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Communicating for Influence: Christian Proclamation from the Margins

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

COMMUNICATING FOR INFLUENCE:
CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION FROM THE MARGINS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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READING, PENNSYLVANIA

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DATE: OCTOBER 28, 2008

TITLE:

**COMMUNICATING FOR INFLUENCE:
CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION FROM THE MARGINS**

***WE THE UNDERSIGNED CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ
THIS PROJECT AND APPROVE IT AS ADEQUATE IN
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FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY IN
LEADERSHIP IN THE EMERGING CULTURE DEGREE***

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ABSTRACT

It is my opinion that North American Christianity needs to re-consider how it communicates to young adults about following after the person of Jesus Christ. The Church should seek to understand the present cultural milieu and the implications of influencing from below. Established Christianity formerly held a position of prestige and relative power. Due to cultural and epistemological shifts this is no longer the situation. The message of Christ is still relevant in the new millennium, but the standard approaches to communicating and thus influencing others in this new world are at times no longer relevant. Much of organized Christianity is relying on pragmatics of communication that is no longer tenable. An understanding and skillful use of the tools and philosophies of influencing others from a position of marginalization is needed for contemporary Christian mission.

Others have offered up alternative solutions to this problem. Some have claimed that modern Christianity has simply become too liberalized, no longer holding to fundamentals, and therefore is less effective. They believe the calling for the Church is to stand stronger against the culture and return to a more prophetic posture. Additional voices suggest that Christendom is finally waking up to the fact that much of the supposed revelation in the Bible is little more than flawed ancient attempts at understanding God. The Church has been naïve and often oppressive and therefore the Christian message is to join with the program and values of the world by becoming a spiritual community whose main focus is social justice activism. They believe this is the true essence of the mission of Jesus Christ Himself. And finally, another camp suggests the Church has become simply too institutional. Centralized communion is part of the

problem. If the people of God would learn to organize themselves in more cutting edge sociological forms, the Church could regain much of its prominence. Though all possible solutions provide grains of truth, I do not believe any of these paths are the key to mission in the present situation.

It is my claim that the Church of Jesus Christ needs to learn to influence those outside its walls through a thorough understanding and effective practice of communicating from the margins. This is defined as communicating from a place of weakness. When a person or community is generally disregarded by the populous, different strategies of influence need to be utilized than when they are communicating from a position of power. This work will explore insights from psychology and leadership from below, along with Biblical and theological reflections on the mindset and practices of missional communication in a hostile world.

I am proposing a book of personal essays that will serve as an example of what it means to influence others from the margins with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This piece will be written in a popular style, aimed at young adults (aged 20-35), who as most Americans have some familiarity with Christianity, but are increasingly finding it irrelevant to their world views and experiences. Through the book's writing I will attempt to utilize many of the principles and findings discussed here.

SECTION 1

THE PROBLEM

One of the hindrances to effective kingdom mission is a failure to understand that 21st century North American culture has significantly changed and therefore, requires a different philosophy and application of communication. Western Christianity for centuries has occupied a place of power and respectability. Therefore communication was shaped in a context of pronouncement and calling people back to sincerely believe what most people already knew to be true. As the context has changed, the philosophy and praxis of influential mission has largely not changed. The Church is attempting to win at a game whose rules are now different than before and it is largely unaware that it has lost its place of prominence in Western culture. The Church is considered by many to be irrelevant to contemporary life. This requires Church leaders to learn a different form of communication from the margins.

The power of the Holy Spirit in advancing the kingdom of God is just as powerful today as anytime in the past. However, without proper understanding and the utilization of the proper tools of influencing from below, the message of the people of God largely is tailored for a world that no longer exists. It is in effect proclaiming Jesus Christ in a language that the world does not speak. Sincerity and hard work are not enough when one does not understand the culture that one finds oneself in.

A Personal Ministry Journey

Since becoming a follower Jesus the Christ in the early 1990's, I have always felt disconnected with the messages, thought-patterns, and approaches to ministry from the

churches I have attended and even been employed by. For many years I felt miscast, even in professional ministry, wondering why I simply did not resonate with much that was considered accepted belief and practice in American Christianity. I would vacillate between trying to simply join what was religiously popular, only to find myself frustrated and burned out, and feeling hypocritical. At other times, I questioned God and my own personal calling to full-time gospel ministry. This was a period of much frustration and experimentation.

For several years I was all over the spectrum of Christianity. At different points I would have called myself classically Reformed, popularly Evangelical, a Pragmatist, and maybe even privately, a Post or Neo-liberal. I experimented with various styles of ministry and even radically different theological systems. At times I succumbed to the ecclesiastical pressures to conform, while losing touch with the world around me. At other times I constructed fairly effective bridges to my unbelieving peers, while alienating those who I officially served or served under in ministry leadership. I even risked my family's personal finances planting a new church, with only nine other friends and a \$20,000 salary.

It was not until I enrolled in a Doctor of Ministry program, Leadership in the Emerging Culture, under Leonard Sweet that I began to fully understand what was happening. I was straddling the world of lived reality with my secular generation, while serving as a Pastor in a religion that was increasingly becoming marginalized and responding largely by fighting back. Over several months I began to see the need to understand and emulate mission and influence demonstrated in the Bible with some

additional psychological insights. I needed to learn to impact my generation, while understanding that I was coming from a place of perceived irrelevance.

Slowly learning to understand these contexts and the craft and Spirit of mission is beginning to change my own personal ministry effectiveness. Through the Doctor of Ministry program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, I was given a framework to understand what I had been intuitively experiencing in my ministry. I have gained a new passion for full-time ministry and the fruits of connecting with God's work in the world.

SECTION 2

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

My proposal is one among many. The only true consensus in the North American Church is that many things have changed in our culture(s) and that the Church is struggling to respond. The three solutions offered below all contain some merit but are still lacking in missional effectiveness.

1. *Churches need a return to a more literal, Biblical worldview and proclamation, and stand separate against an increasingly secular and hostile world.* God's people have always been called to being separate from the world around them (1 Pet 1:13-16¹ and Matt. 5:48 TNIV)². This has often been popularly understood as not participating in the entertainment forms and cultural pastimes of the broader world. Increasingly some have even been calling for Christian young adults to not attend secular universities to avoid the seduction of worldly philosophies. The belief is that being different from the world in general will lead to effective witness. This overly simplistic understanding of holiness and the distinctiveness of Christianity do not seriously consider the cultural context of Jesus of Nazareth and his first followers. In the popular ecclesiastical imagination, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, along with the false teachers that are condemned in the epistles, have been described as skeptical intellectuals who lacked true faith. However,

¹ In this passage, Peter echoes back to Leviticus 11:44-45 and 19:2, thus showing this to be an ageless command and fruit of living by faith in the Creator God.

² This verse in the Sermon on the Mount displays Jesus' message (which is considered offensive, and troubling to the teachers of the law,) is still be consistent with the essence of God's character in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the repeated phrases, "You have heard that it was said... But I say unto you..." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-34, 38-39, 43-44), Jesus displays that sticking with the teachings of the past, will inevitably mean seeing them through new lenses and even new expressions as different historical situations and events arise.

new scholarship has shed a different light on the first century context.³ Jesus and His followers were calling people to a third way. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were religiously zealous, calling for a complete separation from the secular Roman authorities. They chastised people who attempted compromise. Many of the false teachers condemned by Paul and Peter were preaching gospels that denied the present world and called people to an otherworldly spirituality of escape. John also was concerned that some teachers denied the humanity of Christ (1 Jn. 4:2)⁴. The message and life of Jesus did not call for withdrawing from the world. Jesus followers were called to live for a different kingdom and different values. But this call compelled them to love and build bridges to their secular neighbors (Matt. 5:38-48; 7:1-6,⁵ 1 Pet. 2:12-17)⁶. These passages were misunderstood when Western Biblical scholarship existed in a place of power and respectability. As the Church finds itself in a period of liminality, it can begin to see a third way. The people of Jesus live in between religious zealotry (world denial) and secular hedonism (world worship). The calling of God in the New Testament is to be a people who are separate, but separated for God's mission in the world. Even in the Old Testament (Jer. 29: 4-10), God's prophets called the exiles to work for the good of the

³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), particularly chapters 6-10. Also *Jesus and the Victory of God*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996). E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1977). Though Wright and many other Evangelicals would distance themselves from Sanders on many theological points, his seminal work on 2nd Temple Judaism is very hard to refute.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 734-736. And Nicholas Perrin's entry "Gnosticism" in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al, eds. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁵ The Messiah was calling the people of God to do the very opposite of what they had thought. They were commanded to love and forgive and bless those who were hurting them. Not to fight against them.

⁶ In the midst of severe persecution at the hands of pagan societal leaders, the early Christians were to submit and even show honor. Keener, 706-707.

foreign city, even when it was complete with foreign gods. The false prophets claimed that God was going to lead the people immediately out of the foreign culture.

Engaging in culture wars is effective at rallying the troops of the religious sub-culture. It can lend people a sense of transcendent importance. These stances are in opposition to the posture of Jesus and Paul in their recorded ministries. They often serve only to rally secular leaders to attack Christianity as a dangerous force in the world.⁷ As our culture continues to fragment into different sub-groups, the cause of Christ is often compromised by joining the “spirit” of the world, Christians begin to war over societal debates rather than living as people of peace and not following the example and life of Christ.

2. *The Church has been a community of violence and ignorance, therefore the Church needs to join the world and become a platform for social activism and diversity.* This accommodating posture has largely been proclaimed by intellectual Christians who have some understanding of the splintering of our contexts and the Church’s fall from prominence. These are sophisticated believers open to new ideas and therefore can easily agree that the Church has perpetrated much evil in the world.⁸ In a desire to be relevant and respected, theology and mission is reformatted solely to be in concert with the social values of economic and legal justice. The gospel communication then is a call to be a kind and caring people who roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty.

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), and Sam Harris *The End of Faith* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005). Both of these authors have as a key premise that religion is violent and a curse on the progress of society.

⁸ Bruxy Cavey, *The End of Religion: Encountering the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2007), as an excellent example of using healthy forms of bridging and influencing through subtly connecting with cultural narratives.

Admittedly, there are many aspects of this posture that are needed correctives to a comfortable and powerful Church praxis. Jesus and His people were friends of the poor and the oppressed (Matt. 9:9-13, 14:36, Acts 6:1-7, James 1:27). The problem arises when these cultural servants cease to be specifically Christian. Issues of truth, conversion, atonement, judgment, sexual sin, etc. are minimized and the gospel is stripped of its power. Without a transcendent God who calls people to the reality of another world, desires for justice and equality often collapse into legalisms of justice.⁹ People begin to measure their righteousness not in terms of Biblical revelation, but simply in being kind and accepting towards others. This collapses belief and ethics into one's own personal opinion.

Historically, these forms of theology and praxis have tended to weaken the Church. The public at large begins to realize that they don't need the body of Christ, or the Bible, or even a Transcendent God, to live as decent people.

This approach strips the Church of its ability to prophetically call out injustice. If there is not a God or final Judgment, it can make logical sense for people to simply live as they desire.¹⁰ Ethics become tribal, built and formed around whatever is popular in a particular sub-culture.

3. *The Church is too institutional and bureaucratic, what is needed are decentralized organic forms of spiritual community.* Additional voices claim the Church's struggle in

⁹ Tim Keller, "Preaching in a Postmodern City: Case Study 1- Preaching That is Christ Centered, Moralism Versus Christ-Centered Exposition" (accessed 31 January 2008); Available from http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/june/postmoderncity_1_p3.html

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), especially Chapter V.

the world is caused by outdated structures of organization.¹¹ This belief agrees with the postmodern critique that authority is dangerous.¹² These proponents claim professional clergy or official leaders do not have any more special knowledge or authority than anyone else. Church should be de-centralized, freeing it from stifling organization and professionalism.

Again, there is truth in these statements, but also shades of narcissism.

The New Testament epistles challenged believers to live in commitment and mutual edification with persons who came from different backgrounds (Acts 15, Rom. 12:3-21, 14-15:13, Eph. 2:11-4:16). Most of Paul's theology was not borne out of a vacuum, but was penned in response to people arguing over the proper form of Church life and structure. Gentile and Jewish power struggles led to the penning of the book of Romans.¹³

Effectiveness of any endeavor requires some form of solid sociological structure and official leadership. Societies and families cannot last without some form of established guidelines and leadership. Many of these new experiments in ecclesial life end as only experiments. They appear to be freeing in the beginning, but finally reveal themselves to be based on little more than personal opinion.

¹¹ Neil Cole, *Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005) and Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change The World: The Return of House Churches* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic, 2001). Admittedly, both of these authors have thoughts and beliefs that are known for Christian maturity. They are doing fine work. However, many young adults with a subconscious axe to grind can use these as launching pads for their own interests.

¹² Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1999), 43.

¹³ Keener, 411-413. N.T. Wright, "Romans Introduction," NIB Volume X (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 395-409).

SECTION 3

THE THESIS

Although the popularly offered solutions have some merit, I do not believe they are effective at persuading those on the fringes of faith. The way forward in gospel mission will not be found in attack, warping our present theology, or simply in doing church differently. I offer that a central key to life-changing mission in the 21st century is learning to skillfully communicate from the margins. Effective communication takes a different form when ministry leaders are starting from a place on the margins.

Introduction

Contemporary people believe that everyone has an agenda.¹ Due to unprecedented amounts of information, there is little faith anymore in the “hero-leader.”² The church is not immune. As far back as 1974, Fred Craddock wrote “One hears a great deal these days about the fall of Christendom... Whatever else it may mean, the collapse of Christendom means loss of the scaffolding of a supporting culture. No longer can the preacher presuppose the general recognition of his authority as a clergyman; or the authority of his institution, or the authority of Scripture... The claim of Gospel must be presented... with the understanding that the hearers stand amid several alternatives.”³

To influence people, we cannot be Messiahs.

¹ Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, *Why Should Anyone Be Led By You? What it Takes to Be an Authentic Leader* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 3.

² Ibid. 6-7.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 14-15. The 1990 version of this book was used in this research, however the statement appeared in the first edition in 1974.

Many ministers are attacked by their own congregants as they seek to build bridges to a new world.⁴ Heifetz and Linsky state, “People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss.”⁵ And again, “Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one’s identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves.”⁶ Mission is the Spirit-led attempt of changing people, their self-identity, and their deepest beliefs. This can lead to painful realizations.⁷ Many people build defenses against a transformation of deeply held beliefs.

The Biblical record contains many accounts of God’s messengers being rejected and even violently attacked, (Acts 12:1-3, 14:1-20, 16:16-24). “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tim. 3:10-12 TNIV).

But this is a time for opportunity. There is quite a difference between religious compliance and being genuinely influenced by God Himself. The current cultural climate which

⁴ Ronald A Heifetz. and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 31-48. Heifetz and Linsky have an all too sobering list of the various strategies and methods people use to dismantle leaders to avoid having to change.

⁵ Ibid. 11.

⁶ Ibid. 27. This is one of the major thrusts of the work of Heifetz in particular.

⁷ Ibid. 28. This is a significant concept that brings much understanding especially to controversial subjects such as race relations. This explains why even “good” people can hold doggedly to dangerous ideas.

affords hearers the opportunity to say “no” to the gospel, can also produce a deeply genuine “yes!”⁸

Influence is a Slow Process

The kingdom mission to know and love God and others does not happen quickly (Eph. 4:13). It is still customary in many Evangelical circles to push people for a quick and concise life-change (repentance), while the reality is that most people change very slowly.⁹ In certain Biblical texts people, have what appear to be, instantaneous conversion experiences (Acts 2: 38-41). Closer examination of these texts and Church history reveals clearly that the more people are familiar with Biblical material, the more quickly conversion may occur. The further people are away from Biblical understanding, the more likely that evangelism becomes part of a lengthy process.¹⁰

Sociologist Rodney Stark writes that within the history of the Church, what appears to be rapid life change on a grand scale is in actuality, much more gradual. Personal and corporate change happens slowly and gradually. What appears like a quick change is often simply a person or culture reaching a tipping point.¹¹

Howard Gardner believes that the more direct the appeal to life-change is made, the quicker people “appear” to change. Yet they are more likely to fizzle out over time.

⁸ Craddock, 15. Craddock’s guarded optimism with this in regard to the preaching task is as helpful to ministers today as it had to have been to the original readers in the mid 1970’s.

⁹ Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 60-61.

¹⁰ In the Biblical arena, compare and contrast the messages and outcomes of gospel proclamation between Peter in Acts 2:14-41 with Paul at Mars Hill, Acts 17: 16-34. See also Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990), especially chapter 2. However, Rodney Stark’s work on the sociology of conversion is the clearest, with possibly the most surprising results.

¹¹ *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1997), 20-21.

While the less direct appeals appear to be less effective in the short run, often they offer greater transformation of thought and action in the long-term.¹²

Life-Change is Socialization

The Biblical record suggests that early in Christianity, life change was precipitated by socialization into the community of faith. “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”¹³

When people later re-tell the stories of their conversions, they often tell of hearing a message, which brought about significant transformation. Studies have shown the contrary. After people have found lasting personal change through the community, they adopt official beliefs that are consistent with their new lifestyle.¹⁴

After years of researching how and why people join new religious groups, Stark concludes, “The only ones who joined were those whose interpersonal attachments to members over-balanced their attachment to nonmembers. In effect, conversion is not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one’s religious behavior into alignment with that of one’s friends and family members.”¹⁵

¹² Gardner, 210.

¹³ Acts 2: 46-47. Other texts include Tit. 2:6-10 and 1 Pet. 2:11-12. Paul and Peter’s admonitions on living according to God’s revealed truth is motivated by the fact that their lives can have a positive effect on Christian mission.

¹⁴ Stark, 14-15; 19-20.

¹⁵ Ibid. 16-17.

Psychologist Cialdini describes this as social proof: “We view behavior as correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it.”¹⁶ Therefore, people learn discipleship to Christ by living within a church that is demonstrating God’s new life through their actions and beliefs.

Stark and other’s research remind us that mission is always corporate. Without a Church, there is no mission. Without the community there is not conversion. Spirit empowered communication is central to mission, but this must be fed and empowered by the whole people of God. “People do not seek a faith; they encounter one through their ties to other people who already accept this faith.”¹⁷

The Candidates for Life-Change

“New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities.”¹⁸ Contented people are rarely open to change. People who feel stuck and frustrated with their present condition are the best candidates for mission. This may derive from a lack of proper mental frameworks to explain the conflict between what they are experiencing daily, and their official beliefs.¹⁹

It is a common assumption that converts to new religious groups are among the poor and uneducated. According to sociologists like Rodney Stark, this is not the case.

¹⁶ Robert C. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 100.

¹⁷ Stark, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 77-78. Gardner, 26.

The educated and gifted members of a society are the first to embrace new religious beliefs and experiences. They have tried to find success in a former worldview, yet they did not find as much as they had hoped. Their intellectual prowess aids in being some of the first to realize that the system is not working.²⁰

In the Biblical canon we find the poor attracted to Jesus during his earthly ministry, but most of his disciples appear to be people of at least modest financial and cultural rapport (Matt. 4:18-22, 9:9). During the Church's expansion in the book of Acts, many of the converts were fairly important people in society (Acts 5:1-2, 8:9-40, 10:1-8, 16:11ff).

Along side the thinkers, the young (who naturally want to try new things) and the new residents of a specific geographical location (who do not have many existing social ties)²¹ are also people who tend to be open to a new way of living.

Personal Authenticity

If people are fatigued by false promises, being one's self is crucial to genuinely influencing others. It is essential for a Pastor to be herself, or else she risks being exposed as an imposter early on in her initiative.

A minister needs to learn to use her weaknesses to her advantage. Most people understand super-hero leaders are a myth. If ministers are secretive about all of their faults and vulnerabilities, people view them as disingenuous. Authentic ministry will

²⁰ Stark, 37-39.

²¹ Gardner, 17, 62, and 117; Stark, 17 and 144; and Cialdini, 140; all seem to be in almost total agreement on these categories of candidates for change.

require leaders to admit, with wisdom and tact, where they fall short.²² Goffee and Jones believe influencers admit some weaknesses, using this as a tool to recruit others to fill roles that they themselves are incapable of filling.²³ This strategy reveals the Pastor is human from the beginning, which lessens detractor's desire to expose some of their faults.²⁴ Craddock adds that admission of personal weaknesses is essential for leaders to aid people in moving to faith.²⁵

“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:13-16 TNIV).²⁶

This ability to be unexpectedly honest, even in a way that may be slightly uncomfortable for the communicator, can be quite persuasive. When an individual or

²² Goffee and Jones, 20. Heifetz and Linsky, 90-91.

²³ Goffee and Jones, 61.

²⁴ Ibid. 77.

²⁵ Craddock, 61.

²⁶ This was a regular strategy of Paul's, telling the story of his sinful past and how God saved him when he was unable to save himself.

group sees that a communicator is willing to admit that her detractors may have a point, they are much more likely to believe she can be trusted on other matters.²⁷

Telling the Truth

Truth telling is the center of Christian mission. Jesus Himself claimed to be “The Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6 TNIV). Paul reminded his converts: “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.” (Acts 20:20 TNIV)²⁸

Anne Lamott suggests that writers give voice and perspective to the nature of human life. “We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are... in an interesting way.”²⁹

Part of the gifting of a communicator involves possessing an intuitive sense of human experience. This is not possessing truth ontologically, but understanding what resonates with people’s experiences. Linguistic philosopher George Lakoff explains, “We understand a statement as being true in a given situation when our understanding of the statement fits our understanding of the situation close enough for our purposes.”³⁰

A helpful form of truth telling avoids labeling people or opinions by stereotypes, but confessing that no person or belief is completely virtuous or completely corrupt. Real life and people do not fit clear frames. Communicators can instead seek to give

²⁷ Cialdini, 50. The psychologist refers to this as the tactic of “concession.”

²⁸ Acts 20:20.

²⁹ Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1994), 3

³⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 179.

language and voice to other's beliefs and why they have come to their positions. Stephen King advises: "It's also important to remember that no one is 'the bad guy' or 'the best friend' or 'the whore with a heart of gold' in real life; in real life we each of us regard ourselves as the main character."³¹ The Christian theological understanding of human sinfulness can allow mission leaders to admit, within reason, some of their present flaws.³²

Those who work with the tools of language know that to be heard, understood, and considered, they must make truth interesting. Whatever has the potential to bore needs to be omitted.³³ However, also using information or stories simply because they are interesting can come across as a gimmick. The reader or listener perceives that someone is trying to pull or manipulate them and does not respect them.

Using Truth to Influence

People like people who like them.³⁴ When a communicator genuinely cares for people, they are more likely to being persuaded. The listener is willing to lessen their defenses, if they believe that the writer or orator has their best interest in mind.

³¹ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2000), 190.

³² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 193-198.

³³ King, 222. Lamott, 45 and 50.

³⁴ Cialdini, 152-153.

Americans in particular respond in these contexts.³⁵ Loving the audience should be a given for Christian communicators.³⁶

There are two methods leaders can employ personally to aid their imagination in understanding and caring for those they seek to persuade. One is simply to view the recipient as one who suffers.³⁷ All people suffer in some form or at least, they believe they do. Attempting to personally empathize with others pain can helpfully craft the tone of persuasion. Secondly, many writers advise leaders to remember how they may have felt in a relatable situation.³⁸ When a communicator can begin to imagine what people are experiencing, their power of persuasion can increase dramatically.

Consider the Other's Framework

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23 TNIV).

Paul's ministry philosophy demonstrates the importance of working hard to understand the context, thinking, and society of the missional context. History reveals this has always been a hallmark of successful mission.³⁹

³⁵ Lamott, 51.

³⁶ R. Mohrlang, "Love" *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 575-578.

³⁷ Lamott, 97-98.

³⁸ Ibid. 225. This is also true in the pursuit of method acting.

³⁹ Neill, 46-52. Neill displays here in quick succession that early mission was led by people who were willing to do the hard work of understanding and relating to the hosts cultures they were seeking to evangelize.

Leaders need to ask themselves, “How can I avoid egocentrism and tailor my message or content for the needs and desires of those I am seeking to influence?”⁴⁰

The knowledgeable communicator searches for resonance. She searches for the right phrase or story or metaphor or that feels right, relevant, and respectable to those they are seeking to impact.⁴¹ This includes crafting messages that describe the personal story of the listener, which creates the sense that the listener has been properly understood. The message then will not seem alien, but as the fulfillment of their hopes.⁴² Wise communicators seek to explain new ideas in terms of what people already know and understand.⁴³ If ministers do not fully enter the worldview of those their listeners, their ideas will not resonate and will be dismissed as irrelevant at best, or as utterly false at worst.⁴⁴

The most complete way of understanding an audience’s framework is to become a student of their culture. “All experience is cultural through and through, we experience our ‘world’ in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself.”⁴⁵ Though individuals themselves are often unaware of the frameworks they live within, the wise missionary can understand the host culture through thorough examination. Methods include examining the “prototypical person” whom the culture

⁴⁰ Gardner, 163.

⁴¹ Ibid. 15-16.

⁴² Chip and Dan Heath emphasize this repeatedly *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007), 92-93, 163, and 199. Stark believes that when ideologies are received as fulfillments of what is already is believed, there is a great likelihood of conversion, Stark, 55.

⁴³ Heath, 54.

⁴⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 57.

holds up as the ideal,⁴⁶ the unconscious daily rituals that people perform routinely,⁴⁷ and through investigating the shared popular expressions of a diverse culture.⁴⁸

Remember Not Believing

The struggle of many communicators is that “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like to not know it.”⁴⁹ By the very nature of their task, communicators who are seeking to be change agents are trying to persuade those who do not know or care about something to know or care or act upon it. And yet, communicators can easily forget what it is like to not know or care or be acting on something. Many Christian leaders can struggle because after their own conversion, discipleship, and often seminary training, they have begun to forget how they saw themselves and the world before the process of spiritual formation. Thus it is crucial that they work to remember life before they believed. Communicators need to labor to stick to a clear and simple message. Being simple does not mean simplistic and lacking in profundity. As the Heath brothers write, “What we mean by ‘simple’ is finding the core idea of a concept.”⁵⁰ The message may have incredible wisdom that potentially leaves one pondering the ramifications for days or years, yet still be stated simply and succinctly.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 235.

⁴⁸ Gardner, 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 20. This one quote is worth its weight in gold to educated preachers.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 27-28.

Complex messages can artfully be compared to simple concepts or objects.⁵¹

Otherwise potential converts may get lost in complex details. If messages are too complex, people will abandon them and cling to the simpler narratives they already possess.⁵²

Using Stories

The success of story-telling has long been documented. Some studies reveal that people can remember up to 63% of concepts that they learned through a narrative, while remembering as little as 5% of what they receive in the form of a principle.⁵³ In a story some details are given, but enough is left out that the listener or reader is forced to supply the additional details with their imagination, therefore engaging them.⁵⁴ The Scriptures themselves mainly contain narrative, and stories seemed to be one of Jesus' favorite methods of communicating.⁵⁵

Story-crafting and story-telling takes skill, not only for aesthetic effects, but to resonate with the hearer and to challenge them. Howard Gardner explains: "A new story has to have enough familiar elements so that it is not instantly rejected yet be distinctive

⁵¹ Ibid. 61-62.

⁵² Gardner, 92.

⁵³ Ibid. 243.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 209-210.

⁵⁵ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 29-43 (Part II). Though his style and research are heavy on rationalism and principal, this section of his work may be one of the best treatises on narratives, worldviews, and how life change happens through stories, not ideas.

enough that it compels attention and engages the mind. The audience has to be prepared in one sense and surprised in the other.”⁵⁶

Successful communicators remember that good stories are always about people, not simply events.⁵⁷ Effective story-telling is not self-centered but guides people in considering their own stories. “When people shine a little light on their monster, we find out how similar most of our monsters are... we write to expose the unexposed.”⁵⁸ As people hear and compare a story with their own story, they are rehearsing action in their mind. Listeners are actually preparing themselves to act differently even as they are listening or reading.⁵⁹ Missional proclamation therefore is not simply telling people truths from the Bible or theological sources. Christian mission is telling people the true story about themselves and their Creator within their context. The skillful use of narrative form is more palatable than direct argument, it can be helpful for engaging a skeptic.⁶⁰

“Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature... the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”⁶¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson believe that metaphors are the fundamental substance of which we think and understand our world. They believe that all of our mental frameworks and worldviews are made of metaphors. The right metaphors have potential to not only bring understanding, but also

⁵⁶ Gardner, 74.

⁵⁷ King, 190.

⁵⁸ Lamott, 198.

⁵⁹ Heath, 206 and 213-214.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 234.

⁶¹ Lakoff and Johnson, 3 and 5.

deep change.⁶² New metaphors bring new understanding and therefore new actions. Christianity has long used the metaphor or symbol of the Creator dying on a tree to redeem His creation as the central image.

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2 TNIV). “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4 TNIV). Therapists and counselors who seek wholeness in suffering individuals typically offer new metaphors.⁶³ People can only act within the metaphors that are ruling their thoughts and emotions; whoever casts the metaphors, in effect, rules the world.⁶⁴

Anne Lamott to writers: “If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you must place real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Don’t worry about appearing sentimental. Worry about being absent or fraudulent. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth the way you understand it. If you’re a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act- truth is always subversive.”⁶⁵

Joseph M. Webb to speakers: “Research has taught us that the most effective public speech is only secondarily about words, about language. Invariably, what people listen to and for in public address are not the words themselves, not even the images

⁶² Ibid. 139, 144-148, and 178. This may be the whole premise and purpose of the book.

⁶³ Ibid. 233-235.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 160.

⁶⁵ Lamott, 226.

conjured up by the words as they are spoken. What they watch for and are most sensitive to are the feelings, the emotions, out of which the words that are spoken arise.”⁶⁶

Whatever forms the content or message assumes, it is best that it is not predictable,⁶⁷ but “post dictable,” otherwise the Heath brothers believe it may be ineffective.⁶⁸ People are drawn to the unexpected when it ties in to a core message. “The most basic way to get someone’s attention is this: break a pattern.”⁶⁹

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions.” (Matt. 11:19). Mission in today’s context will demand that Christian communicators do not simply tell the Biblical story in the way people may have heard it in the past. Skillful communicators will craft and frame the story of God in a way that brings surprise and a different angle on life.

Mental constructs can be broken through identifying the counter-intuitive implications of the core message, which people are not expecting. Once people are jolted from seeing life the way they are accustomed, then an idea can be explained.⁷⁰ This can be accomplished by simply comparing the core message or concept with its opposite(s) in a more extreme fashion.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching Without Notes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 27.

⁶⁷ Novelist Stephen King includes this as necessary for any good story. 45.

⁶⁸ Heath, 71.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 64.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 64

⁷¹ Cialdini, 14-16.

Abstraction can be hard to follow and can create a mental fog. The more specific a writer or orator is with detail, the more concrete and clear things become for the receiver. The more specific the images and language, the easier it is for others to make correlations to separate phenomenon or experiences. Details not only make things concrete and clear, the right ones bring credibility.⁷²

Using Content

Some of the consistent questions influencers ask themselves include how much information, facts, or background content should be shared? How much is enough? How much is not enough?

Content is always needed. If there is not intellectually substantial material, the message may be easily dismissed by educated people.⁷³ But Stephen King reminds communicators, “What you need to remember is that there’s a difference between lecturing about what you know and using enough to enrich the story. The latter is good, the former is not.”⁷⁴ Include the information people need to be invested in the message, but anymore than that can potentially bore listeners.⁷⁵ Having the skills and abilities to find the truth, and having the skills and abilities to effectively communicate the truth are not the same.⁷⁶ Paul preaching at Mars Hill in Acts 17:16-34, is one of the clearest examples of Christian proclamation in a secular context. In this passage Paul is true to

⁷² Heath, 138.

⁷³ Gardner, 15.

⁷⁴ King, 161.

⁷⁵ Heath, 91-92.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 244-246.

the story of Jesus but does not use any Scripture, he only utilizes cultural references from his hearers' world. This is in stark contrast to other tellings of the gospel in early portions of the book of Acts, in which the audience was composed mainly of Jewish people familiar with the Biblical narratives.

Embodying the Transformation

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Cor. 11:1). A Pastor can be tremendously gifted, can be knowledgeable about the methods of her craft, and can work hard to develop her rhetorical skills to full potential. But she cannot overlook a crucial component of effective persuasive communication: his personal life and reputation. If she is to persuade, she must live a life that embodies the message that is given.⁷⁷

People are drawn to others who seem similar to themselves—people who dress in their same style, and have the same background and interests.⁷⁸ This is especially the case for people who are new to ideas and may need a model to follow.⁷⁹ Therefore, in addition to being people of character and example, persuasive communicators also seek to build personal bridges of similarity between themselves and those who receive their messages.

Stark believes this is especially the case in spiritual contexts. The sociologist calls on communicators to lead new people to identifying with a spiritual community.

⁷⁷ Gardner, 69 and 80. The Harvard Psychologist uses Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as examples of this well lived.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 150-151.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 120.

Leaders should remind listeners of the tangible benefits of following Christ for their everyday lives. Leaders should also be clear that these same benefits cannot be found in secular communities. Finally, he suggests communicators' model lives of sacrifice, even living of simple means, if they want to persuade others of the reality of their message.⁸⁰

Understanding Context

The late Statesman John W. Gardner stated "Leaders act in the stream of history. As they labor to bring about results, multiple forces beyond their control... are moving to hasten or hinder the result."⁸¹ Ministers must realize they are acting within a system, and they themselves are only a small component of something larger.⁸² According to Robert Terry, one cannot even begin to imagine what one could be or should be as a leader, without beginning with rigorous attention to context.⁸³

Aspects of the ultimate vision and direction of missional initiatives emerges from the context itself. "Vision is not imposed; it is proposed. It is even discovered in our midst."⁸⁴ Part of the work of any ministry leader is to regularly "observe, understand, adapt, and re-write,"⁸⁵ according to the context. An effective missionary in a climate of skepticism is less of a prophet or classical CEO, and more of the exegete and interpreter of the situation in which they find themselves.

⁸⁰ Stark, 172-174.

⁸¹ John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1990), 8.

⁸² Ibid, 41.

⁸³ Robert W. Terry, *Authentic Leadership: Courage in Action* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), 62-64

⁸⁴ Ibid. 193.

⁸⁵ Goffee and Jones, 93.

In Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) we find Jesus staying within the context of Hebrew revelations of God, but also revealing a new way of living the teaching. His attacks on the religious establishment were largely an attack on holding to former applications of the Hebrew Scriptures, but missing the essence of them (Matt. 12:7). Mission leaders need to hold to the centuries old story of God and Jesus that we find in the Scriptures. This is the spiritual narrative they play out personally. Yet people operate in a cultural context and situation, which they do not easily abandon. People need to be shown that God is there already in their context. "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:27-28 TNIV). One of the central skills of contemporary mission is the ability to help people wake-up to what God is doing among them already. Conversion is not only a call to become something altogether different. Conversion is waking people up to what God is already doing and joining with Him.

The mistake of many Pastors is assuming they have more influence than they actually have. Many "followers" also falsely assume that they have less power than they do. "No one person or group is totally powerful or totally powerless."⁸⁶ Influence is operating skillfully within a context: nudging it, or guiding it slightly, rather than forcefully creating a vision seemingly from nowhere. Effective ministers heed the advice of Jeswald Salacuse, "In developing your leadership strategies and tactics, you need to

⁸⁶ Terry, 204. Gardner's work, shaped by his decades of political experience, also alludes to this repeatedly. This is clear from the very outset, 1-2.

take account of the interests of the persons you would lead... Your job as a leader is to convince them that their interests lie with you.”⁸⁷

Missional leaders need to learn to be what Goffee and Jones call “authentic chameleons.”⁸⁸ The work of effective missionaries is being “able to read the context and respond accordingly. They tap into what exists and bring more to the party.”⁸⁹

Building Relationships, Getting Feedback

Historically, leaders have rarely been described as “relational.” Some have assumed that what these leaders are doing is too important for the soft work of relationships. But Pastors cannot truly understand their context with an accurate sense of what is possible, without getting to know the people they are attempting to reach.

There is not a substitute for face-to-face interaction with common people.⁹⁰ The minister can develop a skewed perspective from their own limited interests, which can vary greatly from the “ordinary” people on the ground.⁹¹ When this happens, distrust of the clergy only grows.

Particularly in times and periods of adaptive change, when there is not a simple way forward, it is essential to stay close to the people on the ground.⁹² This builds

⁸⁷ Jeswald W. Salacuse, *Leading Leaders: How to Manage Smart, Talented, Rich, and Powerful People* (New York, NY: AMACOM, 2006), 16.

⁸⁸ Goffee and Jones, 88. Again, this alludes to Paul’s confession of methodology in 1 Cor. 9.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 20.

⁹⁰ Gardner, 27. It is fascinating that this comes from a man who advised and worked with several presidents who led millions of people.

⁹¹ Also Goffee and Jones, 50-51.

⁹² Heifetz and Linsky, 17-18. This is the largest lesson I have learned from the work of Alan Roxburgh. *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle, ID: ACI Publishing), 2005, and the book

trust.⁹³ People rarely state exactly what they are thinking or experiencing. They may be fearful of being viewed negatively or may be simply too polite to state their honest assessments. They may not even be totally aware of what is happening in their lives. Therefore, a minister is charged not only to listen to the people in relationship, but also to learn to interpret what is being said. She then can discover the underlying reality beneath people's stated words.⁹⁴ This may require even pursuing and maintaining relationships with those who disagree or even challenge a Pastor.⁹⁵

The wise missionary walks a tight line between being very close to people and also having enough distance to be able to interpret feedback and to see the big picture. One must guard herself from being too distant from the people, creating misunderstanding, or too close, that one cannot challenge or be prophetic.⁹⁶

Important feedback comes from getting into the world. Gardner states, "Leaders unwilling to seek mutually workable arrangements with systems external to their own are not serving the long-term interests of their constituents."⁹⁷ Positioning a Church to be against the surrounding world fosters relationship problems for parishioners and disenfranchisement with the culture at large.

he co-authored with Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church To Reach A Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass), 2006. Roxburgh has been heavily influenced by the seminal work of Lesslie Newbigin. See for example, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans'), 1989. However he shared with me personally that Newbigin's Achilles' heel was working only with academics and church leaders. His theories and philosophies never benefited from inter-acting with normal, everyday people on the ground.

⁹³ Salacuse, 15.

⁹⁴ Heifetz and Linsky, 64-65.

⁹⁵ Goffee and Jones, 15 and Gardner, 103-105.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 26.

⁹⁷ Gardner, 99.

Building Bridges

Contemporary North America is comprised of diverse, fragmented societies.

Many individuals are hybrids of different cultures, philosophies, and worldviews.

Ministry is not simply leading a similar group of people in a certain direction. It is balancing and mediating the demands of several different groups with various goals and agendas.⁹⁸ The question is not “What does my constituency want?” but rather “What do each of my constituencies want?”⁹⁹ For ministry leaders this requires the challenging and imaginative work of artfully combining the desires, narratives, and beliefs of people in the Church, with those who are outside of the Church. Neither group can be left behind if one hopes to successfully impact others missionally.

Building a bridge between these different groups requires a skill that has not always been assumed to be a part of leadership training. Leaders must learn to be “historians”¹⁰⁰ of the various groups, or even factions, in the process of discerning what is best for the whole. It requires learning to be a “visionary diplomat” rather than a “visionary prophet.”¹⁰¹ Mission cannot move forward without leaders seeing themselves as “diplomats.”

The problems today are too large for one individual. Only a diverse team will have the understanding, skills, and resources to attempt to bring solutions to navigate contemporary evangelism.¹⁰² To bring together diverse elements to work together, the

⁹⁸ Salacuse, 112; and Heifetz and Linsky, 68.

⁹⁹ Gardner, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Salacuse, 102-103.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 71.

¹⁰² Goffee and Jones, 104.

leader needs to frame issues and concentrate the competing factions on building and creating justice for the common good.¹⁰³ This creates a vision that is bigger than all the groups, appeals to the better part of human nature, and also includes the various concerns and questions of those who disagree with each other.

Speaking and Giving Voice

In our world of technology, information, and abundance of know-how and resources, the missing ingredient for many is a sense of meaning. Robert Terry says meaning, “Answers the *why* or *for which* of action.”¹⁰⁴ Jeswald Salacuse advises leaders to consider that, “People follow you because they believe it is in their interest to do so.”¹⁰⁵ He quotes Napoleon Bonaparte saying, “A leader is a dealer in hope.”¹⁰⁶ Effective missionaries are dealers in hope and meaning. The Church is one of very few places today in a fast-paced world where substance, meaning, and issues of transcendence are considered. This is a huge advantage for contemporary mission.

“To sustain momentum through a period of difficult change, you have to find ways to remind people of the orienting value- the positive vision.”¹⁰⁷ An evangelist works to renew values that have always been part of people’s deepest longings.¹⁰⁸ One

¹⁰³ Gardner, 106; 113.

¹⁰⁴ Terry, 64.

¹⁰⁵ Salacuse, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 151.

¹⁰⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, 120.

¹⁰⁸ Gardner, 122-124; and Craddock, 60.

of the strongest forms of persuasion involves clearly demonstrating that this message will help people to find what they have always been looking for.¹⁰⁹

“A great civilization is a drama lived in the minds of a people. It is shared vision; it is shared norms, expectations, and purposes... Values always decay over time. Societies that keep their values alive do so not by escaping the processes of decay but by powerful forces of regeneration.”¹¹⁰

Part of communication is teaching. Part of the minister’s role is to help people clearly understand what is happening in their lives. Heifetz and Linsky encourage communicators to help people “see from the balcony.”¹¹¹ “Every great leader is clearly teaching- and every great teacher is clearly leading.”¹¹² Influential communicators craft words and phrases that give people language for what they are experiencing.¹¹³ Mission is not changing people, it is helping people to see their life, and beliefs, and actions, in a new way. Ministers are seeking to wake people up to the work of God that is already present in their lives.

The Pastor will only be effective in offering the proper language if they understand their world enough to be able to speak into it; to describe it. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Someone can only speak to me with authority if a word from the deepest

¹⁰⁹ Gardner, 58.

¹¹⁰ Gardner, 13.

¹¹¹ Heifetz and Linsky, 135-136.

¹¹² Gardner, 18. Though Gardner believes the two practices are more distinguishable than the author of this paper does.

¹¹³ Salacuse, 137; 140.

knowledge of my humanity encounters me here and now in all my reality. Any word is impotent.”¹¹⁴

The minister seeks to paint word canvasses and images. She works with the language of the people that is familiar, yet also challenging. The tools she works with are images and experiences from the people’s world, specific language and concrete examples, understatement not overstatement, while also using her voice and normal language.¹¹⁵ As she uses all of these words, phrases, examples and more at her disposal, the effective communicator will remember what she is doing and for whom. She is not speaking her words; she is not speaking for herself. She does not have that privilege. She is speaking for the mission, for God, and for the unspoken spiritual needs of people, not at them. Therefore she does not have the luxury to speak her own mind about what matters to her. She speaks for the people, for the mission, with their stories and images, which moves people toward change.¹¹⁶

Leaving the Details with the People

In a complex, constantly evolving world, pastors need to leave the details with the people, for them to experiment, and innovate, and learn on a grassroots level. The missionary is not called to oversee all the aspects of other’s lives.¹¹⁷ Rather, they let people work through the implications, and lead and coach them through these difficult changes. Giving in to people, by creating a pre-mature solution, is one of the major

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Craddock, 72.

¹¹⁵ Craddock, 92-95.

¹¹⁶ Salacuse, 189.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 59.

mistakes leaders make.¹¹⁸ Some things take a long time to figure out before a person is ready to move forward.¹¹⁹

If the people do not come to terms with God themselves, no real learning or transformation will take place. They may follow the directions of a ministry leader, but real solutions and lasting change will not endure.¹²⁰ When people are given room, especially people who may disagree, to buy in personally to God's call, they will be forced to deal with the message. Otherwise the minister herself will be attacked and marginalized and people will remain stuck where they have always been.¹²¹ One has to wonder how many churches in our context are not filled with people who have found a transforming faith in Jesus Christ, but instead are going through the hoops that gifted executive ministry leaders are leading them take.

In this section, we have reviewed many rhetorical tactics. These are particularly helpful for pastors who are working from the margins of respect. Influential preachers see to utilize these strategies along with the Scriptures and the Spirit to impact listeners' lives.

¹¹⁸ Heifetz and Linsky, 14-17.

¹¹⁹ Goffee and Jones, 173-174.

¹²⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, 139.

¹²¹ Ibid. 124-128.

SECTION 4

THE PROJECT

The project will be a popular level book written for twenty to thirty-five year olds who have: 1. Struggled to hold on to their faith in the everyday, practical world; or who are 2. Seriously considering a faith relationship with God but are concerned this will transform them in to a strange person who know longer fits their social world in the 21st century.

This piece will not explain the findings of the above thesis, but will serve as an example of practically living out the conclusions and applications based on the research. The project will not be scholarly or even always proper, but will serve as a way of incarnating mission into the everyday mindsets, desires, and language of the intended audience.

There are a myriad of other forms that influential communication can utilize: Sunday preaching, blogging, emails, and personal conversation to name a few. I have chosen the medium of writing a popular book because it has the potential of reaching a wide audience, while also giving me a chance to experiment with my newly found interest in the art and craft of written communication. As a church-planting pastor I have the opportunity to utilize Sunday preaching on a weekly basis. I am also interested in exploring blogging. I have owned a domain site for several years and also do podcasting. However, I believe the craft of book writing is more of a current challenge for me and so I decided on this particular genre of communication.

SECTION 5

PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS

The task of writing a popular level book for people in their twenties and thirties has been a challenge, but within possibility.

Through the Doctor of Ministry program, Dr. Leonard Sweet has opened a few doors for me in publishing. Working under Ms. Gina Ochsner has also allowed me to work on the craft under the watchful eye of an award-winning writer. I look forward to pursuing formal publication. However if this is not possible, e-publishing is a possible avenue to explore.

This artifact seeks to utilize many of the principles that have been described in the above sections.

Some of the strategies employed in the work include:

- **Entering Their World:** Chapters are written on the topics that interest the audience such as partying, sex, and fighting the establishment.
- **Influence is Slow and Leaving the Details:** The reader is not challenged to make an immediate decision for faith but left considering their options.
- **Candidates for Change:** It is assumed that the reader is inactive or discontent with Christianity as they know the faith, but are also open to spirituality.
- **Personal Authenticity:** The author in several places admits openly his faults, his frustrations, and even some doubts.
- **Entering Their Framework:** Popular song lyrics begin each chapter and several examples of contemporary culture are referenced.
- **Stories:** Much of the content is personal narrative, not simply sharing principles.

- Content: Biblical quotations are used and concepts explained. However, the text is not academic. It is written in an extremely personal, conversational, and at times even crass voice.

General Information

The book is entitled, “You Gave Me Life... Now Show Me How to Live: Honest Spirituality for the 21st Century.” The title itself is a reference to a song by the Alternative Rock/ Post-Grunge band, *Audioslave*, entitled “*Show Me How to Live*.”

Chapters include:

- Living on the Edge: Many of us desire to live the unsafe, untypical life. This is evidence of a search for God.
- Fight the Man: The desire for fighting against authority can be a spiritual desire for the “real” thing. However, simple rebellion does not bring life; overcoming ourselves does.
- Reality: People long for authenticity, but there is more to life than simply telling the truth. It’s bringing beauty into the world.
- Living in the Now: The trend is to abandon the past, and live in the now. Though some things do need to change, throwing away everything from the past can be a disaster.
- Worldly: Most people want to be in the world, to enjoy the best of this life. Our present age has much to be enjoyed, but we also need the Spirit.
- Be Yourself: Life moves to a new level when we learn to be ourselves, but for the benefit of others.
- The High Life: God is for pleasure and having a good time, but pleasure alone is

damning.

- Family Crap: Many of us come from less than ideal families. The only way we can find peace is to live in forgiveness.
- I Want Your Sex: Sexual desire reveals that we were made for relationship with God and others.
- I Get By With a Little Help From My Friends: True friends are made by dedication to others, not simply partying with them.

SECTION 6

THE POSTSCRIPT

This Doctor of Ministry Project is the fruit of quite a journey and period of discovery in my own life. For years I have longed to serve the kingdom through operating as a highly effective ministry leader. Once I began a Church in my late 20's, it became abundantly clear that executive ability is not an area of strength for me.

I enrolled in this program to continue to think and see life and ministry differently, figuring it would be helpful in figuring out my own personal place in God's world, and that I would be encouraged studying under Leonard Sweet, to continue to think and dream creatively. All of this has happened.

During my first year in LEC 4, I continued to study and reflect on organizational leadership. As each semester moved forward, it became clearer to me that what I was really interested in was influence, making a difference, and not necessarily executive leadership. This self-discovery was extremely helpful in gaining a more true understanding of my gifts.

Eventually, through the program, I learned that communicating was one of my greatest strengths. I have always enjoined preaching and speaking, and believed I was pretty competent for my young age. However starting our new Church revealed my weaknesses, but also that I was stronger in public communication than I had imagined. I began to weekly apply many things we were reading and discussing with Dr. Sweet, and fairly rapidly noticed a big difference in my skill, and in the lives of people that we were connecting with my work.

At the same time, fellow students in our cohort began to compliment me online and offline, about my posts. I received much encouragement from them to pursue writing and to see what may happen. Dr. Cliff Berger, my faculty adviser was also encouraging me to see what might open up in this direction. Finally, the school gave me Gina Ochsner as an expert advisor. Ms. Ochsner is a published novelist and short story writer, and I have been excited about the privilege to work with and be reviewed by her.

When the option for a Track 2 project was explained, I felt like attempting to write a book would be the perfect capstone to all that I have learned and experienced in this wonderful program. Dr. Sweet has made some contacts for me in the publishing world, and I am extremely grateful to be able to explore this new avenue of ministry. My Church is full of young adults, and so it seemed natural to attempt a popular book, dealing with typical longings and life patterns of 20 and 30 something's. This work attempts to write not as an authority or as one who is correcting them. I seek to write as a peer who has experienced many of the same situations and feelings of my readers. I seek to write willing to "open a vein" and "say what I feel, not what I am supposed to say."¹ I hope in some small way I can be a friend to my peers, and gently and creatively put an arm around them, agree with their desires and the things they care about, and show that what they are looking for is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is better than we can ever imagine.

¹ Theses phrases are directly from interviews, articles, and published works by Frederick Buechner. Though I find his style too sophisticated and literary for the average person my age, I will always be in debt to his philosophy of writing. See the stimulating work *Speak What We Feel, Not What We Ought to Say: Four Who Wrote in Blood, G.K. Chesterton, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mark Twain, William Shakespeare*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco), 2001. I find as a more popular writer that I benefit from literary writers philosophies of writing, while I do not have the skill or background to write in that genre. The oft-quoted advice "Writing is sitting down at a typewriter and opening a vein," has been transforming for me. This phrase has worked in my life, the suggestions of the above surveyed research.

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You Gave Me Life... Now Show Me How To Live:

Honest Spirituality for the 21st Century

By

Brian A. Ross

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“Living on the Edge”

*“There's somethin' wrong with the world today
I don't know what it is
Something's wrong with our eyes*

*We're seein' things in a different way
And God knows it ain't his
It shore ain't no surprise...*

Livin' on the edge...”

- Aerosmith

I am parched by a seemingly unquenchable thirst. I want to drink deeply from the experience of being alive. This thirst all began before I had a driver's permit.

I had the privilege and notable distinction of going on a date with an eighteen-year-old girl who swore and smoked. I cannot say I was overly attracted to her but her age and aura and apparent interest in me, were all more than appealing.

We double-dated, a common feature when one cannot legally drive a car. Many complain that a foursome Friday is not the same as a twosome. But I was all knees and elbows and 130 pounds. I found the pairing with my friend Matt and my date's younger sister Jess comforting.

We finished the movie and pizza. It was around the time a young man's hopes arise literally. Nervous rivers of sweat began their descent from fuzzy armpits. My date suggested Jess pull into a church parking lot. I ironically prayed to Venus, the goddess of love, that this was not for prayer. This mature, older woman had another thrill ride in mind. We pulled into the parking lot of this budding mega church, filled with shadow and empty space, and the distant sound of insects in the tree line one

hundred yards away. She finally revealed her plan. “Brian, let’s go up on the roof of the car together.”

“Sounds good,” I added with confidence, wondering what the hell she meant.

My date added, “Jess, why don’t you drive? Go about as fast as you can in circles. We’ll hold on tight.”

Suddenly the emotional cocktail of anticipated love mixed with the fear of inexperience seemed completely juvenile. She wanted to tempt fate. I wanted to run away and hide in a corner and suck my thumb until they mercifully all wanted to go home. But I had to stay and ride. She was an eighteen-year-old woman. I had to perform. My mettle found its first real test.

We ascended the red four door: I sprawled along the passenger side of the roof, she the left. I held tightly to any slit in the frame that I could find, wondering what to do with my left arm.

She pulled me close to her torso with her right arm, and so I did the same with my left. Her gesture typically would conjure up some teenage fantasy... but right now I just wanted to live.

I offered up one of those very sincere, yet very selfish prayers to the real God. I promised to no longer think dirty thoughts about girls, at least not to hold them captive in my mind for long, if I could only be spared from tumbling of this sedan and rolling across the parking lot. I pictured my scrawny body lying under a sheet like a murder victim on a Law and Order spin-off.

All that I wanted was to see the day when I earned my driver’s license from the State of Ohio.

The car lurched forward; the wind blew in our hair. I flexed my muscles with all the strength that a beanpole basketball bench warmer can muster, clutching the vehicle and the tempting siren that had lured me into peril. She screamed with delight; I was as silent as Mr. Bean.

I thought for sure that I would wet my pants.

We survived figure eights and full circles for maybe about three minutes. I had contemplated the meaning of my own life, my victories and moral failures, the surety of heaven, hoping there wasn't a purgatory.

All in 180 seconds.

Eventually Jess parked the car and my risk taking partner and sighed and hugged me as if we just ended a make-out session. Weak in the knees, I searched futility for something witty to say- the male duty after an explicit rendezvous. I received a kiss on the cheek to end the evening.

Something began to grow within me that Friday evening, even though I never called my date again. She showed me something; she exposed me to something that I could not leave behind. Infected, I wanted more.

I wanted to learn to live. I wanted to be alive. I wanted life abundantly.

Today I don't want to live a normal life. I don't want to live a life that is safe, and comfortable, and average, and that just blends with the other 300 million normal lives in America. I don't want a middle of the road life. I don't want my life to be just another number in the impersonal factory of life.

The way I see it, a life just like everyone else's is not a life worth living. Cover bands don't change the world. Words like *median*, *typical*, and *moderate* do not excite. To be middle of the road is to not be on the journey at all.

What's in the middle of the road?

Roadkill.

Blending in, conforming, is the ultimate pursuit for adolescents in Junior High School, pre-pubescents fear being singled out. Big boys want to stand out in the crowd.

I remember well skipping school in the early 90's and ordering "The Dead Poets' Society" on Warner Cable's Pay Per View. Typically I would not be drawn to anything that included the word "poetry" unless it was an attempt to catch a shapely blonde and make her my own. The trailer enticed me with a film about sucking all the marrow out of life. I am still not exactly sure what marrow is- but it seemed worthy of a couple of hours of my "Brian Ross's Day Off."

Robin Williams' character, Mr. Keating, struck a chord somewhere deep within. He taught that life was to be lived by going for it, pursuing our truest dreams, attempting to wrestle and conquer whatever it was that made people nervous.

If you thought about some adventure, some primal pursuit that made you tingle down there, life was calling you out.

Young men spurned their controlling father's wishes; they kissed the girl that was dating the local football hero; they took risks and drove through the limitations of their milky personalities. I was smitten. No more of middle of the road life for me. I was going for it!

This film watered the seeds that a mysterious older woman and her enchanting ways had planted that fateful Friday night.

I know when the word “God” is mentioned- excitement, and thrill, and the extraordinary life can seem to dissipate, like a fourteen year-old fanning cigarette smoke before Mom gets home. However, when I am able to cast aside Church-speak, and TV preachers, and those who claim to speak for God on cable news programs; when I just open myself to the life of Jesus as found in his four biographies in the New Testament, I find something else.

We don’t find a “play it safe nice guy” in the Bible.

Jesus was a man who truly lived on the edge, who broke on through to the other side...

Jesus the Christ was not the skinny guy with pretty hair who walked around in a state of prayer with a yellow halo around his head like those framed pictures on Grandma’s bedroom wall. He’s incredibly wonderful. He’s incredibly risky.

I find that compared to the Spirit-narratives in the Bible, my life looks pretty tame, pretty lame.

Christ came that we may find life and find it lived on the edge.

Seeking Him, knowing Him, following Him is signing up for a life beyond the wildest double-dog dare.

When I began to open myself to the implications of the life that God calls from me, I was not prepared for the vision I found. The Creator God modeled personal risk and torture and shame to prove by His actions that love was the better way. I learned to freely confess my faults to other people. I began to see enemies as people made in the

image of God who I could bless and encourage and practically love. I found freedom by giving my personal finances and my future for a Being that I could not see or feel or even hear audibly. I gave up on my life and found a new path not based on my natural inclinations.

I never imagined that living an ancient faith formed by an executed woodworker creates a lifetime more thrilling than spinning donuts on the roof of an automobile.

“Fight the Man”

*“How can I predict my words
And have an impact like this?
I musta struck a chord wit somebody up in the office
Cuz congress keeps tellin me
I ain't causin nuttin but problems
And now they sayin I'm in trouble wit the government
I'm lovin it!”*

- *Eminem*

Something lurks within me, that no therapist can find. This Something , hungers to be against something... to be against someone.

I am full of inner angst, rage against the religious machine. I try to be positive. I pray for the spirit of rebellion to leave me. I often attempt to talk it away with a Spiritual Director, with a close friend.

Nothing helps.

In the most acute phases, in the pinnacle of wanting to rip the world from its hinges, I am reminded of Marlon Brando's character, Colonel Kurtz, in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Kurtz told Captain Willard a story of returning to a village where the American soldiers had cared for Cambodian children.

American servicemen had inoculated impoverished children. Amidst madness and death, they wanted to bring a little hope to the world. Later the GI's returned only to find maimed toddlers. Their arms hacked off by the North Vietnamese.

In the bleakest scene, light half reveals Kurtz's bald head, while darkness covers most of him. Thin rays of white shift back and forth like a morbid set of disco lights.

The Colonel cocks his head back, and drops open his mouth while he looks to the heavens. Brando's character confesses, "I didn't know what to do...I wanted to tear my teeth out... The horror..."

When I try to find hope, too often I only find horror.

Like a bad metabolism formed by a gland issue, the horror and rage does not go away. It seems that the discontent can only be managed.

At times I wonder if I am mad.

I possess a slow simmering rage against the way things have been and against the way things are. If something is popular, status quo, normal or the accepted standard then I don't like it. I think it needs to be transformed. It must change. It must be doused with fuel and burned to the ground.

I need to build something again but according to my standards.

Is this burning rage the inevitable result of growing up in a family of multiple divorces? Is this because I am member of "Gen-X," the lost generation? Is this what it means to be a sinner? Do I simply suffer from a genetic root of the melancholic personality? If so, I am in the same brotherhood as Old Abe Lincoln and Owen Wilson. I sound then less like a human disaster and more... noble.

But I know better than to flatter myself with such comparisons.

There are plenty of us who occasionally admit that when no one is around they occasionally scream and yell and break stuff. It's like they are Dunder Mifflin's Michael Scott on his sad attempt at being Survivor man. I know pleasant young mothers who admit in moments of domestic chaos, letting loose a torrent of barbed sailor talk, that as far as we know, is still hanging somewhere over Lake Michigan. They don't use the

word, “fudge.” Young mothers will use the mother of them all.

Occasionally in rare moments of magnanimity, I wonder if God is responsible for my personality and struggles. I don’t believe the Almighty has ever read Norman Vincent Peale’s “The Power of Positive Thinking.” This world is too much of a disaster for God to be okay with everything. He is better than that.

If we live in a broken world, a world of cancer and child abuse and rape and genocide, then I wonder if it is unhealthy to not be unsettled. Maybe the smiley, happy, positive types are the ones with some psychosis? Maybe it is insane to not feel like you are going insane?

If God does not exist, if there is nothing beyond the current state of biological evolution, if we are only advanced primates, why would I care so much about what is wrong with life? If this is all that there is...if we are all that there is...if there is no other side... why would daily events bother me? Why is there an inside compulsion/need to change things...to change everything... to not let things stay the same?

Would I struggle with inner turmoil if there really was no one above? Would I care about the mess of human existence?

When I go to the Bible, I don’t find people pulling out teeth, but I do see ripping of clothes, sackcloth and ashes. There is even a story of Nehemiah pulling out other people’s hair! The Bible does not include many incidents of people coming to know their Creator, experiencing deep change, without some type of calling or mission to change things.

Even the “boring parts” of the inspired text, that most who even read the Bible don’t read, are full of vision and piss and vinegar and Spirit to make a new world. What

are the Old Testament prophets doing? They are challenging the man. They dress and act funky. They ride the straight talk express all the way to the palace. They are frustrated, and at times full of rage. They are working with God to change things, to change everything.

Jesus Christ was nothing if not an instigator. The Messiah loved to stir the pot.

The Son of God was not a nice little church boy. He certainly did not do what society said that He should.

He would stand up in the middle of the boat, without a life vest, and get it rocking.

¹³ *When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

¹⁴ *In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."*

¹⁸ *The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"*

¹⁹ *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."*

²⁰ *They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After*

he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need human testimony about them, for he knew what was in them.

- John 2:13-25

Jesus has been painted and flannel graphed as meek and mild, an obedient Catholic school boy, with Terri Hatcher's hair and Mic Jagger's build.

What does John say the Christ was doing?

Christ sees something with the establishment that He cannot handle. There is something wrong with the system and He is keen to it. Some people are getting fat and happy, while others are struggling just to try to find their way to God. Jesus will not have it. He's got a whip and He's gonna slap somebody. He's going to make a mess of the place. He's going all Fight Club at church. He's demanding the entire religious culture change. He's giving notice, that when He finishes nothing will be the same.

Religious leaders asked Jesus the old paternal questions all young adults are used to, "Who do you think you are? You don't know the way the world works, do you? Yeah, yeah, get over your rebellious young ignorant self and grow up why don't you?"

People in the days of Christ did not get the heart of the God-life. Most of us do not either.

Interestingly, the Christ did not reply with a new system, with another capital religious building in which He is worshipped. The religious leaders thought of Him as

pipe dreamer for His own political/religious party, His own cult, but they just did not understand.

When Jesus said He is the Temple, He said the God of the cosmos is relationally open to all people everywhere. No system or building or moral code has the corner on the Divine. But there is also none in which He cannot be found.

God is not for a specific race, nation, or spiritual building. All of the world-every apartment, indie film theatre and sports bar has the potential to be sacred space. In this new move of the Spirit, God is everywhere. He can be found anywhere, if people want to find Him.

He began a revolution that has never ended. He invites us to pick up the Spirit and join the uprising.

Everyone knows that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. Everyone knows that crucifixion would have been awful to see, like a centuries gone by version of Eli Roth's Hostel. Not everyone knows why people were crucified.

Crucifixion was the punishment for those who were considered a threat to the state. It was left for those who were considered a Menace to Society. Nails were driven in the hands and feet of rebels. Those who wanted to change things would be left hanging naked in all their glory for a mocking and horrified world to see. Insult added to injury as the criminal leaked and dumped publicly, hanging till the public victim could no longer breathe.

People didn't get this Roman Royal treatment because they believed in God and prayed, and thought others should think twice about who should be their sexual intercourse partner.

This was for people who wanted to change things. Capital punishment came to those who thought they could change everything. People who attempted to fight the man received the ultimate punishment.

The old, old, story says that Jesus hung between two thieves. These men did not steal people's wallets. They did not run Viagra or Extendze scams. They engaged in violent revolution. They hid large knives under their cloaks. They waged guerilla warfare against their Roman oppressors. They slit the throats of those in power.

The Nazarene brought about a revolution, but it was a different kind of war. He sought to overthrow the current state of affairs. God's revolution even rebelled against typical forms of rebellion. He worked to even change the way people sought to change things.

Most revolutions end in disaster. Typically, thousands of people die horrible painful deaths, mainly women and children. Horrific things happen when all of society is as stable as the private life of a young starlet.

The rebel forces eventually take over and form a new government. The problem with most revolutionaries is they are really good at deconstructing beliefs, attacking the royal guard, shouting death to the king. However, they are often really bad at governing and leading people, creating helpful compromise, working as statesmen who use synergy to find the best solutions.

Most revolutions achieve little more than spilling innocent blood and replacing a poor government with a terrible one.

But Jesus had a different mission. He rebelled against the establishment and the revolution.

The Son of God did not line up with armies and swords and political parties and philosophies. He had a real revolution to be leading.

Jesus' fight the man campaign went farther than regime change. He wanted to go deeper. He didn't care if either Caesar was leader or the High Priest of Israel. He wasn't terribly interested if it was going to be the Pax Romana, or the law of Moses that ruled the land. He wanted to see the hearts of men and women change. He wanted to go deeper than governors, deeper than law, deeper than culture. He wanted to go all the way down into the core of what it means to be a human being and bring deep change from within human hearts.

Jesus worked for the transformation of the oppressors and even the oppressed through the rebel act of crucifixion and resurrection. God defeated evil itself by allowing it to inflict its ultimate punishment, death, and proved it ultimately impotent by rising again. He proved that a Creator of love and forgiveness, who gives until He is killed, can outlast the worst of human wickedness. He proved that those who follow Him and those who love until the end are the ultimate rebels whose work will never be overthrown.

Christ seeks the conversion of those who have been sinned against. Those who grew up under oppressive regimes, mocked as young people who don't get it. He seeks to so overwhelm the hurt and frustrated with His revolution that they will learn to see that love overcomes evil. Suffering and persisting in doing good to your enemy is what brings victory, not retaliation. The Source of Life knows if those who suffer seek to win in the world's game, they will lose. They have been made into the image of their oppressors. They are now worse than victims. They are now victims who have the soul and blood thirst of victimizers. They moved from heirs of heaven, to the inheritors of

hell.

The message of Jesus is not simply fight the man, but fight the man that lives within us.

When I understand the mission of Jesus, I forget about those who should be taught a lesson. I pray to be saved from myself.

It's simplistic to think the answer is a new government or ideology. Anyone can be for one tribe and against another. The real revolution is being against evil in general, and being for every person in particular. This is the revolution of God.

My generation desperately wants to change things. I hope we do not settle for generational change, but we open to the revolution of God. I hope we win the war within, the war with ourselves.

It's encouraging and discouraging watching people who want to change everything. We all subconsciously desire real justice, the very thing God longs for. But if we do not know Him, if we have not received the love of the only perfect practitioner of social justice, we are just playing make believe justice. It is similar to playing house when we were in elementary school, we might look like justice and we might use the vocabulary of those who seek peace on earth. But if we have not found the revolution that causes us to get over our pet projects and to learn to love those we believe are wrong, we are simply playing make believe justice.

The real revolution changes the administration inside of me.

I am tired of getting dressed up, scratching the surface, and proclaiming myself a liberator. It's a game for children.

“Reality”

*“i try to be perfect but nothing was worth it
i dont believe it makes me real
i thought it'd be easy but no one believes me...
i'd say all the words that i know
just to see if it would show
that im trying to let you know
that im better off on my own.”*

- Sum 41

Reality is big business. Seeking entertainment, we pay for reality. At least we pay for the appearance of reality. Comedians build careers on pointing out the absurdity of real life. Chris Rock, Dane Cook, Chelsea Turner, Jerry Seinfeld are masters of mining reality, the universal experiences of humanity, and with great timing reveal the inconsistencies of life.

A comedian's material works because he or she breaks through the thick spongy bubble of our images and our false fronts that we strut into the world. They burst our bubbles of false realities with sarcasm, insight, and the occasional explicative. The resulting laugh is the moment when we see ourselves rendered clearly. The reality we all know and breathe and live and act on and feel everyday hides within a masking bubble.

It's not only comic artists that tap into the human longing to be shown reality.

Popular songs lure us to listen to them repeatedly because they are poetic ballads of the emotions and feelings we experience living real life. The lyrics are artful expressions of the reality we all know.

The demand for popular arts increases because living in a leggy, fancy hair, perfect teeth, pro-active skin care world brings difficulty. It becomes a full-time job to

keep up. Many women walk around with their heads down because they don't have washboard abs or bottoms that look good in designer jeans. Many fellas are maxing their credit cards, limiting their futures, so they can feel potent behind the wheel of the latest SUV. Children are stripped of their childhoods for ballet, tumbling, soccer, karate, early sculpture, and Spanish classes so Mommy and Daddy can feel that their seed swims just as fast, and their egg is just as fertile as all the rest of the pretty people on the glossy magazines.

The Biography Channel, Behind the Music, E! True Hollywood Stories bring light to the personal stories, often filled with pain and broken relationships, of the rich and famous among us. When people seek to live as larger than life icons they become disconnected from the reality of human life and often destroy themselves.

Stephen King, the master of horror, is one of my favorite writers. His book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* is good advice of putting pen to paper, but also an informal treatise on reality. King believes the secret of a good novel, and of course his great movies, is simply telling the truth. He advises against any type of literary agenda, advancing an argument, or taking a story where the author desires it to go.

King instructs writers to watch their characters, to simply discover what they as life-like people would do in even most fanciful situations. The author does not lead a story, but watch what characters do within the situations they find themselves.

In his memorable speech upon receiving the National Book award, King goaded the literary elite who often consider him vulgar and too pop. The novelist said he built a successful career by simply looking at reality and telling it like it is.

King invited the people of letters to imagine they were writing a novel with

characters stuck in an elevator. They hear the frightful sound of creaking and popping and cables splitting. The elevator begins hurling to the ground at the speed of gravity. King suggests if authors write of characters telling each other of their love, or if they pause and pray, they are honest. If characters spontaneously yell, “Shit!” then they have captured reality.

King cites an example of a downed commercial plane. When the FAA recovery team finally found the black box, they did not hear a heart-felt good-bye to the pilot’s family. The pilot simply kept repeating “Son of a bitch.”

About a year ago, I struggled in my ministry. Some people we connected with decided to move on. Financially we were falling behind, and being the only paid staff in a new start-up, this had many personal ramifications. I wondered if I was putting my family in permanent financial binds by staying with a church full of young, single, twenty-somethings.

I spilled the beans to my bishop. I confessed wondering if I really was a pastor. I imagined someone else could do this much better than I could. I finished my swan song; he looked at me, folded his hands, and grinned. He said, “You know, everyone feels this way. You’re just the one who admits it.” At that moment, stepping into reality was a relief. It’s okay if your life sucks, if you realize everyone else’s does too. Sometimes knowing we all experience the same reality is all that we need.

As a pastor, I never stop being surprised at how so many people want to confess their reality. When we get together for coffee, or lunch, or a bottle of suds, people feel free to spill their guts. They want to cut open a vein and let the blood spill all over the table and run on to my lap. They need to tell someone their secret destructive habits,

their doubts in the dark, their personality quirks that keep tripping them up. They long for honesty, truth, and confession.

Stepping into the truth helps truth step right back into you. Finally getting things out of the shadow lands and into light of life has a calming effect. It's a huge part of finding God.

Christians claim they want to know Jesus Christ and to make him known. If they are going to accomplish their twin goals, then joining the light and life of reality, honesty, and truth is going to have to be a bigger priority. We cannot simply smile and sing and encourage people to be joyful in the Lord. We will need to climb down from our tall steeds and openly share with our hats in our hands. To lead others, we will follow God on the path of truth-telling, which begins with telling the truth about ourselves. We will need to move past political/social agendas about winning, and move towards losing our life, so we can find it. Then we may discover others walking next to us along the way.

The lack of honesty, the avoiding of reality, is a huge struggle I have with our communities of faith. This is the disappearance of truth. I believe Jesus Himself is "The Way, The Truth, and the Life." But some of his followers need to go back and meet him again as for the first time.

I sensed this early on when I began to get serious about knowing God and finding His truth in the Bible. I find the Scriptures to be the most honest and realistic collection of writings I have ever read. It is full of stories and heroes and dramatic events... all good writing is. But it tells the truest story of humanity.

Though I find the Scriptures to be so full of life and truth and inner resonance, I

find almost the opposite in church. There are big smiles, occasionally big hair, and people excited to praise God. But it often does not seem real. People use semi-sacred lingo, which no average Joe would ever use. Worst of all, nobody seems to admit to real problems. Surely some admit to a bad back or colon issues, but not the real internal, dark side issues that we all have.

Church can be all “God is good” and “He’s faithful” and “His mercies endure forever.” I agree in principle with these statements. But not the way they are expressed. Hushed voices and slight grins and nodding heads rarely seem authentic.

Reality tends to arrive with tears and anger and four letter words and spousal fights... and then we are in a position to see things through the light of a God who is always with us.

We bottom out in the real world and then we find God.

The cross is the central symbol of the life of Jesus. The cross is reality. The Roman tree reveals human nature. People torture the Prophet who speaks of love for enemies and a better way. The cross tells the truth that we really are not good people.

The clearest revelation of God is the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. He came to be the unmasker. He shows the religious leaders have no clothes. He teaches that the prideful are living in a never never land that has never been grounded in reality. The Christ does not use double speak or mince words. We are worse off than our therapist thinks, but we have a better hope than anything psychology has to offer.

Sometimes in the religious realm of unreality we create theologies and beliefs about God that bolster the bubbles we live within. Some of our faith systems actually become bubble builders.

Honest analysis of Jesus defies a single unified interpretation

Even a semi-honest consideration of Christ's life resists one single interpretation.

Jesus cannot be pinned down. He expels easy codification. We are left doing the best we can to understand who He is and how to find life with Him. But some are not satisfied. They create views of God which simply affirm the healthy parts of their own personal lives, while ignoring the aspects of their lives that are not pretty.

Conservative/ mega-church land is all about family values, keeping your pants on, and working hard. Because that's who those people are already. They create God in their image. Human nature magnifies aspects of divine instruction that we already live while ignoring sections of Scripture that challenge our lifestyles and beliefs.

The progressive, left-leaning church, though, proclaims a God who cares mostly about peace, justice, and being inclusive. This is mainly because....that's who they are! See how we pick and choose and fashion a God that looks like us?

Evangelical success land doesn't talk about racism, the growing divide between the rich and the poor, loving the stranger- unless he wears pleated khakis. Conservatives correctly teach that personal morality and marital faithfulness and hard work are part of the will of God. Republicans, executives and hunters fill their new buildings. Yet they miss all that God has for them.

The leftist smarties struggle with the "no sexual immorality among you" and the "lake of fire" texts. Progressives correctly teach that social justice and inclusive and conservation are part of the will of God. Democrats, educators and non-profit workers remain their dependable faithful. Yet they miss all that God has for them.

When Christians are more concerned with image than reality we create niched

communities of faith. The fastest way to create a growing church is to tailor everything for a specific demographic.

When the church operates according to what is easy or natural for the people who are already there, its message seems unreal. Reality means struggling with messages and passages of the Bible that do not make us comfortable.

When people are honest about reality, they find love and community.

When churches begin to admit their own problems, others feel like they have encountered the real thing.

When people open up to reality they are ready to find God.

The first leaders of the early Church opened up about the reality of their own lives.

¹⁴ *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.* ¹⁵ *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.* ¹⁶ *And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.* ¹⁷ *As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.* ¹⁸ *I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* ²⁰ *Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

²¹ *So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.* ²² *For in my inner being I delight in God's law;* ²³ *but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at*

work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my flesh a slave to the law of sin.

- Romans 7: 14-25

¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

- 1 Timothy 1: 15-16

Paul is totally forthcoming about his own issues. He almost seems to despair over his failures. In his letter to the Jesus followers in Rome, he is working to help the Gentiles and Jews form a real community out of their distinct cultures. One group thinks the others are backward moralists. The other thinks their counterparts are pagan sellouts. Paul does not call down hellfire on them.

But Paul does not dress in black, writing indie songs about how he hates his inner child. He has hope that honesty and self reality checks can bring about change. God Himself has and will come to the rescue.

The Creator God, who lies mysteriously as the partly veiled figure behind the huge epic saga of the Bible, is honest. If you have read the Spirit narrative, and not simply listened to preaching about it, it is the ultimate reality show. Much of the

Scriptures are R-rated, some X-rated, as our human souls are split open by a loving God who dares to tell it to us like it is.

Honest reality has always been the domain of the arts. Two of my favs have long been the troubled and brilliant Jim Morrison and the next generation's Morrison, Kurt Cobain. Who has not listened to their hauntingly thrilling vocals and their inner despair and not resonated with them? I live a very different life than those geniuses of Rock and Roll, yet they keep pulling me back in.

But I do not want to be them. It would be balls to still be a favorite on MTV, years after my death, still downloaded regularly on iTunes. But if this is where reality finally ends, I want to end up someplace else.

People in the church need reality. But the world needs a reality that ends in hope.

My friend Rod lives in the world as it is. Though he is middle-aged, he leads a spiritual community of single 20 something, counter-cultural types in Center City, Philadelphia. He walks among the stark honesty of HIV/AIDS, poverty, domestic abuse, and addictions. He would never be mistaken as a silly "Smile, Jesus loves you!" optimist. But he knows we need more than stark reality.

He shared with me how all the young people are hip to being "authentic." They hate pretense, hypocrisy, spin, and the silly dreams of untruth. To believe being a real person is being who you naturally are- not trying to be someone you are not.

Rod admitted, "I get it. They want to authentically be themselves. But who are we authentically? We're a bunch of shit. Life is not about being authentically me. It's about authentically following the life and pattern of Jesus Christ. Isn't that better?"

If the real enemy is untruth, then we need to admit the untruth of just swimming

around in reality as it is. If the world is really screwed up, if there is so much pain and hurt and utter darkness out there as we say there is, then just admitting to it is not being real. At least it's not finding and giving life. Living in truth is admitting where things are and then seeking a God of hope that brings something better from reality. Otherwise we all might as well all go pull a Morrison and Cobain and kill ourselves. What would be the point of living?

After high school I attended a small theological school for a couple of years. A well meaning spiritual mentor suggested that I enroll. I should have visited the school first. There were tons of rules, tons of trying to maintain an image, little reality.

One year, a nice enough fellow, one without many friends, decided he wanted to live in reality. He was tired of living a double life. He donned sunglasses as if ready for a poker game. If you were not a high-roller, it was a little difficult to understand why someone would wear that type of eye gear.

Everyone found out soon enough why.

It was our custom to have a large Sunday evening Worship service. We stood and sang and someone talked out of the Bible until we longed for our beds. Afterwards, people were encouraged to stand and share with the other hundreds of 19 and 20 year-olds about their spiritual life. It was kind of like an AA meeting except everyone knew your last name and it was typically expected that you would quote the Bible. The hidden eyes, pear-shaped, young man found his opportunity.

He stood as everyone quieted as it was his turn to bear his soul in praise of God. He started with the latter, sharing that God is good and holy, and by His grace showed him where he had wandered from the fold. So far... so good. But then he did the

unimaginable. The dark glassed student confessed that he had been competing in his own personal version of the “Contest” from Seinfeld lore. Except he was not in any competition, he was the lone warrior, and he was the first one out every time. To the shocked, snickering, and embarrassed semblance of young worshippers, the confessor then asked forgiveness from all the young ladies, whose appearance and blossoming femininity was the source of his most private sinful life.

He finished with even less than friends than when he had begun.

Pure reality may be funny, even pitiful at times, but by itself it doesn’t help anyone. Reality alone does not produce life.

The same school that produced the unforgettable confession, also created a context for confessions that end in life and hope.

This school required year long attendance. Students did the academic thing during the standard school calendar, September to May, but then stuck around for the summer. They became counselors at camps for children at the school.

That first summer I counseled with two acquaintances: Jon and Andy. I did not know Andy; I only retained a memory from earlier during the academic year. I had walked into the campus lounge when he was challenging some kid named Tom to a fist fight over a game of billiards. This is the stuff that future ministers are made of.

Jon I knew better. He served as the yes-man of an amateur body-builder in my dorm. Jon, a man of lesser stature, was a fun guy, even though full of himself. Think of that guy on the Princess Bride who drank the poison. Remember he was Cliff Huxtable’s neighbor on the Cosby show? Put that guy’s face, on a 19 year-old frame, with the personality of George Costanza. That is Jon.

We ended up as counselors together, the summer of 1996, overseeing twenty or so elementary boys together.

Though studying theology, we were still typical college boys. The standard bodily function contests, sneaking people's personal cameras to shoot a full hairy moon before placing it back in their back pack; talking way too much, in way too much detail, about the ladies.

Over time something began to change in all of us. As we tried to patiently oversee the young campers, as we finished up some theological papers assigned over the summer, our conversation began to change. We already talked openly and honestly about the realities of being testosterone filled young men working at a crummy camp. We already shared the intimate details of what we knew about a few particular women's bodies. But now we began to also talk about God, and the world, and truth, and hope, and love, and the good life. We talked about reality and hope.

Even as young men who believed, our bodily desires ruled our lives. God helped us to see that these urges are part of our biology but unchecked, they could ruin us. Young women are not simply play things we pursue. They are people too. I believe I would not have ever moved beyond my own selfish philosophy of life and relationships if it was not for these conversations of life and a better way.

That summer we became different people. We became men. We were not like the stuffy church boys who enrolled in the school, who seemed less human and more like moralistic androids. We were not like other guys our age, who wanted to drink every experience of life all the way down until there was no room left in their stomachs for God or beauty or what's truly good about life. Somehow for that summer, we found reality

and hope.

Years later I have lost contact with Andy, yet I talk with Jon weekly. We are both married with three kids. We are both pastors and yet neither of us feel like we quite fit the mold. We are both guys who want to be more real than much of what passes for Christianity, and more hopeful than our depressed friends who are out doing their thing trying to find themselves. I feel like we stumbled upon, by accident or providence, a little bit of what God- like relationships are supposed to be like: laughs, confessions, brutal honesty, guy talk. And yet hope, dreams, and seeking the Beyond even in this life. I want all of my friends to experience this. To experience the marriage of truth and beauty that comes from knowing God...in reality.

This is why God visited humanity in Jesus Christ. He arrived to form people who are scarred, yet somehow attractive. He arrived to form people who don't always use the appropriate language, but who have the best hearts. He came to form people who can be frank about their issues and their ugly sides, but who also know the One who is beyond.

He came to form immortal art out of the trash and refuse of the world.

There is something better than pure reality.

“Living in the Now”

*“Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...”*

*You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one.”*

- John Lennon

Few things panic a young man as when his so-called best friend points out that he is losing his hair. He might as well be told his manhood is turning black and falling off.

There I stood cursing and threatening and acting tough in the steamy bathroom of a freshman dormitory in Marion, Indiana. Evan that great friend, had laughed at me as I combed my wet hair amid the smell of soap and something left in one of the stalls the night before.

A dozen other guys circled us. Some smirked and looked at my receding temples; others looked down at their boxers as if they knew it was only a matter of time until Dad's blasted genetic follicle impairment would wreak havoc on their own scalps and romantic lives.

My throwing a masculine fit worked. Evan shut up. I pretended to not be staring at my slightly higher forehead as I brushed my gappy, David Letterman like teeth in the mirror.

That morning I learned I was afflicted with the slow death march of male pattern

baldness.

I determined to do something, anything. I would fight this disease. I would be a survivor.

At home, away from my buddy's verbal bombs and my hidden embarrassment, I started taking down those 1-800-Hair-Now phone numbers during change of possession breaks of televised football games. Brochures arrived at Mom's split level home on an almost daily basis. I studied them and looked for all the hope that modern medicine had to offer. This was not about me, it was about the future. I needed to one day continue the family line. Mom wanted more grandkids. I could only pray that this black death would pass over any future male heirs. Mom says those brochures still turn up time to time, thirteen years later.

It did not take me long to realize that student loans and part-time shoe-salesman pay-checks (my "friends" called my Al Bundy) would prevent me from raising a few grand for a hair transplant. Alone, I would catch myself reciting "Help me Rogaine... you're my only hope," over and over again, like the repeating hologram of Princess Leia. Rogaine advertised itself as the new wonder treatment in those days. Who cared about the impotence thing? At 19, I could afford a dash of cold water or two to the pelvic region.

I scrounged up \$30.00, partly from searching underneath sofa cushions. After standing in the aisle of the Super-X pharmacy for about a half hour, I finally garnered the courage to purchase it from a lovely 17 year-old brunette working the cash register. I couldn't look her in the eye. She may notice the male pride running down my leg.

Once home, I read the directions and stared at the package for what seemed like

half the day. I was still unsure if the marketing promises were true. I decided to hide it amidst my clothes and try it when I got back to school in the frozen North. I only had a month's dose; I wanted to make sure it worked when I was roaming campus. It would do me little good to begin wearing off soon after I was back in the company of young co-eds.

On the flight back to my studies, I philosophically considered that baby blue box from every angle. Was I just being weak? What if other guys, or worse yet, girls, found out I was sneaking this box and its magic around? Would I look as foolish as an old dude wearing a cheap rug on his head? But then again, all muscles and athletic Karl Malone swore buy it on the commercials... I was not sure what to do.

A few days after the semester was back in swing a roommate made funny about himself. In front of another steamed mirror surrounded by toweled bunkmates, he fessed up to using the hair growth stuff. Everyone chuckled and of course... I did too. This time I attempted not to hide that I was studying my hairline, but that I was studying his. He unknowing had volunteered to be my guinea pig.

I passed nights staring at the ceiling three feet away from my elevated bed. I prayed. I hoped my friend would wake-up one day with flowing hair like Sebastian Bach. I reassured myself that this miracle ointment was backed by research, a breakthrough. Human culture and learning keep progressing, keep improving. I would not suffer my father's, and grandfather's fate. I too would be a proud example of modern/technological man. The scientists' would lend me a hand, preventing me from slipping off the cliff into the realm of the ridiculed. I would be fine... no, I would be dashing and young and vibrant forever. I would marry and pass on my genes and enjoy

long hours of my microscopic boys' swims, making it all the way to the golden shores of the female egg. I would... not think about all of this too much. They say it makes the hair fall out even faster.

Weeks later Rogaine boy shaved his head. He said it was a hoax. Even Karl Malone gave up the ghost and began buying lots of Bic razors.

That was my first painful realization that what is "new and improved" isn't always better. It may not even work. Sometimes it's simply better packaged snake oil. Now I only wonder what I will look like when I finally have the chutzpah to use the hair clippers on the top of my head.

Many of us feel lost. Many of us do not understand who we really are. Many of us bounce from pursuit to pursuit, from person to person, full of hope and excitement of what new dreams may come true and yet they never do. We believe that the new and improved is always better; it's always going to be better. We often believe that all of yesterday is worth throwing away. Sometimes when kick all of yesterday to the curb; we discover we are left with nothing.

Some relics from the past are worth flushing down the toilet. Segregation, and male chauvinism, and religious hatred and anti-intellectualism, and the arms race, and the demonizing of racially mixed couples are plagues that needed a vaccine. Some things just have to change. But we make a grave mistake if we think everything from the past is useless in our contemporary world.

We don't need a return to yesterday. But some things that were born in the past are essential to moving successfully into the future.

A century ago bright people believed everything was getting better. The new and

improved ideas and inventions would improve everything. Science and industrialization and psychology and universities would usher us into the age of world peace. Humanity was evolving, once and for all, right out of the days of ignorance and bloodshed and poverty. The new and improved was the new gospel.

But then arrived “The Great War,” the first World War, complete with trench warfare, and mustard gas, and millions of soldiers, and even more civilians, tumbling into early graves. When the global conflict ended, the progress filled victors proclaimed the struggle as “The War to End All Wars.” Then Hitler and his henchman and gas chambers arrived and millions of even more gruesome deaths in World War II. Then all of the enlightened crowd proclaimed, “The hell with it all!”

The children of the war-torn generations imagined progress again in the 60’s... all flower power, and Age of Aquarius, and everyone’s favorite: “Free Love.” They had new ideas, better ideas. All the old Mom and Pop values were antiquated and tired and dead. Everything was different, everything was a break from the past, everyone would finally be free of God, and religious legalism, and hate, and all that is backwards and restrictive to human experience.

These grand new ideals produced only shallow materialism, and numerous divorces and latch-key children, and drug abuse, and the Grim Reaper of HIV/Aids. We are the children of these joys. I am ready for a New New Age.

Do not believe the lie that whatever is new and improved and chic and with the “Now” is best. Many times it only flushes away the very things we need to imperfectly pursue what’s best.

Jesus said:

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca, ' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

- Matthew 5: 17-26

Jesus of Nazareth was a revolutionary. He came to change everything. But He did not come to flush away everything from the past. If He did, then there would be hell on earth. The problem was not that everything from the past was worthless and dead and needs to be buried six feet under. The problem was that people had thrown away what really mattered from the beginning, and they were left calling its shell the real thing.

Shells need to be shedded and new ones grown every season, every time the culture and world changes. But the essence, what really matters and has always mattered, needs to be retained, even as we constantly fashion new shells.

People in Jesus' day clung to the shell of "do not murder" while they cursed and damned one another. They did not stab anyone else with a shiv, but they sowed the seeds of hate that created a thirst for violence. The problem with hypocrites isn't that the God that they say they worship is false and the whole thing a fairy tale. Hypocrites cling to the shell so tightly, that when God sheds the forms of the past and moves what has already mattered into a new one, they are left with nothing but hot air.

God left the building and they never noticed.

Legalism and deadly fundamentalism are not the same as belief. They are the worship of the shells God left behind.

The message of Jesus represents a quantum leap backwards and forwards at the same time. He called and still calls people back to the old stories, the ones that really mattered. He was, and is, calling us back to a beginning created by a good God. His story is an old, powerful tale, of human beings that are made in His image, made to know and walk with Him, made to be immortals that can learn from Him how to enjoy the best of this life and all of the next one. His message is the ancient narrative of human life

crafted by the God of love.

Jesus said to find this life, to live in it, to be a significant character in this drama, means we will always be shedding our skin and shells when a different context emerges. We will be adorning ourselves with the new ones He has been crafting for the future.

I laugh when I read the New Atheists. They seem like fun guys. It would be a joy to take them out for a drink some time. I can imagine we would have quite an evening. They catalogue over and over and over again the evils of religion in the past and in the present: preaching a God that is pro-slavery and racist, fanning an ignorance that produces the devouring flames of holy war, gospels of selfishness that create disciples looking to get rich quickly, while they neglect the needy. The cultured despisers of religion are so good at this stuff. I marvel at the wonderful service they have achieved for the people of Jesus Christ. They have awakened all of us to this ugly reality. They have told us the truth. I thank them all. I really would enjoy hearing more of these accounts over a pint.

But the real hilarity arrives when they suggest the way to avoid these human evils is to abandon the “idea” of God. Ha! They are quite the hams! Sometimes I wonder if this is all an elaborate joke they are pulling on Western Civilization like Sean Penn did to Michael Douglas in *The Game*.

Can they really be serious!? As if we abandoned the belief that human life has eternal significance, that there is a just God who rewards the merciful and brings down the cruel, that there is so much more beyond this life that compels us to take this life more seriously, as if we flushed all of that away, that we could all finally hold hands and sing and love one another forever!? Ha! What a game they are playing!

Why would I stumble out of bed in the middle of the night to care for my sick 4 year old anymore!? He is nothing more than a 35 pound jumble of my DNA. Who cares? I could always sire another one! I don't need to bite my tongue anymore when some moron cuts me off in traffic! I can follow him until he parks his car and punch him right in the chin. We're just two animals marking our territories. May the biggest primate win! I don't even need to wear pants anymore! I'm a fertile male looking to continue my genetic line. Who needs a wife!?

If I really bought into the "new and improved" through and through, discarding all of the past as nothing more than bathroom waste, it would be quite a different world, a world of terrors.

I listened to a podcast this week of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Goose bumps popped out all over me again. My heart thumped as if my 200 pounds actually went for a run.

Where did this larger than life hero get his gumption, his bravery, his vision? In the middle of that thousands of years old fuddy stuff: Isaiah, Amos, St. Paul. Dr. King learned this way of life from Gandhi (old dead Indian guy.) Gandhi learned it from Tolstoy (really old dead Russian guy.) Tolstoy learned it from Jesus (truly ancient dead, and then alive again, Jewish guy.) How did Dr. King ever become so creative as to change our nation, change the world, giving his life while demanding that no others' lives were taken? He studied those tired, old, 2,000 years ago stories of Jesus' words and actions. He simply dressed them in a different shell. The Civil Rights leader took the old stories of loving your enemy, and living for a world to come to heart. He knew better than to flush them.

Where did the Wachowski brothers and their Matrix, Lucas and his Star Wars, Jackson and his Lord of the Rings come from? What birthed these genius combinations of intrigue, and lovable characters, and dialogue dripping with wisdom? It all came from those aged, left behind, spiritual stories and concepts from yesteryear. The only thing new is their 21st century shells.

Can't we be people who live fed from the gifts of God and humanity from the past, while embracing the trendy shells of the now? Some things are too valuable to ever be consigned or dropped off at Good Will. A beautiful God eternally present, powerful, and available never goes out of style. A life caught up with the glory of sex, which leads to serious consideration to whom it is shared with always makes sense. The understanding that forgiveness always prevails over bitterness is always an intelligent way to relate others. We don't really want to rid ourselves of these truths of pro-creation, love, and healthy relationships do we?

But yes, we need to wear the latest line of shells. It's time to fit ourselves in the realities of living in a global village where everyone counts, not just white Westerners. It is a good thing to don the new clothes of everything being connected. What we do privately, spiritually, corporately, who we are publicly, and what we do to the environment is all inter-related and affects the whole. We should try on the popular culture of film and music and books and mass technology which is becoming the universal language of the developed world.

It's fashionable to wear new shells.

There does not exist though any new pill, or new book, or new website, or new diet, or new idea, or new spirituality, or new vacation spot, or new invention that is going

to make everything better. Life comes from the Source that has always offered it. There is only one Source. But the Source increasingly comes in updated models and assorted colors.

I enjoy walking an old canal path here in Berks' County, PA. Its nine miles of track which used to be part of the Reading Railroad, immortalized in the game Monopoly. I regularly walk it alone, thinking and praying, assessing and imagining. The river is the home of several blue herons and several types of trout that lure waders who tie their own flies. It's my place to be alone with God.

I come year round. I cannot stay away for long from the natural beauty of the lazy water way. Sometimes I am in shorts and flip flops. Other gray days require my red knit Ohio State hat and water proof boots. Some days I am sweaty. On other afternoons I can see my breath waft into the air.

I am never disappointed here. I can hear myself think. I often hear God speak. I always have the water. But the river's form constantly takes a new shape. In the spring it's fast and full, muddying my shoes as I walk the flooded path. In the summer its still, seemingly motionless. In the autumn it's misty, with a mystical fog oozing out into the crisp air. In the winter it's solid and cloudy white.

The water is always there. The same water. The same path. The same pleasing mass of H₂O molecules that offer beauty and life. Depending on the season I need different walking shoes. It is good to put on fresh clothes.

It may not always look the same, but the water in its core never changes.

God and His life rarely looks the same in different times and places, but the real One, the real thing, never changes.

Shells will come and go. Some forms need discarded, new ones utilized. But the real things in life, the things that matter, are as true today a millennia ago.

Don't throw them away. Learn to recycle.

“Worldly”

*“I wanna be just like a king
Take my picture by the pool
Cause I'm the next big thing...*

*Truth is...I don't stand a chance
It's something that you're born into
And I just don't belong.*

*No I don't - I'm just a no class, beat down fool
And I will always be that way
I might as well enjoy my life
And watch the stars play...”*

- Weezer

I went to church some as a kid. Mom believes and I guess she thought it would be good to have her two kids in church. She felt bad about us growing up a single parent home. She could not do much about it, but she hated it. Somewhere along the way she thought if we went to church, if we heard about God and Jesus and sang some songs everything would be better. She knew it would not be all right completely, but somehow better.

As I grew into a teenager church was the last place I wanted to be. Given a choice between going to church or doing tedious geometry proofs, I would have gladly picked the proofs over church. Nothing about worship seemed... interesting, fun, enjoyable, or relevant.

Sunday church was all tight shoes, those strange graduation like robes that clergy wear, and wacky songs written by some old Englishman which made me think, “What? What does that mean? Ahhh, who gives a ...”

Admittedly, all of life sucked a big one at that time. I was sexually frustrated, who isn't as a teenager? I hated my body and the funky stuff it was doing, wouldn't do,

and even more, desired to do. Everything just seemed freakin' pointless.

Eventually I decided to dust off a black leather Bible Mom gave me, one with a zipper around it. I still do not know what the point of that was. I tried different portions of the big books, the ones that had names I couldn't pronounce: Ezekiel, Job, Psalms (silent "p" there), and one called Isaiah. That one I could pronounce thanks to an All-star point guard for the Pistons with the same name. These books supposedly were to make you a good person if you read them. It reminded me of reading Shakespeare. You might learn to respect it, but that does not mean you understand it.

One fall as a high school student I found myself in a bad place emotionally. I could not compete with teenage social life and statutes. Mom threatened me with psychologist sessions. I opened my Swiss Army knife blade regularly; it was a gift from one of Mom's boyfriends. I fantasized using it to open the underside of my left wrist. It was not a happy time.

Once after a particular bad day of school, with the knife opened on my bed, I flipped over to the red-letter section in the New Testament. These are the words of Jesus himself. I did not quite understand it, but it made more sense than the hard to pronounce names in the middle of the book. After reading I closed up the blade and put the survivor tool in a desk drawer. God showed up in some funky way when I read those texts, and though I was slightly depressed, it was enough to attempt going to school the next day.

Overtime I began to buy it. I bought into Him, Jesus. He was what I needed, He did fill whatever was gray and mushy and nauseating inside of me. I realized I could make it after all.

But there was still a problem. I knew I should go to church, because that's where

God and people who like Him hang out. But I still had a hard time stomaching the whole thing. I tried listening more, but the topics and values the guys or gals up front talked about seemed created for a people who were not like me.

Living holy in an evil world meant nothing to me. I doubt it means much to me now. I did not care for the missionary slides. (Not position, the people who go to Africa.)

So I double lived it for a while. I took in plenty of movies with naked people in them. I still thought I was a bad man jamming to tapes of Two Live Crew... Banned in the U.S.A. I continued to try unsuccessfully, to be a hipster at the parties. What I lacked in muscular definition, I made up for with four letter words.

I needed and wanting God, but the gig was a little lame. Even after things at church changed: the music started including guitars and the clergy quit wearing ties, I was still sure they were all Martians from somewhere beyond Jupiter. I still tried desperately to be someone in my struggling social world; chasing its offerings, but I felt a little shallow, a little dirty, a little left wanting more.

I wanted God and I wanted the world. I still do.

There is a passage in the Bible that helped me piece things together. In this passage, Paul was doing the missionary thing, the go to Africa sort, but I found something else there.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened

to be there.¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹ "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.³⁰ In the

past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."*

³² *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."* ³³ *At that, Paul left the Council.*

³⁴ *Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

- Acts 17: 16-34

When I read this, I realized I was not a total freak. This prominent leader of the early Jesus movement was hanging out in the world. Paul found himself in Athens, the capital cultural and academic center. Greenwich Village, Seattle, Oxford, Berkeley, Hollywood all rolled into one. Paul's faith did not lead him to chant in a monastery; the Spirit led him to the center of the cultural world.

Paul could talk the world's language. He was hip to the latest ideas, he knew the ins and outs of popular culture, he could banter intelligently about the Spirit of the Age. He was cultured. He was well read. He was worldly. He wasn't recycling some shrill cry he learned from a paranoid minister.

Similar to what I intuitively experienced, Paul knew going all the way down the way of the world wouldn't do it for him or anybody else. He believed on some deepest level that the cultural gate keepers wanted to know God but they were not there yet. Paul interpreted their own Athenian culture for them. He sought hope for his hearers. He wanted to free them from bleak afternoons alone in their room after school checking out

the latest Swiss cutlery. They needed to find more in life. The Pagan world was not fully evil, but without their Creator, they just might find more outer blackness than they ever desired.

Paul spoke of God, not screaming but speaking and reasoning, as the Great Spirit who moved through their culture, all through their lives. God desired to know them and to be known by them. The sophisticates just didn't have the eyes to see Him yet. God was right there, and if they could change the way they saw themselves and their world and the things of the Spirit, there was so much life right there for them. God brought hope to the world and He longed for people to discover it.

Some of the cultured Athenians were interested. They were prominent people: sophisticated, in the now, with it. But they knew there had to be more...

Paul warned the people against following idols. That may strike some as strange in today's world. I do not know anybody who sacrifices their dog (though if you must, I suggest a cat) to a statue, or prays to a totem trying to garner favor.

Paul worried that this chic Athens crowd were ruining themselves by making good things, ultimate things. We all become like what we worship. We all are warped when these nice, decent, helpful things, become the sole purpose of life.

But we still do the idol thing. In the Bible, an idol is making a good thing, an ultimate thing.

Money is a nice thing to have in your wallet, but when it's everything, your relationships fall apart. Children are great, I have three, but when your whole world revolves around them, things get a little wacky. Sex is a very good thing. Very good. When it's everything, there will be hell to pay all the way around.

These good things in our world: films, songs, shows, concerts, novels, ideas, get together of all types; offer something, but not everything. They create a thirst and wet the tongue, but they leave us desiring another shot. If we respond by guzzling a little more, we end up puking, crashing our car, and waking up with a ten-pound weight on our head.

If we wake up at all.

Boredom is living as if this life is all that there is. I like wine. I love movies. I like shuffling the MP3 player. But if this is it... it is not enough.

I cannot think of a period of my life when I was an addict of something (idol) and it created joy. It may create numbness or a tingling for a time, but not a stable satisfaction.

The only way we can enjoy this world is to not worship it. But human beings cannot not worship. The only way we can be human, the only way we can be a person with an identity, is to base our life around something. If our lives are not founded on something, we are not persons. It is impossible to be a living, breathing, nothing.

My wife Stephanie and I attempted watching movies together. We Blockbusted it every Sunday night while the little tykes were tucked in their beds. It did not work. She likes titles that star Reese Witherspoon, or Julia Roberts, and all the nameless Hugh Grant films. I certainly like Reese and Julia, (who doesn't?) and Hugh is okay. But I cannot tolerate romantic comedies. I gave those up when I was done courting Stephanie and the deal was sealed with vows. Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do.

Mainly I like darker dramas. Michael Mann's *Collateral* is a well crafted film. *Crash* is excellent. Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* is my favorite.

When I told Steph that Mystic River is my favorite, she wanted to see it.

She hated the film.

For my beloved, the Paul Haggis storyline is depressing. She wonders why anyone would watch a film that included child molesters, blind rage and revenge, and meaningless fatal consequences. Not quite a pick me up.

But when I take a few hours to enter the story again, I don't just see Sean Penn, Kevin Bacon, and Tim Robbins. I see a tale of human misery. A narrative of what attacking first and asking questions later does to everyone. A story of the inevitable consequences when evil hurts us, and we do not possess the resources to respond appropriately. I want to live a different life than the drama of the movie. The film does not feature characters than anyone would want to emulate. But I do believe God is sitting next to me sharing some popcorn. He's elbowing me and reminding me that this viewing is a picture of what He says about human life. This work could come straight out of the Scriptures themselves.

Yes He is there, He is everywhere in the world. But movies alone are not enough. I need to be looking for Him. I need to be watching it with Him.

Paul spoke of a God that is bigger than human conceptions. He is bigger than temples (think churches). He is bigger than their statues (think our understanding of Him). He is bigger than debates (think our messages). This God is bigger than the world and our culture. But He is not absent from the world and culture. He is hidden behind the products of life, but He is there if people desire to find Him.

If those of us who claim to know and follow Jesus, really believe that our God made the whole world, then we cannot believe that human culture and society and

creative and intellectual expressions are inherently evil. God gave humans the ability to create and mold and make and express the human condition, to put into words and images and products all that humanity experiences. It's a sign of the image of God within us.

The salvation we are offered in knowing and being known by our Creator is not a salvation from the world or its vast enjoyments that He provides for us. It's a salvation from worshipping these things and being left used and hurting and looking for something else. When we know a Creator that is in this world and beyond it, we can enjoy the world and yet be above being trapped within it.

To be holy is to be different, but not withdrawn or backwards. Holiness is a difference of living in and enjoying the world, without worshipping it or being caught in its clutches.

It's not holy to attack things you do not understand. As master Yoda said, fear leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering. It's worldly to avoid the world.

When the people who say they have faith in God, avoid and denigrate the world, they are worshipping an idol. They bow to the idol of religious security. It is idolatry to say God likes what we like, but hates all the other stuff that other people like.

I seek God. I believe in Him. But living with my head in the clouds- hidden in the sand of religion is boring. We were not meant for it.

Many say they believe in God, but are troubled with some of the organized religious systems. Many want to believe in God, but are afraid of becoming one of "them." Whenever I encounter these friends, I simply suggest that they have been exposed to poor explanations of Jesus and His mission. Some of our presentations have

not cut it. Maybe it's a good thing when people feel stuck between the world and the church? Maybe that is a sign to people that they have found Him?

Jesus is the God-man. The One who is not from this world, and yet, who is also a part of the creation. He invites us to live with a foot in heaven and foot on the earth.

“Be Yourself”

“I'm tired of being what you want me to be

*Feeling so faithless lost under the surface
Don't know what you're expecting of me
Put under the pressure of walking in your shoes...*

*Can't you see that you're smothering me
Holding too tightly afraid to lose control
Cause everything that you thought I would be
Has fallen apart right in front of you...”*

- Linkin Park

When my wife fell for me I looked good. I can still remember with distant fondness the first time I heard that a cute girl named Stephanie said I had a nice chest. I remember dorm mates commenting they wish they had my artfully won abs. You really could do your laundry on them. I pumped iron, I ran, I consumed cans of tuna. I had energy. I had some lady admirers. I had confidence.

But when I moved to Pennsylvania with my wife I had to work two jobs. I was a full-time undergraduate. I stayed up late studying Greek and eating potato chips. I ate out almost every day. I chowed on PA Dutch bread and ham and Amish grown corn and lots of pie. I quit playing ball... too busy.

I traded in my size 32-inch waist GAP denim for any brand of 38-inch waist pants I could find. I looked pregnant. I began to grow a nice pair of hearty man-boobs. My best friend mocked the cottage cheese that was culturing on the back of my thighs. Trips to the can seemed just short of giving birth. I didn't like who I was becoming. Everything, yes everything, was going in. No energy was given out. I was fat and not

happy. I wish I could say that period is over, it isn't. I am pleased to be no longer ordering C-cups from the man-zerre catalogue. I'm down to an A.

This began a struggle with my deep fear.

My body will age. Youthfulness will slip away. Life itself will slip away.

Will my life mean anything?

I fear becoming an old man, with thin and frail ankles, a bald scalp, plenty of healthy follicles in all of the wrong places: ears, nose, upper back. I fear becoming an old man whose body is slowly shutting down. I fear becoming an old man for whom Viagra quit working years ago, along with ears and eyes, tendons and joints. I fear becoming an old man whose chest resembles breasts. I fear spending my final days bed ridden and incontinent, unable to sleep due to the damp noises coming out of my various orifices. I fear regularly gurgling and squealing like a balloon with the air going out. I fear regularly gurgling and squealing like a balloon with the air going out.

What I fear this happening while remembering my former young and toned body. I fear remembering meeting and marrying and making love to my wife. I fear remembering my babies and watching them grow into strong men and a sassy woman. I fear remembering working long hours for decades. I fear remembering Christmases, and vacations, and being a grandparent for the first time. I fear remembering retiring and settling in Florida with my wife of 50-plus years. I fear remembering it and being reminded I became nothing of significance. I was only a cog in the machine of the biological life cycle.

I fear growing old with the passage of time because most of what I want in life, I know, I will not achieve.

I want to be an incredible CEO of a thriving non-profit organization. I want to be a person who others seek as a consultant, who is paid handsomely to give my thoughts on others' endeavors. I have desire to be someone that inspires and motivates and organizes and leads others to take the next hill. I long to be someone that doesn't try to write books, but that books are written about. I have long to be someone important, someone who matters, someone who changes things, someone who is a regular guest on Larry King, someone who Oprah has features.

But I know I will never be that person.

Over the last few years some people regularly encourage me. They say I am a pretty good speaker. They say I should write. They say I have a way with words. They say that communicating is my future. But I say, "No, I want to be a brilliant leader. I want to build a model organization. I want to be a talented organizer that every one admires."

They say, "Maybe you should take a writing course?"

The fear grows until I read the Scriptures.

The Bible offers perspective on who I really am and what it may mean.

Romans 12: 3-16

³ *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.* ⁴ *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,* ⁵ *so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.* ⁶

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior.

Sometimes, I am tired of the words of God. Sometimes I am tired of being proved wrong. But sometimes I need it.

This text from the Bible kicks my butt, but when the bruises heal, I find it is exactly what I need.

Paul says I am different and special and important. I am not just like everyone else.

Paul also says I need to get over my bad self. I cannot be what I want to be. I cannot be everything and everyone. God made me to be a certain kind of person. I have

a unique role to play, a path that only I can walk. I will find it when I accept who I am. I am not a CEO. I am not a gifted leader. I am not the man.

But maybe I can communicate? Maybe I was created to say something? Maybe I have a handful of words that can help a few people?

I need to accept my spot in the world, my place where I fit, and make something of it. I was not created to have my name in lights. I was made to help others live in the light of life.

I am slowly learning to give in. I am accepting my lot as a communicator of words, not as a builder of worlds.

I listen to podcasts of my favorite speakers and try to learn what they were doing. I watch speeches of great orators on-line and take notes and try to imitate them. I read books on communicating well, the ones that everyone had to pay \$59.99 for their required college speech course.

I go to a local Penn State branch and read every book I can on writing. I read the heavy weights, Updike, Mailer, Talese. I scour Google to find anything on iTunes, or even streaming MP3's, where people are interviewed on the writing process. I am painfully getting better. I am beginning to learn the craft. I am turning out more written pieces and giving more public talks.

Last year I was invited to speak at a spiritual retreat for Penn State students. I studied and brainstormed and crafted brilliant and touching talks for thoughtful students who grappled with the relevance of God for their everyday lives. I quoted popular culture. I shared my personal stories. I wove together insights from philosophers with passages of the Bible. I realized I came along way.

And nobody liked it but me.

Because my gifts have been about me.

Life is not about us. This life is too important to be freaked out because we are not getting our due. We never will. We were made as unique people, but what makes us special is there only to be given away.

I recently caught an old interview, circa 1991, with George Lucas, on the grainy televised, late night, local Community College channel. The interviewer asked the author and mastermind of Star Wars about his original aim in making the pictures. What was the purpose of this seemingly silly world of droids and Wookies and Jedis? Lucas replied that he was trying to tell stories that everybody would like. He did not follow the footsteps of his good pal, Martin Scorsese, who is known for making films that he, Scorsese, would want to see. Lucas used his skills for others. And that has made all the difference.

Some religious types paint a picture of a psychologically disturbed God who needs and demands to be the center of attention. It's as if the point of being human is to at every possible opportunity stroke God's fragile ego. He is like a fragile soul who needs a \$100-dollar an hour therapist to tell Him he matters. I do think God is IT. But I do not believe He is sitting around waiting on me to remind Him.

The God of the Scriptures is revealed as a complete Being who made everything and can do everything. Yet He uses His abilities to create other beings outside of Himself. He gives His best to the world. He gives Himself to the world.

God is IT and He is always giving it away. We can't see Him. He does not need to be seen. He shows up in people who use who they are to give and build into the world.

The way we begin to understand God is by looking at the person of Jesus Christ. He did not travel outside of his tiny nation. He never assumed an official position. He worked as a simple carpenter... He never wrote anything. He didn't organize an army. He just gave it all away.

Who is Jesus? The God-man who used everything He was, everything He had, and He gave it away to the world, to the point of death on a cross.

The message of Jesus is this: God is everything, and He became nothing, so you could be a something. You are naturally a nothing, but you have become a something, so become like God and be a nothing, so others can be a something.

If God gives everything away, maybe we can?

It helps us if we understand what makes us who we are. How are we honestly different from most everyone else we know? Not how do we want to be different, but how are we honestly different? What do we love to do? What are the things we would gladly do for free? What do we find ourselves studying and thinking about and practicing for no reason? What do others say we are gifted in?

We begin to gain self-knowledge when we try and fail. The light bulb only goes off after we have tried and failed, tried something else and did okay, tried something else and found we had a knack for it. But we need to live with eyes wide open. We are to listen to our lives. We may take notes on the different experiences we have.

God is speaking right into the circumstance of our lives. He is speaking through our daily activities. He may be saying something we are not always prepared to hear.

The hard part is being okay with who we are. It can be a challenge to come to terms with being human. None of us can be and do everything. We cannot even be and do many different things. But we can be and do some things, or at least something.

One little secret to life is that the people who make it, the people who do something, the people that make this terrestrial ball a better place to live on, are people who accepted who they are and began to dream and plan and work to make something of it.

The key is to be spiritually open enough to see what can happen, with the little that we are.

We can't choose what family in which we are born. We didn't choose the city or suburb or hick town that formed our early years. We can't change our I.Q. But we can do something with who we are. We can play your part well on the stage of life. We can do all of this for others, and not squander it on ourselves.

"To be yourself is all that you can do..."

- Audioslave

“The High Life”

“There's a smell of stale fear that's reeking from our skins.
The drinking never stops because the drinks absolve our sins
We sit and grow our roots through the floor
But what are we waiting for?

So give me something to believe
Cause I am living just to breathe
And I need something more
To keep on breathing for
So give me something to believe...”

- *The Bravery*

I don't want to tell people what I do for a living. When people ask me what I do for work I cringe and quickly try to come up with some creative, yet interesting way of describing being a pastor without using the term. Eventually I just say “Pastor.” They force a polite smile, similar to a child opening a shiny Christmas present, only to discover it is a new pair of underwear.

The new acquaintance offers something like, “Oh....well.... That's nice. I am sure your mother is proud. There are always needy people who need some nice people like you to help them.” Then they walk away and I know they won't chat it up with me the rest of the evening.

I will stand outside the circle, straining to hear their killer joke that they ripped off from Jon Stewart.

Recently I headed downstairs from my friend's apartment in Morristown, NJ, to Dublin's Pub. I needed some authentic shepherd's pie, mixed veggies, and a pint or two.

As I was waited for the thirty year-old waiter to bring me my bill, “O Holy Night” played on the canned Christmas music seeping through the system. The tenor bellowed,

“Christ is the Lord...Oh praise His name forever... His pow'r and glory evermore
proclaim.”

My waiter stood next to the bar with his arm around his girl, another waitress, as he waited for my bill to print. If he's that eager, who knows what happens back in the kitchen?

A middle-aged woman, shifting her extra weight that comes with age, played the part of a clown with too much blue and orange make-up. Her circus act included pretending to be terribly interested in what the guy next to her was saying. His smile revealed an assurance that he played the Don Juan of the establishment.

Behind me, a large group with some type of Eastern European accent, laughed at someone's dry wit. The chuckles over Carlsbergs echoed more genuinely than the lady and her Casanova.

In front of the main wooden doors, two young female employees discussed something in blonde speak.

Nobody listened to the song. Apparently Christ is the Lord of the Nineteenth century.

He appears irrelevant to people who want to live the High Life.

One of my ex brother-in-laws lives a life torn in two as he jumps from Concord to Concord, visiting one land and then the other. A man of excesses, he spends weeks and months spent scrapping together pocket change for more Skoal and Heineken. These intoxicants lead him into failed marriages, failed attempts at co-habitation, and failed attempts at being a father to children of different women.

Eventually he sobers up, dries out, kicks the tins, and goes to church. Here he finds God again. Here he prays. Here he tries to drink up ballads of God and the life beyond, and tries to walk the narrow path. Eventually it's too otherworldly. Eventually the head of the nether regions comes a calling, the ghostly world of buzzes and orgasmic releases beckons, and he takes a trip again to the land of pleasure.

He seeks the mythical heaven here on earth only to be reminded he lives in hell.

I suspect that like my ex-brother-in-law many of us also live between two worlds.

One side is the domain of God. This appears as the kingdom of what is good, of what we are supposed to be, the world of what we should be doing. There is a tribe full of buttoned up, sober and somber people, who obey the speed limit, and endure every minute of it.

The other end of the chasm is the realm of the god of hedonists. This is the sphere full of laughs, feeling good, the other kind of spirits, and of course the ladies. And there is clan that is free and fun and like heaven pouring through the veins. But eventually we awaken to hangovers and headaches and broken and messy relationships.

Many of us live in one world for some time, then tire of it, dig out our passport, and venture into the other one. Neither feels like home.

Jesus understands. He sought a better way. One of his first "God-man" displays brought a halt to this bi-polar travel. The Creator became Lord of the Dance.

¹ *On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there,* ² *and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.* ³ *When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."*

⁴ *“Woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. “My hour has not yet come.”*

⁵ *His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”*

⁶ *Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.*

⁷ *Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.*

⁸ *Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”*

They did so, ⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰ and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

¹¹ *What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples put their faith in him. ¹² After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days.*

- John 2: 1-12

Apparently Jesus and his crew were no strangers to parties and celebrations. This is not a Church social. Wine is flowing in the plenty at this wedding feast.

They ran out. No more happy juice.

The virtuous Mary, the Mother of our Lord, suggests that her Divine Son should do something. He didn't get this party started, but he keeps it going. Of course Jesus,

the ever dutiful, mild and meek son, takes a moment to suggest to the Virgin-Mum that she didn't really get his mission or purpose. Then he does the unimaginable: he makes more wine.

The Christ worked the miracle at the time of the bash when the kosher host should pull out the cheap stuff, the sauce that teenagers try to illegally purchase because it's cheap, but works.

Jesus does not make just any \$10.00 box wine that my buddies would have grabbed years ago as they jammed out to Def Leppard.

He made the type of wine that those across town, who enjoy the finer things of life, drink when they toast each other.

Jesus becomes the Savior of the party. He provides the fuel for the DJ to keep mixin' it up in all good faith at the turntables. He makes fermented drink with spiritual water, holy water. He makes the drink used for other worldly spirituality. He is hinting in that cheeky way that Jesus tends to operate, that the God of the Holy of Holies is also the God of good times and the other kind of spirits.

He was serious when he said, "I come that you may life, and have it more abundantly."

Maybe salvation is not about escaping laughs and your turn on the dance floor, and the more enjoyable things of this present world? If salvation is escape, if it is turning off the music, and wearing chastity belts, would it really be salvation?

It would be more like walking to slow inner-hell, with a hymnbook tucked under your arm.

The Other that we find revealed in the person of Jesus the Christ, appears as a God who has dual citizenship, or better yet, an ambassador seeking to make peace and a permanent treaty between the two states that can never seem to reconcile. He is the God-man. The One who invites us to find a life of meaning, depth, redemption, reconciliation to our Creator, in the ever present Now. Jesus invites us into the on-going discipleship of enjoying God Himself, AND the things of this world that He created as a gift for His people.

You can have your cake, or your brew, or your salvation, and eat em' and drink em' too. You can sing heartily that Christ is the Lord, even at Dublin's Pub.

We all know that being an ascetic does not work. How is that celibacy thing going in the Roman Catholic priesthood? How is the "don't taste, don't touch" mentality working out for Southern Baptists and their slowly diminishing numbers of young adults? But yes, if we only buy into the culture of wine, women and song, the results include: vomiting up wine, knocking up women, and too often being alone with a lament in our hearts.

When we find a relationship with God, the real kind, not the screamed at you platitudes kind, we find a purpose, a center, a relational compass that helps us keep moving towards the true North.

You can accept invitations to the parties.

Way back in the Stone Age of the early 90's, I vacationed annually with a friend named Matt and his family at Myrtle Beach. Coming from a single-parent home we could rarely if ever, afford thirteen-hour drives and time share fees for a week away. At

the time, Matt's parents were like second parents to me, and this week away, beginning the day after the end of the school year, was the highlight of my pubescent life.

Several trips involved little more than too much sun, steaks on the grill prepared by Matt's father, and late nights staying up watching Letterman and whatever crappy early 80s movie was on after hours.

But on one special trip, my last visit to the Carolinas, it all changed.

Matt was a football player, outside linebacker, and he worked hard that year at bench-pressing from all imaginable angles. He sipped a daily Creatine cocktail. I was still 6'1'', 130 pounds.

Matt decided he was going to get his freak on and I was going to awkwardly live vicariously through him.

One cloudless afternoon we met a smoking hot blonde, thin, eye-shadowed, and looking desperate and inviting all at the same time. She invited us, well actually Matt and by extension that meant me too, to her trailer for the evening. A crew from a hick High School in North Carolina had a place to themselves. It was a hip-hop week: drinking, cussing, lots of doing the nasty. We had stepped out of our pedestrian, suburban, Columbus, Ohio life into 2AM Cinemax.

I sat on a sagging, flowered, smoke stained sofa drinking a can of beer. I tried hard to look smooth with a Swisher Sweet we picked up on the corner. Matt went into the backroom with his beach Nymph. All around me were beautiful women, who couldn't walk straight, who spoke as if they just returned from a tour of duty, and who threw around sexually loaded phrases like guys in a high school locker room.

I loved it.

The joyous atmosphere was broken by screams of rage. Apparently one of the Carolina boys had left with an unknown vacationer who had to have weighed at least 200 hundred pounds and yet wore stringy pieces as if she was slotted for Sports Illustrated favorite cover. She made it known she wanted to take a ride, any kind of ride, with anyone willing to oblige her. The Carolinians' smallish friend saw his underage opportunity and left with her for a dark place on the beach. After all, Matt and his partner had the room occupied.

His friends were livid, not that their boy was getting his turn, his first turn, but that he apparently failed to bring along the expected rain gear. His classmates envisioned him returning with a smile and pep in his step, and with a fresh case of HIV.

They yelled, they threw things, they demanded to know who I was and if I was with this thief of a female who could take his life away. I stammered, turned red, trying to remain calm with my tobacco and barely sipped brew, explaining I was simply waiting for the door to the backroom to open. They swore, reminding each other that strangers were not welcomed and stormed into the den of pleasure. The Carolina crew drug out Matt and his half dressed friend and demanded we leave. We weren't going to wash those sheets they had to sleep in were we?

Back at our place sitting in the dark, with only the flicker of Letterman and his top ten list, Matt told his tale. She had a boyfriend back home, but he would never know. She smelled flowery and young and intoxicated. She wanted to go all the way down as much as Matt did. They tried. She could not, still too young and not ready. She felt bad. She felt guilty. He felt frustrated and only slightly guilty.

Matt could not quite pick the fruit, yet he realized it would not have tasted as good as those Cinemax stars portrayed.

That night lying in bed, imagining all that happened, or could have happened, I was full of masculine drive like the rest of my young teenage brothers. Even if it was contained in a thin 6'1" inch frame, there was a V8 under the hood. But I was surprised at what I also sensed...

The girl from the hot-sunned afternoon, with the bleached hair and cocoa skin, was a total wreck. What if that was my sister? Or my teenage love from back home? What about the overweight one that was offering up herself free of charge to some unknown hormone machine? Why was everyone so angry, so pissed, so...not happy? Why did everything that appeared to be paradise, a South Carolina oasis of young ecstasy, 80 proof, seem only like a humidity filled mirage?

Why did everything that looked like life smell so much like death?

As the years and experiences have rolled on since my first exposure to the underside of pleasure, the mirage slowly receded into a glimpse of reality. We want the rush, the waves, the surfing of human ecstasy and peaked blood levels. We want to be lighter, to smile and laugh and be free, we desire to leave our problems behind as we ride the crests for a couple of hours.

Yet these same waves can swell into a tsunami of pain and everything that is bleak. God is not against pleasure and life, but pleasure on its own is against Him, and it robs us of life. It can drown His people.

We are all pretty much in the same boat here. We want something. We need something. Normal, everyday life is not enough. We are convinced there is some

experience out there, some trailer of good times, which can bring something more to our dull days. God is not against it. But the delicacies of life, those peaks that make human life enjoyable, only seem to work out when we are rooted. It works when we actually know how to ride the waves without crashing and burning. It works when we can enjoy the sea and its gifts, without plummeting into the torrents of the deep.

What we long for is God Himself.

I find that when I am connected with God, when my inner life finds friendship with an Infinite Person that loves me as I am, He fills the shallows of my heart. I am stable. I am clear. I am okay. At these points the good life is good. I can laugh, I can make merry, I can tell party jokes. These extras become just that... extras. They are gifts of enjoyment from a Happy Creator. I am not needy, depressed, vacuous. I am not digging at the sand frantically, plunging my parched lips into the grains, convinced eventually I will find that source of water. I already have it. I have dug a well that never runs dry and has no murderous undertow.

The mirage gives way to a scenic landscape that is perfect for relaxing.

If we live without God, if we live as if He has nothing to do with this real life, our souls become black holes. Our inner life becomes an Orick vacuum sucking everything up, even as everything bunches into depressing gray within.

We were made for Him.

Without our God, we take limited, everyday life items and try to make them dress up like our souls' deepest needs. Then they bite like hell. When there is no larger meaning in something, its offerings are shallow and short-lived.

Finding God is not finding escape. It is finding the right eyes to see with. We don't have to hide the Captain Morgan, or throw away all of the Romeo y Julieta's. We learn to see them rightly. We learn to see ourselves rightly. We become people that need a Creator, not just a good time. We become people that need a Creator, not a religious escape. We become people that need a Creator, then we can enjoy all that is His creation without being swallowed up by it.

Life is too short to spend it hiding from the enjoyments He has made. Life is too short to try to make enjoyment without Him.

I wish I could say that I am a noble man. That I always live by principles and standards, and ironclad virtues of morality. I don't. I can't. I am a product of my family, my generation, my world. I want to have fun. I want to live it up. I want anything that is not boring.

I do not follow God in the person of Jesus because I should. I follow Him because He is right. I follow Him because there is no party without Him. But with Him, even ceremonial holy water can be transformed into a party that goes all night long.

You can't start the party until He shows up. Who's going to ferment the best wine?

“Family Crap”

*“Father of mine
Take me back to the day
When I was still your golden boy
Back before you went away...”*

*Daddy gave me a name
Then he walked away
My dad gave me a name...”*

- Everclear

Too many of us know well what the broken, divorced, unhealthy, dysfunctional, blah, blah, blah, family is like. Sure, growing up there (or between the homes more likely) wasn't hell. Hell, most of our friends did! But it definitely was no picnic.

If someone asked me even four years ago, at the age of twenty-eight, what it was like growing up in the cracks of a divorce with a parent being divorced a couple of times and a sibling who has struggled through her own broken marriages, I would say it was no big deal. I do not remember anything else. I did not have a close friend whose parents were married.

I did date a girl that came from a happy family, a strange experience.

This world was new for me.

I didn't quite get it, and they sure didn't quite get me. They were all nice enough...extremely gracious. I was given the keys to Daddy's Caddy. Not a bad ride at age sixteen. I looked great leaning to one side with a skinny arm fully extended on top of the wheel.

I learned a long time ago that nice, Christian family, healthy, everyone married, everyone gainfully employed, everyone going to church, types pray against their kids

hookin' up with an unfortunate peer who spun the wheel of life and landed on "Latch Key Kid."

Now that I am so much older and wiser (thirty-two) with three offspring of my own, and happily married for over nine years, I sense something. Some of the toxins from my birth environment have unknowingly been flowing through my veins for years. My body and my mind developed exposed to some lethal chemicals.

I now see I have been adrift for much of my life. Other guys who grew from diapers through puberty in a connected family do have their own issues. We cannot avoid them. The waves of the sea get choppy for their sails as they navigate the channel. But they have an anchor. They rock and pitch and get wet and can blow chunks over the side. But they are grounded. They know they are staying put. The nausea will subside. They have no danger of blowing up against some jagged rocks hidden in the night's fog.

Yet I was reared and cut loose with no anchor. I've always had enough pride and inner drive to feel like I had a decent enough vessel and that I have a clue of how to man sails. I have the stones to set for the deep. But after I ventured out into adulthood, I realized my ship does not have an anchor. A ship without an anchor can be a little flighty, regularly deciding to chart out a new course and final destination. These boats are at times described as immature, they have been assembled with so much "potential," but no Captain has ever seemed to put it all together to go anywhere. These schooners can end up circling repeatedly, staring into the blackest sea abyss.

Now I am a husband and dad, a man with a mortgage and a daily calendar and responsibilities. It would have liked to have taken a boat safety course. It is damn hard voyaging without an anchor. Over-compensating can really do a number to your sea

craft.

We all have our insecurities. We all have our inner bent and broken things that make us feel like hollow men and women walking in and out and among other human stable solids that make up our social lives.

My interior caverns however, appear to be longer, emptier. My personal thoughts echo like those Swedish people on the Riccola commercials. The eerie echo magnifies the sound, like some aged, cranky mariner from Scooby Doo.

I have some explainable reasons for insecurities. Dad's male pattern baldness is proving that it does not skip generations. The sympathy gut I grew when my wife was growing our children inside of her is still gestating inside of me. I've never had nice teeth and as much as I worked to have a seat on the pine, I've never been a good athlete.

The other fellas I know don't second-guess themselves as often. They don't slide into a perpetual funk when they have a bad day and things don't quite pan out on the Harris project at work. Most seem rather content going about life and career and home and pub and football Sundays.

They just live.

I question. I doubt. I stop doing and start examining. I rappel into my personal cavern with a small flash light, checking out the surroundings. I shop for Quick Crete that can maybe be mixed with water to fill up the cavern. I compare myself. I live with potential that rarely, if ever, is realized.

I am like one of those disappointing chocolate rabbits you found tucked in the shining green grass in your Easter basket. A tall bunny complete with baby blue eyes and a yellow mouth. When you bit into it the thin edges fell into the hollow inside. It

looked good, but it lacked inner substance.

I am a big fat cheap Easter Bunny from the dollar store.

I learned to spot my own kind, my brothers and sisters from messy family beginnings. I worked with teenagers for years. They could simply walk in the door and my divorce-dar would begin registering immediately. There is something in the fashion or protest against it, the smile or lack thereof, the way the shoulders are held or slumped, the personality or better yet, the search for one. I know them when I see them. When they see me they know what they may become.

In the past, I bought into the American Dream that everything should be happy and good for me. One day Dad will call and say he is sorry, he and Mom will say their vows again, and we would start going to ball games at the new big league park with a brand new catcher's mitt.

Daddy will dance like Fred Astaire with his little girl when she gets married and the excited new Grandpa and Grandma won't interfere in my deeply loving marriage. They will only stop by to care for little Chase and Ella, who will sit on their laps, being read Charles Dickens and eating Werther's Original Candy from Granddad's special hidden stash.

In the back of our minds, most of us buy into this myth. We think we deserve this. We think this is being born in Christian America. We think that the couple, which bestowed us with their physical characteristics, are required by law to also grant us this familial life and liberty and happiness. It is their job. They have to do this.

Eventually, after listening to another conversation with one of my parents complaining about the other, I realized that contrary to Walt Disney and his empire of

theme parks and animated escape films, dreams do not always come true. My journey began under a bad moon. My vessel lacks an anchor.

I am sure one day my kids will complain about me, the circle of life. I grew up and looked back and saw my parents' faults and the things I believed I missed. The pattern will continue as my children will look back and see my faults and things that they will believe they have missed. This is the circle of life.

My biggest problem, our collective problem, comes from desiring a world that is fair, a world that is the way it is supposed to be.

Fairness is over-rated. Fairness is hell.

Do we think Mommy and Daddy need to say they are sorry? They have to make things right? They have to hire a single engine plane with a banner trailing behind, admitting they are failures and they are sorry and everything will be different? They have to beg and plead for forgiveness like Ralph's parents when he went blind from soap poisoning?

Where did Mommy and Daddy come from? Happy homes? No way. Grandpa was cold and distant and never talked except to complain, swear, or drone on and on about politics. How about Grammy? Irrational when talking about most topics, she possessed a high-pitched voice that it made it hard to take her seriously. Mom said her mom was a dedicated mom, which meant she drank enough out of a flask in the pantry to mop the floors one more time for her husband. Dad said his dad was tough but fair, which meant if he looked at him the wrong way a barrage of belt lashings, along with a dose of finely tuned curse arrows was headed right for him.

Mommy and daddy hooked up right out of high school, totally immature and

naïve and unprepared, thinking their generation and its hope for a new world and their young love, were better than the stuff that was called home life.

What is fairness? What do our parents think is fair? What do I think is fair? What will our little Chases and Ellas think to be fair when they are all smart and mature and grown-up?

Some things are more important than fairness.

I am drawn to Jesus Christ because He is not fair. God lives above fairness. He lives in love. He loves me when I do not deserve it.

God calls me to a life that is above fairness.

²⁵ *Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said:* ²⁶ *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple.* ²⁷ *And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

²⁸ *"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?"* ²⁹ *For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you,* ³⁰ *saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'*

³¹ *"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?"* ³² *If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.* ³³ *In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.*

³⁴ *"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?"* ³⁵ *It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.*

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

- Luke 14: 25-35

Church people talk about family constantly. Family must be first. Family must be everything. Family must be your life. Family must be your ministry. Family must be your calling. Family must be the foundation of society.

But Jesus did not say that. He forges in a totally different direction, a different direction than the family promoters who use his name regularly on Bill O' Reilly.

When we actually look at what the representative of God said and did and not what others say he said and did, He surprises. Family must not be everything. Life and faith are not measured by family status. There is something bigger. There is something even more important than family.

Jesus says finding the Way includes giving up what we want. Its letting the perfect, happy, close-family, smiling, fun holiday dinners, American dream go. God brings transformation and says the path to life is not lined with achieving and finding what you hoped and dreamed for. The Way involves giving up our dreams and becoming a part of helping others find their dreams.

The Creator we find through Jesus the Christ loves all people unconditionally. Like a Father or Mother we always wanted, He is for us, He has our best interest in mind, He gives and loves, even when we wet the Star Wars sheets.

When soldiers hung Jesus naked and bleeding and suffocating and soiling himself on the cross, he uttered two incredible statements. He said "Father forgive them, for they

do not know what they do.” This is prayer of undying love, for small people who cowardly and selfishly whacked the prince of peace. He also cried, “Father, why have you forsaken me?”

Even the Son of God felt like his Father hung him out to dry.

If we dare enough to take Jesus Christ seriously, then we seek to live these two prayers even knee deep in family crap. We may still feel that Mommy and Daddy let us down. But we will be compelled to love people, yes even our parents, with self-giving love, even if believe they do not deserve it. When we love people unconditionally we find something much more important than growing up in a solid family.

Let’s be clear: God invites us to be the lovers and encouragers and forgivers and life-givers to our parents. He invites us to leave the sophomoric posture of sitting around and crying or cussing or just going numb because they were supposed to do for us, and they failed. Mommy and daddy felt the same way about their Mom and old man. Chase and Ella may feel the same about us.

The downward spiral of family grudges needs to end with us. It ends because we don’t live judging what people were supposed to do and failed. We live loving and bringing life, the life fueled by the unfair love God gives us, and we pass that unfair love back up the family tree.

Faith is not ultimately about family. Faith is pouring the water of life into the base of the tree so the leaves all the way at the top will grow healthy and strong and turn beautiful reds and yellows and oranges when the cool winds of autumn blow. When the crumpled leaves finally fall to the ground, we don’t rush to fire up the blower and swiftly move them to the gutter. We gently rake them up into full piles that our own children

will laugh and run and roll around in the fallen colored leaves.

The tree exposes dead branches. Nasty little white worm bugs wiggle under the bark. But a mature human being treats the tree and brings it back to health. Nothing is more unsightly than a sawed off stump in the yard. Chase and Ella cannot play in its leaves. A tree stump might mean less yard work for us, but it's not fun for anyone else.

Besides, we all hope our children will nurse the tree along when it is their turn to care for the yard.

The crucifixion and resurrection of God is not only a challenge and call to salvation to the abusers and neglectful, it challenges those who were wronged. If we wallow in our supposed victimhood, and don't change in our hearts and their dreams, we become the abusers when it's our turn to parent. We overcome our upbringings not by giving people an ear full, but by redeeming our family of origin. We learn to re-chart and re-tell the story of our family.

Family crap smells. But God can use it as fertilizer for that family tree.

My three children are still young enough that we bathe them all together. Six and four year old boys, and a two-year-old girl, make great playmates among the bubbles and Elmo and Cookie Monster figures.

Eventually one of them decides warm water is a great place to take a leak. It's too comfortable to not let the bladder go when playing with spongy alphabet letters that stick to the shower wall. Eventually one of the others will notice and scream foul. I used to immediately get them all out, scold the offender, and try to run the water again. But I figure: "Hey, toddler piss isn't that bad, is it?"

After the immediate outburst, they get over it, and return to playing with toy

alligators. They swish it around and dilute it among the bubbles and they continue squirting water out of the rubber shark on each other. They call for me to check out their foamy Santa beards. I wouldn't propose they like urine. But they have learned to play with each other and deal with it.

Those little ones of mine are going to have to live a whole life of smelling family secretions. Maybe if they can learn to make the most of it now, they will build a tolerance for the future?

“I Want Your Sex”

“Conquest-
He was out to make a conquest
Didn't care what harm was done
Just as long as he won
the prize

Conquest-
She was just another conquest
Didn't care whose heart was broke
Love to him was a joke
'til he looked into her eyes...”

- *The White Stripes*

When it comes to sex it can be hard to imagine God. When people are fully engrossed, I doubt many consider the long bearded God sitting on a throne and approving.

If that isn't a turn off, what is?

Church is not typically a place that sings the praises of orgasms, erotic love, and the total sensual pleasure of oneness with another. Sex is only mentioned in “Don't do this, don't that, or the flames of hell are knocking on the door.” Apparently Dante's Inferno's center ring does not only include some medieval Pope , but every red blooded American male. And more than a few women.

Normal people, ones who not only are into sex, but who also think about it often, are left with 2 options: 1. Try really hard to not be sexual, repress it all, and make themselves sick. Or 2. Forget the whole God thing. Libido and heaven are just too far apart.

The long epic tale of God in the world, the Bible, is not something you want to

read to your small children. There are tales of rape, and men of faith with bigger harems than an Islamic martyr with his allotment of virgins. There is a story of teenage girls who get daddy sauced and decided to hit the hay with him. There is Godly leader who has a friend killed so that his adulterous fantasy can burst into reality.

Many of these are graphic warnings. But there is more.

Early in the story is the Divine command to be fruitful and multiply. God is encouraging the most intense physical writhe of pleasure, which He Himself created. At points, the Creator uses the metaphor of sex to describe his intimacy with humanity. There is the Song of Solomon, a book in the Old Testament, which no one reads aloud in church, because it is erotic and does not always mince words. Breasts, intercourse, and physical release drip from the pages. Many a self-respecting clergyman has tried to interpret it as a picture of God and us. They say it is an allegory. Normal people know better. It's steamy, honest, full-bore praise of sex and romance.

Apparently God is a little more honest about the unmentionables, than many of his followers who simply leave it unmentioned.

Many years ago I had a friend named Kerry. There was not much about her to like- she was that lost girl who was blessed, or cursed, with quite a body.

Everyone knew she was a mess inside. Something was missing in her depths that made it clear to everyone that she was not right. Many guys tried to make the most of it. When I was feeling kind, and positive, and believed in humanity, I thought the rumors were simply that. Another part of me, my lesser side, knew it was true. Or I hoped so.

One night when the crew was out, she came to me crying, wrapping her arms close, so that I could feel her tears on my cheeks and other aspects of her in my

imagination. She sobbed over the newest tale passing around in the locker rooms.

Apparently Mike, the hilarious guy who resembled a cross between Scott Farcas from “A Christmas Story” and an early Philip Seymour Hoffman, let it be known that he had climbed her peak and tasted the spoils. She swore it was a lie and wondered aloud why our peers were so cruel to her. I held her half like a concerned older brother looking out for his little sis, and half like a twisted young man that wondered what Mike experienced. In the end, my better side won out, and I listened and encouraged her that she was a wonderful girl and a good friend.

Years later reality was exposed. A real friend of mine shed heavier tears over the phone as her marriage with the Farcass/Hoffman hybrid was falling to pieces. She learned of his several extra-curricular activities, the latest included the longhaired brunette who I had consoled and comforted that memorable night.

How could she do this? How could she be one of those dark women that for a gamble of temporary love, had left a devoted wife and young children as the ultimate losers at the crap table? How could she offer up her innermost treasure to the very guy who seemed hell bent on ruining her social life?

We can be a pitiful species.

I guess she was like me. A soul that on one hand hoped and dreamed of real love and growing old with your best friend rocking together on a porch swing watching the sun go down and missing the grandkids.

And on the other, willing to risk it all when the animalistic desire to mix fluids with another filled the imagination.

Many of us could be named Kerry.

It's like we are trapped. Stuck. The angelic forces of good and the orcs of evil live within all of us. Sometimes one wins, sometimes the other one wins. The tension lying inside the bodies and souls of our kind is nothing less than an epic battle.

Can anyone be blamed for cursing, or more, doubting that some type of loving Creator made this mess?

He did create our sexuality. If we are simply mammals, biological masses that roam the earth seeking to spread our seed and give birth so our DNA may continue on, this would not be a big deal. Who would care?

But if another portion of us is Spirit, immortal, then these deeds are a serious matter, which can bring us tremendous pain.

Somewhere in our shadowy depths gushes a spring of passion that we feel if we don't let it gush out, we are doomed to pull out our hair and gnaw the inside of our cheeks. We also know if we give in, depression, loss, and the death of our soul will soon follow.

The unreasonable desire to jump somebody else's flesh, seems to come from nowhere. What man has not suddenly, and for no apparent reason, had an almost instantaneous desire to engage in that type of activity that not only brings the flush of fluids and heaven on earth, but could also destroy everything in his life? Everything he has worked for. Everything he has hoped for.

Too many of us know the slow death march of being led around by our genitalia.

Betrayed relationships, inner decay, heavy guilt, feeling like we bid too much for that "gotta have it" from eBay, only to unwrap the standard U.S. Postal service package and experience a huge let down. So much that offers heaven, includes fine print about

experiencing hell, but we rarely read it.

This battle reveals that normal life is not enough.

If we believe we are spiritual and sensual, immortal and earthy, then penises and vaginas are pleasure portals that plug into the deep immaterial parts of us that we cannot see. They are mystical gateways to the soul and to the forever

We need intimacy. We need to bind to other souls. We need God.

Paul writes:

³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

- 1 Thessalonians 4: 3-8

We are made for each other and the Holy other. We are not simply individuals. We are interesting pieces of a puzzle. By ourselves we are strange and misshapen, flat figures that do not make much sense. But when the grooves and indentations and curves are in the right place, the series of relationships make something much bigger. As a whole, every piece makes sense, has a purpose, and is linked together in such a way that

reveals a new image. We become a picture that is worth framing and hanging in the basement family room.

The sense of lacking something individually, but being something incredibly new collectively, is sexuality. Sex is a huge aspect of being human. Like failed attempts at trying to put a puzzle piece in the wrong spot, pieces can get torn and frayed if you try too hard.

The pleasures of the flesh are a craving... because the right union makes you more. We can be something bigger and more beautiful, part of a larger soul.

Sexual desire is spiritual.

We do have the tendency to want to play Master Puzzler. We can be tempted to want to leap off the table and try our particular shape, with all the other shapes. But we don't work that way. When we try to personally fit all the other pieces, we splinter and fray, and lose our shape and struggle in the future to fit the larger puzzle. We want to have the view of the puzzler sitting at the table and taking it all in, but we are limited and we cannot see the complete design. The Puzzler sees three dimensions, we see two. We are limited to fitting a particular piece and letting him see it all. Sexual attempts at playing the divine are the most dangerous of all games.

Supposedly we live in an era where we have been freed from outdated, religious prudes who held us back from enjoying that natural stuff our body desires. Sex has always been fun, necessary, healthy, and only people stuck in some ignorant medieval world would put a clamp on the joy. In a by-gone era, religiously paranoid people made a big deal about not talking or doing this stuff, but we are soooooo past that.

Human experience, reality, and the better part of humanity know better.

I have often been asked, even by family members, “Why sex only in marriage? If two people love each other, are committed to each other, fit each other, what’s the big deal about making it legal? There are plenty of husbands and wives who practically hate each other... but it’s cool with them makin’ it, but not others who really do have a great relationship, just not a document fixed with a County Seal?”

The real issue here has nothing to do with being uptight, rigid, or a killjoy. The issue is about loving other people. Sex is enjoying the most private, personal, deepest part of another human being. It’s literally getting all of the best they have to offer another person.

The issue of marriage comes to this: Is it loving to help yourself to the best a person has to offer, a place of total vulnerability, if you have not committed to being there in the morning, regardless of what happens?

There are no part-time parents. People miss the joys of watching their boys grow into men, their daughters into women; they miss rewarding adult relationships with their children, if they did not change diapers, clean up vomit, and deal with thousands of tantrums. People receive the joys of parenthood, because they were committed even when it was joyless.

We receive the joys of intimacy, if we have committed our life to always being there.

God’s calling, God’s desire, God’s intention for us to rock the bed within marriage, is the call to unselfish love. We don’t enjoy and take the best from people without putting our lives on the line for them. Some will say, “But why do I need a ceremony and piece of paper for that?”

Because then it is a real commitment.

It means something to stand before friends and family and say we are committing to each other no matter what the future may bring. We place our finances in jeopardy. We change our legal status. Our lives are inter-mingled. Everything is together. When this happens, we are then in a place to dive into the depths of another person, to bask in all that is there to find, because we love them, we are seeking their best, we are not simply getting off on the best physical attribute.

So when people ask, “Why get married?” I ask, “Why not?” The answer to that question reveals the reality of a relationship.

Typical answers:

“I have been hurt before.”

“We need to see if we are really compatible.”

“We will one day.”

“I don’t need a judge or a minister to validate my love.”

“I don’t want it to be too stuffy, too hard. I want this relationship to be free and exciting.”

What do all of these answers have at their core? Not love, or commitment, or sacrifice, or another person being more important than me. They all reveal selfishness.

We can say that it is love, but if we are not willing to put ourselves on the line, it is not love.

God is on the side of love.

We need to ask ourselves, “What do we want? More messy break-ups? Cycles of interest, excitement, passion, boredom, frustration, aloneness and depression, and then starting all over again?

Sex is ultimately not about our bodies, though they may enjoy some nice perks. Sex is two souls inter-twining. It’s a connection, two becoming one, its real love.

Pretending sex is anything else is just asking for it. . .

“I Get By With a Little Help From My Friends”

*“You don't have to put up a fight
You don't have to always be right
Let me take some of the punches
For you tonight*

*Listen to me now
I need to let you know
You don't have to go it alone...”*

- U2

Years ago I worked for a landscaping/mowing company. Most of my co-workers were high school dropouts known for calling in to talk radio shows quite upset that the President of the United States or the local football team’s General manager had not listened to their suggestions. If these idiots would, we would have record Gross National Product increases and annual Super Bowl victories. These men are not only experts of international affairs (“Let’s just nuke the hell out of em’ all, then they’ll learn!”) and the NFL (“I’d bet my \$400 paycheck I could coach the Bengals better than that Bum!”) but they are also collectors of more porn than the local Lion’s Den Adult Bookstore.

The work force included plenty of beer guts that looked like they were ripe with invitro fertilized septuplets and tales of last night’s sexual exploits that no one believed, even the taleteller. Any of us could easily identify every 25 employees butt cracks if we were shown a rapid-fire slide show. It was a classy line of work.

Rick and Jim were the veterans. They sculpted beds and strolled with walk-behind mowers for 15 years. They ate together, laughed together, and yelled at the rest of us together. They rode together in the same rusty 1983 Ford F-150 daily. They drank huge bottles of cheap liquor together many evenings and plenty of early mornings. They

were boys.

One July Monday I was riding shotgun with Rick because Jim had another court date on some regular legal infraction. I, being a naturally friendly chap, attempted to engage Rick in conversation. I asked several open-ended questions and Rick gave two or three word answers.

It was a long day sweating and listening to classic rock between work sites.

Somehow I brought up the acknowledged fact of Rick and Jim being good friends. This topic brought out the only lengthy response from Rick the whole day. He called Jim a M_____ F_____. He called Jim a slacker. He called Jim a back-stabber. Rick had plenty of creative metaphors degrading Jim's live-in girl. Rick called Jim just another bum that he had to work with. I was shocked. Not at the language, Rick was certainly a black belt in verbal name-calling.

But all of us underpaid co-laborers assumed they were best friends. I knew better than to press the issue.

In my youth and naivety I chalked this startling experience up to the rough and tumble of blue-collar work places. As I have known many more people over the years, I am concerned that this is actually how many people, of various walks of life, talk of their "friends." They look like friends, they talk like friends, and they even walk like friends. But they are not friends.

Everybody wants friends. Almost everybody says they have friends. Most people do not have any friends.

For several years I was guilty of the same stunts. Sure, I had my crew that I hung out with on weekends. There were plenty of fellas that I would call my friends, that

Mom would call my friends. I've had more than a few guys that I mooned the general public with, that I indulged in a juvenile need to vandalize with, that I laughed and swore and in general did things you were not supposed to do with.

There have been plenty of young ladies that I talked on the phone with, that I danced with, that I tried to kiss or snuggle with, that I went to movies with.

I generally referred to all of them as friends.

But they were not real friends.

We have grown up spending our waking hours in a world of Dell computer screens, instant online communication, and checking our in-boxes throughout the day. Many of us have traveled through elementary, middle and high schools, and college, having two homes we need to visit if we want to see our parents. Many of us moved out of state repeatedly. We often drive alone on freeways for thirty minutes, sixty minutes, or even hours a day.

The whole context creates a growing desire for friends. But most people don't have friends.

Often what we call friends, are simply other lonely souls we socialize with so we don't feel alone. We aren't using them for sex; we are just using them for our own personal recreational needs.

"Friendship" can be little more than hurting people filling in a Friday night for something to do, so they are not left alone, feeling like a misfit spending prime time checking their email repeatedly and watching something from Netflix on their laptop.

It does not change when you grow-up and settle down.

I am saddened by the number of bright, educated, good-paying job, nice home in

the suburbs or x-burbs, a few kids in the mini-van- types who have absolutely no friends. Some of these people say it is because they are focusing their time on their family, but... that is not the whole story.

Seinfeld is a great show. I love it almost as much as the Bible. Almost. But it is pretty inauthentic. When life really is about “nothing” you don’t stay close to people for a decade. You tell them off when you are in a bad mood. You rip them a new one when they are not around and it gets back to them and you never speak again. You end up trying to get with their girl when they are out of town.

If we want friends, life will have to be about more than “nothing.”

⁷ *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.* ⁸ *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.* ⁹ *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* ¹⁰ *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* ¹¹ *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹² *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

¹³ *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.* ¹⁴ *And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.* ¹⁵ *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.* ¹⁶ *And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.*

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ *This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment:*

In this world we are like Jesus.¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.²⁰ If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen.²¹ And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love one another.

- 1 Jn. 4:7-21

As we see over and over again in the Bible, John speaks of God as the Eternal Love. Love is His essence. Love is who He is. It's not warm fuzzy love. It's not you're a special person kind of love. It's seeking what's best for others regardless of how we feel kind of love.

God in the historical person of Jesus Christ, coming to be one of us, enters our world and shows us the way.

He shows us what love is. Even, what it means to be a real friend. Giving Himself, dying a horrible death, coming back once again to give to us. Christ came to do what we cannot do for ourselves. He came to soothe and meet our deepest needs- this is love, this is being a friend.

John says this is how we know that we are friends with God: when we give this same kind of love, when we extend this same type of "I care for you more than I care for myself" friendship to other people. People who know the Creator are people who make and live as real friends.

We can only have real friends when we are not socially needy.

People know how to be a friend and attract others when they know God.

When we are in real touch with a Being who loves us more than we can ever comprehend, when we find a desire to love him back, we quit thinking about our sorry selves. We begin to think about others and what we can be and what we can do for them. I'm afraid without God, it's normally "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." That is better than being alone in a dark cave somewhere, and it's nice to have people you can call about Saturday night, but that isn't having friends. Not the kind we want to have.

The main thing that sent Jesus into a rage with the professional holy types was their terrible relationships with others. It's a common problem in spiritual circles to think that beliefs and principles matter more than people. The religious elite in the days of Jesus were so afraid that God would be against them if they were worldly, that they avoided and pronounced judgment on "sinners".

Jesus turned around their pronouncements back on them. They claimed to worship God, but they didn't know Him. If they did, their main focus would be seeking to be friends to the friendless. Seeking to build bridges to the outcasts.

Occasionally some smart mouth will plead, "I don't want to be fake. I don't want to be a hypocrite. Isn't that lying to act like you are friends with someone you don't really particularly enjoy talking with?"

No, it's called love.

Those of us with families know this. We know we do not always feel like she is our lovely bride that we can't live without. We know we do not always feel like the rug-rats are cute and make us proud. We know we do not feel like mowing the grass or

helping with homework or changing diapers when we are invited to go watch Monday Night Football at that happenin' local Sports bar.

Love and friendship is not what we feel. It's what we decide to do and be. I do not imagine Jesus Himself felt like the crucifixion thing. But some things, some people, are more important.

As we keep exploring and taking steps towards God, we need to be careful to not buy into the B.S. that says faith is about me and God. It's not. This is not what Jesus lived and taught. Faith is me and God and others. Otherwise we are just using a blow up version of God as a spiritual hang out partner to meet our own warped social needs.

If we get a clue about friendship, the real thing, we see it means building relationships with people we typically wouldn't spend time with. It's normal to go out on the town with people who are like us. It's nothing to fraternize with people who look like us, dress like us, have the same bootlegged songs playing in their car as we do. Big freakin' deal.

God formed friendship always involves building some type of relationship with people we naturally don't connect with. In the New Testament the Jews and gentiles could not be more different. One was moralistic, fiercely religious, withdrawn from the dominant culture. The other was led around by their desires, frequenting the best watering holes, and trying to experience first-hand all the world had to offer. When they both found Jesus, they were challenged to become one people.

The Spirit does not lead us to being comfortable. He leads us to making real friends, even with people really different from us. Even when we don't feel like it.

I have felt all alone without real friends plenty of times. But never as painfully as

the beginning of my freshman year of college.

I flew by myself into the aged Albany airport. I was heading North to a small school that I had never visited. The shuttle bus wasn't waiting for me as promised, and I sat eating cheese crackers with peanut butter between them, guarding my luggage for two hours. When the wagon finally arrived, the driver and the other nameless students were not exactly... friendly. No one spoke.

When we arrived at the snow riddled campus, the driver dropped me off at the first building we came to and told me to go register. My bags would be waiting for me in my dorm when I finished with the preliminaries.

After standing in line through the check-in, read these papers here, sign your name there, an uneasy awareness crept over me. I had this unwelcome sense that I was not very good at getting to know people when I was in a context where I knew no one else. Throughout the hour or so I kept saying to myself, "Smile. Don't be a dope. Tell jokes. Speak up. Ask people their names. Offer yours. Try to appear confident and witty." It didn't work. I increasingly felt like that guy in high school with 12 year-old taped up glasses and a nasal issue that never clears up. The one for whom gym-class is a living hell.

I knew this was not going to be good.

Finally I made my way back to my new collegiate home and when I walked in it seemed like a party was going on. One dude with muscles like I had only seen on the cover of Men's Health, strutted around without a shirt, yelling at someone else, half teasing and half not. Another black student decked out in the latest of urban attire, added two pennies to an insider conversation, revealing his unexpected West Indies accent.

Two other beefy boys wrestled in the room to the right. I instantly knew my Midwest attire wasn't wit it' out East. I knew I was now the kid with the nasal issues.

I sheepishly scanned the foyer for my green bags. They were nowhere to be found.

Several calls later, some manager of transportation said, "Sorry, we don't have your luggage. I am not sure what to tell you. Look around and if you don't find them, get back to me in a few days." Click.

I prayed there was no climbing rope on campus.

The next several days were the death of a dream. In my small high school I was somebody. I was a decent three-point threat shooting guard. The school named me "Actor of the Year" in the spring drama. I knew all the looker ladies quite well. In this strange, new world, I showed up at the Basketball try-outs and left in ten minutes. I probably would not make ball boy. I tried out for the fall drama, and was informed, as if it was a compliment, that I had landed a role with one line.

I quit.

No girls talked to me.

I had to wear the same smelly t-shirt and increasingly soiled jeans every day for two weeks. The only time someone talked to me was to ask me if I had actually worn that same thing every day. After several days, someone left me a voicemail saying my luggage had been sitting in some girls' dorm lobby for two weeks. Like me, no one had noticed them. When I unzipped the largest bag, I knew again those Midwest threads weren't going to cut it here. It sucked.

The next several weeks were like being the main character in the old HBO show

Tales From the Crypt. There was not any undead stalking me, but the reversal of social fortune I experienced, and the ever increasing sense of depression and being trapped alone in a sea of my peers, was my personal horror show. I wanted to leave. I wanted to walk right out on the large frozen Adirondack lake and sink right in. I wanted to die.

After several more weeks of feeling like the living dead I broke down. I decided to try reading the Bible. When I did, I began to realize that this perpetual funk I was soured in had nothing to do with being in a new place, or being dateless, or being passed over for extra-curricular activities, or even being ignorant of coastal fashion.

I was simply self-absorbed. I was the problem.

Slowly I began to experiment with being a friend, not desperately trying to find one. In my bottom of the barrel dishwashing job, I began to ask another guy named Ryan about how he was doing. After days of small talk, he began to talk about his parents' recent divorce and that he had no idea what to make of it. I listened to him. I shared my experience. I even prayed for him.

I made it a habit to stop and talk to others walking through campus, especially when they were also alone. One balding thirty-four year old guy named Roger, an even worse predicament in college than the real world, opened up about voices he was hearing. He was schizophrenic. He didn't know anyone either. I became the only semi-friend he had.

I would scan the cafeteria for someone else sitting by themselves. Someone else who cursed climbing ropes. I would sit across from them and spend the 45 minutes asking them about themselves as we ate beanie weenies.

Over time... things changed.

I grew more confident. I began to feel like I was in no-where, upstate New York, for a reason. A few blondes and brunettes began talking to me.

Even better than the co-eds... well not better... but very important, was the fact that I now had friends. These were not simply people who knew my name. These were peeps that were really there for me. I was hangin' with people.

I wish I learned how to be a friend earlier.

My best friend in High School was a guy named Evan. We had a great time. We smoked and drank things when we shouldn't. We mocked people when we shouldn't. We talked about girls in ways we definitely shouldn't have. He was great. We even double-dated on the first night out with my High School love.

Between graduation and the beginning of the next phase of life, my girl and I had a rough patch. We were "broke-up." I worked hard at making a go at her again, lots of Gucci cologne and grocery store flowers, but it was taking time. I believed she was worth it.

One afternoon I sat with the object of my affection on her parents' large front porch. I tried to find the right mantra to conjure up Ross magic. She wouldn't even invite me in. I worked a tale of rekindled love, of what we could be again, reminiscing about our past and how we were meant for each other. She responded by saying she went out the night before with Evan.

"I'm sorry!" is all he could say. "I'm sorry." I was too stunned to hit him. He was my best friend. Or... the guy I hung out with the most.

A few years later, after my young girl married another, Evan and I were in different states attending different higher educational institutions. We had dinner

together one Christmas break. We talked and laughed like the old days, but the subject matter was different.

Neither of us had money. Both of us had many people to see and things to do. We loved talking about the good times of years past. But we were different. We were starting to really take God seriously, though we had no words for the change that was taking place.

When it was time to say “See ya later,” he stuck out his hand. I took it, and in it was \$100.00.

I said, “What is this?”

He said, “A hundred bucks.”

I said, “What is this for?”

He said, “For you.”

I said, “Why?”

He said, “I want you to have it. I know you don’t have much money.”

I said, “But either do you.”

He said, “I know. But I really want you to have it.”

We had begun to find God. We had begun to be friends.

We are both Dads and husbands now. We still live in different states. Every time we come home during Christmas, we still tell the old stories. We laugh, and yes at times, we mock... but only a little. He shares what God is doing in His life.

We’ll be friends forever.