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XROSS CULTURES



*10 true short stories of lives
changed across cultures*

New
2nd
Edition!

Ari J. Rocklin

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CHAPTERS

Introduction - Why this book?

Montreal 1976 - *The world in our backyard*

Erie shores - *Banker makes rational decision*

Trans Canada - *Rainbow of promise*

South Porcupine - *Life lessons from a wise lady*

Fan Tan Alley - *Knocking on heaven's gate*

Varanasi - *Joy at the River Ganges*

Kathmandu - *The journey of a PLO terrorist*

Taichung City - *We lost our bikes!*

Vancouver Island - *A Jehovah's witnesses journey*

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The last chapter

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The last chapter – the most important chapter you may ever read

<https://xrosscultures.wordpress.com/>

Online version: No ISBN number - Alexander Nygård – Author

Introduction

Why this book?

Perhaps we have just met and may never meet again, or maybe you just picked up this book out of curiosity. Whatever the reason, I'm glad that we have this opportunity to meet.

In my travels to more than 55 countries I have met a lot of interesting people - some for just a few moments, others for a few days, and others still who have become lifelong friends. This book is written for those that I meet only fleetingly. Please take an hour or so to read this little book. You will learn of places, people and customs and how we all share a common need.

Travel with me on my journeys. Meet the people and hear their stories. They are Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Traditionalists, Unbelievers, and Atheists. We in the West seem to have forgotten the art of storytelling, whereas in many parts of the world this art is still an honored tradition.

You may very well thank me someday for telling you my stories.

The names of the persons have been changed, but everything else is real.





Montréal 1976

The world in our backyard

As a member of "Ambassadors in Mission", or AIM'ers for short, we spent the entirety of the 1976 Summer Olympics out on the streets of Montreal, a truly world-class Canadian city. 300 of us came together from across the country and were divided into teams with different duties but the same goal: to welcome the world that had arrived in our backyard.

I met someone there who would change my life.

Our team was housed in a high school, where we slept on granite floors, with just our sleeping bags and no mattresses.

The first day of orientation, we were scheduled to go swimming at four o'clock, so off I went to pick up my towel and swimwear. This was one trip I did not want to miss; summer in Montreal is hot and humid, so swimming is a great way to cool off. It would also be a good time to get to know some of my teammates.

But was not meant to be. As I got to the entrance of the school with my towel draped around my neck, it was unusually quiet. Everyone had already left. Puzzled, I went and sat on the stone steps at the front of the school. I had not noticed that there was a lady sitting on the other side of the entrance.

She said: "Come over here, I have something to tell you." She introduced herself as Nechama, a Messianic Jew. "Don't you want to know what God has to say to you?" she asked.

Yeah, right, I thought. Nechama was not amused by my indignant attitude. "Let me tell you about your life," she said. Since I wasn't going anywhere anyway, I sat down to hear her out.

Nechama started to talk about my life with intimate knowledge that no one could have possibly possessed. She quickly had my undivided attention. As she wove an intricate story of all the major events in my life thus far, I knew that this lady was speaking of things only God and I knew about. I was spellbound, but at the same time aware that this was not a coincidental moment in my life.

As she came to a close, I was amazed at the accuracy of her story; it was my entire life up until that moment. Nechama sat there with a big beautiful smile on her very Jewish face. She told me that there was Jewish blood in our family tree. It would take many years of studying our family genealogy to discover that she was absolutely right.

I got up to leave when she said: "Sit down, don't you want to know what God has planned for you?" She then proceeded to tell me a story interwoven with events both joyous and horrifying.

I would have been afraid, had it not been for the ending remark. "And in all this, be assured that God will be in control, He will bless your every step, no one who rises against you will prosper."

It has been many years since my meeting with Nechama. Time has proven every one of her predictions absolutely correct - like the accident that should have ended my life.

Let me share that story with you.

I was driving to work as usual one morning, and I never even saw the other car coming.

The driver was late for school and thought he could make it before me to the intersection. He did not.

The next thing I knew, I was lying in a field with blood gushing out of an open head wound. Suddenly, I saw myself as if from treetop level. I saw people rushing to my assistance. I thought of family members to whom I did not have a chance to say goodbye. A feeling of sadness washed over me.

Then I entered a tunnel. *A million miles an hour* would not accurately describe the speed at which I travelled. Soon I came to a green grassy knoll. Some miles away was a city of beauty. There in front of me stood a friend who had died earlier that year. She looked beautiful and radiant, dressed in a white loose-fitting gown. Her blonde hair flowed casually over her shoulders. Her mouth did not move when she spoke to me. Yet she told me: "It is not yet your time to come here, please tell my mother to stop grieving for me for I am happy here".

From the city below appeared a Man clothed in light. He was so radiant that I had to look over to my left side to avoid the intense glare. Love seemed to be pouring out and permeating everything in His presence.

He spoke softly with authority: "I love you very much, you still have work to do, it is not your time to come here"

I did not want to leave this peaceful place, but slowly at first, then at the speed of light, I started back down the same dark tunnel from where I had come.

I awoke to people's faces staring at me in horror. In the emergency room I overheard a nurse say: "He should be dead!" I wanted to say that I had been but was not able to speak.

Nechama's prophetic vision of my life gave me a focus. The near-death experience gave that vision an urgency and a total fearlessness of eternity. It gave me firsthand knowledge of heaven and an intense desire to share Jesus with everyone who would listen. I speak of that which I have seen and heard. There is a new Jerusalem, complete with city walls made of precious stones.

This book is a part of that urgency. May the good Lord bless you, the reader, as you travel with me on my journey.



Erie shores - Young banker makes rational decision.

Arthur was a self-made man. He had gone far as a hockey player, winning a scholarship to a major university and, of course, playing hockey for their team. His talent was widely recognized, as even an NHL talent scout came to see him play. The talent scout was impressed and assured him that a tryout would be coming his way.

Then Arthur's dad passed away suddenly. His aspirations of NHL stardom died with his father, who had been his faithful coach and fan throughout his life. Arthur had many fond memories of getting up at 4 am to go practice at the ice rink since before he was a teenager, with his father, standing on the sidelines, always his biggest fan.

He walked away from his NHL aspirations and focused on working his way up the corporate ladder in banking, first as a loan officer and then later as a bank manager.

I thought I was an up and coming tennis player and had worked my way up from minor tournaments toward a city-wide tournament. Quite by accident, I met Arthur on a tennis court. We decided to play a game in which I was thoroughly humiliated by this almost-professional hockey player. In my defense, he had a lifetime of hand to eye coordination from playing hockey, while I had picked up tennis as a 20-year-old.

We went out for coffee after the match, and that was the start of a great friendship. We took trips together, I taught him the finer points of sailing, and he taught me about finances, which he knew a whole lot more about than I did from his years of studying business and high finance.

Inevitably, the question of faith came up during our long drives together. He was intrigued but could not see how being a Christian had any value to himself. It was just for the weak and the old, not a strong athlete with a brilliant mind like himself.

He chose to attend church with me, mostly due to curiosity and to the new friendships he was making there. He admitted that church had value to him, but only as a social gathering place, as well as a place to hear some good singing, which he really enjoyed.

Arthur's other best friend, Jake, was a former believer who was now vehemently against anything to do with Christianity. The three of us made quite the interesting group, with opinions on most things from one extreme to the other.

Now, Arthur was caught in between the two extremes. This put him in an awkward position most of the time, needing to defend one of us to the other.

It was this need to rationalize these two extremes that started slowly changing his own position. He was spending more and more time thinking about where he actually stood in all of this.

All three of us attended a long weekend event where hundreds of people had gathered for a midsummer celebration. We were having a great time meeting new people, eating good food, watching sporting events, and attending a concert. It was after the concert that Arthur struck up a conversation with a young lady named Cindy. They ended up talking long into the night. Jake and I were trying to get him to stop so we could go to our motel room.

Back in the motel room, Jake was asking Arthur what was so special about Cindy that he had spent all that time talking to her. Arthur said she was intelligent, interesting and just a very nice person to be with. The following evening after the final dinner, Jake asked Cindy to go for a walk with him. It was one of those deciding moments that give birth to something unplanned, as they started dating that night.

After we returned home, Arthur told me he had given a lot of thought about faith and had come to the conclusion that it was irrational not to accept what Jesus offered. If what Jesus said was true, no man could seriously look at what was being offered (for free) and not accept that gift.

And that night, Arthur's journey with Jesus began.

What happened to Jake and Cindy?

On learning that their friend Arthur had become a Jesus follower, they too decided to dedicate their lives to Jesus. They were married a short time later.

And so ends my story about Arthur the banker and his friends.



Trans-Canada Highway, East to West.

Rainbow of promise

I would be driving across Canada to join the salmon fishing fleet in Tofino, British Columbia for the season. Dreading the long and lonely drive, I put an ad in the local paper looking for someone to share in the gas and driving.

Michelle, a self-professing yuppie, answered the ad, and soon I was at her parents' home picking her up for the 4000-kilometer journey. She had some unused vacation time and wanted to see this country by car.

As we drove and shared our stories it became apparent that we were total opposites in just about everything. When we got to the topic of faith, it was no surprise that we again shared nothing in common.

Michelle tried to rationalize that what we see is all there is. When we die, that is the end. It does not matter what you do while you live, so go for the gusto and get all the toys before you die. She who dies with the most toys does not necessarily win, but at least has a good time.

I asked for permission to tell her about my faith and belief. Michelle answered that as it was a very long drive, I should go ahead and make the best of it.

Since time was on my side, I decided to make this the best and most thorough story I had ever told. It began in the book of Genesis and ended in Revelation, with many stories in between. Hours passed, and my story continued. Michelle listened without comment. We stopped only for gas, food, and stretching our legs.

Just before arriving at the Rocky Mountain foothills, my story came to an end. I asked her to tell me what she thought of my rather lengthy epic.

"Well," she said, "I've listened carefully and even checked the Bible for the places that you have mentioned, but you haven't persuaded me. Show me even one piece of real evidence that the Bible is true. Something tangible that I can hold onto."

A long silence followed while I tried to come up with something. I drew a blank. I had exhausted all my arguments and had nothing more to offer. That is when God took over.

As we headed up into the mountains, we were awed by their beauty. This was the first time for both of us driving over this range. No more sermons, just drinking in the majesty of His handiwork.

Someone once said that if God can create something as beautiful as the Rocky Mountains in six days, just imagine what heaven will be like, which he has been preparing for thousands of years.

We were descending into a green valley bathed in sunshine. A twisting river ran at the bottom, ominous clouds were quickly sailing toward us and in an instant water poured at us as if someone had opened the very floodgates of heaven. All traffic came to a standstill as visibility dropped to a mere few feet. Gone were the valley views, replaced by wind and rain that threatened to force us off the side of the road. There was silence inside the humid car. We could not see anything but water against the windshield. The wind was rocking the car as if it were a toy. We were stunned by this display of nature's strength and man's insignificance.

Then, as quickly as it had started, it was over. People started driving again and the sun broke through the black clouds. As we rounded a corner the traffic ahead was once again stopped. We pulled over to the shoulder and wondered what was happening, as people were coming out of their cars.

People were pointing into the valley below. And there it was: God's handwriting in the sky, the most beautiful rainbow we had ever seen. We thought that it was so close it could be touched. People by the hundreds were standing in silence, awed by the master's colors. Some had tears in their eyes, others were taking pictures. It was a moment frozen in time. No traffic was moving.

Once back in the car there was a long period of silence, with both of us reflecting on what we had seen.

Michelle! There was your sign! God made Noah a promise that He would never again destroy mankind with a flood and as a sign of his promise there would be a rainbow in the sky!

"Is that really in the Bible?" she asked. I replied: "Yes, please look it up and read it to me."

When we finally rolled into Vancouver, tired, in great need of a shower, it truly was the end of a journey for both of us. We said our goodbyes, wishing each other well, exchanging addresses and promising to send postcards.

Some weeks later the ship I was working on came into port for supplies. Mail was being forwarded to the local post office. It was an unsteady walk on solid ground after many weeks at sea. So much mail, and among it a very long letter from Michelle. Once out to sea again, I opened it, wondering what could possibly be so important as to write such an epic.

Six pages of writing on both sides can be summed up in a few sentences: "After you dropped me off, my girlfriend picked me up and excitedly started telling me of how she had made a commitment to become a follower of Jesus.

It was a continuation of your story. I was amazed and realized that God was trying to reach me. A few days later, I too accepted Him as Saviour."

So, with tears rolling down my salty cheeks, out on the blue Pacific Ocean, somewhere near Tofino, with praise on my lips, ends the story of Michelle.



Life lessons from a wise lady

South Porcupine? The first question that comes to mind after hearing that is: Where is North Porcupine? There *is* a place on the north side of Porcupine Lake called simply Porcupine, thus the area south of the lake is, you guessed it: South Porcupine.

What on earth would make anyone move to this place? Well, the commercial salmon fishing season on the west coast was over and we were told that there was a lot of work in the gold mines with good pay.

While waiting for the mining company's impending call, I saw an ad for a few weeks' work at Austin Airways, which was at that time the oldest airline in Canada. The job was counting inventory for tax purposes, and I took it. While counting nuts and bolts I could not help noticing the busy airplanes taking off and landing with a combination of cargo and passengers. On the route maps I read the names of places that not many could even pronounce: Attawapiskat, Kashechewan, Pangnirtung, Kuujjuarapik and so on.

A position as flight attendant was offered and I jumped at the opportunity to see the great Canadian north, the *real* north with Inuit people and permanent ice floes.

What an education it was to be, seeing firsthand how our First Nations people lived. But my real reason for being in this cold, long winter and short, black-fly-filled summer place, had nothing to do with flying.

Someone told me that there was an old lady dying of cancer in the hospital. She spoke the language of my adolescence, one of very few with whom I could exercise this language of my soul.

Each day after work, I would stop in and see Karin. She told me her life story with all its fascinating twists of fate. It became my favourite part of the day, even though hospitals always made me uneasy, especially when someone close to you is dying.

Well, Karin was not ready to die as she walked home one day after a lengthy stay. She recovered, much to the amazement and delight of the doctors.

Our friendship continued, many cups of coffee were consumed while we talked about anything and everything under the sun. Her husband, a grizzly of a miner, always listened to us with amusement while reading the paper. Karin was full of life wisdom, often injecting her anecdotes to liven up our times together: "Always hang up your clothes with the hook of the coat hanger facing the rear of the closet, in case of a fire - then you can simply pull all your clothes off in a hurry."

But there was one area that was closed for discussion: the topic of faith. This was not allowed.

Even after a few years, this topic was always kept strictly out of the way. Of course, this puzzled me. If I had an illness that was taking away my life prematurely, surely one of my priorities would be to prepare for eternity.

With her love of the outdoors, her incredible zest for everyday life, her abundant love toward her fellow man, her passion for her husband and best friend, Karin was a person to admire and respect. I counted myself blessed to have a friend such as this. But why could I not share of my most innermost being? This always burdened me as I drove away from another fun-filled visit.

It came time to say goodbye as the fishing season began again, thousands of miles away on the west coast. Even at this tearful moment, perhaps sensing that we would not meet again, the subject of faith remained taboo.

The news came as all bad news does, brutally and with total disregard for the pain it brings: Karin passed away, the cancer having returned with a vengeance. Gone, just like that. No more pleasant afternoon chats in her warm and inviting kitchen. Karin was gone. Worst of all, she had died without knowing the author of life, her fate sealed in eternity. How could this be? Was there not something else that I could have done? This thought would keep me awake at night for a long time.

Years passed until one day, quite out of the blue, a friend from the North came and talked to me. He told me a story he thought I should know since I had been such a good friend of Karin's. A short time before she passed away, he had dropped by her house to see how she was doing. After the visit, he was already putting his overcoat on (no doubt it was hanging properly, ready to go in case of fire) when he turned and asked: "Karin, would you like to accept Jesus as Saviour right now?"

There in the cold city of South Porcupine, in a house where everything was in its place, my dear friend passed from death unto life eternal.



Fan Tan Alley, Vancouver Island.

Knocking on heaven's gate

Fan Tan Alley. Yes, there really is an alley with that name. It is about seven feet wide and cuts through a Chinatown block, with locking wrought iron gates at each end. It has a questionable past as an opium den and for other illegal activities at the turn of the century.

I was new in town, living in a tent while apartment hunting. As I was putting up a notice on a bulletin board seeking a place to live, a man was watching me. "You may take that notice down," he said. "I have a place that you can rent in my atelier, I am an artist and could really use the extra income."

The address was 23½ Fan Tan Alley. What a place it turned out to be! No heat, no hot water, no shower, no cooking facilities, very little privacy but the ambiance more than made up for the inconveniences.

Besides, this was Chinatown, and who wants to cook with the awesome food smells of so many Chinese restaurants drifting in through the open skylight over my bed? A bachelor's paradise. Nearby was a public swimming pool with a sauna. This was to be my year of Chinese food, not knowing that a short six years later I would be married with children and living in China (but that's a story for a later chapter).

I quickly became friends with the artist and his family. Their young son, Mike, became my alarm clock and frequent visitor. His atheist parents asked me not to share my faith with them and especially not to tell their boy anything about Jesus. I wondered at such a request but had no trouble respecting their wishes.

I learned what it is like to be an artist with vision; it is a life with many unknowns, feast or famine depending on art sales and the success or failure of art shows.

Mike was born with a horrible, visible skin affliction. The pain he had to endure while having a bath was filled with screams of anguish. Doctors had given up hope that any known medication could ever cure his condition. While his parents had gone away for the day, Mike and I spent the day beach combing and park hopping. Tired and hungry, we made our way back home. After supper it was time to put the little fellow to bed. His parents were not home yet so he asked me to stay in his room until he fell asleep. Just as he was about to nod off, he opened his eyes and asked: "Why does it have to hurt so much? Do other kids hurt like I do? Why do I have to be sick when all the other kids in the park are not hurting?" It was one of those moments in life when you find yourself without answers.

All I could say was, "I don't know Mikey, now close your eyes." As he fell asleep, I hurled the same question at God:

"Why *does* my little friend have to suffer? What did he ever do to deserve this?" I looked at the boy, content in his dream world, and felt so overwhelmingly helpless. As I was about to turn off the light and go to my own room, I leaned on the door frame and sighed: "God, I don't have this kind of faith, but please don't let my unbelief get in the way of this boy's healing" I remember staying up long into the night waiting for the folks to return and questioning life in general.

Early one morning some three days later, Mike's parents came bursting into my room demanding to know what I had done to their son. Confused and still groggy, I told them I had no idea what they were talking about. They proceeded to ask me if I had seen Mike's skin lately. No, I said, I hadn't seen him for the past few days, was there a problem? The parents then explained: "For some reason, his skin is as smooth as a newborn baby's, and it has never been like that before!" Raising his voice in anger and confusion, the father continued: "Don't even dare to suggest that your God had something to do with this!"

Only then did I remember the evening prayer. I guess a smile crept up on my face as the parents walked back into their apartment. A little while later Mike came by and I could see for myself that his face and arms were totally without scales. Tears of joy flowed from my eyes as I realized that God was still in the business of healing and answering even the weakest of prayers.

A decade after this incident I was at the airport when a handsome young man walked by with his mom. It was Mike. As we swapped stories, I was itching to ask whether Mike was still cured. Sensing my question, the mother said: "Yes, Mike has been completely healed with no relapse." Oh God, you are so cool!

There is another neat little story that has to do with wrought iron gates, not much unlike the ones at Fan Tan Alley.

Cycling had become a passion of mine some years before, so moving to the West - or as some might say, *Wet* coast - had extended my cycling season to a year-round obsession.

Kirk was a naval officer with whom I had very little in common. He was an engineer and inventor who totally believed in his own abilities to overcome any problem. The one thing we did share was a love of cycling, which we did together whenever our schedules permitted. On our long rides we often discussed my faith and lifestyle. He thought that faith was just a crutch for people who could not make it without one. He even went as far as saying that after having read the Bible, it offered nothing for him and thus was irrelevant.

That is, until God decided to reveal himself to Kirk.

After a day of cycling and our usual stop at the local coffee shop, Kirk went to the bunkhouse and went to sleep, content in himself and his abilities to deal with whatever came his way.

In his sleep he had a dream. In the dream we were cycling together through a beautiful countryside. As we came to a wrought iron gate, he was quite upset that it did not open for him. Only those whom he recognized as believers were allowed to pass through the gate.

No problem, he thought, *I'll just ride around it*. But he soon realized that there was no getting around this one. Next he tried climbing it, but it was too high. Then he tried studying it for weakness but found it to be very well constructed. The craftsmanship was superb, and the design was stunning. Then he awoke. Kirk was so impressed by the design that he sketched it onto a piece of paper - after all, he *was* an engineer. What a weird dream, he thought, and then went back to sleep. The second time the exact same dream made him wake up even more puzzled. After falling asleep and seeing the same dream for a *third* time, it finally dawned on him: " Only those who believe are allowed to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, and I am not one of them." In the early morning hours, this self-made naval officer realized his need to find God and get to know Him in a personal way.

And that is my story of Fan Tan Alley.



Varanasi, India

Joy at the River Ganges

My travels through India had brought me to the River Ganges, a holy site for the Hindu religion. This is where the mighty, mystical river flows with purpose and serenity. Sitting by her banks in the setting sun, one is almost hypnotized by her presence. Most

of the banks around Varanasi have been made into steps affording pilgrims easy access to the river.

The funeral pyres on the beaches spew their thick, putrid smoke, choking your every breath. Dead bodies covered in flowers slowly float down the river and onward into the Bay of Bengal. Children swim in the water, playing and splashing each other, no different from any other children throughout the world.

But most children throughout the world do not dive under or swim beside bloated corpses.

People stand in the river, as if spellbound, hoping not only to cleanse their bodies but to cleanse their eternal souls as well.

They call this river "mother of life", and indeed she is revered as a god throughout her 2500-kilometer journey, which begins at an altitude of six kilometers, high up in the Himalayan mountains. This river serves all at once as lavatory, burial site, vessel for cremated bodies, a laundromat, a place for bathing, a swimming hole, and a source for drinking water for millions of people.

As all water in Varanasi comes from the Ganges, I dared not drink any form of water during my visit. This was India, a land of contrasts, with gods numbering in the millions.

Some call Varanasi the drug capital of the land. This was evidenced by the many foreigners there with their eyes glazed over, drifting in and out of the city. It is also one of the best places in India to launch a trip to the Kingdom of Nepal. I was already full of anticipation for the trip that I was about to make there, but that's a story for the next chapter.

We toured some carpet factories in Varanasi, where children work from dawn to dusk, many having been bought as slaves. Their task was brutal and time-consuming.

Little fingers worked nimbly at the multi-coloured threads until a masterpiece of great beauty and value was formed. The factory owners explained that these children did not go hungry, and they had a place to sleep under a roof, as well as spending money to do with as they please. I didn't feel comfortable with these rationalizations and made a hasty exit.

Some thirty foreigners decided to get together for a private dinner at a posh restaurant one evening, and I joined them. There seemed to be as many waiters as there were customers. The food was exquisite, hot and spicy. The cost of one meal would have easily fed a family for weeks in India. The vast difference between the poor and the rich was hard to ignore.

The mood at the tables was festive, as it was nearly Christmas. A waiter named Joy broke with protocol and tugged at my sleeve.

"I must talk to you," he said. "You are a holy man."

I replied that I was not a holy man, but that I would gladly speak with him after dinner. Joy made me promise not to forget. There was an urgency to his request that stirred me.

After the wonderful meal and terrific service, Joy and I sat down at an empty table, while the other waiters began to clean up the dishes.

"Now, what do you wish to talk about?" I asked.

Joy began: "I see that you are a holy man, and you must tell me how I can also become holy. I have searched and studied for a long time. I have not found God in all my searching. The *Sadhus* [holy men] have left me questioning for the real meaning of life. I feel like a man who is about to drown, please you must help me to find God!"

The young man's agony was evident and his despair genuine.

"If you do not help me, I am lost, please, you must!" He grabbed a hold of my arm.

In response, I pulled out a small New Testament from my pocket, opened it, and begin to read, paraphrasing to make it easy to understand:

"For God so loved Joy, that He gave His one and only Son so that if Joy would only believe, he would be saved. For everyone, including Joy, has sinned, and falls short of the glory of God..."

By the time I was finished reading from the well-worn book, Joy was weeping.

"I want to accept this Jesus, please pray that He will save me."

There in that elegant restaurant, in the city of Varanasi, in the land of India, in front of his mocking work friends, Joy, a seeker of the truth, passed from death unto life eternal.

And so ends my story of Joy from Varanasi.

Kathmandu, Nepal

The journey of a PLO terrorist.

Still wiping the sleep from my eyes, I slowly dragged myself toward the bus station. It was an early morning in Varanasi, with the pungent smells of India awakening around me, and a lonely Arab man waiting at the bus stop was eyeing me with suspicion. "Is this the bus stop for Kathmandu?" I asked. The man nodded nonchalantly. We sat on the curb and waited. Eventually, and in no apparent hurry, an old, tired bus rolled to a stop in front of us. We boarded for the 16-hour trip to Nepal. There was room for us at the back, where we sat in silence.



As the bus started noisily on its way, we made introductions to our fellow travelers. Young people from many countries were heading to Kathmandu as though drawn in by an invisible magnet, some for drugs, some for the best mountain trekking in the world. Why was I on this bus? For over a year I had heard an inner voice calling me to go: "When you get there you will know." One of the passengers was singing Bob Seger's hit song. *I'm going to Kathmandu...*

My travel mate was Abdul from Palestine, a self-proclaimed PLO (or Palestine Liberation Organization) fighter. "I am a Muslim," he said with arrogant pride. "I must tell you of Allah. It is my duty." We listened with feigned interest to his somewhat rambling story. Abruptly he stopped: "That is all, I am finished." In the next twelve or so hours we became friends the hard way. We argued vehemently about terrorism, the Jews, Arafat's beard (which never seems to grow), and our perspectives and opposing views on the history of Israel. Sometimes we just sat silently, regrouping. To our surprise, however, we noticed that we were becoming friends. We agreed to disagree.

Halfway through our trip, we stopped at a river that looked too deep for the bus to ford. Before we had a chance to be concerned, though, the driver accelerated into the river while we watched in horror at the water rising inside the bus up to our ankles. Amazingly, the bus made it across. We all had a good laugh and wondered what would happen next.

It was already dark by the time we get to the border. My new friend Abdul came to the rescue when the border guards asked for *baksheesh* (bribes). He ordered me not to give any money but just to sit calmly and wait. Sure enough, after an hour or so of stalemate, we were allowed to walk across the no-man's land, having suffered only the loss of a single pen.

We reached the Nepalese side - and learned that the border was closed for the day. Upon returning to the Indian side, we realized that they, too, had closed their border station. So there we were in no-man's land.

We looked around in the dark and found a small hotel conveniently located between the two countries' borders. As we sat in the grungy restaurant eating our fries and drinking our first Cokes in months, someone started playing Christmas carols. Only then did we remember that it was Christmas eve. We put our tables together, Abdul grabbed a candle from another table, and we sat down for an impromptu meal. I asked for permission to share the Christmas story, and proceeded to read from a pocket Bible. One girl started weeping: "I have come here to get away from my Christian parents, and here you are talking of the things I am running away from!" I suggested that perhaps her parents were praying for her, to which she nodded her head.

Later I stood in the hotel courtyard, in the moon shadow cast by the Himalayan mountains. The stars seemed so close that they could be reached if one was up on top of the mountain. I remembered another starlit night, and a star that led the way two thousand years ago, which continues even today to show the way unto salvation.

We headed off to our bunks where very large rats were scurrying on the tops of the walls and taking shortcuts across our legs. Somehow, we slept.

In the morning we proceeded to the now open customs house and were welcomed to Nepal - amazingly, we noticed, the border guard resembled the owner of the inn. We boarded a bus again and continued on mountain roads barely wide enough for one vehicle. The mood on the bus was cheerful and full of anticipation.

We finally pulled into Kathmandu. The mountains around the valley greeted us in majesty. We were spellbound by the sight of snow-capped mountain tops. Abdul and I went our separate ways with the promise of getting together for breakfast.

The next morning, we sipped hot, strong coffee from clay mugs. Huge cinnamon buns were produced for us from wood fired ovens. We breathed clean, fresh mountain air. Life was good.

We continued our spirited debates. At times we spoke softly, mulling over each other's points. We explored this mystical kingdom at the top of the world. The kind and respectful Nepalese treated us with true hospitality. The art museum was closed, but an artist whose work was on display there let us in for a private, day-long tour. Outside, the rain began coming down buckets. Across the courtyard of the art gallery was an orphanage. I watched the children through a window as they played in the rain. It seems puddles are made for jumping in, no matter where you are on this planet.

We rented mountain bikes for a day. As we were racing down a steep path from a famous temple, we came upon a mass of monkeys scurrying to get out of our way. One of the panic-stricken monkeys jumps onto the handlebars of my friend's bike and for one hilarious moment, monkey and human are screaming at each other face-to-face while careening down the hillside.

Well, I guess you had to be there.

A week quickly came to an end. Abdul and I had exhausted our debates. He had tried to convince me that Islam was the only way; I had tried to show him that *Isa*, Jesus, was the only way. If the word *Muslim* means "one who submits," how about becoming a true Muslim: "one who submits to Allah through Isa as Savior?"

We had reached an impasse. Abdul had called me his brother, and so in one last attempt I asked him: "If your religious leaders asked you to kill me, would you?" He replied that he would have no choice but to do so. I told him: "No one can make me kill you, no leader, no holy book, no ideology. Jesus has taught not only to die for your friends but also to love your enemies." Abdul looked puzzled. "This is not easy to understand," he said.

At the bus stop once again, our journey together came to an end. We would not meet again. My final words to Abdul were this: "My brother, it will be a sad day when I hear that you have died for your cause. On that day I will say to my children, 'Abdul died for nothing. He could have chosen life but instead he chose death. What a tragic waste of a life. He could have been the father of many, but his hatred was greater than his will to live.'"

There were tears in the eyes of my friend. He lowered his gaze for a moment, then looked up at me and asked: "What must I do to be saved?"

There at a bus stop in Kathmandu, in the kingdom of Nepal, so far from his home, Abdul decided to choose life over death.

As the bus rolled away from the platform, I watched a proud man with tears flowing, waving and smiling until I could no longer see him.

And so ends the story of Abdul and my trip to Nepal.

Taichung City - Republic of China

We lost our bikes!

Why are you taking your bicycles to Taiwan? The traffic is horrendous, and it isn't safe to cycle in it! These were the concerns of our friends who had come to say goodbye to my family and me at the Vancouver airport.



I, too, had wondered about the wisdom of bringing our rugged, American-made, Cannondale aluminum mountain bikes, when we could easily have bought local bikes once we got there. But God knew.

At the end of a very long flight with my wife and two young children, we finally arrived at Taiwanese Customs. The customs agent only asked if we had any guns, and was about to wave us through - until he noticed the bikes.

"I am sorry, you must pay a customs duty of \$1000 per bicycle, as they are American made."

We tried explaining, begging and reasoning with him, but to no avail.

At a loss, I finally said: "Fine, send them back to Canada. We don't have that kind of money."

As we drove in the humid evening air of Taiwan, I was troubled by having to leave the bikes at the mercy of the customs agents. But we were soon busy unpacking and cleaning our new apartment, forgetting all about them.

A few days later, I received a call from the airport. A man was suggesting that he could perhaps get our bikes to us without any customs payment. Warily I asked: "What will I have to do for you?" His response was unexpected. "You must come and work as an English teacher at my aviation school."

I agreed to talk to him about it only after we got our bikes. They were delivered to us the next day, as promised.

At the aviation school interview, I met Jake, the man who had arranged for us to get our bikes back. He calmly explained to me that in return, I must now work at his school three nights a week for a year. He would pay me more money than I had ever made before.

As I had previously worked as a flight attendant in Canada, it seemed fitting for me to now teach English to flight attendants who were about to fly internationally.

Soon we were settled into our new life in Taiwan. The food was incredible. The night markets with their blaring music and hustle attracted us immediately to this land. We truly enjoyed living as foreigners in this ancient culture, with so much to see and learn. I especially loved the way my Taiwanese friends spoke Mandarin - it was like music to my ears.

Together with some other expats from Canada, we started an English language Bible study in our home. The problem was recruiting people with whom we could share the Gospel. I cautiously started asking my students from the Aviation school to join us. Some came immediately and enjoyed their evenings with us. Others were more reluctant, but with many invitations they would come too.

We asked one of the students to come to our home to teach us Mandarin Chinese, and in return, she would learn English from us. We enjoyed her company and she became a fixture in our apartment. A Taiwanese evangelist came to town to hold a youth rally, so we suggested that she attend the meeting. Afterwards she called us excitedly, telling us that she had accepted the Lord that night. We were amazed.

Another time, I was out riding my bike at night. A young man named Yuill was also riding his bike home from cram school. He started talking in his very poor English and asked me to go biking with him and at the same time teach him English. We made a date for the following Saturday. We biked all over the countryside, where I learned about local history and listened to tales from his forefathers.

We stopped under a very old tree for shade and drinks. "This tree is a god to some of the people around here," Yuill said. Indeed, it was a magnificent old tree that provided welcome shade in the midday sun. He asked many questions of life in Canada, and we quickly became friends. Unexpectedly, he asked me if I had a Bible. As a matter of fact, I did. He asked me to read to him from it, and I read the third chapter of John. He asked great questions about my faith and what it meant to be a Jesus follower. I asked him to come to our home to meet other young people who were also studying the Bible with us. Thus, he became a regular at our humble home church.

A few weeks later, Yuill went to the same outdoor youth rally as our Chinese tutor and also gave his life to the Lord. We were awed at how God was working in the lives of those people who had become our friends, none of whom had ever even heard the name of Jesus.

One night at the aviation school, a new student named Jennie came to class. As I looked over the classroom, I felt an inner voice saying: "I have called her, and I have a plan for her life." So, after class, I went over to her and asked her to join us at the English Bible study.

She politely refused and left the classroom.

It took many more invitations before she finally came and joined our little group. She immediately wanted to know more. She read all the books we gave her, she was onto something important and she was not going to miss out on it. Like many of our friends, she too had never heard the name of Jesus before.

One night as she was reading her English New Testament, she concluded that this indeed was the way for her to follow. Alone in her dorm room, she accepted Jesus as Saviour.

She began bringing her friends to Bible study and telling her family members of her decision.

Her father wanted to know who had led her to the Lord. Happily, she was able to tell him that no one did, but she did it by herself while reading her Bible.

One Bible study evening, Jennie called to say she would be late and to please wait for her. She was very late and out of concern we started to pray for her. Just then she came in the door with tears in her eyes. After a little while she told us this story:

"As I was coming here tonight, I felt led to instead go and visit an uncle who was in a hospital. When I got there, he was in very serious condition and dying of cancer. As I sat at his bedside, I opened my New Testament and began to read. 'For God so loved the world...' The dying man opened his eyes in amazement at such words. He had not heard of this Jesus. All his life he had worshipped the Buddha and now at the end he was hearing such beautiful words. In a few short sentences I showed my uncle the way unto salvation, and by the grace of God he was able to accept it."

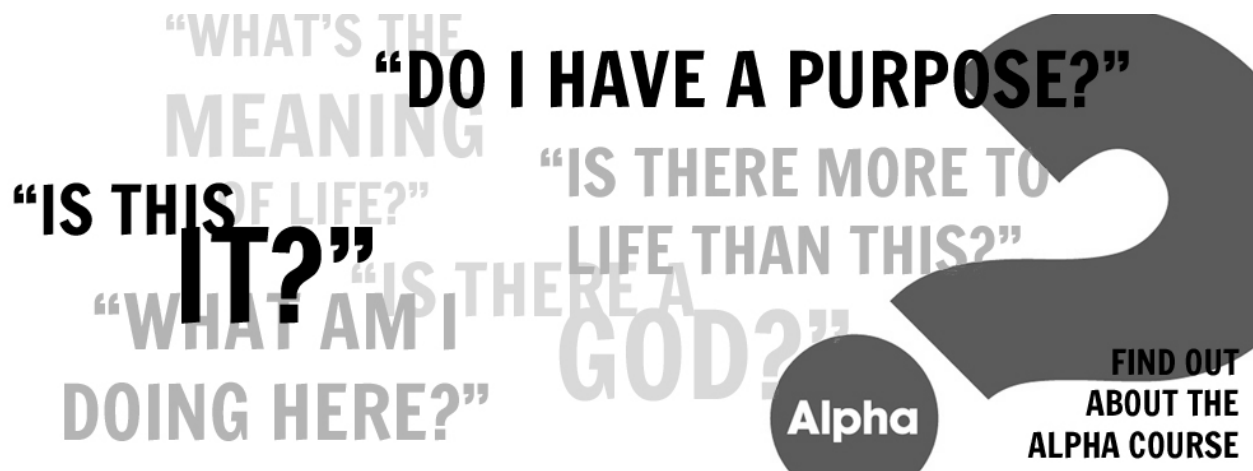
As Jennie left the hospital, she didn't know that she would be the last visitor that her uncle would have in this life.

There once was a convicted criminal hanging on a cross waiting to die. But in those last moments he looked over to Jesus and asked for forgiveness. He was rewarded with the immortal words: "Today you will be with me in paradise." Just like the man who had worshiped the Buddha all his life, they both stepped into life eternal. Oh, such Grace, such wonderful unwarranted Grace.

If we had not brought our bikes with us, we would not have met the owner of the school and we would never have met Jennie and her uncle would not have met Jesus on his deathbed.

And thus, ends my story from Taichung, Taiwan.

P.S: The longer version of this story is being written as a book titled "Accidental Tentmakers".



Vancouver Island

The Journey of a former Jehovah's Witness

I first met Mr. Jefferson when we both worked an afternoon shift at a hospital. For two weeks we worked the same hours and became fast friends. During breaks and dinner, we usually sat together reading the daily paper and discussing events. He had recently moved from the south and was pleased to discover that him being a person of colour mattered little on the west coast of Canada. It was quite intriguing for him to be discovering a new way of life and being just another guy among other guys.

He shared of his Jehovah's Witness upbringing, of its strict rules and interpretation of the Bible to suit their own belief system. As a teenager, he walked away from the faith and decided all religions were a scam and not worth his time. He became a devout atheist.

Then he decided to also leave his surroundings and move to another country and start a new life. He found a summer job at the hospital where he was well liked by his co-workers.

One evening we were both reading the newspaper when another co-worker at the end of her shift walked by and wished us a good night. She then said to me that she would see me at church on Sunday.

Mr. Jefferson dropped his newspaper very slowly in disbelief. Staring at me for a long time, he blurted out in disgust: "You go to church? Man, I thought you were cool!"

You could have heard a pin drop in the cafeteria as everyone around us waited to see how I would respond.

I walked over to him and, with a finger to his face, said quite loudly: "Mr. Jefferson, I am the coolest guy you will ever meet, and I go to church!" He was left speechless and our dinner hour ended without another word.

As we were ending the shift in the change room, I gave him a challenge. Mr. Jefferson, if you come to my church on Sunday morning and you stay for the whole sermon and at the end of that sermon tell me it was a waste of time, I will pay you what you make here at the hospital in 90 minutes. You can't lose.

Well, the next Sunday, Mr. Jefferson showed up at church and sat beside me on the balcony. He did not seem overly impressed. The pastor, who had a habit of sticking to his well-prepared sermon notes, had chosen a topic that was intended for the congregation and not for someone who wanted to hear something that would make him decide if coming was a waste of time or not. In other words, it was a great sermon for the members of the church but had nothing of value for my friend. I was already thinking about how this was going to cost me, when all of a sudden, the pastor stepped away from the podium, pointed straight at Mr. Jefferson high up on the balcony, and spoke directly to his heart for about five minutes. Mr. Jefferson was awestruck. He even suggested I had told the pastor about him being there in advance, that this was all a setup.

I asked him if he really believed that a pastor in front of hundreds of people would take time out from his sermon notes to talk directly to him.

Mr. Jefferson agreed that it was unrealistic to think that way.

As we were walking out of the church, I asked him if he would take cash or cheque for his 90 minutes of paid church attendance.

"Keep your money," he said, "I know God was speaking to me through that preacher. What do I do next?" I suggested attending the Alpha course at our church, which comes with a free meal each week. He agreed to attend. For a single man, getting free food was the deal breaker.

Around week five of the course, Mr. Jefferson decided Jesus was the real deal. That is where the story of my friend ends, a former Jehovah's Witness who became an atheist and then found Jesus.

Casablanca - Morocco

The woman on the train

After a few weeks of exploring Morocco and meeting with some underground church leaders, it was time to take the train north to Tangiers and then sail across the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain.

I was deep in thought over the stories that were told to me by many former Muslims who had become followers of Jesus at great cost to themselves and their families. One young man had lost his place at the university for being vocal about his new-found faith. Some had been beaten and tortured in jail. Daughters of new believers were molested in front of their parents. The horror stories seemed to be without end, and yet the underground church was thriving and growing, sometimes meeting in a secret space right beside a mosque.



I had met a Moroccan security official, and during our lengthy conversation, he admitted that too many Moroccans were becoming Christians and that it was his job to stop and jail those he found following this Jesus.

One day I was walking with some friends through a bazaar, drinking in all its colours, sounds and smells. I stopped to talk with shopkeepers, having tea with them and answering their questions. Not all interactions were friendly - one Imam challenged my belief in what he considered to be multiple gods. I am not sure that my story of believing only in one God was acceptable to him, but he did calm down as I shared my story. We parted as friends.

As we were leaving the maze of merchant stalls behind us, an old man ran up to me to ask for a Bible (*Injil*). I told him I did not have one, and upon hearing this the man fell at my feet, crying and yelling: "You are a Christian and I have never met a Christian and now you tell me you don't have a Bible for me!" That was when I remembered that I *did* have an Arabic New Testament in a hidden compartment in my day pack. When I took it out and gave it to the man, he started dancing and yelling, holding the book high in his hands, chanting *I have a Bible, I have a Bible*. Then he bowed down before me and kissed my dusty sandaled feet. Right about then, my believing Moroccan friends grabbed me and told me to run behind them - the police were coming. As we ran out through the back of a carpet stall, I saw the old man gathering a group to listen to him reading out loud from the Bible.

Later on, we were sitting in a six-person train compartment with one empty seat beside the window. A young Moroccan woman walked by our compartment and made her way past our knees to sit by the window. We were not quite sure of the protocol of being five foreign men with a single Muslim woman in one crowded compartment.

She introduced herself as Nadia and proceeded to tell us that she had felt a powerful peaceful spirit as she walked by our compartment and just had to find out what it was.

I started by telling her about my wife and three daughters, and about my extended family of Jesus followers. I asked Nadia if she was a Muslim because of being born to Muslim parents. She said of course, there is no other way. I then told her that Christian parents do not give birth to Christian children, each generation has to discover their faith individually. This was shocking for her to hear. I then proceeded to tell her how a few of my family members had become Jesus followers, each finding their own path.

Nadia asked dozens of questions while pausing to reflect on answers. I then told her that it was Jesus who brings peace to his followers, which was what she was feeling when first walking by our compartment. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and many of her countrymen were now following him as well. She found it impossible to believe that a Muslim would leave their faith to follow Jesus.

As the train started to slow down for her station, she blurted out: "Pray with me so that I too can become a follower of Jesus!"

When we pulled away from the station, Nadia was walking by our window and waving goodbye with tears of happiness in her eyes.

Later I received a letter that she had found other Jesus followers in her own city and was meeting with them in a secret place.

And so the story of Nadia, who found Jesus on a train in Morocco, comes to an end.



Oulu - Finland

Roma of Finland

The original Finnish Romani groups came to Finland via Sweden in the 16th century. In 1637, all Romani groups were declared outlaws who could be hanged without trial; this practice was discontinued in 1748. When Finland declared independence in 1917, all Roma received full citizenship and rights. During the Winter War and Continuation War, about a thousand Roma served in the Finnish military.

Today, some 25% of Finnish Roma are evangelical Christians.

After a long day of meetings, I was really looking forward to getting on the train and sleeping for the next four hours. Finding a nearly empty train car and a row of empty seats was a relief, and I quickly fell asleep.

Perhaps 15 minutes later I was awoken by a tap on my shoulder. The look on my face could not have appeared very welcoming to the Roma lady standing beside me.

"What do you want?" I asked in what was not my friendliest voice.

"I apologize for waking you up," she said, "But I had already walked past you when I felt a peaceful spirit surrounding you, so I had to return to find out what that was!"

Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I somewhat reluctantly asked her to sit down across from me.

"Dear lady, that is about the only question that could stop me from getting some much-needed sleep to give you the best answer I can come up with."

The lady shared to me how troubled her soul was from all the difficulties she was going through, and nothing was making sense in her life anymore. Her husband was in jail for murder, her daughter was missing, and her teenage son was in trouble with the law. Too many people in her life had died tragically. Life had more questions than answers.

I explained to her that I was a follower of Jesus, and His presence always brings peace with it.

As I finished my story about why I was His follower, she simply asked me to pray for her so she also could start a new life as His follower. Together we prayed a short prayer. She told me to go back to sleep and walked away.

Not long after that, she was back with her teenage son, who had been in the other train car. She introduced him to me and said that he also needed to hear my story about what it means to be a Jesus follower.

What could I do, but start all over again from the beginning? The boy listened intently as I spoke, and when I asked if he, too, wanted to become a Jesus follower, he said yes.

And that is where my story of a train from Oulu, where a Roma mother and son found Jesus, comes to an end.

The last chapter

The most important chapter you may ever read

By the way, did you notice there were actually eleven chapters? I simply could not decide which chapter to leave out and using a tagline of 10 short stories sounds better than 11 short stories.

If you have read this far you have arrived at the epitome of this book.

It can be summed up in one sentence:

Inside everyone, anywhere in the world, is a void that only God can fill.

He has put each and every one of us here, and lovingly waits and guides our lives so that we may accept the most precious gift of all: His one and only begotten Son, Jesus.

If your soul has stirred even once in reading this book, perhaps it is God speaking to you and asking the eternal question: "What will you do about my Son Jesus? Accept Him or reject Him?" Those are the only two choices.

"Ignorance is bliss," said the man with whom I once drove west to east across Canada. He had heard the Gospel message for the first time in a way that he could either accept it or reject it. Unfortunately, he chose to reject it.

Why so many religions?

If you noticed the wheel on the cover of the book, here is the reason for it being there.

A Sadhu (Indian holy man) once drew a picture in the sand. It was a large wheel with many spokes leading into the center of the hub. He explained that: "the hub is God and all the spokes are the different religions and beliefs. As you can see, all spokes lead to the center. All roads ultimately lead to God"

Sounds very convincing and oh so politically correct. To the Sadhu's amazement I told him that I agreed with him. Yes, all roads will lead to God in the end, and *then* comes judgement! Everyone will stand in front of His judgement seat and be asked a simple question. "Did you accept my only son, Jesus?"



What have you got to lose?



The life ring

I want to throw you a life line with a life ring at the end. When a man is drowning he will grab a life ring no matter what he believes or thinks. At that moment he does not question whether this particular life ring is the one he should grab, he just grabs it to save himself.

So, I want to give you the following "life rings" for the day when you don't care which one is thrown to you.

With three minutes to live:

Dear God, I know that I am a sinner and there is nothing that I can do to save myself. I confess my complete helplessness to forgive my own sin or to work my way to heaven. At this moment I trust Christ alone as the One who bore my sin when He died on the cross. I believe that He did all that will ever be necessary for me to stand in your holy presence. I thank you that Christ was raised from the dead as a guarantee of my own resurrection. As best as I can, I now transfer my trust to Him. I am grateful that He has promised to receive me despite my many sins and failures. Father, I take you at your word. I thank you that I can face death now that you are my Savior. Thank you for the assurance that you will walk with me through the deep valley. Thank you for hearing this prayer. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

With one minute to live: Jesus save me I am a sinner, forgive me of my sins!

With one second to live: Call out to Jesus!

May God grant you the presence of mind and a final opportunity to accept Jesus as Saviour.

Thank you for sharing in my journeys so far. My journeys continue, with so many lands and people to meet and so little time. I have many more stories from more places and may write another book from those experiences.