

Through the Lens of Faith | BY MARTIN DOBLMEIER

At the Adventist Forum annual conference in Rancho Mirage last year, guest filmmaker and keynote speaker Martin Doblmeier shared his spiritual journey as he addressed the conference theme “Present Truth in Visual Media: How Film Illuminates Faith.” President and founder of Journey Films, Doblmeier is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker who most recently directed *The Adventists*, a film that looks at the intersection of faith and health through the work of the church. This is his key-note speech.

Before we begin, I want to show a clip from a film I did a number of years ago called *Creativity—Touching the Divine*, about the intersection between the creative self and the spiritual self. First, I want to give you just as a little background.

I was walking down the street in my hometown, Old Town Alexandria, VA, and saw this crowd of people gath-

ered. When I walked up, I saw a man sitting at a card table filled with brandy glasses, and those brandy glasses were filled with water at different levels. And from those glasses he was creating some of the most beautiful music you could imagine. When he was finished the people broke out into loud applause. After I talked to him briefly I took his card, which said “Jamey Turner,” and below his name was written, “*To God be the Glory.*” Johann Sebastian Bach spoke openly that his art form—music—was a powerful tool to proclaim the glory to God.

When I met Jamey Turner I had no idea how we would intersect in the future, but I felt we would. I kept his music and his gift in my heart, and sure enough, a year or so later I had the chance to produce this film on *Creativity*, and I knew Jamey would be perfect. The film had several stories—one was on Jamey—and to close the film I flew Jamie to California. In a single long day I shot this music video that was the close of the film. It is only a couple of minutes in length and is not meant to be too theologically challenging, so enjoy it.

Thank you for the invitation to be with you for this Forum. I want to thank Bonnie Dwyer for the invitation and for being the editor of a great publication. I want to thank Brenton Reading and Brent Stanyer for all their friendship and support.

And I want to thank two of my dearest friends who I can honestly say are the people who more than anyone else are responsible for my getting into this Adventist chapter of my life—Lee and Gary Blount.

Over this last year I have been traveling a great deal across the country with *The Adventists* film. While I am a Christian but not an Adventist—yet—people tell me I have come to see more of the Adventist Church than many Adventists, including congregations large and small, colleges, and campmeetings. The Jewish comedians



PHOTO BY PAUL JEAN | WWW.LOUDOUN.COM/PEOPLE/2010-10-31/DAY-TRIPPER-TORREDO-FACTORY-ART-CENTER

who traveled around the country used to say they felt like they were on the *Borscht Circuit*. I feel I have been on the *Haystack Circuit*.

I learned about Loma Linda Big Franks, which you can buy used on Amazon and at campmeetings, and spoke at the General Conference session in Atlanta. And while people have told me time and time again how grateful they are for *The Adventist* film, I am the one who is truly grateful for all that has happened and the many blessings I have received.

I know enough about the Adventist world to know where I am—that *Spectrum* attracts a certain kind of reader. Before I left home I told my wife I was going to be with those dangerous liberals of the SDA. Hanging out with the Left. But before you get too pleased with yourselves, look at what you are left of: a self-described conservative, Bible-centric form of good old American Protestantism, and in my mind that still puts you somewhere between Dwight Moody and Chuck Scriven.

We have begun the Sabbath, and one of the things I so admire is the genuine reverence Adventists have for Sabbath. It is, in my mind, not only one of the treasures you hold for a healthier body, mind and spirit but a model way to honor God as you put order and rhythm into a life that can too often be filled with chaos and wasted energy.

A Sabbath that begins on Friday at sunset is one thing you share with the Hebrew tradition. So I don't need to tell you that according to the Talmud—which stands alongside the Bible as Judaism's most important literary creation—the Talmud says *sexual relations are especially blessed on the Sabbath*. And Torah scholars in particular are *required to make love to their wives on Friday night*. So if any of you leave this talk early I will assume it's not because of the speaker. Who says religion is all work and no play?

Our conference is titled *How Film Illuminates Faith*. In many ways what we are really talking about is story—whether it is re-telling in new ways the parables of Christ, sharing tales of our ancestors in faith or putting words to the way we live today—it is story that binds us together, story that fuels our imagination, story that propels us to achieve in ways we never thought possible. Story—and not just in telling stories, repeating them for others, but it is having the courage to internalize a story so deeply that we have no choice but to become part of the story ourselves. The story then takes on new life—our life.

Rabbi Kagan

There is a great tale told in Jewish circles about a rabbi in a small village in Eastern Europe around the start of the previous century, during the early 1900s. His name was Rabbi Kagan. And Rabbi Kagan was known in his village as a brilliant man, a great scholar of the Torah and Talmud, but also a man who always favored *people over the law*.

And there was to be a trial on the other side of the county, and the lawyer for the trial needed a character witness for the man he was defending. So he asked Rabbi Kagan.

At the trial the lawyer introduced the Rabbi to the judge saying: "Here is a man of outstanding reputation—a scholar and a holy man." And the lawyer went on saying to the judge, "People tell the story about Rabbi Kagan that one day he returned home only to discover a robber in his house with an armful of his possessions. When the robber saw the homeowner, he fled out the door and down the street, still clinging to the Rabbi's goods. And Rabbi Kagan chased him down the street shouting, "I declare to all who hear my voice that the things this man carries belong to no one," so that the robber could not be accused of taking any man's possessions.

The judge looked at the lawyer and said, "Do you believe this story?" And the lawyer said, "I don't know, but they don't tell stories like that about you and me."

For Christians, Christ is the master storyteller, and according to the gospel accounts, his stories engaged people from his earliest years.

Jesus in the Temple

In the Gospel of Luke we have the story of Christ as a young boy who, during the Passover celebration, which was a time of massive crowds, deafening noise and chaos, gets separated from his mother and father, Mary and Joseph. His parents, naturally, are worried sick. Remember, it is only twelve years since an edict went out to kill all newborns in the hopes of killing this very boy. That could cause any parent to worry.

And where do they find Jesus? In the temple. Not at the ballfield or playground but in the temple with the rabbis, doctors and scholars. This story appears only in the book of Luke, who was a physician and a companion of St. Paul, a learned man.

And Jesus, at age 12, is "sitting in the midst of the teachers." He was not standing like a catechumen to be



Jean Vanier (left)

examined or instructed by them, but was allowed to sit among them as one who *has* knowledge, wants to *increase* his knowledge, and is anxious to *communicate* that knowledge. Christ, by all accounts, is excited to share his understanding, his story with others.

And upon finding her lost son, Mary says, “We have been worried sick, looking for you everywhere.”

And Jesus speaks what amounts to his very first spoken words in the Bible: “*Don’t you know I must be about my Father’s business?*”

Business. Of course, no one has ever taken that line literally. “Mom, I know I am in trouble here, but give me five more minutes. They’re eating out of my hands, and I’m just about to close a big deal.” Business, in this case, means so much more.

And Luke continues writing: “...and his mother kept all these things carefully in her heart.”

What did his mother keep in her heart—that her child was going to run off the minute she turned her back again? What did she keep in her heart? That this son had something in his heart, something he felt so compelled to share he was willing to get lost? Something learned people were excited to hear?

And in closing his chapter Luke writes, “*Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and men.*” I must be about my Father’s business. In many ways for me, that notion has stayed in my heart as it stayed in his mother’s heart. On one side it may seem a bit callous and cold, lacking the emotion we so often like to associate with Jesus stories. But as filmmakers who continue to explore the unique world of faith in an increasingly troubled world—that matter-of-factness, that settling of the heart, that focus of mind, I find both comforting and empowering. Let’s strip away the veneer and false shine and set about a framework for understanding; there is work to be done here, knowledge to be gained, and a remarkable, life-giving story to be both lived and shared.

I can think of no story in my life that better shows an example of that sense of doing the tough business of being about my Father’s business than Jean Vanier, who, in the mid-1960s, began a series of homes called L’Arche for men and women with mental handicaps—based on the Beatitudes. He decided to build the homes as communities and make the handicapped person the center of the home. And in these homes, through these homes, he would be about the difficult and very un-romantic business of living a life of faith.

New Day in Television

When I began my career in television in the late 1970s, one of the greatest barriers to entry was access to the tools of filmmaking—the cameras and editing equipment. Today more and more the tools to make quality programs are in the hands of everyone. The question is, what will we do with them, and what will the films we make say about us? What will those films say about our faith and how we practice that faith?

Last week I participated in an event around digital media, what we now call User Generated Content. Facebook has over 150 million active users. News, sports, even prayers are being APPED to our cell phones. Blogs are getting more “hits” than the sites for what we used to consider legitimate news outlets. YouTube has millions of clips, but recently they reached an extraordinary and telling benchmark. They announced that every minute of the day 24 hours of new material is being uploaded onto their site. Imagine! Every minute of the day 24 new hours of material is posted on YouTube. It is a very different time, not just because the technology has changed but

because people genuinely have embraced it.

And look at what we are doing. We are recording our every thought, every silly pet trick, every foolish stunt, every presentation at every conference. Our children and grandchildren will be the most documented children in history. We are in love with our media to a point as the Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan said, "The medium IS the message." McLuhan, who is credited with the expression "global village," also wrote, "*All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values.*" More and more we are seeing the truth in that statement.

In some ways we can see just up the road ahead that we will have to start more carefully separating the wheat from the chaff—what is worth holding on to and what is not. It is no longer simply because we don't have the storage capacity but because computer memory is getting cheaper each year. What is getting more and more priceless is our time.

And with all this mountain of material being created every minute, what will all this say about how God is alive in our world, what will it say about our story of faith? In the midst of all this mound of media will there be any room or any interest in what we as people of faith think is vitally important? How do we tell stories of faith and not see them thrown out with the chaff?

Not a Filmmaker First

It may come as a bit of a surprise to some, but I DO NOT consider myself first as a filmmaker. I do often find myself at film festivals, and I do talk at a number of film-related events. But I always make it clear that for me, film is a medium, and I am always first about the business of the message. Just as a typewriter has been a means of transcribing thought, not creating it, so, too, the camera is a way to capture faith, not create it.

For me the excitement is in discovering new ways to capture how God is alive and vibrant and working in our world *right now*. I know I must accept that for many people today religion is seen as the cause of so much of the world's problems. The media is not shy about telling us about how the latest religious leader has failed to live up to his or her vows and hurt others in the process. And when one fails so publicly, others are dragged down as well. Yet I live in a world where I have the privilege to stand beside people who every day put their own self-

interests aside to help others because they see in that other person the face of God. And that is the very reason I continue to do this work.

Our differences can be great—there's no denying it—differences in religion, education, economic status, differences in how we were raised, our family experiences. But the one thing we all share, the one thing that is undeniable, is that we are alive in this world right now, at this very moment in time. And we have these natural resources, these God-given natural resources, which we can either hoard and abuse or share and enrich. We have our histories which may be very different—yet the choices are the same. We can either view our histories as tools for teaching a way forward or as an excuse for our revenge. And we have each other, and we either recognize each other as a partner in this experience or as our prey.

The decisions we make today will be our legacy. The decisions we make will determine what others say about us to generations yet to come. The decisions we make will become OUR STORY.

MLK

One of the most memorable sermons ever preached by Martin Luther King, Jr., was called *The Man Who Was a Fool*. His wife, Coretta Scott King, later wrote that what this sermon contained in a few sentences was the whole of King's principle of social action and the struggle for change.

King said: "*All of us are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.*"

In the film *The Adventists* I put out for the PBS audience the notion—the Adventist notion—that we need to care for the body for the simple reason that our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. I believe we are commanded to care for our neighbor's welfare—body, mind and spirit—for the very same reason. If I truly believe that my body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, then I must accept that the same holds true for you.

That notion of compassion and care for the other must erupt out of us despite our religious divides, our political affiliations, class distinctions, education and our personal histories. Too much is at stake for us to fail. The decisions we make become our story.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer

Are there stories that help us see our way forward through our differences to this common understanding? A number of years ago I had the privilege of doing a film on the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was one of the first clear voices of resistance to Adolf Hitler. He spoke truth to power at a time when it could be very costly to do so. He tried to challenge the state church to resist the temptation of following Hitler, but he was mostly unsuccessful. Often he was swimming against an evil tide, but that is often the circumstance against which faith is best clarified.

In the mid-1930s as Hitler was solidifying power, Bonhoeffer fled to England to escape the growing madness. He returned to Germany only because a number of pastors-in-training, pastors willing to also stand up to Hitler, needed a seminary director. It became one of the happiest chapters in Bonhoeffer's life because he could speak openly about the Gospel challenges to confront evil in their midst. To do that, he drew on many faith traditions and musical expressions to create for them an environment of trust and joy.

To my mind, Bonhoeffer is unique because he transcends so much of the rancor and vitriol present in our world today—especially in religious circles. The progressive side admires him and often quotes him because he put the Gospel message into social reform to overturn oppression. Bonhoeffer was often quoted in the struggle to overturn apartheid, and he remains a favorite son of liberation theologians in South America. Yet conservatives often return to Bonhoeffer because he is so Bible-focused, so Christo-centric. He truly loved Jesus, the Psalms, the stories. He was a martyr for the faith who was a man of the Book with an extraordinary gift for expression.

The *Bonhoeffer* film ends with a dialectic mix of tragedy and redemption as his closest friend Eberhard Bethge reads from a letter Bonhoeffer wrote to him from prison just after the last plot to kill Hitler failed. Bonhoeffer had come to see his fate was sealed, and his time on this earth was not long: *"I am still discovering right up to this moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By this worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes, failures. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own suffering but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith."*

Life's duties, that sense of being about my father's business means recognizing how God is suffering through his people in this world, right now, in our world.

Jesus Became Story

For Christians, Jesus remains the master storyteller. From his lips and by his examples we have parables and stories for the ages. In so doing he also showed us what we had to see, sometimes quite literally. He brought us to the broken, the poor and the outcasts. He pointed the way. He healed the blind so they could see. He literally opened their eyes.

With every day of our lives we must ask ourselves—do we see? We look. Our eyes are open—but do we really see?

Blessed are those who do not see the suffering in the world—who do not see those who are persecuted, who does not see those who hunger and thirst. Blessed are you who do not see the suffering, for you are not tormented by their suffering. For it is only when a person actually sees—when the suffering person becomes real before our eyes, and we actually feel their pain, that you must make a choice. And here is where the filmmaker can illuminate

what, in faith, must be seen. Our business is to bring light and sound and voice so those who are invisible can be seen, those whose voice is ignored can be heard. And through the power of that lens to speak truth to power and thereby offer the hope we all cry out for in our lives.

Admittedly, filmmakers must compress the world around them. They compress it for time so that it fits into strict formats. They compress complex notions and put them through the prism of their own lens which is always formed by the filmmaker's own realities and prejudices. And by that filmmaker's lens and prejudices it is not just that the story is being told by a liberal or conservative, progressive or regressive, someone from a red state or blue. It goes deeper than political persuasions. Is the storyteller angry or at peace, frustrated or content? Is their purpose to build up the world around them or tear it down? It seems tearing down is so much more in fashion these days. And those who choose to build it up often are labeled—naive.

The lens a filmmaker sees the world through must be well cared for, like a fisherman who each day travels miles offshore must tend to his boat. Many years ago I did a story about a man in Washington, DC, who was trying to recapture the ancient art of iconography. He was a talented artist who not only studied the works but tried to understand the artists who painted them. Iconographers were mostly nameless people who were willing to forgo credit for themselves because they saw the work as sacred work that brought glory to God alone. Their talent was a gift from God, "To God be the Glory."

In the Middle Ages before iconographers would start a painting they would pray and fast to prepare their hearts. Then every act, from the gathering of the different pigments and paints, the mixing of the colors, to the painting itself, it all became an act of prayer. The artist often felt humbled before the image he was creating.

As filmmakers, especially those who tell stories of faith, we need to prepare ourselves, to ready our hearts. We must take seriously the research and prepare the equipment so it will not fail. But we must also prepare our inner selves and ask, "Is the lens through which I will see this story clean, or is it fogged up with my own issues and problems? Is my heart angry or at peace? Am I so fixed in my own view that I won't be open to a bold, new mystery I might encounter along the way? Will I be fully present or will I allow distractions to take over? Are my eyes

open—do I really see? Will this work become its own form of prayer?

This kind of preparation, this openness to making the work a form of prayer is not just for filmmakers—it applies to anyone who labors and wishes God to be part of that that labor.

No matter what our work is, preparing both our tools and our hearts and inviting God to be part of our efforts makes every form of work sacred work.

Become the Story

Iconographers believed God's hand directed them, inspired them. They saw themselves as simply the conduits for God's creative powers. I believe as important as that notion is, we are called to be something more—to participate in the creative act in a very personal way. I believe we are called upon—even commanded—not just to convey the story, but if we are to truly be part of the transformation of this world, then we are called to become part of the story ourselves. Jesus was the master storyteller, but in the end he became the story. His life, death and resurrection became the heart of the Christian story, our story. To be an active part of that legacy commands us to advance as Jesus did—in wisdom and age and grace before God and men.

How does film illuminate faith? How do our stories of faith not get separated with the chaff? By telling stories so profound and compelling, so poignant and riveting, that the medium itself is humbled in their telling. If we live the lives we are called to live—with our whole hearts—if we are truly committed to being part of the transformation of this world, then we will have no choice but to become part of the stories ourselves. It holds true whether we are filmmakers, health care workers, teachers, caretakers, no matter what we do or in what field we labor.

If we live our lives fully, with a joy that attracts others to the work at hand, we will *become the story*, and in years to come, that same lawyer will hear the tales about how we have gone about the business of transforming this world for the better and will have no choice but to say about us, "They don't tell stories like that about you and me." ■

Martin Doblmeier is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and president of Journey Films in Alexandria, Virginia. His films have been aired on national television and PBS stations and have received various awards, including an Emmy for best cultural documentary.