

As I mentioned earlier, throughout the book I introduce each section and subsection with some general observations that I call compass points. These are simply one—of many—ways to orient to a person's story. The stories are what are important—and my desire is to have these observations float lightly, like weather vanes. I've chosen to place particular stories near observations that I think may be especially helpful in opening up that particular story to our imagination, but I assume that all the stories can be reread using some other compass point to orient by—so the stories in the Conversion section can be read with a special ear for childhood, or the stories in the Mystical Experiences section can be reread with the observations about existential theologies in mind. What is important here is to find that empathic point that allows you to resonate with the story. You will, of course, inevitably and often unconsciously, bring your own compasses and categories to bear on what you are reading. By separating mine out, I'm inviting us to make an important distinction between the irreducible mystery of a person's faith journey itself and what it comes to mean—to them or to us at any particular point in time.

In this section, I cover some of the observations that are most generalizable to our experiences as readers and to my own experience as a listener and then a writer of these stories.

## GETTING A FEEL FOR SOMEONE

Getting a feel for someone is as far as can be imagined from copping a feel, and feeling felt by someone is the opposite of being felt up. But the associations are illuminating. These are precious, kinesthetic, deeply vulnerable and powerful sensations. Our sense of gratitude and betrayal are strong but often inarticulate, sometimes unconscious, when these needs are met—and when they are not.

How do we feel felt by someone else—and how do we get a feel *for* them? Both of these sensations have to do with coming into some essential synchrony with the other. Feeling felt by someone doesn't mean they are always matching our rhythm, but showing through their own actions that they *hear* it. They may indeed get quiet when we are upset and running a mile a minute—or energetic when we're discouraged. But they are in some kind of consoling dance with us, with what things mean to us. They show us this by asking the right question at the right time. Or making eye contact. Or breaking eye contact in rhythm with what is going on in us. Or saying the unspeakable in a way we can bear to hear it. Sometimes it means matching focus—meaning that both of us are looking at a third person, or object, simultaneously—and are aware of doing so. Aware that what you see is different from what I see, but that we are, even more essentially, sharing the experience of seeing for ourselves.

In general, feeling felt by someone means that we feel that they understand what the world—an event, statement, relationship—*means* to us. They don't have to agree. They just need to know—and respect—the difference. It isn't about the words but the music that carries them. Indeed, some of the times we feel most unfelt are when someone hears our words but uproots them from the matrix of our felt universe. They don't hear the question nestled inside the statement. Or the simple declaration inside the question. When we feel felt by someone, we feel, at an essential level, held in

their imagination.

Getting a feel for someone is when we begin to get a sense of their way of being in the world. What it means for them to speak out in a class, or to keep silent at the dinner table. Being able to anticipate what might catch their attention. Do they notice smells first? Sounds? What makes them laugh? Do they think in images? Metaphors? Do they need to categorize before they can touch? Do they organize their experience from the outside in or the inside out?

Getting a feel for someone is an embodiment practice. We truly begin to get a sense in our own body of their patterns of attention, pace of thinking, their imaginal world. This sense, I believe, is necessary if we are to hold them in imagination and if they are ever to *feel* felt by us (see Stern; Fowler; Siegel; Goleman; Lewis; and Lewis, Amini and Lannon). So the central question becomes, what makes it safe for us to enter the sensory reality of another?

One answer I believe is story. Story—our capacity for narrative—develops at about the age of two, when we begin to become aware that our actions are open to interpretation, that meaning is not inextricably enfolded with intention, and neither is consequence (Bruner). At this point we become aware, simultaneously, that we can be understood and misunderstood. And that it matters essentially to our sense of self which of these is taking place. We also, at about the same age, become able to hold ourselves, however insecurely, in imagination (Stern, Rochat, Lewis, Siegel). Story is a way to safely open the world to interpretation—our own and others. Story assumes that life is an experience, that it is fundamentally meaningful, and that we all participate *in* that meaning, in ways we intended and in ways of which we are completely unaware. Story assumes language, an interior reality and an exterior one, a social world. It assumes a fundamental likeness. Getting a feel for someone is getting a sense of both their inner narrative *and* its relations to the world we share. It also involves a sense of our own narrative, how it may, in the same circumstance, have developed very differently—and where those differences may come from or lead to. Do we just notice a different set of stimuli? Are the interpretations we make—a falling acorn or a shattered sky—different? Do our stories assume a frail or resilient selfhood, the kindness or caprice of strangers?

To get a feel for someone else is to get a feel for where they experience freedom, where they experience inevitability, and *how* they experience them. It is to come to some kind of interior relation with these very different

experiential fragments and the patterns of possibility they create in our own body/self. It is not for the fastidious or the faint-hearted. But it is deeply grounding and consoling. *Our* interior world is made larger every time we have the courage to invite someone else in, in all their difference, as of the same stuff as us, the stuff of imagination.

