academicians. I envision the book being an excellent source of spiritual reading for many kinds of Christian individuals. It could be most engaging for book-club and faith-sharing groups, and a good sequel for those who have finished the RCIA process, RENEW groups, and participants in the Alpha Course. Reflection questions have been added to the end of each chapter to make this use more possible. Hopefully, many pastors of churches as well as leaders of faith formation and ministry preparation programs will find the text a useful resource for their preaching and teaching. Psychotherapists might also recommend it to clients who are open to spirituality. Finally, I am hoping that the general seeker of spiritual truth and hope, whether Christian or not, will find this book helpful in his or her own search for the One from whom each and all of us come.

Chapter One

THE JOURNEY BEGINS IN EARNEST

We can live many years yet not really live. We can pass through the greater part or even all of our life unaware of who we are and why we are. We can be a great success according to the norms of the public media or the company for which we work. We can possess health and wealth, long life, an education, the pleasures and joys of marriage and family or many friends but still not have a sense of the meaning of our life.

What is it, then, that “kick-starts” our life’s journey and provides its centerpiece and integrating factor? What has to happen that will free us to come really alive and be filled with purpose? The best literature I read, including the Bible as well as life testimonies and the story of my own life, tells me that the pivotal event in any person’s life is our waking up to and accepting a great love in our life. Yet it is more than just waking up to this great love that has to happen. It is absolutely essential that we also welcome this love. We need to receive it and be moved by it, recognizing its rightness for us and letting it make its claim on us. We have to let it lead us beyond our own small sense of

self and prompt us to respond, honor, serve, be shaped by it, and enjoy the mutuality it offers. This is the moment our life's journey or Passover begins in earnest. Before this, our life by comparison might be likened to having "our engine much of the time in neutral"; or maybe our life was largely a sleepwalk, or worse, a life that was spiritually anemic, even sick unto death.

The gift of this great love is offered to us from our earliest days in a myriad of ways: in parents and family, in nature, in the arts, in people we meet along the way, and in our own self-discovery of the talents as well as limitations our bodies, minds, and hearts place in front of us. Each encounter of our life speaks God's love to us: I give this to you because I love you and want to share myself with you. You are mine and you are "precious in my eyes" (see Isa 43:1, 4; Gal 2:20). Every human experience, in fact, is potentially an experience of love's presence, the depth dimension that is the basis or foundation of all that is.

Yet we can go on and on, taking in all of these gifts but failing to recognize their Source, or at most, paying mere lip service to this Source. We might be moved by a significant love in our life, a spouse or child or great friend, and yet not make the connection with their Source. It is true that our journey will have begun insofar as we have responded with love and gratitude to a significant love in our life. Such experiences, however, await a deeper discovery on our part, an awakening to this faithful presence as Someone inviting mutuality. Once we recognize the veiled presence of this holy One and develop a habit of responding, our life opens out into a new fullness and depth that was not there before. It becomes, now more than ever, a Passover journey into God.

By acknowledging and welcoming this Someone we begin to make room in our depths for a life-changing relationship. We no longer live as a completely autonomous individual in charge of our life. Rather, we have awakened to the great truth that we have been loved by Someone who knows us personally, by name, and cares for us. We begin to live the reality that each of

us is part of a “we,” part of a unique relationship with the divine Source of everything. Because of our new consciousness, we learn to trust that we are never alone, even if we feel alone. Gracious Mystery is deeper than any and all of our feelings because he has come to live with us in our center and make our center his home (John 14:23). In time we learn that this Gracious One is even grateful to us for our “yes” and treasures this new friendship.

God as Teacher

Like a wonderfully skilled teacher, this mysterious One takes us step by step on a journey with a specific direction. We awaken to a sense of being led in a spirit of love; we see more than ever what innumerable gifts this divine Gift-giver has been showering on us. Such a great outpouring prepares for our saying yes to living with this divine Friend in mutual love and friendship. The eye of our heart is opening and is increasingly appreciating the love and affirmation behind the many gestures of care, protection, healing, guidance, and inspiration received over the years. Gratitude and awe emerge. Reverence and respect pour out spontaneously. Wonder for this One who has been in our life from its beginnings grows within us as we realize we have done nothing to earn such joy.

The gifts of creation and our own creation are seen in a new light. We begin to appreciate this Gracious Mystery creating all things, whether cosmic or microscopic in its dimensions. We find ourselves marveling at the infinite spaces and beauty the astrophysicists show us. At the same time they speak about how tiny our earth is in relation to the rest of the cosmos. We stagger with wonder as geologists and astronomers tell us our earth was born over four billion years ago and that our galaxy is one of billions in an ever-expanding universe. We are moved to praise and wonder at the delicacy and ordered beauty of the world under the microscope.

We are overwhelmed with the majesty of divine Love as well as the minute and particular nature of that love, which has included us in it. Our sense of reverence and adoration deepens, especially when we begin to look at the circumstances of our own conception, birth, and our years of growing up. More and more we grow in wonder, gratitude, and praise for how all of this is a great gift to us, as if we were the sole object of the love of this mysterious Gift-giver. And so we are drawn, attracted to know and love this Creator who first knew and loved us. Our journey, our Passover into God, is now marked by new desires and hopes that urge us to explore this relationship with God.

This wondrous process deepens. God comes closer than being just our creator. In Jesus this Gracious One becomes one of us creatures, becomes more invested, gets into our skin, so to speak, and experiences our life from within. How humble is such love, to get down on our level and relate to us in our human ordinariness. It reminds one of Søren Kierkegaard's parable of the prince who woos a peasant girl by donning the clothes of a peasant.¹ Who, then, is this God who wants to feel what we feel, know as we know, and love as we love? Just as the best speakers know their audience—their history, culture, preoccupations, and present situation—God knows us in giving us Jesus. God adapts to our situation with its countless particularities. In Jesus God speaks love and hope to us as never before. Jesus is that divine Word coming from the deepest part of Gracious Mystery and is proclaimed in the midst of the ordinary as well as in the struggles of our daily existence.

This is not what the peoples of the world expect, however. The history of religions shows a much greater readiness to believe in a God who is transcendent, far above us, rather than one who shares in the joys and frustrations of mortal humanity. A God who would sit with us, laugh and weep with us, eat, struggle, suffer, and die like us is simply too much for most in this world. It is all too inappropriate because God is commonly thought of as all powerful and immune from death and the

foibles of humanity. Yet the stunning, shocking truth is that this all-powerful God is, at the same time, a humble and vulnerable God. In Jesus God fully embraces humanity, all its glory as well as its ignominy and messiness. We run from our messiness and shame, from what we fear and what we are powerless to control. There are some things in life we do not want to face. But in Jesus, God become human, we are loved for who we are, even with all the sad and awful situations we bring on ourselves. God chooses to enter into what we most fear and loathe about ourselves.

It is quite awe inspiring to realize that Gracious Mystery moves from being our creator to becoming a creature like ourselves in the person of Jesus. But it leaves us virtually speechless to witness this One who in Jesus chooses to embrace that part of our creaturely nature we most fear and want to flee: suffering and death. In Jesus God chooses to be with us in all of our struggles, in our experiences of powerlessness and failure, in our humiliations and losses, and ultimately in the loss of everything in death. This is the mystery of his cross! Is there any god like this God? Can we even begin to fathom how deep, how great is this love embracing us? We can be, at the same time, both fascinated by it and left trembling with a fear of it.

God Hidden in Humility

A God so humble raises the question, How can one submitting to indignity and humiliation be God? It is foolishness. Yet those who have suffered significant injustice or personal harm often recognize this gesture of Gracious Mystery in Jesus as the supreme act of compassionate love. To be shown a love this vulnerable, courageous, and faithful to the end has moved millions over the years to faith in this One as the only God. Eventually, the whole world will stop shielding its eyes and will finally face this ultimate expression of love . . . and fall to its knees and adore (Phil 2:5-11).