

offered, however faltering, never a tear is shed, however secret, never a sincere desire after God is cherished, however feeble, but the Spirit of God goes forth to meet it.”<sup>4</sup>

The conviction deepened that the Bible was inspired, Ellen White was inspired—not, perhaps, in the way I had thought, verbally, mechanically—but dynamically. You can pick flaws with isolated statements, you can argue over sources and originality, but if you want to know how to find life through Jesus, how to experience the heights and depths of the love of God, how to aspire to and achieve the highest goals in life, how to avoid the snares of Satan, how to maximize health, how to have a happy home, how to bring souls to Jesus, how to live and end your life with the greatest satisfac-

tion, then make it a habit to read the great Ellen G. White books.

Just this last year I went through some deep trials. I needed the Lord with me. Once again I pulled out *Desire of Ages* and feasted on its contents. Then I turned to *Ministry of Healing*, especially those last chapters, “In Contact with Others,” that tell how to be Christlike in the midst of strife. Then I went on to *Christ’s Object Lessons*, *Steps to Christ*, and *Mount of Blessings*. I found Jesus there. I found that he had experienced all I was going through and much more. I clung to him and prayed, “Lord, help me to act as a Christian through all of this.” I slipped a few times, but he helped me through.

I find that I need not only my bread of the Word every day, but my supplements—the great Ellen

G. White classics—to give me easy access to the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. That is one reason why I remain a committed Christian and a Seventh-day Adventist.

## Notes and References

1. Alden Thompsen, “From Sinai to Golgotha,” *Adventist Review*, Dec. 3, 10, and 17, 1981.
2. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:215.
3. Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1942), 85.
4. Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1941), 206.

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## Rehabilitating the Testimonial

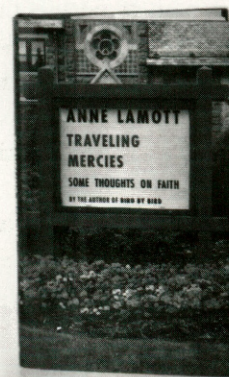
*Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith.* By Anne Lamott, New York: Pantheon Books, 1999. x + 276 pages

Reviewed by Dennis Brand

I am reluctant to admit my Christianity. Partly this is because I can’t help wishing to distance myself from wild-eyed, far-right-wing-type Christians. You know; those overly sincere, humorless folks who bomb abortion clinics, think Jesus destroyed the World Trade Center to get back at homosexuals, and use words like “abomination” with no trace of irony.

But there’s also the cringing, status-conscious, wannabe liberal arts intellectual part of me worrying that in the smart-people culture Christianity is just not cool. Yes, it’s straight back to junior high. So, even more remarkable to me than

the power and beauty of Anne Lamott’s meditations on faith and living in touch with the love of Jesus is the fact that she makes Christianity seem cool, something compatible with feminism, reading the *New Yorker*, and thinking.



She also rehabilitates the testimonial. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* is basically a testimonial—stories from her life, often relating how faith or God helped her deal with death, heartbreak, and that hardest trial of all, daily life. Unlike most testimonials—where ex-sinners detail the many and lurid escapades of their previous life until they hit rock bottom and in the end get themselves saved—Lamott takes the end of most stories and begins hers there. She fits her entire preconversion story (which has as much drama as any I’ve ever

Photo: Thomas Osborn

heard) into her overture, which is entitled "Lily Pads."

However, her story is hardly your average testimonial. (For instance, I don't recall any of the speakers at my college's vespers ever using the "f-word" to accept Jesus into their lives.) The problem with most testimonies is, as far as I'm concerned, the problem with our whole society: ratings. The drug deals, violence, general depravity of the "before" part of conversion stories make for much better ratings, and in an attempt to hold audiences' short attentions, these features become the focus.

Lamott trusts that the Christian life—eating breakfast, paying bills, leaning on Jesus every day—will make for an exciting enough story. Instead of focusing on her old life, with all its lurid details and vicarious thrills for those safely in the fold, she knows that much of what is thought and said and done each day is often lurid enough, and infinitely more useful for those of us not currently addicted to drugs while running from the law and the mafia.

Community is central to Lamott's Christianity. All the Christians (and Hindus and unaffiliated people) who help her get over alcoholism attest to the importance of community. Members of her church help her get through pregnancy and single motherhood with their love and financial help, even though most of them can hardly afford to take care of themselves. When she is depressed or angry or afraid, God most often uses her friends—whether they're old friends or have known her for five minutes—to comfort her.

However, what really made me understand the point of community for maybe the first time since high school was the end of the book, after the last chapter, where Lamott thanks all the people who helped her

write it. There are priests who explain theology; her mother, who helps with Marin County history; friends who help with politics, marine biology, and geology; and editors who give input and ideal conditions in which to write.

Perhaps I'm the only one foolish enough never to realize this before, but that's the way to do it. If I had tried to write this book, I would never have thought to involve my friends. I would be out there reading encyclopedias, trying to become an expert about too many things, when other people could have explained it all in a fraction of the time and in greater detail. It's amazing to me to think of just calling up a friend and chatting about, say, politics, instead of slogging through mostly unhelpful entries in reference books or entirely unhelpful Web pages.

Because I was so dense about community, it took this outright, unsubtle example to make me finally understand. The idea of community permeates this book, the beauty of people working together to make the world better, to prop each other up, and to let each other know that they are not alone. To me this was a revelation, an epiphany even, which may mystify those who have understood community all along.

Anne Lamott knows how easy it is to slip into routine, how easy it is to go from relief at simply being alive after bulimia and alcoholism to complete despair because the car ran out of gas. But she also is able to find meaning, and sometimes even miracles in everyday life.

At one point, she is traveling on a plane, sitting between a prim, uptight Christian man reading a book she has recently reviewed ("hard-core right-wing paranoid anti-Semitic homophobic misogynistic propaganda—not to put too fine a point on it" [60]) and a woman who hardly speaks English. Then the plane hits

turbulence so bad that the pilot yells at the flight attendants to sit down, and a passenger has a heart attack. Then, bolstered by the memory of a small miracle that happened in church, Anne Lamott reaches out and connects with the two people sitting next to her.

Writes Lemott: "I thought, I do not know if what happened at church was an honest-to-God little miracle, and I don't know if there has been another one here, the smallest possible sort, the size of a tiny bird, but I feel like I am sitting with my cousins on a plane eight miles up, a plane that is going to make it home—and this made me so happy that I suddenly thought, This is plenty of miracle for me to rest in now" (66-67).

Lamott knows a thing or two about grief. Close friends, her father, and people at church all die in the course of this book. "I am no longer convinced that you're *supposed* to get over the death of certain people," she writes, "but little by little, pale and swollen around the eyes, I began to feel a sense of reception, that I was beginning to receive the fact of Pammy's death, the finality. I let it enter me" (72-73). And, "if you are lucky and brave, you will be willing to bear disillusion. You begin to cry and writhe and yell and then to keep on crying; and then, finally, grief ends up giving you the two best things: softness and illumination" (72-73).

Often bitingly funny and insightful, and at times heartbreaking, Lamott's writing conveys the feeling of coming from a normal person—small, weak, scared—who has the exhilarating experience of resting safe in the arms of Jesus. All of us could use more of that feeling.

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