
Paper
GOD

Chapter 1

Restless

Seven years and seven months ago, I was spinning restlessly in my office chair. Back and forth I spun.

Shortly, I'd be heading down two flights of stairs to teach the class that every college student takes—freshman composition. My lesson plan lay on my desk; it was the same as last year's. Once you've taught a class such as composition, you're pretty much set. You stand at your lectern, smiling politely as your students file into class, a few of them slowing for a quick question: Did I use this comma correctly here? How long should our essays be again? Then you wait for everyone's attention. OK, you say, let's hear your topics for your descriptive piece. Lauren, we'll start with you. What did you decide is your favorite place in the world?

I spun some more. Then I stopped, unable to escape the truth: I was bored.

This was only my second year as a college professor, and already I was losing interest. I thought I'd done the good family thing here. At the age of twenty-eight I'd left behind a hectic but stimulating editorial job outside Washington, D.C., to take a job teaching English and Communication at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. I wanted a safe, affordable place for Cindy and me to raise our two little girls, Ally and Morgan. And I thought that my new schedule would be great for our family: flexible days, holiday breaks, and summers off.

And my schedule was great. Most days I'd come home to eat lunch with Cindy and the girls and hear that morning's big news: a cocoon they'd found,

or a new friend they'd met down the street. The other day I'd walked in to see Cindy mockingly pounding her head against the kitchen wall, laughing hysterically.

I'm such a total idiot! she said.

What happened? I asked.

Cindy said that she'd just left a phone message with Pam, a woman in town who had offered us a free kitten. For the past few days, Cindy had been debating whether we should accept the kitten. The girls were only three and one, and Cindy already felt as if she were herding cats. After carefully considering it—even praying about it—Cindy decided it just wasn't the right time for a kitten.

So I call Pam, Cindy said, and leave a message. I say, Hi, Pam, this is Cindy Nash. I'm just calling to thank you for the offer of a free kitten. We really thought long and hard about this, but with the girls still so young, I just decided that I'm not up to a kitten right now. I really hope that you can find a good home for the kitten. In Jesus' name, amen.

I laughed. You really said that? I asked. In Jesus' name, amen?

Yes! Cindy screamed. How could I do that?

So then what did you do?

Well, I just paused a second, and then I said, Um, this is still Cindy here. I'm not sure why I just said in Jesus' name, amen. But I hope you find a good home for the kitten. Bye.

She fell against me, laughing. This was classic Cindy—the girl I'd fallen in love with so quickly when she'd suddenly appeared, a new nursing student, my senior year of college. So beautiful and so real. I loved that I had married her, loved how she loved our girls, and loved our life together. I couldn't have planned it any better.

The only thing I hadn't planned was how I was feeling at work—how teaching left me empty. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy my students. I liked them a lot, and apparently they liked me too. I just didn't like repeating the same material over and over.

Earlier in the semester I talked with one of my colleagues, Chris Blake, over lunch, about the sinking feeling that I was in the wrong field.

Don't you get bored teaching the same material year after year? I asked.

I don't teach material, Chris said. I teach people.

Yes, of course. What Chris said made sense. Intellectually, I recognized the distinction right away. When you teach people, the experience is always

new. People are always different, so the experience is always different. This was a helpful perspective, and I hoped that it would work for me.

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OK, Nancy, let's move on to you. Tell us about your favorite place.

Nancy's favorite place in the world is sitting on the roof of her barn back home. She's especially nostalgic for her barn, since she's away from home for the first time. Nancy's barn is a great topic really—much different from the usual favorite places students list off: Grandma's kitchen, an amusement park, their room. The roof of a barn is a cool idea for a favorite place in the world.

OK, I say, what specifically do you enjoy about sitting on the roof of your barn? I'm trying to help Nancy develop her supporting ideas.

Well, she says, it's just so quiet up there, and I have a chance to think.

OK, good, so one of your points is the quiet—the solitude. No noise, right? No TV, no traffic, no teachers asking about topics. We laugh.

I do get pleasure in these moments. They flicker like the evening fireflies at Nancy's barn. For brief moments I'm happy, but they never last. I don't want to feel this way, but I do. How can you keep yourself from waking up in the morning with the lingering sense that you're just not happy? How can you make that go away?

I heard once that each of us looks for fulfillment in one of three areas.

Some of us look to possessions—what we have.

Others of us look to people—relationships, socializing, and popularity.

Still others look to performance—what we accomplish.

That was definitely me: fulfillment through performance. I viewed my performance as an extension of myself. If I were working on a project, that project became part of me. In fact, I cared more what people thought of my work than what people thought of me. My work was me.

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I looked at my watch—still plenty of time before class. I reached for the Bible on my desk and spun my chair to my outside window. Since the start of the school year, I had been reading through the book of John, and today I was on the final chapter, John 21. I knew this story well.

After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Peter and the other disciples had returned to the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, where Peter had lived and worked as a fisherman for most of his life. Unexpectedly, Jesus met them there, miraculously filling their empty nets, just as He'd done three years earlier. As the nets burst with fish, Jesus told the disciples to bring some of their catch to shore—where He already had breakfast cooking. Jesus then looked at Peter and asked a very direct question: "Do you truly love me more than these?" (John 21:15).

"Yes," Peter responded. But Jesus wasn't done. Twice more He asked Peter about his love. The threefold question was fitting; just days earlier, Peter had three times denied that he even knew Jesus. Jesus was now giving Peter a chance to put all that behind him. John 21 is a beautiful story about forgiveness—about a new start.

Intellectually I knew this. But as I sat reading in my office, I was affected by this story in another away. The deep professional emptiness I'd been feeling found strange comfort in the image of the bursting nets. I longed for that kind of fullness in my own work. As the nets had surfaced, I felt a new clarity surfacing as well.

In the margin of my Bible, I wrote the words "11/00 I'm fishing." It was November 2000. My life was about to change.

Chapter 2

Born for This

We're supposed to follow our dreams.

That's what I'd grown up believing. Each of us has a work that we're literally born for. From the moment we're created, God places within us a natural desire for this work, and this desire only has to be awakened. For some, the desire might be making music, fixing things, caring for people—whatever gets your heart stirring. One of the most beautiful moments in our lives is when the desire already present within us is suddenly awakened. Our palms get sweaty, our stomachs get weak, and our hearts get stirring again. I had seen this happen many times with my students, and it seemed to be happening anew with me. The desire that washed over me on this morning was the desire to publish. I wanted to create a publication that would pull in a mass of folks the way Peter's net pulled in a mass of fish.

Until this moment, I hadn't realized how much I missed publication work and the deep satisfaction it brought me. I *loved* how I felt when I was putting together a publication. It was as though I'd entered another world—a world of words and images that needed to be brought together in just the right way. I wasn't good at many things, but I was good at this. It was completely me.

One thing I'd never attempted, however, was to start my own magazine, and the sudden idea of doing so appealed very deeply to me. I knew exactly the kind of magazine I wanted to create. It wouldn't be about celebrities, like so many other magazines out there. Instead, it would be about ordinary people.

A publication like this was deep in my soul.

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I grew up near Lake Wobegon—in the small Minnesota town of Detroit Lakes (population 7,106). On Saturday nights, my parents would tune our van radio to Garrison Keillor's popular variety show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. Often we'd be driving to Fargo with the Burgesons for an exciting evening of Chi-Chi's and a movie. Our town didn't have restaurants like Chi-Chi's, and our movie theater only had one movie at a time, for two months at a time.

Garrison Keillor's gift was storytelling, a segment he began each time with, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon . . ." As the studio audience clapped, we, the radio audience, shushed each other. *Shhh.* Keillor's monologue was a real treat for all of us; it was when imaginations came alive, when calm made a guest appearance. Keillor's voice was as soothing as the Vick's VapoRub he talked about, and he took his sweet time telling his tales—savoring the human comedy as much as we did. He told us about Johnny Tollefson, a gangly adolescent desperate to get out from under his parents' rules; about Harold Star, publisher of the *Herald Star* newspaper; about the Sidetrack Tap, where the regulars warmly welcomed the newcomers. "That's the news from Lake Wobegon," we'd say along with Keillor, grinning at each other, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

Most of Garrison Keillor's characters weren't real, but they reminded me of the very real characters in my own life—particularly the people I'd see at our small Adventist church each Sabbath, sitting in their usual spots. My family sat on the left side of the sanctuary, about halfway back. The Burgesons sat just behind us; the McTaggarts in the middle of the right section; the Nelsons and Umbers just ahead of them; and the Kleins well up front in the third row. Everyone knew to stay out of another family's row at church. The service itself seemed to flow better with all of us in our regular places.

Occasionally, however, we had a problem—visitors. One week during the prelude, I watched a visiting family stride down the main aisle and sit smack dab in the third row on the right—the Kleins' row! I couldn't believe my eyes. The Kleins had sat in that row every week for years. That was *their*

spot, and someone else had taken it. *What will happen?* I wondered. A few minutes later, I watched the Kleins themselves enter the sanctuary, walk briskly down front, pause, conference together for a moment, reverse direction, and sink slowly and bewilderedly into the fifth row. I felt sorry for the Kleins. All those years, all that time invested in their row, and some hotshot family of five, probably from Fargo, had rudely bumped them two rows back. I waited for one of the church elders to leap off the platform, scold the visiting family, and order them to switch seats with the Kleins; but no one did a thing, and I felt just sick for my friends.

Church wasn't the only place that felt like Lake Wobegon. Often our home did too. One evening we were sitting by the fireplace when our cat strolled in. Mom suddenly got the giggles. She asked my little sister, Angel, and me if we wanted to hear a funny story about Dad and the cat.

Yes! we said.

Oh, Michelle, Dad said.

Mom told us how, the night before, the phone rang very, very late. Because the phone was right beside Dad, she just waited for him to get it. Mom said she could hear Dad saying, Hello? Hello? but for some reason, the phone kept ringing.

Hello, Nashes, Dad said, as the phone continued to ring.

Finally, Mom turned over to discover that half-asleep Dad had grabbed the cat rather than the phone.

Hello? Hello? Dad kept saying into the dumbfounded cat. Angel and I laughed our heads off.

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These were the stories I'd always enjoyed most—the stories of real life, told by regular people like us. And it seemed to me that a publication full of people's best stories would be every bit as good as a publication full of celebrity news and gossip. This idea—a magazine about ordinary people—welled up in me so deeply on this morning in November that I felt like there was nothing that would keep me from seeing it through. Nothing. This was what I had been created to do. It was deep in my soul. And I couldn't wait to talk to Dad about it.