

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

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## The Father I Never Knew



By Greg Albrecht

*In honor of parents everywhere, with Mother's Day and Father's Day in mind, allow me to share a letter I wrote to my father.*

*I never knew my father, so this is a different kind of letter, but still one to honor him and seek his love. I wrote this on the occasion of what would have been his 100th birthday, July 18, 2020...so here it is in time for his 101st birthday.*

**E**lmer Otto Gustav Albrecht appears as your name (the name of my father) on my birth certificate—but I never knew you. Had you lived long enough, July 18, 2020 would have been your 100th birthday, but you only lived a few months past your 28th birthday. As I celebrate your 100th birthday, I mourn a past that never was and a father I never knew.

My "memories" of you have fashioned a mosaic-like image, emerging like a jigsaw puzzle, pieced together from mementos and stories. Those cherished treasures have helped me fill the massive hole in my heart.

I have gazed at old photos of you so often that it almost seems like I was there—I wasn't in most of them and the few in which we were together, I was far too young to remember. They are faded black-and-white photos, prized souvenirs of the father I never knew.

I have the flag that was draped over your coffin and the dog tags you wore around your neck when you served in the United States Navy during World War 2.

I have the faded front-page hometown newspaper article reporting the details of your death.

I have your old watch that quit running long before I learned to tell time.

I had your baptismal certificate framed—it's a beautiful and ornate piece of art, with the text in German. It connects me with you, because I was baptized as an infant in the same church building as you were.

I have your old Bible—a dog eared copy of the New Testament and the book of Psalms.

I have spent my entire life

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## Get Comfortable With the Questions

Once a year, usually around the Fourth of July holiday or the long Thanksgiving Day weekend, we'd all pile into our old family station-wagon and head out from our home in western Pennsylvania for the woods of central Connecticut. We were off and traveling to see our Grammy and Grampy Reeves, grandparents on my mother's side of the family. It was hard to contain the excitement of five eager children. Our visits were a rare and cherished treat, and both the trip and the time together were treasures we truly looked forward to.

Grammy and Grampy Reeves split most of their years living in two places—the school years living in New York City and the summers in upstate Connecticut. As the lead chaplain at New York's Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, Grampy Reeves carried a constant and challenging responsibility for all things “spiritual” at the hospital. Whether praying with those who were sick and facing the fear of uncertain outcomes or comforting those who'd just lost a loved one, Grampy Reeves had his emotional plate full. He loved the times when he could retreat from the demands of his job and the busyness of the big city around him and return to the quiet of his country Connecticut home.

At least, it was a quiet home until we all showed up! Five young children, hyper from being cooped up in the car for five hours and overjoyed with excitement to see them, we'd burst through their front doors and invade poor

Grammy and Grampy's home like an unbridled force of nature. Running upstairs and then down, inside and then out, from the garage to the living room—we'd unpack the car and all talk at once as we competed for their waning attention. I now understand completely why both of them needed a mid-afternoon nap not long after our arrival.

**“A man who asks questions is a fool for five minutes. A man who never asks is a fool for life.”**

I remember one visit in particular. I'd reached that tender age where I was asking questions continually—questions about Grampy's work, questions about our family, questions about the world and life and why bad things seemed to happen all the time.

I remember Grampy trying to field my questions graciously, answering them to a level he felt was appropriate for me. But, as I continued further, digging a little deeper with each follow-up question, he stopped suddenly at one point and looked sternly at me. “Get comfortable with the questions, Ed, get comfortable with the questions.”

“What do you mean by that, Grampy?” I, of course, had to ask.

“Life does not give us many answers, Ed,” he continued. “As a result, we just have to get comfortable with the questions.” I've never forgotten his thought.

To ask questions is only human. Whether we relate to William Shakespeare in *Hamlet* when he

asked the questions of *Who* and *How* with, “To be, or not to be: that is the question,” or to Rabbi Harold S. Kushner when he asked *Why* in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, we all feel the deep need to ask the big questions of God and of life from time to time. We are not alone. David Hayward in his book, *Questions are The Answer*, writes, “Jesus asked twice as many questions as he answered.” Many of the questions he asked pertained to the *Who* of his identity and the *What* and *Why* of the Law. These are big questions, indeed. I'd say that's good company for us to keep.

So much of the wisdom literature we read in the Bible is all about asking the big questions. King David, and others, fill the Psalms with impassioned questions of God and of life. Job may well have been a man who asked every *Who*, *What*, *Why*, *When*, *Where* and *How* question of God one could. Again, these biblical characters offer us good company.

Although our spiritual lives, our lives in Christ Jesus, need not be questioned, our physical lives can be full of uncertainty and unexpected outcomes. We suffer and often ask, *Why?* That's just life. As an old Chinese proverb states: “A man who asks questions is a fool for five minutes. A man who never asks is a fool for life.”

Personally, I'd rather ask the questions. To “get comfortable with the questions” as my Grampy advised many years ago is to have a conversation with God. And, that's the best company of all. □

—Ed Dunn

*Continued from page 1*

looking for you, the father I never knew—a military veteran who survived the war only to be suddenly taken from my mother, the love of your life, in a tragic accident.

I have no real memories of you at all, but I have loved you since I was old enough to know that I never knew you. I have missed you all my life—I still do.

Before she was also unexpectedly killed in a car accident 37 years after your death, my mother told me stories about you. Her stories left me with impressions of a legendary, super-heroic, strong and loving man who was my father.

With regrets I must report that I, your only child, fall far short of those larger-than-life stories I have heard about you. Even when I was younger and “in-shape,” my body was never as muscular or as strong as yours apparently was.

My mother and many of my relatives have told me you were admired as a Paul Bunyan-like character in our hometown—they said everyone liked you, you were

kind, generous and a hard worker. When you left home to join the Navy, they say you wrote everyone “back home” that the rigors of the military were like a vacation compared with the long hours you worked on the farm.

Like those old black-and-white photos, time has distorted reality and you remain a mythical creation in my mind. While I know my mental portrait of you is an exaggerated illusion, I am thankful for that idealistic picture as I know many who live with painful, real nightmare memories of fathers who have abandoned and/or abused them.

In many ways I am thankful I have been encouraged and allowed to make you whatever I have wanted you to be—though I know much of the picture is not based on factual reality. I’ve lived long enough now to know you had to be very human (I am quite certain my genetic weaknesses and predispositions to dysfunctions and behaviors did not all come from my mother!).

I have been told that when you were a young boy your family endured the Depression and the Dust Bowl on a little farm just outside Herington, Kansas—the town where you were born and where you are buried. I know that you and your twin sister Velma started school without knowing much English, but they say you both learned English quickly.

During the Great



Depression, I am told the only food Grandma Albrecht had available to make school lunches for you and Velma was homemade bread from the little wheat they were able to grow and lard from the few pigs they had.

I have traveled the world and I have seen misery, poverty and horrific disease, but I never imagined my own father growing up with such hard-scrabble hardships and impoverishment.

Most of us want our parents to think highly of us and be proud of what we did and what we became. I do. I hope when we finally meet, you will be proud.

Still, at the same time, I also know that I have lived a far from perfect life, and like all children, I have done things I never want you to know. I am confident our loving heavenly Father will never tell you the bad stuff.

I believe with all my being that we will meet—not again—but for the first time. What a party that will be! We have a lot of catching up to do.

See you soon, I love you Dad.

Your loving son,

Greg □



# How Free Do You Want to Be?



By Jim Fowler

**W**riting to the Galatians, Paul declared, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free” (Galatians 5:1). Previously Jesus told the Jews, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32), explaining immediately, “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Who sets the Jews and all men free? The Son, Jesus Christ.

Mankind was not made for bondage or enslavement. So, it is a natural desire of human beings to want to be free, especially from the bondage of religion, which is the precise context that both Jesus and Paul were referring to in the verses just cited. Religion, in whatever form, is bondage.

The English word “religion” is etymologically derived from the Latin words, *religare* and *religio*, meaning to “tie up” or “bind again.” Religion binds and ties people into strictures of performance conformity. Performance-bondage is the essence of all religion.

Religion demands that an individual engage in the self-effort of performing according to imposed standards of behavior, aligning oneself to rules and regulations of

“thou shalt” and “thou shalt not,” or participating in the rituals deemed to have meaning in that particular religious camp.

Eventually people seek to free themselves from the bondage of religion. Not an easy task! Anyone who seeks to set himself free, usually finds himself less free. Attempts to buy freedom, win freedom, or earn freedom enslave us all the more. True freedom is not self-sought, but Christ-wrought and Christ-bought. Jesus paid the price (I Corinthians 6:20). Jesus has done everything necessary (John 19:30). Jesus is the Victor who has triumphed over the forces of religion that would enslave us in human performance.

*Christian freedom is freedom from sin* (John 8:34-36), from being slaves to the selfishness of sinful character. *Christian freedom is freedom from the “old man” identity* (see Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22). *Christian freedom is freedom from the “flesh” and its patterns of selfishness* (Galatians 5:17).

*Christian freedom is freedom from death* (Romans 8:2).

*Christian freedom is freedom to accept the will of God in Jesus Christ. Christian freedom is freedom to live by the Grace-filled dynamic*

of God and His empowering Spirit. Christian freedom is freedom to live in “newness of life” by the “finished work” of Jesus Christ. *Christian freedom is freedom to live in victory, rather than defeat.*

*Christian freedom is freedom to be humanity as God intended, deriving all from Him. Christian freedom is freedom to live in the context of eternity as a “citizen of heaven”* (Philippians 3:20; Romans 8:19-23).

*Christian freedom is freedom to let Jesus be our life, without anything to prove.*

I am not sure that many Christians really want to live in the freedom that is theirs in Christ Jesus. Why would I make such a statement? Christians have grown up and continue to live in a performance-oriented culture, and many are not really sure they want to be free from the performance expectations of seeking to please and appease God and men. We have grown accustomed to taking credit for our performance, to all the “atta-boy” and “atta-girl” accolades for our achievements, to receiving all the certificates and awards for being the best in our class. □

*Excerpted from The Issue Is Jesus by theologian/author Jim Fowler.*



# God's Not Through With Us Yet

Steve Brown

**H**ave you ever been hurt by church members who didn't seem to care that you were going through a difficult time?

Have you been ignored by the "friendliest church in town"?

When it was dark for you, have church members used clichés at best or just pretended that you weren't there at worst?

If you are there or have been there, I'm here to help. I have spent a lot of time with Christ-followers and we're sometimes not as bad as you think...well bad, but probably not evil.

Sometimes we don't know what to say, so we don't say anything or we say the wrong thing.

Then there are some of us for whom people in pain have become an anomaly. Isn't God supposed to bless you when you're faithful and nice?

When it is quite apparent that you're still trucking and at this time not being "blessed," it messes with our heads.

It's the same thing one sometimes sees in "name it, frame it, claim it" fellowships when someone dies of cancer or

some other disease. If the disease is admitted then their whole theological super-structure comes crashing down. They don't know what to say.

Then there are those of us struggling with our own stuff yet deny it.

You are too close to our reality and we simply don't want to go there. So, we don't. It's the same reason some people don't go to funerals. We are more scared than bad.

I'm sure you've heard the old story about the mother who woke up her son and told him that it was time to go to church.

He said, "I'm not going and I'll tell you why. They don't like me and I don't like them."

"You will go," his mother answered, "and I'll tell you why... you're their pastor."

## **The Only Thing That Helps**

I've been on the receiving end of rejection and judgment, and a lack of compassion. Do you know the only thing that helps? It's the recognition that I've been on the other end more times than I can count, too.

When Jesus said in Matthew 7 that we shouldn't judge the "speck" in someone else's eye until we take the "log" out of our own eye and could see properly enough to judge, I always thought that he was telling me (someone who is ordained) to work at getting better and better in every way every day so I could preach convicting sermons—and exercise proper pastoral oversight and godly discipline to those who were not "walking the talk."

I was young then. I'm a lot older now and a bit wiser. I've been trying to remove the log from my eye for a long time and, frankly, haven't been very successful at it.

And that, of course, is the point Jesus made.

He said that I can't fix others until I can fix myself.

Since fixing me is a lot harder than I ever thought it was, my whole attitude is different. I can't even fix myself, so how can I fix other people?

Not too long ago I shocked some people at a church where I was preaching. "If you're visiting here," I said, "or if you're not yet

a believer, we're so glad you're here. But take some advice from the old guy. Leave before you get hurt. We're not nice people. Sometimes we hang out in cliques and it's hard to break into those. Sometimes we're so selfish that we don't even notice. Sometimes we offend others. So just leave before you get hurt."

A friend of mine told me about a motorist who drove by a Texas ranch and hit and killed a calf crossing the road.

The motorist went to the calf's owner, explained what happened, and asked how much the calf cost.

"Well, the calf is only worth \$200 right now," the rancher said, "but if you hadn't killed the calf, in a few years it would've been worth around \$900. So, I'm out \$900."

The driver got out his checkbook and wrote the rancher a check.

He handed it to the rancher with, "Here's a check for \$900. I've postdated it six years from now."

God's not through with us yet. Sometimes change takes time. Paul wrote in Ephesians 5 that eventually we'll get it together. So, you have to give the Holy Spirit some time to work.

Meanwhile, what do you do when you get hurt by some very self-centered people?

You remember the times God loved you even when you were self-centered.

How do you overlook the rejection and pain inflicted by your Christian family?

You remember how often God has overlooked yours.

How do you cut slack for those who have hurt you?

You remember how often God cut you some slack. It really works! ☐

*Steve Brown is a preacher, professor and the president of Key Life Network.*

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## Life's Lava Tubes

It was dark—darker than a black hole in an abandoned coal mine at midnight. My family, a few friends and I were exploring the Ape Caves—2,000-year-old lava tubes on the south flank of Mt. St. Helens in southwest Washington State. Back then in the 1980s this site was relatively unimproved—no lights, guides, eateries, gift shops or other touristy things. Just a gravel parking lot, and a hole in the ground with a ladder. I think there was a U.S. Forest Service sign warning us that we were entering the cave at our own risk. So we cautiously descended into the abyss, carrying our flashlights and lanterns.

Lava tubes are formed when molten lava flows through a hardened crust and then empties, leaving behind a long underground tunnel. Some of these formations can be wide enough for a subway train. But as we scrambled over chunks of collapsed ceiling, making our way through the tube, it grew narrower and narrower. Eventually, we had to crouch over, scraping our heads on jagged outcrops. Finally, the conduit tapered down to nothing. At that point I recall a wave of claustrophobia before we turned back toward the entry point.

Some years after our adventure, one of our neighbors took her own life. She had fallen into a dark depression, and could see no way out. In retrospect, a psychologist who lived down the street observed that depression can make a person feel enclosed in an ever-narrowing tunnel with no options. The challenge of friends and counselors, he said, is to help the person see that there are always choices—even when it seems the tunnel is ending without a twinkle of light. Listening to his explanation, I couldn't help but remember the feeling I had years earlier at the end of that lava tube.

In the last couple of years, circumstances have confined many of us to our own homes—virtually imprisoned in our own living rooms. With viruses, virulent politics, violence, and a volatile economy, it's safe to say that these years have been fertile ground for end-of-lava-tube experiences—dire situations with

seemingly no options and no way out. In such a tight spot, we can be tempted to jump headlong down any hole that looks like it may offer an escape. We can fall for conspiracy theories, odd religious ideas, cultic teachings and charismatic demagogues—things that will ultimately constrict and imprison us even more. Worse yet, we may begin to think that God himself has somehow brought us to this point to punish, humiliate us or make us suffer.

But the truth is that God is not in the business of confining us in deep, dark holes—whether they are of our own making or imposed on us by situations beyond our control. In fact, he always offers to lead us out of darkness and confinement into his glorious light and wide, open spaces, because *“where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”* (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Scary though they may be, end-of-lava-tube experiences can be great learning moments where we discover that we are not (and don't need to be) in total control of our own destiny. They can prompt us to rethink our assumptions, do some creative problem solving and seek advice. They can even prompt us to begin a more serious conversation with God, who will open our eyes to the possibilities around us.

In the final analysis, end-of-lava-tube experiences are illusions. There are always options, even though they might be so hard to see at the time. Even if it actually is the end of a tunnel, we still have a choice of how to react, and we still have the absolute guarantee of eternal life.

The Apostle Paul was an old hand at prayerfully navigating tight, dark spots. Here's what he had to say about it: *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed”* (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). Yes, there is bright light at the end of that lava tube! □

—Monte Wolverton



## Quotes & Connections



"God loves our efforts, involvement and participation as we follow Christ. Being a Christ-follower is no picnic. However, God insists that our faith and hope fully rest in Christ, knowing that he alone can and will give us what we can never earn or deserve."—Greg Albrecht

"Never, never pin your whole faith on any human being; not if he is the best and wisest in the whole world. There are lots of nice things you can do with sand; but do not try building a house on it."—C.S. Lewis

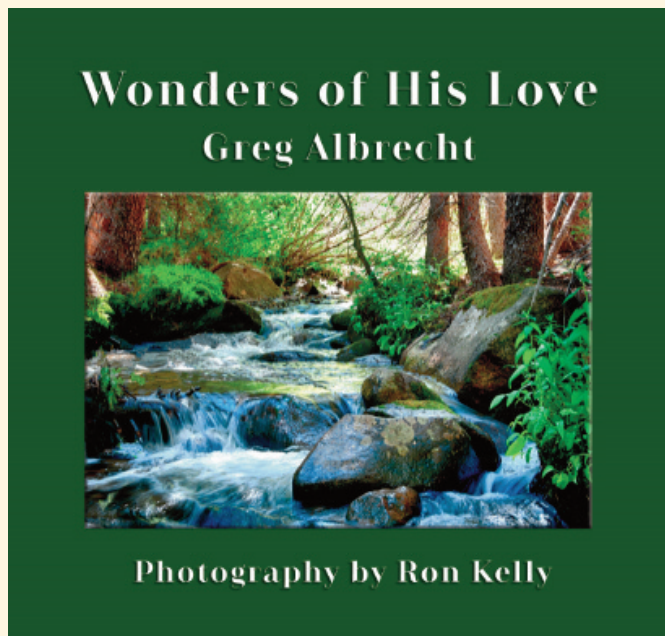
"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."  
—Socrates

"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."—Mark Twain

"Jesus Christ is what God does, and the Cross is where God did it."  
—Frederick Buechner

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