It's all in the dash

On almost every tombstone you'll find a name, a description, a date of birth, and a date of death. While all of this information is important, there's one element that's more significant than anything else—the dash.

It's probably the most overlooked part of a tombstone, but that little line represents a person's life and story.

Consider Nelson Mandela. Preparations are being made for the former South African president's burial on Sunday. His memorial will no doubt feature a beautiful design and some moving words. To understand what made the much-loved “Madiba” the “greatest man of his generation”, however, you have to look at the dash—you have to consider his story.

As we draw closer to the end of 2013, we encourage you to think about what you have done with your "dash" this past year . . . and what you hope to do with it heading into next year.

For more stories worth reading and ideas worth considering, check out this week's edition of Record eNews.
Love more: The story of Linden and Bri

It's a love story for the ages—a romance between a blue-collar bloke and an American beauty. When Linden popped the question and Bri said yes, everything seemed perfect. Hopes were high. Then the unthinkable happened.

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"Lord, give me a child." This five-word prayer is as ageless as it is timeless.

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Family life educator Trafford Fischer shares the secrets of lasting marriage. And there are 18 million Adventists around the world—more than the number of Southern Baptists, Mormons or Jews. How to connect effectively with all of them? Record InFocus host Kent Kingston chats with the communication director of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church.
Hell or high water

"How can the 'vengeful God' of the Old Testament also be a God of love?" It's an age-old question, and one that's still prevalent today.

More Opinions
When she walked into the large, airy aircraft hanger at Goroka Airport, Papua New Guinea, she was certain of one thing: the guy she was about to meet wasn’t for her.

It was obvious. After all, Bri’s mum had flagged the handsome pilot and aircraft engineer as a love prospect, and nothing kills a romance like a parent’s recommendation! If that were not enough, Bri promised herself one thing early in life—she’d never get serious with a guy in the mission aviation business. There were shadows there. Shadows no-one outside her family could fully understand.

Linden was hunched over an engine he was rebuilding when Bri walked in the hanger. He’d seen pictures of her. Heard stories. But nothing prepared him for Bri’s sky blue eyes, her fine features and her effortless elegance. She was breathtakingly beautiful. But, he reminded himself as he wiped the grease from his hands, there’s a lot more to a person than beauty.

It was no secret that taking the job with Adventist Aviation Services (AAS) wasn’t going to do much for a young bloke’s love life. For the years he’d been in Goroka, Linden hadn’t been in a single romantic relationship. And he wasn’t looking for one now. Growing up as a kid in PNG, he learned early how to be emotionally self sufficient; he was content within himself. Still, it was hard to ignore the beautiful American girl with her carefree style and exotic African and South American history.

Out of the Goroka hanger, AAS brings supplies to remote clinics spotted throughout PNG; conducts medevacs in emergencies; and transports pastors, teachers, aid workers and building supplies to places that would otherwise take weeks to trek in and out of. And it provides an economic lifeline to the poorest people by hauling produce to market in the cargo pod of the planes. Grass landing strips, steep mountains and the unpredictable weather so prevalent in the region are all part of the daily rhythm of service. It was where Linden believed God wanted him and he was the rare kind of person who thrived on all of it. Working with him was Bri’s dad—an experienced mission aviation pilot.

As the two months of Bri’s visit passed, bit by bit, day by day, word by word, look by look, something started to build. Eventually, Linden couldn’t resist any longer and asked her out on a date.

"There are only two places to take a girl in Goroka," he laughs, "so I didn’t have to think too hard!" They became regulars at these places, rode dirt bikes in the nearby hills and spent hours upon hours hanging out in the aircraft hanger after work. Somewhere between the grease, engine parts, noise and fumes, something very precious and just as fragile began to grow. When Bri flew out of Goroka in August 2009 to complete her last year of studies at Union College in Nebraska, she took Linden’s heart with her.

Not that he said too much about it. "I’m not a big talker," Linden says simply. For the next few months, he played the waiting game. Patient. Unflappable. He knew that what had started was unstoppable. At least he thought he knew.

When Bri arrived back in Goroka after graduating the following year, Linden beat a trail to her door. He walked in the front gate carrying a
large bunch of bananas. "It's Goroka," he recalls, "not a lot of fresh roses around, so you have to make do." However, the woman he found waiting for him on the front steps was strangely different. She was reserved, uncertain, the smiles and the bounce were gone. After some awkward pleasantries, she blurted out, "I don't think this is working anymore."

Linden couldn't believe it. He pulled back, a thousand things going through his mind. But all he could say was "OK." After a minute's silence, he turned and walked slowly back home.

He spent the night tossing and turning. It all seemed so improbable. What about the past 12 months of long distance communicating? What about the Christmas break spent together? What had happened in those months in Nebraska? Why the change? How could she be so completely cold and withdrawn?

What he didn’t know was that Bri was up all night as well. Crying her eyes out. How could she be so totally in love with a guy who couldn’t verbalise anything? It’s one thing to be strong and silent, it's quite another to be indifferent. "I had just broken up with Linden, and he had simply acknowledged it and walked off," she remembers. "Where was the fight? The depth? Where was the driving desire to be together? Obviously I didn’t mean that much to him after all."

Linden couldn’t accept the break up. It seemed so vague. So totally random. A few days later he mustered the courage to go back and see Bri. This time he was there to talk business. He spoke from the heart and heard her concerns, writing them down in a list. Over the next few days they sat together working through the list of Bri's concerns and Linden’s list of all things important to him, to determine what they each wanted out of life, what they needed and where they could find common ground. "The intensity in his eyes gave me the assurance he was serious about me," Bri remembers with a smile. Linden, sitting next to her, looks on silently. But she’s right—there is intensity in the way he's looking at her.

Love had died, been reborn and life was on track—even if it was a very uncertain one divided down the middle by 12,000 kilometres that were soon to separate them again. After Bri graduated she applied for 30 different jobs in the US. She didn’t get a single offer. Linden encouraged her to move to Perth (WA), his Australian base. Within three days of arriving, Bri got the first job she applied for. And a few months later she accepted a job in the service department at Lexus. Linden came home to Perth every other month, and on a September evening in 2012 he asked Bri to marry him. She said yes, and they began dreaming and planning for the day when they would marry and begin life together.

Everything seemed so perfect. Hopes were high. Linden had gone back to Goroka to complete his commitment; Bri was enjoying life in Perth and looking forward to a wonderful future.

But then it happened.

Bri was at work when a call came. But she was wrapped up with a customer. The receptionist sent her an urgent email. And then another. And then another and another and another.

All the echoes of the pain in Bri's childhood were about to catch up with her. Her grandfather's death flying mission planes in Mexico when her dad was only 16. Her aunt and uncle’s disappearance a few years ago flying mission planes in Venezuela. The fear her mother had every time her father took to the unpredictable PNG skies in the single engine turboprop plane. The unrelenting grief her father carried with him for the father who never came home and the survivor’s guilt he lived with for his missing brother. She had promised herself she would never repeat the life her parents lived. Love had forced her to be untrue, first to herself.

By the time she got back to her desk, Bri's inbox was full of urgent emails. Her heart fell through the floor. This was what everyone in her family expected, sooner or later. As soon as she looked at the screen, she feared she was the next widow of mission aviation even before she was married.
When she returned the call to Linden's father, the news was as bad as she had anticipated. "There's been an aviation jet fuel explosion in the hanger at Goroka. Linden's been terribly burned and he's being airlifted to Brisbane." While doing maintenance on AAS's newest P750XL aircraft, a tool malfunctioned and let off a tiny spark. That tiny spark ignited fumes in the empty fuel tank. And in a split second, Linden had been bathed in white-hot flame.

With help from her kindly manager and a co-worker at Lexus, Bri was on a plane to Brisbane a few hours later. When she arrived at the hospital, she was warned, "We aren't sure if he'll pull through. Be prepared, when you see him you will be shocked. He's been burned over 50 per cent of his body . . . ."

Linden was bloated, bandaged and unconscious when Bri walked into the ICU. But he was alive. And with life, there was hope.

For five long weeks, Linden remained in a coma.

During those weeks, Bri flew back and forth from Brisbane to Perth, working three days a week and spending four days at Linden's bedside. "The worst part for me," remembers Bri, "is I just missed him so badly. I would sit by him and talk to him every day but it's really hard to have a one-sided conversation day after day."

Three weeks into Linden's coma, Valentine's Day arrived. "Because of our bi-continental relationship, we only managed to be together on Valentines once, but Linden faithfully sent me flowers and chocolates every Valentines and every birthday," remembers Bri. "He is amazing at remembering special dates. I'm absolutely shocking—if his birthday wasn't on New Year's Day I'd probably forget it! On 2012 Valentines he sent me beautiful orchids at work. I happened to be back in Perth at work on Valentine's Day 2013. Coincidently, there was another girl named Bri at the dealership and all her flowers kept getting delivered to my desk. So I'd call her and she'd come and get them; there must have been at least five bouquets. It was really hard.

"Finally these beautiful roses arrived, and I called her to come and collect them," Bri recalls. "She picked them up and looked at the tag and said: 'No, these are for you.' I knew she must be wrong. But I had a look and sure enough, they had my last name on them. I was really baffled because Linden is the only person who has ever sent me flowers and of course he was in a coma. I opened the note and it had the most beautiful message from him saying how much he loved me and was looking forward to seeing me soon. I ran into the bathroom and cried for an hour. When I came back to my desk, I burst into tears every time I looked at them. It was so sweet and totally unexpected. I later found out Linden organised them just a few days before his accident."

"Linden was really smug when he finally woke up and I told him that he had sent me flowers on Valentines even though he was in a coma," laughs Bri. "I don't think many guys can top that!"

But it wasn't easy when Linden came out of the coma. "The first thing I can remember on the acute burns ward is when I realised I couldn't do anything. My mind was working perfectly, but I was trapped in a completely disabled body. It was terrifying," remembers Linden. "I've always been an active person. In the matter of a split second, I had everything I took for granted snatched from me."

After months of painful treatment, skin grafts and rehabilitation, Linden was informed by his medical team he would be discharged. He was still profoundly disabled. He couldn't dress himself. He couldn't cook for himself. He had difficulty walking. He couldn't drive. But all of that wasn't going to be a problem. The woman who had broken up with him because she thought he didn't need her, was waiting for him with arms wide open.

"I couldn't move in with Bri without being married," says Linden. "I wanted our lives together to start off the right way. We were planning a full-blown church wedding with her family in the US, but the accident put all of that on hold. So when I was ready to leave the hospital we had a simple service with a few friends and family members. Unexpectedly, several of the retired pastor/pilots from Adventist Aviation organised a little wedding reception. A civil wedding isn't my idea of a proper wedding. But you deal with what is dealt to you. I moved from the hospital to the little apartment Bri organised in Brisbane. That's how our married life began."
Today Bri sits, her bright blue eyes, refined features and slight frame poised delicately in her chair as she talks easily. Her husband of three months sits next to her, wrapped in compression garments covering his arms, legs and entire head except for his eyes, mouth and the lower part of his nose. The garments are designed to help his skin heal without ugly raised scars. In a way, Linden and Bri are like any newly married couple. Laughing together, tender touches, sharing stories and planning their future. In other ways, they are profoundly different.

Life hasn’t been easy. Linden needs Bri to button his shirts as calcification in his joints has made it impossible to bend his elbows and difficult to bend his knees. Joint calcification can occur in extreme burns cases as part of the body's distress reaction to trauma. Linden’s joints are continuing to calcify, but the reaction is expected to stop eventually, and when it does he will be able to have corrective orthopedic surgery. Bri also changes his compression garments every night. And does the 101 other time-consuming things needed to keep a burns patient’s recovery and the family on track. "I’ve always been the one taking care of others," says Linden. "It's been really hard to be on the receiving end and to accept the generosity of others. It’s been a good lesson to learn. But I have to think there must be an easier way to learn it!"

"I’m a procrastinator," laughs Bri, "and Linden worries I’ll forget something or let another slip. So he makes lists. He’s a firm believer in lists! Between the two of us, and the support of family, friends and local church members, we’re making it all work. So many people have stepped up to the plate to help us out financially, physically and emotionally, and our families have been so encouraging and supportive. God has been very close, looking after us through His people, and we feel very blessed.

"We love being married—it’s our excuse to stay home," Bri continues. "Most couples get a week or two of honeymoon. Because of what we’ve been dealt, we have had a year together, just focusing on each other. It’s wonderful. We’ve gotten to spend more time together this year than the previous three combined."

But didn’t she think twice about marrying Linden after the tragedy? "Not once. True love is a choice. You stick by the person you love. You want to spend every day with them. They become your best friend. Being married is fantastic. Our relationship just keeps on getting better, the more we’ve chosen to commit. If we’d known how good it would be, we would have gotten married earlier! I signed up to live my entire life with my best friend and ironically, this has been the best year for us—I’ve finally gotten to spend as much time with Linden as I want. He’s stuck with me and I’m taking full advantage of it! Life is what you make it. Linden’s first thought was that it was a terrible way to start our life together, but I told him ‘It can’t get worse than this, so it’s all up from here!’ And it is. It gets better every day," Bri says, as she lightly touches Linden’s arm.

"What happened to me isn’t so exceptional," observes Linden. "I got conditioned to tragedy in PNG. Life is very raw. You deal with life and death all the time. My story is only one of thousands every year, all around the world."

"Tragedy like this is just part of life on this sinful planet. It’s not always nice," adds Bri. "We really are in the battle of good and evil. When something like this happens, you know you’re on the frontline of that battle. We’ve seen God work in so many ways. He’s been so good to us through all of this."

"You have a choice," concludes Linden, "let something like this destroy your faith, or you can use the experience to go on trusting God and allowing Him to work in your life. Faith is like physical exercise—and we’re running an ultra marathon right now. But when we’ve finished this phase of our lives, as tough as it is, our faith will be all the stronger for it. Just like our relationship."

To financially support Linden during his rehabilitation, go to: <www.gofundme.com/1wssao>. To follow Linden's recovery, go to: <www.facebook.com/PrayerForLindenBri>. 
James Standish is editor of RECORD.
“You know what happens to your articles the day after they’re read, don’t you,” quipped a veteran Washington journalist to me a few years back. “They end up lining bird cages!” He let out a husky chuckle and shook his head. His point? The pen may be mightier than the sword on occasion, but generally our words are like trickles into creeks that flow into rivers that flow into oceans where they settle comfortably into obscurity with all the other fragments of text ever spoken, written, sung or spun.

Christmas is upon us, the new year is creeping our way, new calendars are replacing old, life is taking a pause before the beginning of another year. But before getting swept into mirth and optimism, I can’t help taking the sum of 2013. And what, if anything, the words flowing into the ocean via these editorials have shaped on the way downstream.

I should begin with a confession. In “Too Fat for Church” I promised to get fit. But if you run into me, you still won’t confuse my keg for a six-pack! I have lost roughly the weight of two newborn babies. So it’s a start. But in the same time, my colleague Jarrod Stackelroth has put my paltry efforts to shame by losing something in the range of 25 kilos (that’s roughly six newborn babies, if you’re counting). He says the “fat” editorial gave him a little extra impetus. I wonder if anyone else was inspired to get moving in the right direction and is feeling a bit lighter today as a result? I certainly hope so. And I give you this commitment: I am not finished with getting a little fitter and a little less fat every day.

Over the year I’ve written a couple of pieces that have caused widespread controversy and consternation. There was the vaccination piece. For all the heat, I hope there are some children who are today vaccinated, who might otherwise have not been. Why? Because without any shadow of a doubt, vaccinations save lives. If you’re still confused, google “measles outbreak” and read what happened in Queensland and Wales this year.

I also wrote a piece that gave voice to a third path on homosexuality—a path that rejects destructive permissiveness on one hand, and equally rejects silence and ostracism on the other; a way forward that fully embraces unfashionable ideas like faithfulness, denial of self and obedience to God’s law. But at the same time a love that has the strength and honesty to talk about the full range of sexual impulses. Predictably, my inbox filled up with letters. But there was a second reaction; the increasing prominence of faithful women and men like Virna Santos and Daniel Laredo, speaking candidly and powerfully about their spiritual journeys. I am inspired by their courage.

When writing about the sacrifice of Adventist missionaries, I promised we would build a memorial to their memory. Assistant editor Linden Chuang has done just that. I hope you’ll take a minute to visit the memorial and consider their ultimate sacrifice in God’s cause: <www spd.adventist.org/in-memoriam>. Let us know if there are names missing, facts that need updating or if you have an article or tribute you would like included.
Unexpectedly, I ran into a friend not long after the sacrifice editorial was written, and she told me she and her husband were so inspired by the faithfulness of missionaries of the past that they had decided to take the call to serve at Pacific Adventist University. That was not the reaction I expected: it was far, far better. I hope and pray they are a rich blessing to PAU and that, in return, they are richly blessed by their experience of giving to others so unselfishly.

You’re right: we still have as many conferences as we started the year with, asylum seekers are still being shamefully mistreated by governments in our region and we are still flying in speakers from overseas by the plane load. But I hope that maybe, just maybe, as a result of the voices in RECORD this year, we are a community more prepared to take the hard steps necessary to protect our children, we are more courageous in defending women against brutal abuse and preventing abuse in the first place, and that we are just a little more inspired into an active faith by stories of ordinary people just like us, who are doing remarkable things for God. If so, this stream of words has not been in vain; they can now rest at the bottom of your budgie’s cage, satisfied in a job well done.

_James Standish is editor of RECORD._
Misconceptions about Christianity abound in the secular world. One of the worst, and most pervasive, is that of the "vengeful deity". Whether it's the seemingly brutal actions of the God of the Old Testament or the "burning" doctrine of hell, people are falling away from God—or refusing to come to Him in the first place—because they cannot reconcile these images with that of a loving God.

But Hebrews 13:8 clearly tells us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" and the Jesus of the New Testament was certainly a loving, caring Character, so shouldn't it then follow that the God of the Old Testament—the same God—is also loving?

My answer: certainly!

So how can these seemingly disparate personalities of God be reconciled?

The best illustration we can look to is Noah and the ark. For years Noah laboured on this colossal boat—close to the length of two football fields! And all the while this would have been clearly visible to the people. Surely they taunted him. Surely some threw insults—and worse. Maybe some of them even began to wonder if Noah’s undertaking truly was the result of something other than simple insanity. In the end though, none of them got on the boat. Even though the ark was right there, right in front of them, they did not seize the opportunity.

Then came the flood.

Today, many sceptics similarly find it difficult to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the teaching of hell. For Adventists, this seldom-talked-about event is seen more as a process of annihilation rather than a punishment of everlasting torment. Even so, utter destruction is still, ostensibly, a rather monstrous act. But there are two important things to remember.

Firstly, God is the number one Advocate of free choice. Come hell or high water (literally!), He still maintains our freedom. "Why?" you may ask. Because of love. If we don’t want to be in heaven, God isn’t going to force us to be there. He so desperately, desperately wants us to be there, but He loves us—and respects us—too much to intervene and break our free choice.

But He’s not going to let us go down without a fight. He fought for us on the cross and now He calls for us. Continually. “Get on the boat. Get on the boat.”

2 Peter 3:9 tells us God is “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”.

And that is just as true today as it was in the time of Noah.

God was, is, and always will be, love. The very epitome of it.
Most, if not all, misconceptions about Christianity arise when people fail to realise that love is the greatest and foremost of God’s characteristics.

_Brendan Tucker is studying for a Bachelor of Communication degree at Newcastle University._