“The effect of reading this book is extraordinary. There’s a sense of warmth and intimacy here that is often lacking in more systematic presentations of theology. It’s like being invited to pull up a chair at the breakfast room table where two wise and gentle monks are having a conversation, pondering the deepest thoughts of their hearts. Their conversation draws on insights from the enduring religions of the world as well as from psychology, philosophy, and poetry. But it is all grounded in the real stuff of ordinary, human life. Brother David and Father Anselm delve deeply into places of the human heart that every reader knows well, and you might find yourself marvelling at how well they seem to know and embrace you. The words conversation and conversion share a common root—one conveys friendly intimacy and the other conveys dramatic power. This book conveys both.”

—The Reverend Gary D. Jones
Rector of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia

“What an inspiring book! I feel humbled and greatly enriched by discovering the pearls of wisdom revealed in these challenging conversations. We meet two spiritual masters speaking from the depths of their hearts and a wealth of experience. The deepest insights of spiritual life are presented here with so much discernment, beauty, and love as well as great simplicity. They open up the treasures of faith beyond all well-worn doctrines, rituals, and beliefs by concentrating on the heart of religion, its life-giving energies, and its eternal message of trust and hope. This book is a precious gift, a real treasure. Let us hope that it will be discovered by many people and give them a deep sense of trust, strength, and joy.”

—Ursula King
University of Bristol, England

“This is an extraordinary conversation between two of the most eloquent voices in contemporary Benedictine monasticism. Br. David, whose poetic, prophetic rearticulation of ancient truths has inspired believers and nonbelievers across the globe, and Fr. Anselm, with his prodigious output of practical down-to-earth monastic spirituality, invite us into an intimate colloquy that at times is nothing short of breathtaking in its vision of and for Christianity.”

—Cyprian Consiglio, OSB Cam.
Author of Spirit, Soul, Body
“Faith beyond Belief reawakens the ancient form of monastic writing known as a ‘chapter’: brief, condensed writing on a host of topics. Together these two revered, spiritual masters from the Benedictine tradition offer reflections and guidance on the deep-tissue, spiritual topics of our day. Their reflections shimmer with wisdom as they traverse the pathless path of prayer with poise and proclaim it in perfect pitch. Readers will find their gratitude expanding into canyons of receptive reverence for the wisdom and perspective that David Steindl-Rast and Anselm Grün, each in his own way, offer to each one of us.”

— Martin Laird
Author of Into the Silent Land and A Sunlit Absence

“Readers are treated in Faith beyond Belief to a unique opportunity to be a ‘fly on the wall’ and listen in on a thought-provoking series of discussions between two of the greatest spiritual writers of our time. This volume presents a wide-ranging array of timely theological, spiritual, and cultural themes that will not leave those already familiar with David Steindl-Rast and Anselm Grün disappointed. Those new to their creative and original engagement with faith, tradition, and dialogue will surely find this a welcome entrée to their respective works.”

— Daniel P. Horan, OFM
Catholic Theological Union
Author of The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of His Life, Thought, and Writing

“Faith beyond Belief presents a compelling blend of scholarly and practical insights, grounded in ancient traditions and texts while also providing fresh approaches to meaning-making in a diverse and global society. The wide-ranging dialogue explores the basic values found at the heart of all religions—gratitude, courage, self-knowledge, forgiveness, compassion—each one oriented toward sustaining positive human relationships. The authors excel at illuminating nuances when they encounter points of tension—from exploring the hidden value of suffering, to reconciling the goals of self-acceptance and self-mastery, to navigating religious and nonreligious approaches to social justice and environmental crises. The result is an impassioned and inspirational book that calls for each of us—no matter our belief system—to connect with the heart of what it means to be human. And furthermore, it points to practical steps toward this noble aim.”

— Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi, PhD
Director of the Emory-Tibet Partnership at Emory University
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“Discovery is our business.” Quite naturally, most scientists would define their searches in such terms. One of them, a Nobel Prize–winning scientist, is often pictured with the original motto, in Chinese, framed above his desk. Now, thanks to the generosity of a family member of its original owner, it hangs behind my shoulder as I, a nonscientist, go about my work. Of course, the calligraphic announcement invites questions, as it is supposed to. What does that saying have to do with studies in the humanities, in my case, of history and theology? “I’m glad you asked that.” As we read ancient sacred texts we are not being antiquarians. We hope to discover meanings appropriate to our times, our searches.

“Discovery is our business” serves well to describe the vocations and intentions of Anselm Grün and David Steindl-Rast. They are seeking deeper meanings than those that are readily available on superficial levels, meanings that may seem hidden or obscure but that they both know and show can now be of as much help to us readers as they were in their own moments of discovery.

“Discovery is our business.” How do the two authors go about their business in this case? Through conversation, dutifully recorded, transcribed, edited, and published. Sages and scholars can impart knowledge by spelling out doctrines or imposing dicta, because they know some answers, can
argue for them, and helpfully expound them. If argument is governed by a person’s knowing answers, conversation is guided by posing questions, in familiar give-and-take or take-and-give exchanges.

“Discovery is our business.” What is our role in this exploration? Since the two authors are conversing with each other, we might at first think of ourselves as being mere overhearers, intentional eavesdroppers, or ill-mannered kibitzers. If we are ill-at-ease in such roles, Anselm and David—we can call them that here—minister to us reassuringly by what they say and how they say it. Some conversations exclude others, but in this book they are inclusive, open, inviting. That is clear from the way Anselm and David set out to inform or persuade each other, by confessing their own limits, describing their experiences and experiments on their path to discovery.

Conversation that we hear on these pages is anything but chatter on the level we expect among most tweeters and twitterers. Did I say we “hear” the conversation? It is easy to forget that we are reading, so realistic and vivid are the contributions from both Anselm and David. And it is clear that both speakers are veteran communicators to various kinds of individuals, audiences, and publics. They never forget the single “other” hearer in their two-way communications, but they draw on so many levels of discovery that we can tell they are writing for “others,” for all of us.

To win us and hold us, they have to have something to say that matches what we seek to discover. Far from casually chattering, they demonstrate their at-homeness with mystics, prophets, and scholars with whom they are familiar and whom they would like us to know better. The endnotes confirm what page-by-page readers will have discovered: the names of titans and giants who help shape the spiritual
search through the ages and especially in our epoch appear on page after page. But just as this conversation is not chatter, so the citations are not here because the two authors are name-droppers. No, they have listened to, learned from, or read diverse sources from Bavarian Catholicism to the Tibet of the Dalai Lama or the Japan of Buddhists.

Since this is not intended to be a reference work, it will at times appear to be haphazardly organized; one of the authors admits this. Go elsewhere, one is advised, if you want a formal catechism or encyclopedia. Not that the authors are opposed to such literature. It is simply not their vocation, in this setting, to work with formulas and formal schemes. As I was reading this, I pictured painterly analogies, most vividly to the genre of impressionists like Claude Monet. Where in it are the figurative right angles, straight lines, and formalities that serve dogmaticians, systematic theologians, and lexicographers so well? The first glance in most chapters here is blurry, subtle. Yet whoever has stood before the works of impressionist art in great galleries, and there has given himself or herself to the artists, is likely to have formed memorable impressions of gardens and gateways, water lilies and windows. From these, viewers and ponderers are likely to have found that they have discovered something unforgettable or at least less forgettable. They will remember the images as they become clarified in fresh ways.

Tempted as I am to exegete or expound some of the probings and depictions left by Anselm and David, I have learned from the way they go about things to keep disquisitions brief—and then get out of the way. That leaves the scene open for them as they help us about our business: spiritual discovery.

Martin E. Marty
**Prologue**

*Prelude ex silentio*

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**Erg Chebbi, Morocco**

Here I am at last. High up, on the biggest sand dune for miles around. The Algerian border is a mile or two behind me. In the far distance, the red-gold ball of fire is sinking behind a table mountain. The first stars are twinkling in the firmament. Our dusty motorcycles and igloo-shaped tents stand at the foot of these mountains of sand; from up here I can scarcely make them out. My friends stayed below, searching out dry roots and dung for the evening’s fire. The three blue-robed Bedouins on camels disappeared hours ago into a valley between the dunes. My lips are dry. I let the fine, cool sand run through my fingers like water. Desert wherever I turn my eyes. Not a breath of wind. Not a sound. Silence over the earth. Silence in heaven. Silence within me. I breathe in. I breathe out. I am here. Entirely here. Now! In this moment, it is as if scales fall from my eyes: I have arrived at the center of the universe. Then I remember all the places in which that was true: Scotland, Norway, Mongolia, New Mexico . . .

But the geography is a minor detail. Ultimately, it is not about special places. When one is traveling—and in some sense we are journeying throughout our lives—it is about moments in which the passage of time seems suddenly arrested. Everything I think I have to be and do, everything I
am seeking and even the things in which I have failed—all that falls away in such moments. I feel altogether naked. But I am. Entirely. Here. As if from nothing, the silence within me begins to speak, softly, inaudibly.

People appear around me, the living and those long dead. Encounters that have shaped me come to life. Joyful and painful, delightful and disappointing—everything is transparent to this single moment. There is no more separation between me and the world, between my ego and my Self, between my history and that of others, between being and time. Everything is altogether clear. The goal of the journey is within my grasp. It is in such moments that I am completely flooded with love. If I had to die then, I would be ready. Nothing but concern for my loved ones would hold me back.

Sometimes the conversation becomes a silent song. It sings itself within me. Just so. Pure happiness. What better meaning could there be for my life than to respond in gratitude for the gift of being. Through, with, and for others. Thankful for the invisible sources whose origins reach back into nothingness . . . here in the middle of the Moroccan desert and everywhere I am and will be.

What does all that have to do with this book? Some will already guess; I ask that others be patient for a few more lines. First, a change of place.

This summer is peculiar: cool, wet, and windy. To the west, above the Burgundian hills, another dark line of clouds moves over the little village. Here, seventy-five years ago, Brother Roger Schütz, from Switzerland, came to found a monastery that would be a symbol of reconciliation in a world wounded by divisions. A life of simplicity in the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus and companionship with people of today. Since the 1960s that community at the edge of
the little village has been a meeting place for thousands of young people from all over the world. Such thousands gather several times a day for the regular prayer times, the mantra-like singing, times of silence, and times of dialogue in the long, candlelit nave of the church. They come from all over Europe: Sweden, Germany, and Spain, Ireland, Italy, and Ukraine. There are a few guests from South Korea, the Philippines, Nigeria, Brazil, Argentina. They sit and kneel, close packed, praying, singing, keeping silence. This assembly is not a classic audience. You can sense that for some it is a “first” in their lives.

The different languages, cultures, mentalities, and ways of life shape the temporary community of thousands into an image of the global village in which we live virtually nowadays. And yet with a major difference: Here we look into each other’s eyes, listen to each other, share simple meals, clean the showers and toilets together, read Bible texts together and share our life experiences with one another. We are varied and different, and yet we are one. Not because we know so much, but because we are seeking, open, present in the spirit of newcomers. Here it does not matter what you have but only who you are. Simplicity in the multiplicity of forms. Unity that does not iron out differences or suppress them. This is a fundamental unity that allows individual uniqueness to be, that enables and rejoices in the cultural choir of voices and splendor of colors that enriches the world here. An anticipation of the utopia of a new Europe and of global common life—here it has a place and can be experienced as reality.

My glance wanders slowly through the dimly lit church. Here young people are gathered, hungry for a spirituality for our time. Will they discover the hidden treasures that have repeatedly given new life to Christianity? Will they
find credible witnesses who can translate the core message of Jesus Christ in an authentic way for today? Will they be able to live a mysticism that turns toward the world, that reveals itself as practical politics in its care for and solidarity with the world’s outsiders? Will they become agents of a transformation to a global commonality that our world so urgently needs?

For me, Brother David Steindl-Rast and Father Anselm Grün are such figures of hope, people who by the power of their example can offer an orientation in a world that has become too complex to comprehend. Knowing them and spending a whole weekend with them in the monastery of Münsterschwarzach, leading deep, vital exchanges, has filled me with great joy and gratitude. The spirituality they radiate is an everyday thing that is nevertheless both profound and vivid. Their life experiences, their gift for critical spiritual discernment, their radical honesty, their considered, poetic language, their therapeutic-spiritual knowledge, and their capacity for humor and self-directed irony have inspired and delighted me for many years.

In fact, the impulse for our conversations came from Pope Francis’s native land: Alberto Rizzo from Buenos Aires conceived the idea and persuaded Brother David Steindl-Rast to participate. All that remained for me was to consult with Anselm Grün to see whether it would be possible to find a common time slot in the close-packed appointment calendars of the two spiritual masters. When that was accomplished, and we met together in Münsterschwarzach, the Spirit was free to flow.

Our conversations, now in book form, could be read as a “crash course” in Christian spirituality. Because of the conversational form and the limited time available to us,
some readers may well miss one or another topic and find that the chapters are not organized systematically. I am to blame for that. But I think this book will be an inspiration and an aid to spiritual life for many people of our time, whether they are believers or not. In this sense I, as a radio journalist, hope I can count on the “vocal journalism” of those who are touched and enlightened by it.

Johannes Kaup
Erg Chebbi, Taizé, and Vienna
November 2014
First Love, or:
Childhood Sources of Solidarity

What people believe, how they understand and live their spirituality, is influenced above all by their childhood experiences. Therefore, reflection on spirituality is always also a search for traces, a reflection on our first profound experiences of the Holy, with what the world’s religions describe as the divine.

David Steindl-Rast

My earliest memory of an experience of the Holy goes way back—I must have been about four years old. It was just before Christmas, and there was a gold thread from Christmas wrapping on the floor of my parents’ bedroom. I asked excitedly what it was, and my mother said: “It must be a hair from the Christ Child.” That moved me deeply. It was not silly then, and it is not silly as I remember it today. The experience both drew me and made me shudder—that is, it was a true encounter with the Holy.

You could object that such an experience is soon demythologized when one grows older. But for me the transition from Christ Child to a broader outlook was quite easy because my parents were very skillful. They simply said: “The Christ Child sent us.” That Christ lives in everyone and everything and that he loves in us was something I could easily translate.
Another memory: I was still very small, at most five, when I saw an airplane writing “IMI” in the sky with steam or white gas of some kind. It was an advertisement for a cleaning product. The plane was tiny—I couldn’t even recognize it as a plane—so it must have been flying very high. So I asked: “What is that?” and the answer was: “That is the skywriter.” (Planes like that were called “skywriters” back then.) I immediately thought of the Holy Spirit because the plane really did look like a tiny dove writing on the sky. That was, for me, another encounter—a real one—with the Holy.

A third incident I remember, perhaps one or two years later, was a dream: Our house had a circular stone staircase from the ground floor (where we children and our parents lived) to the second floor (where my grandmother and great-grandmother lived). I always called it the “old floor.” In my dream I was going down the circular staircase, and Jesus was coming up it. He looked like the picture in my grandmother’s room. When we met, we merged into one another. That was the dream. Nothing more. I didn’t think about the dream for decades, but I could never forget it. I now understand it as a true spiritual experience.

In themselves these early experiences were perhaps not so very important, but all these childhood encounters with the Holy that I remember have to do with Christian teaching. From the beginning, the spiritual was for me entirely embedded in the Christian form of its expression and in Christian ritual.

Interestingly, Nature did not move me as deeply as religious things. We were in the mountains quite often, because my mother was a great mountaineer; we always looked wonderingly up at mountain peaks and cliffs and said: “Mama was up there!” But experiences of Nature were not really peak experiences, except for this one: Opposite the
one little store in our village, behind some fruit trees, was a hidden spring that bubbled out through a little wooden pipe. While my mother was shopping I liked to sit alone and in silence by that spring in the orchard. And the miracle that fresh water came out from deep in the earth was also a true peak experience—in the encounter with Nature, without any explicit thought of God.

Anselm Grün

For me, too, the mysterious was first sensed at Christmas. We children waited upstairs until the bell rang and we went down. The living room was full of candles—that was already a kind of mystery, a shivery thing. Other such experiences were strongly linked to the liturgy. I well remember that I took my first communion very seriously. Becoming one with Christ—that was a spiritual experience. And the Holy Week liturgy when I was eight or nine years old—and later as an altar server—that was something holy. At such times I experienced something numinous and, therefore, when I was only ten years old, I told my father that I was thinking of becoming a priest. Of course, that was still a childish idea. But I do remember that I experienced a special fascination with liturgy and its mysteries at my first communion, which I took very, very seriously.

Later I sensed particular experiences in Nature as encounters with the Holy. Once I was in the woods and heard a noise: the rushing wind was like a union with God and with all things. That was a very profound experience.

My father, who went for a walk with me and my siblings every Sunday, always pointed out the beauty of Nature to
us: the trees, the birds, the starry sky. In that sense Nature was always something important. The mountains, in particular, were the grandest and most majestic things for us children. When evening came and the sun set behind high mountains, I sensed the Holy. Then I was very still and simply looked. But for me the liturgy was the beginning.