

THE JOURNEY IS THE GIFT

Happy are those who are strong in the Lord,
who set their minds on a pilgrimage.
—King David of Israel (ninth century B.C.), Psalm 84:5

Pilgrimage involves committing to a way.

I came to a major crossroads in my own journey one night around midnight. It was a cold fall evening during my junior year at the University of California at Davis. I wrestled with the Spirit of God that night—or should I say, the Spirit wrestled me. Like many brought up in a Christian home, I had to come to terms with my own beliefs and convictions. A heart-based pilgrimage can't be inherited, and, anyway, I wasn't one to believe something just because I was told to. I figured if Jesus is truly God and I am not—as the Bible proclaims—then he is worthy of my complete trust or none at all. So I struggled with what it meant to trust God with my life—*all* of it. I decided I would either trust and follow him¹ or just live on my own.

After several hours of praying through tears, I was finally able to voice a wholehearted promise to Jesus: “I trust you, Jesus. My answer to you is an eternal yes. I will be who you want me to be, I will do what you want me to do, I will say what you want me to say, I will go where you want me to go. I am yours, Lord Jesus.” I simply believed Jesus was far more able than I to lead my life.

The moment I surrendered, the angst subsided and a tangible peace flooded my heart and mind. I gave up my blueprint for life in order to follow the Spirit. I had no more decisions to make about

overall direction, because my spirit had settled on Jesus Christ as my ultimate Spiritual Director. I knew I just wanted to live from a place of intimacy with Jesus, not from others' expectations (or even my own). I hungered to hear the voice of Jesus and to discern his ways and walk in them. That night proved to be a spiritual marker that has set me on a course that would shape my life, marriage, and friendships.

A Companion on the Journey

Two people can accomplish more than twice as much
as one. . . .

If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. . . .

A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated,
but two can stand back-to-back and conquer.

for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

—*Ecclesiastes 4:9–12*

At about that time, I met Jennifer at a spiritual retreat in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. From our first meeting during an initial snowball fight, we continued nearly daily conversations back at the UC Davis dorm cafeteria. As weeks went by, we found ourselves talking long after the rest of our friends were gone and the grill was closed. It probably helped that neither of us was interested in dating anyone at the time, so we weren't trying to impress each other. We struggled with the same life questions. Our hearts both longed to experience life led by the Spirit, enjoy real community, and make a difference in the world. Those early days of our friendship were marked by a genuine openness and searching. We stayed up late many nights, wrestling with how to surrender our lives to Jesus. As much as our hearts yearned for a deeper spiritual reality that would transform every area and moment of our lives—a passionate, reckless abandon—we struggled with what this would mean.

Little did we know at the time that we were setting our bearings to navigate life together. But those critical, deep conversations

altered our paths forever and set us apart from a conventional way of living. They demanded sacrifice and surrender of our selves before God. Jennifer remembers wrestling with not wanting to lay down her desire for spontaneity and adventure in life. At the time, she thought a deeper spiritual reality meant conforming to the daily rigors of pious (and boring) life. She now looks back and laughs at how foolish that perception was! Our lives are anything but rigorously religious, but they are deeply spiritual, highly adventuresome, and (frequently enough) punctuated with major challenges that bring us closer to God and one another as a family.

Eventually, our united desire for God influenced how we viewed our relationship with each other. Although we kept insisting we were “just friends,” as we grew closer in friendship we began to talk about marriage. We soon realized we were considering much more than whether we loved each other, enjoyed spending time together, or had common interests and passions. We agonized over whether we should even get married. *Would our marriage dilute our spiritual passion? Would we be better together than apart?*

We finally came to the point of laying down our relationship. One night we prayed about whether to get married. Jennifer asked God to help us clearly know whether we were to continue. The Spirit spoke to each of us, saying basically, “I’ve already told you; what more do you want?” Like so many before us in the Bible and in history, we insisted on questioning God, asking for more signs, but God made it clear to us that night. Our hearts were united, and we had the blessing of our families and countless friends.

Twists on the Way

Keeping to the main road is easy, but people love to be sidetracked.

—Lao Tzu (c. 570–490 B.C.), *Chinese philosopher*

Our tapestry changed even before we married. Just as I was about to go to graduate school in organizational psychology, a growing

church in the foothills of Northern California invited me to serve as associate pastor. This was the same church at which I had worked as a youth director the previous summer. Jennifer and I both sensed God leading us on this path.

So in the fall of 1987, just six months before we married, I began ministering at the church. Soon I was speaking at conferences, writing religious curricula, and leading mission projects overseas. The church even paid me to take time to commute two days a week to San Francisco to earn my Master's degree at seminary. I was on the fast track to prototypical success as defined for professional church pastors. Everything was going well, and even better after our wedding. We enjoyed the congregation, and our church grew rapidly. We bought our first home and helped design the new church building on the growing edge of the city. It was a good life. We were doing all the seemingly right things for continued success. But the more we did, the more restless we became.

I had it made, at least from a career perspective. It took me a while to realize I was being groomed to pastor a large church. As I was rising up the church corporate ladder, my soul was disintegrating in spiritual decline—even though I didn't know it at the time. Little by little, I was being pulled apart, slowly conforming to ways that I have since come to realize were unnatural to who I was. What began as serving Jesus and people slowly turned into serving the needs of an organization. It was a subtle but significant shift.

For instance, I no longer felt the freedom or had the time to pursue certain relationships that I was drawn to. Instead, I felt tied to maintaining and propping up “key” relationships within the church. And regardless of how I was feeling, or the spiritual condition of my heart at the time, I was still expected to fulfill my duties and responsibilities.

In a way, I was extracted out of living a life in the real world and inserted into an artificial Christian subculture. As well as I was doing in the world of ministry, I still had a constant nagging in my soul, a feeling that my spiritual life was slowly withering away. In contrast to the spiritual vitality of my college years, my seemingly

successful professional church life felt stagnant. As the church grew numerically, I grew increasingly more disenchanted. With so much time spent on administrative meetings and organizational logistics, we had little room to nurture friendships. We were expending more time and energy on preparing for next Sunday or the next event than in being present and listening to the Spirit. The church budget reflected little concern for the real needs within our community, and no regard for social justice, environmental stewardship, or the world's poor.

Jennifer and I kept asking ourselves, *Do we really want to give our lives to this? Are we willing to spend the rest of our lives building the organization of the church? What difference is all this making in society?* In college, we'd given our lives to Jesus to follow him and serve him wherever he would lead. But somehow, in the course of events, it seemed as though we were serving the church more than Jesus. Our life in Jesus and our position in church blurred. The needs of the organization outweighed the Spirit of God moving in our hearts. We wondered, *How did we lose our way with Jesus? And how can we recover it?*

From Pastor to Planter

In the midst of my growing spiritual crisis, the senior pastor left our church for a denominational job, so I was asked to serve as the primary pastor while the church searched for a replacement. Even without a permanent senior pastor, the number of people at the church continued to grow. But, as is typical when there is no senior leader, the church's finances were unstable. As I sat in the next quarterly business meeting, my heart sank as I watched what was happening. Buildings and budgets replaced the focus on Christ and community. The deep cuts wiped out any funds for our ministries to the outside community, to children and overseas mission, while the mortgage payment and salaries remained untouched. Midway through the business meeting, I came very close to making a motion to sell the building, so we could be free to move as the Spirit would

lead us. Why, I thought, are we paying professionals to do what the people of God should be doing anyway? Why do we need a professional pastor? Why do we need a building to be a church, especially when it's only used a few hours on two days a week? What do buildings and salaries have to do with being the Body of Christ? Are we moved more by money or by the Spirit of God?

As Jennifer and I asked these questions, we came to realize we could no longer perpetuate such a system. We were not as free as we thought we were. We had to get out. But how? We explored options: start a business, move overseas, start a new church free of religious trappings.

Eventually, we sensed God's leading to plant a new church in an urban area. Our aim was to follow the example of Jesus and gather a community of people who simply wanted to live out the Way of Jesus in relationship with one another. So in 1992 we sold our home and moved to Southern California to establish a church in the fast-growing area of Riverside.

As we will share later, the next seven years would prove transformational in *every* aspect of our lives. Some of those we journeyed with called this our season of "deconstruction and discovery" since we questioned *everything* about our faith, our church, and our very lives.

During that period, we experienced simple community, centered in Jesus and lived out with our friends and neighbors. The original church we started multiplied several times over. Its generations crossed over many cultural barriers that are typical in Southern California. This network caught the attention of people in power, who, for better or for worse, keep looking for the "next big move" for growing churches. And so I was discovered. I began to teach seminary. I traveled throughout the United States and overseas, teaching on New Testament spirituality, church planting, and cross-cultural leadership.

In my day job, I worked as a church-starting consultant for one of the largest evangelical denominations in North America. I

coached and consulted with hundreds of church leaders and seminary students who were preparing for careers in the church.

Then, at night and on weekends, our family gathered with others to worship and pray freely. We met simply as friends and families in one another's homes. We were a microcosm of the metropolis, a diversity of ages, social strata, and cultures. We began to see ourselves as pilgrims, journeying together to discover the Way of Jesus. We experienced authentic community, united by our common love for Jesus. We laid down our pretenses of having it all together and became real with one another. We experienced the Spirit of Christ in action as we shared our lives with each other, loving one another in practical, everyday ways. We saw men become role models for fatherless boys. We paid for a college student's auto engine to be rebuilt so she could get to work. We painted houses. We played in the parks. We cared for one another's children. We listened to each other, we cried with one another, we gave to one another. Simply put, we learned to live together in the Way of Jesus.

We were pilgrims exploring alternative paths in Jesus, which often conflicted with what I was being paid to do all week long.

As a church planter strategist, I was paid to consult with churches and leaders who were usually asking how to plant or grow a church. But the questions most on our minds were "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?" and "How do we make more disciples?"

Those I consulted with were concerned with raising money for a new building, salary increases for the staff, or a better sound system. Our community asked, "Where should we give our money away since we don't have to spend it on real estate, salaries, or a sound system?" So once again I found myself living a double life. The disparity between what I was living on my own time and what I was doing at work began to take its toll on me.

In my day job, there were also political factors to dance around, because there were positions and money to preserve or gain. My clients asked questions of demographics and marketing strategies, primarily to achieve quantitative growth. Meanwhile, people in

our community of Jesus were discovering qualitative ways to get to know our neighbors and serve their real needs, whether it was helping them get a job, shoveling compost into their backyard, or listening to them cry over their marriage.

The more we experienced the life-changing dynamic that loving one another can have, the more we became convinced that the Body of Christ was far more than, and much different from, what we see on a typical Sunday in church. The Body of Christ is simply enjoying communion with Jesus, enjoying community with one another, and moving together as his Spirit leads.

If you cannot bear to live in everlasting dissonance between your beliefs and your life, thinking one thing and doing another, get out of the medieval whited sepulchers, and face your fears. I know very well it is not easy.

—Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910),
Russian novelist and
reformer

In short, the discussions by day were about church and all the logistics to make church structures happen, while at night and on the weekends we were asking, “How do we live out our intimacy with Jesus?” and “How do we live out the life of Jesus among our family, neighbors, coworkers, and friends?” As time went on, the chasm between the two environments widened. I could no longer continue furthering the

American church system. As this conviction grew, I knew I had to get out. It wasn’t because I had ever had a bad church experience in growing up or on the staff of a church or mission organization. But I had always suspected, and now I knew, that there was something more. I had growing convictions of *what* the Body of Christ *was not* and new experiences in which I was discovering *who* the Body of Christ *is*.

For a while, I thought formal church institutions could be renewed. I thought I could make a difference by working inside them. I thought wrong. As traditionally focused churches grow, they take on a life of their own; so much energy is needed to keep the services and programs moving each week that less and less time is spent listening together to what the Spirit is saying.

Jennifer's and my experience in seeking to bring about change in an institution can be likened to planting a garden. Before planting, you must weed and remove plants that can compete with the roots of the new seeds. There must be enough room for plants to receive the sunlight and air needed to grow to their full size. So it is with our spiritual lives; if there are too many competing agendas and authorities telling us what to do, we do not have the space we need to freely experience Christ in our midst.

We've known many people whose heart's desire was to move freely in the Spirit, but they felt their church leadership and structure required them to conform to the church program. Others have tried to add new convictions about listening to Jesus and following him to all their previously held convictions. It just doesn't work. We cannot fully experience Jesus if we accept any other competing authority. Jesus plus religion equals something less than what Jesus intended.

Risking All to Return to the Root

Not all who wander are lost.

—J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), *author*, Lord of the Rings

The seeds of change began to grow in the spring of 1999, after I returned from a trip to the Philippines with Hseih and Ben, two young leaders from our community. Having trained hundreds of indigenous leaders to be free of Western methods, controls, and resources, I realized that we needed to do even more of the same work in our own context. Around the same time, several of my friends and colleagues challenged me to practice what I'd been preaching: set an example by giving up my profession, and lead a life that others could emulate.

Being a church planter strategist for a large denomination was not something that many could follow. I was convinced that any indigenous movement following the Way of Jesus in the West was not going to be led by religious professionals. Instead, it would be

embodied by diverse and ordinary people. When Jesus was with his disciples, he not only lived a life they could model but said, “Greater things will you do.” In fact, it was obvious to all that the early followers of Jesus “were ordinary men who had had no special training” (Acts 4:13). I wanted to lead a life that others could look at and say, “Hey, I can do that.” I wrestled with the question, “Am I living this way of life because I am paid to live it?” *How could I teach others to be free of Western methods, institutional controls, and financial dependencies when I myself was not fully free from these things? How could I teach something I was not fully living?*

In May 1999, Jennifer and I both sensed the Spirit impressing us that it was time to get out of the system. As a family, we made the radical decision to leave the safety of everything we had known. After completing my Ph.D., I gave up religion *and* my profession and

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all that went with it. I would have no church strategist job, no seminary teaching, no conference speaking, no international engagements. And no financial security! We gave up everything that supported us

externally: position, stable pay, a respectable profession, our spiritual community, and a life lived close to family and friends.

I’ll never forget the reaction of the team of leaders in our spiritual community when we told them how we sensed God was leading our family. Ben responded with, “It’s about time!” He knew that we had been wrestling within our hearts as we sought to discern what it would mean for us to follow Jesus with full integrity to our convictions, and to be about his work alone. He knew our desire to live a life about which we could say, “Follow our example as we follow Christ.” The rest of the team and the broader spiritual community also heartily agreed and sent us off, with prayer and enough money to pay for the moving van.

When I told fellow ministry colleagues what I was doing, more often than not, they had only two responses. First, they couldn’t believe that I would give up financial security and a prestigious posi-

tion. But second, most of them also expressed envy; they wished they could get out of their church-related jobs. They confessed sharing some of the same inner conflict but didn't feel they could afford to face it. The comforts and security of ministry outweighed their desire to follow the leading of the Spirit within their heart. One senior denominational leader simply said, "I admire your courage. I know many who want to leave but won't because of finances or family obligations."

Some Rewards of Risk

To risk is to lose one's foothold for a while; not to risk is to lose one's self forever.

—Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855),
Danish philosopher, Writings

That spring, we moved with our four children to the Pacific Northwest to start a new life. With no guarantee of income, we bought a fixer-upper home on Bainbridge Island, a thirty-five-minute ferry ride from Seattle. On evenings and weekends, we worked at making our house livable, since our kitchen consisted of a microwave and toaster oven on the living room floor, a refrigerator on the front porch, and a faucet out the back of the house. This was a challenge, especially since our four children were all under six years old. But by the fall, we had made ourselves a home.

For the next two years, I was baptized into the business world as I built a small media-technology company with a friend I had known from California. In a matter of months, our little company moved from the basement of my partner's house to loft offices in Seattle's Pioneer Square, growing from two employees to ten, and shifting from small dot-com gigs to contracts with Fortune 100 companies. I found a new place in business, and an income too. My entrepreneurial gifting began to emerge in Seattle's growing business climate.

When we moved to the Island, we didn't know anyone. We learned how to be a family again apart from the many demands that

had clamored for our attention in the fast-paced life of Southern California. We had no expectations to fulfill. This was truly a new start. We built new friendships. More than anywhere we have ever lived or visited, we feel at home in the Northwest. We appreciate the strong sense of connection with the land and the fresh openness about spirituality.

Over the next few years we didn't "do" Christianity. Our focus was not on leaving the church or Christianity, but on moving closer to Jesus. Jennifer and I knew that my transition out of professional ministry and into business would be big. We just didn't realize how big. The process was a paradox, both liberating and painful. It was a time of stripping and shedding religious baggage, a lot of which we didn't even know we were carrying. As we moved outside the box of religion, we came into a whole new perspective on life, family, and spirituality.



Reflection and Discussion



In ancient Sanskrit, the word for chess player is the same as that for pilgrim. This implies thoughtful consideration rather than aimless wandering. Take a few minutes to reflect on your spiritual pilgrimage.

- Where are you? Are you satisfied with your progress on the pilgrim path?
- What is your next move? Can you identify anything that may be hindering your progress?
- As you look at the journey before you, what are your greatest hopes, fears, and challenges?