

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Surviving life's tragedy; seeking greater meaning



**Douglas Kindschi** *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU*

“Why religion, of all things? Why not something that has an impact in the real world?”

This was the question that religion graduate student at Harvard University Elaine Pagels was asked by her future husband, a quantum physicist faculty member at New York's Rockefeller University. She in turn questioned him about why he loved the “study of virtually invisible elementary particles: hadrons, boson, and quarks.” They came to realize, as she put it, that “each of us was hoping to understand something fundamental.”

In August I wrote about Elaine Pagels and her latest book, “Why Religion? A Personal Story,” leading up to the book discussion group that was exploring this book in preparation for her visit to Grand Rapids. We are now looking forward to her coming here for two presentations on Oct. 30.

In that earlier Insight I summarized the first chapter that tells of her being raised by secular parents, her conversion at a Billy Graham rally, her struggles with the death of her high school friend who was Jewish, and her continued interest in religion leading to her doctoral study at Harvard.

Her “Personal Story” continues in the next chapters as she writes of her marriage to that questioning physicist, Heinz Pagels, and their son Mark, born with a heart defect. Her graduate work at Harvard included work on the recently discovered hidden documents from early Christian history, sometimes called the “secret gospels” since they had been rejected for inclusion in the New Testament canon and banned and burned by the established church. These more than 50 texts, known as the Nag Hammadi Library, were found in Egypt after hundreds of years of being hidden and forgotten. Pagels was part of the team translating and studying these texts, leading to many scholarly articles and her popular book, “The Gnostic Gospels,” a New York Times best seller.

She writes with great tenderness about her son and the complications of his heart defect. He had imagination and insight unusual for a child so young. His death at age 6 occurred in the hospital where he was to undergo tests and while Pagels stood by his side. She reports saying, “It's not over until it's over — let's ask him to come back and go to California with us.” She then writes that at that moment she felt his presence to the point of speaking to him. Shortly thereafter his cardiologist reported that his heart was beating again but not to get their hopes up. They went into his room and held him but he did not regain consciousness and soon the heart stopped again.

Pagels reflects on this experience: “We don't know, of course, what happened. I had the clear impression that he'd heard us and had gone back into his body, but found that

## If you go

**What:** Elaine Pagels, Interfaith Consortium Conference

**Date:** Oct. 30

**Time:** 2 p.m. What do “secret gospels” suggest about Jesus and his teaching?; and 7 p.m. Why Religion? A Personal Story

**Where:** Eberhard Center, GVSU, 301 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

**Information and free registration at:** [InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org)

it couldn't sustain his life. ... I also sensed that he'd felt a burst of joy and relief to leave his exhausted body. Before that moment, I'd taken for granted what I'd learned, that death was the end, any thought of surviving death only fantasy. Although that may be true, what I experienced that day challenged that assumption. I was astonished, seeming to sense that Mark was all right, wherever he was, and that he was somewhere. But that didn't change what we felt: utter desolation.”

Such a terrible loss would strain many couples' relationships, often leading to separation, but Pagels reports that she and Heinz grew even closer to each other and to the daughter they had adopted. As she processed Mark's death she was moved by reading about another bereaved mother, Maria of Paris, a Russian Orthodox who wrote after her 6-year-old daughter died that she felt her “whole natural life ... shaken ... disintegrated; desires have gone ... meaning has lost its meaning.” But Pagels writes that Maria did not sink into passivity, rather, “she risked her life to save the lives of other people's children during the Nazi occupation.” Pagels and Heinz decided to seek another child to whom their love could be directed, leading to the adoption of a younger brother, David, for their daughter, Sarah.

Only a year later when the family returned to their favorite spot in Colorado, Pagels describes in great detail, in the chapter titled “Unimaginable,” the event of the terrible death of her husband in a climbing accident. To face this second death in so short a period was devastating to Pagels and to her faith.

Pagels' very personal story, as well as her scholarship reflected in her eight other books, will be the focus of her two presentations in Grand Rapids on Oct. 30 at the annual Interfaith Consortium conference. Please plan to join us for this event.

[interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)