

# Making It Personal

Memoirs of faith teach and reassure readers



Lynn Garrett

**P**eople seem to learn best through personal stories. That's why in religion and spirituality books, memoirs are often used as a medium to teach life lessons and as a source of inspiration. New and forthcoming memoirs recount the experiences of individuals while also intersecting with contemporary issues—the problems that are making headlines and reshaping the culture. And timeless tales of loss, grief, illness, and injury continue to reassure readers that they are not alone.

## Shedding Light

In the time of the #MeToo movement and continuing developments in the Catholic Church, new revelations of sexual abuse carried out by prominent individuals seem to come every day. Among the highest-profile recent scandals has been the exposure of decades-long exploitation of hundreds of young athletes at the hands of USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar. In a new memoir, *What Is a Girl Worth: My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth About Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics* (Tyndale Momentum, Sept.), Rachel Denhollander—the first woman to file a police report against Nassar and the first to speak publicly about the abuse—points to the institutional blindness and fears of confronting the truth that enabled him.

Denhollander has been asked, as have many other victims, why it took so long for the women to come forward. “Sometimes [the question] is motivated by a genuine desire to understand, and sometimes it’s articulated like a weapon, casting doubt over whether my abuse even occurred,” she writes. “The truth is, I did say something sooner—many of us did. But as survivors of sexual assault will tell you, saying something is one thing. Being heard—and believed—is another.”

Throughout the press attention and the trial, Denhollander relied on her Christian faith, which also motivated her to offer Nassar forgiveness. But, she writes, that forgiveness should not come cheap: “I pray you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt so that you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, though I extend that to you as well.”

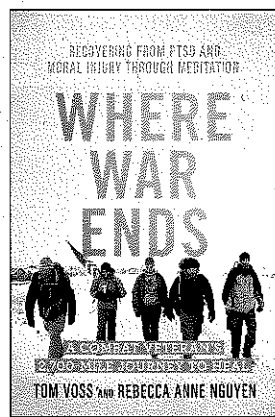
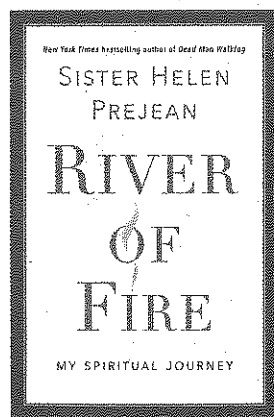
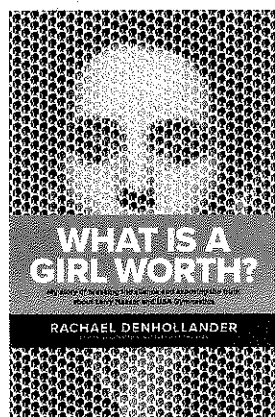
Denhollander, an attorney, advocate, and

*New York Times* and *Vox* op-ed contributor, received *Sports Illustrated's* Inspiration of the Year Award for 2018 and was one of *Time's* 100 Most Influential People. She was also a joint recipient of ESPN's Arthur Ashe Courage Award and named one of *Glamour* magazine's Women of the Year.

*Dead Man Walking* by Catholic nun Helen Prejean, about her spiritual counseling of men on death row, became a cultural touchstone when it was published in 1994, was a long-running bestseller, and became an Oscar-winning film and an opera. Her memoir, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey* (Random House, Aug.), traces the trajectory of her life—from a privileged childhood in segregated Baton Rouge, La., to her decision to enter the convent at age 18, to her efforts to abolish the death penalty.

Prejean rode the wave of activism among nuns and priests touched off by Vatican II and fed by the social unrest of the 1960s. Likening her life to being carried along by a river, she writes, “The river was fed by historical events, by changes in the Church and culture that turned so much of my world upside down. After vowing to be a bride of Christ, I came to know Jesus in a new way, through encounters with poor and struggling people.” Random House executive editor Andrea Walker calls *River of Fire* “a revelatory, intimate memoir,” adding, “Sister Helen shares the story of her growth as a spiritual leader, speaks out about the challenges of the Catholic Church, and shows that joy, religion, and the fight for social justice are not mutually exclusive.”

The profound emotional and spiritual effects of war came into focus again as veterans returned from Afghanistan and Iraq with a cluster of symptoms that came to be called post-traumatic stress disorder. In *Where War Ends: A Combat Veteran's*

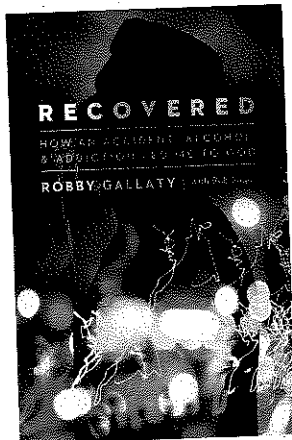




*2,700-Mile Journey to Heal—Recovering from PTSD and Moral Injury Through Meditation* (NWL, Oct.), Tom Voss and coauthor Rebecca Anne Nguyen uncover the invisible wounds of war. Voss served in Iraq, and though he wasn't injured physically, he suffered the "moral injury" of doing or seeing acts that violated his beliefs. Voss writes that he contemplated suicide until he found a way to transcend the damage by embarking on a spiritual quest. Walking with a fellow veteran 2,700 miles across America, he encountered Native American healers and other struggling vets. Through that journey, Voss discovered that meditation and sacred breathing bring him peace. Voss's story was featured in the Emmy-nominated documentary *Almost Sunrise*. Nguyen is Voss's sister and an author, travel writer, screenwriter, and digital content strategist.

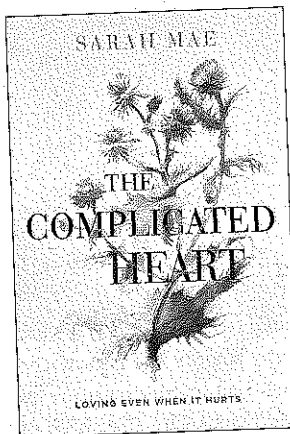
### The Enemy Within

In *No Turning Back, Regardless: How God Rescued Me, Redeemed Me, and Restored My Heart with a Song* (Salem, Oct.), Christian country singer Lisa Daggs recounts landing in jail on felony drug charges and turning to God for help. "When I'd lost almost everything



I could lose, God never lost His grip on me," she writes. "When I could no longer see, I was kept in God's sights." Released from jail after just one night, Daggs went on to win numerous awards, including Entertainer of the Year from the Inspirational Country Music Association in 2017.

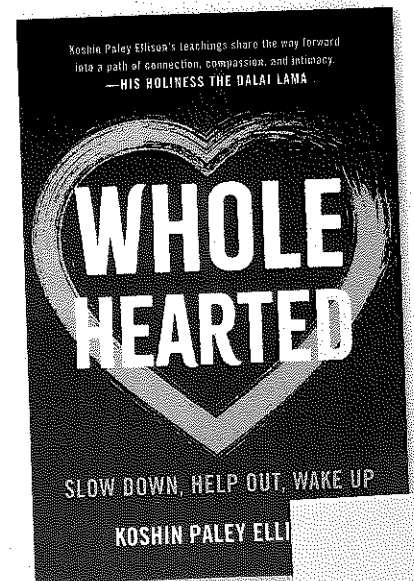
*Recovered: How an Accident, Alcohol, & Addiction Led Me to God* by Robby Gallaty and David Platt (B&H, Oct.) tells of how being rear-ended by an 18-wheeler led to Gallaty's addiction to pain medication; his desperation for the drugs resulted in stealing from his parents. After two stints in rehab, Gallaty was born again and befriended by Platt, then a seminary student and now an author (his books include *Radical*) and leader in the Southern Baptist Church. Gallaty is currently a pastor and is the author of *Here and Now*.



What could be lucky about becoming an addict? Laura McKowen explains in *We Are the Luckiest: The Unexpected Magic of a Sober Life* (NWL, Jan. 2020). She describes how, early in her fight for sobriety, when she was no longer able to anesthetize her pain and anxiety, she realized that she was lucky to be able to change the story of her life—to break free of alcohol, learn to face her emotions, and get close to her daughter. "Addiction is not a problem, it's an invitation," she writes. "We all get an invitation, if we're lucky. Something asking us to step into a bigger life." McKowen founded the Bigger Yes and We Are the Luckiest, online programs

for personal development and sobriety, and hosts the *Spiritualish* podcast. Families of addicts suffer, too, as Sarah Mae writes in *The Complicated Heart: Loving Even When It Hurts* (B&H, Sept.). Mae grew up with an alcoholic mother and writes that she knew as a Christian that she should forgive her but had a hard time doing so. But after discovering her mother's journals just before she died, she came to understand her mother's struggles in a new way and found empathy and understanding. "This isn't an easy story," Mae writes. "It's the one about me and my mom, about addiction, hard moments, and redemption.... I know she wanted to do right by me, but it was all just so complicated. But it's also the world's story. Brokenness, darkness,

Koshin Paley Ellison, Zen teacher and psychotherapist, shows us how to live wholeheartedly and uncover our enormous capacity for love.



### WHOLEHEARTED

Koshin Paley Ellison

\$11.95 | ebook \$7.99

EXPLORE MORE AT  
WISDOMPUBS.ORG