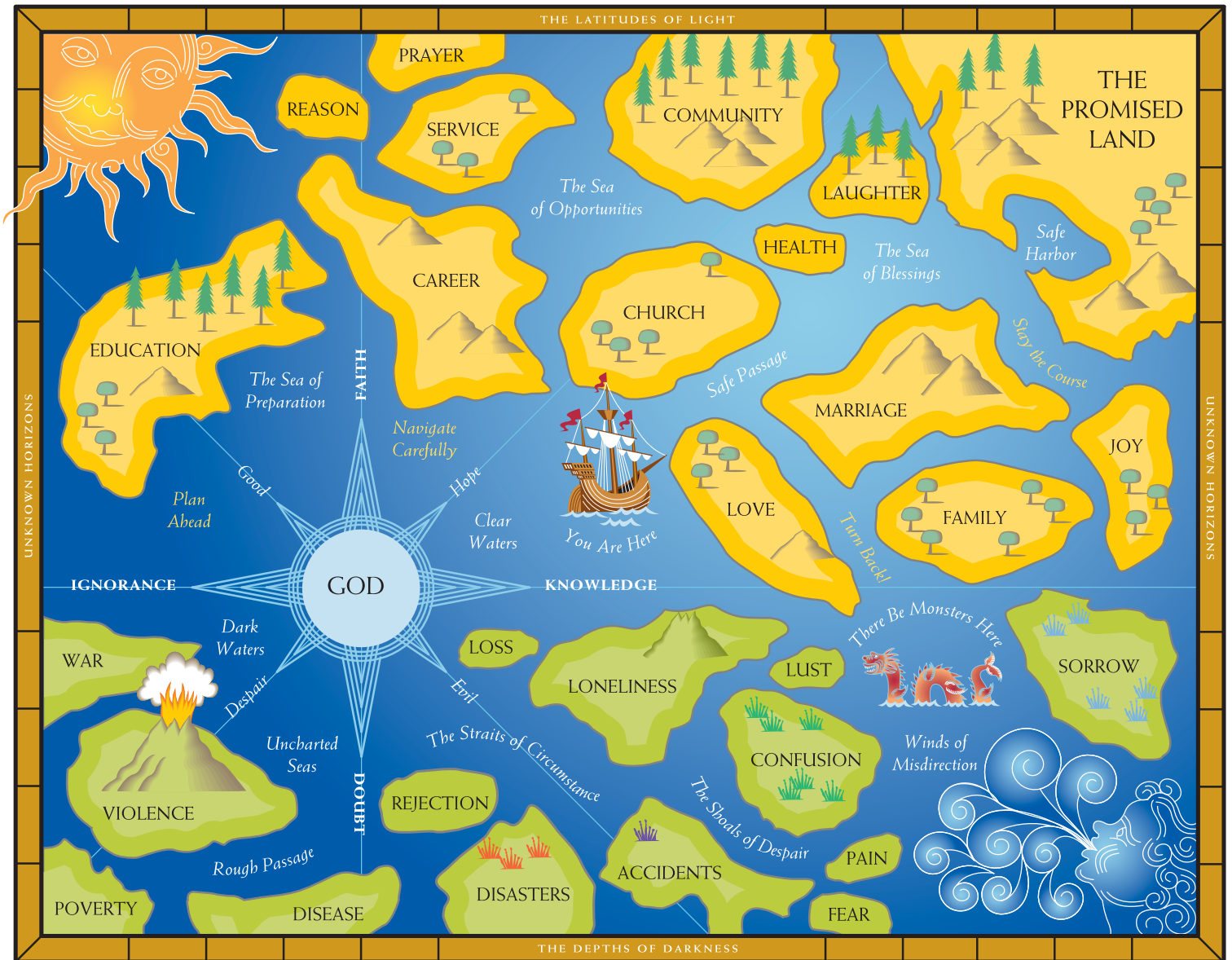


community through conversation

# SPECTRUM



**The Pursuit of Happiness** | *A New Kind of Adventism* |  
**Mugging at Midnight** | *"I Won't Ask to Speak With God"*  
 | **My God, Why? The Question That Never Goes Away** |  
*The Many Faces of Religion* | **Mission to the Secular City:**  
**The Value of Research for Reaching the Unreached**

community through conversation  
**SPECTRUM**

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SPECTRUM is published by Adventist Forum, a nonsubsidized, nonprofit organization for which gifts are deductible in the report of income for purposes of taxation. The publishing of SPECTRUM depends on subscriptions, gifts from individuals, and the voluntary efforts of the contributors.

SPECTRUM can be accessed on the World Wide Web at [www.spectrummagazine.org](http://www.spectrummagazine.org).

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Letters to the editor may be edited for publication.

ISSN: 0890-0264

**Subscriptions and Advertising**

[subscriptions@spectrummagazine.org](mailto:subscriptions@spectrummagazine.org)  
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# contents

## Editorials

- 2 The Pursuit of Happiness | BY BONNIE DWYER
- 3 A New Kind of Adventism | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

## Feedback

- 5 Letters | KRISTEN FALCH JAKOBSEN

## Noteworthy

- 6 Mugging at Midnight | BY FERN BABCOCK

## Bible: Suffering and Spirituality

- 9 "I Won't Ask to Speak With God" | BY SIGVE TONSTAD
- 22 Suffering: *Personal Experience and Reflections* | BY IVAN T. BLAZEN
- 28 My God, Why? *The Question that Never Goes Away* | BY RICHARD RICE
- 34 Participating in God's Redemptive Response to Our Suffering World: *Stories of Care* | BY ANNE COLLIER-FREED

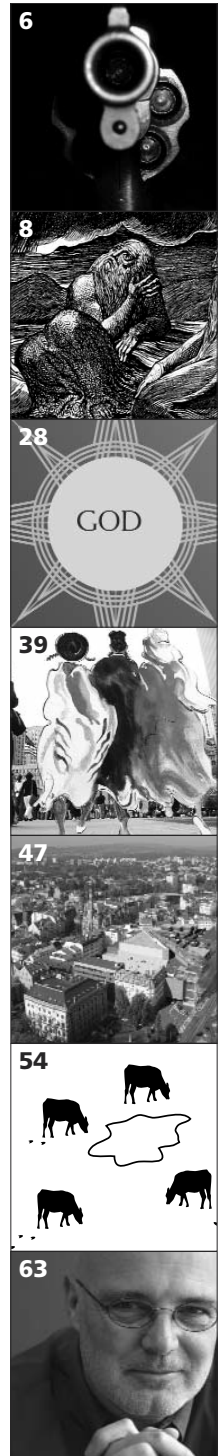
## Mission

- 40 The Many Faces of Religion | BY RUBEN SANCHEZ
- 47 Mission to a Secular City: *The Value of Research for Reaching the Unreached* | BY PETR ČINČALA
- 54 A New Mission School Model: *How Adventist Colleges and Universities Can Thrive and Fulfill Their Mission in the Twenty-First Century* | BY DON WILLIAMS

## Book Review

- 63 Reflections on *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* | BY BRENTON READING

**back cover** Angel Song | BY JOHN MCDOWELL





# The Pursuit of Happiness | BY BONNIE DWYER

**How do we  
as Christians  
make the case  
for a loving  
God that is  
present to  
people now in  
suffering, as  
well as in the  
pursuit of  
happiness?**

While in the pursuit of articles about suffering and theodicy for our Bible section in this issue, I was also reading Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. The juxtaposition of the two informed both readings. Greenblatt tells the literary detective story of how bibliophile Poggio Braccionini, a papal secretary, stumbled upon a five-hundred-year old copy of Lucretius's ancient poem *On the Nature of Things* in 1417. His discovery helped to bring the poem back to the attention of writers and thinkers, setting in motion Lucretius's influence on luminaries from Leonardo da Vinci, to Galileo, to Thomas Jefferson. Lucretius, a first-century BC Epicurean philosopher, did not believe in the afterlife, angels, or demons, but did believe in the idea of pleasure and beauty.

In addition to the detective story, however, Greenblatt's book is secondarily an antireligious polemic, and flat-out wrong in its depiction of the Middle Ages, according to Jim Hinch, who wrote "Why Stephen Greenblatt is Wrong and Why It Matters" for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. It matters because the book "is really a salvo in the culture wars: an effort to lend an aura of historical inevitability to the idea that religious faith has no place in a modern society," Hinch says. Greenblatt's *Swerve* won both the National Book Award for nonfiction and the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, which also irritated Hinch, who felt that two distinguished prize juries managed to overlook the fact that "the book's animating thesis was at best questionable and at worst

unwarranted."

Describing the world of the fourteenth-century popes and their in-fighting, perhaps it is not surprising that Greenblatt arrives at his antireligion statements, but to me his assertion that there is no Intelligent Designer, for instance, smacks more of current atheism than Lucretius. But perhaps where the idea originates is not the point in the current cultural war. It is out there.

How do we as Christians make the case for a loving God that is present to people now in suffering, as well as in the pursuit of happiness?

In this issue we provide you with lively reading material from some of Adventism's best minds: Sigve Tonstad on Job, Richard Rice on theodicy, Ivan Blazen on personal suffering, Anne Collier-Freed on caring.

Petr Činčala tackles the topic of presenting the gospel to the secular city. Don Williams looks at new models for mission in higher education, and Ruben Sanchez takes us into the heart of New York for an Abrahamic Immersion.

Another salvo in the contemporary culture wars from the Christian side is Brian McLaren's *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words*. Brenton Reading movingly reviews it for us in this issue. McLaren's description of God's pursuit of us here and now for me is the key to understanding a life of faith—and why it is such a blessing to life today, in the midst of pain and suffering or joy and the pursuit of happiness. ■

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**Bonnie Dwyer** is editor of *Spectrum*.



## A New Kind of Adventism | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**W**hat good is a state of denial? So let me just say it: if we don't shift toward a new kind of Adventism, our church will go out like a spent candle. It's a matter of time, but it will happen.

Apocalyptic sects stand athwart the tide, battered by the dominant cultures they challenge and pray to God to redeem. New Testament Christianity was itself an apocalyptic sect and it did manage, against great antagonism, to stand tall; down the centuries its flame continued to shine. But New Testament Christianity never swerved from the sense of ultimate mystery. The wonder of grace kept pride—kept self-satisfaction; kept fundamentalism—substantially at bay.

What is more, New Testament Christianity never surrendered the responsibilities of the “two or three who gather in Christ's name” to a centralized, authoritarian bureaucracy. Typically, problem solving addressed local need by way of local energy and imagination. If Paul's mission to the Gentiles could be endorsed by a gathering of leaders in Jerusalem, that was only after Peter, without the sanction of an authoritative hierarchy, had *already* started baptizing Gentiles. If Paul could later become the most important leader in the church, his influence was never coercive. His advice was *advice*, his authority *persuasive*.

On these points, however, our community seems to have lost touch not only with the New Testament but also with the Adventist pioneers. Now the most powerful Adventist

leaders, oblivious to mystery, want to make a fundamentalist version of the Bible's Creation teaching into enforceable dogma. And despite the clear and crying need (at this stage) for local nuance on gender and ordination, these same leaders have been fighting to press Adventists everywhere into a single mold.

If these leaders get their way, it will surely put the church at new risk. The risk may be invisible to most, at least in the short run, but it will be real. Apocalyptic movements so tone-deaf to mystery and so reconciled to top-down control eventually go away.

Is that what we want for our church? What, then, will keep it from happening?

One thing is the deep meaning of our heritage; another is the will we may muster, by God's grace, to explore and renew it.

Consider Jesus Christ. For all Adventists, Jesus—the Messiah, the risen Christ—is the center of faith. We take Jesus to be God's human face, the “image” and “exact imprint” of the invisible divine; he is the Desire of Ages, the embodiment of grace. And as such, he is meant to become, through God's Spirit, the focus of our trust, the wellspring of our deeds and very lives.

Now consider that unlike either Lucifer or Adam, Jesus did not aspire to be God but instead, as Philippians 2 puts it, “emptied himself”—“humbled himself”—in order to live a life of service. It was just by reason of this humility that God “exalted” him to be the fitting object of our loyalty. And it was just by reason of all of this that Paul wrote, “Let the same

**The mind of Christ exudes humility, and true humility bends toward service.**



mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5 NRSV).

Unless Paul was wrong, this *entails*, does it not, that we fully commit ourselves to humility. Cocksure pronouncements, contentious hyperorthodoxy, loathing of others just because they differ from us—all these trappings of fundamentalism we must disavow and overcome. Our leaders must do so. And whether we live at the center or on the fringes of church life, so must all of us.

In conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus himself acknowledged the limitations of religious speech. In a famous parable, he made compassion, not orthodoxy, the test of true discipleship. Seeing resentment and jealousy in his closest followers, he rebuked their disdain for people outside their own circle of belief. And with a view to disagreements inside the church, he authorized a polycentric understanding of community: problem solving would be local, where "two or three are gathered in [Christ's] name" (Matt. 18:20). Neither an arrogant individual nor an overweening bureaucracy could have the last word.

Both our understanding and the relationships shaped by this understanding suffer when the heart is proud. Human excellence is fine: many early Christians were accomplished and well off; most of the best-known Reformers were university professors. But the sense of a monopoly on truth or virtue is for—the self-deceived. The sense of a right to dominate or "lord it over" is for—the doubly self-deceived. The mind of Christ exudes humility, and true humility bends toward service.

What might the mind of Christ mean for the church?

Humble acknowledgment of mystery and humble devotion to service would delegitimize self-indulgent doctrinal speculations, and would stamp a question mark on efforts of centralized control. Christ's teachings say nothing, after all, of heroism in acrimonious disputation; they call us to heroism in character. They make no case for standardization of practice and conformity of thought, except to invite us all into the love of God and neighbor as exemplified by Christ.

Under this liberating regimen, we would embrace the whole Bible story and be drawn together into the joyful honoring of God in Christ the Son. We would restrain our collective and personal egotism. We would shape our teachings into instruments of love and peace. In both our saying and doing, we would be responsive to human

need and local nuance; and all the while, we would be open to growth in mind and heart alike. By God's grace, our self-emptying would drive away the fear that makes us watch our backs and leaves our scientists mute with consternation. In our life together we would find acceptance, purpose, and ever-renewing energy.

How would we pursue our mission? How would we bear our witness?

Humility is not acquiescence. A new kind of Adventism would still be Adventism, still preach the gospel to the whole creation. Where deviant religious cultures veer toward inhumane obsessions—with personal prosperity, with the enshrinement of self, with violence in God's name—we would proclaim the love and peace of Christ. Where secular culture veers toward indifference to truth, or turns science into religion, or makes work and frivolous distraction the whole meaning of life, we would proclaim the love and peace of Christ. Where relationships break down from disdain for commitment, or where the strong lord it over the weak, or where blame and reproof excuse cold disregard, we would proclaim the love and peace of Christ.

We would bear a big-issue witness. More important still, we would *live* what we say. Witness involves words, but words—or at least religious words—have no power apart from their embodiment in lives. Except as there are Christ-like people, "love and peace" is a hollow slogan, a sounding of brass and a tinkling of cymbal.

We would still be a people of hope, naming emptiness and evil, announcing possibility and promise. And we would still call our neighbors not only to faithfulness, but also to those lovely Sabbath retreats that strike down routines and distractions by which we might otherwise fritter our lives away.

And we would still be a city set on a hill, a complex political as well as spiritual reality. This is no call for disorganized religion, nor am I forgetful of the good and generous work done by those who lead us. But in both 1861 and 1872, once at an organizational meeting and once in a statement of our belief, the Adventist pioneers said no to enforced uniformity. Later, in 1901, they said no to "kingly power." A new kind of Adventism would not only honor Christ; it would also honor them. ■

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**Charles Scriven** chairs *Adventist Forum*.



## The Hiddenness of God

### Re: "A Civil Blog Conversation"

THE DISCUSSION IS THE SAME as it always has been and always is being repeated ad infinitum. It is impossible to find common ground with agnostics and atheistic human ethicists this way. The reason is that Christians always assume that God is like a human being and intervenes now and then. The fact, according to the Bible and sheer reason, is:

- 1) God is always there, and by his all-mighty power and omnipotence continually controls everything, from the nuclear particles to the mightiest galaxy hosts, from eternity to eternity.
- 2) He is not a human being, but a spirit, according to Jesus (John 4:24). A spirit is not a person. That the trinity doctrine does say something else is not necessarily a truth.
- 3) When things happen, they are in the Bible partly described as an act of God, and partly as an act of Satan. This is confusing, if God is considered as a real person and characterized as a human being, and not as a spirit. A spirit is an abstraction.
- 4) God exists inside our heads, and has no effect on our spiritual and ethical thinking outside of us.

Richard Dawkins accuses us of being victims of an illusion. He calls it "The God Illusion." I say, OK! Everything we see, hear, and perceive is subjective; even colors do not exist outside our heads, but they are real enough for us. Objectively, they are different wavelengths of light, and the beautiful colors are created inside our brains, so they are in fact divine "illusions."

So it is with everything. Immanuel Kant has taught us something of this phenomenon. I will not go into details on that, because I believe that the partakers in the discussion have read Kant already and know this. This is also completely according to Jesus in Luke 17:21, "The kingdom of God is within you." To be a Christian is a choice and a decision, and entails a continuous and living connection with God within oneself and one's fellow human beings.

Atheists, agnostics, and secular ethicists often accuse Christians of not being able to answer the question of why God does not intervene against evil in the world. The question is in fact meaningless because they do not believe that God is a person like human beings; but Christians do. But not all Christians believe that God is a Superman who does not need to follow the laws of nature. Even the laws of nature are unbreakable, according to Jeremiah 32:35–37, etc., and modern science. As long as a medieval dogma is insisted upon in the church, secular ethicists and traditional Christians shall never be able to have meaningful discussions on this vital and painful problem.

*Greetings,*

KRISTEN FALCH JAKOBSEN,  
STRAUMSJØEN, NORWAY



## Mugging at Midnight | BY FERN BABCOCK



**O**n a frosty Michigan night in November 2012, George and I were in Benton Harbor for the showing of the film *Seventh-Gay Adventists*, a documentary highlighting the dilemma of gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists who love their church. Our daughter Sherri, whose family is featured in the film, drove up from Ohio for the screening and panel discussion afterward, and shared our hotel room. At the theater, we found dozens of inter-

ested persons, as well as students and faculty from Andrews University, eagerly awaiting the film. So many wanted to see the film that the producers had to schedule a second showing, and due to the after-film discussions, the event ended after midnight. We headed out the door, leaving a faculty member, a couple of students, and the husband-and-wife team who had spent over three years producing the compelling film—Stephen Eyer and Daneen Akers.

George had parked our Highlander

in a handicapped parking spot directly in front of the theater, and he, Sherri, and I hurried to get out of the cold. Just as we started up the car, a young man waving his hand ran toward us from the theater entrance. We stopped, thinking it was one of the Andrews University students, and George rolled down his window.

“I was here at the movie and my friends drove off and left me,” he said. “Could you give me a ride just to that McDonald’s over there? I’m staying at the Motel 6 and can get there from McDonald’s.” Pulling his scarf closer about his neck and shivering obviously, he pointed to the golden arches half a mile down the road. When we hesitated, he added, “Don’t worry. I’m a good guy. I just need a ride.”

I gave George a questioning look and he shrugged. Then I turned to Sherri in the seat behind me and said, “Do you mind having this guy sitting by you?”

She shook her head. “No, he looks cold, and it’s just a little ways.” So, George told him to get in.

We left the lot, and had gone only a block when our hitchhiker exclaimed, “Oh no! My bad! Take a left here. Then a right at the stop sign. I can walk to the motel from there—in front of Meijer.”

Confused, George asked, “Where? Where?”



"There's a road in front of Meijer," he replied, pointing. "Right over there."

Obediently, George drove to the road bordering Meijer's deserted parking lot. We were all puzzled and alarmed by then. Suddenly, our man demanded, "Stop the car. Right here."

George stopped. Without further ado, our passenger pulled out a pistol, waved it around, and announced, "This is a holdup. I want your money."

I turned in my seat so I could see him right behind George. "What?" I asked, "What do you want?"

"This is a holdup," he said again.

Sherri put out her hand and patted his right arm, since the gun in his left hand was now drilling into George's left shoulder, which rose above the car seat.

"Oh, no, no, no," she protested.

"You're not going to do this."

"This is a real holdup," he insisted, "and this is a real gun. I need your money. You can get more, but I can't."

Sherri kept patting his arm and talking. "I understand that you have a real gun, and we will give you some money. But what's really going on in your life that you have to go to this extent to get some money?"

This holdup wasn't going at all as the young man had planned. We didn't seem scared, we seemed to want to help him, and this young woman kept patting his arm. Frantic, he began cussing loudly and pointing the gun at each of us in turn.

I asked George for his wallet, extracted the three 20-dollar bills from it, and began talking to the gunman again.

"How much do you need?" I asked.

"Two hundred dollars!" he answered.

"We don't have that much," I told him, "but here's sixty dollars. Now would you please get out of the car,

and I'll hand it to you?"

He shook his head. "I need at least twenty dollars more."

"I don't have that," I said. "But here's sixty dollars. Take it and go."

"Don't be messing with me!" he snapped. "I have your license number and I have friends in high places and I can find out where you live and come after you. Is your money worth more than your life?"

Sherri was still talking a blue streak. "You don't want to do this. This isn't the way to solve your problems. . . You aren't going to hurt us because this car is full of angels and God's presence."

He countered with, "*Get your hands off me!*"

I looked him square in the face and said, "May I pray for you?"

He paled and stammered, "What? What?"

I persisted. "May I pray for you? I'm going to pray for you. Bow your head."

I bowed mine and began to pray, asking God to help this young man, whatever his situation was. I have no idea what I said, but it seemed like a lengthy prayer.

As soon as I began to pray, the mugger took the gun from George's shoulder—we don't know if it went back in his pocket or where—threw both arms around Sherri, and began sobbing on her shoulder.

"This is unbelievable. I'm supposed to be in charge here! I can't believe this. What's happening?" Sob, sob, sob.

Sherri was patting his leg and whispering, "It's OK. It's OK. You're going to be all right."

When I said "Amen," he sat up, wiped his eyes, and spoke.

"This is only the second time I've done this, and I'll never do it again," he said. "I'm having a hard time. My moth-

er and my grandmother died in the last three months, and I've got three kids to care for. You look a lot like my grandmother," he said, nodding at me. (I hoped he liked his grandmother!)

I faced the mugger and repeated my request.

"OK. As soon as you get out of the car, I'll give you the money."

"No you won't," he said. "You'll drive off fast and leave me. You'll call the cops and they'll catch me. Give me the money and I'll get out, I promise. I could have taken your purse and wallet, but I can see you're good people. Just give me the money and I'll go and we'll pretend this never happened."

When he said he could take my purse, I got mad. Exactly one week earlier, my purse had been stolen from a cart in the Walmart parking lot, and I'd spent all week trying to cancel cards and get replacements and a new driver's license! The idea of losing *this* purse was too much!

I faced him with determined eyes. "You promise? We can't trust your promise! You have done nothing but lie to us ever since before you got into our car. But I haven't lied to you! *I do not lie!* Get out of the car. Here's twenty dollars. My husband will hand you the other forty dollars when you're outside. See? He's holding it out the window. Just go get it."

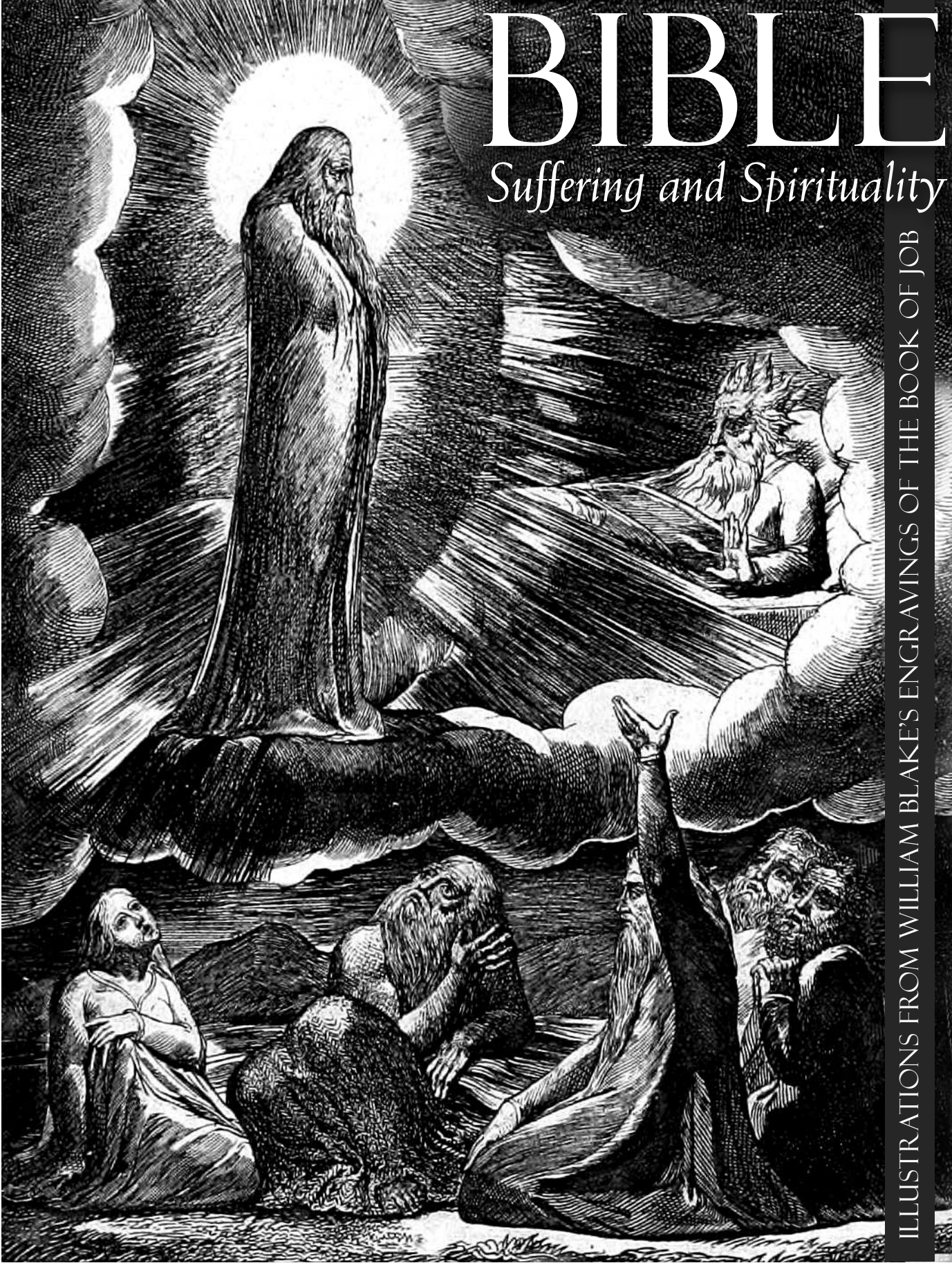
He looked confused. When he'd announced the holdup, he'd pulled his scarf up over his face. When he was crying on Sherri's shoulder, it was down. Now, it was up again.

"Okay. I'll get out." He opened the door, the light went on, and he panicked. "Turn off the light! Turn off the light!"

Sherri reached up and turned off

**Mugging** → continued on page 62...





# BIBLE

*Suffering and Spirituality*

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM WILLIAM BLAKE'S ENGRAVINGS OF THE BOOK OF JOB



## “I Won’t Ask to Speak With God”

(Job 37:20) | BY SIGVE TONSTAD

Teach us what to say to God; our minds are blank; we have nothing to say. I won’t ask to speak with God; why should I give him a chance to destroy me?” the young Elihu says to Job toward the end of his tirade in one of the most startling books in all of literature (Job 37:19–20 GNB). The book of Job says four times that Elihu was angry (Job 32:2–3, 32:5), angry with Job “because he justified himself rather than God” (32:2), and angry with Job’s three friends “because they had found no answer though they had declared Job to be in the wrong” (32:3). Anger fuels Elihu’s determination to prevail where the others have failed. Mindful of his anger, one cannot rule out that there is a threatening tone in Elihu’s voice, as though he means to be the embodiment of the anger of an angry God. “I won’t ask to speak with God,” says Elihu, “and you, Job, should take my advice.” “Why,” he says, “should I give him [God] an opportunity to destroy me?”

Before Elihu has his turn, Job’s three friends have had theirs, through three cycles of amazing poetry where Job speaks and they respond. The text does not say outright that they are angry, but we sense growing annoyance on their part as they fail to make progress against him.

Communication, we know, is more than words. It is also body language, facial expression, tone of voice, hints, and gestures. All of this and more should be assumed with respect to the Bible, although often it is not. And yet, the more important aspect of Elihu’s speech is largely lost in translation, even if we make strides on points like facial expression or tone of voice. Robert

Alter says that the three main interlocutors in the poetic portion of Job—counting Elihu and Job’s friends as one—“exhibit three purposefully developed levels of poetry.”<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, the conversation in Job and its impact on the original reader depend not only on what they say, but on how they say it. According to Alter, Elihu and Job’s three friends occupy the lowest of the three levels in this verbal tug-of-war. “In keeping with the conventional moral views which they complacently defend, the poetry they speak abounds in familiar formulations.... What this means is that much of their poetry verges on cliché,” says Alter.<sup>2</sup> In addition to anger, there is on their part formulaic speech and the inauthenticity of cliché.

At the second level, we find Job. Alter says that “the stubborn authenticity of Job’s perception of moral reality is firmly manifested in the power of the poetry he speaks, which clearly transcends the poetry of his reprovers.”<sup>3</sup> Job’s speeches are not static. There is fluidity to his argument, development of perspective, and there is no formula.

And then, at the third level, God speaks. “The third—and, ultimately, decisive—level of poetry in the book is manifested when the Lord addresses Job out of the whirlwind,” says Alter.<sup>4</sup>

*If the poetry of Job—at least when its often problematic text is fully intelligible—looms above all other biblical poetry in virtuosity and sheer expressive power, the culminating poem that God speaks out of the storm soars beyond everything that has preceded it in the book, the poet having wrought a poetic idiom even richer and more awesome than the one he gave Job.*<sup>5</sup>

**Job’s  
speeches  
are not  
static.**

**Job's  
quest  
...is the  
quest for  
under-  
standing.**

In God's poetic speech, there is "a sublimity of expression, a plasticity of description... and even an originality of metaphoric inventiveness, that surpasses all the poetry, great as it is, that Job has spoken."<sup>6</sup> The contrast is even greater when it is held up to the speeches of Job's friends, "a revelation of the contrast between the jaded half-truths of cliché and the startling, difficult truths exposed when the stylistic and conceptual shell of cliché is broken open."<sup>7</sup>

What shall we call this? What shall we call it when Elihu and Job's three friends combine anger and cliché in their communicative arsenal? What shall we call the mixture of consternation of voice and predictability of argument?

While we ponder what to call it, let me try to make the task easier by giving three excerpts from the speeches of Job's friends.

Eliphaz: *Now a word came stealing to me, my ear received the whisper of it. Amid thoughts from visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh bristled. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice. (4:12–16, emphasis added)*

Bildad: *For inquire now of bygone generations, and consider what their ancestors have found; for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding? (8:8, emphasis added)*

Zophar: *So my thoughts give me a rejoinder, by dint of my inner sense. I have heard the reproof to my shame, and a spirit from my mind lets me answer."<sup>8</sup> (or, as in the NRSV, "a spirit beyond my understanding answers me. [20:2, 3, emphasis added])*

These excerpts relate to the source and not to the content of the friends' argument. Each claims a different source for his conviction but, as we know already, the different sources all agree. Eliphaz claims revelation as the source of his conviction, Bildad invokes tradition, Zophar, rea-

son. What shall we call the essential posture of the friends, whether we see the encounter through the eyes of William Blake or in a makeshift representation of our own? When Job looks into the face of his friend Eliphaz, he does not see the familiar face, but the look of religious authority. When he looks into the face of Bildad, he sees the immutable stance of dogma. And Zophar, the beloved face of Zophar, has lost its humanity and manifests only the callous demeanor of a fundamental belief. The three friends and the young Elihu unite to make the force of authority bear down on Job and the recalcitrant particularity of human experience.

As a concluding observation on the importance of how things are said, scholars have been impressed by Job's final speech to his friends. A superficial reading of this part might lead to the impression that Job is beginning to agree with his critics. Such, however, is not the case. "Most perplexingly," says Carol Newsom, Job "uses the friends' arguments as though they were a refutation of what the friends had just said."<sup>9</sup>

*One can imagine the friends whispering together in confusion: "That's what we said. But he can't mean what it sounds like he's saying. He can't mean what we meant. What does he mean by saying that?"<sup>10</sup>*

Job delivers the verbal coup de grâce to his friends' line of thought by repeating their arguments in a tone of voice that accentuates the inauthenticity. "He does not mean the same thing the friends do, even if he speaks just like them," says Newsom.<sup>11</sup> How we say things, then, is as important as what we say. Job silences his friends by repeating their formulaic argument in a different tone of voice. This could be one reason why Elihu is angry when he sets out to undo the damage, and why there is no way he can succeed.

### **Suffering and the Quest for Understanding**

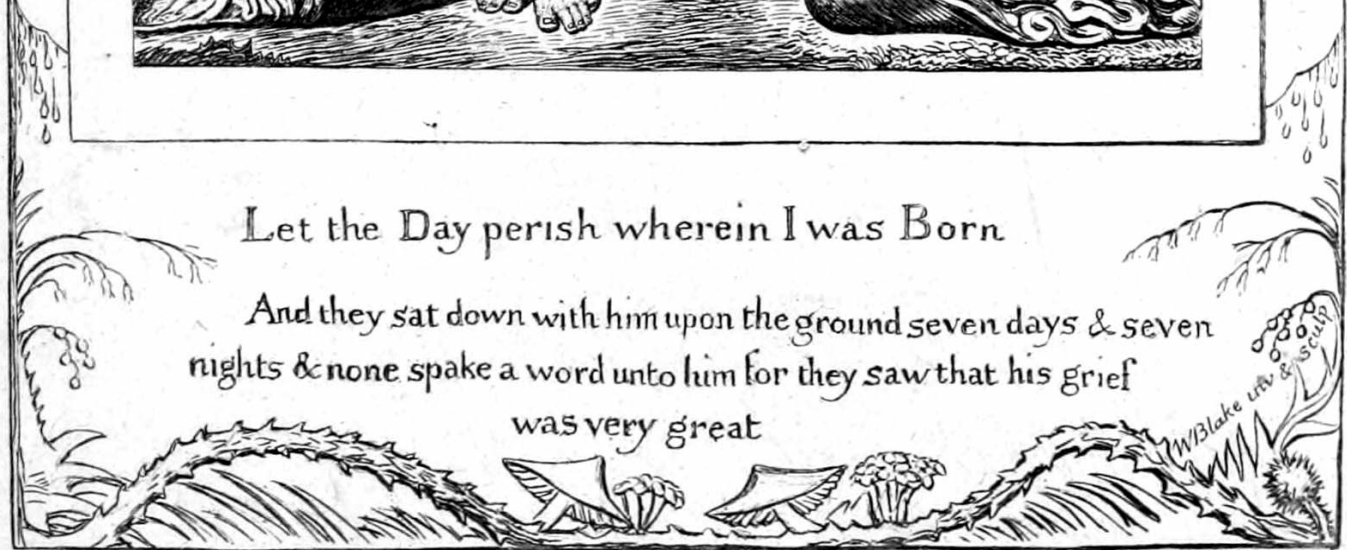
Job's quest, playing out against the massive and strident opposition of his friends, is the quest for understanding. According to his friends and

Lo let that night be solitary  
& let no joyful voice come therein



Let the Day perish wherein I was Born

And they sat down with him upon the ground seven days & seven  
nights & none spake a word unto him for they saw that his grief  
was very great



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Proof



to Elihu, Job should cease and desist from this quest. At first, they deem Job's pursuit unnecessary because his plight *has* an explanation, and they know what it is. Job suffers. The formula says that where there is suffering, there must be sin. "Think back now," says Eliphaz, "[n]ame a single case where a righteous man met with disaster" (4:7). "The wicked man's light will still be put out; its flame will never burn again," Bildad insists (18:4). "Surely you know that from ancient times, when man was first placed on earth, no wicked man has been happy for long," says Zophar (20:4). In this paradigm, the constituent parts are known, and the conclusion is certain.

But this is surely a vulnerable argument, easily refuted by stubborn facts to the contrary. Job shatters the moral and theological calculus of human sin and divine retribution by hitting a series of easy winners. The wicked do not die young, and they are not swiftly punished, as his friends parrot the line. "Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?" Job asks (21:7; see verses 6–13). "How often is the lamp of the wicked extinguished?... How often does God apportion pain to them in his anger?" (21:17 NET).

Human reality does not conform to the formula. "Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony, that the wicked are spared in the day of calamity, and are rescued in the day of wrath?" Job prods, intimating rather unsubtly that they have not done their homework (21:29–30 NRS).

Do the friends have a counterargument? They do. While Job's friends are guilty of misrepresenting Job nastily, resorting to innuendo, smear, and character assassination in order to salvage their doctrine (22:5–11), what shall we say of their representation of God?

*Eliphaz: Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error; how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like a moth. (4:17–19)*

No reader of Job is likely to deny that Job's friends end up misrepresenting his character, but their representation of God may be a bigger problem. Is God really exacting and impossible to please along the lines argued by Eliphaz?

*Eliphaz: What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous? God puts no trust even in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, one who drinks iniquity like water! (15:14–16)*



Does God really view created reality with such ungenerous, faultfinding eyes? Is nothing good enough, heaven and angels not excepted?

*Bildad: How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his sight, how much less a mortal, who is a maggot, and a human being, who is a worm! (Job 25:4–6)*

By the logic of the proportionality between imperfect nature and imperfect humanity, Bildad's misanthropy turns human beings into maggots and worms. All creation is flawed, human creation only to a greater degree than the rest. Given God's impossibly high demands, Job's claim to innocence is doomed.

*Eliphaz: Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to him? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? (22:2–3)*

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**Bildad's  
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beings into  
maggots  
and worms.**

This is Eliphaz speaking, but is it also God's view of things? Are humans irrelevant to God and human conduct inconsequential?

In the second line of attack, then, Job's friends set up an extreme ontological distinction between God and created reality, reinforcing it by an extremist moral view that places demands on humans (and angels) that no one can possibly meet. The fallout casts God as remote and detached, on the one hand, and on the other hand, as close and exacting.

Elihu does not retract any of this in his speech, but he sharpens the stress on divine transcendence and human finitude. In his closing missive, he attempts to cut off the merits of Job's complaint at the feet. In Elihu's version of what Newsom and others call the "masochistic theodicy," humans are incapable even when it comes to knowing what to say (37:19). Elihu rebukes Job for insisting on a meeting with God, denying legitimacy to a case that would be irreverent if not for the fact that he has already deemed it incoherent (37:20a; cf. 23:3–6). And he is convinced that Job is so out of bounds that his insolence invites real danger. "Why should I give [God] a chance to destroy me?" he warns, hinting that if God were to destroy Job it would be self-invited and well deserved (37:20b GNB). To Elihu, divine transcendence, inscrutability, and sovereignty are the verities against which Job is banging his head. "The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate," he counsels (37:23). "Those who are truly wise, according to Elihu, know their limitations, and do not expect to be able to argue with God," says David Clines in his summary of Elihu's argument.<sup>12</sup> Job ought to leave it at that.

Let me take a breathing pause here for the following assertion: what comes from the mouth of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and even more crudely from the mouth of Elihu, flows like the Amazon River in the theological tradition from Augustine to Luther, and from Luther to Karl Barth (who modifies it somewhat): radical divine transcendence, retributive justice, divine incom-

prehensibility, and a conflation of human finitude and sin.

Augustine (354–430), leading the charge, echoes Elihu and not Job when he takes the most basic measure of the divine-human relationship. In a letter to his friend and fellow bishop Simplician in 397, Augustine asserts that God "decides who are to be offered mercy by a standard of equity which is most secret and far removed from human powers of understanding."<sup>13</sup> "God owes explanations to no one," Paula Fredriksen notes, concerning Augustine's mature view on the subject.<sup>14</sup>

Martin Luther (1483–1546) ups the ante, arguing that God arbitrarily consigns humans to damnation and eternal suffering. Like Elihu and Augustine before him, Luther insists that no one should expect an explanation.

*This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him [God] merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith.<sup>15</sup>*

This clip from Luther's debate with Erasmus offers less explanation for a belief that needs it more. In order to keep questions at bay in the face of this belief, Luther deploys the twin argument of human incapacity and divine incomprehensibility in much the same way as Elihu. Faith, he says, is the antidote to human incomprehension, and submission the right attitude for anyone who might be tempted to take up a Job-like complaint against God.

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) offers advice that sounds like a reincarnation of Elihu's words. Job, says Barth, should serve God "with no claim that His [God's] rule should conform to some picture which he [Job] has formed of it."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Job's need for an explanation "is itself a symp-

**God's  
reference  
to Job's  
integrity  
forces  
Satan  
to show  
his hand.**

tom of man's enslavement to moral and logical criteria and norms irrelevant to the conduct of the divinely unique One."<sup>17</sup> God is accountable to no one.<sup>18</sup> In Barth's words, God "does not ask for his [Job's] understanding, agreement or applause. On the contrary, he simply asks that he should be content not to know why and to what end he exists, and does so in this way and not another."<sup>19</sup>

*"Be content not to know!"* I have added italics and an exclamation mark to this statement because the admonition to "be content not to know" is an apt summary of the theological tradition that runs in a resilient stream from Augustine in the fifth century to Barth in the twentieth. We are well advised to understand that the advice not to know—and the impossibility of knowing—is the voice of Elihu, not the voice of Job and not the voice of God.

**"If It Isn't God, Who Is It, Then?"  
(Job 9:24)**

This is a good time to address the most difficult issues in the interpretation of Job. I shall do so more by way of assertions than by arguing each point in the detail that it deserves. One such issue is the identity of Satan in the frame story. Is Satan God's loyal, if somewhat restive court bureaucrat, as many interpreters see him,<sup>20</sup> or is he God's cosmic enemy? What, too, is the connection between the frame story and the poetic section? Is the book a compositional quilt or whole cloth?

Addressing the last question first, I will answer that the book is a whole cloth in a big way. In the poetic section, Eliphaz asks whether human piety means anything to God.

*Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to him? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? (22:2–3)*

Elihu blithely repeats the line.

*If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him? If you are righteous, what do you give to him; or what does he receive from your hand? (35:6–7)*

Here, if not before, we have hard evidence that Job's friends are not saying what is right, whether of Job or of God, but we have also a crucial link between the frame story and the poetic section. "Have you considered my servant Job?" God asks Satan in the frame story. "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8). God speaks as though Job's commitment and conduct are consequential to God, completely negating the most disdainful argument of the friends, while also seriously weakening the view that the frame story and the poetic section are awkwardly stitched together.

Alter wisely spots "an element of jealousy...and cynical mean-spiritedness" on the part of the Adversary.<sup>21</sup> Satan is not a benign figure, an interpretation, if true, that would rightly make the plot in the book frivolous and offensive.<sup>22</sup> When God takes the initiative in the conversation, the topic suggests a discussion long in progress. It is as though God and Satan are picking up where they last left off, on a subject about which they disagree. "Have you considered my servant Job?" Yahweh says to Satan (1:8). If Satan were the vigilant prosecuting attorney that some take him to be—or a legal clerk in the employ of the heavenly council—he should be the one to bring charges against Job. Instead, he appears to be on the defensive. *When God brings Job to Satan's attention, therefore, it has the connotation of evidence that Satan would like to ignore. In the conflict that is in view, Satan is not the watchful fact-finder that undeservedly dignifies his résumé and reputation.*

God's reference to Job's integrity forces Satan to show his hand. He will do it by proposing a test that is meant to give him the edge in the argument with God.

*Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." (1:9–11)*



But he knoweth the way that I take  
 when he hath tried me I shall come forth like gold  
 Have pity upon me! Have pity upon me! O ye my friends  
 for the hand of God hath touched me  
 Though he slay me yet will I trust in him



The Just Upright Man is laughed to scorn

Man that is born of a Woman is of few days & full of trouble  
 he cometh up like a flower & is cut down he fleeth also as a shadow  
 & continueth not. And dost thou open thine eyes upon such a one  
 & bringest me into judgment with thee



W. Blake inventit & sculp

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**God,  
no less  
than Job,  
is motivated  
by self-  
interest.**

Here, the Adversary launches a frontal assault on the integrity of the divine-human relationship.<sup>23</sup> The attack on Job is equally devastating for the way it impugns God. “You,” Satan intimates, “have bought Job’s loyalty. His piety is the devotion of patronage and self-interest. For both of you, it is a mercenary relationship.” All this, we are called to imagine, Satan is saying in the hearing of the heavenly council. Is it true? Does it matter whether it is demonstrated not to be true?

Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that Satan does not deny that Job is a devout person.

*What he questions is rather the disinterestedness of Job’s service to God, his lack of concern for a reward. The satan objects not to Job’s works but to their motivation: Job’s behavior, he says, is not “for nothing” (in Hebrew: *hinn m*). In the satan’s view, a religious attitude can be explained only by expectation of a reward: we will shortly learn that this is also the view of Job’s friends. If, however, Job be regarded as a truly just man, then, even though there be no other like him in the land, the lie is given to this view of religion.<sup>24</sup>*

Satan, we realize, claims that Job has selfish reasons for his conduct. Piety and devotion are wise investments in the interest of bringing a bountiful material return. The equation is simple and is, in fact, only another facet of the law of retribution. Piety is rewarded; sin is punished. This is one step closer to realizing how important the frame story is to the rest of the book, and how prose and poetry are mutually reinforcing with regard to the theology of Job. Again, in the words of Gutiérrez,

*The central question of Job is raised at the outset: the role that reward or disinterestedness plays in faith in God and in its consistent implementation. God believes that Job’s uprightness is disinterested, and he therefore accepts the challenge. The author is telling us in this way that a utilitarian religion lacks depth and authenticity; in addition, it has something satanic about it.<sup>25</sup>*

Gutiérrez takes the frame story seriously, and yet something is lacking in these insightful comments. The sordid bargain to which Job is a partner is of God’s making. God, no less than Job, is motivated by self-interest. In Satan’s view, God does not

have many devotees for reasons that are intrinsic to the divine character. The one person he claims as a faithful follower—Job—will quickly turn away if God rescinds the lavish patronage (1:11).

The adversarial texture to this charge is blatant and explosive. Satan is in effect arguing that selflessness, whether in the divine or the human realm, does not exist. God and Job are in his view in a contractual relationship based on mutual self-interest. In return for gifts received, God earns Job’s devotion. Conversely, in return for devotion, God showers Job with rewards. Does it matter whether this charge is shown to be untrue?

The thought that Satan is present in the frame story, but conspicuously absent in the poetic section, is also flawed. In the frame story, Satan makes it seem like God is in a mercenary relationship with human beings (1:9–11), a relationship of retribution and reward. Satan is not mentioned explicitly in the poetic section, but the demonic theology is not absent. It is as



though Satan has gone undercover, now speaking in the guise of Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. Eliphaz, as Samuel Terrien notes, deploys a doctrine of radical divine remoteness, “wholly otherness,” and impassibility, buttressed with the thought that finitude equals moral corruption.<sup>26</sup> Creatureliness and sinfulness are said to be two sides of the same coin (15:14–16). God and human beings do not have a common language with respect to right and wrong. While nothing



in these speeches is flattering to Job, their mantra is unremittingly unflattering to God.

*If God and man remain external to one another—if man is nothing more than a worm, and God a distant, unmoved and unmovable Being, an Absolute which is detached from the giving and the seeking of love—there is no hope, not even in repentance, or in good deeds of behavior or piety. Prayer is just as irrelevant as blasphemy.*<sup>27</sup>

This comment by Samuel Terrien is to the point because Job is doomed if he does (it isn't good enough) and damned if he doesn't (it isn't important). If the friends are right, human life must henceforth unfold under the gaze of a God who is alternately demanding and detached, and this will be the truth even if Job shuts his mouth. Under the pressure of Job's outbursts, the friends have come forward with a view of God that purports to defend God and yet reeks of the theology Satan has espoused in the frame story.

When God at last makes an appearance, on first impression it seems as though God's response confirms the friends' ideas more than they support Job's. Divine transcendence towers forbiddingly over human finitude; omniscience runs circles around one who does not know much (38:1, 38:4, 38:21). Who, indeed, "is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2). God rains question upon question on Job,<sup>28</sup> many more than we can reproduce here (e.g., 38:4, 38:17–18, 38:31, 38:41, 39:27).

God's speeches are stupendous disclosures of complexity and beauty, of order and design, of unfathomable grandeur and, in contrast to Job's death wish at the beginning (3:1–26), a resounding paean to life.<sup>29</sup> Human life is decentered by the introduction of other creatures that have their own rhythms, yearnings, and idiosyncrasies (39:1–30). In the first speech, God does not counter Job's claim of being innocent of wrong, but he never directly addresses it, preferring instead to shower him with a meteoric display of life and light.

And somehow, strangely, the voice from the whirlwind succeeds in stilling the storm of Job's

quest on its first try (40:2–5; cf. 42:1–6). And God is not done speaking. In the second speech, God goes beyond the bounds of necessity, ignoring that Job has declared himself content after the first speech. Having taken Job on a tour of the earth and the cosmos that included astronomy, meteorology, and zoology, God narrows the focus until it rests resolutely on the mysterious Leviathan.

"Can you," God asks Job, *draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever? Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it? No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up. Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?—under the whole heaven, who?* (excerpts from 41:1–34, emphasis added)

The poetic idiom is baffling. Here, in God's description of Leviathan, it pulls out all the stops.<sup>30</sup> What, or who, is Leviathan?

First, agreeing with Carol Newsom, we see that at the end of the divine speeches "three characters dominate the scene: Job, God, and Leviathan."<sup>31</sup> This means that Leviathan is an important figure, the most important of all the creatures that are featured in God's speeches.

Second, I believe that Matitiah Tsevat is profoundly correct when he says that God's speeches have content and that the content, at least indirectly, resonates with the rest of the book. "Is it conceivable," Tsevat asks, "that the author invested this stupendous intellectual energy in the question only to seek, receive, and transmit the solution on a nonintellectual level?"<sup>32</sup>

*Not only is the intellectual element characteristically present in their communion with God, the communion involves: usually the understanding of, often the approval of, sometimes an active sharing in His plan. Job's communion with God is not bought with an intellectual sacrifice, at the cost of renouncing his wish to understand the constitution of the world.*<sup>33</sup>

If we take this view seriously, it means that God is

**And  
somehow,  
strangely,  
the voice  
from the  
whirlwind  
succeeds  
in stilling  
the storm  
of Job's  
quest on its  
first try.**

**Who  
can stand  
up to an  
adversary  
whose chief  
weapon  
is its  
mouth?**

not silencing Job with shock and awe. God is not practicing “education through overwhelming” for the reason that he “is in that inscrutable business, the government of the world.”<sup>34</sup> Others, including great readers like Robert Alter and Robert Gordis, incline to the view that God compensates Job for the injustice of his suffering with a vision of the world’s beauty. Tsevat rejects this view, asking how anyone can accept that “the demands of justice are met by the administering of an anesthesia to the victim of an unjust sentence?”<sup>35</sup> These criticisms seem valid and compelling.

But then, failing to give adequate billing to God’s description of Leviathan, Tsevat drops the ball. God gives an answer to Job, he says, and the answer is that divine justice “is not an element of reality.”<sup>36</sup> By “de-moralizing” the world, Job is prepared “for a pious and moral life uncluttered by false hopes and unfounded claims.”<sup>37</sup>

This necessitates a response that goes directly to the identity of Leviathan. In God’s speech, and not only in the frame story, we have proof of a cosmos in turmoil. There are adversarial powers, and this reality is projected most forcefully in God’s second speech.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the book, the Adversary in the frame story reappears, now disguised as Leviathan. In his poetic incarnation, he cannot be cast as a benign figure doing God’s dirty work. The poetic idiom that veils him bewilders interpreters, but the bewilderment is unwarranted. Job eschews the axis of retribution and reward, but the book does not throw the idea of justice overboard. Justice, however, is not found in retribution. It consists in making right what is wrong, which is precisely what God is doing in the cosmic struggle with Leviathan.

Leviathan, in turn, is a figure that cannot be trusted because he does not speak “soft words” (41:3). Deceitful words and destructive action go hand in hand; “from its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out. Out of its nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth” (41:19–21).

“Its heart is as hard as stone,” God tells Job (41:24), and it has the power to intimidate any-

thing and anyone that stand in its way (41:25, 41:33, 41:34). “Who,” therefore, “can confront it and be safe?” God asks Job in what is the most poignant of all God’s questions, adding, insistently, “*under the whole heaven, who?*” (41:11, emphasis added).

Who, indeed? And who can stand up to an adversary whose chief weapon is its *mouth*, as Samuel Balentine notes.

*At the center of God’s portrait is a description of Leviathan’s mouth (vv. 18–21). If we read this section alongside the previous description of Leviathan’s mouth (41:3–4), then two contrasting images emerge: one that emphasizes what does not come forth from its mouth; the other, that which does. What does not come from this creature’s mouth are “soft words.” In the unlikely event anyone should ever successfully capture it and force it into service, even then it would not conform to any “covenantal” relationship that required it to do or say only what its master permitted. Instead, when it opens its mouth it instinctively speaks like a god. The rhetoric emphasizes fire and light, smoke and flames. . . Like a god, Leviathan announces its presence with an awesome fierceness that commands attention and defies coercion. (emphasis added)*<sup>39</sup>

As these excerpts show, Satan is no less present in the poetic section than he is in the frame story, although he is disguised in the theology of Job’s friends and veiled as Leviathan in God’s speech from the whirlwind. Job is not left ignorant of the reality of the cosmic conflict, even though he only seems to entertain it on the level of hypothesis until God speaks. Wedged in his second speech after Bildad and before Zophar, we hear him say, “The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?” (9:24).

I agree with all my heart with Robert Fyall that here, in this question, “the key to unlock the dark prison lies tantalizingly close to Job’s hand, indeed his fingers brush against it.”<sup>40</sup> Fyall, for this reason, argues that this is the most significant verse in Job. We, the modern readers, and especially a conservative reader like me, scramble for Job’s attention on this point. With knowledge of the frame story that Job does not have,



For God speaketh once yea twice  
 & Man perceiveth it not  
 In a Dream in a Vision of the Night  
 in deep Slumberings upon the bed  
 Then he openeth the ears of Men & sealeth their instruction

That he may withdraw Man from his purpose  
 & hide his Privie from Man  
 & saith Deliver him from going down to the Pit  
 then he is gracious unto him  
 I have found a Ransom

For his eyes are upon  
 the ways of Man & he observeth  
 all his goings



I am Young & ye are very Old wherefore I was afraid

Lo all these things worketh God oftentimes with Man to bring  
 back his Soul from the pit to be enlightened  
 with the light of the living

Look upon the heavens & behold the clouds  
 which are higher  
 than thou

If thou sinnest what  
 doest thou against him or if thou be  
 righteous what givest thou unto him

W Blake invent & sculpt

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**Job...**  
**is pressing**  
**forward in his**  
**existential**  
**do-or-die**  
**quest for**  
**understanding.**

I want to knock on the window of his suffering chamber from outside, trying to get his attention: it isn't God, Job!

### **Job and Currents in Adventist Spirituality**

Is there anything in this book for us, as a prescription or as a vision for Seventh-day Adventist spirituality? I will suggest three areas for further thought.

1. Job confronts the power of authority, formulaic statements of faith, and dogma. Is that where Adventism will be going in our time? Rumors that scholars and leaders in the church wish to tighten the screws on Fundamental Belief Number Six could be proof that we intend to deploy the authority of creed in order to ensure conformity of belief. Before we commit to this approach, we should pause in the presence of Job to remember that how we say things may be as important as what we say. The rumored attempt to improve the wording of Fundamental Belief Number Six might see us commit not merely to inferior poetry, but to exceptionally mediocre prose. If we go ahead anyway, we should realize that we will be choosing the company and method of Job's friends, walking the path of inferior poetry.
2. Job faces impediments to his quest for understanding, laced with well-meaning misrepresentations of God as remote and unaffected on the one hand, and severe and exacting on the other. Is that the road we will take? Or rather, is that not the road we have taken for some time?

I will admit that it has been a source of wonder to discover the low esteem in which A. Graham Maxwell and his cosmic conflict theology have been held in theological and administrative circles in Adventism. There can be no doubt that this criticism has been energized by a theological tradition that emphasizes divine transcendence, human finitude, retributive justice, and divine inscrutability. These features of Protestant systematic theology seem to be as dear within Adventism as they are defining of



the Christian theological tradition from Augustine to Luther and, with modifications, all the way to Karl Barth. If this will be our road, it will be the road of Job's friends and the road of the angry Elihu: the road of inferior poetry.

3. And now, as a corrective to the latest, but probably not the last, burst of anxiety in Adventism, let us listen one last time to Job, first, and then to Elihu.

*Job: Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! (23:3)*

*Elihu: I won't ask to speak with God; why should I give him a chance to destroy me? (37:20)*

Job, we have seen, is pressing forward in his existential do-or-die quest for understanding, seeking illumination in the context of experience. He will not have one without the other, nor does it occur to him that illumination and experience live separate lives. Elihu, on the other hand, considers understanding beyond reach and experience off-limits. The bottom line in Elihu's theology centers on the peril of the direct encounter, even though we know that those who warn Job have themselves been victims of a spurious encounter with the supernatural (4:12–16).

Are we, too, afraid of the experience, whether in ecstasy or in despair, as was Elihu? Will we be strangers to Job's exclamation, born in the crucible of God's apparent absence: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!" (23:3)? Will we settle for the voices of authority and demonic misrepre-

sentations of God that for centuries have held court in the halls of Christian theology, no other characterization sufficing? Will we be deterred by the somber faces warning us against the direct encounter, preferring the predictable routine to the voice from the whirlwind? If that will be our choice, it will be the way of Job's friends and of the angry Elihu, the loudest human voice in the book, but the poorest poet. ■

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**Will we be  
deterred by  
the somber  
faces warning  
us against  
the direct  
encounter,  
preferring  
the pre-  
dictable  
routine to  
the voice  
from the  
whirlwind?**



## Suffering: *Personal Experience and Reflections* | BY IVAN T. BLAZEN



**T** rue enough, life presents us with good moments when we experience love and joy, beauty and refreshment, but like a thread running through all our days is what Paul calls “the sufferings of the present time” (Rom. 8:17).<sup>1</sup> M. Scott Peck gives expression to this in a now-famous dictum at the beginning of his book, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*.<sup>2</sup> He solemnly intones, “Life is difficult.” Indeed it is.

In terms of my own experience, it is difficult to lose a father—his name was Matthew—to a massive gangrene-producing heart attack; to watch him suffer excruciating pain and fast-dwindling reserves of life over a period of three weeks, and finally die. It is difficult to lose a brother, another Matthew, to the effects of alcohol; to watch him hemorrhage profusely and die with my hands hold-

ing him as he scrunched up his face, breathed his last, and took leave of life. It is also difficult to lose a wife to breast cancer, to watch her on a downward spiral toward death over the course of a year and a half.

And it is difficult beyond measure to marry again, and in the first few days, receive the unbelievable message that just as my new wife had lost her first husband to a massive heart attack less than two years before, she had now lost a beautiful sixteen-year-old daughter and a wonderful nineteen-year-old son in a tragic automobile accident on the way, and almost there, to Grandma’s house. A husband and now her only children, gone, wiped out. A Job-like reversal of fortune with a new set of children could not make up for such a loss as this. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1).

These incidents do not even begin to measure the volume and intensity of experiences that bring on pain, suffering, and death. But they, along with encounters with others who suffer, and reflection on the whole issue, lead to the question: What can be learned from suffering? I offer a number of my own personal observations.

### Learning from Suffering

#### *No Quota on Suffering*

First, I would affirm that there is no such thing as a quota of suffering, so that one could say, “I have suffered enough”; as if God says to Job, “Thus far and no further.” Job’s “no further” included everything he ever possessed and loved, and all that was left was his own wretched existence and a body headed straight to the grave. As for “Thus far, no further,” the agonizing question mounting up to the throne of God itself, is: If no further, why so far in the first place? I conclude that there really is no quota when it comes to suffering.

**A mother-in-law.** The losses that my new wife endured were not hers alone, but also those of her mother-in-law, who lost not only her son and his two children, but before that had lost also her daughter and her two children, when their lives were burned away in a fire. All this was followed by the suffering and death of her husband from Alzheimer's disease, an agony she witnessed over a long period of time.

**A woman at a campmeeting.** Then there was the woman I met at a campmeeting. She had lost nine members of her family—her husband and eight children—to disease, accidents, and murder. There is no limit. We have a mystery before us. But that mystery to which we are all connected can, if thought and prayed about, lead us to more sensitivity and tenderness—tenderness toward those who suffer before our very eyes. It can make us all better caregivers.

### ***No Respect of Persons in Suffering***

In the second place, I believe there is no respect of persons when it comes to suffering. It comes to all alike, the righteous as well as the unrighteous. In view of this, we must surely avoid the too frequently held opinion that those who suffer must have done something wrong, and God is punishing them for it. True, bad habits can lead to disease, but the factors that dispose one to disease and hurt are so much broader than this. It is much better to see in every person a child of God. If the suffering person feels that caring attitude directed toward them by others, a new peace and healing of the spirit, and even in some measure, the body, may result.

### ***No Discontinuation of the Laws of Nature***

Thirdly, it becomes clear that notwithstanding their sometimes negative consequences for human life, God does not suspend or destroy the laws governing the world, such as cause and effect, gravity, and so on, as well as such entities in the world as bacteria and parasites, which like human beings, have both positive

and negative potentialities. These all play a role in the drama of life. Without the laws of nature, for example, there would be no stability in the world, no possibility for science or for that research whereby disease might be studied, controlled or cured, and pain eased. It is appropriate, therefore, to thank God for the good order of Creation, even as we face what is painful, and when there is no miracle.

### ***Generally, No Direct, Miraculous Intervention by God***

The previous observation about the continuance of basic laws and realities in the world is fundamental to what I say now. Generally, there is no direct miraculous intervention by God. Hospitals and clinics would be out of business if there were. God does not answer all our prayers for healing with yes, despite biblical statements that may seem to affirm an almost ready-made yes. This raises the question of how God's power is manifested in the world, and whether our availability as healing persons, and our developing knowledge and expertise, constitute main loci of God's saving activity. If God does not regularly work directly or miraculously, then does he work through processes and persons in the world? Persons like all of us, who are here today? I say yes.

I teach a course called "Medicine, Humanity and God" to first-year medical students. At the beginning of the course, I write the title of the course on the board, and point out to the students that humanity is the middle term. Then, I draw a cupped arrow from medicine to humanity, showing medicine's interest in the healing of humanity. Next, I draw a cupped arrow from God to humanity, showing that God likewise is interested in the healing of humanity. Last, I draw a long, broad arrow from medicine to God, suggesting that medicine and God are partners in the work of healing in the world. I believe it is of the greatest significance that all of us who care about people see ourselves in this partnership with God. This cannot help but affect the personal and spiritual quality of the

**There  
is no such  
thing as  
a quota of  
suffering.**

care we give, especially in a person's last days.

A sense of God's loving presence, mediated through a caring person who knows they are in the employ of the God of redemptive love, is just what a sufferer needs. It is as in the book and film, *Dead Man Walking*. The Catholic nun says to the young, soon-to-be-executed prisoner, whom she has visited many times, "The last face I want you to see is the face of love," in this case, her face. As human faces are bearers of the face of love, they are also bearers of the face of God.

### **Generally, No Divine Interference in Human Decisions**

As we think further, just as the laws of nature are not suspended, so also the freely willed decisions of people are not obstructed. God is so interested that people freely embrace the good that he is the guarantor of freedom, even when that freedom may be misused. People may make choices that are contrary to current and available health knowledge, and may refuse both medical advice and treatment. God respects this freedom; so should we, his children.

### **God Does Not Prevent Health Care Professionals from Making Mistakes**

As God does not block people from making poor choices, so he does not prevent health care professionals from making mistakes.

Though my first wife had a very strong family history of breast cancer, her gynecologist, a very genial and good man, did not order a mammogram for a period of eight years. He did so only when there was a discharge from one breast, and this was largely to calm us down. I can still hear his words, "I don't think there is a serious problem here, but if it will make you feel better, let's do a mammogram." When calcium deposits were reported in the breast, he once again gave us assurances that this probably was nothing to worry about. But since he wanted to make us feel better, as before, he then sent us to a surgeon for a biopsy. The rest of the story is history with a fatal ending.

God does not prevent these mistakes or mis-

judgments as a matter of course. However, an attitude of humble dependence upon God and constant prayer for his guidance and insight, along with continued study and consultation with others in the community of God's caregivers, might minimize some of these mistakes.

### **Importance of Developing Spiritual Resources Before Suffering Hits**

Now, turning to a different kind of observation, I have found it to be true that spiritual resources gained before suffering are what sustain a person through suffering. Suffering needs to be prepared for. When the realities of suffering and loss hit, it seems that one has no resources at all, nothing to help in coping with these dark situations. But if one has been developing a connection with God and a sense of his presence and love, these will operate through the darkness to bring one's spirit through. The attitude of love and appeal to the spiritual on the part of those who minister to the dying will only enhance these resources. And if these resources have not been developed, the faith, hope, and love of those who minister can stimulate a kind of "thief-on-the-cross" experience. The thief, truly seeing Jesus and his goodness for the first time in that last moment of his life, becomes the recipient of a sustaining promise of love and life: "You shall be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Those we minister to can receive Jesus's promise from us at the end of their days.

### **Human Support and Identification with Sufferers is Crucial**

All of this means, therefore, that human support and identification with suffering people is absolutely crucial. Though sufferers need spiritual resources from God in heaven, they need God's people on earth to identify with their pain, suffering, and fear. They need healing people who are willing to suffer with them. Interestingly, the word "compassion" means "feeling with," hence, "identifying with," and is the ultimate form of empathy. It is incarnation, and its model is Jesus.

**All of us  
are called  
to identify  
with those  
who are  
victims  
of life's  
cruelty.**





**Romans 8:17.** There is a curious statement about Jesus and us in Romans 8:17. Paul says that since we are God's children, we are heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided "we suffer with him in order that we also may be glorified with him." In order to be a part of the glorified world, the world that is coming, this text says that we are called to suffer with Jesus in this world. What might this mean? I am led to this application of the text: we can suffer from the hurtful things of this life, the "slings of outrageous fortune," but according to Paul it is not what we suffer from, but who we suffer with, that qualifies us for a part in God's new world. Suffering with Jesus is what makes this possible. To suffer with Jesus is not only to identify with his personal suffering, noting for example his pain upon the cross. Rather, it is to identify with his cause and enterprise. What he suffered for is what we need to be into. Who can fail to be moved by the portrait of the suffering servant of God in Isaiah 53, a depiction that the New Testament applies to Jesus, when it says in verse 4, "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." To suffer with Jesus is to suffer with those who suffer. To suffer with Jesus is to have our cheeks wet with the tears of those who cry out in pain, loss, and the frightening prospect of the future. We come so close to them that we bear their griefs and carry their sorrows. What a privilege to do so!

**A caring surgeon.** I learned something about identification when my first wife died. I wanted to spend time with her in the hospital room

where she lay. The surgeon who had operated on her took me to the place. I expected to be there alone, but when I walked into the room, the surgeon walked in with me. When I moved to one end of her bed, he moved to the other. When I drew closer, he did also. When I bent down, he bent down. He was my alter ego. He had worked so hard with her just before she died to dislodge a clot in her pulmonary artery. Now, he worked to identify with me. He suffered with Jesus by suffering with me. In identifying with the person whose time is short, we help to ease their emotional pain and make them ready for what is to come—ready not merely for death, but to meet the Author of Life.

**A cancer victim.** Some years ago, a dear and longtime ministerial friend and I were summoned to anoint a physician who had suffered for over twenty years from cancer in her jaw and face, and from all the unsuccessful surgeries to halt its growth. The most recent surgery, at first thought to have finally done the trick, also proved to be futile. Now, in harmony with scripture, she called us for anointing. I feared the event, for I thought if our prayers and touching her with oil in the name of Jesus did not bear the fruit of healing, she might despair and grow weak in faith. I was extremely concerned about this. What she said when we arrived, however, healed me of my fear. What she wanted from us was to gain assurance that she was ready to meet God. This is what all those we care about need as well in their final days.

**A student with Lou Gehrig's disease.** A while back I visited a long-ago student of mine after he learned that he had Lou Gehrig's disease, which was advancing swiftly. He was a brilliant person who would have made uncommon achievements if he had not had horrendous physical and emotional suffering along life's way. He called me to come, not for an anointing, but to help him avoid bitterness against life and God. What a privilege to be in a place where my friend would expose his wounds to me. It was difficult to keep from crying with him, but perhaps being with him in his agony brought him some peace and

**Suffering  
needs  
to be  
prepared  
for.**





softening of his just resentment. I certainly hope so. I believe that all of us are called to identify with those who are victims of life's cruelty. The boomerang of love and compassion will return to us as well in our afflictions.

**An oncologist at Michael Reese Hospital.** I can still hear the voice of our Jewish oncologist at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago during a telephone conversation. When he heard that my first wife, who had just had the last of many surgeries, now had cancer of the lung, he shouted "No!" I had shouted it myself, but to hear his "No!" gripped my soul redemptively. It was a shout of identification that said, "I hurt, for I really care." Paul is right; we are called to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15), and by doing so, to suffer with Jesus.

***Suffering Not Caused by God, but Used by God for Good***

**A father.** My reflections on suffering lead me to the further consideration that while God is not the cause of our suffering, he may use it for good. Years ago, my father went back to Croatia to visit his homeland. While there, he had a severe heart attack. I was able to get there in time to spend ten days with him before he died. One could think that his sufferings were meaningless; that no good could come from such an experience. Not so!

I was reading a book in the intensive care unit late one evening. A nurse was there, reading as well, and I asked her what she was reading. She responded, "I'm reading a novel." I

asked, "Is it good?" She replied, "Yes, it's very good. What are you reading?" I had a thick, heavy, complicated tome on justification by faith, and didn't know how to describe it. So I said, "Well, I am reading a book about the goodness of God." Her surprising response was, "God is not good. I am good!" What she meant became clear in that context: "Here I am doing all I can for these people who are critically ill, but what is God doing?"

It was a just reflection on her part, but before I got to Croatia, God had already been doing something in my father's situation. Christians of my own faith, which my father had resented bitterly when I, as a teenager, converted from Catholicism to Adventism, were ministering to him. A husband and wife visited him. They brought him food, which he could not eat, and drink, which he could only take a little of. They touched him, lifted him up, put him down, turned him over, and talked to him about God's love. When I arrived, one of the first things my father said to me was, "If they make people like this, then I want to be a part of this people. If I live to get out of this hospital, I want to be baptized into this people." My father was moved by the love of those Adventist Christians in Croatia, and gave his heart to God. He died in the peace of a new relationship with God. God may not save us from suffering, but he does often work in our suffering to bring about good.

**A brother.** My brother experienced a similar situation as he lay dying in a coma—the result of alcoholism. Contrary to all expectations, he awoke. During this brief period of lucidity, I was granted the opportunity of talking with him about the love, forgiveness, and kingdom of God. In the strongest terms he expressed his sorrow for his misdirected life, and his desire for forgiveness and entrée into God's kingdom. When the darkness returned, he was ready to meet his Creator and Lord. Providence had granted him an opportunity to gain a new vision of himself, and a new possibility for the future.

Her  
surprising  
response  
was,  
"God is  
not good.  
I am  
good!"

## The Encouragement of the Biblical Vision of Eschatological Hope

**The future.** My last reflection is about hope. In 1 Corinthians 15:19, Paul says that if the hope of believers extends no further than the borders of this life, then we are of all people in a most pitiable condition. However, this chapter makes clear that the resurrection of Jesus is the promise of the resurrection of all. As Paul says, “Each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (15:23). I am grateful for this promise of the future, when in a twinkling of an eye we shall be changed and death will be swallowed up in victory. “Pie in the sky by and by,” a sometimes-maligned idea, is a meaningful correlate of the death and resurrection of Christ, which the apostle underlines as being of “first importance” (15:3–4).

**The present.** Their importance has to do with the present as well as the future. When for Jesus’s sake we go through the sufferings of the present time, the death and resurrection of Jesus are at work in us, and it is the power of the resurrection that gets us through. We may note the following comparisons in 2 Corinthians 4:7–12:

Death of Christ	Risen Life of Christ
<b>4:8</b> We are afflicted in every way,	but not crushed;
perplexed,	but not driven to despair;
<b>4:9</b> persecuted,	but not forsaken;
struck down,	but not destroyed;
<b>4:10</b> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,	so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.
<b>4:11</b> We are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake,	so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.
<b>4:12</b> So death is at work in us,	but life in you.

The climax of Paul’s thought in this passage comes in verses 14–17:

*14 We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. . . . 16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. 17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.*

**Last words.** When my wife, after her last surgery, opened her eyes on Saturday morning, she asked the nurse what day it was. The nurse, an Adventist, answered, “It is the Sabbath.” My wife’s words, her last in this world, were, “Oh, Sabbaths will be nice in heaven.” It was then that a clot blocked her pulmonary artery, and her breathing stopped. I am glad for our hope for the future, which God alone can give, which the resurrection of Christ assures, and to which scripture strongly testifies. ■

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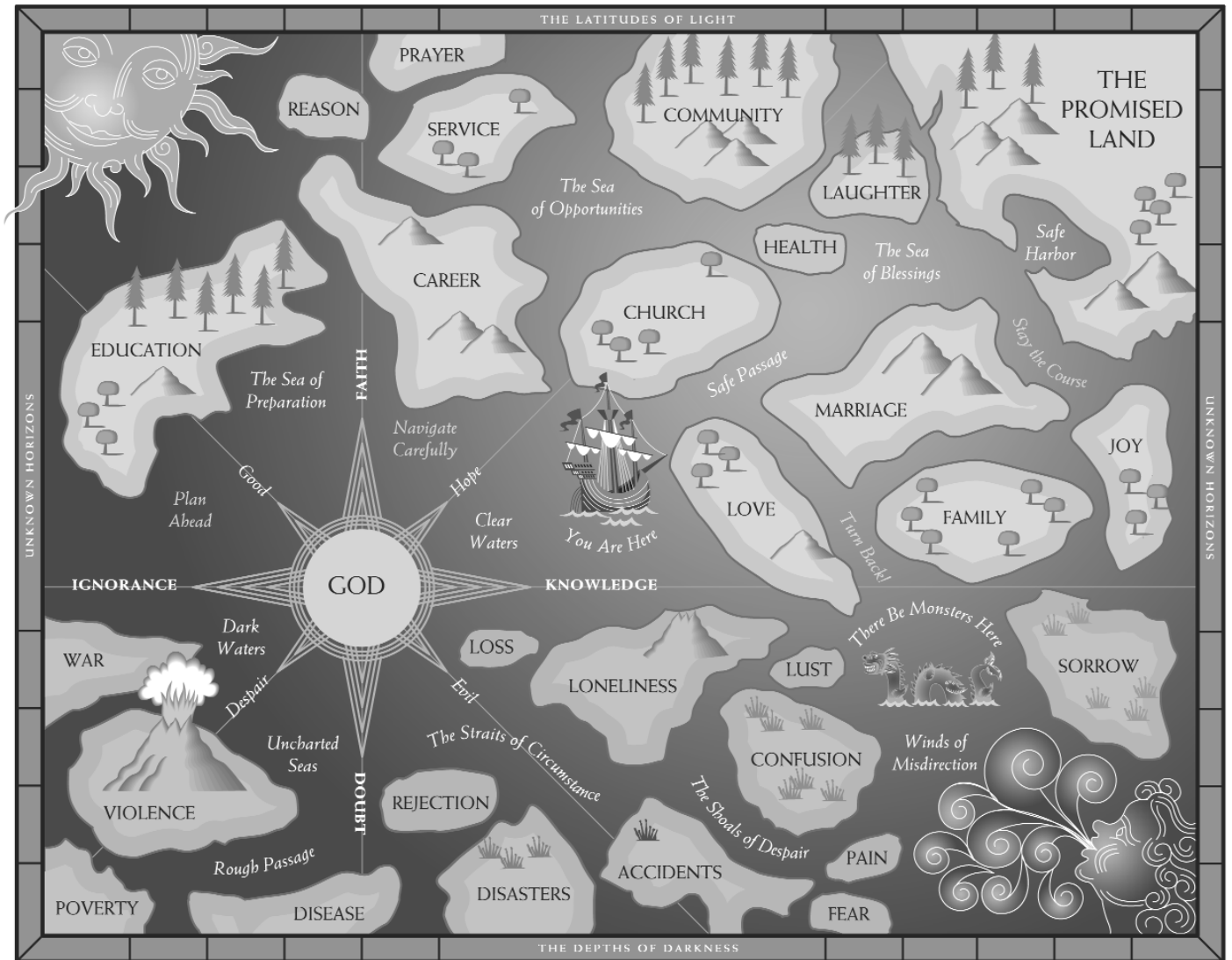
1. All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1988).

### A note about the illustrations in this section:

William Blake (1757–1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. In 1826, he completed a series of twenty-two engraved prints using the intaglio method of engraving, illustrating the biblical Book of Job, which was published by John Linell.

**He suffered  
with Jesus  
by suffering  
with me.**

*A Map of Life with God as Our Compass* | ILLUSTRATION BY MAX SEABAUGH



**A theodicy is a kind of map. Its purpose is to locate our suffering on the landscape of human experience and help us find a way through it.** —Richard Rice



# My God, Why? *The Question That Never Goes Away*

| BY RICHARD RICE

Adapted from *Sensible Suffering* by Richard Rice, forthcoming from Intervarsity Press. Copyright © 2013 by Richard Rice. Used by permission of Intervarsity Press, PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515. [www.ivress.com](http://www.ivress.com).

## A Call to Think Seriously About Suffering

One evening soon after I started teaching college, there was a knock at our front door. It was a student in one of my religion classes. She was visibly upset. “Your mother’s been in an accident, and she needs you,” she blurted out. “Where is she?” I asked. “It happened just down the street,” she replied.

Mother was visiting us from across the country at the time. She had accepted an invitation to go to a prayer meeting several miles away with two friends. On the way home, Mom was sitting in the backseat on the passenger side. Her ride dropped off the lady in the front seat first, and since they were only five minutes or so from our house, Mom stayed where she was—a decision that probably saved her life. They made a left turn onto our street, and before they cleared the intersection, a speeding car from down the road crashed into them. The right side of the car took the full force of the collision.

My wife and I rushed to the scene. Mother was already in the ambulance, conscious but in severe pain, and we headed for the nearest hospital. We searched for reassuring things to say. “Everything will be all right. We’ll get you the best doctor we can. You know Jesus loves you.” “I know he does,” she said. As things turned out, her right hip was broken. But she had an excellent surgeon, and made a full recovery.

Everyone has stories like this to tell. And our family has others as well. Sooner or later, we or someone close to us meets with illness, accident, or worse. Suffering is universal, and no one is immune.

## Contrasting Approaches to Suffering

There are hundreds of books on suffering. A bookstore of any size has stacks of them. Some are “survival” stories or “grief memoirs,” moving accounts by or about people who have gone through a tragedy or lost someone dear to them. Others are “how-to” books, with lists of things we need to do in order to “cope,” “move on,” or “reach closure,” when we find ourselves in a painful situation.

In the same store, you will also find books on the topic of evil. I don’t mean dark dramas about monsters, demons, or aliens. I mean serious discussions about the nature of the world we live in. For centuries, suffering has driven people to ask questions about God. If God is perfectly good and powerful, the argument goes, then evil is incomprehensible. A good God would want to eliminate it. A powerful God would be able to. So, why does evil exist? Why do people suffer? What possible explanation can it have?

The difference between these various approaches is rather sharp. Books of the first and second sort sit in the self-help or popular psychology section of the store. The others rest among weighty tomes on theology or philosophy. The division isn’t airtight, of course. Philosophers occasionally touch on the practical consequences of their theories, and how-to books sometimes appeal to philosophical positions. But ordinarily a book will focus on one concern rather than the other.

Although philosophers and sufferers respond to suffering in contrasting ways, it is important to bring their various concerns together—to explore the connection between ideas *about* suffering and the personal experience of suffering. As we noted, suffering comes to everyone, philosophers included, and over the long run we need an approach to suffering that is more than just a philosophical treatise on the subject or a how-to book for sufferers or

caregivers. We need something that probes the connection between these concerns—a response to suffering that brings together theological ideas and practical experience.

We need an approach like this because ideas have consequences, as it is often said, and in the case of suffering these consequences can be tremendous. In fact, there may be no experience in life where ideas play a more important role. “The way we interpret suffering,” Wendy Farley observes, “has a great deal to do with how we experience suffering.”<sup>1</sup> And the way people respond to crisis often reflects a particular vision of how, when, and why God acts, or doesn’t act, in the world. When we consider ways to respond creatively to suffering, therefore, it is important for us to explore the relation of each religious or philosophical interpretation to concrete, lived experience.

Of course, theory and experience are seldom in perfect alignment. When sufferers view a great loss through the lens of their religious convictions, they are sometimes reassured, sometimes perplexed, sometimes disillusioned. Once in a while, people find that their suffering fits comfortably, and comfortingly, within a well-developed framework of understanding. Their long-held ideas and convictions give them great peace.

Quite often, however, suffering forces people to change their views about God—sometimes dramatically. “Given what I believe about God,” one person may say, “my suffering makes perfect sense. I know exactly what it means.” “Given what I always thought,” another may say, “my suffering makes no sense at all. Now I don’t know what to believe.” So, there are people whose suffering draws them closer to God, and others whose suffering drives them away. Because suffering is such a formidable and complex challenge, we need all the resources we have to meet it.

### **Suffering as Life-Changing Loss**

“There is one question that matters, and only one,” says Harold Kushner in his best-selling book on suffering, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. “Why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting.”<sup>2</sup> Kushner emphasizes what everyone knows. Suffering is typically a great obstacle to faith. When people don’t believe in God, more often than not, the number one reason they give is the suffering they

have experienced personally, or the suffering they see in the world around them. And for people who do believe, suffering is still a tremendous challenge. As philosopher Alvin Plantinga sees it, the argument from evil is the one argument against God’s existence worth taking seriously.<sup>3</sup>

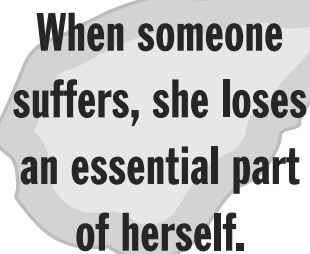
People use the word “suffering” to refer to a great many things, from minor inconveniences to much more serious matters. But the sort of suffering we are talking about isn’t something that merely interrupts or complicates our lives. It isn’t something we can make a few adjustments to accommodate, and get on with business as usual. The sort of suffering that concerns us here is like a natural disaster. It sweeps away all the familiar landmarks, like the tidal waves that devastated southern Asia in late 2004 and the eastern coast of Japan in early 2011, or the hurricanes that inundated New Orleans and battered the shores of New Jersey and New York, or the devastating floods of 2010 in Brazil and Australia, or the tornadoes that cross the midsection of the United States with increasing frequency. Suffering sometimes engulfs large numbers of people and sometimes cuts into the lives of a few. Either way, great suffering is like a tsunami or Katrina of the

soul—it alters the landscape of our lives. It transports us to a strange new world. And everything about us changes... permanently. Suffering, to put it simply, is life-changing loss.

In a horrific accident, college professor Gerald Sittser lost his mother, his wife, and one of his three children. A drunk driver crashed into the van he was driving. When Sittser climbed out of the

wreck and saw the effects of the collision, a powerful sensation settled over him. He began to realize that things would never be the same. By the time the ambulance reached the hospital, two hours later, he knew he could never go back to the life he had before. In his words, he “stepped out into a whole new world.”<sup>4</sup>

When someone suffers, she loses an essential part of herself, something central to the meaning and purpose of her life. What is lost may be a physical ability, someone or something we love, a career, or an income. Suffering can obliterate the work of a lifetime. It can destroy things that took years to accomplish or accumulate. It dashes hopes and shatters dreams. And when it does, it makes us strangers to ourselves. Sittser is right. To suffer is to enter



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a world we've never known before. Suffering leaves us feeling isolated, abandoned, and betrayed.

Suffering can disturb us even when we are not the ones suffering, because suffering anywhere reminds us that suffering is everywhere. I've taught university classes on suffering for many years, but I've never kept a file on the topic. I don't need one. All I have to do is check the morning news. It always contains plenty of examples. In fact, by my rough count, ninety percent of the items on a typical front page of the *Los Angeles Times* connect in one way or another to some form of suffering. Whether it's in a far-off corner of the world or just down the street, suffering is everywhere.

Most of us can list disasters that have befallen people we know. Just recalling some of the people I went to school with years ago brings to mind a catalog of tragedies. One died when his motorcycle ran into a truck. Another perished in a traffic accident on her way to meet her husband at the airport. A third died from burns after a space heater set fire to some cleaning fluid. A fourth ended her own life during the holidays one year. Another has a son who was sentenced to life in prison for killing a fellow high school student when a drug deal went bad. I could go on. So could anyone. We all know people who have suffered greatly.

### **Suffering and the Meaning of Life**

But if suffering is so common, you have to wonder, why do we hear so much about it? Why does something so pervasive upset us? It looks like suffering is a just a part of life. So, why don't we simply accept it and move on? People obviously take great interest in suffering—"If it bleeds, it leads," say newspaper editors—but why? What accounts for its "shock value"? Why do we react with a shudder?

Here's the reason. Suffering unsettles us because it threatens one of our deepest convictions. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we all cling to the belief that the world is orderly and life makes sense. This is one of those "basic beliefs" that provide a foundation for everything else we believe...and for everything we do, for that matter. It is a part of what we might call a

basic existential faith, "our basic confidence in the abiding worth of our lives," as one thinker puts it.<sup>5</sup> Because suffering threatens this visceral confidence that reality is stable and our lives have meaning, we are compelled to make some sense of it. We are driven to look for ways to fit suffering within some framework of meaning. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, our minds abhor absurdity. We need suffering to be sensible.

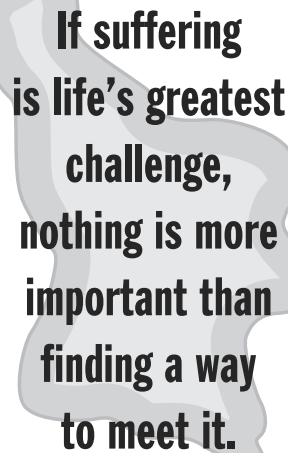
In fact, this urge to make sense of suffering is just as pervasive as suffering itself. As the ambulance made its way to the hospital after her accident, my mother said, "I know it happened for a purpose." Here she was, just minutes after a violent collision, wracked with pain, not knowing the extent of her injuries, or how they might affect her life, yet she considered the eternal questions that suffering brings. "Why?" "Why did this happen?" "Why did this

happen to me?" And, she voiced an answer. She found comfort in the thought that there was a reason, an explanation, for what she was going through. The crash was not an empty, meaningless, random event. There had to be a purpose behind it.

If suffering is life's greatest challenge, nothing is more important than finding a way to meet it. And that, in a nutshell, is the most fundamental question that suffering raises. What can we do to respond to it creatively and resourcefully? How can we resist the threat that suffering poses to the meaning of our lives?

### **Theodicy and the Quest for Meaning**

In many discussions of suffering, whether technical or not, there is an unusual expression that often appears, and that is the word *theodicy*. The word originated with a seventeenth-century German thinker, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Along with science, mathematics, and metaphysics, Leibniz took a special interest in the problem of evil. And to give his book on the topic a title, he coined the word *theodicy*, combining the Greek words for "justify" (*dikaioo*) and "God" (*theos*). A theodicy is an attempt to justify, or defend, God in the face of evil. And in spite of its philosophical overtones, it has become fairly common for people today to use the word to refer to any thoughtful



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interpretation of suffering.

As a philosophical exercise, a theodicy serves a minimal purpose. It does not presume to explain why specific instances of suffering occur. Its only goal is to show that the presence of evil in the world is not logically incompatible with God's existence. For most of us, this doesn't accomplish very much, even if it succeeds. People who are actually suffering want a good deal more than this. To rebuild our lives after a devastating loss, we surely need more than a philosophical treatise. At least, that is the conventional wisdom. "Sufferers don't need explanations," we often hear. "What they need is compassion. Instead of burdening them with theories, offer them a listening ear, a sympathetic touch, something in the way of concrete, practical assistance."

Not only do suffering people want more than theories, they may not want theories at all. In fact, instead of relieving suffering, theoretical explanations sometimes make it worse. That was true of history's most famous sufferer. When the biblical figure of Job lost everything—property, children, and finally his health—three friends came to visit him. They sat in sympathetic silence for seven days, but when they started to speak, the burden of their mission became clear. One by one they gave Job an explanation for his suffering. "Innocent people don't suffer," they told him. "Guilty people do. Your predicament is not a baffling mystery. It is perfectly understandable. For some reason or other, you have brought this suffering on yourself. You deserve what is happening to you."

With friends like these, we are tempted to ask, who needs enemies? No wonder people say that sufferers need compassion rather than theories. But that is only part of the picture. Certainly, no one in the throes of grief or loss wants to sit through an abstract discourse on the nature of reality. But the fact that people in pain don't want explanations doesn't mean they will never want them. As time goes by, those who have endured a great loss often crave nothing more than some serious reflection on their plight.

We noted that suffering alters the landscape of our lives. Its seismic upheavals leave us bewildered and dis-

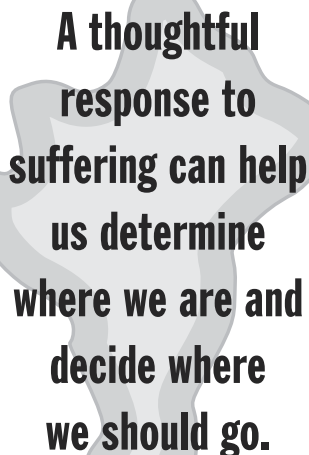
oriented. In order to continue life's journey in this strange new world, we must thread our way through enormous obstacles. That's where theodicy, reflecting carefully on the nature of suffering, comes in. A theodicy is a kind of map. Its purpose is to locate our suffering on the landscape of human experience and help us find a way through it.

A theodicy, then, is like a pause in a journey. If you are in the middle of a long trip somewhere and you realize that you are lost, the best thing to do is stop and take your bearings. Once you figure out where you are, you can plan your next move. That's what a theodicy can do. A thoughtful response to suffering can help us determine where we are and decide where we should go. By providing an aerial view of our location, so to speak, it gives us a way to place our suffering within the larger landscape of our lives. It's a little like a diagram with a "You are here" dot on it.

To change the comparison, a theodicy is less like emergency surgery than physical therapy. It may not belong in a first aid kit for sufferers, but it does have a place in long-term care. Ordinarily, people numbed by enormous loss are not ready for theorizing. They need a sympathetic touch, a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on. Over the long haul, however, they often need something more—a sense of where they are, and a reason to keep going. That's where theodicy can help.

A friend of mine lost his son several years ago in a tragic accident. He often talks to groups about the experience and how it has shaped his life. Over the years, the emphasis in his remarks has shifted. Early on, he described the loss in some detail—what happened and how he and the rest of his family reacted. Then, he added some reflections on what this loss might mean. As time went by, however, my friend came to devote less time to the accident and its immediate aftermath, and more to the way his religious perspectives have changed. He now views his loss within a well-developed theological framework.

This progression illustrates something important about suffering. Practical problems often have a theoret-



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ical side, and this is never more true than when we suffer. Although suffering often swamps us with tremendous practical problems, the challenges don't stop there. We are creatures of thought as well as action and feeling, and suffering raises unavoidable questions. Because suffering threatens the very meaning of life, an effective response to suffering must help us recover that meaning. And for that, careful thinking is indispensable. As Viktor Frankl discovered in the midst of the Holocaust, someone who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.<sup>6</sup> Without a theoretical element, then, without a theodicy of some sort, no practical response to suffering will be enough.

This is why it can be helpful for us to become acquainted with a number of the influential responses to the intellectual challenges that suffering poses. A careful look at various theodicies reveals that each one of them has both a theoretical and a practical side. Each offers an interpretation of suffering and implies that we should adopt certain attitudes and practices in response to it. It is important to examine both sides—both the thinking behind each position and its personal, practical applications.

There is something else that is true of each influential interpretation of suffering—some people like it and other people don't. No one theodicy has universal appeal. Each one has attractive features, and each has its limitations. Both deserve attention. In the case of each theodicy, it is therefore important for us to note the questions it raises, especially the questions it leaves unanswered. If a theodicy is an attempt to map the experience of suffering, then it will leave some of the territory uncharted. After all, no map perfectly represents the terrain it seeks to cover. And for this reason we may need to draw on several theodicies in order to develop a personal, practical response to suffering.

There is another reason to consider various approaches to suffering. Different people draw personal strength from different positions. No one size fits all. In fact, the very responses that some people find helpful will strike others as offensive. If we want to be helpful to others who suffer—and that may be the most important thing anyone can do—we need to remember that there is a wide variety of perspectives and each one has tremendous appeal to certain people.

As we consider the landscape of suffering, then, there are three things to keep in mind. First, suffering is uni-

versal. In one form or another, suffering is all around us, and sooner or later it reaches everyone. Second, the urge to make sense of suffering is universal, too. We have an instinctive desire—a deep-seated need, in fact—to come to terms with our suffering, to come up with some way to explain or interpret it. And people have been doing that since the dawn of history. And third, no theory or explanation for suffering perfectly accounts for it. Every theodicy has its attractions and its questions. We need to look at both sides. The ultimate goal of such efforts is a practical one. From reflections like these, we want to bring some ideas about suffering that will help us, and help us help others, when the unavoidable invades our lives, and we face the question that never goes away. ■

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## Participating in God's Redemptive Response to Our Suffering World: *Stories of Care* | BY ANNE COLLIER-FREED

The establishment of Adventist institutions of learning, healing, and relief and development, testifies to important ways Adventists respond to the world's suffering. Yet at times, Adventists have been perceived by outsiders as apocalyptic sectarians primarily concerned with personal, divine deliverance from the sufferings of this world to the neglect of prophetic engagement of systems that proliferate suffering in the world. In light of this perception, could further exploration of an integrative theology of suffering and its embodiment assist us in our witness to the hope we seek to announce through word and deed? To such an end, I hope in this article to introduce a few contemporary, seasoned theologians whose work profoundly engages this topic, biblically, personally, and historically. In addition, I will interweave stories of suffering, vulnerability, learning, and spiritual growth in contexts of care for the suffering, which have shaped my ministry and understanding of God's redemptive work through the Spirit.

Many Adventist believers who walk closely with Christ consistently care for those suffering in their midst and in their wider communities, whether through formal church ministries, informal relationships, or professional care-giving ministries. For example, in my local congregation one family in particular has consistently identified those suffering alone at the end of their lives and invited others to reach out to these individuals with practical help, emotional support, and love. I have also heard individuals at church testify to their trust in God's promises to redeem their own suffering and loss in ways that uplift the faith of others. In what ways do such actions flow from a biblical faith, thereby standing as a prophetic witness to the wider world?

In his book *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*, the Dutch Presbyterian theologian J.

Christiaan Beker, who had been enslaved by the Nazis as a young man, reflects on the challenge of contemporary Western Christians to live in the tension between hope and despair as they share their faith.<sup>1</sup> He argues that not only remembering the horrors of the Holocaust, but also our ever-increasing exposure through technology to the immensity of suffering around the world, presses upon Christians the need to grapple again with the biblical vision of God's triumph over suffering and death. And yet, Beker says, we all too often fall prey to enticements within both our religious and secular cultures to escape into "technologies" and strategies that insulate us from, or lead us to deny, the magnitude of suffering in the world. I believe many Adventists easily find such insulation, ironically, in our medical communities. Though surrounded by suffering people daily, the required professionalism of our service protects us from entering more fully into their suffering. Beker's call reminds those of us who understandably keep ourselves sheltered from the world's suffering to look again at the complex layers of biblical responses to such realities.<sup>2</sup> Even as Beker challenges his readers to distinguish between the emphases and social contexts of these scriptural texts, he insists they should ultimately cohere with the death and resurrection of Jesus as it testifies to the place of suffering and hope in the Christian life.<sup>3</sup>

First, Beker outlines the Deuteronomic view of suffering, which primarily presents a "scheme of sowing and reaping." Here, both the pleasures of reward and pains of punishment are part and parcel of God, good, and moral order. The Old Testament prophets are more subtle, says Beker. While still affirming the choice to participate or not in God's moral order, they often uphold a greater tension between God's judgment and mercy. Beker suggests this allows for a reckoning with perceived injustice where



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the proportion of suffering seems greater than the judgment inflicted. Beker notes that Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all “proclaim a final restoration of Israel,” expected after its suffering and exile, which will manifest the priority of “God’s mercy over his judgment.” Beker notes that, especially in Ezekiel, this is described as God’s unilateral action prompted by faithfulness to his covenant and for “the sake of [His] holy name” (Ezek. 36:22).<sup>4</sup>

The sense of disproportion of punishment to crime continued to be addressed by apocalyptic writers, whose responses sought to preserve moral order while affirming the faithfulness of God to his people. While books such as Job and Ecclesiastes address the unjust linkage of justice and suffering, their messages fall short of “apocalyptic authors like Daniel [who] cling to the faithfulness of the God of creation and covenant, and refuse to surrender their hope in the justice of God and in God’s ultimate triumph over the powers of evil.” Through their visions of God’s imminent intervention, apocalyptic authors keep suffering and hope linked together, while resisting any move to let suffering become “purely tragic and meaningless.”<sup>5</sup>

While such an analysis might sound like an unreserved affirmation of apocalyptic-oriented communities, Beker cautions contemporary readers to look at the whole of the apocalyptic thrust of various biblical authors from both Old and New Testaments. Such an approach, he argues, will help us to avoid extremes that disconnect our suffering from our hope. This will help us avoid a Platonic or Gnostic “disavowal of creation” that makes “the world...a valley of tears which prepares us for our true home in heaven,” where we enter “real life.”<sup>6</sup> We can also avoid making God a sadist who gives us suffering for our own good. And we can avoid the excesses of monastics and mystics, who at times elevated suffering to a kind of nobility that sets one apart or intensifies religious experience.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than suffering conferring a mark of nobility, Paul points to the *necessity* of suffering

in light of God’s battle with the powers of evil. This battle has been won through the cross of Christ, but awaits the final cleansing of the world from sin, death, and suffering. Christ’s resurrection becomes the “first fruits” of God’s victory, and provides for our assurance of the world’s final transformation. Yet in the meantime, Paul also brings to light the *redemptive possibilities* of the suffering of those incorporated into Christ’s body. (Paul also distinguishes a kind of suffering that is not redemptive, a kind of suffering that must be seen as a “mysterious ‘dark residue’ of evil and death in God’s created order.”)<sup>8</sup> Here, Beker highlights Romans 8:17–30, pointing to its announcement of the Spirit leading the church in “solidarity with the world and its suffering,” so that (unlike the focus of the message of Revelation) “the windows of the church are open to the world and its suffering.” In this way, the church is called to exist and suffer *for* the world, rather than merely sheltering against it.<sup>9</sup> It is called to stand not only in solidarity, as God redeems the whole of creation, but also to stand *prophetically* against injustice and idolatry. Beker argues that both Paul’s writings and the apocalyptic message of 1 Peter link the church’s suffering *for* the world with the “enfleshment of its hope in God’s coming triumph over evil and suffering.”<sup>10</sup>

What might redemptive suffering *for the world* look like, as reflected in the humble ways we serve the world and each other in the church, in contexts of care for those suffering inside and outside the church? The reflections of Frances Young, a retired British Methodist scholar of Bible and patristics, are instructive here. Though Young had a successful academic career, her personal suffering was found in caring for more than forty years for her profoundly disabled son. With little ability to move or communicate, this son accompanied Young as she taught, researched, traveled, participated in associations, and parented her other nondisabled children. Her disabled son’s suffering also lodged in her heart as she wrestled to understand how the God she served would

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allow such a son to be born. Young explores her internal struggle and wrestling with biblical texts in her book *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality*.<sup>11</sup> Engaging stories like Jacob's struggle with a divine Stranger along the road to meet Esau, or the Children of Israel's story of journeying through the desert, Young discovers her own deepest identity in finding herself in the Presence of a transcendent and loving God.

After years of struggling with God allowing her son's profound disability, Young finds herself, like Job and Moses, confronted with God's incomprehensible being "from himself." In this light, Jacob's struggle begins to frame for her the importance of her own *wounding* in knowing God, which allows her finally to let God be God. This leads her to challenge (prophetically) our contemporary culture's idolatrous vision of human fulfillment. She contends that, for the Christian, the journey to human fulfillment takes us through the desert, through a sense of exile and estrangement, even intense suffering at times. It involves not so much a struggle with our conceptions of God, but with ourselves, until "the created nature is defeated and we are fit to receive God's blessing."<sup>12</sup>

As a chaplain I have seen, in a variety of ways, God's use of suffering to prompt such a realization, as well as a growing receptivity to God's love, to resting in God's God-ness. As a young chaplain trainee in the late eighties, I encountered a stranger whose spiritual orientation was quite foreign to mine, though her struggle to let God be God, I would find later, was quite similar to mine. Responding to an evening call, I found a late-middle-aged Pentecostal woman attempting to support her husband as he was transitioning to actively dying of bone cancer. When I arrived, I could see the overwhelming horror on her face as she struggled to watch her husband's physical and emotional pain. In talking privately with her, I saw, despite my youth, that she also struggled with her trust in God. As a Pentecostal, this woman had come from a tradition in which she was

affirmed to have the gift of faith healing. She shared stories with me of numerous times when she had been able to miraculously heal relatives and friends throughout her life. Yet at this moment, she was not able to help her suffering husband. My own capacities to help her through this struggle were limited, yet I sensed, even as I offered my presence and attuned listening, that God's Spirit was present in her struggle. At the same time the mystery of God's ways in bringing each of us through psychological suffering and loss would be left for God's unfolding over time, both for me and for the patient's wife, who I sought to support.

In my recent experiences of ministry with the dying in a hospice context, I have seen patients witnessing through their suffering to the redemptive love of Jesus. One patient, who I will call "Edith," powerfully "lived into the story of Jesus" at the end of her life. Edith came from a loving Mormon family, yet she had survived two difficult marriages while raising her four children, mostly away from her immediate family living in Utah. When I first encountered Edith in her midnineties, I found her unusually open to spiritual conversations with me, a non-Mormon chaplain. At times lucid and at other times confused, Edith shared stories of her life, fears, and suffering from her confinement and isolation in her care center. Though it was located close to one daughter and many relatives who loved her, Edith did not see them daily and missed those close friends who had already died. She also suffered from mild dementia and limited mobility, along with unresolved hurts and frightful delusions.

Yet, Edith had a rich history with her Heavenly Father. Through our conversations and prayers together for two and a half years, Edith shared how prayer sustained her through losses past and present. As a relatively young woman, she had undergone major open heart surgery, along with a separation from her children for months on end in her hospitalization and recovery. During this period, she was not able to use her talents or abilities to serve others.

Yet Edith learned to love scripture, particularly the Psalms. I noticed how she responded to these texts more fully than other Mormon patients I had come to know in my hospice work. She also loved to have me pray for her.

After a long stint on hospice, it seemed that Edith was starting her final stage of decline. Even as the hospice team noticed signs of this transition, one of Edith's children, living in another state, decided to take Edith off hospice and move in with her so she could provide up-close care. She enrolled Edith in rehabilitation in spite of the fact that the hospice nurses feared her systems were beginning to shut down. Still, Edith made efforts to eat and drink more than she had in the past, while she clearly continued to decline. After returning from a ten-day trip, I learned from a staff person, who had closely cared for Edith in her last days, the story of her passing. In the end, it was difficult, even traumatic, for all involved—for the relatives who were present, the staff members seeking to support them, not to mention for Edith herself, without the help of the hospice team. The out-of-state daughter had called for an ambulance to take her mother to the hospital, against the advice of those at her bedside. Her attempts to deal with her own sense of inadequacy and loss in the face of her mother's dying seemed to increase the suffering that naturally accompanies death.

On hearing this story, I began a process of grappling slowly with my own submerged sense of grief. I wrestled not only with losing a beloved patient, but also with a sense of the incompleteness of this loss and other losses. It was not until I found a way through reflection and prayer to interlace Edith's lived story with her family and those who cared for her, and the story of Jesus, that my grief could be transformed into a deepening conviction regarding God's abundant provision and love.

At one point, I read again Psalm 23. I saw that despite her fears and delusions, Edith truly "dwelled in the house of the Lord eternally." Despite the fact that from a hospice perspec-

tive she had undergone unnecessary suffering at the end, Edith *kept choosing* throughout her life to walk through the valley of the shadow of death hand in hand with her Heavenly Father. I recalled also the way she ate at the abundant table of the Lord, receiving God's bountiful love through prayer and by opening herself to spiritual companionship. This allowed her to generously respond to all who trespassed through her room, making each person feel like a welcomed and honored guest. I further understood that in living out her days to the very end, Edith sacrificially held out to her beloved children, who might be seen as letting her down, a profound and loving witness to the way of Jesus. I remember with a smile the phrase in which she once captured the essence of her faith: "I just love love!" As a witness to the dying of one who has gone ahead in the way of suffering *and new life* in Christ, I believe Edith longed for her children to find the true path. This path, which she had walked, would take them beyond the rules and scripts of their faith community that entail filling roles conferring a sense of social identity and approval. Whether they were seeking to live out such scripts, or reacting against them, was not the point; rather, she held out to them a picture of what turning one's path in surrender to living in one's true home in the Father's house looks like.

I realize that in citing such a story, I point to what might be considered "normal" suffering, unlike the kind of tragedies and senseless suffering that Beker, following Paul, distinguishes from redemptive suffering. Yet, I could write similar stories about friends and relatives who died tragically in their late twenties or thirties, or another friend who died of the same disease in her early fifties, from which one of her housemates in her late twenties had died little more than a decade earlier. All these women "showed the way" to life in God's house. They showed the pattern of Jesus's free and self-sacrificial love, to which I am called as a wife and mother of four young children,

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intervention,  
apocalyptic  
authors  
keep suffer-  
ing and  
hope linked  
together.**



**I caught  
a glimpse  
of what  
Luther must  
have meant  
by Christian  
freedom.**

the truly giving and yet costly love of God that opens up the sharing of our deepest gifts and capacities.

According to Rowan Williams in his book *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (an influential book in Frances Young's spiritual journey), we can find such a pattern in Martin Luther's early theology, known as his "theology of the cross."<sup>13</sup> Williams notes Luther's insight that God himself "shatters our images," meaning our attempts to speak accurately (or ontologically) about him, "by addressing us in Jesus." Though such a suggestion might be seen as a restatement of the Classical theological tradition's "negative theology," Luther affirms here that God is known to us in history, where God himself enters into our suffering and is ultimately "made known to us in the cross, in man's death and abandonment." God can thus be sought even in that which "opposes" or "contradicts" God. This theology does not encourage escape from the world, but prompts us to find in the world's harshness "the garment of God." After finding freedom from his own demons that mired him in a false "theology of glory," Luther announced the freedom of Christians to enter deeply into places of darkness and affliction, even as God is free to act in all life circumstances, particularly in life's most desperate places. We are free to follow God there, even if it means getting our hands dirty, or even if it leads to our own suffering.<sup>14</sup>

One Sabbath, one of our church members preached about the gift of forgiveness provided by God in the face of the bitterness that comes with profound personal loss. During her sermon, she played clips from the PBS *American Experience* documentary on the Amish community that lost a group of schoolchildren at the hands of an angry shooter. Though I had slipped out to help prepare for the potluck and keep up with my children, I came back in time to hear the commentator musing in wonder at the Amish families who lost children, several of whom *chose* to attend the funeral of the

shooter. "Who attends the funeral of someone who shoots your children?" he asked. Then, the voice of one of these parents became audible. He began to speak of his freedom from having to judge this man, betraying in his tone a transparent sense of trust in God's justice and love. In this profound testimony, I caught a glimpse of what Luther must have meant by Christian freedom, the kind of freedom allowing us to go into life's most painful places, and there to find God. ■

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Union College, an MA in religion from Andrews University, and a PhD in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. She taught at Pacific Union College, and later, while mothering four children, did part-time work at various colleges and graduate schools, followed by work as a hospice chaplain. Anne, her husband, and children now live in Utah and attend Wasatch Hills SDA Church.

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# MISSION

ORIGINAL WATERCOLOR BY BILL PAPAS, IMAGE BY MAIRIM PINA | WWW.FAITHHOUSEMANHATTAN.ORG



## The Many Faces of Religion | BY RUBEN SANCHEZ

### Religion is a Commodity

*"I turned from phraseology to reality."* This is Dietrich Bonhoeffer (left) reflecting on the time he spent in Harlem, New York City, during the 1930s, in the midst of the black congregation of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, while studying at Union Theological Seminary under Reinhold Niebuhr. "There's no theology here," he said, referring to Union. Rather, his short time in



Manhattan brought him life-changing experiences, friends, and music from the dispossessed that he would take back to soon-to-be Nazi Germany: Negro spirituals.

The black church of Harlem introduced the white Bonhoeffer to a gospel new to him, a gospel in which Jesus is black, angels are black, people are black, and all of them are the victims of social injustices. Out of positions of privilege, and in the midst of people condemned by a socioeconomic system that made legal distinctions based on color, leaving their descendants with less socioeconomic opportunities today, Bonhoeffer started to see things "from below." His Christian experience would never be the same.

It is now late July 2012. On a Wednesday evening, we, a heterogeneous group of ministers and religion scholars mainly affiliated with Christianity, along with an embedded journalist from the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), arrive at the same church

where Bonhoeffer used to teach Sunday school, Abyssinian Baptist Church (below).<sup>1</sup> There, we find a line of white tourists from all over the world, waiting to experience a black Christian service. Among our group, a tall black woman stands out. A former Episcopal priest, recently defrocked because of her dual affiliation with Christianity and Islam, her skin color buys her a first-class ticket to skip the line and be the first to enter the temple. She refuses the invitation because she is now and for the next two days part of the first group to attend Abrahamic Manhattan, a three-day immersion into Abrahamic communities present in the Big Apple. The program is organized by Faith House Manhattan, a nonprofit entity whose mission is to help New Yorkers experience their neighbor's faith.

It is with this in mind that we accommodate ourselves on the church's pews. We have entered in rigorous order, and have been guided to our seats by immaculate deaconesses with gloved hands. I look around and see at least a



LEFT: WWW.ACTION.ORG; RIGHT: WWW.POST-GAZETTE.COM



hundred people ready for the service. Since more than three-quarters of them are tourists, the only way for us to remember that we are in a black church is by looking at the black musicians that fill the pulpit. Then it feels like being inside one of many movies with gospel music, exported by Hollywood all around the world.

After the music, the Reverend Violet L. Dease



Lee (left), “the first and only woman to serve as Assistant Pastor and the first woman to preside over the ordination in Abyssinian’s 204 years of Christian witness,”—and also, according to the church’s website, the only one out of three serving ministers with a PhD—preaches the word.

“Have you taken a sabbatical from your TV or Facebook?” she asks rhetorically, making the importance of rest the core of her message. “Resting is a courageous act in the world we live in,” she says.

However, despite the fact that Rev. Lee is a woman, black, and has experience in social work, and despite the fact that gentrification in Harlem is causing pain for its poorer black inhabitants, many of whom are forced to move out, none of the social justice spirit that shook Bonhoeffer’s life and helped him stand against the Nazis surfaced in her inspirational words.

The sermon ends, and black gospel music fills the church again. Tourists are encouraged to make a donation, and so they do. Finally, the music comes to an end. We all feel good, full of energy. We have experienced a black service in a marvelous church in the heart of world-famous Harlem.

What happened to the spirit that moved Bonhoeffer? Where were those words of longing for justice that would later inform Bonhoeffer’s works and the creation of the Confessing Church? What made this experience different for the tourists present, distinct from any other activity that one can enjoy in NYC?

“The black church is the result of systemic

oppression on black people,” the very same defrocked black Episcopal priest who was offered preferential treatment, told us. Self-described as a writer and musician, she also holds a PhD in Christian Testament, and was a seminary professor. Nowadays, she added, “black culture has been commodified and co-opted.”

## Religion is Alive

Experiencing your neighbor’s faith is easier when someone guides you, because as Henry D. Thoreau said, “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.” Faith House Manhattan’s founder and president of the board, Samir Selmanovic (below), and then-executive director,



Bowie Snodgrass, lent us their eyes to see some of the religious richness that Manhattan contains.

They arranged several visits to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities for us; Abyssinian Baptist Church was only our first stop. Ahead lay a tour in a museum that is a synagogue on Saturdays, blurring the line between church and state; a mass delivered at fast-food tempo in the Wall Street area; a visit to the famous “Ground Zero mosque”; two very different ways of worshipping Allah; and to close, one of the most festive ways of entering Shabbat that I have ever experienced: a service in a synagogue that Selmanovic described as “orthodox and postmodern.”

This accounts for only a very small fraction of the unending religious diversity one can find in Manhattan. According to the 2010 statistics from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), out of the city’s total population of 1,585,873, there were 698,097 religious adherents, distributed among more than ninety religious bodies, such as Reconstructionist Judaism and the Mennonite Church USA; within sixteen defined families, such as Baptists and Holiness churches, plus many other undefined families; and all of them comprised within five

**“Resting is a courageous act in the world we live in,” she says.**

traditions, like the Black Protestant and Orthodox traditions, and still many others also undefined. Two religious bodies that pertain to an undefined family and tradition are Buddhists and Hindus. ARDA recognizes two types of the former and four of the latter.<sup>2</sup>

Believing that simply labeling communities and classifying them by family is enough to know what the different religious communities are all about can be as risky as believing that all Republicans only care about abortion and gay marriage. As Selmanovic writes in his illuminating book, *It's Really All About God: How Islam, Atheism, and Judaism Made Me a Better Christian*, "Religions are alive."<sup>3</sup> And with life comes the unexpected.

## Religion is Secular

Thursday morning begins in the Lower East Side, where Chinatown is and Little Italy used to be more than just the touristy place with no Italians that it is now. There, we visit a National Historical Landmark hard to define in one word. From 1887 until 2008, it was the Eldridge Street Synagogue. For four years now, it has been the Museum at Eldridge Street (*below*). However, both names are still suit-



able today. From Sunday through Friday until 3 p.m., the building is open as a museum to a broad public from many backgrounds, for a general admission fee of ten dollars. On Friday evening and Saturday, the building becomes a synagogue only open to a Jewish Orthodox community.

According to its website, the Museum at Eldridge Street is the result of a restoration project that lasted over twenty years and raised more than \$18 million, which came from the city of New York (\$6 million), New York State, the federal government, corporations, foundations, and thou-

sands of supporters from around the country. Public money transformed a centenarian synagogue in ruins into a splendid, must-see museum.

We enter the building, and for the first and last time in our Abrahamitic Immersion, we find no community and no



neighbor whose faith we can experience. Instead, a young lady guides us through the vestibule, the sanctuary, and the women's balcony. We admire the stained glass panels, the Rose Window, the East Window—and the lighting, while our guide explains to us some of the building's history and its meaning for the Jewish community that immigrated to New York City in the nineteenth century.

We walk freely around the building and admire its beauty, but we do not experience what Selmanovic calls "holy awkwardness," i.e., being present during another's experience of his or her holy sites or objects.

Does this mean we had no "religious experience" at all in the museum? A good answer to this question does not have so much to do with experiencing our neighbor's faith, in this case, Judaism, as with experiencing our own beliefs. And not so much with our religious beliefs, like Adventism, but with our beliefs regarding the Western world we live in, which somehow hold all of us, "believers and nonbelievers," Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and many others, together: the religion of the secular.

With the help of Finbarr Barry Flood (*above*), humanities professor at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, and the social anthropologist Alfred Gell, who died in 1997, I would like to briefly argue that our visit to this synagogue-museum was indeed a "religious experience." A religious experience that, ironically, because of the secular worldview that sustains our understanding and definition of religion, we would never consider as such.

Flood affirms that the creation of the secular institution of the museum marks the "shift from cult to culture." He uses the word *cult* not in the sense of an abnormal religious movement, but as a system of ritual practices. This shift so crucial to the birth of modernity means a scientific outlook on how the very same humans can produce such different belief systems, rituals, and so on. Thanks to this scientific move, "religious artifacts" become "art." Thus, the new museum is to the secular world what the

temple was to the premodern world.<sup>4</sup>

In his book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Gell wrote,

*I cannot tell between religious and aesthetic exaltation; art-lovers, it seems to me, actually do worship images in most of the relevant senses, and explain away their de facto idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe. Thus, to write about art at all is, in fact, to write about either religion, or the substitute of religion which those who have abandoned the outward forms of received religions content themselves with.*<sup>5</sup>

## Religion is Politics

Our next stop is St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church (*below*), New York's oldest Catholic



parish. It is located in the financial district, so close to Ground Zero that during the 9/11 attacks, a portion of the landing gear of an airplane damaged its roof.

Mass starts on time, and things go more quickly than any of us could anticipate. I have never heard a pastor preach this fast. It feels like the father of the parish is late for an appointment. "People come here on their lunch breaks, so we have to make it happen in thirty minutes," says the father, after the service.

At St. Peter's, we found a group of people that reflected the surrounding area's diversity, not only racially, but also financially. In a city like New York, where economic inequality has reached the levels of some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Wall Street area is where one can sense the differences the most.<sup>6</sup> Inside St. Peter's, however, these differences are very easy to forget. We all line up to receive the host from the same father. There is no first-class ticket here,

neither an organic nor whole-grain host sold at a more expensive price.

The father tells us to go in peace, and we sing the benediction. While it is still sinking in that the service has ended, the father comes straight to us and asks, "Are you the Faith House group?"

Selmanovic has organized a time for us to get to know Father Kevin Madigan (*below*) in person. The latter explains to us that St. Peter's is a very traditional church, and that when the World Trade Center was here, the church was packed.

Selmanovic takes this chance to explain that Faith House Manhattan and St. Peter's together organized a peaceful march to show support for our next stop, the Ground Zero mosque, as the Islamic community center became known during the summer 2010 controversy, although it is as far from the actual Ground Zero as St. Peter's, and is not a mosque, but a community center.

As Father Madigan reported to *The New York Times*, Catholics experienced the very same hate and rejection when they were planning to build St. Peter's Catholic Church, back in the 1780s.<sup>7</sup> US Protestants, seeing the Pope as the enemy of democracy, forced the 200 Catholics then in the city to build their church outside the city limits. Not happy with that, twenty years later Protestants surrounded the building, disrupted the service, and in the disturbances that followed, one policeman was killed. This is why in a letter Father Madigan wrote to his parish-



ioners, it read that "[m]any of the charges being leveled at Muslim-Americans today are the same as those once leveled at our forebears." For Father Madigan, Catholics have a special obligation to make sure such discrimination does not take place again.

Over two hundred years have passed, and Catholics have not only become the second largest religious tradition, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives, but even put a Catholic in the White House.<sup>8</sup> However, reli-

**There is no first-class ticket here, neither an organic nor whole-grain host sold at a more expensive price.**



gious discrimination is still with us. Now the “bad guy” is not the Pope but Osama Bin Laden (until he died), and “bad people” are not Catholics but Muslims. “People threw pieces of ham at me [during her school years],” says the young lady who guides us around the Ground Zero mosque, once we left St. Peter’s. Crying, she recalls how a glass bottle had also been thrown at her.

The young lady explains that at this community center, they host a variety of programs that range from lessons in capoeira (a “dancelike martial art of Brazil”) to history classes such as “The Genealogy of Muslims in America,” in which students learn that Muslims were among the first to set foot on this land. They were brought as slaves.

She also gives us a different interpretation of Islam than the definition that the general media tend to spread. Islam is a way of life for her. And although for many, jihad is a holy war against infidels, for her, and for some Muslims in the United States, jihad refers to inner struggles we all face when confronted with doubts and difficulties in life.

Again, Faith House Manhattan’s project to make us experience our neighbor’s faith proved to be more than right; the encounter was indispensable. We took away many things from our visit to the Catholic church and the Islamic community center. Yet to me, none of them was as important as the realization that this country fancies itself as a place for religious freedom precisely because it is not. From the rejection Catholics experienced in 1785, to the New York City Police Department spying on Muslims in New York and New Jersey just last year, many other religious groups have faced discrimination and hate throughout the past two centuries.<sup>10</sup> “We the People,” a short video produced by a coalition of nonprofits for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, shows how far we still are from truly respecting the First Amendment.<sup>11</sup>

## Religion is Diversity

It is Thursday night, but before we go home to rest, religion



will still make us sing and dance.

After 10 p.m., we enter a Sufi mosque located in the Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca, a fashionable and very desirable district that is home to several celebrities. Inside, we find a small community with many young people, some of them white, led by a female imam, Shaikha Fariha (left).

We take off our shoes and sit on the floor of a small prayer hall. Close to the quiblah, the wall that faces Mecca, there are big pieces of sheepskin where members sit.

What we are about to experience is the dhikr, a devotional service to remember or invoke God. We start by singing several songs, moving our heads from right to left, in an effort to bring our attention to the heart, where, according to the Quran, God dwells. After a while, we stand up, hold hands, and sing a repetitive song, moving our bodies in a defined and also repetitive manner. Each word uttered in a chant is a name of God, and each motion has a symbolic meaning. Meanwhile, some members chant different songs. We do more collective dances and movements before we break up and start whirling, following the music’s rhythm and melody. We turn counterclockwise, as though embracing our hearts, where their Beloved dwells. We raise our right hands with open palms to receive the blessings from God, and lower our left hands, blessing the earth.

Exhausted, we leave the mosque before many of its members, who will still continue looking for God in their mystic way.

This late-night, emotional, and full-of-action Muslim worship service is a sharp contrast to what we encounter the next day, Friday afternoon, at a Harlem mosque of the Islamic Brotherhood (not to be confused with the Muslim Brotherhood). According to Selmanovic, the worship center (top, page 45) was founded by a Malcolm X follower with a very progressive view of gender equality. Also countering the stereotypes of many, the founder and imam is very much against war, and works for social justice.

The mosque does not have a coed prayer hall. Women and men worship one floor apart. Still, a conscious effort is made to ensure that all events and speaking are directed toward both genders, not only the men.

We again sit on the ground, but do not stand up and dance. On the contrary, we kneel and bow to the point where our noses touch the floor. We do not sing, either. It is the imam (far right, above) who speaks, appealing to our reason—and our hearts—and the only thing close to music that we hear is the call to prayer.

Finally, we note that the Muslims of this community are of African descent. “Not all Arabs are Muslims,” said Selmanovic, in one of the immersion’s several debriefing sessions, held in Bonhoeffer’s room at Union Theological Seminary. “Also, there is an Arab Christian church in NYC. In fact, the majority of Muslims are not Arabs. There is as

much diversity within Islam as there is diversity in Christianity. It is unfortunate that Christians have low religious literacy of other religions," he adds. In the Abrahamic Immersion's introductory session, Snodgrass had already reminded us that no religion is monolithic.



"There is more diversity of Muslims in NYC than anywhere else in the world," she explained.

It is quite easy to be aware of the religious diversity present in the United States. Our understanding of religious freedom implies that there are at least two religions from which to choose. In addition, many not-for-profit organizations focused on interfaith work or dialogue are living proof that not everyone is affiliated with the same religious community. The state protects this type of diversity, and thus we are all called to at least tolerate it.

However, when it comes to the distinct communities found within the same religion, it is not clear anymore for some of us if this is "diversity" or "difference." But when the spectrum belongs to a religious community foreign to us, instead of seeing the rainbow we experience at home, the most we perceive are one or two colors that are usually painted by the mass media.

Faith House Manhattan's Abrahamic Immersion provides this extra step. It confronts us with our stereotypes, and very empirically shows us how, under the same sacred canopy, there are distinct communities that worship what all consider to be the same God. This realization can be so paradigm shattering that questions such as, "What is a Jew?" become very difficult to answer.

Our last religious experience reaffirms the point. In a Presbyterian church, we welcome the Sabbath with a Jewish renewal community that Selmanovic defines as both "orthodox" and "postmodern." The people that make up this community are a blend of "old-school"-type members and hipsters.

During the service, we sing, we clap, and we dance. It is a combination of traditional liturgy

with now in-vogue practices such as meditation. The rabbi asks us to close our eyes and reflect on our inner state. Since this community is very much about integrating body, mind, and soul, he makes us embody the Shabbat and release our tensions of the week. Indeed, it is a very refreshing experience quite different from our time at the museum-synagogue. As a Seventh-day Adventist, experiencing different uses of the body during worship with Sufis and this Jewish community has opened up a space for reflection on our bodies in the church, and added meaning and insight to Luke 10:27 (MSG), "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence."

At the beginning of November, Faith House Manhattan announced the creation of Faith House Institute. The program draws on this pilot experience to offer not only Abrahamic Immersions but also immersions in any set of religious communities in New York City, tailored to organizations, groups, and congregations. The ways in which this can enrich religious people are quite in tune with Selmanovic's book, *It's Really All About God*. Getting to know other religious traditions through their followers has the potential to give us new insights about our own religious identity.



At the same time, for those who don't consider themselves religious, this immersion can be a special window into our very human condition. Because, as Selmanovic told us, after an entire lifetime in the midst of religious diversity, "It all comes down to human beings and a God we cannot own. You can never box in anybody, nei-

**"It all comes down to human beings and a God we cannot own."**

# ADVENTIST FORUM PRESENTS



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ther God nor humans. It is about our relationships, the challenges, and the joy of finding God in the other. The Divine Other loves to visit us sideways." Or, in a more secular tone, it is about illuminating our understanding of ourselves and the world, and about finding inspiration in the life of the other. ■

**Ruben Sanchez** is a Fulbright scholar who holds a master's degree in religious studies and journalism from New York University. He was raised in Spain and moved to New York in 2010. He is currently working as the university chaplain for Seventh-day Adventist students attending colleges and universities in the New York City area.



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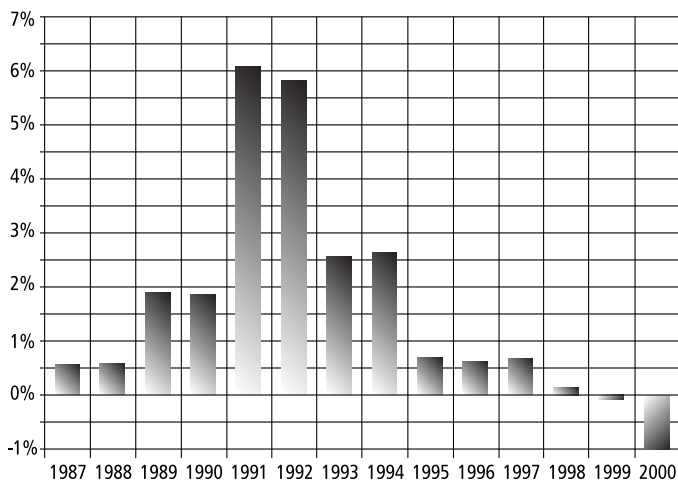


# Mission to a Secular City: *The Value of Research for Reaching the Unreached* | BY PETR ČINČALA

It was an exciting experience for me to attend the Human Resources Conference at Andrews University, where I met those who were teaching and mentoring me more than a decade ago. It was an honor to present my report on how a God-given dream is being fulfilled.

You've probably heard of or read about how the church functioned in a Communist society, where I grew up as pastor's child. In those days, God gave me a dream that one day more people from that overwhelmingly unbelieving Communist society would come to love God and follow Jesus. Shortly after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when I attended the newly reopened Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, we witnessed a great wave of spiritual receptivity. Crowds were attracted to evangelistic meetings and to the local churches. However, it took only a few years before they were gone, as the annual church growth rate (*below*) shows.

## SDA Church in the Czech Republic Annual Growth Rate (1987–2000)



Global Church Growth Research Center

In 1994, God allowed me to come to Andrews University and study for a master of divinity degree to better prepare for ministry back at home. My pregnant wife accompanied me and was very supportive throughout the entire time. Classes at the North American Division Evangelism Institute (NADEI) taught me that there is more to evangelism than public crusades. I realized that besides theology, there are other disciplines that may help us develop more efficient ways of reaching people for Christ, and that led me to get involved in social work and missiology (1997–2000). It became more and more clear to me that Jesus was not just a theologian who understood the Bible; he understood people, he was able to work with them in a practical ways, and thereby reached them for his kingdom.

As an unsponsored student looking for work, in 1996 I was introduced to a research project led by Erich Baumgartner. Based on the entry of SDA church growth data, the website [www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org) was later developed. During the last year of my studies at AU, in 2001 I became involved with the Institute of Church Ministry as a research assistant. In the meantime, NADEI hired me to research the methodology of Natural Church Development. These experiences allowed me a taste of various kinds of research projects that directly or indirectly supported the mission of our church.

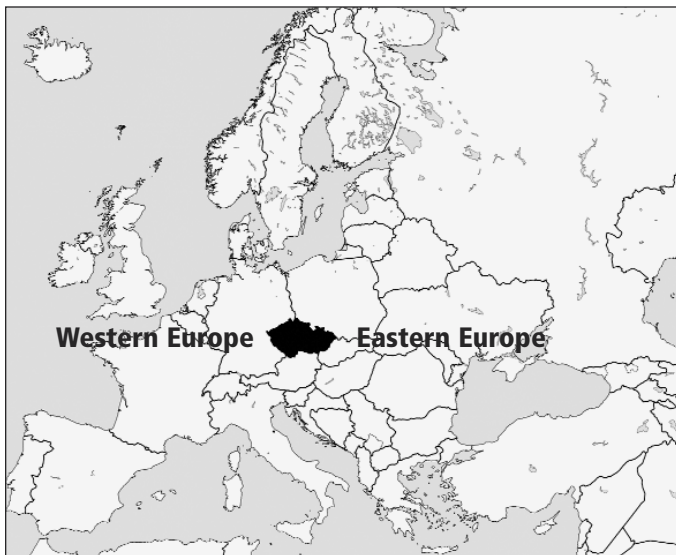
Although research has not been a major aim of my preparation for ministry, it has stayed with me ever since. Along with assisting the Institute of Church Ministry and other organizations with statistical research, I served in 2003–2008 as a research manager for the Institute for Natural Church Development (NCD International), maintaining a large worldwide database and helping to assess the health of local churches.<sup>1</sup>

My dream and main aim in life up to that point, however, was to be involved in mission outreach among the

Czech atheists. God put a passion in my heart to work in a very secular and irreligious environment to be a catalyst for the mission revitalization movement. But, how could that happen in a country that is so resistant to church and empty of religion?

My teachers gave me the idea that research is not just for academics, but can actually play a fundamental role in understanding people's worldviews and in forming mission strategy. I came to believe that research actually might have an impact on the effectiveness of reaching people for Christ. Various research projects gave me the idea that God can grow church in a similar way as he grows organic nature, and I was increasingly interested in understanding the Czech context to find the possibility of breaking through the thick walls of prejudices and resistance of irreligious people, exploring how to bridge the bottomless and unbridgeable gap between the church and the society, and discovering how to foster a mission movement.

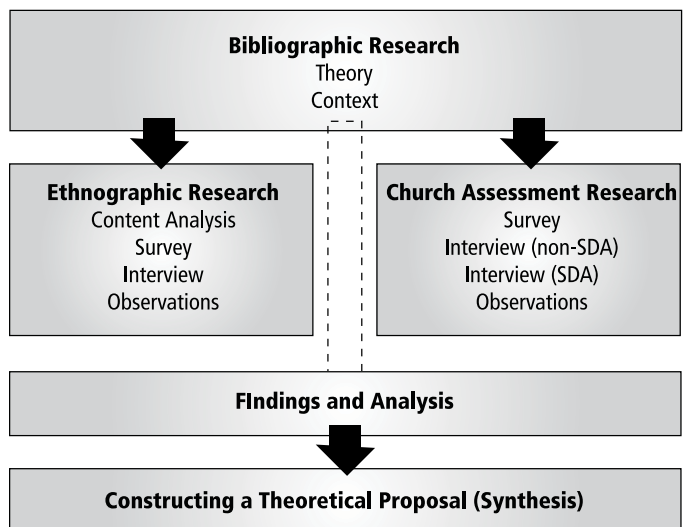
Thus began my doctoral research: a search for why the Czechs are the way they are. Why is it that historically, the Bohemians and Moravians were so religious (their search for truth led toward the rise of Hussites, Anabaptists, the Moravian movement, Czech Brethren, the Unitas Fratrum movement, etc.), and yet at the turn of the twenty-first century they claimed to be one of the most atheist nations?



**The map shows the Czech Republic in the heart of Europe, between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Politically, the Czechs have been considered Eastern Europeans; historically, however, they have leaned toward the West. The country has been rather small among surrounding larger and stronger countries (such as Germany and the former Soviet Union).**

A research method has been devised to understand the “religiosity” of the irreligious Czech people and to construct a theoretical proposal of how to reach those secular people (see methodology chart). The findings indicate the Czechs are not really atheists, as they like to claim, but overall the Czech Republic is a spiritually disoriented and wounded nation, which gave up on church and resists any authorities. Words like “church” and “God” are either avoided or used with caution. People admit they believe something, but they refuse to call it God. Surprisingly, the historical reformation mindset has remained part of the Czech worldview, and not surprisingly, this so-called atheism is only a result of it.

### Methodology for a PhD in Mission Dissertation Research



When my research phase of preparing for ministry ended, it only made sense to us to go back and become involved in missions. As my wife, three little children, and I returned to the Czech Republic in the fall of 2002, two years of prayer and vision-casting followed to get one SDA church person to pray with us and prepare for whatever God had in mind for us. We were meeting on a weekly basis, until in 2005 God providentially opened the door for launching a community outreach center right in the downtown area of Liberec (*top, page 49*).

When we prayed, we did not know exactly what kind of ministry would be appropriate for the outreach. But with the new facilities the idea was born to bring together all facets of life that were being separated by the new freedom of capitalism in the post-Communist society, such as the



**Downtown Liberec (arrow shows location of our center)**

younger and older, rich and poor, disabled and healthy, politicians and common citizens, etc., and so the Generations Center was born. We explored various ways of reaching people and developing a community. Our motto was soon formed: to “build healthy relationships, foster personal growth, and live better lives.”



**Generation Center's team in June 2012**

The following seven years (2006–2012) were filled with various outreach activities, working with children, youth and young adults, families, and seniors. Our center became a place where moms and dads were coming and spending time together with their children, where children were attending kindergarten, and various clubs, leisure activities, and programs were going on (English classes, art bees, interest clubs). During the first years, we were simply “salt,” loving people and mingling with them, building networks,

etc. Although we desired to talk more with people about God, to start a Bible class, for a long time there seemed to be no interest. When people got closer to us and learned we were Christians, whenever they trusted us enough to be open, they told us not to impose our beliefs on them, and asked us to give them the time they needed.



**Kindergarten program in Generations Center**



**Part of Generace Gospel Choir performing in Tebo, South Bohemia, in June 2012**

Generace Gospel Choir was born out of an adult English class early in 2007. Five mothers on maternity leave thought that singing songs in the style of the movie *Sister Act* was OK for them, and they started to invite their friends to sing along. Somehow, they embraced singing spiritual songs (particularly in English), although most of them claimed not to be religious. Over time, the group grew not only in number, but also close to each other. Now, people come each Wednesday, bring their children, sometimes spouses, and



spend time talking, then sing beautiful, heart-touching songs worshipping God, often without realizing it. From time to time, someone brings a “prayer” request, and then we sing a song thinking of this or that person. Although many of these singers are not yet ready to go to church or publicly study the Bible, they have their hearts open and are soaking up God’s love through other people, singing songs, kind words, and through prayers.



**One of the Gospel Choir baptisms, June 2012**

In 2008, a small group of believers gave birth to a church plant for those atheists who would eventually want to follow Jesus publicly. Early in 2009, God gave us the impression to pray more for those we were working with. Even some overseas prayer warriors “adopted” gospel singers to pray for. And then, the first gospel baptism came. Gospel singers were right there by the baptistery, singing “Take Me to the Water.” Since then, the number of baptisms continues to grow; we celebrate weddings; new babies are born; we honor birthdays and anniversaries; yes, we had also a funeral; and the gospel singers are always there to sing. Some of them joined recently, and some have been singing with us for three, four, five, or even six years already! We keep praying for them to give their heart to Jesus.

How long does it take? What can we do to make it happen? One never knows. On Sunday, December 16, 2012, our choir was supposed to sing in one little chapel. A few minutes before we were to go on stage, I asked the group to form a circle, holding each other’s hands to pray. I asked our heavenly Father to give us strong voices despite the cold weather, fill the chapel with his presence, touch the hearts of listeners, allow us as singers to be his channels,



**Summer family camp in July 2012 (mostly our “atheist” friends)**

and also take away stage fright, especially of those who would sing solos.

Then, we went off to sing. The concert went well. At one point, I made a mistake and switched the sequence of two songs. The conductor did not like it, but I told her to just sing the song I announced. At the end, the listeners were pleased, and gave money for our long-distance adopted girl studying in Bangladesh.

Later in the evening, Radka, a singer in her forties who sang a solo for the first time, sent an email, writing,

*My Dear, I am still “recovering” (in a good way). I give thanks for this beautiful experience of the whole concert, I give thanks for the trust you gave me, I thank to my daughter who was assuring me the whole weekend that I will sing the solo well (I had only very little faith but did not want to disappoint her) and I also thank God because nobody else could make me not to have almost any stage fright despite there were listening my closed relatives among the many listeners. I give thanks for the fact that you are and I can be among you.*

Because she repeatedly claimed she was not a believer, I asked her at the next rehearsal about her statement regarding God. She said it was the first time in her life that she had completely felt God. A month later, her singing friend revealed another interesting detail. In the middle of the concert, the organizers had announced that a car was parked incorrectly outside the chapel, and needed to be removed. One listener went out. At that time, the unwitting song switch happened. Well, for our soloist this was God’s miracle. Why? The person going out to move the car was her close relative, and the prop-

er song we were supposed to sing was her first solo. God made us switch the songs without giving it any significance. Through this mistake, God made himself known. When Radka sang her first solo, all her family was back in place and her usual nervousness was gone, a miracle that made God's existence evident for her.

Separate from the gospel singing, our Generations Center launched a campaign called National Marriage Week back in 2007. Many churches, nonprofits, and activists followed suit, and organized local events focused on a healthy marriage. It has become a nationally known campaign over the last six years, allowing us to organize press conferences in the senate, parliament, ministry of work and social affairs, and even in the government pressroom of the prime minister. Every year, national media pay attention and announce National Marriage Week in newspapers and news broadcasts. This campaign has recently spread into other countries, including the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Another area we wish to tell you more about is working with youth. After years of prayer for the youth work, about a year ago God raised up a group of young people (including our own children) who have been meeting every Sabbath on their own, worshipping God, and zealously reaching out to their unbelieving friends to bring them the Good News they embraced. Their music is different, their manners are different, but they love God and contagiously share faith with their peers.

One of the biotic principles indicating health is multiplication. It amazes me how that principle is applied even by those precious souls that are not churchgoers. One very active and sacrificially serving senior lady, Nina, who—with a grin on her face—still claims to be an atheist (her cousin was the first baptized gospel choir soul in 2009), decided to start her own choir just for seniors, though she is still part of our gospel choir. It did not take her long to mobilize twenty-some senior citizens, who started to meet every Monday (since October 2012) to rehearse songs they love to sing. Others have joined since then.

Nina is a good organizer, but she does not lead the choir in singing. So, she asked me to be their choirmaster, at least temporarily. Laughing, she warned me not to impose my religion on them. But the third time we met, when the singers were already tired of singing, Nina exclaimed, "So, Petr, come, tell them something about our Gospel." She meant the choir, but I knew it was an invitation to tell these people about how God cares for

and loves them, and that's what I told them (with the same grin on my face). Over the last four months, her choir and I came to love one another, and I strongly believe there are souls God is about to save.

There is not enough space to report on what's going on in the neighborhood and city as a result of the ministry being multiplied. It seems we are on a verge of a local movement with the potential to multiply and continue spreading.

## Conclusion

When considering mission as the main purpose of the church leading people to worship God, the value of continual research is priceless. The connection between research and application of research findings is particularly powerful. Understanding theology without understanding people appears narrow and limited. In our case, understanding the text led to researching worldview issues of specific people, and then to applying the findings. It did not stop there; the application then brought new insights into the understanding of scripture, and that deepened the understanding of the application's context. This spiral-like continual research has made all the difference.

What does it mean to follow Jesus, and what were the ways he related to people outside of "religion"? These questions have become a whole new issue after seven years of living among and working with the Czech atheists. Jesus not only listened to people and spoke to them; he understood their hearts. Thus, it became a lot easier for them to love and follow him. Today, there are serious attempts made to research and understand unreached groups in various corners of our globe, but what about the exponentially growing group of unreached secular people who are amidst us Western Christians, and yet live in a completely different world than us? How do we reach the unreached in a Christian society, or better said, in a post-Christian society? How far are we willing to go, and how long are we willing to take?

It is very difficult to reach people in a faraway place where they never heard about the God of the Bible, and do not have their own written language. But, it has become more and more obvious that it might be as difficult to reach the unreached in a society where there are hundreds of Christian denominations and numerous Bible translations, and only honest research leading to application can help us to see the differences among them.

Whenever mission-minded people want to reach out to

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people in a newly emerged segment of a society, quantitative or demographic research is good, but not enough. Is it possible to pay more attention to research of worldviews that would lead to more effective and culturally sensitive ways to win people for Christ? Research of secular unreached and in some ways "unreachable" people, tied to those who are also willing to explore applied and incarnational mission, is still missing.<sup>3</sup>

To do research in order to obtain information or enhance education is great, but is it enough? What if we advocate creating a forum to do transformational research that when communicated, would serve to motivate, involve, enable, encourage, and empower people to be more Jesus-like missionaries outside the church walls, outside our religion, amidst emerging communities? Research that allows for spontaneous multiplication of spiritual families, small companies, big companies, hubs, clubs, house or cell churches and/or new church plant movements, in which churches come to exist just so they can produce other community-based churches? ■

**Petr Činčala** holds MDiv and MSW degrees and a PhD in missions.



While he continues his lifelong passion for reaching the Czech people for Christ, he is currently in the process of being hired as the director for the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University.

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### References

1. There are number of books written on this topic. For more information, see [www.ncdnet.org](http://www.ncdnet.org).
2. See <http://www.nationalmarriageweekusa.org/>.
3. However, there are some great research resources with general ideas on how to do such ministry; Monte Sahlin's book *Mission in Metropolis: The Adventist Movement in an Urban World* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2007) is one good example.

**Note:** To view video clips of the Generace Gospel Choir, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBSvpoWPPUM> (the December 2012 concert) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GENZPGke3NA> (the December 2008 concert).



## A New Mission School Model: *How Adventist Colleges and Universities Can Thrive and Fulfill Their Mission in the Twenty-First Century* | BY DON WILLIAMS



Adapted from *Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education in North America: Theological Perspectives and Current Issues*, eds. Steve Pawluk and Gordon Bietz. Copyright(c) 2013 by Pacific Press Publishing Association. Used by permission of Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1350 North Kings Road, Nampa, ID 83687. Available soon at your Adventist Book Center.

*A man never goes so far as when he does not know whither he is going.*

—Eric Hoffer<sup>1</sup>

**D**uring the summer of 1992, my family and I moved to Florida to help start a new Adventist college of nursing and allied health. At that time, my daughter decided to move into the girls' dormitory at Indiana Academy, where she had been attending as a village student. My son moved with us to Orlando and enrolled as a sophomore at Forest Lake Academy.

Within a year, my daughter graduated and moved home

to start her freshman year at Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences, now Adventist University of Health Sciences (AUHS), where the tuition was free because of my faculty status. By the end of that school year, however, she decided to transfer to Southern Adventist University (SAU), where she could find a more traditional campus life.

That same year, my son began a journey that would first lead him away from Adventist education and, eventually, the church. By the fall of 1994, I found both of my children on educational trajectories different from the one I was helping to shape.

The reality of these distinct paths challenged my thinking about Adventist education. I was working at a school whose standing as a “real” Seventh-day Adventist institution was being questioned because of its low Seventh-day Adventist enrollment. My daughter’s successful transition to SAU forced me to ask whether its homogeneous, conservative atmosphere had captured what was

best in Adventist education. At the same time, my son's choices made me wonder whether there was a place for nontraditional, perhaps even nonbelieving, students in Seventh-day Adventist schools.

Seventeen years later, I'm still working at the same institution, and my children have continued on the paths they started years before. My quest for an answer about what constitutes genuine Adventist education has led me to this conviction: the church must provide philosophical frameworks that help institutions and individuals who do not fit the traditional mold. Fortunately, there is a well-known approach that can be adapted to meet this challenge.

### Development of Mission Schools

Most of us are aware of the Seventh-day Adventist schools around the globe whose enrollment, and perhaps even survival, depends on matriculating students who do not come from Seventh-day Adventist backgrounds. Through the years, church members have been supportive of those institutions with their tithe and mission offerings.

My first exposure to this type of school came in 1971, when my wife and I went to New Guinea as student missionaries. There, we found an educational system from primary school through college in which many, if not most, of the students came from animist homes. Later, we spent eight years working in the Far East. Most summers, I taught at the Seventh-day Adventist college in Singapore, where a significant number of the students were non-SDA. During one term, I even taught a class designed specifically to teach non-Christian students about Christianity. I also became friends with the chaplain at the Chinese Seventh-day Adventist high school, whose enrollment of church members' children never exceeded 5 percent of the total, and who baptized between thirty and forty students each year.

In each of these cases, institutions built on the mission school model proved to be the most effective evangelistic outreach in those countries. Years later, while manning the AUHS booth at a General Conference Session, I visited with a worker from New Guinea who shared that a number of members of Parliament and government leaders in his home country were Seventh-day Adventists. He attributed this to the mission schools scattered throughout the villages and towns across his nation.

Floyd Greenleaf, in his work *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education*, tells the story of the development of mission school education in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Solusi

is, for him, the model of the Seventh-day Adventist mission school. Started on a 12,000-acre gift from Cecil Rhodes, head of the British South Africa Company, Solusi became a center for the spread of the gospel in that part of Africa.<sup>3</sup> Converting, and then training, the future teachers of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa, Solusi developed a system of smaller outlying schools that, by the second decade of the twentieth century, enrolled over 3,000 students.<sup>4</sup> Solusi also became an Ellen White-approved model of when it was appropriate to accept government largess at an SDA educational institution.<sup>5</sup>

In India, as the Adventist work spread, so did the mission school concept.

*Similar to Adventist schools in Africa, the original purpose of Adventist schools [in India] was to convert students to Adventism rather than preserving Adventist children to the church—at first there were no Adventist children to preserve—but they also prepared workers. . . It was from the elementary and mission schools that the church realized membership gains.<sup>6</sup>*

In a country with strong Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Seventh-day Adventist education became a critical evangelistic tool. "As G.G. Lowry envisioned it, the mission school was the most important vehicle to carry the gospel to the Indian masses."<sup>7</sup>

Seventh-day Adventist education in China developed a more complex model. There, Fredrick Griggs envisioned four categories of institutions: "Schools for the children of missionaries and English members, training schools for nationals, elementary schools conducted by church members for native children, and mission schools for the public."<sup>8</sup> The approach was successful. By the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century, the Seventh-day Adventist educational system in China was the largest outside of the North American Division.<sup>9</sup>

The history of those mission schools belies the "one blueprint" misconception identified by George Knight in *Myths in Adventism*.<sup>10</sup> His contention is that there has never been a single blueprint for Adventist education. Quoting Ellen White concerning this, Knight says,

*Again in 1907 she wrote regarding the Madison School, which was doing its best to follow the "pattern" under Adventism's most zealous educational reformers, that "no exact picture can be given for the establishment of schools in new fields. The climate, the surroundings, the condition of the country, and the means at hand with which to work must all bear a part in shaping the work (CT, p. 531)."<sup>11</sup>*

Clearly, the Adventist church developed several models of education even in its earliest years. From the implementation of the classical model of education at Battle Creek College, to the establishment of the Avondale Model endorsed by Ellen White, to the establishment of the schools in Africa, India, and China, Adventist education adapted to fit the time, place, and needs of the surrounding population.

So, what does this all have to say to twenty-first century Seventh-day Adventist education in North America? Let us begin with some basic facts. The North American Division has fourteen colleges and universities ranging in size from small to medium, when compared with other private institutions of higher education. Their educational offerings fall into two broad categories, liberal arts and health professions. The makeup of their student bodies divide along these lines as well. The eleven liberal arts colleges cater largely to members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. The three health professions schools, Loma Linda University, Kettering College of Medical Arts, and Adventist University of Health Sciences, enroll students from within the church, as well as significant numbers from the larger community. The number of non-Seventh-day Adventist students in the former group of colleges ranges from 4 percent to 30 percent. The latter three institutions have enrollments of the same demographic, ranging from 50 percent to 90 percent.<sup>12</sup>

While the health sciences schools might seem to fit the mission school model, it would be inaccurate to give them that label. The traditional mission schools had certain aspects in common:

1. They were established in developing countries where the number of Adventists was low—too low, in most cases to support a school for the children of church members only.
2. Typically, the government educational system was nascent or non-existent.<sup>13</sup>
3. Other, more traditional, means of evangelism were challenging, at best.
4. Within the family and the culture at large,

education was seen as an important avenue to a better life.

5. While there were various times and places where the colonial link with mission endeavors were seen as a negative factor, in many cases the idea of a foreign-sponsored school had built-in appeal, especially to the elite.

While Loma Linda, Kettering, and Adventist University of Health Sciences do not share most of the above factors, they do share one central characteristic with the traditional mission school—they have reached beyond the church roles to define their circle of influence on a much broader scale. Because their parent medical institutions cannot conduct business with only the number of Adventist health care professionals available, each of these educational institutions has purposefully reached beyond the church for students, faculty, and staff. Depending on one's point of view, the result has been either a breach in the wall defending the denomination's youth, or an opportunity to impact the world for good.

### A New Model

To provide a framework to guide those institutions with a significant number of non-SDA students, I am proposing the New Mission School Model. It is an approach that addresses the contextual issues identified by Ellen White as critical in developing effective educational institutions—"the climate, the surroundings, the condition of the country, and the means at hand with which to work."<sup>14</sup>

The New Mission School Model provides a way of dealing with these factors in a principled, rather than a pragmatic, way. This model does not replace the original mission school model, which is still an effective educational and evangelistic approach in many parts of the world. Rather, it builds in a mission approach that will help them address the unique challenges faced by the growing number of non-SDA students, faculty, and staff.

A critical component of this model is based

**Adventist  
education  
adapted to  
fit the time,  
place, and  
needs of the  
surrounding  
population.**



upon the concept of the centered set. Centered sets and their converse, bounded sets, are sociological models that identify the organizing principles used to define group membership. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come* use the agricultural metaphor of wells and fences to illustrate their understanding of centered and bounded sets.<sup>15</sup> In their native Australia, water wells, rather than barbed wire fences, are used to control herds of livestock. Providing a source of water keeps the animals centered geographically. In America, ranches are more likely to use fences to corral their herds. The Australian way could be considered a centered set, and the American way a bounded one.<sup>16</sup>

And so it is with the church; if Christ is at the center, individuals are drawn to him as the source of living water (see John 3:14–15). Centered set institutions identify an individual's movement toward or away from Christ as the defining principle for "membership." In contrast, bounded sets have criteria such as doctrines or religious practices that help a church know who is in or out of their group.

Bruce Bauer, an Adventist missiologist, sees the centered set church placing Jesus at its heart.<sup>17</sup> While baptism (and therefore church membership) still plays an important role at the beginning of the Christian life, discipleship, with its goal of moving people toward the center, is the end. In contrast, he identifies three characteristics of bounded sets. One, they are created by "listing essential characteristics." Two, "objects inside

the set share [common] characteristics." And three, these sets identify who is either inside or outside of their boundaries.

The adoption of the centered set within an educational model has important implications. Institutions using this approach view their students not in terms of whether they are in or out of the church, but whether they want to move closer in their relationship with God.

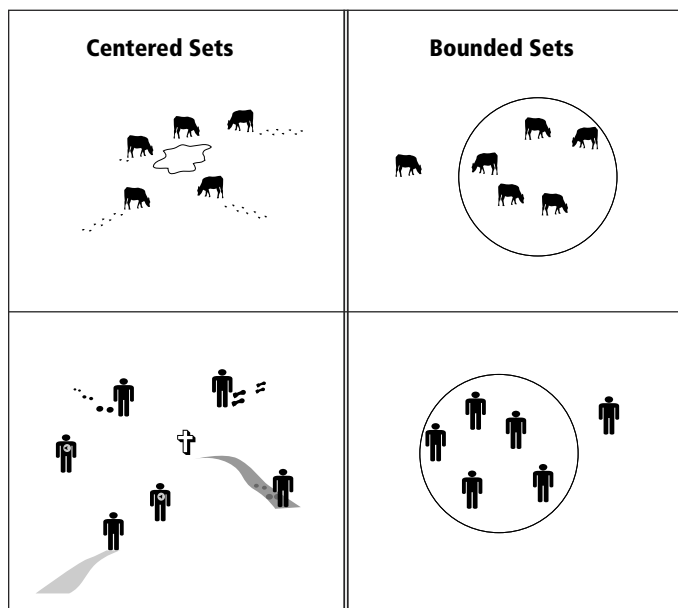
My experience at Adventist University of Health Sciences is indicative of what I know has happened many times at each of the health sciences schools. The opportunity to teach hundreds of non-Adventist students in the religion courses at AUHS has been one of the great joys of my life. When asked by church members whether I was teaching Adventist truths, I replied that I always taught the Bible from an Adventist perspective. The centered set approach brought in students who wanted an education in a faith-based environment, and did not preclude the teaching of Adventist doctrine. In fact, it ensured that the Christ-centered basis for each of these doctrines was what was being taught.

Thus, within the context of the New Mission School Model, students who are not members of the Seventh-day Adventist church should be considered part of the marketing mix. If an institution has made its faith orientation clear, any student interested in growing within that environment should be considered for admission. Both Loma Linda and Adventist University of Health Sciences have their statements of mission on their recommendation forms. Individuals asked to complete those forms are encouraged to give their feedback on whether that prospect is a good fit in light of the school's orientation.

The inclusion of these students can help schools fulfill their evangelistic mission.<sup>18</sup> When criticized by others for having a "mixed multitude" at Adventist University of Health Sciences, I always respond by asking which of those students would they not want sitting in Bible class. Many stories could be told of students who have never entered a church before, but who found Christ as a result of going to school in that environment. The AUHS student from Communist China who became a Christian, and the Hindu student who was baptized several years ago, quickly come to mind.

One might ask what the presence of this type of individual has on the institution's Adventist students. I believe institutions with this mix provide a healthy, real-world

### Centered and Bounded Sets



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[students']  
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environment for Seventh-day Adventist students preparing for their lives and careers. Rather than bringing distractions or temptations that they may not otherwise be exposed to, rubbing shoulders with peers of different persuasions can actually strengthen and clarify their own faith. Students who have grown up within the Adventist educational system are challenged to not only stake out their spiritual turf, but also explain it to others. A number of students I have worked with at Adventist University of Health Sciences have stated that this environment has helped make their faith real.

At the same time, this approach can help ensure the economic viability of institutions designed for the education of the church's children. Sadly, if the financial rationale for admitting non-Seventh-day Adventists is placed first, the mission/evangelistic goal may be watered down or missed altogether. However, kept in its appropriate place, the financial benefits can be significant.

This means that institutions using the New Mission School Model must be very purposeful in their mission emphasis. This is critical, not only for the success of this approach, but for the true success of the institution. For example, at AUHS each academic department has committed to having prayer and a devotional thought before each class period. Even online course chats begin with prayer requests and prayer. Sadly, in my undergraduate experience at another Seventh-day Adventist college, only the religion teachers regularly had prayer in class. In my major field of study, psychology, no attempt was made on the part of my professors to give me an Adventist, or even Christian, perspective in a very secular field. I tell myself that I should have figured it out on my own, but speaking as one who found Christ in college, I didn't know anyone who could guide me in the process. Perhaps my teachers assumed or presumed too much because of the homogeneous makeup of the student body.

With the presence of students from a wide variety of backgrounds in the health sciences

schools, no assumptions can be made about what the students already know or believe. In the New Mission School Model, no aspect of school life is left unaffected by the overall spiritual mission of the college. Every employee hired is screened for mission fit, not just for church affiliation. Every course is designed with the spiritual/moral/ethical development of the student in mind.

In reality, the New Mission School Model is a framework that can address what is already happening at all of our colleges and universities. As seen from the enrollment statistics stated previously, non-SDA students are already on our campuses, and in growing numbers. Many are in graduate and evening adult education programs. One institution is contemplating a partnership with the local community college. Others are opening programs in response to needs in their state, rather than just in their Adventist constituency.

It is not that the more traditional Seventh-day Adventist institutions don't care about the mission impact of these trends. They do. What I am concerned about is that, as a church, we have no model to guide the demographic changes taking place to ensure their fit to mission. Perhaps we have even been guilty of downplaying these changes because they have not been mission driven. In some cases, I fear we have slid into these trends and programs for financial reasons. Thus, spiritual opportunities may be missed and important services neglected. For example, what should the chaplain's office, student services or residence halls look like with a significant number of students coming from non-Adventist or non-Christian backgrounds?

What strikes me is that while some may recognize that there is more than one model operating in North America (e.g., Loma Linda), even this institution is frequently criticized sotto voce for not fitting the traditional model. In Floyd Greenleaf's (2005) comprehensive history of Adventist higher education, I find no mention of either Kettering or Adventist University of Health Sciences. Clearly, these institutions do

not meet what might be considered the traditional model or blueprint for Adventist higher education. A recent article on Seventh-day Adventist education in a church paper, in an area where one of the above institutions resides, did not mention the nontraditional college within its territory, while fairly extensive coverage was given to both the traditional institutions as well as the nontraditional high schools and homeschools.

I propose that, rather than ignore (as in the case of Kettering and Adventist University of Health Sciences) or criticize (as in the case of Loma Linda), the church should learn from the approaches these institutions are pioneering, and, where appropriate, embrace them. There is no doubt that seeking a heterogeneous environment presents significant challenges and that these institutions have fallen short many times of their own goals. However, in spite of the challenges, much good has been done by these schools, and lives have been changed which might not have been, were it not for their efforts.

An additional benefit of the New Mission School Model is that many students from SDA homes who are not choosing Adventist schools may give this type of education a second look. With a larger pool of applicants to choose from, these schools may be able to offer their education at a lower tuition level. A significant part of church growth in the North American Division in recent years has been coming from first-generation immigrant communities. These families may not have yet reached the median income levels found in the general population. Their children might be better able to afford this option.

Looking at the benefits from the perspective of the students who do not fit into a traditional Adventist environment, the New Mission School Model institution may provide an attractive option. With its centered set approach that looks at one's openness to spiritual matters rather than behavioral or doctrinal ones, this model may provide an attractive atmosphere for these nontraditional students. It is not that spirituality is a soft sell in this new model; it is simply presented in ways that may appeal to them.

## Caveats

Up until now, I have identified the benefits of the New Mission School Model. There are weaknesses and dangers inherent in it as well. One of the most obvious is the fact that parents send their children to Seventh-day Adventist colleges not only to find a career, but also to potentially

find a life partner. At a school where there are a significant number of students not of our faith, the odds increase that those students might fall in love with someone outside that circle.

With that reality in mind, several countervailing factors must also be noted. If this type of school is able to attract Adventist students who might have ended up at a public institution, they will at least have greater odds of meeting an Adventist mate in one of these schools than in the public sector.

Also, one of the realities of Adventist students living in this more diverse environment is that they have the potential of ending up with a stronger, clearer sense of their own spiritual values. As a result, I believe those solidified spiritual values will help them choose mates with greater discernment. For example, while the single Seventh-day Adventist students at AUHS have individuals from many faith backgrounds to choose a mate from, to my knowledge (and this is certainly not a scientific study), I am not aware of one Seventh-day Adventist student at AUHS who has married outside their faith as a result of attending AUHS. While that does not mean it won't happen, it does indicate the risk of poor choices may not be as high as feared.

A concern often expressed by the church organization is the creeping compromise that, it is assumed, will accompany the trend of accepting more non-SDA students. There is no doubt that this is a possibility if this direction is chosen for the wrong reason or without a clear mission in mind. That has not been the case with the traditional mission schools when they have stayed true to their mission mentality.

The works of two men are often cited when raising this concern: Philip Marsden's study of the drift to secularism in the Ivy League schools in *The Soul of the American University*,<sup>19</sup> and James Burtchaell's similar study of smaller denominationally related schools in his work *The Dying of the Light*.<sup>20</sup> Both authors document the drift away from spiritual mission and denominational orientation by many well-known and respected schools such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Duke, and Wake Forest. Their analysis should act as a cautionary tale for Seventh-day Adventist education. The factors identified by these authors as leading these institutions toward secularism are as follows:

1. Weak or tangential denominational linkage from the beginning of the school
2. Spiritual matters relegated to the religion department or the service sectors on campus



3. A clear identification by the faculty with larger trends in society, such as evolution in the sciences and postmodernism in the humanities
4. A decline and disappearance of financial and leadership support from the founding denomination
5. A desire to be open and tolerant of all points of view—  
a movement away from the truths and absolutes identifiable at the founding of these institutions

The trends identified by these authors are real and must be addressed, but they are not inevitable. For example, there is a difference between intellectual drift toward a particular position (or for that matter away from one), and a well-thought-out decision to take a particular position and provide the support to make it happen. In the case of the New Mission School Model, a conscious choice is made to diversify the student body. That need not mean a corresponding watering down of beliefs or mission. In fact, as stated earlier, it may mean a more intentional mission, and more clearly chosen theological positions.

I believe that there is an important distinction between a drift or slide and a carefully embraced approach to Christian education. One may not agree with those choices, but the fact that they are well thought-out and have a clear basis in mission can make a big difference in the final outcome.

A related issue is that of hiring faculty members who are not members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Does the embracing of the New Mission School Model result in a corresponding increase in the number of teachers who are not Adventist? Not necessarily. With the three health care institutions, it would appear to be the case. These schools not only have the highest percentage of non-Adventist students, but they also have the highest number of non-SDA teachers. According to the *World Report 2007*, the percentage of non-SDA teachers

at these three schools was as follows: Loma Linda—35 percent, Adventist University of Health Sciences—40 percent, and Kettering—69 percent. The percentage for the liberal arts institutions ranges from almost nil to 17.5 percent.<sup>21</sup>

Since mission is lived out by faculty members (and staff as well), does the presence of those who may not embrace all of the fundamental tenets of the Seventh-day Adventist church inhibit the accomplishment of that mission? Though Robert Andringa identifies a strong president as one of three recommended best practices for Christian colleges, he also says that, “if a campus wants to position itself as a distinctly religious institution, one key is to hire faculty who see faith not just as a private matter but as one central to the development of the whole person.”<sup>22, 23</sup>

Both Burtchaell and Marsden attribute the drift in the schools they studied at least in part to the hiring of faculty with different spiritual values and beliefs. Burtchaell states,

*Whatever presidents and trustees do, whatever be the market forces imposed by those who pay (students and benefactors), the inertial force of these institutions is in their faculties. And in our saga, the faculty was the first constituency to lose interest in their colleges being Lutheran or Catholic or Congregational. The faculty shifted from clerical to lay status before the presidency did. The faculty resided farther from their students [colonial institutions had students living with faculty], became dissociated from responsibility for their moral discipline and from partnership in their piety.<sup>24</sup>*

In his “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” Marsden addresses this issue in particular for the liberal Protestant institutions he was studying.

*Throughout the first sixty years of the twentieth century, as prevailing intellectual ideals became less friendly to religious concerns and the dominance of the mainline Protestant ethos receded, Protestant leaders became increasingly uneasy with this original arrangement [the exclusion of religion from the core business of their universities]. They realized that in academic life itself it favored purely naturalistic and materialistic worldviews. In response, they added campus ministries, schools of religion, chaplains,*

**Institutions  
using the  
New Mission  
School  
Model must  
be very  
purposeful  
in their  
mission  
emphasis.**

*impressive chapel buildings, student programs, and literature to promote religious concerns. They had limited success, however, in challenging the original definitions of academic life, and with the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, such efforts declined as well. Academic life remained a haven largely freed from religious perspectives.*<sup>25</sup>

In thinking about this issue, several factors must be taken into account before any conclusions can be reached. The first is that membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church does not guarantee either doctrinal buy-in or spiritual commitment. A look at the history of any of the institutions of higher education in the NAD reveals action on the part of administration to reform or remove Seventh-day Adventist faculty members who do not meet institutional spiritual bona fides. Certainly, the movement on the part of the General Conference to institute the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education attests to these concerns relative to faculty in the religion departments. And there has been informal discussion at various levels within the church as to whether a statement of faith in young earth creationism on the part of science teachers is also warranted.

Another factor to consider is the challenge that the health professions schools face in recruiting and retaining Adventist faculty. Even when there is a preference for Seventh-day Adventist educators, if a position comes open in a professional program and no Adventist accepts, should the school close down the program? Large programs such as nursing present less of a problem than allied health, but even if there is a policy to search for Adventists first, I'm sure that each of the three schools in North America have had to make strategic choices to get the best candidate available.

Since faculty members play such a critical role in mission, there are several strategies used by Seventh-day Adventist health care institutions and the schools they run. One, hire a Seventh-day Adventist first if he or she is qualified. Two, keep Seventh-day Adventists in institutional leadership positions. Three, core areas of mission delivery must have qualified Seventh-day Adventists or no one. Four, no matter who is hired for whatever position, the institution should never compromise on mission. Each person hired at AUHS is interviewed by the president for mission fit.

Would the ideal be to have a faculty of academically qualified, Seventh-day Adventist teachers? Perhaps. But there are two problems with that. One, some employees from other faiths may have as much or more of a commit-

ment to the Christ-centered approach we are striving for. It was a non-SDA faculty member who proposed the pre-chat prayer sessions for our online classes. Two, it is unlikely to happen at the health science schools for the reasons stated above.

In fact, as counterintuitive as it may seem to some, the presence of non-Adventist teachers keeps us from falling into the trap of assuming we are all on the same page when, in fact, we almost never are. That has benefits for both employees and students.

One of the trends identified by Marsden is the influence of fundamentalism on the devolution of the institutions he studied.<sup>26</sup> As a reaction to biblical higher criticism and evolution during the early part of the twentieth century, the fundamentalist movement played a major role in driving a wedge between the denominations and the educational institutions they had founded.

There appears to be a similar trend taking place in Adventism today. The development of Weimar and Heartland a generation ago, and the more recent development of the ministerial training centers such as the Black Hills Health and Education Center, are an indication of the split between the traditional colleges and universities within Adventism and those members who believe the drift mentioned above has already taken place. These feelings are strong enough that some conferences are reluctant to hire ministerial graduates unless they have come from either Southern Adventist University or the Black Hills Health and Education Center. Several years ago, the academic deans at two Seventh-day Adventist colleges reported at a meeting of the Association of Adventist Academic Administrators that they each had only one ministerial graduate hired as pastors by the local conferences. At the same time, a number of those completing a ministerial program at self-supporting ministerial institutes had been hired as pastors in the same conferences.

What does this trend have to do with the New Mission School Model? First of all, it is a recognition that there is in fact more than one blueprint for Adventist education already operating in the North American Division. Second, the needs of a wide variety of homes and students must be met, and the traditional campuses may not be able to be all things to all people. Third, in their own way, and from a more fundamentalist approach, these new institutions are as sincere in their attempt to accomplish mission-driven goals as are Loma Linda and Adventist University of

Health Sciences. I believe the church is a healthier place not only for having this wide variety of institutions, but also because the competition/dialogue among these entities will make all of them stronger. As in the case of my daughter, not all institutions will be a good fit for all students. Options should be available so students can choose.

## Conclusion

The New Mission School Model with the centered set paradigm provides a philosophical framework for recruiting students from outside the fold, and growing them spiritually in ways that are consistent with the overarching purpose for Adventist education. While there are challenges inherent in the model, I believe the benefits outweigh the potential harm.

Does Adventism need another model of higher education? I believe one is needed. The downward trend in enrollment, the increased number of students from other faiths at our institutions of higher education, and the fundamentalist divide all demand we look at education in new ways. ■

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**There is an important distinction between a drift or slide and a carefully embraced approach to Christian education.**



**Mugging** → continued from page 7...

the light.

Again, he opened the door and put one foot on the ground.

“Okay. I’ve got one foot out. Now give me the money.”

I shook my head. “Not till you are all out and shut the door.”

“You’ll floor it and take off! You’ll call the cops!”

I shook my head again and leaned forward. “You forgot. *We don’t lie!* And we won’t call the cops. But there’s one thing you’re going to have to watch out for. We turned you over to God tonight. He’s going to be after you until he catches you. He loves you and wants you in heaven. He’s better than cops.”

Leaning toward him as he half-exited the car, Sherri chimed in.

“Yeah, God’s going to do something in your life. Watch for it *this* week. He’ll intervene in your life somehow. You’re going to be all right.”

He sighed, and leaped out of the car.

George held the money out the window at arm’s length.

He hesitated, shut the door, snatched the money, and then grabbed George’s hand and uncovered his face.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted, “and I’ll try to make restitution somehow. I promise I won’t do this again. You’re good people.”

And with that, he turned and ran back up the access road—we think. None of us looked to see where he’d gone! We just drove off.

We hadn’t gone two blocks before Sherri said, “Oh no! Daneen and Stephen might still be at the theater. He might get back there and hold them up—and they have the offering from both showings in a big popcorn bucket. I have to warn them!” She dialed Daneen’s number. We had all

been so calm during the holdup, but now Sherri’s hand shook so hard that she could barely hold the phone to her ear. To her relief, Daneen reported that they were in the car on their way home. Sherri told her what had just happened.

“No!” Daneen exclaimed. “We came out of the theater right after you. It’s a good thing he wasn’t standing there, then, because someone asked how much we’d gotten in offerings, and a student called out, ‘\$980! Isn’t that great?’ After Stephen and I said good-night, we made our way to the rental car, which we’d parked on the far edge of the lot in the dark. If that guy hadn’t gone with you, we’d have lost all the offering! I’m so thankful you weren’t hurt. This is terrible!”

True to our promise, we didn’t call the police. But the faculty member who had rented the viewing site did inform the theater manager that someone had been mugged, and he should request police protection for his patrons after midnight.

Back at the hotel, we read Psalm 91 and thanked God for guardian angels. In trying to process the whole thing, we puzzled over why all three of us felt we should pick up this fellow—although it was 12:45 a.m. in a notoriously high-crime town.

“I think God struck us stupid,” Sherri concluded. “He wanted to intervene in that young man’s life and protect the movie money. It’s kind of like the sixty dollars he took was insurance on the \$980! If you’d told him no when he asked for a ride, he’d either have pulled the gun on us then, or robbed Stephen and Daneen when they came out a few minutes later. They were young and fit and more of a threat, and if he had overheard the amount of

money they had, the stakes would have been higher, and they could have been hurt badly.

“Two old people and a woman had looked like an easy mark. He just hadn’t counted on a car full of angels! As soon as he told us to turn away from McDonald’s, I made a plan. I thought if he did anything strange, I’d throw out my left arm and karate chop him across the face and follow it with a right punch. But when he said it was a holdup, God just filled me with love for the guy. We’d been talking all evening about God loving everyone, and I guess God gave me a glimpse of what it’s like to look through his eyes.”

Since then, we’ve been praying for the young robber, asking God to turn his life around. We can hardly wait for heaven to hear the rest of the story. ■

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# Reflections on *Naked Spirituality: A Life With God in 12 Simple Words* | BY BRENTON READING

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**W**hen I realized my little girl would be developmentally delayed, I was devastated. Not knowing the severity of her delay, but recognizing signs hinting at the worst, the looming challenges and vanishing dreams threatened to erase hope and strip away faith. In the midst of this crisis, I was gratefully reading Brian McLaren's *Naked Spirituality: A Life With God in 12 Simple Words*.<sup>1</sup>

By chance or perhaps providence, my slow savoring of each page meant I was just turning to Part III, *Perplexity: The Season of Spiritual Surviving*. Recalling the initial seasons of faith and the first few of the twelve simple words McLaren uses to frame each chapter, I recognized my own seemingly fatal arc of faith. As McLaren describes it,

*If faith shoots up in the springtime of Simplicity, and if it branches out and grows robust in the summer of Complexity, it appears to fade and fall like leaves in the autumn of Perplexity. It falters in the impatient when of aspiration, and then it falls to pieces in the no of rage. The furious no of raging prayer leaves one spent, exhausted... and strangely quiet. And in that quiet, in that bush and stillness of exhaustion, a subtle turning occurs, a turn from no to something beyond it. It's the beginning of a kind of surrender, in a way. We say, "Okay. Life hasn't gone my way. My expectations are shattered. I have no mastery, no control. Why must it be this way?"<sup>2</sup>*

Turning from "No!" to "Why?" my own visceral groan transcended the unknown and split the darkness, revealing a glimmer of light on the



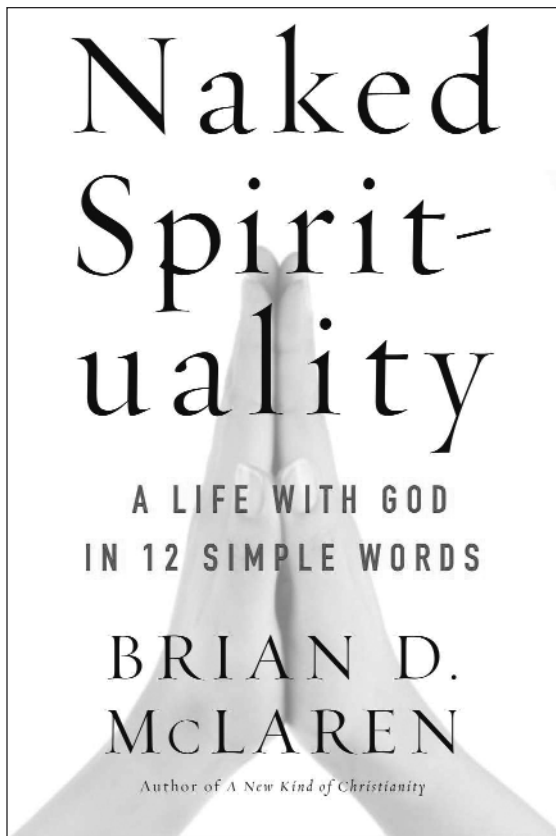
Brian McLaren

horizon. It dawned on me that the dark void was not the end of faith, but a temporary space with potential for divine renewal.

The dawn cast life's dark moments in new light. Rather than looking back with gratefulness that I never slipped down one of many proverbial slopes into spiritual oblivion, I realized I had already slipped headlong into valleys of the shadow of death, and yet I need fear no evil because when I make my bed in the depths, even there God's hand will guide me. The slippery slope of questioning a 6,000-year-old earth did inevitably lead to a sense of utter loss, with more and more questions on the scientific and historic interpretations of other parts of scripture. Listening to the faithful stories of those from other religions and orientations did cause grace to grow wild with the hope of universal redemption. But, each

**Just as  
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is similar.**

The dark void was not the end of faith, but a temporary space with potential for divine renewal.



falling away from the wide and familiar path of faith opened space to discover a narrow way winding to new dawns and breathtaking perspectives on once-familiar vistas.

Perhaps you share my initial concern that describing stages of faith will create a spiritual hierarchy allowing those at higher stages to gaze sympathetically on others blissfully ignorant at lower stages. However, McLaren makes clear not only that each stage of faith is filled with beauty and promise all its own, but that arrival is never the point. Rather, just as creation is cyclical, spirituality is similar. The ever-changing journey of faith opens the possibility for circling back to know each familiar place again, as if for the first time. No matter where readers are on their faith journey, they will find in this book affirmation for the present and courage for the future.

At times, I wished McLaren had taken a more communal view of faith. In some places, I wondered if the words obscured rather than revealed truth. Yet the progression in the book spoke to my deep personal need, and I was

reassured to find that the last word is not even spoken but an ellipsis...of silence.

My daughter is now two years old. She walks and even communicates in her own way. She's not where my boys are, even when they were her age. When I come home, she doesn't scream, "Daddy!" and throw herself into my arms as the boys still sometimes do. Instead, when she realizes I am home she glances coyly over her shoulder and claps her hands for more. I knowingly ask, "More tickle?" With that, she buries her head between her toes, waiting for my fingers to release squeals of laughter.

I don't know what the next stage of life holds for her or me; but, I do know that while this stage is not perfect it is very good. And, just as the twelve simple words in McLaren's book lead to one word which enfolds them all, there is one word which claps its hands for more, fills each stage with meaning, and drives out all fear...love. ■

**Brenton Reading** is a pediatric interventional radiologist



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# Angel Song

By John McDowell



I WEEP WITH YOU THIS HOUR BY JOHN MCDOWELL - CAST ALUMINUM AND ENCOUSTIC.

*"How we are enlarged by what estranges"*

—Richard Wilbur

Night after night, I wax and wane, pour  
all that I love into bowls silver-lighted along your  
windowsill. I watch you bend  
over, reach, touch each.  
A jeweller intent—setting wheels  
into gears with rubies.

Music for the eye to remember in the morning when you rise  
open the door to the garden and say,  
*The leaves have gone now.*  
*Only the Small-leafed Southern Maples*  
*bold the last red.*

I know everything we touch burns away. Yet  
we give ourselves again and again.

Is it enough that in the end our two shadows  
both silvered in the light we share  
stand thus on the red edge of the world?



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**John McDowell** is a poet, artist, and professor, and the dean of arts at Canadian University College. His poetry and photography have been featured on past *Spectrum* covers, and his essays have appeared in the journal.