

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeking healing of the heart through relationships



Douglas Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

Following her husband's tragic death, so soon after the loss of Mark, their 6-year-old son, Princeton religion scholar Elaine Pagels was led to reexamine the biblical stories of Adam and Eve and the encounter with the serpent; Job and his struggle with the loss of family and fortune; and, the role of evil and Satan in our world.

In her latest book, "Why Religion? A Personal Story," Pagels writes, "If we believe that an all-powerful God created a 'very good' world, what happened to it? ... Jewish and Christian theologians ... speak of 'the problem of suffering,' as if suffering and death were not intrinsic elements of nature but alien intruders on an originally perfect creation."

She wanted to believe in a "morally ordered universe, in which someone or something — God or nature? — would keep track of what's fair." Recalling how her physicist husband, Heinz Pagels, talked of chaos theory and randomness in the physical world, led her to reconsider the role of nature. She writes, "Now I was living in a world where volcanoes erupt because that's what volcanoes do, regardless of whether anyone in their path is good or evil, and in which children often die young, for no reason we can find."

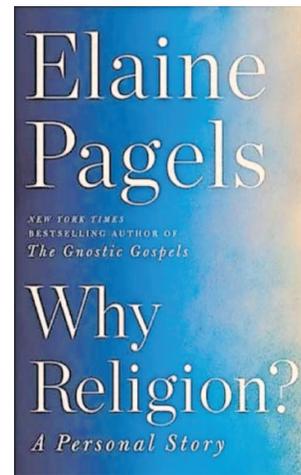
In reading the Gospels, she sees a new understanding of reality: the old script, "things turn out well for the righteous, badly for evildoers? — no longer worked." The writer of the Gospel of Mark reports Jesus' warning to his disciples of wars, persecutions and death: "For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation." (Mark 13:19) Pagels sees Mark's "vision of a world where evil is more powerful than previously imagined ... while refusing to give up hope that God reigns in heaven."

She recounts the history of living in this hope, from the early followers of Jesus to modern prophets like Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis, and Martin Luther King Jr. Pagels writes, "each acutely aware of the power of hate, greed and fear, nevertheless held on to what King called 'a dream,' a vision of justice and brotherhood, while taking action to realize it here and now. Every one of them knowingly risked death ... and was killed."

She sees Mark's Gospel story as not ending in death, rather as a promise that "God's victory is coming soon — but coming beyond the frame of his narrative, perhaps even beyond the frame of human history. ... He writes not about failure, but about an unfinished victory." Looking at her own grief, she continues, "Such stories stirred something in me, and I wondered, even though Mark and Heinz are dead, could there be something mysterious going on in the universe that we don't yet see?"

Pagels also returns to the Gnostic Gospel texts that had been hidden for so many centuries and that she had translated and studied in her graduate work at Harvard. She finds there an openness to wisdom, spirit and mystery. She also finds suffering not as punishment but something that can show us how we are connected to each other and to God. In studying the text, "The Gospel of Truth," Pagels writes that it "is all about relationships — how when we come to know ourselves, simultaneously we come to know God. Implicit in this relationship is the paradox of gnosis — not intellectual knowledge, but knowledge of the heart." These writers are less concerned about beliefs than in spiritual practices, especially those leading to a "healing of the heart."

She reflects not only on the ancients' concern for healing the heart, but the search today for various ways to heal the heart, from chemical remedies to exercise



"Why Religion? A Personal Story" is by Elaine Pagels. Ecco Press, HarperCollins



Best-selling author and scholar Elaine Pagels is a professor of religion at Princeton University.

IF YOU GO

What: Elaine Pagels, Interfaith Consortium Conference

When: Wednesday, 2 p.m. — What do "secret gospels" suggest about Jesus and his teaching?; 3:45 p.m. — Panel discussion with Elaine Pagels; 7 p.m. — Why Religion? A Personal Story

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

More information and free registration: InterfaithUnderstanding.org

and support groups, as well as meditation and therapy practice. Following the death of her son and then her husband, she was compelled to seek healing "beyond anything I'd ever imagined."

Pagels recounts the invitation to receive an honorary degree from Harvard where, decades earlier, she had been a graduate student. In the excitement and revelry of such occasions, she suddenly stops, and asks, "Where are they, those who aren't here, now lost to us?" She reflects on how she had survived such unimaginable loss, but then sees her two children and their families and writes, "Yet the children left for me to raise were both here, alive and well, and so am I: How is that possible?"

She concludes: "During that noisy and joyful ceremony, the pomp and privilege of that scene receded, and the invisible bonds connecting everyone there, and connecting all of us with countless others and with our world and whatever is beyond it, felt stronger than ever, echoing the words of an ancient Jewish prayer: 'Blessed art Thou, Lord God of the Universe, that you have brought us alive to see this day.' However it happens, sometimes hearts do heal, through what I can only call grace."

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

interfaith@gvsu.edu