

GOD
GRACE
AND
HORSES

GOD GRACE AND HORSES

Life Lessons from the Saddle



LAURIE M. BROCK



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God, Grace, and Horses: Life Lessons from the Saddle

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To

THE WEDNESDAY NIGHT RIDERS

at Wingswept Farm.

And in memory of
CHAMPION TIPITINA,
who let us soar when we rode her.

And of
JACK,
who taught so many to love horses.
Your love and spirit remain with us.

And to
NINA,
always.

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INTRODUCTION

*H*umans walk about four miles an hour. When we lived in a time when walking was our main mode of movement, our lives and our communities were fairly small—our entire world probably existed about ten or twenty miles around us.

I'm not sure, for most of us, our daily lives today exist much beyond that same ten or twenty miles, but the possibility, even the probability, of more, is attainable and fairly effortless. We drive our cars to the new restaurant in the next town over on a Friday night. We catch a train to move across several states in a few hours. We board a plane and go across the country or the world for a business trip or vacation. We journey and move to new places without much thought.

Our ancestors moved differently. They walked. If they were ingenious and daring and near a body of water that wasn't too deadly to navigate, they boated.

Until the horse.

That one partnership, that one moment when one creature of God looked at another creature of God and wondered, "What if?" changed us. Humans formed a relationship with something that moved us beyond the known and familiar. While humans and horses walk about the same speed, horses can trot long distances at eight miles per hour and gallop at up to thirty-five miles per hour for short distances. A well-conditioned horse can cover one hundred miles per day.

Our relationship with horses moved us beyond the world we knew into something larger and vaster. Horses gave us the ability to explore, to connect with other peoples and communities, and to move differently. Suddenly a village that

was two hours away by walking on our own two feet became easily accessible on horseback. Horses connected us with each other, just by their very embodiment, by doing what horses do.

And horses did something else. We could take things with us. A person used to carrying things from place to place can generously carry forty to fifty pounds. A horse, however, can carry about 200 pounds. Add a cart to that, and now that same horse can transport twice their body weight. So that village two hours away by foot suddenly becomes closer, and now we can take things.

We could also use the strength of a horse to plow fields and grow more food. And horses became our partners in defending our communities from those who were not welcome or, perhaps unfortunately, offered us ways to invade other communities. Trade, interaction, community, and even our modern concepts of political societies began to take shape in a new way. Because of horses.

Not until the early 1800s did the advent of steam locomotion have such a tremendous impact on how humans move in our daily lives. But we've been in a relationship with horses for around 6,000 years.

My relationship with horses began when I was three. My father's family had horses, and one of my first times sitting on a horse was captured in a photograph. When I see it, I see two creatures of God who are wondering, "What if?" What if I rode you to somewhere else? What if I listened to your wisdom, to who you are? What if my breath became so intertwined with yours that I learned to breathe better, to live better, to pray better? What if I let you move me in a different way to an understanding of God and grace that was beyond anything I could discover on my own?

I'm still trying to do these things.

However, I'm fairly sure my three-year-old self didn't think any of that, not then. I just loved holding on to the thick, wavy mane of the mare on which I sat.

I rode casually and inconsistently for years until my soul needed to be moved away from the familiarity I had known, the ten- to twenty-mile radius of the words of the prayers of faith I'd used, still holy and useful, until my soul knew that just over the edge of the landscape, God had something . . . more.

And the one way I could get there involved a horse.

So I saddled up and rode. I got some bruises and broken bones along the way. I shed some tears in the face of the overwhelming feeling that is stepping into something new for the first time, or stepping into something new for the seven hundredth time but realizing that on this occasion the journey will forever mark your soul. You may not even be aware that you're on such a journey until you are well down the road.

The Kentucky cowgirl in me was excited about this journey. She is always up for any excuse to wear her boots. But the priest who spent more time than she often wanted in the margins of mystery and vulnerability of human life, felt a bit of dread and absurdity about an adventure that guaranteed a shift, a transformation, a difference, a movement somewhere. But the human in me? She took a deep breath and climbed in the saddle.

Kentucky writer Wendell Berry shares this ambivalence, when we leave the familiar, secure places and venture into unknown wide-open spaces: "You are undertaking the first experience, not of the place, but of yourself in that place. It is an experience of our essential loneliness, for nobody can discover the world for anybody else."¹

Humans have ridden horses for eons, and we've been in a relationship with them for far longer. These chapters are all about my experience in the saddle. No other human can discover the world for anybody else, but we can resonate with each other's experiences. We can and do need companions along the way as we learn to move differently. I saddled up, and let horses move me from what was familiar into what I needed to discover about God, about grace, and about me.

GOD
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HORSES

PART ONE

ON THE TRAIL



*The spiritual journey is like a road
that goes from somewhere to nowhere.*

We know the starting point, but we see the destination only dimly.

—MICHAEL CASEY, *GRACE: ON THE JOURNEY TO GOD*

J balanced on the second rail of the fence and pulled my left leg over the top rail. Checking the ground on the other side to make sure it wasn't a slop of spring mud, I made the short jump down to the ground. Jumping over a fence was one of those significant measures of age—it is a skill that gets more challenging as the birthdays pass, as my knees reminded me when I landed.

Tonight, I was jumping a fence into the field where the pregnant mares were grazing. A large piece of white plastic had blown into the field. Some of the mares were already wary of this interloper into their paddock. Horses, for all their vast, deep intelligence, also have the amazing ability to find trouble. My grandfather once noted that if you had one hundred acres fenced off for a horse to live in with one nail sticking out of one board on that long line of fence, a horse will find the one nail on the one board and manage to hurt itself.

This six-foot piece of plastic would certainly be terrifying enough to startle the mares, and they did not need to be startled with babies so close to being born. Some of the mares eyed me, the new interloper in their space. They quickly went back to grazing. Apparently, I didn't register as a threat to them.

I wadded up the white plastic and climbed back on the fence, taking some time to sit on the weathered wooden rail in the March evening, a bit warmer than usual. After several weeks of March's leonine ice storms, snowfall, and lows well below zero, I appreciated the toasty evening in the high forty-degree range. I watched this group of mares, their bellies lush and heavy in various stages of carrying the newest generation of Wingswept foals. After several moments, two of them began to walk on the trail they had made.

In this field, one of the larger ones at Wingswept Farm, where I ride horses in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, the horses have walked in the same steps as horses from years past and created a well-trodden series of trails in this field. They have a huge spread of grass, but a three-foot packed dirt ribbon looped over the hill from the front part of the field and meandered down to where I now sat on the fence. The path branched, and the branches led to a water trough, their feed buckets, and the run-in shed, which is a three-sided building open in the front so horses can run into it and be sheltered from the weather. These are the common places all horses need to find to survive.

We humans follow trails to the place we need to find to survive, although I'm not sure we're as efficient as horses are. I'm certainly not.

I've followed plenty of trails I didn't carve out, or really even want to walk. But when I was young, when we are all young, part of youth is following the trails created by those who are older and presumably wiser (although not always). I've wandered over many trails, hoping they would lead somewhere, to something I needed to survive. Some did. Many didn't.

I walked a trail away from the faith of my childhood and youth that didn't lead to a place of springs. It led instead into the wilderness of believing in God, but not believing in a formal religion. That path was wide-open, and I needed to wander for quite some time. Then I listened to a quiet whisper that invited me down another trail to find the Episcopal Church, and eventually another trail to ordination. Those trails were well-trod and well-packed by the many who walked them before me, but God still called me, as God calls all of us, to walk our own way.

I walked the manicured trails and followed the arrows and again found myself following the trails marked by others. These trails were often the trails of “supposed to” and career advancement. Yes, even in the church, we speak of decisions and choices that will look good on the resume. Clergy often gave me advice how I, as a young woman priest, could be taken “more seriously” as a priest. So once again, I found myself too often going from one destination to another, following the directions of others because I was fearful of wandering, fearful of being lost, fearful of following the trails God called me on that might not be as well-worn or as clearly marked.

One evening, while preparing for a Sunday school class I was teaching, I wondered just how far the Hebrews actually had to walk from Egypt to the Promised Land. I dragged out my Bible atlas, which had been mostly unused since seminary. I discovered that the distance, about 240 miles on the most direct route, meant that the Israelites basically averaged six miles per year on their journey.

Even if they were taking a leisurely stroll and in no hurry to settle down in a homeland, six miles per year seems to be an incredibly slow pace, a pace that is almost purposeful in its dawdling. Using the average human and horse walking speed of three to four miles per hour, walking four hours a day for five days a week, the Hebrews would have arrived in the Promised Land in about a month.

And yet, they didn't.

Something about wandering in the desert for forty years mattered, and that wandering formed them into the chosen people of God who were embraced in covenant.

Being the people of God is not something we earn; it is instead a space we inhabit not from our sureness, but from

our vulnerability and wandering and learning, of walking on trails that lead to somewhere and some that lead to nowhere. This forming came and comes from experiencing things vastly different from our expectations, from a fair amount of complaining and arguing (WHEN are we getting there?!?), from obedience and disobedience, with consequences for both.

I had slipped into the patterns of following trails because someone else suggested them, rather than doing my own work and discernment to follow the trail God called me to walk. The many trails we encounter can be confusing, to say the least. Not all of them lead to things that are life-giving.



I shifted on the fence and watched a group of mares follow the trail from the far edge of the field to the run-in shed. Night was coming and my guess was that they sensed the winter wind was not done on this March evening and would be arriving in the next few hours. Horses are sometimes better predictors of weather than the local news.

They also know how to follow a trail. Whether from smell or memory or a combination of senses, horses can find their way to where they need to go. For those of us who join them for the ride, they take us where we need to go too.

Almost a decade ago, when I found myself on the trail of working too much and having too little of a life that fed me with the sustenance of God, quenched my thirst for love, and sheltered me when I was vulnerable, I found horses. I followed an unlikely trail to them, and horses took me on another trail, a holy trail.

Most of the trails I ride with them have been walked before. Sometimes we wander in the meadows behind the barn. Sometimes I find trails in wide-open spaces on new horses.

Being on the trail with horses gives me space to breathe and to be.

They notice things, and I notice things.

They are companions along the way, to sometimes ask me if this indeed is the trail we need to take. They slow me down when I feel rushed, their meandering walking pace giving my soul time to catch up with my body.

Horses take me on the holy trails where God walks with us.

CHAPTER 1

Easy Silence



*For God alone my soul in silence waits;
truly, here is my hope.*

—PSALM 62:6 ²

Centering prayer is a prayer practice that involves silence, an emptying almost, of our words and even images as we offer ourselves in prayer with God simply by our presence. Practitioners sit for a significant time, finding silent union with God. The method I was taught involves choosing a word to center my intention, and when my thoughts drift away from the simple silence that is the pure encounter with God, the word serves as a way back to the place of prayer. Cistercian monk Thomas Keating is credited with bringing centering prayer into the common practice of many Christians. A Buddhist monk colleague opined that it resembled the meditation practice some Buddhists have practiced for a few eons.

I didn't disagree.

She invited me to practice meditation with her, and some months ago I decided I needed to amp up my prayer practice and agreed to join her once a week.

Why? Who knows. In a moment of searching for things that will make the hard questions and the hardness of life easier, I thought sitting in quiet contemplation would be the answer. Emptying myself to the fullness of God would give me a way to connect with God. I've always admired my friends who

practiced centering prayer each day. Centering prayer seemed a level up from the Daily Office I prayed each morning and evening. Advanced prayer, I guess.

In our first session, she invited me to sit comfortably in a cross-legged position and blow my nose as we began our practice of meditation/centering prayer. Cleaning out one's nostrils is apparently a good precursor to prayer. We started.

I shifted.

She sat.

I shifted and found myself wondering about the sale that started at the tack store tomorrow. I could always use a new pair of riding boots.

As if she could read my mind, she said, "Draw your awareness back to your breath, not to the distractions of the day."

I breathed, but rather than a release into God kind of breath, it was more like one of those exasperated sighs that my horse, Nina, gives me when I have given her the last of the peppermints and now she's forced to eat her hay.

I made it for five practices, my frustration growing with each one. I've always been an advocate that committing to a daily prayer practice takes work. After all, the ancestors of my faith didn't call it a spiritual discipline for nothing. Discipline is work. Discipline reminds us that there are tasks necessary for instruction and learning that aren't easy or fun. For me, this prayer practice felt like I was praying to get myself out of trouble, as if I had to write, "I will sit in profound silence to find God," on the chalkboard one thousand times or be banished to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Prayer as penitential chastisement is apparently a bridge too far for my soul, so on the day I had my sixth meditation

practice on my calendar, I texted my Buddhist colleague that I deeply appreciated her time, but after reflection, I realized I was not experiencing God in this type of sitting prayer, and I needed a few weeks' break.

Actually, I texted that something came up at the church and I'd talk to her later.

I'm a born explainer, thinking somehow if I flesh out the reason I don't like something, the perceived rejection will land more softly. However, the part of me that has slowly learned that "No" is a complete sentence stepped outside on this perfect spring day and said, "Let's go ride."

Which is exactly what I did.

I went to the barn, saddled up Nina—my elegant, sassy princess, a chestnut-colored American Saddlebred horse—and set off for a ride on the paths that surround the barn in the woods.

Kentucky has four distinct seasons, sometimes all in one day. The stagnant heat of summer was still months away, and the icy exhaustion of winter had finally given way to spring. Spring had secured its presence, which in Kentucky is no small feat. From the last snowfall until the sustained arrival of spring, we can have any number of winters, all with a name—redbud winter, dogwood winter, locust winter, blackberry winter, and linsey-woolsey britches winter. The last one usually arrives in late May and is the final appearance of winter clothing made of a homespun linen-wool combination. Or, by today's standards, the Patagonia puffer jacket winter, which had come and gone two weeks ago.

Spring is the season where all creation stretches and moves again, freed from the deep rest winter demands and, in fact, our souls demand. We need rest, the deep repose that winter

offers in the more northern climates. My ancestors spent winter by pot-bellied stoves mending clothes and sitting. Of course, animals needed to be fed and wood needed to be chopped, but winter was by and large a time of lying fallow.

Then, slowly, days lengthened and snow melted, leaving mud. Lots of mud. I kept a pair of muck boots in my SUV for the trudge into a paddock to get a horse or the walk to the barn. There, I changed into old riding boots, saddled up Nina, and let her stomp through the mud to the trail, less muddy because the roots of trees rousing from their winter rest were taking the water into themselves and flinging it out in spurts of green leaves and white, red, pink, and purple blossoms.

The air was warm with just enough bits of chill to keep the sweat from running down my back and the bugs at bay. I clucked Nina forward past the edge of the fence line. We walked past the paddock where Woody the stallion, whom she hates, lived, and then moved through a gateway of dogwood branches into the easy silence of the woods.

A few feet in and Nina realized we were on a trail ride. Nina thinks trail rides are the cat's pajamas. Her ears pricked up, her hind hooves pranced. She was excited.

In response to her energy, I sank into her. My hips rolled under slightly and my rear sat deeply in the saddle. I got comfortable and quiet. My feet dropped out of the stirrups and my legs reached downward, letting gravity gently add space between bones and joints that are too often pounded into each other by the jarring work of living.

Being with her energy allowed me to rest in my lack of it. In these moments on the trail, I don't have to be up or ready. I'm not worried about my shoulders being back or holding her head in that position that stretches her neck out in an elegant

arch, which are the hallmarks of riding a Saddlebred. We were on a trail, and the audience was simply each other. I became part of her for the time I was on the trail and could simply ride. I rode for the sake of movement alone, not worrying about a destination, but just being present to the moment.

Nina occasionally stopped to notice something she deemed interesting—a newly sprouted leaf alone on a branch being moved by the slightest breeze, the way the sunlight fell in a dappled pattern on the forest floor of decaying leaves and pine straw, even a golfer who suddenly stopped before making her putt to notice Nina and me. The trail followed the tree line that is shared with a golf course for part of the way.

Nina and I were both more impressed by the trees than the golfer on this day. Unlike in my centering prayer practice, I don't need a word to bring me back to my intention or to focus on my breath when my mind wanders. I'm riding a horse with her own breath and intention that keeps me focused even when I'm aware of the world around me.

This world is one that lets the weight of me and my anxieties and concerns and worries fall away on the back of Nina, drip down my legs, which are dangling free of stirrups, and drop back into the deep earth to be mulched and buried until they can regrow into something useful.

In this prayer, this prayer on horseback, I am carried by Nina in our little partnership of love and companionship on a trail.

I wonder if the practices of centering prayer, meditation, and other acts of quiet solitude with God are our attempts to be carried a while by the Holy. Our souls hurt from walking in this life through the swampy, muddy ground of grief and questions and endless needs that seem overwhelming. We use

so much energy explaining, and feel crushed when we aren't heard. We reach for options and alternatives that will help us find peace and quiet because we are tired.

I am tired.

And so, in prayer, I desperately want God to hold me, carry me, direct me to a mountain hideout that is a place of refuge in the midst of a world that is always in some stage of burning down. I want to find that holy, easy silence that, at least for a time, puts some space between the world and all its crazy and me. I want to be held in peace, where I can breathe and be, just simply be, without to-do lists or noise or any other static that fills my soul.

Some find that place in centering prayer or meditation or even walking along footpaths in the woods. I find this prayer of easy silence on a trail ride on Nina.

We moved together in the quiet and stillness that is the movement of horses and God. Walking, being supported, and being carried. Centering prayer and meditation, at least how I've been taught, invite practitioners, whenever we become aware of feelings, thoughts, to-do lists, or other distractions, to return to a sacred word to root ourselves in the practice. Thomas Keating wrote that this prayer practice consists in letting go of every kind of thought during prayer, even the most devout thoughts.

Maybe my prayer word is "horse," and it is not a word to be said, but a living thing to be touched and experienced.

For the time I'm on Nina, I am present in an easy silence. I hear her hooves on the path. I hear the birds move and the breeze.

My thoughts wander and fade until I am present to the slick leather of the saddle underneath me and the feel of Nina

moving. I breathe in her scent deeply, that of wildness and companionship that is the smell of horses and God.

What a gift it is to find the silence that allows me to hear the breeze move, the breath of God inhale and exhale, in the world around me. When we are in the Kentucky woods together, even one that borders a golf course, the world is somewhere else, held apart for just a while as Nina carries me.

Prayer, I think, is a practice that moves us into a silence with God where we are made deeply aware of where we are, the easy silence of God and horses. This prayer, one in partnership with Nina, centers me in God.

CHAPTER 2

Drenched



*M*y Alabama Appalachian grandfather would have opined the rain to be a frog strangler.

My grandmother might have offered it was more of a gully washer.

I wondered if Wyoming had either frog stranglers or gully washers, pronounced more like *gully warsher* by most people in the Appalachian foothills of Alabama, except my grandmother, who had the easy, lilting accent of coastal Mississippi with so little use for *r*'s that they were dropped from the end of most words and certainly weren't added in the middle of others.

Wyoming is dry, by and large, so maybe they have little need for the colorful gradations of the rainstorms that deluge the South. The wrangler leading our trail ride simply called it a rainstorm and handed us bright yellow plastic dusters to wear as we climbed in the saddle.

Of course, in the middle of this rainstorm in the mountains of the Grand Tetons, I was on a horse. And of course, this experience of riding in a rainstorm was going to invite me to listen to God. Horses have that effect on me.

As I spread the duster's split tails over the saddle and the back of the horse, I was reminded that fashion was first and foremost functional. The duster covered my legs and most of

the saddle. My inner cowgirl squealed just a bit at the image I had of myself astride a horse, wearing a duster and a cowboy hat. I stood up in the saddle to check my stirrups and quickly realized the functionality of my cowboy hat and the evidence that I didn't wear one regularly.

As I looked down to tie off a rein, a stream of rain fell straight down onto my saddle horn and into my lap from the brim of my hat. So to help the hat do its job of keeping the rain off me and onto the ground, I adapted a swagger tip to the right which had the effect of sending water onto the muddy ground, and also looking cool and cowgirl to anyone who might be watching.

This Kentucky cowgirl on a Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse cross named Maverick rode out of the paddock of standing water and mud, through a thicket of woods, and onto a trail of more mud. I shifted in the Western saddle, significantly larger than the cutback one I usually ride in. Western saddles have structure and gravitas because they are made to hold things—rope, saddlebags, rifle, rider, and even, if necessary, a calf that needs help moving from one grazing field to another (or a fellow cowboy who drank too much and can't ride his own horse home). The stirrups are likewise thick and substantial, easily allowing me to drop more of my weight into my feet as I rode.

My cutback is barely there, a sleek construction of leather made to allow the horse to move and the rider to feel almost every movement. If I ride to a bar in my cutback, only I'm riding home in it. Any friends who need a lift are on their own. Not that I regularly ride my horse to a bar, although Windy Corner, one of my favorite restaurants in Kentucky, does have a hitching post that I've seen used on occasion.

I had noticed that riding horses was not an unusual mode of transportation to watering holes in Wyoming. And I was

in Wyoming, in the Bridger-Teton National Forest, riding on a muddy trail along the edge of a rise, on a horse I didn't know, sitting in a style of saddle I hadn't ridden in well over twenty years, in a frog strangler of a rainstorm. I was dripping water and riding across old cattle trails, past a line shack with four walls, two windows, and the remains of a roof, and through vast fields of sagebrush and thistles.

I reached down to grab a handful of sagebrush as Maverick meandered by. I crushed the silver-grey leaves and petite pale-yellow flowers between my fingers and took a deep breath from the plant. The water had intensified the sage-like smell. Maverick felt me loosen the reins and angled for a thistle. We don't have wild thistle plants growing on the trails where I ride, so the epicurean delight of thistles for horses was unknown to me until Maverick informed me that thistles were, in fact, delicious. Maverick got a thistle, and I got a deep breath of rainy, sage-dense air of Wyoming.

I suspect we were both content in our drenched selves.

My first ride had been this morning, but the rain came, and the larger group of riders from the morning settled in around a fire in the great room of the ranch lodge with books, cards for a poker game, or puzzles. Four of us, including the wrangler, the woman who leads the trail ride, headed out into the Wyoming rain in early September. Our occasional yells to each other to signal low branches or that we had not fallen from our horses were the only noise that interrupted the steady harmony of rain and horse hooves sloshing along: nature's version of a candlelit church, perhaps, where something about the environs invites us not to talk except when functional.

Our voices joined the practicality of cowboy hats and dusters. Use when necessary.

Our small group of quiet, wet riders and horses came to a slope. I gave Maverick his head by dropping my hand down and forward so the reins loosened and I leaned back a bit. This allows horses to see their surroundings better to place hooves with sureness. I felt him steady his hooves and slide down the muddy embankment. Then he clopped across the wooden bridge, stopped and surveyed the path forward, which was viscous, runny mud. Maverick snorted, sounding in my mind like his derision of such an unpleasant path. He moved sideways, off the path, to create his own by crushing through the sagebrush on the side to the top of the rise. In his own time, he found the trail again. The wrangler told me he wasn't always a fan of the trail, so not to worry when he made his own, even if it seemed perilously close to the edge of a cliff or, in this case, a slide down a slope.

I did not know horses could slide in mud. I did not know the path Maverick saw, but I trusted him enough to let him take me on it. He knew the trail, the way, better than I.

Then Maverick stopped, short and suddenly. I fell forward a bit in the saddle, all the rain that had gathered on the brim of my hat unceremoniously dumping all over me. Maverick snorted and turned his head, blowing some more.

I clucked him forward. Maverick stood still. Most horses don't resist our asks for no reason, and my guess was he'd caught wind of something that he wasn't sure of, and in the Grand Tetons, it could have been any number of things, at least 73 percent of which might think Maverick and I were this evening's dinner.

And then, at the edge of the tree line, I finally saw what Maverick already knew was there—a doe and three babies. The babies continued to graze, sheltered by the canopy of trees.

The doe watched Maverick and me. Maverick and I watched them. The babies ate, ignoring all of us. The rain fell, and I paid attention.

Here I was, riding in the rain on a horse whose indiscriminating yet precise flat walk wasn't the elegant walks of my Saddlebreds, but was exactly what my wet self and the muddy trail needed. Maverick shuddered, as wet horses do, flinging the droplets from his bay coat and black mane. I breathed in the musty richness of sagebrush, the mellow scent of Maverick's wet coat, and the crisp smell of this frog strangler, gully washer rainstorm.

These were certainly the smells of heaven, right in the mountains of Wyoming.

The ends of my hair that stuck out from the cowboy hat were drenched. The lower parts of my legs not covered by the duster and my boots and my feet in my boots were drenched. My hands and the gloves that covered them were drenched.

This feeling of being drenched was also certainly a feel of heaven too.

I wondered about the generations of cowboys and cowgirls in these mountains who had ridden in the drenching rain and cursed it because they, unlike me, did not have a warm bath waiting after I put up my horse. And I wondered about those who also relished the rain, the drenching that comes with some rarity in Wyoming and maybe even in our own lives. Drenchings are needed to nourish, to wash away, to settle the dust that our often too many movements in life stir up.

The ancients of the church recognized the importance of these drenchings, these moments when rain and tears flow with gentle ferocity. Saint Benedict in his Rule observed that God regards our tears more than the many words we say in

our prayers.³ Water is an important element of the stuff of faith. It's essential in the story of creation. Genesis suggests that the formless void and the water existed together as the foundational elements God used for the complexity of the vast creation. Through the waters of the Red Sea, the Hebrews passed from enslavement to freedom. We sing of this and all the mystery of water in the ancient hymn sung at the Easter Vigil, the *Exsultet*. Baptism, the rite of initiation into most Christian communities, involves water.

This elemental, utilitarian thing is one of the tools God uses to redeem, rescue, and restore humanity. Water is also so ubiquitous we can miss the mystical, life-giving, even destructive power of it.

In my day-to-day life, I avoid being in the rain unless I have to, which is more often than I want but certainly less often than my ancestors. Between plastic and my lifestyle, which is not as outdoorsy as past generations, I can limit my exposure to the art of a good holy drenching.

This, I think, is not good for my soul.

The part of my soul that loves horses more than the comfort of being dry had no desire to miss an opportunity to ride in the rain. After Maverick decided he'd seen enough of the deer, he turned his head toward the other riders, now a small distance in front of us. He shook again, then stepped forward, making his own path. I rode, listening to the hymn of the cushioned squish of mud as Maverick dropped his heavy hooves firmly with each step, and let the water of Wyoming, the water of creation, the water of God, drench me.