

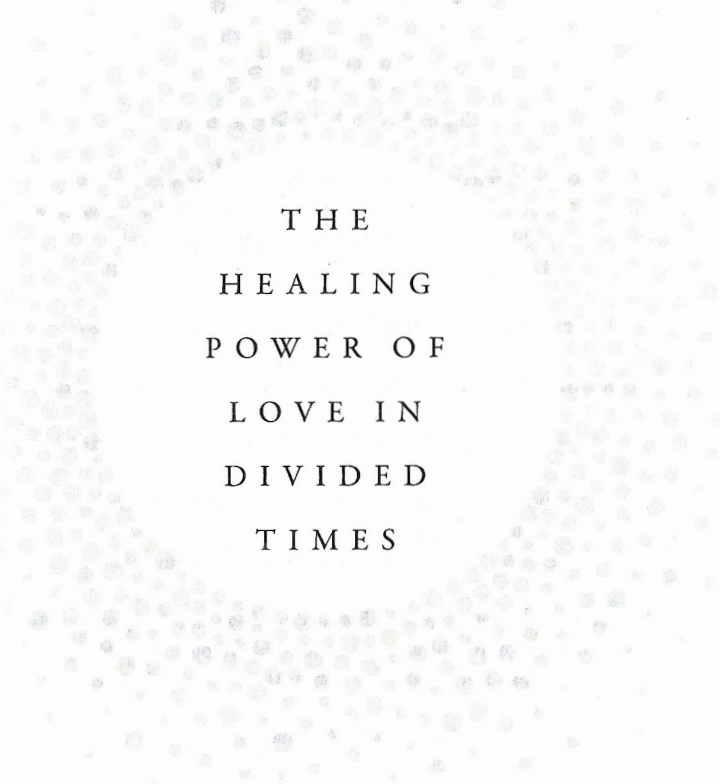
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# CHERISHED BELONGING



THE  
HEALING  
POWER OF  
LOVE IN  
DIVIDED  
TIMES

GREGORY BOYLE

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*For*

EILEEN *and* MICHAEL

MAUREEN *and* JEFF

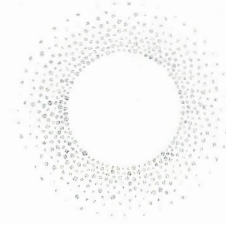
STEVE *and* THERESA

ANNIE *and* JIM

MEG *and* PAT

KELLY *and* GRANT

PAUL *and* JOY



## INTRODUCTION

I HAD THE AISLE SEAT, EXIT ROW, WITH TWO HOMIES FLYING home to Los Angeles from Philadelphia. As people boarded, I could see a very tall man making his way down the aisle. I tried to read the words printed on his shirt. "PHILLY IS EVERYBODY." I'm heartened. I think kinship, connection, exquisite mutuality, and, yes, we belong to each other. As he got closer, I could see that the T-shirt ACTUALLY said, "PHILLY VS. EVERYBODY." Shoot. We were so close there.

How do we arrive at a place and tenor of community that asserts: Nobody VS. Anybody? This is, in fact, a good definition of the kinship of God. Normalization and polarization have both proven corrosive to kinship. Musician Taj Mahal used to say: "Everybody is somebody. Nobody is nobody." No Us and Them, just Us. This is, indeed, God's dream come true.

The homies recently changed my Siri voice to that of an Irish

woman. I'm taken back to my relatives in Dunloy, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, every time I hear her. I was preaching, not long ago, in a packed church prior to a fundraiser and awards event, and in the middle of my homily, during a pause in my preaching, comes this amplified, sweet Irish voice from my left pants pocket: "I do not understand what you're saying." I told my cell phone, "Join the club," and fumbled to power her off.

But this same voice guides me in all my GPS needs. I'm directed, for example, to "pull into the car park." She'll warn me on the freeway, "Accident up ahead," or "Road work," or "Hazard ahead," or some other potential obstacle in my journey. Then comes a pause, a brief beat, and I await, breathlessly, for instructions to navigate the obstacle. Then she says with a lilting voice, "You're still on the fastest route." This message never fails to console me, and I proceed apace.

I don't understand this to mean that I'm on the quickest route. I know that I am on the "surest" one. This path is certain to get me there.

I recently spoke on a panel at the *LA Times* Festival of Books with Rabbi Naomi Levy and my friend, *LA Times* columnist Steve Lopez. I told the crowd that two unwavering principles held at Homeboy Industries were the following: 1) Everyone is unshakably good (no exceptions) and 2) We belong to each other (no exceptions). Then I posited: "Now, do I think all our vexing and complex social dilemmas would disappear if we embraced these two notions?" I paused, then continued, "Yes, I do." And the entire audience exploded in laughter. I was startled. When the laughter subsided, I repeated quietly: "Yes. I do."

These two ideas allow us to roll up our sleeves so that we can actually make progress. So that we can love without measure and without regret. So that we can cultivate a new way of seeing. We finally

understand that the answer to every question is, indeed, compassion. How else do we bridge the great polarizing divide that presents itself now, as a clear and present danger in our country? Poet Amanda Gorman writes, "Our only enemy is that which would make us enemies to each other." If all our efforts don't pull us together as allies, then folks will fill in the blanks and presume we are adversaries. Paramount for all of us, at the moment, is how to forge a way out of our intractable impasses. Obstacles and hazards abound. With a cherishing love, we're still on the fastest route.

I suppose I am writing this book because of that one question I always get at some point during the Q and A period after a talk I've given. My friend Pema Chödrön, Buddhist teacher and nun, also gets a version of the same question about what she calls "Mr. T." It's a question about the alarming divide and this excruciating impasse in which we find ourselves at the moment. I never feel like I adequately answer the issue for people. I often wondered how I would more fully answer this frequently asked question if I had more time. I want to take a stab here. Consequently, this book will be different from previous ones. This book hopes to see some horizon above the impasse. After all, an impasse is a situation in which no progress can be made. I'm writing now with a longing to dissolve the deadlock.

For many years now, in my talks, I refer to a saying by Mother Teresa: "Mother Teresa tells us that the problem in the world is that we've just forgotten that we belong to each other." I was speaking somewhere and, I threw that line out. A local newspaper did its research and, in the paper the next day, printed the full and accurate quote: "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." This simple principle seemed to unlock a door for much that ails our country and world.

If there are people living in tents on Main Street . . . it is because we have forgotten. If there are more and more fentanyl overdoses . . . suicides . . . hate crimes . . . homophobic assaults . . . election conspiracies . . . anti-Semitic rants . . . homicides . . . massacres in Israel and Palestine . . . it is because we have forgotten. If only we can land on a common story, it just might propel us to connection and belonging.

This book hopes to address the existential moment in which we find our country (and world). It seeks to remind ourselves of what we deeply want and how that longing connects us to each other on a route sure to lead us to our destination. It encourages a search for wholeness and a collective patience with each other as we all engage in healing and mend our severed belonging. It is not my intention in this book to “win some argument.” Nigel, who did twenty-five years of a thirty-five-year sentence, speaks of the need for “vision casting.” He calls it “linguaging.” I suppose one needs to make the case and put words together. How strong is any argument, if we’re afraid to make it? Our quest for wholeness is not a destination that we arrive at; it’s a journey we keep at.

For forty years, I have been accompanying gang members in Los Angeles. Near as anyone can tell, there are 1,100 gangs and 120,000 gang members in the county of Los Angeles. It feels like most of them have my cell phone number. Nearly ten thousand people a year walk through our doors at Homeboy Industries, wanting to explore a new life. I include in this number the many who come for a tour, to volunteer, and to support our efforts in the café and store. They, too, are exploring something new.

After thirty-six years in the city, Homeboy Industries has backed its way into now becoming the largest gang intervention, rehab, and

reentry program on the planet. We never set out to do that. It just happened. Like Isaiah underscores: “While from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears: this is the way; walk in it.” It was definitely a voice from behind, not some clarity in front of us.

Sometimes when I’m being introduced at a talk, the host will say all of the above but also add “the most successful.” I never say this. I make certain that phrase is never inserted into our material. Successful? Who knows? I always want us to become less outcome obsessed and more faithful to loving. We are outcome aware but not outcome-driven. What drives us is the person in front of us. After all, Jesus never heals a crowd of people. Just one person at a time. Oddly, the very idolatry of outcomes can keep progress distant. We hope against hope that beyond professionalism is a person-centered approach. “Practice-based evidence” rather than “evidence-based outcomes.” Outcomes don’t define who we are. Same with organizations as with people. What if we didn’t punish the wounded but, rather, sought to heal them? In American society, we are faced with broken people, and we have chosen to build prisons to accommodate them. What if we did the reverse? We want to commit to creating a culture and community of cherished belonging. I’m not suggesting that Homeboy is the answer, but we might have stumbled upon the question. As Daniel Berrigan says, “Know where to stand and stand there.” Homeboy just wants to keep standing there.

Glancing back at these thirty-six years, I remember well the hostility directed at Homeboy in our first ten years. Our daily diet was replete with death threats, bomb threats, and hate mail. None of it, of course, from gang members, who always saw us as a sign of hope and an exit ramp. But to those who demonized this population, we were fraternizers with the enemy. It was always a short hop to demonize

Homeboy for walking with the demonized. Then everything changed overnight.

In October of 1999, our first social enterprise, Homeboy Bakery, burned to the ground. The next day, the *Los Angeles Times* declared that Homeboy Industries didn't belong to "Fr. Greg Boyle," but to the entire city of Los Angeles. In an instant, we went from reviled to watching Homeboy Industries get hoisted onto the shoulders of the city. This tipping point enabled us to build a new bakery and our headquarters, where we have set up for sixteen years now.

COVID-19 arrived for us all in 2020. For the poor, the pandemic wasn't an inconvenience, but the great exacerbator of despair, trauma, and mental illness. We also discovered that privacy was not a luxury afforded to those on the margins. We discovered that our vulnerability was not equal. This inequality fomented more violence and death in the inner cities. Homeboy tried to stand in this therapeutic place, honoring the beloved belonging to which we are all called. In the wake of the COVID crisis, cities were again tempted to crack down on crime as they have in the past, regardless of the ineffectiveness of that effort. Homeboy shines a light that reminds us that a civilized people cares for each other. We will care or we will cuff. As always, we will find gang violence in communities with historically high levels of concentrated disadvantage and disinvestment. We want to spotlight the need to raise the advantage and make investments and then watch what happens to rage, violence, and despair.

Homeboy represents a proof of concept. We have no interest in scaling up and becoming the McDonald's of gang intervention programs (with over five billion gang members served). Instead, we have spent the last sixteen years nurturing into existence the Global Homeboy Network: a loose band of partners who take Homeboy's

model of a community of tenderness and apply it to local, vexing, and complex social issues like homelessness, disaffected youth, folks suffering from mental anguish or substance use disorder, returning citizens, etc. We have over three hundred "partners" in the United States and fifty outside the country. We convene as many folks as we can hold at our Global Homeboy Network Gathering, held for three days every summer. We explore together this *modo de proceder*, as Saint Ignatius would say. What would happen if we applied the culture of Homeboy to all that ails us as a society and as a world? It's not that we think Homeboy is (as the homies say) "all that and a bag of chips." We aren't. But as Dan McKanan said of the Catholic Worker Movement: "It's more of an organism than an organization." That also feels right about Homeboy.

Homeboy reflects elements that we think can put us on the fastest route of healing, good diagnoses, relational wholeness, and cherished belonging. When we embrace relational wholeness, our divisions tremble. We aspire to be on the lookout for the secret wholeness in each other. We zero in on the precious soulfulness in everyone. We see as God sees. Vice president of operations, homie Steve Avalos, says, "A structured place is a safe place. It is there that we see the homies' hearts until they can see their own . . . then they leave here, and they see other hearts." The homies don't need saving. They need healing. I am certain that I am not a healer. I'm equally certain that at Homeboy, healing happens.

Being a part of something positive rewires the brain. Fresh neural pathways get forged. From a healthy place, we all discover that separation is folly. I never call us an "agency." It feels too bureaucratic. Agency, tools, curriculum—all of this is secondary. It's what we do. But a community of cherished belonging is who we are. A homie,

Marcus, told a classroom filled with inner-city teenagers, "If love was a place, it would be Homeboy."

I recognize that the word "rehabilitation" is deficient as well. It implies restoring someone to some former privilege, a state of pre-damage. A previous moment where injury didn't exist. That time and moment basically wasn't there for our folks. Since 1988, I've buried 261 people who were killed because of gang violence. Most were buried in what I call the decade of death (1988–1998). Pádraig Ó Tuama says that in Northern Ireland, the Irish word that we translate into English as "troubles" really means "bereavements." I understand this distinction.

In the early days, I'd walk my very poor parish, comprising two extremely large and densely populated public housing developments. Then, in later years, on my black beach cruiser bike, I would "patrol" my parish and the eight warring gangs there. I've recounted many stories from those days in previous books. Today, gang members who came up through the Homeboy program now run the place, and I meander as an "emeritus something or other." From founder to flounder. We are healthier at Homeboy whenever we move from power-hoarding to power-sharing. It's worth getting used to. "We are a power-building organization," Steve Avalos says. "There is a process, but there is also a practice."

One of our homie vice presidents, José Arellano, puts it this way: "This is beautiful work, but it's not always pretty." True dat. Recently, I received a generic letter from prison, from an inmate wanting more information and a support letter for his parole board. We get thousands of these requests a year. He writes in the letter that he has "read the Homeboy book" (presumably *Tattoos On The Heart*) and then "Please send mines to Fr. Greg. To my understanding, he's the program's Art Laboe."

I give talks to audiences around the world. My Jesuit community has become Southwest Airlines. An old friend texted me about a conversation she had with a woman who asked, "What does Father Greg's wife think of all his traveling?" I wrote back: "Tell her she's glad that my ass is out of the house." On these trips, more often than not I bring along two homies or homegirls or couples to share what happens at Homeboy. Consequently, many of the stories here are culled from "travels with homies." Before a talk in Pasadena, a man came up to me and said, "Homeboy Industries has gentled the culture of Los Angeles." The brave men and women who choose to walk through our doors are responsible for such a thing.

Planes are odd communities. You can't help but have your annoyance gland constantly activated. The cluelessness, the invasion of personal space. The nervous flyer who can't stop talking. Really. The woman who keeps pushing her call button thinking the flight attendant is her waitress or personal valet. The guy who keeps jumping up to reach into the overhead compartment. Of course, the passenger in the window seat needs to go to the restroom nine times; she won't stop drinking iced teas. You're going to eat that on this plane? Seriously?

So I ask myself: Is everybody on this plane good? Yes, unshakably. Anyone wicked or evil? Nope. Is there anyone on board who does not belong to us. No.

So we can begin.

Above all, this book explores the question: Why have we made so little progress? And, yes, I agree with Barack Obama, who said at the end of his two terms, "If you think we haven't made progress, then you're not paying attention." Maybe it's more precise to ask: What keeps us, consistently, from making progress? This book posits that

some very specific sets of thinking impede us. When we've made progress, it's because we've named things correctly and then pointed the way.

We don't make progress when we demonize. We should abandon that altogether, and in all circumstances refuse to do it. A mother and stepfather tortured and killed their young son. A candidate for district attorney said, "They are bad people. And I use the word 'people' lightly. They are nothing short of monsters." Surely, we can hold something as horrible and still not make monsters of anyone. Demonizing keeps us from solutions. Plus, it's always the opposite of how God sees.

We should likewise jettison the idea that there could be such a thing as good people and bad people. And finally, we must include every single person in our circle of belonging. This isn't a book that merely advances Rodney King's "Can we all get along?" notion. It wants to underscore that when we demonize and divide the world into "good and bad people" and exclude folks from cherished belonging, progress gets stopped in its tracks. These notions end all conversation. But with the clear goal of a community of cherished belonging, dialogue gets jump-started. There is nothing in our path to shut it down.

At Homeboy Industries, we're always trying to pry the criminal justice system away from violence and punishment, overpolicing and mass incarceration, and bend it toward healing, repair, and restoration. Heal wounds rather than punish them. Our tendency, to date, as a society, is to medicalize and criminalize unlivable lives. We've nearly outlawed the hopeless. This punishment system needs to be dismantled.

We are all seeking a more powerful narrative of belonging. Our

next frontier at Homeboy Industries is to imagine Hope Village. We want to create a neighborhood of services that can truly stand as an alternative to incarceration. Beyond just a campus expansion, this renewed narrative of cherished belonging might serve as a model for the country beyond the punitive and instead represent a heightened reverence for the complex causes of crime. Instead of bars and cells, we lay out a welcoming community that tries to soothe mental anguish, substance use disorder, and an underlying despair. Rather than the tribalism that excludes and punishes, the new narrative proposes a village that cherishes.


Writing is arduous, at least for me. It is very difficult to find time to dedicate to this task, and often, when I read what I have drafted thus far, my stuff feels like it's been written by a committee and I wasn't invited to the meetings. Annie Dillard says that writing is like sitting up with a sick friend. I've spent many a night with my ailing pal. I suppose I wrote these pages in response to those endless questions, after my talks, about the division in our country and the polarizing malaise that has us stupefied. But also, my writing kept trying to find "the straight line."

On September 13, 2023, Danelo Cavalcante was captured. He was a Brazilian national, convicted of murder, who had escaped from Chester County Prison not far from Philadelphia. He evaded capture for two weeks. On the day he was apprehended, the sheriff declared: "Our nightmare is finally over, and the good guys won." This book wants to assert that one can draw a straight line from that sheriff's statement—"the good guys won"—to the very lack of progress we fail to make in crime, mass incarceration, homelessness, fentanyl overdoses, gangs, mental illness, the political divide, etc.

I suppose seventy is the new fifty, but still. Geezerdom has set in

and I'm feeling mortality skulking around my house. My dad died at seventy. Like many folks my age, I've had random bouts with cancer and remission. Some days, you just feel old. A homie stage-whispered to another, in my hearing, "G is so old, he's still on AOL." Another said, when I celebrated fifty years a Jesuit, "Damn, that's a lot of reading." (I don't even know what that means.) A very weathered, tattooed homegirl, before she can introduce herself, breaks into tears: "You baptized me in Juvenile Hall"—trying to compose herself—"and now . . . I'm a grandma." Yes. That's a lot of reading.

I don't think I'm at death's door, but I find myself assessing things I believe as I inch toward that door. I believe the following things:

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1. God is in the loving.
  2. God IS inclusion.
  3. Demonizing is always untruth.
  4. We belong to each other.
  5. Separation is an illusion.
  6. Tenderness is the highest form of spiritual maturity.
  7. "Kindness is the only non-delusional response to everything"  
(George Saunders).
  8. Love your neighbor as you love your child.
  9. We are all unshakably good.
  10. A community of cherished belonging is God's dream come true.

For what it's worth, this book just wants to lure us to embracing God's heart and *punto de vista*. It proposes a mystical view that perhaps can lift us above those things that keep us apart. Nobody VS. Anybody. God's dream come true.