

*Spirituality
& Social Action*

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SPIRITUALITY & SOCIAL ACTION

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To my spiritual mentors for their profound influence on my faith and for being the inspiration for this book: my parents—Irving and Julie Harris, William Sloane Coffin, Gert Behanna, Marge Lottis, Brennan Manning, Richard Rohr, Ched Myers, Barry Heath, Chris Haydon, and my daughter, Jennifer Harris Morris, missionary in Peru since 1997.

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
 But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
 They will soar on wings like eagles;
They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

—ISAIAH 40:29–31

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will
listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with
 all your heart.

—JEREMIAH 29:12–13

You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore,
 though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine.
 For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins.

—AMOS 5:11

And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and love mercy
 and to walk humbly with your God.

—MICAH 6:8

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Administer true justice, show
mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or
the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil
 of each other.”

—ZECHARIAH 7:12

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Introduction

OUR PLANET AND THE people who inhabit it are experiencing unprecedented stress and turmoil. In these fraught times, *Spirituality & Social Action* takes a deep dive into how to move forward through a spiritual awakening and a commitment to social, economic, and racial justice. Through the process of connecting with God, we can more effectively reach out to others with love and compassion.

Pastor Daniel Hill writes, “A spiritual rebirth ushers in both the salvation of our souls and our participation in the redemption of this world. It is also to hold together activism and evangelism; protest and prayer; personal piety and social justice; intimacy with Jesus and proximity to the poor.”¹

If you, like so many others, have put thoughts and concerns about God on the back burner of your life, it may be time to bring the saucepan forward and stir in some fresh ingredients. Humans are doing a poor job of managing the planet and responding to the needs of our coinhabitants. It’s time to seek God’s direction, and with renewed faith, to serve our brothers and sisters next door, in our communities, and around the world. This book aims to raise consciousness about spirituality and social justice, allowing us to move forward with conviction and hope.

Here are a few practical tips to navigate your way through this book:

1. Hill, *White Awake*, 144.

INTRODUCTION

- God is not referred to with a pronoun denoting gender, except when I quote some other source. I believe God is not restricted by gender.
- I have tried to avoid Christian jargon and clichés, as they sound exclusive and are often offensive to non-Christians.
- I generally don't use the title "Saint" before Paul or anyone else, as this is a concept of organized religion.
- The New International Version translation of the Bible is used exclusively, unless otherwise noted.
- Books of the Bible are spelled out in their entirety, not abbreviated, to make them more recognizable to readers who rarely frequent the Bible.

Andy Harris, April 5, 2020

CHAPTER 1

In the Pressure Cooker

IN THESE FRAUGHT TIMES, we the people have had enough. We have had enough of mass shootings of innocent civilians, including school children. Enough of political polarization, divisive language, and legislative gridlock. Enough of racism, racial injustice, and white supremacy. Enough of refugees dying in leaky boats in the Mediterranean, and children separated from parents in detention facilities on the US-Mexico border. Enough of increasing economic disparity between rich and poor. Enough of toxic pollutants poisoning children, killing off bees, and polluting our rivers, land, skies, and seas. Enough of increasing suicide rates, epidemic drug addiction, widespread homelessness, and high incarceration rates, especially for African-Americans. Enough of leaders ignoring climate disruption and the specter of nuclear weapons, both of which threaten life on Earth.

We have hoped that political institutions would save us, but they haven't. We have sought out gurus to lead us through the wilderness, but little seems to change. We have joined support groups of all types, and yet the existential crises press us from all sides. We feel frustrated, disempowered, and depressed. No wonder so many people take anti-depressants, and some people choose to ignore the news altogether. We feel like we live in a pressure cooker of a society, and the temperature just keeps getting hotter.

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For many people God seems distant and aloof, a nonparticipant in our time of crisis. On social media sites people identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” or as agnostics or atheists, who have given up altogether on God and religious institutions. With some exceptions, church attendance is on the decline because organized religion seems irrelevant, especially to the younger generation. In Portland, Oregon, my hometown, only about 18% of residents regularly attend churches, synagogues, mosques, or temples. Restaurants serving Sunday brunch have lines that snake down the block, while church pews sit half-empty on Sunday mornings. We suffer from a spiritual crisis, and many see little hope to reconnect with a God who seems detached and indifferent.

And yet, what if God does care about this dysfunctional world, a God who loves us and is trying to connect with us? As worries overwhelm us, many of us have become so distracted by our busy lives that we have little time or interest to explore a spiritual dimension. When we drive, we often listen to news or music on the radio, and when we walk or jog, we plug into our favorite music playlist or listen to audiobooks. Advertisements, text messages, emails, tweets, and even robocalls barrage us constantly. Who wouldn't feel overwhelmed in a society where the pace of life increases with each passing year? Why would we want to introduce one more thing into our already frenetic schedules? Spirituality? Be serious!

The younger generation, in particular, is wired to social media. An hour without their cell phone connection and most teens and twenty-somethings get distracted and twitchy, as with other addictions. What might their teen network be saying about them? Who might be dissing them? Social media often interrupts their concentration at school, while driving, at work, and while studying. Take away a teenager's cell phone and she/he is likely to respond with a tirade.

It's time to reconsider spirituality and to see if it offers answers to some of the pressing issues of our day. Brené Brown's definition of spirituality resonates with me: “Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a