

Wineskins Magazine

Ye That are Men

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Encouraging Men to be Godly Men

by Rubel Shelly

November – December, 1997

Maybe I'm missing something. But has anybody else caught the humor of the National Organization for Women – an all-female organization whose mission is to promote female causes – criticizing Promise Keepers for its all-male membership?

Maybe I'm missing something. But writers keep expressing their fear of a “hidden political agenda” for Promise Keepers. All PK events are noticeably apolitical in nature, and political groups – left, right, or center – are not authorized to distribute literature or to work the crowd on behalf of their causes. People who do so anyway are asked to stop.

Maybe I'm still missing something. But several Church of Christ preachers are speaking against Promise Keepers, and some Church of Christ elders have made it clear that they do not want men from their churches attending PK events.

Promise Keepers is not a necessary part of faithful spiritual life for Christian men. It is not central to my life in the way my local church is, though I have attended three rallies (Atlanta, Memphis, and Washington) and have been blessed by them. For the life of me, though, I can't see any good reason to oppose the movement. Or to reinvent the wheel by creating a Church of Christ version of it.

Could Promise Keepers possibly be one of those “fruitless deeds of darkness” which Christians are supposed to avoid? (cf. Ephesians 5:11). To make such a claim would be quite a stretch in misusing the Word of God! PK events call men to love Jesus Christ, obey the Word of God, live morally upright lives, and seek racial reconciliation.

Many of the speeches I have heard at Promise Keeper rallies have sounded very much like vintage sermons from a hundred years ago in the Restoration Movement. They have decried denominational division and the building of walls among believers in Christ. They have called for Christians to come together in Jesus by seeking unity based on the truth of the Holy Bible. Max Lucado, Tony Evans, Chuck Colson, Bill McCartney, Wellington Boone – all have pleaded for the unity of Christians that our *scripture* says we want. I cannot begrudge their making the plea. After all, the Church of Christ long ago lost its credibility for making it.

The call to unity sounded by Promise Keepers is nothing like the ecumenical movement of the 1960s. That ill-fated effort called people together under an organizational umbrella, without regard to doctrinal soundness. What is being said in stadiums and arenas by PK spokesmen is biblical and strong. The goal is not organizational union but deep personal faith that transcends denominational polity and goma for the sake of salvation in Christ Jesus.

[One of the neatest and saddest stories from the Atlanta Conference was the reaction of two Assemblies of God pastors behind me to Max's call for the unity of the Body of Christ. As the

whistles and cheers from a prolonged standing ovation began to subside, one said to the other, “Isn’t that just like God! Calling for the unity of believers through a Church of Christ preacher!” Ouch, how I wish they hadn’t seen humor in it. They were, of course, dead right in their reaction.]

“But they don’t say everything that needs to be said about baptism!” protests someone. That’s right. Neither do they say everything Christians from other traditions want said about spiritual gifts or eschatology. I haven’t heard everything I think needs to be said to this generation about some basic issues in Christian apologetics. And I’d certainly like more teaching to be done by someone on the deeper issues of Christian ethics and social responsibility. But aren’t these criticisms unfair?

Promise Keepers isn’t the church. It is a parachurch ministry calling men to Jesus, Scripture, and their families. It encourages those same men to seek out a Bible-believing, Bible-preaching church. It will be the responsibility of those churches to build on the repentance and faith commitments of men who have attended PK events. Mature brothers from my church and yours can help do additional teaching some of these newcomers to Christ need. We can supply more biblical data on baptism, discipleship, and body life. We can help dysfunctional families with prayer, counsel, and support. We can answer questions. We can link babes with nurturing churches and caring brothers.

The idea that we can help build on the foundation laid by the preaching of Christ at Promise Keeper events presumes something. It assumes that we are there. It presumes that we are able to affirm as much as has been said about Jesus. It assumes that we share the goal of Coach McCartney and others to call men of this generation to Jesus.

I have never heard PK offered as a substitute for the local church. To the contrary, I have heard men urged to find a church that will nurture them in Christ. And I have never heard a Promise Keepers spokesman suggest that what someone takes with him from a weekend event is all he will need in his spiritual life. The promises made on one of these spiritual retreat weekends are carried out back at home with the support of churches that honor the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because I have only Jesus to serve and not a sectarian agenda to pursue, I can affirm the exaltation of my Lord at a Promise Keepers gathering, Franklin Graham crusade, or Christian music concert. I can be grateful for every positive thing said and done to promote holiness and to call people to the Word of God. Within those contexts, I can live my own distinctive convictions, share anything I believe to be from Christ with others, and be open to receiving new insights the Holy Spirit may offer through another follower of Christ.

Afraid of Promise Keepers? Aloof from its call to spiritual renewal. Opposed to it because of deficiencies in it? Hardly! I thank God for what he is doing through Promise Keepers and pray for him to keep its focus on Jesus.

I remember an exchange between Jesus and John in Mark 9:38-40. John wanted to close down an operation that was doing holy things because its leader was not “one of us.” Jesus rebuked John for his narrow arrogance and articulated his attitude toward such movements. “Whoever is not

against us is for us,” he said. Why should we have John’s attitude toward Promise Keepers rather than Jesus’?

All of us have promises to keep, and I am grateful for every encouragement the Lord provides us for doing so. At the present moment, some of the strongest and most positive encouragement coming my way is from Promise Keepers. I praise God for it and encourage you to experience it in your life.

The Seven Promises

The seven commitments Promise Keepers asks a man to make ...

- Honor Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to God’s Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Pursue vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.
- Practice spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
- Build strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values.
- Support the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor and by actively giving his time and resources.
- Reach beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.
- Influence his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (Mark 12:30-31 – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . [and] Love your neighbor as yourself”) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”).

Our Struggle For Purity

by Mike Cope

November – December, 1997

I should have been suspicious! When the men in my weekly prayer group asked me to bring my *DayTimer*, I should have smelled something rotten. They know how I struggle to keep my travel under control. On one hand, I know when enough is enough, when my family and church need more attention. But on the other hand, I'm a sucker for any speaking opportunity that sounds "good." (Of course, that's the noble reason for traveling. These men are aware that there's usually more at stake than spiritual altruism.)

These three men – former friends! – asked me to place my *DayTimer*, my watch, and my wedding ring in the middle of us. Then they prayed – prayed about purity, about rest, about priorities. And they challenged me to accept no more out-of-town speaking engagements beyond what I already have scheduled for a certain time.

This small group of guys has been meeting together for years. We stay together because we share a common goal, to be pure men of God, and a common problem, recurring failure in meeting the goal. At this point, we almost couldn't get out of the group if we wanted to; we know way too much about each other!

We believe just what Paul told the Thessalonians: that God doesn't want us to be impure but to live holy lives. And we know ourselves well enough to know we might not be up to that challenge without being accountable to one another.

So we come to confess. That we're weak. That our marriages have ups and downs. That we're tempted. That we struggle to get our sense of worth from God rather than from the approval of people.

When men struggle alone, they usually fail. Who can stand up against the magnetic pull of Internet pornography, office flirtations, raging anger, pay-per-view seduction, or lucrative deals that cost integrity?

"It is God's will," Paul told the church in Thessalonica, "that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5).

Even though a Christian man believes in personal holiness and longs for it, the sweet illusions of sin can too easily trap him:

- "This isn't really an addiction";
- "She and I are just friends – it's all so innocent";
- "You have to play this way to survive in the business world";

- “I’ll pour myself fully into my career just one more year and then I’ll reengage with my wife and kids.”

It is in the powerful context of fellowship and of confession that these illusions can be resisted. There we can admit what’s lurking in our hearts beneath the surface.

The problem for many of us is that we’re afraid to admit that we have such thoughts. We live in the even greater illusion that other men are doing well and they’d just reject us if they really knew us. I’m sure Satan wants us to believe that. But the truth is that other guys are fighting their own temptations.

Recently my older son and I attended a Promise Keepers rally and heard the results of a PK survey. Among men who attend PK events, 60% are in a real, life-and-death struggle with sexual sins (adultery, homosexuality, lust, pornography, etc.). That’s not 60% of the general population, but 60% of men who are already fairly motivated to follow Christ.

Brothers, it’s the testimony of Scripture and of my own life that our battle against sin is best waged in the context of community. We need other men in our lives who can hear our sins and struggles, pray with us, and keep us accountable.

Seven years ago, Alan asked a minister who’s a friend of his for a few moments. For years, he’d wanted to blurt out his own confession, but he had always backed out. On this day, Alan fidgeted in his seat, made small talk, and felt cotton mouth attack before he pressed on to tell about his long struggle with sexual sins – a struggle that had taken him to pornographic magazines, late night premium channels, 900-numbers, and many near-affairs. All the while, he had been a ministry leader in one of the most aggressive youth ministries around. He had loathed – and then loved – and then loathed again his sin. The only way he’d been able to cope with the guilt was to restart the cycle with another flush of excitement.

But that day he bared his soul. And God’s Spirit, through the help of a friend, began the process of healing and reformation. Today he still struggles – but he no longer sees himself owned and defined by that struggle. With the admonitions and encouragement of a few caring men, he has yielded himself more and more to the purifying work of God’s Spirit.

Is it time for you to follow Alan’s example? “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:1, 2a).

Fathers in the Fast Lane

by Lynn Anderson

November – December, 1997

My father warned me years ago. When our kids came we asked Dad for advice on child rearing. He answered, “I can’t help you. I reared you in another setting and at a different time. Your kids are growing up in a changing world and they face pressures you never experienced. Parenting for you, son, will be far more difficult than it was for me.”

Later, a common drama repeatedly played itself out in my study. Scene one goes something like this: A student anguishes, “My parents don’t seem to understand me. But then I don’t know why my parents value the things they do, either. I guess I need to find their roots.”

Scene two: Enter parent. “My kids! I don’t understand them at all.” The parent may have grown up in a world where life was well ordered, where roots ran deep and values stood clear – and the whole town helped reinforce good morals and stable lifestyles. Then the communities got linked by urban sprawl; Mom and Dad soon found themselves rolling down the freeways in big cosmopolitan cities, where they are now raising their children – children born far from the stable roots and sterling values of the parents.

David and Absalom were like this. David was born to the Bethlehem pasture. His roots ran deeply through the soil around Bethlehem and into the God of his fathers. He sang the Hebrews songs and prized the ancient values. Even when David was catapulted from the back pasture to the front page, firm values shaped his life. When he wandered, as he often did, he knew his roots and he was always drawn back.

David’s son Absalom, however, was born in a palace. He didn’t know his father’s roots. David, in a world packed with pressure and action, did not take time to help his son find the ancient Hebrew ways. No invisible infrastructure held Absalom’s life stable. As a result, David and Absalom seemed to live on different planets. The tragic result is known to the ages.

A family in the fast lane.

Reaping the whirlwind.

After his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of his friend Uriah, David repented and God forgave him. However, the consequences of sin often continue long after forgiveness ... “Sowing to the wind. Reaping the whirlwind.” Fathers and sons. Roots and freeways. David and Absalom. David sowed the wind and in his family, he reaped the whirlwind.

First, rape. Amnon, son of David, fell in lust with his half sister Tamar. When Amnon feigned illness, David sent word to Tamar to “go to the house of your brother Amnon and prepare some food for him.”

Poor David, how out of touch he was. When Tamar arrived with the food, Amnon raped her, sent Tamar out and bolted the door.

David was furious. So, David, you are only furious? But what else could David do? Where did Amnon get that look in his eye? Could he have been imitating the look in his father's eye? How does David punish a boy for taking a page out of Daddy's own book?

Absalom was furious too, but Absalom's fury had teeth in it. For two years his hatred festered and watched for an opportune moment. Then rape begat revenge. Absalom casually invited David to come along on a family sheep-shearing. David declined, blind to his son's murderous intentions. So the boys went without their dad. Meanwhile, Absalom gathered his men and instructed them in treachery. "We will get Amnon drunk."

Oh, David, where have we heard this before? Who got Uriah drunk?

"When he is drunk," plotted Absalom, "fall on him and kill him." Deja vu! Another page from Daddy's bloody book!

Murder. Brother against brother. Poor David. How he grieved. He was paralyzed by his own guilt. Yes, David was "grieved." That's all. Big deal.

Absalom hid in Geshur with his grandfather for three years, during which time David made no attempt to bring his son home. Finally, after those three years, David brought Absalom back to Jerusalem, but, incredibly, even then David said, "He must go to his own house" (2 Samuel 14:24). So for two more years Absalom did not see his father's face.

The opposite of love is not hatred; it is indifference. Whether he meant to or not, David was communicating the opposite of love for Absalom.

True, all this time David was crying over his son, but Absalom didn't see his father's tears. David's pride stood in the way. Or was it insecurity? What convoluted thoughts tortured David's mind?

Through all this, Absalom wanted to be with his father. Did he have mixed feelings, too? What son really wants to be rejected by his own dad? Absalom pleaded with Joab, "Help me get an audience with my father." When Joab ignored the appeal, Absalom set Joab's field on fire.

Kids still do this. When children are ignored too long by parents, they will "set some fields on fire." The fire may fall in a variety of ways. I sat on the back porch of a Tennessee farmhouse as a sweet little girl told me she was trying to get pregnant to gain her parents' attention. She set the fields on fire.

Other kids try booze or drugs, or they even attempt suicide, desperately calling for a relationship with distanced parents. Yet like Absalom, they are often left out of the parents' emotional loop. A father may even be with his children for years physically without the children ever really seeing his face – only the reflection of it in the mirror of the TV set.

According to *U.S. News & World Report*, 53 percent of teenagers report spending less than 30 minutes a day with their fathers. Twenty-five percent do not discuss their daily activities with their parents. Fifty percent had not gotten a hug or kiss. Fifty-four percent had not heard the words, “I love you.”

Rape! Revenge! Revolt! David’s sky continued to rain fallout from his horrendous sins. Violence escalated as Absalom actually plotted the death of his own father. He cleverly won the hearts of the people by sitting at the gates, shaking hands, kissing babies, making lavish “campaign promises,” and grabbing the power. Finally, Absalom openly and decisively moved to kill David and seize Dad’s throne.

Terrifying news reached David’s ears: “The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom” (2 Samuel 15:13). David fled from his own son.

Child revolt now has the parent on the run.

Beecher and Beecher, in their book *Parents on the Run* suggest that “the adult-centered home of yesteryear made parents masters and children slaves. The child-centered home of today, however, has made the parents the slaves and the children the masters.”

Master. Slave. Absalom became both.

A father’s sins had led to rape, then revenge, revolt, and even repulsiveness.

Absalom pitched a tent on the palace roof and had sexual intercourse with his father’s wives “in the sight of all Israel.” In the ancient world, the conqueror often ravaged the wives of the conquered to state total domination. This accounts in part for Absalom’s repulsive actions, but he added a touch of eloquent mockery. “The roof” was where David had lusted after Bathsheba and fetched her for adultery; so, on “the roof” Absalom tore another dreadful page from the father’s book!

As David fled Jerusalem, “the whole countryside wept aloud” (2 Samuel 15:23). David, with his eyes scarcely visible under the cloak thrown over his bowed head, stumbled blindly up the steep, the whiteness of his bared feet splotched with blood, his body convulsed in sobs, “weeping as he went” (v. 30).

The people around him were wailing, too, but for different reasons. The people wept over a lost kingdom – David cried over a lost boy.

David’s family was running completely out of control in the fast lane.

In the systems school of family therapy, researchers talk of “genograms,” which trace patterns within family systems from generation to generation. The foibles of the parents repeat themselves in the children with alarming regularity. This certainly rang true for David.

From rape and revenge through revolt to repulsiveness. All led to enormous regrets. Down they go. Families in the fast lane. Absalom attacked David and his armies. David sent his troops out to repel the attack, but with strange orders. As the lines of fierce armed men marched out the gates of Mahanaim, I can see David grab the arm and look into the eyes of each officer pleading, "Be careful for my son. Win the battle, but please be careful. He is my boy."

But soldiers are not trained to be careful. Absalom fled defeated that day, and a low-hanging limb snagged his hair. Joab ruthlessly ran him through with darts, and Absalom died on the spot. Messengers ran to David and bluntly reported, "I wish all of your enemies were as dead as Absalom."

Poor David. Disaster in the fast lane. Stumbling up the stairs under the weight of his sorrow. Agony. Tears. Grief over his dead son. But even more grief over the regrets of a guilty father. "Oh, my son Absalom. If only I had died instead of you!" (2 Samuel 18:33).

We reluctantly leave the scene for now, to backtrack and review: How did David get here? We must know so we don't wind up here ourselves.

Ramp to the Fast Lane

David's sad end is likely not attributable to one sin alone but to the style of his life once he entered the fast lane.

To begin with, David *was out of sight*. he was seldom at home. Too many battles. Too many responsibilities. Too many wives. Too many children. How could intimacy flourish?

Too many soldiers to keep track of, too many construction projects, too much money to count. Too many preoccupations. David was the classic absentee father.

In one form or another it occurs in families of many businessmen, athletes, other celebrities, politicians, and even preachers. Reaping the whirlwind. Absentee father. Fast lane. Out of sight. No time right now. Someone else will nurture "roots." The Sunday school teacher. The youth minister.

"What's that? Of course, I love you! Why else would I have given you that BMW? I am eager to send you to the best schools; nothing is too good for you. Be an achiever, boy, a winner."

Dad is anchored by his roots, but the son's roots end at the hard surface of the freeway, because Dad is out of sight.

David didn't know his boys. When a father is out of sight, inevitably he will *drift out of touch*. he didn't know Amnon. He didn't seem to recognize in Amnon's eye the lustful look, which had once been his own. He was out of touch with Absalom, too, oblivious to the murderous expression on his face. For two years Absalom plotted revenge against his brother right under David's nose. Not only was David out of touch by being out of sight, but he also was out of touch emotionally. Absalom, the wayward son, was allowed to live in the same town with his

father for years but not allowed to see his father's face. How out of touch! Tears over his stranger-son. Pride. Insecurity. Confusion. Emotional distance.

For all their geographic proximity, too many dads are out of touch with their children.

David was not only out of sight and out of touch, but he was also *way out of line*. Treacherous murder to cover adultery. David was big-time, heavy-duty out of line.

Kids suffer when parents are out of line. The tragic reality is that, even though kids may be angry at their parents' sins, they often imitate with a vengeance the very patterns they have hated in their parents, whether it be workaholicism, alcoholism, affairs, or divorce.

My secretary nervously interrupted a "no-phone-calls-accepted-hour." "You have got to take this one," she said. The caller instantly grabbed my attention. "Sir," he mumbled. "would you please pray with me? I am waiting for my mother and her boyfriend to come home. When they walk through the door, I am going to blow them away with this loaded rifle. Then I will blow myself away. Please pray for me. They are due any minute."

After a long, tense conversation I was able to persuade the young man that I should come to his house and pray with him.

When I walked in his door he was indeed clutching a loaded and cocked 30.06 in his crippled hand. As he tried to shake hands with me, he dragged its muzzle across my belt buckle. In an agitated and drug-addled state of mind, he poured out his story, which included child abuse from the time of his earliest memory. His mother had lived with an endless series of boyfriends. Once he remembered being locked for days in a travel trailer. His mother and friend would come around occasionally to throw food on the ground at his feet and, when he reached for it, they would kick it away from him and laugh.

Now, at age 21, he had begun to treat his girlfriend like his mother had treated him. His mother had reported him, and she was committing him for psychiatric care. In his confused and pent-up rage, he vowed to kill them all.

Not all stories are this extreme, of course. However, some dark and dreadful time bombs tick in distanced and disillusioned young hearts, which roll down freeways in fancy automobiles.

Out of sight. Out of touch. Out of line. This left David completely *out of control*. When his daughter, Tamar, was raped by her brother, David was merely grieved. When Absalom's hands shed Amnon's blood, David was angry. Grieved and angry! But he did nothing! What is a father to do when paralyzed by guilt? How do you punish your sons for copying pages from your own book?

Although David was out of control, he was *not out of time*. True, some of David's sons were dead, but he still had time to zero in on Solomon. David was not beyond the circle of God's love. Solomon at this time was not a junior high preteen. He was a man with a family and in line for the throne.

Even so, David had not taken his hands off Solomon's heart – nor had God taken his hands off David.

David charged Solomon: “And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9-10).

Too bad David hadn't said these things to Amnon and Absalom!

By this time, though, deep grief had taught him high values. With Solomon, David put some roots straight down through the hard surface of the fast lane.

About the time I hit my mid-forties, our children began to marry and leave us. I dreaded the rapidly approaching day when Chris, our youngest son, would leave home. Everything important to me was slipping into the past. The future seemed to have vaporized. I definitely identified with Ralph Cushman when he wrote:

*I lay awake last night.
You ask me why? And I can't say exactly,
only I have lost my boy.
And you won't understand, unless you
too have lost a pal,
a boy who walked with you the fields,
who jumped with you the brook, and
together with you climbed the trees.
You taught him all the wonders of the skies
And of your hopes for him.
And then one day you came to realize,
that you had lost your boy.
How did I lose him?
Ah, there is the rub.
I lost him just the way my old Dad lost me,
there came a girl and I need say no more.
But just the same I've lost my boy.*

*I lay awake last night.
I've lost my pal
And now I walk the field alone.
Alone I walk the road beside the brook.
And everywhere I see his tracks.
Marks of him.
But he is gone.
I think that somewhere in the great
beyond there must be a place
where Dads find once again their pals,
and yet I don't quite understand how*

*such a thing could be
Life is so strange.*

Me, too, Ralph. Me too. But

Then our grandchildren came along. Hallelujah! Suddenly, everything important in life shifted to the future. I am more eager than ever to teach the ways of God to my sons and daughters and their children. Or to your grandkids. Or someone else's. Carolyn and I grandparent dozens of ids besides our own.

We learned this from David.

Things may not have gone well in your family. Possibly you have been out of sight, out of touch, out of control; but you are not out of time. Maybe it is not too late.

Drop this magazine. Get up and make some phone calls. Circle around you what family you can. Sit down and say, "I know now that in many ways I have failed you. But could our family have a new start? We can still change the way we live. Let's be family: father, mother, children and grandchildren for the future generations."

While we are still in the mood for poetry, let's heare one more:

*An old man, traveling a lone highwya,
Came at evening cold and gray
To a chasm vast and deep and wide
That barred his way at eventide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
That turbid stream held no fear for him.
But he turned, when safe on the other side,
And builded a bridge to span the tid.
"Good friend," said a fellow-traveler near,
"You're wasting your time in building here.
You never again will pass this way;
Your journey is over at close of day.*

*"You've crossed your chasm deep and wide.
Why build this bridge at eventide?"
The traveler lifted his old, gray head.
"Good friend, on the way I've come," he said,
"There follows on my path today
A youth who, too, must pass this way.
This stream, which was but naught to me,
To that fair-haired lad may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim.
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."*

Here the familiar poem ends – but it didn't say enough to suit me. Our children grow up in the fast lane where roots are not automatically stimulated and where the challenges to their spiritual development are vastly different from our experiences. So I have taken the liberty to scratch a few lines of my own to complete the poem for our times:

*When the youth arrived at the chasm wide,
He scorned the bridge which spanned the tide.
“That bridge is obsolete to me,
I have strength to leap the stream, you see.
But from my vantage point,” he said,
“I can see that an ocean lies ahead
Which never presented its challenge to you.
So how can you help me see it through?”
The old man listened, then nodded his head.
“You have taught me a lesson today,” he said.
Then traveler and youth worked side by side,
Ripped planks from the bridge which spanned the tide,
And from these timbers tried and true,
They fashioned a vessel to sail the blue.
Then, driven by winds from the heavens above,
They challenged the ocean together in love.*

Excerpts from *The Shepherd's Song*, Howard Publishing Company

The Example of Fatherhood

by Kim Seidman

November – December, 1997

I have a friend whose father is a workaholic. He puts in 65 to 70 hour weeks at the office, determined to provide for his children all the things he never had. In his relentless pursuit of financial success, he never has any time to spend with his son. He could not attend any of his high school soccer games, because they were always in the afternoons when he had to work, or Saturday mornings when he was in meetings. He would get home late at night, too tired to talk, and leave before breakfast. His son brought home athletic trophies, but they went unapplauded, just as all the dad's hard work and faithfulness in providing went unacknowledged. The silence between them grew and divided them as time passed, and they had less and less to talk about. He left home and came to college without ever hearing or speaking the words, "I love you."

Another friend was on my basketball team in high school. Her father had been a professional baseball player, and he had wanted his only child to be a boy, so he could teach him the game. She knew she could never be the son he wanted, but she tried to earn his love and approval by excelling in both academics and athletics. When he failed to acknowledge her achievements, she turned to her high school dates to gain attention and quickly developed a sexually promiscuous reputation.

I also know a man who is an alcoholic, like his father before him. When he is sober, he is a responsible and supportive dad, but the more he drinks, the quicker his temper flares. Several times I remember his young boy coming to church with bruises that were too extensive and dark to have come from "falling out of bed."

I went to school with a woman who is a psychology student, intending to earn a Ph.D. and begin her own therapy practice, specializing in adults who were sexually abused as children. She is not a Christian, and it did not take me long to figure out why. Her parents have been missionaries in Africa for over 20 years, so she had spent her life there until coming to college in the States. Her father had preached countless sermons, helped to establish three churches, and baptized over 300 converts; but the same man would come home at night, enter his daughter's room, and molest her. She has not stepped inside a church building since she left Africa.

Each of these individuals lacked close and healthy relationships with their earthly fathers. How would their perceptions of God be different if they had grown up with godly fathers?

Fatherhood possesses an inherent power which is only enhanced by the biblical metaphor of God as heavenly father. Metaphors are images that relate something familiar to something unfamiliar, so it is no surprise that "adolescents have trouble differentiating God relationally from their earthly dad. Their image of their fathers influenced their image of God."¹ Because God chose the father's intimate, loving relationship with his children to represent his own infinite love for his creation, the role of the Christian father in adolescent spiritual formation is to emulate the heavenly father. As much as humanly possible, a father must seek to embody the paternal

qualities of God, so that his children may gain accurate insight into the father heart of God. The following acronym defines a structure which aids in exploring the role of the father in adolescent faith development. A father is called to be:

Faithful, to
Affirm, to
Teach, to
Hold, to
Empathize, to
Remember.

To Be Faithful

A father cannot pass along to his children something he does not possess²

First and foremost, a father is called to be faithful: to God, to his wife, and to his children. His faithfulness to God means that he will worship no idols, not “the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, or the pride in riches” (1 John 2:16). As the spiritual head of the family, should the father choose to walk in darkness, all his household will suffer the consequences of his faithlessness.

A father’s relationship with God provides a spiritual foundation for his children to build their own faith. The father who spends time in the presence of the Lord will refuse to measure his masculinity according to the worldly standards of prestige and wealth, because godly wisdom will teach him that no amount of success outside the home will compensate for failure within the home.³ The father who kneels before God will never forget where the source of his strength lies. A father who is faithful will pursue God with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength, and his life in God will empower him to fulfill his role in the home.

A father must be faithful to his wife. If he is not fulfilling his role as a husband, he is failing to model Christ’s love for the church, and when this love is not demonstrated in the home, young people become emotionally crippled. “The most important thing a dad can do for his children is love their mother,”⁴ because their marital satisfaction determines the peace and security of the home. “If the atmosphere of the marriage is distrust and anger, then that mood will permeate the entire family. If the attitude is non-communication, the children will get used to silence or foreboding. On the other hand, if the marriage is love, the whole family will absorb that love.”⁵ When the marriage is unhealthy, the children’s sense of security is undermined. “Through union with a woman, children are born. Through communion with the same woman, secure and confident children are born.”⁶

A young man learns how to treat women and his future wife by watching how his dad treats his mom: Does he respect her? Does he display his love and affection for her? How does he talk about her when she is not around? Does he look at other women or indulge in pornography? Consciously and subconsciously, the son is learning what it means to be a husband by observing his father. A girl is also watching how her dad interacts with her mom, wondering if it is desirable to submit herself to a man in marriage: Would it be a lifelong blessing? Or a lifeterm

sentence? A girl's father is the first and most important male in her life, and she will form her ideas about a future husband based upon her own relationship with dad. She will expect her spouse to treat her as her father treated her. If the father is loving, nurturing, and affirming, she will anticipate the same from her husband, but if her dad is verbally, physically, or sexually abusive, she will tolerate that behavior also, because she knows nothing different.

A father is also called to be faithful to his children, making them a priority in the face of all the pressures the world places on him. If a dad fails to father, someone or something else will; the world is full of father substitutes.⁷ By consistently keeping his promises and being there for his family, a man attests to God's faithfulness and consistency – that God is and always will be there, especially in times of greatest need. Unconditional, eternal love reveals itself in faithfulness, and faithfulness over time breeds commitment, and commitment allows for a sense of security that is fertile ground for intimate relationships to develop.

To Affirm

*All kids growing up seek their father's affirmation. All.*⁸

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened, and God spoke, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Children look to their parents for identity. "Fathers who tell their kids, 'You are my children' give them an invaluable point of reference. Children then feel secure in exploring the world, because they always know where home is. They know where they belong ... making this claim communicates belongingness, acceptance and pride."⁹

Parents are the mirror by which children see themselves. Children with high self-esteem usually come from homes where they were loved and affirmed, while children with low or no self-confidence emerge from homes where little or no praise or love was expressed. So many suicidal teens see themselves as completely unlovable, because fathers did not communicate their love.

A father tends to affirm his children for external qualities, such as appearance and accomplishments, which perpetuates a cycle in which adolescents feel as though they must look a certain way or act in a worthy manner to gain attention and praise. Over time, this performance-based acceptance breeds resentment, because teens do not feel loved unconditionally and may even cease to believe this kind of love exists.

A parent can put a barrier between the young person and the kingdom of God with a negative, critical relationship. It is difficult for a teen to respond to the Gospel and its message of "I accept you for Jesus' sake, not because of your behavior" while the parent gives the exact opposite message. The teen needs to experience through his parents the same kind of total acceptance that the Bible says we have in God.¹⁰

Fathers should identify and commend character or spiritual fruit in children's lives, and praise them for who they are instead of what they do. Receiving unconditional acceptance and love from their earthly father enables teens to believe that their heavenly father also unconditionally accepts and loves them, thus freeing them from a lifetime of trying to earn his grace.

To Teach

*Teaching children a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is the most important task fathers have set before them.*¹¹

A father cannot overlook his role as a faith-former in his children; too many relinquish that responsibility to the church, unaware that they have more influence in their adolescent's spiritual development than any formally trained minister. Adolescents cannot be expected to take God seriously if their father does not. He is called not only to share the gospel, but also to live the cruciform life, because children are better witnesses than listeners. A father must demonstrate forgiveness, grace, and mercy for his children to believe that God extends forgiveness, grace, and mercy. He should model spiritual disciplines, such as meditating on the Word of God, praying and fasting. His silent example will normalize these practices and allow for a natural incorporation into his children's routines; they will take their spirituality seriously if their father does.

Another thing a dad should do is confess his mistakes and failures in parenting to his children. Admitting mistakes removes barriers and promotes sharing. Adolescents are old enough to recognize their dad is fallible, but if he is unwilling to remove that mask, that communicates deception, and they, too, will be reluctant to admit weakness and failure. By confessing sin and asking forgiveness, allowing his kids to see him as totally dependent on God, he renounces the myth of perfection and places them in the hands of their heavenly father. "Only by removing himself as God, can he give them to God."¹²

To Hold

*God became flesh for us to show the way to come in touch with God's love is the human way, in which the limited and partial affection that people give offers access to the unlimited and complete love of God, love that God has poured into the human heart.*¹³

Physical affection is vital to the adolescent. Many dads refrain from displaying affection with their teenagers, because their daughters are physically developing, and their sons are becoming independent men. Yet this is the time when warmth, tenderness, and touch are needed the most, because fathers play a very influential role in the development of their adolescents' sexual identity. Studies show that teenage girls with unaffectionate fathers are more prone to sexual promiscuity and tend to marry earlier while young women who continue to receive affection from their dads throughout adolescence have the physical closeness they need and are more patient in selecting a mate.¹⁴ Young men who are not affectionate with their fathers tend to be more physically aggressive and will have a difficult time demonstrating a love for their own children.

Teenagers need to be held by their dads. If a father's affection is not physically demonstrated, there is a tremendous breakdown in the feeling of love as a result, because his embrace communicates total acceptance. There is no substitute. When children are held, they feel safe, secure, and protected. As they mature spiritually, they will be better able to understand that God

holds them, and they are safe from the Evil One. They will know that resting in his arms is a haven, a place of comfort and security.

To Empathize

*Even a minor event in the life of a child is an event of that child's world and thus a world event.*¹⁵

Perhaps the most important thing a dad can do to maintain open communication is to empathize, that is, to put himself in his children's place in order to identify with their own personal struggles. Teens will cease communicating if they feel that they are not being taken seriously.

Harry Chapin wrote *The Cat's in the Cradle* in the '70s. The first couple of verses are about a boy growing up, desperately wanting to spend time with his dad, but he was always too busy, and they would have to get together later. The last verse fast forwarded several years and turned the tables, because, as the father grew older and finally had the time, he wanted to be with his son; but the son had become too busy. A father cannot truly know his kids without spending vast quantities of time with them. Time is the biggest pressure fathers face in raising teens. "For the father, it is a loss of intimacy and the satisfaction of really knowing his son or daughter. For the child whose father has been unavailable, the primary loss is generally a feeling of rejection that turns to anger ... the child's self-esteem also tends to suffer."¹ Kids just want to be with their dads. It is a God-given, inherent need.

Shakespeare wrote, "It is a wise father who knows his own child." The best way to know someone, to understand what they are thinking and feeling, is to listen. Fathers are often searching for solutions to problems, when their children just want to share their struggles. They want someone to know what they are thinking, what they are experiencing, without passing judgment. "Many teens dislikes, complaints and hurts cannot be handled on a purely rational level. Recognizing and dealing with their feelings, making them feel better about themselves and assured of love, is often what is needed."¹⁷ In a culture that generally disrespects adolescents, their idealism, their unanswerable and uncomfortable questions, teens desire to be heard and understood. Sometimes they are seeking answers, sometimes they are seeking empathy in quest of their own identity and faith.

To Remember

*Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.*¹⁸

A father's final role in adolescent spiritual formation is to remember his place. Ultimately these are God's children and not his; he is but a steward who has been entrusted for a brief time with human treasures, created in the image of God. His mission is to equip these young people for

service in the Kingdom. While they are in his care, he is appointed to oversee and actively participate in and contribute to their physical, social, mental, and spiritual development. When this task seems too overwhelming for anyone, he should remember that he is not alone; the community of faith surrounding him will help raise his children in the Lord. The gifts he lacks and the sum of his shortcomings and imperfections are not a curse, but rather a reminder that he is human, and God is the only perfect father.

Exodus talks about the sins of the fathers being passed on to the fourth and fifth generations. Family sins are not merely bad habits; they are deeply ingrained, unrighteous traits that must be brought to the cross of Christ and crucified. Only the washing of blood, only the gospel can free men to love their families enough to face their own pain in order to bring health into their homes.

Beautiful things can happen when a father and his child nurture their relationship as God envisioned and intended for their mutual blessing. My friend Caren has this kind of relationship with her dad. He is her best friend, but she never questions his authority. He is her hero, but she is aware of his humanity. He is her preacher, but she knows she does not have to be perfect. Her father took the time to develop an intimate relationship with her. She believes that his unconditional love for her is the impetus behind all of his actions. When she makes a mistake, he seeks understanding before he disciplines and is quick to forgive. When she talks, he is quick to listen. When she cries, he is quick to hold. Caren loves her dad. She sees in him an image of her heavenly father.

1 Ken R. Canfield, *The Seven Secrets of Effective Fathers* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992) 88.

2 Jay Kesler, ed. *Parents & Teenagers* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984) 97.

3 *Ibid.*, 95.

4 Thomas Hesburgh.

5 Brock Griffin, "Marriage and Fathering ... What Children Gain When You Love Their Mother," *Today's Father*, (National Center for Fathering, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 4).

6 Ken R. Canfield, *The Seven Secrets of Effective Fathers* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992) 117.

7 *Ibid.*, 35.

8 Dr. Frank Minirth and Dr. Brian Newman and Dr. Paul Warren, *The Father Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992) 196.

9 Ken R. Canfield, *The Seven Secrets of Effective Fathers* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992) 32-33.

10 Jay Kesler, ed. *Parents & Teenagers* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984) 140.

11 Greg Johnson and Mike Yorkey, "*Daddy's Home*" (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992).

12 Dr. Frank Minirth and Dr. Brian Newman and Dr. Paul Warren, *The Father Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992) 192.

13 Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

14 Steve Farrar, *Point Man* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1990).

15 Gaston Bachelard, as quoted in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. By Angela Partington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

16 Jay Kesler, *Parents & Teenagers* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984) 105.

17 *Ibid.*, 134.

18 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: A. Knopf, Inc. 1951), 18, 19.

The Write Side: Story and Truth (Part 2)

(part 2 of a 2-part essay on story and the transmission of faith)

by Thom Lemmons

November – December, 1997

Previously, I discussed the place of story as a vehicle for the transmission of religious and spiritual truth. Now I turn to the next question: what value, if any, is therein the creation of extra-biblical stories; either about biblical people and events or about non-biblical people governed (or, in some cases, refusing to be governed) by biblical principles? is there a place for Christian fiction? Or, to use phraseology I find more palatable, is there a place for fiction written by Christians? And if there is such a place, where is it, and would anyone else want to go there? As you may recall from the last discussion, there is not universal agreement, even within the Christian book-selling industry, that fiction is useful for communicating truth. Indeed, some regard the phrase “biblical fiction” as a rather unfortunate oxymoron.

Remember, though, that story is no stranger to religious purpose. Previously, we considered the use of story by both God’s prophets and Jesus Christ himself. Further, in the early fourteenth century Dante Alighieri published his *Divine Comedy*, a towering allegorical journey through Hell and Purgatory into Heaven, regarded by many literary scholars as the first novel. Three and a half centuries later, John Bunyan composed *The Pilgrim’s Progress* while imprisoned for preaching without a license. Fyodor Dostoevsky, a devout Russian believer for the latter nineteenth century, produced *Crime and Punishment* and, perhaps more to the present point, *The Brothers Karamazov*, two novels that deal with the problem of good and evil from a frankly Christian perspective. And others could be named who have produced great literature informed and shaped by eternal truth.

But in the late twentieth century we don’t hear much about the Christian literary artist. And, in all fairness, the late twentieth century is not entirely to blame. While it is true that most literature nowadays could hardly be called Christian, it might also be suggested that much Christian writing could hardly be called literature. With certain notable exceptions, much of the material that comes from evangelical Christian publishing houses contains wonderful theology clothed in mediocre literary raiment.

I believe this is a shame. Why? Partly because, as I have stated above, humans have always had an insatiable need for stories. if they can’t get good ones, they will listen to bad ones. This has never been more true than in our time. W. Fred Graham makes the following observations on the imaginative poverty of modern life: “We inhabit a flat world where discoveries of unimaginable glories and mysteries in [celestial] space are received with sullen inattention because experienced life is ‘just one damned thing after another’ The place to start ... is not with argument but with stories that startle the imagination or whet the appetite for mystery.”

I include Mr. Graham’s expletive not to shock, but to make an important point. Many people’s lives are indeed “one damned thing after another” – with nothing to exalt, nothing of grace or

salvation, nothing, in short, to lift their eyes above the doomed, poverty-stricken material horizon; nothing to challenge the ultimately damned view that reality consists solely of what we can see, feel, buy, sign a contract for, or analyze in a laboratory. It is story, Graham tells us, which has the power to remind us that we were meant for bigger and better things.

In this bleak, mystery-starved landscape, who better than the Christian novelist can remind us that there are things beyond our experience which can never be explained and are best seen through the eyes of faith? Who should know better than the Christian novelist that mystery is alive and well and living in any human who has eyes to see and ears to hear? Surely those of us who have heard the one story in all human history that must be heard ought to be about the business of spreading the word. And in a story-starved culture such as ours, why shouldn't the word go out in the form of literature which embodies the central message of the Christian faith; the message that hope is not dead; that hope emerged alive from a tomb in Palestine almost two thousand years ago. Our culture has heard plenty of hopelessness. Isn't it about time that it once again heard the Good News?

What should such Christian fiction be like? To whom should it be addressed, and in what language? One difficulty I have with the current state of the Christian fiction market is that it seems to expect plot lines, characters and dialogue drawn from experiences comfortable to church insiders. But are those the folks we're really trying to reach? Why would an unchurched seeker want to read a story about people who speak in evangelical Christian jargon and operate from a set of assumptions which he doesn't share? I long for the day when Christian writers can stop talking to each other all the time, and start talking to the people who need to hear the message. It's the sick, not the well, who need the Physician, and if we know the Doctor's address, we need to give it to the folks who are ailing.

Another way of making the point: if someone has to go into a Christian bookstore to buy my books, I'm probably missing the audience that most needs to hear what I've got to say. Those who already know where to look for the answers may not need my message as much as those who browse the philosophy and personal improvement sections at Waldenbooks or Borders. Unless my craftsmanship can stand on its own in that marketplace, I haven't employed my talent in the most effective way.

To communicate with the outsider in his own language, am I suggesting that we put in all the smut and filth that the world expects of its fiction? Not all. But the quality of the work, its merit as story and entertainment, must be of the very highest caliber. It must accurately report on the human condition from a point of view firmly grounded in Christian beliefs and assumptions. Only by doing so can the Christian fiction writer make any legitimate claim to have a message worth hearing. The light of good theology is necessary, but not enough. The salt of uncompromising literary craftsmanship is also needed. When these two ingredients are present, God will be glorified and lives will be changed.

In this connection, I'm reminded of a statement attributed to Martin Luther. Luther was a great composer of hymn lyrics, and he would often set his verses to the popular tunes of the day, scandalizing many in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Luther's rationale was simple. "Why should

the devil get to use all the good tunes?” he is supposed to have said. It’s interesting that such a controversy predated the movie *Sister Act* by almost five hundred years.

Some in the Christian publishing industry maintain that there are “gatekeepers” in the secular publishing establishment who will bar the way for any God-affirming material to enter the larger literary marketplace. I wouldn’t deny that such conditions exist, but I would make the additional observation that the writings of C.S. Lewis, Stephen Lawhead, Madeleine L’Engle and Walter Wangerin, among others, have managed – at various times – to find secure places on the pages of the Book-of-the-Month and Barnes & Noble catalogs. These authors may have to share space with the latest novel about the gay experience or the goddess movement, but they are there, all the same, and their presence creates the possibility for the secular reader to be exposed to the work of Christians who are consummate literary artists.

And so, I mistrust books in which all the characters come to a saving knowledge of Jesus and all the questions are answered by the close of the final chapter. The unchurched reader knows real life doesn’t work that way. The Christian life is one of struggle and unanswered questions – even though we know, as the unbeliever does not, that God grants strength for the struggle and peace in the midst of perplexity.

You see, I don’t believe its necessary or advisable to sugar-coat the call of faith. The task of the Christian novelist is not to propagandize for Christ – he doesn’t need propaganda. The task of the Christian novelist is to hold up a mirror to the darkness of human experience in a way that reflects the only ray of hope any of us have – the saving knowledge of Jesus. We shouldn’t try to make life prettier than it is. We should try instead to present a faint glimpse of God just as he is, and convince the searcher that she is welcomed by that God, just as she is.

Is it possible to present the entire gospel story in a single book and still maintain credibility for the unchurched reader? Probably not. But if the Christian literary artist can, by means of a well-told tale, nudge the unchurched reader in the direction of hope, or honesty, or faith in the unseen, or fidelity to family, his labor will not have been in vain. I think we need to honor the goal of “speaking a good word for Jesus.” My audience may not sit still for the entire sermon, but if they hear a good word or two here and there, and if my skill as a storyteller is adequate, and if they are even slightly intrigued by the implicit message which underlies the story, and if the Lord is preparing a seedbed for such tiny mustard seeds as I may be able to scatter, then who can say what the eventual result may be?

I suppose it’s somewhat inevitable that an essay like this should end with a story. Actually, this is the story behind a body of stories. You’re probably familiar with tales like *Sinbad the sailor* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. And unless you’ve been under a rock for the past few years, you’ve heard of Aladdin and his magic lamp. All these tales come from a group of stories known in Arabic as *Alef Laillah – the Arabian Nights*. Legend has it that, once upon a time, a certain cruel caliph would wed a new wife each day, only to have her put to death the following morning. That is, until he met Scheherazade.

Scheherazade was not only beautiful she was also quick-witted, resourceful, and a gifted storyteller. She, of course, knew of the caliph’s marital dysfunction, and so had concocted a plan.

On their wedding night, she began telling a story to the caliph. using all her skill and charm, she wove a tale of such beauty and wonder that the caliph was quickly enchanted. And then, at the crucial point in the story, Scheherazade played her trump card. She informed the caliph that she would conclude the story – on the following night. I suppose you could call it the first mini-series.

Well, what's the good of being supreme ruler if you can't bend the rules a little, once in a while? The caliph, of course, had to hear the rest of the story, so he had to allow Scheherazade to live long enough to finish. Lo and behold, she not only finished the story the next night, but began another even more entrancing than the first, with the same tantalizing promise as before. Once again, the caliph had no choice but to allow her to live another 24 hours.

And so it went, night after night, for almost three years – for a thousand-and-one nights, to be exact. And you already know the final result. in the end, the caliph was so enchanted by Scheherazade herself, by the marvelous mind that could endlessly spin such perfect, entralling tales, that he renounced his cruelty and proclaimed her as his one true love from that day forward.

If a Christian analogy can be drawn from a Muslim legend, I would say Scheherazade's experience proves that story can be a vehicle of salvation. her stories not only saved Scheherazade from the caliph's cruelty, but they also produced a turnabout in the heart of the caliph.

In much the same way, the Christian literary artist can provide a medium of transformation for the modern secular reader. Through our stories, we can give hopeless humanity a reason for the hope that lies within us. Our stories can become salt and light in a dark and tasteless world. The task is by no means easy or sure of success, but our times demand the effort

Transferring the Life

by Brent Abney

November – December, 1997

I was in great spirits as I hopped into the front seat of our beautiful, red and white, '67 Plymouth VIP. The windows were down, the air was cool, and the expectation of a two-hour adventure with my dad was almost as good as it got.

We were going to my grandparents' house to meet up with the rest of my family. I had stayed behind to ride with my dad after he got off work. I was ready. I was excited. I had even packed us both a snack. I knew he'd really like that. My expectation was so intense that I was bouncing up and down in my seat as we pulled out of the driveway and began our drive into the setting sun.

I immediately began to pepper my father with meaningless questions and incoherent stories. I couldn't help it. I was just so excited to be with him, alone. He was a special dad, and even at a mere seven years of age, I sensed his uniqueness and loved him beyond words. He loved me too. Evidenced by the fact that he oohed and aaahed at all my trivial stories and boastings. Boy, I liked him.

As we exited greater Atlanta, we began clicking along the concrete, two lane highway that connected our hometown to the State of Alabama. The road was crowded by steep, muddy banks and tall pine trees and, as the twilight set in, the combination created an eerie channel to drive through. I scooted closer to my dad. He responded by turning on the radio and honking the horn to the beat of the music. This lightened me up considerably. Then unexpectedly, he flipped off the headlights and we whisked through the channel as if we were a submarine in the great dark deep. "Stop it!" I screamed, and Dad flipped on the lights like it had been an accident. We both laughed and laughed.

Eventually, things began to quiet down. My stories got slower and even more incoherent as we neared our destination and my bedtime. I was yawning. But just before I closed my eyes for good, my dad's voice changed tone and he said, "Brent, I want to tell you a story now."

I felt the privilege of the moment. My father, arguably the greatest story-teller that had ever lived, was about to bless me with another tale. I put my head on his lap, looked up, and waited for the blessing.

With my body comfortably situated, the resonance of tires clicking on the cement highway was peaceful and relaxing. All was right in the world.

"Son," he began, "when you were four years old, and your sister Danna was eight, and Terri was seven, they found tumors in my chest. Now, son, that was 1970, and tumors meant cancer, and cancer meant death. I was scared, son."

I was too, all of a sudden. I listened on with all my heart. “I made a vow to God right then and there, son; I said to God, ‘God, just give me enough years to help my children love you with all their heart, soul, mind and strength.’ I made that vow, son. My part is to teach you.”

For the first time all night it was silent in the car. We didn’t speak again until we arrived and waved hello to the grandparents. Something significant had taken place in that car, and though I didn’t understand just what, I locked the memory of that conversation away in my memory vault. And life went on.

Eighteen years later the tumors were back, and so was the memory. Dad and I were huffing and puffing our way up a “bald” mountain midway between Knoxville, Tennessee and Asheville, North Carolina. My parents lived just outside of Asheville at the time, and the outing was planned in advance by my father. Dad was leaning on me heavily as we walked. The tumors were squeezing his breath from him. We would take a few steps up the trail, stop, take a few more and stop again. Traveling in this manner, it took over an hour to cover a distance that either one of us could do, when healthy, in less than 15 minutes.

The place is called Max’s Patch. From the pinnacle, it affords a view of six states. It is treeless and covered with picture postcard wildflowers. It also hosts a beautiful segment of the Appalachian Trail. The trail is marked with shoulder-high cedar posts. One of those cedar posts marked the highest point on the mountain, and reaching it became our joint goal.

Although neither of us said it aloud, reaching that post became symbolic and important. When we made it there, my father dropped to his knees, and I spread out a blanket for him to lay on and rest. I then unpacked the snacks I had brought for both of us, and after catching his breath my dad began to eat. I stood while he ate and used my pocketknife to carve an exclamation point in the cedar marker. I asked him to help me carve the dot. The cedar post ceremony was symbolic of our joint conquest of the mountain, and the hope of beating the cancer.

We sat and enjoyed the scenery for a long time. I urged him to retell the stories that had enriched and enchanted my world as a child. I knew my request was emotional, but graciously he obliged. We faced different directions while he spoke, neither feeling strong enough to deal with the tears from the other. When I felt I had a firm grasp on the stories, I thanked him. For those bedtime tales would be my most treasured inheritance.

Dad quickly turned the discussion to serious matters. “Son, I’ve loved you since before you were born.” And with that opening, he began to tell me every instance he could recall that had made him proud of me. He canvassed my entire life. I was astonished at his memory. Next, he went on to discuss his love for my mother. He did the same for each of my two sisters. When he was finished, I had no doubt of his love for his family.

He immediately followed those statements with words of encouragement. he said, “I think I have done well in these aspects of my life, son,” and he listed a few of his best qualities. “Please try to emulate me in these areas.” And then his demeanor changed and he looked at me intensely, and gave me this stern spiritual warning. “Son, these are the areas in which I have weaknesses. you

mind yourself – you be careful, or you will inherit them without realizing where they came from.” The list was frank and revealing.

As he finished, I knew what Dad had been doing. He was passing the baton. Saying goodbye. Transferring the life. I knew it and it hurt, but I tried not to let my emotion show. Instead, I looked him in the eyes and said in my firmest and most respectful voice, “Yes, Sir.”

With that out of the way my dad stood up and lifted his shirt. There under his arm, where it had been smooth the very night before was a lump the size of an egg. When I saw that cancer under his skin I lost all composure. I wheeled around spread my arms wide, and begged God to save his life. I yelled into the clouds, with what I have often imagined was Elijah’s posture, and petitioned God over and over in King James English – desperately wanting to be taken seriously. Quickly I then turned back to him – he was still holding his shirt up – and asked his permission to put my hands on the tumor. He nodded, and I prayed like a faith healer. My sobs were drowning out my words. I prayed as hard and with as much faith as I have every mustered in my life. My dad just hugged me. We stood on the mountain and embraced each other for a long, long time.

That was the last time I ever saw my dad alive. I certainly still miss him. It has been six years now. But I knew what was happening on the mountain, and the chance to say good-bye was accepted with indescribable gratitude. He transferred life to me up there. But not just there. he had been transferring “the Life” to me for over 18 years. He had kept his vow, and God had kept his.

Today I am a missionary in Uganda, East Africa. Regularly, I get a chance to sit on the ledges of cool, green Ugandan mountainsides with close Ugandan friends and disciples. What a blessing it is to tell them of a Father in Heaven who loved his children so much as to transfer “the Life” to them.

Even more exhilarating though, is watching my two young sons grow, laugh, and play. They don’t understand it yet, but their father has made a vow to God. A vow that is going to be kept. And “the Life” will be transferred again.

The Write Side: Mountain of Praise

by Jeff Nelson

November – December, 1997

What a mountain!
There is no other like this one.
This mountain once had a very noble purpose.
This mountain literally was made out of a mole hill.

When the earth was formed, the Creator blew life into this great ball of matter.
The earth understood its purpose: to praise the Creator.
After the ball was made many inhabitants were created.
As each being was given life it began praising the Creator.
Plants groomed themselves with the finest green they could produce.
Trees stood proud and tall and clapped their hands.
The sun rose at its conception so pleased to offer beams of light.
The face of the moon was all smiles.
Cheery stars twinkled in agreement with the Creator that this was good.
Water creatures danced and whirled as they explored their new world.
Birds sang their praises in the sweetest songs.
Livestock breathed fresh air and then replenished the air with a harmony of sound.
Soon there was a concert of moos, quacks, chirps, and ribbets.
Wild animals raced from one end of the planet to the other in search of the one who had made them all.
Man stood amazed in the presence of the Creator, taking it all in.
The creation was in love with the Creator.
And the Creator was in love with the creation.
All was well and the Creator delighted in the praise from his creation.

Then one day an intruder interrupted the symphony of praise.
The intruder had once been with the Creator but had turned away and began to coax others away.
The intruder seemed out of place in the creation but there was something alluring about his character.
With deceitful charm he could deflect praise intended for the Creator.
He planted seeds of discontent on the earth.
He convinced man that he could find more happiness on his own than with the Creator.
He told man that he could be as wise as the Creator if he would seek praise for himself.
If praise was so rewarding why should the Creator have it all?
Man became jealous of the praise given to the Creator.
Man began to praise himself and liked the feeling of being in control.
The trees noticed the new attitude and decided to join the challenge.
The animals didn't want to be left out of the action.
All the created beings turned their focus inward and soon were strutting around drawing attention to themselves.

Animals took each other on in boasting contests.
Plants adorned themselves for personal admiration.
The sun selfishly kept its rays and warmed only itself.
This felt so good ... for a while.

But soon anger and fighting broke out as one creature thought another was demanding a little too much praise.

No one wanted to give any praise.

They only wanted to receive.

And the Creator was completely left out of the picture.

Silence replaced former shouts of praise.

Something had gone terribly wrong.

What was it?

Praise had been choked from the voice of the creation.

And the brightly lit world of perfect harmony became dim and dismal.

Creation became disenchanted with its self-love.

Man walked with stooped shoulders.

The leaves on the plants lost their vibrancy.

The livestock became gaunt and labored just to breathe.

A miserable chill replaced the perfect atmosphere.

The gorgeous rainbow of color had been reduced to dingy brown.

Creation was powerless.

Fellow creatures reminisced about how wonderful their home had once been.

But they dared not hope this miserable state of praising self could be undone.

They assumed they had gone too far and the Creator had forgotten them.

The creation was sad.

The Creator was even sadder.

The earth observed this tragedy and wept at the absence of praise for the Creator.

“How could we forget our purpose?” the earth pondered.

“Has the Creator forgotten us?”

“No praise, no power?”

“The Creator must be praised!”

“I must do something and do it now!”

So the earth mustered all its strength and pushed itself upward toward the sky.

“If I can reach the Creator, he will see my praise.”

The earth moved higher and higher to awaken the Creator’s attention.

The earth tried with all its might, but could not reach the Creator’s domain.

A great chasm exposed the inside of the earth as the jagged edges resembling a sea of hands thrust themselves upward.

A spectacular mountain now replaced the area where once a small hill had existed.

It cried out in desperation, “I cannot reach the Creator. The rest of you must help.

“I beg of you, cattle! Fish, you must praise Him!”

“Heavenly lights, renew your glory!”

“Everyone, please give praise to the Creator!”

The trees were the first to respond.
“Will the joy return if we return our praise?”
The trees shook themselves and began clapping their hands excitedly.
They stood as all as they possibly could to break the barrier.
Would praise from wooden sticks reach the Creator?
They began shouting to the others.
“Wake up, rocks, before it’s too late!
“Praise the One who created you, caterpillars!
“Give him glory, morning glories!”
Birds offered a warbly rendition, “Praise be to the Creator of all things!”
Other beings rose to the occasion.
There was a great awakening across the earth.
In one chorus they begged their Creator to once again receive the praise of his creation.
“Return your favor upon us, O Great Creator!”
“Save us from ourselves!”
“Redeem us from our evil ways!”
“Strip from us our self-praise and receive what You alone deserve!”
Man wept and repented.
Creation poised, anxiously expecting a response from the Creator.

Gazing upward, all of creation watched as tiny particles began falling from the sky.
The powdery substance was cool to the touch and refreshing to the land.
Millions of flakes fell in waves of white ... beautiful shapes, extraordinary designs.
As the particles fell, the ideal atmosphere returned.
Tiny emblems of mercy began to collect on the branches of the trees.
The dry, brown earth was gracefully transformed into a palette of sparkling white.

Great joy and celebration erupted.
The Creator had heard!
Not only had he heard; the Creator himself reentered their existence and inhabited their praise.
He was never far; creation had just ignored him.
They faulted themselves for the separation but he was forgiving.
Their praise was now filled with redemptive gratitude.
Giving him praise was even more joyful than before.
He changed their ugly brown to pure white;
And made a promise that he would always see them covered in this perfect purity.
He did this for his pleasure, because he loved his creation.

This mountain still stands today as a monument to the Creator.
When creation ignored its first love, the earth evoked a great awakening.
A repentance so profound stirred the heart of the Creator. He came in a tangible way to reclaim their praise and offer them an eternity of his peace.
The trees on the mountain stand tall, continuously lift praise to the Creator.
And no matter what time of year, the mountain is always covered in a blanket of pure, white snow.

From Jeff Nelson: *These impressions were laid on my heart when Carol and I were sight-seeing in Canada. Not many sights have moved me like the spectacular Mount Rundle in Alberta. Mount Rundle looks like not other mountain I have seen. There is no one peak and the design on the side shows diagonal markings as if it once lay flat. I was told that the geographic explanation for the jagged edges across the top is a natural phenomenon. The temperature of the earth caused a contraction that split the earth and forced this section upward. It was named for Rev. Robert Rundle, a missionary who worked with the natives in the 1840s. I wasn't aware of this information while I was staring at this profound monument, having one of those "God" moments. maybe this is partially why I felt such a strong spiritual connection to this mountain. God chooses many places and venues to get our attention. He has lessons to teach us in the smallest activities. My advice to you: when you have the slightest sense God wants to preach you a sermon, by all means stop long enough to hear it.*

Walking

by Scott Brunner

November – December, 1997

My little girl, Claire, turned one the other day, and on the afternoon of her birthday, I stood in the doorway of her cheery little room and watched her napping. After 12 months, I still can't stop looking at her – and that's a good thing, too. If I were to blink, I might miss something significant.

In the past two weeks alone she learned “doggie” and “cow” and says “gotta go” when she wants to ride in the car; finally learned how to sit herself back down after pulling up to a standing position on the coffee table; and showed the first signs of understanding that Mommy will allow only so many Cheerios to hit the floor before Mommy takes them away.

Claire can almost walk now – almost – although she doesn't much care for it. She's more fleet of hand and knee than foot at this point, and whines a lot and tends to plop down on her fanny when we stand her upright.

But although the mechanics (and allure) of walking apparently elude her at this point, she's nevertheless very bright (of course). As of this week, we can identify almost 30 words she knows and can say, and if she's not yet ready for freshman comp or German lessons, she can nevertheless hold her own in a confab with a child twice her age.

She'll walk eventually. Me too, I hope. I've fallen on my fanny more than a few times in the past 12 months as I've tried to keep pace with her growth. Who'd have thought Daddy and baby would learn to walk together?

I expected there to be some rules, a manual or something. “Do these things and have a well-adjusted child, guaranteed” – something like that. Instead, I'm realizing that there's more to fathering than can be gleaned from last month's *Parenting Magazine*, or even from a talk with my dad. It's sorta like, well, learning to walk. External support will only get you so far, then it's up to you.

Mothers, I suspect, have known this for centuries, but then, they come equipped with maternal instinct, don't they? We daddies generally aren't so sophisticated – at least not at first. In the delivery room, a nurse thrusts a squalling bundle into our arms, and there we are, fathering for the video camera. Inside, though, we're as disoriented as the newborn, just as pitiful, but not nearly as cute. At that moment, the only thing we can do instinctively, as we try not to bobble the bundle, is worry about how we're gonna pay for braces and college tuition.

We spend the next 12 months or so flailing about – ruing the reproductive process that created our disequilibrium; wondering why Mommy is so grumpy; longing to do something spontaneous, like catch a movie. In the wee hours of the morning, to the tune of an infant's

wailing, we sort through our feelings of inadequacy, trying groggily to get a handle on exactly what being a Daddy is supposed to mean.

And then suddenly, we're crawling – I mean, the baby's crawling, and Daddy's doing okay, too. Curiously, having got past the initial trauma brought on by that dose of awesome responsibility in the delivery room, on-the-job training gives rise to our own visceral understanding of our role as fathers. Maybe a *paternal* instinct, albeit a late-blooming one, exists after all.

Listening to that emerging instinct requires every bit as much poise and balance and circumspection as Claire's reluctant first steps do. It means weighing my words and actions, knowing what to say and how to say it, when to hold and when to hush and how to fix things when you mess it all up. It often means foregoing the evening news in favor of tumbling on the floor. It means less me, more us.

Most of all, it means walking the talk. Newbie that I am, I'm just beginning to grapple with the unmitigated influence I apparently have as a father. Just beginning to fathom the power of my example. The other morning, as usual, I stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, readying myself for work, drying my hair. I looked down at my feet and there was Claire, on her knees, doing her hair, mimicking my every movement with imaginary hairbrush and dryer. "Daddy," she said, and patted the top of her head.

Sure, it was cute, but it also was epiphany. There, staring blankly into the bathroom mirror, I saw the real challenge of fatherhood: to be, in my daughter's eyes, exactly what I profess to be; to practice what I preach.

And *there's* the rub. Precepts I can ladle out. It's the role modeling that'll keep me on my toes. Just thinking of all the bad habits I need to change – my wife says I should start with my driving – gives me a headache. Oh, to be a babe with someone to mimic. I'm sure I'll fall on my fanny plenty more times. And I'll have to get right back up and try again. After all, that's what I'm teaching my child.

Claire can almost walk now – almost – and although she doesn't much care for it, some days it feels like she's progressing faster than I am, and I wonder if I'm going to be ready for that next developmental stunt she's sure to pull. Today it's teaching her not to eat the house plants, not to rip pages out of Mommy's *Southern Living* magazine, that "no" means "no." Tomorrow it's teaching her to share, to say "yes sir" and "no ma'am"; to assuage her fears and to respond appropriately to myriad impossible questions she's bound to ask. Then comes getting her ears pierced and dating, and I don't even want to think about that right now.

Gotta learn to walk first, one step at a time, both of us.

The Son I Never Had

by Anonymous

November – December, 1997

When my wife and I were awaiting the birth of our first son almost a year ago, I spent a lot of time thinking about the son I never had. He would have been 16 if he hadn't died in 1981. I have recently reflected on all the events which might have occurred in my first son's life if he had lived:

- His first smile,
- His first steps,
- Hearing him say Dada,
- Potty training,
- Waiting expectantly in the doctor's office to see if the 103o temperature could be broken,
- Washing his mouth out with soap for repeating something I had said,
- The "terrible twos,"
- Finding a daycare center,
- Building sand castles on the beach,
- Teaching the new puppy not to bite him,
- Saying prayers on our knees with him at night,
- His first "I love you" and first "I hate you,"
- Dropping him off at school and having him cry because he doesn't want me to leave,
- Talking to him after his first black eye,
- Cheering as he crosses the goal line for a touchdown in his peewee football game,
- Eating rocky road ice cream as a reward for good grades,
- His first broken heart from a crush not returned,
- Making s'mores by a campfire in the Smoky Mountains,
- His declaration of his love for Christ as he is dunked in the waters of baptism,
- Trying to remember the Pythagorean theorem,
- Having him teach me how to use the Internet,
- Yelling, "turn that thing down," "cut your hair," and "get rid of that earring!"
- Being awakened at 2:00 a.m. as he crawls into my bed during a thunderstorm,
- Being awake at 2:00 a.m. because he's not home yet,
- Crying as he tells me he's gotten his girlfriend pregnant. Probably the same way I did 16 years ago when I got my girlfriend pregnant. After all, that's how he came to be ... and not to be.

A junior at a state college, I had come back early from Christmas break because the kitchen in the second-floor apartment in the house nine of us shared had somehow caught on fire. At 0 miles away, I was the closest one of us to check on everything. My girlfriend who had stayed in town came over and, after having too much to drink, we had unprotected sex.

I sat in the waiting room with all the other pathetic males. Staring at the floor, flipping through a magazine, looking out of the corner of my eyes lest I would have to share an awkward glance or,

worse yet, say something. Without even Musak playing in the background, those four sterile white walls were as quiet as a morgue ... perhaps because it was a morgue.

A jolt of conscience ran through me as I fantasized about running into the operating room and stopping the butchering. Leaving with my girlfriend in my arms as other girls cheered and cried, wishing their impregnators would do the same. But I sat still. Frozen by my own self-centeredness, my own self-indulgence.

“After all,” I rationalized, “what kind of life would the kid have anyway?” With two college dropouts for providers ... With parents who were still kids themselves ... With a father who was realizing that, if he didn’t love and care for the baby’s mother enough to have a child with her, that, even if they did get married, they’d probably get divorced anyway ... That it’s what the mother wanted after all, and I shouldn’t take responsibility for her getting an abortion ... That, “hey, I have no proof that it’s my child, anyway!”

Well, needless to say, I never moved. When my girlfriend walked slowly out of the recovery room, I could see in her eyes the hurt, the humiliation, and the despair of what had just happened. We drove away in silence. In fact, we didn’t speak until late the next day, and then only because we had to.

Our relationship drifted on for a few months, but ended with the end of the semester. She never forgave me; I never forgave myself.

I tried to call her a few times over the years, but her family would just hang up when they found out who was calling. An unlisted phone number ended my attempts.

I know that if my father had done to me what I did to my son, I never would have forgiven him. I don’t know if in heaven my son is a fetus, a baby, or 16 years old, but I hope Jesus has taught him what Jesus knows best – forgiveness. Forgiveness, not for missed birthday parties, or ball games, or camping trips, but forgiveness for not taking responsibility, for not being a man, for not being a father, for not giving him a chance to be a son.

There are some of you who have been in the same situation. Some of you chose my path, the one of rationalization and selfishness. You’ve lived with the sense of failure that has sabotaged other relationships, careers, and the taking of responsible action. Hopefully you’ve given your broken life to Jesus so he can put it back together again.

Others of you chose to have your child ... To get married ... To raise the child on your own ... To quit school ... To finish school ... To work two jobs to get by or to work one job and learn to get by with less ... To be a mother, to be a father, to take responsibility.

If you haven’t, there is no time like the present. Get on your knees and ask Jesus to forgive you. He will!

The author of this true story is known to *Wineskins* editors. Though he has given us permission to use his name, we prefer to protect him by withholding it. He has shared the story with his wife

and with his church family. He knows the joy of forgiveness, but continues to live in the sadness of remembrance.

I Have Called You Friends

by Rick Atchley

November – December, 1997

There are many popular myths about “real men.” According to one recent book, real men don’t eat quiche; real men don’t floss; real men don’t buy flight insurance; real men don’t play Frisbee; and real men don’t call for a fair catch. But perhaps the most damaging myth, perpetuated by the Hollywood stereotypes of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and the Marlboro man, is that real men can exist just fine without significant relationships. The myth says: Real men do not need other people.

For years males have been told that being a man meant one was independent, isolated, disconnected. We are told that rugged individualism made America great, but the truth is what we are told is culturally created fiction. America was made great by men working together, not apart. In other words, if it weren’t for Tonto, the Lone Ranger would have been the late masked man.

People who need people are not the luckiest people in the world; they are the only people in the world. Why? Because that is how we were fashioned by our Maker. “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). While these famous words from Scripture set the stage for the creation of woman, they also make a primary ontological statement about the nature of man – that he, whether he wants to admit it or not, was designed to be a relational being. “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:10). Scripture declares that the man who goes it alone without friends is an object of pity. God created men to live in community.

Jesus is our example of what it means to be a man in community. He was a real man who lived in the company of real men. While occasionally seeking time to be alone with his Father, Jesus always came back to the company of his friends. It was in community that he preached, prayed, ministered, and even died. Yet most men – even Christian men – seem to live their lives with a relationship deficit. What men call close friends, women would call casual acquaintances. Alan Loy McGinnis says in *The Friendship Factor* that America’s leading psychologists and therapists estimate only ten percent of all men ever have any real friends. In *Man in the Mirror* Pat Morley writes, “I think most men could recruit six pallbearers, but hardly anyone has a friend he can call at 2:00 a.m.” Some might respond, “But my wife is my best friend.” Certainly our wives should be our most intimate companions, but saying, “my wife is my best friend” could be another way of saying, “I don’t have any significant relationships with other men.” Yet I think most men crave the kind of bond with other men that Jesus exhibited so openly. Deep down we all want friends who will help us up if we fall. So why don’t we have them?

Part of the problem is that the socialization of men in our culture hinders the development of male community. Men are taught to erect barriers that help produce what some today are calling “the friendless American male.” One of these barriers is *an aversion to showing emotion*. One

cannot develop real friendships without going past the fact level to the feeling level in communication. But most men don't even have a large "feeling vocabulary" because of the myth of manliness perpetuated today. Do you remember, for example, when Edmund Muskie cried during an important primary contest after perceiving that his wife had been unfairly attacked? He was immediately dismissed by the public as being "too weak" to hold the nation's highest office. So men learn to appear strong by stuffing their emotions deep inside them. But if manliness means being stoical, what are we going to do with the SON of God? Jesus was not afraid to let his emotions out in the open, yet have you ever known a man with more courage? Somehow I think we would all like Jesus for a friend.

Another factor that hinders male friendships is *a tendency to value others for utilitarian purposes*. While women tend to be more relationally focused, men tend to be more task- or goal-oriented. Consequently, male relationships typically center around activities, while female relationships tend to revolve around sharing. Men find it hard to accept that they need the fellowship of other men. Women can simply say, "Let's have lunch; I've been missing you." But men, when asked by a friend to have lunch, feel compelled to say, "What's up?" In other words, men feel they must manufacture non-emotional reasons for getting together. So while women build real friendships, men settle for "buddies I do things with."

Another obstacle men must overcome in relationships is *inadequate role models*. How many men have actually seen close male-to-male friendships? Ineed, we have actually been socialized to be suspicious of male relationships that seem too close. After all, you never saw the Duke with a sidekick. And so most men follow the only path they know, unconsciously patterning themselves after John Wayne more than Jesus Christ.

Men erect another barrier between themselves through their *constant temptation to engage in competition*. Have you ever noticed how boys can turn almost any matter into a contest? They don't change much when they grow up. It seems men are wired to operate on the "I win, you lose" model, and there is nothing worse to a man than to be perceived as a loser. So men are constantly evaluating themselves on the basis of how they are doing in the eyes of other men. Men will compare anything: bank accounts, job titles, houses, wives, kids, bodies, even scars! Some men have even been known to compete in the "who's the greatest disciple?" contest (see Luke 9:46). But it's hard to build relationships with someone you are always trying to beat. The iron is that by playing the game everyone winds up losing.

Certainly *the need to appear strong* is another barrier in male friendships. Men do not like to admit weaknesses. Asking for help is considered "unmanly." That's why men do not like to stop and ask for directions when they are lost. It's also why husbands more than wives are hesitant to go for counseling when their marriage needs help. But the price of friendship is personal vulnerability – letting someone know that their help is appreciated if you fall down. Men must learn to accept with extended hands instead of giving the stiff arm. Is that a sign of weakness? Just the opposite! To offer and accept unconditional love is an act of utmost bravery. At least that is what the strongest man who ever lived taught. Check out his thoughts on the matter: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. No one has greater love than the one who lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you

friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other” (John 15:12-17).

If Jesus is the truth – and he is! – then what he has to say about men and relationships exposes the popular ideas today for the myths they really are. The truth is this: **real men pour their lives into others!** Jesus says a real man is not a loner; he is a lover. So the way to measure a real man is by his investments ... in people. Are you that kind of man?

A number of years ago I recognized that I was not a real man by Jesus’ terms. I did not have significant relationships outside of my family where I was deeply investing myself. I kept my emotional distance from others, and made sure that I covered up any appearance of weakness with a nice facade of “Christian strength.” I knew I needed to seek the kind of community with others – especially other men – that Jesus enjoyed. I began to ask God to help me become a man after Jesus’ model, and God has been faithful to teach me what that means. In particular, God has given me for the last 10 years a group of men to meet with weekly for confession, support, encouragement, and accountability. I have never been so willing to be “weak” in my life as I am willing to be with these brothers. And the interesting result is a stronger walk with God than I have ever had.

Let me ask you three questions that a real man needs to face:

1. *Who are you sacrificing something for?* Jesus says no love is stronger than that which lays down its own needs to meet a friend’s needs. You cannot build friends on the “I win, you lose” model. A friend says, “I will lay down my life to move you forward.” So, who are you making a major investment in for their own good? In other words, are you really anybody’s friend, or just everybody’s buddy?

2. *Who are you opening up to?* Jesus says that the difference between servants and friends is that you are willing to share significant revelations with friends. You build community through vulnerable truth-telling. Now that intimidates many men. Competitive individuals never reveal themselves because it might be used against them. But God did not create men to live in hiding. Real men seek arenas where masks are not worn and contests are not held – arenas where hurts can be revealed, struggles can be admitted, and sins can be confessed. Are you strong enough to be that honest?

3. *Who are you walking with to do something bigger than yourself?* Jesus says that men were meant to bear lasting fruit, and that call does not come to rugged individuals, but to men in the context of community. In other words, the kind of friendships God wants us to have must exist for an end greater than self. Men are not to be used for personal agendas. Men are to be used by God as they work together for his agenda. He knows we can do things together that we could never do alone.

Be honest now – when you read those questions, were you able to put faces with them? Can you quickly identify the people into whom you are pouring yourself? Are you a buddy, or a friend? A real man is not afraid to face the truth. And he’s not afraid to make a change.

*I sought my God, but my God I could not see.
I sought my soul, but my soul eluded me.
I sought my brother, and I found all three.*

I Was There – Standing in the Gap

by Ron Rose

November – December, 1997

Thirty-nine Fort Worth adventurers squeezed through the massive crowd.

We were late in arriving, but just in time to experience sensory overload. We were cautiously, but expectantly, walking into the overflowing unknown. It was to become our day of promise.

I had come to be a part of a historical event. I came searching for something beyond the politics and controversies of our times. I came anticipating a spiritual adventure. I came longing for an epiphany – a life-changing experience – a soul moment. I came, along with my friends, to renew our relationship with the God of creation. I came looking for holy ground. And, during the hours of non-stop singing, praying, listening, confessing, forgiving, and encouraging, surrounded by over a million like-minded men, my spirit was revived and rekindled. I discovered holy ground. I heard one speaker put it this way, “So many before us have come to this Mall to claim rights; we have come to confess wrongs.”

The day was humbling and empowering at the same time. I left the Mall [in Washington, D.C.] possessing in my heart everything I had come for, and more.

That night as we sat around in the darkness of an empty church building discussing the wonders of the day, one thing became crystal clear: we were to a man, better for having made the trip . We had all learned something deeply personal about ourselves.

Those who had difficulty in the past revealing their feelings, now eagerly opened their hearts expressing their fears and frustrations and failures. We discovered our need for each other. We cried together, laughed together, blessed each other, prayed for each other, sang together, and together we shaped a new image of manhood. That image will be developing for at least a generation, but it has begun. These were moments of healing and hoping.

After what must have been an hour of re-living highlights of the day, a relative newcomer to our group spoke up. “You guys don’t really know me,” he began. “I came because I’d never seen D.C., but I’ve seen something I didn’t expect. I’ve seen what it really means to be a man. I didn’t know men prayed, or cried, or confessed wrongs, or talked about their personal lives. That’s the kind of man I want to be.”

For those who experienced **Standing in the Gap**, a fresh vision of manhood was initiated. And it’s still developing.

I stayed over in D.C. for a couple of days. As I wandered the hillside around the Capitol building I overheard a couple of security guards talking.

“Did you have to work Saturday?” one asked.

She responded, “Yes, it was the best day I’ve ever spent on this job!”

“No way,” he said.

She explained, “Those guys smiled. They were polite and kind and they smiled. Do you know how long it’s been since the people around here have smiled?”

He shook his head and mumbled, “Too long ... too long.”

The trip to D.C. was unrivaled. I’m glad I was there; it was a historic moment. When I left town the next morning, I vowed to start my life, after **Standing in the Gap**, by smiling more. It’s working pretty well.

All the Way Home

by Grant Boone

November – December, 1997

A lot of things are said between umpires and managers during a baseball game. Most of them are not fit for print in a family publication. But the words of American League umpire John Shulock three years ago in an altercation at Yankee Stadium may well have saved a family.

The game was between the New York Yankees and Baltimore Orioles. The family in question belonged to Johnny Oates, the Orioles' manager at the time, who had rushed out of the dugout to vehemently argue a close call.

“He told me at home plate,” says Oates, who thought Shulock had made a bad call on a close play, “John, you better get help. Something's wrong with you.”

The ump was right.

“Of course I'd been thrown out of ball games as a manager before, but John saw something in me, and he didn't know me that well. Since then, I've called him and said, ‘Thank you for what you did for me that day.’ He doesn't even know. I mean, I don't think he understands, but he saw in my eyes that I was hurting so badly.”

Oates was hurting because the everyday pressures of managing a major league ball club had been compounded by criticism from, among others, the owner of the Orioles, Peter Angelos.

“I was having a tough time separating John Oates, the manager, from John Oates, the person, because really they were the same person. I didn't separate them. I thought everything people were saying about me was personal and that I was a bad person,” said Oates.

The hurt reached a boiling point that afternoon at Yankee Stadium. After being ejected, Oates retreated to the tunnel that leads from the dugout to the visiting team's clubhouse. He had no idea God was there waiting for him.

“I was just about ready to give up, and I said, ‘Lord, help me. I can't do this anymore.’ And I felt a physical presence of something or someone sitting on my left thigh. And it was an experience that I had never felt or experienced before, and I can't explain it. The Holy Spirit touched me and said, ‘I'd never leave you. I'm going to be here with you. I've told you I'm here.’ He knew that I would need something to physically touch me to encourage me that day.”

That wasn't Johnny Oates' first encounter with God. And it wouldn't be his last. Though he grew up in a church-going family, Christianity for Oates as a young man was more liturgy than lifestyle. Whatever happened in a Sunday morning worship service certainly had no bearing on the rest of his week. It wasn't until 1983, after years of receiving some of the best pitchers in baseball history, that the veteran catcher finally received salvation with the Philadelphia Phillies.

But, as he reflects on his commitment to Christ nearly 15 years later, Oates sees a man who accepted the Lord's forgiveness, but not his full authority. "For a guy who has been in charge his whole life, being a catcher, being a professional athlete, being looked up to everywhere I go, boy, it's tough to say, 'I surrender all.'"

The struggle to surrender became even more difficult as Oates moved from the most important position on the field to the most important position off the field. When his playing career ended, Oates became a manager, first in the minor leagues, then in the majors with the Baltimore Orioles in 1991. But as he began devoting more and more of his time to the 25 players on his team, the four most important people in his life – his wife, Gloria, and his three children, Lori, Andy, and Jenny – got less and less husband and father, whether he was on the road or not.

"The physical separation, I think, a lot of people understand and try to deal with," says Oates. "In my case, the thing that almost killed my family was the emotional separation even when I was present. I was so wrapped up in my vocation that I didn't have time to even sit down at a meal table without jumping up to do an interview or think about a lineup. Gloria and the kids were dying inside, but they had so much respect for me that they let me do my thing. That's the trap so many men fall into: 'Well, it's my job, I've got to do it.' It's that old male ego. Where we get our satisfaction from is our vocation most of the time. And being in the limelight of a professional athlete, boy, everybody's gonna give you the red carpet treatment. They're gonna throw the warm fuzzies at you, and that's gonna reinforce that you're doing the right thing while your family is crying inside and dying emotionally because even when you're home, you're not there. You're mentally at the ballpark."

The emotional separation contributed to the burden that bubbled over on that 1994 afternoon at Yankee Stadium. And, while divine intervention got Oates' attention, it didn't change his lifestyle.

"It went great for a couple of weeks," Oates says, "and then I got right back into the Oates verses Angelos thing. Then at the end of the season I was let go, and if I ever wanted to be a baseball manager, well, from then on I wanted to be one even more."

Oates got that chance the very next season when the Texas Rangers hired him as their new manager. But his debut with the new team was delayed when God grabbed his attention once again, not with a tender touch but with a frightening phone call.

"Gloria and the girls were coming to spring training. Gloria had already been to Florida a couple of times, but when she was there, I'd leave the house at six in the morning to go to spring training, got home at seven at night and then do a couple of TV shows. You know, we talk about physical separation. I think the family can accept that, but then when I emotionally wasn't with them when I was physically with them, that just killed them. So, on the way to spring training, they stopped in Savannah, Georgia. They got ready to go to bed about midnight, and Gloria had what the doctors described as a severe panic attack. She couldn't breathe, and she didn't want to breathe. The kids called me and said, 'Dad you'd better come.' She didn't want them to call. She said, 'Don't call dad because baseball doesn't even stop for death.' The medics got her to the

hospital, but she wanted to die that night. She thought my life would be better if she would just go on out.”

Unable to find a flight out of Port Charlotte, Florida, Oates drove to Savannah, fully expecting to solve the situation and carry on as usual. It didn’t happen.

“I walked into that motel room and saw her sitting there, and, just like turning on a light switch, my whole view of Gloria changed. I saw a beautiful lady that, for all intents and purposes, was dead sitting on the side of the bed. We just sat there on the bed, and I don’t remember how long it was that we didn’t speak. I could feel her crying with her head on my shoulder, and we just sat there because I didn’t know what to say. For the first time in my life, I can honestly say in my heart that baseball wasn’t number one in my life. And it wasn’t something I had done. The Lord had tried so many ways to get my attention.”

This time it worked. With permission from the front office of the Texas Rangers to take as long as he needed to get his house in order, Oates and his wife went home to Virginia where Gloria entered Rapha, a Christian treatment center.

“I would attend some of the classes with her, and we’d go to lunch,” says Oates. “We were telling each other things about each other that I never thought I’d talk to her about. It was so exciting! We became like high school sweethearts again.”

So much so that Oates was prepared to prove his priorities were finally in order.

“I was ready to stay home, but the doctors said, ‘Johnny, she’ll never make it if you don’t go back. The rest of her life she’ll say she cost you what you wanted the most.’ I said, ‘But she’s what I want!’ And they said, ‘She sees that now.’”

“That’s all she wanted,” says Oates, “for me to hear, ‘I’m important. Value me. Validate me as your wife, as an equal.’”

So Oates did go back. After missing the first week of the 1995 season, he rejoined the team and led them to a winning season. The next year, the Texas Rangers won the American League West and reached the playoffs for the first time in the club’s 25-year history. Johnny Oates was named the American League’s Co-Manager of the Year, but his greatest individual honor came when he returned home to Virginia at season’s end. Gloria showed him a tree that had changed as much as she had since the previous spring.

“It had been pruned back to just the bare roots. And when we went back, it was in full bloom. She said, ‘You know, that’s me. When I went to the hospital 16 months ago, I was pruned to the ground, and now, I feel like that tree looks now, full of pink and white flowers, and it’s because of you and God.’”

Another season has come and gone since then. Oates is disappointed that the Rangers did not make the playoffs in 1997, but he is excited about spending the off-season at home.

“My desire to do well at my job has not lessened, but my desire to be a husband and a father has increased greatly. Therefore, I’ve given up a lot of stuff that I didn’t even want to do to begin with.”

Like granting every one of the dozens of daily requests for interviews. Like golf with the guys. Now, he spends that time with his wife and children.

“[God] gave me an acronym, to DREC,” Oates says. “Delegate, regulate, eliminate, and communicate.”

He recommends those concepts for men whose time management leaves their families behind. And he urges other men to avoid the mistakes he made.

“Our families are right there in front of us, and we don’t even see them. We look right through them to our jobs because we get so much satisfaction, but if you really give your family a chance, they can give you so much more satisfaction.”

It’s ironic. After spending his entire life in a game where the objective is to get home, Johnny Oates is finally there.

AfterGlow: Fishers and Men

by Phillip Morrison

November – December, 1997

Lena Lochridge helped make a man out of me.

Chronologically, I was already a man – a preacher, married, a father – but quite naive about the definition of manhood. Lena was the Sunday School teacher for our oldest son. He was probably five or six when she came out after church one Sunday and said, “Today when we were talking about Jesus calling fishermen like Peter, and James and John to be his followers, Richard looked real sad and said, ‘My daddy never takes me fishing.’”

I began to explain and defend, but Lena interrupted to say, “You don’t have to explain anything to me; I just thought you needed to know.” Not long after that, I went to Bill Claypool – the friend who knew the most about boating and fishing – and asked how to start getting a boat and equipment. With a thin smile and moist eyes (he had two older boys), Bill said, “You don’t need to buy a boat; just go get a trailer hitch on your car and use mine!”

Weather permitting, almost every Saturday found us on *Bill’s Bay-Bee* cruising Biscayne Bay. The fish we caught and the ones we almost caught remain treasured memories for our family. Our children are grown now, but they still enjoy telling about the time Daddy stepped on a slime-covered launching ramp and ended up on his rump in the bay ... or the time we ran out of gas and had to be towed in. (I still maintain that it was a clogged fuel line.)

Growing up as a boy during World War II, my ideals of manhood were macho men. My uncles were soldiers and sailors. Our neighbor went off to war and brought me a German uniform belt and a mortar shell. I imagined all of them performing heroic feats, killing the bad guys, and making the world safe for the rest of us.

As I began dreaming of preaching, my ideal preachers were not much different. My heroes were the loud, bombastic, never-in-doubt orators. Preachers less self-assured were soft-soapers, spiritual cowards. We were right; everybody else was wrong.

Gradually, I began to see things through different eyes. I learned that real manhood is characterized by love, tenderness, gentleness, compassion. The one who modeled manhood best taught us to turn the other cheek, to treat people as we would like to be treated. He always made time for children; he deliberately chose the company of people others had made outcasts. When he was reviled he did not try to get even. He endured the shame of the cross because he loved me. Scoffers thought a real man, if he were truly divine, would have destroyed his enemies and delivered himself from their torture. Much of the world still does not understand that it takes a real man to do what he did.

Thank you, Lena, and thank you, Lord, for helping me to understand more fully the meaning of manhood.