



ABUNDANT DEATH, ABUNDANT LIFE

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Search through any pastor's library and you are likely to find a whole manner of books covering the various disciplines of pastoral ministry—biblical commentaries, church history, preaching, counseling, doctrine. But it is often the other books you find on the pastor's shelf that give insight into the soul of the pastor.

Most of the older generation of pastors I know filled their shelves with the great classical works of literature—Dickens, Shakespeare, Greco-Roman poets like Ovid or Cicero and philosophers like Plato or Aristotle, great mystery writers like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I would imagine that the collective depth of the literature of the past generation far surpasses the titles that one would find on the bookshelves of the pastors of my internet and television generation. Ironic, given the sheer volume of books published in comparison to previous generations. Perhaps familiarity leads to irrelevance.

On my own bookshelf you are most likely to find adventure travel writing sitting next to the textbooks of my college and seminary classes. John Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, Charles Houston's *K2: The Savage Mountain*, and anything by Tim Cahill. I am embarrassed to admit that these books show significantly more wear than my volumes of Pannenberg and Pieper. At the end of the day, these books excite me in ways that a theological treatise cannot, for they give me a window into the soul of my fellow man. The writing, if not the content, is eminently more preachable in any case.

One recurring theme that emerges from these adventure narratives is the introspection of the soul, the reaching for something greater, the vibrancy of life, all of which is made clearer in the face of death. The great mystery is why so few of recent history's greatest adventurers, the

people whose books line my shelves, have been people of faith. Why would people who don't have the safety net of an afterlife be so much more willing to risk life in the pursuit of adventure? If life is all there is, there is hardly room for error.

It hasn't always been that way. In centuries gone by the great adventurers often were religious men like Brendan the Navigator, the monk who quite probably "discovered" America on a voyage from Ireland long before Columbus. In his classic history of mountaineering, *Hold the Heights*, Walt Unsworth devotes much of his first chapters to "parish priest explorers." He writes, "These were men of some education, isolated spirits surrounded by ignorance, with little wealth, but plenty of time to study and explore."¹ They saw the great unknown of creation as something to be explored, something that was worth risking your life to discover. Alpine historians almost without exception regard

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the eighteenth-century Benedictine monk Placidus à Spescha as the father of modern mountaineering. He is famously to have remarked that his study of nature had given him a better understanding of God.

Many of these explorer priests came from the monastery founded in 962 by Bernard of Menthon, he of the oversized-dog fame. St. Bernard established a monastery and a hospice to aid pilgrims from France and Germany through the avalanche-prone pass in the snow-covered Alps as they made their way to Rome. The dogs were bred and trained to assist the monks in providing rescue for unfortunate travelers. In recent years, the dogs have given up their rescue responsibilities to modern technology and have become tourist attractions complete with the cute little thermoses

of brandy around their neck. As if to echo the death peal of the adventurous Christian spirit of Bernard, in 2004 his monastic heirs sold off the last of the dogs, citing a lack of monks to care for them and time commitments better spent elsewhere.

In the cautiousness of the modern Christian age, perhaps life is too precious to squander on the frivolity of adventure. Family and vocational obligations are too great for life-risking adventure. And yet it is those modern-day atheist and agnostic adventurers who, in believing that this life is all there is, understand most clearly that life is indeed precious—it is too precious just to go through the motions of living; it is too precious not to take the risks. When this life is all there is, this life is too precious not to live.

Risk-taking runs in my family. My grandfather was a Scottish Covenanter Presbyterian who had the hard luck of falling in love with an Irish Roman Catholic. In the adventurous new world of America, possibilities were far greater for their love than in the old world from which they came. That's how my mother became a Lutheran and was in church one Sunday morning to meet my father—you take a Covenanter and a Roman Catholic, put them together, and end up with one of the few instances where compromise works its way into the history of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Contrary to what many assume, stubbornness and compromise are not irreconcilable opposites. They just need that final ingredient of love to pull it all together.

My grandfather was noted for his consistent stubbornness throughout his life. Those who grew to know him understood that those things that were important to him provided motivation for his living well into his nineties, until he died this fall. Those things that were not important to him were just details that could be taken or left behind but shouldn't get in the way of what really mattered. And if you dared to get in

the way of what was truly essential, you would get his famous scowl, as if you were robbing him of life itself.

It was not all that surprising to me when my grandfather died. His vitality had already been taken from him. When his knees finally gave out and he couldn't climb the stairs to the Sauer family communal meal on Sunday afternoons, there was no point in going on. I had seen it before with my grandmother. When she fell while working in the garden in her mid-eighties, and was told that her gardening days were over, something inside of her shut down. She died the very day her children, in an effort to get her the medical care she needed, tried to admit her into a nursing home. I had seen it before with my older parishioners who could no longer climb the steps to our church. When you live eighty years sustained by the weekly

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presence of Christ, you tend to feel his absence more intensely. "Home communion is important, but it is not the same," one of them would frequently say. And I as her pastor often failed her by not being able to bring the presence of Christ to her at home every week. *Communio sanctorum* means so much more than mere bread and wine.

More often on my desk than on the shelf in my office is a book whose pages are worn even beyond Cahill's *A Jaguar Is Eating My Flesh*. It is a book that is intimately connected to the life of the people that I serve at Our Saviour in the Bronx.

Penned by one of my predecessors here in ministry, the Rev. Dr. Berthold von Schenk, *The Presence* has become the source from which I shamelessly

borrow for each funeral sermon that I preach. It has been a helpful guide in trying to make sense of the living and dying that permeates so much of pastoral ministry. On death, he writes, there is this great comfort:

Here at the Altar, focused to a point, we find our communion with the dead; for the Altar is the closest meeting place between us and our Lord. That place must be the place of closest meeting with our dead who are in his keeping... How pathetic it is to see men and women going out to the cemetery, kneeling at the mound, placing little sprays of flowers and wiping their tears from their eyes, and knowing nothing else. How hopeless they look. Oh, that we could take them by the hand, away from the grave, out through the cemetery gate, in through the door of the church, and up the nave to the very Altar itself, and there put them in touch, not with the dead body of their loved one, but with the living soul who is with Christ at the Altar.²

And about life there is this great description:

The abundant life is more than the forgiveness of sins. An adult Christian will not be contented with the mere assurance that he is not going to hell. He wants to swim in deeper water. Forgiveness is only the entrance to the ocean. The mature Christian wants to play around in the ocean of grace and exercise and have fun.³

In this day and age when parents need to be ever more vigilant, when bicycle helmets need to be worn and warning labels cover everything from toys to shampoo, I am proud to have passed on the adventurous spirit of my grandfather to my daughters. As mothers and fathers tell their children at the park to "be careful," "don't run," and "get down," I can be heard

encouraging my girls to “run faster,” “climb higher,” “play messier,” under my own watchful eyes. And when my neighbors look at me a little askance, I cheerily remind them of the very words of our watchful good shepherd in John 10: “I came that they might

have life and have it abundantly.” These are words that my grandfather took to heart. It was how he lived his life and breathed his last, and in so doing he stood in a long line of Christian adventurers.

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Notes

1. Walt Unsworth, *Hold the Heights: The Foundations of Mountaineering* (Seattle: Mountaineers, 1994), 37.
2. Berthold von Schenk, *The Presence: An Approach to the Holy Communion* (New York: Ernst Kaufmann, 1945), 130–31.
3. *Ibid.*, 32.

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