

Rowboat or Kayak? | BY CHRIS BLAKE

Imagine you are on a pristine Alaskan lake, as I was this past summer, and you're in a rowboat. As you row, you pull past magnificent scenery—snow-capped peaks and cascading waterfalls, roaming blond grizzlies and soaring bald eagles. The entire time, you are looking backward to what you have passed. You may look over your shoulder briefly to correct course, to look ahead. But you're not going to do it that much. After all, you're in a rowboat.¹

Now, imagine you are in a kayak. You paddle forward, enjoying the same scenery, but looking ahead to what's coming, finding it easy to steer toward your destination. After all, you're in a kayak.

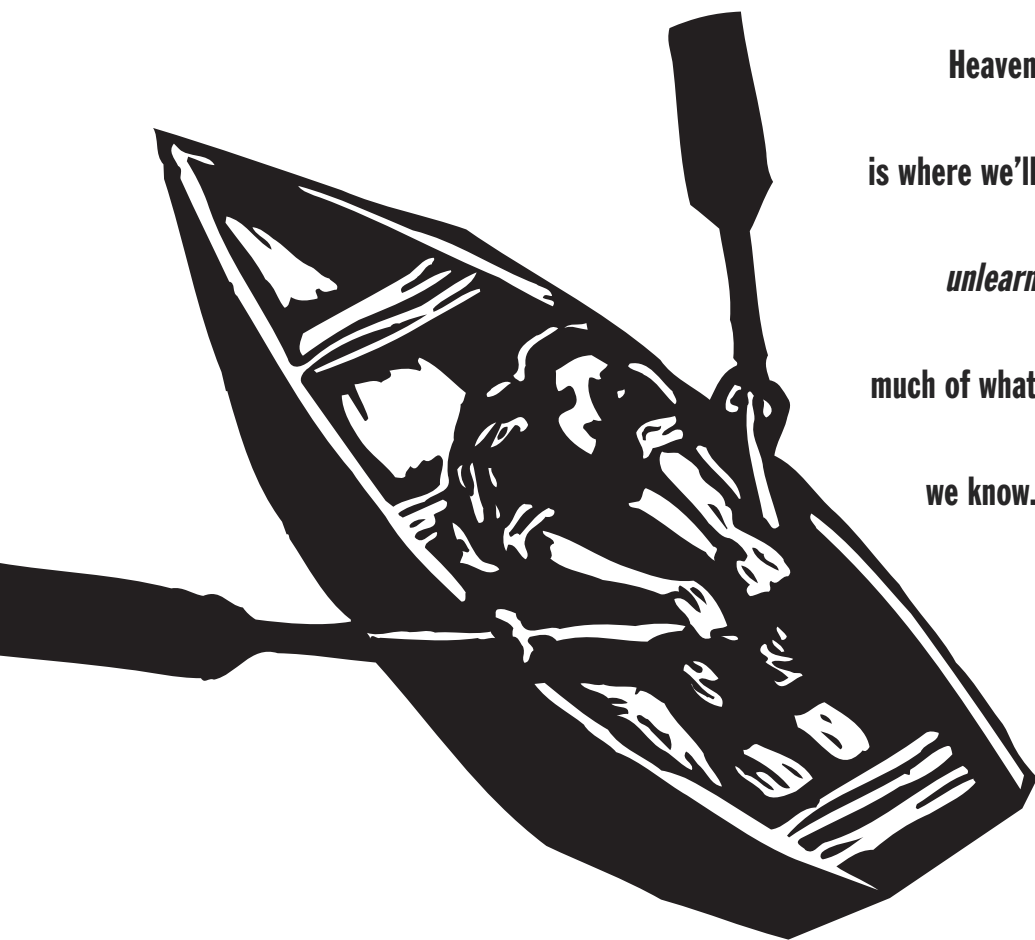
The Adventist Church has been traveling in a rowboat most of its existence, as has every other Christian denomination. Of the three primary existential questions—"Where did we come from?" "Who are we?" and "Where are we headed?"—Adventism has spent incalculable energy on "Where did we come from?" We talk about and write about origins, we gather people from around the world for "Faith and Science" conferences that nearly always are about Genesis—the beginning. *What happened there, exactly?*

But how much do we think and write and argue about life's goal, life's purpose, life's unending ending? As Stephen Covey wrote, "Begin with the end in mind."

To be clear, I find history and archeology—what Larry Geraty does so nobly and well—to be fascinating and essential. The problem is one of degree. *Must our direction be always looking back?* At present, the ratio in favor of the time we spend on origins versus the future is at least 99:1—which may be one reason so many become weary and wary when the topic of origins arises.

I became an Adventist convert at the tender age of 24. What kept me from becoming a Christian were primarily the three Hs: hypocrites, hell, and heaven. I didn't wish to traffic with any of them. Later, though, I took another look. In particular I became intrigued by the Adventist version of hell and of heaven. According to Revelation 21:

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SHUTTERSTOCK

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea [the author's prison] was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."¹²

In the history of humankind, are those not the most beautiful, most hopeful words ever written?

Unfortunately, we've allowed discussion of endings to be sensationalized, truncated, and absurdly depicted. Armageddon scenarios of horrific destruction or tales of raptured escapism regress to images of the saved strumming harps on cumulous couches.

Actually, I don't want people to talk more about heaven. Heaven is freshman orientation. Nobody spends years preparing for and talk-

ing about freshman orientation. Heaven is a celestial boot camp to get us ready for our true home—the new earth. Heaven is where we'll unlearn much of what we know, to be retrofitted for an eternal community.

We don't leave here and go home to heaven. We leave heaven and come home to the new earth. The difference is infinite, as much as is looking backward and looking ahead.

I want people to talk more about the new earth. In particular, here are two quick considerations.

First, universal laws will remain in effect. We must adjust to the universe. Otherwise we fall prey to the sort of self-indulgent, solipsistic nonsense spouted by Last Generation Theology. If there's one thing we should have learned on this old earth, it's that universal laws remain in effect even if we're a "believer." If you jump off a bridge and land on your head, you will die. Also, if you jump off a bridge and land on someone else, they will die.

We have discovered that consciousness is somehow linked to the behavior of the quantum world. Even our thoughts affect others. Moreover, gravity, naturally, will still be in place. (Once I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Gravity sucks.") But as we find the Gospels describing Jesus in His resurrected body, we will also have

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exquisite traveling visas.

The new earth is a mystery, but a mystery isn’t something we know nothing about. A mystery is something we don’t know everything about. Jesus Himself said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.”³

That’s why on the new earth the universal laws of relationships will apply. In an eternal community we will need to forgive, accept, and share—just as God does with us. This is more than “a sense of community.” I don’t want a sense of community—I want actual community. On the new earth I believe we will be more similar and more different from one another because we’ll be free to forever pursue our interests. But the new earth motto will be, “I like you *because you’re different.*” Of course, that should be our motto now. God isn’t just making up this grace stuff; we’ll need to use it forever. Grace is as much a universal law as is gravity.

The documentary film *I Am* points out that when Charles Darwin wrote in 1871 *The Descent of Man*, he wrote the phrase “survival of the fittest” twice—95 times he wrote “love.” What we have, realistically, is the ability to take care of others. Sympathy is the strongest instinct. That’s why a wildebeest knocks a predator cheetah off a fallen wildebeest.

However, humans deviate from that instinct. In the human body, when something takes more than it needs, we call that “cancer.” In the United States we call it “capitalism.”

Second, what we practice now matters. Many years ago, my father watched from the sidelines while I shot baskets in an empty gym. I was feeling lazy, enjoying the echoing thud of my dribble and the squeals from my shoes, and I began carelessly, haphazardly

flinging the ball at the hoop.

My father, a superb basketball coach, observed a few moments before giving me advice that left a lasting impression. “Don’t practice missing,” he said. “You might get good at it.”

As human beings we practice missing far too often. For example, environmentalism and peacekeeping matter infinitely. This is our home—it’s not in the end a disposable planet. Adventist Christians ought to be the best environmentalist peacekeepers on the planet. All of the world’s religions carry a circular motif, following the seasons, from birth to death to rebirth. We call it Eden to Eden. The poet Arundhati Roy writes:

*Another world is not only possible, she’s on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.*⁴

Practicing creativity and good humor and courage matter infinitely. The question is, *Who would you want to live next door to forever?* In her interview in *The Paris Review*, author Marilynne Robinson comments, “There’s no reason to imagine that God would choose to surround Himself into infinite time with people whose only distinction is that they fail to transgress.”⁵

When the Association of Adventist Forums conference met in Chicago in 2011, I led a discussion of what the new earth could be like. We divided out tables into these topics: new earth theology; new earth social sciences (education, history, law, sociology); new earth business and technology; new earth sexuality (that was a popular one); new earth life sciences (biology, ecology, physiology); new

earth rhetoric and communication; new earth physical sciences; and new earth music, art, literature, and drama. For example, all drama on earth is based in conflict. No one goes to see the film *The Village of the Happy People*. How will drama play out on the new earth?

One participant, who has written extensively on origins, growled to me, “So you want us to guess, is that it?”

I wanted to say, “Yes, just as we guess in discussing origins. However, that discussion has had the benefit of centuries of discourse.” Fortunately, I kept my mouth shut.

The discussion in Chicago was lively, and spokespeople reported on each table’s conversation. Here’s one sample from the visioning report on new earth rhetoric and communication:

“More poetry—things said in beautiful ways. Theater, musicals, oratorios. (No more PowerPoint.)”

“Delightfully passionate descriptions of new experiences as children first experience them.”

“We’ll understand each other more deeply and fully.”

“At last we will have the time and freedom to explore a topic without limit—and to share that.”

“We’ll understand the animals, even minute ones.”

“Allen: ‘Sometimes the universe will fall silent as I tell them my experience.’ Jack: ‘Out of pure sympathy!’”

“No cell phones at the table! No ear cell phones anywhere north of hell!”

When talk turns to dogmatic and increasingly creedal views about evolution, we can flip the conversation. We can turn around in our linguistic vessels. Two of the most winsome words in the English language are, “What if.” Try asking how we will become fit for the evolution of new earth. Really, what will it be like? What does a new earth person look like today?

One reason young adults flee Adventism is they believe everything has already been worked out. They yearn to forge their own paths. They understand the adage, “If you’re not the lead dog, the view never changes.”

Providentially, a stimulating new horizon stretches ahead.

In his poem “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot wrote,

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*⁶

Rowboat or kayak? My hope is that we’ll climb into conversational kayaks to start looking *beyond* Revelation. That we’ll explore the mysteries of life as it will be, as it was meant to be. That we’ll dedicate, say, 25 percent of our discussion to the new earth. That leaves 75 percent for origins—a 3:1 ratio instead of 99:1. Fair enough?

The future lies in front of us, after all. ■

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numerous national awards for writing and editing and is the author of hundreds of published articles and many books, including *Searching for a God to Love* and *Swimming Against the Current*.

Footnotes

1. This article was originally presented as a talk at the Association of Adventist Forums annual conference, San Diego, California, October 5, 2014.

2. Revelation 21:1–5. All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

3. Matthew 13:11.

4. Arundhati Roy, “Come September,” transcript of a speech given at Lensic Performing Arts Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 29, 2002.

5. Sarah Fay, “Interviews: Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198,” *The Paris Review*, Fall 2008, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5863/the-art-of-fiction-no-198-marilynne-robinson>.

6. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 145.

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