

***What inspired you to write The Four First Things? Was there a particular moment or realization that led you to focus on these foundational truths?***

I would say there was a slow buildup over more than three decades. Before thinking about writing a book, I started writing about a few topics I found challenging early in my “reversion” to the Catholic faith to help strengthen my intellectual convictions. But over time, I began to realize that my own faith challenges were less about intellectual conviction and more about consistency. I was allowing distractions and disappointments to get the better of me, and I was having to learn the same basic lessons repeatedly, even though I thought I had fully embraced the faith.

Ultimately, I came to believe that the best thing I could do for myself was to go back to the fundamentals. At some point, still more than ten years ago, the four first things occurred to me. I didn’t think I would have time to do much work on the book until retirement. But a few years ago, I started to experience insomnia, waking up extremely early in the morning and being unable to fall back asleep. Initially I wasn’t too pleased about it, but then I realized that this was my opportunity to write the book!

***You describe the “first things” as truths we must return to again and again. What are these four things, and why are they so essential?***

The four first things are confidence in God, self-surrender, continual prayer, and supernatural love. One way to arrive at how essential they are is to consider the great theological virtues given by St. Paul – faith, hope, and love. These are the true fundamentals

of our relationship with God, but these words can also be used very loosely, so the four first things are meant to emphasize how we actualize them in our spiritual lives.

We can also think about them in the context of our relationship with God as our Father, which is often compared to the relationship of children to their parents. If we had the best parents that ever lived, how would we as children relate to them? We would have complete confidence in them. We would always be seeking rest and consolation in their arms. We would continually tell them about our hopes, fears, joys, sorrows and desires, and about how much we love them. And most importantly, we would always be trying to please them. These are essentially the four first things.

***In a world full of spiritual noise and confusion, why do you think returning to the basics is so powerful?***

Since God's desire is that everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, I believe there must be a basic pathway to deep faith that is easily accessible to everyone, from a person with no education who is preoccupied with basic survival, to the person who has received every possible blessing in this world. I believe we are all better off building or re-building from the fundamentals, instead of trying to wade through all the noise and confusion.

One memory I have from my childhood is reading about Ty Cobb, who was perhaps the best pure hitter in baseball history. When he fell into a slump, he would tell himself to simply hit the ball back to the pitcher. Just make solid contact and hit it straight back to where it came from. After a short time doing that, he would again be hitting the ball hard all over the field.

In the same way, if we simply focus or re-focus on the primary elements of our relationship with God, we will soon escape whatever spiritual confusion or malaise is currently affecting us. And we can help ourselves repeatedly this way. What I hope *The Four First Things* will do is to help readers start putting this into practice after a few hours, even though it took me decades to really start doing so myself.

***You have a background in mathematics and finance. How has your analytical training shaped the way you approach questions of faith and meaning?***

I think my background has been very helpful, in that it often involves trying to produce simplicity from complexity. What I liked about mathematics and the physical sciences is that I could derive a significant part of the subject matter from several basic relationships (at least for the introductory courses). Memorization was never really my strong point, so I was happy to know that if I could remember these relationships, I could quickly work my way back to the rest of the material.

When I consider questions of faith, or almost anything else for that matter, I always find myself trying to reduce it to the critical underlying principles. And this is the way I approached both the writing of the book and reading it. I re-read and re-wrote it until I felt that I had uncovered these fundamentals and expressed them as clearly and simply as possible. Almost like a scientist would repeatedly redesign experiments to reach the most definitive scientific conclusion. And subsequently, consistent with behavioral

science, I have read the book repeatedly, trying to establish the four first things as habitual in my life.

***Your book argues that without God, even our highest ideals fall apart. Can you unpack that idea for us?***

Two of our highest ideals are freedom and justice. The U.S. Pledge of Allegiance ends with “liberty and justice for all.” I argue that freedom and justice cannot exist without the supernatural. Atheistic science claims that humanity’s origin and continued evolution is explained by natural organic chemistry. According to this theory, basic molecules naturally aggregated into organic material, which then evolved into complex life (and ultimately human life) by natural selection over hundreds of millions of years, and this process continues to shape our development today.

Evolution has certainly played a role in human development. But if it were the only driver of our existence, then our lives would be nothing more than a blind sequence of chemical reactions. Since there is no freedom of action in chemistry, we would be purely reactive, compelled to do whatever our chemistry dictates. We would become like gasoline that always ignites when the spark plug triggers it. We couldn’t say, for example, my name might be gasoline, but I’m going to act like water today instead...so good luck with your road trip.

If freedom doesn’t exist, then justice doesn’t exist, because there are no grounds to punish or praise someone for behavior that is not freely chosen. And judges couldn’t make their judgements freely; they would be bound to react to the behavior of others as their chemistry dictates. In the absence of freedom and justice, our

fundamental human rights don't exist. Human rights presume freedom for individuals to respect and exercise these rights, and judgement and justice from the state to uphold them. The founders of our nation wrote that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, and indeed human rights are not possible without God.

I could go on to say that every commitment we make would be meaningless without God, because we don't have the freedom to keep those promises. Who knows what the chemistry in our bodies and brains would be doing when it becomes time to honor these commitments? The only difference between a kept and broken promise would be the chemistry in play at the time. The basis for any kind of trust would disappear.

The worst thing of all is that love in an atheistic world is nothing more than a chemical attraction. If we are not making a free decision committing ourselves to honor and care for someone, what meaning does love have? Basically, without the freedom that can only come from God, we all become "biochemical puppets," as Sam Harris put it, and every one of our highest ideals falls apart.

***Many people today are searching for meaning but hesitate to commit to faith. How does your book meet them where they are?***

I think one of the virtues of the book is that it doesn't make any specific articles of faith into a prerequisite for living out the four first things. I certainly try to demonstrate the virtues of my own Catholic faith, and to address the reasons that persons might hesitate to embrace it. But I believe that the four first things are present within every state of mind which aspires to truth and goodness.

I would argue that virtually everyone has a certain degree of faith; those who don't believe in God still typically believe in something greater than themselves. Within any form of faith, there is always some kind of higher power to develop confidence in. And the objectives of the faith are typically to dedicate our lives to that higher power, to honor it, and to draw our own power and strength from it.

Anyone can start where they are, by exploring or deepening each of these ideals within themselves and with others. By doing so, people will ultimately find the path they are meant to travel in terms of their faith.

***You write about God inviting us to “create freely with Him.” What does that look like in everyday life?***

One of the key points I make in the book is that God didn't create the world to its highest possible degree of perfection. Since God is pure freedom and pure action, we can't possibly be made in God's image and likeness unless we also have the freedom and the power to act ourselves. We can't simply be passive recipients of God's largesse; we must be active collaborators with God. God left his work of creation unfinished in certain respects, so that we can work with him towards its completion.

In everyday life, we all have different ways of doing this. Most of us have specific work that we spend much of our time doing. There is some creative aspect to every type of work, and we should be focused on doing it extremely well and honorably, since we are collaborating with God himself. Beyond this, we are all responsible for raising our children, allocating resources that we have earned

and been entrusted with, and most importantly, working on transforming ourselves ever more into God's image and likeness. All of this of course involves collaborating and creating freely with God.

I also note in the book that some people are neither able to work nor contribute any material resources. But perhaps counterintuitively, they might be the most powerful among all of us. As important as work and resources are, they can begin to replace God in our hearts if we are not careful, becoming the end rather than the means, and cluttering our minds with endless distractions.

We should consider that the first words of God as reported in the Scriptures are "Let there be light." And there was light. This type of power, requiring only a thought and a prayer, is offered to us when we collaborate with God, and especially to those who are burdened with disability or deprivation. Because many people suffering in this way are unable to work and have few resources, they are also mostly free of the troubles and temptations that the powers of this world can bring. Amidst their suffering and freedom of mind, they typically have tremendous potential to offer up what I would call prayers of creation, which have real effects in this world through God's answers to their prayers, and through the wisdom they receive from God and convey to us.

***How does understanding our relationship with God as collaborative, rather than restrictive, change the way we live?***

One of my favorite parables from Jesus in the Gospels is about three servants who received money from their master to manage while he was away. Two doubled the money that their master provided to them – they collaborated with their master and then

were invited to share their master's joy. But one simply buried the money out of fear, even though it would have been easy for him to turn it over to the bankers and deliver it back to his master with interest.

This represents the tragedy of a restrictive relationship with God. Most of us don't go so far as to bury our talents, but sometimes we live our lives afraid of making mistakes, afraid of being embarrassed, resenting that we have less than someone else, and afraid that God will punish us or ignore us. We are not meant to live in fear of God, but rather to love him, be loved by him, and trust in his Providence.

We can't allow God's greatness to somehow make us believe that he won't concern himself with the small details of our lives, or that he will always be looking to put us in our place. God's greatness rather means that in his infinite love for us, every hair on our head is numbered, as Jesus tells us. And Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and to empower us to fully collaborate with God. With this understanding, we can go forth in confidence and joy to live out the vocation that God has given us.

***One of the most difficult questions in faith is the problem of suffering. How does your book help readers make sense of suffering and evil?***

The greatest blessing received by humanity is that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We are not passive under God's grace, but just as God does, we have the freedom and power to act. Freedom and power, by their very definition, imply that we may choose and act to collaborate with God, or we may choose and

act otherwise. Of course, we know that humanity has often chosen and acted otherwise, leaving us with an abundance of evil in our world. But even amidst this terrible abundance of evil, I think almost everyone would consider living out freedom and power in the image and likeness of God to be a greater good than a passive existence without any possibility of evil. If everything is already completely perfect, there is nothing left for us to do.

As we learn from the Book of Genesis, our sins began with our first parents, who after being elevated by God to tremendous heights, brought themselves down with their arrogance. God removed them from earthly paradise not to take pleasure in putting us in our place, but rather to prevent us from destroying ourselves before we could be redeemed. With humanity now having been redeemed by Jesus Christ at the most perfect time, we experience only the evil that is necessary to keep us on our best path to salvation. God ensures that every evil produces a greater good in the end.

But understanding why evil exists doesn't make it any easier to experience. To make it more tolerable, I keep three analogies in mind, which come from Scripture and great spiritual authors. The first is that we are like gold that must be refined by fire before it can become brilliant. The second is that we are like blocks of marble which must be chipped at repeatedly to create a perfect sculpture. And finally, as Jesus himself said, we may liken ourselves to a tree that bears fruit, but which must be pruned to bear even more fruit.

***What would you say to someone who is struggling to trust God because of pain or disappointment in their life?***

The first things I would say are don't allow yourself to suffer alone, and don't feel pressured to "snap out of it," as if we could simply stop feeling what we are feeling. If we look at Jesus' example, he really felt his Agony in the Garden. He had to suffer through it mostly alone, at least from a human standpoint, because his disciples fell asleep and then abandoned him. But we don't have to suffer alone. God knows how hard it can be for a suffering person to trust someone, unless that someone has the type of empathy which can only come from having suffered themselves.

Jesus endured every possible kind of suffering – persecution, slander, betrayal, abandonment, disappointment, humiliation, and anticipation, along with his physical agony. Jesus suffered for our sins, and not because it was all necessary to expiate them. Just one fleeting moment of suffering endured by God made man was enough to expiate every sin ever committed. His suffering was primarily because God wanted to live in solidarity with us as a human being, experiencing every suffering that we experience because of sin, and to be a source of strength to us whenever we are in agony ourselves.

When I feel my own suffering starting to affect my trust and confidence in God, I simply try to envision myself kneeling next to Jesus during his time in the garden, as he was facing his passion and death. We can trust Jesus, because he lived to suffer with us. And it is enough for God that if we are struggling to trust him at times, we at least begin by trusting in Jesus as a suffering fellow man. And we can certainly trust in his mother Mary as well, whose heart was pierced by the suffering of her son.

***You emphasize developing “unwavering trust in God’s will.” What are some practical ways readers can begin to grow in that trust?***

I think the first thing to do is to develop a better sense of God’s infinite power and goodness. One way to begin is to read the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles in their entirety, probably more than once, so we become very familiar with the works of Jesus and his apostles.

Then I would suggest reading about the saints, many of whom I mention in *The Four First Things*. This will allow us to see that extraordinary supernatural events have occurred not only during the time of Jesus and his first disciples, but also in the lives of great Christians in recent history. And from the lives of the saints, we will see how trust in God can transform ordinary people, who in many cases were grave sinners or persons with physical and mental disabilities, into extremely powerful collaborators with God.

Another suggestion is to look back every day with gratitude at the times we believe God intervened for us, so we can continually reinforce our own experience of God’s Providence. We should often also reinforce our memory of cases when greater good emerged from events we were very upset about initially. And we should be on continual lookout for God’s action in our present lives day-to-day. Every time something positive happens or we avoid a potential disaster, we could raise our eyes to God in gratitude. If something negative happens, we could try to think of ways that it will ultimately work for the greater good, insisting to ourselves that one of these or something better is certain to occur, and we again raise our eyes in gratitude.

While these spiritual exercises are not always easy to do, I believe they will ultimately create a habitual trust in God for everyone. One last idea is to try to visualize God's infinite love somehow. I like to think of God's love as the heat at the center of the sun. But unlike the sun, the center and infinity of God's love is focused everywhere and on everyone at every moment, forever.

***You share a powerful moment in your life when you experienced God's presence in a profound way. Can you tell us more about that experience and how it shaped your faith?***

I was sitting on the Staten Island Ferry, coming home after quitting my job in anger. I was extremely depressed, maybe the worst of the many times I was depressed in those days. I hadn't had much success in anything up to that point, I was quite lonely, and I essentially considered myself a failure. By then I had pretty much lost my faith, even though I had been well raised in it.

But on that ferry ride I eventually said something to myself, sort of a prayer but not really, and not said with any kind of faith or expectation. It was almost a throwaway line. It went something like "If there was a God, now would be the time he would have to help me." And I literally and instantaneously went from extremely depressed to totally exhilarated. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and nothing like it has happened to me since. And I became convinced at that point that God is real. And while I had a long way to go and a lot to learn, and still do, I was at least on the right road.

***You mention that you drifted from your faith in early adulthood. What brought you back and what kept you there?***

It was that religious experience which brought me back, but what kept me there was encountering the right people afterward. Soon after that religious experience, I returned to school and got involved with the pro-life group on campus. Through that, I met several people that helped me develop my faith. Most of them were associated with Opus Dei, which as I have seen and experienced myself, has made an extraordinary difference in helping people develop relationships with God.

I've definitely had my ups and downs in living the faith over the years, which scandalizes me somewhat given all of the blessings I've received, but I trust in God's mercy, and the more I stay in touch with the people and practices that got me on the right track in the first place, the better I do.

***What's one simple shift someone could make today to begin reorienting their life around these "first things"?***

I would say we should pick one difficulty we are currently facing, and approach it with the four first things. We can start by having confidence that God will give his infinite attention to the challenge alongside our own, and that it will certainly be resolved in the way that God deems best, with conviction that God's works are so perfect that they cannot be better. Then we explicitly turn our challenge over to the care of God, knowing that everything of concern to us, no matter how trivial it might seem, is also of concern to God. We continually pray for his strength and guidance throughout our efforts to address the challenge. And finally, we remember that the great commandments God gave us are to love him with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind;

and to love our neighbor not only as we love ourselves, but as Jesus loves us. Knowing this, we always seek to address the challenge with a spirit of supernatural love, working as hard for the benefit of other people as for our own, and always using honorable means to achieve our goals.

***How can readers move from understanding these truths intellectually to actually living them day to day?***

I think it's mostly about committing the time and energy to make these ideals habitual in our lives. I have learned from long experience that if I don't dedicate enough time to my relationship with God, I'm not going to be able to properly live out my vocation.

The time pressure from our responsibilities can be overwhelming, but at the very least we could try to make God our first thought when we wake up, praying for the grace to live the day well. We could also make him our last thought before we go to sleep, with gratitude and prayers for forgiveness. And we could take a minute several times during the day to say the Lord's Prayer and other short prayers that speak to us, carefully considering each phrase as we say it.

We can look to develop the presence of mind to ask God to work with us each time we take on a project. And we can develop the habit of making joyful sacrifices for others, taking our own pleasure in the pleasure of God and other people when we put forth extra effort for them. This doesn't have to start with anything dramatic, just a series of small and simple acts of generosity that begin to make it habitual for us.

Over time we could aim to develop our spiritual lives further, supported by longer periods of prayer and guidance from a spiritual director. And I would recommend making a retreat every year, during which we put everything else aside as much as possible for a few days, and concentrate on our relationship with God. We will emerge from our first retreat, and each one thereafter, with a greater capacity to live out the four first things.

***What gives you the most hope about people rediscovering faith in today's world?***

It's been well publicized that religious faith has steadily declined over recent decades, but we are seeing signs that religious revival is possible and may be starting already. I've spent my entire life in the northeast U.S., where the religious decline might be the most pronounced. But I recently heard about a 6pm Mass at St. Joseph's Church in lower Manhattan, where it is impossible to get a seat unless you show up before 5:45pm. It's a Mass primarily for young adults, and they get together to socialize before and after the Mass. And there was a recent article in the New York Times about a surge of people joining the Catholic Church across the U.S., in much greater numbers that have been seen in the last 10 or 20 years.

Ultimately, I think it is inevitable that faith will make a significant comeback. There is a lot of isolation and trepidation being produced by the rapid development of technology and the advent of artificial intelligence. Maybe in the past technology led people away from faith, but now I think it is starting to push us back to it. I believe more people are giving faith a chance and being very pleasantly surprised at how much of a difference it makes.

***If you could summarize the message of The Four First Things in one sentence, what would it be?***

I would say “Alone we can either sink or swim, but with God we can walk on water.” I heard that in a sermon many years ago from a visiting priest at St. Patrick’s Church in Newport, NH. I hope he might come across this at some point.