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Letter from Los Angeles by Linda Sandoval

An Interview with Heather King as she “stumbles toward God, marginal sanity and the peace that passes all understanding.” (From the title page of her book **Redeemed**.)

It seems to me that many of us in the middle years of our lives look to make some sense out of the punishing and crazy jumble of our own personal history. As we look for what really matters to us there may be profound changes in perspective and goals. Perhaps we come to understand our limitations better. Perhaps we look to ourselves as the source of our problems and stop blaming others -- or at least learn to view those “others” with charity and forgiveness.

*I first met author Heather King at a dinner with our mutual friend Julia Gibson shortly after her first book **Parched** was released. I was impressed with the dark-haired woman who seemed so full of wit and watchful humility. I could tell that she had really been through something and had managed to come out the other side. And indeed **Parched** is the harrowing story of Heather’s escape from years of alcoholism. (Publisher’s Weekly chose **Parched** as a Most Memorable Memoir in 2005.) Interestingly, during that bleak period of blackouts and hangovers, Heather managed to earn a law degree, and as a sober alcoholic moved from Boston to Los Angeles, where she worked with a law firm in Beverly Hills. But the constant demand to manipulate truth in order to protect the “bottom line” proved to be as deadly and soul killing to her as alcohol addiction. With her new book, **Redeemed**, Heather continues her search for authentic purpose and meaning, finding herself drawn towards Catholicism and embracing her true calling as a writer. She uses the word “redeemed” in its original meaning as being freed from bondage, ransomed and recovered. The LA Times said of **Redeemed**, “King’s book is as honest and raw as the model of the spiritual memoir, the ‘Confessions of St. Augustine...’” **Redeemed** is a humorous and intelligent book that draws the reader*

into a highly personal spiritual journey. It is not at all an attempt to proselytize or convert. And, she pulls no punches when it comes to self-criticism and more importantly self-forgiveness.

Linda: Heather, you have traveled a painful and complex journey from alcoholism, to Beverly Hills lawyer, to cancer survivor, to being a writer, to the embrace of the Catholic Church. This last was accomplished in, of all places, Los Angeles. Is there something about your life in this city that led you this particular direction? Can you give us a description of “spiritual LA”?

Heather: The editor of *Best Spiritual Writing* series asked me, “How can you be spiritual in L.A.?” I wanted to say, “How can you *not* be ‘spiritual’ in L.A.?” You’re surrounded by so many people, so much traffic and noise, so many cultures, languages, ways of being, I don’t see how anyone can navigate his or way through without, for lack of a better way to put it, coming to something greater than themselves. L.A., even at its most ugly, or perhaps even because of the ugliness, can also be breathtakingly beautiful. The heaven/hell, sacred/profane paradigms are on daily display. I’ll be walking through my neighborhood and see an old broken-down sofa someone’s dumped on the sidewalk and three feet away will be a scarlet hibiscus in full, splendid bloom. Catholicism is a religion based above all on wonder and mystery. And I do think living in a city with so many paradoxes, with a sense of so many parallel, vital, but unknowable cultures and lives, has given me plenty to observe and ponder. Also, L.A. is, or can be, an incredibly lonely place to live, a city with a kind of built-in isolation. I’m a loner by temperament anyway. So I’ve been led to develop a rich inner life...

Linda: It’s interesting to me that although you moved from a law practice you despised to the life of a writer one of the strongest virtues of your writing remained the ability to put forth an argument. Do you think attempting to seek truth through law, proof, argument, gave you a foundation for seeking a greater spiritual truth?

Heather: Well, I don’t think you come to faith through reasoning. At least I didn’t. I “came to believe” first, and then I brought all my faculties, including my intelligence, to bear as I began to

contemplate the “God of my understanding.” Once I believed, in other words, I put my beliefs to an intellectual test and found they held up. I enjoy making order out of seeming chaos—in a way, that’s what I do as a writer. But it’s not a mathematical order, as satisfying and useful and otherwise beautiful as mathematics and science are. God can’t be “proved” or disproved; that’s His glory. The proof of what I believe is in my heart, in my soul. The proof is that once I started to take responsibility for my shortcomings and the harm I’d done to myself and others, started to forgive, started to develop a somewhat disciplined spiritual path—all very faltering and stumbling, one step forward, two steps back, but at least moving in the right direction—I started to come awake, to be transformed. Except the transformation is nothing like I thought it would be...the transformation has been the increasing realization of how broken I am, how human. But also how loved—which in turn helps me to develop compassion and to love others.

Linda: You once quoted Mother Teresa, “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.” What are some examples of small, loving, gestures that you feel might propel us towards less destruction and more compassion in our lives?

Heather: Wishing people well in our hearts, especially people who have hurt us. Letting people off the hook. Saying, “I’m sorry”, saying “That hurt”, saying “I value your friendship”. Noticing small beautiful things like a branch or the shape of a bowl. When in doubt, saying nothing. Praying to be relieved of the desire to be the favorite, to be consulted. Not taking our anger out on the people who can’t fight back—the telemarketer, the person driving ahead of us on the freeway, the tech person we get to after an hour on hold. Setting people free to live their own lives and realizing that as soon as we get focused on someone else’s life and how we think it should be changed, we’re not fully inhabiting or living our own lives.

Linda: What is for you the balance between seeking (that is questioning) and obedience and acceptance?

Heather: I think obedience and acceptance are part of seeking, or the fruit of seeking. Acceptance doesn’t mean to submit to the “unacceptable” or to be a doormat, but it does mean to stop

fighting everybody and everything, even evil. I want to be for something, not against everything. "Resist not evil," Christ said, and I think he meant don't waste your energy fighting; use your energy to live in love. Love is the antidote to evil. Obedience actually means to listen attentively, and that's what I've tried to do as I seek. I've listened to other people, to our culture, to many, many books, to the Church, to my heart. And the Church, for all its faults—inevitable faults, because it consists of broken humans—is the voice that's closest to my heart, that speaks most to my longing to be good, for connection with myself, others and God, for eternity.

Tod Davies comments: That's very like something Dorothy Day once said when asked how she could bear to be a member of a Church that had caused so much injustice over its history. She said, "You can't have Christ without his crucifix. And the Church is his crucifix!" So I wonder if that's how you're thinking as a woman when you think about the Church's attitude toward us over the last few centuries...and the reactionary attitude the present papal administration is showing about women's position in the Church's history, and in the Church today. Do these things bother you, and if so how do they affect you? Or do you just think of them as inevitable faults in a human system of faith?

Heather: What attitude? That the Church accords the utmost reverence, second only to the reverence it accords Christ himself, to the Virgin Mary? That over the centuries it has consistently elevated women to the status of saints? That it attempts to comprehensively protect the sanctity of motherhood, the family, sex? No, I'm not bothered in the least. I have accorded approximately zero time in my life for instance to bemoaning the fact that Catholic priests must be male. I have no doubt that women would make "good" priests but there's also no particular or pressing reason to have women priests or that the rule needs to be changed this instant. I'm much more bothered by the fact that our prisons are overflowing, that basic health care is unaffordable, by the pride, greed, sloth, fear, lust that sometimes keep me, and everyone I know, from the friendship and intimacy we long for, from fully utilizing our talents, from reaching out, in whatever way is give to each of us, to our brothers and sisters. In 11 years, I can't think of a single instance where I have

ever remotely felt degraded, demeaned, discriminated against, condescended to, constrained, forced, or harassed by the Catholic Church. On the contrary, the Church has fostered a kind of coming into myself, not so much, or only as a woman, but as a human being. I've become a writer in the Catholic Church. I got divorced and had my marriage annulled in the Catholic Church. I'm exploring my oldest emotional and sexual wounds in the Catholic Church. A whole world of philosophy, mysticism, poetry, contemplative prayer, the lives of the saints has opened up to me in the Catholic Church. And I've been given incredible, exemplary role models of womanhood, of femininity. Chief among them is The Virgin Mary--- fierce, steadfast, persevering, tender, intuitive, loving, wise. St. Teresa of Avila, St. Therese of Lisieux, Mother Teresa, Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Dorothy Day, Flannery O'Connor: these are not women you'd want to mess with. These are not women who suffered fools gladly. They had huge hearts and iron wills, which they spent their lives trying to bend toward the good.

Politics of all kinds make my eyes glaze over and, I suspect that if I was participating in, or interested in participating in, the administration or politics of the Church, I'd have additional observations, views, and feelings. As it is, I look to Christ himself, who had many rich female friendships. I hope to be worthy as one of them.

Linda: Do you feel prayer more for celebration or comfort or are they the same thing?

Heather: I don't think they're the same thing, and though prayer may be either or both celebration and consolation, I think of prayer more as simply placing myself in the presence of God. Showing up and making myself available to the consolation and the banquet that are going on all the time. Probably my most basic prayer is Thank you. The second, of course, is Help! Sometimes I have a kind of conversation in which I'll thank God for some lovely interaction I had with a friend, or a beautiful walk, or for being with me throughout the day. I'll tell him what I've been noticing about my thoughts; what I'm struggling with; what I'd like to move further toward, which is usually just to be closer to him, to abandon myself more fully. My

experience has been that the more time and heart I devote to this, the more I begin to feel a dynamic, give-and-take, breathing relationship. I begin to trust it, because it always leads me in the direction of sacrificial love.

Linda: Say someone looking for guidance is inspired to pick up the Bible for the first time. Where would you suggest they start?

Heather: I think if you're really seeking, almost anything you find in the Bible, even opening it at random, is going to help. And if you're not seeking, if you're looking to ridicule or disprove or shoot down, nothing is going to help. When I was working as a lawyer, for some reason I brought a Bible with me to work and put it in my desk, even though at the time I barely knew the difference between the Old and New Testaments. And one day, a particularly despairing day, I opened it and the first thing I saw was a line from Isaiah: "I have called you by name; you are mine." I'm not one of these hokey paranormal-event-believing type folks but I must say the line got my attention. I am still far, far from a Biblical scholar but I read the liturgy for the Mass each day, whether or not I go to Mass, which means at least one Gospel reading. What the Gospels basically show me is that there's a different "world," a different "economy," a different system of justice, based on mercy and forgiveness, than the system of this world. I don't mean we're supposed to live in some abstract, fantasy world: on the contrary, our task is to fully inhabit this broken but sublime world where we already live. But we get to inhabit it with a different set of values than the worldly values of money, property, prestige. We get to forge our own hard, lonely path, and walk it to the end. We get to become our authentic selves.

Linda: Conversely there are many who have fled the Christian religion. They remember oppression, hatred of others, hypocrisy. Would you guide them back?

Heather: No, not particularly. I would just tell my story.

Tod asks: And I'm interested to know why the Catholic faith was your path in particular? Why not, for example, a Protestant sect, or

Buddhism, or even Islam? What was it about Catholicism that called out to you particularly?

Heather: I can say that when I began my quest I didn't shop around for a church where I felt "comfortable" or where the people necessarily looked or dressed like me, or where I was going to hear things that were safe or familiar or politically correct. I was seeking the truth. I was looking for a church that would tell me the truth. I was concerned about the state of my soul, which I believed to be a matter of life and death. Catholicism was the only church that addressed that, as a matter of life and death: addressed it directly, continually, truthfully, without stinting or flinching. The cross in a Catholic church has a body on it. Right up front, right above the altar, is the message that subconsciously haunts us: someday, we're going to die. Right up front, loud and clear, is the human condition: suffering, torment, conflict. As I say in **Redeemed**, the first time I went to Mass and really "saw" that body on the crucifix, I realized Christ isn't saying that we need to suffer more; he's acknowledging the suffering we're already in. And I suppose on some level in that moment I "got" as much as I ever will, or as it's possible to "get"—which is that God loves us so much he incarnated himself as man, he came down and pitched his tent among us to teach us how to come awake, to accompany us on the journey, to show what it looks like and what happens to you when you live in total integrity. Eventually, one way or another, they'll kill you—which is why hardly anyone ever dares to live in total integrity.

But the real message of the Gospels is love, and the heart of my conversion was that I fell in love with Christ. To believe that Christ is the Savior of the world is a very very different thing than merely believing that he was a prophet, or "enlightened," or especially selfless. To believe that the Body and Blood of Christ is the Real Presence is to believe in an entirely different order of the universe, a mystical order. Protestants share bread as a symbol of communion but the Eucharist is not a symbol. You don't lay down your life for a piece of bread; you lay down your life for the Body and Blood of Christ, for your fellow man, or you do if you're a saint. I don't mean you suffer through this vale of tears for the "reward" on the other side. I mean your desire for Christ is kindled here on earth and that

makes you want to be with him afterward, fully, and you begin to understand that the way to do that is basically by dying to your ego and serving others. You start to realize the things of this earth—money, clothes, cars, expensive food—aren't fulfilling: not because they're not good, but because they're a lesser good than the greatest good. I just read the obituary of a woman named Irena Sendler, a Polish Catholic social worker who died at the age of 98, and who'd saved something like 2500 Jews, many of them children. The Nazis repeatedly tortured her, breaking her feet and legs, but she'd refused to give the names of her collaborators, or the location of the garden where she'd buried a jar containing a roll of paper with the names of the children and their parents. The Nazis finally let her go and as soon as she got out, she continued with her rescue work. You don't have to be Catholic to be an Irena Sendler, but I can't imagine anything that would encourage me more in that direction than Catholicism. Someone like Irena Sendler makes me realize how unworthy I am to call myself a follower of Christ: if I were really a follower, I'd live in a lot more courage, humility, poverty, chastity, and obedience than I do. But people like Irena Sendler give me something to strive for, to emulate. There's something sublime about an Irena Sendler, about Catholicism, about a religion that makes saints out of sinners. Saints aren't "good," they're beyond good, they're part crazy. I read recently that faith means believing in the surprise ending. The Crucifixion was a surprise ending. You don't expect the Savior of the world to die an apparent failure, rejected and scorned, spat upon, cut down in the prime of life and butchered—just like we don't expect cancer, broken hearts, bankruptcy, alcoholism, war, lost children, famine, crime, and aging to cut us down like they do. So the Crucifixion was a surprise ending.

But the Resurrection—that's the biggest surprise ending of all.

Linda: Who do you consider the important prophets of today and what do you think are the most important things they tell us?

Heather: Dorothy Day. Mother Teresa. Martin Luther King, Jr. Depth psychologists like James Hillman, James Hollis, Helen M. Luke. Poets like Jean Valentine and Franz Wright. The people who are telling us in

so many words that the world is going to be saved by love but that love in practice, as Dostoevsky said, is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams. We have to be brave enough to undertake a sort of mythic journey. And the journey requires a sacrifice. The further I progress in my own journey, the more I see the call is to sacrifice our whole selves, our entire old way of being. We have to allow our egos to be crucified, in order to make room for the Resurrection. We have to stop identifying with our addictions, our wounds, our attachments, our baggage in order to allow for “the new man” to be born. The new man who's willing to lay down his life so the rebirth can perpetually continue...

Tod: Quite a few of the ‘important prophets’ you mention were social activists, too – particularly Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. Do you feel an activist component in your faith? Do you think faith has a responsibility to act, a responsibility to a wider community?

Heather: Absolutely: the very reason to cultivate faith is to re-connect us with the rest of humanity. The proof of faith, the fruit of faith, is how we treat the least of our brothers and sisters. So we're all called to be activist. But I also think activism can manifest in a spectrum of ways other than “socially.” A hermit in a cave can be active in the sense that he or she is offering his or her prayers up to humanity. A mother is an activist in that she's spending her life shopping, cleaning, cooking, instructing, dropping and picking up the kids. Activism is a whole stance toward life: how we spend our time, how mindful we are of our thoughts. “I must plan my day and arrange my time for the good of my soul,” said St. Augustine—that's the basis from which to go out and picket against the death penalty, or vigil against nuclear power. This is why I'm a Catholic: an across-the-board stance for life. Against war, for the convicted criminal, the unborn child, the sick, the diminished, the dying. I'm good friends with the Catholic Worker here in L.A. I've worked at their soup kitchen, vigilled with them, written articles for their paper, *The Catholic Agitator*. Last year, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I participated in an “action,” as they call it, at Vandevere Air Force Base. Right now I'm writing a review for the *Agitator* of the diaries of Dorothy Day, who is really a model for

blending the active and contemplative lives, and interestingly, for all her social activism, who also said, “The Mass is the most important thing we do.” Most of my “activism,” if that’s the word, takes place in the context of working with other alcoholics who are trying to get and stay sober. Part of that involves going to jails, prisons, hospitals, but I consider the whole enterprise a form of activism, and not least of all on my own behalf. I think spirituality is at bottom very practical. You have to realize first of all that you’re a spiritual wreck yourself and start, and continually come back to, there.

Still, I should no doubt be more active. We should probably all go to jail at least once in our lives, for example. And I don’t suppose my night in the Hampton, New Hampshire jail for public drunkenness when I was 17 quite fulfills that obligation.

Linda: Recently I sat for a time with someone with late stage Alzheimer’s and I remembered you once wrote that learning to just sit with someone in their own suffering is one of the greatest gifts and one of the most difficult to accomplish. It was helpful for me to realize I didn’t have to try to fix anything but that there was a purpose in just being there. Do you feel that grace lies in giving witness in that way, without any mirror for the ego?

Heather: Grace is a slightly overworked word that seems to mean different things to different people, but I think it requires grace, that is, the help of God, in order for our ego to “disappear” in the first place, in order for us to detach from our deep desire for results. We tend to value productivity, and to value ourselves according to how effective we are. Just sitting with someone in his or her suffering is difficult because our impulse is either to fix the person, or to be thanked, or both. If they can’t be fixed, we tend to lose interest; there’s nothing in it for us. The last thing Christ asked of his disciples was to sit with him, for his “hour” in the Garden at Gethsemane the night before he died—and of course, they couldn’t; like us, they fell asleep. It requires tremendous vulnerability, on the side of both parties, to simply sit quietly in each other’s presence. We feel we have to say something interesting or the other person will leave or get discouraged. So to get close enough to your own heart, and the heart of another, to realize, *This is all I’ve ever wanted, for someone*

to sit with me. To love me just because I exist. To be in solidarity with my humanity and my suffering...

That's big. I hope I make it there some day.