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Living on the Edge of Adventure

by Larry Den Besten, M.D.



Dr. Larry Den Besten, professor and vice-chairman of surgery at the University of Iowa Hospitals, holds a B.D. from Calvin Seminary and a M.D. from the University of Iowa College of Medicine. Dr. Den Besten was a medical missionary in Nigeria for several years and has also done graduate work and research at the University of Iowa. Dr. Den Besten delivered the following address at the 1976 Dordt College commencement.

Introduction

The world's worst crime is that people grow dull. Some people never grow dull, but they constitute a small, exceptional minority. Most of the rest of us grow dull...intellectually, spiritually and physically. Intellectual activity becomes limited to television watching and conversations about the weather and taxes. Spiritual activity becomes three mumbled mealtime prayers, and two dreamy hours of church attendance on Sunday. Physical activity is cleaning the house or riding an air-conditioned tractor. If you don't believe people grow dull, listen to the conversation at a social gathering; join your Elders on house visitation; or work with me one day examining patients coming for medical care.

All kinds of people grow dull...children, students, professors, preachers and parents,...and the time it happens varies from a few years of age to the age of retirement. The child laughing and giggling in a handkerchief game can become listless, sullen and silent in an orphanage. The roller skating child with hair streaming in the breeze may become almost schizoid, forced to abandon reality because of a fractured home. The idealistic dreams of the high school graduate may be quickly replaced by a sense of purposelessness with an endless repetition of meaningless tasks dedicated to provide food, gas for the car, or support of a drug habit. All too often the lofty, confident ideals of a young couple on their wedding day are replaced by a sense of futility and emptiness. Love is displaced by babies coming too often,

long days on the tractor and nights watching the sky for rain...never daring to question whether God has forgotten that the corn will not make it without a shower. Middle age becomes a nightmare of concern over crops, taxes, weather, the "lousy preacher," and the kids going to pot. Finally there is retirement and the rocking chair with its tendency to hasten intellectual, spiritual and physical death.

The greatest crime in the world is that people created in the image of God with all its potential become dull...become the world's walking dead. People grow dull when the embers of imagination and idealism grow cold and the adventure of life is defined by a series of carefully limited goals...graduation, a set of lesson plans, a 300-acre farm, a reservation in the retirement home, and a family burial plot in the cemetery.

I dare say that individual members of today's graduating class would be horrified at the prediction that the majority of you will have grown quite dull in one or two years. Life will be perceived by you as long days of hard meaningless work, worries about job security, television from 8:00 to 10:30 p.m. ending with the news, and fitful sleep. The dull repetition of 24 hour cycles will go on endlessly until God mercifully intervenes to make this walking death a release in physical death.

In contrast there is that minority of you who will continue to live on the edge of adventure...daring to grow intellectually, spiritually, and physically when those all around you are dying.

I. Biblical Basis for Living on the Edge of Adventure

Life on the edge of adventure is rooted in the very nature of God, himself. Allow me the indulgence of a few anthropomorphisms. The essence or existence of God never required his entrance into history. Infinite, self-contained, and secure, He might have existed forever in his timeless eternity. However, I John, Chapter 1, tells us that there was also

from the beginning a second person of the Trinity. This side of God referred to as the "Word" which entered history incarnate in Jesus, his son, is the creating, revealing part of God's nature. Because He is not only timeless, eternal and self-contained, but also word, communication, activity, it was natural and necessary that He manifest the total potential of his being. In a real sense, for God to remain self-contained, inactive and unknowable, would constitute a denial of his total nature, and God himself would have grown dull. In God's decision to enter history through his creating and revealing word and later through his incarnate son, we have the most imaginative example of life on the edge of adventure.

A. God's Example: Let us look at God's example. In creation God dared to do something wholly different. He created the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets and flung them into space. Locked into His creation was the infinite wisdom of science which has continued to baffle the mind of man until now.

Among the bits and pieces which God flung into space was the planet called Earth. On that planet He manifested his ultimate venture to the edge of adventure... He created man. Certainly we would have advised God to program this creature with the predictability of a computer. In sharp contrast, God dared to place him in the beautiful Garden with the option of either doing His will or refusing it. In so doing He dared to risk the pain and disillusionment of man's failure, or realize the fulfillment of seeing this manifestation of his image grow to the ultimate potential of his creator. In Eden man opted for the lie rather than the truth...God ventured and lost. At that time He might well have directed the elements of the universe on a collision course with each other, wiping out his misadventure with an explosion greater than millions of hydrogen bombs. But God did not succumb to fatigue and disillusionment, withdrawing to a state of suspended animation in his infinite essence. Out of the whole chaos of Eden's sin, He dared to embark on a salvage plan that

would have been rejected by even the most heady optimists among us. Since death had entered his creation, He provided for man to replicate himself through birth. To bring man, the crown of creation, back into a relationship with himself, He launched the whole plan of salvation. He

flesh, and a shadow was cast as the cross was planted. God was able to endure the pain of the pleadings of his son as he cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." His heart jumped with momentary fulfillment as his dying son could look down on those who had

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dared to choose a nameless nomad from Padan-Aram to become the father of a chosen people. When his people groaned under the bondage of Egypt, He dared to bypass articulate Aaron and choose a stuttering desert shepherd to lead his people back to the promised land. They repeatedly sinned and rejected Him, but He never persisted in his plan to wipe them from the face of the Earth. Instead He gave them judges, kings and prophets. Finally He dared to send his son, born to a peasant maiden and her carpenter husband. He dared to have his son choose as apostles simple fishermen, and gave him only three years to communicate a message whose words have echoed down the corridors of history even until today. Finally, He dared to reopen the relationship of God with man through the death of this son on a cross.

The daring of God reaches its focal point in the death of his son. Tried and condemned in a kangaroo court, He was beaten, spit upon, and finally crowned with thorns. They led Him away to a place outside the city to Skull Hill. The sickening thud of the carpenter's hammer was heard as the spikes were driven into His quivering

crucified Him and pray: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But finally the agony and pain of the venture became too much, and even God hid the eyes of the world from those final moments...He placed a curtain in front of the sun. For three hours darkness obscured the mortal struggle between the God-man and Satan. Then the darkness was pierced by a voice from the center cross: "It is finished, Father into thy hands I commit my spirit." And at that moment...at that most crucial point in the history of man... by that crack of the Almighty voice, the success of God's venture was announced... the foolishness of the cross had become the "wisdom of God."

But God did not stop with the cross. He was willing to move even closer to the edge of adventure. He dared to make the task of calling out his church the responsibility of a handful of apostles. He dared to place his revelation with this church and trust them to guarantee its purity.

Inspired by the example of God and in response to the promises in Christ, early Christians were willing to live his ideal. They might herd them in droves

before gladiators or wild animals...they might be hung on crosses row on row until the light of their burning bodies would illuminate the city of Rome and the stench of their burning flesh might ruin even Nero's appetite...but for everyone who laid down his life at the edge of adventure ten more stood up to take his place. And so true Christians have persisted throughout history. They have been willing to sail uncharted seas, risk the threat of economic catastrophe, offer themselves on the altar of idealism, all to fulfill God's plan.

In a very real way each one of us symbolize another series of heirs to God's unbelievable experiment on the edge of adventure. We, too, are called to exercise, hone, mould and refine our bodies, our minds, and our spirits to the limits of their potential, knowing that in so doing we become a part of making God's dream for the re-creation of all things a possibility whose reality will become complete at the end of time.

B. The Essence of Man: The Biblical basis for our life at the edge of adventure remains incomplete without an understanding of the nature of man. Our potential for adventure far exceeds that inherent in just another biologic species. When God finished creating the universe, including vegetative and biologic life, he created man. He called man the "crown of creation." Without man the purpose of creation would have remained incomplete. In creation the second person of the Trinity...the Word...expressed the mind and idea of God. But that creation, without man, would remain wholly inarticulate, isolated, and in communion only with itself. Much like the waste of distant planets, or the unheard voice in the desert, it could never communicate with its creator because it was wholly other...wholly different from Himself. The solution of the isolation of the created universe from its wholly different creator was resolved in the unbelievable brilliant idea to create man. To the thinking of the modern scientist, man is simply another variety of biologic life. To the theologian and Biblical scholar,

he is often defined simply in terms of his spiritual being and his eternal soul. Both of these perceptions of man do grave injustice to his being.

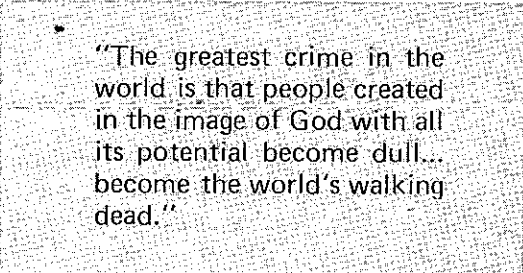
The key to the understanding of man's essence is found in the words recorded in the first chapter of Genesis. We are told that: "God created man and breathed in his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a Living-Soul." So, you see, man is not simply a biologic being with a superior forebrain. Neither is he a soul living in symbiosis with a physical body. This tendency to dichotomize man as body and soul is a fundamental theological error. Man must not be perceived as body and soul, but as a 'body-soul. He is a unique fusion into oneness of the very spiritual essence of the ultimate spirit, God, with the very essence of the created biologic universe. The result is a creature who is body-soul. As body he is capable of communicating completely with the voiceless creation, and as soul or spirit he is capable of knowing and communicating with spirit. As body he can smell the flower, marvel at the beauty of a sunset, and probe the endless secrets entombed in the universe God created. As soul he can escape the limitations of space and time. His spirit can be in London, Hong Kong and Heaven with the rapidity of sequence that defies the time-measuring capacities of an atomic clock. Certainly the body suffering the fatal blow imparted to it by the sin of Eden feels fatigue, pain, and disease. His spirit, although "restless until it rests in God," continues in its desire to repeat the arrogance of Adam's sin. But the potential inherent in man's body as created to replicate its cells without error forever, and the original potential of man's spirit to know and be able to communicate with God perfectly will one day be restored. Those of us who accept God's revelation know that this redemption of body and soul which will become complete at the end of time must have its beginnings in history. These beginnings become the edge of the Christian's adventure.

II. The Divine Mandate

The Divine Mandate is expressed in a variety of ways in Scripture. In a very real way, each of us are heirs to God's unbelievable experiment on the edge of adventure. As heirs we are not simply invited to follow God's dream, but we are commanded to do so. Scripture is replete with these exhortations. To Noah God said: "Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the Earth." To the disciples Christ said: "Go make disciples of all nations...for lo I am with you always." And Paul said: "Fight the good fight...study to show yourself approved." I am suggesting that God wants us to stretch our potential to the very edge of disaster, exhaustion, and defeat. I suggest that He wants us to learn that there really is no pleasure without pain, no reward without sacrifice, no fulfillment without risk. Please understand that God never intended, and I am not suggesting, ventures in futility. Even God changed his plan when Eden failed. So, too, we deal with the realities of our potential and the opportunities of our age. Two things become apparent when we examine Christ's parable of the talents: God rewarded the husbandmen on the basis of their use of the talents he had entrusted to them. Secondly, the failure of the one servant to exercise his talent evoked the severe displeasure of the master.

I want very much to avoid the platitudes so characteristic of commencement addresses. But, an appreciation for the excitement, personal satisfaction and gravity of God's mandate is important to our perspective as we leave Dordt College. The bits of knowledge which your professors have been able to impart to you during your short stay at Dordt represent less than a drop in the bucket of God's infinite wisdom. However, if you can leave these brief moments with a commitment to use your talents to the limit of their potential, life will be full and the world will be changed. God desires that we will fine tune our bodies so that they make a beginning to the restoration and

redemption which will become a reality at the end of time. We must know the sense of excitement that comes from having run five 7-minute miles when months ago a trip up the steps of the library produced total breathlessness and near apoplexy. To ski the highest, steepest mountain; to rid our bodies of potentially lethal excess fat; to clear our blood of cholesterol and fat resulting from dietary indiscretion; to hone and tune our bodies...these are part of the adventure. Intellectually, we are never allowed to store our textbooks, to turn in our key to the library as we leave this institution. The tools imparted to us must be used in our adventure. We must create and discover new knowledge, pursue advanced degrees and accept the opportunities for scholarly challenges and appointments commensurate to the talents God has given us. Spiritually, we cannot be content to simply mouth old truths in forms irrelevant to the unique challenges of our age. Responding to the moments in history



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which God opens to us, we must prophesy to our age with existential relevance.

The life of adventure to which we fall heir will never be completed in our short three score years and ten. But this is how life was intended to be. There is a myth among us which is sometimes blessed with a text. This myth suggests that life is a series of end points...graduation, marriage, a job, a home paid for, retirement, and then inactivity. This construction of life, it seems to me, is more compatible with the

Far Eastern religions than the Christian faith. In the Hindu ideal, the true man of God arrives when he reaches the state of total suspended animation and contemplation. In marked contrast, the Christian life is much more characterized by the admonition of Christ that "We work for the night is coming." The myth that satisfaction comes with the attainment of a series of self-limited goals is probably the cause for more depressions, disillusionments and unhappiness than anything else. We do well to remind ourselves that the essence of life and fulfillment is not in the goal attained, but in the process of struggle which lies between the acceptance and attainment of a goal.

It is perfectly appropriate that the event in your lives which we celebrate today be called "commencement." You have graduated from one adventure which declares you eligible to commence another. It is simply one of a series of commencements which you have experienced in the past and will continue to experience in the future. The opportunities for commencement do not end after the job is secure, the children are married, or retirement from one's occupation. Rather, the opportunities to commence new experiences move closer to the edge of adventure as life progresses. This truism applies to the end of life as well. Death itself, for the Christian, may be viewed with a sense of excitement and anticipation which eclipses our natural abhorrence of it. In death we may join Christ in the victory which prepares us for the greatest adventure of all.

Christianity has manifested a definite preoccupation with the distasteful and pathetic aspects of the cross and Christ's death. The whole thing gets to be a tragedy, a tale that should never have been told, a page in divine revelation which should never have been written, or at least buried with the Dead Sea scrolls, only better hidden. But much more than being the tragic end of a misguided mystic, we witness the final daring of God. In the cross, we see the Son of Man stretching

his intellectual, physical and spiritual capabilities to the limits of endurance. In the Garden, intellectual perception of the plan of salvation momentarily escaped him and He prayed: "Father, if it would be possible, let this cup pass from me...nevertheless not my will but thine be done." On the cross, the faith in his father was stretched to the point of breaking and He cried: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." And his body, bruised, bloody and broken, caused him to utter: "I thirst." But in the end there is the voice of triumph and victory as He shouts: "It is finished. Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit." So much more than being the end of a misguided mystic, it is the wisdom of God undoing the foolishness of man; so much more than being ignominious defeat, it is the Son of God establishing his church; so much more than being the tragic end of a tragic life, it is the Son of God riding forth in the victory of accomplishment.

This tendency to see only tragedy in the end of life colors our Christian perspective of the greatest commencement which is death. At that final graduation, we will be declared eligible to go from the edge of adventure to the true adventure as God intended it. Without the encumbrances of sin which has scarred God's creation, including ourselves, we will regain our true image...the image of God. The potential of that endless adventure almost overwhelms us. To be able to sing C above high C, to play the violin in infinite perfection, to probe and understand the profundities of theology, to write the most beautiful poem, to understand God's creation, to preach the ideal sermon...to deliver the perfect commencement address.

The greatest crime in the world is that people grow dull. Babies grow dull, college graduates grow dull, professors grow dull, husbands and wives grow dull. But the nature of our Trinitarian God, his example in creation and salvation, and the mandate which he gives to us beckon, urge, yes demand that we commence living our lives at the edge of adventure.