

May Book Summary

Dan Brent

Compass Points Margaret Silf, Loyola Press, 2009, 235 pp., \$13.95

“*Compass Points* is written out of the conviction that God isn’t as elusive as we think.” (p.xv) It “catches snapshots of God’s footprints, and invites you to look here, wherever you happen to be and however you are feeling.” (p.xvii)

Silf takes what would appear to be tiny or very ordinary things or incidents and sees in them signs and metaphors for the presence of God in our lives. Here are a few examples.

When Edmund Hillary first reached the peak of Mount Everest, he planted there “the flag of conquest.” His companion in the climb, Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, “knelt in the snow to beg the mountain’s forgiveness for disturbing her peace.” Silf continues, “I also remember the day of the first moon landing.” Astronaut Edgar Mitchell would later say, “My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity.” Silf writes, “When we glimpse divinity, however momentarily, we are forever changed by the encounter. Nothing can ever be the same again.” (p.13)

There is the story of the author’s young daughter making her stop on the sidewalk to watch in wonder as a beetle crossed. “I needed a little child to read the map of this world’s holy ground and to make me take off my shoes as I tread its sacred pathways through the ordinariness of every day.” (p.18)

Then there is the pub sign she saw on a drive: Free beer tomorrow for those who missed it yesterday! So the sign works every day and there is never a free beer. “That little sign is more than a reason to chuckle. It reminds me that the here-and-now is the only reality.” (p.30)

A young boy’s unhappy tantrum ends abruptly when a snowfall – the first he’d ever seen – begins. “The sheer wonder at the loveliness of the world far outweighs my minor frustrations. May I have the grace to know it.” (p.38)

A lame man is struggling to get through a revolving door when another man crashes around and through it. Filled with frustration and rage, his angry eyes follow the culprit down the street. “He does not realize that the man who has brushed past him so carelessly is blind. I begin to see why Jesus warns us not to judge.” (p.46)

A zebra foal memorizes its mother’s stripe pattern, a defense against getting lost. “I believe that God paints a unique pattern of presence in each human life. We discover this pattern as we reflect on what is actually happening in our everyday experience. It is there we will notice God’s personal relationship with us.” (p.53)

Walking a bending road on an extremely dark night, the author finds that shining her flashlight into the distance is no help. Darkness consumes the light. But pointed at the

next few steps, the light is enough. “The way opens up step by step. No way of deciphering the mysteries that may lie ahead. Enough just to trust the light one step at a time.” (p.94)

Then there is the story of a school Sports Day in which a special race was arranged for children with physical or intellectual challenges. Off they ran at the start of their race. But then one of them fell and all of the others stopped to help her get back up! “These special children had shown what it means to choose life.” (p.124)

On what was apparently a distressing day, Silf writes, “God lies down right there in the mud and the mess and the muddle of our living to call us into the labor of love that will, in the fullness of time, give birth to all that we can become. And God waits for as long as it takes for our growing and ripening.” (p.143)

The author tells of burning her hand accidentally on the oven element. The burn at first resisted care, then eventually healed. She expresses a hope that the scar will remain. “Our scars are our reminders, not just that we have been hurt but, more important, that we have been healed.” (p.166)

She tells of making a phone call to a friend in Australia and realizing that it is already tomorrow where her friend is talking. So “what makes me so sure of tomorrow is that I know someone who is already living it.” (p.210) She tells of a rose bush that split and grew up both sides of a wall until the flowers from each side were looking at each other. “I suspect that all that springs from the single root in the heart of God is destined to meet in a unity that eclipses all differences.” (p.218)

The book is only 235 pages and consists of 137 stories. So the stories are short. The reader becomes engaged with these pops of light that explode in rapid succession until the sense of the presence of God all around us is impossible to miss. The next thing you know, you are becoming conscious of those pops of light in your own life! “I keep going because just once in a while, very occasionally, I have felt the touch of God on my heart. If you have glimpsed the sun just once, you know it is always there. If you have known even the lightest touch of God upon your life, you know that God is always there.” (p.102)