TRANSFORMED by God's Grace

BY PAT MAGNESS

The before and after photographs probably wouldn't look that different. Both pictures would show a handsome, tall, athletic young man with a big smile. Unlike the transformation depicted in before and after pictures for a weight loss promo or exercise video, this transformation was not in looks, but in attitudes and actions.

When I knew him "before," **he was self-absorbed, careless with the feelings of others**. Some might have called him arrogant, and while he was never lazy, he often looked for the easy way. Perhaps most disturbing, he treated his sweetheart of a girlfriend with a casualness that to me seemed almost cruel. My mother had a phrase for people like this, and it often occurred to me: "I would just like to shake some sense into him."

Years passed and we lost touch—so I wasn't there to see how the change came about. It was probably not overnight—probably one small step at a time. I feel sure it wasn't without pain; there must have been a few tears shed. I do know that the transformation came through the love of Jesus. Grace given and received over and over gradually awakened in him a deep well of compassion. Unselfishness, hard work, and self-sacrifice became the hallmarks of his life. The old smile of self-satisfaction became transformed to a welcoming smile that extended God's love to everyone he met. **He answered God's call to work in urban ministry**—surely the definition of hard work. And just as wonderful, he had learned to treat that sweet girlfriend, now his wife, with the honor and respect worthy of her and of him.

When I began writing this story, I was concerned I might be revealing too much about someone I admire. And by the time I finished, I realized I could write this same story about many people I have known and loved and seen transformed by God's grace.

Dr. Pat Magness is Professor Emerita of Humanities and English from Milligan College in Tennessee.

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A Child Named Faith

BY TIM SPIVEY

Greg came to live a better story even through the tragedy of losing an infant child just hours after birth. Greg and his wife (who was a Christian) suffered that unspeakable loss. After I preached the funeral for their dear child, Greg surprised me by asking to study the Bible, and I was thrilled to baptize him into Christ a couple of months later. He eventually became a drummer in our worship band, sporting a large, lifelike tattoo of his recently passed daughter on one arm.

He and his wife conceived a second child but were told late in the pregnancy this child suffered the same, 100 percent fatal disease as the first. They were understandably devastated, but informed me they had already named the child Faith and were committed to prayer and hoping God would deliver a miracle. My heart broke for this couple, and I privately wondered if this might shake Greg's young faith.

Faith was delivered 12 weeks early, on her mother's birthday. We all hoped for the best but were prepared for the worst. Through it all, our now shared faith in Christ provided a foundation of support and prayer that sustained the young couple through those dark nights.

God delivered a miracle. Faith was born in perfect health and just celebrated her third birthday. The faith of her parents is stronger than ever, and they have since had another healthy baby boy.

Ask Greg what changed his life, and he will tell you unequivocally—Christ.

Tim Spivey is lead pastor with New Vintage Church in San Diego, California.

Full Circle

BY RAYMOND BODLEY

His name was Larry, a 20-year-old soldier who came into the church in Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1980s.

When he arrived, he seemed to be running from what he thought was expected of him, while also searching for where God could use him. I wondered how he fit into the U.S. Army mold, though he was really smart.

When I met Larry, he was a "gun bunny" who carried howitzer shells from point A to point B. After he dropped two or three shells, however, the command decided to make him a driver for a captain. That lasted a few trips before the captain decided he'd drive himself, thank you very much.

Larry was passed on to company headquarters where he was put to work filing papers and typing up memos. His supervisors discovered he was gifted as a writer and could type quickly and get the filing done, so for the next 18 months Larry served as the company clerk.

It seemed like **Larry always knew in the back of his mind he was destined for ministry** (but just couldn't admit it yet). He came from a family full of missionaries, ministers, and Christian workers, so he had big footsteps to follow. He had a heart for the Lord and wonderful gifts of voice and musical talent that he used for the Lord at the church in Germany. Through his time in the church and in our home, it was amazing to watch him grow and gain confidence in himself and his faith.

After leaving the Army, he returned to finish Bible college and went on to become a worship leader. We were reintroduced when he took a ministry in Ohio. He eventually moved on to Florida, and now has come full circle back to Germany to minister in Berlin through Open Door Libraries.

Raymond Bodley serves as director of engagement at CrossRoads Missions in Louisville, Kentucky.

Living Out the MYSTERY

BY TRAVIS HURLEY

My story changed when I served as lead minister for a multiethnic congregation in the Washington, D.C., area. Suddenly I was seeing an answer to Jesus' prayer for the visible unity of his people (John 17:20-23) in a way I had never seen before. As I developed deep, rooted relationships across ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic lines, my faith was sharpened, my willingness to love and serve all people was stretched, and a newfound humility and teachability was born within me.

The mystery of the gospel—reconciling us to each other as well as to God himself—defies conventional wisdom. The world draws lines to keep the peace. Jesus and his church offer a better story through visible unity no matter our ethnicity, background, or social standing. Visible unity that doesn't gloss over differences, but learns to love through them, pointing people to Jesus in a powerful way.

This better story is why I am compelled to make it my life's work to preach, teach, counsel, and encourage the church to live out the mystery every day. It's what drives me in my work at Ozark Christian College and with the Dream of Destiny Initiative.

The sin of racism continues to plague the church, and a broken world is watching. A more well-rounded expression of Christian faith is available to us when we worship, serve, and live alongside those whose life experiences are different from —and can challenge—our own.

I believe we need a revival of repentant people who realize that Jesus and his church are not held captive by America's Western culture and values. Every political party and platform, every social and financial system, pales in comparison to the mystery of the gospel and the law of love that advances Christ's kingdom when his people obey it.

Travis Hurley serves as vice president of development and diversity with Ozark Christian College, Joplin, Missouri, and as director for Dream of Destiny.