

This commemorative edition of *The Chaplain's Corner* was presented to Bishop Robert H. Spain on the occasion of his birthday on October 26, 2015. It contains a collection of reflections that he wrote for the people of The United Methodist Publishing House. These many writings have inspired and served us since Bishop Spain came to UMPH in 1992.

A copy of *The Chaplain's Corner: Reflections From Bishop Robert H. Spain*, can be downloaded from the Abingdon Press website for all to enjoy.

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Happy Birthday, Bishop Spain!

THE CHAPLAIN'S CORNER

SPAIN

THE CHAPLAIN'S CORNER

Reflections from Bishop Robert H. Spain

ABINGDON PRESS

A Commemorative Edition

THE CHAPLAIN'S CORNER



Bishop Robert Hitchcock Spain

BISHOP ROBERT H. SPAIN

Author of the Chaplain's Corner

Robert Hitchcock Spain was born October 26, 1925, in Loretto, Tennessee. Following high school, with the Second World War in progress, he joined the Navy spending the following years on the West Coast and in the South Pacific ultimately concluding with the invasion of Okinawa.

In 1948 he was married to Syble Mink, and two children, Mollie and John, were added to the family.

Also in 1948 he began his ministry in the then Methodist Church as a student local pastor serving the Collinwood 5 point rural circuit and later a student appointment in Spring Hill. Following Vanderbilt Divinity School, he served First Methodist Church in Livingston, First Methodist in Lebanon, Belle Meade Methodist, District Superintendent of the Nashville District of the United Methodist Church and Brentwood United Methodist Church. He was elected a bishop of the church in 1988. As a bishop he served the church in Kentucky and South Carolina.

Upon retirement in 1992, he became a part of the staff of the United Methodist Publishing House, a position he has held for the past 23 years.

BISHOP BOB: TIME-MAKER

Some people take time. Some lose or waste time. Some bide their time. Bishop Robert H. Spain makes time.

For more than twenty-three years, Bishop Spain has been a time-maker, devoting his life to loving, teaching, and molding the staff of The United Methodist Publishing House for joyful worship and faithful ministry.

He's found time for encouraging conversations and to help many of us relish unfolding family stories—births and adoptions, graduations, marriages, small and large triumphs. He's lamented with us about mishaps, dutifully admired photos of our renovated kitchens or new puppies, and advised how to stay open to life's surprises with a sense of wonder. He's made time to help carry our pain and grief, visit hospital rooms, stand vigil for us at funerals, and listen with graceful compassion as we pour out and ponder our regrets and anxieties.

Bob has made time to serve as our beloved chaplain, friend, pastoral counselor, mentor, and encourager—always reminding us about the reliable presence of God's abundant and merciful grace. As the seasons turn, he makes time to plan and lead

worship that directs our attention to what it means to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

Twenty-three years ago Robert H. Spain reached the age of mandatory retirement as an active bishop, but he never retired as a servant of God and an energetic, loyal, steadfast pastor. He shows up like clockwork, come rain or shine, to remind us that what we do in developing and delivering resources makes a difference in the lives of real people, the character of Christian faith communities, and the quality of life in God's good creation.

Some point to the importance and fruits of faithfulness. Some even preach and teach about such things. Bob Spain embodies, expresses, cultivates, and delights in these holy endeavors as he unfailingly makes time for the UMPH community and our ministry.

For ninety years Bishop Robert H. Spain has been making time for God and God's people. We are greatly enriched by and profoundly thankful for his unwavering gifts of heart, mind, and spirit—and for the way he's generously made time so that many will know and love God and choose to serve God and neighbor.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BOB!

You are a time-maker extraordinaire!



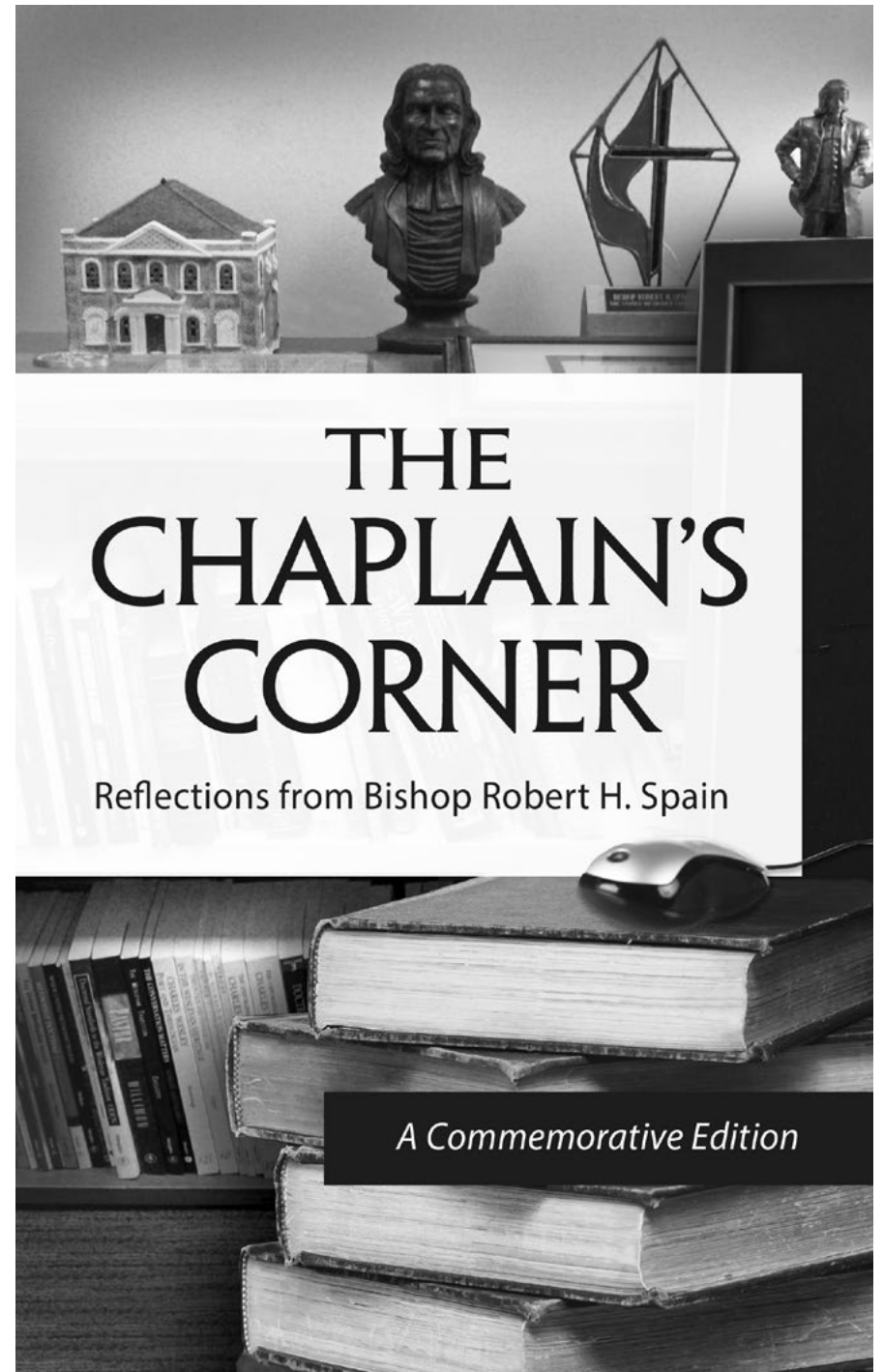
Neil M. Alexander
President and Publisher
The United Methodist Publishing House
October 26, 2015

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*Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can,
in all the places you can,
at all the times you can,
to all the people you can,
as long as ever you can.*

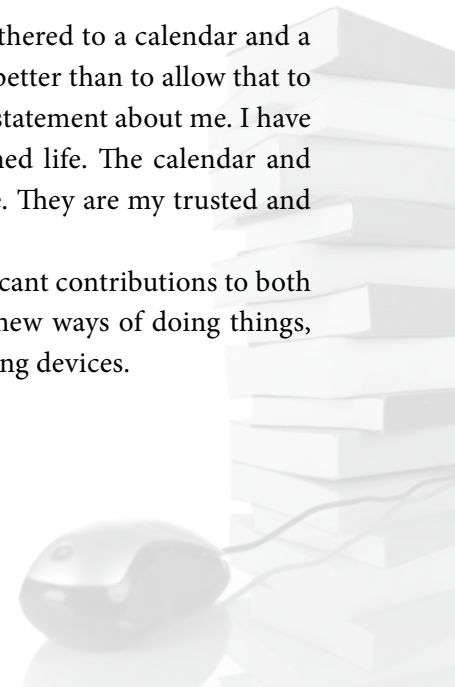
—John Wesley

TIME IS A PRECIOUS COMMODITY

For most of my life I have been tethered to a calendar and a clock. I know that's not good. I know better than to allow that to identify me, but it is a pretty accurate statement about me. I have lived something close to a programmed life. The calendar and clock have been very important to me. They are my trusted and faithful companions.

But today's world has made significant contributions to both the calendar and the clock. We have new ways of doing things, and most of them have been time-saving devices.

Just think about it:



The computer program Word is a wonder. It's glorious. What a time saver! No more typing erasers. No more painting the little white stuff over the misspelled letters. Rarely does one have to search the dictionary for spelling. It's the complete thing.

With the trusted computer, there is no more hassling with multiple sheets of paper with carbon paper hopefully turned in the correct position. This is a real time-saver.

With e-mail as an electronic postman, instant messages can be sent anywhere without addressing an envelope or licking it sealed.

We don't even have to go to the post office.

The income I receive goes directly to my deposit. I never see it. It's mine. It is just not physically with me. It does not come to my house, and I do not handle it. It's all done for me.

And when it comes to regular ongoing bills that must be paid, this new day is wonderful. A bank draft does it. I don't have to spend time writing a check. The utility company and others notify the bank and the bank pays them.

With constant assistance from the UMPH Help Desk and a committed cadre of IT friends, I can phone most of my family and friends without even dialing their numbers—just touch the name and presto! It's hard to believe, but I can read most of the important newspapers from my little tethered cell friend. I can also “touch my way” to check the weather or find the up-to-date score of today's ball game. All these things without going anywhere.

All this leaves me a little troubled. Where is the time I have saved?



LIVING YOUR STORY

I told you a couple of weeks ago about reading someone's brief summary of my life. Some of it was factual, but it didn't belong on the “Memorial” page.

What would the story of your life look like? Have you ever thought about writing your life story? Upon reading such a question, one's mind quickly reboots, and events and adventures and celebrations and accomplishments flash by in rapid-fire order. How would your story be told? Would the chapters be a chronological setting—from birth to the present? Would your story be told through adventures or career paths or relationships or accomplishments? All these things would be good chapters providing structure to your story. That's the way many life narratives are chronicled.

The high points of one's life usually provide the story its organization. The vacations were fabulous. It's great to relive them and build a season of your life around them. The career tracts were unexpected but interesting. The opportunities and successes were more than anyone deserves. They make for good reading. The people we have met and the relationship with family and friends—what would we have ever done without them?

These life peaks make good chapter divisions for our story, but it's the stuff between the chapters that really defines who we are. It's the bits and pieces of the daily grind that tempers us and molds us for more. How we handle the blah days equips us for big-event days. How we live the absolutely uneventful days readies us for something bigger. How we handle the day when nothing was accomplished tells much about us, though it probably will go unwritten.

Most of our lives are lived down in the trenches, down in the everyday variety, where jobs are done, bills are paid, kids are raised, groceries are bought, homes are cleaned, and you finish the day dead tired. In the final analysis, most of our days are regular and ordinary—no flags flying, no banners waving, no gold medals being awarded. But this is where we are shaped.

Much is written today about the successes and great things that accrue from a faithful and loving relationship with God. Such a bonding with God brings blessings beyond our imagining, but I doubt that heaven is as concerned with winning and triumphs and top-of-the-chart things as we are. I have no doubt that God rejoices in our victories, but I am pleased and take great encouragement from the fact that God is with me whether I am up or down. As a faithful companion our Lord walks with us through the trenches. On my not-so-productive days, there is an abiding presence. It is through the regular ordinary every day that God knows me best. I'm glad because that's mainly where I live.



USE WHAT YOU'VE GOT

For the entire semester the journalism professor shared with the students the accumulation of years of study and experience. Toward the end of the school season he piqued their interest by announcing that at the closing class he would give them both a summary of the semester's work and his hope for their future careers. With such a promise they eagerly arrived to hear the departing lecture. The entire class session was given in four words: Use what you've got!

Inasmuch as this was a class in journalism, I suppose the professor was saying to the students that it is better to use what you have prepared, even though it is imperfect, and get it out than to keep it sanitized and isolated from the world in a notebook or stored on some computer's hard drive.

Those closing words are important to more than journalism students. They ring a clear bell for all of us whatever our careers or professions. Think about it:

USE WHAT YOU'VE GOT

- You are you.
Celebrate it!
Embrace it.
Don't let the world define who you are.
Accept yourself
- You have something:
It is of worth.
It is needed.
It has meaning written all over it.
- The something you have is a gift.
There is a reason behind all gifts.
Plant it. You'll never know the hidden secrets within.
Nurture whatever springs to life.
Massage the sprouting passions.
Pollination is more than a gardening idea.
Generously share what develops.
Flavor it with grace and honest toil.
- The not-so-perfect is still valuable.

A Recovery Ministry in Virginia lives with the philosophy "Good Enough." They are not advocating mediocrity or one doing or being less than their best. They are saying that all who

frequent their door are "good enough." They have worth. Their lives are filled with possibilities. They may not have reached their potential or fulfilled their dreams but where they are and who they are is enough.

In II Timothy the admonition is to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you." It may be that this was a part of the professor's thought. Take what's there, give it a good stirring and turn it loose.

P.S. As with everything I do, this Chaplain's Corner article is not as good as it should or could be. But since there is a deadline and I've carried this thought as far as I can today, I am submitting it. There is very little I've ever done that has been perfect. But I sure have enjoyed the trip.



I look upon the whole
world as my parish.
—John Wesley



DOING WHAT WE CAN DO

It is an often told old story. The forest was on fire. Invading flames were gobbling up huge trees as if they were kindling wood. It was a raging fire totally out of control. On a distant hill overlooking the sprawling inferno were the gathered animals of the forest huddled together wondering about their homeland and their own personal fate.

While watching the encroaching fire, the gathered forest animals noticed a tiny hummingbird whirling through the air making repeated sorties from the lake to the edge of the raging fire each time releasing a small drip of water from its beak. Once the beak filled with water was unloaded onto the raging fire, a return trip was under way. Back and forth, back and forth, drop by drop of water unloaded onto the fire.

The watching audience of forest animals saw the impossible task being attempted by the tiny hummingbird and cried, "You can't smother this forest fire with the tiny load of water you're carrying in your beak. What do you think you are doing?" Without stopping to discuss the matter, the tiny water tanker answered, "I'm doing what I can."

I watch the news. I watch a lot of news. I am awakened each morning by the news coming from my radio-activated alarm clock. I go to bed right after the news. I watch it at other times also. The news is now a 24/7 commodity. One can watch it anytime and almost anywhere.

Much of the news is troubling:

- the boondoggling in Washington
- the unusual ravaging weather patterns
- the throngs of malnourished children in third-world countries
- the Wall Street protests
- the uprisings in the Middle East
- the worldwide financial crisis

Years ago it may have been that I would not have known about these scary and troubling things until I had read about them in history books, but this is no longer the situation. Like the frightened animals watching the forest ablaze, I know about these troubling problems.

If this were not enough, this week's lectionary Bible reading included the words of Jesus,

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

What am I to do? As I survey the enormity of the problems and as I understand my own inadequate stockpile of resources and graces, I feel less than the hummingbird with its tiny beak filled with water.

But I am not going to take my place with the gathered animals watching the forest burn. My contribution to the world's problems may not amount to much, but I am going to do everything I can with what I have. Anything less is too little.



The best thing of all is
God is with us.
—John Wesley



A CROTON PLANT

For more than fifteen years I had a croton plant in my old office—the same croton plant. In warmer climates, a croton is usually an outside plant, but in our region it cannot withstand the winter's chill. The plant is large for indoor plants, thus it was housed in a container measuring about 14 inches in diameter and about the same in depth. I didn't have any light from the outside, but the indoor lighting apparently was sufficient to maintain it. I doused some water on it once a week and an occasional gift of plant food. It served me well. The leaves were dark green with center veins of yellow. Expertly calibrated by mother nature, smaller yellow ribbons ventured from the basic feeding vein ferrying nutrients throughout the leaves. The croton plant does not blossom, its beauty is in its foliage.

With the move before us, I salvaged my plant by taking it home. Not having a place for it I put it temporarily on a table at the corner of our screened porch. There it would get morning sun and a bit of filtered rays during the afternoon.

Within a month the plant began waking up. The tips of the plant were sprouting new leaves and week by week the dark green leaves were inviting the yellow feeling tubes to unleash their color throughout the entire leaf. The rays of the sun ushered in something new—unusual growth and a pent-up beauty joyfully expressing itself across the tip of every branch of the plant.

As I have regularly witnessed this croton transformation, I have been daringly reminded that this is what Jesus wants from me. Jesus wants me and all his followers to come alive, turn loose, be something beyond the regular. And the wonder of it is that he made it possible. “. . . you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be . . .”

It's amazing what some extra light can do for a plant. It is no more amazing than what the Holy Spirit can do with us.



THE HARVEST MOON

Last night (September 8) I arrived home at about 7:30 p.m. Awaiting dinner with my wife, I perched myself in my well-worn, comfortable chair on my back porch. From this comfortable setting I often watch the moon emerge from the lower branches of the tree on its nightly pilgrimage across the sky—its presence influenced by the fullness or absence of cloud cover, and its shape determined by its solar trajectory. Over the years I have watched its path change with the seasons. As if directed by some divine choreographer, this earth companion tiptoes across the sky in orderly fashion displaying a swath of light everywhere it goes.

Last night it was different. I was alerted to something different even before the moon made its appearance. There was

no thunderous sound, no announcement, but something big was about to burst upon the earth. I watched as this enormous full-circle ball of light unhurriedly edged its way through the branches penetrating the darkness with a celebrating brightness. It was huge. It lit up the sky as it rose from the horizon. There was something unwavering about its path. It knew where it was going. Last night, the Harvest Moon was queen of the heavens. It reigned in regal glory.

I sat and watched its climb. Little by little it cleared the trees, and my entire backyard was covered with its beauty.

As I watched, I was drawn into a deep reflection as to what was going on. Moonlight is everything the poets and singers make it out to be. But the moon has no light. What I saw last night were rays from an earth-spent sun bouncing off the surface of the moon toward the earth. The moon is a reflection of something else. Far behind the moon is a power and life-giving something expressing itself through one of its solar travelers.

How like us. We are the reflection of forces and powers beyond ourselves. For sure, we trot our personal assets before the public with confidence and hope. But like the moon, we have been gifted with a light from above. The character of our presence and the brightness of our abilities are not self-generated commodities, but we can allow a life-changing light to bounce off us onto the world.

There are not a lot of Harvest Moons. Most of us are not of the red carpet folks, but we have been invited to be participants.



I'M EXCITED

Last Friday I had the privilege of seeing “my place” in the new UMPH home. Well, not actually seeing it, but seeing it marked out on a big architectural-type paper. I have regularly gone by the new place just to make sure “they” were doing everything the way it should be done, but this marked place for “The Chaplain’s Office” prompted a new wave of adrenaline. Along with you I have known for a long time that we were moving. The truth is that we are almost into a count-down mood, something like Lent or Advent, when we mark our progression toward Easter or Christmas. At our house we often get “save the date” notices, but last Friday’s look at my future home made me feel like the event was almost here. The picture of our spaces made me feel invited and wanted.

As a minister, I have often moved. (Bishop's do that to clergy.) I don't think we have ever moved without going through a bit of depression, at least some sadness. Normally in our homes we become somewhat settled. We have our comfort zones, our own private retreat areas, our special chairs, and even chosen navigational routes through the house. There are dinners and family gatherings and Christmas celebrations etched on our memories. A "place" becomes a slice of one's life. It is a part of the life story.

But also, as a minister, I have had the privilege of getting to move into new places. I don't ever remember moving when I did not have some excitement about it. The move represented a new chapter in my life book. There were new challenges and new places to roam. My life and my work became a new adventure.

All my adult life I have focused on a single ministry and mission. The "what" I was doing has remained the same, but it has been carried out in several geographical locations. In every venue I have experienced new challenges and new opportunities.

For me, the soon-to-be move is special. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that at my age I would get to be a part of a "new beginning." Just think about it—we're about to begin a new chapter in the history of the United Methodist Publishing House. Our mission remains intact. We know what we are to do, but a new environment beckons us to new opportunities. A new place, a new environment is challenging. We can create some new traditions. We can become even better at serving the church. We can reach out to a broader Christian community. In short, we can be the beginning of a new day for our Publishing House.

I'm excited. Bring it on!



THE CHANGING SEASON

During this past week (October 24–28) the trees across Demonbreun from our 201 building at the Frist Center have turned into glorious shades of red and orange. It's not only there but everywhere. All of a sudden, the dogwood trees have taken on a reddish tint. The mums are singing hymns of gladness as they beckon all that pass with their colorful yellows and purples and rust-colored blossoms. Red berries nestled against their green anchors are appearing on the holly bushes. Crepe Myrtles are shedding their leaves and scattering their offspring upon the surrounding soil. Newly carved pumpkins are awaiting the arrival of the trick-or-treaters. And yes, there are already some various shades of brown reminding us that nature observes a time of rest.

The change of season reminds us that time truly is like an ever flowing stream. As the song suggests, it just keep rolling

along. I know it is an age thing, but time has picked up speed. Christmas used to be forever in coming. The county fair seemed to never come. School vacations took forever to arrive. But now—nature's rainbow of color reminds us that yesterday is gone and a new day is here. And before we know it, the embroidered tapestry of nature will quickly fade, and the chill of another winter will be upon us. Time is moving on.

The change of season also reminds us that some of nature's gifts need attention. For some it means relocating the plants. Other specimens of nature need an extra blanket for the eventual frost and freeze. Some of God's good creation needs a good feeding before winter's hibernation. Still others of nature's wonders have fulfilled their role and must be released back into the world.

The change of seasons also serves as a call for me to look at my personal life as well as the natural world in which I live. Here, too, time is moving rapidly and a checkup could reveal some needs that should be addressed. It seems that I give more attention to some of the things around me than I do to the me that is embedded in a physical frame. Should I have some extra wrapping for the unexpected? Should I shed some the anxiety about the future? Should I be leaving more of myself for the needs of others? Have I trimmed away the shaggy elements of my life that something new and vibrant can take root?

Nature seems to closely follow an orderly program; but our lives are less outwardly ordered. We have been gifted with freedom; and with choices being ours to make, much of our tomorrow depends upon what we do today.



A GIFT LIKE NO OTHER

In one of my early churches there was a lady who “took a liking to me.” That was the way she expressed her appreciation of me. Even so, she was doggedly assertive when my sermon delivery was less than she expected from me. She was a retired school teacher with no close family but over the years had become a fixture in the community. She lived in a fairly large home filled with interesting vintage antiques.

In making a pastoral visit with her I expressed an interest in her classic furnishings which immediately transformed the visit into an exhibition tour with a first-person audio history of almost every relished treasure.

Some time later, she invited me to come to her home again. This time it was not for a pastoral visit, but she wanted to give me a gift—one of her antiques. She was very clear. She told me to look around the house and pick out any one antique. The choosing is in your hands, she said—any one of my antiques. This was both exciting and tough. There were some real treasures in the house. As a minister of the gospel, I am supposed to have at least a little humility and reasonableness in regard to possessions. I couldn't choose the big furniture piece in the dining room. I couldn't choose the pier mirror adorning the entry hall. After a time of corralling my thoughts, I became able to somewhat tame my desires and finally made a decision. "I want the lamp in your study—the lamp with the oil feed from the upright canister, the lamp with the dark green shade." She complimented my choice and on the spot gave me a history of the piece I had chosen.

With much fanfare she carefully wrote my name on a piece of paper, which she affixed to the bottom of the lamp. She said, "See, I am putting your name on the lamp" And with a look that is indelibly etched in my memory, she said, "I'm not giving it to you now. As long as you suit me, I'll leave it on. And if you don't, I'll pull it off." And with those last four words, she demonstrated her ability to indeed pull it off.

The Advent season is now upon us. Unlike the invitation described above, God didn't invite us into the heavenly storehouse to select something we wanted. Rather, a gift the world sorely needed came to us in the birth of a child—the babe of Bethlehem. With love as wide as the sea and a love beyond the measure of our minds, God came into the world through a son, Jesus. It was not a promised future gift. It was now! It wasn't conditional. It was sure! It wasn't for a favored few. It was for all!

This is the season to once again hear the hope promised by the prophets. It is the season to hear the angels singing. It is the season to watch and wait with the shepherds. It is the time to follow the leading of God into a new life.

P.S. The above story happened 55 years ago. I have the lamp.





“I learned more about Christianity
from my mother than from all the
theologians in England.”

— John Wesley



A NASHVILLE ZOO FAVORITE —A WOOLLY WORM

It was a grandparents outing with the young grandchildren. My wife and I had them well prepared for the marvelous day they were about to experience—the Nashville Zoo with all the animals. Before the trip, we helped them understand what they would be seeing. We named the animals, showed them pictures, told them about their behavior and natural habitat. With all of them adequately primed for the pilgrimage, we left our regular world for the never-seen-before animal kingdom.

We had barely begun our trek down the path when our youngest granddaughter let out a scream. She saw what she apparently had never seen before—a woolly worm just beneath her feet. The giraffes were just down the way and the elephants a bit further down the path, but for now the pilgrimage came to a

halt. There was no going farther. This little creature was crawling, moving tiny fin-like feet, propelling itself across the path awaiting the squashing by someone's big foot. But that demise for this woolly worm was not to be on this day. The other animals of the zoo had to wait their turn. We hadn't alerted the grandchildren to the likes of woolly worms. This was a new experience. While blocking the flow of other visitors to the zoo, she crouched to watch and wait until that little creature made its way safely across the path.

We eventually made our way through the zoo, but there is no question about the "favorite" of the animals—a measly little woolly worm.

Meister Eckhart knew about little creatures years ago. He was a German theologian, philosopher, and mystic who lived from 1260 to 1327. In a day when everything is "new and improved," it is helpful to understand that those before us were capable of some transforming and enlightening thoughts. He saw and was able to express in words the majesty of God's creation—even the tiniest of creation.

APPREHEND GOD

Apprehend God in all things,
for God is in all things.

Every single creature is full of God
and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—
even a caterpillar—

I would never have to prepare a sermon.
So full of God is every creature.

(Source: Earth Prayers from Around the World.)



UMPQUA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Never heard of Roseburg, Oregon, or the Umpqua River or the college with the strange sounding name, but I know it now. The world knows about it. It ripped open our hearts and minds yesterday—again reminding us of the fragility of life and the malicious evil that is straddling our society.

How can it be
that innocent people be massacred?
that schools, of all places, become "lock down" places?
that a peace loving culture is infected with a carnage virus?
that weapons of mass destruction are so feared from other
nations and so defended by our society?

that we apparently accept a culture of violence that is totally unacceptable?
that tragedy would strike at such a peaceful sounding place as “Umpqua”?

When Isaiah witnessed some tough times, he cried out to the Lord. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence” (Isaiah 64:1-2).

As I understand Isaiah, he said, “Lord come out of your celestial housing and get down here. We need you to come with your power and shake things up down here. We need you, and we need you now.”

There are tons of prayers being lifted for the people of Roseburg and especially for the families and friends of those killed and injured at the Umpqua Community College. In our cry to God for help we must remember that God works mainly through human instruments. We are the vehicles through which God reorders the world. We are the conduits through which the grace and mercy of the Lord must flow. As the poet has suggested, we are the arms and legs and eyes and ears of the Lord. We are God's people. We are the witnesses and expressions of his love, his grace, and his desires.

I will continue to pray for the people connected with the Umpqua Community College massacre. I believe, however, that the Lord expects something more of me.



THE COSTCO STORE IS A MANY SPLENDORED THING

- For some it is a warehouse-type supplier of products.
- For some it is a wide-aisle walking tract with company provided walkers.
- For some it is a cheap hotdog and coke.
- For some it is a “sort-of” wholesale broker of specialty goods.
- For some it is a gallery of “must-have” merchandise.
- For some it is a broker of home services.
- For some it is a destination place on a cold or rainy day.

And then there are yet others who see the store as a sampler of food products. They are, of course, not the only stores doing

this, but each day (and especially on weekend) there are food stations throughout the store offering free ready-to-eat samples of food products. It's a virtual progressive restaurant. Some refer to the ritual of visiting each of these eating places as "grazing" through Costco. They eat and drink their way through the store—sampling a little of whatever appeals to their pallet.

Sad to say but this is the way some approach the Christian faith. They hurriedly take a little bit of whatever is available at the moment. They sample an experience of worship, they try their hand at a habitat project, they serve a night at the rescue mission, they meet with some friends to discuss a mission visit, they sometime visit a Sunday school group, they drive occasionally for "meals on wheels," they volunteer to be a greeter in the church parking lot—there is nothing wrong in what they do. All these things have worth and are important, but these things are invitations for us to go deeper. Taking a swig of a newly flavored tea or nibbling at a crab-covered biscuit is not enough. Sampling is not fulfilling, and it is not enough for Christian discipleship. Christ invites us to go "all out." It's time we of the faith got serious.



FROM MY BACK PORCH

From my back porch, I saw a crow gliding across the sky—not racing, wings fully extended and feathers positioned for maximum buoyancy. The crow was sailing through the air—never a flap, being majestically carried along by undisturbed air. As it passed, it cried for the world to hear, caw! I don't know whether it was a cry for help, a mating call, a song with one note or a deliberate response to the glory of the ride.

It landed in a tree a hundred or so yards away. Where did it come from? Was it a planned trip? Did it know where it was going when it started on its flight? How did it chose this place to rest? Was it aware of this particular limb or was this simply a good parking place to rest.

No sooner the stop it took flight again. With a flap or two it was airborne and it soared above the power of the wind. Why

was it coming back? Did it not find what it was looking for? Did it forget something? Is this what birds do—just fly around for the fun of it? Was it looking for a companion? Was it looking for food? Was it a part of the daily exercise regimen? Again, this crow was sailing with outstretched wings—feathers positioned to catch the uplifting power of the wind.

Closer by, two blue jays were playing tag—or so it seemed, hop-scotching their way among the branches of the overly thick leather-leaf viburnum. Giddy-like, they hit every limb as if having to touch each one on the way to whatever goal they had set. They were flirtatiously bouncing from limb to limb—one on the heels of the other.

Down from the porch, a robin wasn't concerned about any of the flying or flitting going on. It too had wings and obviously used them to get to this particular place, but with its head bobbing staccato-like into the ground, it was obviously feasting from the earth's bounty.

And on the porch screen a much-too-early wasp was clutched to the wire mesh seemingly oblivious to being stranded in its travel.

Where did these winged creatures come from? Where did they spend the winter? How did they get to my yard? Was this their playground and vegetable patch last year? Was this a homecoming or is my back yard a stop-over to a more rewarding territory?

Sometime I feel compelled to spout-off my directives for the world. In doing so, I am assuming the world is looking to me for thoughtful understanding and perceptive wisdom.

The truth is that I really can't even understand the "going-on" in my back yard.

Maltbie Babcock reminds us in the hymn, *This Is My Father's World*, that the wonders wrought by God are all about me.

*This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears,
all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees of skies and seas; his hand the wonders wrought.*





GLIMPSES OF GLORY

“Faith is the divine evidence
whereby the spiritual man
discerneth God, and the
things of God.”
— John Wesley

There is a growing interest in near-death or near-life experiences. Each of these is a recalled experience when one is presumed dead—not breathing, heart not beating. Some people have been brought back to life through resuscitation or other means. While in the state of being out-of-this-world, some have memories of bright light, tunnels as pathways to lawns or meadows, or billowy clouds floating across a lake. Notable among the near-death experiences are those from a young boy whose recollection of his out-of-this-world experience reached best-seller ranking. These after-life or near-death experiences are not just interesting but are becoming the focus of multiple neurological research projects.

I am familiar with the normal and customary thoughts about life with Christ throughout eternity for those who have been

judged faithful. Most of us live for the fulfillment of that hope. But the present is a part of eternity, and faithfulness is often a part of today's experience. The fact is that we can live with Christ in the here and now. The scripture is clear that when we love one another (as Christ has loved us) we truly pass from death to life. Jesus declared the kingdom of God to be both here and hereafter. We live in the *now but not yet time*. I await the fulfillment of eternity with Christ but even now I am privileged to see and experience glimpses of that glory. Here and there I see a bit of heaven on earth.

- It was raining, and I had almost reached my destination here at the Publishing House—on the Demonbreun Street overpass. The car in front of me came to an abrupt stop blocking me and all behind me from continuing. The driver jumped from his car, whipped open his umbrella, and hurried to the sidewalk where a lady with a baby was battling the rain. I didn't hear the conversation, but he obviously offered her a ride, which she rightly refused. Not being able to help her by giving her a ride, he handed her his umbrella and ran back to his car drenching wet and continued on to wherever he was going.
- Adults and youth leave the comfort of their homes to serve the homeless a dinner.
- Those who don't have to do it spend their afternoons loading and unloading food boxes at Second Harvest Food Bank.
- Drivers in vans line up inviting others to a "Room-in-the-Inn."
- A police officer patiently and carefully guides a stumbling and troubled man to a place of help.
- A volunteer provides an afternoon snack for a family at the hospice facility.

- And here, there are acts of love—real, caring love—expressed in this UMPH building.

The "not yet" part of the Kingdom awaits. And yes, there is so much trouble in the land I call home that I can hardly stand it. But even in this troubled "now" there is a bit of glory—a glimpse that invites me to live for the "more to come."



“God grant that I may
never live to be useless!”
— John Wesley

ARMS REACHING OUT

I'm fascinated by those tall spine-like cranes that now seem to have squatters-rights down on Demonbreun. They also have infiltrated the West End area of town. By now, it would seem that I would be so accustomed to them that I wouldn't notice them anymore. Here at UMPH we've lived with them in our front yard for much of three years. But I am intrigued by them. Today (Thursday, July 11) those dinosaurs-in-the-sky were roaming their territory helping to ferry tons of concrete to upper level floors. (Years ago, this would have required a battalion of muscle-bound persons pushing wheelbarrows up and down ramps.)

I wonder about the person perched up there in the hanger-like nest. How did he get up there? Did he actually climb straight up the more than a hundred stairs? Did he do it all at once or did he program the ascent? After such an exhausting adventure,

did he have the physical or emotional stamina to navigate the controls? And how did he get down? I've never seen anyone going up or coming down.

One thing I have noticed, there seems to always be good communication between the on-the-ground folks and the one orchestrating the powerful roaming arm above. The one in the little Austin-Healey-like cubicle up above has control of unbelievable possibilities, but there is a need for the hands-on-ground-folks to contribute to the accomplishment of the task.

Our minds can shape and mold any story into what we want it to be. I know that, but I cannot watch the construction crew without thinking about my cooperation with the working of God as a part of the ground-crew. There is little I can do by myself, but I can be the on-site worker than God may need to make a difference. I hope I am that person.



THE COSMOS

On TV last night I watched a program on the Cosmos. Our universe and those that exist beyond our realm of recognition boggle my mind. The extrasolar systems are so far beyond me that I cannot even begin to grasp either the place or activity of them. All of us have studied the basics of our solar system; but beyond the introductory level things, it too is beyond my comprehension.

But there is a lot I don't understand. It's not just the big things floating around in some kind of a sky that I don't comprehend, it's little things that I have been around all my life. Much of it relates to the natural world of which we are a part.

I used to be a gardener—more than making a trip to the local nurseries where they come “ready-made.” I like to start things from seeds—sometimes tiny seeds. I know they are just “little

ole seeds” collected from spent blossoms. But in every seed there is a vast potential of life that is unrevealed, hidden away. Who could ever guess from that one minuscule seed would come a long reaching vine or a flower of fragrance and color and beauty. Each seed is a hidden secret waiting to reveal its true nature.

I also know when I plant a seed that I am committing it to a struggle. It is not without effort that a seed becomes a plant and ultimately a harvest. First the seed must break free of its hard old protective coating and make itself vulnerable to its new possibility. This alone is a battle many seeds never accomplish. It must then fight its way out of the darkness, the same darkness that nurtured it can now kill it if it does not find light. Once in the light, it basks until it is desperate for water to drink, water to live, perhaps one might say living water. Then it must marshal all of its resources to grow, each and every day, despite the bugs, the critters, and the elements that would hold it back or take such a toll it might die. And this means changing every single day. If it is ever static, it will die.

This week I am enjoying the gorgeous colorful peonies. A while ago they were only thin stalks emerging from the winter sleep. Quickly they grew with buds, some the size of a golf ball; and with a day or two of sun, they exploded to four or six inches of unfolding beauty. How can this be? How can such beauty and color come from a buried root.

It makes me wonder what the good Lord wanted me to look like and be like when I became a mature plant.



REAL LIVING

In front of the tall and imposing pulpit at the church, the Altar Guild fashioned an artistic rendering of our God-created world. In the center was a tree with branches soaring skyward. Below were green plants and live flowering plants dotting in between. As with most worship focal areas, there was a scattering of beautiful scented lighted candles showing forth the heavenly light. Emerging from below a small aquarium came into view with fish darting to and fro in what surely was an unusual view for them. Then at the pinnacle of the worship arrangement was a beautifully crafted bird cage with a live tweeting bird flitting from one roosting place to another.

We were at worship. I was seated on the front pew, a scant 15 feet from this miniature world before me. At first I was attracted to the fish swimming and feeding and what-seemed-to-be gazing at

all of us. But more and more I found myself emotionally attached to the bird in the gorgeous three-tiered white cage. I watched it eating the carefully arranged selected seeds. I was close enough to see the swallowing when it drank from its secured bowl. I watched as it danced from one trapeze-type swing to another. I was mesmerized. Live creatures are not a regular part of worship. I became intrigued by the apparent abundant life of this bird. What a life? What a beautiful home? What a marvelous play area? What a way to live?

But the longer I watched, the more I questioned my thoughts. This beautiful bird had an attractive voice that could command attention anytime she wanted. She ate and drank at her slightest wish. She paraded her yellow and black feathers every time she danced from one level of the cage to another. She had everything.

But did she?

It is good to have a place to live. In the case of this bird, it was a very ornate and spacious home. It is good to have an adequate supply of food and water. It is good to have comfortable surroundings and adequate provisions for healthy living. But is this really living? Is that all there is? Is there not something missing?

My life needs more than a place to live and food to eat. Enough said. Think about it.



DIAGNOSTIC SERVICES

On the way home yesterday, the old gospel hymn rumbled through the strings of my mind, “This world is not my home. I’m only passing through.”

The Spain household is not free from the ordinary and regular “break-down” of things. At this particular time, it’s the refrigerator. It’s still running, but it has a mind of its own. It runs a while and then has to have some time to rest—or so it seems. A kick or hefty shove will usually start it running again, but probably we need a new refrigerator.

Yesterday afternoon on the way home I visited one of the big box stores to see what they had in refrigerators. To my amazement, they had tons of them—well, at least 30 or 40. A gentlemen with proper company identification asked if he could

help me. I told him my situation and that I was beginning to survey the refrigerator market. He was pleased to offer his service.

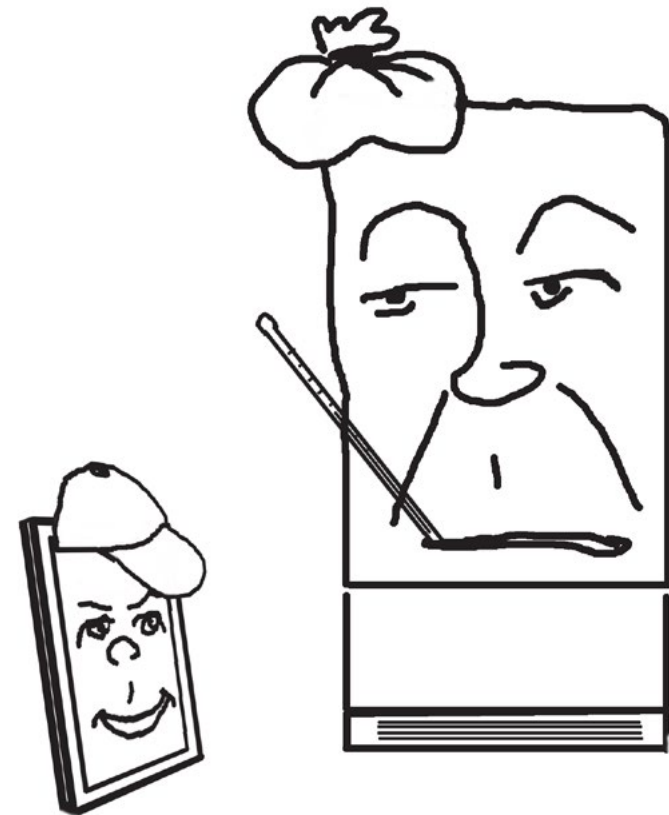
Following the customary parade through the neatly parked refrigerators, he said, "I want to show you the refrigerator you should own." Let me give him a lot of credit. He had done his homework. He knew the product and was delighted to tell me about it. Obviously he had been schooled in presenting the fine features of the refrigerator. He demonstrated the double door, the door within the door, the ice maker with the smaller cubes, not the big oval clunky kind. He relished in showing me the place for the fresh vegetables and the various temperature setting. And with his hand he artistically demonstrated every feature of the appliance.

His face glowing with pride in his product, he asked "do you have one of the new cell phones?" I did; and with that, he was re-energized for his continuing demonstration. He said, "With your phone we will install, free of charge, an app that will allow you to fix anything that ever goes awry with this appliance". With an app already installed in his phone he began the demonstration. He turned off one of the controls and then verbally spoke into his cell phone explaining the problem. Placing the phone against a designated place on the refrigerator, a diagnostic search of the refrigerator was undertaken. Within seconds, an automated voice identified the problem along with a detailed procedure for correcting it.

This was more than I could handle. All I wanted was a reasonably nice looking appliance that would cool our juices and fruits and vegetables and an additional freezer space. I expected an ice maker that spit its cubes out the front door. I expected LED lighting. I expected changeable shelving. I expected variable temperature settings. But self diagnostic services . . .

In earlier days, understanding the refrigerator was simple. It was on when the cooling was being distributed and off when it had cooling enough.

I wonder . . . yeah, I wonder if I could have an app downloaded onto my phone that would scan my inner life offering diagnostic services?





...God is in all things,
and that we are to
see the Creator in the
face of every creature;
that we should use and
look upon nothing
as separate from God...
—John Wesley

TAKE CARE OF MY LAMBS

She stands as a sentinel guarding the entrance to a palace. She proudly sports the lime-green jacket making herself visible to all around. Her western-motif black tie is snuggled against her white shirt. Her cap squarely and securely sits on her head. There is nothing sloppy about it. It's just a regular school patrol hat; but on her head, it is something more. It speaks a message all its own. Around her neck is a lanyard clutching the ever ready you-don't-want-to-hear whistle. In her hand she hold the bright red S T O P sign. There is no slouching around the corner light post.

The Edgehill/12th. Ave. South is her territory in rain or snow or shine from 7:30 to 8:30 each morning and all that pass had better be aware of it. From the car, I can't actually see her eyes, but I feel them. Like the light from a radar screen, her eyes scan the territory making sure there are no vehicle infractions on her watch.

As children arrive from nearby housing, she gathers them near as a mother hen would gather her little ones in times of danger. She guards them. And with the changing of the light, she proceeds military-like into the center of the 4 lanes of traffic. There is nothing ho-hum about her. This is more than a job. She stands and walks and behaves as a person on a mission and she goes about it with a passion. Holding the bright red sign high, she signals the children to cross. As they do she watches as they safely make their way. Her eyes survey the stopped traffic. With the children safely across, she returns to her station and peers at the vehicles as they cautiously tread through the 20 mph zone.

There are some who just occupy space on a corner, but this lady has a presence. She doesn't know me and I don't know her; but when school closes, I'm going to miss her. I've never been on the receiving end of one of her commanding whistles and I don't want to be. She has convinced me that this is her territory and my invasion of it is subject to her wishes. This space and responsibility belongs to her and she is in charge.

Her job doesn't carry a lot of glamour. It is probably not on the high-pay scale. Because of the hours involved, it is not full-time work. But whatever the pay or the position, she is there—not with arrogance, but with pride in a job that enables one part of the world to function as it should.

In the final chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus leaves a parting request of Peter to "*Feed my lambs . . .*" In the Christian community we take Jesus' request seriously by providing Christian education and examples of Christ-like living in every way possible. But the Christian community also exists and is alive outside the boundaries of our houses of worship and study. It may be that the school patrol lady at Edgehill and 12th. Ave. is what Jesus had in mind.



AND THE LAST SHALL BE LATE

The drive into work this morning was a nightmare. The day one wants to be early and get a head-start on the day—it happens. A huge 18-wheeler jack-knifed spewing the contents of the product-laden trailer all over the Interstate. Those of us three miles back didn't know about it. All we knew was that the Interstate was something akin to a parking lot. As we later discovered, the wreck occurred at the place where the Interstate was 6 lanes. And now, one lane remained—one lowly little pitiful lane for all the traffic heading North, East and West. It was a mess.

The Interstate overhead sign informed us that all traffic was restricted to one lane, but the sign didn't specify which lane. Upon getting the message, the questions began. Which lane? Would it probably be the one on the left, or could it be the one

on the right? Surely it wouldn't be one of the middle lanes. Like bumper cars at the carnival, the morning caravan of vehicles started jockeying for position. One car squeezed toward the right while one of the big trucks took his chance on the left lane—hundreds of automobiles playing Russian roulette in the middle of the Interstate.

Make no mistake about it. I traded lanes four different times before I reached the wreck trying to get ahead of the pack. It takes skill and daring squeezing into tiny crevices all the time hoping the other car will give up an inch of their precious space.

It's funny! The lectionary gospel reading for the week is from Mark 10:35-45. Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Jerusalem when Jesus stopped to share with them what awaited him there. He told it all, withheld nothing. He had told them before, but they seemingly didn't get it. Now he tells them again—exactly what it going to happen. Straightway, a couple of the disciples rushed up claim their space in the best lane. Could we sit at your right and at your left when you come into your Kingdom? Can we be at the head of the line?

There seems to be a flaw in humankind. There is something about us that wants to be first, to be at the head of the line, to be center stage, to command an honored position. And Jesus cries, "You don't get it." That's not the way it works. That's the way it is with the world. My Kingdom is not like that. Whoever wishes to be first must be slave to all. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life . . ."

With the lectionary gospel lesson etched in my mind, I did what a lot of folks my age do—I carried on a little conversation with myself and reluctantly settled into a lane of traffic that was slow—snail-paced slow. I looked at the clock in the car—it was 8:05 a.m. I was late for work. I hope the Lord (and a few others) understand.



UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITIES

Recently I visited one of our UMPH family at Vanderbilt hospital. While there I went on to visit a friend of mine on the 8th floor of the hospital. From the lobby of the hospital, I made my way along a familiar long corridor to the elevators servicing the Medical Intensive Care Unit. The elevator door opened and I was the lone occupant. I pressed the number and began my journey. But on floor two the elevator stopped and a lady stepped aboard and the two of us rode the remaining 6 floors together—neither saying a word.

The elevator reached the eighth floor, the door opened and the two of us exited. It was there it happened. The lady with whom I had ridden the six floors stopped, reached out her hands inviting mine to join with hers, her face now wet with tears,

looked straight into my face and said, “Would you pray with me for my husband?”

Yes. Of course I will. What is your husband's name? Robert. What is your name? Lucritia. What is your husband's situation? He's dying. We were still standing outside the elevator; and for that moment, the world around us was only a blur. Neither of us were aware of the coming or going of others. Holding the hands of one I had just met, we prayed. She thanked me, asked God's blessing to be upon me, and faded into a people-filled corridor.

Much of my afternoon was filled with questions. Were there no family and friends to be with her? Had she just heard the news? And more—I wondered how much one had to be hurting to reach out to a total stranger. Did she know that I was a believer in prayer, or did it even enter her mind? When one is hurting deep inside, did she care who I was? Was this an involuntary cry for help?

I am not one who aggressively shares my faith and gives a Christ witness on an impromptu stage. This is only to say that I respect the privacy of others and do not, unless somehow having the door opened, intrude into their lives. But the elevator companion was hurting. At that particular moment, I was the one near. It was absolutely unexpected, and it was a beautiful opportunity. I'm glad these unforeseen moments come.



UP AND RUNNING

It was a beautiful Spring morning and the General Conference was being held in Cleveland, Ohio. The day was bright and beautiful. Up until this particular morning everything had been regular and planned. But this day was different. We looked out our hotel window and saw thousands of people clad in shorts, gym gear and running shoes racing down the street toward the hotel. It was if the whole world had gathered in one place. For us, the activity of the General Conference took second place to the Cleveland marathon. We had a front seat for watching more than twenty thousand people competing for either the prize of winning or the prize of “making it.”

William Ritter, in an Internet collection of sermons, tells about another Cleveland marathon and one of the participants by the name of Georgene Johnson. I don't know a lot about marathon

races, but I've been around them enough to know the confusion in and around the starting line. It's more like total chaos. On this Cleveland marathon day, Georgene Johnson found herself in the wrong starting line. She was supposed to be in the group running the ten kilometer race but suddenly found herself catapulted into the beginning of the 26 mile group.

She was four miles into the race before she realized her mistake. So she just kept on running, finishing the 26 miles in four hours and four minutes. That was a feat within itself, but the best was yet to come. When asked about the mistake and her going all the way she said, "This isn't the race I trained for. This isn't the race I entered. But, for better or worse, this is the race I'm in."

I doubt that many of us have been channeled into a wrong marathon-type race, but very few of us are exactly where we thought we would be. How many of us trained or studied to compete for the positions we now hold? How many of us figured we would be doing what we are doing? How many of us are doing what we always dreamed of doing?

Georgene said it for all of us: "For better or worse, this is the race I'm in."

With that said, I think I'll just keep running. Who knows, it may be the best race of my life.



A RANDOM ACT OF RESPECT

It was so unexpected. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing. It happened as if it were choreographed. I have seen time-lapse photography of the unfolding of a lily bloom or the ripening of a fruit. I have seen dance routines where everyone did their thing in order. But this seemed to just come off without any prompting from anyone. It just happened and my day was changed.

I was a part of a funeral procession leaving the Belle Meade United Methodist Church in West Nashville and making our way to the Spring Hill Cemetery in Madison. Our route took us via Post road, White Bridge road, and on to Briley Parkway. It was a long distance for a funeral procession but we were led by three escort vehicles doing the things they do—all with lights flashing.

I was traveling behind the hearse, the designated place for the minister's car.

On Briley Parkway we saw signs indicating road work and that the right lane would be closed. This posed no problem to our procession for the funeral escort people know about these things. We soon came upon the road work. Indeed, there was work on the right lane—two or three big trucks waiting their turn, a huge dinosaur-looking machine chewing up the old asphalt, an oil tanker, a roller-packer, and several other service machines. Far back from the work, orange cones outlined the path for our travel. In addition there were workmen in yellow striped safety vests and yellow work helmets directing us to the left lane.

I could hardly believe what I was seeing. The first worker in the half-mile or so construction, the one waving the procession into the left lane, removed his helmet and stopped his waving. Almost like a “wave” in a stadium, every worker along that construction zone as the hearse approached removed his helmet—one after the other in precision-like order. My mind was whirling.

How did this happen? I've been in funeral processions for more than sixty years. I've seen cars stop when traveling in opposite lanes. I've seen people line the street when a military hero was being transported. But I have never seen an entire battery of workers in machine-like order remove their helmets and stop their work as a funeral procession proceeded on its way. Was this programmed? Was this a part of the company's orientation for workers? Was this an impromptu gesture by one person and then followed by others? What prompted this gesture of respect?