

ADVENTIST STORIES ■ *an original short story*

Two Baptisms | BY GARY E. GILBERT

Editor's Note: The following story is true to the author's recollection, but its characters' names have been changed.

My first impulse for baptism, in the fall of 1967, may have been competitive. I wanted baptism when Linda got it, in the same way that I wanted the same bedtime and permission to watch the same television programs. I didn't deliberately imitate Linda, but I didn't like her to get ahead. I made fun of her long chain of chewing gum wrappers, her posters of the Beatles and the Monkeys, and her obsession with keeping me out of her bedroom.

Linda was eighteen months older, in the eighth grade, whereas I was in the seventh. She was ahead of me in making friends, ahead in collecting records of rock-and-roll bands, ahead of me with invitations to parties. Linda generally showed scorn for me, particularly when her girlfriends were around. "This is my fat brother," she would introduce me, not bothering to provide my name. I would mumble and look away.

Linda was also ahead of me in wickedness. She rolled her skirt up at the waist as soon as she was out of sight of our house and had smoked cigarettes on the way home from school. She watched television after sundown on Friday night when our parents were away. I peeked around the corner to see what show was on, and she scorned me because I wouldn't actually sit down and watch with her.

Linda played "love-in" in the bow of our trailered boat, where she and Pam had invited

several guys. The guy would lie in the middle of the bunk with the girls on either side, taking turns kissing. I was not allowed to join the invited boys, even when another girl substituted for Linda on the far side of the bunk.

Linda was angry that I wanted to be baptized at the same time. "Gary can be baptized later," she said. "Why does he have to do everything that I do?"

I overheard only a little of my parents' conversation, forced whispering, coming from their bedroom. I was old enough, my mother said. I had demonstrated maturity. She had been only nine years old when baptized.

Dad countered that it was important for Linda to be able to enjoy some things on her own, not competing with her younger brother...

Mom mentioned that Linda had smoked and skipped school.

"Linda is past that now," Dad said.

"But Gary didn't do it. He knew better," Mom countered. "I think he is more mature."

Mom prevailed. I was enrolled in the baptismal class, together with Linda and two other girls at church.

In addition to maintaining a competitive posture at home, I hoped that baptism would make me feel like I belonged in our church. The former railway station in Santa Fe, New Mexico, boasted a membership of seventy, with typical attendance of thirty-five.

When I was younger, I had hurried to the front of the church potluck line to hustle one of Maria Hernandez's enchiladas. Afterward, I played "wild stallions" with Ronnie and Judy



and Joe in the tumbleweed lot behind the church. I was happy then, and the church was where I belonged.

In the past year, it had come to seem difficult to talk to the kids and even the adults at church. "You're really growing, Gary," a woman might say to me. I couldn't think of a reply. The three girls near my age seemed to have become shy, at least toward me. I didn't know what to say to them and there were no boys my age.

I was conscious for the first time that there were differences between our families that might be important. They spoke Spanish at home and their fathers worked as painters and builders in Santa Fe. We drove to church from Los Alamos and my father was a physicist, working to complete his Ph.D. The church members, most of whom had who had not completed college, had a sense of awe about physics and a Ph.D.

Pueblo Junior High School, in Los Alamos, was no more comfortable for me than the Santa Fe church. I don't remember the names of any friends I made that year. I do remember that we took the first national physical fitness test and that I couldn't do a single pull-up. I recall watching in self-conscious envy as the athletes easily pulled themselves to the bar again and again.

My parents yielded to my begging that year and permitted me to play football, on the second string seventh-grade team (with no games or practices on Friday night). A kid threw my helmet in the girls' locker room after practice and I grew angry. We fought in the doorway to the girls' locker room, surrounded by a circle of guys in football pads. I walked home quivering with fear, jubilant that I had bloodied his nose but disturbed by the angry words, the flying fists, and the circle of teammates.

My father taught the baptismal class for Marilyn, Becky, Linda, and me. The Junior-Earliteen class, which he regularly taught, sat in a pew sitting sideways at the front of the sanctuary. For a couple of months, the Junior-Earliteen class became the baptismal class. We could see the baptistery behind the pulpit, with the low glass barrier in front of the drapes. The pastor was also studying with an adult man in the church office, but we kids didn't know his name.

I think we learned fourteen essential Adventist beliefs. They were familiar and seemed self-evident. Affirming

that God created the world, *ex nihilo*, within the past few thousand years seemed a fact, not a contentious idea. Should the earth's roundness be another doctrine?

Mom was enthralled with the prospect of our baptisms. During the thirty-five mile drive from Los Alamos to the Santa Fe church, she would slip into a reverie.

"I remember the day I was baptized," she told Linda and me. She looked backward over the front seat as Dad drove. "It was the happiest day of my life." She had been only nine years old, baptized by her father, the evangelist. "Afterward, I always knew that I belonged to the Church, that I belonged in the Truth." The joy she described seemed too big for an ordinary Sabbath afternoon in our little church, with the rubber mat up the center and the wooden floors gritty with sand tracked in from the front stair.

Another Sabbath morning she said, "I have been thinking. After you are baptized, you may not want to go to dances anymore." Linda and I had both attended the Pueblo Junior High School dance.

It was in the afternoon on a weekday in the school gym. I stood alone, amazed at the loudness of the music from the amplifiers and by the guys near my age who sang and played on stage. I ventured out twice to move awkwardly with a shy girl from my home room. I was amazed by the scattered couples that clung to each other, moving slowly and easily when the band played the occasional quiet, slow dances. Afterward, I walked home alone. Linda came later, with her friends.

On another Sabbath morning, Mom said, "When you have your first communion service, I think you will feel differently about church. I know I did. Church meant so more to me when I had accepted the beliefs and the responsibilities as my own."

After Christmas, as the baptism approached, I realized that Mom's vision of the baptism had enveloped me. I could imagine myself emerging from the baptistery consumed with longing for what was right and energy to undertake worthy tasks. I could even imagine a peace, an orientation toward eternal things, no longer caring if I didn't have friends to talk to, couldn't attend a dance, couldn't play at "love-in," and shouldn't watch some television shows. I had almost forgotten about keeping pace with Linda, almost forgotten that I felt awkward in our church. I began, tentatively, to read passages from my Bible in private.

If Mom's hope for the transforming power of our

baptisms affected Linda, she didn't let it show. Linda wanted a new dress for her baptism. An odd request, I thought, typical of a girl. My parents argued again, forced whispers coming from behind the bedroom door. Linda was smiling before the door opened. I knew she had been listening and would have her new dress.

The day of the baptism was cold and overcast, making the snow patches gray rather than white. There was a potluck dinner after church and we baptismal candidates were taken aside before the meal was over. The three girls would change clothes in the ladies' room, the pastor and the man who was to be baptized would change in the pastor's study. I was to change in the Kindergarten/Primary classroom, donning a blue robe over my underwear.

The gray February light that came through the windows made me self-conscious as I undressed. I was cold under the robe. The hardwood floor was gritty on my bare feet as I walked cautiously back and forth in the classroom that I had recently graduated from.

I heard splashing, Pastor Smith talking, more splashing, then singing. It was repeated three times, with different intervals of singing. Then the singing continued for several songs. When would my turn come? My feet were cold and I had goose bumps on my arms. I was too self-conscious in the robe to open the door and ask when they would be ready for me.

The door finally opened and Mrs. Roberts said, "See! Gary is here. He's waiting to be baptized." The pastor, no longer in his baptismal robe, looked in the door. He had his shirt buttoned to the neck and was knotting his tie. He mumbled something about being late and needing to go to another church. Mrs. Roberts spoke clearly about me waiting to be baptized. Pastor Smith asked if they had a dry robe. No. He grumbled as he put on a cold, wet one.

While Pastor Smith grumbled, I realized he had forgotten that I was to be baptized. He thought he had finished for the day and was ready to hurry to his afternoon meeting. Except for my parents and Mrs. Roberts, the congregation thought that the baptisms were completed. Now I was slowing the pastor down, forcing him to put on a soggy, cold robe. I was beginning to feel like I did when Linda introduced me as "my fat brother."

The water in the baptistery had been draining when the pastor and Mrs. Roberts discovered me. They quickly replaced the drain plug, leaving water that reached just above my knees. It was uncomfortably cool and a yellow-brown color. Pastor Smith whispered that I would have to stand up after he baptized me. He wouldn't be able to lift me up from shallow water.

When the curtains opened, I saw Linda, Becky, and Marilyn, and the man who had been baptized standing at the front of the church, their backs to the baptistery. I recognized Linda's new dress. A line of people hugged and talked to them and it took several minutes for them to sit down. I had begun to shiver.

Pastor Smith raised his hand above my head, put a cloth over my face, and lowered me a long way into the cool water. I pulled my feet and hands under myself and stood up. The baptistery curtains closed while we stood in the shallow water. Pastor Smith hurried away toward the study and Mrs. Roberts met me with a dry towel.

While I dressed, I wondered if this was the time I should feel wonderful. What I felt was anxiety, afraid that everyone would be gone before I had finished dressing. When I went into the sanctuary, Pastor Smith had disappeared and the church had emptied. Mrs. Roberts gave me a hug and shook my hand. Mom and Dad hugged me, but both looked disturbed and neither talked very much. Mom said, "I should have said something sooner. I was afraid they might be forgetting you." I was still cold and didn't feel like talking.

Linda and I rode in the back seat of our Plymouth station wagon. "I'm sorry they forgot you, Gary," she said. I didn't reply. Mom and Dad whispered in the front seat. I leaned against the car door and felt the cold handle, transmitting my body heat through the door to the February evening. I let the cold seep into my flank as we crossed the bridge over the Rio Grande. The cold felt right to me even though I was still shivering from the baptism. I didn't want to talk.

During the next week, I felt empty, sad. I didn't feel a new longing for goodness or rightness, only a desire to forget about how cold and small I had felt during the baptism. I hadn't even kept pace with Linda. She had stood, radiant in her new dress, while the church sang songs and people came to hug her.

I did feel that I had made a good commitment. Those fourteen doctrines I had learned were surely true

and I felt an abstract commitment to the Church. But I associated my commitment with being painfully, embarrassingly alone. The next Sabbath no one mentioned the baptismal service or the fact that my particular baptism had been forgotten until the last minute. It reminded me of the time I had played a trumpet solo for church and floundered badly. No one ever mentioned the obvious blunders. I am sure they were polite, but their silence left me feeling alone.

As the spring winds blew up over the Pajarito Plateau, the snow patches that remained in Los Alamos melted and seeped into the porous dust. The baptism experience seemed more a part of the melting snow than the warming wind and the translucent green leaves on the aspen trees. I rarely thought of it.

I slipped past Linda in height, looking down on her for the first time in our lives. I found the discarded instructions from her Tampax package. After carefully considering the diagram and instructions, I realized that I now understood a mystery about women, men, and babies.

My father's weight management program for me reached fruition before school let out for summer. For two years, I had collected a nickel every day that I weighed less than 110 pounds and paid a nickel each day I weighed more. I had a can with seven dollars in nickels and now weighed slightly less than Linda. With my new height, I was no longer chubby, even by my sister's harsh criteria.

At communion service, I awkwardly splashed water over my father's feet, and he washed mine. I sipped the grape juice carefully so I didn't cough. Linda wore her new dress for communion Sabbath. I felt strangely close to my father, but still found nothing to say to Marilyn, Becky, or Donna.

With summer came junior camp and a sense that life was different. At the end of summer, Linda would leave home for boarding academy. We went to Glacier View Camp, even though it was more than four hundred miles from home. Dad remembered helping to construct surplus military barracks on the hill above the lake when he was a college student.

Linda would attend teen camp, for the first time, and I would attend earliten camp the following week.

Linda went without her girlfriend and she actually talked to me as we drove to Colorado. She talked about what she wanted to do at camp, about the school year, and particularly about boys.

When we picked Linda up the following week, she and I talked in the back seat of the station wagon while our parents talked with friends. Linda was gushing about a guy named Steve who attended Mile High Academy and played in a rock band. They were going to write letters to each other.

Then she whispered, "On Saturday night we walked around the lake. We lit candles and were supposed to walk all by ourselves. Steve walked right behind me. When we went behind a big rock he blew out his candle. He caught up with me and put his arm around me. No one could see that we were together because it was dark and we shared one candle. We walked around the lake that way. It was really cool."

I listened, wide-eyed, not certain I understood and surprised that Linda was telling me this secret.

I took sailing that week, maneuvering home-built sailboards over the shallow, cold lake. As a learning exercise, we capsized the sailboards in the middle of the lake, deliberately submerging ourselves and coming up with moss strewn across arms and shoulders. The lake was so shallow that I planted my feet on the bottom even though I had capsized toward the middle of the lake. I righted the sailboard, pulled myself on, and sailed to shore. I hurried, shivering to dry off and dress.

A dark-eyed girl from Durango smiled at me. During morning assembly, I looked across the aisle at Barbara. She wasn't looking at me but two of her friends were. They smiled at me, then looked at Barbara. On Sabbath, I walked with Barbara to the cafeteria after church. We talked for more than thirty minutes on Sabbath afternoon before being ushered to our cabins for the intrusive "quiet time."

At the campfire program on Saturday night, Elder Ross admonished us to think about our lives and about eternity. He asked us how many were baptized. I felt proud when I raised my hand and noticed that Barbara raised hers too. Elder Ross told us that he wanted us to walk around the lake, in silence, in the darkness and beauty of the mountain camp and reflect upon our lives

and eternity. We would each carry a candle.

This sounded like the situation in which the kid from Denver, named Steve, had blown out his candle and then put his arm around my sister. My heart began to thump.

Elder Ross instructed us that we would be on our honor. We were being treated as adults and we should act like adults, worthy of the trust. At the far side of the campfire bowl, staff members dispensed six-inch white candles, each with a paper skirt to catch dripping wax. I pushed my way toward the edge, watching where Barbara would line up.

The boys and girls were alternating, one from each line. I counted how many girls were in front of Barbara and got into the boy's line. My heart sank when I realized that I had gone too far forward. Two of Barbara's friends saw me, though, and quickly moved Barbara in front of them. She took her candle and started walking, then I took mine and followed her. About fifty yards from the campfire bowl, the trail passed behind a large boulder. I paused for a second, blew out my candle, and hurried forward in the darkness.

"Hi," I whispered. Barbara looked surprised to see me beside her but she smiled. "My candle went out...maybe it wasn't completely an accident." Barbara giggled quietly.

I slipped my right arm around her shoulder and waited nervously. She leaned slightly against me. She smiled at me again, appearing shy in the candlelight.

Barbara's arm was warm under my hand. I could feel her hip brush lightly against mine as we walked. When she whispered, her breath was warm on my cheek. We held the burning candle together, my left hand over Barbara's. We stumbled on a root, then on a rock, but we walked together and it felt good and easy.

I thought about the beauty of the lake, with more than a hundred candles blinking between trees, up and down, the light skipping on water ripples. The pine smell was fresh, the air cool, and Barbara's shoulder was warm against my chest. A few stars blinked between tree branches. The night seemed so big, connected to the universe, connected to God and to truth.

The naughtiness of violating Elder Ross's trust hovered, like a light-seeking moth, at the periphery of my thoughts. But I felt a thrill in having trespassed. I had slipped into a new secret place, a place where Barbara whispered, smiled, and brushed against me.

It was a place where Elder Ross's admonitions to con-

template my life and eternity came to me clearly. It felt right to consider my life at the same time I contemplated Barbara's softness and the way candlelight dramatized her smile. I belonged in this church with flickering candles across the lake, with Barbara's hair brushing my cheek.

For twenty minutes, we walked along the dark trail, following a silhouetted figure ahead, keeping away from the dark figure that carried a candle behind us. Finally, floodlight showed through the trees as we approached the open grassy center of the camp. I squeezed Barbara and let her go. She walked ahead, carrying her candle and I followed in the darkness, my heart thumping. Two counselors stood near the edge of the trees, preoccupied with their conversation. Barbara was dropping her extinguished candle into a box when I threw mine in beside hers.

Barbara and I walked together toward the auditorium, self-conscious in the light. We laughed softly about our secret and found ourselves talking with hushed voices. Later, I lay awake for a long time noticing the cotton of my sleeping bag against my chest, listening to the breathing from other bunks, remembering dancing candles across the lake water, the tickle of Barbara's hair on my cheek, and the glow I had felt when sensing eternity stretching out unbroken from the footpath around the lake.

At breakfast the following morning, I kept glancing at Barbara, who was eating at another table with the girls from her cabin. She waited for me on the porch of the cafeteria. There were already a few cars in the parking lot, and parents strolled to the cabins to collect their kids. Barbara and I exchanged addresses and promised to write. She smiled and then walked toward her cabin on the opposite side of the camp.

I gushed when Mom asked about my week at camp. I told her about the sailboards, the horses, and even about dark-eyed Barbara. I was impatient to leave camp, though, eager for the moment when the car would be on the highway. Linda and I would sit in the back seat, our conversations covered by the road noise. It would be my turn to share a story about an adventure at camp.

I collected a stack of letters on pastel stationary during the next year. Some of the letters were scented with perfume. Linda collected letters from Steve but soon was writing letters to me, from Thunderbird Academy, that featured another boy.

The letters from Barbara arrived less frequently as the months passed and stopped altogether during the

following summer. When I next saw Barbara, four years later, I wasn't sure that I recognized her. By that time, I had kissed Gail in the piano practice room at Sandia View Academy, and, later, Susie behind the curtains on the stage of the gym at Champion Academy.

I forgot the details of my baptism for many years. I easily remembered the baptismal class with my father as instructor and the pretty, but shy girls of the Santa Fe church. When my own sons began to contemplate baptism I started to piece together the memory fragments. I remembered with surprise the cold feeling of my bare legs, the muttering of Pastor Smith as he put on the cold, wet robe, and the sensation of the cool door handle in my flank as we drove across the bridge over the Rio Grande. Even now, the memories make me feel cool, unattached, unimportant.

Recently, I heard my mother recount the joy and glory of her baptism to one of my sons. She told of the happiest day of her life, and the deep joy that she felt afterward. I realized that my thread of joy leads more clearly to the week at Glacier View Camp than to my official baptism. The immersion that I recall with joy was in the cold, green, mossy lake water. The happiness that I recall is entangled with the shy smiles of Barbara and my quiet approach to her in the darkness behind the bolder. I felt bold and original even as I imitated Steve's action in my sister's story of her week at camp.

I remember that Barbara and I, very conscious of being baptized Adventists, walked around the lake, clasping one candle in two hands. For twenty minutes, we scuffed our feet on roots and rocks of the dirt trail that seemed to lead into eternity. That walk was my adolescent immersion into the warmth of belonging with other Adventists and my introduction to the strange calculus of bartering the trust of an elder for closeness with someone my own age. It was the first time I recall the heart-thumping thrill of having trespassed a rule, gaining the forbidden pleasure of intimacy, and simultaneously gaining a sense of peace as Barbara and I pondered our lives and eternity. ■

Gary E. Gilbert is assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and deputy ACOS for research and development, Veterans Administration Boston Healthcare System.

Some doors are still closed to women...



because Adventist women still can't serve as ordained ministers. And that's too bad. For them and for us.

Men's Club?

When we deny people's spiritual gifts, a terrible thing happens. We cripple the body of Christ.

Doesn't the church need the gifts of ordained men *and* women?

Isn't it time to open this door?
Contact TEAM.



TIME FOR EQUALITY IN ADVENTIST MINISTRY
P.O.Box 7816
Langley Park, MD 20787
or by e-mail BHAB8@aol.com

Put me on your mailing list

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____