
Sacred Romance

Chapter Seven

The Beloved

I am my beloved's and his desire is for me.

Song of Songs

Helen of Troy must have really been something. Two kingdoms went to war over her; thousands of men gave up their lives so that one might have her. Hers was “the face that launched a thousand ships.” Helen was the wife of Menelaus, King of Greece, in the ninth Century, b.c. Their home was a peaceful Mediterranean kingdom until the arrival of Paris, Prince of Troy. Paris fell in love with Helen and, depending on the version of the story you've heard, she with him. Under the cover of night, Paris stole away with Helen and took her back to Troy. It was the beginning of the Trojan War. Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon amassed a mighty Greek army and set off in one thousand ships to lay siege on Troy, all to win Helen back.

Few have ever felt so pursued. Sometimes we wonder if we've even been noticed. Father was too busy to come to our games, or perhaps he jumped ship altogether. Mother was lost in a never-ending pile of laundry or, more recently, in her own career. We come into the world longing to be special to someone and from the start we are disappointed. It is a rare soul indeed who has been sought after for who she is—not because of what she can do, or what others can gain from her, but simply for herself. Can you recall a time when a significant someone in your life sat you down with the sole purpose of wanting to know your heart more deeply, fully expecting to enjoy what he found there? More people have climbed Mt. Everest than have experienced real pursuit, and so what are we left to conclude? There is nothing in our hearts worth knowing. Whoever and whatever this mystery called I must be, it cannot be much.

“In fact,” we continue, “if I am not pursued, it must be because there is something wrong with me, something dark and twisted inside.” We long to be known and we fear it like nothing else. Most people live with a subtle dread that one day they will be discovered for who they really are and the world will be appalled.

The wife of a close friend was seeing a counselor to sort through some of her own Arrows. After several private sessions she asked her husband, who is a pastor, to come along. As the day of the event drew near, his quiet dread swelled to full-fledged panic. The night before their joint session the pastor had a dream in which the counselor uncovered his true self, then leaped up from her chair and ran out of the office and down the street, screaming, “My God—he's a pastor!”

We come into the world with a longing to be known and a deep-seated fear that we aren't what we should be. We are set up for a crisis of identity. And then, says Frederick Buechner, the world goes to work:

Starting with the rather too pretty young woman and the charming but rather unstable young man, who together know no more about being parents than they do the far side of the moon, the world sets in to making us what the world would like us to be, and because we have to survive after all, we try to make ourselves into something that we hope the world will like better than it apparently did the selves we originally were. That is the story of all our lives, needless to say, and in the process of living out that story, the original, shimmering self gets buried so deep that most of us hardly end up living out of it at all. Instead, we live out all the other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather. (Telling Secrets)

Think about the part you find yourself playing, the self you put on like a costume. Who cast you in this role? Most of us are living out a script that someone else has written for us. We've not been invited to live from our heart, to be who we truly are, so we put on these false selves hoping to offer something more acceptable to the world, something functional. We learn our roles starting very young and we learn them well: Joey's the smart kid and his role is to be smart. He'll help you with your homework and grow up to be a computer programmer. Karen is the victim of abuse, struggling against overwhelming odds. She's been given the role of being used. The pretty girls get to be the cheerleaders, the others are sent to the library. The athletic boys are picked for the team, the others are simply picked on. Either we're chosen for the wrong reasons or not chosen at all.

What does any of this have to do with our heart? God created each of us with a unique identity, a role in the larger story, but early on we've been handed a revision by the other players in our life.

"Well, then," the realist might say, "don't let people affect you so much. Be your own person. Believe in yourself." Those who've tried realize that this advice just isn't enough for the healing of your soul and the recovery of your true identity. The deepest Arrows we've known are lodged in the places of our self-identity and no amount of positive thinking or self-affirmation will remove them. There are words that have been spoken, repeated a thousand times, and they play like a recording in our inner thoughts: "stupid," "incompetent," "ugly," "unlovable"—the list goes on and on.

There are images, too, scenes from our lives that speak more deeply even than words. In the second grade I (John) wet my pants in school one day. We were watching a film and I was too embarrassed to interrupt class to ask permission to leave. I tried to hold it as long as I could, but the film was longer. A puddle formed beneath my desk. Mortified, fearing the Arrows of playground taunts, I tried a cover-up and claimed my thermos had broken. The teacher sent me to the office for the nurse to call my parents to bring a pair of dry pants. No one was home. In a moment of real need, when I so desperately wanted someone to be there for me, I was alone. Something clicked within me; an image settled in that place, which captured the message that I had better never blow it again because there wouldn't be anyone to pick me up when I fell. So much of my perfectionism as an adult is energized by that image: Never be in a place of need.

Deep within the Arrows stay, poisoning our self-perceptions, until someone comes along with the power to take them away, free us from all the false selves we use to weather the world's weather, and restore to us our true identity. Without such a person, we are lost in the smaller stories, anxiously looking about, hoping for a clue as to who we really are. We read the opinions that others hold of us like a report card on how we're doing. Parents of teenagers warn them against the riptides of peer pressure, but who of us does not to some degree succumb? Fashion is an enduring testimony to the fact that we live quite consciously before the eyes of others. And for such we were made. We were created to live in community, not a hall of mirrors. Philosopher and author Gabriel Marcel uses an experience from daily life to reveal the way in which we establish a sense of self:

Take, for instance, the child who brings his mother flowers he has just been gathering in the meadow. "Look," he cries, "I picked these." Mark the triumph in his voice and above all the gesture . . . which accompanies his announcement. The child points himself out for admiration and gratitude: "It was I, I who am with you here, who picked these lovely flowers, don't go thinking it was Nanny or my sister; it was I and no one else." (Homo Viator)

Luke, my two-year-old, found me one Saturday morning puttering in the garage. "Mere," he said, in a tone and with an expression that allowed no room for debate. He turned and I followed him into the family room. "Sit." I sat down, my curiosity fully engaged. "Watch!" He climbed onto his WonderColt and began to ride with great passion, a cowboy on some dangerous mission in which he would be the hero. Something outside the window drew my attention and I looked away, a very big mistake. "Watch me!" he demanded. Luke wanted what we all want—to play our part, to live our lives before the eyes of another. Actually, he wanted more than simple recognition. He wanted praise, admiration, applause—in short, he wanted glory.

How could it be otherwise? We are created in the image of God, or more precisely, as a reflection of the Trinity. If we really understood this wonderful truth deep in our hearts, it would probably bring revival in our day. Consider just two essential realities that flow from this fact. First, as we observed in the previous chapter, the Trinity is a community and so to be made in its image means we are relational at our core. "Our creation is by love, in love and for love," writes psychologist Gerald May. But there is more. The Trinity is a society whose members draw their identities from the others. The Father wouldn't be a father if it weren't for his relationship to the Son and to us. He might be "God," "Jehovah," even "Almighty," but never "Abba, Father." Of course the Son would never have been one if not for the presence of the Father. But because of his relationship to the other members of the Trinity, Jesus has been and forever will be the Son of God. And just like my son, Luke, and all children, what he craves most, his greatest prize, is the applause of the Father. "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24).

Identity is not something that falls on us out of the sky. For better or for worse, identity is bestowed. We are who we are in relation to others. But far more important, we draw our identity from our impact on those others—if and how we affect them. We long to know that we make a difference in the lives of others, to know that we matter, that our presence cannot be replaced by a pet, a possession, or even another person. The awful burden of the false self is that it must be constantly maintained. What happened to Helen of Troy when her hips began to bulge and her face sag? Did she leap from bed each morning to the mirror, fearing that the effects of the passing years would make her less and less lovable? Our dilemma is hers: We think we have to keep doing something in order to be desirable. Once we find something that will bring us some attention, we have to keep it going or risk the loss of the attention.

And so we live with the fear of not being chosen and the burden of maintaining whatever it is about us that might get us noticed and the commitment never to be seen for who we really are. We develop a functional self-image, even if it is a negative one. The little boy paints his red wagon a speckled gray with whatever Father left in the can after putting a new coat on the backyard fence. “Look what I did!” he says, hoping for affirmation of the wonderful impact his presence has on the world. The angry father shames him: “What do you think you’re doing? You’ve ruined it.” The boy forms an identity: My impact is awful; I foul good things up. I am a fouler. And he forms a commitment never to be in a place where he can foul things up again. Years later, his colleagues wonder why he turned down an attractive promotion. The answer lies in his identity, an identity he received from the impact he had on the most important person in his world and his fear of ever being in such a place again.

A little girl draws her father’s attention only when he wants to use her for his sexual perversions. I am sexually dangerous, she concludes. I am a dirty little girl. She lives with the tremendous rift in her soul caused by the ambivalence of abuse. On the one hand, the attention felt good. She was made for intimacy. Yet the only intimacy she’s ever known was violating. Years later, she becomes the efficient, competent head of women’s ministry at church. She’s known as a tireless worker and a real servant—but there isn’t a man who is drawn to her in any intimate way. She carefully avoids all compliments and keeps any potential relationships at a purely “ministry” level. She can’t take the risk of being attractive sexually. Long ago she learned that intimacy leads to violation, that the sensual parts of her are dirty and so she hides them well beneath a false self of Christian service.

For the past thirty years, I have found my identity and earned my living by being up front, first as an actor, then as a public speaker. That script began in the second grade when I fell in love with my teacher, Mrs. McGrath. She was young and pretty and she noticed me, noticed that I could speak well in front of the class and so she picked me to narrate the school play. Something deep within me was stirred, touched. I gave a brilliant reading and all the mothers cried. Ahha! my little foolish heart concluded, this is my part—this is how I will find glory! And for thirty years I have lived out that part, rarely offering the truest parts of me and so rarely feeling alive and connected with anyone. You cannot have intimacy out of a false self.

There is no escaping your identity. You will not live beyond how you see yourself; not for long. If “Failure” is the part you’re playing, you will fail. The Performers will perform, the Seductive will seduce, the Victims will be victimized, the Nobodies will fade away, and the Somebodies will do whatever it is that made them feel like somebody, donning coat and hat according to the weather. Again, what we are doing in this costume ball of life is looking to avoid exposure while at the same time trying to offer something that will bring us glory.

As a young girl my friend Susan was lost in a busy household full of brothers and sisters and seldom seen by distracted parents. One day she made a necklace from pumpkin seeds, a simple craft to pass the time. For some odd reason the necklace captured her father’s attention. “Hey, everybody, look at this, will ya? Look at what Susan made!” Years later, as she reflected back on what seemed a trivial moment, she remembered the power she seemed to suddenly possess: “People came alive at something I did!” Does it come as a surprise to learn that she is now makes her living as a creative designer?

It’s not that her father’s attention and affirmation were wrong; it’s just that they were the exception, not the rule. When we live with so little love, we will grasp onto what we do receive in a way that becomes defining. Those moments may not reveal our true identity and calling, but they’re all we’ve got.

We will draw our identity from outside ourselves; the question is, from whom? In the end, it will be from those moments and those people on whom we’ve had the biggest impact. Think again about Helen of Troy. Why “of Troy”? Wasn’t she really Helen of Greece, Menelaus’s wife? In calling her “Helen of Troy” we are forever reminded of the impact she had on the mediterranean world of the tenth century b.c. She is not Helen the Beauty or Helen Like No Other Woman. Those are qualities she could possess alone. No, she is Helen of Troy, which really means something like Helen the Fought Over, Helen the Captive and Rescued, Helen the Pursued. Her identity is inseparable from her relationships; it has been bestowed upon her. Maybe she enjoyed the attention, maybe not. Perhaps in the end she merely played the part of the rare art object, stolen from Menelaus’s palace to be put on display in Troy. I hope that someone in all those thousands was pursuing her for her heart. But whatever else she felt, as the center of an international crisis Helen must have known beyond a shadow of a doubt that she mattered.

The gospel says that we, who are God’s beloved, created a cosmic crisis. It says we, too, were stolen from our True Love and that he launched the greatest campaign in the history of the world to get us back. God created us for intimacy with him. When we turned our back on him he promised to come for us. He sent personal messengers; he used beauty and affliction to recapture our hearts. After all else failed, he conceived the most daring of plans. Under the cover of night he stole into the enemy’s camp incognito, the Ancient of Days disguised as a newborn. The Incarnation, as Phil Yancey reminds us, was a daring raid into enemy territory. The whole world lay under the power of the evil one and we were held in the dungeons of darkness. God risked it all to rescue us. Why? What is it that he sees in us that causes him to act the jealous lover, to lay siege both on the

kingdom of darkness and on our own idolatries as if on Troy—not to annihilate, but to win us once again for himself? This fierce intention, this reckless ambition that shoves all conventions aside, willing literally to move heaven and earth—what does he want from us?

We've been offered many explanations. From one religious camp we're told that what God wants is obedience, or sacrifice, or adherence to the right doctrines, or morality. Those are the answers offered by conservative churches. The more therapeutic churches suggest that no, God is after our contentment, or happiness, or self-actualization, or something else along those lines. He is concerned about all these things, of course, but they are not his primary concern. What he is after is us—our laughter, our tears, our dreams, our fears, our heart of hearts. Remember his lament in Isaiah, that though his people were performing all their duties, “their hearts are far from me” (29:13 italics added). How few of us truly believe this. We've never been wanted for our heart, our truest self, not really, not for long. The thought that God wants our heart seems too good to be true.

Craig, my closest friend, whom I've known for almost twenty years, is a man I deeply respect. His life is full with many of the qualities I so want to reflect: insight, love, courage, a wonderful sense of odd humor, a man of sad gravity as the occasion requires. We live in separate states and our visits are rare and precious. As we were walking in the fields near my home one day, he was speaking about the future in a way that assumed we would be friends for life. Something stirred within me, and I heard my heart wonder, Why would he want to be friends with me? What could he possibly see in me? I was surprised by the honesty of my heart in response to being pursued, enjoyed. We just don't think there is anything desirable in us. And yet, we want to be desired. We were made for glory, for the attention that the Trinity gives to each other, and we can't live without it.

Things Are Not What They Seem

The reason we enjoy fairy tales—more than enjoy them—the reason we identify with them in some deep part of us is because they rest on two great truths: The hero really has a heart of gold and the beloved really possesses hidden beauty. In the last chapter, I hope you got a glimpse of God's good heart. But what about the second great truth—could we possess hidden greatness? It seems too good to be true.

Remember, the theme of veiled identity runs through all great stories. As Buechner reminds us, “Not only does evil come disguised in the world of the fairy tale but often good does too.” The heroines and heroes capture our heart because we see long before they ever do their hidden beauty, courage, greatness. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White—they're not simple wenches after all. The beast and the frog—they're actually princes. Aladdin is “the diamond in the rough.” If the narrative of the Scriptures teaches us anything, from the serpent in the Garden to the carpenter from Nazareth, it teaches us that things are rarely what they seem, that we shouldn't be fooled by appearances.

Your evaluation of your soul, which is drawn from a world filled with people still terribly confused about the nature of their souls, is probably wrong. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*,

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Imagine if Cinderella's story ended this way: "And the Prince married Grimheld, one of the brutish, wicked stepsisters, who complained about everything and picked her nose during the wedding." It's not far from our understanding of the gospel. The familiar refrain goes something like this: "You are a sinner, a traitor, a depraved wretch—pond scum, really. But God, in order to show the world what a great guy he is, will let you in anyway." We can't start with the Fall in our understanding of who we are and our role in the story. That's like coming into the movie twenty minutes late. But most Christian efforts to explain the story begin there. The whole idea of a fall assumes a starting place from which to plummet and given what a big deal the Bible makes of the Fall, it must have been from a pretty high place. "Boy trips, stubs toe" doesn't make the evening news. "Skydiver jumps, chute fails" does. The higher the original position, the bigger the story. Nobody's surprised when the neighborhood mutt runs off, plays the mongrel, sows a few wild oats, and kicks off a great night by rummaging through the trash. But what's the response if the Queen of England is found rolling around in the alley?

Yes, we are not what we were meant to be, and we know it. If, when passing a stranger on the street, we happen to meet eyes, we quickly avert our glance. Cramped into the awkward community of an elevator, we search for something, anything to look at instead of each other. We sense that our real self is ruined, and we fear to be seen. But think for a moment about the millions of tourists who visit ancient sites like the Parthenon, the Colosseum, and the Pyramids. Though ravaged by time, the elements, and vandals through the ages, mere shadows of their former glory, these ruins still awe and inspire. Though fallen, their glory cannot be fully extinguished. There is something at once sad and grand about them. And such we are. Abused, neglected, vandalized, fallen—we are still fearful and wonderful. We are, as one theologian put it, "glorious ruins." But unlike those grand monuments, we who are Christ's have been redeemed and are being renewed as Paul said, "day by day," restored in the love of God.

Why is it that thousands of years later, Helen's story still has the power to haunt us? Isn't it that we long to believe beauty really could do that—there really might be someone worth launching a thousand ships to regain and someone willing, out of passionate love, to launch those ships? God has launched his ships for us. Could it be that we, all of us, the homecoming queens and quarterbacks and the passed over and picked on, really possess hidden greatness? Is there something in us worth fighting over? The fact that we don't see our own glory is part of the tragedy of the Fall; a sort of spiritual amnesia has

taken all of us. Our souls were made to live in the Larger Story, but as Chesterton discovered, we have forgotten our part:

We have all read in scientific books, and indeed, in all romances, the story of the man who has forgotten his name. This man walks about the streets and can see and appreciate everything; only he cannot remember who he is. Well, every man is that man in the story. Every man has forgotten who he is. . . . We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are. (Orthodoxy)

Every woman is in some way searching for or running from her beauty and every man is looking for or avoiding his strength. Why? In some deep place within, we remember what we were made to be, we carry with us the memory of gods, image-bearers walking in the Garden. So why do we flee our essence? As hard as it may be for us to see our sin, it is far harder still for us to remember our glory. The pain of the memory of our former glory is so excruciating, we would rather stay in the pigsty than return to our true home. We are like Gomer, wife of the prophet Hosea, who preferred to live in an adulterous affair rather than be restored to her true love. Like Helen, we participated in our capture, though we were duped into it. And like Helen, our king has come for us, in spite of our unfaithfulness. If it is true that our identity comes from the impact we have on others, then our deepest and truest identity comes from the impact we've had on our most significant Other. Listen to the names he has given us: "No longer will they call you Deserted. . . . They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord; and you will be called Sought After" (Isa. 62:4, 12).

In other words, we are the ones to be called Fought Over, Captured and Rescued, Pursued. It seems remarkable, incredible, too good to be true. There really is something desirable within me, something the King of the universe has moved heaven and earth to get. George Herbert reached for words to express his wonder:

"My God, what is a heart
That thou shouldst it so eye and woo
Powering upon it with all thy art
As if thou hadst nothing else to do?" (Mattens)

King David used a similar refrain:

"What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:4–5).

The Scriptures employ a wide scale of metaphors to capture the many facets of our relationship with God. If you consider them in a sort of ascending order, there is a noticeable and breathtaking progression. Down near the bottom of the totem pole we are the clay and he the Potter. Moving up a notch, we are the sheep and he the Shepherd, which is a little better position on the food chain but hardly flattering; sheep don't have a

reputation as the most graceful and intelligent creatures in the world. Moving upward, we are the servants of the Master, which at least lets us into the house, even if we have to wipe our feet, watch our manners, and not talk too much. Most Christians never get past this point, but the ladder of metaphors is about to make a swift ascent. God also calls us his children and himself our heavenly Father, which brings us into the possibility of real intimacy—love is not one of the things a vase and its craftsman share together, nor does a sheep truly know the heart of the shepherd, though it may enjoy the fruits of his kindness. Still, there is something missing even in the best parent-child relationship. Friendship levels the playing field in a way family never can, at least not until the kids have grown and left the house. Friendship opens a level of communion that a five-year-old doesn't know with his mother and father. And "friends" are what he calls us.

But there is still a higher and deeper level of intimacy and partnership awaiting us at the top of this metaphorical ascent. We are lovers. The courtship that began with a honeymoon in the Garden culminates in the wedding feast of the Lamb. "I will take delight in you," he says to us, "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will I rejoice over you," so that we might say in return, "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me."

Lady Julian of Norwich was given a series of revelations into the sufferings of Christ and the glory of the gospel. She was taken into the heart of God and upon her return she concluded quite simply, "We are his lovers." The bridal imagery often fails to capture a man's heart, but consider: God is neither male nor female. Both genders together are needed to reflect his image and he transcends them both. The question every woman is asking goes something like, "Am I lovely? Do you want me?" The question every man is asking is, "Do I have what it takes? Am I adequate?" As men and women, we want to be chosen for different reasons, but we both want to be chosen, to be welcomed into the heart of things, invited into the Drama to live from our heart. We both want love, the adventure of intimacy, and this is what God's pursuit means for men and for women.

O Living Flame of Love . . .
How Gently and how lovingly
Thou wakest in my bosom,
Where alone thou secretly dwellest;
And in Thy sweet breathing
Full of grace and glory,
How tenderly Thou fillest me with Thy love.

These words, penned by St. John of the Cross in his book *Living Flame of Love*, capture the heart-cry of every soul for intimacy with God. For this we were created and for this we were rescued from sin and death. In *Ephesians*, Paul lets us in on a little secret: We've been more than noticed. God has pursued us from farther than space and longer ago than time. Our romance is far more ancient than the story of Helen of Troy. God has had us in mind since before the Foundations of the World. He loved us before the beginning of time, has come for us, and now calls us to journey toward him, with him, for the consummation of our love.

Who am I, really? The answer to that question is found in the answer to another: What is God's heart toward me, or, how do I affect him? If God is the Pursuer, the Ageless Romancer, the Lover, then there has to be a Beloved, one who is the Pursued. This is our role in the story.

In the end, all we've ever really wanted is to be loved. "Love comes from God," writes St. John. We don't have to get God to love us by doing something right—even loving him. "This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Someone has noticed, someone has taken the initiative. There is nothing we need to do to keep it up, because his love for us is not based on what we've done, but who we are: His beloved. "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me" (Song 7:10).