

NewesLetter

Vol 14, No 1

Fifteen Year Re-Vision - or

How a hyper-active kid goes on a sabbatical and ends up sort-of like a monk, but not really

It has been a while since I last sent a NewesLetter. Spirituality Shoppe started in 1995 and I wanted to write a fifteen-year re-vision, but I could not seem to find the words. Until now. Our family designed this year's holi-day "zine" (our version of a Christmas letter) around four themes: power, vision, happiness, and action. I tried to integrate these themes in my contribution. And as I wrote that piece, I realized that I was writing the NewesLetter I had been searching for. So, with a few revisions and lots of additions, here is my story.

I was an active little boy. Indeed, those who made labels back then gave me the label of *hyper-active*. They probably would have drugged me today. Parents, teachers, friends, all told me to SIT STILL, but I just couldn't do it. I needed excitement. I needed to move, to initiate, to act. I have also been addicted to influence nearly all of my life. My junior-high dream was to become the most popular kid in school. I wanted to be "in," where it was happening. And I wanted to be in-fluential among my crowd. I tried hard to achieve that goal, but I didn't know what I was doing (socially a bit slow), and the result was that I was left alone, powerless in my small world.

My conversion to Christianity gave me a fresh start (let's call it a "new birth," OK?). I began to see a vision of being someone else, with Jesus as my friend. I was happy. Right away I got involved in Christian things, and, being smart, active, and a people-pleaser, I was able to rise in the ranks of Christendom. I became a *leader* (read - power and influence). Since that time I have climbed up one Christian ladder after another, wanting to be "in" where the action was happening, consciously or unconsciously trying to possess some form of influence over others. Note that phrase, "over" others. Usually, being short, I stand *under* others (a position which should be welcomed as a source of under-standing). But, I have wanted to stand over.

Yet it wasn't all just a matter of Evan living out his own sick unconscious motives. I sincerely pursued the truth of the Gospel and tried to live it. I loved people and tried to help them as best I could. At key times, I repented from my pharisaism and took the back seat. And God has a wonderful way of welcoming, using, and even blessing us in the midst of our mixed motives. Perhaps the high point of my experience of this blessing was April 25, 1995. It was the graduation ceremony for the Internship Program of the San Francisco Vineyard, a program I had been instrumental in starting and leading for three years. It was a wonderful ceremony and I received a fair amount of approval. I remember turning to Cheri and saying, with tears in my eyes, "It's happened, Cheri. I'm the most popular kid in school."

The next day I moved to Montrose. It was a hard move, giving up opportunities for teaching

and pioneering a cutting-edge Church work. In a moment of sanity, when Cheri asked me to dream of life in Montrose, I received a vision of a life of rhythm: work, study, prayer, and ministry. It was a kind-of monastic life, but one without a monastery. I experimented with this rhythm in every imaginable configuration, and eventually hit upon a way of doing it that works for the most part. At the same time I poured myself into my dissertation, *Praying the Scriptures*, and then into writing the *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. I tried, perhaps unconsciously, to carve out places of influence--in Spirituality Shoppe, in local activities, in my writing. I tried to sit still here and there, but it was (is) *so hard*.

And then about two years ago a few things happened all at once. The '07 scholar's gathering had reached an all-time low and I was beginning to wonder if it was worth promoting scholarship in "evangelical spirituality." I had finished the writing portion of the *Brazos Introduction* and was beginning to ask what might come next. In late September/early October of '07 I travelled to Georgia and North Carolina, my first steps into the world of "new monasticism." I was encouraged with the visits, but cautious about my own involvement. And while I was there Cheri's mother died in Montrose. A new season of relationship with Cheri's father and responsibility for their ranch land had just begun. In May of '08 Terese, our youngest daughter, graduated from college. Our years of child-raising were over. Both girls were now capable and eager to make their own life. It was time to take a little sabbatical, a time to wait and see what might be coming next.

What came was a variety of events and impressions from which clarity emerged only slowly. *The Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* was started and I had increasing opportunity to write about evangelical spirituality. The scholar's gathering gained membership such that last year we reached an all-time high. I received lots of opportunities for writing. My interest in the topics of religious life, conflict, philosophy, and world religions remained high. Yet at the same time I discovered that my expectations about publishing needed some correction. After eight years of work, the *Brazos Introduction* has received nice reviews but poor sales (a much needed medicine to my influence addiction). I watched the invitations for teaching come and go: some arising where I least expected them and others canceled due to the economy. I toyed with the idea of ceasing nearly all activity and becoming a real "hermit," and actually this past early spring was pretty contemplative. But the fact of the matter is that I am married with children and a wider community that God is pleased for me to maintain.

Perhaps most significantly during this time is that I have fallen in love with a number of intentional communities of young people trying to live the life of Christ in the midst of places of deep need. I found myself writing letters to people in Romania and Cambodia and talking on the phone with a man in Venezuela. A few have come here to visit us in Montrose. They help us with work, and I help them listen to God. And they share life a little with Cheri and I. Most recently, I visited a couple of intentional communities in Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey this past November, where I led a School for Conversion. These people have stolen my heart. I have a hunch that we share a vision, these young people and I. I have a hunch that I might have something to contribute. Not some unrealistic place of power, but a niche of appropriate action.

My sabbatical is over. I wanted to see what might be coming next, and now I have some clarity about what that might look like. What this means for Spirituality Shoppe looks like the following:

- I will continue to teach and write and facilitate scholarship in evangelical spirituality. I am working with Jim Wilhoit on a book on Scripture and spirituality. I have been asked to author the “evangelical” portion of a book on *Spirituality: Four Views*. The Scholar’s Gathering will continue. I may write a piece on evangelical spirituality for *Spiritus*, the journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality.

- I will continue my work in philosophy and world religions. This research will not take a primary place, but some of it is helpful for other interests and my contributions in these areas help me serve people here in Montrose. We shall see.

- I will continue my studies in conflict. I am at the early stages of this exploration, but I am convinced that we need to think of spiritual formation in terms of formation *into* conflict management: with social and political forces, with our own sinful passions, with demonic forces, within community dynamics, and with the harsh forces of nature. More of this in future NewesLetters.

- I will continue to pray, although I have no illusions of becoming a “real” hermit.

- I will continue to work. I do manual labor not simply as a means of occupying my mind or body, but as a celebration of creaturehood. Some of my most mystical moments are spent working on wood or walking a fence line, repairing barbed wire. I enjoy work more and more every year.

- I will study and pray and work and teach especially with these new forms of religious life in mind. I am particularly interested in questions of “monasticism” and such, and this interest will guide my study. I suspect that I will increasingly have young intentional communities in mind as I write NewesLetters. I will continue to travel, but I will prioritize my travel around serving new religious communities. No, I’m not moving to the latest ministry “hot spot,” though while I am in California in January teaching at SFTS I will also give a three separate presentations to intentional communities in San Francisco. Sometimes I pout; it’s not very sexy staying here in Montrose when all the action is happening “out there” (or is this just my imagination?). I can’t pride myself on staying here playing the role of the “desert father” either, because that’s not really what I’m doing. I lead a mixed life, and that is where I find God. There is a grace that God has given me and as I settle into that grace, divine influence is manifest. In that place I find what I want most.

- I will probably publish things on the web more than I have. Some of the research I am doing is not ready for release in book form, and is not really appropriate for the usual journals. I have

already begun to post some of the “Reflections” portions of my NewsLetter on the web (www.evangelicalspirituality.org/spirituality_shoppe; see Archives of Newsletters organized by topic). The contributions I can imagine in the near future might be more useful as web pages. I have already posted a list of tables of contents from the Rules or covenants of religious communities. A similar anthology of “Resources from Old Monasticism for New Monastics” complete with links to appropriate sites might be helpful.

- I need to rebuild my mailing list. Over these fifteen years, I have lost track of some of you. Some of you may prefer reading online rather than receiving this hard copy letter (though you would miss the art). Or perhaps you know of someone who would really enjoy receiving a NewsLetter like this. So I have enclosed an addressed, stamped, postcard so you can let me know if you want me to keep sending you this NewsLetter. **I WILL NOT MAIL YOU ANOTHER NEWSLETTER UNLESS YOU SEND ME A POSTCARD INFORMING ME OF YOUR DESIRE TO RECEIVE THEM!!**

- I also need to rebuild my financial support network. What I have concluded, after looking at the various factors emerging over the past two years is that, as far as I can tell, my income will come more from personal support rather than university appointments or popular books. Spirituality Shoppe is still a “research and development” ministry. Most of my work is a ministry of prayerful study that is aimed at empowering a small segment of the Christian Church. Fifteen years ago, when I started this ministry and was concerned about how I would “make a living,” I thought God said that a few people would believe in me. These few would keep me going. That is why I started Spirituality Shoppe as a formal 501(C3) non-profit organization. That has been true until the past couple of years. I suspect there are still a few who might believe in my work. If you feel like supporting Spirituality Shoppe, feel free to send something to the address on this NewsLetter.

I am looking forward to this new year. I am coming at it with a renewed sense of confidence and devotion to my work.

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.