



AND SONS

INITIATION AND THE YOUNG MAN'S SOUL

VOL. 8



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CONTAINS MATURE CONTENT

(But only the stuff that will feed a young man's soul)

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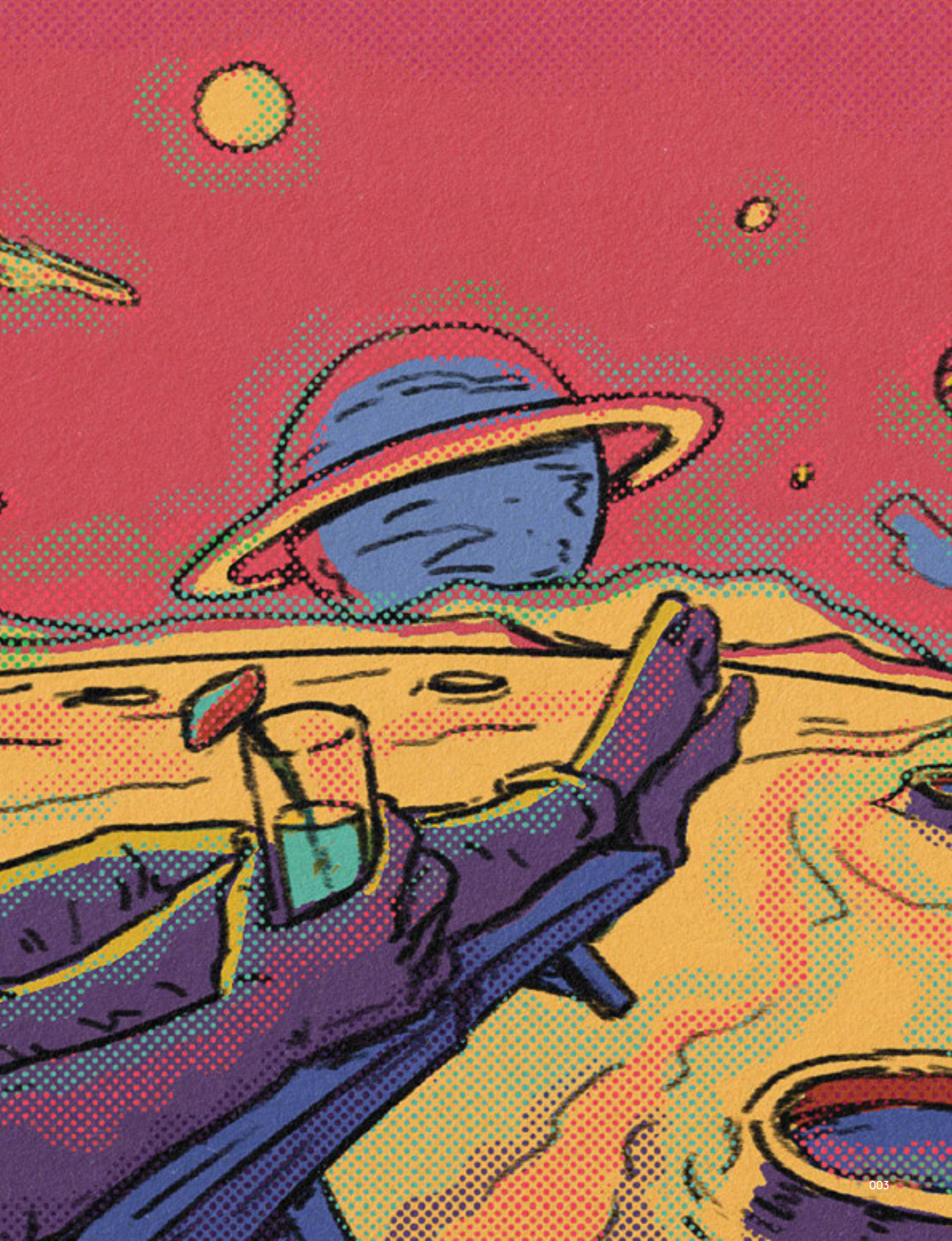
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Image on front cover and this page by Goce Ilievski.

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FOREWORD

Early in Tolkien's "The Fellowship of the Ring," Gandalf is giving Frodo the real history of Middle Earth, not the washed-down, gossip-filled, that-was-the-past kind of history that floated over the top of frothy mugs in the Shire, but the dangerous, complicated, and looming history that would compel Frodo to action. It involved his family, and danger, and the imminent loss of his creature comforts. And it all felt beyond his control.

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Sound familiar? I don't mean in that, 'oh yeah I think I remember that scene' kind, I mean does it sound like someone has been making your life into an allegory? The amount of unprecedented global events that have transpired in the last year, let alone the last decade, had me muttering Frodo's sentiment to myself this morning. Tensions around the COVID-19 pandemic, violence and vitriol surrounding racial differences, Russia invading Ukraine, a looming climate change threshold, and that's just the tip of the iceberg from cruising altitude.

It says nothing about what your daily life has been like. For the grief, the trauma, the anxiety, the depression, the broken people all around you, and all the million things that make those previous headlines seem unimportant.

I wish it need not have happened ...

... So do I. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

We did not pick our family or our moment in time on Earth, but we do get to choose how we live in it. Here at And Sons, we believe that means that we get to choose if we want to chase after wholeheartedness, after Jesus, after being initiated and becoming a good father, husband, friend, and leader. It is up to us to choose the narrow way that leads to life, and not once, but a hundred times each day.

In light of that, we have pulled together a print volume filled with articles meant to connect, inspire, teach, and confess as we journey together. My hope is that this will be a source of refreshment, laughter, conversation, and a cairn or trail marker for any that follow, that you might be encouraged and know that you do not make the journey alone.

Here's to deciding what to do with our time.

– Sam Eldredge

OPPOSITE: Tuscan (pictured) and Steve Glass navigate up the strenuous pitch to their highest point on North Palisade in the Sierras, about 200 vertical feet below the summit. Their climb came to an abrupt halt minutes later when God made it clear that they must turn around ... none too soon. Within about 20 minutes of this photo being taken, the sky opened up and Steve and Tuscan navigated down the mountain in ice, snow, sleet and rain, having their actual descent route obstructed by waterfall over the rappel route ... their summer climb became a full on epic—more than they'd bargained for.

READER MAIL

Thank you for how honestly and vulnerably you have navigated this year and the “fuller” season of the podcasts. The episodes have always enlightened me to new spiritual practices, often slowing my heartbeat and “life speed” down to a more sustainable pace.

My wife and I have walked through two early miscarriages this year, and as I write this she is 8 weeks pregnant. I have seen my wife experience all the emotions—from the pure elation of a positive pregnancy test to the deep, deep stress and anxiety of no longer feeling nauseous, or crunching all the hormone level numbers, and so on. And what I’m left with is a curiosity as to why there haven’t been many tears. We have lost so much, but felt so little.

I have found some feelings within myself after reading your “Do you like olives?” piece from one of the earlier And Sons issues. We had just experienced our first miscarriage a week prior to that week, and were all geared up to share the exciting news with my wife’s family while on vacation, when all of our plans came to a screeching halt. I was pissed. My wife was hurt. Sad. Depressed. I channeled all of my frustration coming from not being able to “fix” the situation into an 8-mile run on the beach.

I think I realized that in order to feel the emotions that are swirling around within us, we have to stop. I was so angry, I could have run 5 to 10 more miles and not have felt a thing. But when I stopped moving, it gave me the opportunity to heal. And to listen to what God was saying to me—“you’ve been with me all the while” is a Mike Donehey lyric that has been echoing in my soul since the back half of 2021.

That’s a good metaphor for what And Sons has been for me. I started following your content when I was in college, about 5 years ago, and have been finding myself gravitating more and more toward Christ because of what you guys do.

– *Tristan L.*

Thank you for ALL the time, energy, thought, and heart that you have poured into And Sons. I know it’s not geared toward me since I’m a mom of 3 younger kids but I learned so much from you. My husband would listen and then comment on what a great podcast it was that week and so I would jump on and listen as well. The two of you are a deep well of wisdom.

When I heard that you were bringing your podcast in for a landing, my heart sank. I have loved listening to the two of you and not just for the great thoughts, humor, and real-life feelings you share, but that it also gave me a glimpse into this really cool generational dynamic and legacy that the Eldredge family has. With the ending of your podcast, I feel like I’m losing an essential piece to “my” team. You might think you are just covering certain topics, but there is so much more that is being gleaned when you speak and share about your lives.

Your podcast will be greatly missed and I wish you all the very best as you keep walking your stories out. Thank you!

– *Julie B.*

Listen to the Wild at Heart podcast and read everything your dad writes, etc., BUT I want you to know that I listen to And Sons, LOVE the magazine, and find a lot of fuel for my soul in receiving from you guys.

What you are doing is so life-giving for any man in any stage. It is really sharpening me, encouraging me, and fueling me forward in my journey with God.

I’ll miss the podcast, but there’s a whole bunch I’ve missed so I’ll go back through the archives, and by the time I’m done, hopefully you will have some new amazing way to pour into guys like me (and the younger guys you’re aiming for).

– *Nik H.*



I just finished your “All Good Things” podcast and I just want to thank you for the work your family has been doing. I’ve been tracking with you guys ever since my time at Base Camp 7 or 8 years ago and I really want you to know how much of an impact you guys have had on my life (as a now 40-year-old father and husband). And how Jesus has led me into new chapters of life using your conversations as signposts along the way.

Through Wild at Heart, Jesus has allowed me to grow and to father my children (not perfectly of course). It has changed the entire trajectory of my life. So to end, I want to thank you again. I want to bless your journey and my own. I want to bless your father, and you both as fathers, and our sons. I thank Jesus for intervening in all of our lives, and for showing us what a life with him has to offer.

– Steve G.

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WHEN I STOPPED BELIEVING IN GOD

Words Jon Dale Image Chris Koelle

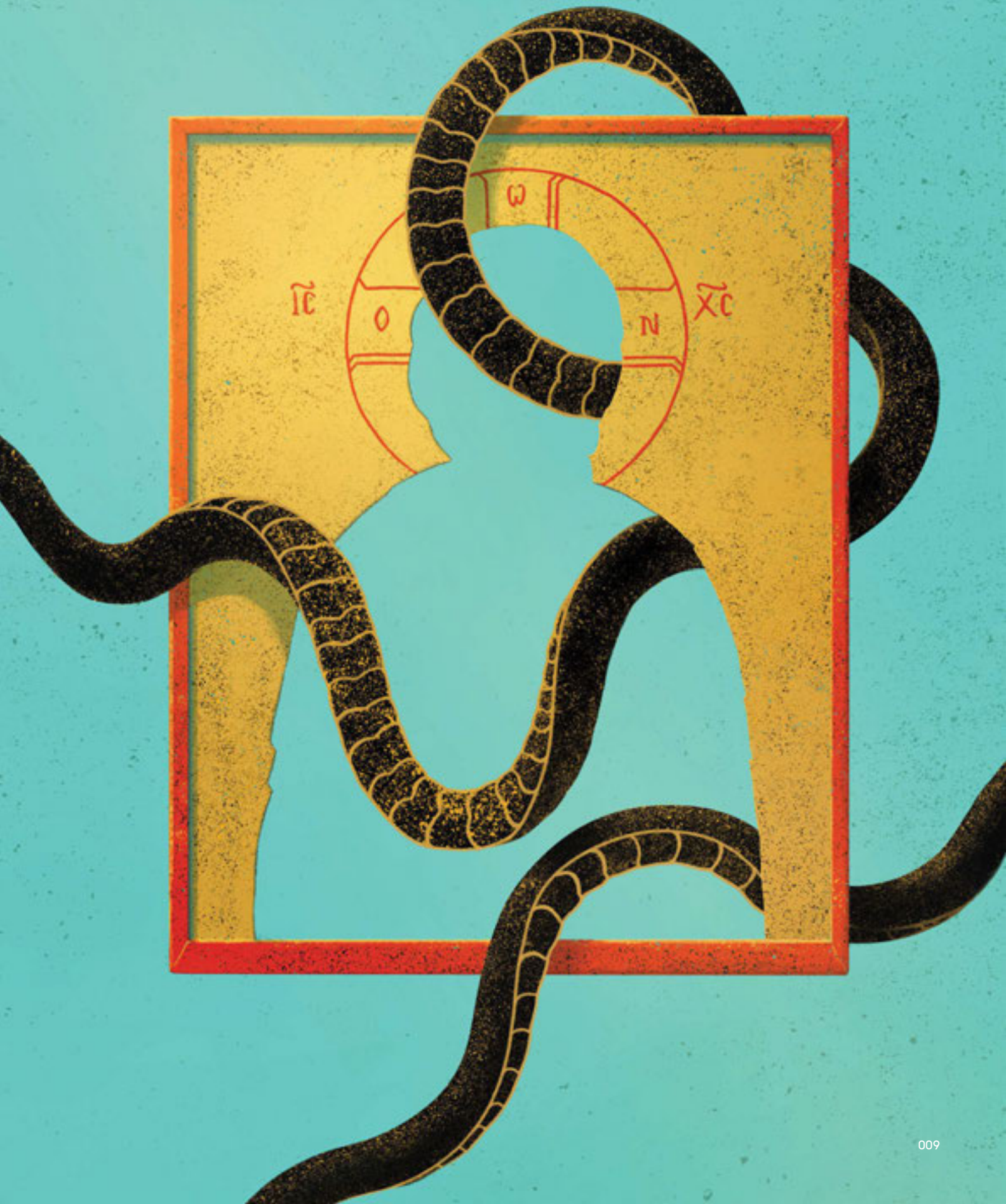
“I’m not sure I believe in God anymore.”

The words hung in the air, staring back at me with pointed fingers. I couldn’t believe I’d just said it out loud. Sitting with me were two of the men I most respect in this world. One had been my pastor for many years, the other I consider my spiritual father.

I was very aware of the implications. This didn’t just change my view of eternity but had very real implications for the present as well. You see, not only have I considered myself a Christian since I was a kid, but I’ve also built my entire life around my faith and followed that into full-time ministry as part of the leadership team at Wild at Heart. If I didn’t believe in God anymore and I was going public with it, then I might be walking away from my career as well.

As I sat there waiting for a response, I thought back to how I’d gotten to this place.

There’s a sweet story my parents tell of me coming into their bedroom when I was five or six and telling them I’d “given my heart to Jesus.” Growing up, I was the good kid who led a Bible study at school and went to youth group every week. A few years after I got married, my wife Amy and I did a discipleship training school with Youth With A Mission and it was there that I really learned to do what was called “hearing the voice of God” and made the decision to try and figure out God’s intention for my life rather than my own. From time to time I’d have my doubts about my experiences, but like any good Christian, I learned how, as they say in the Book of Mormon musical, to “turn them off, like a light switch.”



Now, here I was at 45 years old, in a funk that I couldn't figure out how to shake. I was pretty convinced I was experiencing severe depression and the question that had been plaguing my thoughts for the last several months was what if God isn't real and my whole life is actually built on a fairy tale?

But there was one problem. I was pretty sure I could point to several instances in my life where God had spoken to me. Not out loud, audibly, but in that still small voice that seems a lot like one's own thoughts or imagination. But as soon as I would begin thinking about the times I've heard from God, another thought would come: "Did God really say that?"

You see, I can't stop believing in God, if he really speaks. If I was going to stop believing in God, I had to become convinced that he hadn't actually spoken to me. So, I began to question everything I'd ever heard from God. Maybe it was all just my overactive imagination.

I was shaken from my thoughts by Mark's response, "It's okay, I've been there too." Chris followed on, "You're going to be okay; these are important miles." And while I wasn't better, I did believe that they both loved me, and something about their response gave me peace that it might not all be over.

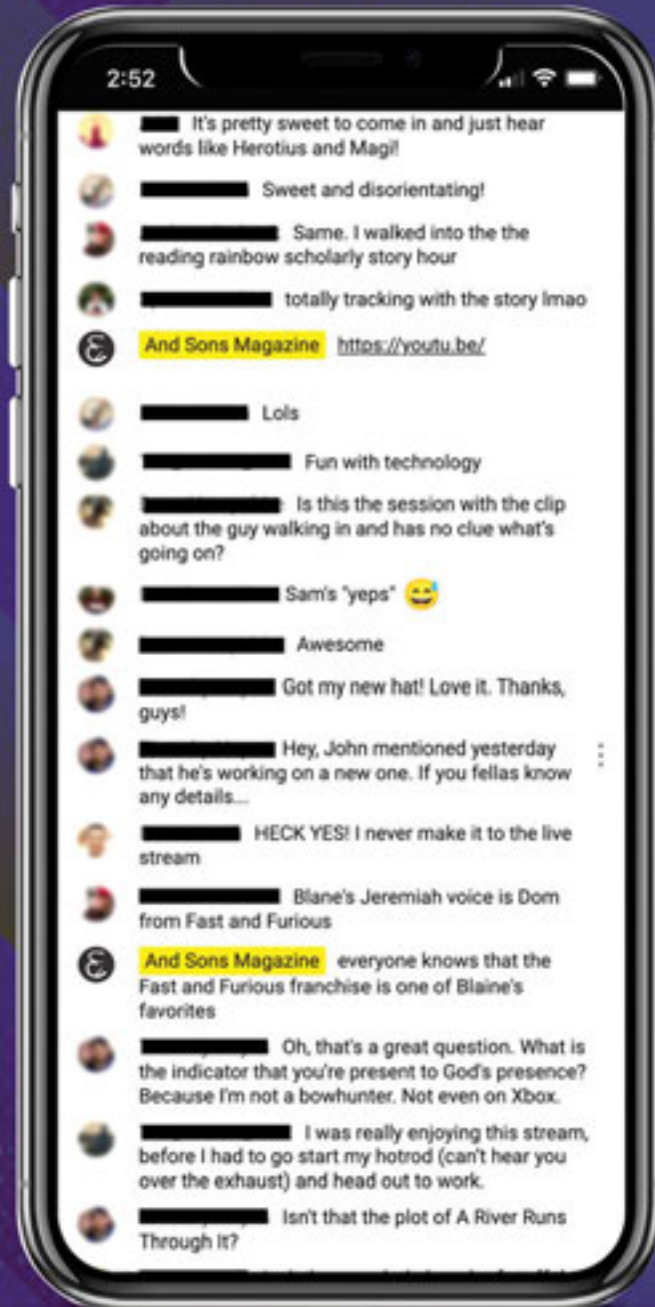
The months that followed are a bit of a blur. I started seeing a therapist and dug into my story. That was really helpful. I went on a retreat with a couple of my closest friends and for the first time in my life shared a story of childhood sexual abuse. In that instant, a lifetime of guilt and shame that I'd been completely oblivious to was suddenly lifted, not in a prayer time, but in the act of sharing the story out loud. But, even though I began feeling much better and was no longer depressed, I was still dealing with this nagging thought: "What if every time I think I've heard from God was actually just me?"

So I did something that seemed a little crazy. I asked God about it. And when I did, I heard a still small voice as a thought in my head, "That's the question my enemy has always been asking."

And I suddenly saw it. I picked up my phone, opened the Bible App, and went to Genesis 3 and started reading, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say ...". There it was, the original accusation. DID GOD REALLY SAY? And the spell I'd been living under suddenly broke. The truth really does set us free.

I'd be lying if I said that all my doubts were gone. I don't know that I'll be able to say that 'til I'm staring Jesus in the face. But I do know this: something in my heart has been settled. And I'm "hearing God" again. And I'm so grateful. ■

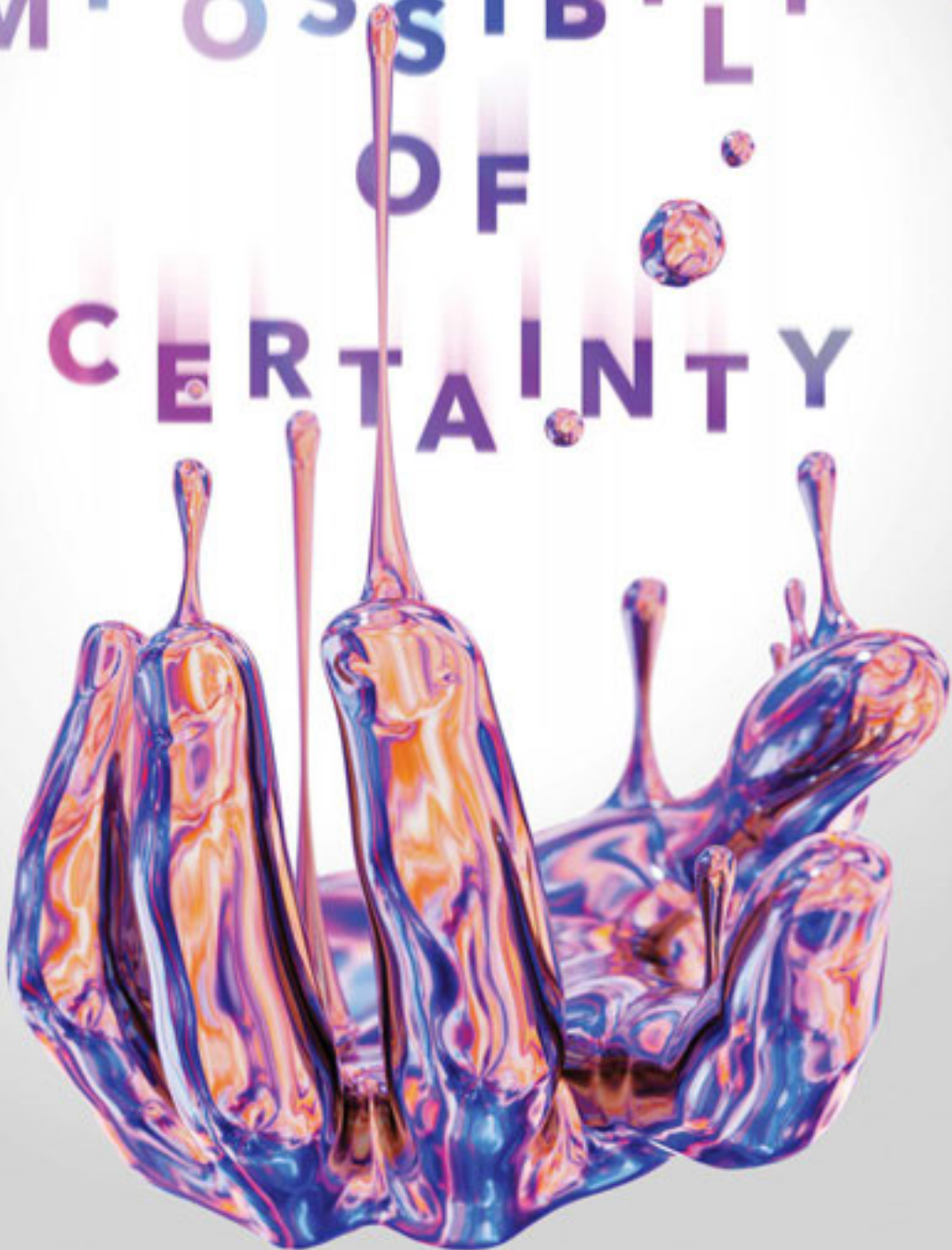
THERE ARE MORE WAYS TO CONNECT WITH AND SONS.

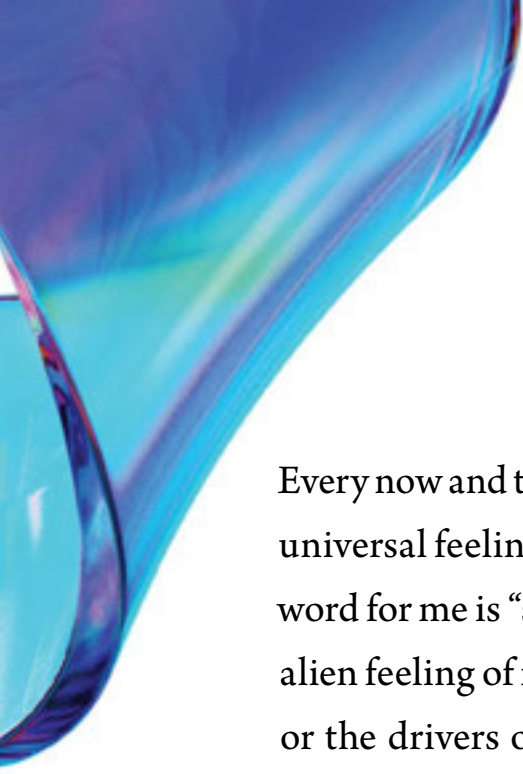


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THE
IMPOSSIBILITY
OF
CERTAINTY





Every now and then an obscure word that names an obscure but universal feeling achieves a moment of popularity. The recent word for me is “sonder,” which, you probably know, names the alien feeling of realizing that the people you pass on the street, or the drivers of the cars surrounding you in traffic, all have lives just as complex and rich as your own.

It is a moment when we are lifted out of our rapt attention on our own tediously quotidian lives. It can be overwhelming. There’s a reason there’s a word for it and there’s a reason it’s an acute sensation. It can be overwhelming. Yet at the same time it is a lovely sensation as the moment of realization brings a democratic and fraternal feeling of togetherness, of a grand interconnectivity of the human race.

I’m driving from the basement I sleep in while in Fort Collins, Colorado, for graduate school to my classroom to prepare for my morning lesson. Sitting at a stop light, I glance over at the minivan idling next to me, steam rising around us from the warming vehicles’ exhaust in the cold winter light of early morning. The van’s many bumper stickers paint an indistinct picture of the personality of the driver: A rebel alliance symbol demonstrates the driver’s love of Star Wars, a “baby on board” and stick figure family confirm what the minivan itself already suggests of family and a particular stage of life, support of the local rock radio station and its meaningless station number, perhaps a political or religious affirmation here and there. A minivan with bumper stickers is itself a kind of contradiction when I think of the parents I knew growing up and their

disdain for stickers—lowers the resale value of the car. Perhaps it is this inner dialogue or the strange intimacy of the bumper sticker broadcasting to the world the driver’s beliefs, home life, and interests that broke me out of my inner life and into a moment of sonder; the thought that played through my mind was, “How could I ask this stranger to take a risk that I am unwilling to take in order to get the life I want?”

You see, this was the winter of 2021 and Covid vaccines were beginning to roll out and with them a war of information. Even my own family stood divided. I myself strongly believe in the scientific method and the efficacy of vaccines, whereas members of my extended family find the research inconclusive or the methods of development unethical. I trust and respect my family, and their concerns had me second guessing my confidence. But at this moment, in sonder, looking at the van, I realized that even if every conspiracy theory around the vaccine is true and I’ll either turn into a lizard or have the blood of babies on my hands, what I desperately want is for life to go back to normal, or a semblance of normal. And I cannot ask strangers to take a risk that I am unwilling to take so that I can have the life and world that I want.

As Kili says in *The Hobbit* film, “I will not hide behind a wall of stone while others fight our battles for us. It is not in my blood.” Any need for certainty ended. It is not in my blood.

The global and personal conversation and the social media mosh pit that vaccines cause were not the only conflicts of information that Covid exposed, to many of us, for the first time. The pandemic introduced us to a war of information, a war that has been there for a long time, but the scale brought it into the foreground of our lives for the first time. We were all forced to make public decisions of who to believe, who to trust, and where to get our information. “Yes, but how do you know?” It felt like truth became a subjective reality and belief and certainty all depended on the choice of who someone considered an authority, who to believe. It is a choice we are constantly making, even if we aren’t aware of it. We know that we are sure, we are sure of feeling sure, we’re certain of certainty.

But should we be certain of certainty?

Everything we know to be true comes from a source. I know the sky is blue because my senses tell me it is blue, and I know the word “blue” signals the color I see because we all agree on it. I know the capital of the United States is Washington D.C. because Mrs. Cliff told me in the third grade and it has continued to be confirmed. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Teachers, parents, friends, the Bible, pastors, sources we consider to be authority. What I know is based on how I know (or epistemology). What the pandemic showed all of us is that whether someone is or is not an authority is based on whether we choose to see them as an authority. A choice that is being made based on prior information given to us by prior authorities we saw as authorities because of prior choices on and on and on down to parents and kindergarten teachers before we even had the ability to reason out the choice.

The problem is, every decision we make, not just the decision of who to trust, is made based on the premise of other, untested, unreasoned decisions. An assertion is always based on another untested assertion.

At the end of the day this is philosophy, and I am going to quote and talk about philosophy. But don’t be too quick to dismiss philosophy as cerebral and irrelevant: The way we think about certainty has direct and life-altering consequences to ourselves and others.

The Austrian existential philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his book “*On Certainty*,” says:

We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all the reports about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which I make in order to test the truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there?

To go out to prove something as true requires a network of presuppositions that I have not proved. The chemistry student proves that magnesium reacts violently to water, but the student already assumes that the beaker will not break when she drops the magnesium strip into the vial, an assumption that is not tested. More often than not it does not break, and sometimes it does. How did she know it would not break? How did she know the beaker contained water? How did she know that she was given a magnesium strip? Were these things tested? It goes on like this. The integrity of the lab table is untested and is certain of, the teacher is untested and is certain of, the senses are certain of and untested.

The central idea is that when my brother tells me that testosterone is used to regulate metabolism, to believe him is to believe his belief in the podcast that gave him the information. His belief in the podcast is based on a belief from high school teachers and my belief in him is based on earlier belief. “When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions.” The certainty that one has the best and most reliable source of information is grounded in earlier, untested sources of information. We must choose to trust authority, even if it is a primary school teacher or textbook.

And when we begin to believe in a particular certainty, we are choosing to believe in the network of untested propositions that web out ad infinitum.

Perhaps the answer to our certainty is previous experience. I trust my brother is telling me the truth about the involvement of testosterone in metabolism because previous experience has proven that my brother is trustworthy. Or at the very least, though sometimes incorrect, more correct than not. Previous experience gives me certainty that my parents are to be trusted, that my teachers are to be trusted, that my physics textbook is to be trusted (despite the coexistence of equal experience of all of them being wrong, or incomplete, at different times or with new information). Previous experience tells me I am wearing pants even though my mind has tuned out the physical sensation of wearing pants because I have the memory of putting them on and the previous experience of having put them on every day of my life.

What reason have I, now, when I cannot see my toes, to assume that I have five toes on each foot? Is it right to say that my reason is that previous experience has always taught me so? Am I more certain of previous experience than that I have ten toes? That previous experience may very well be the cause of my present certitude; but is it its ground?

Previous experience can certainly be the cause of certainty. The chemistry student does not feel the need to prove the unproven assumption because previous experience has taught her that she does not need to test it. Her mind is full of memories of trustworthy teachers and trustworthy instructions. A table has not simply disappeared when her back was turned a single time. She has absolutely no memories of the atoms of her body perfectly aligning with the atoms of the chair so she simply passes and falls through it while sitting. I am certain my brother is telling the truth because I have memories of him telling the truth. Perhaps many more memories of him being right than him being wrong. You are certain the car will stop when you press the brake because every memory you have of driving the car proves it.

But memory, the way in which you are aware of previous experience, is no better than chance.

A study on the efficacy of memory looked at 73 mentally healthy 14-year-old males. At 14, the boys were asked questions concerning areas of family relationships, home environment, dating, sexuality, religion, parental discipline, and general activities.





Thirty-four years later, 67 of these subjects were reinterviewed again at age 48. They were asked to answer the same exact question given to them as teens. When the answers were compared to their originals, significant differences were found between the adults' memories of adolescence and what was actually reported during adolescence. The study found that the accuracy of memory was no better than chance. Just above 51 percent.

Another study interviewed people about the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers a year after it occurred. It found that 50 percent of the details of any given memory changes in just one year. People remembering the events of the attack a year later remembered the gist of what happened, but were just as likely to get right who they were with, what they were doing, and what they said as guessing the outcome of a coin toss.

In 2015, psychologists created the conditions for a study in which participants unknowingly and spontaneously generated rich, detailed memories of a crime they didn't commit—simply by the psychologists asking leading questions. Seventy percent of participants accepted that they had committed this fictitious crime.

Memory is inadmissibly flawed. Every time you remember an event from the past, your brain networks change in ways that can alter the memory of the event. Because of this, the next time you remember it, you might recall not the original event but what you remembered the previous time.

To arrive at certainty, we rely on the grounded and irrefutable nature of our memories. We trust in previous experience to affirm what we know, to make a decision to believe, to trust. And yet, time and time again, our ability to remember is no better than chance. Previous experience as a ground to be certain is no better than tossing a coin.

We say we know that water boils when it is put over a fire. How do we know? Experience has taught us. I say "I know that I had breakfast this morning;" experience hasn't taught me that. One also says "I know that he is in pain." The language game is different every time, we are sure every time, and people will agree with us that we are in a position to know every time. And that is why the propositions of physics are found in textbooks for everyone. If someone says he knows something, it must be something that, by general consent, he is in a position to know.

In Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason," he calls knowledge independent of experience "a priori" knowledge, while knowledge obtained through experience is termed "a posteriori."



*Without certainty, every decision then requires
a kind of faith, whether we are aware of it or not.*

According to Kant, a proposition is a priori if it is necessary and universal. A proposition is necessary if it could not possibly be false, and so cannot be denied without contradiction. A proposition is universal if it is true in all cases, and so does not admit any exceptions. Knowledge gained a posteriori, through the senses, Kant argues, never imparts absolute necessity and universality, because it is always possible that we might encounter an exception. Through a posteriori knowledge, I have the expectation that the chair will be solid, and when I sit down it is. I have the expectation that the current administration won't raise my taxes. Rather than affirm that expectation by sitting, I affirm it by voting, but then the administration does raise my taxes. The latter example is not universal. Is the former? Has a chair ever failed me? Whether or not the expectation is affirmed varies in probabilities of success, but the choices made by expectation do not. We assume a granted level of risk, and yet expectations are changeable. And we can never predict the future. There is an accepted level of chance, which we call luck or fortune.

Certainty is impossible.

Despite the impossibility of certainty, I must still go forward in the world and act, and act justly. It remains a choice, an act of will. But what then, what is the foundation of knowing?

How does someone judge which is his right and which is his left hand? How do I know that my judgment will agree with someone else's? How do I know that this color is blue? If I don't trust myself here, why should I trust anyone else's judgment? Is there a why? Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable. It is part of judging.

What is the foundation of knowing, the end of doubt? An innate moral compass? Our personality and character? Are these not determined by our environment? Perhaps it is God, but which God? Not just the differences of religions and theologies, but between the

individual and unique Gods of neighborhoods, churches, family systems, and pastors. Past experience has taught me that contemporary prophecy and revelation are like memory, no better than chance. And like other invisible forces, they cannot be disproved, nor proved.

Without certainty, every decision then requires a kind of faith, whether we are aware of it or not. When I say "faith," I don't simply mean belief in an institutional religion and its doctrines and creeds. I mean having certainty in that which cannot be proved. Every decision we make requires us to put our faith in something. To take a step requires me to put faith in the ground, that it will not open up beneath me; it requires me to put faith in my inner ear, my sense of balance; it requires me to put faith into the physics of motion and inertia, of the muscles in my leg, in my eyes and senses. And the strangest thing is that this example feels silly to you. Walking requires no faith, right? It is automatic. And yet there is not a person alive who has not tripped, who put their utter surety into the step taken, and that surety was met by a sudden flip of their body and the pain that followed.

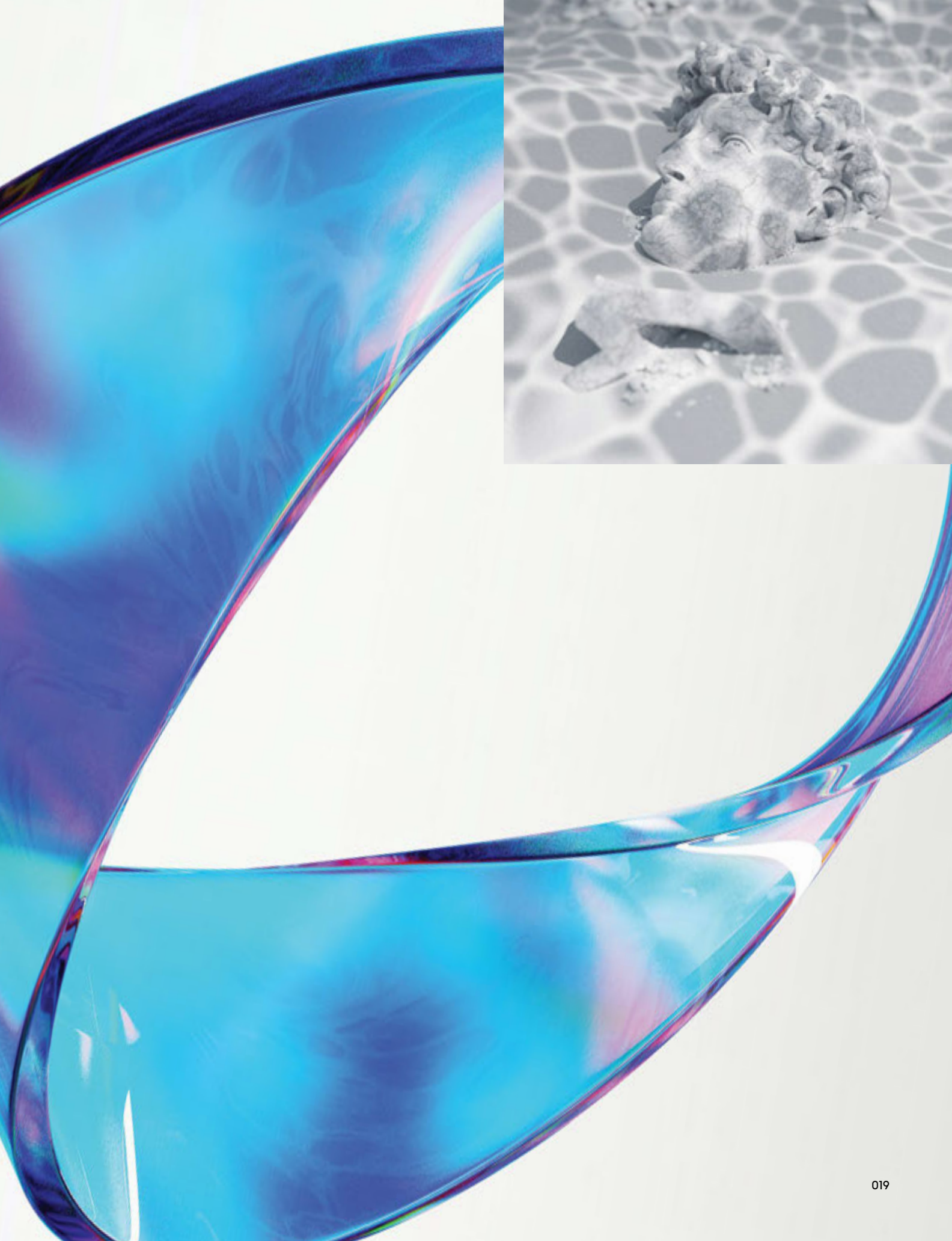
And after a fall that comes from nowhere, we do not fret over walking. We may take a few careful steps but soon regain a blind and unwavering confidence.

Every decision requires faith. From walking, to choosing authorities to believe, to acting on what you have been told, to buying a house or investing in a stock, to believing you exist, to eating a hot dog. Certainty is impossible; we live on faith.

For me, the foundation of certainty and the end of doubt must be something that does not begin from within myself. It must be something that does not begin from within another person. It must be something, as Kant describes, that is true in all cases. For me, that is beauty. If it is beautiful, I can be certain of it.

Perhaps that is too easy an answer, but each of us must find an answer. Reality requires us to lay down the hubris that you, I, we, are the exception, that you, I, we, truly have the only and impossible source of absolute certainty. ■





“YOU ARE NOVAK DJOKOVIC”

Words Jon Carlson Images Wookie Jones

As tennis' grand slam season began amidst the controversy that continues to follow Novak Djokovic, with him quarantined in a Melbourne hotel room, I found myself thinking about the events that unfolded in last year's US Open men's final on September 12, 2021. Like many avid tennis fans, I have found myself in the Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer camps over the years, not really finding a liking for Novak.



I fell in love with Nadal in 2008 when he bested Federer in what many consider the greatest tennis match of all time. I remember postponing our departure from my in-laws' cabin up north that Sunday so we could watch the conclusion of that epic battle. It was then I knew we were seeing something truly special in this unassuming man from Majorca with the heart of a lion. And I've also always admired Roger Federer, his grace in all things both on and off the court.

But what of Novak Djokovic? All of this left little room for Novak to even have a chance to win my affection. This seemed to have been the case for the New York crowd, who had never really embraced Novak as one of their own, their people. Certainly I have found many of his on-court antics less than likable. There are the tantrums and the tearing of shirts. I was appalled when he hit a lineswoman in the throat and was subsequently disqualified from the 2020 US Open. I am not condoning any of his behavior nor am I taking a position regarding his predicament in Australia. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I didn't really like Novak prior to that fateful afternoon. However, what I am finding afresh in all of this is that, with God, all things are possible. Even in a tennis match, he is the God of "more than we ask or imagine."

I sat glued to the TV that September day, adrenaline coursing through my body. Novak Djokovic vs. Daniil Medvedev: I was in it with these two gladiators as they battled for one of the biggest prizes in the tennis world. For Novak, it was a bid for tennis and sports history. If he won this match he would not only take his place among a select few who have won "the grand slam" (winning all four grand slam events in one calendar year), he would also top the list with 21 career grand slam titles, surpassing both Rafa and Roger who each had 20. I was fully in the Medvedev camp that day. My default position was that I would have rooted for almost anyone who opposed Novak's bid for the title. Medvedev commanded a two sets to love lead and was turning the corner toward his first grand slam title. I was overjoyed.

That's when I sensed the Divine Intruder and heard God speak, "I want you to root for Novak Djokovic."
"What!?" I protested.

"I want you to root for Novak."

I resisted initially but something shifted within me. I began to root for Novak from the heart. I found myself doing what I had NEVER done before, pulling for this unusual Serbian man.

My heart toward him began to change. Then God spoke something else I could have never seen coming, "You are Novak Djokovic."

Clearly I'm not a Serbian man who is arguably the greatest tennis player of all time. What the Father was saying to me would be revealed as the match went on. Down five games to four in the third set, a weary Novak sat down on the sidelines amid the cheers of the New York crowd. He received a standing ovation. As the Flushing Meadows crowd poured out their love and affection upon him, he wept. I wept with him. My eyes are filled with tears as I write this. He had won the love he had been chasing after his entire career.

"You are Novak Djokovic," the Father said as he moved toward me in love.

In his acceptance speech for the runner-up trophy, Djokovic spoke from the heart, "I would like to say, that tonight, even though I have not won the match, my heart is filled with joy and I'm the happiest man alive because you guys made me feel very special on the court. I've never felt like this in New York."

We thought he was chasing history, but he was really chasing love or maybe, just maybe, love was and is chasing after him.

"You are Novak Djokovic," the Father said as he moved toward me in love.

"You are Novak Djokovic."

In those moments on that seemingly ordinary Sunday afternoon, Novak became "my people" as he did for the New York crowd. That is the power of attachment love, the attachment love that filled Novak's heart with joy. I saw myself in him, chasing after love, only to find that love had been chasing after him. I realized that all these years of striving in the shadow of Rafa and Roger, what appeared to be chasing after success and history was really a quest for love, validation, and belonging—simply to be loved. We are all, every one of us, down on the court, crying our eyes out in a towel with hearts full of love and joy, listening to the adoration of the crowd.

You are Novak Djokovic. ■





Photo by Malachi Brooks

A dramatic landscape featuring a volcanic eruption in the background. A large plume of dark, billowing smoke rises from a mountain range, partially obscuring the sky. In the foreground, a small town with several houses and trees is visible, situated in a valley. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric, with a sense of impending danger or a powerful natural event.

WHAT DO YOU ENVISION?

Words Brodie Arbeiter

Do you have dreams? Futures you imagine for yourself that your heart yearns for? Something to look toward that is positive and life-giving? Personally, those are some pretty murky waters. The lack of clarity about my course on this side of Heaven is frustrating.

Currently, I am a wildland firefighter stationed in Boulder County, Colorado. This topic hit my heart while working a fire in the Bighorn National Forest, roughly 180 miles east of the Tetons. Looking over the plains of Wyoming at 8,000 feet, I began to ponder my purpose. I never imagined I would be here, fighting fires across the West in rugged terrain and extreme conditions.

I got a bachelor's degree in sports medicine and worked as a physical therapy aide two years before working fire. It was painstakingly boring. I find biomechanics and kinesiology fascinating, but the job just wasn't for me. In 2020, a friend recommended firefighting and the rest is history. In two fire seasons, this job has taken me to Oregon, California, Colorado, Wyoming, and South Dakota. Even though the work can be brutal, I am still extremely grateful for the adventure.

But it's temporary. I would be lying if I said I want this to be my career. So what on Earth am I here for?

What can I do to move closer to my purpose? My dreams? The first thing that comes to mind is some sort of vocation. I feel this pressure to know exactly what I am here for, to pursue it with my whole

heart, and make it my career as soon as possible. That has never been my style. In my late teens, I became fond of the phrase "renaissance man"—someone who has done it all and who is well versed in many areas of life. A Swiss army knife, if you will. A multi-use tool forged through a colorful blend of experiences.

That said, it is difficult to dream about the future with such a vast horizon. I am still learning to find it more exciting than scary, but this pressure to narrow my sights and focus solely on a certain career is real. Maybe that's called maturity? Maybe it's what all men are called to do? All I know is that there is a fine line between dying to self and pursuing your desires. I desire many things for my future. To counsel young people back to Christ. To become a missionary in a part of the world that knows nothing of the Gospel. To write as well as I can so I can help bridge the gap between the Sunday morning Christians and the genuine relationship Jesus offers. To become better with a guitar.

To be an amazing father, husband, brother, son, and friend. To own a boat. To get my pilot's license. Honestly, some of these passions seem selfish.

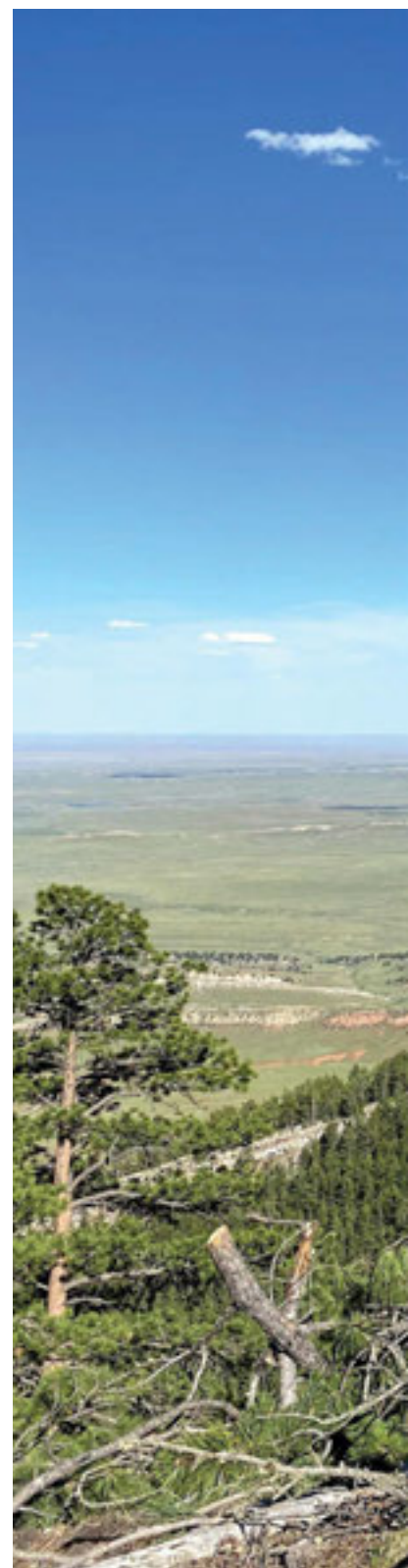




Photo by Brodie Arbeiter



Photo by Brodie Arbeiter

Photo by NOAA





*Trust God, don't try and figure it all out,
submit everything you have to him.*

Most of them have to do with the one thing we were put on Earth to accomplish (co-create redemption in others and make disciples of all nations) and yet I would feel immature if I were to drop everything and pursue them.

I believe we all have extremely high callings on our lives that we would not be able to do without Jesus and his supernatural ability in us. That is definitely scary! But some days (most days) I would much rather have God tell me to stick with firefighting or go back to school instead of what I feel to be infinite possibilities.

Frankly, I'm jealous of those who know they are meant to be a doctor or a teacher or a police officer. I really have never had that type of clarity. Maybe what I listed above is my calling. Maybe I'm being thwarted with trying to figure it out so much that I'm missing the point of it all. My life verse has always been Proverbs 3:5-6: *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."*

Trust God, don't try and figure it all out, submit everything you have to him. It is a promise that if you do these three things, everything will play out as it should. So why even have dreams? Why even bother with what you envision for your future?

I am starting to believe that a kind God blessed us with passions so that he may fulfill them. I will keep trusting, I will lean less on self-obsessed clarity, and daily submit all that I am in humility to my Father. Although my hope is rooted in the coming kingdom, it would be a disservice to my heart to not expect my kind Abba and his faithfulness to put me where I become alive through him and for him.

I pray I may refuse the mundane and have the courage to step into the paths that forge a colorful and multidimensional masculine soul. ■

Can you relate? Talk to us on Twitter @andsonsmagazine. Use #whydream.

Photo by Brodie Arbetter





*Words Blaine Eldredge
Images Grandfailure*

ONLY
THE
LOVER
ENDURES

I carry a flashlight, tourniquets, gauze and chest seals, a satellite communicator, spare food, rope, sundries, tools, and books. It's the books that surprise people, though they're a core part of the mission. My bag is the obvious thing. It's packed with tools I never carried before. But six of us have had to change quite a lot in our lives because we made our community a promise: Whatever happens, we'll get to you.

I left And Sons to help the Church thrive at the end of an age. So now I'm asked, on a fairly regular basis, what families and churches should do to prevail over resignation, hatred, and despair. And because most of the people who ask me that question know that our church has a crisis response team, and that we've sought out retired Navy SEALs and farmers and Christian leaders and Christian activists and a host of others to orient ourselves to the time, they're often surprised, and a little deflated, to hear the answer.

Love Jesus.

But I mean it. There's a straight line from there to chest seals and satellite communicators (for some of us), but you can't skip point A: love Jesus. There's a simple reason for that. The world needs the things we do out of our Union with Christ. It's damaged by the things we do apart from him.

We're living through the end of an age. In academic circles, that point's largely beyond debate. The mathematician Peter Turchin calls it the end of a Secular Cycle.

Every so often, civilizations implode. Now, that's intuitive: of course all empires end. The reason to trust Peter Turchin is that his models pegged 2020 (and a number of other important dates in the 20th century) as the starting point of a society meltdown, years before anything happened.

Or there's William Strauss and Neil Howe. They articulated a theory of American history in which society moves through a predictable cycle of four generations. Those generations have particular characteristics: the High, the Awakening, the Unraveling, and the Crisis. It's an imperfect model, but it's insightful. Needless to say, we're at the Crisis.

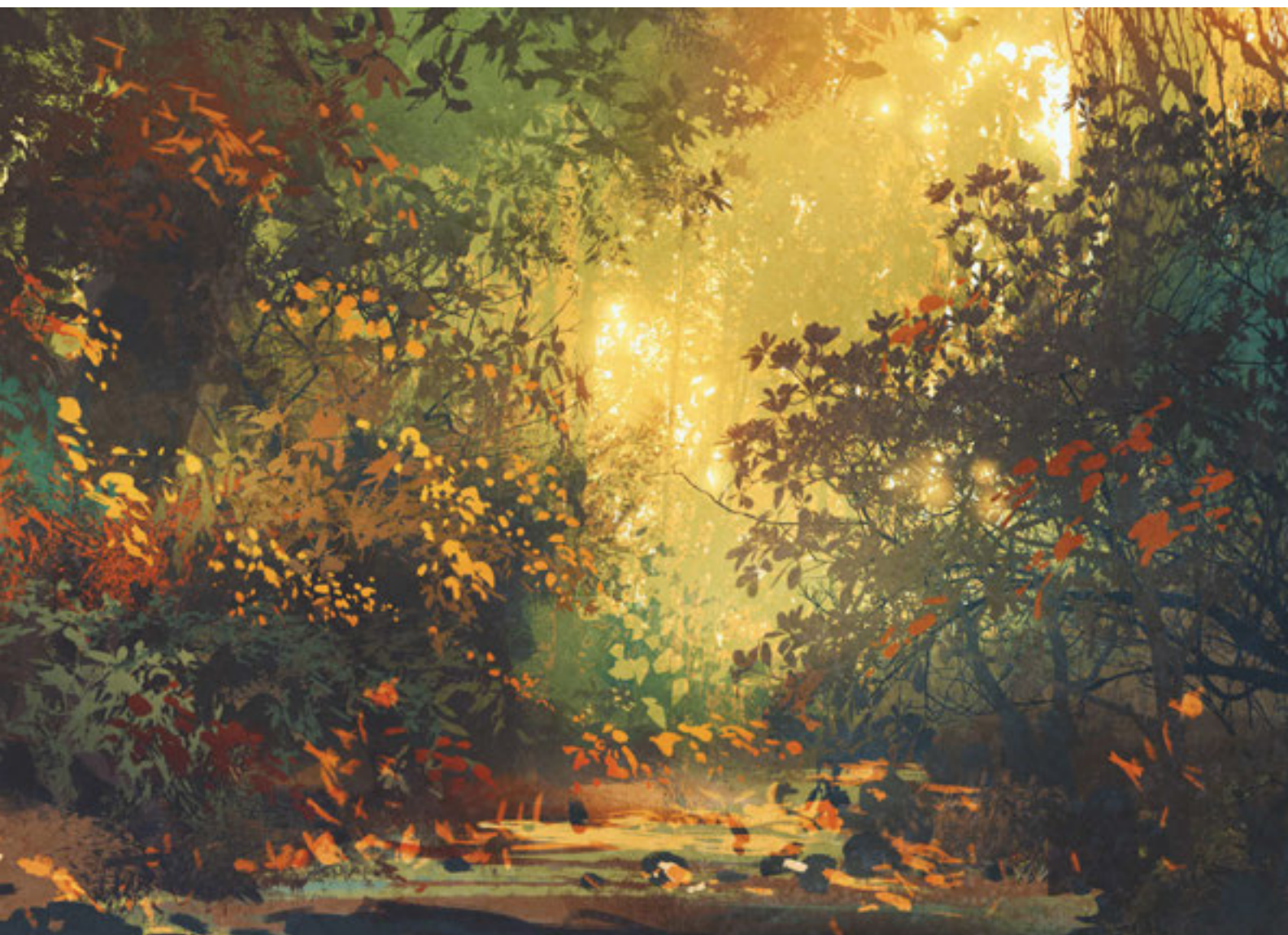
In fact, you can find that opinion in almost any academic discipline. Once upon a time, I thought I would be a college professor. I studied complexity theory and discovered that, every so often, complex systems go through catastrophic periods called Regime Changes. The rules invert. People go crazy. The world transforms. That's happening now.

And the point is, it's a hard time to be alive. So we've got to take our love seriously.

I'll admit that, on a day-to-day basis, it's hard for me to believe that a loss of heart is Threat #1. Except, I experience it. I get to the end of a workday and realize that I haven't felt very much joy. A friend asks me, "What makes your heart come alive?" and I honestly cannot remember, even though, the day before, I thought I was doing great. You remember what Jesus said in Matthew? "*The love of many will grow cold*" (24:12). Or in Revelation? "*You have lost the love you had at first*" (2:4).

We've got to love Jesus.







When God gets hold of a person, their life becomes a place where demons are cast out, people are welcomed, hearts are restored, and the Kingdom comes.

I have a page in my journal. The heading: What Makes Me Love God? It's an expanding list: re-telling Old Testament stories. Mountain bike rides. Brian Hardin's Daily Audio Bible. Vacations with my family. Weightlifting. The Bible Project podcast. The Naked Bible podcast. The Lord of Spirits podcast. First responder training. Good nerdy books.

And that, you see, is where the books come in. I carry around a copy or so of Jim Wilder's "Renovated," Michael Heiser's "The Unseen Realm," Father Stephen De Young's "The Religion of the Apostles," and others. The books are for me. They're also to lend and to give away.

This is my first encouragement for you: Take a walk today and remember what made you fall in love with Jesus. Write it down. Then, do it again. Was it worship? Wilderness? The "Ragamuffin Gospel"? A cigar-driven book study? You must, you must, you must care for your heart. You must cultivate your loving attachment to Jesus.

Now, what about tourniquets?

The point bears repeating: We need what you do out of your union with Jesus. Meaning: when you see Jesus, what are you moved to do for the people you know? Or for the city you live in? Or for your roommate?

Motorcycle classes? Baking? Gardening? High angle rescue? Free lectures? Poetry? A book club? What would you like to try? Because, get this: You fit the times you're in. You are the right person, the right friend of Jesus, for the season. You don't have to become someone else to thrive.

I watched the documentary *The Rescue* by Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin. It tells the story of the British cave divers who were recruited to rescue children from a flooded cave in Thailand. It's a hair raising story, and, seriously, I'm never going to cave dive. But I was arrested

by the film: the British divers never planned to rescue stranded kids. They had a hobby, an unusual obsession. And they were the right people for the right time. The Kingdom of God is like that. When God gets hold of a person, their life becomes a place where demons are cast out, people are welcomed, hearts are restored, and the Kingdom comes. It may look radical; it may look extremely ordinary.

I love crisis response. I've been a WFR (Wilderness First Responder), a guide, a guy who runs up to car accidents. I've shuttled folks through blizzards. I've used an ax to fight a crazed fox harassing livestock; that was one of the strangest things I've ever done. And still, most days, I'm trying to keep my head above water. The things I do to receive the life of God are not optional. Our church's crisis response team has evacuated people from fires, removed people from riots and served in other ways. But mostly, we've prayed. We've dropped by the homes of our friends when they're afraid. We've interceded for the small kingdom Jesus has entrusted to us. We've lifted weights and repaired homes and done the work of remembering together the story of God, and what this is all about.

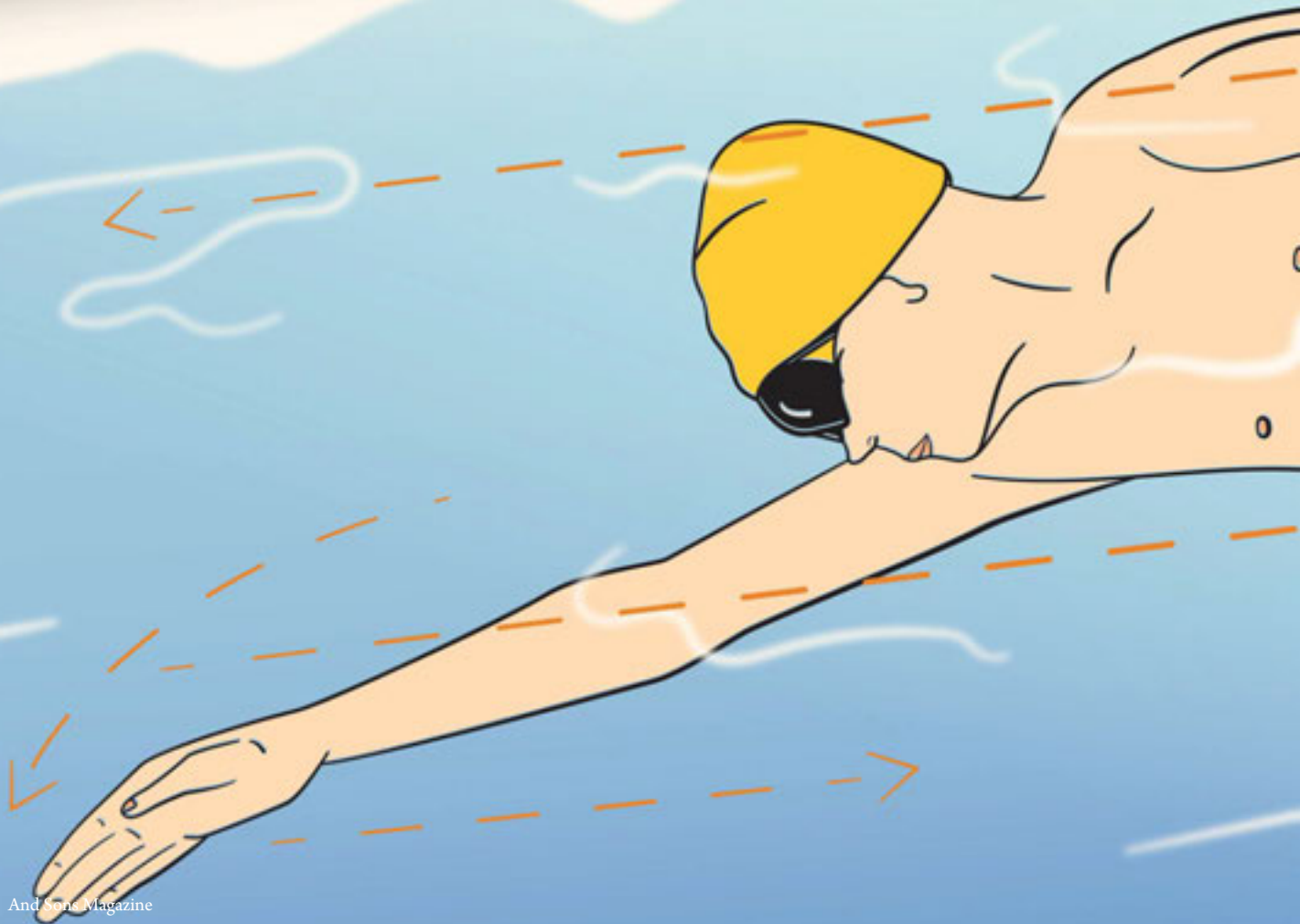
And there is encouraging news about this loving Jesus thing: He wants to care for your heart. He wants to be seen by you. He wants it to go well for you. This may be one of the few things you try to do where the odds really are in your favor. There is warfare. There's mental fatigue. There's the background noise of news and social media. And then there's God, ready to get through to you.

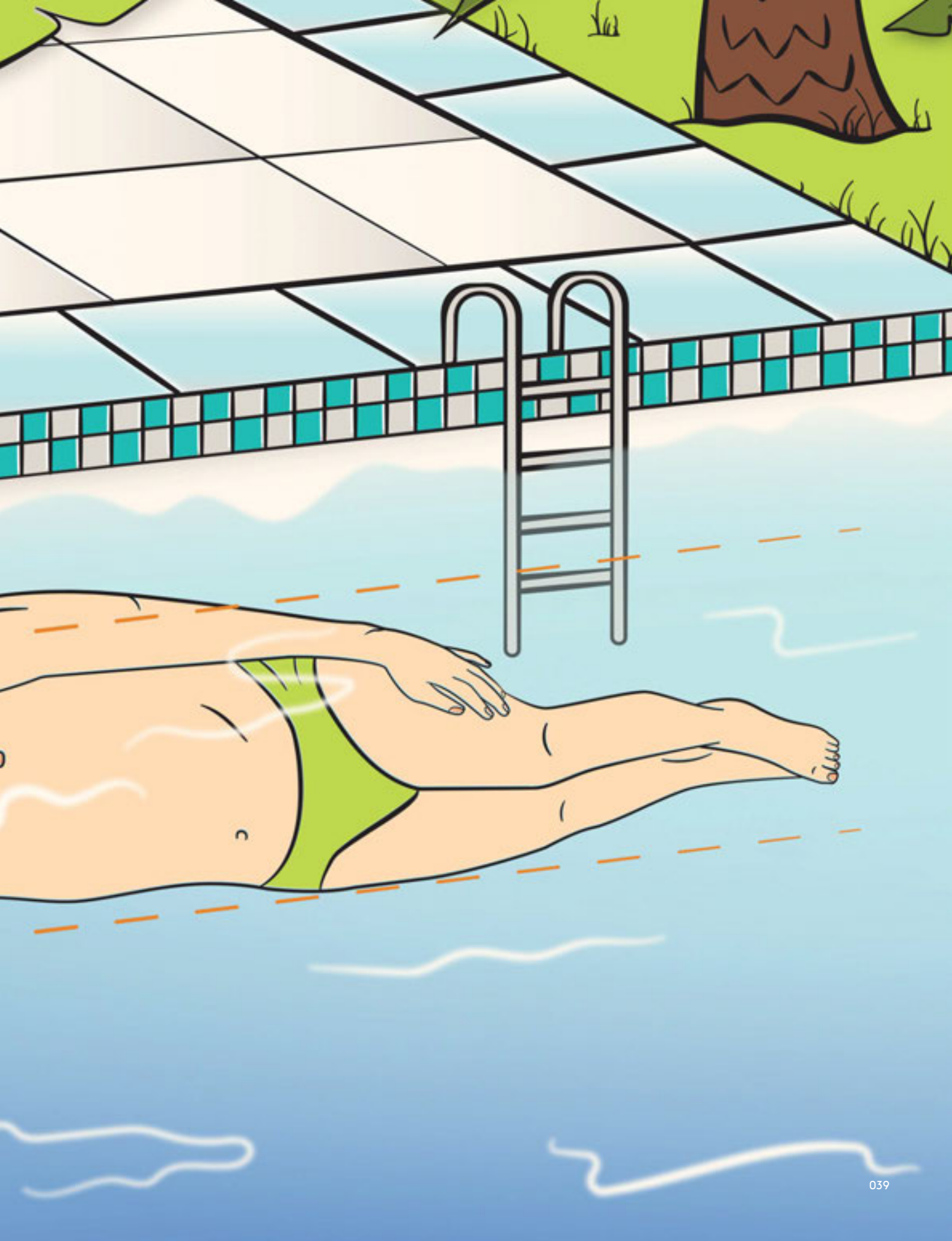
You must simply remember how he did that the first time, and then open the door for him to do it again. ■

Editor's note: Want more from Blaine on the end of an age? Check out MOUNTVIGIL.ORG.

TECHNIQUE VS. POWER

Words Jesse Barkalow Images Becca Kaiser





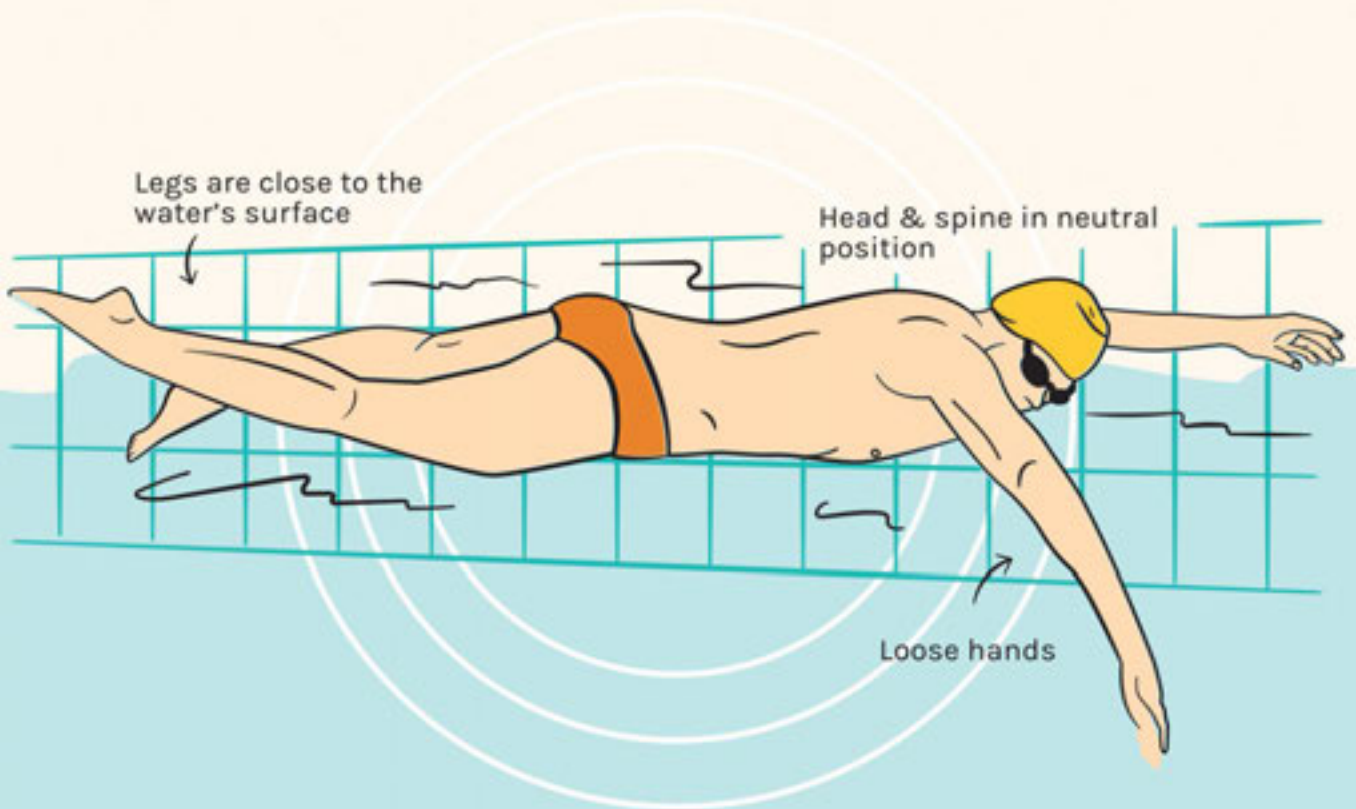
I've been told that humans are not made to swim. The reason given is that we are only about 23-percent efficient when we swim, meaning that the distance-to-energy ratio is very low. When we run, we get almost a 100-percent return from our energy output. The harder we work, the faster we run. Expending energy in a swim, however, has a much smaller return.

Despite those statistics, I can't believe that humans are not made for swimming. How could we gauge purpose from some statistics? Just because something is difficult to accomplish, or requires a process of learning, does not mean that it is unnatural, that it is not part of our design. The energy-to-efficiency return on parenting is, in my opinion, much lower than 23 percent, yet I still believe that men are made to be fathers. To learn how to father children "efficiently" requires a skill set that only comes through innumerable "laps in the pool" and a willingness to balance energy-output with technique. Numbers like "23-percent efficiency" do not tell us anything about our purpose, but they can be tools to help us understand the task at hand and make progress in it.

I recently spent a day in the pool learning a method of swimming called Total Immersion (T.I.). This method lends itself to distance swimming and is especially useful for triathletes. Its purpose is to find a balance between maximal speed and minimal energy output over a long distance swim. This is important for a triathlete because a fast swim can only do so much for your overall time, which is a combination of your total swim time, total bike time, total run time, and total time transitioning from one activity to the other. Swim time matters, but it's not enough to swim fast. You have to have something left for the bike and run that follow.

T.I. puts technique first, training the swimmer to put efficiency first. It wouldn't win a 50-meter freestyle race, but it produces great swim times in a triathlon or any long distance swim race.

THE BASICS OF TOTAL IMMERSION SWIMMING



STEP 1

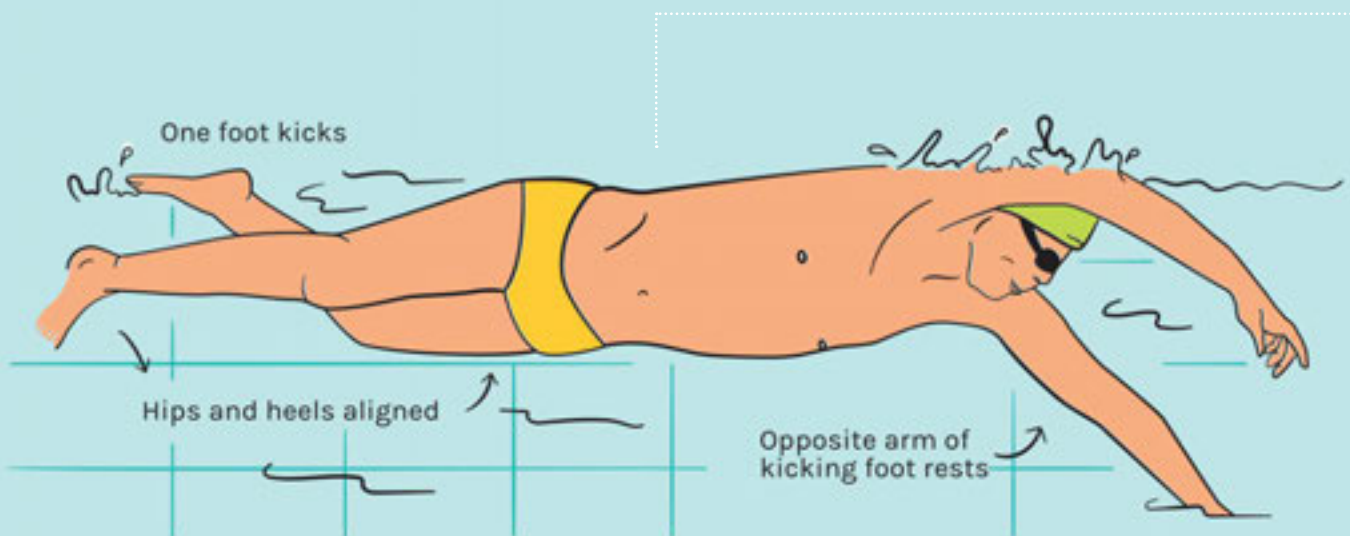
First, you float. Try doing a "Superman" float in the lap lane by putting your hands in front of you and just jumping into the float. Keep your face looking straight down and the crown of your head facing directly toward whatever object you are swimming to (in the case of triathlon, that object is usually a huge and brightly colored buoy that's unbelievably far away).

When you get the form correct, your legs should be somewhat close to the surface and not dragging down toward the bottom of the pool. This is the foundation of the T.I. method. It's the mirepoix (cooking reference) of this swim. Practice this way more than you think you should; do it every time you swim until it's completely natural.

STEP 2

Second, you introduce the stroke. There are several keys to the stroke but the most important is probably keeping your hands in the tracks. That means your hands leave and then reenter the water in the same straight line coming out of your shoulder. When you leave this track, all kinds of bad things happen. You can over-rotate your whole body, and you waste energy by losing efficiency. Your hands enter into the water on each stroke in one specific spot. There are not two spots, there are not four spots, and five is right out. There is only one spot that your hand enters into the water and it's right across from the elbow of your other arm.

If your technique is right, you will hit this exact spot every time, as if it's fixed to your body. You can find this one spot by leading with your shoulder and your elbow when you bring your hand forward for the stroke, which causes a natural movement in which your hand comes forward and drops effortlessly into the water. Your hand should remain loose and mostly limp, not wasting any energy on tightening up those hands muscles. The hand moves forward and slightly down after entering into the water, and only when your hand is on its way to the front of the track does your other hand start scooping water as it takes its turn around the track. Having a hand always in front keeps you pointed in the right direction and balanced from back to front.





STEP 3

Third, you introduce the kick. The kick helps to pivot your body, which is necessary to the whole stroke and helps propel you forward. The kick is a double action, but that's it, just one movement from each leg. This is no off board motor running nonstop, churning the surface. It's a simple and, when done right, elegant double kick. The leg on the same side of your body as the arm that is moving forward kicks down, while the opposite leg kicks up, and then the rest.

If you can add the stroke and the kick onto a good Superman float, you will move efficiently and quickly through the water. Your stroke-to-meter ratio will go down and you will come out of a triathlon swim ahead of the pack and feeling good. There are plenty of resources out there to help you visualize the T.I. technique, and if you get really excited about distance swimming, as I did, you can find a T.I. instructor to take you to the next level.

There is no doubt in my mind that we are made by God to swim. We just won't do it well until we put in the work and submit to the technique. ■

MORE SOLDIER THAN SON

Words Brandon Palma Images Wookie Jones

“Brandon, you tend to talk more like a soldier than a son.”

With one sentence, my counselor leveled me and the session was over. All I could do was stare and blink. And then I had to leave so he could see (and, I assume, destroy) his next client. Walking back to my car, I rubbed my neck like I was sore from whiplash. Maybe my body was sympathizing with the needed blow my heart had just received. Or maybe I wasn't prepared to go back to work and pretend like I hadn't just had my dome rocked.

I've been going to this counselor for a few months now and God is meeting me in some massively impactful ways through him. When the fit with a counselor is right, it's wild how much work can happen in a relatively short period of time. He has been talking to me about several topics that I didn't realize until this session were deeply interconnected. We've addressed my desperate need to perform in order to earn love and affection. We've addressed how deeply my heart desires to always do the right thing. And we've addressed the paralysis that happens in my heart when faced with a major decision and no clear answer from God. Now, I am under no illusion that I am unique in these issues. Quite honestly, that's why I'm sharing them here, hoping that the revelation can help someone who is in a similar space.

What my counselor is helping me unravel is that each of these things connects to the mindset of a soldier and not of a son. A soldier shows up in the exact right place at the exact right time, receives his orders, and executes them as flawlessly as possible. And then, he returns again for the next set of orders. I'll be honest. To me, this sounds like holiness. Forget your desires and your flesh and your heart. Show up, shut up, and put up. God will tell you what needs to be done to further His Kingdom. You should be humble and obey and not be concerned about your own hopes or dreams or happiness. That stuff is worldly and pulls Christians away from the purposes of God.





Could God really be such a loving Father that instead of giving me marching orders, He asks me how I'd like to join Him and participate in establishing and building His Kingdom here on Earth?

Maybe I'm the only one who has felt this, but these thoughts flood my mind whenever I hear someone ask about my passions and dreams. They don't matter. Only what God wants matters. Besides, isn't the heart wicked and deceitful above all things? Aren't I bent toward depravity, by virtue of being a human?

My counselor has challenged me deeply in these beliefs, and if I'm being completely transparent, I'm still wrestling with this. But his argument to me is that, as a born-again believer in Christ and because of His atoning work on the cross, I hold both depravity and dignity. He challenged me that I focus too much on my depravity and not enough on the imbued dignity of all image-bearers, but especially those born again into the new covenant in Christ. Now, he's not telling me to go wild out and do whatever the heck I want. But he has been gently (and not so gently) prodding my notions of sonship. He argues that a beloved son doesn't worry about having everything figured out. Instead, he lives wisely, but adventurously, safe to make choices and trust that his Father will take care of him if something goes wrong.

Again, being honest, the dignity of choice—the invitation to partner and partake in the plans of God in my life as an active, loved, valued participant instead of a nameless, faceless executor of orders—still often feels out of reach. But something about this challenge is eating away at me inside. It feels like a potentially life-changing revelation and also like it's too good to be true. Could God really be such a loving Father that instead of giving me marching orders, He asks me how I'd like to join Him and participate in establishing and building His Kingdom here on Earth? I can only liken it to a Dad spending a day with his son.

If he loves his son, he would likely be more concerned with what the son wanted to do during his special day with Dad than with getting away to the golf course all day because he loves it himself. Maybe the kid wants to run around the park or hit some baseballs or see a movie or go to the zoo.

This is messing with me in profound ways, but I think I've needed it for a long time. I feel many invitations from the Father in this year, but not many direct commands. I prefer commands. They're easy to obey because God says so, end of story. But making my own choices and trusting that I'm following the Spirit's leading? With no direct yes or no? In this economy? Part of the invitation I feel led into even includes the invitation to fail. I may make a wrong choice (hard to believe, I know), but if and when I do, He will be there to help me clean it up, make things right, and move forward by His leading. That messes with someone with a perfectionistic performer's mentality, but that's probably the point. My counselor offered that, for me, taking the time to do less and be more may actually stretch my faith more than just adding to my already overflowing plate of service to God's Kingdom.

Perhaps for me, the deep formation of trust that's needed in my heart will come from learning to accept being loved by my Father, even if I don't fill my life with hours of ways I can "show my work" in being a good son. Maybe it will just come from accepting that I am as loved as I ever will be, regardless of what I do or don't do. And maybe a healthy heart of service for God's Kingdom can only come from that place of identity. Maybe getting honorably discharged from the army I enlisted myself in will be the best thing that ever happens to me as a beloved son. ■

THIS,



I LEARNED



IN AFRICA

Every one of my senses was being bombarded with the unfamiliar. I had just sat through a two-hour “thanksgiving” service. Only it was not Thanksgiving. There was no pumpkin or pecan. No crisp chill inviting me to tuck in to a warm sweater and wrap my hands around a hot coffee.

It was mid-August in a small village on the outskirts of Masaka, Uganda. It was hot. My belly was full of posho, matoke, peanut sauce and whatever fishy meat wrapped in banana leaves I had just consumed between desperate gulps of warm water.

We were given the honored front row seating in the open air structure as the women of the village marched out in song and rhythmic dance, shaking their hips at a rate that would have left Shakira blushing.

Various village members stood before the gathering, eagerly pouring out praise and thanks for the support of the ministry, for children’s school fees, 50-pound bags of rice, and clothes. I watched an 11-year-old Ugandan boy slip on a shiny new pair of black dress shoes, turning then to help put his dusty old loafers, holes in the sides, obviously a couple of sizes too big, onto his younger, barefoot brother’s feet.

We shuffled toward a beat up white van, and grateful faces young and old crowded around us, speaking, smiling, grabbing our hands, eyes shining with gratitude. The language slipped back and forth from Luganda to English. I tried to meet their eyes and smile. I wonder what my countenance was to them with the sun blazing against my face. Dust flew around our feet as we made our way to the vehicle. In one sudden movement, an elderly woman happily shoved a large black hen into my arms. Alive. Dirty and fully feathered. A big old bird. I must have made eye contact with the president of the ministry organization at that point because he laughed and said in his Danish way, which I could never decipher between sarcasm and sincerity, “Yeah, it’s a gift for you. You will cook it for dinner.”

I clutched the bird against my chest and climbed into the 15-passenger van, loaded with well over 20 people. Not counting the other chickens and possibly a small goat.

The words shell shocked come to mind. This was Day 5 in Uganda.

This is a story about learning how much I didn’t know. It’s a story about traveling to some of the poorest places and realizing how poor I was. It’s a story about divine do-overs and no shortcuts.





My husband, Micah, and I went to Uganda on a 3-month visa to volunteer for a Danish Christian organization and offer media support for their mission (an English website, photography, and articles following the stories of the schools and children's homes). We thought we would extend our visas and possibly make the long term move if things went well.

It sounds like we really had something to offer as I'm writing this . . .

The truth is, we were a couple of young married kids, raised in churches and youth camp programs that had us dreaming of the mission field before we were old enough to tell you that Africa was not a country, but one of the seven continents. I had this vague romantic idea of being a missionary. I thought if I just go, I'll figure it out from there. Like my destiny will open up if I make this big leap and the picture that I've been trying to put together my whole life will suddenly become clear! Naive, I know.

Never mind asking God if this was what He had for us. God wouldn't say no to being a missionary, would He? By doing something I deemed grand and heroic, my life would actually become grand and heroic. Maybe then I would believe that God was happy with me. Maybe then I could be proud of myself. Unprepared and uninitiated, we arrived in a foreign country to work within the subculture of another foreign country (Denmark). There were no guidelines, no mentors, no points of reference in all of my life experience to prepare me.

I needed to prove myself with the bird.

Among my family and friends in America, I was considered a good cook. I felt confident in the American kitchen with my recipes that relied heavily on little packs of seasoning, boxes, cans, and frozen meats. Throw in a little fresh (ahem, from the grocery store) peppers and onions. Some good cheese or heavy cream. You can fool the untrained tongue. There's no shame in being on either side of that table (serving or receiving). I truly loved cooking, even then.

But I did not understand the thing I loved.

And that led to a lot of shortcuts. Uganda, it turned out, was the raw and organic garden to expose all of my shortcuts. In the most holy and painful ways. It began with the chicken. I had never slaughtered or cooked a whole animal before. My meat came from the grocery store. This was before the days of iPhones, and the internet connection was spotty at the volunteer home. We were "winging it." My brave Micah did the brunt of the dirty work. I waited inside with hands pressed over my ears.

But by the time I had it out of the quick 2-hour brine and began prepping it for the stove, I was feeling good. Fresh garlic, some dried rosemary and thyme, shallots. Within the half hour, the afternoon breeze was whispering the promise of a rich savory meal through the rustic cinder block home. I added potatoes and carrots to the pot, carefully placing them around the main course.

It was a luxurious centerpiece on a humble table. I watched Micah cut into the bird, his knife meeting considerable resistance. Who took the first bite, I can't remember, but there was a quick consensus moving around the table that something was not right. Tough. Not just "gamey," but downright rotten fishy.



How could something that looked and even smelled so good taste so bad?

One does not slaughter, brine, and roast an old bird in one day.

And thus the journey of divine exposure began. I'll never forget how, on our first night with the Danish missionaries in Uganda, the leaders laughed at our conversation, telling us, "You're so sweet. That's how it is with all the American volunteers. Give it a couple of weeks and then the horns start to show."

I thought I was coming to offer. What I was actually doing was taking a 7,000-mile shortcut to answer some of the deepest questions we all wrestle with. What's my purpose? Will God be pleased with my life? How can I make the biggest impact? I brought my question to Uganda. It was a hard teacher. Identity rooted in the love of the Father was a very young category for me. Words like initiation, frontier, and navigating my heart with Jesus were not in my vocabulary.

What surfaced in me those three months? An intense stronghold of fear, a broken and unfaithful heart, a resistance to the long and narrow road, a barrier to genuine connection.

I sat in the dark and damp home of a Ugandan couple who gave their lives to raise orphaned children. They took such care. Blankets folded neatly, everything tidy and put together for the video interview. With my pen and yellow notepad, I felt like a kid pretending to be a reporter. I asked the adult the questions and then let them carry the rest of the conversation. I couldn't ask the right questions. I couldn't connect to their hearts. I couldn't find the story. I felt like such an imposter.

Jesus did come for me in Uganda. Looking back, I can see it.

In a friend who let me into her sorrowful story and showed me what it looked like to be angry, hopeful, and keep trusting God through the darkest times.

In the exposure of how fear was so deeply entangled into my story.

In the middle of all that was surfacing, a plump Danish woman stood in the kitchen of the volunteer home, kneading a ball of dough, and looked at me. "One day," she said, "you will look back on your time here and you will say, 'This, I learned in Africa.'"

I wish I could have held onto that then. The truth is, I despised her. She was so good in the kitchen. She would come from the market with a paper bag full of fresh vegetables.

I dreaded the nights when it was my turn to cook dinner. I often went into debt with the ministry cafe in order to feed the other volunteers and avoid further embarrassment.

*In my long and narrow journey with Jesus, cooking is
a place of desire and risk, creativity and joy.
It's one of the places I meet with Him.
I've been in the kitchen a lot lately.*



I ached for boxed macaroni and cheese. Now I ache for the flavors of Masaka. The journey toward “real” began for me at the end of my time there. Surrounded by poverty, I could own the poverty of my own soul. Surrounded by richness, I could be okay with learning what I didn’t know in a safe place. Simple things, like how to properly cut a pineapple. Complex things, like not having all of the answers and grieving deeply over stories that needed Jesus to come through or else. Beautiful things, like watching hope and freedom break through against all odds.

My breakthrough didn’t come there. It has been a journey and a process. That was 12 years ago. We were in our early 20s with no kids. Now we’re mid 30s with four young ones.

I am learning to daily surrender the desire to measure my success. I choose to believe that God can be just as happy with me teaching my 4-year-old her ABCs as He can be with the person teaching ESL on the mission field. I see less of myself and more of His grace and kindness.

One of my favorite chefs says, “No shortcuts. Or it will taste like shortcuts.” I don’t want my life to taste like a shortcut.

I want my husband, my children, my family and community to “Taste and see the goodness of God.”

Micah has this phrase—“divine do-overs”—to mark occasions where Jesus lets us walk through a place with Him that was originally marked by shame and “redo” the thing. In my long and narrow journey with Jesus, cooking is a place of desire and risk, creativity and joy. It’s one of the places I meet with Him. I’ve been in the kitchen a lot lately.

Tomorrow, I get a “divine do-over.” I’ve had a young bird marinating in a beautiful mixture of creamy buttermilk and organic honey, salt, and herbs. I have fresh vegetables waiting to be roasted and I’ll make bread for my family. I haven’t attempted the chicken in all these years. I think Jesus was saving it for me for now. I don’t know how it will turn out. I’m expecting good. There were no shortcuts here.

I feel proud. I feel the delight of my Father in the process. So I can be thankful for the process and proud of the outcome ... whatever it may be. ■





AN INTERVIEW WITH
AARON ANDERSON:
A HUMANIZING LENS

Interview by Sam Eldredge

And Sons: Aaron, I'll start with an easy question: What do you think a photo is for? Obviously that's not an easy question, but swing away!

Aaron Anderson: Super easy, thanks for lobbing me that one (insert sarcastic wink). A photo is for a lot of things, but what draws me to photography is the challenge of telling complex and dynamic stories in a single image. Obviously, that can be used in a variety of ways, from selling products to documenting a family trip, but I believe at its core we use photography as a way to be seen. There's something about another person picking up a camera and taking your picture that says "You're worth photographing ... this story is worth telling."

There's an interesting flip side to that as well; photography is a type of language. I feel the most comfortable telling a story through visual language (mainly photography). It's how I see things, and it helps me to communicate what the world looks like to me. I've also found over the years that I am drawn to help people see themselves in a different light (pun intended) and, more specifically, to show them how awesome they are. So many people have bad experiences with photography, and showing someone a picture of themselves that doesn't suck is usually a new experience. As an artist, this is the "baby" moment, where I show them something that until now I've only seen in my head. It's pretty great. On a super nerdy level, I actually see things this way when I'm wandering around in the world. There are moments when it freezes in my head and I can see how I would capture and light a specific moment ... but don't tell anyone that.

AS: How long have you been a photographer? We notice that a lot of what you do focuses on people, obviously, but more specifically people in motion, whether that's on the back of a motorcycle or doing some kind of sport. What has drawn you to the subjects and themes that you shoot?

AA: I'm kind of a late bloomer when it comes to photography. I don't have the "when I first learned to walk my mother gave me a camera and I had an agent when I was 5" kind of story. This is my super-fast timeline: I started on accident about 12 years ago. I stole a camera from my wife that I'd bought for her birthday, my friend Zak told me to always shoot RAW and in manual mode (I had no idea what that meant but I've done it

ever since), went to school for photography about 10 years ago in San Francisco at Academy of Art, dropped out after two years (that was the plan), started a job retouching full time at a firm in SF called Sugar, went back to scuba diving in Colorado and did retouching on the side, stopped scuba diving and went full time freelance about 8 years ago. That's probably a longer answer than you were looking for, but that's my answer.

I love humans and experiencing life with humans. Full stop. My main goal when looking for a career was the question, "How much time do I get to spend with humans having experiences?" In photography, when you're actually getting to do the photography bit, you get to spend a lot of time with humans and the experiences are kind of ridiculously awesome ... this is very nice, high five. I've tried a lot of jobs, over 20 actually, and there isn't anything else where I get to meet so many different humans and have so many radical experiences. I've often joked that if I could figure out a way to go to coffee shops and talk to people while traveling for a living, I would do it, but photography is pretty dang close to that.

The sports/action side of that question relates to two things. First, I played high level soccer for a pretty good chunk of my life; it was what I wanted to do when I was younger, and I have a huge respect for people who are competing at the highest level of sports. I also love motorcycles, and grew up riding dirt bikes ... also something I wanted to do but wasn't quite good enough at that. Secondly, in Colorado Springs we have the Olympic Training Center, and one day I had this idea to start photographing Olympians. I started off looking at posts on Instagram that had the location tagged as the OTC, and then I would send them a message (that's not as creepy as it sounds, I think). What I found was they were not only incredible athletes who really needed new images, but most of them have amazing stories about their journey. I started taking them to coffee before we did a shoot and hearing their story. Then I would build the idea around what they told me. Honestly, just hearing their story and drinking coffee with world class athletes is rad, then we get to take images of them being awesome humans ... bonus. Slowly I became more a part of the community and I really enjoy the challenge of telling these stories, but also creating "action" images that are new and different.

AS: What does "Defy Mediocracy" mean to you?









AA: Yes! Thank you for being one of the 10 people to notice my tagline! Honestly, it's a bit of a cultural middle finger. I hate it when we celebrate mediocre stuff, especially in the Christian realm, like "You did your best making that photo, golly gee whiz! Here's a trophy and a badge saying you love Jesus to post on your wall!" I threw up in my mouth writing that. If anything, we're called to be better than the best because we represent God in our work. Also, have you seen the work He does? It doesn't suck.

This isn't just a shot at Christian art culture, either. It's me letting people know I'm not into making sub-par work. If "good enough" is what you're looking for, then you're looking in the wrong place. We made multiple decisions in the branding that are designed to weed out potential clients that are what I would call "ho-hum," and it reminds me what we're trying to do. On my journey this idea of being the best at something has been both a huge help and a major downfall. I've had to learn that it's okay to want to be the best, and try really hard to be that, but it's also okay not to actually be the best (maybe like second sometimes lol). There was a time in my life, that I wish was longer ago, when, if I wasn't the best or couldn't see it on the horizon, I would quit. That's not super healthy, and I'm working on that part of me still, but it's at the core of who I am and I believe in pursuing greatness. It's also worth noting that we purposely chose "Mediocracy" and not "Mediocrity" because it refers to a group of people who celebrate mediocrity and hold it in high regard, not just the act of being mediocre.

steps down from soap box

AS: Talk to us about the process a little. Start to finish, how do you take on a new project?

AA: It depends on what the project is and who it's for. With personal projects, where the goal is simply to create images for the talent and myself, it usually starts with a person. I'll have either met or seen someone I'd like to work with and I'll reach out to grab coffee with them. After hearing their story, I'll create a mood board and usually come up with some far-fetched-totally-hard-to-pull-off idea. Once they approve of the far-fetched idea, we then figure out how to make it happen. I really enjoy this part. One of the things I tell people is to work on replacing the phrase "imagine

if" or "wouldn't it be cool?!" with "remember when?!" As a personal challenge, I try not to say "Wouldn't it be cool" unless I have the full intention of doing it. Back to the process: I am into full producer mode at this point, calling locations and trying to meet people who might be able to help us. Typically, we don't have a huge budget, so we're relying on the cool factor of the project and the generosity of other people, which has been really humbling to experience. I've found that human beings want to be a part of cool stuff, we want to have experiences, and generally if we're given the opportunity to do something awesome we'll do it, regardless of money. Once we get a location, I'll do everything in my power to actually go there and look around. We call this scouting, so I know how we can move through the space. I process better when I can be in the space before shooting, and it tends to help things run smoother the day of the shoot. I'm also looking for other people to help during this time, hair/makeup, assistants, BTS video, stylists, etc. Usually, we have at least a couple other people involved. I like working with teams as much as possible.

Then we shoot! This part is fun, and if you've done your work, it's smooth. We're all excited because it's usually been a long journey to this point, so getting to see this thing come to life is pretty rad. You could compare it to having a baby. You've thought about it and planned for it, pictured what he would be like, and now that you're finally holding him you're super excited and very glad he isn't ugly.

After that comes post production, which can take weeks depending on how much there is to do and what I need to do to finish the idea. I won't bore you with what that looks like, but it's kinda magical.

AS: What are you thinking about during a shoot?

AA: If I do my job right, nothing. I read a book a while back called "Designing your Life" by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, where they describe what they call a state of "flow." It's where you're working and everything kind of melts away, like it moves in slow motion, I love it. Don't get me wrong; it can be super stressful, and the pressure on a high-dollar client's shoot is pretty crazy, but I'm genuinely stoked on it.

Something I've never really told anyone is that I love being alive. I know this sounds weird to say, but stick with me.













There are many times on set when I'm literally thinking "Holy sh!@#, this is real life" or even just whispering "thank you" and taking a look around. This may not sound like a big deal, but it's taken a lot for me to tell people that I love being alive, and it's really healing to say it here. I believe that one of the reasons I'm here is to be stoked about being alive, and to help others be stoked about it. My life is not conventional or easy by any means, and I often feel guilty about how much I enjoy what I do (that's for another story), but I am grateful, and I am stoked.

AS: It's easy to see that contrasting colors and the role of light play a big part of your images. How much of that is fabricated after the fact, and how much is you seeking that out in real time?

AA: I went through a phase early on where I would just try to make these crazy composites and most of the magic would happen in post-production, but now I do as much as possible in camera. Colors especially I like to have in camera, and we use a lot of gels to get it as close as we can. I still do A LOT of post-production on my images, and I shoot with the final product in mind, but I really enjoy seeing something beautiful straight outta camera. Most of that has to do with lighting, and I love lighting. It's something I knew I wanted to do from the very beginning. If I can get it 80 to 90 percent of the way there with lighting and color, then I can just add the cherry on top in post.

AS: Best case scenario, where do you hope photography and visual storytelling take you? What do you hope people remember after looking at one of your images?

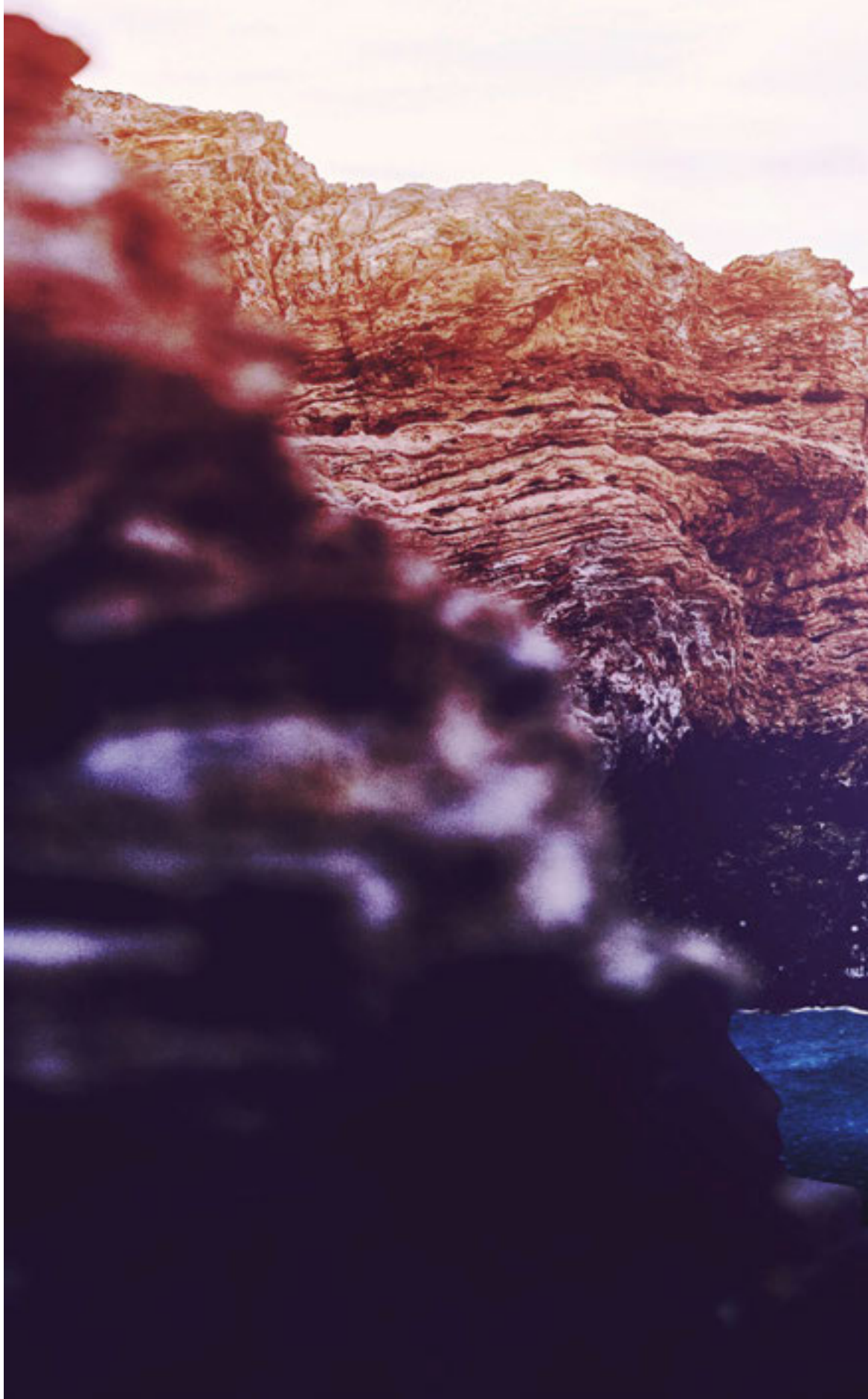
AA: A bigger, badder version of what I'm currently doing. I have a dream of a rad house and studio on our property in Colorado, traveling around trying coffee and food, all the while taking pictures of awesome humans and providing abundantly for my family. I also want to be engaged in the journey, to meet people and hear their stories, to tell their stories well and create beautiful things together. Finally, to INSPIRE others to be their best, and dream big regardless of how impossible it seems.

I hope people feel a sense of wonder when they look at my images, and see that I did my best to love people well. I love people, I want them to know that. ■

***Bio:** Aaron Anderson is a commercial photographer based in LA and Colorado, traveling full time with his family of 5 in an RV. He started his career at the Academy of Art in San Francisco and has since worked with incredible clients from around the world making pictures. Also, he's a part time coffee snob and food critic, and consequently so are his kids. Find him at ANDERSONVISUALS.COM and on instagram @aaronandersonvisuals.*

swimming with jesus

Words: Tim Hayes Images: Wookie Jones





“Sometimes you’ve got to step off the dock before God puts the boat in front of you.”

Those words came from a mentor of Austin Conant, who penned the article “How a Truck Brought Me Closer to God” in Volume 7 of this magazine. It’s a glorious lesson in our path of initiation, and a beautiful story. If you haven’t read the article, you should. But what do you do when you step off the dock and God doesn’t put the boat under you?

Stick with me here because this is a hard lesson. God often puts the boat under us, but we have no guarantee of it. If our idea of a faith journey means that nothing ever crashes and burns, we’re just employing a more sophisticated version of a rain dance. “If I believe enough and do the right things, God will (read = is obligated to) come through for me.” Sometimes, however, when we step off the dock, God lets us plunge into the water. That’s my story.

I was working the job I had always wanted. After years of character formation in a soul-killing job, I had been on staff at a church I loved for five years. It wasn’t easy and the pay wasn’t great, but I had the opportunity on almost a daily basis to walk with dear friends in the church through harrowing circumstances. Despite that, I sensed an undercurrent of yearning within me. I didn’t want to think about it, but somewhere deep inside I knew God had more for me.

In February of 2020, I attended a Wild at Heart Boot Camp. Things looked great at that time, but took a nosedive in March with the onset of the pandemic. During that time, circumstances forced my wife and I to begin praying and fasting for some direction. Jesus answered by lifting our vision from our present circumstances to the future, and we knew it was time for a new chapter. Only at this point did I find out that my wife had known for months, but she was waiting for God to move in my heart as well.

With a mixture of trepidation and anticipation, we let our church know we would be leaving soon. We expected God to move quickly, so we began looking for new opportunities. That was at the end of May.

The rest of the year provided no prospective movement, but lots of death. An 11-year-old girl in our neighborhood passed suddenly from a brain aneurysm. Our girls were devastated. My sister-in-law delivered her first child, only to lose him to genetic complications within weeks. My dad went to the doctor to have stents put in his arteries in early July. He ended up having quadruple bypass surgery and dying from respiratory failure a month later without ever coming home. In October, we had to part ways with our cat. As I dug the grave in our side yard, the handle of my shovel broke. Cold, crying, and utterly spent, I gave up for the night. As I was drowning in sorrow, God met me there. He gave me fresh hope. We finished out the year, like many others, looking for a better 2021.

However, the story didn’t change. By April, we were still wondering what God was doing. I was unemployed by this point and starting to feel abandoned by God once again. The months of waiting with no answer were wearing on me, and though I fought against it, it was hard not to feel like an orphan.

My cousin and his wife invited us to vacation with them at their home. It was a beautiful, refreshing time!



My wife and I talked about what we wanted out of the next chapter of our lives and came home with renewed focus. Shortly thereafter, we received the call from a church on Hilton Head Island to become their new pastor.

Finally, we were embarking on the adventure God had put on our hearts! We moved from Missouri to South Carolina in June 2021, excited about what we were going to see God do as we walked with him.

When we got there, our expectations were crushed. We already believed that nothing good goes unopposed, but this season made that belief experiential. Our moving truck was a week late. We discovered that our grill was broken in transit when we tried to use it and a fireball burned my hair, eyebrows, and beard. The job my wife was promised never materialized, so we were almost immediately living well beyond our means. On top of all of that, it quickly became apparent that we were not a good match for the church. Somehow, some theological differences went unchecked through the interview process. We mutually agreed to part ways after four months.

We stepped off the dock. Instead of finding the boat, we plunged into the water. Just when we thought we had managed to crawl into the boat, sopping wet and relieved, it capsized.

It's hard to describe the weight of the "I screwed up" instinct that threatened to engulf me at this point. We followed Jesus into an adventure. After months of waiting for his direction and after confirming it through prayer and fasting, we found ourselves hundreds of miles away from all of our family and friends.

We had no jobs and no job prospects. We were living on the rapidly-dwindling money we received from the sale of our home. This was not what we had expected.

All the questions surfaced. Did I hear God incorrectly? Did he change his mind? Did I make a massive mistake? What was next for us? Should I look for another ministry job? Should we go home? Why was it that every time Sam said something on the And Sons podcast about rocking himself in a dark corner in the fetal position, I felt like I had a dangerous understanding of what he meant?

I still don't have all the answers. I do know what has happened in the past three months.







We determined that we had followed God's lead through prayer and fasting, and we believe that he doesn't arbitrarily change his mind. Because of that, we chose to stand on our belief that he has a purpose for us here and that we need to persevere. We started looking for new jobs, answers, and guidance.

While listening to And Sons podcast #229, I resonated with Luke's description of anxiety so deeply that I knew something was wrong. My wife had been taking a psychology course, and when she got home, I nervously brought up the subject with her. I told her what I had heard and how much it hit the mark. Although I felt shame and anticipated a negative reaction, she responded with a grace that was practical: "Yeah, that sounds like Generalized Anxiety Disorder." She pulled out her notes from class and began to help me recognize that what I had treated as ordinary stuff for years was probably something far deeper.

I began to invite Jesus into the anxiety, allowing him to surface things and heal them. It started to get better. In the meantime, we found a new church that we love. I'm not on staff, but I'm able to serve and offer what I have freely. My wife is enrolled at a community college, which is something she's wanted to do for a while.

This past week, I accepted a job with State Farm. I'm writing this during breaks from my studying for the state insurance licensure. It seems like things are starting to stabilize.

I'm different than I was two years ago. I was already a man under construction, learning to walk more freely and wholeheartedly before God. I thought I was doing alright, and maybe I was, but these past two years have shaken me to my core. When we consented to follow God on a new adventure, he gave me Joshua 1:9 as a verse to hold onto: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." That verse has proven to be indispensable to our season because the question that underlies all the others is whether God will be with us even when it looks like our adventure is burning around us. That's what I've learned in this excruciating season.

When you step off the dock, Jesus will be with you whether you land in the boat or in the water. He may call you to follow him because you need sailing lessons. He may also call you because you need swimming lessons.

And I'm so grateful. ■







Words Ben Richardson Images Taylor Brandon

a final toast

I recently listened to and savored the final episode of the And Sons podcast. I've listened to every one of the 242 episodes and several of them many times over just to suck the marrow from the bone. While obviously a major achievement for Sam and Blaine, it also signified something monumental for me as well.

After the episode came to a sharp end, a barrage of questions quickly surfaced. Below are a few, and I hope you'll join my sentiment as I reflect on the passing of a beautiful journey.

How do you say goodbye to friends you've never met, or lament memories you've never actually shared, and embrace those you've never actually held?

What do you say when something you have cherished so deeply comes abruptly to an end? How do you explain such an authentic experience when even as the words escape your mouth it sounds like a mere illusion? How do you carry on into the day wondering if it actually happened, or indeed was just a dream? How do you share with others the culmination of something so significant to the soul, but so inconsequential to the world?

How do you explain to someone the joy-filled grief you feel when you turn the final page, finish the last sentence, and close the book reflectively, looking at its front cover one last time?

How do you invite someone to begin a years-long sojourn that you've just completed? How do you take steps forward into the unknown as the companions you've walked with wave "So Long!" as they turn away?

How do the men in the arena, "marred by dust and sweat and blood," bid farewell to each other as they leave the Colosseum? How do they bear the weight of their reflections while surrounded by critics and cynics?



How do you grieve the passing of one tale while simultaneously stepping into another? How does Charlie say goodbye to Snoopy? How does Frodo toast Sam? How does Sherlock honor Watson? And how does Calvin part with Hobbes?

Surely they treasure the stories deeply in their hearts. Undoubtedly they step bravely into tomorrow. Absolutely, they await the return of the King.

Here's to you, And Sons, and your undaunted courage. Bless you Sam and Blaine, as you step intrepidly into your callings. We, your listeners, your comrades, and your comrades, leave you with this final benediction:

*May the road rise to meet you,
may the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
and may you never walk alone.*

Cheers. ■







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NECK BEARDS



(AND OTHER SIGNS
OF SELF-NEGLECT)

Words & Images Erik Swenson

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

I can't grow a normal beard. It comes in patches, which would be okay if there was some symmetry. But the bald patterns are random, like my lawn. Despite this, I tend to go for long stints without shaving. To articulate why this matters, I need to make an abrupt shift. But we will come back to beards.

Some time ago, Matthew 22:36-40 came into the foreground for me. I grew up church-ed so I'd heard it a million times, but for some reason I'd never comprehended the weight of it. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. All the legal codes and thousands of years of divine communication summed up in a few words.

The first two points made sense to me. Love God and love others. I'm not saying they are easy to do but it's not hard to see they're important. But the third one was a tripwire. I'm referring to the love of self, as in “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Looking back, my hang-up came from equating self-love with self-centeredness. And self-centeredness was a slick slope I knew well. Self-centeredness says I am at the center, the story is about me. This leads to self-reliance because if it's all about me, it must be up to me to make things happen. And self-reliance leads to self-neglect. It causes me to drive until I break down.

For me, this self-neglect has manifested in a variety of symptoms:

- Heavy backpack where I haul the important books, papers and equipment needed to carry out the projects that hinge on my unyielding effort.
- Hunched shoulders from carrying the overloaded backpack.
- Trucker hat that never leaves my head because I have no time to cut or comb my hair.
- Bags under the eyes caused by major sleep deprivation (because 16 hours a day isn't enough time to knock out the work).
- Neck beard because I forget to shave or consult a mirror.
- Protruding belly linked to a dependence on refined sugar and caffeine as opposed to healthy, sustainable energy sources.
- Same clothes I've been wearing for three days (I generally change my underwear at least).
- Flip flops in October, not worn out of joy but because I have no mental reserves to find matching socks or socks without holes, or to tie my shoes.

All this to say the fruit of self-centeredness is self-neglect. Which means I was wrong. Self-centeredness cannot be the same as self-love. If I loved myself, I would take care of myself.

Why does self-care matter? One, because you and I matter to God. But it is also important for the people around us. If I don't take care of myself, I can't take care of anyone else. If I don't love myself, I can't love others. I can't give away what I don't have. It's the proverbial oxygen mask on a plane. Which brings us back to where we started: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Coming to the revelation that self-love is not selfish was helpful. But I still have a problem. I'm used to living as though life is up to me. There is a fair amount of muscle memory in that direction. And I lack awareness when I'm sliding back into the ditch. Clarity often only comes after I've neglected to love my wife, my kids and my friends.

*Coming to the revelation that self-love is not selfish was helpful.
But I still have a problem. I'm used to living as though life is up to me.
There is a fair amount of muscle memory in that direction.*

So where to go from here? I could go to shame (it's basically a programmed response at this point). But it's unhelpful. It leads to self-hatred, which is even worse than self-neglect and grossly counterproductive.

Thank God there is a better way. It turns out those outward signs of self-neglect can work in my favor. They can serve as warning shots. The wrinkled shirt and tight belt are small indicators I've stopped loving myself. By paying attention I can make changes before things get out of hand and people feel hurt.

If I scratch my neck and discover a small indoor soccer field, there's an opportunity to repent. An unruly beard can trigger the truth that I'm not alone. I have the help of heaven and a good Father who wants me to ask. When I return to walking with him, the stakes feel lower, and I can stop striving so much. I am only responsible for what can get done with God's help.

This frees up time for things like shaving and sleeping. And most importantly, it frees me to love well. ■



This is a poem about our wrestling with God, especially during hard and confusing seasons.

Our son Jack was diagnosed with the same chronic illness as our son Teddy last fall. Though I have a lot less questions about the “why” from my time lamenting Teddy’s diagnosis, there still of course is a grief within that these bodies are fragile and cannot always be fixed.

I have been wrestling with the trite phrases we say to each other about God to appease us through hard seasons, things to “cheer us up” and try to get us through, while instead missing the entire story of Jesus in suffering. When dealing with those whose bodies were broken, whose hearts were mourning, he did not stand at a distance and offer paltry platitudes. He spit in his hands and rubbed them in dirt and touched the wounds. He used his own body to bring comfort and healing to the hurting bodies. This incredible paradox of God in human form, with all the frailty that being in a human body brings, is what actually brings Him nearer to us in our own frailty than we could ever imagine.

I have needed this God desperately while trying to work out the story of two children with chronic illnesses, of two other children who are healthy but carrying much more of an emotional load than they should, of aging parents and friends who are ill, and of our own limited bodies. I have needed the God who spits in his hands and rubs it in dirt and touches my pain.

A WORD ON GOD

by Sarah Bianchi

I don't need a god
who lives in the sky
amid golden streets
and riches and thrones.

I don't need a god
who grants me a wish
only if I remember
to throw a coin in the well.

I don't need a god
who is good all the time,
just so so so good
all the time, all the time.

Instead, I need one
to hand me a tissue
to wipe off the blood
from my sons' fingers,

to hold back the hair
of my dry heaving mother,
to run a gentle hand
along her IV bag.

I need the God who breathes life
to put his mouth over mine,
to exhale and fill my lungs
when I sit here and struggle

to breathe on my own. ■

GEAR GUIDE

WHISKEY TASTING

WORDS Sam Eldredge

IMAGES Richard Seldomridge

When it comes to whiskey, I have to admit that I felt like we would fail in our review.

First off, a dear reader who has overcome addiction will look at this and go, “Not helpful, guys.” Then there is the snooty Scotch snob, who is going to be disappointed by whatever we choose. You know the type. And lastly, there is the drinker who doesn’t care for the price tag. He makes a point to drink from plastic bottles that slide neatly into a coat pocket.

If you are not one of those three, you may enjoy this And Sons whiskey review, which I felt was overdue. I did my best to create a tasting that delighted, surprised, and maybe disgusted my tasting crew. I’m happy to report that this was the case. I hope that what follows is of some use to you in your whiskey-tasting development.







1. SUNTORY WHISKY TOKI (JAPAN)

I began with this in our tasting because it was the lightest and therefore most likely to be enjoyed before our taste buds were destroyed by tougher flavors. At \$35 in our local shop, this is one of the cleanest, highest rated, and affordable bottles of whisky any of us had ever tried. Plus, you get the added bonus of confirming that the Japanese actually do most things better.

Group tasting notes: cedar, smooth, clean, peach and vanilla notes, bright.

2. MONDAY ZERO ALCOHOL WHISKEY (CALIFORNIA)

Surprise number one: an alcohol-free whiskey! A bottle runs around \$45 before shipping, and the founders of Monday have clearly thought through their brand, their coloring, and the mouth feel of whiskey, even adding some spices to emulate the back of the mouth burn. When I drank this on its own, I found it to be an enjoyable alternative to traditional whiskey. However, when tasted side-by-side with the other alcohol-filled whiskeys, this bottle elicited disgust rather than curiosity. It's a fine alternative to drinking; just don't add it to your next whiskey flight.

Group tasting notes: caramel, vanilla, aspartame, maple, sour grape, cayenne.











4. FIGHTING 69TH IRISH WHISKEY (EIRE)

Set your ideas of Irish whiskey aside (looking at you, Jamison), and give this a try. When doing a blind taste, some of our group had a tough time telling the difference between this, the Suntory, and the Oban. Of course, these members were all voted off the island.

Group tasting notes: butter, mild, old sweat, cardamom, orange.

3. OBAN 14 YEAR SINGLE MALT (ALBA)

This Scotch is an Eldredge foundation. We love everything about Oban, the town, the food, the Scotch, heck we even named one of our dogs after it. With flavors of orange, salt, honey, and peat, this is a classic Scotch and the distillers know it, charging just under \$100 a bottle. Probably not the best choice for a young man on a budget, but a great choice for a special occasion gift.

Group tasting notes: peat, oak, caramel, tequila-y, citrus, salt.





5. BULLEIT BOURBON (KENTUCKY)

What the—yep, it's our second surprise. I threw this one into our blind test to see who could pick out the corn, and who didn't mind sipping a whiskey that most of us wouldn't think to sip next to a bottle of hundred-dollar Scotch. While none of the group said this was their favorite, Bulleit has been a staple of mixed drinks over the years. And the truth is, sipping even mid to low-tier whiskey does something to your brain ... you like it more.

Group tasting notes: honey, Taco Bell leftovers, corn, butter.



6 - LAPHROAIG 10 YEAR OLD ISLAY SINGLE MALT (ISLAY)

Ah yes, Laphroaig. Some say this smells like gasoline, others like elk, others like the remains of a burnt-out cask. It's no joke: The peat in this Scotch will wind up and sucker punch you in the nose. Eldredges traditionally enjoy this Scotch while elk hunting and on particularly cold nights. Nearly every woman in our tasting group, and some of the men, couldn't stand this one. So let's say it's an acquired taste, and you shouldn't pretend to like it just because John Eldredge does.

Group tasting notes: peat moss, no ... god ... please no ... mescal, Islay, salt, smoke. ■



just an

addict

Words Cameron Moix Images Wookie Jones

I remember sitting on the curb in front of my old apartment in Colorado Springs, half-drunk and weeping to my mother on the phone.

“I don’t know who I am sober,” I told my mom. “I’m scared.”

That was the last late-night, drunken phone call I ever made. The next day, I went to a 12-step meeting and something clicked. That was October 17, 2015, and I haven’t had a drink since.

For many months, I made my sobriety a full-time job. I went to meetings, met with my sponsor, did the work and my life felt good for the first time I could remember. That fear of who I was without a drink in my hand faded as quickly as my last hangover.

My recovery relied, in part, on a basic premise: that I was an alcoholic in need of help.

When I started going to church the following spring, people expressed a genuine curiosity about me and my story. Over and over, I’d tell them of my addiction and newfound sobriety. They loved it—well, almost all of it.

I’d sometimes be midway through telling a new church friend my story and they’d stop me. “Oh, don’t speak that over yourself,” one woman said with a concerned look on her face. I’d think for a moment, confused about why someone would interrupt a moment of vulnerability to express an opinion about the way I told my story.

I had referred to myself as a “recovering alcoholic and addict,” just as I had a hundred times or more in the six months since my last drink. To her, this was a personal attack on my identity in Christ. That’s the moment I became intimately familiar with the concept of Christian identity.

You see, what that woman heard was that “I’m just a lousy alcoholic and addict and that’s all I’ll ever be and God doesn’t love me.” To her, these words were an attack by “the enemy” on my being confident as a “new creation” under God.

As Christians, we often like things to be black and white. Some concept of human dualism is lost. And in thinking of ourselves first and foremost as beloved children of God, we sometimes push away other truths that get at who we are as people on any given day.

Ideally, we all would focus on the aspects of our identities that are most true; the ones that align with who we are in the context of God's love for us all. But as long as we're on this earth, it will never be that simple. There will be modifiers. There will be complicated and uncomfortable parts of our stories that must be reconciled.

*If you hear someone describe themselves
in a way you feel contradicts what is
most true about them, listen closer.*

As humans, we need language to put to our lives. For me, that was admitting to myself and others that I was powerless over my addiction and that my life had become unmanageable (in my 12-step program's parlance). To forego that part of my identity would be to ignore the reasons I got sober in the first place. My sobriety and well-being depended on my humility when it came to identifying with that description. Because it is as true about me as my being an accepted and forgiven child of God.

I don't think modifiers are a threat to our identities in Christ. In fact, it's my belief that they reinforce the work He is doing in our complicated, messy, and beautiful lives.

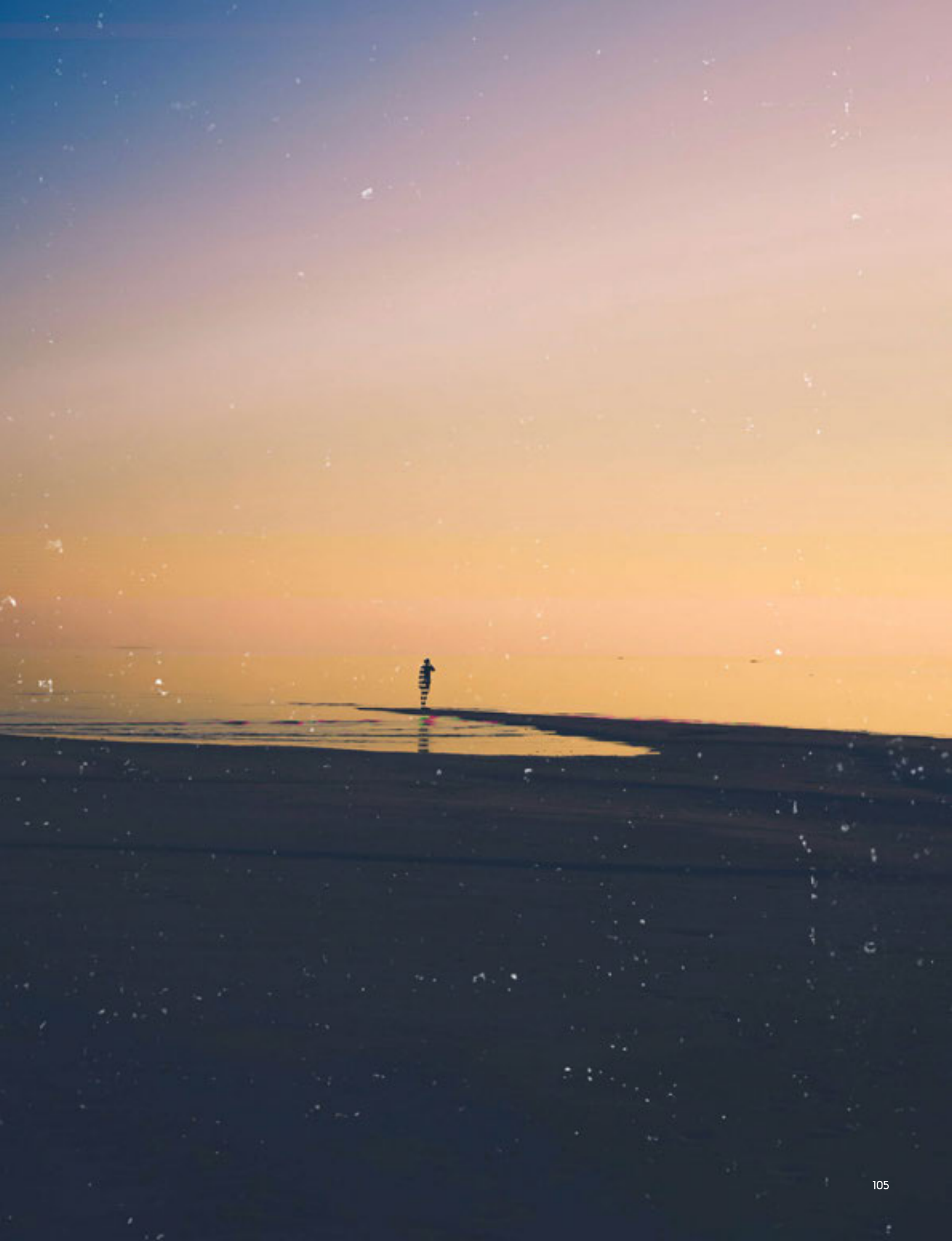
If you hear someone describe themselves in a way you feel contradicts what is most true about them, listen closer. Don't be afraid on their behalf, and certainly don't pity their struggle. Look past that initial assumption and try to see what they're really getting at.

We need to allow each other to use the language that feels most honest and authentic in our own stories. Let's embrace our unique struggles and the ways that we walk alongside God. ■



DON'T BREAK OUT

*Words John "Padre" Eldredge
Images Wookie Jones*



I've finally figured out what the enemy's plot is for the world right now.

For the past two years, my friends, family, and people I barely know have been sending me articles, videos and interviews about what's "really" taking place in the world. These exposés always come with some urgent tag like, *You've GOT to see this!*

China. Vaccines. Blackstone. Bitcoin. Covert military operations.

Everybody's trying to uncover the secret intentions of everybody else. But one thing unifies all of it—whatever the new exposé is, the subliminal (or maybe not so subliminal) message that comes is always *Get upset! You really ought to be UPSET about this!*

And I've been upset, I'll admit.

Then one day, I was sitting in a time of prayer when Jesus said to me, *You can't live upset, John.*

Wait . . . what? Really? That's possible? Upset seems like . . . the responsible thing to do. But I knew it was God when he spoke, and I could sense immediately the relief he was offering. It was like the breaking of a spell, like somebody opening a window in a really stuffy room. *You can't live upset.* That is totally reorienting.

Living upset is draining. It saps your mental and emotional energy but like a sugar high it delivers no satisfaction. It only leaves you wiped out. And the thing is, life is *already* draining, so all this stuff is extra draining. Two scoops of draining. It's like pulling up to the drive thru and saying, "Yeah, I'd like an order of draining please, but give me an extra shot of draining with it. Thanks."

And this is what the enemy is trying to do to everyone—keep us spun up and strung out, living upset. From there it's easy to sow division, hatred, fear . . . all his favorite stuff. Wiped out people are *vulnerable*. I've been feeling vulnerable because I've been living upset.

Now yes, the times are pretty intense. That's true. But every form of adversity training from military ops to big wall climbing teaches you that the first order of business is learning to keep your head. *Don't Freak Out* is basic survival gear; it determines the ones who make it and the ones who don't.

Notice—when Jesus began riffing on the pressures and trials of living through the end of the age, one of the first things he said was "don't freak out." "*You will hear of wars and threats of wars, but don't panic . . . see to it that you are not alarmed*" (Matthew 24:6).

See to it—meaning, we have a choice.

Level-headed Jesus, the most unshakable guy ever, refused to get baited into all the drama of his day. He's urging us to be unshakable, too. This is the same guy who said, "*Do not worry about tomorrow*" (Matthew 6:34). Honestly—if we practiced that, it would set us free. This isn't denial; it's ruling our mental life. Jesus knew that everything was going to be shouting for our attention, trying to get us all spun up. This injustice, that exposé. Get mad, get upset, get all wrung out.

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It wears a soul down.

And there is a way out.

Mental resilience begins when we take hold of our thought life, intentionally, and not let it run loose like a crazy dog. Your mental life is critical; as it goes with your thought life, so it goes with your joy, your hope, your peace, and your perspective on all things. You don't want to just let it go unprotected, like leaving your car windows down and your phone and wallet sitting there on the seat. Your mental life is a big deal; it's worth taking charge.

One: Pay attention to what you are thinking about and saying to yourself as you move through your day. (You are saying a lot to yourself every day, and most of it isn't encouraging.)

Two: Don't take the bait of all those exposés that come with, *You've GOT to see this!* Don't even open them.

Three: Every morning, fix your mind on really good stuff. The first few pages of my personal journal contain a series of short statements that I need to read and embrace every day. Here's a sampling:


God is Good—always, completely good. His heart is beautiful and true.
God is Loving—always, completely loving
God is with me, in me; Jesus and I are deeply one
God is trustworthy, completely reliable; Faithful and True
Jesus Christ is reigning and ruling right now, over all the heavens and the earth.
He is sustaining at this moment the entire universe. Yet intimately involved with the cares of a single life.
Through Jesus Christ, God my Father made this magnificent world—including me.
Through Jesus Christ, God my Father redeemed this magnificent world—including me.
And through Jesus Christ, God my Father is about to completely restore and renew this magnificent world—including me.

If you fix your attention on truths like these, it will build mental resilience and a whole lot of joy!

I'm thinking of Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," which seems appropriate for a journal of masculine initiation. Part of it goes like this:

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating...
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools...
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son! ■*





This year, it's time to pull off that adventure that's within a few days' drive. That week-long backpacking trip, or the motorcycle ride with your cousin, or climbing the last few peaks on your 14er list, or learning to surf at long last.

- First, what is it? Second, when are you going?
- Who's coming? Anybody? Who needs to know where you're going and when you should be back? (you know, in case they need to send search-and-rescue out looking for you)
- What do you need for gear? Are you renting, borrowing, buying, using what you've already got? Can you get anything while you're there, or do you need to be fully self-sufficient? Food and water? Shelter? Gas money?
- How do you plan to remember your time? Bringing your journal or a camera? Your phone?
- Are you able to unplug from the outside world, leave the e-mail at the trailhead, put the phone in airplane mode, truly fall off the map for a bit?
- What is your plan for reentry? Driving through the night to get up early and go to work is a great way to lose all the joy of your trip in about 15 minutes. Create some space, a day or two, to reenter your world and your normal rhythm. Banzai trips are fine, just make sure you're not crash landing. ■

AND SONS