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Are You Called to be an Alligator Tamer?



by Sydney Hielema

When I left my position as a theology professor at Dordt College in 2006, I thought I had a good understanding of the institution, but when I was invited this past spring to give a lecture about vocation under the title “Are You Called to be an Alligator Tamer?” I had to wonder how much had

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changed in three years. As I pondered the invitation, I tried to imagine these three phenomena together—Dordt College, vocation, and taming alligators—and I asked myself, “Might these three generate a coherent and meaningful presentation?” Something in my heart said, “Yes, they can.” And so this piece came to be. We’ll start with vocation, tell many Dordt College stories along the way, and conclude by taming alligators.

Vocation – voca – voice: Ponder the role of “voice” in the Christian faith. The entire universe is embedded in voice, in the voice of God, the one who called out, “Let there be light!” Rob Bell declares that Genesis 1 shows us a God who is king of the universe, because what he says and what happens in reality totally line up with each other; the voice, the character of the one who speaks, and the character of reality are all in complete harmony (I heard him say this in a sermon in San Diego).

This vocal integrity continues as the story unfolds and the harmony is lost. After the man and woman rebel against him, the voice calls out, “Where are you?” and sets the stage for the drama of redemption. At the climactic point of the drama, the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth; the Word is obedient unto death; the Word is raised to the highest place; and now that Word lives in us through the outpouring of the Spirit. And this Spirit is a deposit of what is to come: the fullness of the new creation. That is the grand story of the Voice. Vocation is our response to the Voice: our lives are the many little stories inside that grand story, and we discern our vocations as

we engage in a lifelong conversation in response to God's voice.

This morning we'll ponder that lifelong conversation in terms of three questions. I invite you to discern which of these three creates the most resonance in your life right now, and to allow that question to permeate you as you follow your vocation.

The first question is this: What questions are you being called to ask as you discern your vocation? The first thing I've learned about our vocational conversations with God is that they follow a "Q and Q pattern" instead of a simple question-and-answer format. For example, when I came to Dordt as a freshman in August, 1972, I did not know what to major in. I thought my options were music, English, and philosophy; the only thing I was convinced of was that I would absolutely not take a single course in education. I hated high school, and after getting my high school diploma, I made a vow that I would never enter another high school again in my life. So, during my years at Dordt, I waffled among these three majors and finally graduated with a music major and minors in English and philosophy. Looking back, I don't think the Lord really cared which of those three I majored in, to be perfectly honest; I never found a clear sense of a strong calling to any one of those three.

But a funny thing happened along the way to graduation. In early April of my senior year, I did not have a clue about what I would do after graduation, and I was becoming a little bit anxious about this. But one fine spring morning, I walked to campus, and for some reason I was actually five minutes early for my 8 a.m. class. So I stopped by the bulletin board in the old classroom building to read the daily announcements. There was a little three-by-five card on the board that said, "representatives from Toronto Christian High will be on campus this afternoon seeking potential candidates for a music position." I grew up an hour south of Toronto; I had a music major; graduation was four weeks away, and I had no plans. I thought, "I'll talk to these people. What have I got to lose?" Two weeks later I had a signed contract to teach high school music. I rationalized it this way: "I'm desperate. I can break my high school graduation vow for one year."

In hindsight, I realize that my arriving five minutes early to class with extra time to read that day's announcements and my pre-graduation anxiety were the Lord's way of turning my questions back on me: it was as if he were saying, "so you think you can make vows without consulting me first? Vows are pretty serious stuff – do you realize that? And do you think that just because you experienced some garbage in high school you can abandon that place? Don't you realize that I'm even more aware of the garbage in high schools than you are? Do you know how often I lead my children to be sensitive to the garbage they've experienced so that they will wake up with a passion to go back and do something about all that garbage?" It took me quite a while to hear those questions; I certainly wasn't hearing them when I signed that contract. When I signed the contract, all I was thinking was, "I love music, I love Toronto, it's a job, I have no idea if I can teach, but I can try it for a year."

I've learned that as I ask the Lord questions, I need to make myself available to hear the questions he will throw back at me. If I'm only listening for his answers, I won't hear those questions, and I'll wonder why he's ignoring me.

I've been teaching teenagers and young adults for thirty-three years now. Along the way I picked up an education degree, and I even teach teachers almost every summer. And it's as if the Lord took my rash vow, my set of vocational questions, and my lack of questions and threw them up in the air and asked, "Do you mind if I scramble things up a bit? Syd, your questions and lack of questions are ignoring several key factors about my kingdom and your place in it. Do you mind if I tweak them a little?" When the Lord asks for minor tweakage privileges, you'd better fasten your seatbelt and tighten your helmet. I like the way Annie Dillard describes interacting with the Lord. She writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews" (40).

If this Q and Q pattern surprises you, notice that it's all over the Bible. Very often when people ask God a question or send along a comment to

him, or when people engage Jesus in conversation in the gospels, they receive a question in response. For instance, Job has a lot to say to God. He wants answers for all the trouble in his life. And when the Lord finally responds to him out of the whirlwind in chapter 38, he begins by asking, “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand.” Similarly, when Elijah flees from Queen Jezebel, he wants answers from the Lord too, and the Lord comes to him on Mount Horeb and simply asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And the gospels are filled with questions that Jesus asks those around him: “Who do people say I am?” “What do you want me to do for you?” “What is written in the law?” “Whose likeness is inscribed on this coin?” “What did David mean when he wrote Psalm 110?” And I could go on and on and on. At first glance, we assume that discerning our vocational calling is about asking God questions, but the discernment doesn’t really begin until he starts asking us questions.

When God responds to our questions with his own question, it’s his way of saying, “yes, we’ll discuss this—but we’ll discuss it inside my frame of reference and not yours. So, wait while I reframe the parameters of our discussion so that I can open you up to my tweakage work.”

How do we make ourselves available to be questioned and prodded by the Lord in this way? There are dozens of ways to say, “Here I am, Lord. Ask me your questions.” The four best ways that I know are journaling, being silent, turning on the radar screen, and comparing notes. *Journaling* means keeping a written prayer journal with entries like, “Dear Lord, I’m not sure if I should ask Danielle out on a date or not. Let me tell you all the pros and cons as I see them. Help me sort them out, and bring questions to my mind that I hadn’t thought of.” *Silence* means going for a walk or sitting in a place where there are no people and no computers and simply throwing a question up to the throne room: “Lord, what am I doing here at Dordt College? I miss home, I feel kinda lonesome, and I was convinced you wanted me to come here, but now it’s feeling pretty fuzzy.” *Turning on the radar screen*

means saying, “Lord, during the next year I really need to decide on a major. For these next twelve months, make me alert to every little thing that will help to clarify in what direction I might be called to go. *Comparing notes* is possible because every single one of us in this auditorium is engaged in vocational discernment of different kinds. We need places to share our stories and discover what others found helpful or what their confusions look like.

God has been walking with most of us since about nine months before our birth date; He has been there every step of the way, nudging, poking, prodding, molding, questioning, and inviting us to a deeper awareness of Himself. About three months into my first year of teaching, teaching started to feel pretty good, and I wondered if the Lord was calling me to keep this up for the longer term. Somewhere in there I remembered that when I was twelve years old I was helping my younger sister with her homework, and my aunt—who was visiting—said to my mother, “Listen to Syd helping his sister. You can tell he’s a good teacher.” I had never paid much attention to that comment, but eleven years later it was if the Lord were asking, “Is your radar screen turned on? Don’t you remember what your aunt said way back then? Don’t you realize that I was nudging you in this direction already eleven years ago?” That’s how the Lord asks us questions that place us inside the sound of his voice.

The second question is this: This Q and Q conversation works out differently in each of our lives, but there is one constant underlying it. When the Lord questions us, it’s as if he’s asking, “My son, my daughter, are you intentionally living *Coram Deo*?”

We discern God’s vocational leading as we deepen the way we live *Coram Deo*. Dordt College taught me the meaning of that phrase—*living before the face of God*—very well: “Syd are you intentionally living before the face of God? Syd, have you memorized Psalm 139 in your heart? Are you intentionally walking with me 24/7, everywhere you go and whatever you do? Do you remember that I am with you? Are you open to my guiding and leading and protecting and challenging every moment? Look Syd, you tend to rush from moment to moment, focusing on the demands of each day and letting

little anxieties shape many of your moments. How are you doing at living in light of the perspective of the heavenly throne room at every moment?”

What the Lord is really saying with this *Coram Deo* question is this: “Syd, you pray to me every day—at certain times you stop what you’re doing and put some words together that come to my throne as a prayer—but what is your prayer life like

When God responds to our questions with his own question, it’s his way of saying, “yes, we’ll discuss this—but we’ll discuss it inside my frame of reference and not yours.”

when you are not praying in words?” Think about that for a moment—what is your prayer life like when you are not praying in words?

Seven years ago, the fifty or so musicians who sing on the soundtrack of that great Civil War movie *Cold Mountain* did a U.S. tour, and they put on a show in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Our family went down for the concert, and towards the end of the show, the star of the group, Allison Krauss, came out on stage all alone, with just her acoustic guitar, and sang a haunting gospel song with this refrain: “Take my life that I may be, a living prayer, my God for thee.” You could hear a pin drop in this cavernous indoor hockey arena as she quietly shared the song: “Take my life that I may be, a living prayer, my God for thee.” She nailed it—that’s *Coram Deo*. That’s living Psalm 139. That’s living I Thess. 5. 17—“Pray continually.”¹

Some of you are thinking, “Praying continually? 24/7? I have a hard time getting myself to feel spiritual enough to pray for a few minutes every day. I do try, but it’s so hard!” Several years ago I was giving a workshop on worship, and someone said during the discussion time, “When I walk into a

church on Sunday morning, 80 percent of me stays in the car, and about 20 percent of me actually makes it through the front door and into the pew.” I know exactly what he meant; I think you do too. So often, worship and prayer become activities for which we squeeze ourselves into a certain kind of mold so that we feel properly spiritual as we worship and pray. How often don’t we begin worship by praying something like, “Lord, help me push all distractions away from my mind and heart so that I can truly focus on you during this hour of worship”? That type of prayer is not found in the Bible. A more biblical prayer would sound like this: “Lord, my mind and heart are traveling in a million directions right now. Gather all these threads together, Lord, and draw them to your throne so that I can continue walking *Coram Deo* with you in this hour of worship and all day long.”

Our vocational Q and Q with the Lord requires us to bring every bit of our lives into the conversation. Let me read a few verses from the Psalms. As I do, ask yourself if these Psalm writers, as they worship and pray, leaving 80 percent of themselves in the donkey parking lot outside the temple:

You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape; (Psalm 88.8)

my eyes are dim with grief.
I call to you, O LORD, every day;
I spread out my hands to you. (Psalm 88.9)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13.1)

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13.2)

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. (Psalm 44.23)

Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression? (Psalm 44.24)

Many students have told me over the years that when they try to pray before bedtime, they fall asleep. No student has ever told me that she accused God of sleeping when she was praying to him. But

dozens and dozens of students have told me that they wondered if God was really paying attention to them, and if their prayers even made it beyond the ceiling of their dorm room into his heavenly throne room.

When we learn to pray with the Psalmists and pour out all that lives in our hearts before God's throne into words and open our lives to him 24/7—instead of giving him a cosmeticized, prettied up spiritual self—we begin to live *Coram Deo*, and we open up our entire being before his throne. Then a funny thing happens: *we become more alive*. Instead of 80 percent of us staying the parking lot, 100 percent of our being lives before the face of God. Jesus says in John 10.10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." The early church father Irenaeus once said, "the glory of God is seen in man fully alive." *Fully alive*. Central to our calling as God's children on this earth is to live *fully alive*. In a wonderful book, *An Altar in the World*, published earlier this year, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that we have "the larger vocation of becoming fully human" (117).

Perhaps you are familiar with Thornton Wilder's 1938 play, *Our Town*. In it, a woman named Emily, who has died, receives permission to re-experience one day of her childhood, as a spectator. As she watches this day from her past, she is astounded by what she sees. And towards the end of the play, she has this conversation with the stage manager of the play:

Emily: "I can't go on. Oh! Oh! It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed.... Do any human beings ever realize life where they live it? Every, every minute?"

Stage Manager: "No. The saints and poets maybe—they do some."

Emily: "That's all human beings are! Just blind people." (Act III)

Did you catch that? "The saints and poets maybe—they do some." Isn't that us, called to live life to the full, to be fully alive? The Roman poet Juvenal, writing in the late second century, concluded that the masses only want bread and circuses—he said to feed them and entertain them; that's all they want.

Has life changed much since the second century?

God invites us to be fully alive, to walk *Coram Deo*, to receive life to the full. We tend to rush around, not noticing life, craving bread and circuses. Today we have a unique challenge in facing life to the full: it's called "multitasking." In August 2009, a study was released by Stanford University on the effects of multi-tasking on people. We're all multi-taskers, right? We have five to eight windows open on our computer at any given time, and we can handle it because we're all multi-taskers now.

Listen to a few statements from the authors of the Stanford study: "multi-taskers are suckers for irrelevancy because everything distracts them.... We kept looking for what multi-taskers are better at, and we couldn't find anything." The researchers go on to conclude that multi-taskers cannot distinguish important information from useless information. Let me try to place these conclusions within the biblical narrative by translating them as follows: We are called to receive life to the full, but multitasking tends to make us shallow instead of deep. We think we can obey the call to be fully alive by becoming busier and busier, but it's a lie! Multi-taskers are weak on discernment, and those who are weak on discernment have trouble becoming wise. What happens when an entire culture of multi-taskers becomes weak on discernment?

What happens is that we end up with this summer's national health care debate. I believe that one of the results of being a multi-tasking society is that the current national health care debate in this country has been allowed to be powerfully shaped by deception, manipulation, fear, and irrational screeching. It doesn't matter what your opinions about it are; the debate is a national embarrassment, and we all need to e-mail our politicians something like, "Please stand up, tell us that you're sick of all the silliness out there, and show us the wisdom that we know you have."

Where's the Christian community standing up and declaring, "We are a community that lives *Coram Deo*, and as such, we know we are called to be deep, wise, thoughtful, discerning, and prophetic. We together as American Christians call this nation to repent of all the silliness being screamed everywhere about health care, because in the kingdom of God,

health is a very important concern, and we need the deepest wisdom we can find to guide us.”

We are called to live *Coram Deo* to become fully alive; to become deeper, more grounded-in-God human beings; and as we do, we also experience spiritual warfare in newer and more powerful ways. When we pretend that we don't live *Coram Deo*, we live *Coram* something else, and instead of becoming a living prayer before the face of God, we live non-prayerfully before the face of something else. Thomas Merton wrote, “If you want to really know me, ask me what I'm living for, and ask me what is keeping me from living for it fully.”

I'll never forget the student who came to me after class and said, “This course has really challenged me to change my assumptions about a lot of things, but I'm graduating in a month and moving back to my home community, and in order to survive with my family and my church, I have to pretend that I share all their assumptions.” She speaks for a lot of us, right? We know that we're called to live *Coram Deo*, but the spiritual warfare that comes with that territory can be too scary, and so we instead we live *Coram* family, or *Coram* church, or *Coram* friends, and then we can reshape God into the image of our family or our church or our friends, and after we reshape him, we can pretend we are living *Coram Deo*, and that pretending allows us to avoid some tricky spiritual warfare.

It's easy for me to stand here and tell you her story because she was so unflinchingly honest, but her story is also my story and maybe your story too. Life is complicated and scary; I'm tempted to live *Coram* the familiar and predictable instead of living *Coram Deo*. I want to live for the Kingdom of God in a sturdy, fully alive, prophetic way, and I know what keeps me from doing it: fear and complexity. I'm afraid of the unknown, and I feel that life is too complicated for me to take risks.

During my years teaching at Dordt, a recent graduate stopped by for a visit, and this was his story: “I just quit my job. I was installing home theater systems in huge mansions in Sioux Falls; the average cost of these systems is \$90,000. I was making a lot of money, but one day I woke up and thought, ‘What's the point? All I'm doing is helping rich people waste their money to impress their neighbors

and their teenagers' friends. Is that why I'm here?” What he was actually saying (though he didn't use these words) was, “I'm not fully alive; instead of living *Coram Deo*, I'm living *Coram* Dollar; I'm not embodying wisdom.”

Are you fully alive? Are you intentionally living *Coram Deo*? What false *Corams* are blocking your vocational conversation?

The third and final point is this: discerning our vocation as we live *Coram Deo* requires living inside the biggest picture possible. Are you living inside the biggest picture possible? A while ago I was reading

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a book about a monastery in Germany, and I ran across this anecdote:

One day a monk was talking to an energetic young man named Robert. The monk asked what plans he had for the future.

“I want to earn a Law degree as soon as possible,” the young man replied.

“And then?” the monk asked.

“Well, then I would like to set up a law firm, then marry and have a family.”

“And then, Robert?”

“To be honest,” the young man continued, “I would like to earn a lot of money, retire as soon as possible, and travel all over the world. I have always wanted to do that.”

“And then?” The monk continued almost rudely.

“I have no further plans for the moment,” Robert replied.

The monk looked at him and said, “Your plans are too limited. They reach only eighty years into the future. Your plans should be broad enough to include God and all eternity.” (Barry, Yeo, Norris 120).

All Eternity? Plans to include God and all eternity? If I spend fifteen seconds pondering eternity, I get dizzy and have to sit down. I almost literally fell over once teaching about eternity in a freshman theology class. How can I discern my vocation by putting my life inside a picture of eternity?

Let me begin with a couple of stories. About ten years ago, I was teaching a course on the four gospels here at Dordt, and one day we pondered Jesus’ teaching in Luke 14: 26: “‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.’” The next day a wonderful young man from Ripon, California, who was taking the course came to my office and said, “That verse just turned my life upside down.” I looked a little surprised, and then he continued: “I’ve always assumed that family was a very important value, and to honor that value, I would live in the Ripon area my entire life and practice my calling there. But I also have this deep desire to go into full-time church ministry, but you can’t do that and limit yourself to one confined region, so I just assumed I couldn’t do ministry. But that verse shattered my assumption. I can honor my family without telling God that I must live close to Ripon my entire life.” He went on to seminary, and now he has just begun pastoring his second congregation, which is a long, long ways from Ripon.

Do you see what happened there? His assumptions had kept his vocational picture small, and it had put limits around how God could lead in his life. Sharon Parks once said, “God is always expanding our boundaries outward.” That’s another way of saying, “We want clear, definable frameworks to work in, and the Lord just smiles and says, “But I made you for eternity, and so from time to time I will put your frameworks to death and invite you to walk with me inside a much larger picture.”

Two weeks ago our family was visiting a couple of Dordt graduates living in a city of 50,000 on the East Coast, and we had the joy of meeting

their three young children aged 1-4. She was an education major here at Dordt, and she was one of those maddening high-energy types who was going to change the entire education world after she graduated. With three pre-schoolers at home, she’s not teaching at a school right now, so she started a non-profit organization to encourage parents to be more involved in their kids’ lives in wise, life-giving ways. This organization just exploded. They held an event earlier this summer, and 5,000 people showed up—and this is in a small-town region of the east coast where hardly anyone lives! She just turned thirty, and now people in her community are urging her to run for mayor of their town of 50,000 people.

If someone had told her on her graduation day from Dordt that this is what her life would look like on her thirtieth birthday, she would have laughed and said, “You’re nuts.” She left Dordt after graduation with a teaching contract for a school on the West Coast. But the Lord put her graduation day assumptions to death and expanded her boundaries outwards, as she’s raising a family on the East Coast.

What can we conclude from these two stories about discerning our vocational call inside a picture of eternity, the largest possible picture? I like to think of it this way: I am called to be a new-creation signpost. Because the Holy Spirit in us is a deposit of what is to come, the Spirit expresses himself through each of us and the Christian community in such a way that glimpses of the new creation shine through. The student who realized “the Kingdom of God is bigger than staying close to Ripon” and the student who said, “I can seek the kingdom in fresh ways while raising our three pre-schoolers” grasped something about discerning their vocations inside a picture of eternity, a bigger picture than they had previously imagined. As we discern our vocations, we live as “fossils of the future.” Just as a fossil that we find embedded in a rock on the beach provides a dim outline of a fully-alive organism from centuries ago, so the fossils of the future that we can become provide dim outlines that anticipate the fullness of life in the new creation.

We are new-creation signposts, fossils of the future. Vocationally, this means two things. First, there are always more possible ways to point to the new creation than we had imagined possible. As

I left this place with my diploma in May, 1976, to begin teaching music in Toronto, the only vocational clarity I had was that I would teach in a high school for one year, and I hoped to become engaged to my girl friend that summer. I did not even begin to imagine that

- I would fall in love with teaching, and spend twelve years at that high school.
- I would return to studying in my mid 30s and work toward a doctorate in theology.
- I would return to Dordt College twenty years later as a professor.
- I would walk alongside many people who were encountering significant struggles and suffering in their lives and, through such walking, become equipped for ministry.

As the Lord asks us, “Is your vocational picture big enough to embrace eternity?” he prepares us for futures that we can’t foresee, and calls us to be open to his surprises.

Because the Holy Spirit in us is a deposit of what is to come, the Spirit expresses himself through each of us and the Christian community in such a way that glimpses of the new creation shine through.

On Sept. 11, 2001, I was scheduled to speak in chapel here at Dordt College at 11 a.m. I finished teaching my morning class at 9:15. Then I learned from my colleague Wayne Kobes about the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in Manhattan and on the Pentagon. While attempting to absorb the shock of this horrific news, I realized that my prepared chapel meditation was suddenly useless and that something else would have to be prepared to help the Dordt community worship in the midst of the chaos and

fear of this historic day. I remembered a sermon I had prepared five years earlier on Psalm 46 and was drawn to its opening three verses as a way of describing what this day meant:

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

The hastily scribbled meditation was not particularly profound, but it did bring the Word of God to bear upon a communal trauma, and it struck me later that at breakfast that morning I would never have imagined that part of my vocation—my calling—would be to preach the Word for a community in crisis before lunch time. But I also realized that the God who had called me to that role had also equipped me for it, though I could never have seen it coming.

A second implication of the call to live as new-creation signposts is this: we become prepared for the surprises the Lord sends our way as we allow the Spirit to grow the heart of Jesus within us. In Jesus’ ministry and teaching, we see the style of heart that shapes us as we live open to the possibilities within God’s Kingdom that we cannot yet imagine. Listen to these heart-transformation teachings from our Lord and Savior:

“Your heavenly Father knows that you need food and clothing. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 6: 32-33)

“Whatever you do to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine when you feed them, clothe them, visit them and care for them, you do unto me.” (Matt. 25. 40)

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt. 5. 44)

Jesus told them a parable to show them that they should always pray and never give up. (Luke 18:1)

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For who-

ever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” (Luke 9. 23-24)

When our hearts are shaped by teachings such as these, we are open to the grand adventure of following Jesus on a vocational journey that embraces and extends into eternity. So, as you ponder eternity, do you think you want to be an alligator tamer? Let me apply the main points of this speech just for you. One of the Bible’s many beautiful pictures of the new creation involves all creatures in harmony: the wolf will lie down with the Lamb, and a child will play at the cobra’s hole. I don’t think alligators make it into the new creation descriptions, but we can trust that we’ll play with the alligators after Jesus returns. We’re preparing for eternity now; some of us are called to get ready by taming them now.

How do I know if it’s me? All my life I’ve been drawn to the animal kingdom. When animals and humans live in such harmony that they seem to understand each other and communicate in some deep, intuitive way, one can sense that God is right there present in that deep harmony, like the way the people and animals interact in the Narnia books. When I’m with animals in that way, it seems that every moment is an intensely beautiful prayer. I have not personally experienced this with alligators, but I have with birds and horses and our own two dogs.

But you, you have this special bond with alligators. All your life you said to yourself, “I’m nuts. I can’t be called to being an alligator tamer. My family will commit me, and my friends will disown me.” But then that same verse jumps out at you: “If you want to truly be my disciple, you must hate father and mother....” But then you say, “Lord, I’m terrified. Nobody becomes an alligator tamer,” and this one word question comes back, “Nobody? Really?” And then you say, “But the world has so much suffering and struggle and pain and brokenness, how can I waste my time bypassing all that mess by trying to tame alligators?” And a voice comes back, “Don’t you think that one way of addressing the pain is to help people to glimpse just a tiny bit of the profound shalom between creatures that I have restored in my death and resurrection?” And then in exasperation you exclaim, “But I’ll have to leave Dordt College if I want to be an alligator

tamer.” And a little chuckle comes back that says, “No you don’t. Ask them to set you up with a summer internship at the Reptile Gardens in Rapid City, South Dakota; they have a great alligator tamer there.” And all you can do is shut your mouth, nod your head, and follow Jesus into the alligator’s den.

For the past twenty years, I’ve had a poem hanging over my desk that describes this kind of following. Listen to it:

The Road of Life

At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge,
keeping track of things I did wrong,
so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when
I die.

He was out there sort of like a president.
I recognized his picture when I saw it,
but really didn’t know Him.

But later on
when I met Christ,
it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride,
but it was a tandem bike,
and I noticed that Christ
was in the back helping me pedal.

I don’t know just when it was
that He suggested we change places,
but life has not been the same since.

When I had control,
I knew the way.
It was rather boring,
but predictable . . .
It was the shortest distance between two points.
But when he took the lead,
He knew delightful long cuts,
up mountains,
and through rocky places
at breakneck speeds,
it was all I could do to hang on!
Even though it looked like madness,
He said, “Pedal!”

I worried and was anxious
and asked,

“Where are you taking me?”
He laughed and didn’t answer,
and I started to learn trust.
I forgot my boring life
and entered into the adventure.
And when I’d say, “I’m scared,”
He’d lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed,
gifts of healing,
acceptance
and joy.
They gave me gifts to take on my journey,
My Lord’s and mine.

And we were off again,
he said, “Give the gifts away;
they’re extra baggage, too much weight.”
So I did,
to the people we met,
and I found that in giving, I received,
and still our burden was light.

I did not trust Him,
at first,
in control of my life.
I thought He’d wreck it;
but He knows bike secrets,
knows how to make it bend to
take sharp corners,
knows how to jump to clear high rocks
knows how to fly to shorten scary passages.

And I am learning to shut up
and pedal
in the strangest places,

and I’m beginning to enjoy the view
and the cool breeze on my face
with my delightful constant companion, Jesus Christ.

And when I’m sure I just can’t do anymore,
He just smiles and says, “Pedal.”²

Continue pedaling, as you make yourself
available to the Lord’s vocational questions in your
life. Continue pedaling, as you seek to live *Coram*
Deo, fully alive in every way.

Continue pedaling as a new creation signpost,
open to the Lord’s surprises as he grows the heart of
Jesus in you.

Endnotes

1. This and the other Bible quotations are taken from *The New International Version of the Holy Bible*, Ed. New York International Bible Society (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978). Print.
2. This poem, author unknown, is copied from Tim Hansel’s book *Holy Sweat* (W Publishing Group, 1987). Print.

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