

The River Flows

A Journey to the Heart of Our Common Humanity

By

Dr Wayne Tinsey

God makes the rivers to flow. They tire not, nor do they cease from flowing.

May the river of my life flow into the sea of love that is the Lord.

Guard us against all danger, O Lord.

Lead us from darkness into light.

The Rig Veda

The Invitation

To journey without being changed is to be a nomad.
To change without journeying is to be a chameleon.
To journey and be transformed by the journey is to
be a pilgrim.

Mark Nepo

Long before the invitation to visit India, something within Gabriel had begun to shift. It wasn't the search for and desire for God; that had been his passion for all his adult life. What was happening was much harder to name. The idea of God he had grown up with now seemed small and limiting. A God he had simply outgrown.

Gabriel hadn't lost his love of and admiration for Jesus. If anything, they were stronger now than ever. However, it was not the 'superhuman' Jesus of doctrine and devotion that attracted him these days; it was the human Jesus, the prophet of transformation, portrayed in the Gospels as siding with the poor and those the religion of his day did not welcome. No, it was not Jesus that Gabriel was struggling with, but he could not accept much of what he now saw as a distraction from Jesus' original message and vision.

Gabriel Marlow had built a very solid career in Catholic education. He had become a deputy principal at a Melbourne secondary school at a young age. He was respected, thoughtful and well-liked, with a leadership presence well beyond his 35 years. He taught religion and ethics, spoke well and read widely. He knew the language of the Christian tradition and could speak to it with clarity and ease. Yet increasingly, he had noticed, doing so with total conviction was becoming more difficult for him.

Increasingly, Gabriel struggled through Mass and liturgies that now carried less significance for him, and his usual weariness with poorly prepared homilies now felt uncomfortably close to anger and grief. The religion he had been raised in, which had given him his career, no longer spoke to him as it needed to. A religion that prioritised protecting its theology, doctrines and boundaries, defining who belonged and who did not, failed to inspire him or help him in his search for a deeper way of living. Gabriel felt increasingly alienated yet also guilty about being in this space.

He still strongly believed that the Gospel, at its best, was a force for liberation; a call to kindness, justice, and compassion. He believed that Jesus lived and died for a world in which inclusion and the fullness of life were offered to all. However, Gabriel increasingly struggled to reconcile this vision of humanity with narrow, inward-looking forms of religion.

Often, in this difficult space of guilt and confusion, Gabriel wrestled with a question that was growing more urgent for him: what if the vision of Jesus and other prophets and sages was larger than any tradition that tried to own or contain it, including his own?

In recent times, Gabriel had begun to read more widely. He was drawn to wisdom from other traditions, philosophies, and the poetry of the East. All these voices seemed to point to the same truths: that compassion mattered more than moral perfection, that kindness was our highest calling, that the call to justice could not be separated from prayer and worship, and that the measure of any faith was not how tightly it held its beliefs but how deeply it enlarged our hearts.

Language, symbols and rituals might vary. But Gabriel began to sense a common thread flowing through what he was reading. He increasingly felt a call towards a more expansive horizon. He could not articulate it fully yet, but he knew this for sure: his inherited God and the faith that had sustained him to this point were too small for the hunger awakened in him now, too small for the person he was becoming.

Gabriel had always had a good relationship with Margaret, his school principal. Margaret was experienced, wise and nurturing. They worked well together and somehow complemented each other. After school had finished on a Thursday in August, Margaret asked to speak with Gabriel in her office. "Gabe, we've been offered two places in a 10-day immersion program to India next term," she said. "Participants will be visiting projects in Kolkata. School visits, outreach programs, women's initiatives and other projects. I'd like you to consider going."

Gabriel reacted. "Me?" "Yes." "I'm not sure I'm the best choice. Aren't there others on staff who can and want to go?"

Margaret looked at Gabriel with a warm smile.

"Gabe, you've spent years teaching religion and helping others reflect on faith, justice and purpose," she said. "But I have noticed something has changed a bit in you lately. It's like you're searching for something new and different."

"You know, Gabe, knowing about religion and theology is never a substitute for knowing and experiencing God. India was so helpful for me in my own search."

"I think this experience would be helpful for you," she added. "Sometimes stepping into a different world, a different way of seeing, can help us see our own situation more clearly. The immersion isn't really about India. It's about allowing your encounter with difference to transform you and help you see more clearly."

Gabriel looked down. "Margaret, I'm not looking for a new religion."

"I know," she replied gently. "Then why me?"

Margaret smiled. "Because I think God might have a few surprises waiting for you. Think about it, will you? Here's the info, and remember, Gabe, we don't go to India to teach anyone. We go because difference has a way of teaching us. Real immersion isn't measured by the kilometres we travel, but by the distance our hearts are willing to move as a result of the experience."

Margaret passed Gabriel a folder with the words "India Immersion Program: An Experience of Solidarity and Encounter" in large letters on the front cover.

Margaret's words and the offer she had made stayed with Gabriel throughout the rest of the day. On his drive home, he kept glancing down at the folder on the passenger seat.

After taking his coat off, he made tea and sat at the kitchen table, reading through the material. It contained descriptions of schools and community projects, along with photographs of teachers, children and life in Kolkata. He lingered over the faces he saw.

One photograph held his gaze longer than the others. An elderly woman sat in a doorway, her sari neatly gathered around her. Though desperately poor, she radiated an unmistakable stillness and serenity. As he closed the folder, Gabriel thought once more of the invitation and challenge in Margaret's words.

Gabriel's house was not far from the Yarra River. He often walked there on Saturday mornings, not out of discipline or for fitness, but because the flow of the narrow, brown river seemed calming and unhurried to him. From a distance, the river looked still, but up close, it was always moving.

Gabriel put down his teacup and made his way to the river. While strolling along the bank, he noticed the river flowing more quickly than usual. He thought of an old saying he had once heard: 'You never step into the same river twice.' Perhaps

faith was like that too, he thought. As the river flows, it picks up sediment and debris from its banks and deposits them along the way. What remains constant is the flow of the river itself, not the ever-changing contents it carries. Likewise, beliefs and cultural traditions that abound in our religions are not what is essential to the flow of Divine love. Perhaps what we once thought was essential was only an attachment to the shape the river of faith once took.

The thought somehow consoled Gabriel. He felt less anxious, less guilty for questioning what no longer spoke to him in his search.

By the time he turned towards home that afternoon, he knew he would go to India. Not because he expected all the answers or a sudden transformation, but because something in him recognised the invitation as more than random, part of a deeper movement already underway.

Gabriel realised Margaret's invitation had merely given shape to something already unfolding within him. For years he had sensed a quiet restlessness, a longing he could neither explain nor ignore. Sometimes the deepest calls in life arrive not as thunder but as whispers, inviting us beyond the life we have settled for into one waiting to be discovered.

Before Monday morning classes, he told Margaret, "Yes, Marg. I'll go."

She nodded. "I'm so pleased, Gabe. Go with an open heart, my friend. Simply trust and enjoy."

In the weeks that followed, life was busy with preparations: injections, meetings, briefings, reading, and conversations about travel, culture, and expectations.

During the preparation sessions, Gabriel was reminded that immersion was not simply another overseas trip. It wasn't organised as an adventure or even a humanitarian project. The articles he read insisted that immersion was, first and foremost, an invitation to listen, to observe, and, above all, to allow oneself to be changed.

One of the quotes from historian Miriam Beard resonated strongly with him: "Travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in one's ideas of living." Gabriel couldn't help wondering whether that was truly possible. Could a few weeks in another country genuinely alter the way a person saw life and their place in it?

He began to understand that the journey he was about to undertake was less about travelling across the world than about travelling into and beyond himself. Every

culture, every religion, and every human being offered a unique way of seeing reality. He came to realise that the purpose of immersion was not to compare or judge those worlds against his own, but to enter them with enough humility to allow them to question his assumptions. If he returned home exactly the same person who had boarded the plane, then perhaps he had only been a tourist.

The journey had already begun, the moment he said yes and agreed to leave the familiar behind. There was something deeply symbolic about stepping away from home. The routines that had shaped his life, the assumptions he had never questioned, the comfortable certainty of his own world; all of these he would leave behind for a while. Perhaps that was why every spiritual tradition spoke of pilgrimage. Sometimes we have to change our place before we can change our perspective.

For years, Gabriel had worked to instil in his students a sense of social justice in an unfair world. Perhaps poverty should never be something to observe from a comfortable distance. Statistics could educate the mind, but only relationships can educate the heart. One sentence from the orientation stayed with him long after the session had finished: "Do not go to change the people you meet. Go prepared to let them change you." It sounded simple enough, yet Gabriel sensed it held a wisdom he did not yet fully understand.

The greatest discovery of immersion is never another country. It is another way of seeing. And sometimes, through another's eyes, we finally begin to see ourselves.

One evening, in the final days before departure, Gabriel returned once more to the Yarra, just as the sun was setting. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets, listening to the sounds of the river. He was about to leave the country he had known his entire life and travel to a place he had never seen.

He would carry with him everything that had shaped him thus far: his admiration for Jesus, his unease with formal religion, his hunger for justice, his questions, and his longing for the experience of a bigger God.

He knew that he was travelling to India in search of something he could not yet name. Later he would understand that the real journey had never been about finding a different God, but about becoming the kind of person who could recognise the Divine everywhere.

The River

The world is the river of God, flowing from God and flowing back to God.

The Shevetashvatara Upanishad

No one ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same person.

Heraclitus

His first experience of India was an assault on Gabriel's senses. As he stepped into the humid Kolkata evening after arriving at the hostel, the city seemed like a tide of sounds, smells, and colours rising around him without warning. Smoke and incense mingled with exhaust fumes, bells ringing and horns honking. The voices of street vendors; the engines of old yellow cars straining beside rickshaws pulled by men who struggled to survive. Gabriel found himself overwhelmed yet totally enlivened. The sacred and the ordinary, beauty and hardship, devotion and exhaustion, stillness and haste; everything seemed to inhabit the same vibrant, living space.

Despite the chaos, everything here somehow appeared connected and in place. Spirituality seemed woven into the texture of daily life. A woman paused before stepping into traffic and touched her fingers lightly to her forehead in a blessing. A driver bowed his head and lit incense before turning on the ignition of his taxi. A flower seller arranged marigolds with the care of someone tending an altar. By a crumbling wall, a man sat cross-legged in prayer as buses roared past in clouds of fumes and dust.

On their second morning in Kolkata, they visited the first school on the itinerary. The building was modest and in need of repair, its walls marked by heat and time. There were no desks; the children sat on the floor. Yet when the students entered, the whole place seemed to change. Somehow, dignity arrived with them. Dignity was a word Gabriel kept returning to, even though these kids had nothing in the way of material possessions. The children greeted the visitors with joy and enthusiasm scarcely imaginable in Australia. Big smiles and open hearts.

All the children and staff greeted each other and the visitors by clasping their hands together as if to pray and saying Namaste. Gabriel had been aware of the custom but not its true meaning. Namaste literally means that the Divine presence in me recognises the same divine presence in you. Gabriel could scarcely grasp the power of this gesture. Imagine, every time you encounter another person, you recognise that this person is your brother or sister because you both share a common home in the Divine. How beautiful he thought.

Later, over tea in her humble office, the principal, Sister Meera, spoke with the group about education, poverty, social barriers and the slow work of hope. She did not speak to evoke pity in the group. Her words carried the weight of someone who had seen suffering up close and refused to let it harden her. At one point she said, "One of the mistakes people often make is to begin by asking what these children lack. We begin by asking what gifts they can contribute. We refuse to reduce any person to need, wound or circumstance."

Gabriel found himself recalling words he had once written in a notebook: Every person is infinitely more than the circumstances into which they are born. Looking around the room, he realised that Sister Meera was not merely articulating a philosophy of education. She was revealing a way of seeing. Liberation begins when we recognise the dignity that has always been present, even when it is hidden beneath poverty, injustice or fear.

They left the school that afternoon feeling both challenged and uplifted. This truly is education for liberation, Gabriel thought, not just as a poster on the wall but lived, real and urgent. Before arriving in Kolkata, he had expected facing abject poverty and marginalisation to be the main challenge. He had prepared himself, as best he could, to be uncomfortable in the face of stark inequality. However, this somehow did not seem to be the main challenge emerging so far. He thought of the kids he taught in Melbourne. Would they use the good fortune of their birth as a springboard for making their contribution towards a more equitable and fairer world?

That evening, Fr. Joseph, one of their local hosts, explained that they would visit the river early the next morning. "The river?" Gabriel asked. "The Hooghly," he replied. "A branch of the Ganges." Something stirred in him. Perhaps it was because rivers had already become quiet companions in his imagination. He thought of his last walk along the Yarra and smiled gently.

They arrived just after sunrise. The light was pale and low, and mist hung over the water. Along the steps, called ghats, and the bank of the river, people were already gathered, moving in ways that seemed at once ordinary and sacred. A man washed his face and chest. A woman in a bright sari lowered a small tray of flowers into the current. Two boys splashed each other and shouted with delight. A Hindu priest stood waist-deep, eyes closed, lips moving in silent prayer and ablution. Nearby, a man washed clothes on a stone. Gabriel stood a little apart from the others, simply watching.

The river was broad, muddy and vibrantly alive. It was not beautiful in the picturesque sense of some rivers. It carried silt, flowers, waste, branches, ashes and other remnants of human life in a huge city. Yes, it was dirty and polluted, yet none of this diminished it in any way. If anything, its ordinariness made it more compelling. This was not a decorative river. It was a living one, and what made it alive was not its adornments but its movement and flow. It received and carried everything, yet remained itself.

Gabriel's thoughts turned once again to his thoughts on that last walk along the Yarra. For much of his life, he had thought of faith as the careful holding of the right things: right beliefs, right practices, right forms, right words. A river suggests something different. Not holding, but flowing; a living current. Not the absence of sediment, but the capacity to keep moving through it.

A river remains a river even when it carries branches and debris. The same should apply to people. We are not the stories gathered along the way, nor the roles performed, nor the wounds carried, nor even the beliefs held, however intensely. We cannot be reduced to what we carry; we are in essence the flow itself.

Gabriel thought of the roles he had played and continues to play. Like an actor who forgets he is playing a part, he had spent years identifying himself with these roles: teacher, leader, Catholic, husband, friend. Yet perhaps these were only garments worn by a deeper and more enduring essence. The river flowed beneath every it carried, just as awareness remained beneath every experience. Roles come and go. Thoughts and feelings arise and pass away. Yet the awareness in which they appear remains.

A little further down the bank, an old man with a basket of marigold petals sat on a worn stone step. He wore a plain white cotton kurta, and his lined face spoke of many mornings spent watching the river say different things. Gabriel moved towards him.

The man looked up briefly as Gabriel approached, then looked back at the water. For a few moments, neither spoke. Then the man said in broken English, "Welcome to India! Where are you from?"

"Australia," answered Gabriel.

"Ahh, cricket!" the man smiled.

The man plucked a single marigold petal from the basket at his side and let it drift into the current. After a while, he spoke again. "People come here to wash away their sins, to pray for guidance, to remember those they love, to let go of what holds them." He gestured towards the water with an open hand. "The river receives all of it without judgement." After a pause, he added, "Our religions can be like the banks of this river, you know. They can give shape and direction. They can help us know where to begin and keep us from getting lost. Without banks, you know, the water spreads everywhere and is lost."

The old man turned slightly towards Gabriel. "But sometimes people mistake the banks for the river itself." Gabriel did not answer. He knew the man had touched something profoundly true. He understood why every great wisdom tradition had produced both guardians and mystics. The guardians protected the banks. The mystics entered the river. Both were necessary. Without banks the river lost direction. Without the flowing water, the banks enclosed nothing but an empty channel.

The old man reached into the basket again and let another petal go. "The river bends," he said. "It narrows and widens. It gathers branches, silt, leaves, offerings and ashes. It drops some things and carries others all the way to the sea. Its shape changes constantly. It is never the same twice. But what remains, what truly matters, is the flow."

Gabriel realised he had spent much of his life trying to believe the right things, to serve faithfully, and to remain loyal to the tradition that had shaped him. There was good in that, and he knew it. But sitting beside this old man, he realised that spiritual growth might be less about clinging to forms and more about recognising the living current beneath them, the ceaseless, living motion. The energy that gives life to and carries every form.

The old man smiled gently.

"Our sages have a very old saying," he said.

"Tat Tvam Asi." You are That.

Before Gabriel could ask what he meant, he picked up his basket and disappeared into the growing crowd.

Gabriel stayed by the water that morning long after the man had gone. He watched the river carry tea lights, petals, mud, memories, and all the visible fragments of human longing towards the sea. "What if God were not separate from the flow of life, but the very life within the flow, the source and sustainer of all that is?" Gabriel sensed he had long known the answer to this question. He smiled and walked slowly up the steps to join the rest of the group.

The Many Faces of the One

Truth is One; the wise call It by many names.

The Rig Veda

The lamps are different, but the Light is the same.

Rumi

In the days that followed, Gabriel noticed a new and unfamiliar openness, as though something inside him had been released. He was still unsure what any of it meant, but he noticed changes. He had begun to move more slowly, more humbly, more consciously, allowing himself to be open to what these experiences could reveal to him.

One morning, before the city had fully awakened, he wandered into a small temple that caught his eye when he had passed by on his first night in Kolkata. There was nothing special about it: no crowds of worshippers, no ceremonies happening, no magnificent architecture. There were a few figures of the faces of God in unpolished brass, the scent of incense rising into the still air, and an old man sitting cross-legged near the entrance with his eyes closed.

Gabriel sat on the floor some distance away. He observed the old man. A very faint smile softened his weather-beaten face. He is meditating, Gabriel thought, admiring the serenity and gentle devotion. There was no liturgy or process being followed. Simply presence in the moment.

After a while, the old man opened his eyes, looked around, and saw Gabriel. "Namaste. You are travelling," the man said softly. It was not a question. "Yes," Gabriel replied. A pause followed, and then, almost automatically, he added, "I'm trying to deepen my understanding of so many things."

The old man smiled, "Can you be more specific?" Gabriel hesitated. How could he put it into words without making it feel small? "I want to understand God," he said finally. His words felt somehow insufficient. The man nodded, as though acknowledging something deeper than the words themselves, and asked, "And what do you think God is?"

Gabriel had answered that question many times in his life. In classrooms, retreats and conversations with students, he had spoken about God using language shaped by scripture, theology and tradition. But now, in this small temple, with this old man beside him, the answers he had once carried so confidently did not come. "I really don't know," he said. Here, in this small temple, in a foreign land, the admission did not feel dramatic or like failure. It felt like the most honest thing he had ever said.

The man did not respond immediately. Instead, he reached down and picked up a small clay cup beside him. Pouring water slowly from a simple metal jug, he filled it to the brim and held it out towards Gabriel. "Drink." Gabriel took the cup. Despite all the warnings he had received about the water in India being unfiltered and dangerous, he drank the cool water.

When he finished, the man spoke again. "Where is the water now?" Gabriel frowned slightly. "Inside me," he said. The man nodded. "And before?" "In the cup." "And before that?" Gabriel paused. "In the jug, I suppose." The man's eyes remained steady. "And before that?"

Gabriel hesitated. He could follow the logic easily enough: the river, the rain, the clouds, the sea. But something about the way the question was asked suggested it was not really about tracing the water's origins. It was about seeing what had remained unchanged beneath every form the water had taken. "It was always water," he said slowly. The man smiled. "Yes, it was. Many forms, one essence."

A long pause followed. Then the man said gently, "Form changes. Names change. But what is does not become something else." The words did not seem entirely new to Gabriel. He had heard similar thoughts before in the books he had been reading. Yet here, in this moment, they did not feel like an idea to be understood. They felt like something pointing beyond the ideas themselves, to a much deeper realisation.

"In India, we sometimes speak of Advaita," the man said quietly. "Don't worry about the strange word; it really means not two." He gestured lightly. "Not you and God. Not seeker and sought. Not here and there." His hand came to rest softly against his chest. "We are already one. But we imagine that we are not."

Gabriel thought that he had spent a lifetime thinking in distinctions: Creator and creation, human and Divine, self and other. Those distinctions had shaped his mind and, in many ways, protected the faith he had been raised in. But now he wondered whether maintaining these distinctions had kept him distant from a mystery that was never meant to be explained exactly or observed from a distance.

“Then what about our beliefs, our practices, our religions?” The man nodded, as though expecting the question. “They are like the cup,” he said. “Necessary. Beautiful, even. But not the water. People sometimes spend their whole lives polishing the cup, arguing about the cup, protecting the cup and even fighting over the cup. They forget to drink the water.” Something in Gabriel immediately stilled. He had spent so much of his life focused on the cup, and he had forgotten what it was meant to hold.

The man resumed his meditation after farewelling Gabriel with another polite gesture of Namaste. Outside the small temple, life was happening at full speed. Vendors called out from every direction. Children ran through the crowd, chasing one another. Colours, sounds and textures; everything alive, everything in motion. Despite the noise and bustle, however, he sensed something he could not quite describe. Even in this chaotic street, he could sense the same stillness he had felt in the temple and by the river. No, he could not describe the new experience, but something inside longed for more.

That evening, in a popular restaurant, he sat with a group of travellers and pilgrims from different parts of the world. One woman spoke of her Buddhist practice, another of her devotion within Islam, and a man described years spent in silence in a Christian monastery. The languages, symbols, rituals and stories they referred to were different, yet as each spoke, they struck a common resonance. The words and forms differed. But the reality they pointed to, was the same.

It was not agreement. It was not sameness of belief. It was something deeper: a shared experience of presence that no single tradition could own. Gabriel felt no need to collapse the differences or pretend they did not matter. They did matter. They were beautiful, particular, and alive in the cultures they animated. But no particular perspective represented the whole vision. It occurred to Gabriel that the world doesn't need more adherents of religious belief systems. It needs more people who embody the teachings of love, compassion and justice.

That night, as he lay in bed waiting for sleep to descend, Gabriel once again considered the questions that had always moved him. He had come to this point searching for what was true, but now another, deeper question was emerging. Not simply, what is true? The new question that seemed to possess greater urgency was: What is always true, regardless of the form it takes?

If every sincere path, every tradition, every language of devotion and every honest search were pointing towards the same underlying reality, then what he had called

“God” all his life was not confined to any one expression of God. The thought did not threaten him as it once might have. It did not diminish his faith. If anything, it freed it from the burden of having to be the whole package and allowed it to become, again, what perhaps it had always been meant to be: a doorway to Divine consciousness. One doorway among many others.

In the days that followed, Gabriel consciously stopped trying to make sense of everything as it happened. Instead, he endeavoured to do something simpler: to notice, to stay present, and to let each moment come to him as it was, without rushing to name, explain, or neatly fit it into what he already knew.

And in that surrender to the experience, something began to take root within him. It was not another belief to hold onto, nor a conclusion he needed to defend, but a gentle sense that what he had been searching for all this time had never been separate from him. The Divine was not elsewhere, waiting at the end of a correct path of religious observance. God was nearer than breath, present in every face, every silence, every river, every prayer, and every form that briefly held the one drop of water.

The Mirror

Know what is false, and what remains is true.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

Be still, and know that I am God.

Psalm 46:10

Gabriel returned to the temple several mornings that week. Something drew him there to watch the old man meditate before the city fully awakened, before the rest of the group surfaced for breakfast. Sometimes he and the old man spoke. More often, they did not. The old man seemed entirely comfortable in silence. One morning, they sat for almost half an hour without speaking.

Eventually, Gabriel broke the silence. "I've spent my whole life searching for God." The old man smiled. "So has everyone." Another silence fell between them. Then the old man asked, "And who is the one doing the searching?"

Gabriel laughed quietly, as though the question were too simple to be taken seriously. "I suppose... I am." The old man tilted his head. "Who is this 'I'?" The question seemed almost absurd in its simplicity. "Myself," Gabriel answered. The old man nodded gently. "Tell me about this self."

Gabriel hesitated. The obvious answers came quickly. "My name is Gabriel." "That is your name," the old man replied. "I am a teacher." "That is a role." "I am Australian." "A nationality." "I am Catholic." "A religious tradition." "I am thirty-five." "An age." Each answer was dismissed as quickly as it was offered, gently, without mockery. Gabriel finally shrugged and said, "I don't know."

The old man smiled. "Good," he said. "Very good." Gabriel felt unexpectedly irritated. "You seem pleased." "I am." "Why?" The old man leaned forward. "Because what you do not know cannot imprison you." The words hung between them, unsettling Gabriel more than he expected.

After a moment, the old man asked, "When you were five years old, were you aware of things?" "Yes." "When you were twenty?" "Yes." "When you first became a teacher?" "Yes." "When your father died, were you also aware?" Gabriel's eyes

closed momentarily. "Yes." "When you first started to question your faith?" A long pause followed before he answered. "Yes."

The old man nodded. "So, your body, your thoughts, your beliefs and your opinions have changed." "Yes, many times." The old man let the silence settle again before asking, "But tell me, Gabriel... what has remained?"

The old man let Gabriel sit with the silence.

Then asked one final question.

"Can you observe your thoughts?"

"Yes."

"Can you observe your feelings?"

"Yes."

"Can you observe your body?"

"Yes."

The old man smiled.

"Then none of those can be what you really are."

Gabriel sat very still. He had never truly considered these questions. Everything he had ever called "me" had changed at some point: his body, his relationships, his understanding of things, even his image of God. Yet something had accompanied him through all these stages of his life. The same knowing. The same awareness. Present in the background while all these things were happening.

The old man picked up a tarnished brass mirror from beside him and held it before Gabriel. "What do you see?" he asked. "My face." "And when you walk away?" "Your mirror stays here." "Does the mirror grow old because an old man looks into it?" "No." "Does it become beautiful because a beautiful woman appears?" Gabriel smiled. "No." "It reflects everything," the old man said, placing the mirror back on the ground. "It becomes nothing. Awareness is like that." Gabriel looked at the mirror, then at the old man, and felt a twinge of understanding. His thoughts turned to an old Zen saying he had heard but never really understood, till now: 'The moon is reflected in a thousand rivers, yet the moon remains one.'

Gabriel had spent so many years identifying with what appeared in the mirror: success, failure, belief, doubt, grief, reputation, recognition. Perhaps his true image

and identity had never been revealed in any of those reflections. Perhaps his deepest identity was the looking itself. Perhaps the journey is not about discovering a new self, but rather, remembering the Self that has always been present beneath every role we play.

These thoughts at once challenged, unsettled, and liberated him. If he was not merely the changing reflections in the mirror of life, perhaps he had never truly been diminished by failure nor enlarged by success. The awareness that witnessed every joy, every grief, and every doubt had remained untouched all along. He looked again at the mirror resting on the stone floor. For the first time, he wondered whether the One he had spent his life searching for was not another object to be found, but the silent awareness through which every search had taken place.

The Seeing Heart

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

One morning, as he left the temple, the old man called after him. "Today, as you make your planned visits," he said, "do not look for wisdom." Gabriel was puzzled and turned back. "What should I look for, then?" The old man smiled, that familiar gentleness somewhere between mischief and truth. "Simply notice who is looking and what the world reveals in return."

At first, the old man's words seemed almost meaningless, the kind of saying that sounded wise only because it was hard to explain.

The streets of Kolkata were incredibly alive. Children in white uniforms hurried to school, women arranged vegetables on faded cloths spread across the pavement, rickshaw drivers rang their bells and called out to one another, and the scent of incense and spices drifted through the warm air. In this city, life unfolded in an exuberant mix of beauty and struggle. He noticed that it no longer overwhelmed him, though. He found himself slowing down, noticing faces rather than crowds, finding more meaning in the midst of what looked like chaos.

At a tea stall, an elderly man, a chai wallah, poured steaming chai into tiny clay cups. His movements were deliberate, almost graceful, and each cup received the same careful attention. A businessman in a suit, a barefoot labourer, and a young mother balancing a child on one hip were all served with the same attention and dignity. No haste. No preference. Gabriel watched the smiling tea seller for several minutes, and it occurred to him that holiness might sometimes look remarkably ordinary. Perhaps holiness had never belonged to extraordinary people at all, but to ordinary people who lived intensely and loved extraordinarily well.

Later in the day, during another school visit, he noticed a young teacher kneeling beside a boy who was struggling to write. She never corrected him, nor did she reach for the pencil herself. She simply stayed beside him, encouraging each hesitant attempt until, at last, the boy looked up and smiled.

Gabriel recognised this smile. The boy didn't smile because he had mastered the exercise, but because he realised that someone had believed that he could. Gabriel had seen this smile a thousand times during his years in education. This was a sacred moment. No cathedral, thought Gabriel, could have contained more grace than this small classroom in this moment. Education, at its heart, had always been an act of hope made visible. He thought of the words he had once read from Simone Weil: 'Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.'

That evening, the group returned to the river. The Hooghly reflected the fading light of the afternoon as long ribbons of gold. Children chased one another along the steps; an old woman released flowers into the current; nearby, a group of young men laughed loudly as they washed before heading home. Nothing extraordinary was happening. Nothing mystical or dramatic. Yet Gabriel sensed the same stillness he had felt in the temple that morning, not hidden beneath the ordinary events but expressed through them. For years, he had imagined spiritual life as an occasional ascent into sacred moments. It now seemed more like an awakening to the sacredness that had always surrounded him. Perhaps heaven was not another place. It was simply another way of seeing what is.

The next morning, he found the old man, not meditating, but sweeping fallen leaves from the temple courtyard. Wanting to help, Gabriel reached for the broom, and the old man handed it to him without a word. For several minutes, they worked together in silence. Finally, Gabriel spoke. "I think I'm beginning to understand." The old man laughed. "I hope not." Gabriel laughed too. "I thought you'd be pleased." "I am." "Then why do you hope I don't understand?" The old man leaned on the broom and looked towards the trees. "Because understanding belongs to the mind," he said. "Seeing belongs to the heart."

They resumed sweeping. After a while, the old man stopped and carefully picked up a single fallen leaf. "When this leaf was on the tree," he said, "people admired its beauty." He placed it gently in Gabriel's hand. "Now that it is old and lies on the ground. Has it lost its life and beauty?" Gabriel looked closely. The leaf had begun to curl at the edges, its green softening into brown and gold. "No," he answered quietly. "It is simply changing." The old man nodded. "Everything changes." Then he looked directly into Gabriel's eyes and asked, "But tell me... what is it that notices the change?"

Gabriel did not answer. He no longer felt the need to. He was beginning to understand that some questions were not problems to solve but places to live, to

wrap your life around. They open a space within us and ask only that we remain there honestly, without rushing towards certainty of answer.

That night, awaiting sleep, lying awake beneath the old, slow-turning ceiling fan in his room, Gabriel found himself thinking about Jesus. Perhaps, he thought, Jesus had never asked people simply to believe more. Rather, he had invited them to see more deeply: to notice the Kingdom already present among them. Perhaps awakening was not the discovery of another world, but the recognition that this world had always been charged with the presence of God.

The Face of God

Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.

Thomas Merton

Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.

Matthew 25:40

A week into the immersion, the group travelled to a small hospice for gravely ill people run by Sister Meera's congregation on the city's edge. The building had whitewashed walls stained by years of monsoons. The wide verandas opened to the afternoon air, and flowering bougainvillea spilled over cracked concrete. It was an ordinary looking Bengali building, but the moment Gabriel stepped through the gate, he sensed he had entered sacred ground. Not because people came there to die, but because they came there to be loved.

In this special place, kindness and compassion were in such abundance that Gabriel found himself moved to tears several times during the day. A volunteer spoon-fed an elderly man whose hands no longer allowed him to feed himself. Another massaged lotion into the cracked feet of a woman who had not been able to walk for months. He witnessed smiles and laughter emanating from toothless mouths. Gabriel noticed that none of those who worked here behaved as though compassion were a task to be completed. Love and kindness had become the atmosphere, and Gabriel found himself wondering whether this was what Jesus meant when he spoke about the Kingdom of God: not another world, but this one, whenever love became visible.

Sister Meera walked beside him. "We know we can't cure everyone here," she said. "We stopped measuring our success that way years ago." Gabriel looked towards a young volunteer sitting beside a frail man, reading softly from what looked like a children's storybook. "He probably can't even hear her," he remarked. Meera smiled. "Perhaps." "Then why read?" She looked at Gabriel as though the answer were obvious. "Because love and compassion are never wasted."

In one room lay a man probably no older than Gabriel. Cancer had consumed his body, and his breathing had become slow and laboured. His wife sat beside the

bed, holding his hand without speaking. Neither seemed aware of the visitors. Even though every instinct told him to move on and give them privacy, instead, Gabriel remained.

After several minutes, the woman looked up and smiled. It was not the smile of someone pretending everything was going to be okay. It was gentler, a smile born of complete acceptance. She beckoned Gabriel to the bedside. "You are visiting Kolkata?" she said in surprisingly good English. Gabriel nodded. She gently placed her husband's hand back under the blanket. Looking towards her husband with deep tenderness, she said, "He cannot speak now. But he still teaches me every day." Gabriel felt tears gathering unexpectedly. "What does he teach you?" The woman considered the question, then answered softly, "How to love someone when they can no longer give you anything in return."

Gabriel stood there, gripped by a strange feeling that brought him to the edge of something far deeper than pity or emotion. He had seen and experienced love in many forms during his life, but here was unconditional love, without transaction, without the promise of return.

As had now become his ritual, Gabriel returned alone to the river that evening. Dusk was approaching. He thought so many random thoughts: about the hospice, Sister Meera, the wife beside the bed, Jesus, and the river. For years he had imagined that enlightenment meant learning, seeing and knowing extraordinary things. Today he had witnessed so much love and compassion expressed through ordinary acts of listening, washing, and smiling. No, awakening was not about escaping into mystical experiences but rather about entering more deeply and completely into the painful ordinariness of the world, determined to make a difference.

The following morning, he found the old man sitting beneath a banyan tree outside the temple. Before Gabriel spoke, the old man asked, "What did you see yesterday?" Gabriel answered without thinking. "I saw love." The old man nodded, then said, "You can call it love, yes, but you also saw what remains when the illusion of separation begins to fade. True love and compassion have their source in the realisation that we are all one; one Life expressing itself through countless lives."

"When you believe you are separate, compassion becomes a duty. When you discover you are not separate..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "...compassion becomes as natural as breathing." Gabriel closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He

had spent much of his life trying to become compassionate, as though it were a virtue that could be produced through effort. But what if compassion were not something added to the self? What if it were what naturally flowed when we transcended the illusion that we are separate?

That morning, Gabriel sat for a long time after the old man left. He thought of a Bible verse he had heard so often: Love your neighbour as yourself. He had always heard those words as a moral command, noble yet difficult, an instruction to stretch beyond ordinary self-interest. Now, another possibility dawned. Perhaps what Jesus was really trying to say was to love your neighbour because he or she IS yourself.

On his way back to the hostel, as he heard the temple bells echo across the waking city, Gabriel felt another of his old certainties was being challenged. He had spent years trying to become a better person: a better Christian, a better leader, a better man. But perhaps the challenge was not about becoming something better. Perhaps it was remembering what had always been true beneath every fear, every ambition, every identity and every story we had about ourselves.

He now believed that beneath humanity's countless faces, there was only one Life. And that Life had looked at him all morning through the eyes of the dying man, the devoted wife, the hospice volunteers, the old teacher, Sister Meera, and so many others. Gabriel had come to India searching for a bigger God. Now he wondered whether that bigger God had ever been hidden at all. Perhaps the Divine had been faithfully looking back at him through every face he had ever loved, every stranger he had ever overlooked, every child he had ever taught, every friend, every enemy, every act of kindness, and every moment of compassion. The face of God had never been elsewhere. It had always been here if only we have eyes to see.

A Larger Heart

Love is not just something we do. It is what naturally arises when we recognise ourselves in another.

We're all just walking each other home.

Ram Dass

Morning arrived in Kolkata.

From the veranda outside his room, Gabriel watched the city awaken, the sky still hazy from days of constant humidity. Long before the traffic picked up, life had already begun. A tea seller carefully arranged his cups on a wooden cart, like a priest preparing an altar. Women swept the ground with hand brooms outside their homes, then sprinkled water to settle the dust. Shopkeepers raised corrugated shutters, revealing tiny stores no bigger than a single room. Nearby, a temple bell rang out. Moments later, the call to prayer drifted over the rooftops, soon joined by the laughter of children on their way to school.

It struck Gabriel again that this city had a rhythm unlike anywhere he'd known. Even amid obvious hardship, there was a surprising gentleness, as if the city understood something about belonging that wealth and order alone could never provide.

"You're becoming an early riser."

Gabriel turned to see Sister Meera joining him on the veranda, carrying two steaming cups of chai.

"I think India is changing my habits," he smiled.

"No," she laughed gently. "India is simply slowing you down enough to notice them."

She handed him one of the cups.

For several minutes, they stood together in silence, watching the city continue its awakening.

Finally, she said, "If you have no plans today, I'd like you to come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To visit some of our families."

Gabriel nodded.

"I'd like that."

After finishing their tea, they walked for about an hour, gradually leaving the wider streets behind. The shops thinned. The roads narrowed into winding lanes where bicycles, handcarts, and pedestrians moved through tiny spaces with incredible skill and ease. Homes built from salvaged timber, corrugated iron, and brightly coloured tarpaulins stood shoulder to shoulder, their open doorways offering glimpses of ordinary family life.

Gabriel noticed almost immediately that his attention was pulled in two different directions.

Part of him saw the obvious signs of poverty. This was the type of Kolkata slum area he had been prepared to encounter. The crowded homes. The open drains. The patched roofs. The faded clothes drying on makeshift lines stretched between buildings.

But another part of him kept noticing entirely different things.

A grandmother laughing as she taught a little boy to clap a rhythm with his tiny hands. A young father carrying his sleeping daughter on his shoulders while she absent-mindedly played with his hair. Three women preparing vegetables together, talking and laughing so freely that it was impossible to tell where one conversation ended and another began.

Everywhere he looked, he noticed small acts of kindness. Life here, he realised, was shared. People belonged to one another.

Gabriel thought of the apartment building where he lived in Melbourne. Months sometimes passed with nothing more than a polite greeting between neighbours. At home, privacy had become a treasured virtue, and independence was admired.

Here, it seemed, was the opposite. Survival itself seemed to depend upon interdependence. Nobody appeared to carry life alone.

As they continued walking, Gabriel recognised assumptions he had carried without ever examining them. He had unconsciously associated poverty with deficiency,

not merely the absence of possessions, but somehow the diminishment of people themselves.

Yet, nothing before him supported that belief.

Yes, there was hardship. Certainly. There was uncertainty. There was struggle. But there was also a sense of dignity strangely untouched by these challenges.

As they rounded another narrow corner, Sister Meera slowed her pace. A young family sat beneath a simple shelter made of bamboo poles, with a weathered blue tarpaulin stretched above them. It offered little more than basic protection from the sun and rain, yet the space they occupied had been meticulously swept clean. Outside stood several small pots of flowering plants. A kettle rested on a tiny charcoal stove. Beside it lay a pair of children's sandals, neatly lined up as if waiting to be worn again.

A little girl sat cross-legged on the ground, arranging smooth stones into intricate circular patterns. She worked with complete concentration. Occasionally, she would move one stone a fraction before sitting back to study the whole design.

Her mother sat nearby, gently brushing the child's long black hair, pausing now and then to tuck an unruly strand behind her ear with extraordinary tenderness. A few metres away, her father patiently repaired an old sandal with little more than a needle, thread, and remarkable determination. It was obvious that life for this family was tough. But no one complained.

The little girl suddenly looked up. For a brief moment, her eyes met Gabriel's. Then she smiled. It was such an open, uncomplicated smile that Gabriel instinctively smiled back before he had time to think. She returned immediately to arranging her stones.

As Gabriel continued walking, he found himself glancing back. The family had already resumed the quiet rhythm of their morning. Something about the encounter with this family remained with him. He couldn't have explained why. For reasons he didn't yet understand, he suspected he would remember that smile for a very long time.

During the rest of the morning Sister Meera introduced Gabriel to one family after another. They entered homes no larger than a single room, where grandparents, parents, and children somehow forged lives of extraordinary warmth in spaces we

back home would barely consider liveable. Everywhere they went, they were greeted with smiles, offered tea and biscuits the families could ill afford, and invited into conversations that flowed from family, school, and work to future dreams. One grandmother insisted on pressing another biscuit into Gabriel's hand. A young boy proudly spread his schoolbooks across the floor, eager to show off his week's work. One father spoke quietly of hoping his daughter might become a doctor; another simply dreamed his children would finish school. Hardship was everywhere here, yet Gabriel found almost no trace of self-pity. What he encountered instead was dignity, resilience, and a generosity that seemed to spill naturally from people who had very little besides each other.

Another feeling slowly awakened within Gabriel.

The warmth of these families didn't soften the harsh reality of their circumstances. The more he recognised them as human beings, just like him, the more impossible it became to dismiss their suffering as misfortune or random bad luck. He found himself wondering how the same world could produce such beauty and such inequality at the same time. Why should one child inherit security while another inherited a lifetime of uncertainty? Why should one family have opportunities beyond imagining while another struggled to meet the most basic needs every day? How do we tell the people here that we are all children of a loving God and that God wills fullness of life for them as well? The questions refused to leave.

As they walked back towards the school, they passed the young family living beneath the blue tarpaulin once more. The little girl was no longer arranging her circles of smooth stones. She was kneeling beside her mother, carefully washing clothes in a plastic bucket almost as big as she was, humming softly as though it were the most natural task in the world. When she noticed Gabriel, her face broke into the same gentle smile she had offered that morning, and she lifted her hand in greeting. Gabriel smiled and waved in return, yet as he walked on, he found himself looking back again and again until the family disappeared around the corner.

Eventually, he broke the silence. "How long have they lived there?" Sister Meera followed his gaze. "Almost three years." "They've lived on the street for three years?" She nodded gently. "They came from a farming village after floods destroyed everything they owned. They hoped the city would offer work. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't."

Gabriel walked on without speaking. His thoughts kept returning to the little girl's smile. It seemed impossible to reconcile such beauty and dignity with such uncertainty. He thought of children he knew in Australia whose lives were filled with opportunities, security, and every imaginable advantage. They had done nothing to deserve those gifts, just as this little girl had done nothing to deserve the circumstances of her birth. The difference between them lay in geography and history, in economics and politics, in forces far beyond either child's control. Yet somehow those accidents of birth would shape the possibilities of their lives.

Gabriel realised his questions were not merely about poverty. They were questions about humanity itself. What kind of world had we created, where some lives were surrounded by abundance while others struggled for the essentials of dignity? What responsibility did he bear for a world from which he had benefited so abundantly? Until then, he had thought of compassion chiefly as kindness towards those who suffered. Standing in these narrow streets, however, he began to suspect that compassion demanded more. It demanded that he not only to care but also question; not only feel but also to examine the assumptions on which his own comfortable life had been built.

By the time Gabriel reached the river that afternoon, the sun had begun its descent towards the western horizon. The river mirrored the evening sky in shades of warm gold and soft amber, carrying fishing boats, floating flowers, and the quiet prayers of another day out to the distant sea. Along the riverbank, life went on with its usual rhythm. Children laughed, chasing each other along the shore. Women gathered water before preparing the evening meal. Elderly men sat together in the shade, speaking little, content to watch the river's endless journey. As was now familiar to Gabriel, everything felt both ordinary and sacred, as if the river had long understood there was no difference between them.

The old man was already there waiting for him.

He greeted Gabriel with his familiar smile, then turned his gaze back to the water. Neither spoke for a while. Their friendship had reached a point where long silence needed no explanation. For a minute, they sat, listening to the gentle lapping of the river against the stone steps.

Eventually, Gabriel spoke.

"I've been asking questions all day."

"They won't leave me."

The old man nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"Some questions become companions."

I keep wondering why one child starts life surrounded by every opportunity, while another begins under a sheet of blue plastic. It doesn't seem fair. The more I think about it, the more I realise I have no answers.

The old man listened without interruption.

The river kept flowing.

Finally, the old man asked quietly, "And what have these questions you are asking done to you?"

Gabriel considered the question carefully.

"They've unsettled me."

"How so?"

"I don't think I can look at the world as I did before."

The old man smiled gently.

"Then perhaps the questions are already doing their work."

Gabriel looked at him.

"I thought wisdom gave people certainty."

"Wisdom," the old man replied softly, "rarely begins with certainty. More often, it begins when our certainties start to crumble."

The words sank deep into Gabriel.

He realised that for much of his life he had searched for answers. Yet the questions he now carried weren't merely asking him to think and answer differently. They were challenging him to respond.

After another long silence, he spoke again.

"Why is the world like this?"

The old man didn't answer straight away. Instead, he stooped to pick up a small pebble from the riverbank, turning it thoughtfully in his hand before placing it gently back where it had been.

"Every generation has asked that question," he said. "Some blame history, some politics, some economics, and others religion or human selfishness. There's truth in all those answers, but blame is not helpful to anyone."

Gabriel waited.

The old man turned towards him.

"The first question is this."

He paused.

"Now that you have seen what you have seen, who will you become?"

The challenge in the words struck a deep chord in Gabriel.

Who will I become?

He thought again of the little girl, smiling as she arranged her stones. He remembered her mother patiently brushing her daughter's hair, her father repairing a worn sandal, the countless cups of tea offered by people who had almost nothing, and the laughter that filled homes where comfort was scarce, but love was abundant.

None of them had asked him to solve their lives.

None had asked for pity.

They had simply welcomed him. Trusted him. Been present to him.

Slowly, another understanding began to dawn.

The deepest gift of an immersion experience like this wasn't that it showed us another world. Tourism can do this. Far more importantly, it gave us new eyes to see our own world. We returned home unable to pretend that suffering belonged only to strangers, because strangers had quietly become neighbours; they now had faces. The distance between "their lives" and "my life" had begun to dissolve.

"I think..." Gabriel said slowly, almost afraid of the words as they formed in him, "...that compassion begins the moment another person's life matters as much to me as my own."

The old man's eyes shone.

"Yes."

He spoke little more than a whisper.

"Love begins there too."

The old man rose slowly to his feet.

"The purpose of the spiritual journey," he said, "is not merely to gain a deeper understanding of God. It is to become more fully human. Every genuine awakening expands the heart. Every true encounter dissolves another boundary. Every act of love reminds us that there has always been only one human family."

Gabriel remained seated for some time after the old man had said his farewells and walked away.

He realised he would return to Australia with no simple answers to the questions now filling his heart. The world's inequalities wouldn't disappear because he had visited India. Yet something had changed. Even more important. He knew he could no longer live as though another person's suffering had nothing to do with him. The people he had met had given him no solutions, no programs, and no demands. They had given him something far more precious.

They had given him a larger heart.

As darkness settled over the Hooghly, Gabriel began the slow walk back to the hostel. He now understood that this journey wasn't leading him away from the world, but into it more deeply. Awakening wasn't an escape from the world but an invitation to embrace our common humanity more fully. And perhaps, he thought, that was where every journey towards God had always been leading: towards a life in which love became less an ideal to admire in others and more the natural way of being in the world.

In this city where she is revered as a saint by all faiths, Gabriel thought of the simple words of Mother Teresa: 'If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.'

The Return

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of
all our exploring will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

The day before they were due to leave Kolkata, Gabriel rose before dawn and walked once more to the river. He felt the need to bid farewell to the old man. Mist drifted over the water, the birds had begun their morning chorus, all while the city was still asleep. For several minutes, he stood exactly where he had first met the old man. The river flowed with the same gentle certainty. Nothing appeared to have changed, yet everything had changed.

He smiled at the thought. The river had not grown wiser; perhaps even he had not become wiser in the way he once imagined wisdom. Perhaps the river had simply worn away another layer of certainty. He no longer felt the need to possess truth. It seemed enough to belong to it.

He heard a greeting of Namaste from behind him. The old man approached, carrying the same woven basket he brought every morning. Without a word, he sat beside Gabriel. For a long while, they simply watched the river, neither feeling the need to fill the silence with words. Finally, Gabriel broke the silence. "I leave tomorrow." The old man nodded. "I know."

"I don't want to lose this," Gabriel said. The old man looked amused. "What is 'this'?" Gabriel searched for words. "The peace. The seeing. The feeling that everything somehow belongs together." The old man listened carefully, then replied. "You believe Kolkata gave you these things." Gabriel hesitated. "Didn't it?" The old man smiled. "No."

"No."

He pointed towards the river. "Did the river create the sky?" Gabriel looked up. The pale morning light stretched endlessly above them. "No," he said. The old man's eyes returned to the water. "It merely reflected what had always been there."

The words settled in Gabriel with surprising gentleness. It was true. Kolkata had not given him God, nor truth, nor peace. It had simply become the still water in which he had finally recognised his own face.

The old man reached into his basket. Instead of flowers, he took out a small, polished stone, smooth from years in the river, and placed it in Gabriel's hand. "Take this." Gabriel turned it over thoughtfully. "Is it holy?" "No," the old man laughed. "It is only a stone, but remember, my Australian friend, there is no such thing as 'only'. Everything is a doorway for those who have learned to see."

He gently closed Gabriel's fingers around it. "When you return home, keep this somewhere you will see it." "So that I remember Kolkata?" Gabriel asked. The old man shook his head. "So that you remember yourself." Gabriel slipped the stone into his pocket. He knew he would never see the old man again. But, as he was beginning to understand, some relationships belonged to eternity rather than to time.

Later that afternoon, the immersion group gathered for their final reflection. Participants spoke emotionally about poverty, the difference education can make, and the hospitality they had received. In tears, Julie described Kolkata as life-changing. Tom called it unforgettable. When it was Gabriel's turn, he remained silent for several moments.

Then he said quietly, "I came here hoping to discover more about God." The others waited. "But I think I am leaving having discovered more about myself, about being human." Gabriel smiled gently. "I used to believe that spirituality meant becoming more religious. Now I think it may simply mean becoming more fully alive."

On the flight home, Gabriel looked down through the aircraft window as India slowly disappeared beneath the clouds. For the first time in many years, he felt no urgency to resolve every question. Mystery no longer frightened him; it invited him. He realised that the faith that had once seemed to demand certainty now asked for humility.

Somewhere over the Indian Ocean, while most of the cabin slept, Gabriel looked around at the faces: an infant sleeping peacefully against her mother's shoulder, a businessman still working on his laptop, and a flight attendant quietly covering an elderly passenger with a blanket. Different stories, different dreams. He recalled the same truth he had begun hearing beside the river: different waves, one ocean; different windows, one light; different hearts, one Life.

As the sun rose over Australia, Gabriel wondered whether the real immersion was only just beginning. India had never been the destination. It had been the invitation. The real journey would begin on Monday morning: in the school corridor, in ordinary classrooms, in meetings, in traffic, in paying bills, in comforting a grieving student, and in listening more deeply than before.

If what he had discovered by the river was true, then awakening was not reserved for monasteries or mountains. It belonged equally to kitchens, classrooms, hospitals and crowded railway stations. Every place was holy, not because God occasionally visited it, but because there had never been a place where God was not.

Home At Last

God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk.

Meister Eckhart

Gabriel's wife, Anna, waited outside the arrivals gate. Before they spoke, they embraced longer than usual. When they finally stepped back, she looked at him closely. "You've changed." Gabriel laughed softly. "I was hoping it wouldn't be that obvious." Anna slipped her hand into his. "It isn't something I can see," she said. "It's something I can feel."

On Monday morning, he walked through the school gates at 7.15. Some students waved enthusiastically, and teachers hurried towards the morning briefing, balancing coffee cups and laptops. Margaret met him outside her office. "Welcome home, Gabe." "Thank you, Marg." She smiled. "So... did India answer your questions?" Gabriel considered. "No," he said. Margaret looked surprised, and he smiled. "It gave me better ones." She laughed. "That sounds about right. I can't wait to hear more."

The next morning, before school, Gabriel took his usual stroll along the Yarra. Recent rain had filled the river, yet it moved quietly, carrying leaves and debris towards the sea. He stood at the same bend where, only weeks earlier, he had first wondered whether faith itself might be like a river. For a moment, looking at the water, he thought it looked different.

Then he smiled. The river had not changed. He had.

Reaching into his pocket, he drew out the smooth river stone the old man had placed in his hand on their final morning together. It remained wonderfully ordinary. There was no inscription carved on it, no sacred symbol, no hidden mystery waiting to be deciphered. It was simply a stone, patiently shaped by years of surrendering to the river's flow. Turning it gently between his fingers, Gabriel realised that perhaps wisdom was much the same. It was not something added to us from outside, but something quietly revealed as life gradually wore away everything that was unnecessary.

A little boy wandered down the path, holding his grandfather's hand. The child crouched by the water, searching among the pebbles until, with obvious delight, he lifted one triumphantly above his head.

"Pop! Look what I found!"

His grandfather accepted the stone with exaggerated admiration.

"It is beautiful." The child frowned. "But it's just a rock." The grandfather smiled gently. "There are no 'just' rocks."

Gabriel laughed quietly to himself. The words travelled along the riverbank and halfway around the world. For an impossible moment, he could almost imagine another old man sitting beside another river, smiling with those same kind eyes that always seemed to see beyond appearances. Looking again at the flowing water, Gabriel found himself thinking that teachers appear in many forms. Perhaps every encounter held a lesson waiting to be recognised. Perhaps life itself had always been his greatest teacher, patiently revealing truth through rivers, children, colleagues, strangers and the ordinary events of each passing day.

Nothing is ordinary once we begin to see clearly, with the eyes of God.

The words seemed to gather everything India had offered him: the tea seller pouring chai with respect and reverence; the women in the hospice whose love had transformed suffering into tenderness; the wise old teachers by the Hooghly and in the little temple; the children in Kolkata and the students in Melbourne. Different countries. Different cultures. Different faces. Yet beneath them all flowed the same mysterious Life.

Gabriel smiled.

He had travelled halfway around the world only to discover what the river not far from his own home had been teaching him all along.

The first staff meeting of the new term began exactly as every staff meeting had: timetables, budgets, maintenance, curriculum changes, parking complaints and technology issues. Only weeks earlier, Gabriel would have impatiently waited for it to end. Now he looked around the room and saw thirty educators, thirty different personalities, thirty different life stories. Some looked tired. One teacher was quietly grieving her father's recent death; another was worried about a struggling son; one had just become a grandmother; and another was waiting for biopsy results. None of these stories appeared on the agenda, yet each sat silently in the

room. He realised that every meeting was, in truth, a gathering of human hearts carrying invisible burdens. The agenda suddenly seemed much less important.

Later that week, Gabriel and Margaret introduced a simple practice at the start of each staff meeting. One minute. Nothing complicated. No religious language, no formal meditation instructions. Just silence. "Before we begin discussing policies," Gabriel said quietly, "let's remember that everyone in this room is carrying a story we cannot see."

The room settled. One minute. Sixty seconds. At first, people shifted awkwardly, unused to the silence. Nothing miraculous happened. No one used spiritual language. Yet the meeting that followed felt different. People interrupted less and listened more carefully. There was less need to win and more willingness to understand.

Driving home that evening, Gabriel found himself laughing softly. He didn't need to bring India back to Australia. Instead, he should Australia become as sacred to him as India had been. The Kingdom of God was never anywhere else. It had always been waiting in staffrooms, classrooms, hospitals, kitchens, airport terminals, supermarkets, and riverbanks, wherever one human being truly recognised another.

Spring arrived quietly that year.

Almost overnight, the bare branches that had stood patiently through winter bore the first tender leaves of new life. Wattle blossomed along the riverbank where he walked, filling the air with quiet colour. Magpies greeted each morning with songs they had sung long before anyone thought to call them beautiful. Nature seemed entirely unconcerned with impressing anyone. It simply became what it had always been destined to be.

It also occurred to Gabriel that nothing in nature hurried. Nothing strained to become what it already held within itself. Trees did not struggle to produce leaves. Rivers did not force themselves towards the sea. Morning never competed with evening. Everything unfolded with gentle confidence, as though creation itself trusted the wisdom of its own becoming. Perhaps the same is true of us. Perhaps the deepest transformations in our lives are not those we force into existence, but those we patiently allow to emerge.

Gabriel no longer felt the need to insist on certainty. At school and in his relationships, he found himself listening more than speaking, asking questions

more readily than offering answers, interrupting less, judging more slowly, and laughing more easily. Colleagues occasionally remarked that he seemed calmer, lighter, and more at peace. He never quite knew how to explain it. Peace had not come because life had become easier, nor because all his questions had been answered. It had come because he had finally stopped resisting. He no longer felt compelled to control every outcome or defend every opinion. Somehow, without fully understanding how, he had learned to trust the flow of the river.

Several weeks later, the school held its annual formation day, and Margaret invited Gabriel to give the closing reflection. Standing before colleagues he had known for years, he looked slowly around the room. Teachers. Office staff. Groundskeepers. Laboratory assistants. Receptionists. Counsellors. People who had quietly devoted their lives to helping young people flourish. Before speaking, he stood in silence for a few moments, letting himself truly see them.

Every meeting is, in truth, a gathering of human hearts carrying unseen burdens. Beneath our different personalities, beliefs and responsibilities, we all long for the same things: to belong, to matter, to be loved and to know that our lives have meaning. He realised then that nothing he had discovered beside the Hooghly would matter unless it found expression here, among these ordinary people, in this ordinary school, on this ordinary afternoon.

"When I travelled to India last term holidays," he began quietly, "I imagined I was going in search of a bigger understanding of God. What I discovered instead was a more complete understanding of what it means to be fully human.

"I discovered that wisdom is measured less by how much we know than by how deeply we love; that spirituality is not an escape from ordinary life but an invitation to enter it more fully; and that every person we meet carries a story we cannot see. Perhaps the greatest gift we can offer another human being is not advice or solutions but our wholehearted presence."

He paused before continuing.

"For many years I believed education was primarily about shaping minds. I still believe that. But I now believe something even deeper. We are helping young people remember who they truly are, not simply what they can achieve or merely the career they might one day pursue, but the dignity that already belongs to them, the goodness already alive within them, and the light that no examination can measure and no failure can extinguish. Perhaps that is our deepest vocation: to

recognise that light, to protect and nurture it, and, whenever possible, to help it recognise itself.

That evening, Gabriel chose to walk home. The western sky glowed with the soft gold of late spring as children rode their bicycles along quiet streets, neighbours tended their gardens, someone practised the piano behind an open window, and a couple sat on a veranda, sharing tea while a magpie sang from a nearby powerline. Nothing extraordinary happened. Yet for Gabriel, everything shimmered with significance. The ordinary world had become transparent to something deeper. It was as though every familiar moment had become a window through which the sacred gently revealed itself.

The search for a bigger God had not taken him away from Jesus. Rather, it had brought him closer to the very heart of Jesus' life and message. His Christian faith had not become smaller but more spacious, free to recognise truth wherever love appeared. He no longer saw Christ primarily as the possession of one religion, but as one who fully embodied the Divine and invited us to awaken to the same. The Kingdom had never been elsewhere. It had always been here, quietly waiting to be recognised in every act of compassion, every moment of presence, and every human heart awakened to love.

Almost without thinking, he found himself praying words he had spoken since childhood.

"Our Father..."

This time they sounded entirely different. Not because the prayer had changed, but because he had. He lingered over the first word.

Our. Not my Father. Not your Father. Our Father.

Everything belonged. Everyone belonged. Nothing and no one existed outside God's embrace. There had only ever been one Life expressing itself through countless lives, one Love seeking expression through countless hearts, one Presence quietly shining through every face. Like rivers finding the sea, every sincere spiritual journey had always moved towards the same infinite Mystery.

He slipped the smooth stone back into his pocket and stood quietly for a few moments, watching the evening light dance across the water.

Gabriel smiled. Nothing had changed. He had simply learned to see.

He turned towards home. Behind him, the river continued its patient journey towards the sea. And somewhere beyond every river, every road, every prayer and every human story, the great current carried everything towards its Source.

On the first day of the long holiday at the end of the school year, Gabriel found himself sifting through the papers he'd brought home from India.

Nestled beneath the others was the small journal that had been his constant companion throughout the immersion. He recognised a single sheet of paper, neatly folded in half.

It was the reflection he'd written during the final debrief with the group before leaving India. It had the simple title: What are the gifts that Kolkata has given me?

He unfolded the page and began to read.

Every person carries a dignity no circumstance can diminish.

The poor are among our greatest teachers.

Presence is one of the purest expressions of love.

Compassion begins when judgement ends.

Justice is love refusing to remain silent.

Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can offer another person.

The questions that challenge us most are the doorway to our greatest transformation.

The sacred is most often encountered in ordinary moments, hidden among ordinary people.

Joy grows more from gratitude than from abundance.

We need far less than we imagine in order to live a rich, meaningful life.

Every faith is a window into the Divine, yet no window contains the whole sky.

God is always greater and more expansive than our understanding of God.

The illusion of separation from God and from one another lies at the heart of much human suffering.

Beneath all our differences, we belong to one another.

We are more than the roles we play. Beneath those roles lies our deepest self.

The purpose of life is not simply to succeed but to awaken to who we really are.

The world is changed one awakened heart at a time.

The river never struggled to become the sea. It simply discovered what it had always been.

We spend our lives searching for the One from whom we have never been separate.

The journey towards God is also the journey towards our truest selves.

At the bottom of the page, beneath the final reflection, he had written one last sentence:

The greatest gift of this immersion was not seeing a different world, but seeing this one differently.

Gabriel lowered the page and sat in silence for a long time.

As he reread the reflections, he realised they were no longer merely words he had written at the end of an immersion. They reflected the way he now wanted to live. He wanted them to shape how he listened, taught, prayed, and looked upon every person he met.

Gabriel folded the paper carefully, slipped it back into the journal, and smiled gently. He realised that nothing had changed since his time in Kolkata, except the one who was looking.

The journey to India had ended but the journey home had only just begun.

Afterword

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only they who see take off their shoes.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Stories have a way of telling truths that arguments never can match.

For much of my life as an educator, I have spent countless hours in classrooms, staffrooms, lecture theatres and meeting rooms, and I have had the privilege of visiting schools and communities in many countries around the world. Along the way, I have discovered something that always surprises and encourages me.

Although we differ enormously in language, culture, religion and life experience, the deepest longings of the human heart remain remarkably alike.

Everywhere I have travelled, I have met people longing to belong, to love and be loved, to find meaning, to make a difference, and to discover a peace independent of circumstances. Beneath our apparent differences, something profoundly human unites us all.

This story was born from that conviction.

Gabriel is not a real person, yet in another sense he is very real. He carries elements of my own journey, those of friends and colleagues, of educators I have admired, and of the many remarkable people I have met around the world who have quietly deepened my understanding of life, faith and humanity. Like all fictional characters, he is woven from many lives.

The events of this novel are imagined. The journey they describe is deeply real.

As I have grown older, I have become less interested in defending ideas and more interested in discovering what helps people become more compassionate, more present, and more fully alive. Increasingly, I have come to believe that the purpose of authentic spirituality is not to make us more religious but more deeply human.

Every great wisdom tradition, in its finest moments, seems to point in that direction. They may use different languages, symbols and stories, yet again and

again they invite us beyond fear into love, beyond separation into relationship, beyond certainty into wonder, and beyond the restless search for fulfilment into the quiet recognition that what we seek has always been closer than we imagined.

For me, that journey has never required me to leave my Christian faith. Quite the opposite. It has drawn me ever more deeply into the life and teachings of Jesus. The more widely I have explored, the more profoundly I have found myself returning to him, but not as the possession of one religion, but as one who embodied extraordinary compassion, radical inclusiveness and complete trust in Divine providence. His invitation to love God and neighbour, to forgive, to serve, to welcome the stranger and to discover the Kingdom within has grown richer, deeper and more luminous for me with the passing years.

As Gabriel learned, wisdom is less about accumulating beliefs than about learning to see.

To see ourselves with greater honesty. To see others with greater compassion. To see the sacred shining quietly through ordinary life. To recognise that every person we meet carries joys and sorrows we know nothing of. To understand that every act of genuine kindness changes the world, however quietly.

If Gabriel's journey has encouraged you to pause a little longer by a river, to look more closely into another person's eyes, to become less certain and more curious, less fearful and more loving, then this story has fulfilled its purpose.

The world does not need more arguments nearly as much as it needs more understanding. It does not need more people convinced of their own rightness as much as it needs people willing to listen deeply, forgive generously and love courageously.

Every authentic spiritual journey ultimately leads not away from the world, but more deeply into it. Not into possessing truth, but into allowing truth to possess us.

As you finish this little story, life will continue much as it always has. Rivers will keep flowing towards the sea. Children will laugh. Teachers will encourage. Parents will worry. Friends will comfort one another. The ordinary moments of daily life will quietly unfold, asking for little more than our attention.

My hope is that, after walking beside Gabriel for a while, you may notice ordinary moments a little differently. You may discover, as he did, that nothing is truly

ordinary once we learn to see with the eyes of the heart. And perhaps you may come to recognise that what we have been searching for has never been far away.

Beneath all our different stories. Beneath all our beliefs. Beneath all our journeys.

There is one humanity. One mystery. One love.

Our Common Heart.