

# 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*

