

AND SONS

INITIATION AND THE YOUNG MAN'S SOUL

VOL. 7



HEAD

EAR

NECK

SHOULDER

BREAST

FORE
LEG

SHANK

SHANK

AND SONS

IMITATION AND THE YOUNG MAN'S SOUL

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CONTAINS MATURE CONTENT

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

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Front cover by Richard Seldomridge

Image on this page by Eli Dale







SereneLife

AND
SONS

FOREWORD

Welcome back or welcome for the first time if you've never picked up one of our magazines before.

And Sons continues to gather and produce content for the initiate, for the young man on the journey of becoming more, for the man who loves Jesus and doesn't know why he's dying in church. Which means that in this volume you'll find gear reviews, a father wrestling with lasting grief, a young man entering a trade with no idea what to do, and so much more.

And what is going on with that cover image? This is not how I imagined I would look in my shirtless photoshoot for the cover of a magazine. I'd like to think that our magazine is steeped in playfulness, or maybe even quote a little Shakespeare: "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

But I wouldn't consider myself to be a wise man, so who knows. Guess you'll have to read on to figure out what the story is.

Here's to another volume of And Sons, best enjoyed in a quiet place, a favorite chair, a garage with a couple of buddies, or out in the wild. I think you will dig what we've put together for this, our seventh installment of the printed magazine.

– Sam Eldredge

OPPOSITE: Dalton Olive, looking like the epitome of summer solitude (which is impossible, because someone took this photo) and repping the Warhorse and Cataphract tee. Thanks for the support, amigo!

READER MAIL

I love the new Patreon format! I don't really get to participate in the livestreams due to work, but that's life right? I'm probably one of your older listeners at 40 now. It's funny how life stages and seasons work. You guys have really edified my life and challenged me over these last few years and for that I will always be grateful!

Keep up the great work and keep choosing Story 2.

– Adam S.

Gentlemen, I can't articulate in full how specific your recent podcast was for me. You guys have hit a sweet spot in your last few episodes. Just wanted to share a heartfelt thank you for your ability to voice and put in words the concepts and questions and experiences that you have. Even if it may not come out the way you hope it to, I think the heart of the matter comes across through the very tone and ethos of who you two are. And for that, I am grateful.

I hate to be the fanboy here, but in so many ways I find myself in the same boat as you guys and so many of your friends you mention. You may have seen on the YouTube livestream that I too bought some property (without a house in it) and feel like it's been my "dream" for years. What happens when the dream becomes daunting? Can it evolve into a new dream and even an adventure?

Praying for you and all the other sons out there who are struggling to death, but are unrelenting in the pursuit of knowing Jesus. Cheers.

– Steve M.

Hey And Sons crew. Thank you guys for all that you do. I have been so unbelievably blessed by your ministry and genuine hearts to know Jesus and be known by Him. Thank you for your love and devotion to Him, His words, and to leading guys like me into becoming the men He fully calls us to be. Forever grateful.



Oh, and also, loving volume 6. I can't put it down. This is me at the front desk of the Fort Wayne Rescue Mission. I work 3rd shift as part of the Care Staff. Basically we're pastors and first responders. Know that you are reaching the men here at this shelter.

– Blake A.

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK.

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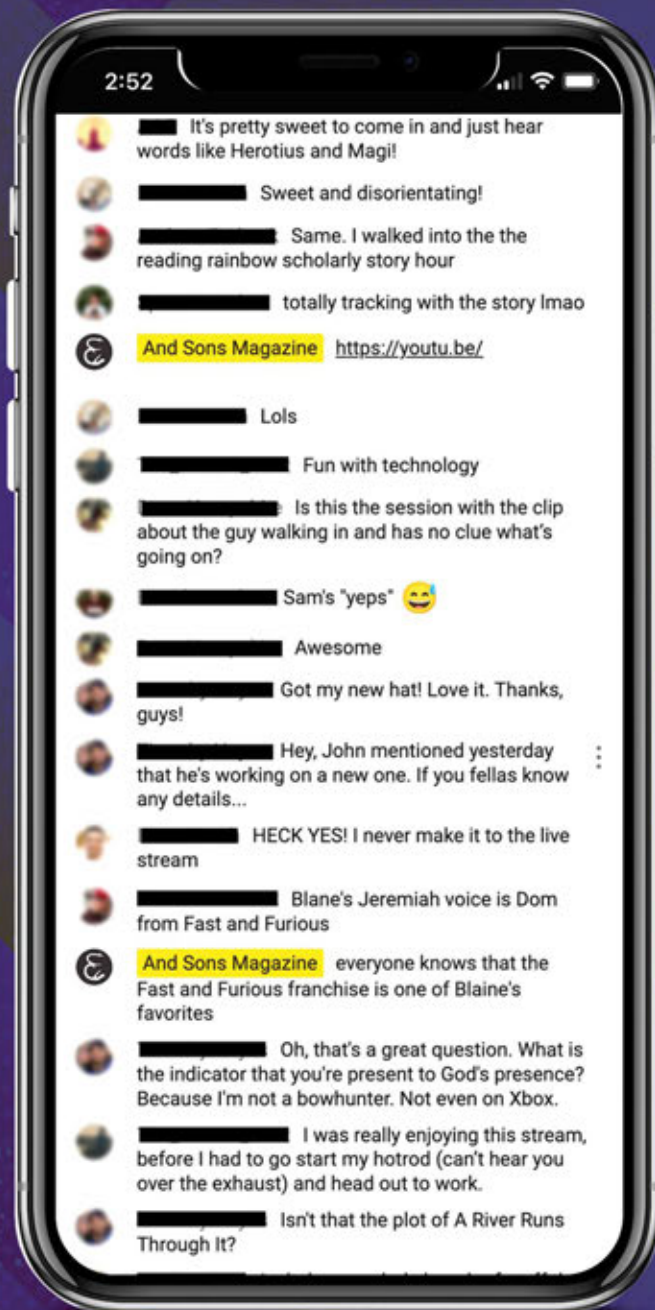
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IDENTITY

WORDS Cameron Moix
IMAGE Martin Sattler

*“Know thyself?
If I knew myself,
I would run away.”*

– JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

When I was 19, I thought I knew everything. My first year of college was a period of discovery. It seems now that every spare second was spent listening to new music, reading about philosophy or listening to NPR. At times, the thought of not knowing something—whether it was the backstory of a Dylan album or the true history of U.S. involvement in southeast Asia—filled me with dread. I became a journalist and made it my business to know these things. My mission was to document the truth, telling hundreds of stories about men and women I barely knew. All of my curiosity and creative energy was spent on other people.

College Cameron felt confident about who he was becoming. But as I made my way through my twenties, that self-assured feeling waned. When life didn't meet my expectations (I didn't win a Pulitzer reporting for the New York Times), I became jaded and cynical. I struggled to find my place in the world—my identity.

I realize now that during the years I spent so focused on stories about anyone and anything else, I failed to research my own life. I was avoiding the hard truths, distracting myself from the complexities and contradictions of my story. I was afraid of what I would find if I took a long hard look behind locked doors and under rugs.

The fear of my true identity led me into darkness. For the better part of a decade, I drank and used drugs to push away the truth and remain in depressive denial. I yearned to build a new future atop the brokenness of what came before it. I know now that my future is dependent on reconciling my past—clearing the debris so I can build something new.

I got sober, found God and learned bits and pieces about who I am. I fell in love, got married and worked to be better. I made mistakes, got divorced and was depressed once again. I came to see my life and the world differently, and I learned more about myself than I had ever been prepared for.

As I crossed the threshold of my thirties, none of the hopes of my youth seemed to ring true in my daily life. That realization led me to re-evaluate my understanding of identity—to come up with a new theory of who I was.

Over the decades, I've cobbled together the bits and pieces that gradually became me.

My identity in God as a cherished creation tells me I'm worthy and loved. My identity as a writer and young professional tells me I'm doing pretty well for myself. My identity as a recovering addict and an ex-husband tells me I've made big mistakes but am trying to be better. My identity as a friend and family member tells me I have true allies.

So which one is the one?

I think there is a balance to be struck—a tension between the identities we're tirelessly working to attain and the realities of our day-to-day lives. Our true selves must lie somewhere between the bits and pieces we gather and what God says about us. Right?

We may never know our entire, complex selves in the ways we'd like. But we do what we can: forgiving ourselves for our mistakes, learning more about what makes us us, working to improve upon what we've been given and leaving some mystery to eternity.

If I'm lucky, I'll have some cursory understanding of who I am by the time I die. For now, I'm satisfied exploring what it means to be Cameron. ■



WORDS Austin Conant

HOW A
TRUCK
BROUGHT
ME CLOSER
TO GOD

Have you ever been sure of God's direction in your life? I mean like shaken to your core sure? Move your family across the country sure? I was. But I still had doubts and concerns even though everything was coming together.

In October of 2019 while at Boot Camp with Wild at Heart in the mountains of Colorado, I clearly heard the Holy Spirit's voice tell me: "Be ready to sell your house by Christmas. You are moving." When I asked where, He answered, "Wait." My wife and I, having lived in central and South Texas our whole lives, had long talked and dreamed of an epic adventure living in a new place but we had never acted on it.

We were ready to list the house on time and we did. Along the way God pointed us to Colorado Springs. I had a gig in Denver about two weeks before the move date and we wrapped up early. Rather than head home, I used the extra day to house hunt and meet business prospects. I don't even remember how it happened but somehow that day I found out that my dream truck was illegal in the county I was moving to due to diesel emissions requirements (probably from all the Texans moving there with their jacked up emissions-deleted trucks). But it was gonna cost \$8,000 to get it fixed (I only paid 16K for the thing)! What to do?

I remember riding in the early 90s in my dad's square, used-to-be-red S-10, listening to country music. If we begged enough, and Dad was in the right mood, he would hit two huge bumps in the right lane of Crestway Road and we could launch the truck seemingly into the air and get that roller coaster feeling. I can remember as clear as yesterday diving with the 255 air conditioning (two windows down at 55 miles per hour) and listening to George Strait.

That's just the way things were. Trucks were simple. I remember arguing with my brother about who had to ride in the center. Whoever did had to shove their legs to the right in that skinny cab to avoid dad's shifts and breaking the acceptable brother-touch barrier. Don't get me wrong, we had no problem touching if we were hitting each other, but if our legs grazed each other we pretended like it was weird. It was an extended cab but dad was a contractor and the back was always filled with tools. As a society, we were not yet obsessed with safety. No one had a booster seat. I can't even say I remember wearing a seatbelt. These and experiences like it certainly sowed the seeds for my love of trucks.

The S-10 eventually died an ugly, oilless death while driven by an employee across town. By the time I was 16, dad had taken a job that provided a company vehicle and the short cab, short bed 1996 F-150 that replaced the S-10 was gifted to me. We're talking 300ci straight six 4-speed with OD and a split rear window. The AC worked flawlessly, but with the old quarter glass windows that channeled the air to the driver and out the back sliding glass, it was rarely used in spite of living in South Texas. I cranked Jesus Freak with the windows down until the Pioneers were cracking.

I'm 35 now and those memories are as vivid and real to me as the day I accepted Christ. It really is a trip how a song, sight or memory can take one back in time.

I've always driven trucks (with one slightly embarrassing Toyota Yaris thrown in the mix). They've almost all been Fords and each one has a special connection to me. I enjoy a Ferrari, Viper or McLaren as much as the next guy and I'll drool with the best of them, but I truly can't see myself owning anything other than a truck as my primary driver. Maybe I just heard Joe Diffie sing "Pickup Man" too many times while riding in that old red GMC.







“We’ve gotta talk about what we’re gonna do about your truck,” she said.

In 2017 I quit my job at God’s leading and opened a handyman business. That’s another story for another day. But since I am who I am I already owned a 2003 F-150 and it served me well when I started the business.

One day I was at a client’s and on his counter was one of those “for sale” signs you stick in your window. It was for a 2008 Dodge 2500, 6-speed manual 4x4 with a 6.7 Cummins that produced 600 foot-pounds of torque from the factory. Dan had ripped the emissions equipment off and added a programmer to boot. If you aren’t grunting like Tim the Toolman Taylor by this point, I’m not certain we can be friends. Dan told me that he wasn’t sure if he really wanted to sell it. He loved the truck and had bought it new off the lot, but he was getting older and, having had four open heart surgeries, shifting a manual transmission was not just an inconvenient chore. It was painful for him. A few months later he called me. He was ready.

I know, I know, I was fulfilling that Texas stereotype: young dude, giant truck. But man, I was bad. I drove it like I was king of the world for almost two years. Asleep at the Wheel (Texas western swing band) blaring and a few “blips” of the rear tires while passing someone at speed...life was good.

That was the most expensive truck I ever owned. Not because of the sticker price but every time something broke it was two thousand bucks. But it was sooo worth it. (*My retirement accounts may beg to differ.)

So how was I gonna unload a truck I could no longer legally drive two weeks before I moved, still fulfill the appointments I’d made, and then have a vehicle when I got there? My options were 1. Within 90 days, fix it and register it in Colorado. 2. Take it with me with 90 days to drive it and sell it (to someone in a surrounding state or county). 3. Register it illegally in another county. 4. Register it illegally in Texas at my parents’ address. 5. Sell it.

The first two options were unrealistic and the second two were not happening. Not because I’m some holier than thou, but because I’m gonna get caught.

I know it. So I did what I always do. I waited to make a decision (I’m not endorsing this method).

Just a few days before we were to leave, I was about to head to our local “outdoorsman meeting” with the men of our church and my wife caught me before I left. “We’ve gotta talk about what we’re gonna do about your truck,” she said. We weighed the options but I told her “I really want to trust God to take care of it.” I went to my meeting to say goodbye to the men I cherished the most.

The next morning, my phone rang at work. “Hello, my name is Shane. This is gonna sound crazy but I live in California and I’ve been scouring the country for your exact truck. If it is as described, I’ll get on a plane tomorrow, meet you at your bank and pay with cash.” After a FaceTime showing him all the “quirks and features” (thanks Doug), he sent me his flight info.

The next afternoon I picked him up at the airport. He’d never been but the reputation of Whataburger preceded this Texas gem so we ate well and then headed to the bank.

It was a whirlwind and I’m still blown away by the circumstances. Needless to say, any doubts I had about what we were doing by leaving everything we’d ever known and moving to Colorado could no longer be chalked up to bad camp food and/or the whims of an adventurous soul. My faith was solidified that day by God working through the circumstances surrounding a pickup truck. God speaks to us in ordinary ways every day. I’ve always known this but I heard it summed up on that retreat by John Eldredge real well: “Sometimes God speaks to us through what happens to us.”

I’d encourage you that if you are certain the Lord is telling you something, obey. The last year has had its challenges. But God is always faithful when you obey. A mentor of mine told me about another decision I was making, “Sometimes you’ve got to step off the dock before God puts the boat in front of you.” In other words, you may have to risk the unknown and be obedient to Him before He confirms the blessing. ■

LITURGY *for* THUNDERSTORMS

WORDS Dan Zehner IMAGE Tom Barrett

In the midst of the tempest, I cry to you O Lord of the wind and waves.
Bring peace to my troubled soul.
Bring safety to my family.
Bring us safely to the dawn after the darkness of night.

Lord, you speak peace and the winds obey.
You are the One who walks on water
The One who created the waters and skies from the formless void
Come into this storm now and speak peace!
Speak peace to the wind.
Speak peace to the rain.
Speak peace to the lightning.
Speak peace to the thunder.

Christ be with me in the darkness.
Let your glory be revealed in the lightning flashes.
Let your power be felt in the peals of thunder.
Let your cleansing blood be revealed in the torrents of rain.

Lord, you are my shepherd. I shall not be in want.
Your rod and your staff comfort me when I am fearful.
You make me lie down in green fields. You lead me beside quiet waters. You restore my soul.
You lead me on paths of righteousness for your name's sake.
Even when I walk through the dark and stormy valley, I will not fear, for you are with me.

I will sing your praises until the morning when the storm has passed.
I will celebrate your mercies which are new each day.
Your love never fails.

Amen ■



GEAR GUIDE

SWIM GOGGLES

WORDS Sam Eldredge IMAGES Richard Seldomridge

If you've been around the And Sons world for a little while, you'll know that we love the sport of triathlon.

Maybe it's that the average age of participants is in the mid 40s, which I take to be a good sign as a guy in my 30s. It means I've found a sport that is sustainable. Or maybe we like triathlons because of the variety. Between swimming, biking, and running, we never have an excuse to not do something today. Knees hurt from your last run? Hit the pool. Pool closed? Jump on the bike. Your bike needs a tuneup? Bust out those running shoes before the kids wake up. You get the idea. Or maybe we love triathlon simply because we love the challenge. I'm not very good at swimming, biking, or running on their own, so put them together and squint and I start looking like an athlete...

Reel it back, Sam, you've got this.

When we first jumped into triathlon training, I picked up the advice from a variety of sources that triathletes should attempt to fully enter each discipline as they train. Which boils down to: Don't take your aero bike out on group rides, don't wear your tri suit in the pool (wear a pair of jammers or a speedo like the other guys) or on a run. Actually just save the tri suit for race day.

Taking swimming seriously then, we felt it appropriate to review some of what feels like hundreds of goggle options. In this list are the highest rated but super cheap goggles straight from our friends who only swim, to the more expensive goggles offered by one of the most recognizable brands in triathlon.

Let's jump in, from least expensive to most. And as always, And Sons does not receive money or product for our gear reviews. We bought these and tested them ourselves.





AEGEND SWIM (\$14)

What we like: \$14?? Um. Yes, please. All goggles have a lifespan before they get too cloudy in the lens and end up in the bin. With a wide lens color option, you can tailor to your personal preferences, and they don't look half-bad. I mean, they were first designed for Will Smith in Hancock...

What we don't care for: Well, you get what you pay for. The goggles held up fairly well in testing with the others; they just didn't feel as comfortable on the face due to their wide design, and (despite the claims otherwise) we did experience some leaking.





SPEEDO VANQUISHER (\$18)

What we like: The price point and brand name on these are big takeaways. Who hasn't heard of Speedo by this point? Most of our swim buddies use these, and they hold up well both in the pool and in the lake. Be a chameleon: blend in.

What we don't care for: These are narrow, intentionally built to create as little drag as possible, but that means they leak pretty easily and your field of view is really limited.





ROKA R1 (\$38)



What we like: Ahh yeah look at me, I'm wearing Roka! I mean, I can't afford the \$800 wetsuit, so this is about as much Roka as I'll ever own, but man these are sexy. The lens is angled at the top to provide better peripheral vision, and there are a range of colors and tints designed for different conditions and color spectrums. Comfortable fit and minimal leaking were also cited by the guys wearing these.

What we don't care for: The price is steep for young guys just starting out. With decent options at less than half the price, the R1 will get skipped over due to price point alone.

AQUA SPHERE KAYENNE (\$29)

What we like: This is our OG goggle, the one we picked up because the ex-special forces swim instructor wore them and he was a badass, so it just made sense. Plus they come in just under \$30, so they didn't feel expensive at the time. The wide field of view has been very helpful for our open water swims.

What we don't care for: You aren't going to win any fashion contests with these bad boys on. In fact, you're more likely to appear like a sidekick who has lost his super hero. Vanity, yes, but there you go. Also, due to my choice of a clear lens, I have swum off course in four out of five races wearing these. That sun is bright, yo. ■



Photo by Dillon Fancher

MONTANA



Photo by Joe Anastasio

WORDS Joe Anastasio

You could describe it as a hunting adventure or simply an excuse to travel, but ultimately it was supposed to be the trip where we proved ourselves out West.

The “we” was my young setter, Penny, and I, hunting upland birds on the Montana prairies. In my eyes, life was a bucket list and this was the next item to cross off. A logical person might question the wisdom of driving cross country in the midst of a pandemic for an introductory upland hunt on three weeks of planning. But how often is rational memorable? While we were relatively new at upland hunting, deep down I did believe that I had a very special dog who would simply figure it out. After all, she had impressed with flashy points on planted birds all summer during our Maryland training sessions. How hard could it be to transition from finding birds in training fields to finding a wild covey or two of sharptails or huns?

If you have hunted upland birds, you likely do not need to be told how these assumptions turned into reality. To be explicit: A nearly 4,000-mile and 10-day round trip from Maryland to Montana with zero pointed birds over my young setter. If the question was whether we had what it takes to be a wild bird hunter, then the answer by most counts would be a flat no. But did we fail to discover a worthwhile story and adventure? Also no. I believe that sometimes dogs have a way of revealing a void in yourself that you didn't know existed. Penny helped me to learn that my quest for western travel had little to do with proving my mettle but everything to do with uncovering the real story written on my heart. A tale that I dare say is also likely written on yours.

Consider me Type A, often to the point of annoyance. This is a dressed-up way of saying that I rarely sit still. For a large portion of my life, I have rushed around trying to get things done rather than stop to take a deep breath and simply enjoy. Owning a bird dog was just another item on my checklist that I had to do in order to prove myself as a hunter, perhaps even as a man. Penny was an English Setter puppy, purchased from a kennel in northern New Jersey. The pup was a bundle of ambition and independence. While my impatience often conflicted with the natural tendencies of a young, driven dog, we eventually cobbled together a workable team.

With a deep desire to travel and chase adventure in new areas of the world, I began to set my eyes on a western trip in search of wild birds. In the midst of the 2020 pandemic, with a scant three weeks' notice, I was offered the perfect incentive to turn this dream into reality.



My wife said, “My mother is coming to town for a week. Feel free to go hunting if you want.” Three weeks later, Penny and I had our truck packed and were headed to Montana. Did I mention how wonderful my wife is?

From Maryland through Wisconsin, our trip was, thankfully, unremarkable. Suddenly, as we entered the grasslands of Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota, we encountered a staggering amount of visual beauty. I felt as though we were moving through a living canvas. Rocky brown outcroppings splintered against a stunning prairie undergoing its fall color metamorphosis from green to dying brown. On the other side of North Dakota, we found open road and prairie landscape as far as the eye could see. This topography changed our whole demeanor and gave us a boost of adrenaline as we crossed the Montana border and headed toward our final destination.

By the grace of God, we had driven safely across the country on only two nights of light sleep in the front seat of my silver 2013 F-150.

Stepping out of the truck in central Montana, I was taken aback by the staggering size of the landscape. My eyes met what seemed like an endless ocean of still, but clearly living, brown shrub grass. This indigenous grass was decorated with patches of sagebrush, with the entire artistic creation bordered by the occasional distant snow-covered mountain range.

There is a cheesy motivational poster that says, “I like places that make my problems seem small.” This one line actually epitomizes my awe as I breathed in the Montana landscape. Living in the Northeast, it’s so hard to grasp how enormous these open tracts of western land can be and how we can seem so insignificant while exploring them.

While the natural setting alone was worth the trip, we had come to test our luck hunting birds. We chose a piece of Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) Hunter Access property and set out with high hopes. These early outings quickly taught us that sometimes it’s the little tidbits of seemingly meaningless advice that, through time and experience, become weighty in worth. In my brief preparations for the trip, I was told to take notice if your dog ever goes on point and a bird is not produced. This lesson came into play on our first real hunt, on a wide and empty piece of public access land.

After just 30 minutes of hunting, my dog went on point around a patch of brush. Not knowing much about the cover in which to find sharptail grouse, I allowed myself to think bird hunting was easy as I cautiously kicked the grass. After a few kicks failed to produce a flush, I thought to look back at what my dog was pointing. Imagine my shock when I found my Setter a mere six inches from a porcupine! I quickly grabbed Penny and pulled her out, her flailing legs catching a few quills. Thankfully, tailgate triage worked and we were able to call it a day with no real damage done, except to our egos.

Stepping out of the truck in central Montana, I was taken aback by the staggering size of the landscape. My eyes met what seemed like an endless ocean of still, but clearly living, brown shrub grass.

While our first few hunts left us empty-handed, I refused to give up on my dream of acquiring the all-important Instagram post-hunt photo. Yes, I was willing to cheat a little for success. And by cheat I mean hire a guide. In fairness, I knew that one dog on a one-week hunt would only go so far, so I was willing to hedge my bets and give my dog a much-needed break. After failing to produce any bird contacts while hunting solo, we were excited to meet our guide. As luck would have it, while everyone had warned me how hot it would be hunting in the middle of September, our first day of guided hunting produced a September hail storm. The dogs were brave amid cold and damp conditions, but did not last long in the weather. After this debacle, we were facing a real chance of going bird-less.





Despite our lack of success, each day became more enjoyable. I experienced a mix of emotions, including thankfulness, awe, and contentment. Watching my dog run across these epic landscapes, I reveled in her fluidity and grace. My field-bred Setter running unencumbered across the broad prairie was like watching a paintbrush move across a perfectly crafted canvas. This brush created a watercolor that, instead of hanging on a museum wall, had come alive to capture the ancient chase of dog vs. quarry across dramatic scenery.

As a former collegiate linebacker, I was not supposed to like art or poetry. Who was this person? I discovered that my enjoyment peaked on days when we hunted alone. I scoured maps, showed up at public access properties and hunted huge pieces of land without ever seeing another person. I felt a real connection to the dog and, most importantly, to our Creator as I explored the beautiful landscape.

The pinnacle of our success came while investigating a Pheasants Forever property: a large expanse of habitat conservation land without a soul in sight and no cell service. Just exploring the huge, uninhabited property felt like an achievement. For a moment in time, my dog and I were in sync on a level that only an upland hunter can understand. It truly felt like we were in a different world. Walking up a hillside on the way back to the car, Penny pointed. I was tired and did a half-hearted attempt at a flush. Thinking there was no bird present, I called the dog off point. After my command she promptly dived in the cover to produce a hen pheasant flush. Surprised, I was reminded of the old adage of “always trust your dog” when the episode was repeated three times with more hens rocketing out of the bush. These birds were not in season so no shots were fired.

So had we proved ourselves “tough enough” for the adventure? I actually argue the opposite. I learned I was “soft” enough to enjoy the trip. I came to realize that my soul has a craving for beauty, art and, frankly, heartfelt experience.

I harvested one sharptail on the second and final days with our guide, but I didn’t connect with a bird over my young dog or on solo hunts. With this goal in mind, our last hunting day found us exploring a new piece of public land. Shortly after crossing into a pasture, my dog got into a covey of sharptails. As she was off chasing the first few birds that flushed, a straggler got up and I was able to bag my first sharptail while hunting alone. Not the picturesque point that I had envisioned during planning but no less rewarding!

After this trip, we turned our eyes to the eastern horizon and a return to regular life. Was there adventure? Sure, coming moments from being stuck in a remote farm field slick with mud, getting lost driving across the frontier of Montana and North Dakota with no cell or GPS service, rounding a bend in the road to find a giant bull elk in the early morning dawn count as worthy exploits in my typically “cityslicker” life. Sleeping five nights in the front seat of my truck at random rest stops and campgrounds is roughing it by my standards. By the way, in case you were wondering, at least one Ohio rest stop has contracted lawn maintenance at 11 p.m. A lawn mower outside your window is the perfect alarm clock after a brief snooze.

So had we proved ourselves “tough enough” for the adventure? I actually argue the opposite. I learned I was “soft” enough to enjoy the trip. I came to realize that my soul has a craving for beauty, art and, frankly, heartfelt experience. Owning, training and handling a bird dog is to experience art in all its forms (not to mention patience). The sheer beauty of a young dog tapping into her natural skills as she races across the breathtaking western prairie is visual art at its finest. It must be felt in person and in the soul to be truly appreciated.

The overwhelming awe and appreciation I felt was a visceral reaction that I believe is rooted deep in our DNA, a connection to a place and time unseen but somehow remembered. If you believe in evolution, this analogy should be simple to understand.



Photo by Joe Anastasio

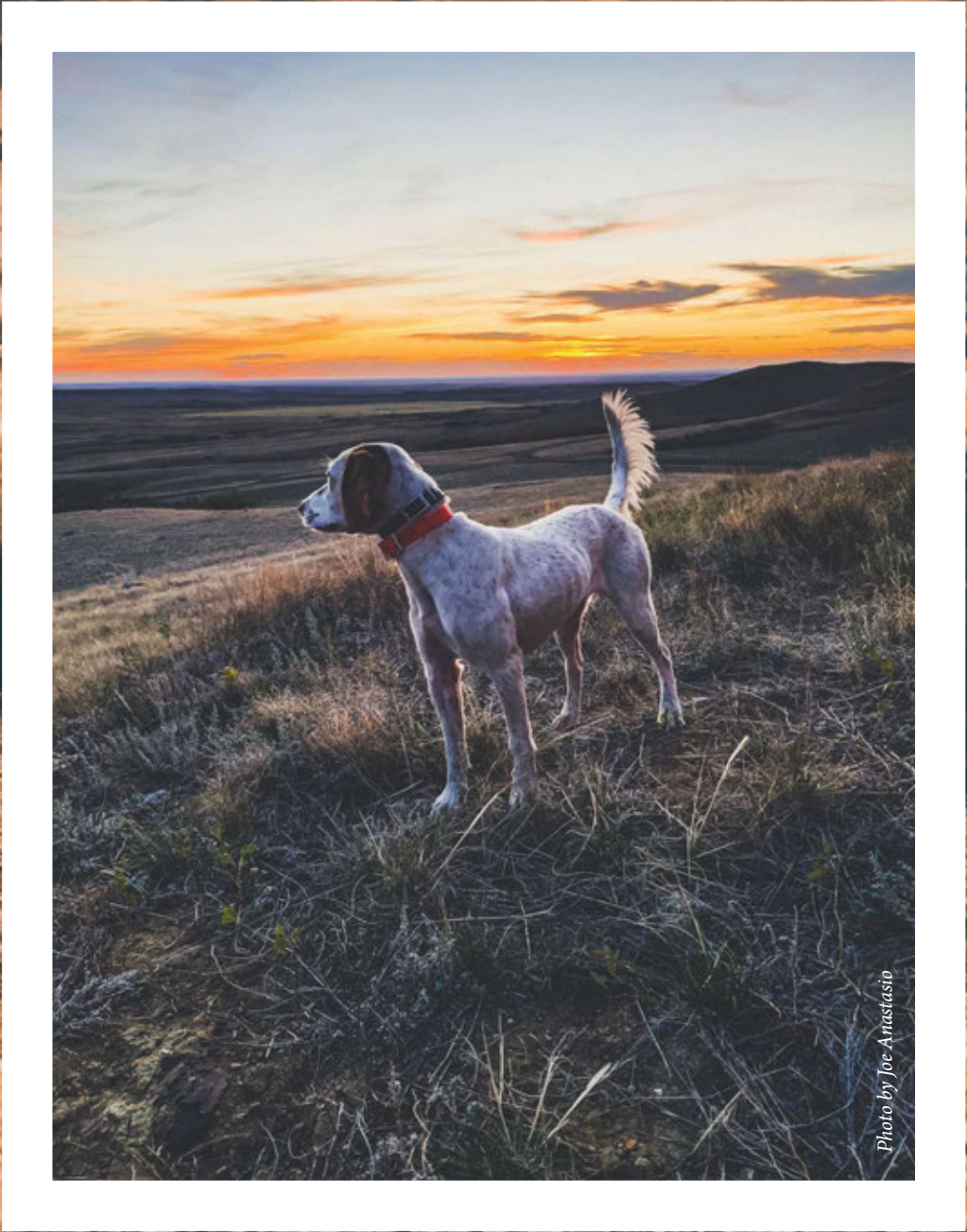


Photo by Joe Anastasio



Photo by Joe Anastasio

As a proud Christian, I believe encountering creation in this real sense allows us to connect with the identity that God has written upon our inner core. There is a reason that being out with your dog in wild locations just feels right. I humbly believe that, as the ultimate author and artist, our Creator loves passion, adventure and beauty in all its forms. As John Eldredge writes, “We are made in the image of God; we carry within us the desire for our true life of intimacy and adventure. To say we want less than that is to lie.”

My soul felt alive on the prairie because the story God wrote on my heart was awakened in ways to which the modern psyche is not accustomed. This seemingly enlightened state helped me to also reflect on how thankful I was for the gift of my life in many areas beyond just the experience of hunting. While never wanting to make light of real struggle, I believe many of us in our cookie-cutter society can be too preoccupied to appreciate the basics of life. We can forget how often we should express gratitude for the blessings that abound in our daily lives.

Modern psychology has coined a term for this: “hedonic adaptation.” Humans simply get used to material goods or services and constantly crave more. I believe that embarking on an outdoor adventure can help to reset this internal adaptation. For instance, being willing to take on a little discomfort through exposure to the elements, vulnerability through adventure, or experiencing the occasional physical harshness of nature and its circle of life. For the upland adventurer, this is achieved through connection with a wild place and by taking an active role in the pursuit of food with canine and game. Participating in this primitive ballad, and recognizing its simple elegance, will help put you in a state of reverence with the utmost artist.

While a week of bird hunting was clearly great fun, the enlightenment I underwent amidst the tall grasses of Montana was the true benefit of the trip. This triggered personal development in other, more important, areas of my life like marriage, fatherhood and my ongoing spiritual adventure with God. If I could see beauty in the participation, rather than the outcome, of a bird hunting trip, then how much beauty was I failing to see in the everyday processes of raising my children, partnering with my wife or other aspects of daily life?

This trip didn’t flip a magic switch that transformed me overnight into an all-knowing and improved person. But I hope it will be a significant episode in the lifetime of discovery of the story and purpose that God has written on my core: a story that, in order to hit play, required me to get out of my comfort zone, turn off the distractions, and go on an adventure with a script written by the greatest playwright. ■





SCALING MOUNT YONAH

WORDS Erik Swenson & Jeremiah Means

IMAGES Jake Dowling, Mike Robinson, Mark Fischer, Matt Jones, Erik Swenson, Phil Gable



It was day three of Wild at Heart Basic in White County, Ga. There was an open invite to hike Mount Yonah (Cherokee word for bear). The trek is 4.4 miles with just over 1,500 feet gained in elevation—not nothing, especially for a novice.

During lunch, one man from our group stood to announce a plan birthed 10 minutes prior. For any willing to join, the aim was to get Jeremiah as far up the mountain as possible. Jeremiah Means is taller than any man who was there and weighs in at just over 200 pounds (mostly muscle mass). A brain injury 11 years ago impacted his sight, hearing and motor control in varying degrees. In his words, the incident took him from 6'4" to 4'2". Jeremiah has massive upper body strength from manning a wheelchair for over a decade. He can split wood from a seated position. And his heart, intellect and will rival the power in his forearms. One discernible weakness (which is common to most men and which he is apt to admit) is a reluctance to ask for and receive help.

But the challenge had been issued. Some of us were pressed to believe it would be possible to carry him that far (though we didn't voice our doubts). And Jeremiah was being pressed to consent to being carried.

The initial suggestion was to attempt a fireman's carry and cart him up on our backs. What the proposal lacked in wisdom it made up for in zeal. Someone quickly offered an

alternative plan. We would build a litter (see pg. 41).

Within minutes we had two poles (scavenged from somewhere on camp), a borrowed nylon hammock and a roll of duct tape. An additional couple minutes and we had a test subject hoisted on the shoulders of four men, nevermind that he was roughly 85 percent the size of Jeremiah.

Once the caravan of 13 men arrived at the trailhead, we circled up in the dirt lot to pray. We then got Jeremiah elevated and started walking. After a few hundred yards all progress halted as we set him down to adjust the hammock. It took four tries but we eventually rigged the litter in a way that proved to hold.

There were a variety of reactions from other hikers witnessing the attempt. Some stood silent while others displayed a sense of awe. Jeremiah capitalized on the audience and began offering rides. He also cautioned several concerned climbers about the mountain lion up the trail. The only reason the joke had any credence was because it was not entirely obvious why we were carrying him. In reality, we'd seen a couple of Chihuahuas being schlepped by their owners.







The level, open trail quickly narrowed and the packed dirt gave way to boulders and fallen trees. At times, one lead man had to drop off while the other took the weight of both poles in order to make a tight pass. We rotated on a regular basis and avoided looking up or ahead. Left shoulder, right shoulder and back.

The hike was no more comfortable for Jeremiah as he took the brunt of the poles with his rib cage. But the main thing he communicated besides humor was gratitude. His joy was like fuel.

It took over an hour but the trail finally opened up like a gulf. We'd made it to the first LZ (landing zone). In addition to attracting hikers, Mount Yonah is a training site for Army Rangers. Jeremiah took up his canes and made his way out onto the landing. The camp below was in full view and beyond that, waving rows of blue draped in a smoke-like mist. We counted it a win to have made the 1.5 miles to the first LZ. It was over a 600-foot gain in elevation. After allowing enough time for the sunlight and sense of victory to saturate us, we took several pictures to commemorate the journey, one of which was captured by drone.

The way back included a shortcut that required Jeremiah to sit and edge his way down under the control of his upper body. He navigated the rock faces like stairs. We paid more attention to loose footholds and changed shifts more frequently. At one point a serious hiker asked if we needed Aspirin. Through labored breathing we explained the whole thing was planned. We were met at the bottom by a collection of cheering witnesses who'd passed us and waited to see this experiment through to the end.





In reflecting on the afternoon, there is a weight to what we all experienced. It is more than a great story, though it is that. The next morning at breakfast, Jeremiah recounted the hike for those who had missed it. He spoke of the points in the trail where we'd passed through 26-inch oaks that had been walled out like Moses crossing the Red Sea. And he voiced the fear he'd felt every time we passed over a "friggin' stalagmite" jetting up in the middle of the trail. He was certain if we'd dropped him it would have meant a broken coccyx.

But it was after we'd all gone home that I received a text from Jeremiah that captures the epic nature of our adventure. He wrote this:

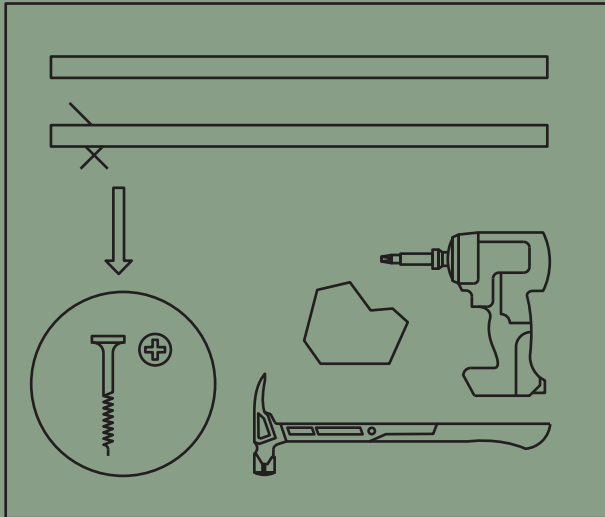
"I wanted to remind you of the true struggle it was to let go and let God use me on that hike... to allow a bunch of guys I had just met bear the burden of my weight on their shoulders to get me to the LZ on that mountain... renouncing the agreements that I have been living with for 11 years, 'I am just a liability, a disabled veteran, a wheelchair, real men don't ask for help'... But all that is a lie, I am not

dead, God is not done with me, I am powerful and strong, I have an indomitable will to never quit... [the Holy Spirit told me,] 'you are not weak to ask for help, you're stupid not to'... freedom like I hadn't felt in years. I realized I needed to stop stiff-arming people and allow them to bless me and to receive blessing from God... I have committed to sonship and, if anything, to telling this story for the rest of my life."

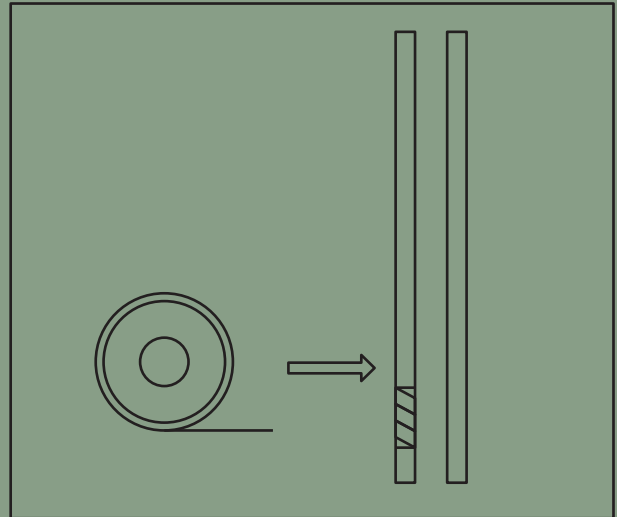
Days after the trip Jeremiah told a group of men, "There were things I took up that mountain but they didn't come back with me." Here is the remarkable thing, though. Jeremiah was not the sole recipient. Whatever help we offered reverberated off him like an echo off the walls of a rockface. His strength infused us with strength. He modeled a humility that undercuts the fiercest pride in all of us. Who among us does not need help? Who among us does not need to be carried? Who among us does not need the love of our Father made manifest in the hand of our brother? So thank you, Jeremiah.

Thank you for carrying us up that mountain. ■

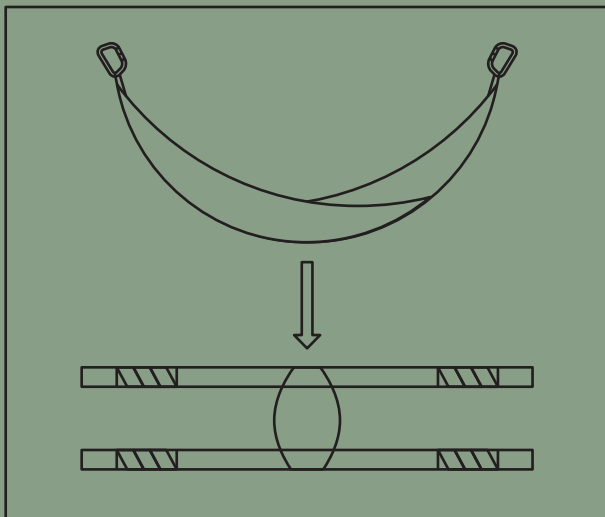
HOW TO BUILD A LITTER



1: Find two poles (using a drill, hammer or rock, remove or bend any sharp objects, such as screws, protruding from poles).



2: Wrap the ends of the poles with duct tape to cover any remaining screws, provide extra grip and to make the poles look cooler.



3: Borrow a hammock and secure it between the poles by either wrapping the fabric or tying a basic slip knot.



4: Maximum carrying capacity for litter is 205 lbs. (Transporting a man taller than 6' 5" is not recommended.)



Drone with Camera
(to record the training exercise)

Water & Food
(if an explanation is required, you probably shouldn't be hiking)

Antacid Tablets
(especially if the team ate tacos prior to departure)

Extra Clothes
(to use for padding between trapezius muscles and pole)

NOTE: It is highly recommended that several members of the transport team carry packs with relevant supplies.

NAVIGATING YOUR CRISIS OF FAITH

WORDS Josh Skaggs IMAGES fran_kie

“God, I don’t think I believe in you anymore.”

I was halfway through college and my world was shifting. Sitting in a dark room by myself late one night, I felt my body cramp around those forbidden words. Tense shoulders. Strained breath. I had never voiced doubt like this, and it felt wrong. Damning. I feared what I might lose if I followed those words to their end: my faith, my friends, my sense of self?

And yet, because I addressed God directly, that statement took on a more familiar cadence, becoming a prayer. I was inviting God into a conversation, one we carried longer than I thought. He stayed with me as my world continued to shift. He’s still here.

A crisis of faith is not like puberty: no one sits you down and tells you what to expect. That’s unfortunate because most of us will enter times of unraveling, when we wonder what will become of our walk with God. Lacking a frame for this kind of experience, we proceed with fear and trembling, braced for the worst, not knowing that there is beauty and goodness to be found.

I’d like to pass along a few tools that have helped me to reconstruct my faith. I can’t map out the wild territory God is leading you into, but I can point out a few landmarks and landmines you’re likely to find along the way.





1. Define Terms

From the start, we should take care to choose the right terms. Words like “crisis of faith,” “falling away,” and “deconstruction” miss the mark by framing this experience primarily as a loss. A change of terms might alleviate some existential dread.

How about “reconstruction?” “Exploration?” My faith isn’t enough anymore, and I’m grappling with God in new ways.

Defining our experience is tricky, especially when we don’t know where it might lead. But refusing simple narratives of loss helps us stay open to curiosity, exploration, and discovery. We can breathe a little easier.

2. Belong to a People

Here’s something you may not have heard: your questions don’t disqualify you from God’s family. You have a safe place here, at home in a robust community of trustworthy fathers, mothers and siblings in the faith.

Granted, maybe the people around you don’t seem like that kind of family. I’ve seen friends lose relationships or even get kicked out of churches for asking the “wrong” questions, so I know how unsafe it can feel to be the skeptic in the room. Big questions trigger people, and even well-meaning friends can respond with fear and judgments. (And we should admit: we often respond with fear and judgments of our own.)

I won’t deny that bringing your heart to people is dangerous. It also happens to be the best way to keep your heart alive. Not everyone is trustworthy with your story, but you’re invited to belong among those who are.

Find some people whose love for Jesus compels you, and risk letting them into your story. Maybe it’s an author whose voice you trust, or maybe it’s a close group of friends from church. Be willing to listen to people who aren’t as intellectual as you. If you are too smart to learn from a stay-at-home mom, you are not yet smart enough. If you are too well read to ask a grandfather what he knows about God, you’re missing out. Belong in the family, even as you raise questions.

3. Engage Your Whole Self

This one goes way back to Descartes, the philosopher who squeezed his eyes shut and eked out that terrible axiom: I think, therefore I am. Rather than engaging the mystery of otherness, of a world outside his own head, he confined truth to what he could cram inside his skull.

Apologetics can get stuck in the same trap. Well-meaning apologists get lost trying to nail down the truth with a checklist of proofs, debating atheists and scientists as if all of life could be reduced to some sort of logic puzzle. In this way of thinking, God is on trial, and we gather evidence to build a case for or against him. With all due respect to “A Case for Christ,” I think we need something more.

While the scientific method promises the cold eye of objectivity, its coldness is what makes it a faulty perceiver. As Wendell Berry writes, “To define knowledge as merely empirical is to limit one’s ability to know. It enfeebles one’s ability to feel and think.” Even though our knee-jerk response to big questions is to stand aloof, we must recognize this as the coping mechanism it is. Are we brave enough to bring our hearts into the conversation?

I happen to believe that our greatest questions are variations on a singular theme: Will I see God face to face?
I also happen to believe that God loves this question.

4. Ask Bigger Questions

We begin our reconstruction with heady, urgent, and (in hindsight) banal questions. Is evolution real? Are we predestined to heaven or hell? But if we're willing to wade deeper in, becoming more honest with ourselves, we might realize that our true questions are much more significant. Do I belong? Am I loved? What is God like?

I happen to believe that our greatest questions are variations on a singular theme: Will I see God face to face? I also happen to believe that God loves this question. I see this played out in the ancient story of Job, whose great suffering gave rise to the kinds of questions that I long to ask. Why is there so much suffering in the world? Is God good? Why won't he answer me? In the midst of long arguments with his friends, Job is brave enough to voice this complaint: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!"

Astonishingly, God shows up.

There's a reason most of us prefer shallower waters. The person who is bold enough to question God must be prepared for God to respond—and to question in return. We start out as the judge, demanding answers and proofs; if we keep going, we find ourselves in the hot seat. When God finally shows himself to Job, his first words cut to the quick: "Brace yourself like a man."

5. Belong to God

The person who doubts can easily feel exiled from God. We used to worship. We used to have a kingdom, a people. We used to be so sure. Now we find ourselves outside the gates, living among the damned and confused, unable to find our way back into the simplicity of the Gospel.

But what if the Gospel makes provision for questioners like us? Again and again, God affirms his place among the wanderers, exiles, and complainers. He keeps and preserves us. He seeks and embraces us. Even the darkness is not dark to him. If we make our bed in hell, he is there.

We may as well acknowledge him in the dark. Afraid, overburdened with our many concerns, we can lean into his dreadful closeness, his awful comfort, and ask the questions we've been burning to ask—the questions God has been burning to hear. ■



THROT C



TLE UP, OWBOY

WORDS Nic Bovee IMAGES Eli Dale & Wookie Jones



I'm not sure what time it is, and I don't really give a shit. It's dark, I'm freezing, I'm soaked, and I can feel the humidity of a thick putrid aroma lingering around me. My mental clarity sluggishly oozes back into focus and I start to remember where we are. I now understand my situation, but I'm not ready to accept it. Weak from sleep, I crawl across the slick floor of our shelter to find my headlamp. It's dead.

I reach past the boundary of our shelter to the forest floor and drag myself out of my sleeping bag into the cold glow of moonlight. I can see the pannier on the side of my dirtbike and remember that it has my spare headlamp. Somehow I manage to dig it out and flip it on. My eyes adjust to the light and I discover that what was once my warm fleece underlayer is now a cold matted mess of bile and freeze-dried chili mac. My ground pad and sleeping bag are a swamp of whiskey and beef stroganoff. When we left on this trip I knew I would probably need a change of clothes so I came prepared with one extra t-shirt and a fresh pair of underwear, but I didn't anticipate needing a new sleeping bag, ground pad and additional warm clothes. Until now, those things had stayed safe inside waterproof bags away from the dust and mud we knew we'd ride through on our dirt bike trip across Colorado.

When I was 10, I rode my buddy's Suzuki JRS0. I can still remember twisting the throttle and feeling the thrill of the seemingly unlimited power that propelled me forward over the grassy lawn. I was gliding without a care in the world, trying to keep my eyes open as wind rushed past me until I slipped on the grass and seared my bare calf on the exhaust pipe. That's something I love about riding dirt bikes. There's a point while I'm riding when the world dissolves around me and there's nothing in the universe except the bike and the trail in front of me. I slip into "the zone," nimbly floating over rugged terrain at breakneck speeds. It's surreal and peaceful until an unexpected rock, root, or drop brings me and the tread of my tires back to earth.











Growing up, I never had a bike, but had lots of friends who would take me on rides with them. Getting out for a day here and there was always fun, but I loved the idea of taking a trip on bikes with camping gear and making it a multi-day adventure. I honestly didn't think a trip like that would be possible until later on in life when I could afford to dump \$50k into the nice bike and all of the gear I definitely needed. It wasn't until recently that I realized this was a trip I could do with a borrowed bike and \$500 for a pannier.

Three of us got bikes, loaded them down with camping gear, and fueled up. Our only goals for our trip were finding some cool campsites, riding some fun trails, and maybe coming back with a story or two. Our first destination was a massive collection of boulders up a windy dirt road west of Colorado Springs. The extra weight took some getting used to, but we quickly adjusted once we got into some more technical singletrack terrain along the road. We left pretty late in the afternoon, so it was dusk when we dropped down into the town of Woodland Park to fuel up and grab some dinner. It felt a bit like we were cowboys finding water for our horses and clomping into the local saloons with our dust-covered boots. After dinner we left in the pitch black to find a campsite. It quickly became evident that our bikes were not outfitted for night riding. Between the dim lights, flickering, and a headlight that pointed almost straight up in the air, our ride through the dark forest was a trust exercise that made each of us hope the person in front could see the trail ahead well enough to not lead everyone off of a cliff. We set up our three-person tent near a rocky overhang and sat around the fire for a few hours talking about bikes and cars and sharing parts of our stories.

The next morning we drank coffee, broke camp, loaded up the bikes and started out on the next leg. Although we still didn't have a concrete end goal in mind, the constraints around our trip were clear. Our bikes could go at most 100 miles before we got stranded, which meant we would need to hop from town to town to keep them from getting too thirsty. The max speed for the bikes was about 68 miles per hour with the throttle fully pinned so we really wanted to avoid the highway if possible.





We took a dirt road out of Woodland Park to the next town over and continued on a maze of dirt roads. After a few hours of riding, while taking a wide corner outside of Lake George, a fawn jumped directly in front of my bike. I slammed my front brake and started to swerve out of control as the fawn bucked from one side of my front tire to the other, its airborne hooves coming within inches of me before finally jumping off the road and descending into the forest.

The weather for the rest of the day was looking questionable with a high chance of an afternoon downpour. We were 30 miles away from Hartsel, which didn't have the greatest places to camp, so it looked like we would need to push the whole 70 miles to Buena Vista where beautiful dispersed camping would be readily available in almost every direction. It was going to be a long stretch, almost twice as long as what we had ridden already, but the three of us agreed that it was worth braving a storm to reach some of the best scenery the Front Range has to offer. The sky started to get dark overhead as winding county roads took us past the Eleven Mile and Spinney reservoirs. The wind picked up, tossing our bikes from side to side, creating waves on the surface of the bodies of water we passed, and droplets of rain began to fall. We could see a break in the clouds ahead and we gunned it through a long patchy stretch of pavement in hopes that we could outrun the storm. We came across an abandoned farmhouse and just as we pulled off to look at it, sunshine broke through the clouds, casting brilliant beams of light across the prairie.

The old two-story building was now bathed in light, revealing a stark contrast between its white exterior and the blackened structure from the fire that claimed it. The outline of an old set of stairs was barely visible on weathered wallpaper that flaked away, revealing a discolored and cracked plaster. We sat near the house for a while and wondered how old it was, what caused the fire and why no one bothered to take care of it after so long. Eventually we got back on the bikes to finish our ride into Hartsel to fuel up and take a look at what routes we might be able to use to get to BV.

According to some forest service maps, we could gun it down the highway briefly and cut off into some county roads that lead all the way to a road at the top of Trout Creek Pass. We took off down the highway, our bikes fully pinned and our eyes peeled for the turnoff. Eventually we saw the road we were looking for as well as a gate and a huge sign that read: "no trespassing." With no other option than to keep pushing forward, we continued on until we found another road that was also closed. This cycle continued and every time we found another road we could take to bypass the highway, it was closed. Finally, we found a dirt road that wasn't closed and pulled over. As we slowed down, the smell of burning oil caught up to me.







Our adventure began with three people who barely knew one another, but after a few hundred miles of riding, some cigars, and too much whiskey, our time by the fire felt like a reunion of old friends.

My motor was covered with oil that had been leaking from who knows where and was burning up in the heat. We let the bikes cool down and tried to see where it was coming from but there was just too much oil everywhere. The bike started up again, but I wondered if it could make it the rest of the way, or if we were going to get stranded somewhere.

We got back on the highway and rode slowly, signaling drivers to pass us as we went. After a long ride wondering if my engine would blow up on the highway due to the lack of oil, we finally found a turnoff for the trails that would take us to some awesome campsites. My concerns about my bike melted away as we started to ride through the rougher trails our bikes were made for. We climbed higher and higher until we reached an overlook with a stunning view of the Collegiate Peaks and the city of Buena Vista. We made our camp for the evening and prepared for a storm we could see approaching from the south but it never came. Around the fire we ate a buffet of Mountain House chicken teriyaki, beef stroganoff, and chili mac.

I don't remember climbing into my sleeping bag, but I can recall snapshots from earlier in the evening. Over cigars and whiskey, we talked about our work, parenting, and other profound things I can't quite piece together. Our adventure began with three people who barely knew one another, but after a few hundred miles of riding, some cigars, and too much whiskey, our time by the fire felt like a reunion of old friends. These felt like people I could trust with my life. They'll wake up to the stained tent floor and the sour smell of drinking too much at high elevation but I'm pretty sure they won't hate me for it. That's the thought I'm taking comfort in now as I change into my only dry shirt and flick the chunks of chicken off my sleeping pad. ■





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*Sex,
the Soul,
Addiction, and
Longing for God*

AN INTERVIEW WITH
MICHAEL JOHN CUSICK

Sam: This [interview] is about sex, sexuality, identity, addiction, and reframing desire, and some root causes under all of that. Truthfully, I was hesitant to step into this because there's some language that the church uses and some messages that the church typically offers that aren't very helpful. This is not that.

MJC: Per our contract, the title will be "How To Stop Masturbating In Three Easy Steps."

Sam: That's a perfect segue to the first thing that I want to ask you, relative to masturbating in three easy steps. You've worked in the area of addressing sexuality, restoring the human soul, issues of deep brokenness for a long time. If you could point to core assumptions that are damaging to men who are looking to take initiative and restore their own sexuality, what would you say?

MJC: First, I honor and support any man who's taking any initiative with his sexuality because we know that all sexuality is broken. It's not just people that are "addicted" to sex, or porn, or people that have sexual trauma; all sexuality is broken. And to make movement toward that is really an honorable and strong thing. However, most young guys, when speaking about sexuality, are expecting one of four things. Number one, get accountability. But accountability has become almost like this new spiritual discipline that ultimately fails because we're self-deceptive. We deceive ourselves, and then we deceive others, and therefore accountability doesn't work because we lie. And I talk about, in my book, "Surfing for God," three levels of accountability; two are harmful, one is helpful.

Most guys experience cop accountability. And that's this idea that I want to get a hold of my compulsive behavior, so I'm going to set up a relationship where you're the cop, and you've got your ticket book. And if I speed in the zones that tell me what the limits are, then you're going to write me a ticket. And usually that looks like shame.

And that's a horrible way to be motivated in the Christian life. It doesn't foster love, intimacy, or spiritual rest. And it leads to hiding and hiddenness in performance. So cop accountability only should happen in the most extreme conditions like when a guy is sleeping with somebody else's wife, and you've got to go, "Dude, not okay."

Coach accountability is when you get the whistle and the clipboard, and you're trying to inspire and help somebody to improve their performance. The problem with that is it's still external. It doesn't bring inner transformation or restoration of the heart. And it's exhausting because it puts us on this performance treadmill that says deep down, there's really something wrong with me unless I'm performing.

The third kind of accountability is cardiologist accountability, which is based on the idea that we've already had a heart transplant. We have a new heart, we have a good heart, therefore fellowship, friendship, adventure, connecting, conversation, is all about promoting the welfare, and the well-being, and the wholeness of heart.

There's a lot of talk, even in secular culture, about wholeheartedness, instead of necessarily brokenheartedness to freedom. So if the first and greatest commandment is to love God wholeheartedly, we think we can do that somehow through performance. And if I perform, whether it's with sexual stuff or not, then I'll love God. But you can't love anything or anyone wholeheartedly if you don't have a whole heart.

So all these false ways of trying to initiate change are really a way to become whole, without having to be vulnerable, without having to be dependent on another, in a healthy way, and ultimately, without having to trust God. So the whole accountability thing, man, I try to shut that down right away, and help people understand the questions to ask, and the categories to have in their mind, to go below the surface where the tip of the iceberg is the behavior or the sin.

Proverbs 20 tells us the purposes of our hearts are deep waters. The other things are, first of all, beyond accountability. "Surely my sex drive is too high. I'm just too horny. I need to dial it down," and therefore, we try to suppress our sexual desires. And this has been the gospel of sexual purity for three or four decades now.

Bonhoeffer said that the pursuit of purity is not about suppressing our desire or our lust, but about reorienting our life to a larger goal. So we need to debunk that. And then the final [myth] is that through some kind of Christian activity or Christian engagement, whether it's reading my Bible, praying more, or doing Christian service, if I'm just more devoted, somehow I'll reach a place where this just won't be a struggle in my life anymore.

Blaine: Could you explain what you mean when you write in "Surfing for God" that sexuality is a pathway to know God?

MJC: Addiction and compulsion are grasping for, and attaching to, in an unhealthy way, what the Bible calls a snare, something that we believe will be life-giving, and sexuality is the impulse, and the movement, and the energy to find a sense of completeness in other.

Ultimately, that other would be a capital O, where we are meant to come up and out of ourselves. The language sounds so sexual, that we are designed to come up and out of ourselves, and not just to spill seed on the ground, but to engage, to enter, to penetrate, in a way where life is generated. In 1 Peter, the metaphor of an imperishable seed has been planted in us, and our job in our Christian life is to nurture that, but also to plant seeds in others so that life would be nurtured. So communion is the biggest thing.

I think there's two lies around sexuality. One is that this is as good as it gets. Thomas Merton said that the greatest temptation in the Christian life is to settle for too little.

Kids in college right now are fumbling all over themselves, trying to get enough accountability. “I’ll try to be a good person.” That’s despairing. Who wants to be a Christian for that?

That was my life for the first probably 14 years of being a Christian, and I came to the point where I said, “Jesus, my sexuality is so broken, and I’m so addicted, and so compulsive, and man, I’ve memorized chunks of the new Testament, and I’ve gone to conferences. If this is what being a Christian is, I don’t want to be one.” And that was the first time I was actually that gut-level honest with God. And of course, He began to push me into deeper waters, and to show me what the Christian life really was about. So this is as good as it gets: lie number one.

Number two is that my sexual sin separates me from God. I hear again and again, “I masturbated, I looked at porn, so man, God is just disappointed with me, frustrated with me, disgusted. I’m not a good return on His investment.”

And if we could just begin to see that that union with God and that communion with God is not something we ever need to acquire by abstaining from sexual sin for a certain amount of time! It’s always there and it’s something we fall into and fall back on. And I think that knowledge alone can begin to free us.

I often ask men, “If you never overcame your sexual sin, how would God feel about you and how would you feel about yourself?”

“Well, God would be disappointed.”

“That’s not what the gospel says. How would you feel about yourself?”

“Well, I’d hate myself. I’d have to keep beating the crap out of myself.” Sexuality, apart from this union and communion idea, becomes the greatest window into our own soul and our own agreements and false beliefs about God. We really believe that God is impressed with our performance. We really believe that God’s mood toward us and his posture toward us and his presence with us are dependent on what we do.

My story is one of sexual abuse at age four, porn addiction starting at age eight, and becoming a Christian at 16. “Okay. Now I’m a Christian. Jesus is going to take this out of my life.” And it only got worse because it went underground, and then three years into my marriage, it all blew up when I was paying for sex with prostitutes and at massage parlors, and I was in as deep as anybody can get.

It was through that season of struggle that I realized that the Christian faith I’d built my life upon was kind of a sham. And you know what the antidote to sexual sin is? It’s love. If we would only trust love and learn to be present to love, and let love be present in us, and I’m talking about the incarnated resurrected Jesus, all our addictions and compulsions would just evaporate.

I think for the average guy, the most present thing that they’re aware of is sexuality, but we could apply that to any issue. Over-eating, anger, gambling, shopping, buying stuff you can’t afford

and don’t need, but you can’t stop. Ultimately when we feed the soul or our heart, we starve our addictive-compulsive behaviors. And, as Peterson says in Galatians 5, in *The Message*, we’re able to marshal and direct our energies and passions wisely.

That only happens as a result of something happening inside, as a result of rest and freedom. It’s always important to talk about freedom as a coin with two sides. Indeed, we need to get free from the things that choke the life out of our heart and soul because they’re bondage and they keep us from receiving. But then there’s a freedom toward something. We do not have to not sin in order for God to love us, want us and to be acceptable to him. When we begin to understand that just a micron into our chest and our soul and not just our mind, we begin to want God more than we want sin.

Many guys are trying not to sin sexually, but what does it mean to become the kind of man, wholehearted, unencumbered from shame, unencumbered from the agreements and the lies about my masculinity and what it means to be in relationship with a woman, disentangled from the lies about God? As I become that person, the man that I was created to be, then evil will not look attractive. And of course, men will always respond to nakedness because, at a neurological level, we were created for that. But the demand and that incessant neurochemical drive no longer takes over because there’s actually something solid that has come together inside of us.

Sam: *It’s necessary for a man in any kind of addiction, in this case sexual addiction, to become a student of their own heart. You have to get acquainted with the desires of your own heart. Why is learning the desires of your heart so important?*

MJC: With addiction, it’s twofold. Number one, desire is the engine that drives the human heart and desire is ultimately that yearning inside of us for something up and outside of ourselves, and ultimately for God. That’s why G.K. Chesterton said, “The man knocking on the brothel door is knocking for God.” The guy surfing the internet for porn or the guy hooking up on Tinder is hooking up or surfing for God. But if we can’t name and own our desires, we’ll never move toward what we really want and what we’re really created for. Most of us are aware of our casual desires. We need to become aware of the desires that are deeper and beyond what we can arrange for or bring about, and that’s what we’re trying to find in sexual compulsion. When we can’t bring it about, it depends on another, and then suddenly pornography gives us the illusion that we’re connected to another, but we’re really not. So it becomes this insidious, malevolent object that we can get hooked to so quickly.

Sam: *When you have someone sitting across from you, what do you do to get them to come to some terms with their deeper desires?*



MJC: To the average guy who thinks that he's broken and that is his identity, more information and insight and cognitive knowledge is not going to change that. What that man needs is encounter, experience, and he needs to be able to shut off. And I'm not talking about going out to the woods and backpacking; there's a place for that and some people's spirituality is fostered that way. And I like to ask, "What's the hardest command in the Bible for you to obey?" And if they're struggling with porn or sex or a substance, they'll always say something like, "Avoid sexual immorality," or "Do not lust." And I'll say, "I think the hardest command in the Bible for you to obey, because I know it is for me, is "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10a).

And if we keep moving, if we keep spinning, if we keep running on the hamster wheel, it keeps the desire at bay, and it keeps the brokenness like a beach ball stuffed under the water until we somehow can't manage it anymore and then it shoots up with great ferocity.

Men, the light inside of you is the strongest, deepest part of who you are. You think that right now all you want is porn or an orgasm or this woman's attention and invitation. And yet what you really want is life and goodness and blessing and joy and self-respect and integration. ■

You can find the complete episode at [Archive.AndSonsMagazine.com/podcast/44-michael-john-cusick-sex-soul-addiction-and-longing-god](https://archive.andsonsmagazine.com/podcast/44-michael-john-cusick-sex-soul-addiction-and-longing-god)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michael John Cusick is a licensed professional counselor, spiritual director, speaker, and author of two books including "Surfing for God: Discovering the Divine Desire Beneath Sexual Struggle" and "Somebody's Daughter: An Experiential Guide." Having experienced the restoring touch of God in a deeply broken life and marriage, Michael's passion is to connect life's broken realities with the reality of the gospel. Find him online at

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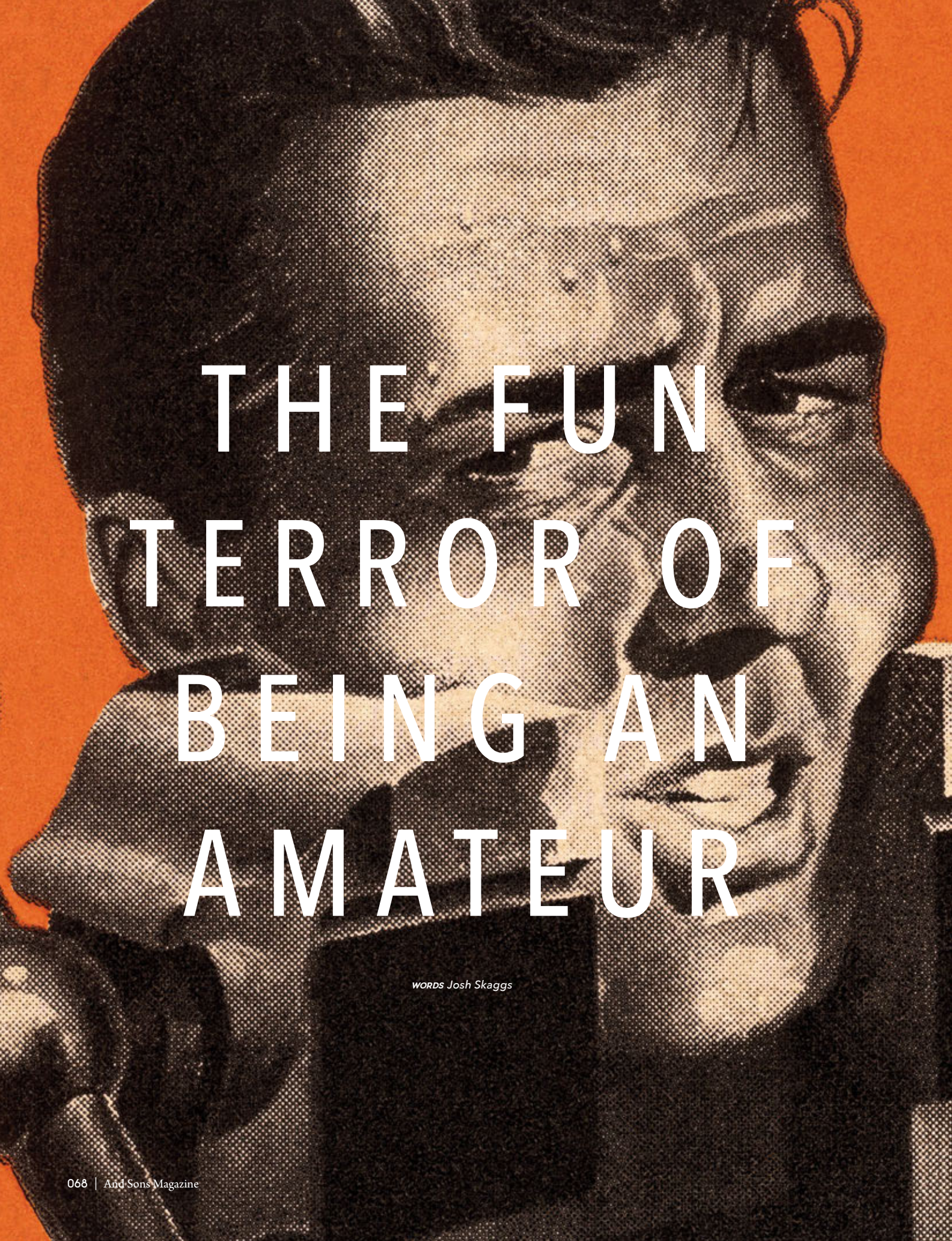
RESOURCES

Surfing for God: Discovering the Divine Desire Beneath Sexual Struggle
Michael J. Cusick

The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God
Brent Curtis & John Eldredge


Restoring the Soul Podcast
RESTORINGTHESOUL.COM

Emotionally Healthy Leader Podcast
EMOTIONALLYHEALTHY.ORG



THE FUN
TERROR OF
BEING AN
AMATEUR

words Josh Skaggs



The man interviewing me has a preposterously Dickensian name—Irvin Bump—but honestly everything about this interview seems preposterous to me. After working for 10 years as a writer, I am applying for a part-time job at a home repair company. I am severely under-qualified. When asked to rate myself from 1 to 10 on a variety of skills (carpentry, landscaping, plumbing, etc.), I tick through the entire left-hand column with ones and twos and an occasional three.

“You are what we would call an ‘unskilled laborer,’” Irvin tells me.

I nod. That checks out.

Then he surprises me: “When can you start?”

I start the next day. In the back of my closet I find an unused tool belt—a miraculous discovery, like finding a still-fresh chicken nugget under your couch cushion—and load it up with some essentials. Tape measure, hammer, earbuds, and 80 SPF sunscreen (pale boi needs his lotion). I show up to my first day clean and ignorant; I leave covered in dirt and still ignorant, having dug fence posts until my soft hands blistered.

One might well ask: What made you take this job in the first place?

I might answer that I needed extra cash. Making a career as a freelance writer takes time; a side hustle cushions my bank account while I continue to write.

I might also answer that this job was available. A buddy of mine works with Irvin and gave a generous reference. Landing the job wasn’t hard, and I could start immediately.

But if I were to answer more honestly, I would hone in on a different motive. After a hard couple years, years of dead ends and an unfinished novel and strained friendships and exhausting arguments with God and showing up again and again to all of it, I wanted a change. I wanted to be a beginner again. I wanted to be an amateur.

So here I am, driving a pickup truck for the first time. I feel like a boy tagging along on “take your kid to work day,” and maybe that feeling is right: At the ripe age of 33 I have been given permission to be childishly curious again. Every day, everything I do is a first. First time using a cat’s paw. First time laying baseboard. First time demo-ing a kitchen. First time worrying if there will be a place at the job site for me to poop.

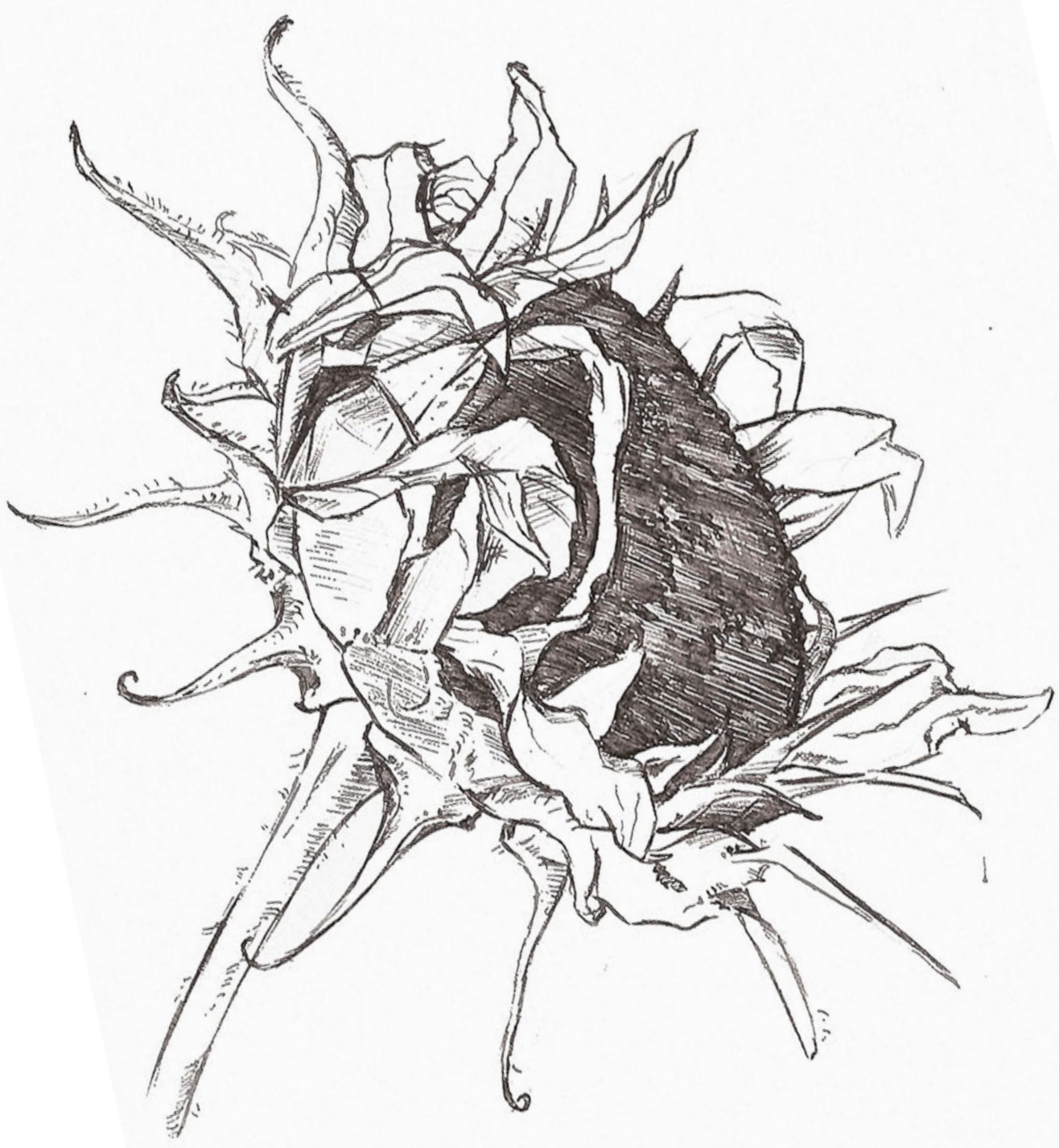
It feels fun—and terrifying. When was the last time I let myself be the amateur in the room?

I know why I avoided it. Becoming an amateur feels dangerous, even emasculating, especially with things like manual labor that give off a whiff of manliness. It’s easier to stick to my wheelhouse, to accept only those opportunities that display my strengths and to avoid situations that expose my shortcomings. I don’t hunt or grill or change the oil in my car because I’m not really interested in those things—but also, let’s be honest, because I’ve never done them and am afraid of looking ridiculous.

Now, as my co-worker watches me squirm beneath a loaded trash can, which I am trying to cantilever onto a truck bed by arching my back and repositioning my arms for the third time, I know that my fear is coming true: I look ridiculous.

I’m enjoying it more than I expected.

If I want to be a lifelong learner, the kind of man whose mind and body are still sharp at an old age, this is part of the process. I’m willing to risk being seen as less capable so that I can become more capable. I’m willing to be a beginner again—and again, and again—lest I wake up one day and realize I’ve forgotten how to start something new. I’m willing to pick up this tool I’ve never used before (I’m told it’s a reciprocating saw) and tear this wall down. ■



BLESSED WOUNDEDNESS

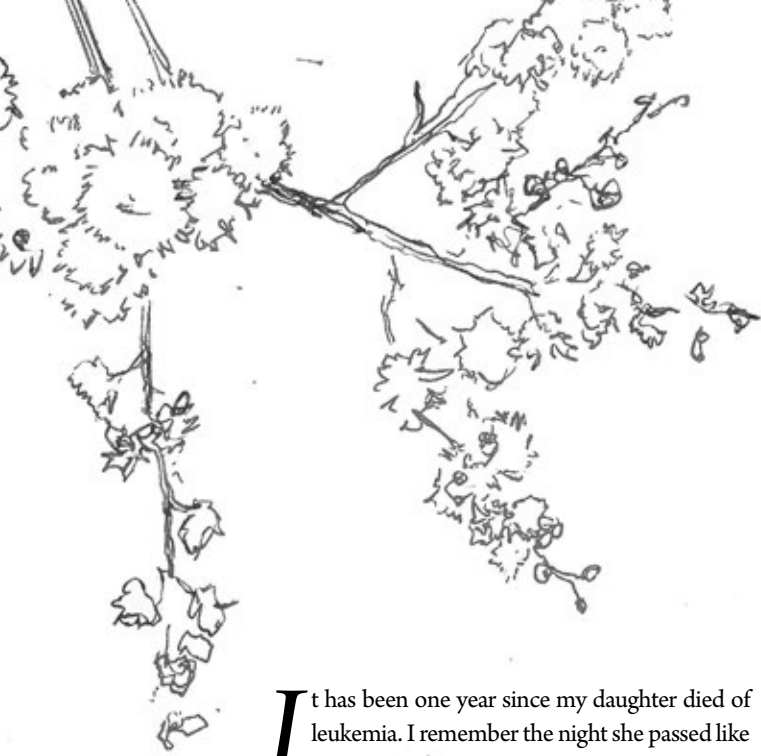
WORDS Ben Richardson IMAGES Anna Dale

Grief is like dorm room ramen: It comes in many varieties, and it always sucks. Like cheap noodles, when grieving life feels cheap and bland, and you just muscle through it.

Those who experience grief may be surprised by the range of emotions they feel: anger, convulsive sobbing, relief, cynicism. In my experience, what shocked me most was how quickly the world moved on after my trauma (if it ever paused at all), and seemed to ask me to do the same.

In this reflection, I share my challenges with carrying on “as normal” while grieving, and how it shaped my day-to-day over the past 12 months. My hope is this provides insight for those in proximity to someone grieving; to help them “misunderstand a little less completely” (Gresham, Introduction to “A Grief Observed”). And for the bereaved, I want you to know I understand. It can feel as though no one does, and that we “should be isolated in special settlements like lepers” (“A Grief Observed”). But while the long shadows of grief may darken your present days, the sun does come up again, and with it warmth and life once more.

•••••



It has been one year since my daughter died of leukemia. I remember the night she passed like I remember my name. After our last goodbyes were said, my wife and I went for a walk. There was a mist in the humid Houston air, that sort of salty mist you can taste and smell. When I closed my eyes, for one merciful moment I was at the coast. The sea means a great deal for our family. For years it has been a place of refuge and restoration. I know it was a great kindness that God used the apparition of our oasis to tear the veil of our deepest sorrow.

We walked to the hotel the hospital was kind enough to get for us. This way we wouldn't have to drive through the night and return to our other children minutes after watching our daughter die. A night away was nice. We needed a month. I remember having to walk to get something for us to eat. Something so ordinary and casual after something so disorienting and excruciating. I remember struggling to get my wallet, having to consciously think about handing over my credit card. As the college student behind the counter handed me the food, he asked such a simple question: "Are you having a good night?" I half considered being fully honest and saying "Actually, no, my baby girl just died about an hour ago." But people aren't used to that sort of candidness. People are afraid of grief and death. I knew it would destroy his night. So I just didn't say anything at all.

I remember the morning after Maggie passed away. We awoke and checked out, along with the other visitors. As I waited in line to return the keys, I listened to the tedium of everyday life for the Average Joe.

I thought to myself, "How can you possibly complain about the continental breakfast? Don't you know my four-month-old daughter just died in our arms last night?" But of course he didn't know that. I thank God the heaviest burden that man had to carry at that moment was whether there was a banana or blueberry muffin in his bag.

I remember that my wife and I drove home in different vehicles. We had driven to Houston on different days, so we returned separately—symbolic of how we journeyed together yet apart through our daughter's leukemia. Joleah spent most of her time in Houston with our daughter while in treatment, and I stayed home working for the medical insurance, and trying to maintain some sense of normality for our young boys. I remember screaming insanely during the drive. A guttural, tortured scream summoned from the depths of Hell. I moaned like this for much of the two-hour drive. For this reason only, I was grateful to be driving alone.

I remember arriving back at our house. The home was full of pizza and barbecue and my teary-eyed in-laws. I wanted to throw up. They ran interference with our boys for a while. And less than 24 hours after Maggie released her grip on this world, we began the cold hard business of calling funeral homes, pricing out caskets, and choosing graveyards. It felt criminal that hearts in such a delicate state should make these matter-of-fact decisions. But there is a business to death, and we are its patrons.

I remember trying to engage with my kids, bravely facing their need for their dad and play, still so young and uncomprehending at ages 1, 3, and 5.

As far as work was concerned, budgets and projects still needed to be managed, and the death of my daughter was in the rearview. For the machine must continue to be fed, and it is illiterate in the ways of bereavement.

At some level they understood their sister was gone. On another level they wanted to play tag with dad and feel “normal.” The same “normal” that I tried to provide them for months during Maggie’s treatment. So I sucked it up and numbly said, “Okay, I’m it.”

I remember working out with my neighbor at his garage-gym a few days after the funeral. He talked about squats and plyos, and nothing about my daughter. I know he had prayed for her and for us. But I don’t think he knew how to handle unanswered prayers of this magnitude. So he didn’t say anything about it at all. I’m still waiting for him to say something. He probably won’t.

I remember returning to work a mere eight days after Maggie’s passing. The trite condolence emails that crowded my inbox were considerate and enraging. They had all the empathy that one would expect for someone who recently lost their goldfish. Clichéd, predictable, well-meaning. How wonderful would it be for once to read, “I pounded the heavens and the earth begging for the healing of your daughter. And when I heard that she had passed away, I was devastated for you and your family and couldn’t get off the floor for an hour. Does anyone know where the love of God goes when your heart is amputated from your body?” But many people don’t seem to feel deeply. Or they haven’t dealt with trauma at an earth-shaking level. So instead I get, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Sorry doesn’t begin to touch it.

I remember a month after Maggie passed away; I became sharply aware of how stiflingly dull my world had become. As far as work was concerned, budgets and projects still needed to be managed, and the death of my daughter was in the rearview. For the machine must continue to be fed, and it is illiterate in the ways of bereavement.

A few more months later, it’s as if Maggie never existed. A mere blip on last fiscal year’s calendar. I wanted to quit my job.

“I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they’ll say something about it or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don’t” (“A Grief Observed”). And when they do ask, it’s distanced, as if sorrow can be contracted like COVID. But now the awkward exchanges of, “How are you doing?” have died off. They seem grateful to avoid stepping into water that’s too muddy. People want to feel like they offered, without ever having to get their khakis dirty. That’s ok, I wouldn’t share much with these folks anyway.

I remember one particularly lifeless virtual meeting that really highlighted the bureaucratic absurdity of my workplace. I walked outside to our memorial garden for Maggie and in a moment of total clarity said, “What the hell am I doing? Isn’t there something more than this? Wasn’t everything I just went through worth something?” For months our soundtrack was filled with the drum of bruised-knee prayers and encouraged hope. The crescendo of seeming recoveries, suddenly diminished by a rapid change in diagnosis and then death. Now, all this is replaced by Excel spreadsheets and status meetings. And then I went back to my desk. I’m still sitting there.





I remember the tears on my wife's face when we'd encounter a baby girl at the store or park. Tears of sorrow, mourning, and blessedness. I looked at her knowingly, a secret language amongst mourners. A language that no one in our community seems to be fluent in. Thank God for that, I guess. They have been preserved from the wounds of grief for the time being.

And now, a year later, coworkers attempt to sympathize, asking, "Wow, has it already been a year?" Behind their voices is a note of "Are we still talking about this?" as if we're talking about last year's Super Bowl. And so the fiscal year turns. And so memories fade. The sound of her giggle. The look of her smile. The feel of her hand around my finger. The smell of her head. "Yes," I think to myself, "it has been a year. And no I am not over it yet." We'll carry these wounds to the grave. There is no expiration date for a lacerated heart. Healing, yes, but the scars are everlasting.

We'll carry these wounds to the grave.
There is no expiration date for a lacerated heart.
Healing, yes, but the scars are everlasting.

There is holiness in sharing our grief. In my year of grieving, I admit it is easy to feel alone in the journey. Frankly, I still struggle to find people to talk with that understand. Praying helps. But there is something so visceral about talking to another's flesh and blood. If you are not grieving, but are witness to one who is, offer to listen. Keep in mind all of lament's feral adaptations; mercy is needed. Conversely, if you are grieving and others are authentically reaching out, take them up on their offer. As Sheldon Vanauken, in "A Severe Mercy," said, "We are all so alone in what lies deepest in our souls, so unable to find the words and perhaps the courage to speak with unlocked hearts, that we do not know at all that it is the same with others."

So speak we must, to heal our wounded souls. And by unlocking our hearts we stand in the face of grief and death and forbid it to have the final word. ■



HOW TO PRAY

(WHEN YOU'RE SICK OF IT)

WORDS Blaine Eldredge IMAGES Richard Seldomridge

I usually see Jesus in Carhartts and T shirts. Athletic gray secondhand hoodies. Birkenstocks, or boots. Hair tied back or dirty and down. The Father looks more put together, but barely. Gray hair. Button up shirts like the Forest Service wears. A knife in his pocket. No wonder—he's there to work. He usually drives a truck, a competent truck. A working truck. Just a little musty, in a good way, inside. He smells like good things, like bunch grass and fall alpine rock and the open country. There's an aura of ability around him. Of resources, and potency. Here's a man who can change things.

I don't know when this happened exactly, but sometime this year, I got sick of praying. That was surprising because, when it comes to prayer, I'm both a fan and a hardcore creature of habit. I've prayed the same morning prayer for more than a decade. I've done the same evening prayer for seven years, and I've only missed two nights: one, when my best friend died, and the other when we lost a daughter 20 weeks into pregnancy.

But only one night each, mind you.

Then, sometime in early spring, I didn't want to do it anymore. It wasn't a conscious decision, and it didn't happen all at once, but eventually, I didn't care. I'd lie in bed, and start to pray, and taper off. The next night, I'd taper earlier. One night, I didn't start.

Bear in mind, I usually like to pray. This isn't about spiritual merit badges: it's something I do to enjoy my life with God, the way some folks go crazy for worship, or solitude, or beauty, or books. It's fun. So stopping was an alarming sign, like the long-term athlete abandoning his sport, which, by the way, I did, too, for a while.

But you know how it goes. 2020 was rough on my soul. Life, though really exciting, is really demanding here on the front edge of the 30s, and, what with kids and moves and job changes and everything else, my brain is tired. The whole damn world is tired. Who has energy for spiritual effort?

Still. I need more of God in my life these days. Hopefully, that doesn't sound vaguely spiritual. I need happiness. I need restoration. I need big, effective doses, like guzzles of water or big bites of syrupy pancakes or drags from a well-lit cigar. Prayer, at least the way I was doing it, wasn't cutting it.

Then, during the summer, I remembered something cool. I was reading an old book and it mentioned Paul's mystical experiences and also the fact that old Christian saints were all about the direct experience, via the imagination, of God. Taken together, those practices are sometimes described as contemplative prayer.







I say “remembered” because we’ve done podcasts on this topic and interviews and there used to be books on it lying around the office. Also, I work alongside some contemplative prayer fanatics. Even so, I forgot. So here it is again: contemplative prayer, aka imaginative prayer or Christian meditation, is a fusty name for an awesome practice, like calling a 5-star buffet “self-directed caloric refreshment.” Imaginative prayer gets the whole soul involved. It lets your body think and talk, too. It’s less slow-track, mind-forward than everyday word prayer. It gives you a way to actively experience Jesus.

Honestly, some things you have to do to understand.

What I need, most of the time, is an experience of Jesus with me in my life. I need to see him. I need the restoration his body language brings. So here’s what I do, most of the time.

Slow down. Find a position that’s comfortable and free of distractions. Cars are good when you get where you’re going and park. Family rooms are good if you’ve got a few moments alone. Even offices will do, in a pinch.

Now. You’ve got to return to the present. Most of the time, your body will tell you everything you need to know—the textures, temperatures, sounds, and sensations of where you are. Tune in. Do a body scan: up one leg, up the other leg, through your gut, and chest, and arms, and head. Notice the texture of your socks. See how your body feels. Breathe, noticing the temperature of the air.

Then, once you’ve returned to the moment you’re in, look around with the eyes of your heart. I like to keep the eyes of my face open for this part. Answer one question: if Jesus came by, where would he sit? Let your heart look around. Is it that chair on the other side of the room? Is it next to you? Does he stop and lean against the wall?

Wait.

You’ll see.

I’m usually startled when Jesus appears. Sometimes, he’s next to me; he’s been there all along. Other times, he’ll come in the door. When Jesus sits down, notice his face. Is he angry or stressed? Worried? Usually not. What’s he feeling instead? What’s he wearing? A friend of mine can’t help but see Jesus in white robes. I usually see him in Carhartts. Baggy thrift store T shirt. Sandals. Notice his body. Notice the absence of tension in his shoulders.

Let your body respond. When you see Jesus, you may feel something. A heaviness in the gut. Tension in the back of your neck. Heat in your scalp. Emotion in your face. Go there. Answer the question. If that place had a voice, what would it say? Sometimes, I'll put my hand on my gut, just to see what it says. Sometimes, it's a groan, or a sigh. Sometimes it's anger. Sometimes frustration. Say it. Give it a voice. Help. Where have you been? Good to see you. I'm tired. What a day.

Then.

See how Jesus responds. What's he say? It's okay if you don't know. See if you can answer the first question again: where would he sit? When he enters the room, take a couple breaths to get used to him being there. That's plenty for now.

But if Jesus answers, let it sink in. See if you can pick out his tone of voice. The look in his eyes. His body language. See how your body feels in the presence of God. Ask him for help. Ask him to strengthen you.

That's plenty for now. ■

Want more? First, listen to Morgan and Cherie Snyder's podcast series on contemplative prayer. Cherie's a whiz and I've learned a ton from listening to her. Read Jim Wilder's "Renovated." Read the books Cherie mentions. But really, just try it. I do this a lot. I'll do it with friends. The point is, when we're strapped, we need to experience Jesus, right here, in our lives, with us. Try it a while. Imagine Jesus in your car. Answer the questions above. Imagine Jesus with you when you get a frustrating email. Or when you leave a frustrating conversation. See how he responds. When I say "imagine," I mean, "use your imagination to take hold of a spiritual reality." It works.





HAMMER & SPEAR: A KNIFEMAKER'S STORY

INTERVIEW BY Sam Eldredge



Photo by Justin Wells

Justin Wells reached out to us after participating in our challenge in “The February Experiment” podcast (air date Jan. 26, 2021). We looked up his knife shop and were intrigued with his process. Happy to share it here. - Ed.

And Sons: *Ok Justin, we gotta start with the name: Hammer and Spear. Where'd that come from, and what does it mean?*

Justin Wells: Yeah it makes sense we would begin there! Once I started going by H&S, a lot of people stopped asking what Hammer and Spear is supposed to mean. It's a reference to Nehemiah 4:17: “The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon.” A hammer is completely a tool and a spear is completely a weapon, and the beautiful thing about a blade is that it doesn't really fall into one of those camps. Knives are both tools and weapons and it's my goal to make knives for the kind of people who want to be ready for anything.

AS: *How long have you been making knives? Did you take this up on your own, or did someone show you the ropes?*

JW: I've been at it for about four years now! I started when I was 16 and I was just doing normal teenager stuff, playing with fire and making prison shanks in my yard. My friend had a birthday coming up so I decided I would make him a knife. It was rough around the edges to say the least but I got hooked on the process in a bad way. It wasn't long before people wanted to buy knives from me. I couldn't believe in a million years people would find so much value in the work of my hands. It felt right to bring my skills (as few as they may have been at the time) to the world in this way.

As far as mentors go, I sadly went without for a number of years and most of my learning was done through a sickening amount of screw ups. Then my Yoda came around. His name is John Wilson. I met him on a forum. He's an older knifemaker who's been at it a heck of a lot longer than I have. Sadly, he doesn't even live in my state but I got his phone number and I tap his brain every time I get stuck. He helps me overcome my problems NOT through training and some sort of advanced techniques but by the simple basics of the craft that he's learned to execute extremely well! Without fail, he breaks down my complicated problems into something a child would have figured out and I'm absolutely humbled and amazed at how quickly my problems become some of my best work.



Photo by Justin Wells





AS: *What makes for a legacy/heritage quality blade, in your opinion?*

JW: Ultimately I think a knife needs to reflect the person who carries it. I could just make the same blade shape as everyone else and slap a plain rubber handle on it, but no one is gonna care about that knife. It's gonna get thrown in the trash or worse it will get exiled to that random junk drawer that seems to collect numerous blades that will never see action again. (Am I the only one who has that drawer?)

This is why I have unique but functional blade shapes. This is why I use exotic woods, funky composites, handle liners and colored pins. I can chase down styles and color schemes I feel would best reflect the kind of people I hope inevitably carry my blades. I'm using high end material so that these knives last a lifetime, and I stand behind everything that leaves my shop. But once I have the function squared away, I go straight to work on making sure each blade I create has soul!

AS: *Talk to us about the process a little. Start to finish, how do you create one of your knives?*

JW: So I feel like I should start with this... I am not a blacksmith!

Knifemaking has gotten a lot of attention lately due to some popular TV shows and that's amazing for the craft, but there's a few ways guys go about it. The process I've learned and fallen in love with is called stock removal. I take a piece of steel barstock and rough cut out my blades using an angle grinder. From there I go about removing stock until the blank is the shape and size of the knife I want to create.

After that I use a drill press to drill out my pin holes and I drill a few larger holes into the tang (handle area of the blade) in order to reduce weight and improve balance in the hand. Next up is probably the part that requires the most skill: grinding the bevels. The tough part about grinding bevels is making sure that your grind lines are symmetrical on both sides of the blade and that you're making those bevels meet at the center of the blank. Once you've got your bevels ground in, you're typically ready to heat treat your blade. The steel I use most is AEB-L stainless. Because it's stainless, it requires a special kind of heat treat "recipe" that can only be accomplished with the use of a heat treat kiln.

These kilns can reach and hold temperatures of over 1,500 degrees, which makes them perfect for heat treating blades.

I do not own one of these kilns so for this season I'm having to outsource heat treating to John Wilson. In simple terms, during heat treat the idea is that you're heating up a piece of bar stock in order to drop the temp as quickly as possible in a quench of some sort. I've seen people use oil, water, compressed air, or even large plates of steel to drop the temp rapidly. The quench is what hardens the blade in order for it to stay sharp once you put the final edge on it, but the problem is after the quench it's way too brittle to be put into action so therefore it needs to be tempered.

Tempering is where we take our knife blade and heat it up to lower temp (low by knifemaking standard but still over 400 degrees) and let it soak at that temperature, which begins to soften the steel so it won't break but leaves it hard enough to hold an edge and withstand being put to work in the field. From that point we are on the downhill slope of this blade. Next I'll finish grind the blade using belts up to 400 grit and then I take the time to hand sand the blade. Hand sanding is the most tedious, irritating and time-consuming process in the whole operation.

I've done everything in my power to work around it and find ways to avoid it, but at the end of the day there is nothing that even comes close to the appeal of a blade that has a well made hand sanded finish. It's a small detail that sets me apart and I'm not sure if I'll ever stop. Once our blade is polished I use an electric etcher to etch my logo on the blade. This is my signature for H&S, and it's my job to make sure that mark means something.

Next I play around with my various handle materials and figure out what I feel will look best. I cut out my slabs and glue them to the knife blade, paying extra careful attention not to get epoxy all over the blade that I just spent an hour hand polishing. The epoxy has to cure for eight hours, but once it's done I go straight into grinding and shaping the handle so that the knife is functionally comfortable to use and beautiful to look at.

After a lot of sanding and cleaning up the dust bomb from grinding handles, I put the final coats of oil on the handle to give it a satin finish and protect it from water damage. All that's needed to finish the piece at that point is to use my belt grinder to sharpen it and then make a sheath from thermoform plastic called kydex.



Photo by Justin Wells



Photo by Justin Wells





AS: *What are you thinking about when you are in your shop? Are you rocking out to tunes or are you imagining using that knife in the kitchen or the field? Or... are you thinking you gotta get faster at this whole thing to really make some money? Be honest.*

JW: In short, Yes! Starting a business that revolves around creating knives has really checked all the boxes for my soul as a man. I get to play with cool tools, I have nearly infinite possibilities for design and materials, I get to play a role and be involved in some of the spaces and industries I love, and I get paid for it! As far as the tunes go, I'm ALWAYS rocking out and to be honest music helps me to focus in order to work at my best. I love this process and I love the fact that every blade that leaves my shop is going to be put to use in other states and even other countries.

AS: *What has been your favorite part of learning this skill?*

JW: I have met some of the finest hunters, chefs, soldiers, and hard-working people on the planet. I provide them with tools that can genuinely reflect their own character and grit. God has led me through building this business to tackle issues of my identity, my confidence as a leader and how my strength is supposed to show up in this world. I have no clue why Jesus used this to shape me into the man I am today but I wouldn't change a thing.

AS: *Where do you hope Hammer and Spear goes?*

JW: I really want to be a full time knifemaker by the time I'm 25. This is a goal I've had since I was 17 and I've been working hard to chase after it ever since! As far as what I want this company to become, my perspective has changed a lot the more I've come to chase God's plan for my life and my heart. When I first realized I wanted to chase down this dream, my heart was the conquest. I wanted every American to have an H&S knife and I wanted to kick sand in the face of anyone who would tell me otherwise. This was extremely flawed and I found myself attaching my identity to being a knifemaker when God has so much more in store for my life.

Now my heart for H&S is impact. I want to make an awesome product for those few like-hearted people who live with a fire in their eyes and their hands in the dirt. I can't be everything the people I love need me to be if I'm a complete slave to this business. Odds are I could get there faster if I dropped my relationships and invested all of my capacity into building this company, but what is the point of achieving your dreams if you hate who you become in the process? ■

Editor's Note: H&S is on Instagram @HAMMERANDSPEAR_KNIVES.

ARRM BARRS & ANSWERED QUESTIONS

I spend \$80 a month to get choked out between another man's thighs. And I like it. Yes, you guessed it—I am a newly minted member of a local jiu jitsu gym. No, I'm not a former Navy SEAL, and I never wrestled in high school. I don't watch UFC and I haven't been in a street fight. Actually, I have spent an embarrassing amount of my life avoiding uncomfortable situations.





When I was in elementary school, the way I showed the cute girl I liked her was by avoiding eye contact and ignoring her for the next three years. In middle school, I chose sports that were noncontact because, hey, who likes getting hurt? In college I enrolled in a major not because I was interested in the subject, but because I felt it would be easy and wouldn't stretch me too far. This has led to jobs that are safe, secure and entirely without soul. The end result of these decisions is a disappointed man living far from his heart. A man who is afraid of failure and risk. A man who is scared to step out on a limb and trust God. Because for decades I have chosen the easy path, and not the narrow and untamed path of following Jesus. Until late last winter, when I sensed a shift. I felt it was time to enter into the things that scare me. And it started with learning to take a hit. Enter jiu jitsu.

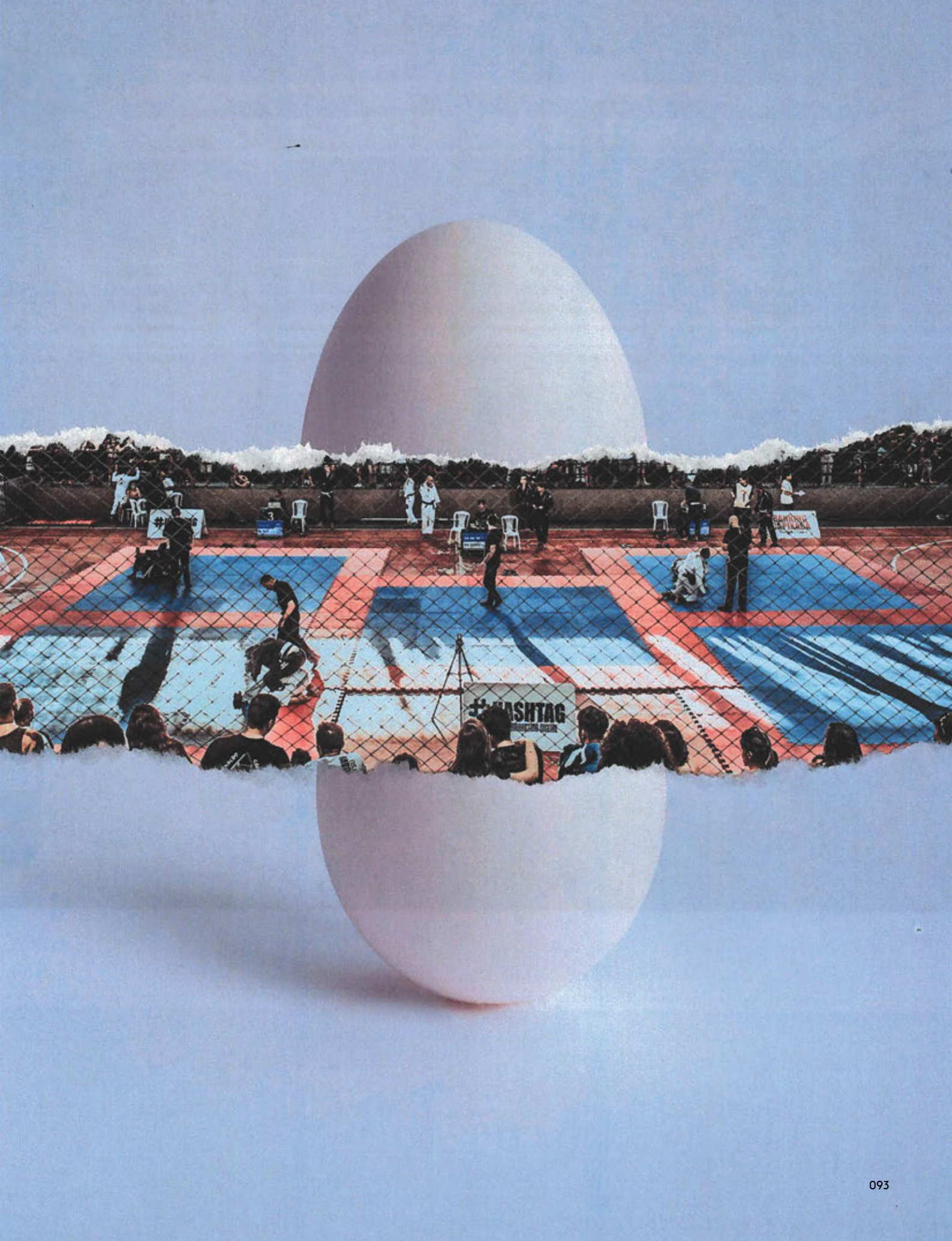
I first came across jiu jitsu when listening to the Jocko podcast. If you haven't listened to it before, I sincerely recommend doing so. Listener discretion is advised, though. This ain't your gospel choir variety show. But it is very, very good. Among his many accolades (retired Navy SEAL commander, author of several books, all-around badass), Jocko Willink is a black belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu. If you're not familiar, jiu jitsu is a form of martial arts that focuses on submissions, chokeholds, and ground attacks. It requires technique, strength, and strategy. While boxing could be likened to checkers, jiu jitsu is definitely chess. And if jiu jitsu is chess, then Jocko Willink is Señor Bobby Fischer.

In numerous episodes and interviews, Jocko praises the many benefits of jiu jitsu. Strength building, weight loss, and stress reduction, to name a few. But perhaps the single greatest reward of training jiu

jiu jitsu is the confidence it builds. When I heard Jocko tout that line, my ears perked. Confidence is something I lack. When I was young, I was subjected to some pretty rough bullying. In kindness, my dad wanted to teach me how to fight back. But teaching wasn't his forté. I can't remember all the details of my one and only lesson, but it had something to do with being in the backyard for 20 minutes, learning to make a fist, and feeling absolutely terrified. Not exactly a Mr. Miyagi-Daniel LaRusso scenario. Fighting, it seemed, was not for me.

Later in life, I'd hear whispers of a weekend fight from the high school press corps. I would nod in faux understanding, as if I were versed in the complexities of hand-to-hand combat. I may have even added a few critiques to really sell the show. Or I'd see highlights from a boxing match and secretly wonder why someone would sign up for (and seemingly enjoy) that sort of insanity. And yet, for millennia grappling has been a part of masculinity. I mean, even Jacob (Israel) went a few rounds in the ring. Whether it's the illicit high school version or the Vegas million-dollar purse, sparring is a bygone way of answering the question, "Do I have what it takes?" But I didn't have the answer to that question. At least not in this particular way. So God went after that.

After watching a plenitude of YouTube videos and hours of self-debate, I signed up for jiu jitsu. When I opened the door to the warehouse-turned-gym, I could immediately sense the significance of it all. Somehow the smell of vinyl mats and sweat let me know I was on the right path. My first several classes were...awkward. ("Pardon me sir, but my leg and his head are to go where, exactly?") But I pushed through and the effects were substantive, in a way that can only be exchanged from man to man.





The false self suddenly takes a back seat when your elbow is bending in unholy ways. You just cannot pretend in jiu jitsu.

At the end of my very first class, we jumped right into sparring. Terror ensued. That kind of whole-body terror where your spine tingles and you suddenly have to pee. I wanted to raise my hand and remind the teacher that I was a jiu jitsu virgin, and perhaps I should just observe. Or run away. I had many valid concerns. What if I get hurt? What if I make a weird noise, or fart in the middle of the roll? Am I going to die? Why did I eat that burrito for lunch? But I had sat in the stands for enough of my life. It was time to be the man in the arena.

Quickly the cadre of sparrers paired off. Of course I was matched with a 6'7", 245-pound glass-eating former NFL linebacker with tattoos on his face. He drooled blood and had the look of death in his eyes. I heard growling from the depths of his expanse. At least that's how he seemed in my panicking imagination. We performed the pre-match hand slap/fist bump ritual. The gesture is a courtesy and meant to acknowledge readiness, but to me the message was loud and clear: "I'm going to kill you." And so it began.

Upon impact, my body made a hefty "THUD" on the mat, like a bag of concrete on wet grass. For the first time in 33 years, I had taken a real hit. And to my surprise, I didn't die. I didn't shatter like a porcelain figurine. And I didn't curl up into a ball humming "Rockabye." Instead, I fought back. Spastically, to be sure, sort of like when a cat gets stuck in the window blinds, but I responded nonetheless. And even though I was quickly submitted, I could feel the offering of initiation upon me. I was engaged in combat, and it was good for my soul.

As my time in jiu jitsu continues, I'm learning there are even more benefits than what Jocko alludes to on his podcast. Namely, the refreshing experience of an activity where the objective is astonishingly clear.

Submit or be submitted. Survive and win, or else you lose. It is that simple. In my life where the goals are often fuzzy, undefined, and sit somewhere in the gray, it is a gift to be involved in something that is so very black and white.

Another effect of jiu jitsu is the sheer authenticity of it all. There is no room for the poser as your consciousness fades while surviving a guillotine choke. The false self suddenly takes a back seat when your elbow is bending in unholy ways. You just cannot pretend in jiu jitsu. The ol' "fake it til you make it" approach will get stomped out by an armbar from hell. And I love that. I need that. In so many areas of life I can coast along, hiding behind whatever fig leaf I can find that will keep me from truly engaging. But not in jiu jitsu. You either know it or you don't, and the other guy on the mat is going to figure that out real quick.

At the time of this writing, I have been practicing jiu jitsu for six months. And as much as I'd like to say that I'm rolling with the best of them, quickly receiving promotions and belt-color changes, this is simply not the case. And it's really not the point. The point is I can feel my confidence growing. Yes, I am getting stronger and faster and being affirmed in that. But more importantly a settledness is developing that comes from knowing I can take a hit and actually fight back. And through it all somehow those wounds from the schoolyard are starting to heal. That terrified little boy in the backyard with his dad is finally getting an answer to his question: I have what it takes. I may not be a black belt or a Navy SEAL, but in this I am walking with God. And that alone is worth all the armbars in the world. ■



HELMS ALEE!

WORDS Sam Eldredge IMAGE Elliott Badiqué

Jon and I walk down the dock with the early afternoon sun already beating down on our necks. We find our instructor squatting under an umbrella, hanging out next to a deck cruiser that has been converted into a tiki-torched, bamboo-covered booze cruiser complete with faux seagulls and palm fronds. He looks up at us with a creased face and I wonder if that's what all sailors eventually look like, all leather and telltales of laughter and weather.

"You Sam and Jon?" he asks. At our nods and handshakes, he wipes his brow and looks out over the calm Colorado reservoir. There's not a hint of wind.

"Well," our instructor continues, "the first thing you need to know about learning to sail in Colorado is that I can't teach you to sail in fucking Colorado."

I first learned how to sail 10 years ago when I lived in Santa Barbara. There, the Pacific acts like a backdrop for everyone's life. You want to go for a run, have a picnic, fly a kite, or spend a sunny afternoon with friends, chances are you'll go to the beach. From the harbor in town, we'd smoke cloves and watch fishing boats pull in filled with unagi. The local news station almost always had a van parked at the pier due to the frequency of drama produced by the ocean, like the time a baby whale used the harbor for a crib for a couple days.

It was there, on a J22, that I first tried my hand at the many sailors knots like bowline, sheetbend, round turn with two half hitches, square knots and figure eights. The terminology for sailing sounds like some fantastical language made up by the drunken sailor

that everyone seems to be worried what to do about. Tack and jibe, broad reach, close haul, and running. Boom vang, sheets, heave to, reef, running rigging, keel, backstay, clew... I haven't even named anything particularly complicated yet.

It was a crash course in a new skill, and it was perfect. After a few lessons I was given a punch card good for 10 hours of sailing whenever I wanted to take a boat out by myself. Dangerous? Absolutely. Romantic? Hell yes. I grabbed my girlfriend's hand, guided her aboard, and we set sail. That she eventually became my wife was certainly aided by those sailing adventures.

It's been years since I lived on the coast, and I still daydream of salty air. Of the roll of the waves and the cry of the gull. Of wind and sun and blue-green horizons. Mostly I daydream of my past, but sometimes I daydream of a future that might come to pass, one filled with the waters of the Caribbean and the deck of a catamaran and the thrilled look in my wife's eyes that I remember.

So that's how I find myself on a dock this summer. It isn't the British Virgin Islands or a catamaran. In fact, we do very little sailing this hot afternoon. Instead, we are working on the next level of certification and practicing the art of not missing what is local and affordable and somehow still inconvenient. Oh, and the best part? The boats are the same as the ones I first learned on, the J22. Stepping on board feels like stepping into the past and bringing that old thread of my story into the present. Prepare to tack. Ready? Helms alee! ■

WORDS & IMAGES Ian Helmke

TO BE KNOWN

I am just trying to keep my head above water. My dad was just released from the hospital after battling pneumonia and a severe case of COVID. I'm working two jobs that get crazier by the week.

Along with that, just yesterday my car tires popped and it will cut into my savings to pay for it. My girlfriend and I are getting engaged and this requires energy with the normal family drama that comes with such a proposal. There is so much going on and I am overwhelmed. In addition to all this, how is the life of Christ central to and flourishing in the life of a 24-year-old man in 2021?

The one thing our generation needs is the actual encounter and experience of Jesus. We know men who speak of Him, we know sermons, pastors, songs. We know the “right” things to say and we know ourselves, but do we know Jesus? We as humans have a core desire for relationships: individuals that know each other and are known by each other. Built into our DNA is the code for companionship but no matter how we try to complete it with people, politics, or social media, etc., we come to find out these substitutes do not measure up. I cannot fill myself with anything of me, no matter how hard I try. It blows my mind to think that Christ's life and will are not dependent on my external and internal battles. So many times I've heard the Lord's name slapped onto a situation as one does with a bumper sticker to a car and we call it “spiritual.” But again we come to find this does not work.

I learned this firsthand when I lived in New Zealand. I went with the name of Jesus “stitched” on my suitcase and my quest seemed to be out of a genuine wholeheartedness for God. Anyone who knew me before I left the States would have defined me as a “good Christian,” but might I just offer that there is no such thing? I ventured into the unknown but quickly discovered my supposed wholeheartedness was not as true as I tried to convey. The self-effort was exposed in me, you know the do-it-yourself man, the “I must do in order to be” man. The prayer that often goes with him can be broken down to “I'm doing it my way so I might as well slap Jesus's name onto this so that my way will go well.” We've all prayed it at some point without considering God has already deemed the self-effort life pointless because it tries to do what God has already done. Well, this was exposed in me in one of the most humbling ways possible. I shared my struggles with a mentor who has Christ Jesus living in him. The look in his eyes was loving and kind yet fierce and dangerous. I picture the eyes of Christ having these same attributes. As we talked, he stopped me mid-sentence, paused and asked, “May I share what I saw in you the first day you arrived here?”

What else did I have to respond with but “yes”?





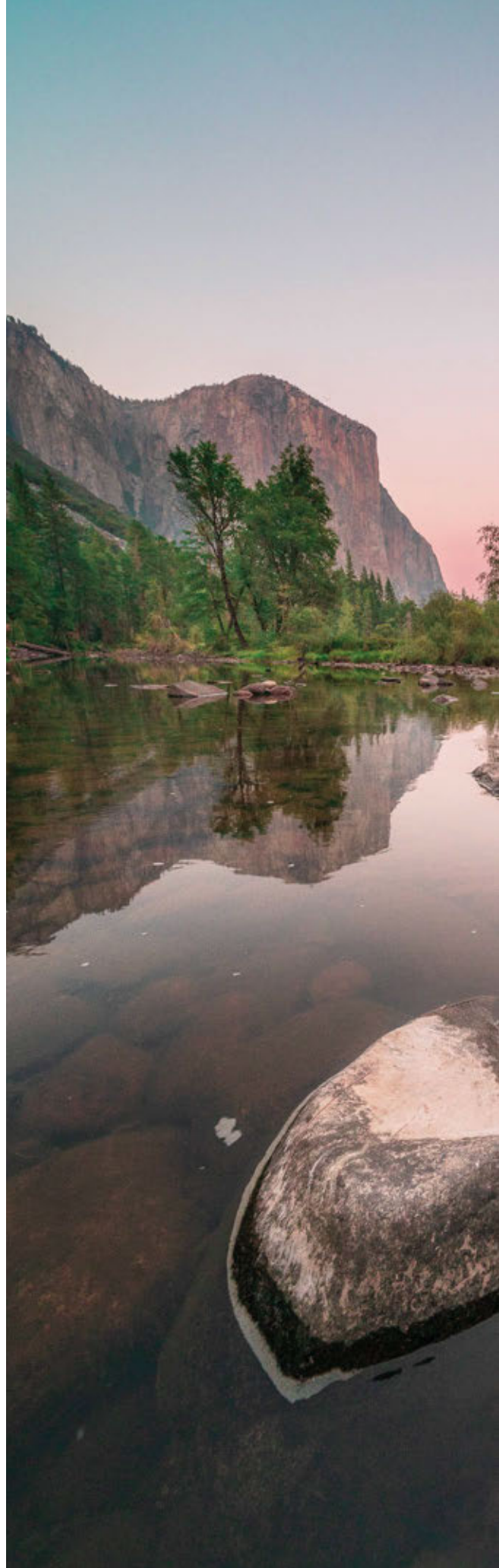
He looked me in the eyes and then down at my chest and back in my eyes and said, "You're hollow."

"I'm what?!"

"You are hollow. There is no Christ in you, I do not see Him. I see you but I see no Jesus in you." Tell that to a pastor in today's religious society, I dare you. But the man looking back at me was right. I had totally misunderstood what Galatians 2:20 says: "I no longer live but it is Christ who now lives in me." I no longer live. In other words: the self-made man can no longer be depended on for life. I am fully dependent on the resurrected life of Christ for everything. I knew the name, but I did not know the man.

Far too often, we can fixate on the death of Jesus but completely forget He is now alive. Most of my life I acted as if He was still dead. But He is alive! So why had I not encountered Him before? Why had I not known Him? Why could I not come to the table to eat? If I am invited to a dinner but decline, it is because I believe I have something better to do with my time. I gave my time to things with Jesus's name on it, but I never even thought to stop and be available to Him. I did not know Him. What we make ourselves available to will know us and we will know it. Today we have so much that asks for our availability and things we can fill ourselves with: jobs, people, stress, entertainment, fear, Instagram... internal and external things filtering through us. It may even have the name of God slapped on it but these things still lack a life deeply desired.

There was a blessing of 2020 (it was actually the best year of my life) because that specific year allowed for all I tried to do to come to a sudden halt. COVID shut down the world and sent my dreams of living in New Zealand crashing down. I returned home aboard the second-to-last flight to L.A. All that I had tried to build my life upon was lost. I came home to lockdown and quarantine with nothing except a camera, laptop, and the clothes in my bag. I remember sitting in my small quarantine room, looking at my camera and thinking, "If He is not in me, then it is all for nothing." I could never have known Christ as He actually IS if I continued to know Him as I was. A man in a mirror telling himself "Jesus loves me" is not as powerful as a man looking at Jesus Himself and hearing Him say "I love you." He is not me; He is His own and offers to live His life through me if I am available to Him. He knows me, and for the rest of my time here and beyond, I get to continue to know and be sustained by Him. For as I am available to him, things I could never have done on my own begin to happen. It is as if He knew exactly what was needed and provided it (Luke 12:28).





Example: I was on a star photoshoot in Moab and my only camera fell and broke. I do believe the Lord knows that a camera in my hand is the same as a knife in the hand of a soldier. That a man and a knife can save the world, so true with a camera and Christ in me. So when it broke, I could have depended on me to get another.

Out of nowhere, the Colorado Springs community rallied together to pay for the camera setup of my dreams. I don't say this to convince you or prove the popular teaching of the prosperity gospel. I can testify that when a 24-year-old man stops the feel-good religious bullcrap and makes himself available to the Lord, things begin to happen that can only be of Him. You begin to see the unbelievable, yet indistinguishable character of a living God (Romans 1:20). He does and will sustain whatever He is a part of. Major Ian Thomas writes:

"I may say to a glove, 'Glove, pick up this Bible,' and yet, somehow, the glove cannot do it... yet I have a glove at home that has picked up my Bible dozens of times but never once before I put my hand into it! ... Everything possible to my hand becomes possible to that glove, but only in the measure in which the glove is prepared simply to clothe the activity of my hand... that is what it is to have Christ... you are the glove, Christ is the hand!" ("The Saving Life of Christ", 41)

It is as if I am brought into an adventure with no idea where tomorrow will lead but it is provided through Him in me. The crossing of the threshold from the self-life of slavery into a land known only to few. Dare I say the promised land? I can no longer rely on myself but only receive what has already been given. "Can any situation possibly arise, in any circumstances, for which He is not adequate? Any pressure, promise, problem, responsibility, or temptation for which the Lord Jesus Himself is not adequate? If He be truly God, there cannot be a single one" (Thomas, 21). The more I've talked with men of all ages, the more I've seen the tendency to live wandering in the wilderness with full dependency on the self-life. I see their hearts die out in the desert. An imperfect being trying to live a perfect adventure only fools himself. If an imperfect soul is free and available to Him who is perfection, then every day is an adventure!

There is a difference in the meaning of knowing. In today's culture "to know" means to have an intellectual and logistical understanding of something. In the context of Christianity "to know" takes a whole new meaning and depth. In John 10:15, Jesus states, "As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father." This "know" in Hebrew can be translated to "yada". We find this word yada all the way back at the beginning of time where Genesis 4:1 tells us "Adam knew Eve and she conceived."









This knowing holds much more gravity than just physical oneness. Yada can be defined as covenantal relational indwelling where two persons have spiritual, mental, and physical oneness to and with each other. To know is to infinitely and intimately be in connection with another. In my travels and adventures I have seen reminders of this “Yada” scattered throughout God’s creation. Stars and flowers, sky and land, ocean and island, light and tree, God in man, together in full availability to one another. It is this interaction that amazes me and which I have come to express in my photography.

As He knows me and I know Him, in making myself available to all that He is I find this abundant life, which completes the picture. A deep indwelling and impression from one to the other that creates wholeness. A satisfaction that I was made for a time such as this.

I am known better than I know myself and I know the One who knows me.

My body aches and society keeps beating the crap out of me. Through all of the hardships I face now, I can indeed testify to this peace: this mysterious peace which does pass my own understanding. There is struggle in the life of a young man, but my understanding of these struggles does not define nor change the man named Jesus Christ. Psalm 27:14 says, “Trust and wait for the Lord.” This is what I find myself doing daily now. Surrendering my ego, my plans, trusting Him and waiting. Have you ever simply waited to see what He will do? “It is for you to be, it is for Him to do” (Thomas, 143).

I am known better than I know myself and I know the One who knows me. I am learning day after day that He is not me, yet He chooses to live in me. I thank the Lord for speaking through that man in New Zealand, for He saved my heart by telling me I was hollow. I find my sin nature is no match for Christ on whom I am now dependent. Let me ask you now: what are you dependent on? What are you making yourself available to: fear, money, Fortnite? Are you hollow? If yes, then my friends you are right on the threshold of an adventure beyond all adventures. Ask Him to burn the ship. Leave what’s lost behind, risk losing yourself. I promise that you will find a life better than just you. Risk to know someone who knows you better than you know yourself. Watch what He does next. ■



AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS

WORDS John "Padre" Eldredge *IMAGES* Blaine Eldredge

The first (and only) time I actually got to use an “amphibious vehicle” was way deep in the Yukon wilderness. We were moose hunting; the outfitter had an “Argo” parked at a backcountry lake. It’s an eight-wheeled bathtub-like thing with wheels, and it floats, which is really handy. We flew in by floatplane, and then used the Argo to go six more hours into the woods. The terrain would suddenly turn swampy and this is where the “amphibious” part came in—the Argo floats, and the turning wheels act like paddles, and you can cruise through swamps until you hit dry ground again, at which point the Argo becomes more like an ATV. It was so very cool.

I'd read about amphibious vehicles used in WWII, especially around the D-Day landings. They tried a number of variations on tanks and trucks so that they could launch from landing craft in water and then move onto the beaches.

Navy SEALs use amphibious landing craft as well. In fact, SEALs are themselves highly amphibious. You probably know that the first Navy SEALs were called "frogmen" because they were trained to operate in oceanic situations. You probably also know that the acronym SEAL comes from the environment they are trained to operate in—Sea, Air and Land.

Now I realize that every pastor sometimes reaches a bit too far when looking for a sermon illustration, but honestly I can't find a better analogy than Navy SEALs and amphibious operations for what the friends of Jesus were created to be.

Christians are designed to live in and enjoy the benefits of two worlds—the physical and the spiritual, the earth and the "heavens."

Each world offers "graces" for human flourishing. The natural world is saturated with beauty, and beauty nourishes the human soul. This is why we vacation in lovely places—when we're looking to be renewed, we choose a cabin in the woods, swimming in the ocean, biking through vineyards, music and dinner on the patio under the stars. There are many "natural graces" that nourish and strengthen the human heart and soul. Beauty is one, stillness is another, nature, disentangling from technology.

We are also created to live comfortably in the spiritual world, to draw upon the "supernatural graces" made available to us through the rest of God's wonderful kingdom. This becomes absolutely vital in a gnarly time like the one we are living in.

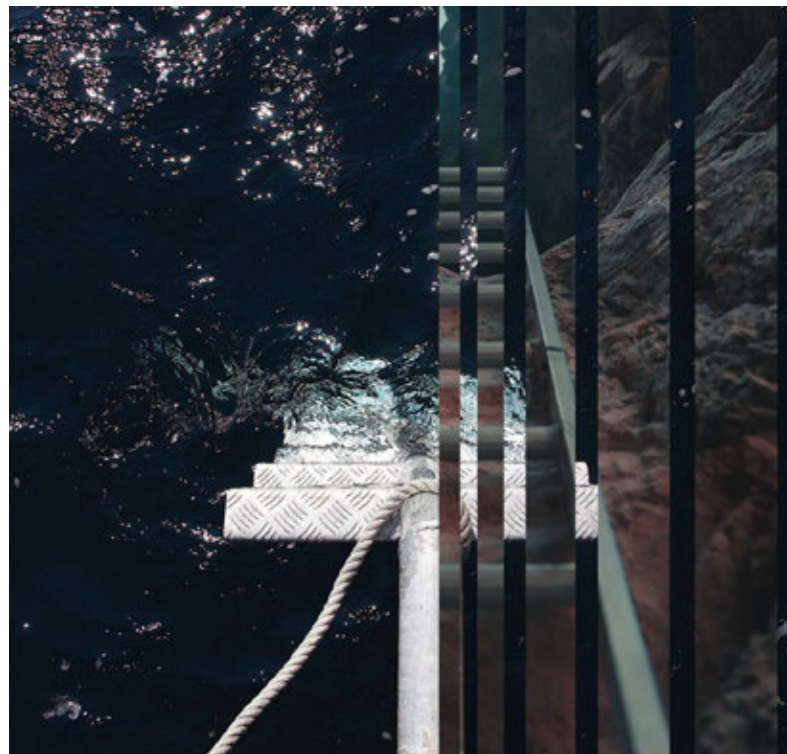
If you've ever experienced the comfort of God, or the love of God, that was Heaven coming to you here on Earth. You "tapped into" the rest of God's kingdom for the help, strength and sustenance you needed. Prayer

is reaching into the heavens for all that we need. If you have had the joy of hearing Jesus speak to you, if he brings to you scriptures, songs, things that stir your heart, that's the "heavens" coming into your natural world. You are tapping into the resources of Heaven.

Fellas—there is a lot more to discover! We are all now involved in amphibious operations. The kingdom of God is invading this world, and the war has never been so intense. I want to encourage you to see yourself as amphibious, and to seek out the tools and resources of the unseen realm to strengthen and equip you for this hour.

For example, toward the end of his days on this planet, Jesus began to give his disciples very clear instructions for living through extremely hard times. He assured us in no uncertain terms that this story would sweep toward a climax, and that those days would be especially hard on the human soul. He urged us to ask for the strength that prevails:

"Pray that you might be strong enough to escape these coming horrors and stand before the Son of Man."
(Luke 21:36)







Strong enough to escape—that’s who and what we want to be. Strong enough to be the survivors, the triumphant ones. To make it through the storm.

This is no ordinary strength; this isn’t optimism, this isn’t simply feeling refreshed for a new day. The Greek word used here by Luke is *katischuo* and it means “to prevail against; to be superior in strength; to overcome.”

There is only one other time the word *katischuo* is used in the New Testament. Jesus is again the speaker, and he pronounces the coming victory of his newly-launched movement, the revolution which is the church triumphant.

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” (Matthew 16:18)

This is no coincidence. Jesus wants us to understand that it is the powers of hell that are trying to crush the human heart, overpower us—especially the hearts of Jesus’ followers.

The strength God urges us to ask for is a combative strength, a strength to win the fight, to overcome. Which is exactly what we need right now.

This is not something we generate ourselves. It is the strength of God within us. Jesus urges us to stay alert, praying often (I suggest daily) for “the strength that prevails,” so that you may escape the intensity of the hour. God offers it, so ask, ask, ask!

Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit—God of all creation, God of the thunderstorm and the waterfall—I need your strength. I need the strength that prevails. I don’t want to fall away. I choose you above all things; I give you my entire allegiance and my undivided love. Fill me with your overcoming strength, a victorious strength. Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, strengthen me. I pray for strength of mind, strength of heart, strength of will. I pray for the strength that allows me to escape all that is coming against the saints in this hour. By faith I receive it, and thank you for it. In Jesus’ name. Amen. ■

LOIN

RUMP

TENDERLOIN

TOP ROUND

TAIL

RIBS

FLANK

SIRLOIN

TOP ROUND

BOTTOM ROUND

PLATE

SHANK

SHANK



AND SONS