

GODZONE

GODZONE

A guide to the travels of the soul



Mike Riddell



Originally published in 1992 by Reed Books,
a division of Octopus Publishing Group (NZ) Ltd,
and by Lion Publishing, Oxford

This edition published in Great Britain in 2010

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Copyright © Michael Riddell 1992, 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

SPCK does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained in its publications.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-06252-2

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

For Hemi te tutua

*And still you speak.
As I read your hard-won lines
And see the bloody tracks and signs,
I feel your pain . . .*

Contents



1	You are now entering Godzone	1
2	Introductions	13
3	The lie of the land	29
4	Customs	50
5	Dangers	68
6	Travelling companions	86
7	The last frontier	101
	<i>Sources</i>	116

1

You are now entering Godzone

Godzone is different. As far as I'm aware, there are no signs indicating where it starts and stops. I have never seen a sign declaring, 'You Are Now Entering Godzone'. And for good reason. You never do enter it, or leave it for that matter. You're standing in it, as the farmer said to the travelling salesman. Wherever you are, you're in Godzone. It is not a place at all, in the strict sense of the word. In fact, it's a lot easier to say what it isn't than what it is. But even though Godzone isn't anywhere in particular, everywhere is in Godzone – if you see.

Perhaps a story will help. Three things are sacred: the journey, the people, and stories. So. Once there was a man who had grown tired and cynical. Nothing brought him wonder or joy, and life itself held no magic. One day he decided to leave his own home town, where everything was familiar, and search for the perfect Magical City where he had heard that all was different, new, full and rewarding. So he left. On his journey he found himself in a forest. He settled down for the night, prepared a fire and had a bite to eat.

Before he retired for the night he was careful to take off his shoes and point them toward his destination. However, unknown to him, while he slept a tramp came during the night and, seeking some fun, turned the shoes around. When the man

You are now entering Godzone

awoke the next morning he carefully stepped into his shoes and continued on his way to the Magical City. After a few days, he found it – not quite as large as he had imagined. In fact, it looked somewhat familiar. He found a familiar street, knocked on a familiar door, met a familiar family he found there and lived happily ever after.

Godzone is fairly self-explanatory. You've heard of danger zones and war zones and nuclear-free zones. This is a guide to Godzone. It's the space inhabited by God. Even though you never cross the borders, there is a certain knack to seeing it. It's not immediately obvious. Some people don't believe it exists. Some people don't believe in God. Some people don't see the magic in the universe. Some people think they understand life. These ones will never become travellers (although they will gaze through the windows of their luxury bus aquariums and think they have been somewhere), and so this book is not for them.

It is a guide for travellers; for those who feel the constant tug of the road; for people who love life, but love it too much to commit themselves to only one part of it; for people who stay long enough to learn the truth of a place, but who eventually shoulder their pack and say goodbye. They are on a journey and that is enough. They follow an inner urge, a voice that calls from the depths.

To those, then, who have never quite settled in the world, I offer this guide to Godzone. You are already very close to seeing it. The hunger in you is the longing which comes before the dawn. The half-conscious murmurings, the half-remembered dreams, the half-forgotten insights are all signposts on the way. Let us journey together, then, for this little part of our way. Take off your shoes. You are now entering Godzone.

Visa requirements

You will be pleased to know that there are no formalities involved in entering Godzone. There are no forms demanding the occupation of your grandmother or the birthplace of your uncle; no long queues while some bloody-minded official examines his fingernails and practises being important; no enquiries as to whether you've got enough money to last you for three months in a luxury hotel. Quite the opposite – the less you have, the easier it is. As that Master Meanderer, Jesus of Nazareth, put it, it's easier to poke a camel through the eye of a needle than for the rich to make it in Godzone – which for anyone who has first-hand experience of trying to poke a camel anywhere, is the same as saying it's hard graft.

Jesus walked the dusty paths of Palestine a couple of millennia ago. He also blazed a trail through the Zone, leaving a few signs for those who stumble through the same territory. He wasn't universally popular with religious types, but has always been a friend of wanderers. One of his insights was that you can't really see Godzone unless you get rebirthed. It's not a matter of joining some exclusive club, buying a suit and becoming Respectable. This would be something like an early death for a traveller, and certainly is a long way from what Jesus had in mind. Conformity turns birth into death, which is just about the reverse of what Godzone is all about.

What Jesus was saying was that you can't buy your way into Godzone – not with money, nor flattery, nor even good behaviour. The only way in is to be rebirthed. Now the person he was talking to at the time was an old man who was Wealthy and Important and Religious. He wanted to enter Godzone all right, but he wasn't too keen on the idea of rebirthing. I guess the thought of having to start all over again was a bit much for

You are now entering Godzone

him. He laughed at the thought of going back into the womb of his long-dead mother, blessed be she. Too long, too late.

Starting out from scratch in life becomes more attractive the less you have to lose. Important people tend to find the idea repulsive, like having to share a taxi with a mother and three kids. But for people like ourselves with only a pack on our backs, being reborn is just the start of another adventure. In fact, if you've made a few wrong turnings on your journey, having another bash with a clean slate is downright appealing.

So how do you go about rebirthing? Well, the thing about being born is that the baby doesn't actually have much say in the proceedings. There it is, all warm and wet and having a cosmic experience, when suddenly the balloon is punctured and the walls start closing in. I dare say it if were to be consulted, the baby would have been quite content to stay where it was. No such luck. It gets pushed out, squeezed through a tunnel clearly too small, and ejected into a bright place full of people waiting to hit it. Rebirthing is something similar. It's not so much something you do as something that's done to you. People who have passed through it can say this and that about it, but if they're honest, they end up having to admit that it's all a bit of a mystery.

What can be said is that you have to want it. Whether out of desperation (the walls start moving in) or longing (you catch sight of something you want on the other side of that tunnel), you have to sign the consent form. There are no illegal entrants to Godzone. They're all there because they wanted to be. Nobody can make anyone do anything they don't want to; adventurers know that from experience. But the illusion is powerful. A lot of people live in prisons they have built for themselves, and curse the bars. In Godzone the wind is called freedom, and it's heady stuff.

You are now entering Godzone

The experience of being rebirthed is the kind of thing lots of people achieve, but not everyone wants to talk about. When they do, they describe it in different ways. Words often stagger when they try to carry big experiences. Suffice it to say that when you're born again, all things appear new. It's like you're seeing everything for the first time. New entrants often giggle to themselves. In reality, of course, nothing in the world has changed, except you. The difference is that now you can see. Everything remains as it was, but everything has changed. Perhaps you can understand why people get themselves tangled up when they try to explain all of this to friends.

To see Godzone is to be a part of it. Or, if you prefer, it is only when you are a part of it that you can see it. The first and overwhelming discovery is that God is in it – everywhere. Waving in the trees, laughing in the thunder, shining in old eyes, speaking in the silence. Through it and in it and over it and beyond it – God. This old world of ours is so full of God that you would think it would just burst. The funniest (and saddest) thing in all the world is to hear people arguing about whether God exists or not. Without God, who could argue?

Getting lost

I guess that all hitchhikers have been lost at some time. It can happen easily enough in a strange place. You only have to fall asleep in some car or other, and then get woken up to be told you have to get out; this is as far as the ride goes. You finally regain consciousness as the car leaves you in a cloud of dust at the side of the road. You know you're somewhere, but where? Which way have you come to be where you are now? How to know which direction to head in?

You are now entering Godzone

Godzoners speak about being lost as the place they all came from. Not lost in a little way, like not knowing what the nearest town is, but lost in a big way. Lost on the face of the world. Waking up one day to find that you don't know how you got to be where you are, and you don't know the way ahead. Lost in the sort of way that a little kid is lost when it can't find its parents; lost so that it hurts. Some react by huddling up into a little ball; others throw themselves into all sorts of things to help them forget; many keep talking in a loud voice to try and impress themselves and others that they know where they're going.

The trendy word for being lost is alienation. Americans have made a multi-million-dollar industry out of it, which keeps psychotherapists off the street. At its most basic level, 'lostness' is the feeling of not quite belonging in the world, like somehow you got born in the wrong time or place. It comes on like a bout of car-sickness, often when you just thought you had everything together. Being lost is a wound of humanity which everyone carries but nobody shows. Like death, it's kept behind closed doors for fear it should spread.

It is an ache in the deepest part of you, a longing which nothing in the world ever quite touches, a pain which is sometimes haunting and beautiful. From this wound springs all that is great in human art and music, and the most piercing artists and musicians are broken people. The feeling thrives in silence and loneliness, but is easily deadened by the hissing static of 'modern' life. People suppress the pain by carefully filling all the gaps in their lives, building sandcastles against the sea. When the tide comes in, it sometimes carries them away.

There are many explanations for this 'lostness'. Often it is termed 'depression', and ascribed to a chemical imbalance in

You are now entering Godzone

the brain. People who suffer from it are sometimes locked away in institutions. However, in essence it is not nearly as complex as it is made out to be. At the risk of pointing out the Emperor's nakedness, may I venture to suggest that the feeling of being lost is an indication that we *are* lost. This is a radical thought, on a par with the idea that the feeling of hunger indicates a need for food.

We are lost in the sense of the person who suffers from amnesia, and wakes in strange surroundings, having forgotten who they are and why they are there. We are lost in the sense of the child separated from its parents, uncertain and frightened of the world. We are lost in the sense of being foreigners in the universe, not knowing the language or the customs, and having no friends. If you don't feel this 'lostness', then it is of no value for me or anyone else to try to convince you of it. If you do, it is of no value to try and hide it from yourself.

The awareness of being lost is an indication of grace. It is the beginning of understanding, the disturbing dream which leads to consciousness. Thirst reminds you of your need for drink, 'lostness' recalls your need for God. God is the Source and Sustainer of existences, the Rhythm which hums through life, the Lover of the world. Nobody is actually without God, or else they could not live. But many are distant and separated from God in their hearts, and so they suffer the yearning of 'lostness'.

Some people consider it demeaning to have a 'need' for God, or for anything else. They follow the illusion of autonomy. The teaching of the universe is that all things live together. Nothing is totally independent, including God. All that has life is in relationship. This is not a cause for resentment, but for celebration. The tree has need of the soil, the soil has need of the rain, the rain has need of the cloud, the cloud has need of

You are now entering Godzone

the air, the air has need of the tree, and all have need of God. None detracts from the other, and in their harmony they allow each other to be fully what they are.

Humans are intensely relational creatures. They need each other. They flourish with love and affirmation, shrivel under rejection and loneliness. But the need for relation is never fully satisfied by human companionship, and those who seek it there alone end up sucking each other dry. We have been made to be the children, friends, lovers of God. As an ancient navigator wrote in reflecting on his own journeys, 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.' From God we have proceeded, and it is in harmony with God that we will discover the meaning of who we are.

A story. The village holy man was a person of great spiritual power. When any calamity threatened his people, he would go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and God would hear him and save the people from disaster. When the time came for him to die, he passed his mantle to a younger sage. He was also wise, but lacked some of the spiritual power of his master. When trouble threatened, he went to the sacred place in the forest and cried out, 'Merciful God, forgive me! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.' God heard and the miracle was performed.

In the next generation, this man's disciple would go into the forest and say, 'I don't know how to light the fire, I have forgotten the prayer, but I know the place and I pray this is enough.' It was enough and again salvation was granted. When it fell to the next in the line of village sages to seek God's help, he was distraught. Sitting in his hut, his head in his hands, he spoke in anguish: 'I am unable to light the fire, and I don't know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can

You are now entering Godzone

do is to tell the story, trusting in God. I only hope it is sufficient.
And it was sufficient.

We are the ones who have forgotten even the story of what it means to be human. We have dreamed that we are alone in the universe, and have tried to adjust ourselves to a life of autonomy. In this self-contained isolation, the sense of being lost comes like a fragment of a familiar song. It calls forth an old longing, yet we can't quite remember how the rest of the tune goes. The awareness of being lost is a great gift, the treasure of the poor and the humble. If nurtured carefully, it brings forth the shoots of a life that will never die.

Finding the way

There is a story of a pilgrim who got lost; a story first told 2,000 years ago by a street-wise poet. It concerns a loner who has hit the road to find himself. He wakes up one morning surrounded by half-empty beer bottles with cigarette butts floating in them. He is alone. He vaguely remembers the house full of friends who helped him drink his way through this week's pay packet. It's after 10 in the morning and he realises that he can kiss goodbye to his job on the rubbish cart. In a moment of depressing self-realisation he sees himself as he really is – lost, lonely, tired.

He finds himself humming Simon and Garfunkel's song 'Homeward Bound'. Suddenly he thinks to himself, 'Why not?' Why not shoulder his pack and head for home, head for the place where his name is known and his face remembered? But what about all those telegrams home for money and the stories he used to milk it? Like how he needed a suit for a job interview, or the time he 'borrowed' the money to do that drugs deal and ended up getting ripped off? And he had never even got home

You are now entering Godzone

for his mother's funeral, having cashed in the return plane ticket a few months earlier. 'What the hell,' he decided. 'I've got nothing to lose. The old man owns a bakery; maybe he'll give me a job on the ovens and I can pay him back over ten years.'

So he fronts the road for the last time, and makes his way toward home. Three days later he gets his last ride, which drops him off just short of his destination. As he climbs the hill to the old house, he's a bit apprehensive. He runs over in his mind again the speech he's worked out – a mixture of explanation and apology. He's still playing with the best tone of voice to use when he becomes aware of someone in the distance running and yelling. As he listens, it sounds like his name that's being called. Slowly recognition dawns. The crazy man is his father, running to meet him and screaming out his name.

With a swoop his father is upon him, wrapping his arms around him and crying. The poor boy is dazed, and responds by going into his speech. But his father cuts him off in mid-sentence, holds him with penetrating eyes, and says, 'I know.' Both crying now, they make their way toward home. Once indoors, his father opens a bottle of his best champagne, takes the steak out of the freezer, and rings around his friends to tell them there's going to be a party tonight. 'My son was lost to me,' he explains on the phone, 'I thought he was dead. But now I've found him and he's come home to stay.'

Finding the way is all about coming home. Its heart lies in the discovery that the One you feared to face is not your enemy but your Lover. You find that your return to the Source of Life has been eagerly awaited. Home is the place where you can be yourself, where you are loved and accepted even though your faults are seen. The point about the story of the lost pilgrim is

You are now entering Godzone

that it wasn't until he made the decision to turn around and head for home that he learned the truth of his father's love.

The thing that keeps most people from the door of Godzone is fear of the sort of reception they're going to get. Partly it's due to the self-appointed PR agents which God has to put up with. They wear ties and shout encouraging things at people, like 'God commandeth all men to repent,' or, 'The wages of sin is death.' They often carry around old-fashioned pictures of a great judge on a throne or people falling screaming into a pit of fire. It's a bit like Sylvester Stallone doing a promotion for cotton wool buds.

But the other part of reluctance to front up to God comes from an inner fear. Nobody knows us like we know ourselves. Wanderers always move on when things get difficult, but on lonely nights they are aware of all the cheap betrayals and tacky motives which cling to the soles of their shoes. There is some deep instinct which makes it plain that to face God means to face yourself, and that's not always an attractive proposition. Especially if the image of God you're carrying around is that of some war-mongering despot sitting on a high throne holding a piece of four by two with which to bash anyone who steps out of line.

To head for home, to begin to find the way back to your place of belonging, takes a lot of courage. You almost have to get to the stage where you give up on life, in order to find it. Sometimes it can feel like dying. It's taking a risk. But then travellers are good at taking risks. The cautious stay at home and die by degrees in front of their television sets. Jesus said that if you guard your life against threat it slips away from you, but if you let go and follow the adventure, you never lose it.

A certain man decided that life was too hard for him to bear. He did not commit suicide. Instead, he bought a large

You are now entering Godzone

awoke the next morning he carefully stepped into his shoes and continued on his way to the Magical City. After a few days, he found it – not quite as large as he had imagined. In fact, it looked somewhat familiar. He found a familiar street, knocked on a familiar door, met a familiar family he found there and lived happily ever after.

Godzone is fairly self-explanatory. You've heard of danger zones and war zones and nuclear-free zones. This is a guide to Godzone. It's the space inhabited by God. Even though you never cross the borders, there is a certain knack to seeing it. It's not immediately obvious. Some people don't believe it exists. Some people don't believe in God. Some people don't see the magic in the universe. Some people think they understand life. These ones will never become travellers (although they will gaze through the windows of their luxury bus aquariums and think they have been somewhere), and so this book is not for them.

It is a guide for travellers; for those who feel the constant tug of the road; for people who love life, but love it too much to commit themselves to only one part of it; for people who stay long enough to learn the truth of a place, but who eventually shoulder their pack and say goodbye. They are on a journey and that is enough. They follow an inner urge, a voice that calls from the depths.

To those, then, who have never quite settled in the world, I offer this guide to Godzone. You are already very close to seeing it. The hunger in you is the longing which comes before the dawn. The half-conscious murmurings, the half-remembered dreams, the half-forgotten insights are all signposts on the way. Let us journey together, then, for this little part of our way. Take off your shoes. You are now entering Godzone.