

The Wisdom Letters

By Tom Atkins



The Wisdom Letters

Volume 1

Excerpts from the letters of
Tom Atkins

idea monger...

... poet, writer of fiction and non-fiction, teacher, dramatist, artist,
Professional creative, video engineer/consultant, change agent,
Corporate evangelist, father, Christian, friend....

Originally compiled by Jack and Heather Herzig, Philadelphia, PA.

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The story behind this book.

Years ago, I was in a bad place. I had been a writer most all of my adult life, writing poems, stories, novels, business proposals, marketing briefs – all sorts of things. Yet somehow life had conspired to sap my writing out of me.

Without writing, I felt I was no longer myself. Something essential was missing, and I could not find my way back.

My friend, Jack Herzig, however, had other ideas.

I had met Jack in graduate school at Hollins in the early eighties, and we had kept up a correspondance that spanned decades. We wrote letters, then e-mails every day and the topics spanned day to day events to religion, to history, to personal philosophies.

Jack and his wife Heather compiled a group of these letters into a printed volume and gave it to me as an encouragement. And it worked.

Friends heard about what he did, and asked to read it. Their praise was almost breathtaking. I heard over and over again how this passage or that passage helped them resolve something in their own minds that they had been wrestling with. It was from one of those early readers that gave them the name, “The Wisdom Letters”.

So, almost on a whim, I recreated the book as an e-book. This was in the 1990’s, when there was no such thing as an e-book. But I created it as a PDF, and made it available on my web site as a free download. Thousands of people downloaded it. I am still a little overwhelmed by the numbers of people who have read this small volume in the last decade.

Now, technology has made so many new things possible. We have Kindles and Nooks and other electronic book formats. So I recreated it once again for these new outlets, and also made it available in a printed version. You can get it bound, or as a PDF, and it is still free (except for the printed and bound version).

The writing here is over ten years old. Yet, when you deal with ideas instead of fads, that seems to matter less. I hope you find something interesting, or helpful, or at the very least, enjoyable.



Tom Atkins
founder, Quarry House

Seeing Patterns and taking in the Whole

I am not good at facts. Never have been. I can read and study for ages, and the facts and details elude my memory. I have always admired those who could rattle off reams of bible verses or scripture. Not for me. I can't even remember half a dozen phone numbers. But I know that knowledge is important. I know there are lessons to be learned there.

So I dump more information in than you can shake a stick at. I read. I study. But I don't just read non-fiction. I read fiction on the times and themes I am looking at. I read poetry centered on those same times and themes. I do it until my poor brain is bewildered and reeling. And then I stop.

The stopping is as important as the reading and learning. I stop. I let things settle. I start to see patterns develop. I develop what I call "a sense of things," a set of principles that are largely, but not always true . . .

When I was working on my masters degree, I had to take a foreign language exam. I had to pass the exam to get my degree. And I did not prepare. Suddenly the exam was just weeks away and I had not looked at any French for, well... years. I knew I was doomed and that all the work I had done on my degree was about to be wasted.

Fortunately there were two french exchange students at Hollins who I had become friends with. And they decided I would not fail this exam. For two or three weeks, we spent large amounts of time together. We went out to eat. We shopped. We went for walks, and they only spoke french and only allowed me to speak french. At first I was hopelessly lost. Then it began to make sense, and when the exam time came, I did fine. That pattern has repeated itself again and again.

If I have a sense of things, of the spirit of a person and the facts of their life, or the trends in an industry, or the character of an organization, more times than not, I will be OK. Perfect? – No, but even armed with perfect knowledge we will make mistakes. But seeking the patterns in life, I will have, if not complete understanding, at least enough understanding that I can serve others well, serve myself well, and serve God well. I will have a sense of life.

While I have a strong sense of the Bible and how one part relates to another, I have a terrible memory for specific verses and readings. In fact I am lousy at memorizing anything.

As a result of that flaw, I have rarely had a single verse or book influence me, inspire me or move me as Psalm 30 has you. The good news about that flaw is that it also means that no single phrase has perplexed me, angered me or confused me. Instead it is the patterns I find that inspire me and drive me. It is not a single saying of Jesus; it is the patterns in his life. It is not any act of David, but his wholeness, greatness and flaws together. It is not any Law of Moses, but his transformations. One of my students calls me the last of the generalists.

I'm that way about everything. I don't even try to balance the checkbook. I just round my checks up when I write them in the register and round them down when I put money in. I figure my jobs and business plans the same way, big estimates, good concepts and few details. Somehow I end up the most profitable sales guy most every year. I manage loosely but the people who work for me do well. I run things I do at church all too loosely, and yet most things succeed.

Sometimes I think we put too much faith in the details. When we sit in a Spring garden, we rarely take in and examine each flower, analyze each sweet smell, or measure the temperature and speed of the breeze. Instead we notice the overall effect of it, take in a few details, and enjoy.

It's a shame we can't do the same for ourselves. We so often go into a catalog of our flaws, yet fail to take in the whole. And the whole of most people is a pretty good thing.

If we could somehow see the whole, ignoring the few dead petals or brown stems, we'd see what a wondrous garden of life God has created in most of us. Your friend Dany is right, God loves diversity. He went out his way to create it and nourish it. It can be found even inside a single person.

A poem.....

The porch sags as you step across and off.
Dry grass cracks against your feet, sounding
like sparks as you walk.

You crest the hill, watching colors mute
as light slips into the lake for the night.
You have come to say your goodbyes.

At first it is still, like a postcard or a painting;
the light soft and orange as dusk
leaves the valley.

A hare careens up the path towards you
and darts into the heavy August underbrush.

Not a leaf trembles.

On the shore a snake cuts the sand, stark
and lean, no lump of past meals showing
in his flowing black line.

Two thin creeks feed the lake, and deer jump
them, splashing in the surrounding mud,
then merging with the night.

Fish break the water. Lake frogs harmonize
with their tee bound cousins. Warm against your skin,
tears fall.

Three years. Three good years and no photographs
to share in years yet to pass. Nothing to show
your friends, waiting in the city.

Walking towards the distant glow of the city,
fireflies flicker the horizon like an old movie;
one you will watch again, and again.

Things

I'm not really big on things. I have enough (too many?) of them. More things mean more things to go wrong, break down and generally be a problem. I like life simple. But some things are very comforting.

Take my desk chair. Nothing hugely special about it. A semi-antique rolling desk chair from the turn of the century. Mahogany. Nice but no collector's piece. My parents gave it to me for Christmas a few years ago, so it has some sentimental value, but not in the same way a family heirloom might. I refinished it and did a pretty good job. It's pretty but not classic. Not perfect. Especially not perfect since one of the legs shattered a few weeks ago.

I was surprised how much I missed that chair. It is extremely comfortable, wrapping its solid arms around you, the back just so. I have spent untold hours working, reading and writing in that chair. It just seemed to fit me and the room. The substitute chair worked fine. I was no less efficient. But there was no sense of comfort in it. No sense of the ages wrapping around you.

I have spent three nights fixing it as best I could. Now it is less perfect, but the comfort remains. I am happy to have it back, happy to be able to lean back in it as I think, as I write you this.

It's a little thing, like the sound of rain on a tin roof, or the soft breathing of the woman you love next to you late at night, but it is the little things that make life.

Cats

I have always enjoyed cats. I can hardly remember a time without cats around. I don't remember anything about our first cat except its death. It was hit by a car in front of our house. We weren't at home, but whoever hit it laid the poor animal on our house. We weren't home, but whoever hit it laid the poor animal on our doorstep, which is where we found her. I remember seeing her small black and white body limp on the steps, and the great sense of loss. Mom and Dad tell me that I was three at the time.

Most of our cats have had lots of personality. Some nights I dream of one or the other of them and wake up amazed that it is 1995 and the cat I was just remembering so vividly has been dead many years. Sometimes I pet D'Artagnan and call him Liebowitz because like Liebowitz he is much too affectionate to be a mere cat.

Cats can give themselves to pure pleasure, give themselves to it completely, in a way humans rarely do. Even when we are enjoying ourselves thoroughly, parts of our minds are at work, thinking ahead, planning, wondering, worrying.

Not cats. When they are in your lap enjoying your petting there is nothing else in the world for them. Sure, they might run out of food in an hour, or be thrown out in the cold and rain, but for now there is goodness and pleasure, and life's only purpose is to enjoy the moment.

You think I'm kidding? Go to a bad section of town and reach out to the scrawniest, hungriest looking stray cat you can find. In thirty seconds he will be rubbing against you, enjoying the attention, purring as if there was nothing else in the world but this moment of pleasure.

I envy them that ability and all my life have striven to capture it. It is hard work for me, because, like most people, parts of one portion of my life leak into other parts, so if I am enjoying myself, thoughts of what else is, or could come, creep into my thoughts. Or at least they used to.

In the past few years, I have developed some of a cat's ability to enjoy the moment no matter what, and that is so refreshing.

Gearshift Cars

I have always liked cars with gearshifts. For some people they are just too much trouble, but I like them. Somehow, when I am choosing what gear I am in and when they shift, I feel more in control of the car, more in tune with it. And I can adjust tiny things in how it

drives to make a car either peppier or more gas efficient, and the choice is mine, at the moment, with immediate feedback.

As so, late last week, I read an article in Utne Reader about time, where the writer says that the problem in most people's lives is not too little time, but too much time on auto pilot, running at an unrelenting pace, with the sense of no control. What she suggests is that we all need times of intensity, but that we need to stagger that time, to shift gears. Most of us only get a chance to do that in the evening, but she suggests that we do it constantly, many times through the day.

Hard for me to do. I tend to either be on (and when I am on I am intensely focused for hours at a time) or off completely off.

I've been trying that technique over the past week, and it seems to be helping a bit. It takes a discipline I've never used before, an active decision not to finish something you have been focused on for an hour or two in favor of something less important, but more restful.

I'm fortunate in that I have more control over my time than most. My situation in work is unique, and I appreciate that about where I am today. Still, going against a nature developed over forty plus years is hard. And long term may be impossible. But I need to do it (or do something), so it is worth the effort.

And I do like gearshift cars.

Money

It has happened twice now.

The first time it was the husband of a young couple. Married about 4 years. Just bought a house about two years ago. Had a baby girl less than a year ago. Both had good jobs. Both fun people to be around. One of those couples you felt good about.

But now we find out that the husband has been spending vast amounts of their money on something (We have no idea what.) He ran through their savings, then began not paying bills (paying them was his job in the household.) and not paying insurance on things. Suddenly she finds that they have to sell their house. The cars are re-possessed, and have thirty to forty thousand dollars in debt.

Yes, she's got family around her, and yes, a lot of people are coming to her aid with gifts of money, but the feeling of betrayal, and the sense of her life collapsing around her is overwhelming.

And then there is another couple, about our age. Her mom has MS, and her sister had volunteered to most of the taking care of mom. So her sister got power of attorney. In less

than a year they pillaged mom's CD's, taking her life savings from \$300,000 to less than \$3,000. Her house, which was paid for now has a \$100,000 second mortgage on it and is about to be foreclosed. And worse, this couple, who is financially stressed because they are taking care of his mom, now have to take care of her mom as well, because her sister has no use for mom now that she has taken everything. . Again: Betrayal, hurt, and a pain that will last for a long time.

None of the takers were the least bit poor. None of them seriously lacked. They had good jobs, homes, all the trappings of middle class America. None of them spent the money on anything of lasting value. They went on vacations. They bought clothes. They replaced their nice cars with nicer ones.

But something about having access to that money just drove them to do something that they knew was wrong, and hurt people they professed to love deeply. It has shattered families, hopes and in the case of small children, futures.

Everyone here is counting their blessings, but it also has a lot of people looking at people they trusted and wonder - could that happen to us? You can almost feel the stress.

In some cases, these things have spawned incredible generosity. Hundreds, even thousands of dollars from people at church have gone to these people who were ruined. Not enough to get them back perhaps, but enough to help, and more importantly - enough to help restore their sense of trust for people. They at least know they are cared for. Letters and cards of support arrive almost daily.

Still, what is it about money? I know we need it. But so often, the money that gets us in trouble, that makes us do things we would never normally do is not money for things we need. Instead it is the money beyond what we need, to get things far beyond what we need.

Case in point: I know of a couple in Richmond that won the Virginia Lottery a year ago. 2 million dollars. \$100,000 a year for the rest of their lives. They had lived a good life and were near retirement age. This meant they could both retire early and well with no worries. But now that they had more than they needed, they began to fight. About money. A year later they are in the midst of a bitter divorce after 37 years of marriage. The irony is that after the lawyers are done, There won't be much to fight over for the next few years. They will both have to go back to work.

Another case: In our own church, the bitterest fight we have ever had was over money. Not doctrines or people, but money. And found money at that. After all, we have always been financially solvent. Most years we have a sizable surplus which we have always given away. But when we were left a couple hundred thousand dollars in a will, the fights over what to do with that money almost split our church.

I hear the same sorts of stories over and over. I don't pretend to understand. But then I see money as a necessary evil; and excess money as something to give away to people or groups who really need it. If we were to win the lottery, I wouldn't worry.

But I grieve for those who find themselves enslaved by it, and grieve more by those who are betrayed because of it. It would be one thing to be betrayed for another person, but for extra money? The horror and sadness of it haunts me.

The glasses we wear

My life colors what I write, but the reverse is true as well: what I write colors how I see .

I was about 8 or nine, and spending one of my many weekends at my grandfather's house. It was mid-day in August, a hot, humid time of year when you stayed out of the mid-day heat. We had finished morning chores and eaten lunch, and granddaddy decided to go lay down for a nap. He laid his glasses on the kitchen table and went off to his bedroom. Grandmother went off to join him.

I read for a while, but got bored with what I was reading, and picked up his glasses and put them on. The world looked suddenly very different. Things loomed big, blurry and even scary. The familiar looked unfamiliar. I walked around the house, amazed that this place that was so much a part of my life had suddenly turned so strange. I sighed a big sigh of relief when I got back to the kitchen and laid those glasses back on the table.

It's the kind of thing that happens to kids all the time, but I learned then, and never forgot, that so much of what we see and know depends on the glasses we wear.

I tend to romanticize people I like. I know I do it. Even when I know the faults and weaknesses of those I like and/or care about, I tend to see them in glowing terms and feelings. I tend to talk about them in warm terms.

Most of us have split personalities . . . Often our focus on one side blinds us to the other. The practical blinds us to the artistic, the responsible blinds us to the bohemian.

Vision

I've always had vision. Years before I hammered the first nail, I knew just what my basement would look like. Long before I wrote *The Prophecy of Peter*, I knew how it would be, the texture, the mood, the characters. Months before a poem or play was finished, I knew how it should be. If it failed . . . or it took re-write after re-write, it was my execution, not my vision that failed me.

I never realized until this past year how important that vision was to me; how it drove me and gave me purpose; how it was like the northern star, a beacon for me to navigate by; how it acted like a light on the horizon on a dark, dark night; how it strengthened me; how it gave me peace.

When we focus on goals first, we set ourselves up for disappointment, for the confidence and enjoyment of those successes is necessarily limited to the reaching of those goals. And if we don't reach them, or don't reach them entirely? Bad news for the ego. And it made worse by the fact that so many factors outside our control play into whether we reach those goals. You can be good at something. You can have real talent. You can work hard, and still never reach the goal. And so you are branded (often by yourself more than society) as a loser.

But if we focus on who we are and how we are made, and strive to do what we do in concert with those things, then the goal is almost secondary to how we do what we do - and that is something we do have control over. One of the few things.

Idealism

I suffer from idealism despite everything (or at least most) of what I see in life. The good happens just enough to keep hope alive. Despite the cynicism of the age (and we are a terribly cynical age), most people do not realize how much society runs on hope and on trust.

Without it we as people, and we as society are toast.

I tend towards idealism. You get burned, hurt and generally beat up emotionally over it, but the alternative is a bleakness I am not willing to accept from the same God that gave us tulips, kittens, small children and mountain vistas.

Realism vs. Growth

Many of us would never try anything, would never grow past a certain point, if we did not think we were something beyond what we are.

If I was realistic, I never would have tried to get into Grad School, not at VCU where I studied before Hollins, and certainly not to Hollins, a nationally known writing school, when I had little experience as a writer. After all, realistically I have never been particularly smart or a particularly good student.

I can remember when I went to my first Graduate class at VCU, a class on Metaphysical Poets. I was so pleased at having gotten into a graduate program, and was feeling pretty cocky about myself.

The prof came in and began to lecture. he talked for two hours and I was completely over my head after he got past "Hi. I'm professor Sarkin." I spent the first several weeks feeling totally stupid and realizing I probably had no business being in grad school. But I toughed it out. I became a better student. I eventually got good enough to actually be a grad student. By the time I went to Hollins I was somewhere near the level I needed to be. The same thing has happened to me in business. I tend to jump in over my head again and again. I damn near drown every time, but eventually seem to figure it out and do OK. I get better at what I do. I learn new things. But the truth is, I'm never as good as I think I am when I begin.

I've always wanted to be one of those people who seem to have a feeling of destiny about themselves. Alexander the Great simply expected great things of himself from his youth. Some artists and businessmen seem to have a sense of "I am great. I can do this." about everything they do. I wish I had it.

But even not having it, I tend to overestimate my ability time and time again, get in too deep, and drag myself up a notch.

What if I was realistic? WOULD I ever try those things? Probably not. What if pastors (or rabbis) were realistic and said: most of my work will make little difference in the world. It's tough and most everyone I speak to will fail time and time again. Why try? What if we always picked our wives sensibly - think of the loves that would never have happened, the poems and love songs that would never have been written.. The list goes on.

So while we can be maddeningly unsensible much of the time (and we are), sometimes that lack of sense can lead to many wonderful things. Maybe as George Carlin once said in one of his comedy routines: reality is highly over rated."

I think God knows that. That is why forgiveness is as much a part of his nature as creation or retribution. He knows we need it when we fail. And he knows how

forgiveness can give us the freedom and the opportunity to do great things even when all seems to be lost. He knows it. We seem to forget.

One of my big gripes about politics is that we never allow people to grow and thus to change. If we change, then we "flip - flop". Yet a person who is incapable of changing as a result of events and time, could be a dangerous person indeed. Unfortunately, that is often the sort that gets into power, because of their ability to paint an evolving person as weak, as having no values, as even being unstable.

Fears and Failure

The biggest thing I have learned from my own fears and failures is that few things are irrevocable, that there are always second chances. I have learned that from my own family. When he was about my age (and I was about to go to college), my father left his secure job to start his own company. He lost everything. The last few months we all lived in fear. But we survived. I got through college somehow. He went on to discover something he loved, made a very good living with the independence he craves, and will soon be retiring well.

You blow it, you learn, you go on. Sometimes you repeat often. Some people never learn the lessons. But thoughtful people . . . do learn, do grow, do change, and at some point put it together and succeed (only, if you are like me, you find something new to fail at and learn from, and . . . I think there is a pattern here).

When I worked for AMPEX, the president of the company had a plaque on his desk that read, "Everything I am today, I owe to my failures." I remember asking him if he really believed that.

He said yes.

"Does that mean that you are tolerant of others' failures," I asked.

"Only if they learn from them." And he was true to his word . . .

It has been only recently that father actually told me that he was proud of me. Over the past few years, I often felt he was, but recently he actually told me and that he was proud of me, and I was actually surprised at what he told me he was most proud of . . .

"You're not afraid to fail," he said. . . While I am (very often) afraid that I will fail, I am not afraid of the failure itself. Failure does not make me a failure, it just gives me the tools to try again, to succeed somewhere ahead. The consequences of failing are less than the horror of not trying, of wondering, "could I have, if I only tried . . ."

And that is one of my biggest fears, that I will lose something great by not trying, by not taking a chance. Most of the truly wonderful things in my life came about because I took a chance. . . . The thought that I might not have those things most precious to me because I wanted to avoid failing is horrifying.

Choices

I am good at finding alternatives. Life is full of them. There is always another path, another way. Life never ends. It only changes. If we don't change with it, we can become bitter and dead inside. If we do, we will find something new in ourselves and in life around us.

I think the reason we become victims (and we all do it at least some of the time) is that it is hard to admit that we have a choice. If (no, make that when) we fail, we don't want to say we are weak or we failed or we blew it. Fate, circumstances, events, those things change and mold us and sometimes force choices, but the broader choices: faith, happiness, bitterness and anger are ours. We can choose one over the other.

Life is collected in small volumes
on a shelf over the fireplace.
I sit there too, watching
the death of unintended flames.

It's a subtle set of chains
the years have rusted around me.
Ah, but rust isn't fatal
if you catch it in time.

I have made some good choices, . . . but often they were when I chose to follow my nature rather than my brains. Going to Hollins was a whim that shaped a big portion of my personality. Moving to the cabin was a silly notion that brought me pleasure, joy and wisdom for many years.

Somewhere along the way, I realized that any decision I made could be changed. If I was wrong . . . so what? I learn and I move on. Mostly though, I learned to trust my heart more than my brain. When I follow my brain, I make safe, logical decisions that have little to do with the spirit that makes me who I am. I can live with less money, less prestige, less comfort if I can have more freedom, more adventure, and more challenge.

I know that seems simplistic, but that is the other thing I learned. Life, even a spiritual life (perhaps especially a spiritual life), is simpler than society would have you believe.

Right or wrong, we learn certain lessons that guide us, hold us up, or limit us terribly. And those lessons wrap themselves around us for our entire lives, with both the good and the bad.

If you really want to change your life, you have to do it incrementally, the same way you learned the first set of habits. You have to learn (by reading or lecture or whatever), then try it out in tiny steps, proving your new reality a tiny bit at a time, the way you learned the old truths, until slowly, almost without your realizing it, the new truths supplant the old ones.

The advantage that we have is that we can be more systematic, and more disciplined in re-learning than most of us were in learning originally. . . .

The dangerous time is when you have made real progress. You want to leap ahead, or worse, you think you have somehow arrived and then stop before the old lessons are unlearned or the new ones are not thoroughly ingrained. We make a stretch that we are often unprepared to deal with.

And when in doubt, we always fall back on our old ways, our old fears and our old weaknesses. It is human nature. We are all children. . . .

Be gentle with yourself. Know it is a long journey. Know that there is much in you to be admired, enjoyed and not thrown out as you work to change the things you would like to.

Setting Priorities

I have read for years that it was important to take some time at the start of the day to look over the day ahead, to look at what has to be done, and to hold that against your priorities and see how well they mesh. A day that is well thought out and focused, the writers say, will be a better day than a day that is not.

This theory seems to be held by a variety of people, from the business-oriented time management folks, to creative types like Julia Cameron (author of *The Artist's Way*). Hmm... I say, after being hit over the head by this thought hundreds of times. Maybe there is something to it.

So for the past couple of weeks I make a real effort to take some time at the start of the day to look at my day and week ahead. Is there any overall theme to the day and week? Is the day or week balanced with things that are important? Are there any less important things I can just not do or shift off to someone else? Is there time out to think, pray, spend

with my family, love, laugh? If not, what business can I move aside to make time for those things?

The results have been astonishing. I have been able to do an amazing amount of stuff, and have time for the important things. How is this possible? Am I fooling myself? is it temporary? These are questions I have no answers to yet.

However, yesterday, I began the day the way I have been doing it for the past several years, waking up with too many things to do, a frazzled mind, a disjointed sense of what had to be done. I was responding to a sense of urgency, not a sense of importance. I ran around all day, frantically doing things, from 4 a.m. until 10 at night. And at the end of the time I was frazzled, and hadn't done anything worthwhile, at work or home or church.

I began today that way too, about 4 in the morning. There was so much to do I couldn't seem to get a grip on any of it. Then, a short while ago, I stopped. I shut my eyes and recited my favorite Bible verse: "Be still and know I am God." and refocused. I made a list of the four major concerns in my life: My faith, my family, my creativity, my work. I added to that list the things that motivates me in all of these things - helping people reach their own potential, and then began making my to-do lists, putting the things to do in the right category. Suddenly things all fell into place. Suddenly it did not look so daunting.

Achieving Balance

The tendency is for either side to take over. The knowledge/order side wants to rule. So does the spiritual side. Each wants to rule.

It takes discipline. as much discipline as the brightest egg-head or the most spiritual mystic. Taking time. Studying. Then stopping. Looking at things in context . . . Work at the balance, because that is what we are - a mixture.

And it takes an acceptance that things are not going to be settled, perfect, or right, that moments of all these things exist, but not for eternity. That is a journey through, not a journey to. For some, acceptance means giving in, but I do not mean that. I mean that we treasure the good when it comes . . . and realize that all of it, good and bad is fleeting, but worth the seeking. Loving what is, hoping for what can be, and realizing that even the worst of things is only a place we pass through. That there is no destination, only the journey.

Keeping Focused

Years ago, I read a book and heard a lecturer on the subject "Happiness is a Choice" I scoffed, but as I get older, I see some truth in that. No, we cannot be happy all the time. Events sometimes rip us apart, but rarely do events rip at us day in and day out. Instead we let a few events ruin the rest of our lives, let our fear rule reality.

And the reality is that there is much good in almost all lives. People who care for them. The incredible beauty of nature. The taste of food. Talents known and yet to be discovered. Triumphs. Passion. A world of ideas. What astonishing gifts!

So the "trick" is to learn to tap those positive things. Let them be our focus. Don't focus on what we can't do, but on what we can. Events may shape our lives, but they cannot, cannot rule, unless we let them.

I find we cede that rule in times of weakness. That is why it is so important to know ourselves, and know God.

God

God loves diversity, and probably tolerates it much better than man does. He loves us for making the journey; the details of how we got there are not so important to him.

God rewards those who search.

So often we tend to evaluate and debate and wrestle religious "issues" down, trying to get at some imaginary truth. We expend a great deal of time and effort and argument and emotional and spiritual energy on such things, so much in fact, that we lose sight of the real truth, something that can be realized by any ordinary man if he does not cloud his mind with other things.

And that is the simple power and glory of God. Awesome used to mean something. The mere fact that God can create all this out of nothing, can make and change the so called laws of nature, can reduce the powerful and raise the flawed is enough to stir many to true worship. And it should be. For God to be God, he must be something so far beyond our understanding that even our best efforts to decipher him are the weakest of translations.

But we try so hard to make God one of us, as if that spark of him that is in us somehow makes us equals, and that he and his nature can be explained on our terms. So we cloud his nature, or hide from it, with facts and arguments and laws, without focusing on the first law: Love your God with all your might . . . The simple act of devout prayer can do more for our souls than all the discourse in the world. Yet somehow we often forget that.

God knows us, really knows us, and knows our weaknesses. What we most fear - that we will not be loved if we are truly known (warts, weaknesses and all) - is not what happens. He does love us, forgives us, and continues to give us beauty, opportunity and grace. Another lesson for us to learn.

For better or worse, God gave us a world and life that is both material and spiritual. We ignore either of them at our peril. To live without either is dangerous, fruitless, and ultimately, sad.

We try and purify our minds by focusing on God, letting Him fill us rather than the stuff of the world, which more often than not is selfish . . . Focusing on Him is a form of purification.

I'm afraid we too often try to limit God, more to give ourselves influence than to glorify God. And to try and place limits on God is a foolish delusion.

I believe that God is more like an ideal father than we realize; that He has certain things He wants us to learn, and He gives us lots of opportunities to learn them: through history, our own experience, scripture, spiritual experiences and more.

God knows (If He made us, He must know) that we humans learn best and more completely, not from success, but from failure; and so He is probably tolerant of our failures than we are, while always leading and showing us a better way. I believe (although I am in the minority among Christians, I think) that this is one of the principle messages of Christ in the gospels - not so much that He said it directly, but in the way He treated the people He came in contact with.

And if He knows this about us, He is also probably more tolerant of mis-interpretations, diversity and struggles than we are. He knows that lessons learned our way, with our own struggles and failures are lessons truly taken to heart, and lessons that can change a person, or even a people.

And so He allows us free will, to make the journey, learn the lessons our own way. He knows that his principles of goodness are so powerful, so central, that in time, with

enough opportunities to learn, we will get there. In short, He trusts us because He knows of that part of him that is in us, and that shining part will eventually prevail.

I love reading theology, but not as a path to God. That comes through reading the Bible, prayer and meditation, through the love of the beautiful and wonderful creations of God and God's people. Music. These are the paths to God and to Christ.

What is God first? A creator. And what did he do with us? Make us in his own image. Part of that image, it seems to me, is to be creative.

Why do I believe in the validity of the Bible, and of the one God your faith and mine share? Partially I am sure because it is what I was raised to believe, but also because over the millennium, despite the world's best efforts to subdue it, beat it out of God's people, force us to deny it, lure us to ignore it - it persists, creating saints, both famous and forgotten.

The basics of life are so simple to me. People are to be listened to and respected, built up and cared for. God is to be praised and worshiped, trusted and obeyed.

Everything else stems from those two things. Everything.

We're the ones who make life so complicated, with all our distractions and wants and comparisons and greed. But in the end, these are things that count.

God's truths and man's temptation to fail

We humans seem to corrupt much of what God gives us. Why? I cannot know but I suspect the answer is because we are not God. We are weak and fall to temptations of power, or money, or both. We cannot control our anger and lash out when a Godly wisdom would tell us to wait. We can see people and hear their promises, and we cannot see God (often because we do not seek him), or hear his promises (often because we do not read them.) We sometimes do not realize that just because we have the power to do something does not mean we should do it . . .

Often we are one tiny step from success, but because we are not God . . . we do not take that step, or we step backwards. And fail. And we do terrible things. Is God playing with us?. I think rather that we are playing with God, using him to exploit others, hide our own weak faith, grab power, justify our means, or to promote whatever frailty we might have. We're too busy telling others what God wants to hear. We're too busy telling God what he wants to hear. . . .

And we blow it.

The interesting thing to me is that when you take people aside, one on one, even those who publicly espouse terrible or cruel positions, and talk to them, you often find that when pushed to say what you think the ultimate rights and wrongs are, their beliefs are often close to yours and mine. They know that massacres are wrong. They know cruelty is wrong. They know lies and abuse of power is wrong. But they go back to their failed lives and continue as soon as they are away from a person who reminds them of their conscience.

In my recent struggle within my own church, one of the church leaders, a good man, . . . told me in a public setting that he never wondered if he was right about anything. "I know that I am right," he said, "I know."

And that is the heart of our problem. We aren't listening to God who says that love and care for our fellow man is second only to worship of God Himself. That message pervades much of the ancient texts. It is a theme that is hard to ignore, . . . hard to ignore, that is, if you read, and pray, and listen.

But we ignore it anyway, because of our fears, our greed, our anger. .

I don't think that there is a solution. Man has been failing since Adam. . . . Our ability to contort and ruin God's goodness seems infinite.

But there are also so many who honor him, so many who reflect his goodness, so many who do his work in a manner that is consistent with His commands. Even in the worst of times these people rise and stand out, sometimes accomplishing astonishing things, unimaginable things. Why? They listened. They worshiped. They lived lives that blaze with his love and we cannot help but notice them. They remind us of God's power to redeem, and his power period.

Most of us live live somewhere in between. And we struggle. And we learn or don't. It's not easy. It's not clear to us. That's where we both live, you and I.

The Key to God's Kingdom

If a great king was to come to our houses and give us a key to his castle, and say to us, "When you tire of this life, come live with me, in the splendor of my home, among the greatest who have ever lived, where there will be only joy and wonder." - We'd treasure that key more than anything. We would know where it was, and the state it was in and protect it always. It would hold an honored place in our lives.

That is just what we have in a soul - the key to God's kingdom. Yet we treat it so badly.

Some of us lock it in a lockbox, harden our hearts and make sure no one sees it. For us, protecting it means hiding it away, where it rusts, sometimes completely, and can never be used.

Some of us sell it. better some gold now than worry about an eternity we can never see. Or better a thrill now than an eternity that may not be. I suspect your tabloid guys have gone this route, as have many people in many walks of life. Anything for the... (job, career, power, fame... you fill in the blank.).

Some of us lose it. Life batters us so badly that in order to survive we shed the very thing that makes us human, that offers us hope, in order to survive.

But a few seem to know the secret, and have the courage to live it. The secret? That the key is wonderful, and available to all. That there is not one or two or a dozen or a hundred or thousands of keys, but as many as there are people. And to wear it outside where people can see it, is to let people know that it is available to all. That the king will let us all in if we openly live his life (wear his key, bear our souls).

Jesus

Jesus had several sides of his life and theology, and often we feel forced to choose which side to emphasize. But one thing about his life that strikes me again and again: Jesus was unfailingly kind and compassionate to those who were truly searching. Even when he felt they might have failed or were on the wrong path, if they were honestly and deeply searching for the right path, his reaction was one of kindness and compassion.

I like and trust Jesus' model in the gospels - being able to care for and love people who are doing wrong; proclaiming what is right firmly without ignoring the value and goodness in those who don't think or act according to your vision of right and wrong. I find it inspiring, but terribly hard to live.

To me, the whole message of Jesus centers around increasing inclusiveness, not merely imposing a new set of rules to limit it.

It seems to me that Jesus was much less concerned about our "denomination" or our religion, than our souls. . . . He had little use for exclusivity, and instead made sure. to include those who were so often cut out - the poor, the gentile, the Samaritan, the rich tax collector, the leper.

One of the things that my students probably tire of hearing is my core belief that Christianity really is as simple as Jesus reduced it to. You know it well - how Jesus, when asked the greatest commandment, he said simply to love God with all our hearts, but he did not stop without adding the second - to love men. All of the law, he said, boiled down to these two things. All of it.

What a statement! It has always seemed to me that if you truly believed in Jesus, either as a great teacher, or as the savior/messiah, you could not ignore this statement. You had to take it to heart, and this one statement would change your life and how you live more than any theology you could ever get.

We make it complicated, putting our emphasis and arguments into all sorts of things, all the while neglecting the core. Some of the complex theology we have wound around Jesus may well be true. I may never (in this life at least) know which is true - predestination - free will - or something in between. I may never really understand the trinity. But these two things Jesus said plainly and unmistakably clearly. These two things I can try to do. These two things are expected of me.

Scary thought. Easier to debate the numbers of angels on pinhead and the fascinating complexities of theology than to do the real thing. Much easier.

One of my favorite parables of Jesus is the one where he talks about the woman who pesters the judge for justice. he denies her and denies her but she won't go away. Finally he relents, listens to her and grants her justice. Jesus' immediate point is that we should pray and pray for things on our hearts, but there is also a larger lesson of "persistence pays" in there as well.

One of the reasons I value the traditional Baptist flavor of Christianity, is that it stresses the fact that faith is a relationship with God and a relationship with Christ. And in any relationship, each of us will see God and Jesus a certain way, and will respond to the way we see them. There is not a "right" Jesus and a "wrong" Jesus.

That is not to say there is no right or wrong, (The ten commandments still stand. Jesus's two commandments can't be ignored), but our response to Jesus can be varied and still be "right".

So the four gospels actually do us a service, turning what could be a one dimensional cartoon character to a person who is very real, very human despite his god-like goodness and power. It gives God a real, complex human face and makes a relationship seem possible. Powerful? - Yes. Yet caring and compassionate, patient and kind at the same time. No where else in the Bible are we shown the same measure of righteousness and kindness. It's a high standard, with the grace to let us fail and And the power to transform us to success.

Peter & Paul

Paul, for all his writing about grace, is still a lawgiver at heart, still the Pharisee he was before his road to Damascus experience. His rules for conduct, or what to believe and do . . . are for the most part clear, and in keeping with what the need of some level of control over a flock growing in numbers and influence, who want to fit in and gather more influence.

Peter is another thing altogether. Throughout his life, I sense that Peter was a constant "Work in Progress." He is changing, growing in understanding and even tolerance. His faith falters, falters again, grows and towers, falters, changes. Not the rock some might have wanted (just as Jesus himself was not what many wanted in a messiah), certainly not what you build a religion with growing political influence on. They could not deny Peter's importance — there was too much evidence of that already out there, but they could downplay it by choosing one of Paul's writing as the final word, and they did. The idea that someone could struggle and grow and change and still be close to the spirit of God was just too much for them to hold up as an example, even if it was truer to the human experience.

Christ and the Conscientious Objector

Your letter from Saturday arrived yesterday, so I decided to wrestle with your mental challenge so as to bide time. Your challenge, of course, was to deal with some of the questions asked of conscientious objectors. Keep in mind that I am not a C.O., and even in 1972, the year I was eligible for the draft, I didn't take that stance (To this day, I have trouble resolving in my own mind whether I should have been. Parts of me fall on both

sides of the fence). But you wondered how I would respond, and so I decided to look at them (and me).

The question: **Did not Christ say, “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”?** He did, in Matthew 22, but he was speaking very specifically at the time, to a specific question of taxes. Keep in mind the Pharisees had crafted the question very specifically to trap Jesus into saying something treasonous. They gave their specific question; he gave a specific answer . . .

The question: **The Church says you have a duty to your country. Do you set yourself against the Church?** Paul says we have a duty to our country, and he leaves that duty very vague. The church, in its many forms and denominations (all man-made) has interpreted that duty very differently from age to age. But Christ was clear that our first duty lies in loving God, and our second in caring for our fellow man. All else falls below those two duties. Moreover, he tells us that often our faith will cause us to be estranged from those who matter from us, such as our families. Over and over, he makes it clear that our first duty, always, is to God. While I can honor Paul and the church, it is Christ’s example we ultimately have to consider.

The question: **Can you state any single instance when Christ won over an evil-doer with love?** Love takes many forms. Often Christ was firm with demons, not acting to destroy them, but insisting that they obey the natural law set above all others, that they love and obey God. He never lost that battle . . .By the standards of the day, the woman at the well was an evil-doer, the sinner of the first degree, yet dealt with her kindly (if firmly) and changed everything for her. He was always railing against the Pharisees as a group, yet dealt kindly (but firmly again) with Nicodemus, when the pharasee snuck into the night to question Christ. Nicodemus resurfaces again at the end of Christ’s life, and in Acts, as a believer and a follower.

Question: **Is the life of the Devil sacred?** Yes, as much as I hate the idea. Every life is sacred. God could have simply destroyed the devil and all those who rebelled, but if you look over his pattern with those he loves, he gives each of us chance after chance to accept God’s redemption. Up until the very moment of death, that opportunity is available to us.

Question: **Why object to killing if you believe in resurrection?** Resurrection is available to believers. By killing, I am making the choice as to the length of life of many people, possibly killing them before their natural time. In effect, I am choosing when their time is up, robbing them of the time they may need to come to a natural recognition of God, and acceptance of him. I am usurping God’s role. Not a good idea.

I don’t know if those are the textbook answers and probably theologians would laugh me out of the house, but they say something about where I am spiritually.

Prayer

Christianity is essentially a relationship between the individual and God. Relationships grow only when there is time spent together, talking, sharing and learning about each other. . . It strikes me that most of the holy men I have known (either by books or from experience) have been people with strong prayer lives. They kept the relationship alive by investing time and effort into it - regularly.

Forgiveness

We live in a society that makes everyone feel they must be perfect: Strong, rich, good looking, business leader, spiritual giant and playful child all at once. Unfortunately we aren't all those things. None of us. I suspect that our failure to be superman or superwoman is one of the things that leads to the low esteem so many people seem to live with.

I much prefer the ancient Jewish and early Christian model of life that says we are valued and precious simply because we are a creation of God. Then we are allowed to be able to see the faults, cracks, warps and warts, without being blinded to the beauty, strength and glory of a person. And then we are allowed to have faults and still be loved and valued. Now we all feel we have to be everything good. If a person points out a fault we have defend it or fix it now, as if our entire self worth was tied up in that one thing. It has been the ruin of too many of my friends.

Sometimes I think we have lost the art of forgiveness. . . You see the rough and the perfect, then you make a conscious choice to love the good, and not let the rough deter your love. Not that you are blind, just that you quietly forgive the things you are unhappy with to be able to love the other.

Forgiveness doesn't mean we don't try and improve or understand others, it simply means that the fixing of those things does not determine whether we love them or not, and that we make that very clear in the way we treat and respond to them.

Instead we try so hard to be "Honest" about our feelings. Translate that to Brutal, harping on faults not gifts. So often we are so "honest" about the faults that we forget to be just as honest about the wonderful things.

Forgiveness is also easier on us as well. Letting anger and frustration go, realizing it is the other person who is responsible for any change, and not us, free us to love, to care for the person. So often we spend so much time trying to change a person that we forget to appreciate them, or we forget to improve ourselves.

For me forgiveness is wrapped up in understanding. If a person is made a certain way, then they are going to act a certain way. If I know that, I can lessen the impact on me and my feelings, and help them at the same time. But I have to take the time to understand them first.

Faith

Sometimes . . . those whose faith seems to be the weakest may be the strongest. . . Someone who is constantly searching for God's will in their life may, by virtue of the earnestness and depth of their search, be a person of more faith (simply because they persist) than someone who seems to have a perfect and blind faith in their destiny (or fate).

Faith means more than a nice feeling. It gives us the courage to do things and get through things we might not get through normally.

Since we are in analogy mode this week, it is like Drewy walking along a log. She won't try it by herself. She has no faith in her balance. With the first wobble she jumps or falls off and that's it. But if I hold her hand, she'll do it, and after doing it, as long as I am close she will do it again and again, until at last she does not need me around to do it, and then she takes the next step to something more difficult.

We're not so different. We don't grow up so much after all, I suppose

For those of us who are faithful, it is a path of constant searching and diligence, of always looking and listening to what their heart and minds tell them, of trying to divine God's will. It's work. Hard work, constant work, but a work focused on God. And it is that focus on God that opens us to his spirit, that gives us the sense of spirituality that is central to our lives.

The Bible is a book of hope, of thousands of years and generations of peoples whose lives were raised to incredible heights, often against all odds, because of their putting their faith into action.

How many blows can a person take? There is no one answer. Some of us can take many, many, many. Others only a few. It depends on so many things - Our inner toughness, our health, the people around us at the time the blows fall, our sense of faith, our sense of humor, our compassion, the depth of our feelings - and all those variables change constantly. Things that would have destroyed me years ago are like rain off a duck now - and in another year might crush me yet again.

That is why it is so important to cultivate good things in our lives - good friends, good hobbies, good attitudes. Sometimes, often, in our hardest times, habit pulls us through where even faith may fail.

And even faith can be a habit at times, and that is not all bad, for a habit is something automatic, and when we despair, that habit of faith may be the only thing we can fall back on until the variables shift and we strengthen yet again.

Lately, I have been teaching a series about faith. Now, the Bible says a lot about the value of faith, and that we should have it and the fruits of faith, but it doesn't tell us much about how to get it. Serious omission, that.

And as I prepared to "teach" this series of lessons, most of the materials I read didn't tell me much about how to build faith either. And to me, that was a much more critical than why we need it. The why is the easy question.

And my own experience wasn't much help. I knew how I had come to faith, but it wasn't as much a path or a method as a process that seemed to happen naturally as a result of events and my nature.

So, I did what I always do when I don't have the answers and have to teach something like this - I asked people. I thought you might be interested in some of the answers.

Some said that history helped - looking back for the hand of God in events of your own life and the life of people you know. Other said that you had to develop a habit of looking at your blessings. Some evoked Biblical history - seeing how God cared for his people over such time gave them faith. Others said that looking at the lives of faithful people, and seeing the results and effects of faith in those people's lives gave them faith. Some said keeping a prayer journal, where you wrote down the subjects of your prayers - then checked them off as they were answered (in either the positive or negative) helped - that they had seen over time that their prayers were addressed and answered.

The common theme seemed to be that we have to look for faith. It rarely just comes. We have to look for it, and look for its effects on others' lives to be able to accept that faith has power. That's how we develop faith in other things. We choose a neighborhood because others like it. We choose a lawyer based on references. We choose our mechanic because our neighbors have had good experience with him. Then, over time, we have our own experiences to build that faith.

That's the other theme that kept emerging - that it takes time, and at times failure. No one in the class said they got their faith easily. None of them came to it young. It came when a large chunk of life's experiences combined with their looking.

Charity

I have a friend who lives in Washington, D.C. She is a psychiatrist who makes a very good living working four days a week listening to people. "Most of my patients aren't sick mentally or emotionally," she tells me. "They have no one who cares about them, so they pay me to care about them for an hour a week."

This, I think, is the real meaning of charity . . . I know the scriptures, both Old and New Testament, often exhort us to give to the poor . . . and the money, etc., is nice, but I often find that caring is even more important. It reminds them that they too are valued people, that they too are of worth. If we cared, the physical things would take care of themselves. We would never let a true friend starve. Never.

Jews

One of the arguments I like to make to twist Christians who seem anti-semitic in knots is to ask if God ever breaks his promise. "Of course not." they always say. "And God promised Jews that they would always be his chosen people. To deny them heaven is to deny his promise." I say. The stuttering and dancing starts here.

Letting God into our lives

I am encouraged that most of the "spiritual giants" in the Bible did not find God as a result of great long searches. Instead, they came to God as part of their living their everyday lives. Moses was watching sheep. Job was the head of a family farm/business. Joseph was a slave, servant and bureaucrat. The disciples were ordinary men, even fishermen when Jesus came to them. But they made time for God in their lives. When God spoke, their lives weren't so crammed full that they couldn't hear. They were ready.

I am also encouraged that so many of the great men in the Bible failed so often, and were so flawed. There is hope, I think, for the likes of me.

Grace versus Works

We Protestants have always been a bit schizophrenic about that bit of theology.

In the New Testament, almost everyone who writes, when they come right out and make a declaration, make a firm point that Christian's are saved by Grace - that is even if we don't deserve it, we are saved by virtue of Jesus' self sacrifice on the cross. As God's son he was the only sacrifice great enough to atone for the sins of man. And even then, that sacrifice is only accepted if we believe in God and Christ, and if we repent (i.e. say we are sorry then act to fix our sins.), and even then, the only reason we are accepted is

because God loves us and wants our relationship to him to be restored. That love God has for us is the grace you hear Christians clamor about all the time.

Paul in particular makes a big point about being saved by Grace (belief, repentance and God's love), as opposed to the law (doing or not doing certain things).

But at the same time, they have to deal with actions. People do things. We act. Now, the generally accepted theory is that if you are saved and have this grace and are filled with God's holiness, you will act a certain way and do certain sorts of things. Paul writes about this a bit.

But this is where we get into discussions, arguments and even wars. Almost no one can agree on the exact list of things we should or should not be doing if we are saved. Some took a very liberal view of what those things were. Paul, for instance scolds the Corinthians and Ephesians for their laxness, but rarely questions their honesty of spirit or whether they are saved.

Some took a stricter view. They felt that you could tell whether a person was saved by what they did - so if you did thus you were obviously saved. (Of course, there are always some people who would do the things, but lack the acceptance, repentance, etc.). We Christian types have been wrestling with the issue for a long time, and writers have spent a lot of time trying to reconcile the two ideas. Some have leaned more towards letting grace rule as a matter of conscience, while others leaned towards the works side (Calvin is the most famous, but Wesley had some tendencies that way too.)

Practically, most Protestant congregations say that we are saved by grace, and grace alone; but we tend to judge others by their works. The argument is that what else can we judge by?

I don't know if we will ever really resolve it. Personally, I tend to lean more towards grace and not waste much time worrying about judging what I can't ever really know - other people's hearts. That is between them and God. So I guess I lean way towards the grace side, but I have never been much for rules. I tend to see Christianity (and I think there is a Biblical basis for it) as more a relationship between an individual and God, while religion (as in that awful question I often hear: "Are you religious?") has more to do with organizations, denominations, rules, and yes.... works. Using that definition, I see myself as a deeply spiritual Christian, who is not very religious, despite spending most of my life deeply involved in church.

Faith, Theology & Organizations

I have been reading a couple of small books by Christian theologians from . . . the early 20th century, and have been struck by the elegance of the language, and the arrogance of their thoughts. What a combination. Still, there is some truth buried in all that elegance, and some wisdom, and all in all it has been a delight to read.

As I get older, it becomes easier and easier for me to see how religion gets twisted from something designed to uplift and give us hope and peace, to something cruel and hard that can (and is) used like a blunt club to batter others into submission.

Largely it seems to be a matter of focus. The simple and painful truth is that if you read through the Bible (and the new testament and even the gospels are not free from this), you can find "commands" (if you choose to read them as such) to do or justify almost anything. And if you are predisposed one way or the other, you tend to see the commands that justify your pre-disposition in bright red neon flashing lights, while everything else fades into the background.

The problem comes when people use the Bible (or any religious book) as a way to justify their actions, as opposed to a place to search for answers. Anyone can (and too often do) take the Bible as justification to punish and harm those who think differently.

To me, you have to read the Bible as a whole, and look for the prevailing spirits and movements. If you do this, and look on the Bible (and since I am a Christian, particularly the New Testament) as a way to discover the nature of God, then I believe you will find a loving God, whose primary commands are simple, caring and powerfully challenging.

But too few people actually read it. And fewer still read it with an open heart, looking for the spirit rather than the letter of the law. I can understand that too. Although for some, legalistic faith is burdensome, it is at least clear.

A faith built on discerning the spirit of God, and then finding your relationship and path to glorify that God may seem fuzzy, but in truth, puts more of a demand on the believer, because you must always be examining your life, your priorities and always be looking at your relationship to God and his expectations of you (Which can often changes as life changes.) Easier to find "A" way replete with laws and rules, declare it unchanging, and run with it forever, no matter who gets in the way.

Most Christians start their theological studies with a firmly set theology already in place, set by their upbringing, or the church in which they were raised, or some such thing.

And they are studying the theology that largely agrees with what they came to the study believing. Catholics go to catholic seminaries, Baptists to Baptist seminary, etc. The studies are designed largely to confirm what is there, not to make us think, ponder or wonder. They are designed to produce people who believe a certain way, not to produce people who will think, or approach all they see with an open mind.

They do not mean to produce robots, but we do tend to produce little theologians in our organization's image, more than in God's. It's an inherent flaw in any faith, I suppose - to keep knowledge alive we have to have some level of organization, but the nature of organizations is to protect themselves, not change or grow.

The "mainstream" Protestant faiths have worked so hard to blend into society that they have lost much of what once set them apart.

Most of them took the homogenized route to blend in with the world, to make themselves more appealing to the world. The theory is that if we are appealing enough, we will draw people to us, that becoming "like them" will be a selling point.

The irony of this is that now, 30-40 years into that process, most of the mainstream Christian faiths find they are losing members faster than ever. And who is gaining them? The churches that take a more fundamental, strong stance.

I believe strongly in the more inclusive stance of the "mainstream" churches. But to abandon the very things that set you apart as a faith and as a people, is folly, and worse, is a lie.

What I find ironic . . . is that religion, at it's best, has so much to offer people without abandoning its roots. Strength. Courage. Comfort. Direction. Purpose. A sense of connection with the eternal. People want these things. We need them.

I know it is an art to knowing what to keep and what to abandon. We want to keep the things that are essential to faith, that set us apart (I don't think God ever meant His people to blend in. He meant us to be set apart and to stand out. And if there is a cost to that, well there is a cost to everything.). There is danger in staying the same, not adapting to the times, but there is also a danger in abandoning too much, and losing your essence at the same time.

I suspect most reform and Protestant leaders are honestly trying to handle change well, with the right amount of pruning. But too often we forget history in the pursuit of some goal (like "fitting in", or "becoming more relevant"), and we don't take a long view of who we are as a people of faith. And we are poorer for it.

Helping others find their way to God

The group of people in my class are a mixed bunch if ever there was one. Few of them are long-time Christians with a deep sense of commitment. Most are new to the church, or newly returned to the church for the first time since childhood. I have been teaching

for nearly ten years now, and this has been the most challenging group I have been involved with. For me the challenges have been three-fold.

First, I try to make God real to them. Some of this comes from the Bible, where I try to help them unlock God's nature. Some of it comes from people's personal experiences which I encourage them to share.

Second, since they lack the background that a lifetime in the church gives you, I have tried to build their knowledge of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. This is what most people think of when they think of Sunday School. Learning the basics. In fact, this is what the Baptists would probably prefer that I do all of the time.

Third, I want them to realize that the strongest faith you can have is built on a relationship between them and God. This is harder for them to grasp, and the concept of spiritual gifts helps, because knowing your gifts helps you come to grips with our own responsibility in the relationship. This often includes what we do for others.

Through it all, I urge them to read, to pray, to question, and to act. I don't make it easy. But the joy of watching people discover their faith and their nature is one of the greatest rewards you could ask for.

Last week in my Sunday School class, one of my students, a woman about my age, spoke up right out of the blue.

"But how do I know . . ." she said, "How do I know what God wants me to do, what he wants me to be? How do I know if I made the right choice in my job, or where I live, or who I marry?"

I know what was going on in their minds. For the most part, these are relatively new Christians, or Christians who abandoned their faith for fifteen to twenty years and have only recently come back. That woman's question is in each of their minds. They are searching for directions, Divine Directions, if you will and my class is just part of their search. Evangelists and preachers have told them to "seek God's will" for their lives, and they are doing just that. I wasn't going to wiggle out of this one.

The whole class fell silent and just looked at me. . . .

"God doesn't care," I said.

If you could only have seen their faces. Jaws dropped. Eyes bugged out. Confusion reigned. It was wonderful.

“God doesn’t care what we do . . . What he cares about is how we do what we do. . . . God’s will is simple. Go on. Do what you want. Be what you want. Hang around with whom you want. But whatever you choose to do, do it in a manner God will approve of, with a sense of thankfulness, worship, and joy.”

Backwards Progress

“But isn’t progress always forward?” one student asked.

“It does seem that way,” I said, “but sometimes, the best progress is backward.”

Everyone looked puzzled.

So I asked them something they missed about their youth

“Time,” one said.

“A sense of sureness” said another.

“Blind faith,” said another.

So I asked them why they missed those things so much and we discussed that for a while.

“Would you like to regain some of those things?” [I asked]

Several heads nod. A glimmer of understanding in their eyes as I recount something of my own struggles to regain much of what I have lost . . . Sometimes the best progress is backwards progress. Particularly when we have lost our way.

The Power of Myths

“The truth is highly overrated. It may not even be important. No, what you must do is find out what myths the man lives by. And that is much more difficult than finding the truth. Truth is always simple. Myths are complex and shifting. They have a logic of their own. And they are much, much more important in the affairs of men than any truth you may stumble on along the way.” (From a draft of Excalibur!_

Myths are capsules of a culture, or a mind set that grabs our imagination. They are what facts should be, and often are more powerful than reality. Entire cultures are shaped by myths. The Germans of world war two were shaped by the carefully re-crafted myths of an earlier age. We as Christians and Jews have also been shaped by myths. Why? they

touch something deep inside of us - hopes, fears, secret thoughts and feelings - that reality abuses or ignores.

When myths uplift, they are wonderful. The myths surrounding the founding fathers of this country are largely that - but they illustrate a hope of what we could be, of how noble, wise and committed we would like ourselves to be, what we should aspire to. They helped shape a people and a destiny for hundreds of years. And despite all that we "know" today, these same myths continue to shape and inspire us. Powerful things indeed.

But like any gift, myths can also do great harm. I look in India, where the caste system prevails despite government efforts, and where their myths limits and ruins lives and families from generation to generation. I look to South Africa, where a corruption of the prophets created a mythology that oppressed the Blacks there for hundreds of years, and which still prevails in many white's minds.

A people can be trapped by myths. In Surry county, where my father and grandfather grew up, it has always been assumed that black/white relations before and during the civil war were right out uncle Tom's cabin. The anger from that treatment has flavored politics for the last fifty years. But over the past ten years, my father, and half a dozen black researchers have learned that was not the case, that relations were good, that there were a host of free black men in the county. Many of them left and fought for the north during the war, but came back afterwards to found schools, rebuild farms and became valuable members of society.

Indeed, it was only in the sixties that the myth of uncle Tom was revived by those looking for power. And that myth almost won. But now the myth is being debunked, and a new truth is freeing the people to deal with each other as they are, not as some myth made them be. A new myth arises, that of people like my grandfather who took care of each other, no matter the color, to survive the depression, or the war time. And people are working together more and more. Was my grandfather the man the myth says he was? Probably not. But at least this myth is an uplifting one, one that honors people, and promotes understanding.

I think we have to understand that to many people, myths are reality. Even as we debunk them, they influence who we are and who we become.

I tend to want to keep some of the poetry and myth in my life, not strip it of all life just for "correctness" If we cannot truly know the reality of God (and both of us agree that we can't) then I have to think that sometimes poetry is more accurate and touches the heart more effectively than fact.

The Lessons of History

I don't know that we can judge the past. It's done. Over. Gone. Interesting, exhilarating, horrifying, but done. Unchangeable. But we can learn from it - take that interest, that exhilaration, that horror - and let it change us. That is not judgement. That is life. That is what we are meant to do.

I have a strong belief that there are principles at work in history; human principles that are larger than any gathering of facts or events, and those principles are what we should really learn from our history.

Also, those lessons are often multifaceted. One of my favorite kinds of lessons to teach in is to take a section of scripture, and pull out of it half a dozen mini-lessons. People seemed amazed to find scripture so rich in lessons, and for many of them it is a revelation that the scripture can be so multifaceted. In most cases they had thought of one or two of the lessons, but to see six, eight or more lessons coming from one small part of the Bible amazes them.

I think history is like that. There are dozens of lessons to be learned from every major time or event. We see a few instantly, and the rest we miss unless we probe and question and learn.

Knowledge, Change & Diversity

We give lip service to the fact that knowledge has its limitations, but we don't act like it. We don't believe it. Not really. If we just read the right book, gather the right combination of knowledge, we think, all will somehow mysteriously fall into place.

Of course it rarely does. Knowledge is sterile. Even the best of it. It is the recording of mere fact, leaving out the mystical, or spiritual. I don't just mean the God-spiritual, but the human-spiritual too.

We live in a world where, if we look at things realistically, facts are just the tip of the iceberg. I can tell you about Dorothy. Describe her to a "t". Give you every fact about her background you could wish, and you would still have an incomplete picture. You would miss something, because she is something much more than just a physical person who has had certain things happen to her. She has a spirit, a soul that processes and acts on things in a way that only has limited relationship to facts. Knowing can only get you so far with her, or with anyone.

And we live in a world full of people, each with their own spirit, held up, injured, healing, weak and strong, all different and all changing.

Change and Diversity. Those are the keys.

I have wondered at what seemed to be sudden shifts in history and thought, but watching my own life since January, I can see how it happens. For the lack of any other name, I'll call it the law of critical mass. Things actually begin changing slowly. Like my painstakingly slow going through the Artist's Way, or the day-by-day growth a fetus into a child, of the sifting of idea and options to my current work, or the painstaking work going on in the background on my pastor search committee.

It all continues, ideas sprout, are toyed with, and change continues, but in the background. there is not enough critical mass to cause change. On the surface things seem the same. In fact, because you are struggling with the change internally, there is a more concerted effort to be normal or regular on the outside.

But at some point, the internal change reaches critical mass. In my case, suddenly (or at least it appears sudden to the those on the outside, those not aware of the internal changes going on), I have a new job. A baby is born. A new pastor is found and I drop off most of my church positions, and I change jobs. People think I've gone nuts. I've over-reacted. I've made a wild swerve to the right.

But it was not as radical as it seems on the outside if you know what is going on inside. And so it is with History. Of course, in history, there are many, many more factors in play, but the idea is the same. And so is the result.

Reading history, particularly the fall of societies, gives you dozens of examples of times when the old answers didn't hold and things fell apart. Eventually the cracks grew large and it all fell apart. It may be blamed on lots of things, but at least one of the factors is the failure to see change and rethink. Companies go through the same thing. Marriages. Friendships. Change is inevitable in our life and unless we adapt, it will sweep past us.

I know a lady who is 94. Every 2-3 years, she moves. Why? I don't want things to get stale, she says. And things never are. She runs with the youth in her church. She travels. She is always looking for answers. At an age where most of us are dead, she seeks change, knowing it is a key to life.

The Spirit of the Times

I can remember being in history courses in college, and as we discussed a book, I would come up with some thought that had come to me as I read, usually a thought that had little or nothing to directly do with the subject at hand.

"That's not what he said" I would be told. And of course they were right. But that was what I got. That was the feeling or sense of what he said. That is what the facts and presentation stirred in me.

And that is the other side of history, I suppose. The history of the soul. Facts are fine, but to capture the spirit of the time, the sense of the hearts of people of the time, is just as important (to me at least) as the mere facts.

That may be why I have always felt compelled to balance historical tomes with historical novels. They each seem to capture a "truth" of the time. Then you mix them up in your own experiences and something new and soul touching occurs.

Everything boils down to People

In thinking over your essay on history, I am reminded of how everything boils down to people. How do they react to what they know? What drives their fears and fuels their hopes? What do they struggle with? Who or what do they trust?

Look at humans. At yourself or Heather, or your parents or anyone you know well. If you were to be asked what that person was like, you could do it in a few sentences, but to do it well and even semi-completely, you would have to go on for a long time. A long time.

We are so wonderfully complex, and history is, after all what has happened to, and because of, people - multiples of them. Put all those people together and you get a kaleidoscope of events, emotions, lessons and learning.

How we view the past

At its worst, history cripples and holds us captive.

At its finest, I believe history teaches us broad lessons of principle and ideas. Those change more rarely, and are harder to confuse with popular culture. Principles after all, go beyond facts, go deeper than facts. Ironically though, it depends less on history per se, as it does our own paradigm.

History is, after all, how we view our past.

The past has more than one facet

Some people read a history book or take a history course and take that one aspect as "truth". This may be in society's or government's favor since a myth can more easily be created that way, a myth that supports a particular view of the world. Sometimes it is done purposely and sometimes it is done just because it is easier - both to teach and to learn. But the result is a truncated view of history, one that lacks the richness of what makes history (to me at least) so fascinating. . .

Others people (you and I tend to do this) saturate themselves in dozens of volumes, trying to see as many sides of the time as possible. We fill our minds with knowledge and views of history hoping the different aspects will meld in much the same way spices in a recipe meld, to make something whole. I think we know we can never find a cut and dry version of why things happen or an absolute truth, but we can have a more complete sense of the time and the things that made it so special.

Every once in a while a historian comes along who fills his tomes with all the aspects. Will and Ariel Durant come to mind. As does Simon Schama, author of "Citizens" and "An Embarrassment of Riches". And while I have a fair number of history books, when I stumble on one, I treasure it. I admire such a breadth of mind.

The lens of the observer

"History" depends on the lens through which people see it. Since we depend on the writings, records, letters and memories of people, we are always getting a distorted view.

That point really hit home last week while we were at the NAB convention. Three of us attended a meeting with a certain manufacturer. We had two or three objectives in the meeting and we were very clear on what they were and how we were going to approach it. We had our meeting, followed our plan, and pretty much got what we wanted. As we left the offices of the manufacturer to go to our next meeting, we talked about what had just happened.

Our views of the meeting were very different. We all felt a different tone, and a different view on what was accomplished, and as a result had differing views of the value of that manufacturer. In the end I gave the report back to the president, so my view became the official one. But was it the actual, true account? Who knows?

That sort of thing is repeated over and over again - in marriages; in friendships; in small groups; in countries. And somehow we sift through all that and come up with "history". It's an amazing thing, really.

I love it when I stumble on a different view of history. Reading the Islamic accounts of the Crusades, for instance, gives you an incredibly different view of what went on there. Their myths and truths are so different than ours.

Those myths and truths are so incredibly powerful. . . They shape entire cultures for hundreds of years. And so much in them depends on that lens. Are we a people of faith? What is that faith? Do we believe in a king? or a Democracy? or an aristocracy? Are people basically good or bad? How about governments? The list of factors in our lens is long and powerful.

We have been having a revival in our church this week. Services every night (Tonight is the last.) I have had the opportunity to get to know the preacher who is leading this revival. He is a well-learned man, with a folksy, even humorous style that belies his deep knowledge.

Revivals in Southern Baptist churches have a long tradition. Generally they have a higher emotional pitch than an average service, and towards the last few days people tend to come forward a lot rededicating their lives to God or to the church, or confessing sins, whatever.

Generally I distrust them because they seem to me to be manipulative, but for many in the denomination, they are an important part of their faith, a time when the fires of faith are rekindled, and passion for God is fired anew.

This has not been that kind of revival. Our church needed something else and we have gotten that from this week of services. We needed something to help us reconnect with each other, to remind us of our caring for each other, and the preciousness of that bond. And by that standard, it has been successful, very successful. But there has been none, or at least very little of that powerful sweeping emotion typical of the breed.

I was talking to the visiting preacher last night, and he was speculating that perhaps he was failing at this revival because it did not have the response he was accustomed to. Even when I explained how and why I thought it was a success, he was not convinced. His lens was different and so his history was different.

Another thing that makes history is how we view things now. So many scholars, particularly in the last 30 years, have gone into their study looking for history to validate a viewpoint, rather than looking for truth. If you do that, you will find validation, by simply ignoring or downplaying what does not fit your view. Then others read or hear what you say and slowly the myth of history changes. What we believe changes. Among so many of the historians I read today, so few seem to be seeking a truth. Instead, they seem to be espousing a view and using "history" to prove it.

Of course, that is nothing new either. Truth seems awfully unimportant to most people.

Those in the spotlight . . .

We tend to think of our leaders, of the people in power in our nations and countries as being extraordinary, but often they are not. They are talented, opportunists, and driven, but they are too often caught in the same molds, trapped in the same mind sets, prisoner of the same paradigms as the rest of us. They are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances

. . . and in the shadows

It has been my experience, as well as the experience in history, that often the people who wield power best and more effectively are often somewhat in the shadows.

It is as if they have realized that to stand in the spotlight, while it may be exhilarating, is also to make yourself a target, and that exposure, but itself, might well be enough to stand as a roadblock. So others take the spotlight while they quietly get the job done and change the course of events.

Often, when I read a particularly complete history of a period, I get a sense of who that "behinds the scenes" person is. Often they are the ones who survive the purges or the ravages of major upheaval. It's pretty amazing sometimes, and makes you wonder who is really pulling what strings.

If I am a "leader" at all, it is largely due to my mother's example. Through work as a lobbyist, in various groups and organizations, and even at the seminary where she works today, I have seen her lead, often from places not considered a "leadership position." Hers is the model I have tried to build on in my own life. I still have a lot to learn,

But it is a model that suits my nature. I have always found the spotlight something I was uncomfortable with.

I have a book from college called *The Diplomatic History of the US*. Terribly dry, yet also interesting when you read it and see all the people mainstream history never mentions, who were vital to various initiatives. It makes you wonder who is really influencing things today.

The dim elegance of one age and the dawn of another

I love historical eras like the Edwardian, but I always have to remind myself that the part of it I like was reserved for a very upper crust. It was another generation before it trickled down to a rising middle class. But the elegance, the manners, that has a huge appeal to me as a person. I often long for that elegance and what seems to be a pace of life and attitude that is lacking today, even among the more well to do. We have lost the art of leisure.

I suspect there are some parallels in near history for that too. We are at the chaotic dawn of a new age - the information age - and it will take a generation to sift things out, just as it did at the dawn of the industrial age. It always takes a generation or so for culture to rediscover itself, its values, and learn to mix the new with the old. I hope I live long enough to see what we make of this and discern the trends we as a culture make of this. I would hate to miss it.

How Far Have We Come?

I think overall, we are well ahead of where we were ages ago. Life is more treasured, or at least it is agreed that life should be treasured even if it isn't. But often we are caught in the step back, and it is a terrible thing. Anger, fear and passion for power have a habit of overwhelming cultures just as they do individuals.

But it is the unrelenting, incremental, never dying no matter how hard evil tries spirit that inches us forward as a people. And when that spark of goodness insists on emerging again and again, to take hold and nudge a people forward again and again, sometimes spectacularly rising, sometimes sneaking up from the depths, bet never, never dying despite the best efforts of evil to quench it's fire - that is what gives me hope for the ultimate victory of good.

We who are "good" tend to be happy at keeping evil "under control" or "at bay", while evil is never content until good is stamped out, destroyed, ruined. Yet good survives, again and again, against all odds. That alone gives me faith.

Time

Time
is too
slippery,
edging it's
way past you.
You realize that
it has gained total
control of all which
is you. Then, if that
weren't enough, you don't
even care. In self defense
you put it out of mind until
you die. Then you discover that
hell is air conditioned and Satan,
to your surprise wear suits tailored by
Brooks Brothers. Also it amazes you that
in your very short life you have managed to go so very far downhill

The Black Tide

I tend to agree on Somerset Maugham about suffering. Too often we learn the wrong lessons from it, or worse, learn nothing. I suppose that is why the people who do learn from it stand out so boldly.

This is especially true when our suffering is caused by other people. What we tend to learn is not to trust, and to suppress others so that we will not be suppressed. Might makes right. We tend to forget the feelings and emotions we were dealing with, and how grateful we would be if someone would just cut us some slack. Instead we vow to do unto others as we were done unto. (How's that for mangling a phrase?).

A tough time seems as if it were a mountain, like something that has always been and will always be. It paralyzes me into a state of hopelessness. Why fight the tide? I ask myself. The river will sweep me away no matter what I do, no matter how hard I struggle. Why climb the mountain? I ask myself. There will just be another mountain, another climb.

At my age, I should know better. And in fact I do know better. At least my brain does. I have seen the cycles of my own life and the cycles of others' lives. I know these things run in cycles. I know I will create again. I know work will change. I know mountains can be crossed and even moved. Tides and currents can be breached. And there are always

shores and valleys where I can rest. I know these things. I have experienced them again and again. I have seen my family and many of my friends struggle and emerge better and stronger. Yes, they had new mountains and rivers to battle, but they were strengthened. I have been strengthened by the struggle. Things will get better.

I appreciated your comments about your search for inspiration that good things happen after bad times. Two weeks ago I had to teach a lesson about the crucifixion.

I hate to teach about the crucifixion. hate it. First, it has been done a thousand times. The challenge to make it new and powerful is more than I feel up to as a teacher.

Second, it is personally painful to me, such cruelty to one so good in the name of religion. There are times I actually cry when I think of it (Probably much as you feel about life in Israel right now).

Third, it is a hard thing to get to the heart of. Many things in life leave us wondering "why" and for many Christians this is one of the hardest questions. Why did Jesus have to die? We know the "explanation" in our heads, but our hearts cry out at the injustice. Last of all, this was a for a group of older people who have the air of having seen it all, done it all, know it all. - and when I teach religion, I don't want to just teach facts, I want to touch hearts. (I don't think the two are mutually exclusive). This was a challenge I was not relishing.

I took a tact that is uncomfortable for me. I bared my life. I am basically and profoundly a private person. I wrestle with my struggles and hard times privately. Most of the world has no idea of my "black times". And that is OK. No reason for them to know.

First I gave them the facts. The week of events leading up to the crucifixion. I walked through a week that went from triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to the challenge of the Pharisees, the sadness of the last supper, the drama of the trials, and the humiliation and horribleness of crucifixion. I talked about the disciples, afraid and destroyed by the turn of events. I talked about it being the worst of times.

Then I made a list of "bad times". It was not complete, but it was long. I talked frankly about how overwhelmed I was, how confused and hurt I was. How weak and helpless I felt in such times. Of my sheer hopelessness. I think, because they have only seen me in my "leader role", that they were stunned.

Why am I telling you this? I asked them. Not because I like talking about it, but because all of us have had such times. Many of us are having them now, even if we here are not aware of it.

Then I took each of those terrible times, and told them of the good that had come of them. And that good was considerable. New work, relationships, directions in life were affected and guided towards something wonderful, by something terrible.

That is the lesson, I told them, that the crucifixion has for me now. That even in the blackest moments, There is something else, something wonderful, waiting on the horizon. For the disciples it was the resurrection that changed them so dramatically it is hard to recognize them. For other characters in the Bible, it happened too. Abraham had to wait forever for that male heir. Moses had a change or two and a wait or two before becoming the patriarch. Poor Joseph got bumped all over the place before rising to power in Egypt.

Our changes after hard times can be as profound, long suffering, confusing, and dramatic as theirs.. We don't know the time table, and we sure don't know why, but I believe it profoundly.

“Sometimes . . . the very thing we consider our biggest blessing keeps us from seeing the thousands of smaller blessings that fill every magical moment of our lives.” – “The Cough”

The Wonder of It All

We rely too much on our wonderful minds, and not enough on our souls.

Use them.
Build them into empires
or destroy men
but

words are useless
when trying to
describe

a waterfall
ivory stilled

The snow is beautiful, if paralyzing. We have over two feet . . .and I have not been able to leave the home since Friday. . . . One of the things I love most about this much snow is

the sense of silence. I went out to do some shoveling, and I heard nothing except the sound of my own work and my breathing. There were a few cars traveling slowly on the road in front of my house, but the snow absorbed their sound. From 150 feet away, I couldn't hear them at all.

Birds flew by and I could hear each and every beat of their wings, each distinct from the other in thrust, speed and direction. A leaf blew against the snow and you could hear its crisp edges hit against the crust on the snow. Then silence again. . . .

There are icicles from the melting snow off of my roof. Some of them are eight to ten feet long, glistening like some sort of primordial crystals, incredibly beautiful as they catch the sun. When the sun is just right, they cast odd-shaped rainbows on the floors and walls of the house. At night, they distort the streetlights from the road into some macabre pattern. Sometimes they break, and they are so large that it sounds as if a whole room has peeled off of the house, fallen and shattered in the cold. It sounds like a gunshot followed by shattering glass.

The ice has been melting slowly for days now. Icicles, hanging like so many swords, shrink first to the size of daggers, then sharks teeth, dripping slowly to death.

The lilac buds are perfect little packages, green gifts precisely encased in ice like a glass cage, delayed by the unrelenting beauty of a winter so out of place here.

Here, winter is usually passing fancy, a few cold bursts of air, a teasing of snow, perhaps one real snowfall, just to remind us that Mother Nature is still in charge. Melting is fast and certain.

Sweep away the thin layer of March snow, and you see ice and below it the grass, held captive since December. It is melting now, with temperatures never quite warm, but finally, no longer freezing.

Here we are accustomed to warmth, even in winter. In February the peach and apple trees bud and we hold our breath, praying for their survival of the final frost.

This year we huddle in our homes, listening. Listening to the slow drip of icicles on the tin roof, and when the thaw is finally complete, we find them: the surprising buds of spring

Crocus, tulips, daylilies, risen from the earth, defying even the cruel dominion of ice that sought to crush them. There all the time, hidden, forgotten. as unrelenting as winter, and just as sure.

I am glad you are returning and finding value in the sensual. I am an unrepentant sensualist, or at least used to be. I used to soak in the beauty of the things around me - music, art, nature, perfumes, foods, beautiful women. I wallowed in it. What glory, to live in a world with such beauty! What a gift to be able to see, hear, taste, laugh and feel! How often we waste those gifts by not savoring them.

Of course that is not all there is to life, but to ignore them, not to enjoy them, is just as wrong as to ignore responsibility. . . I can sit and contemplate a painting without worrying about the things I could be accomplishing.

Tonight . . . I am listening to harp music. So varied. So ethereal. So otherworldly. I feel I am in company of angels. My spirit is lifted. This a joy no responsibility or job or work can replace.

One of my favorite verses in the entire Bible comes from Isaiah: "Be still and know that I am God." I have done some of that this week, sitting on the front porch just after sunset and watching the brilliant red and purple skies, listening to the owls in the woods behind our house at night, petting the cats. It has been restful and healing, this not [doing] anything most people would consider "constructive."

Words

Words certainly can be dangerous, more so because of the unintentional consequences they can have.

"Help" can mean to assist a person with their needs. But to the 19th century European colonial (particularly the British) there was a sub-context of domination and control that went along with that help. For many people today, the word still carries that context. Just last week I sat in on a business meeting where a company wanted us to "help" them on a project. And because the sub-context was "subject yourself to us so we can show you the right way (by our standards) to do all things." I opted us out of the project. All because of that one word.

"Serve" can mean to subject yourself to a person, and often it has connotations of slavery. But it can also mean to dedicate yourself to something or someone, and to voluntarily give yourself and your effort to that cause or person.

The unintentional consequences come when the speaker means one thing and the hearer hears something else. And it happens all the time.

Politics and religion are particularly adept at taking language and co-opting words and phrases that have deep roots in people's hearts, and redefining them to mean what they want to make them mean. Thus they take the deep-rooted connotations of those words,

and manipulate people. Reagan did this fairly effectively when he was president. Clinton far surpasses him and the Democrats (following his lead) have become particularly adept at it. Today, more and more often, the political battle is a battle for the meaning of words, rather than an honest debate on issues.

The early Christians, particularly as Christianity moved past the borders of the early Roman empire, were masters at this, adopting symbols and rituals from the pagan religions they faced and making them their own. They were remarkably successful - most Christians would be astonished to know how many of our most reassured symbols of Christmas and even Easter came from pagan, pantheistic religions that are now only distant memories, robbed of their symbols, holidays and rituals. The early Church Fathers were at least were blatant about it, announcing clearly that they were doing this and why, while today word manipulators deny they are doing it even as they change the language.

Because language is learned early, at a point in our lives when our minds take things literally, these words take on deep-rooted meanings. If our faith is of the heart, the words we use to define that faith take on deep-rooted meanings. And if we come from different traditions, then the words we were brought up with have different meanings.

And if we do not know the tradition, or the background, or the faith, or everything about a person, we are very liable to have unintentional consequences nearly every time we speak.

That is why it is so important to try and understand where people are coming from. Communication is as much or as more about listening than speaking. Stephen Covey, in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* . . . contends that we are often too anxious to make our point than to listen, that we should first see where someone is coming from, and then make it. My experience is that he is very, very right.

This difference in understanding is a potential recipe for disaster and confusion (the tower of Babel revisited) except that we do have a number of common experiences. Language, at it's best, means something similar to us all. And in fact it does.

But there are just enough differences . . . that there is still potential for a real mess of unintentional consequences.

It's a wonder it works at all, isn't it?

Books

I really cannot remember a time without books. My parents have always said I learned to read at four from the comic strips in the morning paper; that I learned to recognize words before I learned the alphabet. Soon I was reading the morning paper (I still read the

paper every day). I cannot remember it, of course, but reading, and books have been a part of me for as long as I can remember.

I never had many books when I was a kid, and no children's books that I can remember. I know I don't have any books from my childhood, and neither do my parents. But each week, I would take as many books as they would let me carry out of the library. At the school library, it was two, but the public library would let me take five. Sometimes I would read a book that caught my imagination so strongly that I hated to take them back, and at the end of each year I always had horrendous fines to pay.

I began working when I was twelve, and you would think that I would have spent all my money on books, but that isn't what happened, and I don't know why. Part of it may have been because I was by then firmly in the habit of getting books from libraries. By the age of twelve, I could ride my bike the four miles to the public library, and often went twice, or even three times a week, always getting my maximum five books.

Also, at that time there were not as many handy places to buy books. Today you can find a bookstore at any mall, but then we did not have malls. Today there are big bookstores in some of the shopping centers, but the closest shopping center was fourteen miles away, and it didn't have a bookstore. Today you can buy books of some sort everywhere: at the drugstore, the grocery store, and even the 7-11 stores. Not so then.

I can remember the first book I ever bought, *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand (still one of my favorite books of all time). I had read it as a high school senior, and it made an indelible impression on me. I had to have it handy, and finally found a paperback copy, which I have read a dozen times or more since then.

It was in college that I began to surround myself with books. The campus library put no limit on the books you could check out, and I would visit it almost daily. There were used book stores just off campus (something I had never seen before), and I spent time there each week. There was also a bookstore called Books, Strings & Things that got a sizable portion of my money.

For me, then as now, books were my friends. They were interesting, they captured the imagination, made me laugh, gave me characters to care about, and exposed me to the best in man (as opposed to the riff-raff I ran around with).

The fact that I was learning was incidental. That is not why I read.

You have to remember that I was (and still am to some extent) terribly shy. But my books were always there for me.

I was never very discriminating. I read everything. Still do. Classics. Trashy spy novels. Science fiction. Nonfiction. Poetry. Historical novels. I just read and read and read. In the morning, when I first get up, I read the paper, a bit from the Bible and a

poem. Before I go to sleep, I read from one of the half-dozen books lying around the house. I seem to be incapable of going to sleep if I have not read something.

So you can see why my library is my refuge, and probably always will be, and why the mere act of having it together calms me.

In general, my favorite characters in literature are men who know what they want, and set out to get it. Often they are thwarted again and again by those who oppose them, but, by virtue of their own single-mindedness, and the rightness of their cause (or at least their perceived rightness) they finally prevail.

Who are some of these characters? Edmund Dantes in *The Count of Monte Christ*, John Gault in *Atlas Shrugged*, Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, Jason Bourne in Ludlum's three "Bourne" novels, Sherlock Holmes.

What I admire them is not their talent . . . No, what admire in them is their sureness.

Right now, this is what I am reading: Every day I read a bit in the Bible (my "faith" book), a bit in the *Practical Cogitator* (my idea book). As my thoughts get to a certain point, I read from the *Three Boxes of Life* (my goal-setting and honing book) or *The Seven Habits of Effective People* (my action-oriented book).

The beauty of this approach is that none of these books tell you what to do. They fill you full of thoughts and ideas. They ask questions that a mind like mine has to think about and try to answer. And each answer seems to lead to a section in another book, which moves me a step further. It's wonderful watching bits and pieces of my life, mind and emotions unfold and integrate tighter and more effectively than ever before.

During the heat of the day, I have read, finishing Jeannie Larsen's *Bronze Mirror* . . . It is more wonderful than *The Pink Pagoda* you gave me several years ago and which I now treasure as one of my "best books." I have read a pseudo Sherlock Holmes novel based on the life of Irene Adler, the only female Sherlock Holmes ever expressed unbridled admiration for. Great fun, that one. And I am now reading an older novel by Anthony Burgess, *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. Burgess is an author I discovered late, much as I discovered Robinson Davies, for whom I have nothing but praise. There are few writers I will read just because they wrote, but Burgess is one of that short list, and this novel has not let me down.

I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the central premise of the book [The Artist's Way] — That the artist's nature comes from God, for God's own nature . . . is essentially that of the great creator; thus, when you create, you are tapping into God's vast reservoir of creative energy.

It is that central premise that has haunted me since I first picked up the book in the bookstore and read the introduction. It has a ring of truth, a feeling of truth, I find irresistible and undeniable.

Writing

It's a bad habit I have, writing letters during the rational light of day. Late nights, or even the "wee hours" of the morning, are a much better time for writing anything.

I've known this for years, of course. It is in the late hours when the rational part of our brain, normally so vigilant, weakens from overuse. For twelve, fourteen, or sixteen hours you've been hopelessly involved with the responsibilities, taking care of the local things that fill up everyday life. If you are fortunate, the logical walls we erect (consciously or unconsciously) simply fall away, and the good stuff kicks in.

The good side is what people call the right side of the brain. Imagination. Emotion. Feelings. The good stuff. I learned that at Hollins. I would purposely work myself to death in order to get so tired I could let my imagination do its thing.

And there I would sit in my cabin, late at night, writing away at anything that came to mind. Poetry. Short stories. Letters. Scribblings of all sorts.

A lot of it was bad writing, of course. Really bad. I was too tired to pay much attention to niceties like grammar, sentence, and what propels any good writing. I could go back and clean up the writing any time. Most of my novel was written after midnight, as were most of my short stories. All my good poetry was written late at night.

Of course, being young, and with the obliviousness of being young, I had no idea what I was doing. It has only been recently, as I stayed up late rather than go to bed or watch some late movie, that I have rediscovered how exhaustion helps me write, or draw. All it takes is a little will power to sit down at my desk and begin. Once begun it takes care of itself.

When I write, I am healing . . . For me, writing is like a scab. It itches, and it won't stop until I heal.

In my journal, I write what I feel, what I fear, what I hope for. I write to-do lists and book titles. I write about what I am reading. I write down ideas, or describe faces, snippets of conversations, whatever. I write prayers.

I enjoy it now. I look forward to the half hour or hours when I can sit down and ponder and write. It is a luxury time for me. The only time when I absolutely do not concern myself about what anyone else thinks about what I write or think or feel.

Sometimes I staple letters into the journal, particularly if the letters reflect something I am feeling Once or twice I have included a letter written to me, because the letter has made an impact I want to be able to recapture someday.

The journal has done me good. It has reintroduced me to an old friend I had lost touch with — myself.

Love

“All of us are blind and weak when we walk alone.” – from an Untitled Thanksgiving Story

“Go now and cling to your treasure.” From an untitled Thanksgiving Story (a different one)

In relationships, not growing, and not allowing growth, is the kiss of death.

Is this then love,
These two who stand before us,
their love fresh and new
with the passions and hopes of the young?

Or is this then love,
Their parents, who for twenty and thirty and more years
have nurtured their dreams for these, their children,
have watched them succeed, and fail, and grow,
who have struggled with hopes and dreams of their own,
both those realized, and those never to be.

Or is it this -
A small child whose love is pure,
unconditional and uncompromising,
with a smile shining in their eyes even before they can speak it.
Is this then love?

Or perhaps this then is love,
These grandparents, who a generation and more ago
made this same commitment, who joined themselves,
unaware of the adventure ahead, unaware of the heartache and joys,
but acting in faith that moments such as this would justify their faith.

Is this then love?
Yes. Yes. yes and yes.

For always it begins here, before this altar.
With a promise...
I will love you always says the father.
I will love you always says the son.
I will love you always says the parent to the child,
from generation to generation

Is this then love?
Who can deny it - Listen!
I will love you always, says the bride.
And I, you, replies the groom.
And just behind them, if you listen, you can hear...
For always, whispers our God. For always.

From a Wedding Poem written for Annie and Bryon LePere

Surry County

I lived a schizophrenic life as a child and youth. I grew up in the suburbs . . . It was a sterile place, with no excitement, no danger, nothing to stimulate the mind or soul.

And so it was that I was always doing things as a child to make up for that. As a kid, I learned about the storm sewers and wandered about and mapped them for miles in every direction. I wandered into the woods beyond our subdivision and discovered the old coal mines everyone warned us against and went in them, daring them to collapse on me.

I spent parts of my summers until I was fifteen or so at my grandparents' farm. On the surface of it, it should have been even more boring than my home suburbia. There was NOTHING to do in the sense we think of: No movies. No culture. No activities. No kids.

Yet I never felt bored. There was life here, real life. I learned to love the woods, and to watch nature. I never did anything to get in trouble, never sought it. The beauty of life was startling and new, each and every day. I loved watching the crops as they rose from a tiny green spot in the soil to a lush green covering with flowers and then fruit . . . Pigs being born. Gardens producing. Flowers erupting into color. I suspect that had I spent my entire life on a farm, I would have become one of those hopeless romantics.

Hunting was a big thing out there in the country. My grandfather was a member of the Blackwater Swamp Hunt Club, and I spent many an afternoon there. I never did much hunting since hunting season was in the fall and I was back in suburbia by then, "safe" at home.

Oddly enough, I never felt like much of an outsider in the countryside of Surry County, except for one thing: boys there started hunting at ages nine or ten, and at twelve I had never held a gun in my hands. It marked me as different.

I could never understand the difference, couldn't understand the idea of wanting to kill. The summer I was twelve, my grandfather took me out with a 22 and we began target practicing. I couldn't shoot from the hip very well, so when it came to flushing out quail or shooting darting animals like squirrels or rabbits, I was a bust. But give me a moment to take aim, and I was deadly. The line in my novel about picking out either "O" in the Coca-Cola can is from real life.

Granddaddy brought me down for opening day of deer season that year, and I got my first kill.: (A raccoon, not a deer). One bullet. One life. So simple. It scared me; it was so simple. It was a turning point of sorts, that moment when you discover you are capable of something you had no idea lurked inside you. Ever since then, I have been aware that if I could take this first giant step, the first kill, even to a coon, the next step would be easier: a man. . . .

Because of that split second, I understand . . . how people kill. How easy it could be to cross that bridge. How even the kind of mass slaughter wars bring on is possible. It all starts crossing that first line, that first moment when you forget about the preciousness of life.

I travel to go someplace new. I rarely go to the same places or old haunts. I rarely return to old friends or to memory-filled places.

Why is this, I sometimes wonder. There is comfort in going back. Yet I never, or at least rarely, look back for that comfort. Instead I always look ahead. I go to new places. I seek new experiences.

It wasn't always that way. For much of my life I used to go back to Surry county, where my grandparents lived, as my place of refuge. "My" Surry county was a place filled with people of my grandparents generation, because these were the people I got to know during the summers and weekends I spent on their farm growing up.

I loved going back. Even though I go back rarely since their deaths, I still get a sense of well being when I hit the outskirts of the tiny town of Waverley, Va.

I delight in the sights there - the old train station that has never been used as a train station for as long as I can remember, Pope's Store - an old time in town grocery store that somehow seems to defy the big chains that have devoured in town stores for the past two decades, Beale Brothers store - more of a hangout for farmers than a real store. I love crossing through the cypress swamps of the county. I find an unusual joy in seeing fields of peanuts and corn rise green and lush in the summer.

Most of all though, I have loved the people. I never knew a time when they were not old. And for decades, it seemed as though time had stopped for them. They were all old, but vigorous and alert.

And they were the most incredible mix of prejudice and open-mindedness I have ever seen. In principle they were against everything that reflected change. Blacks raising themselves in life; girls going to college; boys writing poetry. yet when it came to their blacks, their girls and their boy poets, they were proud of them, seeing them as some sort of wonderful exception.

And so, with that attitude, they seemed to embrace me with all my "big city" differences. They didn't like my "type", but they opened themselves to me as a person.

There was a not so unusual mix of ignorance (book learning) and wisdom too. Most of the really important lessons I learned in life, I learned best there in Surry County.

About the time my grandparents died, so too did most of the people I knew. It was as if a plague hit the county and everyone I knew died within a few years of each other. I only went back for funerals until suddenly, there was no reason to go back.

My father still visits often, but he has friends of his own generation, and even my generation, but I have none.

I rarely go back now, and see Surry only in my dreams. And I miss the kinds of trips you take, where you visit so many people who are near and dear to you.

Travel Snapshots

I am in a hotel room in Charleston, West Virginia. I've been here two days. I'll be here for two more. I worked from seven this morning until eight this evening, then came back to the room and filed reports on the computer for another hour.

For me, West Virginia is both beautiful and depressing.

The mountains are beautiful, and the state is made up almost completely of mountains. Everywhere there are rocky crags and narrow, green valleys. If it weren't for the poverty that invades so much of the state, it would be glorious.

But the poverty is there. It is in the cities, in the countryside, everywhere. Even in places which normally reek of money (like the state house, or the best hotels, or TV stations), there is an aura of seediness.

The countryside is the poorest. Apparently, many of the people in West Virginia work in the coal mines, when they work. West Virginia coal is "dirty" coal, full of sulfur and other impurities. It is the type of coal least in demand, the type of coal many people buy when there is no other coal to be had. As a result, the mines are often closed when the demand is down. Work in the mines pays well, but is irregular. The houses are run down, often with yards full of old, rusted-out cars. The people who sit on the tiny porches never seem to smile.

Here where I am staying, there is a mall nearby. I went there last night just to walk around. I talked to a lot of young people who work there as clerks. These were bright young teenagers who all seemed to share the same desire in life — to get out of West Virginia.

How sad that a place so beautiful is also so poor, and so depressed. I can't wait to get home to Roanoke.

I'm in Abingdon, Virginia and have spent the day traveling through the coal-mining area of Virginia, Bluefield - Norton - Appalachia and Big Stone Gap.

The trip to Bluefield early this morning was like driving in a dream. I left early, about six in the morning, and it was still dark. You've been to Blacksburg, so you know how pretty a drive it can be.

The trip past Blacksburg and on up to Bluefield is prettier, the mountains taller, steeper, and more dramatic, only this trip the fog rolled in. By the time daylight blew in; the fog was firmly entrenched. You could see a little: the faint imprint of a road, or the hint of mountain ridges to each side. But mostly there was the grayness of various shades, wisping past the car. Traveling at sixty, I felt like I was standing still, with clouds moving past me at a high speed.

I spent three hours in Bluefield, but still don't feel like I saw it. The houses, train cars, trees, even the people on the sidewalks were faint and pale. It was like walking through a dream. I almost felt like if I reached out to anything or anyone my hand would go right through them.

I left Bluefield about eleven, and from there drove through Norton, Appalachia, and on to Big Stone Gap. By noon the fog had lifted and I was in the heart of coal country.

Anyone who doubts coal owns southwest Virginia should drive through it sometime. Coal companies spot the highways, sometimes only fifty feet apart. A few of them are large. Strip mines that claim acres and acres of land or show shaft after shaft going down. Others are small, a strip the size of your yard or a single shaft protected by a ramshackle shed. One man had a patch of coal in his backyard. I saw him, looking seventy-five or eighty, digging with a pick and shovel, filling paper bags and piling them on the porch, a sign in front of the house announced that he was the "Golden Ring Coal Company."

Coal dust is everywhere, on the houses, sidewalks, cars, even in the wrinkles of people who walk past you on the street. It's not like 19th Century London, where the smoke and dust hung in the air, but its still there. You can smell it.

A friend of mine says you cannot smell coal. Maybe not, but the dust, the diesel fuel spouting from the coal hauling trucks . . . and the trains all combine. I asked three people what the smell in the air was. They all said the same thing: "Coal."

As you would expect, there's a lot of wealth and a lot of poverty. Tumbledown shacks perched next to gaudy mansions. Every third house, no matter how nice or run-down it is, has a satellite antenna for TV pick-up.

I drove slowly on most of this trip. I had to. I drove behind huge trucks loaded with coal, carrying the coal to the rail yards. They were big, bigger usually than a tractor-trailer, and the road often shook when I was behind several of them.

Now I'm in Abingdon, a small town like Fincastle. Going to the coal country was like going overseas. . . It's odd to think that this very different place is only a couple of hours away.

I am in Myrtle Beach. I don't get excited about beaches. Too commercial. Too many people. Too much neon and too little peace and quiet. But the stay here was free, and it happened to come at a perfect time, just between my leaving my old job at Avec, and starting my new one at Atlantic Broadcast. I figured if worst came to worst, I could hole up and read the week away. I packed half a dozen books for just that possibility.

But I hadn't figured on this being off-season. Although the beach is lined with high-rise after high-rise, very few people are actually here. Each morning I have risen at the first hint of light and walked along the beach as the sun broke over the ocean. Often I have had the beach all to myself. Even in the heat of the day, when everyone is out, there are few people.

The apartment is on the second floor, overlooking the ocean. At high tide the ocean comes right to the foundation of the building and you can hear the crash of the waves, and it is almost as if you are on a ship. You can even feel the mist as the waves break on the huge stones that make a breakwater below. . .

At night, I take a night walk on the beach, then come back and write. . . .

Today, I traveled about a half hour to Brookgreen Gardens, billed as the nation's largest sculpture garden. I have a weak spot in my soul for gardens, whether they are a farmer's vegetable garden, an English cottage garden, or a grand formal garden. There is a peacefulness to a garden that I have never been able to express adequately (a terrible thing for a writer to admit!), but which touches and calms me as few things can.

Brookgreen Garden falls into the grand and glorious category. Laid out on the grounds of a South Carolina Plantation (the plantation house itself burned to the house in 1909), the people who founded the garden have preserved an astonishing array of larger than life American sculpture and integrated it into lush formal gardens of every variety. The combination is something magical. These are not your tacky-tacky garden sculptures, but life-like (and often larger than life) castings in bronze, granite and marble, over two thousand of them. There is tragedy, humor, power, joy and beauty everywhere mingled with lush shrubbery, striking blooms and majestic trees. I could have stayed for days.

So this vacation, that began as a matter of convenience, has turned into a wonderful, restful time. A time of doing what I love to do. In short, I suppose, it is doing what a vacation is supposed to do, re-energizing me, and for that I am very, very, thankful.

This trip has been at a slower pace than most. I visited Ashville and toured Biltmore, the home of George Vanderbilt and one of the few American homes that rival the palaces of Europe. Then I drove to Charlotte and visited my college roommate and his wife. Then to Savannah, Georgia and toured the colonial city. Next it was off to Jacksonville to visit Helen Bain, a lady who was (and is) like a second mother to me. Then a day wandering around Disney World. Then home.

It sounds like a lot of travel, But the pace was slow. I got up late. I stayed in Bread & Breakfasts instead of hotels, so I ate long leisurely breakfasts and read the paper in the garden or on a broad porch instead of in some cold restaurant. When I traveled, we drove only a few hours a day. There was no sense of pushing to go and doing too much.

Perhaps that is more apparent to me because of how hard I have been pushing so hard lately. Somehow (and I have to admit it, right now I have no idea how), I want to find a balance between doing something that will support my penchant for old things (houses, furniture, books) and travel, yet leave me with the time to enjoy them, even savor them. I had always hoped writing would be that path, and perhaps it yet will be.

Of course, a big part of my problem is simply me. I throw myself into most everything I do. I don't simply do things, I dedicate myself to them. I feel a responsibility to do anything I do for anyone else as well as I possibly can. Which often leaves me (figuratively) gasping for breath at the end of a day, and with little time to do well for myself. I tend to throw myself into big projects, just a little bigger than I have any business trying, and I seem always to be just of the edge of having everything run amok.

The only good thing is how much that makes me appreciate the times I have to do something for me. Like this week. Each morning I got up at the crack of dawn, when the sky was light, but the sun was not yet over the horizon, and walked. I peered into people's gardens, smelled the dew, and petted strange cats. The pleasure, so simple and yet (for me) so rare, was so intense I came back to the B&B nearly in (happy) tears.

It was sheer luxury. Not the luxury of fine hotels and the best accommodations, but the luxury of time with no demands on it . . . Don't get me wrong. I enjoy most of what I do, but I miss the sense of endless time lying in front of me. Is that a factor of age, or of buying into a go go go go go society? Heck, if I know.

But I have tonight. It is still fairly early and I'm going to read, for hours and hours. Vacation must have made me greedy.

The Search

At best, we can act as translators, helping ourselves and others find their way a bit . . .

My answers have always come at the oddest times. When things were blackest, or when I had given up on finding the answer, or at four in the morning in a start from a dead sleep, when talking to a stranger. Never when I searched or where I searched. Never. . . .

Yet, had I not searched, constantly searched, I don't think I would have recognized any of the answers when they went by. I wouldn't have known I needed them, or wouldn't have eliminated the stuff that wasn't the answer. I would have missed it completely.

I have come to the conclusion that it is almost impossible to find the truth without actively seeking it. And to seek it you have to sift through dozens of sources and opinions and views and even then, only hope you come to a conclusion that is near the truth. And that may be as close as we can ever come.

But it is worth the search. Most people just go through their lives accepting someone else's version of truth (be it history, religion, family matters and myths) as truth. It is simple. They don't have to work at it. It's there. It defines the parameters of belief and allows them to act within those parameters with the confidence that they are following truth as they know it.

A few others manipulate truth, wrench it and re-paint it to suit their goals, which may be lofty or greedy. They often lead others with them and sometimes even manage to create a new set of universally accepted truths. I am always suspect of those, which often include politicians, businessmen and at times, religious leaders.

I don't want to be led (I'm not good at that), and I don't want to wrench truth into something it never was. Yet I still want a framework to act within. So for me, it is preferable to search. It may mean my parameters to live and act are constantly shifting as my knowledge shifts, but I can live with that.

Searching is scary for some people. It means change, and they would rather have solid ground under their actions. Even if it is someone else's solid ground. I don't know that I will ever find the final truth in this life. But I hope I will never stop searching.

Sailing through Life

When we buy a motorboat, we turn on the engine, aim the boat where we want to go, and Zoom! We get to our destination. In fact, what is important is getting to that destination as fast and as efficiently as possible. All you need to be able to ignore currents and winds is more horsepower, a sleeker hull. . . .

But sailing is different. When sailing, you have to learn to adjust your course to accommodate the winds (both direction and speed) and the currents, all of which are trying to wrench you in some other direction. . . .

In my experience, sailors have a much better sense of the world than motor boaters. . . They have tales to tell, memories to savor, a real sense of being part of the experience. In general, I have always found sailors to be more observant, kinder, wiser than motor boaters.

When most people say they are sailing through life, they mean that they are traveling easily, blown by circumstances and content to be so. But a real sailor knows that sailing through life means always balancing your own desires and destinations with the winds and the currents, always adjusting to constantly changing circumstances, [while] never losing sight of your destination.

So, I suppose, that is what I am doing, sailing through life, constantly balancing and repositioning myself. Therein lies the source of the exhaustion, as well as the adventure. And when I stay focused on the adventure, not the goal, I always do better. I am always happier.

More by Tom Atkins

- The Quarry House Blog (<http://quarryhouse.blogspot.com/>)
- The Better Life/Better Work blog (<http://betterlifebetterwork.blogspot.com/>)
- Love in a Minor Key, a book of poetry (<http://www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/608233>)
- The Quarry House Site (<http://www.quarryhouse.us>)
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