



Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith

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A chronicle of faith and spirituality that is at once tough, personal, affectionate, wise and very funny.

From the bestselling author of *Operating Instructions* and *Bird by Bird* comes a chronicle of faith and spirituality that is at once tough, personal, affectionate, wise and very funny.

With an exuberant mix of passion, insight, and humor, Anne Lamott takes us on a journey through her often troubled past to illuminate her devout but quirky walk of faith. In a narrative spiced with stories and scripture, with diatribes, laughter, and tears, Lamott tells how, against all odds, she came to believe in God and then, even more miraculously, in herself. She shows us the myriad ways in which this sustains and guides her, shining the light of faith on the darkest part of ordinary life and exposing surprising pockets of meaning and hope.

Whether writing about her family or her dreadlocks, sick children or old friends, the most religious women of her church or the men she's dated, Lamott reveals the hard-won wisdom gathered along her path to connectedness and liberation.

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith Details

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Saleh MoonWalker says

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Stephen M says

All I should say, is that this book wasn't for *me*.

Perhaps if I was twenty-five years older and a women who frequently goes to church, then I would really be taken away with this one. I understand her appeal as a writer, but it didn't get me.

I'm not anti-religion by any means, I'm open to spirituality; that is probably why I read this book. However, I don't think at this point in my life it means much to me. But who knows? Life changes.

Kate says

A great writer, whether you like the terrain or not.

I have not read any of her other books, but I am a big fan of this one. It is humourous and dear, ripe with blasphemy and deep spirituality all at once, which is just how i like it.

Anne Lamott writes about life and christianity with very real and human eyes. She is blunt but tender in her thoughts, highly educated and yet unafraid to show sentimentality. She is a bundle of extremes that work together beautifully with all their flaws and jumbled opposites. She embraces the grey shades of complexity that invariably lie between the black and white of popular culture and christianity.

I am not the type to read a lot of self-help or religious material, but this book stands apart from such a sordid lot of those types and offers great insight and great storytelling. I would highly recommend this book.

Jeannine says

I have some mixed feelings about this book. I don't really know how to express them clearly, so just let me know if you want a more detailed explanation!

Reading Donald Miller's Blue Like Jazz gave me some clarity as to why I didn't like Traveling Mercies. On the back of Blue Like Jazz, a commentary compares Miller and Lamott, but I completely disagree with that comparison. Before becoming Christians, both had very strong aversions to Christianity and yet both decided to give their lives to Christ as adults. I feel like the similarity stops there. While Miller's writing style is very accessible, I feel like Lamott is very unorganized, jumping quite randomly from one story to another.

But even more important is that while Miller holds true to the Bible (after evaluating whether or not Christianity is something he believes), Lamott seems to pick and choose whatever she wants to about what God's word says. I really appreciated how Miller addressed tough questions and issues in *Blue Like Jazz*—especially how to be friends, accept, and tolerate his non-believer friends while at the same time holding true to God's word. Lamott doesn't ever seem to address some of those absolutes in God's word and instead appears to ignore what the Bible says. I wish she had given more insight of how she actually integrates how God and His word into her daily life and relationships.

Kurt says

The title is a fair summary of the contents of this book. It really is just a collection of thoughts by Anne Lamott, largely on faith. I was expecting it to deal more with a specifically Christian faith, but Lamott really doesn't do that. In an alternate reality, if she had found Buddha instead of Jesus in her time of need, and if she had a strong community that didn't happen to be a church, there are really only three or four pages in this book that would need to be changed to fit her circumstances. Lamott references a couple of verses from the Bible about forgiveness, and (in my favorite story, probably because it hasn't been so long since I helped scatter my mother's ashes) she connects the idea of Ash Wednesday to the way a person's ashes stick to your hands and you can't ever really let them go. She admits that her son is trying to irritate her by claiming to believe in "all the gods" instead of just Jesus. But in general, this is religion lite: an occasionally moving (deeply moving - when she succeeds, Lamott really succeeds), often funny, usually frustrating collection of thoughts from someone who seems to like God but doesn't seem to know any more about him than that (to the point of referring to God's gender with "his or her" and making statements like, "If there's a heaven, I imagine it will be like snorkeling.").

Lamott herself can be quite irritating - she is open about her quirks, her struggles, her neediness (she describes one boyfriend as being unable to deal with her tears and fears, and I found myself sympathizing with him). Also, her only interactions with God are when she wants something - praying for herself but also for others, always wanting God to change something, never wondering who he is, reading about what he's done, that kind of thing. It's a well-meaning people-centeredness, but that doesn't make Lamott's spiritual outlook one I would want someone else to adopt. I was relatively entertained while reading, but I can't imagine a situation in which I would hand a copy of this book to someone I liked and say, "You should read this, because in some area of your life, I would like you to be more like this author."

This is a pretty popular book among young Christians these days, so I recommend it for the purpose of being in the loop, but that's about it. I think someone on a spiritual journey, if he or she desires a book in this style, would be better served by hitting Donald Miller.

Susan B. says

Anne Lamott is a person who has lived a lot of life and managed to come through the other side. Thanks to her good sense (and good sense of humor) this book is not so much a victim-y detailing of her descent and recovery, as much as it is a compelling story of how she began to catch glimpses of grace in everyday living. To this end, she offers a series of short vignettes on various topics including hair, beauty, illness, kids, family relationships, politics, music, drugs, eating, sex, etc. All are informed by her trademark self-deprecating humor. This is a good book to read when you feel like you'd like to see the world differently from the way it

usually presents. I bought a copy of it about 7 years ago shortly after a dear Aunt of mine died, but never quite got around to reading it until last week.

I had been thinking my Aunt quite a bit in the last week or so, missing her more intensely than I normally do in the normal course of life. One day I was waiting for the red line train at Belmont, heading south towards downtown. As is pretty common these days, it was slow and running on the wrong side of the track due to construction on the line. When it finally came, I boarded hastily looking for an empty seat and as I sat down I looked up to find a woman who looked remarkably like my Aunt. Same age, hair-do, style of scarf, lipstick type. Then she started to talk to me, just as my Aunt would have talked to a total stranger, about what she was doing that day, where she was going, her kids, her earlier life, crocheting caps for cancer patients and so forth. It could have been my Aunt. Really. Even though I knew better, it felt like it WAS my Aunt, so much so that I felt a real pang of loss, again, and had to choke down a few tears as I climbed up the subway stairs and hurried down the street to my appointment.

I thought about it all week. At the end of the week I learned that in the christian church All Saints Day is supposed to signify a time when the boundary between this world and the next, the material and the spiritual is said to be very thin. I don't think I ever heard that in all the years I spent in Catholic Church as a kid. It's a good spin. I wonder if it holds in the subway too. Anyway, I lit a candle on Sunday in memory of my Aunt, feeling more at peace about her than I had for quite some time.

Jon says

This came highly recommended by a Goodreads friend, and I've found it just as good as he said. At first I was a little put off--the author grew up on San Francisco Bay, the daughter of comfortable liberal parents, and one would suspect that she'd only have the blues 'cause she ain't got nothin' to have the blues about. But one would be wrong. She is a very sensitive, funny, and open-hearted writer, not ashamed to admit her inadequacies. She spent most of her time from high-school to early thirties drunk. A friend of mine called her a "narcissistic alcoholic." Which I suppose is true, but she is also a gifted and talented writer. She uses the same technique repeatedly, though so well that it doesn't get cloying--to describe a situation in terms that make you laugh, and make you identify and sympathize with her; and then she reveals her own fault, thus making you look hard at yourself to the extent that you had sympathized. In one essay she describes her enemy--the perfect mom of the perfect kid at her son's first-grade class, the mother who always drove carpools, always baked cookies, always was cheerful and relaxed, had perfect skin, perfect hair, perfect butt. Lamott loathed her and looked for reasons to be irritated; doing exactly what all of us do in that position, thinking thoughts that "would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish." But finally she had an epiphany and realized that she had turned herself into a little J. Edgar Hoover, threatened by commies that existed only in his diseased imagination. Horrible thought for a liberal. But funny, and memorable, especially at times when you find yourself doing it *again*. I look forward to reading one of her novels.

Aileen says

I bought this book the day before I had a late-night conversation with life-time friends about religion, and heritage, rational thought vs "faith," and personal responsibility. I learned a lot from that conversation. Indeed, I think I keep learning from it. Perhaps reading this book prolonged those lessons. At the very least, it kept alive in my own mind the debate. Can a rational, free-thinking, independent person have religious

faith? Is there any good in organized religion? Do we have an obligation to preserve a heritage that our ancestors suffered to retain? Does this obligation extend to a duty to be a member of a group with which you have many ideological and/or political differences? I still don't know any answers. But I do like that Anne Lamott shows that there is a benefit in this heritage. I like to think that she also shows that it is possible to believe in the underlying principles without conceding to the myopic politics of many contemporary institutions. But I shall save this conclusion for presentation at the next installment of our original discussion.

Heather says

if I were in the position of Saint Peter, I don't know if Anne Lamott would make it through the Pearly Gates. But I'm not, so I absolutely loved this book that tickled my funny bone and stabbed my heart. The account of her conversion was powerful and hilarious: "Fuck it. I quit. All right, Jesus, You can come in." After being at Mount Level, her descriptions of Saint Andrew resonate deeply with me. I adored her descriptions of her friends as unrelentingly beautiful. Indeed, her capacity for incredible, deep, bonding friendship impressed me as much as anything else in the book. Her chapter on Forgiveness--particularly forgiving the neighborhood supermom--struck a chord with me and my collection of judgmentalisms that mask insecurities. And oh, how I loved the Aunties. May I adore the Aunties, be as proud of them. As Anne Lamott might say, "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you" for this book.

Jenifer says

I liked Lamott's tenderness in the face of real-life situations. I liked her love of community and her reverence for friendship. I liked her admissions of growth and progress while also recognizing her own human error and frailty. She reminded me to be more forgiving and to look for grace in the everyday. I am a better person for having read this.

A couple of things I really liked;

p82. "I called all my smartest friends. All the ones who believe in God told me to pray, so I did. Here are the two best prayers I know: 'Help me, help me, help me.' and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'"

p163. "I believe that when all is said and done, all you can do is to show up for someone in crisis, which seems so inadequate. But then when you do, it can radically change everything. Your there-ness, your stepping into a scared (person's) line of vision, can be life giving, because often everyone else is in hiding. So you come to keep them company when it feels like the whole world is falling apart, and your being there says that just for this moment, this one tiny piece of the world is OK, or is at least better."

Jocelynlt says

I flat-out love this book. It's probably my favourite book ever, certainly my favourite book on faith and spirituality. Annie Lamott earned her place as my very favourite Author and person-I-want-to-be-like-when-I-grow-up with this book. It's a "spiritual memoir" of sorts, written by a funny, idealistic, liberal, reformed imperfect prophetess alcoholic. This book has perhaps the best description of God I've ever read - God as cat at the door. We are all glad Annie invited him in.

Anne Lamott has had a colourful life, to be sure, but when a series of painful experiences and a lifetime of personal struggles with weight, relationships and career seem to take over, Anne becomes bulimic, alcoholic, and at times, suicidal. This book follows her, in a warm, humble, comfortable and very funny way, from her lowest moments to her discovery of her church, the birth of her son, finding God and letting go of the big stuff.

Annie reminds us that the hard stuff is the true stuff, but that it can be told with life-giving humor and grace.

Erin says

I'm having a hard time identifying why I didn't really enjoy this book. Many of the stories and the related "morals" resonated with me and the author presents them in a very palatable form which is surprising to me given the strong christian current running throughout the book. But yet, I did not look forward to picking this up and found myself reading it just to get it over with.

Elise says

I honestly don't know how to rate this book. Technically it's excellent. Anne Lamott is an exquisite writer, truly. I'm sure better modern writers exist, but I can't think of any off the top of my head. Certainly none writing about religion and I'm pretty well-read on Christian theism.

And I really liked her, although, judging by her reaction to every single conservative Christian mentioned in the book I doubt she'd have had any time for someone like me. I liked that she has dreds and has all kinds of funky friends. I love her alternative-ish lifestyle and I totally envy her freedom. I had a somewhat similar upbringing, although less on the drugs-with-my-parents aspect and more on the intellectual-demands-of-liberal-parents side. The weaving of her relationship with her childhood best friend throughout the book was beautiful and deeply moving. It was, by all bookish measures, a very good book.

However, the book about broke my heart in the reading. This is a woman who clearly and deeply needs salvation, and I mean that in the immediate sense- she's so deep into herself that she can't even see out of it. She knows she's way narcissistic, mentions it several times, but can't drag herself out by the sheer force of her own will which is the only way she knows of to do it. Going by this book, which was all about her- every detail was about her, every character about some aspect of herself, every event about her reaction, even the prayer she offers up when her small son was facing cancer was for herself not for the boy- she's never even considered turning to God and submitting herself to him for relief. That's the gospel- Jesus has promised to take our burdens on himself and give us rest. He's offering to reconcile us with himself- as he actually is, not as we in our sin and misery want him to be. The point is that really, truly, we don't know what's best for ourselves but that Almighty God does and he loves us enough to tell us. She seems to get bits and pieces of that truth but she's still utterly crushed under the weight of her own self-importance.

For perspective, if you liked this book, try Kathleen Norris' Cloister Walk, or even Donald Miller's Blue Like Jazz. Both are spiritual memoirs in the same genre as Traveling Mercies, but without the heavy personality emphasis. Both are written by liberal Christians who genuinely and deeply love God and love their brothers and sisters unconditionally. They both reach beyond themselves in their writings in a way that Anne Lamott just can't.

Yelda Basar Moers says

I absolutely loved this book. I felt that Anne Lamott had invited me into her home for a cup of tea and while she wrapped me around a quilt that she had knit herself, shared her thoughts and stories on spirituality, life, her son, and herself. It's a warm account of her life, her faith, her friends and everything that matters to her. She did a brilliant job capturing the magic that makes her spiritual and how it is infused in her everyday life. The writing is superb, top-notch, and her book is elegantly structured with essays beautifully tied together like the quilt I had mentioned before. Once in a while, one gets quite saddened that a book is about to end, that a voice is about to close, and that is how I felt when I read the last page. I've been reading many spiritual memoirs lately, and this is one of the best thus far.

Megan says

Anne Lamott writes sharp, funny, clever prose -- another of her books, *Bird by Bird*, really does give wonderful advice on writing and is how I was initially introduced to her. This book is a number of essays on a variety of issues -- getting older, handicapped people, what you can learn when you hurt yourself on a ski slope. She can be quite smart and very cute. But although she has a "love everyone" approach and is all about forgiving and laughing through life's brokenness and hurt... it all gets a little thin and stale. She is, after all, in good health, with family, living in the wealthiest nation in the world. Her problems are generally problems of the soul -- and God knows, those are the hardest of all to face. But does she really face them?

In writing about abortion, her hatred against those who oppose it is bleak and glaring. And I could barely read the chapter where she helps euthanize a friend. Which is when I stopped reading. Confusion and seeking are a part of life (especially in cultures wealthy enough to have leisure for certain kinds of existential angst). I would also agree that there's a certain tender beauty in the ubiquitous inelegance of humanity. But I'm afraid this book is just an echoing of Sixties psychology -- a gushily warm philosophy (or, in some cases, really a religion) of Self that in practice is totally depressing. In so far as she escapes that philosophy, her book is beautiful; in so far as she clings to it, the book is extremely disturbing.

So it gave me a perhaps useful insight into a politics and morality much different than mine and helped highlight what areas of confluence there can be. (It might be worth a read for priests and seminarians who want to understand the mind of the Sixties generation which is still very much with us.) But, in the end, I am enough spoiled by the Academic approach to chuck aside a book with a tinge of disgust that vilified any politics or morality besides its own while failing to be conscious (or honest) about its own inner contradictions and problems.
