

Praise for *Beyond the Comma*

A clear and clarion call for building a just and compassionate society coming from deep religious pathos, Chase's gentle yet passionate voice is a much needed charge leading us in the footsteps of prophets and poets. This book raises all the crucial questions and answers with bold exclamation points!

—Rabbi Naamah Kelman

Dean of Hebrew Union College, the Reform Seminary in Jerusalem

Life's most precious gems of wisdom may be missed because we are too hurried to stop, look and listen at points of interruption or delay. Chase's rich treasury of insights and observations makes a convincing case that we must value more highly than ever before God's gifts of pauses and punctuations along our pilgrimage of life.

—Rev. Dr. James Forbes

former Senior Minister, The Riverside Church, New York City

Robert Chase weaves stories, theological reflection, and a passion for justice in this book that reveals "intersectionality" as the paradigm for a hopeful future. He blends the personal, cultural, and religious spheres with honesty and courage. Bob's compelling moral vision is one that inspires me in these challenging times. On a day that you need a reason to hope, pick up this book!

—The Rev. Dr. Nancy Wilson

global moderator of Metropolitan Community Church

Based in compassion and moral courage, Rev. Chase offers hope and guidance in these times marred by religious and ethnic conflicts. We owe him a debt of gratitude for sharing his profound and learned reflections with us.

—Ambassador Akbar Ahmed

Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, American University, Washington, D.C.

Bob Chase reminds us there are moments in life when we need to step back and consider the important things that define the path forward. Here is a roadmap on how to choose the right forks in the road.

—Mike McCurry

former press secretary to President Bill Clinton,
and professor, Wesley Theological Seminary

As a professed agnostic, I've often looked upon Christianity—and all organized religions—with skepticism and mistrust. Reverend Chase has worked to create a different example of Christianity—an inclusive, nonjudgmental faith that brings people of different paths together at the intersections of life. *Beyond the Comma* is an exploration of those moments when the forces that guide us prompt self-examination and a deeper journey to discover our place in the world.

—Sulome Anderson

journalist and author of *The Hostage's Daughter*

Beyond the Comma

Life at the Intersection

Robert Chase



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Prologue

**You may never have proof of your importance,
but you are more important than you think.
There are always those who couldn't do without you.
The rub is that you don't always know who.¹**

—Robert Fulghum

Remember the nursery rhyme to promote safety in the streets? “Cross at the green and not in between.” That childish strophe is a starting point for the pages that follow. Its lesson draws you to the intersection where the traffic light is found but also where, as I hope these pages will reveal, there is so much more. True, intersections have rules, both formal and informal, that order oncoming traffic flow. We can become captive by these rules, allowing us to stagnate; or the rules of the road can free us to become more than we could ever have hoped or imagined.²

A friend of mine, Arvind Vora, is chair for Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Jain Associations in North America and a traffic engineer by profession. He reports that when two vehicles enter an intersection, there are *sixteen* possible safe interactions. It is pursuit of these options (and imagining others) that is core to the narrative that follows. At the intersection, we can discover one another and find that life can shift in wholly unanticipated directions. “Behold,” says God, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not see it?” (Isa. 43:19).

I have become increasingly aware of the simultaneous intersections that confront us in each moment. In vulnerable times, the confluence of these forces can seem overwhelming. In ordinary times, the tendency is to overlook or ignore these competing dynamics and live one-dimensionally. But if we are to be truly attentive to the seemingly contradictory realities that compete for our attention, existence can be enriched, understanding deepened, and options expanded in limitless ways.

Walt Disney built an empire based on two such seemingly conflicting ideas: memory—which looks to the past—and imagination—which builds on an illimitable future.³ When brought into harmony, the deep tap root of past experience merges with an open-ended future inspired by creativity and invention. By making decisions based on both past and future—memory *and* imagination—the present is expanded exponentially. By the same token, if we live in touch with both our deeply personal realities, while at the same time engaging the global forces that surround us, our sensitivities are heightened and our potential for becoming more creative, sensitive, and productive is enhanced.

What are best practices in navigating such a convergent reality? How do we learn from the life experiences that cascade across our individual emotional, spiritual, and intellectual countenance while remaining attuned to societal issues that surround us? Are there lessons to be learned from the varied forces that bombard our senses? Are there even deeper lessons to be learned about the cosmos by comparing and contrasting the marker that is our particular lifespan with the longer arc of history?

The purpose of this book is twofold: to lift up the awareness of these forces that are constantly at work on all of us, all of the time; and to explore ways of creatively engaging this dynamic in order to enrich our lives, achieve our aspirations, and enhance our sense of fulfillment. The concept of “intersection” as a multilayered prism for self-discovery can lead to increased understanding of self, our world, and the human condition.

On a personal level, events from half a century ago when I was quite young, when examined through the refraction of multiple experiences over time, reveal remarkably similar lessons. How are these things related? How can I make decisions *now* that build upon lessons learned *then*? Are there organizational principles that we can use to heighten positive possibilities while avoiding unnecessary pain? Can we avoid missed opportunities that continue to keep us in bondage: to traditions, to patterns of behavior, to limited views of the world and the magnificent mosaic of our global village?

These writings do not fit neatly into categories. They do not represent a business plan or a personal guide to self-improvement. Nor are they a series of parables or morality tales. Muriel Rukeyser reminds us that the universe is made up of stories, not atoms,⁴ and there are many stories in this narrative. All, I hope, serve to portray the mosaic that is life itself—yours, mine, others. At the time of this writing, I was serving as founding director of Intersections International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing individuals, communities, and whole nations together to promote justice and peace. Our task is often to connect the dots, and so it is with this narrative—offering you, the reader, an opportunity to make the seemingly disparate connections in your own life, so that you can discover anew what Dr. Martin Luther King calls the interrelated structure of reality.⁵

The whole exercise of writing a book implies that you think you have something important to say, and others will want to read it. The fear is that you discover your thoughts are too simplistic, too pedestrian, or too obtuse to be of interest to anyone. This is especially true for me since my life—while full and for which I am grateful—has not seemed particularly remarkable or dramatic or beneficent or filled with self-sacrifice. I am a product

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and disillusionment, I ask,
“What do I have to say
that could be of value?”

of the suburbs—how unimaginative. I’m a white, male Christian of privilege—no drama there. I have been spared the gut-wrenching tragedies that so often infuse the lives of others who have truly heroic stories to tell. I never went to war or ran for office and never led a movement of any

real consequence. And, so I ask myself in those moments of doubt and disillusionment, what do I have to say that could be of value?

I’m reminded of a sermon I once heard, “Between Terror and Amazement,” about the discovery of the women at the tomb on the first Easter. They were both terrified and amazed by what they saw.⁶ Ah, yet another intersection. This biblical passage sets a perfect context for the underlying premise of this book and begs the question about what it means to be *fully* human. In Genesis we learn that we’ve been created in the image and likeness of the Creator God. We have been given both the ability and the desire to “make things.” We’ve been endowed with both memory *and* imagination and we have both the privilege *and* the responsibility to be co-creators with God. But this prospect also terrifies us because the outcome is so uncertain and, as human beings, we fear uncertainty and cling relentlessly to the status quo.

I ask, “Is it not in just those moments, between terror and amazement, where so many of us live?” So, putting aside doubts and fears, I wonder if I am not *exactly* the one who should write such a book. Perhaps, if I see myself as painfully normal and then try to extract life lessons from my experience, this will resonate with those who, like me, wonder about who they are and why they are here. I have come across many moments when I thought it would be a good and productive thing to document thoughts and ideas about these intersections in my life. In the following pages, you can see—and judge for yourself—the value of this exercise.

I

Gratitude

**i thank You God for most this amazing
day . . . for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes¹**

—e. e. cummings

Along with the profoundly inventive poet e. e. cummings, we begin with gratitude: for this world, this life, this moment, for all those whose paths cross ours, whom we are privileged to engage in our lives, and for the opportunities to meet extraordinary challenges by doing amazing things. This is the starting point for integration of all that has come to pass with all that is yet to be. If this overarching understanding remains constant, infinite possibilities abound, and for that I begin with, “i thank You God.”

It has been my life’s calling to create intersections, not boundaries, among those who differ. What prompted this call? What shaped the prin-

ciples upon which my life's work is based? How can the confluence of forces in my own life be inspirational and instructive for others?

As founding director of Intersections International, a multifaith, multicultural initiative of the Collegiate Church of New York, I am engaged with individuals and communities at those “thin places” where conflicts, misunderstandings, stereotyping, and even violence can occur. These places include the “intersections” of power and values, faith and science, memory and hope, imagination and action, life and death, order and chaos, sacred and secular, male and female, war and peace, present and future, doubt and belief—because it is in such places that the most cosmic of all questions are asked: Who am I? Why am I here? And, for people of faith: Does God care about my life?

There are many points where I could begin these reflections, but perhaps a good place to start is in Islamabad, in a room surrounded by two hundred Pakistanis—men in long beards and traditional dress, women in chadors and hijabs. The vast majority had never met an American. I was there to explore bringing an interfaith group of U.S. religious leaders to Pakistan to be in dialogue with Pakistani counterparts, and I was addressing a group on the campus of the International Islamic University as to why I thought this was a good idea. Someone rose from the crowd and declared, “I know that your Holy Scripture [John 14:6] says that Jesus is the only way and that no one comes to the father except through him. Christians believe that Muslims are going to hell. At best, you are not here to talk to us. You just want to convert us.”

How was I to respond? Though I pride myself on being liberal (as Bob Dylan writes, “but to a degree”), I was clearly a stranger in a strange land. In a bit, I will return to how I *actually* responded, but to fully answer the question, I need to go way back to a time in my childhood when I first realized that I was different—no, not so different that I'd never be able to blend in (why do kids so desperately want to “blend in”?), but different enough.

I guess you could say the story began in second grade. It was a day, as I recall, like any other, but it would start a series of innocuous events that

would conspire together to awaken in me a knowledge that I would not be the fully complete human being—at least in a physical sense—that my dotting parents had always assured me I could be and that community leaders—teachers, pastors, counselors—implied was my right. The very premise may have been unrealistic and was certainly based upon what I would much later come to know as “privilege.” Still, such parental encouragement, with its societal support, shaped my early years with the idea that anything was possible.

I was called to the nurse’s office for a routine eye exam. I don’t really remember what she said, but when I gave my mother the note from the nurse, it was clear that I needed glasses. With sixty years’ perspective, this seems like a rather minor wrinkle, but in my seven-year-old consciousness, it was devastating. Glasses! From that time forward, I would have to wear glasses to be able to see properly. I remember my uncle telling me jovially at the time that every day his glasses were the first thing he put on in the morning and the last thing he took off at night. He was trying to be reassuring, but actually it sounded like a curse—a trap that would forever ensnare me in a routine—every day! I know, I thought, I will rebel. I will not go quietly into the cold, dark night!

The first thing I noticed when I got my new glasses was that you could see individual leaves on the trees. Now that was pretty cool. For me, trees had always appeared as mottled green blurs, not unlike an impressionistic painting. To see the distinctions in branches and leaves was pretty extraordinary. But such benefits did not outweigh the stigma of having to wear glasses—always to be a nerd (even though the term “nerd” wasn’t invented yet), and, so I feared, be excluded from the in-crowd. So, for my rebellious act: every day for the next two years, I dutifully put my glasses into their case, put the case in my pocket, and took my glasses to school. But I never wore them, never even let anyone see them. For two years.

I learned to cope. When the teacher routinely switched our seats, moving me to the back of the class, I realized I couldn’t see the flashcards that she used to drill us in arithmetic. So I memorized the order of the cards on their shiny metal ring. I breezed through them, confidently calling out the

problems—“six times eight equals forty-eight”—even though I couldn’t see a thing! It was a survival technique, a way I could avoid being different.

One night, my folks invited a friend over for dinner. Phil Sheridan was his name. My favorite television program was on after dinner. TV was a relatively new phenomenon—Phil didn’t have one—and my Mom thought it would be great for Phil and me to watch our new television together. “No!” my insides screamed, “We can’t watch television together! Phil would see my glasses!” And my folks would be suspicious if I didn’t wear them, so I threw a tantrum trying to keep Phil from coming to dinner. I couldn’t say why and made up all sorts of ridiculous excuses for him to stay away. I finally relented and confessed, acknowledging two years’ worth of deception. My infinitely patient mother declared it no big deal (she was right, of course) and I decided to watch the show with my glasses. It was also no big deal to Phil. He hardly seemed to notice. The next day I went to school wearing those glasses and I have worn corrective lenses every day since.

A life lesson was unfolding without my even realizing it, and yet what innocently occurred in that living room in Levittown, New York, began to form a fundamental principle for my adult interactions. As someone later

said in a much different context, “You’re different, dude. Get over it.”

You’re different. Get over it.

Actually, we’re all different and it is precisely in our differences that life’s magnificent mosaic is revealed. I listened to Phil. What was, for me, a very big deal

—wearing glasses—was inconsequential to him. By realizing his total lack of concern and then shifting my actions accordingly, my life changed. Harkening back to the Robert Fulghum’s classic *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* I now recognize that a vital principle in constructive human interaction—listen to the unexpected—I first experienced, perhaps not in kindergarten, but before my tenth birthday. And those unexpected lessons from surprising sources mark a core tenet in my life’s story and in this narrative.

The poignant epilogue to this story occurred more than a dozen years later. I heard the news, mixed in with a thousand other stories large and small, that Phil

Listen to the unexpected.

Sheridan had been killed in Vietnam. I never told him about the drama in my life in which he played such a central part. It was so trivial compared to the ultimate sacrifice he had made (for me) and I was sad that I had never been able to share the story with him. I thought he'd get a real chuckle out of it, and that maybe he'd be able to see in the humor the valuable lesson I had learned from him and how it would shape my future.

I have wondered what prompts me to begin this book here. The journey of this narrative generally concerns the movement from fear to empathy, from ignorance to understanding, and from apathy to action. It is about self-discovery in an age fraught with division, isolation, insecurity, hopelessness, violence, and fear—elements so overwhelmingly consequential that it almost seems a sacrilege to start with such a small incident as the first time I wore glasses. Why start here? And why do I connect this very personal story with Vietnam—something so potent, with such a lasting imprint on the human psyche that memories of and reactions to the Vietnam War factored directly into the presidential campaigns throughout the twentieth and into the early twenty-first century, more than fifty years after the war was fought?

But I have come to realize that it is by connecting seemingly opposite poles—intensely personal, and even mundane, experiences with historical events that touch countless lives—that I have discovered a central lesson about what it means to be fully human. As individuals, we intersect with both personal and corporate realities, and we are challenged to integrate our lifestyles and perspectives in ways that include both and ignore neither. It is not sufficient to be consistent and faithful in one context and arbitrary and unforgiving in the other. So starting with a silly personal story about my youthful hang-up over wearing glasses and connecting this to the much wider reality of Vietnam marks an important passage into what it means to live at the many simultaneous intersections that envelope us.

So, back in Islamabad, how was I to respond to my questioner? True, I am a Christian, and the challenge before me had become increasingly relevant in our interrelated world: How do Christians answer the call of exclusivity in the eyes of God? If we believe that Jesus is the *only* way to God, is it not our duty—out of love and compassion for the “other”—to convince those who do not believe in Jesus that he is the singular path to salvation? Are we unfaithful if we do not do this? That moment offered a real-time application of a core tension of my work at Intersections: how can we be both unabashedly multifaith while still being unapologetically Christian?

Given this backdrop, a first step in answering the challenge posed to me in Islamabad lies in the context out of which Intersections was created and in which we do our work. The Collegiate Church of New York, our parent organization, is the oldest corporation in North America, dating back to 1628, whereas Intersections was launched in 2007. Located in a place where God’s great mosaic is revealed on any given street corner, down almost any block, Intersections’ mandate is to work with communities in conflict and build respectful relationships across lines of difference.

Intersections was created in the wake of a longing throughout our land that we should not be pigeon-holed into neat boxes, clearly defined silos, precise categories, but that the human condition is fluid and we are called to embrace that fluidity in order to achieve our full human potential.

Because the world is fractured and systems of injustice oppress human beings and stifle potential, Intersections exists to harness the power of unlikely voices to speak and act for peace, justice, and reconciliation. We bring together communities in conflict and crisis with our unique and proven ability to convene and spark constructive, open conversations around the issues that divide us. We gather diverse—and often unexpected—voices around a common table. We create safe space for the free flow of ideas. We seek innovative solutions to some of the world’s most pressing problems.

We use the arts, traditional media, and emerging technologies to amplify ideas evoked in group dialogue and we initiate concrete, sustainable, ongoing engagements to heal communities over time. We are in the mix,

addressing the very “stuff” of life and helping communities navigate the challenges that hinder global human progress. This became a critical juncture for me, where principles and programs converged. In many ways, it marks the culmination of my vocational quest, while addressing God’s unfolding reality and exploring ways that my life could “intersect” with world affairs. It is an extraordinary way to experience possibilities “beyond the comma.”²