

Watching the Mundane, Teaching the Profound

Bell produces compelling postmodern video | BY RAEWYN HANKINS

In the *Nooma* series, Rob Bell invites us to stop, look at life differently, experience God's presence, and be transformed. The *Nooma* DVDs are particularly compelling for postmodern, young adult professionals, and this one is no exception. In *Breathe*, Bell positions himself underground in a train station, watching the mundane rushing back and forth, to teach a profound truth about the reality of God's presence, demonstrated by the ordinary action of breathing. The *Nooma* style, use of meta-stories, theology, and simple truths, as seen in *Breathe*, is revolutionizing our communication of the gospel, especially to young adults.

Bell's style utilizes this popular media and enters this generation's mind-set to speak in a way that attracts and engages. Today, we think in icons. We spend our days seeing the world through the lens of the camera. Much as Jesus used parables, Bell begins with stories—spoken or seen—and experiences we all hold in common. For a generation oriented toward sound bites, Bell is able to present a thought-provoking message in only ten minutes.

Instead of using a preacher's voice and speaking from behind an elevated pulpit, Bell is conversational, interacting one-on-one, friend-to-friend. His tone is relaxing, reflective. There is no distance between him and listeners. His authenticity comes through as he shares his frustrations, such as dialing telephone numbers that won't connect.

Before we look at the theology taught through Bell's words, let's explore what *Breathe* teaches behind the words. The meta-stories that happen all around him in the subway station accentuate his message. Beyond the busy-ness of the station, people look tired, depressed, and alone. One man sleeps, unaware of his breathing. Another couple put in their earpieces, separately disappearing into their own worlds. Another person hides

behind a newspaper. We see a couple's hands intertwined, yet they do not face each other. A tired girl brings her Starbucks up to her pale face as Bell comments, "We're fragile... Life is fragile."

As he sits underground in the subway station, Bell is talking about being *adamab*, "dirt-man," who will go back to the dirt. In this land, we watch the trains go back and forth, moving fast in opposite directions.

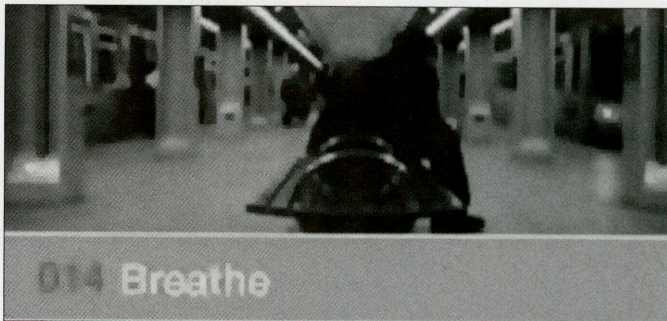
Some people know where they're going; some don't; some really don't care. We see the mundane existence of complete strangers—rushing, tired, and alone in their own worlds—yet each breathing God's breath of life.

Theologically, Bell speaks about God in a language that postmoderns understand. He doesn't use "in-house" talk. For example, instead of quoting texts, he says, "One Scripture says..." or "the ancient Hebrews thought..." Instead of presenting a complex, abstract explanation of "sanctification," Bell speaks about how the Spirit allows us to breathe out life's toxins.

Beyond the terms he chooses, he explains truth through connection, asking contemplative questions, rather than offering solutions: "Who actually thinks about their breathing?" "Are we standing on holy ground, passing burning bushes on the left and the right, and because we're moving too fast, we miss them?" "When a baby is born, what's the first thing they do?" "The last thing we do, is it taking our last breath?" "Or, is it that, when we can no longer say the name of God, we die?" Bell's questions ring in one's head a lot longer than the ten-minute *Nooma*.



Rob Bell, **Nooma: Breathe** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006).



Instead of cut-and-dried points, Bell teaches through a profound paradox. We come from the dust; we return to the dust; yet we breathe the Creator's divine breath. "There is paradox at the heart of what it means to be a human being." Referencing Psalms 8, Bell says, "We're these sacred, divine dirt-clods. Your life is but a breath, yet you were made by the Creator of everything." We are extremely fragile, yet we are temples of the living God.

In response to Bell's teaching, I have one theological caution: It's too easy to assume that we ourselves are divine and already have eternal life living within us without a chosen connection to the living God. I think this may stem from the common teaching that we are created with immortal souls (contrary to Hebrew thought). At the same time, whether or not we have chosen life, we have been given the gift of life, demonstrated by our breathing in and out in this moment. Too often, we miss the fact that we have already been given the gift of life (breath of life). Perhaps what we still need now is the sustenance of that life (breath of eternal life).

Bell teaches profound truth in very simple ways, in the midst of our mundane, everyday existence. His teaching corresponds with my own reality. Today as I breathe, I will think about being honest with what's going on inside of me, the toxins I need to breath out. I will also be aware that I'm breathing God's name, and praying for the Nooma to come in with each breath. I will be conscious that the same divine breath that flows through me also flows through the person next to me.

Now I share Bell's appeal: "May you come to see that God is here, right now with us all the time, may you come to see that the ground you are standing on is holy. As you slow down, may you become aware that it is in YHVH that we live, and we move, and we breathe." ■

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CONVERSATIONS

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ment pastors from mainline and evangelical churches. It has been well-received by other churches.

Also, we have been building a friendly relationship with the Japan Evangelical Association. In a recent meeting with the president of JEA, he promised to help us break the barrier between evangelical churches and the SDA Church and wrote his recommendation for the second printed edition of our book on Adventism that I just mentioned. Of course, because of our past, it has been a gradual process, but we can see increasing acceptance of our church by other churches.

Our publishing house is also benefiting financially. Our colporteurs are aging, and sales through them have been dropping every year. Broadening the market has been timely for the future of our publishing work.

NAM: *Have there been any negative reactions, such as some members being concerned about associating with "Sunday churches"?*

MIYAMOTO: There are always people not in the majority who think what we are doing is just selling out our distinctiveness. However, we can keep our SDA identity clear, yet also be generous toward other Christians who have different convictions. After all, there is no perfect church or denomination and we have to see ourselves as well as others through the eyes of the radical grace of Jesus Christ. In fact, one of our distinctive beliefs—like the Sabbath—has to be a sign of both the radical inclusiveness and the grace of Christ. We want to present our church as characterized by these beautiful traits of Jesus.

NAM: *How can those outside Japan support you for what you're seeking to do?*

MIYAMOTO: I'd like to request your support through prayer so that a revival will take place in Japan in the near future. I would be happy to make contact with those who are trying to implement Willow Creek's principles and style in the Adventist setting and find out how they are doing in other countries. ■

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FLAT NEW WORLD

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Most Americans are not in radical disagreement with the way that their country handles free enterprise so that almost all citizens can benefit from the national economy. But with true globalization, they need to think about forms of global democracy. The John Birch Society advocates that the United States abandon the United Nations. However, logic suggests the need to strengthen greatly the UN for the good of global capitalism.

Smith saw that for the good of free enterprise, there needed to be certain government regulations—and, of course, in his day the only corporations he envisioned were strictly national. But today we have truly multinational corporations. For example, one could originate in Europe, choose to put its headquarters in New York City, and carry out production in a developing country. Therefore, we need to devise international democratic frameworks—if globalization is to thrive morally. Even, no *especially*, dispossessed people of the world need to feel that they are treated fairly and given voice in the shaping of policies that might affect them.

"Eventually, we should be working toward the creation of international legal frameworks and international courts," writes Stiglitz, "as necessary for the smooth functioning of the global economy as federal courts and national laws are for national economies" (207).

A global ethic is necessary to hold a global economy accountable. A nascent effort took place in 1993 with the meeting of the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions, according to Hans Küng and Karl-Joseph Kuschel in their book, *A Global Ethic*. More than six thousand people from various religions met in Chicago to work out a Declaration Toward a Global Ethic. The council approved statements affirming: (1) collective responsibility for a better world; (2) commit-

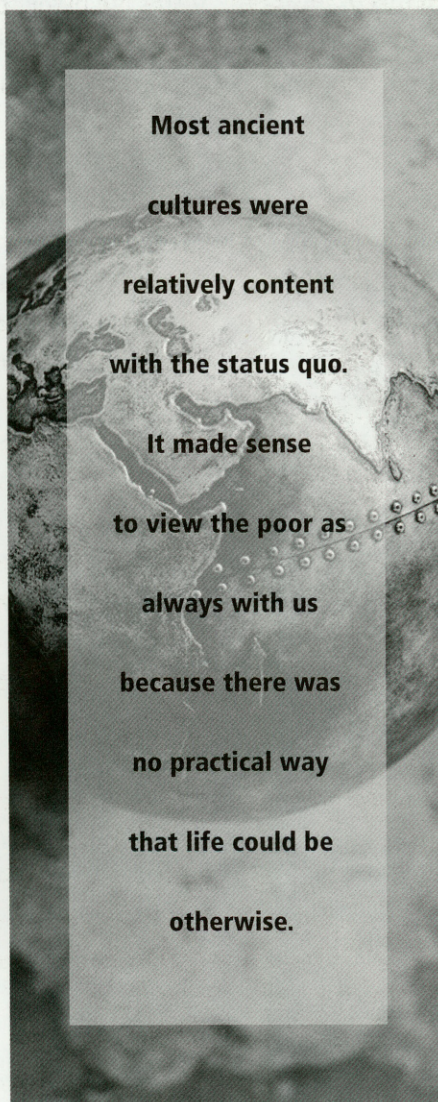
ment to nonviolence and respect for life; (3) dedication to furthering a just economic order; and (4) agreement on the equality of all human beings (18–34).

Aside from national regulations, some multinationals are proactively setting their own ethical standards for worldwide business practices. For example, in late 2004, Hewlett-Packard, Dell, and IBM formed an alliance to work with key members of their worldwide supply chains to enact a unified code of socially responsible manufacturing practices. The new Electronics Industry Code of Conduct includes rules on usage of wastewater, hazardous materials, pollutants; the reporting of industrial injuries; and bans on child labor, bribes, embezzlement, and extortion. Not surprisingly, Friedman claims that these corporations see value in their concern for values:

"Customers care," says Debra Dunn, HP's vice president for global citizenship, and European customers lead the way in caring. And human rights groups and NGOs, who are gaining increasing global influence as trust in corporations declines, are basically saying, "You guys have the power here. You are global companies, you can set expectations that will influence environmental practices and human rights practices in emerging countries." (383)

In calling for a realistic Christian approach to a fair globalization, we must not be naïve, and here we learn, again, from Tom Friedman. In his *The World Is Flat*, he distinguishes between top-down (wholesale) reforms and bottom-up (retail) reforms in the developing world. Reducing tariffs, making loans readily available, enhancing educational opportunities are examples of wholesale reform, and Friedman agrees with Stiglitz that worldwide poverty is as widespread as ever—despite wholesale reforms.

What is missing is widespread retail reform. Friedman contends that "persistent poverty is a practical problem as well as a moral one, and we do ourselves no good to



focus on our moral failings and not the practical shortcomings of the countries and governments involved" (402). He cites the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC), which studied 130 countries to prepare a document titled *Doing Business in 2004*. The researchers, drawing on work by Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, asked five questions about how easy or difficult it is to (1) start a business in terms of local rules, regulations, and license fees; (2) hire and fire workers; (3) enforce a contract; (4) get credit; and (5) close a business that goes bankrupt or is failing.

Friedman sums up the results of the study: "those countries that make all these things relatively simple and friction-free have undertaken reform retail, and those that have not are stalled in reform wholesale and are not likely to thrive in a flat world" (403). He quotes from the report:

[I]t takes less than six months to go through bankruptcy proceedings in Ireland and Japan, but more than ten years in Brazil and India. It costs less than 1 percent of the value of the estate to resolve insolvency in Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Singapore—and nearly half the estate value in Chad, Panama, Macedonia, Venezuela, Serbia and Montenegro, and Sierra Leone. (405)

Biblical insights into the need for the rich to aid the poor are more relevant than ever, given contemporary knowledge. However, like so much of the Bible, its message must be taken seriously without the mistake of taking it literally. Simply giving to the poor is insufficient. An examination is necessary to discover any personal complicity or detrimental behavior that may be furthering local or global injustices. Just as today's Christian must take into account modern thought about human rights when thinking about the biblically condoned institution of slavery, we must also take into account modern economics when advocating the best way to address world poverty. Moreover, precisely because of the biblical pronouncements about rich and poor, Christians have a strong impetus to join humanists in instituting savvy global reforms to eradicate extreme poverty in our world. ■

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I Love the Lord, but...

- Have you ever found yourself focusing more on the praise you received from others than on the praise that you should be giving to God?
- Do you find that you would rather trust the people in your world whom you can see than the holy and infinite God of the universe who is somewhere "up there" in heaven?
- Do terms such as "grace" and "mercy" confuse you every time you hear them?

In simple and easy-to-understand language, author **Sylvester Paulasir** (pictured) explores many issues that young Christians often face—including confronting temptation, dealing with issues of pride, establishing real relationships with God and comprehending God's will—and offers practical advice to help along the way.

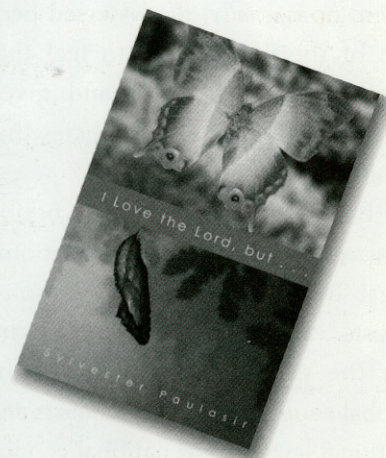


Will you become a super-saint by reading this book? Probably not. But there is a good chance that you'll find that one thing you have been missing in your spiritual journey: Hope.

"Sylvester tells us with refreshing vulnerability about things we sometimes do not dare share with our mirrors."

—Zack Plantak

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