



minister

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Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

Conversion

Larry Greenfield



When she came back in the room after reviewing my blood work, the first words from the nutritionist at the University of Chicago Medical center were, “Well, Dean Greenfield, would you prefer changing your diet and life style before or after the heart attack?”

I didn’t follow my normal procedure of mulling over the pros and cons of the topic in question. Instead, I told my quite un-grand but serious inquisitor, “I’m pretty sure, before.”

Self-care

It was, I realized later, a conversion experience, almost religious in character: how would I decide what to do with God’s offer to make the best use of the resources entrusted to me? Would I choose self-indulgence or, I think it is fair to say in the best sense, self-love – which is another way of talking about “self-care.”

More was at stake, of course, than myself. I had a spouse and two children entrusted to my love and care, and their love and care to me, along with a surviving parent and wider family.

And then there was the calling to a particular kind of Christian ministry that so many others had invested in besides my family. There was that local First Baptist Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota that had loved me, cared for me, invested in me. There were Sunday school teachers, youth workers, pastors and directors of Christian education, and a whole host of lay people who had kept on encouraging me as a child, in BYF (Baptist Youth Fellowship), and BSM (Baptist Student Movement).

There were those directors and pastors and counselors at Camp Judson and speakers and advisors at the American Baptist Assembly at Green Lake.

Faculty and administrators at ABC-related Sioux Falls College had invested in me also, in addition to all who had contributed to my professional and graduate education at the Baptist-founded University of Chicago, where I now had the unexpected opportunity to teach and administer.

This wasn’t just a decision about me alone. It was a decision about how I would treat others in my past, present and future. It was a decision about how I would treat the God who continued to create and transform me for some purpose other than myself.

Yes, yes, it certainly was a decision about the physical body that was a gift from God, but it was also a decision about how this physical body entrusted to me could be the vehicle for my calling in ministry.

So, right there in that small room at the University of Chicago Medical Center, with the nutritionist as the means of grace, I experienced a conversion into a new way of life – a new way of life that I increasingly realized was according to God’s will.

She (the nutritionist) and I, along with my family and close understanding friends, started on my new way of life gradually. Since cholesterol and triglycerides were the major presenting problem, we began with diet: first eliminating red meat and eggs and whole milk and most cheeses, then moving to the removal of fowl and virtually all dairy products, then later fish and foodstuffs with egg and milk ingredients. You get the picture: over three and a half decades I increasingly became a vegan, eating only vegetables, fruits, cereals, and nuts.

Over those years, people have asked why I did it. Was it a moral decision, they wanted to know? For a long time I joked in response: “No, I did it for selfish health reasons first and then got self-righteous about it later.”

But more recently, I’ve had to confess that it was ethics from the beginning, at least in small and then ever-increasing doses, for the reasons I’ve mentioned above – about the stewardship of the body given me, the continuing love and care of those entrusted to me, and trying to make good on the investment that others (and the Other) had made in me.

In terms of ethics, however, my moral vision has indeed widened because of the discipline I’ve embraced – I hope without becoming self-righteous and pharisaic. It isn’t just my body that is at stake, it is the bodies and callings and purposes of others. By “others” I don’t mean only other human beings, many (not all) of whom need a lot less meat protein and useless fats than are the standard dietary fare, but also “the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves upon the earth.” And then there’s the whole matter of the way animals and birds and fish are now treated and mistreated so that humans can indulge themselves at the expense of those “others.” So that means that I’m increasingly less apt to keep quiet when I see fellow human beings preying on those other creatures of God’s creation, and more evangelical in my theoretical and practical ethics. As a matter of fact, I do believe the Good News that Jesus revealed about the in-breaking reign of God has to do with not just a human “beloved community” but one that embraces all of creation.

I formerly made biblical reference to the passages in the first chapter of Genesis, vs. 29 - 31, and the ninth, vs. 1- 7, to suggest both God’s intent for what humans are to eat and how that intent is relative to new circumstances (i.e, pre-fall and post-flood). That’s not so much the case any more. Instead, because I understand that the law of love is always preeminent over every other law, I’m much more prone to make relative my self-imposed norm about not eating products derived from any animal by referring to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church on matters relating to food (chapter 8): it’s all about not causing a sister or brother to stumble. But I tend to think that I’m

more likely, in most instances, lovingly to keep the sisters and brothers upright by encouraging them to abstain from imbibing animal products these days.

My conversion to self love/care and the love and care of others, broadly understood, also included other bodily disciplines, which, in turn, had implications for emotional and spiritual disciplines. Primary among them was and continues to be daily physical exercise. For a long time I had to do that by myself: running, jumping rope, climbing stairs for at least thirty minutes a day. The virtue of jumping rope, by the way, is that you can do it virtually any place in the world if you simply remember to bring the rope along with you.

But now, as a gift of grace, I have a dog who needs daily exercise as well and loves to run with me along the lakefront on the south side of Chicago and at our country place in east-central Illinois. I can’t speak for the dog, of course, but keeping to this daily routine (most of the time only three miles in a half hour and, less often, five miles in the whole hour) has redemptive and re-creative qualities not just for the body but also the mind, spirit and soul – as if those dimensions of our humanity could be separated!

Deal (the dog) and I have a commitment to picking up trash and litter along the path, which is, we hope, our contribution to sustaining and re-creating the beauty of God’s handiwork along Lake Michigan and the Illinois countryside. But the daily exercise serves also to rid of us of the garbage (in the form of sweat) in our physical bodies, and the mental and emotional garbage (in the form of resentment and anger) in our brains/minds, and the spiritual garbage (in the form of excessive self-interest and self-love) in our hearts and souls, and provides us with the opportunity to confirm that we are new creatures in Christ. (My apologies to those readers who don’t appreciate the emotional, moral and spiritual lives of animals, but I have to be true to my own understandings of God’s comprehensive work in the lives of all of God’s creatures.)

My personal testimony is that physical disciplines of these sorts make me better prepared daily to engage in the emotional disciplines of release and embrace and the spiritual disciplines of biblical reflection and devotional meditation related always to contemporary events – an imperative if one believes that God is always and everywhere active in the world.

And, again personally, I’ve found that the physical, mental, and spiritual disciplines are directly connected – how could it be otherwise for the Christ we follow and the God we serve? – to the discipleship of being evangelists of the Gospel who leads us and the world into God’s reign.

The conversion in that conversation with the nutritionist wasn’t a one-time thing. It has proven to be an on-going

transformation -- a work in progress, as we often say. My guess is that this kind of self-love and self-care could be even better if we, as ministers, did it together.

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- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

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Photo Credit: Jennifer Whitmore

The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:

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- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
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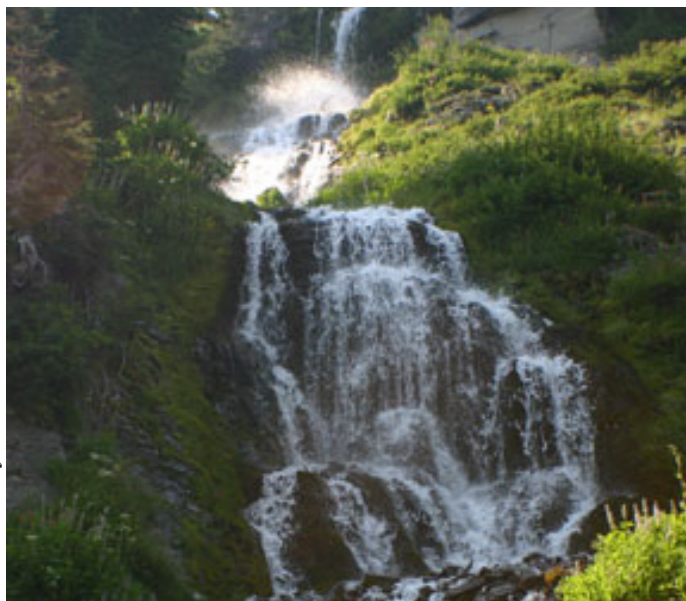


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mission

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