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Richard Dahlstrom



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Breathless

It happens every weekend. This Sunday, hundreds, even thousands of people will leave their place of worship after the final “Amen” or benediction and never return. This is because every week many of the faithful who gather are secretly harboring doubts as to whether any of it is true or, if it’s true, whether it makes any vital difference in daily living. Once those doubts have bloomed into certainty, once it becomes clear in their minds that the church is, indeed, irrelevant to the realities of daily living, it’s only a matter of time before the departure is finalized.

Of course, they’re often right to harbor doubts about the church because for many, being religious or spiritual makes no vital difference. We who gather for worship on Sundays are increasingly becoming a statistical parallel to the rest of the culture in some not very flattering categories. Does our culture have a hard time with marriage? The church does too. Does our culture encourage consumerism and reckless spending as a means of keeping the economic fires burning? The church is following suit. As the culture has increasingly moved to a recreational sexual ethic, has the church maintained a distinctive? I could go on, continuing to ask questions about the health of the church and making comparisons between it and the culture at large. But statistics indicating a general decline in church participation offer chilling evidence that the most honest answer to the question, How is the church in North America doing? is to say that it is dying.

All of our meetings and activities apparently haven’t led to an explosion of love, grace, hospitality, celebration, humility, purity, and passion for the kingdom of God. If that is the case, if we see little difference between the joiners and those who stay on the sidelines, we may legitimately ask why anyone

would want to participate. After all, if the only differences between being people of faith and people of “the world” is that people of faith lose their free Sunday mornings and that a good chunk of their income goes to the offering, what’s the point? I’ll keep my Sunday mornings, with good coffee and more sleep, and keep my money too. As a result, many have stopped gathering. Others continue to gather while still harboring these doubts and wondering if what they’ve stumbled into, or been born into, is real after all.

If people don’t experience an increase in joy or peace or meaning, maybe they are right to leave. If the Jesus that is embodied by our gathering together in community looks like the self-centered, arrogant, stressed-out, upwardly mobile North American whose only distinction from culture is the size of his Bible or the fish on her car, certainly the whole matter needs to be revisited. In order to do that together, and to help us recover a vibrant, life-giving, and life-imparting faith, I hope you’ll join me in a little exercise. Please make yourself comfortable, sitting in a chair if possible, with no distractions. Are you ready? Good.

Breathe. You’re already doing it, or you wouldn’t have this book in your hand right now, but for the next moment or two, pay close attention to what’s going on as you breathe. Inhale slowly, allowing your lungs to fill from bottom to top as you feel your diaphragm and chest expand. Let your lungs fill until you’re convinced they can’t hold any more. How does that feel?

Now exhale, slowly letting the air leave your lungs until, toward the end of your exhale, you’re forcing air out of your lungs until there’s nothing left to release. Now notice how much you long to inhale again and how much joy you feel as you draw in that next breath. But notice too how quickly the initial joy of inhaling becomes satisfaction. And just as quickly, satisfaction becomes fullness. Fullness becomes satiation. In a matter of just a few seconds, you’ve moved from a longing to inhale to a serious need to exhale.

Do this as slowly as possible, counting ten complete breaths.

Are you finished? You’ve just participated in one of the great miracles of nature: the respiratory system. Here’s what’s been happening.

The muscles of your diaphragm have combined with the action of your ribs to create an open space with lower air pressure than the outside air. This has the effect of drawing air into the lungs where blood, rich in carbon dioxide but lacking oxygen, passes through, and an exchange nothing short of miraculous occurs. Through a complex action, oxygen diffuses into the blood and the carbon dioxide is moved out of the blood into the lungs. This will then be expelled as the muscles of the diaphragm relax, sending out a carbon dioxide blessing to other life-forms that need it while the oxygen-enriched blood is now equipped to provide the fuel necessary for virtually every bodily activity. Thinking, loving, running, creating, cooking, eating, sleeping, dreaming—all require the oxygen that we can receive only through the rhythm of inhaling and exhaling.

Of the two, which is more important, inhaling or exhaling? For the human body, the question is ridiculous. But the body of Christ is a different matter. The church body, fractured and divided as it is, has the unhappy reputation of fighting against itself, like a human body with some sort of autoimmune disease. History has often shown the church body to be at civil war over the merits of inhaling and exhaling.

Champions of inhaling, who represent our need to receive life-giving strength from Christ through things like study, prayer, and silence, treat the exhalers, who represent our need to serve and be involved in the issues of this world, with varying degrees of disdain, often portraying them as proponents of a different gospel, a different Jesus. Meanwhile the exhalers have turned a suspicious eye toward the inhalers, who are so heavenly minded with their praying, reading, fasting, and solitude that they are no earthly good. The exhalers say the inhalers would give a starving child a Bible rather than food because the “food which perishes” (John 6:27) will only cause the poor children to hunger again, but the “food which endures to eternal life” will satisfy forever. And the tragedy is that inhalers really think this way.

The champions of each camp raise their voices, shouting across the chasm that divides them. “Exhale!” cry those who are committed to the kingdom

ethic of Jesus: service to the poor, hospitality, and generosity. “Fail to do these things and you fail completely!” they shout as they quote Jesus’ words:

I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me (Matthew 25:35-36).

“This,” they shout, “is the Christian life.”

The cries come back from the far side of the chasm: “Inhale!” The inhalers quote Jesus’ own words from the very same Gospel:

Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:22-23).

They shout this in order to prove that *knowing* Jesus is the true essence of a faithful life, chastening and warning the exhalers that their misplaced zeal could land them in the fires of hell. They have many more verses to offer, immersed as they are in Bible study. But their zeal sounds like arrogance to the people on the other side of the canyon, who often hear the loud Bible quoting with such disdain that it only confirms their own entrenched ways of living. “If I ever become like that, just shoot me,” one of them says to a like-minded friend.

The very existence of the dichotomy reveals that something is wrong. Each of us is bent—by family upbringing, emotional constitution, church background, and other influences—toward either engagement or withdrawal, body or spirit, doing or being. And sadly, some deeply entrenched camps

are eager to reinforce our predispositions. When we join such movements, we become so focused on ourselves that our imbalances become not just a way of life, but *the* way of life.

Sadly, these imbalances have the effect of distorting Christ. The activist creates *exhaling Jesus* (EJ, I like to call him). His version of Jesus is endlessly involved in service to others at the cost of his own well-being. He is the Jesus who is always on mission trips, always serving in the soup kitchen, always throwing a party, always involved in issues of justice and mercy. He's diligent at home too, often scrubbing the grout in the bathroom tile with a toothbrush. He's on a thousand mailing lists and is working hard to change the world. But all this activity is wearing thin on him, and he's showing some signs of cracking. Rage is often lurking underneath his smooth and helpful exterior, and it's only a matter of time before it escapes. He starts to look like Billy Joel's "Angry Young Man"—active, passionate, committed to changing the world, but angry at everyone who doesn't agree with his assessment of things, angry at everyone not as committed as he is to changing the world, and angry at the structures and systems of the world that create pain for so many.

Of course, the rage will only leak out if he lasts that long. EJ sometimes just melts into a pile of uselessness because he's absolutely run out of breath. My wife, Donna, and I were reminded of this some years ago while we were running a retreat center and wilderness Bible school in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. It was a few weeks before our summer programs were to begin, and I was in Europe doing one thing: teaching. My wife was at home doing many things: preparing the grounds for summer, homeschooling the children, cleaning up after vacationers who rented our cabins, mowing lawns, shopping, cooking, making final contacts with incoming students, and arranging the details for our cook, who was arriving from Canada. Oh, and did I say that we also had a house-church that met in our living room on Sundays?

When one particular Sunday came around, Donna had been exhaling for far too long. She hadn't had enough rest and enough margin in her life, so when our anticipated cook for the summer called from Canada to let us

know she wouldn't be coming down after all, Donna didn't take the news very well. She received the message on a Sunday morning just moments before people started coming for worship, which didn't make it any easier. But come they did, with their happy faces on, ready to sing praises to Jesus. With me in Europe, the piano player was missing, and so the small crowd began to plead for my wife to play her guitar. "Not this morning," she said, fighting hard to hold back tears of frustration (over the cook) and exhaustion (because she'd been carrying the entire parenting, schooling, working, cabin, property, ministry, home-church load for two weeks while I was doing one thing—alone—in Europe) and anger. *How dare these people be here! How dare they smile! How dare the cook change her mind! How dare my husband do one thing in Europe while I do ten here! How dare it rain!*

But the guests were oh so persuasive, so in very short order my wife is standing in front of about 30 people, playing her guitar and singing about entering God's gates with thanksgiving, about rejoicing and being glad. Picture this happening with tears of frustration streaming down the guitar player's delicate features and a voice that is sobbing out the "glad" lyrics, and you get a picture of exhaling Jesus, too tired for her own good or for anybody else's good. Slowly, people stopped singing, realizing that their musician was not glad in spite of the fact that her song said she was. When the music stopped, the litany of problems, obligations, and activities poured out from my weary wife. There's little room for gladness when one is completely spent. For the exhausted Jesus, the words of gladness, peace, and rest seem incongruent to reality. It feels like a sham.

"Poor woman," said I, as I heard of what came to be known among our friends as "Black Sunday." I quickly returned to prayer and study in preparation for teaching, after which I would face the laborious duties of journaling and perhaps reading some C.S. Lewis and the newspaper. We teachers always need to be growing in knowledge and thinking about ideas that might be of value someday in some lecture somewhere in the world. Having read myself nearly to sleep, I went for a short walk and came back to brew a cup of tea and pray for my poor wife, who needed

to learn how to rest. I clearly had more than a little to learn about marriage, leadership, and love, but that's a story for another time.

For now, perhaps you can see how easily I embrace the distortions of *inhaling Jesus* (IJ to me, as we're definitely close friends). For us IJs, it is enough to know Jesus, to sit with Him in silence, read His Word, pray, walk through the woods in solitude, listen to creation tell of His glory, and perhaps write it all down in a diary or a book.

We inhale so well that our lungs are about to burst. But since the prospect of actually getting out into the world and doing anything of real tangible value for or with other people is so terrifying to us, we content ourselves with a definition of spiritual health that is purely interior. The IJs lead many people to believe that Jesus' concerns have nothing to do with politics, economics, the environment, the IMF, G8, HIV, the Darfur genocide, non-violence, just war, homelessness, or any other matter of critical importance to the well-being of the planet. Though the IJ misrepresentation of Jesus is more complex than simply inhaling without exhaling, it is undoubtedly a key factor in the church being pushed to the margins of irrelevance for the vast majority of twenty-first-century people. "It may be good for feeling good" or an "opiate for the masses," who can be distracted from the real tragedies of our indulgent, unjust, isolated, tiny, boring lives by a good dose of quiet music and a few psalms, or maybe some candles and rock music if you're emergent. But life-changing? Relevant? Get real.

So which is better, inhaling or exhaling? It's better if we stop asking the question and start breathing because when we do, we will recover some measure of spiritual health and balance, both in our individual selves and our churches. Learning to breathe, to step into the rhythm of life that permeates all creation, is what this book is about.



Part One—The Case for Breathing

Waiting to Exhale

Try it. Put the exhale first, and then follow your breathing in this manner for a few minutes. Deliberately breathe several complete cycles by emptying yourself first then inhaling. Empty yourself, squeeze more breath out, then inhale. Start the cycle again by exhaling and finish the cycle with an inhale.

Dan Brule
Better Breathing

"I see more passion for trees in the Sierra Club than I do for Jesus in the church." Her youth pastor was relating these words to me in the midst of a conversation about why Christianity is often so boring for young people. This particular young woman went on to study environmental science but had a very difficult time seeing any connection between her love for the environment and the Christian life. She never saw that her passion for trees and her desire to address the corrupting effects of global pollution and the consumerism that caused it could in fact be an expression of love for Jesus.

How could she miss the connection? My own assessment is that the few teachings about simple living, creation care, and economic justice issues that she might have heard in church couldn't possibly counteract the avalanche of destructive lifestyle choices she saw all around her in the faith community at large. Perhaps she saw wealth and consumption without active engagement in solving the pressing issues of poverty. Maybe she heard that young people shouldn't sleep together before marriage but heard nothing about the desperation that drives many to prostitution. She might have heard people talking about the end of the world and living



environmentally reckless lives in the present because “the end is near—why save a sinking ship?” After a while, the disconnect between her passions and her faith was just too large a canyon to cross. Forced to decide, she stayed on the side of passion, abandoning her faith in favor of environmental activism. That she was forced to choose is an indictment on the way we articulate the basic tenets of our faith.

In our own recent history as a nation, most people who have joined up with Christ have done so because they’ve become convinced of a sense of personal sin, failure, guilt, or alienation from God. They’ve come to understand that God has made a way for reconciliation through Christ, the only condition being that a person receive this offer through faith. It’s all good news, true and beautiful.

The difficulty often comes right on the heels of that glorious moment of new life and conversion. Rather than telling the story of God’s plan to do away with all greed, injustice, pollution, destruction, hate, oppression, lust, and those other elements that have rooted themselves in us and among us because of sin, we talk about how great it is that we get to go to heaven someday. Rather than inviting people to actively participate in this incredible story that God is writing in the world, we invite people to come and sit, to listen and learn: learn doctrine, learn to pray, learn to be silent, learn to read their Bibles, learn to study, learn to worship. If we’re really zealous we’ll also help people learn what to wear to church, what music to listen to, and what to drink (or more importantly, what *not* to drink). This entire system has the unfortunate effect of taking this explosive and revolutionary movement that Christ began and shrinking it, reducing it to something largely interior, with a few added initiations thrown in to help people get along with other Christians.

We proclaim this largely interior faith when we care more about our sanctuary’s well-being than the well-being of the homeless in our city, or when we worry about the style of music in our churches more than the fact that 30,000 children die every day of treatable diseases, or when we dismiss global warming with the comment that “it’s all going to burn anyway.” We imply that if the only things that really matter are the soul and spirit of a

man, the cars we drive and the stuff we consume have nothing to do with the faith we profess.

The new convert, initiated into this privatized way of thinking and living, is now at a dangerous junction, and the two most commonly traveled paths at this crossroads are both destructive. On the one hand, she may resonate completely with this interior, privatized version of the faith and become one of a large crowd whose theology and lifestyles are mostly concerned with the invisible, "spiritual," and future aspects of faith. Once reconciled to this paradigm, she will feel safe, comforted by assurance that the practices she's developing here will give her peace in her heart now and the assurance of eternal life after she dies. She'll define her faith as a few private devotional practices and perhaps the careful avoidance of a few select sins.

On the other hand, she may become one of the millions of faith casualties who started down the road of following Jesus but eventually become sadly disenchanted with the whole thing. Her own passions for living in a more just, clean, and hopeful world may find little room for expression among those communities concerned predominantly with the development of the interior life, certain lifestyle constrictions, and habits of the heart.

There's a kind of "yes, but" thing that happens to these people as they stand at that crossroads. It's not that they don't believe that Jesus died for their sins or that heaven is real or that reading the Bible is vital to one's spiritual health. To all of that they would say yes. "But," they would add, "I'm concerned about the rain forest disappearing and species becoming extinct. I'm concerned about the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and homelessness, and AIDS, especially among children, especially in Africa. It bothers me that abortion is so easily available as a form of birth control and that many who abort do so because of poverty. I'm worried that our lifestyles as Christians look too much like those of the surrounding culture."

When the church is silent in the face of these questions, or when the church's only answers have to do with a larger dose of Bible reading, another night of handing out tracts, or a promise of personal prosperity if

you have the faith to give more, the tension in the hearts and minds of these friends becomes too great. They need to leave the church or they'll snap. The disconnect between their heart and the gospel they're hearing is just too much to endure. I don't blame them for leaving.

A Different View of Salvation

The tragedy is that they've rejected a caricature of the faith life rather than the real thing, and this caricature is, for many, the only experience they ever have of the gospel. This caricature focuses on the glories of the afterlife, the work of preparing to get there, and the work of getting others there. Its emphasis is on what is coming rather than what is already, and on the state of your heart rather than the state of the world. Such a view of the Christian life quickly becomes tedious and boring for people who can't seem to extinguish their flame of hope for a world of justice, mercy, peace, hope, and so much more right now in this present age.

The gospel Jesus articulated is quite different from this popular view. In His opening day of ministry, He stands up in the temple, unfurls the Old Testament scroll, and reads from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

So Jesus' first articulation of His message is the promise that He'll be moving into people's lives with the express purpose of blessing them in very tangible, visible ways. Good news for the poor. Release for captives. Recovery of sight for the blind. It would be fine to spiritualize these things if Jesus did, but He proclaimed good news to the literal poor when He multiplied loaves so that hungry people could eat. He dignified a poor woman by calling her offering the greatest given among the temple

donors. He actually freed people who were captive. By healing the lepers, He freed them from their life of isolation. By turning the tables on her accusers, He spared the woman caught in adultery from the death penalty. He healed people who couldn't see the light of day or who had withered hands, unstoppable bleeding, or paralysis. These events are not merely metaphors for inward transformation. On the contrary, Jesus' starting point for salvation was usually in the exterior world: sparing a newly married couple the humiliation of running out of wine at their reception, feeding hungry people, enabling a handicapped person to walk, or sharing a meal or a drink of water with someone who'd been socially marginalized.

And though these were the usual starting points in His interactions, His ministry never remained purely external. He engages a woman in conversation because He's thirsty, and the conversation ends up being about personal sin and questions of worship. He saves someone from the death penalty and then challenges her to clean up her sexual life. He feeds 5000 and then chastens them for following Him only because He's a source of good food. Though He begins with external issues, He's relentless in turning the discussion back to matters of the heart.

We see an ongoing dance between internal and external manifestations of the gospel. This makes sense because salvation is holistic, transforming spirit, mind, will, emotions, body, family, ethic, politic, culture, and eventually the whole cosmos. In fact, the apostle Paul speaks of "...a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth" (Ephesians 1:10 MSG).

Essentially, that powerful word tells us that history is moving toward a climax, a new cosmological order of sorts, in which every molecule in the universe is transformed, by virtue of being shot through with the glory of Christ. Christ is whole, so all things will be whole. Christ is just, so all things will be just. The beauty, peace, glory, and vibrancy of such a cosmos is beyond our imagining capacities. I get chills even thinking about it.



A Different View of Ethics

But of course, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul don't talk about such things so we can get chills. They cast this vision because we're called to embody it in some small measure right now in this present time and place. This is what Jesus meant when He called His followers to a different way of living in His Sermon on the Mount. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon explain the implications of this for us:

Imagine a sermon that begins: "Blessed are you poor. Blessed are those of you who are hungry. Blessed are those of you who are unemployed. Blessed are those going through marital separation. Blessed are those who are terminally ill."

The congregation does a double take. What is this? In the kingdom of this world, if you are unemployed, people treat you as if you have some sort of social disease. In the world's kingdom, terminally ill people become an embarrassment to our health-care system, people to be put away, out of sight. How can they be blessed?

The preacher responds, "I'm sorry. I should have been more clear. I am not talking about the way of the world's kingdom. I am talking about God's kingdom. In God's kingdom the poor are royalty, the sick are blessed. I was trying to get you to see something other than that to which you have become accustomed."¹

Followers of Jesus are invited to live in ways that run completely counter to the prevailing winds of culture, taking their cue from the One who, Himself, lived a contrarian life at every level. All of us who follow Christ nod our heads in agreement over that last sentence. But the devil, as they say, is in the details. Though we know that we are to live differently, we remain blind to certain areas where we are not embodying the hopeful and spacious ethic of Christ but are practicing "business as usual," the conventional wisdom of the prevailing culture. Our passivity leads to an unconscious adaptation to whatever winds of culture happen to be shaping the world. As a result, we end up, as we've seen, looking remarkably similar to the surrounding culture.

A Different View of Inviting

If you had only four sentences in which to articulate the gospel, what would you say? Would you begin with the bad news that humanity has failed and is cut off from God but that Christ's death paid the penalty for our failure? Maybe you'd start with an explanation of how all people have sinned and then press people to acknowledge their failure to perfectly fulfill the moral demands of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps you could move from there to the good news that though you failed, Jesus didn't. But you'd better hurry—you're going to run out of sentences soon.

My intrigue regarding how best to invite people to meet Jesus was sparked by looking at Jesus Himself. We don't find Him inviting people to Himself by beginning with three or four propositions about how messed up they are and how He's their solution. Here's what I found instead.

Jesus invites two fishermen to follow Him with the promise that if they do, they'll start catching men instead of fish (Matthew 4:18-20). He follows this invitation with a similar one among the net menders. He invites a despised tax collector to follow Him (Matthew 9:9-11), which leads to a complaint on the part of the religious elite that Jesus is spending far too much time with the wrong people (the "unchurched" as some would call them today). He calls Philip the same way and Nathanael too. Even in the "you must be born again" passage of John 3, Jesus hints that what Nicodemus really needs to do is to simply trust Jesus and start *following* Him out into the literal highways and byways of life, where he'll be led by the Spirit of God into new challenges, new relationships, new adventures, and new ways of thinking.

In every case, Jesus is inviting those who would eventually become His disciples to simply follow Him. It was very practical, decidedly nontheological. He'd been speaking of a new reign, a new King and kingdom. He already had begun His ministry of showing people hints of the new kingdom by healing, by casting out demons, by challenging the religious orders of the day to rethink and reprioritize, and by turning the social order upside down through His contacts with the poor, sick, demon possessed, and otherwise marginalized sections of the society.



Then, having exemplified these different ways of living, He invites others to simply follow Him, to step into the work that He's doing of being a blessing and embodying some sort of hopeful new world order.

What if we were to do the same? What if the starting point of our message was simply an invitation to step into the work God is doing, to follow Jesus by embodying a hopeful new world order? What would this mean?

It would mean that we might invite our environmentally aware neighbor to help rebuild a salmon stream because our church is working on that project right alongside a local preservation group. Or it might mean inviting a friend who is a boat builder to go with our mission team to Sri Lanka after the tsunami. Perhaps we'd invite a businesswoman to join us in Romania as we help teach ethics and economic development in that part of the world. It could be as simple as inviting a friend to distribute blankets and hot chocolate to street people on a rainy night in Seattle or spend the night in the homeless shelter our church sponsors.

This seems to be how Jesus did it. He'd start by inviting people to exhale because when we do, we discover our need to inhale. I know someone who is about to go spend some time in Central America, and when she told one of her friends about the work she'd be doing building an orphanage, her friend decided to go too. This is how many people are discovering Christ. They're learning that Jesus cares about the world in which we live and that He's inviting us to be bearers of good news and hope in the midst of it. It's an invitation that I'm convinced many people are longing to hear.²

Waiting to Exhale

Lots of people are waiting to exhale. They have a passion to serve a continent ravaged by famine and disease, or to preserve the environment by challenging people to live more simply, or to care for the elderly, the poor, the homeless. Some of the people who are waiting to exhale walk right past the church (or they drop in and quickly drop out) because they haven't seen the church as a place where one learns to breathe but as a

place where one inhales and then waits for the spectacular removal of the faithful from this earth in the rapture. Such a vision is neither inviting nor accurate. Most people can't inhale endlessly. Nor can they hold their breath forever.

That's why the *first* invitation for so many needs to be an invitation to exhale. Once this happens, lots of good things are sure to follow.

Exhaling Our Way Back to Health

The untimely death of my dad during my senior year in high school plunged me into a crisis of faith, whereby I doubted the goodness, trustworthiness, and love of God. Why does a man who never let tobacco touch his lips die at the age of 53 of lung disease? When people found out the cause of death they usually said something like "Cigarettes kill," and I wanted to smack them. We're always looking for a formula, an explanation. But the reality is that good people die too soon all the time, and there's no explanation, no formula.

This very lack of formula, this sense of God as the capricious, random being who either actively instituted or passively allowed immense suffering, caused me to withdraw from my faith. I decided to pursue a career in architecture so I could leave my mark on this earth and build some creations of my own before I too died God only knows when.

I'd still sit in church, but nothing angered me more than hollow platitudes about how "all things work together for good" quoted from the Bible by well-meaning friends, along with mild exhortations to make sure I kept reading the Bible and praying.

No thanks. I'd lost my dad. I was depressed, and I was losing my health too. Words about everything working out for the best felt like a hollow mockery, and I didn't know the Bible well enough to find the parts where people who loved God expressed their rage and lament.³ Those sections weren't covered in church, or I missed that Sunday. I thought the faithful were the ones who kept smiling, no matter what, and I realized I couldn't

keep my plastic smile pasted on anymore. I kept my Bible on my shelf and pursued architecture with a vengeance, hoping to find comfort in the fact that, though the grim reaper would win someday, I'd leave my mark in the form of buildings scattered across California.

I'd only been on the coast at my new college for a week before meeting Cindy in the dining hall. "You're a Christian?" I asked, as I'd seen her praying over her food. She smiled and nodded, her eyes bright with hope. "And you?" she asked. The story was too long, and she was too attractive. To keep it simple, and in the hopes of keeping it going, I said yes.

We ate together, and as soon we returned to the dorm, she introduced me to Jim, a big hulk of an architecture student. Some moments abide in our lives long after most memories have faded. One of them is what happened next. This big hairy guy with a red bushy beard looked at me, his eyes filled with as much hope and twinkle as hers, and he said, "God is going to do some amazing things this year in our dorm. And you're going to be a part of it." And then he wrapped his arms around me in a great big bear hug. I had disengaged from hope a few counties back on the road of life, and now a guy was hugging me and assuring me that I was about to be part of something big. I didn't know what to think of it.

He went on to ask me how I wanted to help. Could I sing, play guitar, lead games, play piano? I could bang on the piano, so I showed up for the Sunday evening Bible studies he led. Seven people become ten. Ten became twenty. Twenty become forty. Then sixty. The Spirit of God was sweeping through our dorm, people were going to the beach to get baptized, and I was somehow involved in seeing people trust the same God whom I doubted I could ever trust again.

Had the hairy guy just invited me to a Bible study, I'm not sure I would have said yes. Had he challenged me to pray more or begin a regime of witnessing, I'm certain I'd have said no. I'd inhaled enough platitudes and frustrations recently and felt as if I was choking. But I wasn't invited to sit or study or pray. I was invited to participate. And that made all the difference. I was doubting, failing. I was in a frustrated space where I had

more questions than answers, and the answers I did have were ringing hollow. But I could play piano. Being asked to play rather than sit was just the wooing I needed.

The rediscovery of Christ as a source of hope and healing began with exhaling for me. It doesn't work that way for everyone. But based on the way Jesus invited His followers, the weight of evidence is that exhaling comes first.

Jesus meets a couple guys who are wondering if their lives are amounting to anything and He says, "Come with me. We'll catch men instead of fish!"

Sounds pretty inviting to me.