

JOHN P. LOZANO

GOOD  
NEWS

*in* BAD TIMES

FINDING SPIRITUAL MEANING  
IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY



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## INTRODUCTION

# The Times We Live In

*One thing we all have in common is our humanity, and we all experience in this humanity some profound “good news” as well as profound “bad news.” It is an extraordinary privilege to exist, and our existence comes with suffering. Anne Frank put it this way: “Everyone has inside him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don’t know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is.”*

ANNE WROTE THESE WORDS SURROUNDED BY THE VERY “BAD NEWS” OF THE NAZI OCCUPATION OF HER COUNTRY while she was hiding from almost certain death if discovered. We can all speak of turmoil and pain in the daily struggles of living; the stress of job loss, financial ruin, life-threatening illness, and dissolution of friendships, marriages, and families are all examples. Our current climate of political chaos, turmoil, and polarization

is tearing at the very fabric of our society and is profoundly disturbing. The divisive and caustic language used by political leaders has at times been bone chilling. As a result we are witnessing in our culture an increase in anxiety and depression that is epidemic. On top of all this we are currently in the midst of a world-wide pandemic. The cause is a virus that you cannot see, smell, or taste but is out there and you can get sick and even die. The lurking threat of job loss and financial ruin is currently palpable. This is a lot of “bad news.” One may wonder if there is any “good news” left to consider. The answer is Yes!

The good news is that God speaks in and through our humanity, and if we listen carefully to even the “bad news” in our lives we may discover it too can speak to us of a “good news” we may be missing.

This book is about listening to our human experience especially with the ears of faith and discovering practical strategies for responding to the good news and the bad news in our lives. It provides new ways to respond to our successes as well as our failures and to discover the extraordinary reality of divine presence in our lives that has the potential to change how we view everything.

Imagine you are holding a book that represents all the “bad news” in your life. If you place that book on your face all you see is the bad news. If, however, you move the book out in front of you at arms length, you still see the bad news, but now you also see so much more!

For the person of faith, the challenge, and the divine invitation, is this: “Do you believe what you see or do you see what you believe?” May the following words help you to see what you believe in all the circumstances of your life and discover a hope that does not disappoint.

# Listening

*Listen, so that you may live.*

» ISAIAH 55:3

I AM COMPULSIVE ABOUT ONE THING, AT LEAST ONE I WILL ADMIT TO PUBLICLY: DIRECTIONS. When I go on a trip, I really like to know where I am going and the best way to get there. Naturally, with the invention of GPS navigation systems, I thought it was a dream come true.

For someone like me, this system is great. It tells everything I need to know to get where I want to go. Best of all, it speaks to me with a lovely, sweet female voice.

Shortly after my purchase, I planned a hiking trip with a friend to the Pocono Mountains. Although I assumed I knew where I was going, I thought it would be fun to see how well the GPS worked and to get accustomed to it. A few minutes into my trip, that lovely, sweet female voice began to say, “Wrong way, turn around. Wrong way, turn around.”

My first thought was, *I can't believe it. She is wrong!* Then I thought, *I must be taking an alternative route, not the one she*

*would choose. Eventually she will catch up with me, and she will reroute herself to my way of going.*

That did not happen.

“Wrong way, turn around. Wrong way, turn around.”

Ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes...

By this time her voice was no longer sweet! Forty minutes later, I finally stopped my car only to discover that I was indeed going in the wrong direction. Once I had turned around and started heading in the right direction I had a moment of insight into myself: *Why is it that I assumed I was going the right way?*

A scary thought crossed my mind: How often do I assume I am going the right way when, in reality, I'm not...and I don't know it?

In other words, “we don't know what we don't know!”

I assume that my current thinking is correct simply because it is my way of thinking, but I may be wrong, because I am not listening!

One of the most important skills we can develop in life is the ability to listen. Most human conflict is a breakdown of communication, and this breakdown often occurs when we do not hear or fully understand what another person means by their words or actions. We assume that our interpretation of what someone says is correct, but often it is not. Letting miscommunication continue over time creates a false understanding of the other person and a bias that becomes a lens through which we see them. Once this lens becomes hardened, we see everything the other person does and says through that lens.

It is not often that we say or hear someone else say, “What I hear you saying is.... Am I correct?” Yet so much miscommunication and conflict could be avoided with that simple question,

which requires only a bit more *effort to listen*. Along with listening, *humility* is a key component in healthy communication. It requires humility not to assume my interpretations are always right. Listening with effort and humility creates the bedrock of good communication on which healthy relationships are built.

If the effort to listen and humility are necessary in human relationships, they are even more necessary in the arena of religious faith and the discovery of spiritual meaning. Perhaps miscommunications in our past have also created misunderstandings in our spiritual formation. Or perhaps we assume we are correct in our understanding, even though we may not be.

As in human relationships, “miscommunication” may go on for some time only to eventually form into a bias through which we see all religious belief and activity. I often hear someone say, “Yeah, I’ve been to church, and my parents are Christian. I’ve heard it all before.” I find myself thinking: *Really? All of it?*

Is there a new understanding possible in the area of faith and spirituality for us? If so, perhaps it could come through the same two qualities required for good communication between human beings: the work of listening and the disposition of humility. When it comes to finding a new understanding about faith, the work of listening is required to investigate with an open and patient mind and heart. Humility is required to truly listen to what the results of our investigations are saying and accept that our preconceived notions may be wrong.

This openness to new understanding of faith is what happened to me when I was driving back, in the right direction, to meet my friend. Along the way I had another insight. I began to think about how much technology and human intellectual power went into creating the GPS. All the work and skill of

brilliant people, the sophisticated satellites out there in space, the millions of dollars invested—all to direct me and this little car of mine. Even though I realized this, I still thought I was right. I even paid money for the thing! If I had allowed myself the humility to think that I might not quite know how to get to my destination, and if I had expended the effort to listen to my GPS device and view my route on a map, I might have avoided getting lost.

Humanity often makes similar assumptions when it comes to the mystery of God and faith. If you are like me, you may recognize how often we believe that we already know all there is to know about the world and how it operates, even in spite of growing evidence that maybe we do not. We go around thinking, in subtle ways, that while we are so advanced in our knowledge, Christianity is lagging behind, a bit outdated, but it will eventually catch up.

How much has already been given us in our quest for God!

Billions of believers have trusted that God speaks through this book we call the Bible, giving us guidance on where to go and how to live, revealing something of the very nature of God. Along with this, billions of people in faith communities, some very holy and brilliant, have pondered, prayed, and struggled to help themselves and others know something of the mystery of God. All of this has already been given to us, given as a gift. We have been offered an incredible guidance system. That incredible guidance system is there for us. What if we could honestly admit that maybe, just maybe, we are wrong, or that we don't know everything we need to know to live well and to know God? What if our worldview, our use of our time, talents, and money, the way we live our emotional lives, and how we look at

God, ourselves, and other people might be just a little off? That we don't know what we don't know?

Unfortunately, we still think we know better and refuse to listen. We close our ears to God's lovely, sweet, gentle voice—a voice that is soft, quiet, and almost imperceptible, because God respects our freedom to choose to listen or not. God always gives us a choice.

Often we run from the work of listening and prefer to go along with easy, pat answers. "It was meant to be." "It must have been God's will."

I remember a time when I regularly met with someone for guidance and support for my journey of faith and prayer. After I would tell him everything going on with me, he would always say the same thing: "So what is God saying to you in all this?" Initially my reaction was irritation and I would say to myself, "I don't know, that is why I am coming to you; you tell me!" He would never let me off the hook, however, from the task of listening. He knew it is only in the regular work of listening that we discover the presence of God and hear his voice speak to us in the varied circumstances of our lives.

Often this comes about precisely during the experience of crisis, when we feel the earth beneath us shifting and we can no longer count on what we once took for granted. Initially our reaction is confusion, worry, and imbalance. We can try to drink it away and deny it is happening, or we can "listen" to what it is saying to us. Where will I place my trust now? What is most important to me? Am I alone in all this? We may hear the invitation to a greater trust and surrender; we may discover something of new and greater importance to live for; or we may remember that we are not alone and never have been. Then

we would be in a good position to hear that sweet, soft, gentle voice of the one who loves us and always has.

In the book *Prince Caspian* by C.S. Lewis, the character Lucy, her older sister, and her two brothers are on a quest to find Aslan (the lion who represents Christ in the story) at a time of great crisis and turmoil. At one point Lucy announces with heartfelt joy that she has seen Aslan. He is with them. It is so wonderful. Everything will work out in the end. Her older siblings initially ridicule her since they have not seen him. Later on, the older siblings finally see Aslan as well, and Lucy's older sister, Susan, turns and asks why she could not see Aslan earlier as Lucy did. Lucy answers, "Because you were not listening."

**GOOD NEWS**

*If You Seek, You Will Find*

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION**

*Think of a time when you were absolutely certain you were right about something or someone, only to later discover you were wrong. How did you feel? What did you learn from that experience, and how has it shaped your behavior since then?*

# We Are Worth More

*There's gotta be more than this.*

» TOM BRADY

ONE SUNDAY EVENING I WATCHED AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM BRADY ON *60 MINUTES*. The highly successful quarterback for the New England Patriots was smiling broadly, as he often does, and he seemed to be enjoying the interview as he spoke of his money, fame, and career success. Then he suddenly became serious and said, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there is something greater out there for me? Maybe a lot [of people] would say, ‘This is what it is’...Me? I think, ‘God, there’s gotta be more than this.’”

Interviewer Steve Kroft asked, “What is the answer?”

Brady replied, “I wish I knew...I wish I knew.”

I was stunned to hear Brady thinking aloud like this. Here is someone who really has “everything.” He has money, success, fame, and a great family. So I was genuinely surprised to hear him say, in all seriousness, “There’s gotta be more than this.”

But I think he speaks for us all. There is something within

each of us that wonders, *Is this all there is?* Something within us answers with the word “no,” and like Tom Brady, we often think to ourselves, *There is more, there has to be more.* We can understand how this question of “more” arises in times of difficulty, stress, uncertainty, and loss, but what is so remarkable is how it comes forth even in the midst of success. This nagging, relentless pondering points to the universal and deeply human nature of this question.

We are not the only ones who have thought like this. The great fourth-century philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo was a man who many scholars believed to be the first person in western history to write in a psychologically reflective way.

Like Tom Brady, Augustine of Hippo was a man who “had it all.” He was brilliant, well-connected in society, well-traveled, and a participant in the greatest centers of culture and education. Yet even in the midst of this, Augustine wrote of a persistent restlessness within that gnawed at his mind and heart and would not leave him, a restlessness that drove his many pursuits.

Augustine is often quoted as saying, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Of all of Augustine’s incredibly prolific writings, why is this quote the most repeated by others throughout history? Perhaps because it speaks to us of something we all know and experience within ourselves.

We see this in the seventeenth-century French scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal, who said something very similar: “We are made with a God-shaped hole that only God can fill.”

Do you feel this restlessness in your own life? Have you ever found yourself looking out the window on a Sunday night, after

all the weekend activities are finished, facing a new week ahead? There is a moment of quiet, until suddenly a vacant place opens up inside the pit of your stomach. A feeling of emptiness, a frightening place, a hole. And in that space, something inside you asks, *Is this all there is? Is there nothing more? Am I alone?* Normally, you may just turn on the television, listen to music, keep busy, push it away...but it comes back. It comes back out of nowhere, completely uninvited, and with it comes a pressing realization:

There has to be more. There must be more. This cannot be all there is.

From the perspective of faith, real life begins here. It begins in the experience of our humanity, an experience within of discomfort and disquiet that raises questions for us. However, this human experience may exist within us for a purpose: to point us to something new, to possibilities we have yet to consider. Considering new and unknown possibilities is not easy and can be scary, so we spend little time listening to this discomfort. We ignore it and push it away, and we fear the possible result of it all ending in frustration and disappointment if we discover there is nothing more, and this realization may be too much to bear.

But there is another possibility, that of beginning something unknown, of understanding ourselves, our lives, and God in a new way that would lead to a better, fuller, richer life. This common human longing may be a sign to us that “something more” does, in fact, exist. Perhaps the restlessness itself exists as a way of saying, “Trust. You are wired this way for a reason.” Let it take you somewhere, perhaps to a new place, a new sense of who you are and what your life is all about, perhaps a life more wonderful than you have yet considered or even dreamed possible. As Anne Frank would say, our humanity holds an

abundance of “good news”—the good news of what you can become, what you can accomplish, how much you can love.

Being open to this kind of change may not come easy for us, but it lies at the very heart of a new understanding of life and faith.

Why bother?

Normally we avoid looking honestly at ourselves for improvement and instead focus on ways to change other people. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we think, *If this person or these circumstances were different, my life would be better.* Or, *It is about them—they are the cause of my unrest, not me.* Consider a husband who struggles with anger and instead of changing how he deals with it blames his wife for his actions. Conversely, a wife who is constantly anxious and short-tempered does not accept this or address it as her own issue but decides instead to blame her children as the cause for her impatience. In truth, it’s painfully clear that we all have tried at some point to change those around us—but it always remains that the only people we can change are ourselves. Of all the lessons in life, this is perhaps the most difficult and most important one to learn, and if it is not learned it undoubtedly leads to heartache.

If we take an honest look at ourselves, we should see many things we admire and other things we would very much like to change. Often, we feel unable to change ourselves and feel “stuck.” We end up throwing our hands in the air, saying, “This is just who I am. I have tried over and over. Why not just leave well enough alone?”

Well, there are two reasons why we should not “leave well enough alone.” First, things are not “well enough.” Second, we are worth more.

A truthful and honest inventory of ourselves will reveal our inner conflicts, contradictions, emotional battles, hurts, fears, insecurities, and broken relationships with others—and all of these point to the glaring truth that things are not “well enough.” We often feel powerless before these truths of ourselves and may flock to self-help books, conferences, diets, lectures, and the like, trying to gain more personal power. All of these things can be good to an extent. But if, after all that, you are still feeling stuck, you may begin to sense something innate to our humanity that is keeping you stagnant, unfulfilled, and dissatisfied.

If there *is* more to this life, then we must, at the very least, consider pursuing it. If human development points to the possibility of changing for the better, then why would we not do all we can to see just how far we can go, how much is possible for us in this life? And that brings us to the second reason why none of us should leave well enough alone: *We are worth more*. It is profoundly important to love and accept ourselves as worthy of happiness. If we do not love ourselves, we can never expect love from others. We will always settle for less, never coming to believe that any significant change is possible.

Many years ago, I was a high school teacher. There was a young woman in one of my classes who was attractive, intelligent, well-spoken, and responsible—a fine person and a pleasure to have in class. One day she came in with a black eye. After class we spoke, and she reported how her boyfriend had become very upset and hit her. After a while, he returned to her and apologized. I asked what happened next. She replied that she “slept with him again that night.” It was a moment in which I did not know how to respond. I thought to myself, “Does she

not see what I see? Does she not see that she is worthy of so much more?"

We are all that young woman. We are all worthy of more. It is sad how often we do not believe this. Why else would we enter into behavior that clearly does not lead to happiness? How often I have heard someone say, "Well, I really didn't want to \_\_\_\_\_, but I felt I had to." To act in ways in which we are not true to ourselves, to settle for less, the status quo in which we find ourselves, is a very sad way to live.

What prevents us from recognizing our worth? Why do we settle for less than we deserve? Is it because we feel powerless to change, or is it because we don't think we are worth more than this? Are we settling? Do we simply buy into what everyone around us is telling us because this is the culture and time in history in which we find ourselves? Do we want to just fit in and be like everyone else?

Or could there be something more?

The more we ponder these questions, the more we know that "getting along" falls far short of the dreams we have for ourselves. It is imperative that we realize we cannot "leave well enough alone," that changing ourselves is key to living a life that is more than just OK. Once we accept that there could be more for us, then the only remaining question that each of us must ask ourselves is not whether or not we must change, but rather *how we will* change.

**GOOD NEWS**

*There Is More*

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION**

*Have you ever experienced that sense within that there must be more? Perhaps you enjoyed a professional or financial success but felt like something was missing. Did you explore that feeling? What did it say to you?*