

What Readers Say About *Swimming Against the Current*

Chris Blake's imaginative wordsmithing has made him one of this generation's favorite writers of religious nonfiction. "Nonfiction" because truth is stranger (as you're about to discover), and "religious" because Chris wittingly joins the heart of a believer with the mind of a skeptic. Which, for a generation still looking for God, may be the best surprise of all. And which, for a generation that's already found Him, will make *Swimming Against the Current* a fresh new manual for living boldly on the edge.

—Dwight K. Nelson

Senior pastor, Pioneer Memorial Church

Chris Blake is one of the most perceptive thinkers in the Adventist Church today. And his latest book, *Swimming Against the Current*, is an outstanding example of how to translate biblical principles into contemporary settings. This book is quintessentially Blake—serious issues communicated skillfully, sensitively, thoughtfully, and entertainingly. There's enough here for a second or third read.

—Stephen Chavez

Managing editor, *Adventist Review/Adventist World*

With *Swimming Against the Current*, Chris Blake presents fresh perspectives on what it means to be a Christian and an Adventist today. However different his perspective and experiences often are from mine, I love his writing, his creativity, and the very personal way in which he shares himself in these stories.

—Clifford Goldstein

Editor, *Adult Bible Study Guide*

Author, *God, Gödel, and Grace*

Chris Blake is an engaging storyteller. He hooks us with humor and situations we can relate to and then reels us in with a powerful, thought-provoking point. I love how he tackles real issues in fresh, significant ways with courage and passion. Warning! Reading this will heighten your spiritual sensitivities, jolt your commitment level, challenge your old ideas, and stir up new questions. I can't wait to shake up my small group with it!

—Erin Miller

Associate pastor, Foster Seventh-day Adventist Church

Chris Blake's *Swimming Against the Current* is a delightfully written, in-your-face collection of spiritually meaningful and memorable stories. There is no mistaking his passion for Jesus and his courage for calling oblivious Christians to take their rightful places in being salt to a world desperately in need of savor. Blake

delivers prose in a way that leaves us wanting more despite feeling grabbed by the collar in his attempt to wake us up from a world of complacency and irrelevance. This is a must-read for every thinking third-millennium Christian.

—Willie Oliver

Director, Family Ministries,
Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America

Principle. Faith. Daring. In *The Great Controversy*, I read that these are the qualities that powered history's great reform movements and that are needed to carry forward the work of reform in our time. The stories and reflections in *Swimming Against the Current* make principle, faith, and daring about as vivid as words can. If you're not interested in a megadose of all three for the onward cause, don't read this book.

—Douglas Morgan

Professor of history and political studies, Columbia Union College,
Director, Adventist Peace Fellowship

With penetrating insight, Chris presents to his readers the vital issues of our time: doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly. Sitting in the waiting room of my car dealership's service department, I laughed out loud and then, with the same enthusiasm (though inaudibly this time), said, "Lord, help me be a Christian." My hope is that every Adventist will read this book.

—Ryan J. Bell,

Senior pastor, Hollywood Adventist Church

Reading Chris Blake is like reading Philip Yancey or C. S. Lewis. You find the depth of a philosopher, the relevance of a journalist, and the practical, everyday spirituality of Jesus that has both challenged and changed hearts for nearly two thousand years. From the very first paragraph, Blake takes readers on a thrilling and often humorous journey of discovering God and life as you never saw them before.

—Sam McKee

Senior pastor, Sunnyvale Seventh-day Adventist Church

Through stories that make us laugh and think, Chris Blake articulates what we as Christians should already know but too often ignore: We are not to be isolationists. The theology in this book is intelligent, compassionate, and honest. This is the direction in which Adventism must move if it is to be relevant and alive. I came away from the book feeling that there's hope for the future of Adventism.

—Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson

Translator, *Rainbow Over Hell*
Freelance writer

CHRIS BLAKE
SWIMMING
—against the—
CURRENT



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What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?—Micah, chapter 6

Preface

San Francisco's famous Bay to Breakers race covers 7.46 miles (12 kilometers), from the San Francisco Bay through Golden Gate Park to the Pacific Ocean, winding along downtown hilly streets from water to water. The race, which in 2006 hosted 62,000 entries, is renowned for its colorful, exotic, and bizarre atmosphere. At the start, contestants toss thousands of corn tortillas into the air, creating a tortilla shower and a slick surface to skate across.

Runners dress in outlandish personal costumes, or don't—some run without any costumes, others run without anything but shoes. Teams of people called "centipedes" run connected to each other via ropes. Onlookers cheer on Smurfs, a woolly mammoth, storm troopers from *Star Wars*, and a snaking Chinese dragon. But to me, the most fascinating runners aren't seen where the race starts.

They call themselves Spawning Salmon. Wearing hoods like bishops' miters with fish eyes painted on, they begin at the finish line and race toward the starting line. For a few miles they run unimpeded. Then the elite runners blaze by them, and gradually the course fills with dozens, hundreds, and tens of thousands of runners. The Salmon fight against the current, surging and wriggling through the streaming mass of humanity. After penetrating and moving through the great crush, they confront hundreds, dozens, the stragglers, and finish the final stretch free and clear.

These runners emulate one of nature's marvelous spectacles. Salmon swim upstream—scaling waterfalls!—against the current. Impelled by a drive beyond memory, mature fish struggle to return to their origin. In doing so, they mirror human existence. All of life is a struggle to get to the source, the breeding ground for everything that is real and hopeful and creative and deep. The God source.



The following pages contain offerings of stories, poems, questions, and observations. You will likely find something in them you don't agree with, which is fine, of course. In the true Lord's Prayer in John 17, Jesus prays not for simple uniformity but for complex unity. What a predictable, boring, blah world we would be in if we all thought the same. Ax sharpens against stone because they are different. Differences are God's design.

In addition, you will likely find something in this collection that you agree with. *Hip, hip, hooray! Yowza!flotzam! Razzle-dazzle!* It may affirm or freshen your flagging

faith. You may muse, *I thought I was the only one who thought that*. You might even photocopy it and stick it on the refrigerator or share it with a close friend who will later say, “Now, what was I supposed to get from that?”

It’s also possible you’ll encounter a thought that challenges a predisposition. Aristotle maintained, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain an idea without accepting it.” At some point I may be writing to (brace yourself) another reader. When Jesus says, as He does often, “He who has ears, let him hear,” He means *hear what you should*. God exhorts the lazy to “work harder” and the workaholic to “take it easy,” so the sluggard relaxes as the frenzied worker increases effort. The question is not, What do I agree with? The question is, What do I need to hear?

Most of what’s here is meant for everybody. The primary target audience, however, is narrower than that of *Searching for a God to Love*, which was written for “believing unbelievers”—people who believe in God but who don’t believe what they hear about God. *Swimming Against the Current* is for those who searched for and found a God to love and, lives brimming and eyes shining, asked, “What’s next?”

Portions of *Swimming* target Adventists simply because I need to talk to my church family. However, even if you’re not a Christian or an Adventist, feel free to peek over our shoulders. On occasion I glance through women’s magazines (“How Not to Look Fat in a Bathing Suit,” “Is Hugh Jackman the Nicest Hunk on Earth?” “Oprah’s Aha! Moment”) though, obviously, I’m not their primary audience. Observation can prove to be revealing, intriguing, and endearing.*

While my hope is that this book will prompt a laugh, a tear, a deepening comprehension, a life change, I’m cognizant of the process. As Annie Dillard noted in *The Writing Life*, “This writing that you do, that so thrills you, that so rocks and exhilarates you, as if you were dancing next to the band, is barely audible to anyone else.”



Once we have reached out and touched the face of God, what does He expect of us? Micah gives the clearest, most succinct directive I know: “What does the Lord require of you . . . ?” He answers his question with another question. His implied answer: Nothing more than this.

“Do Justly” is the most countercultural of the three sections. To begin with this requirement may be off-putting, but old Micah wrote it this way, so we follow suit. Maybe its prominence is meant to startle and offend, to make us raise our eyebrows, sit bolt upright and pay attention, to serve as a springboard for our swimming.

*Yes! Hugh Jackman *is*!

PREFACE

“Love Mercy” is for lovers—all of us. While love and mercy make up the first and last names of God’s signature, they are phenomenally misinterpreted. Love is not an abracadabra experience. Amid life’s screaming tedium, we become unmoored. Tumbling deep into dark water, we wait until we see bubbles rise toward the light and we again know which way is up. Love quiets our fear as we wait.

“Walk Humbly With Our God” aligns us with a reality that exists apart from what anyone believes. As Mother Teresa confessed, “Humility is nothing but the truth.” What an enormous relief to holster our pride, to loosen and unload the dripping weight of insufferable hubris. In a culture where image dominates and self-promotion prevails, Micah’s remarks hatch a humble revolution and a cause for ridicule. “In a world of fugitives,” T. S. Eliot observed, “the person taking the opposite direction will appear to run away.”

The pieces in *Swimming* are variously whimsical, serious, short, long.* Some have been published previously, some are altered, some appear fresh-baked here. At times the chronology hops, skips, and backpedals—our sons appear as teenagers, infants, adults, children. The tone may be a squawking goose, an orchid blooming in the desert, green air dancing around a tornado, or a mug of hot chocolate on a shivering afternoon.

I believe I could have written a more wildly popular general book,[†] but I tend to aim at specific, pragmatic shifts and growth. In another millennium, I saw bumper stickers that urged “Visualize World Peace,” but I preferred the sticker “Visualize Using Your Turn Signal.” When I was baptized, wide open were my eyes.

As always, the ultimate goal is to continue falling in love with God and His creation. The current is ever-changing; we cannot plunge our hand in the same river twice. Yet each stroke brings us closer to the source.

Enjoy the swim. □

*“Redeeming Our Sad Gay Situation,” for example, is more than one thousand times longer than “What’s Greater Than God’s Love?”

[†]*Harry Potter’s Purpose-Driven Da Vinci Code’s Chicken Soup for Jabez’s Sudoku Soul.*

How are we changed for better? Let the journey begin . . .

Traveling Necessities

The airplane was stuffed like a jumbo burrito with the works. Unfamiliar exclamations swirled around my aisle seat. I clutched my precious Spanish-English pocket dictionary and extracted recognizable words from nearby conversations.

“ . . . *más tarde . . . puede . . .* ”

“*Entonces . . . ayudar . . . bien . . .*”

“ . . . *escuela . . .* ”

Apparently, three years of high school Spanish had not given me total fluency.

Of course, I knew that before. That was why I was flying from Los Angeles to Guatemala, to learn Spanish. For one month I would live with a Guatemalan family in the beautiful city of Antigua and be privately tutored in Spanish for eight hours a day. *Sí*.

Glancing around, I noted a singular aspect to the passengers. Only one person in the plane did not have black hair. I felt a strong urge to purchase a hat.

Suddenly, the man in the adjacent window seat nudged me. He looked deadly serious. This was my first test. Summoning my vast arsenal of thirty-eight words, I peered intently into his dark eyes and waited. I shall never forget what he said.

“Canpas?”

My arsenal did not contain that word. I held up one hand—the universal gesture of “wait”—and fumbled with the dictionary. “*Un momento, por favor*,” I said, somewhat proudly.

But he couldn’t wait. “Canpas?” he insisted.

Desperately I raced through the C’s. Nothing.

The man stood and glared down at me menacingly. My heart pounded. I was apparently about to be punched out for committing some heinous, politically incorrect insult. *If only I had studied high school Spanish more devoutly. I’m sorry, Mrs. Currie.* He bumped my leg with his knee and demanded, “Canpas!”

At that instant, like a blind man receiving sight, like a caged bird granted release, I understood. “Oh, sure, you *can pass!*” I exulted, and stepped quickly into the aisle while he rushed to the restroom.



It was March 1976, one month after the earthquake that killed twenty-three thousand Guatemalans. The country was crushed, literally. When the quake struck at 3:02 A.M., adobe walls crumbled and heavy tile roofs crashed on sleeping inhabitants. Entire villages had been bulldozed. The air smelled of death. I saw clumps

DO JUSTLY

of villagers slumped in grief and shock, unsure what to do next, while vultures stood like choirs in the trees.

The family I stayed with—Luis, Angelica, and their daughter, Pati—had survived: Their house was wooden. While staying with them and attending classes, I met Steve Bloch, a Jewish student from Los Angeles who had been in the house when the ground shook. He recalled the scene at 3:02 that black morning. After racing out of the house, he looked down the street. *Everyone*, he said, was kneeling and praying.

I remember other incidents from my month in Guatemala. My first tangle with a slippery, sweet mango. Climbing Volcán de Agua after a breakfast of *pan dulce** and raw egg pooling in a saucer. Energetically humming “On Wisconsin!” during icy showers. Villagers streaming out of their homes to stare at my shirtless torso and short pants. The flutter and cluck of chickens. The it’s-still-dark crowing of a mad rooster. *Semana Santa*—a festival of processions and floats and streets decorated with intricately colored sawdust. Black sand and warm ocean water. When I readied to swim, I learned that the deserted beach towers weren’t lifeguard stations. They were shark lookouts. *Gracias, no.*

One weekend, Steve and I decided to fly to Tikal, renowned site of ancient Mayan ruins. As we hovered over Tikal’s landing strip, however, my driveway back home seemed bigger. I asked Steve for a piece of paper and solemnly scribbled, “Give my baseball mitt to my brother.” We giggled through our terror.

Two restaurants graced Tikal—one we couldn’t afford, and one we could. The latter stood at the back of a thatched hut where a handwritten menu boasted three choices.

No. 1: Eggs, rice, and beans

No. 2: Beans, eggs, and rice

No. 3: Rice, beans, and eggs

I usually opted for No. 2.

During those four weeks I learned *mucho Español* and gained so much more. A broader perspective. An appreciation for humanity’s common concerns. An awareness of life’s inequities. A commitment to justice for all people.

When I returned home, I was a different person. I discovered life’s true luxuries are hot showers, clean sheets, and drinkable water. I found I could survive just fine on a bus with two children (not mine) on each knee and a goat beside me. Simply being understood became a treasured gift.

There is no education like travel, whether flying, pedaling, walking, riding, rafting—or listening to, reading, and thinking about fresh ideas. People who refuse to travel remain stunted in their prickly nest of provincial perspectives.

*Sweet bread

Christians are created for travel. Jesus blazed the trail when He left heaven's brilliant splendor and trekked to our poor, bewildering planet.

In addition, there is no nobler experience than that of serving others. I know parents who want their children to graduate from college or earn an M.D. or an M.B.A. or a Ph.D., and those accomplishments are laudable. But my highest ambition for my children's education was for them to travel and serve—to be student missionaries.

Because there's a world of difference out there. □

No matter their circumstances, these 120 did what they knew to be right.

Free Indeed

It was New Year's Eve, and I was in prison. This wasn't the first time. Over the past two years, I had grown accustomed to the gray massive walls, clanging gates, and barbed wire that make up California Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo.

Why was I there? I was guilty of volunteering for the prison ministry outreach of my church. Before I became a sponsor (as workers in prison ministry are called), I had to go through an orientation along with sponsors from other faiths. The most memorable part of the orientation was our viewing a training film prepared for prison staff workers.

To put you in the mood generated by that film, imagine yourself sitting in a dark room. You're relaxed. The surroundings are as you expect them to be. Then a man approaches you. Smiling, he leans over to speak into your ear and emits the following phrase, screamed at 135 decibels: "*WATCH OUT!*"

Get the idea? After watching this film, you don't need to ask for a spiked haircut.

The film highlighted prisoners in various threatening situations. Their acting impressed me with its . . . um . . . realism. I remember vividly one scene in which a convict with arms the size of my thighs was about to assault another convict. As his locomotive fist descended, the picture froze with the fist two inches from the other man's face and a calm voice-over advised, "Often the best way to stop a fight is to note the warning signals before they develop."

Right.

When the lights came on and we stopped wincing (not from the lights), we were herded into a room that served as a museum. Displayed under glass were dozens of artifacts the guards had confiscated from prisoners. Funny little toys such as sixteen-inch knives and zip guns and forks welded into barbed claws. About that time I was certain I heard something. Yes, of course. It was my mother calling me to come home right now. But before I could notify the guard, the orientation had ended.

DO JUSTLY

My first Bible study began the next Sabbath afternoon in a prison classroom. Our pastor had told me a little about the prisoners who had been attending, but I was unprepared when I met them.

After my experience at the orientation, I expected Thigh-arms to saunter into the classroom escorted by a posse of utensil-clanking henchmen. Then, of course, they would wonder aloud during the study how I knew so much about the state of the dead without firsthand experience, and offer to help me with the “research.”

Instead, what amazed me about the prisoners who entered the classroom, and what continued to intrigue me over the next two years, was how much these men were like people on the outside. I couldn’t distinguish a difference. There were accountant types, factory types, friendly types, quiet types, brash types, grim types. They joked and questioned and bragged as we all do. The only trait that seemed to distinguish these men from “regular” people was their keenly felt sense of need.

I grew to be comfortable in their presence, yet I was wary each time I entered the prison. I couldn’t wear blue shirts or pants because in case of a “disturbance,” I had to be quickly identifiable in a crowd. Some weeks I couldn’t get in because of a lockdown—someone had been attacked or had escaped.

Each time I parked in front of the prison, I prayed fervently before entering. I prayed for God’s protection. I acknowledged that I was here on His business, that I was His servant, that my life was in His hands. From that point on I felt peace, and I walked confidently, with my head up. And I never regretted going.



I had been called three days earlier and asked to be the sponsor for the New Year’s Eve get-together, to be held from nine to eleven at night in the interfaith chapel. I accepted, though I was curious how the celebration would be handled.

When I arrived, the men were placing hymnbooks on the chairs. For the next two hours, we enjoyed what “back in the day” was called a testimony meeting. The 120 men sang robustly, pausing between songs to listen to each other thank God. Then they sang some more.

Their final song made an immense impact on me. They sang:

Would you be free from the burden of sin?
There’s power in the blood,
Power in the blood;
Would you o’er evil a victory win?
There’s wonderful power in the blood.
Then,

There is power, power,
wonder-working power . . .

Now, when I tell you that never before had the word *power* meant that much to me, I trust you'll understand. When those 120 men shouted it—those miserable convicts; those lowly, lonely prisoners—it was *powerful*. Like the blast from fifty thousand sports fans when the home team rallies from way behind, the chapel reverberated with sound and energy. If those men were convicted of anything, they were convicted of these words.

The power they sang of was the power to transform the most caged, worthless, hopeless life into a free, vital, caring person. These men admitted absolutely their need of a Savior, and their response was to do justly from now on through the forgiving, accepting, enabling power of the Lamb. With this admission, they opened and entered the very door of heaven.

Then came the prayer, arm-in-arm in a circle, and afterward we hugged each other and thanked each other. And then it was eleven o'clock, so they left to go to their cells and I walked past the *clang-clang-clang* clanging gates to my car.

I drove home thinking about what I had witnessed.

As I passed through town, my headlights caught a figure hurrying across the street. He was a college student in this college town, and he seemed nervous and excited. He held in one hand a paper sack in the shape of a bottle, the way I've seen homeless alcoholics carry their "meals."

Something about the student struck me. His posture, perhaps. He seemed to scurry like a trapped animal, his head low, his eyes darting right and left. Seeing this student in the open night air made me think about the joyful men locked behind bars at the prison. I thought, *Who is more free?* □

Nine symbols challenge our concepts of duty, truth, and justice.

Adventists in Freedom Park

Most people have never heard of it, much less visited it. When asked about its location, even Washington, D.C., area residents scrunch their noses and wag their heads. "Sorry," they say, "can't help you."

One sweltering July day (even the trees seemed to be sweating), our family boards the Metro blue/orange line in D.C. for the Rosslyn exit in Arlington, Virginia. Directions to our final destination appeared obscure; I vaguely recall wandering through a parking garage and down a long fluorescent-lit hallway. Definitely no tourist buses here. Passing the former Newseum, we pause at the Journalists Memorial.

And then, suddenly, we are there: Freedom Park.

Do JUSTLY

Much like freedom herself, it isn't easily found, but the payoff is well worth the trip. The park follows a grassy swath tucked behind skyscrapers. As we walk, we encounter eloquent symbols of liberation in the form of replicas and actual relics:

- The Statue of Freedom, which stands atop the Capitol dome.
- Women's suffrage banners—carried before women's voting rights were granted in 1920 through the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution.*
- Martin Luther King Jr.'s jail cell door. It stands on a concrete pad approximating the area in which he wrote the magnificent "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."
- A small homemade boat used by Cuban refugees, found on the Florida Keys in 1966.
- A ballot box from the election of Nelson Mandela in post-apartheid South Africa.
- Cobblestones removed from the Warsaw Jewish ghetto.
- A toppled, headless stone statue of Vladimir Lenin.
- The Goddess of Democracy from Beijing's Tiananmen Square.
- Nine sections of the original Berlin Wall beside an East German guard tower. A backdrop mural depicts celebrations when the Wall fell.

I find myself marveling at the risky courage of the people who breathed meaning into these icons. And I wonder, *How many Seventh-day Adventists were at those historic events? How many Adventists publicly championed voting rights for women? Marched for civil rights at Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery? Faced tanks in Tiananmen Square?*

"Oh, no," someone says. "Is this another liberal rant on social activism? Let's just stick to spreading the gospel."

Precisely my thoughts.

I'm willing to let other people stand up for freedom and justice. I can't see myself ever chanting slogans on the Capitol steps, and frankly (perhaps because I missed out on Pathfinders), I don't like marching. I prefer to make a more practical impact than "raising awareness." While I may be willing to die for a cause, I'm not willing to be misled and embarrassed for one. And causes these days are often complicated.

But then, once again, I am caught up short, stumbling over my excuses, by the

*Two placards read, "Objection: Women are too pure for the dirty pool of politics." "Answer: If the pool is dirty, the time has come to clean it. Women have had long experience cleaning up after men."

one Person who loves me too much to let me shuck and duck and rationalize my life away.

Jesus.



I see Him clearly, announcing His public ministry by standing up in the place where He had worshiped all His life, and reading in a strong voice from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”*

He rolls up Isaiah, hands it to an attendant, and sits down. As the congregation stares at Him, He concludes, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And everyone murmurs, “That was nice.”

But Jesus never leaves it at *nice*. He always seems to “agitate, agitate, agitate,” in the urgent words of Ellen White. I can imagine His mother, who had “kept all these things in her heart” for eighteen years, about then thinking, *Uh-oh, here it comes*. By the time Jesus is finished instructing and admonishing the very people with whom He used to play games and cut wood, they are so “filled with wrath” that they want to kill Him.

They will have to wait.

The more I study Jesus’ words from Isaiah, the more troubled I become. *Surely He’s speaking metaphorically—setting captives, like the poor, free in a spiritual sense. Or liberating the oppressed medically. We have doctors for that. (Go, Loma Linda!) Anyway, this is the Lord talking. He can do anything.*

Looking through the Bible, however, I find other troubling words. Jesus explains the final judgment with a tale of sheep and goats, but the speech isn’t really about separating livestock. It’s about hunger, drinkable water, homelessness, health care, and prison ministry. Apparently, God insists that we must respond personally to these social issues.[†]

Jesus goes out of His way to bring healing on Sabbath, explaining, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.”[‡] Sabbath observance restores human dignity.

Encountering systemic corruption, the peacemaking activist Jesus brings out a new condiment, the Miracle Whip, and drives from the temple courtyard all the corporate business “thieves.” When He returns years later and finds the same oppressive conditions, He clears the crooks out again![§]

*See Luke, chapter 4.

†See Matthew, chapter 25.

‡See Matthew, chapter 12.

§See John, chapter 2; Matthew, chapter 21.

DO JUSTLY

When asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies that our neighbor is anyone in need—even if they don’t look, sound, or think as we do.*

I turn to Isaiah, where my Master turned. The opening chapter informs me that God *will not listen* to my prayers until I “seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”†

Later, in exquisite chapter 58, God comments on fasting, “Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?”

After studying Scripture, I reach an inescapable conclusion: Working for justice, peace, and dignity (by fighting oppression, poverty, and corruption) is just as certainly a spiritual discipline as are prayer and fasting. Perhaps more.



In 1998, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Seventh-day Adventist Church released an official statement: “Coming from the best and highest part of the human heart, the Universal Declaration is a fundamental document standing firmly for human dignity, liberty, equality, and non-discrimination of minorities. Article 18, which upholds unconditionally religious liberty in belief and practice, is of special importance. . . . Politicians, trade union leaders, teachers, employers, media representatives, and all opinion leaders should give strong support to human rights.”

Do Adventist teachers, administrators, media specialists, and opinion leaders (such as pastors) give “strong support to human rights”? It’s true that when we see Article 18 violated, we head for it faster than a greased bobsled down a glacier. It could also be argued that a tinge of self-preservation triggers our rush. What of all the other fundamental rights of God’s children? Are we—as our official church statement suggests—*strongly* supporting these from Adventist pulpits and in Adventist classrooms, TV programs, and magazines?

Article 5: No one shall be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment

Article 14 (1): Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information through any media and regardless of frontiers.

*See Luke, chapter 10.

†See Isaiah’s astounding chapter 1.

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Article 23 (2): Everyone, without discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

Article 25 (1): Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services . . .

Article 26 (1): Everyone has the right to education.*

Ellen White declares to pastors, “Ye will not give your voice or influence to any policy to enrich a few, to bring oppression and suffering to the poorer classes of humanity.”†

Though early Adventist pioneers were far from silent on social issues, in the past century the Adventist voice—in pulpits, classrooms, programs, and papers—on social ethics and human rights has largely been muted. We may well ask, “Why?”



Let’s admit that Seventh-day Adventists have tended to elude, ignore, and distrust human rights issues. I have been as guilty of this neglect as the next person. How could we become so content with the existence of large-scale evils? Four chief reasons emerge—the sins of I.

1. Isolation. The dominant mind-set of North America, where the Adventist Church began, is individualism. By contrast, today we live in a world community. Global issues have morphed to personal issues. How a pharmaceutical factory is treated in Muslim Sudan affects how a Christian mother is treated as she flies in a plane over Pennsylvania.

Adventists want to help people on an individual basis—medically, educationally, evangelistically. Yet shouldn’t we help to fix the economic and social structures that cause poverty, disease, ignorance, and hopelessness? The principalities and powers that work to lead one person to lose eternal life are the very ones that lead a community, a nation, and a culture down the path of darkness. Their dividends pay off in millions.

We also recognize that political solutions are not final. Our noble stance on separation of church and state has bred an isolationist posture—we back *way* off sociopolitical issues. Unfortunately, we have failed to see that these are often ethical issues.

Moreover, as peculiar members of the remnant, we may believe that the world’s concerns do not apply to us. “Not of this world” mistranslates to indifference. Environmental ravaging? Child prostitution? Pandemic poverty? Discriminatory practices? *Don’t bother me; I’m on God’s business.*

*You can access the full text of the thirty articles by searching on the Internet for “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

†See Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 333.

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Communities, nations, and cultures are God's business, too. All of us are connected—our umbilical cords wind back to God.

2. *Inevitability.* Whom can we believe? Politics breeds deceit and money favors. Corporations sell their souls for profits. News networks are slanted.

I once asked a group of Adventist college students, "Why don't you get involved more?"

"Because we don't trust anybody," a young woman explained. "We really can't do anything anyway."

Inevitability results in a diminution of compassion, a dearth of hope, a death of promise. Jesus' words, "The poor you shall have with you always," can come to mean, "Don't be too concerned about them—they probably deserve it."

As Thucydides observed, "Fatalism tends to produce what it dreads."

3. *Industry.* Seventh-day Adventists are generally hard workers, but there is an industry that is intemperate and imbalanced.*

We become too busy to care. Too tired to get involved. Too overwhelmed to add one . . . more . . . thing. We're just trying to survive, after all, and this added guilt about human rights doesn't help one bit.

If we are sacrificing and working too hard to get involved in the freedom of others, to care about justice and equality and peacemaking, God says, "You are working too hard."

4. *Imminence.* "Jesus is coming soon." Good news! Liberating news! And potentially disempowering news. In peering continually through the telescope, we become carelessly farsighted. If we focus only on the "Bridge Out Ahead" sign, we never stop to rotate the tires or bother to check the oil. We remain on constant, breathless, emergency alert.

So we take emergency shortcuts. We concentrate on counting decisions at the expense of creating disciples. We erect poorly constructed buildings ("We won't need them long.") and sell acreage at dirt-cheap prices. Raising educational endowments is viewed as faithlessness, though had we begun them early enough, every Adventist young person today and thousands more could afford a well-equipped Adventist education.

On the world's stage, we let people's rights erode and their poisoned environment collapse. We ignore materialism's dreadful grip. Anticipating a future time of trouble, we overlook times of opportunity. The danger of living in the future is brought out powerfully in *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. The demon Screwtape admits that God wants us to live in the present, for that is the point where time touches eternity. "Love [looks] to the Present; fear, avarice, lust and ambition look ahead. . . . [Demons] want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy now." Adventists particularly need to live by this precept: Be here now.

*SDA can also stand for Sleep-Deprived Adults.

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The sinful side of imminence focuses purely on escape. *Get . . . us . . . out.* It's a selfish, petulant child's approach to planetary discomfort. In *The Advent Hope for Human Helplessness*, Samuele Bacchiocchi describes some Christians: "They regard any attempt to improve social conditions as futile and unnecessary, since Christ at His Coming will destroy the present sinful world-order." When we flee from the world's woes, we lose our witness.

Jesus wrestled with imminence in an olive grove called Gethsemane. He felt isolated. Betrayal and loss were inevitable; all of His industry had come to naught that night. God's Son wanted *out*, and He wanted it deeply and sincerely and passionately enough to ask for it three times.

You and I were saved by one word: *nevertheless*.

Jesus will return for us. Nevertheless, we will live in the present, for the present is the only time we can serve God.



Thomas Kelley rightly observes, "We cannot die on every cross." Even with the best intentions, it's easy to become paralyzed by the countless needs of humanity. The Adventist Church provides a wonderful selection of ministries. In addition, the following is a sample list of pro-life human rights issues and groups we can all support. Choose two you truly care about. Get involved.

The arms industry. From 1998 through 2001, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom earned more income from selling weapons to developing countries than they gave in aid. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter said, "We can't have it both ways. We can't be both the world's leading champion of peace and the world's leading supplier of arms" (see <http://www.controlarms.org>).

Sex trafficking and child prostitution. An estimated two million women and children are held in sexual servitude around the world. I can think of no more hideous existence for a child (see <http://www.captivedaughters.org>).

Asylum for refugees. Jesus was a refugee. Fortunately, He and His parents were granted asylum in Egypt. Today, millions of people are seeking a safe place for their families to escape persecution and butchery (see <http://www.refugee-action.org>).

Tobacco. "Tobacco use is one of the largest preventable causes of disease and premature death in the world. . . . Halving tobacco consumption now would save 150 million lives by 2050" (see <http://www.internationalcancerfoundation.com>).

HIV/AIDS. In Africa and Asia, the pandemic HIV/AIDS is undoing decades of development. Globally, about forty million people are infected—two million are children. Education in this area is an amazingly effective change agent (see various "AIDS in Africa" Web sites, <http://www.adra.org>, and search for "AIDS").

Other worthy causes include literacy, violence against women, universal health care for children, ending extreme poverty through the ONE Campaign, Doctors Without Borders, eradicating land mines, and the Invisible Children of Northern Uganda.

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Suppose we chose to exhibit Adventist symbols of social justice and freedom. What historical images might we place in an Adventist Freedom Park? A few come immediately to mind—every one strongly swimming against the current.

- The steering wheel (helm) from Edson White's steamboat *Morning Star*, for opening the work to Black people in the segregated South.
- Desmond Doss's medical kit and Medal of Honor, symbolizing commitment to mending relationships through noncombatancy. Around the kit are copies of *Peace Messenger* from the recently established Adventist Peace Fellowship (visit <http://www.adventistpeace.org>).
- Photos of Ana and Fernando Stahl, wearing their *altiplano* hats while riding burros, for their visionary and revolutionary missionary work among the peoples of the Andes and the Amazon.*
- An Underground Railroad station, run by Adventists and activists such as John Byington (later the first General Conference president).
- A mosaic of *Liberty* magazine covers, proclaiming the wisdom of church and state separation.
- A tablet of Ten Commandments highlighting the Sabbath, which makes all people equal before God and liberates the planet in rejuvenating and jubilee ways. God's genius is evident: Time is universal, so no person stands in a place of advantage.
- A Maranatha Ultimate Workout church door, along with the Golden Cords sculpture from Union College, signifying the work of student missionaries around the world.
- An ADRA-dug well. Next to it, a large container filled with The Original Really Useful Gift Catalogs (<http://www.adra.org>).
- A bullet-riddled Jeep, symbolizing the martyrdom of Adventists who bravely worked and died for others.

What a park! Wouldn't you proudly bring your family and friends here? But something is missing. The ultimate symbol of freedom:

- The cross of Jesus. Through the Cross, the grace of the Son, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit[†] create an antidote to the sins of I. Through the Cross, we experience freedom from sin's guilt, freedom from sin's power, and eventual freedom from sin's presence. The

*See The Stahl Center Museum of Culture at La Sierra University.

[†]As listed in 2 Corinthians, chapter 13.

Cross exposes our violent world for what it is, extends God's love to the violated, and opens a hopeful future of creative reconciliation.*

Most people have never heard of Adventists, much less visited an Adventist church. They can, however, locate us by our love. We can be discerning and courageous enough to seek ways to protect and uphold all human rights, and in doing so, fulfill our Master's mandate—the same one He announced long ago in a Nazareth synagogue. This is historic Adventism at its best.

And it's well worth the trip. □

Don't rub your eyes. If you do, you'll never stop rubbing them.

Dangerous Intersection

One summer I spoke for young adult Adventists at Camp Junaluska, an idyllic setting nestled in the wooded hills of North Carolina. Above magnificent Lake Junaluska (owned by the Methodist church) towers a twenty-five-foot cross.

Taking a ride around the lake, my friend Erin Miller and I came upon a remarkable juxtaposition. A blind merging of streets loomed, and in front of that cross appeared a yellow warning sign: DANGEROUS INTERSECTION. From our perspective, the sign described the cross.

This is not a sign of the times. Today's "Christian music" often portrays our friendship with God solely as a yearning for protection. He is our hiding place, our sanctuary, our comfort, our shield.

Safe. Safe in the ironic arms of Jesus—the greatest risk taker in history. Yes, if we follow Him—taking godly risks, as He did—we too will be as safe as He was. You can bet your life on it.

After searching for a God to love and finding Him, we must move beyond a self-absorbed preoccupation with salvation's safety, both behaviorally and doctrinally. The current here is strong against us. Soul salvation is indeed the basic milk, yet "everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity" (Hebrews, chapters 5 and 6).

We shouldn't forsake the "elementary doctrine of Christ"—it is the foundation to build upon, the harbor to launch from. However, while mother's milk is generally

*See Daniel L. Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding*.

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the perfect food for babies, who would want to live on it for the rest of their life?

Sometimes I think of the perfection of Earth's moon—without flaws or disturbances before we fired missiles into her skin, then stepped, golfed, plucked, shoveled, and drove over her. Moonscapes are hauntingly appealing, arid and austere. Compared to Earth's passions and tears and nuisances and yelping discord, the moon seems so . . . peaceful.

On second thought, though, the moon was flawed and disturbed long before we invaded her. Giant craters pock her surface, the result of immense rocks slamming into her again and again. The moon in reality is defenseless. And no erosion from wind or water wears away the craters, so they remain unchanged—until the next impact. While Earth's atmosphere provides fertile soil for life's imperfections, it also protects us from nearly all the frozen death balls flying through our solar system.

The moon is dead. If holiness means only the absence of sin, Earth's moon is holy ground. But holiness is so much more, as light is more than the absence of darkness. Holiness is proactive. Dag Hammarskjöld observed, "In our world the road to holiness necessarily runs through the world of action." That's why sleeping away Sabbath doesn't keep us holy, nor does avoiding hazardous amusements, "rejuvenating" beverages, or illicit drugs. We are called to bear fruit, not to avoid leaf fungus. Trying merely to abstain from everything unclean makes us susceptible to austere death, the condition of too many churches.

In *Your God Is Too Safe*, Mark Buchanan wrote, "The safe god has no power to console us in our grief or shake us from complacency or rescue us from the pit. He just putters in His garden, smiles benignly, waves now and then, and mostly spends a lot of time in His room doing puzzles. . . .

"The safe god is actually your worst enemy. . . . He breeds cowardice. . . . He keeps you stuck, complacent, bored, angry."

The twenty-eight fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are much like multiplication tables. They are fundamentally valuable for aid in real-life situations. We don't walk around repeating, "Eight times six is forty-eight, eight times seven is fifty-six . . .," but when we need to balance a checkbook, we can do it. Similarly, we are spiritually sound when we use foundational beliefs to balance real thoughts, desires, and actions.

"Doctrine is a wonderful servant and a horrible master," wrote Rob Bell in *Velvet Elvis*. The litmus test of doctrine is our application. Stopping with a downcast colleague, listening, and offering to pray. Making friends with those who don't believe or look as we do. Forgiving someone who hurt us deeply. Volunteering to lead Sabbath School in a room filled with hormone-crazed early teens. "*Do this,*" Jesus says, "*and you will live.*"*

*See Luke's magnificent chapter 10.

Adventist News Network reported the Eastern Africa Division's plans to send out one hundred thousand Global Mission pioneers.* These were to be added to the thirty thousand pioneers currently working around the world, who in the previous eight years established more than eleven thousand Adventist congregations. Lately, I'm contributing more of my church offerings to Adventist Global Mission, believing as Jesus obviously believed that the best investment is risk-taking *people*.

My friend Buell Fogg described his visit to an onion-ring factory. As you might imagine, the air inside the factory was redolent with onions, tens of thousands of them assaulting his streaming eyes with stinging fumes. Amazed, through his tears he looked around and noticed that workers there appeared unaffected.

"Don't rub your eyes," his guide advised. "If you do, you'll never stop rubbing them." Sure enough, within minutes, Buell's eyes adjusted and he could see clearly.

Jesus announced, " 'I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind' " (John, chapter 9). As Christians, we enter a dangerous world clear-eyed and unblinking. God will not support an antiseptic approach.

The orbit of the Son intersected the orbit of our blue planet to create an enormous explosion. A blinding flash of God enveloped us in a mushrooming cloud of peace and hope. Now we are all contaminated.

Father, lead me not into sleepy temptation. Lead me out of my comfort zone to intersect with this dangerous world You love. □

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.—Revelation, chapter 12

The Dialogue That Didn't Happen

Gabriel: God, as You know, many of the angels are expressing second thoughts about Your rule in their lives. They're starting to follow Lucifer's wiles. It seems all of creation is listening to him. What are You going to do about it?

God: Believe Me, I have a plan of action, Gabriel.

Gabriel: Could I hear it, please?

*Global Mission pioneers are native to the country they serve. They already know the language and culture and possess a well-developed network of relationships.

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God: Certainly. Just don't spread it around yet—keep it under your halo. It's a two-part thrust, actually. I'm calling the full campaign "Winging Back Home."

Gabriel: Nice touch, Lord. How will You counter Lucifer and his lies? He's cutting deeply into the ranks—and the morale.

God: Yes, it's about time to fight fire with fire. So, let it begin: He tells a lie about Me, I cut *him* down, spread a few stories about him. Let him know he's not dealing with an Infinite Pushover.

Gabriel: What type of stories? You mean nasty stuff?

God: Nothing really bad. Just enough to make the angels distrust him. Innuendos about his motives, that sort of thing.

Gabriel: All true, of course.

God: Not necessarily. Variations on the truth. Who can prove it, anyway? Listen, a *lot* is at stake here. This is *evangelism*. Believe Me, we can afford to fudge a little. If they think Lucifer's slick, they haven't seen anything yet. We'll entice them back to the table by employing a sprinkling of glittering generalities, a slice of character assassination, a garnish of illogical but potent appeals to emotion.

Gabriel: So our overall approach is . . .

God: Whatever *works*—that's our approach. The end will justify the means. The second part of our campaign is an appeal to fear. We tell the fence sitters about the hideous events that are just ahead, frighten them senseless, and they'll turn to Me faster than a fleeting thought.

Gabriel: You *scare* them into the kingdom?

God: Right! We circulate an image of evil Lucifer sucking them into a swirling black hole. Surround it with exploding stars, hideous beasts, angels dying.

Gabriel: What's "dying"?

God: I'll explain later.

Gabriel: Sounds fearful, for sure. But even if this approach reaches some, won't it turn others away forever?

God: Some, maybe, but more will listen to us if we hit them where they're vulnerable. They will *flock* to our doorstep. Believe Me, the most effective recruiting tools will always be fear and deception.

Gabriel: What about truth and love?

God: Truth and love just don't draw enough attention—we're talking about their eternal destiny! You don't understand the seriousness of this threat. We could lose one-third of the angels. This way we lose 10 percent, max.

Gabriel: It just doesn't sound . . . right.

God: Look, Gabriel, the bottom line is this: *How many can we win to Me?* That's all that ultimately matters. *How* we win them isn't really a factor. A little lie here, a shortcut there . . . Anyway, afterward they'll thank us.

Gabriel: I suppose so, Lord.

God: As I said, believe Me. □

In the heat of the game, what really matters?

"Breathe, Justin, Breathe!"

One of the longest basketball games ever played—sixty-nine days from the opening tip to final buzzer—didn't even run into overtime. The game began on December 2, 1993, and ended February 9, 1994, with a finish that moved fans on both sides to tears of joy.

On a cold Thursday night in December, the College View Academy (CVA) basketball team headed out for their first game of the season. This Lincoln, Nebraska, team, formed three years before by Coach Larry Aldred, had produced a winning record the previous year. This year I was helping coach the junior varsity and varsity teams.

Our group arrived in Palmyra, twenty-three miles from Lincoln, on schedule. After the usual player introductions and national anthem, the game began. It soon became a seesaw affair. If Palmyra ran off six points, CVA reeled off six of their own. The packed gym pulsed with energy. Palmyra High School's pep band and nearly nonstop cheering made normal conversation impossible.

With less than five minutes left in the game and Palmyra ahead 46–42, Justin Schober, a six-foot-two CVA junior, intercepted a pass and sprinted for the opposite goal. Behind him and closing fast came Palmyra's Josh Vollertsen, a six-foot-five center who looked like an NFL linebacker—weighing 240 pounds.

Josh reached Justin at the basket. From my angle on the bench, I could see that Justin had slightly misjudged his takeoff and had drifted under the backboard so that he had to lean back, off-balance, to make the lay-up.

That's when Josh Vollertsen reached him. Josh leaped and swatted at the ball, hitting Justin's arm and head instead.

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A hard foul. Not a dirty foul, but one intended to prevent an easy basket. The referee blew his whistle instantly. But Josh's momentum carried him into Justin's legs, spinning him like a pinwheel. Already off-balance, Justin didn't break the fall with his arms, and his left temple smacked unprotected onto the floor.

I've watched thousands of games, seen millions of drives to the hoop, but I've never seen anything like what followed.

As the whoops from the Palmyra side subsided, Justin lay inert under the basket. The referee approached him lying there, then pivoted toward the stands and started yelling, "EMT! EMT!"

For an agonizing moment, nobody moved. Then six people clambered down the wooden stands and ran across the court. Blood pooled around Justin's head. His eyes rolled back. Anxious teammates pressed toward him and then turned away, their faces masks of revulsion. Justin's father joined the group kneeling under the basket.

One of the first to reach Justin was Rich Carlson, chaplain at Union College and a trained emergency medical technician. He and the others attempted to open an airway, for Justin had ceased breathing. Though they spoke to him repeatedly, he didn't respond. Eventually, Carlson had to thrust his finger down Justin's throat to hold open the airway. He would keep his finger extended there, first aching and then numb, for the next twenty-five minutes.

The six people kneeling around Justin obscured everything from the watching crowd except his giant white basketball shoes. They couldn't see the helpers checking his vital signs and stemming the bleeding. Then one horrific, chilling plea from an EMT reverberated throughout the silent gymnasium: "Breathe, Justin, *breathe!*"

As long as I live, I won't forget that plea.

People prayed. Shocked fans silently cried and hugged each other. Nobody left. The gym was eerily quiet.

Josh Vollertsen wept. We later learned that his father had died in his arms a few months earlier. One look at Justin had brought back the terror and sadness of his dad's death.

The scoreboard still read 46-42. Time—4:21.

While Justin lay under the basket, the CVA team huddled and prayed. After the ambulance attendants wheeled Justin away, our team met in the locker room. Coach Aldred asked whether they wanted to continue the game.

"I sure don't feel like it," one player admitted.

"No way I'm going to play now," another declared.

The team emerged from the room. Coach Aldred informed the public-address announcer that CVA had decided not to continue.

And then an incredibly classy thing happened. Each member of the CVA team walked to the other end of the court, where Josh Vollertsen sat on the bench, head in his hands. Every player shook Josh's hand, telling him there were no hard feel-

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ings and that it was just an accident. The crowd watched in stunned amazement.

As the final player shook hands, the crowd rose to their feet to give the CVA team a standing ovation. Days later, a letter to the editor of the *Lincoln Journal* nominated the entire CVA team for sportsmen of the year.

A somber caravan made its way from Palmyra to Lincoln General Hospital, where Justin had been admitted. Consoling one another, longing for some hint of good prognosis, seventy people filled a waiting area next to the emergency entrance. Justin's mother, attending a nursing instructors' convention in Indianapolis, had been notified of the accident and would fly back to Lincoln in the morning.

In time, the gathering received sobering news: Justin was in a coma. He had suffered a brain-stem bruise, with some bleeding in the ventricles and several small bruises in his brain. At about one o'clock in the morning, the supporters, some of them from Palmyra, went home.

Justin's condition made the city newspaper and the TV news. College View Academy received scores of calls from residents of Palmyra and Lincoln, inquiring about Justin's progress and always adding, "We're praying for him." One caller said that she offered a prayer for Justin at every stoplight. Another person related that all of Palmyra was praying.

While the doctors found Justin progressing more rapidly than anticipated, he was still unconscious. Various churches, cutting across denominational lines, held prayer vigils for him. Television news reports updated his progress. A TV reporter interviewed three of the CVA players to hear how they had been affected. Senior Brian Carlson remarked, "We'll all sleep a lot better when Justin wakes up."

Justin was moved to Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital and remained in a coma for five days.

And then, he woke up.

It was a gradual awakening. At first, he could only open his eyes. He couldn't track a figure crossing the room. He didn't recognize people, not even his girlfriend. He couldn't speak. He couldn't feed himself. He couldn't walk.

Every day he made amazing progress. One day he spoke three words. The next day he said three sentences. He smiled at someone. He sat up. He stood without help. Jeff Sparks, a student at Union College who had himself recovered from a traumatic brain injury, spent time with Justin and his family.

Get-well cards and letters poured in, including a banner signed by scores of students at Palmyra High School. Justin was told he would need at least three months of therapy, perhaps a year. Justin later related, "Three months seemed an eternity. I was driven by the need to get out of there and back to school."

Five weeks after being admitted to Madonna, Justin was released. His family and friends maintain that his remarkably speedy progress was the direct result of prayer.



The final 4:21 of the game was rescheduled for February 9. Although Justin wouldn't run the court, he was slated to shoot his two free throws.

However, the conditions of the December 2 game could not all be duplicated. The clock did still read 4:21, and the same players and referees stood on the court, but Justin wasn't wearing his original uniform, which had been cut away in the ambulance. He looked paler, and his reflexes weren't nearly as quick. Another difference was that in the crowd sat newspaper and television reporters from Lincoln and Omaha.

Justin stepped to the free-throw line, drew a deep breath, focused, and lofted his shot. He sank it. Players from both teams gave him five, while the crowd on both sides roared with delight—standing up, whistling, stomping, and applauding. Justin shot the next one and missed. Time-out was called. Amid thunderous applause he walked steadily to the bench, where he watched the rest of the game.*

Justin later quipped to the *Lincoln Journal*, “At least I canned one. I said a prayer before I shot. I should have said two prayers.”

To this day, Justin remembers nothing of his collision with Josh Vollertsen, nor any part of that December game when time stood still. Though Justin expects a near-complete recovery, he and all of us who saw the accident know we will never be the same.

“It's made me a changed person,” Palmyra Coach Mark Oltman told the *Journal*. “I think of kids more as people, and not just my athletes.”

The value of competitive sports will continue to be debated, and so it should be. For once, at least, God transcended the game. Those of us who witnessed all sixty-nine days know the truth behind the scripture, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me” (Psalm 23).

When we look at the stat book of Justin Schober's life, we credit God with the biggest rebound of all. □

The wind howled in my helmet. I stopped moving. What was happening?

All the Way Out

My legs dangle out the door. The roaring wind whips them at 110 miles per hour.

“Right now?” I ask plaintively. Clearly, I'm stalling.

*Palmyra won, 58–52.

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Dave Schwartz, our licensed jumpmaster, again commands, "Get all the way out."

The "landing" over the plane's right tire that I'm supposed to step on looks to be the size of a Barney sticker. Three thousand feet beneath my basketball shoes extends a golden grid of Nebraska's harvested fields.

I move out grudgingly, cautiously, gingerly, like a 103-year-old stepping off a curb. I grasp the wing strut, and my legs blow behind me as my gloved hands slide along until my chute pack jams under the belly of the wing. The wind howls in my helmet. I stop moving.

"Get all the way out!" yells Dave.

From this height, I should land in about three minutes. If neither parachute deploys, I land in twenty seconds, flat. I know the best way to ensure a safe static-line jump is to "get all the way out." So I do.

After I've let go, arched, and—*whap jolt wheee*—succumbed to sensory overload, I find myself floating to earth. A voice (my *bestest* friend in the whole world, whoever he is) talks me down through a radio tucked into my left shoulder sleeve. "Turn left." "Flare now." "Turn right." I steer for the grassy airstrip of Weeping Water, which seems an unfortunate name for a skydiving destination.

For the past twenty-five years I had longed to skydive, but Yolanda wouldn't consent. "I need you around here," she observed bluntly. Thus, I interpreted her decision to grant permission as both good news and bad news.

Actually, I'm not endeared to heights. Ladders and roofs raise concerns. I get nervous watching children climb tall trees. Fellow hikers stride confidently to peer over cliffs, while I've been known to crawl to the edge. Perhaps I desired this experience not in spite of my unease but because of it.

My two skydiving companions and I were superbly trained. On Thursday night, we watched two hours of videos and asked every conceivable question. "What if," I asked improbably, "the static line doesn't release me and I'm being dragged behind the plane like those messages that used to fly around stadiums?"

"Then," Dave said with a smile, "we cut you loose."*

Sunday morning we practiced PLFs (parachute landing falls) from a picnic bench seat. (Elevation: eighteen inches.) We entered a hangar and hung from a harness, made an X-arch, and counted "*One* one thousand, *two* one thousand . . ." to five. We peered up at photos of possible chute malfunctions.

"What are you going to do?" Dave asked, jerking, twisting, and bouncing my harness. "You don't have much time!"

"Uh . . . look, pull, and release." Or, "Pump the toggles."

*Of course, I still would have my two parachutes, along with my "Enroll at Union College" banner.

Do JUSTLY

Repeatedly, we reviewed each possible problem and practiced our reactions until Dave was satisfied. We climbed into the plane to simulate what would happen in the air. I actually gripped the wing strut and, walking on solid ground, slid “all the way out.” We completed a written test and discussed every answer. Throughout the process, Dave remained honest, accessible, and helpful. At the end of my training, I had faith that I knew what I needed to know.

Faith is trust. Period.

So when we talk of building or growing faith, let’s affirm that *training breeds faith*. My faith grew as I learned and practiced what should happen in a real-life situation.

The same is true for church life. Wouldn’t it be helpful if we were *trained* to respond justly to church malfunctions? Suppose a special class was created where a spiritual trainer held up pictures and asked, “What are you going to do now?” Our brainstorming and problem solving could ensure the best possible outcomes. We could even substitute parachuting terms for church malfunctions members may encounter:

Bag lock—church offices perennially locked up

Horseshoe—attendance down, tensions up, morale dropping fast

Slider up snivel—judgmental lip curling and finger pointing

End cell closure—unwillingness to deal with reality and necessary change

Streamer—ethical compromise by church leader

When these malfunctions hit, how do young people, new converts, and even older members handle them? Do we know how to react? Have we considered the options? Far too often we take believers up without training, throw open the door, and say, “God bless!”

That’s not good enough. It’s no wonder people won’t go all the way out in faith. If I hadn’t benefited from Dave’s superb training, I don’t know that I could have gotten out of the plane even though I’d paid my money. For the actual skydive, Dave strapped a video camera to his helmet to record the “precious moments.” Look closely at the video. Uncertainty and terror spark in my eyes when the door is thrown open to the roaring. *I hadn’t anticipated the force of the wind.*

Of course, reality is surprisingly powerful. No amount of training fully prepares us. There comes a time when you must battle your howling fears and step out on your own. *You can do it.*

Fortunately, God is with you, directing the way. Isaiah, chapter 30, promises, “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.”

Letting go is not only leaving. It’s arriving. It’s listening to the good, true voice of the Holy Spirit—our bestest Friend in the whole world—who guides us home. □