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Waiting for a transplant

Father of eight
undeterred by battle
with kidney disease

Not so Good Friday

The assurance of
Easter

MARK LARSON

The truth and total recall

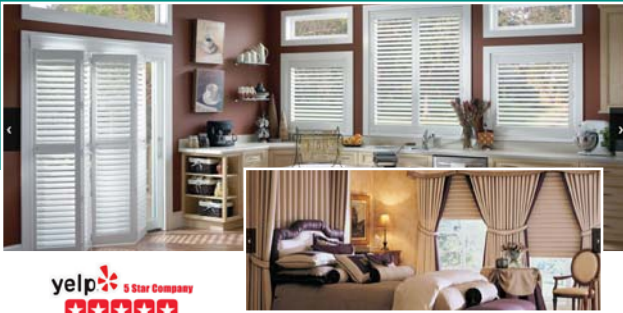
JOANNE BROKAW

Do you have a receipt
for that?

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A single red balloon

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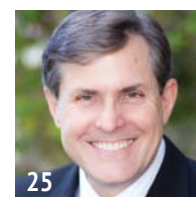
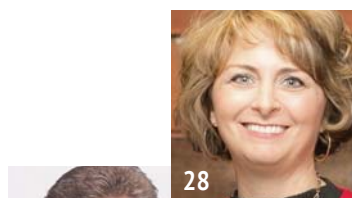
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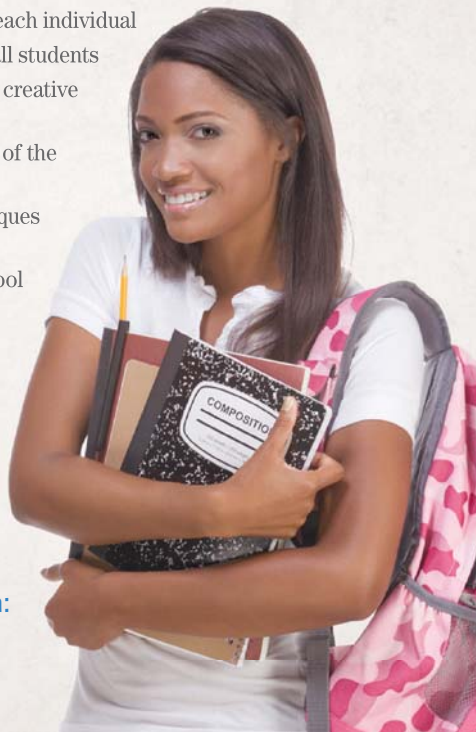
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A single red balloon

Picture this: Southern Ohio in the late summer, no air conditioning, sweltering heat, no breeze, and a 2-year-old with half of his body suffocating in a heavy plaster cast. Makes me sweat just thinking about it.

It started out beautifully—my wife, toddler son and I moved to the area so I could go to graduate school. The university was in the Appalachia region, tucked into the hills and rivers that carved out the triangle of Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia. When we'd walk off the campus grounds it felt like we were stepping back 100 years into American history, past the old typewriter factory and the buildings that made bricks. Some days it was so hot that it felt as if I was walking through those brick ovens.

The house we rented was about two miles from the campus, and I would walk there early each morning before the real heat of the day started. A few hours later my wife and son would walk to the campus during a break from my

She could tell by the way he fell partway down, and landed awkwardly with one leg extended forward and the other bent underneath his body, that he was hurt.

classes so we could eat lunch and play on the hill where the journalism building was located.

On one particularly steamy day, after we had played together, I went back inside the classroom, and our son wanted to run down the hill one last time while my wife watched from the top. She could tell by the way he fell partway

down, and landed awkwardly with one leg extended forward and the other bent underneath his body, that he was hurt. And parents know the different cries of their kids.

This one was serious.

We took him to the hospital, where they told us he had a spiral fracture in his femur—his thigh bone. They put him in traction and set the break with a cast that started at his torso, went down the entire length of his leg on one side and halfway down the other leg. He couldn't bear weight on the broken leg for a few weeks.

The cast made it hard for us to pick him up, and even harder for his skin to breathe in that heat.

We did everything we could to make him comfortable, but for the first few days all he wanted to do was lay on the floor of our living room with a fan blowing on him. It hurt too much to do anything else. Occasionally he'd let us put him in a wagon with a bunch of pillows around him and we'd pull him through the

neighborhood.

One Saturday our elderly neighbor lady came to the front door. She was in her 80s. I'd guess she weighed about 90 pounds. Her posture was stooped from osteoporosis so that her head preceded the rest of her body. She looked frail and weak.

"I was wondering if there was some-

thing I could do to help with your son," she said.

My wife said, "What did you have in mind?"

"Well," our neighbor said, reaching into the pocket of her house dress, "I brought something we could play with."

She pulled out a single red balloon. She blew it up, tied a knot in the end and batted it meekly toward our son on the floor. He lit up, laughed, and swatted it back at her. She sat in a chair across the room and hit it back to him.

This was the first time he had laughed since his accident.

After about 30 minutes, our neighbor said she had to go. As she told our son goodbye, he said, in his Elmer Fudd voice, "You can come back tomorrow." Which she did, for most of the days during his recovery.

Our neighbor didn't have a degree in social work. She just knew that she had something in her hand that could help her neighbor.

It was a minor thing. But it felt like a cool breeze.



How to See the Sacred in a Chaotic World"

Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His book about seeing God in everyday life is "God Hides in Plain Sight:



Mike Atkinson's hobby of raising plumerias has been a source of therapy for the father of eight who is hoping for a kidney transplant to avoid stage five of kidney disease.

Waiting for a transplant

Father of eight undeterred by battle with kidney disease

by LORI ARNOLD

Mike Atkinson tamps down the tropical cutting with enough pressure to secure its footing, but gently, so the trunk is not damaged. With each scoop of specially conditioned soil, he coaxes the best out of the fledgling plumeria with an eye toward his reward: gorgeous, sweet-fragranced blooms best known for their coveted title role in Hawaiian leis.

During the eight-month growing season, Atkinson spends as many as 25 hours a week nurturing his plants—all 500 of them. At his outside workstation, where a sign boasts his unofficial philosophy (“Gardening is cheaper than therapy”) Atkinson diligently balances the correct blend of water, sun, heat and dormancy so that the blooms will voluntarily unleash their intoxicating perfume. As with any garden project, the forerunner of victory is successful rooting by the hands of a master.

It's a good thing, too, since Atkinson has needed that sense of groundedness—physical and spiritual—as he's wrestled with life-threatening kidney disease for the past 14 months.

“It's a very therapeutic exercise for me,” said Atkinson, who shares his passion for gardening with Stacy, his wife of 34 years. “There is an immense amount of satisfaction to help these plants grow larger and stronger, as well as the pleasure of enjoying the amazing array of blooms, sights and smells. It takes a lot of time and energy, which I've had less of the last year, but fortunately plumerias love neglect, and I do neglect *very well*.”

That neglect is a result of Atkinson's ongoing medical treatments, which has been augmented with a solid dose of faith—a type of faith that transcends the sometimes feeble, sometimes fickle attempts of the human body to heal itself.

Since his January 2014 diagnosis of IgA Nephropathy—described by the Mayo Clinic as a disorder in which antibodies build up in the kidney tissue leading to an inflammation that can inhibit the organ's ability to filter toxins—the Mount Helix resident has endured numerous treatments, none of which has been able to slow the progression of the disease. One of the regimens was a six-month round of steroid treatments with prednisone.

“It included three treatments of three days each with doses



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANALISA JOY PHOTOGRAPHY

Mike and Stacy Atkinson share a dance at their son's wedding last year. Two of their eight children were married this past year.



of 1,000 milligrams each day,” he said. “The regular daily dosage was bad enough, but those infusions put me down for a good week or so after each. And in the end the steroid treatment didn’t do anything to help the disease.”

Now in stage four of the disease, Atkinson is just weeks away from outright kidney failure, known as stage five. A test in mid-December showed that Atkinson had just 18 percent of kidney function and was losing nearly 1 percent each month. He will enter the failure stage when his kidney reaches just 15 percent function. Unless he receives a kidney transplant Atkinson will begin home-based peritoneal dialysis, mostly likely within weeks. That process involves nine- to 10-hours of nightly treatment while he sleeps.

“I’m currently going through a raft of tests to qualify for it,” he said of the possible transplant.

Doctors, who discovered the disease after an annual physical, are hopeful that Atkinson—the father of eight and grandfather of

soon-to-be five—is a good candidate for a transplant, and he has no shortage of potential donors.

Long involved in local youth ministry, Atkinson has nearly 2,400 friends on Facebook, where he has often chronicled his medical journey.

His local ties include working nine years with Cardiff-based

More than 100 plumeria trees dot the landscape around the Atkinson home in the Mount Helix area. Another 400 are potted while being nurtured and readied for planting. And that doesn't include the 300 cuttings waiting to be rooted this spring.





This Corona Surprise plumeria was discovered and registered internationally by the Atkinsons.

Al Menconi Ministries, a dozen years with Youth Specialties in El Cajon and four years as chairman of the board for San Diego Youth for Christ.

“I am blessed in that many people

have offered to be donors,” he said. “I am humbled.”

For someone who has been in good health throughout his life, the now 55-year-old Internet marketing manager

said the disease has encroached heavily on his lifestyle.

“Some days I just felt like ‘#lifesux,’” he said, slipping into Twitter lingo. “This illness and the related side effects has brought a lot of loss in the last year—energy, mental abilities, strength, activities, fave foods and drinks, and more, and now (I’m) struggling with the realization that I will be kept alive by a machine.”

Despite those struggles, Atkinson said he’s never questioned God about his medical crisis, “not because I’m any kinda of SuperSaint, but because I believe in His sovereignty. I live by the motto, ‘Accept the reality. Hope for the Divine.’”

While firmly clinging to God’s sovereignty, Atkinson admits the journey has been “like a roller coaster.”

“Obviously any physical ailments come with their share of emotional struggles,” he said. “Since I’ve never dealt with health problems like this, I’ve run the gamut of emotions.”

Those emotions included an unexpected, and nearly unrecognizable, bout with depression.

“I’ve not had an ounce of depression my entire life, until this last year,” he said. “It took me a while to even figure out what it was. Then when I did, I was depressed about being depressed! Double depression isn’t fun.”

One of the remedies for that, he said, has been his Bible.

“I look at depression in the Old Testament—remember sackcloth and ashes?—and realized we try to stuff these natural, normal emotions,” he said. “In the church we even demonize them. What a shame. This is part of the process of dealing with loss and we can’t rush the process. Embracing that reality has allowed me to walk this path and look forward to what God has for me.”

One of his role models for the journey has been the biblical David.

Lessons in suffering

During Mike Atkinson’s 14-month journey with kidney failure, he has discovered that “while physical ailments can bring you down, there are some things that I’ve learned that help remind me that I’m a human and not a blob in a recliner.” He graciously shares those insights:

Laugh. It is the best medicine. Whatever makes you laugh, return to it often.

Keep your hobbies. The weakness from the disease doesn’t let me do everything I need to with my plumerias in the yard, but I do what I can. And that brings me much pleasure.

Find community. For me it has been a couple of groups on Facebook with folks around the world with this same disease. It really helps to converse with others going through the same things I am.

Go to church. Every word of every song and sermon has taken on new meaning for me, especially the newfound depth in our classic hymns. (Just keep the Kleenex close.) God has used all that to bring me strength when I needed it.

Embrace help. I’ve learned that people want to help. And as hard as it is to accept it, I realize that by accepting it I’m allowing God to bless them.

Get outside. As much as it may wipe you out for the rest of the day, it’s worth it. For me it’s going to Crystal Pier, Balboa Park or La Jolla Cove. I need that. Makes me feel human again.

Get outside yourself. I found I retreated into myself at times—getting too self-focused. It’s very easy to do with a chronic illness. But I don’t read anywhere in the Bible that people with chronic illness get a pass on serving others. We understand the power of encouraging, serving, caring for others, but I’ve learned that to do all that from a place of weakness is real power. God *wants* to live in our weakness. The best way I’ve found is being the face of Christ to the hundreds of medical personnel I’ve met in the last year. They don’t get joy from their patients very much so I can bring some into their lives by relying on God’s joy and hope.

Thank God. No matter what happened that day, when my head hits the pillow, I thank God for the day. It certainly could have been much worse than it was.

Accept grace. Just because I may have these views I’ve expressed does *not* mean I live it—or even believe it—all the time. As I said, it’s a roller coaster, and God has a lot more work to do on me.”

“I love King David, since he’s a man after God’s own heart,” Atkinson said. “When you read his psalms, you see him yell and wail at the almighty God, and then ultimately fall in the loving arms of his Heavenly Father. He really knew how to process tough stuff; a great model for everyday life.”

Like David, Atkinson has learned to sing a song of gratefulness.

“They say you don’t really appreciate good health until you lose it,” he said. “This process has taught me gratefulness, for the amazing blessings in my life that Lord has gifted me with: an incredible wife who has given everything for me; a large, loving family surrounding me; great friends around the world; an understanding job; and a spectacular church and pastor. I realized how much I took all that for granted before.”

Still, there have been times when fear has impinged upon faith as he wonders what will come next.

“(There’s) a big question mark when looking forward,” he said. “I read an article recently that said *everyone* gets healed: Medically, divinely or by going ‘home.’ I’m ready for any of those options. An adage like ‘I don’t know the future, but I know Who holds the future’ really becomes real in these situations.”

A particularly humbling lesson, Atkinson said, has been to learn to rely on others for emotional, physical and spiritual support.

“Faith alone can’t always carry you through the deepest valleys,” he said. “We are human after all. You need others who can help and even carry you. That’s so hard for me to accept, but I’ve lived that this last year many times.”

Most of that has come at the hands of his large growing family. Last summer, two of his sons were married and any moment his fifth grandchild will arrive.

“Just being with them is fuel for life,”



Mike Atkinson and his wife, Stacy, take a family Christmas photo in 2013, two weeks before he was diagnosed with kidney disease.

he said. “Even though my grandkids wear me out, it’s worth every precious ounce of energy. My family’s love and support has carried me many times this past year.”

Even with that, though, he’s had to learn to pace himself.

“They don’t overwhelm me as much as exhaust me,” he said. “It took me a week or so to recover after both weddings. But the benefits of being with my family and sharing life together far outweigh the consequences.”

“I’ve also learned that my family was bigger than I thought, with friends, Bible studies, and churches all around the world praying for me. The ‘great cloud of witnesses’ has taken on a whole new meaning. Just blows me away.”

As Atkinson seeks his therapy in the garden, there’s no mistaking the spiritual undertones of his toil in the soil. Just as he patiently creates an environment conducive to healthy growth that will help his plumeria flourish, Atkinson is confident his Maker is doing the same.

“He is still God,” he said. “He doesn’t promise us escape from hard times. He promises to be with us, to walk with us through the dark nights of the soul. Good Christians die every day; they lose their homes; they lose their jobs. God is not a magic potion to get us out of life’s challenges. He *wants* to be our crutch, so we can lean on Him daily.

“Friends have wondered if I get mad at God for not healing me. Umm, sorry but He’s been healing me since the day I accepted His forgiveness 42 years ago!

He has healed bad habits, thoughts, behaviors—a *mountain* of ugliness in me over the years. How can I question how He works in my life now? I am blessed way beyond what I deserve. A few times lately I’ve actually learned to thank God for this illness. He has worked in me more than ever before.” ■

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Leading by serving

Corporate executive sets example of volunteerism

by LORI ARNOLD

Sometimes when you follow, you just have to lead. Fueled by a Young Life camp conversion 35 years ago that led to her baptism in a river, Molly Cartmill has been committed to the tenets of the faith as modeled by Christ, chief among them serving others.

As director of corporate social responsibility at Sempra Energy, Cartmill has been charged with host of duties designed to maintain ethical standards.

“A responsible company is made up of responsible people behaving responsibly,” Cartmill said. “So ethical behavior, responsible stewardship of the earth’s natural resources, and a commitment to give back to the less fortunate—through charitable contributions and the volunteer time of our employees—these are all things that are not inconsistent with the gospel.”

In addition to her work with Sempra, Cartmill, the mother of two adult daughters, has served on more than 20 nonprofit boards and under her direction an inaugural fundraising luncheon to benefit seniors living in poverty raised more than \$400,000.

Outside the marketplace, the Rancho San Diego resident has also served as a youth soccer coach, service club president, Girl Scout leader and PTA president.

As a result of her efforts, Cartmill is one of 15 women who will be honored April 7 at the Salvation Army’s 2015



As chair-elect of the Serving Seniors board, Molly Cartmill frequently rolls up her sleeves. The program assists those living in poverty.

Women of Dedication, which recognizes contributions in philanthropy, volunteerism and community outreach. The 50th annual event, to be held at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront, is a major fundraiser for social service programs offered through The Salvation Army’s Sierra Del Mar Division and is sponsored by its Women’s Auxiliary.

In addition to its thrift stores, local corps churches and community centers, the Sierra Del Mar Division—covering

IF YOU GO

WHAT: 50th annual Salvation Army’s Women of Dedication luncheon

WHEN: April 7, 12 noon

WHERE: Hilton San Diego Bayfront

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San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties—offers drug and alcohol rehabilitation, shelter and transitional housing, food assistance, senior services, youth programming and disaster relief.

From the beginning, Cartmill has had a heart for charitable work and community service.

“My first job was raising money for the local Muscular Dystrophy Association where I saw, firsthand, the devastation this disease can have on people and families more broadly,” she said. “It was very inspiring.”

After a stint of television advertising sales that left her unfulfilled, Cartmill became the first executive director of San Diego County Crime Stoppers.

“Once again, I was in a position of helping others, in this case victims of felony crimes. It was impactful and meaningful work.”

Leader’s heart

Her tenure with Sempra began 25 years ago when she was initially hired for the marketing and communications departments.

“As a leader in a business environ-



Molly Cartmill volunteers on a building project for Habitat for Humanity, whose local projects have included building a home for a wounded veteran, the revitalization of 35 homes and building a community park in northeastern Escondido.

ment, you are afforded the opportunity to help people and coach people, not in a religious context certainly, but definitely in the role of a mentor. So what I try to do is lead by example, practice humility and try my hardest to keep my own ego out of the way, and remember that leadership isn't about me. It's really about those you are given the opportunity to help."

Over time she transitioned into the department responsible for corporate giving and community relations, employee giving, volunteerism and the company's foundation.

"Over many years in those roles, I witnessed firsthand, again and again, the wonderful work being done in our community by organizations like the Salvation Army," she said.

Seeking to be the "best leader I could be," Cartmill enrolled in the

Executive Leadership master's degree program at the University of San Diego,

"What was emphasized most in this program was the concept of servant leadership—putting others before self; the notion that leadership is not about



Molly Cartmill says her family—husband John and daughters Kelsey, left, and MacKenzie—has long supported her philanthropic and volunteer work. When the girls were younger they would often accompany her on weekend projects.

the leader at all, it's about being of service to everyone else."

Her resume now includes affiliations with a variety of leadership organization, including LEAD San Diego.

It was a transformational time that created a convergence between the marketplace and her faith, confirming her belief in the benefits of leading from a place of service, not power.

"In this sense, servant leadership amounts to the basic principles we learn from the Bible: to give rather than receive, to serve rather than be served, and importantly, to help others in need," she said.

Corporate care

In Cartmill's workplace that philosophy is manifested in responsible corporate service.

"There are many definitions, but the essence of it is that social responsibility is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," she said.

Cartmill said she became interested in corporate social responsibility issues after California's 2000-2001 energy crisis caused skyrocketing prices and rolling blackouts, which led then-Gov. Gray Davis to declare a state of emergency. The

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crisis was attributed to market manipulations that eventually led to the demise of Enron, as well as a bankruptcy filing by Pacific Gas & Electric and the near-filing of Southern California Edison.

"My company was actually doing a lot of things right, but we weren't measuring, managing and communicating any of those things to customers, investors and other stakeholders," she said. "Given that difficult time in our company's history, it seemed like it might make sense to be more open and transparent about our approach to a range of challenging issues."

The result has been the advent of more transparency and an increased commitment to community service, including donations of \$18.59 million to charity last year alone, representing more than 1 percent of Sempra's pretax net income. Cartmill said much of that money was donated within California, with at least 75 percent going to assist the underserved.

"Business can create a lot of good, in addition to providing jobs for people," she said.

Embracing the means

Exercising that servant approach has given way to numerous "aha" moments when Cartmill has realized that a career isn't defined only by what you accomplish.

"Anyone can accomplish tasks, meet deadlines, write papers or analyze spreadsheets," she said. "Your career is also defined by how you approach your work and the difference you can make in the lives of others through your passion, your integrity and your willingness to lend a hand, listen to an idea, make an introduction or share an experience.

"If you can help others achieve their hopes and dreams, examine their possibilities, take their next steps, I think you create a worthwhile and memorable career." ■

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Not so Good Friday

by TIM WALKER

Good Friday. Actually most Fridays are good. But this one, well, it's really not so good.

It was probably the worst Friday for a lot of people present.

In the past, I've seen Good Friday as simply the day Jesus died. Almost with the same sentiment as Lincoln's birthday.

That doesn't mean I've taken for granted the significance of the day. I attempt to live out a faith that is very much affected by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But the actual day of remembrance hasn't always been remembered.

As I get older, especially this year, the emotional weight of the day is heavier. Not because of the brutal death, although it was horrific. Or the betrayals or denials. But because of the people.

You see, Jesus knew what was going to happen. He knew how bad it was going to be. And He knew that the cross wasn't the end. But the people who followed Him . . . Well, it sure felt like the end to them.

And I think to appreciate how they felt, you've had to hope in something that seemed to end. Something that didn't turn out the way you dreamed it would. Something that left you disillusioned. Maybe even a little bitter. And incredibly sad.

A pregnancy that ended because of the absence of a heartbeat.
A thriving career that abruptly stopped because of the decisions of others.
Health that has faded, and so has your ability to engage in the things you love the most.
Anything that once held great promise and fueled hope, but now has left you confused, discouraged and even a little abandoned.

It was a good Friday in the big picture, but the heartache of that day went so much deeper than seeing a friend executed.

It was also about hopes and dreams being nailed to a cross.

The hope for freedom for people who falsely believed Jesus would bring a new earthly kingdom.
The hope for a different life for the disciples who gave up everything to follow Jesus.
The hope to live in a new world where men and women, sick and healthy, poor and rich could all be united for one reason.

God had been silent for 400 years before Jesus. Jesus came, lived, spoke, loved. Now God seemed silent again.

And the silence was even more deafening this time. Because they knew God could speak.

I'm not sure how to honor Good Friday. I know personally, there's always been a heaviness, sadness I feel on this day. Almost the same way I remember my mom's death every may, a lingering grief that I can't always explain until I remember "oh yeah. It's today."

And now, as I get older and have experienced various things in my life, I have a different perspective on the day.

I can see how death was so pervasive the day—the physical death of Jesus.
The death of hope.
The death of perceived identity.
The death of so many things.

And while it felt so intense, so devastating. It was only temporary—even if it felt like the end.



Tim Walker is a husband/father/writer who is navigating faith, marriage, parenthood and mid-life. Follow his blog at www.timswords.com.

THE ASSURANCE OF

Easter



by GREG LAURIE

If you have ever lost someone you love unexpectedly, then you have an idea of how the disciples felt when Jesus was crucified. Without warning, someone they had just spoken with, someone they were so close to, was gone. It was traumatizing. It was earthshaking. It was life-altering. There was a deep ache and sorrow like they had never known before.

The disciples were living the Easter story in real time. We know how the story ends. We have seen the big picture. But they couldn't turn to the end of the Gospels and read about the resurrection of Jesus. And they had a different thought in mind. They thought Jesus had come to establish His kingdom on earth and that He was going to be their king. But then he was suddenly betrayed by one of their own, Judas Iscariot, and arrested. Simon Peter, their leader, denied three times that he knew Jesus. Everything was go-

ing wrong – or so it seemed.

But it was all meant to be. Peter, who later preached on these events, said, "This Jesus, following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands" (Acts 2:23 MSG). The crucifixion of Jesus was part of God's "deliberate and well-thought-out plan."

The cross was the goal of Jesus from the very beginning. The reason for the incarnation was for the purpose of our atonement. He was born to die so that we might live. So when Jesus fulfilled his purpose, he summed it up in a word: "finished." And then he died.

Normally, when men were crucified, they died when the Romans wanted them to die. Crucifixion was not a quick form of execution. It was meant to prolong pain, designed to bring misery and to use the person as an example. It served as a warning not to rebel against

Rome. Death was hastened by crushing the kneecaps so a man could no longer support himself on the base of the cross and get air into his lungs. Death by crucifixion was essentially death by suffocation. But when the soldiers came to Jesus, they didn't crush his bones, because he was gone. He came and left at will. As he said, "No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again" (John 10:18 NLT).

The disciples took Jesus and laid him in the tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, and they never expected to see him again. Something went horribly wrong, and they were devastated. The story was over. That is until early Sunday morning.

Man had done his worst, but God was not done. God will always have the last word. Jesus had now risen. He had talked about this all the time, but maybe the

Death died when Christ rose. This is the great promise of the resurrection.

disciples thought he was speaking metaphorically or that he didn't mean exactly what he said. But he meant what he said and he said what he meant. He had laid it out for them, essentially saying, "Guys, check this out. I am going to be betrayed. I am going to be crucified. I am going to rise again three days later." He repeated it and repeated it. But somehow they missed the point. Regardless, Jesus was alive, and he made multiple appearances in his resurrected body.

He appeared to Mary as she wept alone by the tomb, asking her who she was looking for. At first she thought it was the gardener she was speaking to. But it suddenly it dawned on her that he was not the gardener. This was Jesus, alive from the dead. Later he appeared to Peter, and he also appeared to the disciples twice as they were gathered behind locked doors in the Upper Room. Then he appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, and he even appeared to 500 people at once. Jesus had risen, and it forever changed their lives.

Some people make their mark on history, but Jesus divided human time through his death and resurrection from the dead. But what does it mean today?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ assures me that I am accepted by God. Because the Bible says, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25 NIV). Because of the resurrection of Jesus, I am justified before God. Jesus removed sin and the penalty that goes along with it.

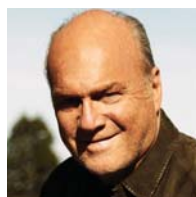
The resurrection of Jesus Christ also assures me that he is now interceding in heaven for me. Romans 8:34 says, "Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (NIV). With the

death and resurrection of Jesus and his payment on my behalf, as well as his intercession for me, I know that he has me covered. I know that he is with me and praying for me and pulling for me.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ assures me that I have all the power I need to live the Christian life. Sometimes people say, "Well, I have tried Christianity, and it didn't work for me." Nonsense. Christianity is not a product that works for some, but not for others. Christianity, boiled down, is Christ himself. And Christ can change any life. He can change any person who genuinely comes to him on his terms. The problem is we don't really commit ourselves to Christ as we ought to. We become CEO Christians – Christmas and Easter only. But when you have really committed yourself to him, you can be assured that you have the power to live this life.

Lastly, the resurrection of Jesus assures me that I will live forever in heaven. The Bible says, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:20–22 NIV). All who are related to Christ are given a new life. Death comes. Life ceases. But because Jesus died, I will never die eternally. I will live forever in the presence of God, because of what Jesus did.

Death died when Christ rose. This is the great promise of the resurrection. ■



Greg Laurie is the senior pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, one of the largest churches in America.

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Exercising faith in Santee

Nearly seven years ago, Pathways Church told its members to stay away from its usual Sunday worship services. The congregation has never been the same.

That Sunday the Santee congregation joined forces with Vision San Diego and its Don't Go to Church, Be the Church campaign. The project, also known as Faith in Action, encouraged churches around the county to use their usual gathering times to serve people in the community.

"There is a calling in all of us to think bigger than our own lives, to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to make a lasting difference in our communities, to answer the challenge given to us by God," said Jeff Atkins, the Faith in Action leader at Pathways.

He said it was a concerted effort to put 1 John 3:11 into practice.

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one an-

other.

"For four hours over 500 volunteers ventured out to serve the Santee community and the city of Santee through 17 projects that included building fences for neighbors, clearing properties of built-up debris, beautifying parkways along the major thoroughfares, painting, weed eating, even the demolition and fill of a pool," Atkins said of the Pathway project.

Not long after the inaugural event, Pathways approached city leaders with a new program proposal called Compassionate Code Enforcement.

Until that point, the standard policy for neighbor-against-neighbor complaints—adopted by cities across the country—had been for Santee officials to send a demand letter to the offending neighbor ordering them to correct the reported code violation.

"This often led to angry responses and uncooperative attitudes from those who needed the most help and, eventu-

ally, the city correcting the code violation and filing a lien against the property for the completed work," Atkins said.

With Compassionate Code Enforcement, the city now sends a letter to the neighbor experiencing the code violation and contacts Pathways to help correct the problem.

"A representative of the church contacts the neighbor and offers for Pathways to work 'side by side,' with them to correct the issue," he said. "A work party of volunteers is recruited and a day is planned to complete the job. The neighbor is happy, the volunteers have a great time and often the complaining neighbor joins the team in solving the problem."

The results are much more affirming than the previous policy, Atkins said, adding it's "helping others, bridging relationships and allowing the city to say, 'Case closed!'"

Not wanting to leave out the Santee School District, Pathways then approached administrators there to establish a School Beautification Day.

"School districts are an integral part to any community and showing love to our kids and their teachers is something that builds strong support in any community," the church leader said.

At the first event six years ago, Atkins acknowledged, the district was skeptical.

"Then the skepticism turned to uncertainty, to questioning motives, to ultimately a full-blown partnership with the churches in the area and now once a year, six years and counting, School Beautification Day happens the second Saturday before school starts," he said.

For the project, more than 500 volunteers spread out across the city's 10 elementary schools and both high schools to accomplish at least 75 projects. Tasks have included weed eating and mulch-



Spreading mulch at Rio Seco Elementary School.



Building a student garden for Carlton Hills Elementary School.

Volunteers from Pathways Church in Santee spread across the city in various Faith in Action projects to benefit their community.

ing of all planter boxes, sweeping walkways and removing built-up cobwebs, cleaning windows, removing gum from bleachers and repainting red curbs.

Larger projects have included the pouring of cement, installing chain link fences and shade structures, paving parking lots and asphalt walkways, making landscaping improvements and upgrading playgrounds. Even 20-ton boulders have been moved.

“The students, families of our kids, and the school employees and teachers start the year with schools looking awesome,” Atkins said.

Since there is also a calling to take care of the elderly and the widows, a Handyman Team has been established to care for elderly residents living in senior mobile homes parks around the city. An ad in the Santee Mobilehome Owners Action Committee’s newsletter reminds seniors to call Pathways if they have light work, plumbing, electrical, yard work, painting, or cleaning to be done.



Washing mobile homes for the elderly.



Creating a Beloved Teacher Memorial Garden for Pride Academy (formerly Prospect Elementary).

More than 500 volunteers spread out across the city's 10 elementary schools and both high schools to accomplish at least 75 projects.



Spreading mulch at Rio Seco Elementary School.



Adding an overhang to provide shade at Cajon Park Elementary School.

The team has also upgraded awkward entry steps, replacing them with completed handicap ramps so residents can more easily access their units.

“All this is handled by 18 men who have decided to put action behind their words and reach out to those who need the most help in our community,” he said.

Finally, their Faith in Action Team serves single moms, armed forces wives whose husbands are deployed, widows, the handicapped and the sick, by providing meals, yard work, oil changes or brake repairs, transportation to medical appointments, or maybe just companionship and an afternoon of fellowship.

Other Pathways service projects are as simple as its Servant Evangelism ministry which hosts such events as the Absolutely Free Car Wash—No Kidding, where vehicles are washed, windows cleaned and interiors vacuumed, while the service crew refuses to accept a single dime from drivers. Its Diet or Regular Rush Hour Thirst Quencher project involves volunteers who line up at a busy intersection to give away cans of soda, diet or regular, to commuters. Those without home laundry access are blessed through the I Got That Laundromat Outreach, where volunteers feed quarters into washers and dryers at neighborhood laundry outlets.

“Our communities are in need of attention, neighbors in need of support. Government cannot solve all the problems, but churches, the government, the school districts working together can make all the difference in the world,” Atkins said. “All these opportunities that have been established are done with one thought in mind: to show God’s love for people, expecting nothing in return.”

That’s Faith in Action, being the hands and feet of Christ, serving those in need and answering the call of God when He said, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ.” — Galatians 6:2.

Funding for service projects like these is provided through grants from Thrivent Financial, a company dedicated to connecting faith and finances for good. Thrivent Financial encourages people to live generously by offering hope and reaching out to those in need to show God’s love in action. For more information, contact Thrivent at (858) 455-5706.



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Marriage seminar at Rock Church

POINT LOMA — Rock Church will host “The Mingling of Souls,” its 2015 Relationship Conference with Matt Chandler, at 7 p.m. March 6 and 7.

The event, based on the Song of Solomon, is designed to counter cultural tools such as songs, movies, and advice that contradict God’s design for love and intimacy.

Chandler is lead pastor of teaching at The Village Church, a Southern Baptist church in the Dallas area and is president of the Acts 29 Network.

Learn more at www.sdrock.com/events/14952 or call (619) 226-7625.

‘Footloose’ at CYT

PACIFIC BEACH — The San Diego Central branch of Christian Youth Theater will present the musical “Footloose” from March 6 to 14 at Pacific Beach Middle School.

All cast and crew for the performances are students who have attended CYT’s training programs, which are open to children 4 to 18.

Now the largest youth theater program the country, with 24 affiliate locations nationwide, CYT is dedicated to developing character in children through training in the arts and by producing wholesome family entertainment that reflects Judeo-Christian values.

Learn more at www.cytsandiego.org or by calling (619) 588-0206.

Writer’s brunch and fellowship

RANCHO BERNARDO — The San Diego Christian Writers Guild will hold its Spring Fellowship Brunch beginning at 10 a.m. May 16 at The Cove, a satellite location for the Church at Rancho Bernardo.

Sandra O’Donnell, an author specializing in the history of religion in America, will be the guest speaker.

The event will also in-



clude several workshop and fellowship opportunities with other writers.

Tickets are \$25, though the guild is hosting a writing contest to win free admission to the brunch.

Learn more at www.sandiegocwg.com or call (760) 294.3269.

Easter Sunrise atop Mount Helix

LA MESA — Foothills United Methodist Church is hosting the annual community Easter Sunrise Service atop Mount Helix beginning at 6:30 a.m. April 5.

Launched nearly a century ago, the Easter services are held in the east-facing amphitheater, crowned by a large cross. The service is free.

In addition to its Easter services, Foothills United Methodist is offering a free Holy Week concert at 7 p.m. April 2. “Requiem” by Gabriel Faure will feature a 50-piece chancel choir and chamber

orchestra.

Learn more at visit www.foothillsumc.org.

Heroic Truth conference

EL CAJON — Foothills Christian Church will host Heroic Truth, a two-day conference for youth, young adults and their parents on March 20 and 21.

The seminar will feature national author and speaker Josh McDowell and his son Sean McDowell, an apologetics professor at Biola University. The conference is geared toward equipping young people to understand their calling.

Learn more at www.foothillschurch.org.

EVENTS ONLINE

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Concert to mark promoter's 100th birthday

EL CAJON — At 99 years old there are two ways that Mildred Spethmann likes to put her stamp on happiness: sending out as many as 800 birthday cards and notes of encouragement each year to family and friends, and by advancing Southern Gospel music as a senior (but spry) concert promoter.

“We wanted our family, friends and community to experience what we had experienced through Southern Gospel music,” said her daughter Ruth Ann DeForest, who also promotes the concerts with her mother.

“It has not been an easy task and it has been a very expensive task personally, because the groups we bring in are top quality which require a set fee.”

Over the years, the duo has hosted local concerts by such groups as Legacy Five, the Hoppers, the Golden State

Quartet, Freedom Singers, Tim Parton, Liberty Quartet, the Collingsworth Family and the Allen Family. During one eight-month period, they had booked seven concerts at four different churches.

In addition to hosting local concerts, Spethmann and DeForest have been frequent guests at Gospel gatherings across the country, including the Great Western Gospel Fan Fest and the National Quartet Convention.

Their next event, a Community Concert of Comedy and Music featuring Geraldine & Ricky and comedian Tim Lovelace, a GMA Hall of Fame inductee and instrumentalist of the year, will serve as a celebration for Spethmann's 100th birthday, which happens March 24. The concert is set for 6 p.m. March 31 at El Cajon Wesleyan Church. Doors open at 5 p.m. Admission is free, but an offer-



Mildred Spethmann, who turns 100 this month, shares a moment with Christian comedian Tim Lovelace, a musician who plays the piano, banjo, mandolin and harmonica.

ing will be taken. A private birthday party hosted by Lovelace and ventriloquist Geraldine will be held the night before.

About six months ago, Spethmann was slowed a bit by a back injury that caused significant pain, but not enough to keep her from the National Quartet Convention in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

“Even though her pain was excruciating, she was glad she went and enjoyed the music, the wonderful groups and seeing so many of her gospel friends from near and far,” DeForest said. “That was the best medicine she could have had.”

In addition to the celebration concert, DeForest plans to turn the table on her mom by having the public send her special birthday greetings. The cards can be sent to Mildred Spethmann, 325 Kempton St. #503, Spring Valley, CA 91977.

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UPCOMING CONCERTS

Geraldine & Ricky and Tim Lovelace
March 31, 6 p.m., El Cajon Wesleyan Church
Comedian Tim Lovelace will join ventriloquist Geraldine Ragan and her sidekick Ricky in a night of music and comedy celebrating the 100th birthday of concert promoter Mildred Spethmann. A freewill offering will be received.

The Freedom Singers
April 12, 6 p.m., Faith Bible Fellowship, Santee
Originally from Romania, the Freedom Singers share their compelling story of faith and God's grace when they fled Romania as teenagers because of Christian persecution. A freewill offering will be received.

The Hoppers
October 25, 5 p.m., El Cajon Wesleyan Church
Considered the First Family of Southern Gospel music, the Hoppers will celebrate 58 years of ministry as part of a 58-city tour, including a stop in San Diego for their only Southern California appearance on this tour. This is a ticketed concert.

For information on these concerts or tickets for the Hoppers, call Ruth Ann DeForest at (619) 442-5941.

Crouch service draws 600,000 online

Beloved Gospel artist Andraé Crouch, who died Jan. 8 from complications of a heart attack, was honored Jan. 21 in a lively memorial service that attracted more than 4,000 guests to West Angeles Church of God in Christ. An additional 600,000 people watched the services, which were live streamed on both the church and BET websites.



Four hours in length, the service was part concert, part church service with performances by Stevie Wonder, CeCe Winans, BeBe Winans, Shirley Caesar, Ledisi, Yolanda Adams, Israel Houghton, Tommy Sims, Jonathan Butler, Donnie McClurkin and the original members of Andraé Crouch and the Disciples.

Crouch, who served as co-pastor of New Christ Memorial with his twin sister, Sandra, was also honored during the Super Bowl Gospel Celebration and the recent Grammy and MovieGuide awards.

Audio A mixes it up

Audio Adrenaline, on the verge of yet another transition, has released its new single “Love Was Stronger,” in advance of the May 5 release of the group’s Fair Trade Services sophomore album, *Sound of the Saints*.

“Watching the guys practice for this upcoming tour and record has been such a joy,” said Audio Adrenaline founding member Mark Stuart. “Hearing the old classics with the new Audio A message makes me proud to be part of a legacy that continues to focus on the glory of Christ and the absolute joy of becoming His hands and feet.”

The band, which is heading out on tour with the Newsboys’ “We Believe God’s Not Dead” 2015 Spring Tour, is doing so with some fresh faces as group co-founder and bassist Will McGinniss shifts from touring to an increased role with the Hands & Feet Project, an orga-

nization he co-founded.

The group has undergone numerous changes since taking a hiatus in 2007 after Stuart was dealing with health issues. The reconstituted group came out of retirement in 2012 to raise awareness and money for the Hands & Feet Project.

The new band features former Stellar Kart frontman Adam Agee, along with Dave Stovall, formerly of Wavorly; guitarist Brandon Bagby, whose touring credits include Plumb and Seventh Day Slumber; and drummer Jack Campbell.

Gokey is a busy dad

BMG recording artist Danny Gokey has shown he can deliver much more than hit music after he and his wife Leyicet welcomed their second child, Victoria Isabella, in late November.

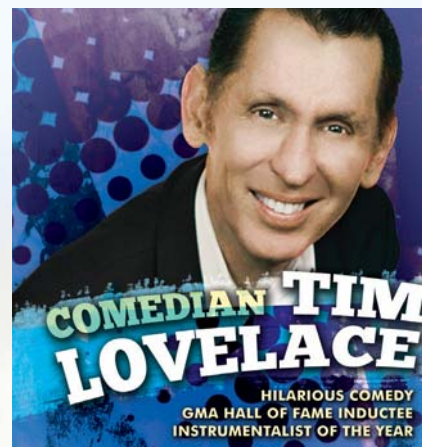
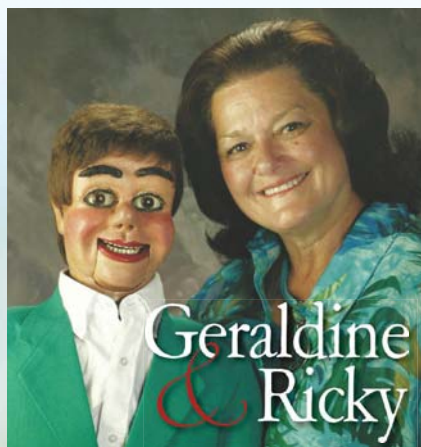
As the household, including big brother Daniel Emanuel, is adjusting to the new addition, Gokey is preparing

to hit the road with the Burn Bright tour with Natalie Grant, followed by The Bible Tour with Steven Curtis Chapman, Brandon Heath and Francesca Battistelli.



The tour comes as fans embrace his latest single release “More Than You Think I Am” to radio, marking the second single from his No. 1 album *Hope in Front of Me*.

“This song is very personal to me,” Gokey said. “It reflects a time in my life where I encountered personal loss and heartbreak. I had a broken soul and didn’t know what to do with it.... I ran to God asking Him to reveal Himself to me. He began to knock down barriers I had put up and began revealing who He really is.”



Community Concert of Comedy and Music

Tuesday, March 31, 2015

6:00 pm • Doors open at 5:00 pm • Open Seating

Concert will include a 100th birthday celebration for centenarian Mildred Spethmann. Mildred and her daughter, Ruth Ann DeForest, are the sponsors of East County Southern Gospel Concerts.

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A merry heart does good like a medicine. Proverbs 17:22 (KJV 2000)

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Sean Astin ('The Goonies,' 'The Lord of the Rings,' 'Rudy') is one of several major Hollywood actors in 'Do You Believe?'



'God's Not Dead' makers release 'Do You Believe?'

by MICHAEL FOUST

What's the best evangelistic movie ever? By that, I mean the best film that has, at its core, the Gospel—and one that makes the message of Christ the film's theme.

I have a new nomination, and it comes out in theaters March 20.

The film is called "Do You Believe?" and it follows the lives of a dozen people as they face their own unique challenges in life and must decide what they believe about God—and then what they're going to do about it.

Written by the same team that wrote the 2014 surprise hit "God's Not Dead," it is also released by the same studio, Pure Flix. "Do You Believe?" is a dramatically different type of movie than "God's Not Dead"—

different theme, different direction—but many moviegoers will walk away saying it's a better movie. I know I did—so much so that I watched it twice.

"The massive success of 'God's Not Dead' proved that audiences want to rally together with their friends and family to see movies that will edify them on compelling issues," said producer David A.R. White of Pure Flix. "With 'Do You Believe?' we wanted to create a film whose message will encourage, but at the same time convict, audiences concerning one of the most critical faith questions they will ever be asked."

It has a cast with several well-known actors and actresses, including Golden Globe winner Cybill Shepherd ("Moonlighting") and Screen Actors Guild winner Sean Astin

("The Lord of The Rings," "Rudy"), along with former pro football player Brian Bosworth and Lee Majors ("The Six Million Dollar Man," "The Fall Guy").

It's fast-paced and well-produced, boasts solid acting and has an amazing musical score. The first third and final third of the movie are particularly impressive, with an ending that has enough surprises that you won't be making any bathroom runs.

It's a movie made for non-Christians and Christians alike. It forces non-Christians to ask "Do I believe?" but also urges Christians to consider: You believe, but what will you now do?

Like "God's Not Dead," it has a few of those "that-would-never-happen-in-real-life" moments, but it is, after all, a movie.

"Do You Believe?" succeeds in part because we all can relate to at least some aspect of it. It follows a young couple struggling with infertility, an elderly couple coping with the loss of a child, a woman and her daughter who are homeless, a gang member who feels convicted about his actions, a soldier suffering from PTSD, a teen mom who has been abandoned, a middle-aged man who is battling cancer, a young woman contemplating suicide, and a married physician and attorney who are both arrogant workaholics.

Their lives intersect and they must all deal with the same question that a street preacher presents at the beginning: Do you believe?

The majority of critics, no doubt, will trash it, partially because it is more overtly evangelistic than any successful faith-based theatrical movie in recent history. But I'm guessing moviegoers will like it.

This is a movie the church should get behind. It's inspiring, convicting and simply amazing. Circle March 20 on your calendar ... and go see it.

Learn more at DoYouBelieve.com. Michael Foust is an editor and writer who reviews films and blogs about parenting at MichaelFoust.com.

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Freedom of dependence: Learning to squeeze out self

It was nearly five years ago that Janny and I moved to Golden Hill, a neighborhood in San Diego, to be part of a little faith community committed to love God and neighbor in some of the most tangible ways we had ever encountered. As you can imagine, we were curious as to what all this would mean for us as individuals, as a young family and for our role within the church as a whole. It was a great unknown, but we were willing to “roll the dice” and did so with much conviction.

We could have never foreseen the beauty and richness that would birth forth out of a community of people committed to share life together as we stumble toward Jesus on the same streets, parks, homes, pubs and coffee shops. There was nothing flashy about it and I can remember thinking early on, “So this is it? Life just keeps happening day after day after day after day?”

I would soon realize that’s the beauty of it. Church wasn’t something we attended on our own time and at our own convenience, it was something we participated in every moment of every day.

In fact, that was our path toward discipleship. It’s not an event, it’s nothing flashy and it certainly doesn’t lift our names/titles/roles above our neighbors. We can’t pat ourselves on the back after a successful event that brought in the masses; we can only love in such a way that we stand in each other’s pain and joy on Monday...and Tuesday...and Wednesday.... There is no day off from discipleship or our commitment to a place and a people who inhabit it. And rather than grab for power or prestige, the road to discipleship requires we give it away for the flourishing of others.

When the proverbial “stuff” hits the fan in our lives or our neighbors’ lives, we sit in the middle of it. We certainly don’t always do this well, and we have a ton to learn, but we do our best to contend for one another in costly and creative ways.

Why?

Well, because that is what we think Jesus meant when he said to love God and neighbor (Jesus went as far as calling us to love our “enemy”). In Jesus, we see that contending for others might even look like giving up your life.

In the end, embracing the Jesus way of the cross is really freeing. When I realize life isn’t about “me” (which I still struggle with EVERY DAY...ask Janny) and my flourishing, but about advancing the good of those around me, I am free to truly love and be loved. Because faithful discipleship doesn’t require that I am comfortable, that I will “succeed,” or even that I will survive.

It. Just. Doesn’t.

And when I spend so much of my time and energy seeking my own personal advancement, it hijacks my ability to follow Jesus and it does harm to those around me.

After three years of learning and being mentored by trusted guides, our little faith community was no longer little and had grown to the point where we needed to multiply (rather than get bigger, we multiply and start new faith communities). It was then that Janny and I were entrusted to lead one of the new communities.

Celebration and gratitude

We’ve now been leading and walking with this community of Jesus followers for over two years and we recently created some space to reflect and celebrate. Sitting around a bonfire, we shared what we have learned about God, ourselves and our neighborhood over the past couple years. It was beautiful and reminded me of the value of simply acknowledging and celebrating the good gifts of this life.

We shared about the times we helped pay each other’s rent when one of us was struggling financially.

We shared about the gift of new friendships with neighbors where we learned about Jesus in the most unexpected and beautiful ways.

We shared about the gift of vulnerability and transparency.

We laughed at the many days where we took care of each other’s kids because we were all sleep-deprived.

I confessed that I simply can’t follow Jesus alone and that this community has helped me own that. We all know the point isn’t community in and of itself, but that community is a means and context for us to all more faithfully follow Jesus.

The bottom line

I need a community of practice that requires me to live the stuff I spend so much time talking about. If I don’t have a community and neighborhood that invites me to give myself away in the way Jesus gave Himself away, I miss out on living into who I was created to be. And, those around me miss out on the gift I have been created to give to the world.

We concluded the evening by offering prayers of “blessing and sending” over our community as we approached another year. Mine was simple and I think it was meant more for me than anyone else:

“May we receive the gift of community we have been given with deep gratitude. And may we not see this way of life as a list of obligations to fulfill, but as an opportunity for each of us to be fully human.”

P.S. Paul’s words in Philippians 2:1-11 offer a beautiful picture of the above based on the life of Jesus and the activity of the early church.



Jon Huckins is the co-founding director of The Global Immersion Project, Missional Leadership Coach with Thresholds, family man, speaker and author of “Thin Places” and

“Teaching Through the Art of Storytelling.” Follow his blog at www.jonhuckins.net.

The truth and total recall

The recent problems facing NBC News anchor Brian Williams should cause all of us to focus on a couple of key things: Truth is essential and time can sometimes make recall a bit fuzzy, if we allow it.

In Williams' case there were the events that became, in his words, "conflated" over time. Most everyone now knows there were other instances of his story being told and retold, growing in stupendous claims in made-for-TV heroics. Once there was a crack in the armor, journalists everywhere pounced, looking for more inaccurate reporting or flat-out whoppers.

But let's not be tempted to think that's only something that is *his* problem. Our minds can play tricks on us, especially as time marches on. Our stories are just as important.

Sometimes a group of people involved in a singular event can "remember" an occurrence in different ways. Individuals may find aspects of a story that connect personally in ways others don't see.

In Williams' case, it became hard to refute what those in the other military helicopters experienced. Once the inconsistencies became public, it didn't take long to see where the story was indeed, inflated and false.

I find it mind-boggling that someone of the NBC anchor's intelligence felt it necessary to magnify a story that was already heroic. Just the fact that he was there at the outset of the 2003 Iraq war was brave enough. He didn't need to add an imaginary RPG hit to "his" helicopter.

It's also very difficult to believe that, even with the fact that memory can often lose sharpness

over a lifetime, someone could forget every aspect of such extraordinary moments.

On one of my Middle East trips, 2006 in Afghanistan, I was also flying in Chinook helicopters, including a stop in Kandahar and time in dangerous Helmand Province. But we were never hit by any "incoming." Believe me, that is something I would never confuse, forget or "mis-remember."

Were we in danger? Sure, with plenty of "what if" aspects. But just being there was enough to be a good story, going beyond headlines.

When the Williams case unfolded, I challenged myself to remember what I experienced, and to go back to a journal I kept during the days there. I found my memories were clear and intact, and came back fresh.

Unusual events in our lives can often take on a sense of "photographic memory." Because of the unique nature of it all, we can also feel like we are re-experiencing the moments when mulling them over.

Sharpened memories

As I think back it's easy to recall faces, sounds, even smells from that trip. Still, every event is colored by our own uniquely personal experiences.

As I replay my Afghanistan adventure in my head, I also remember how the fear of where we were and what we were doing sharpened my faith... in God, and in the valiant men and women in uniform protecting us as we traveled.

Memory can sharpen the soul, especially when cultivated. Keeping

notes along the way helps, and we all have brain cells dedicated to often-vivid recall of the good and the bad events in our lives. The Brian Williams story helped me to "think about thinking" more often, to find opportunities to remember the best times, and to learn from the challenges in life.

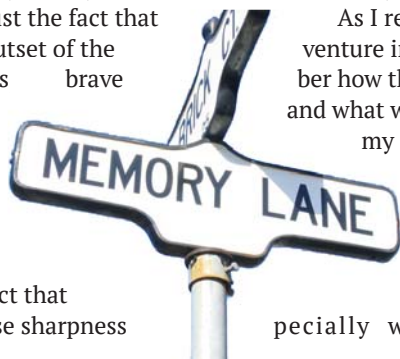
As a little mental exercise, try this: How far back can you remember? How much detail? How did that time or event shape you, your operating reality, your preparation for the future? And how

(Memories) remind us that truth will always trump a tall tale. It's miraculous enough on its own.

many of the negative times need to be seen for what they are, dealt with, then moving on; freed from the things that bog you down in the past?

I can wander back to when I was 3- or 4-years-old and with my grandparents. When thinking of them I allow myself a little trip back to their houses, thinking of the layout, seeing their sweet faces again. Recalling my roots.

Memories are made of this, part of God's way of re-energizing life, helping us find the joy in today. And they remind us that truth will always trump a tall tale. It's miraculous enough on its own.



Larson is a longtime Southern California radio/television personality. His voice is heard on KPRZ 1210AM, and his weekday talkshow airs 6-9 a.m. on

KCBQ 1170AM. He is also a news analyst on KUSI TV. Learn more at www.marklarson.com.

Grief, gratitude and grace

You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy. — John 16:20.

In the month of November, around Thanksgiving, I preached a sermon on the topic of gratitude. Knowing that my father was going to be among the congregants, I decided to write a “Letter of Gratitude” to him and read it in front of everyone on that Sunday morning.

I found myself tearing up with true feelings of gratitude as I thanked my dad for the blessings, both big and small, that came from being his son. He, too, was deeply touched and asked if he could have a copy of the letter. I found out later that he had taped the gratitude letter to the wall in front of his office desk.

A couple weeks ago my father and mother went out shopping, had lunch together at their favorite restaurant, and then went back home to relax. They were just a couple months shy of their 59th wedding anniversary and their love for each other was obviously thriving.

Once back in the safety of their home dad sat down to rest for a moment while mom went into another room. She returned several minutes later to discover

that he had died quickly and quietly.

Elmer D. Jenkins had served as a pastor for 60 years, founded six churches in the San Diego area, started a Christian camp, published books of poetry, and had touched the lives of countless individuals during his ministry.

Although I feel some grief now, and I miss him terribly, I also feel as if something unexplainable happened when I read that gratitude letter to my dad back in November. Our relationship changed in a positive direction, and it felt as if many loose ends were tied up.

Along with the blessing I bestowed upon my dad when I read the letter came a powerful feeling like a burden was lifted in my life. No one emerges from childhood unscathed, and the wounds that nibbled at me in the back of my mind involving my dad were somehow erased with forgiveness when I read that letter to him.

Gratitude was expressed to my dad, but it came back on me exponentially in the form of grace. Apparently one of the powerful side-effects of gratitude unleashed is a healing grace that refreshes the soul of the giver.

Painful separation in all relationships is inevitable. It’s the price we pay



Elmer D. Jenkins

for attachment. But the pangs of grief caused by death or other relational endings can be mediated by gratitude that is expressed to a person while they are with us.

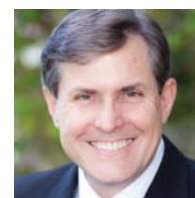
This expression of gratitude is a wonderful gift that you can give to another person. A gift is not earned or deserved but simply given out of love. In fact, the word grace comes from the Greek word *charis*, meaning “gift.”

The amazing thing is that the giver of the gift is blessed even more than the receiver (Acts 20:35).

I read my gratitude letter once again at my dad’s memorial service. It served as a wonderful eulogy that helped us celebrate his life more than grieve his death. But the best eulogies are the ones read out loud to a person before they die.

If you would like to read the letter of gratitude that I wrote to my father before his death, you can do so at www.lighthousepsy.com.

Who should you write a letter of gratitude to before it is too late? Do it for them, and discover that you have also done it for yourself.



Daniel Jenkins, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist at Lighthouse Psychological Services in Mission Valley. He is also a professor of psychology at Point

Loma Nazarene University. Learn more at www.lighthousepsy.com.

MICHAEL FOUST

Letting them win some

My biggest hobbies as a teenager were, in order: football, basketball, baseball, hockey ... and any other sport that was stuffed in the local sports page. I was a sports nut, and my family didn't even have ESPN.

On Wednesday nights at church, my friends and I would gather on the parking lot for the fiercest pickup basketball game you've ever seen from uncoordinated skinny kids. On Sunday afternoons, you could find us playing touch football in the church yard, with me often being selected as what we'd call the "all-time quarterback." During the rest of my free time, I was playing my mom and dad in one sport or another, determined to beat them, too.

Fast forward to today.

My oldest son, who is 6, is at the age where he wants to beat dad each time we play anything: board games and sports ... even tag. That, of course, raises the question every parent confronts: Should I intentionally let my child win—or should I just mercilessly beat him at each contest?

It seems at first a trivial and pointless question, but it's not. Remember that old coach who always told you that "sports teaches valuable lessons about life"? He may not have known it, but he was borrowing a scriptural theme.

The Apostle Paul—who no doubt would have watched a little bit of ESPN—compares the spiritual walk to a runner in a race eyeing the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24-25). He further notes that "every athlete exercises self-control in all things"—implying that the Christian, too, should practice self-control in day-to-day living. It's not the only reference to sports in Scripture (see, for example, 2 Timothy 2:5 and Hebrews 12:1).

God, it seems, does see value in sports. After all, it can be a microcosm of life, and children can begin learn-

ing valuable "adult lessons" long before they're able to apply them in the adult world. We win and lose in sports, just like in life. We learn to be disciplined and patient, to practice self-control, to be a leader, to listen to those in authority, to be responsible, to bounce back, to get up when we don't want to, to get along with those we normally wouldn't like, to encourage, and to share.

Everything translates to life.

So, should you "throw the game" and intentionally let your child win? In my opinion, yes, sometimes. And should you beat them mercilessly in a few games, too? Yes, sometimes. Here's why: If winning and losing is necessary to learn those life lessons, then it's beneficial if we win some and lose some. The younger my children are, the more I let them win. As they grow older, I put up more of a battle.

I want my 6-year-old son to enjoy sports while learning the lessons it provides. This means I want him to learn how to win gracefully and lose gracefully. If he is cocky and arrogant in a given game, he gets everything I have. But if he is struggling with his confidence, I might intentionally miss a few shots—encouraging him all the way. If I beat my son every time, when would he learn how to win with class?

On a recent night, we were playing a game of indoor "mini-hoops," and I felt he was overconfident and needed



humbling, so I beat him ... bad. He was a gracious loser. During the next game I took another quick lead but sensed I was breaking his will, so I let him rally and win. While he was preparing to sleep that night, we had a good conversation about confidence and never giving up—lessons that have far greater application than sports.

Someday, he'll likely catch on and want me to stop "letting him win." And further down the road, he'll probably become so good that I'll long for the days I had to "throw games." Until then, though, I'll let him win some. And beat him in a few, too.



Michael Foust is the father of three small children, a writer and editor, and blogs about parenting at www.michaelfoust.com.

Practically speaking...

In matters of life and death

You always think loss will happen to someone else—until it happens to you. Rachael, a 26-year-old wife and expectant mother, was living the all-American dream when her 30-year-old husband was killed in an accident. I came alongside Rachael to help her make sense of her new normal; the memories of that painful journey remain vivid to me to this day.

Gratefully, her husband had lovingly prepared for the unthinkable by purchasing several types of life insurance policies after they married. Rachael and her son's world were turned upside down, but an uncertain financial future was not part of the equation.

Interestingly, not a single widow or widower has ever told me. *"I wish we hadn't had so much life insurance."* I've seen the effects of the opposite, however, more times than I can count. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to this area of planning, as much depends on the stage of life. While various types of life insurance should be considered, the balance of this article will focus on basic protection for growing families. Consider these points as you evaluate your need.

What are you trying to replace and how long do you anticipate this need to exist? The most common need is income replacement. Other considerations include debt repayment, funding of important goals like college, retirement, and assets acquisition or replacement. There are death expenses, too, such as funeral costs, estate settlement and taxes. Don't forget to factor appropriate inflation adjustments in this step, too.

What assets do you have to meet these needs? This may include savings, retirement accounts, current life insur-

ance, real estate, business interests, etc. You must consider not only what you have, but also how liquid these assets are—you do not want to *have to sell* an asset at the wrong time—and how much they have the potential to grow.

How much risk am I willing and able to retain vs. how much do I want to transfer? Subtract your available assets from your total need and you will have an idea of the need. Trying to insure every scenario would be cost-pro-



hibitive for most families so give careful consideration to how much is enough to provide for the needs of your family. If funds are limited, cover the primary income earner first. Don't neglect the lower-earning or stay-at-home spouse, however, as the costs to replace their services can be substantial, especially if you have children.

What is the most cost-effective solution for the period(s) of time coverage is needed? If funds are limited, consider term insurance, as you will receive the most coverage for the least amount of money. Be aware that term is designed for a specific period of time and will eventually price you out of the marketplace with higher premiums. It is more like renting coverage than owning it so carefully review your ongoing

needs as your circumstances change.

So much of the insurance I see seems to have been bought or sold based on an emotional tug rather than facts. In some cases, people have purchased more insurance than they really need, wasting valuable dollars. Others have purchased the wrong type of insurance and still others are grossly underinsured. A thorough analysis and consideration of all your options will help you choose insurance that will cover your present needs and provide flexibility as life changes.

As a financial planner, I've walked this very dark valley of loss with widows and widowers from age 26 to 96. No amount of insurance assuages the grief. The difference is seen in the options they can consider as they try to move forward.

For one middle-aged widow, insurance proceeds allowed her to pay off her mortgage and comfortably remain in the home she loves. For another, she was able to focus on raising her teenage children without being forced to get another job. Rachael, the young expectant mother, has been able to spend the last 13 years raising her son and volunteering in causes close to her heart. In matters of life and death, it's all about options.

Next month we will look at different types of life insurance.



Janice Thompson is a certified financial planner and co-founder/CEO of One Degree Advisors, Inc. A frequent speaker on financial topics and mentor for financial

professionals, she also serves on the board of directors for Kingdom Advisors. Learn more at www.onedegreeadvisors.com.

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TONILEE ADAMSON

Choosing joy

Recently I had the privilege to hear Meadowlark Lemon from the Harlem Globetrotters speak at a Thrivent Financial Seminar. As a kid and up through my adult years, I was amazed by all his fancy basketball moves and incredible hoop shots. He was entertaining, talented and very inspiring!

Today he is not as agile or as tall as I had pictured him, but Meadowlark still has a radiant smile and a contagious joy. He is a humble and kind man.

He opened his talk by quoting Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.”

He then opened his Bible and said that he is an ordained minister today. Wow!

His main point became evident. This legendary basketball player was humble, thankful, and still amazed by the opportunities he enjoyed throughout the years. It always surprised him, he said, that others took notice of him and thought he was special.

During his talk, Meadowlark shared instances of how he overcame the pressure to find peace in extremely stressful tryouts when first starting his basketball career. He said that it had to do with the encouraging words of others who spoke to him by name.

I immediately thought of the Lord saying that He knows our name and calls us by name (John 10:3), as He is our Good Shepherd. Am I listening to the Lord and trusting His lead? Does His voice calm my fears? Can I hear Him call my name above the stress I feel over a situation?

Does peace reign over panic and trust reign over turmoil because He promises to love me, lead me and protect me?

Is the gospel so real in the depths of my heart that I am not ashamed of

it and can I say that I am not ashamed of the work of God in my life—even through the traumas and dramas day to day?

I could really sense the Lord’s presence as Meadowlark spoke. God clearly had a message for me. I prayed, “Lord, are you telling me that I need to be joyful in all circumstances? Are you telling me that I am not finding peace through Your presence? Let me know and change me.”

Surprise prize

The basketball genius then gave credit to Jesus’ words in John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.” It was clear that his life experiences did not make him humble and joyful. Instead, it was his relationship with Christ that gave him joy, and in that joy he is able to appreciate his life experiences.

Meadowlark Lemon ended by saying, “I give away a basketball at every speaking event and today I am choosing this woman in the front row who has been smiling at me.” It was me! To my amazement, he threw the basketball to me and then said, “You catch like a girl.” I did not think that was so bad since I am a girl.

On the basketball he had written his name with his number, 36, and “Hall of Fame 2003.” Later, he wrote my name above his name. Wow. He chose me and, by it, the Lord confirmed to me that I, too, need to maintain and sustain the joy of the Lord as evidently as this amazing man.

It’s hard to fathom why God chose us to have a relationship with Him. However, He sees our faces before Him, knows our name and calms our anxious hearts (if we choose to let Him). Does our attitude reflect the joy of the Lord?



Pursuing joy

In our travels across the United States last year with our Power of Friendship Tour, we received prayer requests from women who are struggling with many, many serious life circumstances. All of us will struggle in this world: debt, death, divorce, depression, health, relationships... BUT the joy of the Lord can be our strength. God has given each of us gifts and talents to be used for His glory on earth as it is in heaven. We, too, can be thankful regardless of our circumstances: God loves us and He is faithful.

Set your mind on things above, as God understands your deepest hurt. Let Him heal you, keep His commandments, abide in His love and allow Jesus Christ’s joy to fill you.

And let me tell you...I am preaching to myself and now I have a basketball sitting in my favorite chair to remind me!



Tonilee Adamson is co-founder of Daily Disciples Ministries Inc., a Christian women’s ministry. She and her ministry partner Bobbye Brooks have a daily radio program

at 10am on KPRZ 1210AM. Learn more at www.DailyDisciples.org.

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Do you have a receipt for that?

I know that receipt is around here someplace. When we left the furniture store, darling husband told me to put it someplace safe, which I did. Except now I can't remember where that safe place is.

The receipt is for six bookshelves purchased when we cleaned and reorganized my office last summer ("cleaned and reorganized" being a euphemism for "moved everything around so that now I can't find anything.") It's time to do our taxes, and the IRS says that in order to write off the shelves as an office expense I need to provide proof of the purchase.

Well, duh. The shelves are right there in the office. I can even take a picture and submit it with my tax return, if they'd like. And while I can't prove exactly how much I paid for them, I'm

pretty sure each shelf was \$45, because frankly they're not worth any more than that. Does the IRS really think I'm going to try and take a deduction for something I can't prove I actually bought, or claim to have overpaid for some cheap furniture? I'm not a liar, and I take offense to that challenge of my skills as a female American shopper.

And while we're at it, why do I need to prove that I purchased shelves that I can see and touch, but I don't have to prove things like mileage? Sure, I keep a record of where I went and how many miles I drove, but that doesn't actually prove, for example, that six times last year I met my editor for lunch, or that we talked about anything work-related.

I mean, I did meet my editor for lunch and we did talk about work, but I don't have to provide a dated note from the barista or a transcript of the conversation, right? I just add up all the miles I drove and give Joe the Accountant the figure. He taps his adding machine and comes up with a deduction amount. He doesn't ask me where I went or what I did while I was there or if anyone can prove my whereabouts on the afternoon of Oct. 15, 2014. (Although, maybe in the event of an audit, the FBI will be called in and I'll be forced to back up my story with evidence. Note to self: Have barista sign my mileage report.)

And you're not even allowed to write off important things. If I ran the IRS, I'd allow writers to take deductions for any mood enhancing products used to treat writers' block. Things like coffee or tea, chocolate, ice cream, anything

with whipped cream, red toenail polish, and sessions in the tanning booth.

I have to keep track of receipts and papers for both my writing expenses and our personal household expenses, and that can be overwhelming. Fortunately, I have help from darling husband. One year, when he asked what he could do to help, I handed him a folder and said, "Can you make sure everything we need for our tax appointment is there?" A few minutes later, he handed me back the folder and said, "I don't know how to do this, so I did the best I could." When we got to our appointment, I opened the folder and found envelopes from the bank and mortgage company, along with random pieces of what turned out to be junk mail.

I don't blame him. Half the time, I don't even know what we need in order to do our taxes. I just hand over any mail we've gotten in the last few months marked "Important Tax Information" and cross my fingers that it's what the accountant needs.

If I want to get my taxes done on time this year, I really need to find that stupid receipt for the shelves. The good news is that, thanks to my obsession with all things paper, it's probably still around here. Although I wonder if the IRS would believe me if I said the cat ate it. I can offer a hairball as proof.



Award-winning freelance writer Joanne Brokaw spends her days dreaming of things she'd like to do but probably never will—like swimming with dolphins, cleaning

the attic and someday overcoming the trauma of elementary school picture day. She lives with two dogs, a cat, six chickens and one very patient husband. Learn more at www.joannebrokaw.com.

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Wealth management should go beyond what you have, and embrace what you want to accomplish. It starts with asking the right questions. Just as a carefully calibrated GPS can help you land accurately at almost any intended destination, a carefully calibrated financial plan can help you pursue your intended goals.

- Grow your assets
- Protect your wealth
- Give generously
- Transfer a legacy



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