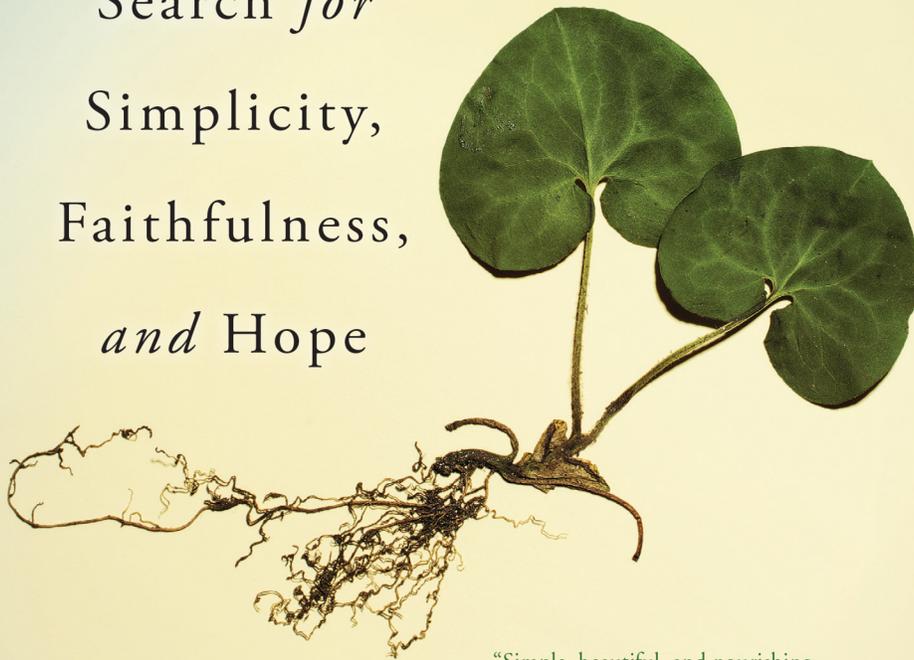


Renewable

One Woman's
Search *for*
Simplicity,
Faithfulness,
and Hope



"Simple, beautiful, and nourishing,
this book is a necessary reminder that the
renewable energy we need most is people power!"

—Bill McKibben, author and founder of 350.org

EILEEN FLANAGAN

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Eileen Flanagan



SHE WRITES PRESS

Preface: A Good Day to Be Arrested



Ash Wednesday is a good day to be arrested.

—Reverend Jim Antal, United Church of Christ

At age fifty, I snapped half a plastic handcuff around one wrought iron bar of the White House fence. Glancing over my shoulder at the famous sloping lawn and the imposing white pillars of the south portico, I slipped the other cuff around my maroon leather glove and locked it into place. To my left, Robert Kennedy, Jr. and his son Conor were doing the same. Beyond them stood civil rights icon Julian Bond and author Bill McKibben, whose books on global warming had helped lead me here to my first act of civil disobedience. In front of us, actress Daryl Hannah sat on the cold sidewalk by a banner telling President Obama to “Lead on Climate.”

For me, a woman who had spent most of the past sixteen years identifying herself as a spiritual writer and mother of two, claiming a place in this company was actually more daunting than getting arrested by the DC Park Police, who stood behind the throng of reporters waiting to cart us away in police vans parked nearby. I had more experience carpooling to soccer games than standing in front of the press pool. At the training the night before, when Bill McKibben had told us to dress professionally and warmly, I realized I might not own the right wardrobe to do both, so I’d gone for warm. Now I felt slightly underdressed in my purple down coat and grey slacks as I glanced around at all the men wearing ties.

The two million-member Sierra Club had never authorized civil disobedience before, but both their board president and executive director were there, along with a top NASA climate scientist, a former poet laureate, and the US head of Greenpeace, who stood next to me. The impressive lineup was intended to attract attention to the action, which would be followed by a march of 40,000 people a few days later. The strategy was working. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had already interviewed me about why a Philadelphia mother was concerned enough about global warming to go to jail, if only briefly.

How on earth had I gotten to this moment, willingly handcuffing my wrist to the White House fence with a bunch of famous people, while my family and friends back in Philadelphia prayed for me? Watching the press jostle for position in front of us, I almost laughed out loud, realizing how dramatically my life had changed in a little over a year.

Only the previous winter I had been preoccupied with our recent move into a five-bedroom house, unpacking the Irish and African history books I'd been carting around since graduate school, and waiting hours on hold for Verizon to transfer our phone and Internet service. Run ragged organizing multiple fundraisers for my son's seventh-grade trip to Costa Rica, I'd been drowning in e-mail, junk mail, and the unused kitchen gadgets the previous residents had left in our new basement. Sleepless at 3:00 a.m., I stared at the ceiling in a midlife hormonal funk and realized with a shock that my life was not what I had expected.

I thought of myself as a former Peace Corps volunteer who had loved living in a mud hut, and now I had more bathrooms than I could keep clean. I thought of myself as a person who used canvas shopping bags twenty years before it was mainstream, but now with two cars and two electronics-addicted teenagers, I'd developed a low-level despair about my inability to protect the planet they would inherit. I'd been reading about how global warming was withering maize crops in Botswana, the southern African country where I had taught decades earlier—the place that had originally taught me about social responsibility. Our new house was so big, no one heard me when I cried.

I had felt alone in my midlife angst, though I knew I really wasn't. I'd heard whispers from my middle-class friends, more than one of whom wished she had less house and more freedom. At the very least,

everyone I knew had too much junk in the basement and too many e-mails. Those who were lucky enough to keep their jobs through the recession often worked longer hours than they liked to pay for stuff they were not sure they needed. Many of us yearned for a different way of living and a sense that our lives mattered. When I confided to friends that I felt I wasn't fully using my gifts—that I was meant to be more than I had become so far—many sighed in recognition. Their lives had not turned out as they had expected either.

I couldn't help thinking of my own mother, a high school graduate who worked for forty-three years but never had a job that fully utilized her sharp mind. At eighty-two, as lung disease sapped her strength, she came to our redbrick home for Easter dinner. At the end of the evening, I walked her out to her gold Chevy Cavalier, mindful of her cautious steps and aware of a shared but unspoken intuition that this would be her last holiday at our home. She paused at the car door, turned to me, and said wistfully, "I guess if I hadn't had you, my life wouldn't have been worth anything."

I loved my children, but I never wanted to lay that kind of trip on them. It was too great a burden to be someone else's only purpose. I'd wanted to stay home to nurse my babies when they were little. I'd wanted to read to them and sled with them on snow days. I believed that nurturing other human beings was important, undervalued work, which I didn't want to undervalue myself just because it didn't count on my Social Security statements. I wanted to honor the work of parenting, but I didn't want to disappear in it, especially now that my children were becoming increasingly independent. More to the point, it was partly my love for my children that was motivating a deep, churning desire to prevent my generation from screwing up their futures irreparably.

At forty-nine, I began taking small steps toward a renewal I couldn't yet name. I went back through decades of journals, trying to pinpoint when and how I had lost touch with the pieces of myself that were struggling to resurface. I gave away half the stuff in the basement and sold our fossil fuel stock. I also joined a group of spiritually grounded activists who were working to stop mountaintop removal coal mining, a devastating practice that contributed to both global warming and high rates of cancer in Appalachia. At the group's monthly meetings, I

started singing again, which felt symbolic of some deeper transformation that involved claiming my power and my gifts. Most importantly, I remembered I was not alone.

Being part of a group that was strategic and sang on key made me feel immensely better, bolstering my courage for a solitary journey back to southern Africa, where I celebrated my fiftieth birthday and learned how rain had become unpredictable and maize crops had diminished. As a descendant of Irish Potato Famine survivors, I couldn't ignore the link between global warming and famine. As a parent, I couldn't be apathetic about the future. And so, only thirteen months after my midlife despair hit, I stood in front of the wrought iron White House fence, calmly waiting to hear the police issue their first warning.

Forty-eight of us would be arrested that February day. In addition to the well-known names, there were ranchers from Texas and Nebraska struggling to protect their grazing land from the Keystone XL Pipeline, which was scheduled to pump the world's dirtiest oil from Alberta, Canada to the Gulf of Mexico to be refined for export. The pipeline was the headline issue at this action, but those in parallel struggles were participating, too. Cherri Foytlin, Louisiana mother of six, had walked over twelve hundred miles to Washington, DC almost three years earlier to demand action on the BP oil spill disaster that had contaminated thousands of miles of Gulf Coast. Maria Gunnoe had gotten death threats for standing up to the powerful coal companies that were literally blowing the tops off the mountains of her native West Virginia.

I was there representing Earth Quaker Action Team, the group that had taught me to ground my social activism in spirituality and song—the group that had helped me see that my personal renewal was linked to this wider movement and a rising tide of change. Two friends had come to support me and were standing nearby, while others back home held me in prayer.

It seemed fitting that I was committing civil disobedience for the first time on Ash Wednesday, the first of the forty-day season of Lent that precedes Easter. Twenty minutes before we walked across the street to the White House, Minister Jim Antal mounted the stage in Lafayette Square in a red baseball cap and a clerical collar to explain what committing civil disobedience on this holy day meant to him as a Christian.

“Ash Wednesday is a good day to be arrested,” he told the crowd

of supporters and reporters. “It’s a day of conscience, repentance, and conviction; a day when we take stock of our personal lives—and our life together on the planet . . . a good day to realign our lives with God’s desire to preserve this good creation.” Then he offered ashes to Robert Kennedy, Jr. and others who wanted them and joined the rest of the forty-eight as we walked across the street alongside the press, their microphone booms bobbing overhead.

Growing up in an Irish Catholic family, I had thought Lent was about giving up candy or ice cream, so you could virtuously binge on jelly beans and chocolate bunnies Easter morning. Lent seemed to be about guilt and self-denial, so I’d rejected it when I left my family’s faith. In recent years, though, I’d become more open-minded, especially because Lent was a special time of reflection and fasting for my Roman Catholic husband, Tom. Now at midlife, I heard Jim’s words about conscience, repentance, and conviction as something hopeful—steps toward transformation. It was about taking stock of my own life and the society that had shaped it. Taking stock in order to make a change.

“This is your first warning,” blared the megaphone after the reporters had moved behind a side barricade, leaving the line of uniformed police in plain view. I stood shoulder to shoulder with the others and smiled. I felt more aligned with my values than I had since living in an African village almost three decades earlier.