

ALAN
GRAHAM
WITH LAUREN HALL

WELCOME HOMELESS



**One Man's
Journey
of Discovering
the Meaning
of Home**

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THE MEANING OF HOME

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INTRODUCTION

The Gospel Con Carne

HERE WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, WITH SANDY cracked ground and hilly mountaintops, in the center of Hidalgo. It's that quiet moment right before the sun rises on the red hills of Mexico. An impoverished Juan Diego eagerly awakes to make his way to Mass, feeling all fifty-seven years in his bones on this brisk morning of December 9, 1531. He eats a breakfast of eggs, beans, and rice on a corn tortilla, and makes his winding way to the edges of the rolling scenery. As he approaches Tepeyac Hill, he begins to hear music.

Juan is a recent convert to Catholicism. Ten years earlier, Hernando Cortez took over Mexico City and ended the Aztec oppression of hundreds of thousands of human sacrifices. When Juan was just thirteen years old, he witnessed more than eighty thousand human sacrifices on top of a one-hundred-foot pyramid in just four days; Ahuitzotl, the Aztec ruler, took only fifteen seconds to remove the heart of each victim.

Now, as Juan draws closer to the music, he sees a brilliant light. He climbs until he reaches the top of the hill and sees the Virgin Mary standing in a radiant, heavenly glow. He listens as

she tells him to go to the bishop in Mexico City, and instructs him to build a church where she is standing.

So he did.

Like Diego, I, too, journeyed deeper into my faith after seeing the hearts of thousands discarded. I also have had this particular relationship with the Virgin Mary—and by that, I mean talking with her.

We Catholics believe in something called the “communion of saints,” which basically means that our death does not separate us from each other; and though we might not fully understand it, we know there is a heaven and that heaven is just another place where we are able to be in communion with each other. It’s all about community. So, just as if I were to come to you and say, “My wife has cancer. Will you pray for my wife?” I can go to the angels and saints who are still *with* us, but are just in a different place. The beauty is that they are not even separated by a physical boundary. They are in their home of ultimate community.

In the simplest of terms, Mary is about communion through community, and community through connection. Mary’s entire existence is about picking “the least of these” to be the mother of humanity—a thirteen-year-old girl who, under today’s terms, would be snubbed or scoffed at. Her story is about bridging the gap between the divinity of God and the dignity of man.

A number of supposed apparitions have occurred throughout Christianity, where Mary appeared to people in different places, entering new spaces, and bridging these gaps for communion and community purposes. You may have

heard about places like Fatima and Lourdes—locations of supposed apparitions where Mary appeared to the people of Portugal and France. Since 1981, Mary has been appearing in a place in Bosnia called Medjugorje, though it is not an approved apparition by the Roman Catholic Church (it takes more than a century to decide a thing like that).

Truth is, even if they say it's real, I am way more of a "Doubting Thomas" type than the guy who just buys into the whole deal hook, line, and sinker. However, there is something about Juan Diego and his vision of the Virgin Mary that resonates with me, something that feels particularly connected to my life and the lives of those explored in this book.

It turns out the bishop whom Juan Diego shared his vision with was a "Thomas" too. When Juan tells the bishop what he witnessed, the bishop tells Juan, not in so many words, "Baloney. I need something more than that."

So Juan goes back up and pretty much tells Mary (again, these are my words), "The bishop says, 'baloney.' He needs a sign to believe it."

And, boy, was he given a sign.

Suddenly, on top of the mountain, red roses bloom—during a time of the year when roses don't grow. Remember, it's mid-December. And, man, what a perfect symbol for Mary to give. Pain and beauty. How lucky for those thorns to have roses.

So Juan begins picking the roses and placing them in the *tilma* he's wearing, which is a piece of cloth made out of cactus fibers. He hauls a bunch of roses down to the bishop, unfolds the cloth, and, as the roses come pouring out, the *tilma* reveals a stunning image of the Virgin Mary.

Five hundred years later, you can see that same *tilma* framed in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. People have researched this seamless garment and concluded that it's not a piece of man-made artwork, but, rather, a miraculous organic fabric that had somehow rooted in this pattern naturally and suddenly. No paint. There are stories of bombs exploding all around it during the revolution in Mexico City in the 1920s, but instead of harming the cloth, a cross that stood in front of it bent over, as if to take the blast. Just like that—a 90-degree bow—zero damage to the *tilma*, just as the cross has done for us. And, let me tell you, I've stood directly in front of that cross, only feet away, and have seen its powerful, unmistakable bow.

But I'm not asking you to believe any of this stuff.

I'm asking you to keep thinking about what the bishop's face must have looked like when he saw all those roses falling to the ground, and then fast-forward 475 years later to when a series of events brought me to the same location where this apparition occurred.



One hellishly hot day in March 2006, near Mexico City, I'm with a guy named Bill—a Catholic theologian buddy of mine pushing seventy years old—and we're making our way to a male convent in a little town called Tulpelac. It's Lent at this Franciscan convent, and I'm sleeping on a concrete floor. This is like no place I have been before. If I want hot water, I plug this thing in the wall that is connected to tons of electrical wires hanging above a bucket of water, and it basically fries

it hot. If I want to pee, it's into a hole in the ground. If I want food, it's the same meal every day, three times a day. That means rice, beans, scrambled eggs, and corn tortillas three meals a day. Everything is cooked in the morning and sits on a shelf the rest of the day. So when lunch comes around, as expected, you get your eggs, your beans, your rice, and your tortilla. But by dinner, the almost-day-old-egg deal is not quite working for me.

On day four, we get on this bus, ride even further outside the Mexico City metropolis, and are dropped off in the middle of nowhere.

Nowhere.

All there is to see is me, this balding, intellectual theologian, and two friars making our way to the Franciscan *Porziuncola*, a small church like the one in Italy where the young Francis of Assisi understood his calling and renounced the world he knew—a life of wealth and comfort—in order to live in poverty. After his death in 1226, they built around the chapel to protect this now-sacred place and later added a number of other huts and chapels for contemplative prayer.

And then there is the rose garden. This is where Saint Francis talked to the turtledoves, inviting them to praise the Lord. The story goes that one night Saint Francis felt tempted to abandon his new way of life, and so he rolled naked in the bramble thorns in an attempt to overcome doubt and temptation. However, the moment his skin made contact, the bramble bushes turned into dog roses without thorns. Since then, these miraculous, thornless roses have grown in the garden.

What is it about roses? Is it that behind everything

beautiful there's pain? Is it that suffering and beauty cannot be separated? Are they synonymous?

All I know is that in this little Franciscan town, there were only unassuming chapels, huts, and rose gardens.

The upside? There are absolutely no distractions for anything *but* contemplative prayer. And, sure as hell, I contemplated.

We are walking, and walking, and walking, and I am *starving*. We pass nothing except the occasional little farmhouse, while keeping our eyes on the two Franciscan friars with their habits on in front of us, and, truth be told, I am feeling pretty cool. If you don't know what a religious habit is, it's one of those dark cloaks with a hood and a rope wrapped around the waist. The only problem with my contemplative state was that one thought would not leave my brain. I look at Bill and say, "Bill, you know what I want right now? I'd like a giant order of fajitas. I am starving to death."

We start laughing. But it turns out this contemplative desert scenery actually works—surely, this is why there was so much desert wandering in the Bible—and that silly thought starts to morph into a theology.

I want *meat*.

Now, maybe this thought is sounding a little too literal when it comes from a born-and-raised Texan who hasn't had barbecue in a week. But what I was thinking on that hot March day was that the church has lost its meat. I'm hungry. Our hunger for more—for love, for communion and community, for home—is much more difficult to remove than our hunger for bread. We need some meat. The gospel has gone vegan. (No offense to vegans—this is merely for purposes of analogy.) They just sling

the Word out there and leave it for you to digest without the nutrients.

Thus, the *gospel con carne* was born.

Bill and I started to develop the theology of the *gospel con carne*, and that's the foundation of Mobile Loaves & Fishes. This organization took the *gospel* and put meat on it so that you and I can collectively partake in the *gospel*—so we can be prepared to go out and serve and our hearts can grow hardy.

It is about being filled with the heavy stuff. Truth is meaty. It's not so we can sit in fancy-schmancy churches that cost tens of millions of dollars, built by people who don't know how to go out and serve. The *gospel con carne* is the *gospel* of flesh and meat—of a reality that's gritty, and truthful, and of being embodied in flesh given a human form. The *gospel con carne* is about becoming fully human. However, it turns out that this isn't exclusively a modern-day concern:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:12–14, emphasis mine)

Needing “milk” indicates spiritual *infancy*. Spiritually, we look like babies still suckling at a mother's breast, unconcerned with the rich, hearty foods at the adults' table.

We are stunted. We are living cutlets at *best*. What then is

the solution to this state of spiritual infancy? The believer in Christ is called to grow in order to be able to process and be nourished by “solid food” . . . the gospel con carne. The aim is to become well-acquainted with the person and perfect work of Jesus Christ.

To get stronger and start walking.

As we continue to walk in the desert of Mexico, we continue to develop this gospel, and we suddenly end up in this even *smaller* town. We go into the home of this impoverished family who happen to know the friars we’re with. They welcome us inside and offer us a fresh glass of cantaloupe juice. Up until that point, I had never had cantaloupe juice, and, let me tell you, it is *mind-blowing*. When it hits my tongue, the flavor explodes with sweetness. But then I see a little girl who had been born eighteen months prior with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. She is a near vegetable. She is lying there, limp, staring off into the distance, and will never learn to walk, talk, or do anything. Her mother asks us to collectively pray over her.

I believe God can heal, but I have never seen *that* kind of healing. As I look at this small girl with her deep brown eyes glazed over, I am drawn into the drama of this intense situation.

Then they ask us if we’d like to stay for lunch.

“Um, yeah,” we respond.

They bring out the *comal grande*, which is a giant, concave wokish-looking thing on legs. It has a place for firewood and a smoke stack. They light it up and slather oil on it. They throw on onions and some chunks of *nopales*, which are baby spineless cacti. They sprinkle some salt and pepper, and it was

at this point that I began to salivate. I turn around and they have this *molcajete*, which is a volcanic rock bowl with a mortar and pestle, and they begin grinding serrano peppers and avocado. Then, here comes the meat. They throw on pounds of chorizo, and, as it hits, the smoke rises in clouds and into our nostrils. And then, more meat. They put down big slabs of ham and then start lining the outside with fresh, still-warm corn tortillas.

I have been to five-star restaurants all over the world, and I can honestly say that the meal I had in that tiny Mexican town was the most phenomenal gospel con carne I've ever had in my life.

And it was in one of the poorest homes I'd ever visited.

To get to that home, you had to make it your intent to put yourself there. It's not somewhere you end up while taking a jog in your Adidas shorts in your suburban neighborhood lined with fresh-cut grass and SUVs. The desire for meatiness often only comes when you're hungry; when you have a desire for more.

That's the key to the gospel con carne.

You've got to get outside of your comfort zone. You've got to go down to the places that allow you to connect with people. Encountering this hospitality—this Christlike hospitality in the poorest of people—is what you'll discover.

The poor of Mexico evangelized me. It's kind of a selfish spirituality—me wanting to be a part of their spirituality—because we all know the poor have an exclusive, special access to the gospel.

Here's the takeaway: We've got to change the lurking belief that any human life is more valuable than another. We must

broaden the perimeters of our relationships and find a place for those left out. When we bear the beams of love, arms wide-open, we become more ourselves. We have to expect more for each other so that when we see Juan Diegos, we see impossibly red roses. When we see a child with glazed-over eyes and no movement, we see a family who fed the hungry with a true gospel con carne.

In the pages that follow, you'll encounter people whose poverty does not come from a lack of money, but, rather, from a lack of being loved. The greatest disease in the West is not contracting leprosy or the result of being strangled by an umbilical cord; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. America can cure or treat many physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. Millions of people across the world are dying for a piece of bread, but many, many more are dying for the smallest bit of love. For human contact. For *carne*.

This is a hunger for love. This is a hunger for God. These pages are filled with stories of smart, disappointed, and baffled people who, at some point in their lives, had no place to go nor people to go to. These are people with some of the best stories ever told, and their stories take time and effort to hear. I hope that by the end of this book your paradigm will shift, your eyes will open, your gospel will become meatier, and your love will grow greater. I hope that you will start to see the great "I AM" in the "least of these."¹

Because, at the end of life, you will not be judged by how many dollars you had, how many friends you made, how many diplomas you earned, how many beautiful places you've seen,

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or thoughts you thought. You will be judged by “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in” (Matthew 25:35).

Welcome homeless.

CHAPTER 1

THE THREAD, THE HEAD, AND THE HEART OF ALAN GRAHAM

THE WHOLE OF HUMAN LIFE IS MADE UP OF THREADS.

Together, human lives are woven into a fabric made stronger and more useful than its individual parts. But, isolated, each individual strand is more easily frayed, and unless other threads come together to be braided into a cord, the single strand will break on its own. When the threads of each individual life come together, they become a thing that derives its strength and resilience from the structured collection of its parts. And while our lives are made up of threads that seem disconnected, they are actually incredibly intertwined and tightly woven together.

The first intersection of threads in life is that strong, yet fragile, intertwining braid with the people who bring you into this world. That being said, the first and only memory I have of my parents together under the same roof as a married couple was when I was about four years old. My mom was standing on their bed with a knife in her hand, threatening my dad.

This took place in the master bedroom of a house in Bellaire, Texas, a suburb that's now been swallowed inside the city of Houston. This was a simple one-story home typical of

those built in the suburbs in the early '50s, and at the time probably only cost about twelve thousand dollars. Like all childhoods, there are memories both sweet and sour, but this memory stands out because it is an origin story, a vivid depiction of our personal dysfunction. Mother needed help, but we didn't know that yet.

My dad worked for Humble Oil, which is ExxonMobil today. He was married to a stay-at-home mom who grew up in Wichita Falls. She aspired to be an actress and went west to California's famed Pasadena Playhouse, later crossing stage left to New York City. Things didn't work out on either coast, so she moved to Houston where she met my dad in 1950. My oldest brother was born in November 1951, and Mother told everyone he was born premature, coming in at just under eight and a half pounds. Funny. If you sit and do the math it just doesn't quite add up.

Eight years later, she was standing over my father, wielding a knife, and the next thing you know she's in the hospital. While she was admitted, she was subjected to some of the most powerful psychotropic drugs known to man. She was given electroshock therapy that froze her brain completely and unalterably. During these treatments, my father filed for divorce and unleashed an Armageddon of a custody battle for me and my brothers. He remarried pretty quickly, too, and as I look back, something was clearly going on while my mom was in the hospital. He was distracted and often unavailable, and, the truth is, I have always felt a bit sad for my dad. He missed out on so many memories—now stories that have filled the time I've shared with my own thirty-two-year-old marriage and four kids. I would have wished the same memories for him.

My maternal grandparents were well-off and opened their

purses like God opened the earth to swallow my father in the custody battle. They also were able to get their daughter some of the finest mental health care in the world, sending her to the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, at that time, which gained its reputation as the leading intensive, individualized treatment for patients with complex symptoms. Think Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland.

When she was released from the hospital, my brothers and I went with her. It's difficult enough for a single mom to raise a family, much less a single mom with an extreme mental health disability. By the time I was in the third grade, my mother—our caretaker and provider—was spinning out of control. She was hospitalized again, and off we went to live with my dad and stepmother, until another custody battle was fought, which Mom would win again.

She was probably hospitalized eight or nine times over long periods for the rest of her life. The drugs and the electroshock therapy began to take their toll. By the time I was in junior high, Mom was an embarrassment. My brothers and I didn't want to be around her. She had noticeable tics from the drugs' side effects, and as far as hygiene was concerned, she didn't give a crap. Poor Mom didn't have the capacity; when she would go deep into her psychosis, it was a total train wreck.

On Easter Sunday, March 29, 1970, I was fourteen years old. There were two tickets to see Led Zeppelin on my bedside table. This was during the Led Zeppelin II Tour, when I was (and continue to be) a huge Led Zeppelin fan. I was *stoked*. I was lying in bed when a knock came from the front door. I looked out the window of my second-story bedroom (by this time, we had moved from Bellaire to another area of Houston), and just

beyond our mailbox were maybe three or four Houston Police Department cruisers parked out front. I knew they were looking for me, so I did what any kid would do. I hid in the closet.

As it turned out, this was not a very good hiding place, and I was promptly arrested.

During that time of my life, my friends and I would take cars and go on joyrides. The coup de grâce was when we decided to have a little destruction derby in a vacant field near our under-construction neighborhood. It seemed harmless, but deep down we knew we were being destructive. I have to admit, though, that to this day a little smile comes across my face thinking about those times. I remember sitting in the police station and saying to one of the officers, “If you wouldn’t mind calling my mom, I’ve got these two tickets to see Led Zeppelin tonight, and I’d really love to go.”

The officer laughed. Obviously.

It didn’t really matter one way or the other. Mom was in no condition to come get me anyway. She was sitting in her own filth as I sat in the filth of thousands of miscreants, ne’er-dowells, and the dregs of society just like me who had been left in the Harris County Juvenile Detention Center for Day One . . . Day Two . . . Day Five . . . Day Seven . . . Day Eight . . .

I finally came to the realization that no one was coming for me, except for maybe the transporter to take me to the Prison for Juvenile Delinquents in Gatesville. But there was an upside: my time spent inside those sad, gray, stark walls was pretty spiritual—as I sat there saying, *Come on, God; show up.*

Finally, my (biological) father showed up.

It turns out that he wanted me to marinate in that place before he got me out, but it was an important moment in my

life—the moment when I began to see a pattern form in the tapestry of intertwining lives.

Let me just say that my dad was not a great father, and I feel sorry for him because he missed out on that. And though his coming did not fix or repair all that was going on in my life, it did straighten out the course enough for me to be where I am today. Whereas many of my friends would have—and *did*—end up on the streets. No mother or father got them out, and so, despite any possible fleeting poor choices or unfortunate circumstances, they became locked into that system. Meaning, they sat there until they were released onto the streets where they would stay because they had no place else to go.

They became homeless—physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically.

The challenge—especially in dealing with such homelessness—is understanding. We have to recognize our own human weaknesses—our own fallibility. We have to realize that most of us are not *that* far from bankruptcy or foreclosure. Any of us could be laid off or suffer a sudden, debilitating injury. Any of us could be negatively affected by the lottery of birth, born into a dysfunctional household with no father to come and get us out of jail, or simply drew the short lot.

And then what? Where would we be?

But I digress.

Around the same time as my conditional conversion experience, my mother had one of her own. She became Roman Catholic. None of my siblings have any memory of going to church until this point, when she began to drag us to Mass, had us baptized, confirmed—all that religious stuff. I felt like I was the only one who wanted to go to church with her on

Sundays (at least that's how I remember it). For many years, she and I were the only ones to go to Mass, simply for our deep love for the church and its rituals, despite her unpredictable, crazy mental tendencies.

Maybe it was surprising that I eventually left it—like many do—but that love was deeply embedded into my DNA. Deep down, it was there. So, when I met my wife, Tricia, in the late 1980s, I considered returning. At that time, I couldn't care less about any "church." But Tricia was Catholic, so I kind of had to be in the church. At first we were the Christmas/Easter Catholics. Then I began to see Tricia taking the kids to Mass on Sundays, and it just looked like the train was leaving the station—so I made the decision to hitch my car to the family car. Now I had to endure the-kneel-and-stand-and-kneel-and-stand and so on part of Mass. But going through the motions yet again became another thread in my journey to where God was moving me, slowly, carefully, into these right places of *I am going to do something for you and with you, but it is going to come later.*

If you look over a lifetime, you begin to see these moments intertwine and think, *Where do I currently reside on this seamless garment that is being weaved? Which thread do I reside on?* I'm not sure how or why you have this book in your hands, but now that you do, our threads are crossing over one another, and we are connected, whether we're aware of it or not.

To be fully human and fully aware of this beautiful, seamless garment that is being woven, you must really discover who you are in Christ.

And who are you?

You are made in a very distinct image. You are a member

of the huge human family, where we're all brothers and sisters no matter where you come from, whatever your culture, your religion, or background. You were born in weakness, you will grow, and, eventually, you will die. Your story is the same as mine or anyone else's. It's a story of accepting that though we are a fragile individual thread, we are made stronger through our interaction with others. The mosaic that many of us call the body of Christ is incomplete unless there are no missing tiles; everyone is included. The banquet table of inclusion is infinite.

I see all these little moments along the way pushing me—all of these threads in this fabric pulling me. My mom's conversion. Her mental health issues. My walking away from the church. The reintroduction to God through my wife.

This kind of introspection isn't just how my mind works. Every single person in this whole world asks four questions: *Where am I? Who am I? What's wrong? What's the remedy?*

In other words: *How can I find a way through brokenness, chaos, and insecurity so that life can be secure and whole again? Where and how might I find a home?*

After a few years in the church, I began to build an intellectual relationship with God. I was studying everything I could about the Roman Catholic and the Protestant church, the Reformation, and more. I wanted to know everything so I could take the roots back to the cross. I had the head, but I didn't have the heart.

I went on a men's retreat called Christ Renews His Parish. Had I known going into it that we were going to hold hands and pray—God forbid, hug each other—I would not have gone. I never wanted *that* to be my spirituality. I spent the first few

hours of a thirty-hour retreat feeling pretty uncomfortable, thinking, *How the hell can I get out of here?* I thought the retreat would be an opportunity to network with some medium-to-high net-worth Catholic guys, and maybe learn a little more about our faith. But, in reality, it wasn't that at all. After about four hours into it, however, I started thinking, *Maybe I'll put in another hour or two.* Before I knew it, it was one o'clock in the afternoon, and I was a spiritually broken man. For the first time in my life, I felt something inside of me—I thought, *Just say yes.*

Just say yes.

This moment was another pivotal moment of discovery in my design. This moment was the first turn of my spiritual rheostat knob. You know that little rotating, circular light-dimmer-switch knob most likely found on a wall in your house? The one you click on and the light is as dim as it can be, but as you turn the knob, the light becomes brighter? Anyway, on the “Alan Graham Wall” are two rheostat knobs. One is my professional rheostat, which, at this time, was high voltage—all the power and light was as strong and bright as it could be. Then there was the ministry light on the other side. When I clicked that one on, a dim light illuminated, and the other (the professional knob) dropped a notch. The diminution of the light was almost imperceptible, but, over time, those rheostats began to move in opposite directions. I think this moment at the retreat was when the movement was so great that you could discern the ministry light beginning to illuminate the room. It was a gradual process. But this was a big moment that led to a series of “just say yes” events.

I realized who I am through discovering the unity between my head and my heart. Through the head we are called to grow,

to understand, and to work through things. But the heart is something completely, 100-percent different. The heart is a call for the concern of others.

This opened me up spiritually, making me susceptible to the opportunities that would unfold in the coming weeks. More so, this moment accentuated the fact that God equips the called, but He doesn't call the equipped.

As always, God would provide.

I don't know why, but I have consistently been called into leadership. I don't know if it's a selfish call, or if it just happened naturally, but I've always led—the German club, student council, football, stuff like that. So it's no surprise that I found myself acting as spiritual director to a group of men called CRHP (pronounced *chirp* and standing for Christ Renews His Parish) Team 10. At the same time, Catholic Charities was putting together something called the SACK (Social Assistance Christian Kitchen) Lunch Program. They were trying to bring together five cross-denominational churches to provide fifty sack lunches to the day-labor sites in downtown Austin. Of course, when my church came to me and asked me to lead that program, I just said yes.

I could see right off the bat that they needed leadership. I promptly took over.

Tricia and I organized all five churches, figured out all the health department requirements, decided how each church was going to be involved, scheduled what the menu was going to be every week, and organized and created a team structure where every night, five nights a week, volunteers would come make the lunches, which included two sandwiches, milk or juice, a boiled egg, a piece of fruit, a pack of cookies, and a

prayer card inside a brown paper bag. The next day, somebody from that team would get them out of the refrigerator, haul them downtown, and bring back the empty crates.

The system was humming.

And then, sometime in the spring of 1998, my wife, our friend Mary Ann, and I had coffee together. Now, I maintain that we were having coffee at Jason's Deli, Tricia believes we were at home, and Mary Ann clearly remembers we were at church. Wherever it was (definitely Jason's Deli), this was the place I had the vision for what would later become Mobile Loaves & Fishes. And when Catholics have visions, the location where they have these visions becomes a pilgrimage site, and from that place comes holy water and medals and all kinds of spiritual craziness. It's funny, because this vision was planted in the brain of an inexperienced, unknowledgeable man with no real idea of how he was going to do it. This man also just so happened to be a Catholic *and* a serial entrepreneur—a recipe for never forgetting the vision.

Mary Ann was telling us about a ministry in Corpus Christi that pooled resources from multiple churches to give to the people who lived on the streets during the cold winter nights. As she spoke, the image of a catering truck entered my mind, bringing necessities from those of abundance to those who lack the most basic of human needs.

I didn't really know what a catering truck entailed. Remember, this is before the food-truck craze. I'd never eaten from a catering truck. I'd seen them. I'd gone so far as to make fun of them, calling them "roach coaches." Nonetheless, this idea of an effective yet affordable means of delivering food to the hungry would not go away. When I went to bed that night,

it was still on my mind. I woke up the next morning knowing that we could franchise it and bring it to every church, every city, and every state to feed the homeless. (This is how entrepreneurs think: one truck becomes a thousand.)

Finally, after a couple of weeks of this idea not going away, I told Tricia about it. She just looked at me and said, “Oh geez, here we go again.” (This is how the wife of an entrepreneur thinks: feast or famine.)

But she knew I was on point and that nothing could get me off it. I don’t quit, even when facing the most difficult of circumstances.

There’s no such thing as coincidence. There are no accidents in life. Everything that happens is the result of a calculated move that leads us to where we are. As G. K. Chesterton put it, coincidences are just “spiritual puns.”¹

When my spiritual rheostat turned at that first meeting, it allowed me to be susceptible to the opportunities that would open in the coming weeks. First, the Catholic Charities program that prepared me and planted a vision. And, finally, the moment of vision becoming reality—of abstract becoming actuality.

That moment: As the spiritual director, I took a group of thirty men on their journey. This journey included four men I was born to meet. These men would later become some of my greatest friends: Bruce Agness, Jack Selman, Mark White (a sociologist), and Pat Patterson.

Instead of men talking about hunting, fishing, and women, we talked about family and God. It’s a relationship thing that none of us had ever experienced.

There was also another significant player.

Enter Houston Flake.

So then there were six. We called ourselves the “Six-Pack.” There is much meaning in that term. You decipher.

Houston Flake was born in 1955 to a very poor mother and father who often were homeless. And Houston Flake, one of the smartest guys I knew, couldn’t read.

But I didn’t know that at the time.

Sunday morning, at the end of our weekend retreat, we came out with bags full of letters. We called them “HELP letters.” As each man read his letters, we went through massive mountains of tissues. These grown men were bawling their eyes out because maybe a wife, a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, or people they didn’t even know were praying for them, and they realized the enormity of the body of Christ, and this seamless woven fabric wrapping around them like a blanket.

Then, Houston got his bag of letters, and he couldn’t . . . freakin’ . . . read.

Shoot. What do we do?

We’ve got to get somebody to read these letters.

Well, Mark’s a sociologist—let’s get him to do it.

I’ve known Mark now for eighteen years, and he rarely talks. He is a great listener. Perhaps the best I have ever met. He’s one of those therapists who just listens, and as he read the letters, we realized they were all from people in prison or kids who grew up on the streets. The letters were all about the amazing impact Houston—who himself had been in prison a couple of times—had made on their lives. Imagine, someone most of us considered part of the despised and outcast group, having such a profound impact on the lives of others in that caste system.

As I was listened to Mark read, I still had that vision of the “roach coach” in my head.

After the weekend was over, Bruce and I were hanging out in the parking lot talking. We wanted to continue the conversation—a conversation that in all reality had begun six months prior. You could even say it began the day I was born.

You see, Bruce was one of those threads that had crossed mine previously, but looking back, I knew it was all for this moment. When we’d first met at the retreat, we shared a little bit of backstory. *My name is Alan Graham. I was born in 1955. I’ve got this. I did that. I smoked dope. I snorted coke. I stole cars.* Whatever your story is, you have about twenty minutes to share it at the retreat. Well, in mine and Bruce’s, we’d both come from Houston, we were both born around the same time, and we both went to Holy Ghost Catholic School when we were kids. It turned out that his mother was my third-grade teacher. And while we may not have met back then, our lives had paralleled and intersected, paralleled and intersected. We immediately bonded because we had such similar experiences.

And as we stood in the parking lot after the retreat, we were now close friends, and he was the first person (besides Tricia) with whom I shared my idea.

“What if we go out and buy a roach coach, fill it up with food, and drive around at night and serve the homeless?” I said.

He looked at me and said, “That’s a phenomenal idea. I’ll put five ‘hun’ in that deal.” I responded with a matching five “hun.” Generosity begets generosity.

He was my first investor, and we figured if we could pull together fifteen hundred bucks more we’d be able to buy a

junker and polish it up. Sure enough, we shared the idea, and a couple other guys wanted in on the deal.

The roach coach idea was kind of happening, but it didn't take long for us to realize that we were just five white guys from Westlake (the highest economic zip code in Austin) thinking that we were going to go out and save the world and help homeless people.

We were clueless.

I don't know what it feels like to walk around all winter in wet shoes. I've never had trench foot. I've never had a skin infection that I couldn't get rid of. I don't know how it feels to hold a sign on a street corner for months at a time. I've never had to defend a grocery cart. My hands don't usually split and seep yellow.

I don't know real physical suffering. But I know a little.

Finally, we realized we needed Houston Flake.

We were meeting in a law office, sketching out the business plan that we'd present to the pastor of St. John Neumann to approve it as a ministry.

Not surprisingly, everyone was comfortable meeting at this location—an eleventh-floor conference room of whatever *hoorah*, ritzy downtown building that overlooks the capitol with a catered-in deli lunch. We had no idea that the only law office conference room that Houston had been in was some hole-in-the-wall court-appointed lawyer guy's office. During the meeting, we discussed what we wanted on the truck. One of us suggested phone cards (this was before cell phones were widely available)—*wouldn't that be awesome?*

Houston looked at us and said, "That is the dumbest idea on the face of the planet. They don't need phone cards. No one

wants to talk to them. They don't want to talk to anybody. You need to put socks on that truck."

Turns out that to this day, the single most desired item on the trucks are socks.

After the meeting, Houston decided to take me to his own conference room.

We drove into South Austin and walked up a dirt path into the woods—grass growing high and filled with thorny stickers. Trash was strewn about here and there. About a hundred yards out, a woman sat in a chair drinking a beer, smoking a cigarette. The closer I got, the more stereotypically "homeless" the woman appeared. All of a sudden, I was absolutely, 100 percent in a space where I had no idea why I was there. I was a traveler in a foreign land.

As we approached, Houston said, "Hello, Marge. How are you doing today?"

She rose from the chair. He reached around, grabbed her, and pulled her in with this great bear hug. He had his hands on her shoulders and as he released the hug, he planted the sweetest platonic kiss on her lips.

I was looking at an ex-con, former heroin junkie, dope addict, alcoholic. And I was just this white guy from Westlake Hills. I knew I was about to be introduced to Marge, and I was going to have to shake her hand. I had no idea what was on that hand. Where had that hand been? What kind of cooties was I going to get off that deal? What disease might I contract? What was going to happen here?

What was happening was this: Christ had sent Houston to hold my hand and journey with me through this spiritual, stereotyping brick wall—slice through it like a stick of hot butter,

and take me to the other side to the point where I could be soaked in urine and receive a big bear hug. Where I could learn to embrace the bouquet of Christ. The bouquet that more often smells of urine, feces, and days-old body odor than it does of freshly harvested roses.

Of all the people I have ever met in my life, in terms of who emulates Christ as I understood to be the Messiah, Houston Flake was number one.

In our culture we dress up these megachurch pastors in these little suits, with their “education” and their ability to vaguely pontificate, and we think those people best emulate the Jesus of today. Whereas the image of Jesus of today and tomorrow and yesterday is really the Houston Flakes—the broken and the battered, the Peters and the Pauls, the Thomases, the persecuted. Servitude that transcends. Not pastors in castles.

Jesus understood the connection between people was always meant to be relational, not transactional. In the beginning, it wasn’t so much that there were plants and animals and no sin; it was that man had a deep connection with everything.

Think about it.

We are born into a relationship. You are born in the womb, deeply connected to and dependent on your mother. You eat what she eats. You hear what she hears. That need for connection doesn’t change, but it can end up looking like a lot of different things. What gives consistency to people is a deep sense of worth—a feeling of being loved as we are loved by God.

So there’s the head, where we are called to understand and to deepen the laws of the world, of nature, and so on. But there’s also the heart. The heart is a very fragile part of us that allows us to feel connected to nature and tend to it.

So, to be fully human is tying together the heart and the head, and by doing this, we can be more aware of the threads that connect us.

You know that feeling of reading a book filled with dynamic characters who are so vivid and well-described, with so much backstory, that you feel like you know them? And when you finish the book you are a little sad to be leaving the story? Well, the world is filled with these stories, and all it takes is for you to just say *yes* to people.

To see people, we have to engage.

We have to get out of our cars and talk to people. To understand the street, we have to walk the street. To weave a tapestry, we have to first find the threads.

We have to see how others live.

Start seeing the world for what it really is—dirty, rough, tragic, and beautiful.

It is truly a wonderful mess.

This doesn't mean pulling up to a stoplight and talking to a guy every once and a while—learning his name and making yourself feel good. You can't drive away thinking, *Oh, poor thing*. You can't understand the heart of people from a car. You've got to get out of the car. You've got to crawl on your hands and knees. You've got to make desperate attempts to truly connect and learn someone's story. You've got to empathize, not sympathize.

Take that loose thread. Start to pull. Let the whole thing unravel. Let's start making something stronger. More beautiful.

Or you could just turn up your radio.