

# FACING UP

THE STORY  
OF MY  
FALL





to Julie, Jacob, Christina, & Taryn,  
who got stuck on the front pew

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# Resignation



April 7, 2013





*near the end*

Drops of sweat trickled down my back. I shifted my weight and looked up from my sermon notes. Normally, by this time, people were sneaking glances at their watches, coming out of a coma. Not today. Every eye was glued on me.

“And so,” I said, trying to control the waver in my voice, “four weeks from today will be my final day as your pastor.” There was an audible gasp.

After twenty years of pastoring the same church, I had become as predictable as the sanctuary furniture. They would have been less surprised if the pulpit had burst into flames.

This was my flock. These were my people. I dedicated their babies to God. When they were sick, I went to the hospital to pray. I officiated their weddings. I stood beside the graves of their loved ones, reading Scripture and speaking words of comfort.

Back in seminary, I had dreamt of staying at the same church until the day I died. That kind of radical

commitment sounded romantic. Now, here I was, bailing out.

It would have been easier if I could have told them God was calling me to a new church or a seminary professorship. But there was nothing on the horizon. No plans. No job. I wasn't leaving them to go somewhere. I was leaving them to go nowhere.

How could I explain this to my parents, who were members of my church and often told me how proud they were? What about my three children, whom I had brought up in the faith? Then there was Julie, my wife of twenty-five years, who had stuck with me though thick and thin. I was terminating the only way we had to pay the bills.

I told people I was like Abraham. When God called Abraham, he didn't tell him where he was going either. Abraham had to take a leap of faith. That made me sound heroic. I didn't feel heroic. I felt like I was being shoved off a cliff.

Ten years earlier, I had begun to feel suffocated. I was tortured by nightmares of being buried alive. I woke with a jolt to a spinning room and had to sit on the side of my bed until it stopped. I fought waves of depression. I knew I needed to resign. But how could I? To do so would be to destroy the foundation I had built my life on, to turn my back on everything I had achieved.

And also, being a pastor isn't a job you're supposed to quit. The whole premise is that God has called you. If

you stop being a pastor it's proof you never should have been one in the first place.

I had always felt a little uneasy about my calling. You're supposed to go into the ministry like Moses, kicking and screaming, telling God he has the wrong man for the job. But I had wanted to be a pastor more than anything. Now, I was getting out the way you are supposed to go in: against my will. An irresistible power left me no choice.

I was betting that the power was God and that somehow, it would all be okay. If I had know what that power was and where it would lead I would have been terrified. And I would have done it anyway.

# Children's Stories



June 22, 1963



*Freshly minted me. Not much to look at.*

After tucking us in, my mother sat at an old upright piano in the living room and played. Chopin Opus 10, #3 in E Major. *Tristesse*—French for sadness. Music is my earliest memory.

The notes echoed down the wooden hallway and under my door, resonant with desire. I can still conjure this feeling of knowing without words. I recall

the taste of Gerber Baby Food the way a worm might know the taste of soil.

A mobile hung over my crib, a blur of dancing shapes and colors. A plastic toy, covered with buttons and bells was strapped to the rails. When I poked, it made various sounds: “Ding!” “Honk!” “Snap!”

I began to point and name: “Mama.” “Binky.” “Blanket.” Finally, I named the strangest thing of all: myself. I was no longer merely aware. I was aware of *being* aware.



*Self aware?*

I arrived as a character in Jack and Sandy's story. They fell in love in high school and got married. Dad became a math professor. Mom was an English major. They wanted a family so they added my sisters and me to their story, along with a dog named Bogie.

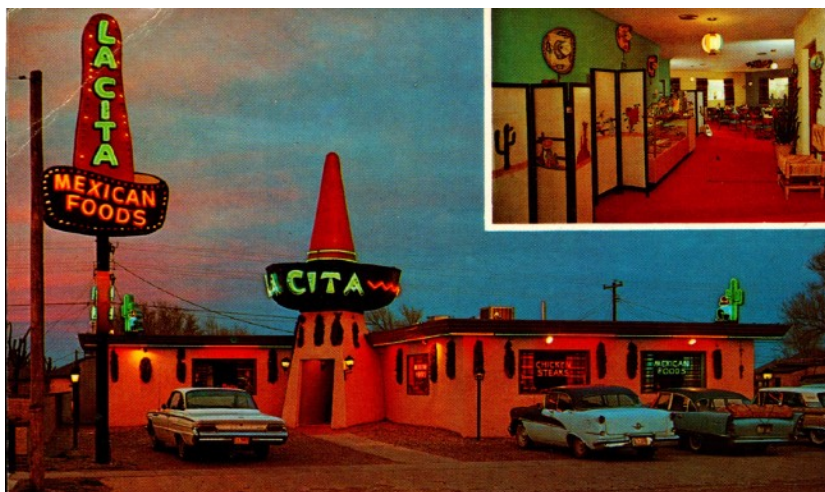


*Jack & Sandy  
King & Queen of the Prom*



*Picnic time. Sandra, Jane, Maury, Bekka, the '57 Chevy*

Jack and Sandy's story didn't start with them either. My mother's parents established an iconic Mexican food restaurant on Route 66 in Tucumcari, New Mexico called *La Cita*.



*La Cita, back in the heyday*

Dad came from farmers who homesteaded near Tucumcari. I was named for my grandfathers: "Joseph" on dad's dad, "Maurice" on mom's. I liked how I fit in.



*Great grandmother Molly loved to drive the tractor*



*The rock house on the homestead in New Mexico*





*Wearing my best boots for the class picture*

In grade school, I learned the story of America. I was lucky. I had been born in the greatest nation on earth, the envy of the world. I placed my hand on my heart and pledged allegiance to the flag.



*after church*

In church I met the author of all stories, the one who put them together and moved things along. God loved me. I loved him back and asked Jesus into my heart.



In middle school, I heard about the Soviet Union. It was a big powerful nation like ours. It had a story called Communism. There was no God in their story. They had nuclear weapons. The world could be destroyed with the touch of a button. It was a game of chicken. Communists had to be converted to our story or be stomped out.

But Chopin made me wonder, left me with a haunting sense, that all the stories might be ephemeral, fragile as soap bubbles, certain to pop.

And what if that happened? What would be left?

Whatever it was, the music spoke of more, not less.

# Born Again



Fall, 1978



*Preparing for the NBA*

“No! No! No! Over here Robertson!” Coach Rhendish grabbed my basketball jersey and yanked me across the court. He was teaching us a new play and doing a lousy job of it. Sweat dripped off the end of his nose. An angry red vein pulsed on his forehead.

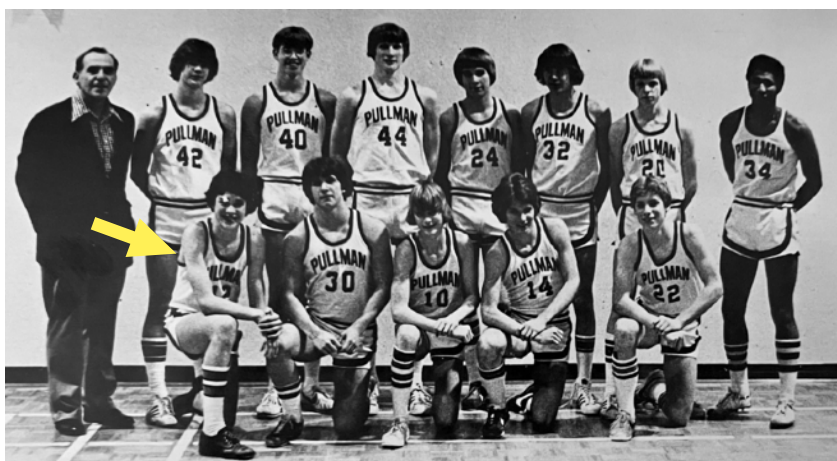
“Run it again!” He barked, flinging the ball at me. I passed the ball to the center and moved to my right. Coach yanked me back on my heels and glared.

“I said to the *guard*, then rotate *left*, then, if the defender...”

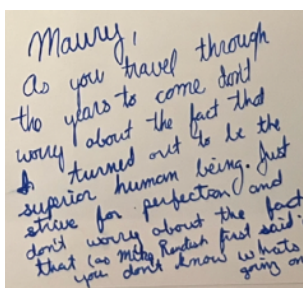
I have replayed what happened next many times. There are so many great things I could have said. But I didn’t stop to think. I erupted with the first words that came to mind.

“I don’t know what’s going on!”

“You don’t know what’s going on?!” He exploded. “Then SIT DOWN!” He dragged me across the court and slammed me down on the bench which is where I spent the remainder of my sophomore year on the basketball team.



*My friend, Eric, wrote in my yearbook, "Maury, as you travel through life, don't worry that, as coach said, you don't know what's going on."*



In our family, sports were how you proved you were a man. In the summers I went to Spokane to attend basketball camp with my cousins. My uncle Dave led the camp. He and his kids went on to glory. Dave won a state

championship. One cousin got a college basketball scholarship. Another became an ESPN sportscaster. Me? I sat on the bench.

I went home, shut the door, and plopped down in a bean bag chair to stare at the wall. I squeezed a pimple between my thumb and forefinger, resisting the urge to make a bloody mess of it. I thought about the girl I had been trying to impress from the moment I saw her back in junior high. For a few glorious weeks, she had taken an



*Acne. And braces.*

interest in me but when adolescence hit, she blossomed. I metastasized. When I passed her in the hall there was a chasm between us. I smiled and waved and tried not to fall in.

I was so desperate I reached for the Bible my parents had given me for my 13th birthday and opened it in my lap. It landed on a Psalm.

*O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?  
How long will you look the other way?  
How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,  
with sorrow in my heart every day?*

*But I trust in your unfailing love.  
I will rejoice because you have rescued me.  
I will sing to the LORD  
because he is good to me.*



*Getting on the bus with my sisters*

The words were electric, as if God was speaking directly to me. It was as real as the arms of my own mother. Jesus was alive! I leapt to my feet and ran around the room, pumping my fists in the air. To the cruelty of High School

rejection I now had a triumphant reply: Jesus loves me.

The next morning I got up early and opened my Bible to try to make the connection again. I pulled Vaughan Williams, Symphony #5 from a record sleeve and put it on the turntable. I loved the sound of the French horn. It was like it came from the same mysterious place where the Voice originated.

It didn't bother me that the Bible was confusing. I would have been disappointed if it hadn't been. The subject, after all, was God. I admired Pastor Ashley, my childhood pastor. He studied the Bible in ancient Greek and had it

figured out. At his suggestion, I bought a King James Study Bible and went to work.

Our family lived in the country. While my friends in town gathered to play sports and



*Mom, Me, and Brute*



*The family by the house*





*Our home, nestled in the Palouse hills*

chase girls, I was home alone. I didn't mind. I had the company I wanted. I got off the bus, grabbed my shotgun, and traipsed through the wheat fields with my dog, Brute, looking for pheasants, feeling the glory of God in every step. At night, I went for walks under the stars, shivering at the cold and yipping of coyotes.



*Break time*

In the summers, dad took me backpacking. We explored nearly every lake in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, whether or not there were trails.

It would be hard to script a better childhood. I was up to my neck in glory. There was no doubt in my mind: I had met God and was on the right path.



*At the top*



# Preacher



1980-1982



*On parade*

I asked the band Director if I could switch from the tuba to the French horn.

"Sure," he said, unenthusiastically. I followed him to a closet at the back of the band room. He rummaged around and dug up a beat-up case containing a dented horn. "Here," he said. "Take it home and try it out." I felt like I had been given the keys to the kingdom.

I put it in the bathtub, cleaning and polishing it as best as I could. I took it to my room and put the mouthpiece to my lips. "Splat."

Each day after school, I tried without success to make the sound I heard on the Vaughan Williams record. My parents saw my determination and set me up with a graduate student at the University named Stanton Falling for lessons.

Stanton was a Native American with wild black hair like a mad scientist. Sheets of music lay scattered around his living room. He lived and breathed French horn. I took a seat beside him on a



*catching some sun on the back porch*

kitchen chair.

"Listen," he said. He played a single note. It began as a whisper, with no waver. It grew to be an unbearable presence, then slowly diminished and disappeared. I was in awe. It was like watching the sun rise and set.

"Now," he said, "You try."

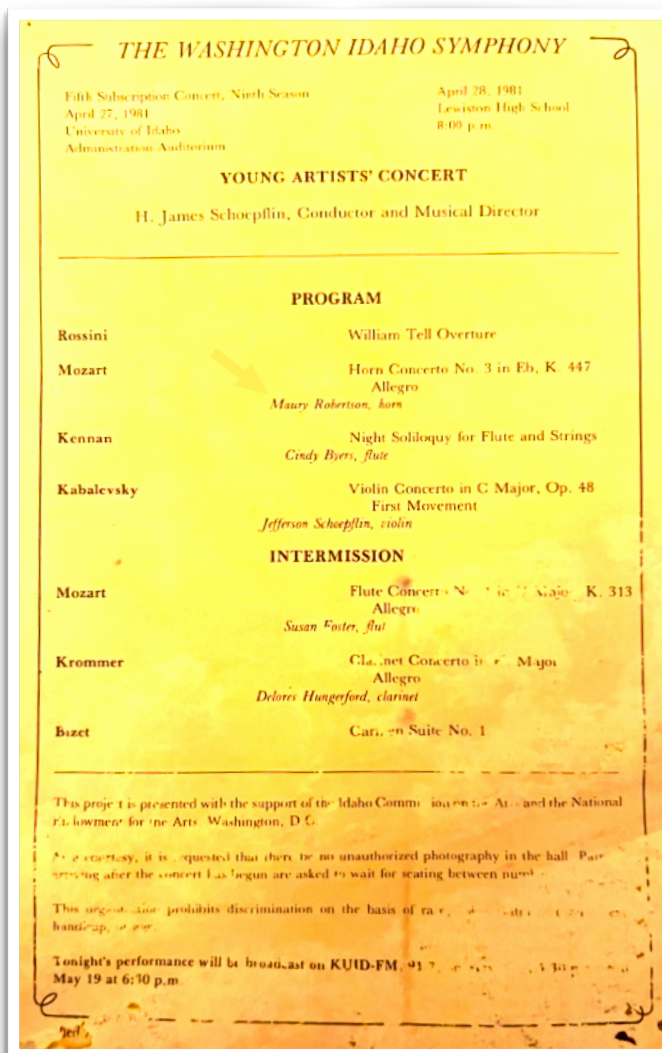
"Splat." The sound seemed stuck in the horn.

Stanton made me put down the horn and taught me how to breath. "The sound doesn't come from the horn," he said. "It comes from you."

Over the next six months, I got better. My parents rewarded my effort with a brand new, professional grade horn. Light reflected off the flawless tubes. I put it to my lips. It made that glorious sound. In the evenings, my mother accompanied me on the piano. Soon, we were playing at church. I entered school competitions and won.



*Playing horn with my mom*



My senior year, I was a finalist in our community orchestra's Young Artist Competition, which meant I got to perform with the symphony.

I wish everyone had the chance, at least once in their life, to be accompanied by a symphony. The sound of a piano is lovely, but there is no escaping the fact that it is a percussion instrument. The strings are struck by things called “hammers.” No matter how gently you press the keys, every note is an attack and a decay.

In an orchestra, each note is produced by a human being playing their own instrument. The notes ebb and flow with their own unique timbre. To be accompanied by a symphony orchestra is like bouncing on a cloud with angels.

But the horn is a notoriously difficult instrument. What if I got up in front of all those people and splatted? What would the reviewer write in the paper? I put on Bachman Turner Overdrive’s *Taking Care of Business* and turned it up as loud as I could stand it.

*Takin’ care of business, every day*  
*Takin care of business, every way...*

I forced myself to tune this out and focus on the sound of the horn. It worked. The night of the concert, I was able to ignore my fear. I placed the horn to my lips and blew. Out came that glorious sound. It filled the auditorium and echoed off the walls. I was Gabriel, proclaiming wonders in the universal language.

Not long after this, Pastor Ashley asked if I would like to preach. This was an even greater honor than winning the Young Artist Competition. The preacher is

God's spokesman. His job it is to turn written word into living Word. It was my chance to help people to feel what I felt; for God to be as real to them as he was to me. I stepped into the pulpit and looked out on a sea of friendly faces. I opened my mouth and began to preach.

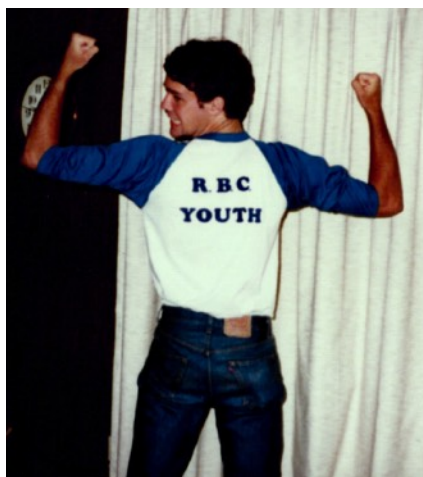
They were smiling. Listening. Maybe the message was inspired. Maybe it was a novelty to see a young person preaching. Maybe they sensed how deeply I felt what I was saying. However, it happened, it worked. It was like the Young Artist concert, that same wonderful feeling of bringing heaven to earth.

Imagine if this was my job; to study the Bible and help others make a connection with God? How could I do anything else? I majored in music and set my sights on seminary.

# Cracks



1983-1991



*My first church job*

My zeal elevated me to leadership roles. I became the president of our Christian college group. The summer of my sophomore year a big church in central Washington hired me to be their summer youth intern.

I discovered this meant I was the slave of the pastor's wife. The first day, she handed me a big stack of names—she called them “prospects”—and told me to call every one of them and invite them to church. I started at “A.” A week later, I arrived at “Z.” As far as I know, no one came because of these calls but the pastor's wife packed the summer so full of fun that kids came out of the woodwork. We went on scavenger hunts and jumped on trampolines and had water balloon fights. We even put on a musical. I tried to squeeze messages about God in the cracks but no one was listening.

This was the first time I got a glimpse behind scenes of a church. The pastor's son was in his 20's and loved to make crude sexual remarks and watch me squirm. People confided in me, telling me why they didn't like the pastor. Some didn't like his preaching. Some thought he was too rigid. His wife was a never-ending stream of complaints



that no one cared enough about the church or was committed to the youth.

I made a special connection with a kid named John. He started showing up during the day to follow me around. In the mornings, I got up early to go jogging with him.



*John, on the set of our summer musical*

One Saturday, we went waterskiing on the Snake River. When it was time to go home, we couldn't find John. The last time anyone could remember seeing him was when the kids were playing on the dock. John had jumped off to swim for shore. We feared the worst. I dove to the bottom and swam around, searching with my hands in the dark, murky water.

We called 9-1-1. The police sent a dive team which began to search systematically between the dock and the shore. About halfway out, a hand shot up. "Got him." They pulled John's lifeless body onto the bank. He was long past any hope of resuscitation. A young couple from a charismatic church approached me and offered to lay hands on John to raise him from the dead.

"Let us do it," they pleaded. "Think of the glory God will get."

I wanted to believe them. What could be the harm? I looked at the anguished faces of John's parents and decided they didn't need any more drama. I thanked them for the offer and sent them on their way. For a long time I wondered if I had done the right thing. Did I lack faith?

The rest of the summer, I lived in the basement of John's house with his parents and two siblings. Maybe the hope was that we would comfort each other. Maybe the idea was to avoid a lawsuit. In any case, I had a front row seat to pain beyond description.

My first taste of church had left me with a lot of questions. I was eager to go to seminary and get some answers. After college, and a year playing horn in the Boise Philharmonic, I moved to Mill Valley, California to attend Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

I was surprised when my Old Testament professor explained that the Bible contained two different stories of creation, that Adam and Eve were not real people, that the



*Julie (far right) on the night we first met.*

Old Testament was not written by Moses, and that there were conflicting accounts of Israel's history. All I was getting from seminary was more questions.

I attended church in downtown San Francisco where I was put in charge of the singles group. A man named Ray took special interest in me. I can still see his big brown eyes, staring at me in adoration. He gave me expensive gifts. One night, he invited me to his apartment for dinner. I knocked on his door nervously. He invited me in and sat me at a candlelit table where we ate a delicious meal. The longing in his eyes was unmistakable. I excused myself as quickly as possible.

This was the 1980's in a Southern Baptist church. Not only did Ray make me uncomfortable. Homosexuality was considered a serious sin. I asked the pastor to meet with us. Ray slumped in his chair, looking hurt and misunderstood. The pastor didn't have a single word of caution for him. I wondered if I was losing my mind. Had I misread the situation? Thankfully, I met my wife during this time. I paraded her around on my arm to make my sexual preference clear.

My roommate, was starting a church among Laotian refugees in Santa Rosa. He invited me to work with the youth. I was broke and there was a small stipend so I gladly took the opportunity. He had a great sense of humor and was fun to work with. Around the dorm he loved to call me "his youth guy."

The pastor of the English congregation in Santa Rosa was more interested in his Christian rock band than his elderly congregation. His children regularly burst into the fellowship hall screaming bloody murder at each other. They used the church kitchen to prepare their meals and left the sink piled high with dirty dishes. The overflowing garbage was crawling with ants.

Finally, in 1989, I graduated. I had a seminary degree and a wife. I had checked all the boxes. I waited for job offers to start pouring in. Crickets. For lack of something better to do, I enrolled in the Ph.D. program. Julie pursued her undergraduate degree at Dominican

University where, for the first time in her life, she enjoyed education.

Two of my professors were starting a new church in Julie's hometown of Novato. They asked us to lead the youth group there. The professors were charismatic and knew what they were doing. It was well organized and fun.



*Julie, outside our apartment  
at the seminary*

We took the kids to a youth convention in Fresno where Josh McDowell was the featured speaker. The theme was chastity before marriage. McDowell blasted the kids with horrors of STDs and harrowing tales of emotional scars left by premarital sex. All the talk about sex had the opposite effect from what he intended, at least in our group. During one of the breaks, a couple snuck off and slept together. So much for scare tactics.

Finally, a tiny church in Yuba City, California invited me to be their pastor. I was elated. This is what I had worked my whole life for. Never mind that it was a group of rebels who had left other churches to start their

own church, or that they met in a tiny rented cinderblock building, or that they couldn't even pay me \$2000 a month. Never mind that I was halfway through my Ph.D., or that I would uproot my wife from a setting where she was thriving. God was calling. That was all that mattered. My experience in churches and seminary education had shaken my faith but if I could just get a chance to be a pastor, I felt sure I could revive it. There was still a flame there.

We dragged a U-Haul to our two-bedroom apartment in Yuba City. People might scoff at this inglorious beginning. I wasn't worried. God would come through. It was time to lift the horn to my lips and blow.



*Northside Baptist Church*

# Disaster



Fall, 1991



Northside Baptist Church was a cinderblock building along a busy street. It sat on an acre lot, the front half gravel, the back half weeds. A homemade sign along the road proclaimed,

### **Northside Baptist Church**

*Supporting the Southern Baptist Convention*

Sunday Bible Study 9:45

Morning Worship 11:00

Evening Service 6:00

Wednesday Bible Study 7:00



A board swinging from chains beneath the sign read, "Pastor Maury Robertson." My office was at end of a narrow modular building where the children met.

The 30-40 people who came each Sunday greeted me with smiles and encouragement.

Bob M, an 80 year-old dynamite salesman, led

the music. He had a face like a bulldog and a wide toothy smile that made me think of a politician.

Bob M called me each week to tell me which hymns he had chosen so I could put them in the bulletin. My first clue that something was off track was his tone on one of



## Mid-Valley Area Religious Highlights



Maury and Julie Robertson

### New pastors arrive

Northside Baptist Church of Yuba City and Marysville First United Methodist Church have new pastors.

The Rev. Maury Robertson and his wife, Julie, arrived in Yuba City in late June. He is a graduate of Washington State University, where he received a bachelor of music in 1985, and Golden Gate Baptist Seminary, where he received a master of divinity degree in 1989.

The Washington native also is pursuing a doctorate in New Testament studies at Golden Gate Seminary.

Pastor Gerald Shawcross has been assigned the new pastor at First United Methodist Church in Marysville effective July 1.

His first message in 8:30 and 10:55 a.m. services tomorrow will be

these calls. He was all dynamite salesman, no politician.

"Number 222. Number 33. Number 426. And for the offertory, Number 319. Got it?"

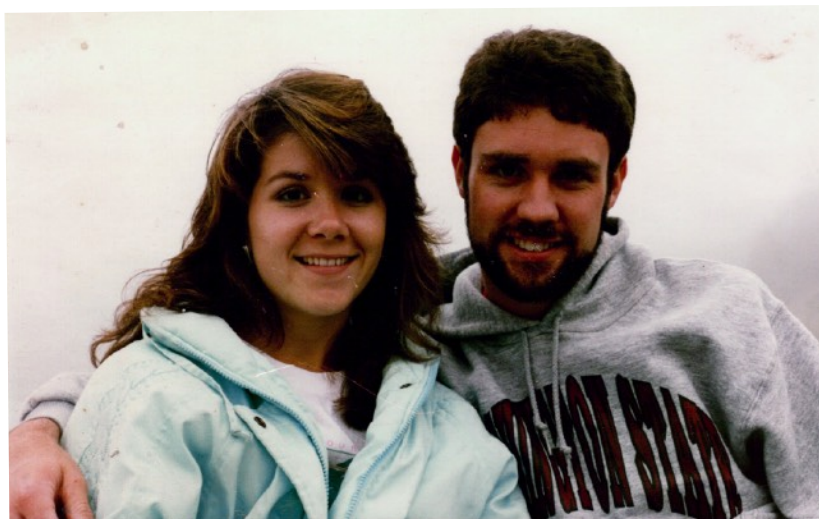
"Got it." I said.

"Click."

Invitations to his house after church stopped. I didn't know why but it was okay. Northside had another option: Bob L. Every Sunday after church, one crowd went to Bob M's house and the other to Bob L's. At Bob L's, we felt like part of

the family. We ate delicious barbecue, watched the 49ers, and discussed the Bible during commercials.

One Sunday, Bob L asked if I would announce the Life Chain, a pro life demonstration that would take place in a few weeks. "Sure," I said. Southern Baptist churches were assumed to be pro-life so I didn't think this would be a problem. The next Sunday, I announced the Life Chain and told them I would be there, assuming my presence was expected. As I made the announcement, a dark cloud crossed Bob M's face.



*Julie and me, during this time*

At the monthly all-church business meeting, Bob M made a motion that we never discuss abortion in church because it was a political issue, not a spiritual one. His people nodded in agreement. They had been prepped for this. Bob L's wife, who was strongly pro-life, burst into tears and disappeared out the back door. Undaunted, someone from Bob M's crowd called for a vote. The motion carried.

Afterward, I went to Bob L's house. They were seething, shocked that Bob M had sucker punched them with this power play.

The next Sunday was our monthly deacons' meeting. There were only three deacons: Bob M and two others, both from his crowd.

"You would be wise to stick with the majority," he counseled me.

"But abortion is a moral issue, not just a political one," I replied, surprised by the strain in my voice.

A look of paternal compassion washed over Bob's face. "You know," he said, "Times are tough. Jobs are hard to come by. You should be careful."

It felt like that day on the basketball court. I lost it. "How can you threaten me?" I shouted.

Bob's face flipped instantly from paternal compassion to injury. The other two bought it. Bob was just trying to help. I, on the other hand, had committed the unforgivable sin. I had lost my temper. I had not yet learned the art of fighting in church where the trick is to feign compassion and sneak the dagger in unseen. I had no experience at this. Bob was a ninja. I returned to Bob L's house and told them what had happened. They were boiling mad.

I had to take a stand. Abortion was wrong, wasn't it? The pastor is the spokesman for God. He cannot adjust the message to the whims of his congregation. The next Sunday, I opened my Bible and announced that I would be laying out the Biblical teaching on abortion. An elderly woman gathered her things and left. She was followed by a young woman who slammed the door so hard the walls shook. I plowed ahead, verse-by-verse, making my case,

finding courage in the nods of my supporters and dodging daggers from the rest.

That night, we gathered at Bob L's house to assess the situation. They congratulated me on my courage. But what now? To my surprise, Bob said,

"We have to end this."

We piled into our cars and caravanned to Bob M's house where his people were gathered. Bob L rang the bell. No answer. He rapped on the door. Nothing. He banged on it. Silence. He broke into tears and cried out.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Let's talk! You can have it your way." No response.

We returned to our cars and went home.

In Southern Baptist Churches the majority rules. We were outnumbered. The next Sunday I resigned to avoid being fired.

Julie and I returned to our little apartment. How would we pay the rent? Julie made minimum wage at a local preschool. I made nothing. I called my favorite seminary professor, seeking encouragement and counsel. Bob M had already called to tell him what a disaster I was.

"I hear you split a perfectly good church," said my seminary professor.

I tried to explain but received with neither understanding nor forgiveness.

That Thanksgiving, I gathered with Julie's big Italian family in Novato. I sat in silence in the TV room with the men, staring at a football game. I had bet everything that if I gave myself to God, God would take care of me and use me to work wonders. In just four months, I had blown my first church to smithereens. My career had ended before it even began.

The phone rang. It was Bob L.

"We want to start a new church and we want you to be the pastor."

I told them I would need to pray about it but I already knew my answer.

# Do-Over



1992-1994

I set my guitar in my lap and smiled at the crowded living room. We had stopped meeting at Bob L's house—too many people for him. He liked order. Jack's house was perfect, like blue jeans. It had a big living room and kitchen, with a swimming pool out back. Jack did crazy dives off the board and splashed his two daughters and any other teenagers who showed up. He and his wife keep delicious food coming.

This was the church I had dreamt of: one big happy family, all on the same page. The feeling was magnetic. Others joined us: A young family. A single man. An elderly couple who were instantly adopted as grandparents. Soon, we no longer fit in Jack's living room.

I rode with Jack in his big pickup to Sam's Club. We loaded 30 folding chairs in the back and set them up under an arbor by the pool. I presented a strategy to become a full-fledged church which would begin in September.

I was aided by an innovative pastor in Chico who was also starting a church. Southern Baptist churches had followed a the same format for decades: Sunday School at 10:00. Worship at 11:00. Evening service at 6:00. For the committed there was a Wednesday night prayer meeting at 7:00. This schedule was as set as any Catholic liturgy.

The pastor in Chico was an iconoclast. He offered just one service on Sundays and took Sunday evening off. In place of Sunday School and the Wednesday night prayer meeting, everyone was supposed to join a small

group in someone's home during the week. He replaced the hymns with rock music and the song leader with a band that included guitars and drums.



These changes felt natural since we were already a small group that met in a home and I led singing with a guitar. All the other Baptist churches in our area followed the old script. Ours was so



free, so fun, so cool.

I found an office building where we could meet on Sunday mornings. It was along a busy highway so we



drew a lot of attention. We came up with a cool new name to go with our cool new way of doing church: River Valley Christian Fellowship. I drew a colorful logo and put it on a sign. This wasn't your grandparent's church!

To our innovative format, we added innovative marketing. We put an ad in the paper and sent a flyer to 2000 households announcing our first service. The ad pictured a variety of people with the caption, "It's easy to fit in at River Valley!"



*The picture we used for our mailing*

On the big day, we waited nervously for people to arrive. At 9:50, a trickle of newcomers appeared. We restrained the urge to mob them. Five minutes later, forty more walked through the door. It wasn't the massive crowd we had dreamt of but it was respectable. We had critical mass.

Our numbers grew. People liked our new church for the same reason they like a new car. We had that new church smell and cool new features. There wasn't a scratch or dent on us anywhere. There had never been a fight or a discouraging word.



*Dedicating Jacob, our first child. The group grandpa is saying the prayer*

One Sunday, a pretty blonde woman approached me and said, "Why don't you lose the coat and tie? You look hot up there." She was right. Most people dressed casually. Some even came in shorts. My attire was part of the old paradigm, like the Sunday evening service and the hymnbooks. It had to go. I carefully chose a pair of dockers and a button down shirt. I was hoping the few remaining formal dressers wouldn't have an allergic reaction.

No one cared about my new wardrobe except the adopted grandparents. They refused to make eye contact with me during the sermon and left quickly afterward. The next day, Julie and I visited them in their modular home. They were polite but didn't offer the customary glass of lemonade. I tried to explain why I didn't wear a coat and tie but could tell I was getting nowhere. They never came back. We had our first dent.

Overall, though, this was still the church of my dreams. Other churches were struggling to survive. We were growing. I managed to complete my dissertation and earn my Ph.D. Everything was on the upswing. What could stop us?

Space. We were out of space. Rent was high and the cost of buying was out of the question. I decided to keep innovating. Where was it written that church has to be on Sundays at 10:00? We could grow by becoming multiple congregations that met at various times during the week. Each could have its own pastor. We could share the cost of rent. We would enjoy the economy of scale and keep the small church feel we loved so much.

I had a pastor-friend who loved this idea and was interested in leading a second congregation. I spent weeks crafting a 40 page set of bylaws, laying out the details of my innovative multi- congregational church. The board was enthusiastic and approved the plans. I shared the vision on Sundays and people became excited. All we

needed was a confirmation vote, which I considered a formality.

On Saturday night before the vote, the phone rang. It was Bob L. "We are over at Jack's and think you should stop this multi congregational idea."

I stared at the receiver in disbelief. Stop it? How could I stop it? It was already underway. If there were concerns, why hadn't they been raised earlier? If there was a gathering of the old guard, why was I not invited? The vote needed 80% to pass. It fell short by a one vote.

I went home feeling exactly as I had when Northside split. Julie and I looked at property in Oregon and thought seriously of moving there. We were looking for a secluded ranch with a long lane and a gate where we could escape church people. I still loved God but I had had it with church.

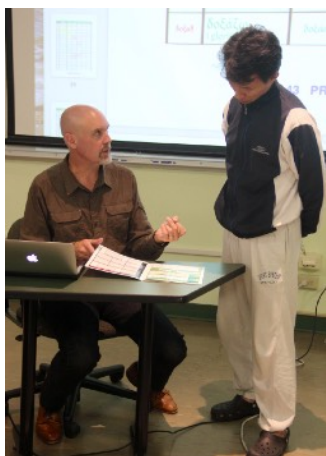
# Band-aids



1995-2016

I was left with a hundred and fifty people who met on Sundays plus 50 more who wanted to become a new congregation. They resented being told they couldn't. My solution was to lead both groups. The plan was to build up the new congregation and demonstrate the merits of the multi-congregational strategy. Then, when the new group had proven itself, they would hire their own pastor.

It didn't work. I was straddling two horses going down diverging paths. The congregation that met on Friday nights regarded the Sunday group as old and stodgy. The Sunday crowd saw the Friday night group as an illegitimate upstart. For a year, I tried to bridge the gap but I had created a monster. There was nothing to do but call the whole thing off. The Friday group felt betrayed. Most of them left and never returned. We had definitely lost that new church smell.



*Helping a student with Greek*

In spite of the commotion, our numbers on Sundays continued to grow. We moved into the gymnasium at the middle school where we had crowds of 200 to 300 each Sunday. It should have felt like a success but I was just tired.

The seminary called and asked if I would be able to teach a class on biblical Greek. This was a

welcome distraction. I got to dress up and drive to the Bay Area and be Dr. Robertson. It didn't do much for our bank account, but it did wonders for my ego.

John Maxwell was at the height of his popularity at this time, writing books on leadership. What mattered was not a church's strategy or the way it organized. The key to becoming a successful church was to have a dynamic leader. I attended his seminars and did my best to be dynamic but this became just another form of exhaustion.

A contractor in our church helped me realize my dream of designing and building my own house. We bought an acre lot at the base of the Sutter Buttes. For a year I spent as much time swinging a hammer as pastoring a church. This, along with raising three kids and and



*The house in Sutter*

teaching at the seminary, left little time for reflection. I kept swinging the hammer and taking the next step. There were many days when life was wonderful. But this was in spite of church, not because of it.

A young man who joined our church back when it started graduated from a conservative Calvinist seminary. We hired him to lead the youth. His influence caused me to a shift my focus again. What



*The kids: Jacob, Christy, Taryn*

mattered was not church strategy or dynamic leadership. What mattered was God. How had I forgotten? Wasn't that the whole point? I turned to the study of the Bible. I piled my shelves high with theology books and honed my Greek. I began preaching through books of the Bible verse-by-verse.

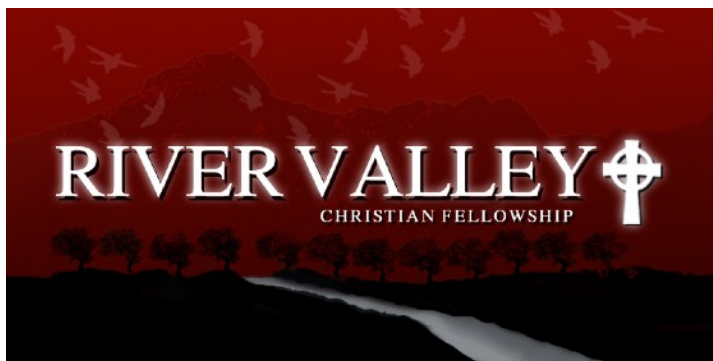
The new focus didn't change things. A couple that had been one of my most ardent supporters left because they didn't like the way I interpreted the book of Revelation. The founder of the Life Chain called and insisted that I pressure the OB/GYN who attended our church to stop distributing contraceptives. I told him I would not do this. Thus ended another friendship. When I



saw him in the grocery store he couldn't even meet my gaze.

Our sponsoring church invited us to merge with them. It only made sense. We had people and no building; they had a building and no people. After the merger, life became easier and more predictable. But looking out at the dated carpet and rows of pews it struck me that we were no longer young and sexy.

Money was a constant frustration in our marriage. Although I had been relatively successful, I never earned as much as a first year school teacher and was expect to cover my own healthcare and retirement. Thankfully, California has good welfare. That took care of health insurance for our kids. I was able to save only a paltry sum for retirement. If I had asked for a raise, it probably would have been granted but I thought it wrong to do so. I took Matthew 6:33-34 literally.



*The church sign, after we merged*

*Seek ye first the kingdom of God  
and all these things shall be added unto you.*

I thought this meant that if I put God first, he would take care of my finances without me having to advocate for myself. To ask the church for more money would look greedy and demonstrate a lack of faith. We got by because of kind church members who donated their services. Also, our parents sent us money. This was nice but I hated being 40 years old and still taking handouts. I wanted to pay my own way like everyone else.

The last straw came when the board gave the entire staff a raise except for me. Maybe they were fooled by our



*The kids at Christmas*

beautiful house.  
I was an expert  
scrounger. Our  
fence was made  
from boards a  
neighbor was  
throwing away.  
Our huge  
redwood deck  
and gorgeous  
wood floors



*Growing up*

came from the junk pile behind the lumber yard. For landscaping, I shoveled dirt from a pile at the cemetery into an old trailer a church member had given me. Wood chips came from an abandoned pile in the almond orchard beside our house.

You might say that this was God's way of providing. That's what I thought at first. But after a while it felt like what I had to do because God did not provide. "The Lord helps those who help themselves" was just a way of saying I was on my own.

One of Bob L's employees told me that Bob was violent at work and used foul language. "He is not who you think he is," she told me. Bob L eventually wound up in prison for tapping his employees retirement accounts to float his business but not before trying to make me lean on two wealthy church members to bail him out.

Jack's was the final family from Northside to leave. After 15 years of both leading the music and doing the preaching, I found a gifted musician to take over. They didn't like his style.

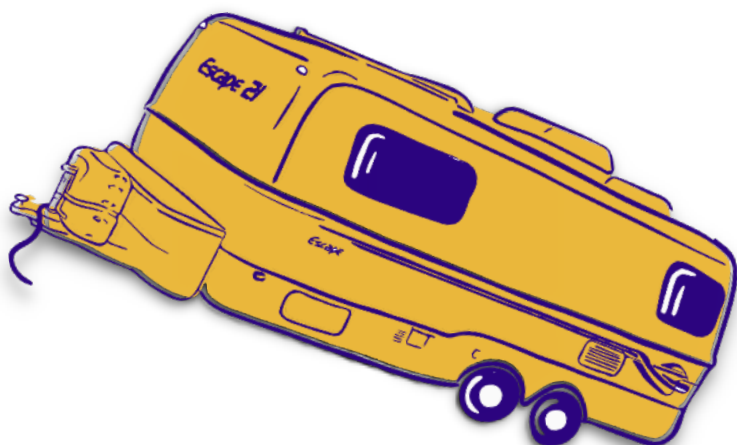
The day came when I could not take another step. On April 7, 2013, I resigned with no idea of what I would do next. I assured people that God had me covered. The truth was I was exhausted from two decades of covering for him.

A few months later, I was at our favorite Mexican food restaurant with my wife and younger daughter. Normally, she was full of fire. Today, she was strangely passive. She put down her burrito and her eyes rolled back in her head. She fell out of her chair and began writhing on the floor.

I had never seen a grand mal seizure before. I lay beside her, cradling her head in my lap as she convulsed, terrified she was dying. The paramedics arrived and whisked her to the emergency room. It was overcrowded so they lined her up in the hall to wait. Only my wife was allowed to be with her. I sat in the waiting room.

I did not pray that night. Not once. Not a word. For a long time afterward, I told people I was mad at God, giving him the silent treatment. The real reason I didn't pray that night was that I no longer believed anyone was listening.

# Hard Reset



2015-2018

The seminary offered me halftime employment, which I eagerly accepted. I was a popular teacher and the academic environment was stimulating. It quickly became a full-time position. I told myself that maybe I just needed a break. Deep down, though, I knew it wasn't true. I felt like a fraud training men and women to go down a path I knew was a dead end.

Our kids were out of the nest, away at college. There was nothing tying us to Yuba City except our house, which was beginning to feel more like an anchor than a dream come true. I preferred my backpack tent. I wanted mountains for walls and skies for a ceiling. Despite Julie's fears that I would be eaten by a bear or fall off a cliff, I took solo trips into the Sierras. It was the only place I felt alive.

One afternoon, while hacking my way through the brushy side of a remote lake, I found myself eyeball to eyeball with a gopher-sized creature I could not identify. It sat on a big rock, just inches from my face. It studied me without fear, as if it had never seen one of me before either. I felt like Adam in the garden. The moment was so intensely intimate that I ruined it with laughter. The creature slowly crawled off the rock and slunk into the bushes.

I emerged at the far end of the lake, far from my campsite. Dark clouds had gathered around the mountain peak above where my tent was pitched. Lightning began to strike. Thunder echoed off granite walls and rolled on

forever. I stood frozen, not just afraid of the lightning; it was a deeper, existential fear, a feeling of alienation, as if the universe was giving an emphatic “NO” to my existence.

I walked briskly back to my tent and crawled into my sleeping bag, pulling the soft down around my face. I tried to process this trip around the lake. Nature had embraced me like a mother, then slapped me in the face. I couldn't make any sense of it. Still, it felt real. I loved to touch it in any form.

I needed a big change, that was obvious. I floated a series of wild ideas past Julie which she swatted like flies. I was shocked one day when her eyes lit up.



*Hopes and dreams*



"We could sell everything, and live on the road. Imagine all the adventures we would have!"

We started to follow people on YouTube who had cut the cord with the status quo and embraced a life of adventure, becoming more excited by the day. We sold the house and used the equity to buy a small travel trailer and pay down our kids' college debt. We hit the road and joined a group called the RV Entrepreneurs. We met the YouTube celebrities we had followed. These were mainly young people, full of dreams and adventures. They made us feel young too.

I tried to hide my former life from them because the moment people found out I had been a pastor things got weird. Christianity is part of our cultural heritage but people don't know what to do with it. Religion is like a



*A day in the office on the road*



crazy aunt who lives in the basement. We bring her up for weddings and funerals but mainly try not to think about her. As a pastor, I had been too cozy with the crazy aunt, which was weird. As a former pastor I disrespected her, which was worse.

I hadn't given up on God, but if my faith was to be salvaged, it needed a complete overhaul. I started a podcast called "Curb Your Dogma." Hell was my first subject. When I looked at the Scriptures with fresh eyes, I saw that the way I

had been taught to think of heaven and hell was a product of the middle ages, a tool to keep the peasants in line. Warnings of fire and judgment could more naturally be taken as metaphors for God's refining work in our lives. God's plan was to save everyone. I packaged this into a podcast called "Why I love Hell" and published it.

We were boondocking in Quartzite, Arizona, a winter haven for RVers, when my phone buzzed. It was my old friend Tim, who had taken my place as the Pastor of River Valley. "Hey brother. We need to talk."

Tim had heard to my podcast and was concerned that my departure from the Christian faith had placed me on a path to hell. Even worse, I was still in contact with



**curb your dogma**

members of my old flock, inviting them down the road to perdition with me. He told me what I already knew: If I kept going this way, it would be the end of our friendship.

I was sad to lose this cherished friendship but it did not surprise me. I was used to religion destroying my friendships. A few weeks later, someone called to tell me that Tim devoted an entire sermon to warning people about me. I didn't listen to it. I could have preached it myself. And I couldn't blame him. Ten years ago I would have done the same thing.

In Louisiana, we camped in a Bayou. We had a blowup kayak that wasn't much more than a pool toy. The Ranger assured us we didn't need to worry about alligators so we inflated it and went for a paddle. A central pond led to a labyrinth of waterways between trees. We



picked a path and headed toward it. As we approached, a huge alligator slunk from the bank and spun in the water.

"That's the death spiral," Julie said. "It's how they kill their prey." We gulped and paddled faster. The waterway was narrow and shallow. A malevolent pair of eyes lay dead ahead. As we approached, they slunk silently beneath the surface. Just then, the kayak snagged on a tangle of underwater vines. We

paddled for all we were worth, finally breaking free. Eventually, we arrived at a second large pond with a dock and gazebo. Stepping from the kayak with relief, we made our way to the gazebo. A weathered Cajun man was leaning on the rail, smoking a cigarette. He gave us a friendly wave and said something in a thick accent. We waved back.

"You look like you're from around here," I said. "Do you think it's OK to paddle around out there like that?"



*Inflating our trusty(?) "kayak"*





"I wouldn't," he said, shaking his head. "Watch." He took a final draw on his cigarette and gave it an expert flick into the water. A pair of jaws emerged and devoured it. We gulped.

"You guys hungry?" he asked. "My nephew just went to the store for some baloney. We're gonna make sandwiches and have a picnic. Wanna join us?"

This man was as nice as the alligators were mean. Maybe he thought we should enjoy one last supper before we paddled to our death. The sun was beginning to sink so we declined.

"We'd better get back."

"Good luck," he said, pulling a fresh cigarette from the pack.

We paddled home in sweaty silence, wondering whether to trust the Ranger or the Cajun. We didn't see another gator but when we got back, we deflated the kayak and put it away.



*On the sidewalk in Key West*

What struck me about this man, and nearly everyone we met in our travels, was how warm and welcoming they were. This was true in every state. As long as politics or religion didn't come up, there was a natural bond. I loved a piece of art on the sidewalk in Key West. It read, "One Human Family." I wanted my Christianity to be inclusive like that.



Two years later, after two laps around the country, we found ourselves back at Julie's home in Novato. *Hard Reset* had become a book, along with another called *The Seven Habits of Wholeness*. An online community called *Anchor Point* was coming together and I had a few financial supporters. I considered my revised version of the faith to

be as least as faithful to the Scriptures as the jumble of traditions I inherited as a Southern Baptist.



I was creating a video, trying to explain my new and improved Jesus, when a tidal wave of despair crashed into me. I realized that as much as I might try to avoid it, any new version of the faith would just generate more debate. I had created another version of Christianity. Weren't there enough already? Plus, there was no evidence that God was behind my efforts. We were barely surviving financially and saving nothing for retirement. Again, I had taken a leap of faith, trusting God to be there. Again, I was falling and falling.

The hard reset had failed. I deleted my website and erased my Facebook page.



# Faithless



2019-2022

Our youngest daughter graduated from college and wanted to move to Seattle. My brother-in-law offered us jobs at his hardware store and gave us a great deal on one of his rentals, which happened to be his family home in West Seattle.



*Julie posing with my boss at the Hardware Store*

I began as a stocker. I arrived at 5:00a.m. to rip open boxes and arrange merchandise. My supervisor was a 60-something-year-old man who took his job very seriously. He worked hard and expected me to

follow suit. Every couple of hours a Matt Nathanson song came over the store P.A. system,

*I've got a king sized bed and a PhD in the way it used to be.*

The song filled me with remorse. That was me, the guy who flushed his career down the toilet to work for minimum wage at his brother-in-law's hardware store. Way to go.



I discovered that some men take their knowledge of hardware very seriously. They love to come into the store and show off. One of them approached me and asked if we had some doohickey I had never heard of.

“I’m not sure what that is but I’ll bet they can help you in tools.”

He sized me up scornfully. “What were you? Insurance salesman?”

He assumed I had chosen some inglorious path in life and failed. How else could you explain a man of my years working in a hardware store and not even being any good at it? It was all I could do not to dump my resume on him. I was a respected pastor and professor. I had a Ph.D. I had built my own house and raised three kids. I had held onto a beautiful woman for 30 years. But all he would have heard was “washed up preacher,” which was even worse than “washed up insurance salesman.” I pointed silently to the tools department.

When I got off at that afternoon, I trudged through the weeds in the front lawn and into the house. Julie’s shift began later so I had the place to myself. I surveyed the scene bleakly. Prior to our arrival, the home had been occupied by one of my brother-in-law’s sons who was raising six kids. The place was a wreck. There were holes in the walls and crayon marks on everything.

I sat at my desk, trying to come up with my next move. The tenant downstairs also worked at the hardware

store and was gone for the day. He had three dogs and three cats. The cats ran loose and peed on our belongings which were stored downstairs. The dogs were crammed into two cages. Mournful howls and the smell of urine pierced the floor and gave perfect expression to my inner state. Later that night, he returned, adding the pungent aroma of marijuana to the mix.

The one redeeming feature of our house was a panoramic view of Puget Sound and the Olympic Peninsula. It was so stunning it could have made up for everything. Instead, it taunted me. It didn't say, "Look at what you have." It said, "Look at what you missed."



*Looking out the window in West Seattle*

One evening, I finished teaching an online Greek class, a final remnant of my former life. I closed the laptop

and entered the kitchen where Julie was slumped over the sink, staring blankly at the dirty plate in her hand.

"It's weird being so good at something you know you can't do anymore," I said.

She lowered the plate slowly to the sink and looked at me.

"How did you lose your faith?" she asked.

It was a question, not an attack, but it landed like a punch. It was the first time I realized my faith was gone and would not be coming back. I stood in silence, searching for an answer. How had I lost my faith? I guess like I lost my hair. Somewhere in my thirties it started to fall out, piece by piece. I tried to make it grow back but nothing helped. One day, I looked in the mirror and it was all gone.

I felt stupid, like the last kid to stop believing in Santa Claus. I had two pastor-friends in Yuba City who ran into the same thing. They both killed themselves, one with a gun, the other by self-neglect. I do not judge them for this. I wanted my stupid life to be over too.

I turned to the atheists and found bitter comfort in their gloating attacks on the absurdities of Christianity. I went online and found others leaving Christianity in droves. Most were angry at pastors, though, even repentant ones. I found a group of pastors who were leaving Christianity but they were a minefield of quirky

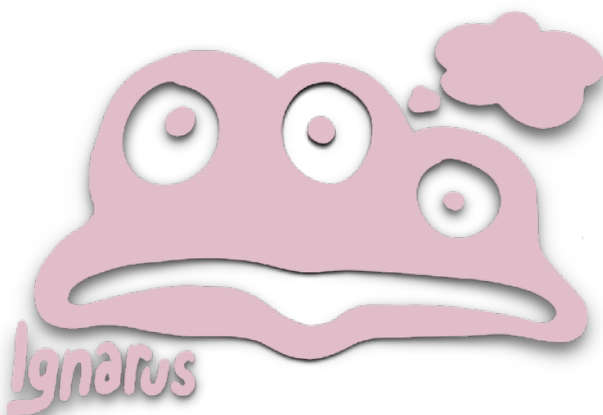
ideas, hot buttons, and utter confusion. In other words, they were just like me. I didn't need any more of me.

It would have been easier if I could have shared my struggle with someone. It would have been nice to let my parents or sisters in on my struggle but I had no words for what I was going through. Would they even know me? My old church friends would have gone to great lengths to be there for me but their way of helping would be to bring me back into the fold. Nope. I was on my own.

I never have trusted myself on the edge of a cliff. It's not that I think I'll slip. I'm afraid I'll jump. My life had been a series of crazy leaps. Each time, I trusted an invisible hand to catch me. Each time I kept falling and falling.

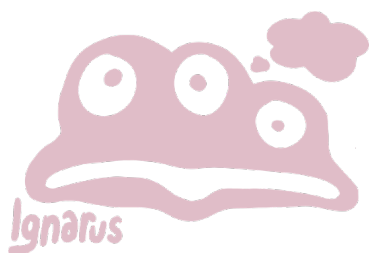


# Nobody Knows



2019-2022

In the absence of faith, I turned to philosophy. For two years I wrestled with the big names and ideas. I liked how the philosophers faced the hard questions. I was disappointed to discover that after all these years all they have managed to produce is a rat's nest of theories.



What is this place? How did we get here? Why does it hurt so much? What happens when we die? The harder I looked, the clearer it was no one knew.

Ignorance took shape and became a Specter that haunted me. It appeared so frequently that I named it: *Ignarus*. I liked the honesty of Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight*. The Joker is terrifying, not because he is insane, but because he is not. He courageously faces *Ignarus* and accepts the logical conclusion that life is meaningless. The Joker leans into nihilism and devotes his life to exposing people's

**ignārus** (feminine **ignāra**, neuter **ignārum**, comparative **ignārior**, superlative **ignārissimus**); first/second-declension adjective

1. **ignorant, unaware, not knowing** [synonyms, antonyms ▲] [quotations ▼]

Synonyms: **nescius, ignōrāns, Inscius, nesciēns, expers**

Antonyms: **cōnsciēns, cognōscēns, cōnsciūs, sciūs, sciēns**

2. **incapable, incompetent, unable** [synonym, antonym ▲]

Synonym: **hospes**

Antonym: **gnārus**

*vanitas*, <https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=vanitas&oldid=72065122>



*The moon outside our window in West Seattle*

ridiculous coping strategies. It was horrifying but at least it was honest.

To my surprise, *Ignarus* did not just destroy my faith. He gave me something I had been looking for my whole life: a universal human family. I had tried to forge this from my Christian faith but no matter how far I stretched it, I always wound up with insiders and outsiders. Now, suddenly, I found myself in the universal family I longed for, standing on the common ground of our ignorance. Our connection wasn't anything we had found. It was the fact that we were lost.

I rode my bike to work in the dark at 4:30a.m. so Julie would have the car when she came at 10:00am. Most mornings I was so tired and disoriented that it felt like pedaling through outer space. One cold morning, as rain



*Patagonia, on a trip with Christy*

beat down on my bike helmet, a children's song bubbled up from some hidden recess.

*Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are,  
Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky,  
Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.*

I found it comforting so I sang again, louder.

*Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.*

I sang it over and over. The louder I sang, the better I felt.

Tears ran down my cheeks and splashed on the pavement. I must have been a sight, riding in the dark and rain, crying and singing.



If a policeman had pulled me over, I



could not have explained my behavior.

Later, I found the word for it: wonder. It's what I felt as a toddler, when my mother bathed my little soul in Chopin. Wonder is why I loved to traipse the hills of the Palouse with my dog, Brute, and take long walks beneath the stars with the yipping of coyotes in my ears. Wonder is what I heard in the sound of the horn. Wonder made me hoist my backpack and plunge into the wilderness alone. What I felt on that cold, rainy morning in West Seattle was nothing new. It was a friend who had never left my side.



For months after *Ignarus* devoured my faith, all I could see was the ruins of my faith. I thought the door to meaning was closed. But *Ignarus* hadn't closed the door to anything. It opened the door to everything. It was faith that had locked me up. Faith was been my attempt to get a grip on wonder. I thought if I studied the Bible, went to seminary, mastered theology, learned Greek, I could grasp



*Sunset in the Sierras*

it. But the tighter I squeezed, the less I had. It was like trying to wrap my arms around the ocean.

Today I wake each morning like Alice in Wonderland and set out on an adventure. Meaning no longer hangs from a thread of faith. It floats on a sea of wonder. I go exploring, whistling as I go,

*Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.*



# Nothing Matters



2019-2022



*My friend, Josh, at the Hardware Store*

Our house in Seattle was cold but we were too afraid we wouldn't be able to pay the power bill to turn up the heat. Our car broke down twice, each time costing thousands of dollars.

We put this on credit cards and tightened the chains of debt. We added side jobs to our work at the Hardware Store. It was no match for the bleeding. There was no choice but to sell our trailer, the last vestige of our former life. A man and his wife arrived with a cashier's check one Saturday afternoon, hooked the trailer to their pickup, and drove away. We swallowed hard as the tail lights disappeared around the corner.

I was sick of my stupid life. Another children's nursery rhyme got stuck in my head.

*Three blind mice, three blind mice  
See how they run, see how they run  
They all ran after the farmer's wife  
Who cut of their **tales** with a carving knife  
Have you ever seen such a sight in your life  
As three blind mice?*

I spelled "tails" t-a-l-e-s. Every time I came to the happy ending, the Farmer's Wife cut off my tale: getting married, graduating from seminary, becoming a pastor,

having kids, building a house, becoming a professor. Each brought satisfaction but the feeling dissipated. Every end was a dead end. The Farmer's Wife stood poised, scythe in hand, ready to cut off, not just my story, but my very life.

I read *Sapiens*<sup>1</sup> which gave a dark account of human origins—nothing at all like what I learned in Sunday School. To this I added *The Sixth Extinction*.<sup>2</sup> It made the case that human beings are not God's gift to the planet. We are more like a rat infestation. Infinite appetite has harnessed the power of technology to bring about a global extinction that is already underway and probably impossible to stop. The only consolation is that mass extinctions have occurred at least five times in the earth's history. We may take it personally, but it's business as usual for Mother Earth.

I didn't just read about the vanity of life. I was living it. I sat at home, quarantined by COVID, staring out a panoramic window at what should have been the Olympic Peninsula. In its place was a wall of smoke created by forest fires burning out of control up and down the west coast. Up the road in Bothell, my mother was dying a slow death of dementia. I went to see her, taking the long way since the West Seattle Bridge had collapsed. When I arrived, my parents were glued to the T.V.,

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<sup>1</sup> Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens*. Harper.

<sup>2</sup> Kolbert, E. (2024). *The sixth extinction (10th anniversary edition): An unnatural history*. St Martin's Press.

watching rioters storm the Capitol. The whole world was coming unglued.

Despair was a frequent visitor and assumed the form of the second Specter. I named it *Vanitas*. Another nursery rhyme echoed through my head.

*Row, row, row you boat, gently down the stream  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream*

“Merrily” was repeated four times, as if the author insisted on the point. There was no solution for *Vanitas* but there was a choice. I could wallow in despair because every moment came to an end or I could embrace the joy of living.



I imagined myself as a child at the beach, laughing and making a sand castle with a friend. A grownup approached and poured cold water on our fun.

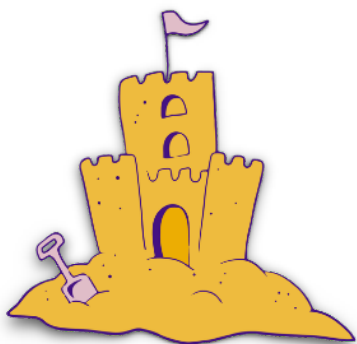
**vānitās** *f* (genitive **vānitātis**); *third declension*

1. **emptiness, nothingness**

*vanitas vanitatum* — vanity of vanities

2. **falsity, falsehood, deception, untruth, untrustworthiness, fickleness**

3. **vanity, vainglory**



“You kids are wasting your time. In an hour the tide will wash away everything you have built. ”

He was missing the point. We never assumed we were building an eternal fortress. Our castle, like all

castles, was made of sand. We were leaning into the moment, finding glory in the day. Moments don't last forever. Forever is in the moments.

My life was like the feather at the beginning of Forrest Gump, floating this way and that, swept along by invisible forces. When one story came to an end, a new one began. There was no stopping this but I could celebrate the ride, just as the pleasure of music is not found by arriving at a final note but in the playing. The ending is not an enemy. It is an essential part of the music. Who wants to be trapped in the song that never ends?

Never-ending  
anything sounds terrible,  
even never-ending



*Bruce and me at the store*

happiness. Maybe Adam and Eve weren't expelled from the Garden. Maybe they escaped. And the problem wasn't the damn snake. It was the damn Garden. Who could take another day in Paradise forever?

For the next moment to be born, the present moment must die. I can't uncouple the two but I do have a choice: I can mourn the loss or embrace the next moment.

But what about death? What happens when I die? I don't know. But I think it reasonable to suspect there is more, not less, than what I see. The Universe has a lot of tricks up its sleeve. However that may be, I refuse to live in anticipation of some make-believe future bliss. I'll take my bliss here and now, playing this day with all my heart.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, *merrily*.



# Nobody Cares



2019-2022

People move to Seattle by the hordes, trying to get back nature. On the weekends every last one of them heads for the mountains. It was nearly impossible to find a place to park at the trailheads. I bumped into more people on the trails than at the mall. I tried to get away from them by going cross-country but after a hundred yards of hacking through underbrush I was so tangled in vines I could barely move. I joined the masses back on the trail. I longed for my glacier-swept Sierras where I could saunter in any direction across smooth granite.



*A hike in the Sierras*

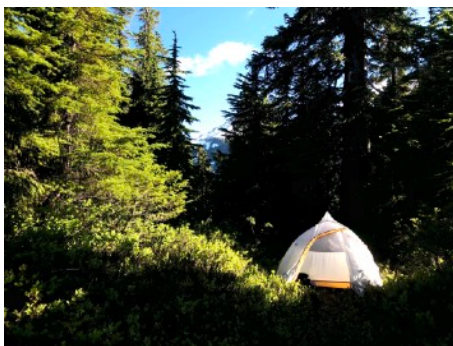
On one backpack trip while in Seattle, I spent a long, hard day hiking to Big Heart Lake. When I arrived, the camping area was covered with tents. I hunted around and found a semi-secluded spot behind a tree. After pitching my tent, I sat down to make dinner. The mosquitos were so thick I had to wear a net over my head and gloves on my hands. I felt like an astronaut in a space

suit. To eat, I shoved food through the net into my mouth, trying not to let mosquitos in.

The buzz was deafening, not so much because of its volume as because of the rapacious intent it signified. Selfish

little bastards! Swarms of 'em, all wanting a piece of me. In place of a "thank you" they left an itchy welt. I studied the little vampires crawling and poking at my outstretched legs, trying to pierce my nylon pants. A dozen gathered in a clump and I unleashed a murderous swat. It was satisfying and pointless. What's infinity minus 12?

The next day, I stopped along the trail for lunch. As I munched trail mix in the warm sun, I admired bees buzzing around brightly colored flowers. Like mosquitoes, they would sting, but only if I threatened, and the attack would cost their lives. That seemed more than fair. Plus, I could see the point of bees. They pollinated flowers. But at the core, they were just like mosquitoes, hungry for pollen instead of blood. How was I any different? Didn't I like to sink my teeth into a juicy steak? There was no escaping it. Hunger, not love, makes the world go 'round. Or maybe love is another word for hunger.



*My hiding place behind a tree*

I felt this in Seattle traffic. I consider myself a kind and benevolent soul but if some fool races past me and tries to squeeze in at the last second, I leave no gap. I stare straight ahead as they honk and beg for an opening. Not on my watch!

One evening I was at the Seattle airport, studying cars as they swarmed around the few remaining parking spaces. Their fronts looked like the mouths of locusts. They said, “Move it or lose it!” Evidently, when God commanded Adam to kill and eat, he hit “Cc All.” We are all cursed with teeth and appetite. Our lives are an episode of the Hunger Games.



I called this third Specter *Rapax*. *Rapax* was the hardest to face because it destroyed my most cherished illusion: that I am a good and loving person and that there are other

good and loving people who put me before themselves. But every motion in the universe is fueled by desire. It's as inescapable as gravity. Love is just desire masquerading as virtue.

**rapāx** (genitive **rapācis**, comparative **rapācior**); *third-declension one-termination adjective*

1. **grasping**, **greedy** of plunder, **rapacious**

My old friends genuinely cared about me but their desire was to restore me to my Christian faith. Without that, I was anathema to them. As for my parents, how could I be anything but an offense if I told them that all their years of dutifully taking me to church had led me down the wrong path? Julie deserves a medal for sticking by my side. But even she had her limits. Our meager retirement savings gave her nightmares of dying in a rancid nursing home and being tossed in an unmarked grave. She held true to the wedding vow—"for richer or poorer"—but it wouldn't go on forever. It was time to get my act together.

In church I used to preach about unconditional love but I never met a parishioner without an agenda. If that agenda went unmet, they complained. If that didn't work, they packed up and left. And what about God? God was the worst of all: anyone who failed to accept his Son burned in hell. There were three deep deceptions: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these was love. Love always failed. Again, I found the words of a children's song on my lips.

*Nobody loves me, everybody hates me,  
Guess I'll go eat worms.*

The death of love was even harder than losing my faith. It left me alienated from everyone and everything, even myself. When I judged people for failing to live up to my standard of love, I felt awful. My world shrunk

because I cut them out of it. By refusing to love my enemies, I loved no one. In the Hunger Games, everyone is an enemy.

There was a way out, though. I didn't have to judge. I could stop condemning people for being what I am and extend compassion. In a crazy world, how does it make sense to condemn people for being crazy? We are all stuck in the same hopeless situation which none of us created or chose. Our common curse is our deepest bond. Judging comes naturally but leaves me miserable and on my own. I have a choice. I can stretch out my arms in compassion. I can treat people with kindness. This expands my world and feels wonderful. It's not that I am a good person. I am as selfish as ever. I choose compassion, not because I am better, but because it is.



# I Spy



November, 2016

We dragged our little trailer down a dirt road and up on a hill overlooking the Trona Pinnacles, an ancient lakebed covered with grotesque calcium spires called tufa, rising 140 feet in the air. It is as close as you can get to being on another planet without leaving this one and a favorite setting for science fiction.



*The Trona Pinnacles*

I was up early, squeezed behind our tiny table, trying to reassemble the pieces of my Christian faith. Mae Mobley, our cat companion, was sitting on a shelf stuck to the back window with suction cups.

She stared at me, sphinx-like, as if she knew all the stuff I was trying to figure out but wasn't about to tell me. I stared into her eyes, wondering what she saw through the vertical pupils. I went online and found pictures that were supposed to represent the world as a cat would see it, fuzzy with washed out color. I wasn't convinced. These



pictures were missing a critical piece—the mind of the cat. They assumed a cat’s brain processed optics like mine. What did Mae Mobley’s mind make of what it saw? The only way to know that would be to become Mae Mobley.



*Mae Mobley in her window seat*

I sat outside that evening watching bats zoom around, plucking insects out of the air, using sonar to guide them. I was astounded. But who knows? Sound frequencies might register to a bat as color. Picking insects out of the air might be as easy for them as plucking a donut off a tray is for me. I thought of Brute, my childhood hunting dog. He could follow the path of a pheasant through the brush as easily as I drove down the Interstate. What might Brute see with his nose?

The assumption that human beings see things as they are is the kind of thing you would expect from a species that labels itself *homo sapiens*. (*Sapiens* means wise.) If there is any sense in which we deserve the label *sapiens*, it is not because we see but because we know that we do not. We perceive only 0.0035 percent of the color spectrum and hear a similar tiny sliver of the full range of sound.

Images from the James Webb Space Telescope raise far more questions than they answer and at the quantum level, reality is as elusive as Schrödinger's cat.

But just because I don't see everything doesn't mean I don't see anything. My partial view is false only if it makes a claim to be complete. When I admire a sunset or thrill to music or feel love, or joy, or pain, the experience is as real as a drop of water in the ocean.

If I arrogantly assume that what I see is all there is, then what I see is all I get. If I confess my ignorance, the door to the infinity swings open and I am in awe, immersed in the Whole.

Telling stories is our superpower. Believing them is our Achilles heel. Stories are an essential expression of our humanity but when we proclaim them to be eternal foundations they create conflict. Every war boils down to a clash of stories. As a Christian, I devoted my life to such stories. Whether I liked this or not (I didn't), this always left me at odds with those who didn't agree.

Coming together on the ground of shared perception offers better way to be together. Birds of a feather flock together, not because of a common creed, but because of shared perception. If we can hold our stories loosely and find our bond in shared perception, maybe we can become more like children on a playground and less like warriors on a battlefield.



*Shorebirds in Florida*

When my foundation shook, I did my best to repair it. When that didn't work, I searched for another. In the end I accepted that all stories are human fabrications. A new question took center stage: "What do I see?"

I began to sketch what I saw—not just the physical world, but also my inner world, my human experience. These sketches were crude at first, like an explorer's early map. In time, they became more reliable and a useful tool to navigate my existence.

# Perceptual Map



2021



My old life was defined by the word *credo*: "I believe." Beliefs came from God and were infallible. If perception contradicted belief, I corrected my eyes. I walked by faith, not by sight.

My new life is capture by the word *percipio*: "I perceive." If perception contradicts belief, I alter my belief. I walk by sight, not by faith.

Before Julie and I hit the road, I sold my theology books and stepped out of others' thinking to listen to my own. I played a game called *I Spy with My Little I*. The goal was to describe what I saw as subjectively as possible. I made no claim to be objective or see the Whole, let alone understand it. I was describing the world as one human sees it. I was an accountant, not a mystic.

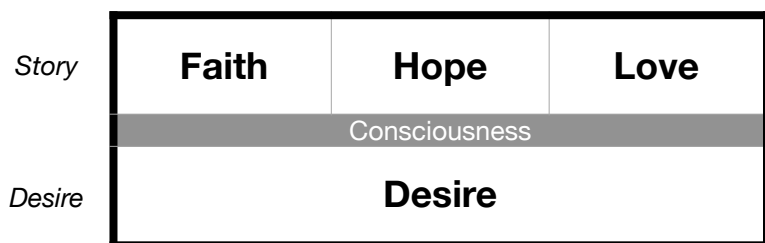
*Desire*

**Desire**

What struck me first was desire. I felt this in the crib, yearning for food, warmth, security. Desire animates everything. It pulls the earth to the sun. It makes mosquitos long for blood. It draws male to female. It bends each blade of grass to the light. It drives invention. It moves Wall Street.






Somewhere between the ages of two and five, I became aware of myself. This happened slowly, more like a sunrise than a lightning bolt. I called this mysterious self-awareness consciousness. I was a self with desire.



But I didn't sit still. I found myself moving through time and space. Motion created before-and-after. Before-and-after produced time and caused me to view my life as story.

Faith was the story I told about my existence. This determined what I hoped for and what I loved—key elements of my story.

<i>Being</i>	<b>Nihilism</b>	<b>Despair</b>	<b>Alienation</b>
			
<i>Story</i>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Hope</b>	<b>Love</b>
	Consciousness		
<i>Desire</i>	<b>Desire</b>		




The Specters ruined my story.

*Ignarus* showed me that my story is not the whole story and exposed all stories to be human inventions. When I lost my foundational story, life lost its meaning and I fell into nihilism.

*Vanitas* devoured my hope. Happiness was a carrot on a stick and death was right around the corner. This threw me into despair.

*Rapax* revealed love to be a mask of virtue worn by desire. The only one looking out for me was me. I was alone in the world, alienated from all others.

I tried to beat back the Specters and uphold my story. When that didn't work, I looked for a replacement. In the end, I gave up. The Specters hadn't just devoured *my* story; they had devoured story itself.

<i>Being</i>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Spirit</b>	<b>Son</b>
			
<i>Story</i>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Hope</b>	<b>Love</b>
	Consciousness		
<i>Desire</i>	<b>Desire</b>		

Christianity saved me.




To *Ignarus*, it said, “Obviously there is much you don’t know but you can pray to a heavenly Father who knows everything. Plus, you have a Bible to guide you.”

To *Vanitas*, it said, “Yes, life on earth is filled with suffering but you are on a path to heaven, with God’s Spirit to comfort you along the way.”

To *Rapax*, it said, “People are selfish and despicable but God loves you and sent Jesus to die for your sins. Soon you will be with him and know this love. You can already experience it at church.

The Christian story had an answer for each Specter. No wonder it I felt so great to believe. No wonder it was so terrifying to lose my faith.



<i>Being</i>	<b>Wonder</b>	<b>Acceptance</b>	<b>Compassion</b>
			
<i>Story</i>	<b>Adventure</b>	<b>Play</b>	<b>Kindness</b>
	<b>Consciousness</b>		
<i>Desire</i>	<b>Desire</b>		

The most important thing I learned is that I need not fear the Specters. They open the door to a new way of being.

By dissolving my faith, *Ignarus* opened the door to wonder. I no longer have to defend my faith. I can set out on an adventure.

When *Vanitas* destroyed my hope in the future it freed me to accept my life today and gave me the ability to approach life with a playful spirit.

By tearing away the mask of love, *Rapax* opened the door to compassion and the joy of treating others with kindness.

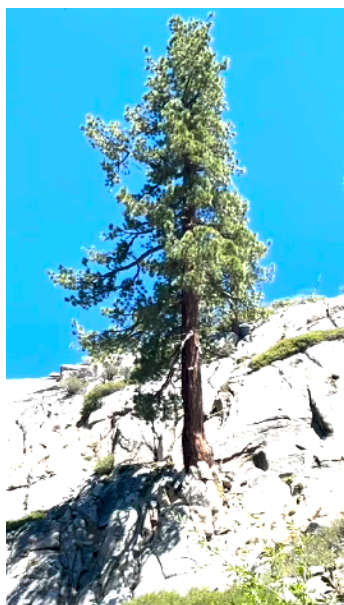
# Facing Up



Present Day

When I resigned my church back in 2013, my world fell apart. By 2020, I had a lot of company. It started with Covid. Then came natural disasters, political unrest, the war in Ukraine, A.I.... Everywhere, the stories that gave life meaning and security were crumbling. The whole world was entering a dark night of the soul. No wonder people want to set the clock back to 1950.

When my foundational story crumbled, every day became a struggle. Some days, I couldn't find a reason to go on. I hated being human. I faced Hamlet's question: To be or not to be? I never seriously considered killing myself but there were times when not-to-be would have been my preference. It certainly would have been easier.



*Yes to life*

Not-to-be may have been easier but it was not natural. Nature chooses to be, however difficult and illogical. The mountain wildflower blossoms and reaches for the sun only to be buried by snow a few weeks later. The salmon swims upstream to lay its eggs and die. The pinecone tumbles onto the ledge of a granite cliff and tries to grow there. Why bother? Why not curse God and die?

I don't know. But I see



*Spring wildflowers in the Napa Valley*

this: Nature gives an unconditional “Yes” to life. This “yes” is not based on a story. It is existential. “I am, therefore I will live.”

The central mistake of my life was grounding my being in story. Stories always crumble, be they stories of God, the United States, the Big Bang, or my idea of how the day should unfold. I am no match for the Specters. They always win. The solution is to stop fighting them and allow them to open the door to an existential “Yes” to life.

I used to get up each morning and do my best to plant my feet on a firm foundation of faith. Now, I intentionally uproot myself. I invite the Specters to do

their worst, tearing my stories to shreds. Releasing foundational story frees me to choose nature's "Yes."

I do not stop there, with my head in the clouds. Expressing myself in a story is as essential to my existence as swimming is to a fish or flying is to a bird. I dive into the flesh-and-blood world of story and tell my tale. The difference is that I regard the story of my life as an expression of my existence, not a foundation for it.

I began by searching for the answers to life's big questions. What I found instead is a deeply meaningful way to live without them.

I was a preacher,  
a professor,  
a Godsplainer  
a Rock.

Then my high pulpit crumbled.

I thought I would land,  
but just kept falling.

So I traded my firm foundation  
for a set of wings  
and made my home  
on a rush of wind.

*I was a preacher,  
a professor,  
a Godsplainer  
a Rock.*

*Then my high crumbled.*

*I thought I would land,  
but just kept falling.*

*So I traded my firm foundation  
for a set of wings  
and made my home  
on a rush of wind.*

