

The Barnabas Letter

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Winter 2009

gratitude

**I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought;
and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.**

G.K. Chesterton

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Hello. Wake Up Call. what is really important

A collage with the words "Hello - It is your wake up call LIFE" is hanging on Pete Bondy's wall in his office. His daughter Rachael put it together for him several years back as a way of telling her Dad what she thinks about him. He says he is really not sure what it all means but there are pictures on it near and dear to Pete's heart, snow-capped mountains, climbers on a steep rock face, open roads and a graphic of how to untie a necktie. All statements on living life fully with open arms and heart to whatever God calls. No one really could have known when she made the collage the wake up call that would be down the road for Pete.

The story he says is mostly about waiting. Waiting for the lump he found in his neck to go away, waiting for a doctor's appointment, biopsy results, surgery, a diagnosis, then chemo and radiation treatment and then a long wait to just feel like getting out of his lazy boy recliner. Recently I got to sit with Pete and ask him questions about his recent battle with squamous cell cancer and what he describes as a call to a "telescopic focus of what is really important in life".

Q. What was your life like before the cancer?

"Life was really good. It was 2007 and the sentence I am reminded I said was

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Hello. Wake Up Call.

what is really important

By Laurie Hobbs interviewing Pete Bondy:

Laurie is administration assistant at the Barnabas Center. She is married to Michael and is a strong and true Tarbeel fan.

Pete Bondy is a counselor at the Barnabas Center and leads the Quest program for men. He is married to Linda and they have five children. Post-treatment, Pete is cancer free.

“Before cancer I would have felt ashamed to be a glider and not a 747 with a big engine and lots of power. Now I don’t have an engine I need the wind/God to fly...”

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that my relationship with Linda was really good. I had no regrets about the last few years. It wasn’t like we didn’t have life and kids and hard conversations but we were in a really good place.”

Q. What were the first signs that something was wrong?

“I remember it being late October (2007) and I was shaving and there was this little lump on my neck like a swollen gland. It was there for awhile and mostly I ignored it. I wasn’t significantly concerned about it.”

Q. So you didn’t think right away, ‘oh I have cancer?’

“Oh no that was not even a thought. It seemed to be a swollen gland but why wouldn’t it go away? I was watching it. I talked to my doctor about it he said if it doesn’t go away in 4 weeks come see me. So when it didn’t go away I went to see him. He gave me an antibiotic and said to call him Monday morning if it didn’t go away or get smaller. It didn’t.”

Immediately his doctor sent him to an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist who ordered a needle biopsy. The day after that appointment Pete was scheduled to go for a wilderness training course to better equip him for Quest trips. “Any reason I shouldn’t go?” Pete asked. “No, “the doctor assured him. Pete spent 10 days in a rigorous training session in the mountains south of Brevard, NC. Returning exhausted yet proud to have passed the course, he had the needle biopsy right after Christmas. The biopsy was inconclusive which led to the next step surgery to remove the lump. Pete had a ski trip to Colorado planned and asked the doctor ‘Any reason for me not to go skiing?’ The doctor said “No, let’s do surgery when you get back.’ There are important things in life and one of them is finding out what this lump is and one of them is skiing.” He got to go on the ski trip which had been planned for months. Three of his buddies got the chance to come out and ski with him. They had tried many times to all get together to ski and it never worked out. But this time it did. “We had a ball!”

Pete was diagnosed in February 2008 with squamous cell carcinoma on the tongue. He said, “They found a ½” diameter spot on the base of my tongue. They caught it so early because the lump in my neck was God’s mercy to me to say “Wake up something is going on in there!”

Q. When you really knew you had cancer what went on in you? Did you think, ‘I am going to die?’

“In one of my darkest moments after realizing I did have cancer I thought *I won’t tell anyone*. I thought if I don’t tell anyone I won’t have to own the reality of it. I could do this alone; I don’t have to be vulnerable. I have been using a chapter in a book on the Quest weekends for years (*All I Ever Really Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten* - by Robert Fulghum) about a man who gets cancer and doesn’t tell his friends or family and hurts them so deeply because he dies and they never even knew he was sick. I thought that only for moment or two. Then I realized I would never get away with that! Pete laughs knowingly.

Q. Were you afraid?

“Yes I was afraid. Honestly the fear that pervades the whole story is that I was afraid of what would be required of me. What kind of debilitation what kind of limits would I be subjected to.

Q. You feared dependency, vulnerability and pain more than dying?

“Oh yes, I thought oh no, what if this going to take?”

Q .How is your life different because you had cancer?

I am more comfortable with being alone than I was. I still don’t like it but I am more comfortable with being alone.

Q. Why do you think that is?

“There was this time in late May and early June. I was having coughing fits and sometimes nausea. My throat was on fire. This was past the end of treatment and it was the whole horrible surprise. The worst was after treatment was over. I would get these awful spasms. People would come to see me, a good number of them. I would look at them across the room and it was almost out of body for me and that was a really hard place because I couldn’t talk much, didn’t

have much energy and they would look at me with this horror on their faces. They were absolutely powerless and they wanted to comfort me or do something for meand this is the breakthrough for me. They couldn't comfort me! They could choose to be there and that was an act of sacrifice and love because they had to face their own mortality and their own vulnerability through my battle.

That took guts and courage. People don't walk into such profound limitation without loving and trusting. That was huge. I am very grateful for that. I realized that others will never understand my pain. It is too much to expect another person to understand my pain. I can't even put words to it. How can I expect them to get it? Do I want them to ask? Well, yes, but something in me shifted profoundly. They aren't going to understand my pain. And it is okay. I am alone. I carry my pain. They could walk with me for awhile but it was my pain before they came and my pain after they left. I came to see they could not carry my pain for me. Even when they were really good and loved me well they could not be there the way I wanted them to be. So in the end I am alone. It is a hard deal. And I am more okay with that then ever."

Q. How did this change your relationship with God?

"Well the darkest times were after the treatment. And I felt God's absence. I had been used to feeling His presence and hearing from Him. In the middle of this time I didn't know where He was. I didn't think I was dying but at times that felt appealing."

"I was despairing. The pain, the feeding tube, and life was reduced to my lazy boy and a regime of eating through a tube. But I had no energy so I didn't want to eat. I didn't care about eating. What happens when you have no energy in your body? I went for a 10 minute walk and then I had to nap for three days. If you don't have energy how can you fight? I realized I couldn't generate energy on my own. I couldn't make it happen. I was despairing and I needed hope so I reached out on Caringbridge and asked God and others for help.

Monday, June 30, 2008 10:02 AM (from Pete's journal on Caringbridge website)

"Will you pray for Linda and me today? This is a long push and we are weary and discouraged. We need a good dose of

Jesus' heart and Spirit to take the next steps today. We are headed off to swallow therapy and acupuncture. My energy continues to be very thin, and with that my desire to push to get better wanes. We both know that God is present and in control. . . And, in spite of that, right now, we need more of Him. We need you and your prayers. Pete

By the end of that day I felt hope again."

Q. How has cancer affected your everyday life?

"For a long time during treatment I couldn't drive myself anywhere probably April through August, finally the day came that I got to drive myself somewhere. Holy Smokes I was driving down Highway 51 and I thought dear Jesus thank you I can drive! So after the suffering let up and I could drive again and I could go to work and eat without a feeding tube I was so grateful. But as time has gone on that has diminished. On any given day I am aware that my life and health are really a vapor and a gift."

"My limp is my dependence. My energy is tied to dependence. If I have no energy, I have to depend on God to let me know what He needs to do through me with the energy I have. Cancer has helped me see my limits and helped me focus on what is important: what I feel God really wants me do. If I described myself as an airplane I would be a glider. Before cancer I would have felt ashamed to be a glider and not a 747 with a big engine and lots of power. Now I don't have an engine I need the wind/God to fly."

"I get periodic scans to check for any signs of cancer. I find myself afraid there will be something there and we won't see it and I am afraid there is something there and we will see it. I feel that I am walking into the Holy of Holies when I go for that scan. Medical technology cannot take the place of God but the scanner can see into my body in ways we can't. In going to get the scan I ask God what do You want for me for the next 6 months. I have a life I want to live, and I am totally dependent on God to live it.

"Here is a big thought for me. Suffering redeems. It can make us bitter or it change us for good. It brings a telescopic focus on what is really important. A great freedom came with cancer, in the middle of treatment life became very, very simple."

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Note: CaringBridge is website that helps you stay connected with loved ones during a serious health event.

<http://www.caringbridge.org/>

By Lisa Ould

Lisa is a counselor, teacher and group leader at the Barnabas Center in Richmond, Va. She is recently married to Nelson.

Gratitude

aware of God's good gifts

When I was single, I longed to be married -- longed for a family. Through the 20 years of single-ness, I was often sad over what I was missing in life. Once while taking a walk with my dog Cocoa, I stumbled upon a play ground where I saw a mom and dad with their two children. I looked at this everyday scene and felt my life was so far from theirs. I wondered if I would ever have a husband and children with whom to share such an experience.

In contrast to those early days of loneliness, I look more recently to celebrating my 40th birthday as a single woman, and I remember feeling I was a very rich woman. I celebrated with a small group of friends and their spouses at my house. I loved my home, and there was really no other place I wanted to be, so my friends gave me a party in my own home. They shared words with me that spoke to our friendship, and I will always remember what a rich woman I felt like that evening. I had reached a settled place in my spirit, a dominant place of real gratitude for my life, rather than loneliness and disappointment.

In writing this article I have pondered, "How did I get to this place of gratitude?" I believe it began with an application of what some would call "mindfulness." By that, I mean choosing to be aware of and to think on, God's good gifts around me,

in the midst of circumstances that are less than ideal. A verse that describes this well is Philippians 4:8, "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.*" Paul wrote these words in the Bible when he was experiencing physical hardship. Yet at the same time, he understood that he could choose to be aware of other realities which could entirely re-shape his experience of his life.

Similarly, I have learned that choosing to be aware of the good things in life, even when life is difficult, is fertile ground for gratitude. This does not mean ignoring the things we wish were different. Rather, gratitude is being honest with your struggles and disappointments, and at the same time mindful of the good and beautiful things in life. No matter how ugly your current life looks to you, there is still undeniable beauty around you. Every day there are beautiful sunrises, flowers blooming, babies being born, and music to be played. Sometimes we have to choose to see these things, realizing that we will not see them unless we choose to be aware of them.

Perhaps the most powerful reality for mindfulness is that a holy, mighty and loving God of the universe has in fact

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given me my life. The circumstances of my life are the ones He chose to give me. One thought I come back to over and over again is, "If I really do believe that God is good and if this is the life that he wanted me to have, then I want to receive it and ENJOY it."

On a deeper level, I believe this is an awareness of God's love and redemption. While not always realizing it, the deepest reality of my life is the truth that God has imprinted his glory on me in creation and has poured out his love for me in redemption. Christ's death and resurrection anchors my life in a place of promise and hope and becomes for me a well of gratitude. Mindfulness somehow always leads me back there, convincing me that my life is God's plan A.

In many ways, gratitude comes down to choices. I know I can not manufacture gratitude. Rather, gratitude is a gift from God. However, I can make choices to put myself in contexts where God can give me that gift. For example, for years leading up to my 40th birthday celebration, I chose to meet regularly with an older Christian woman who encouraged me and helped me see the deep value in my life.

Also, I chose often to go to the mountains or to the beach, alone or with a friend, to take in the glory of God through creation. Lastly, I chose to commit to a group of women who met regularly to help each other see the movements of God in our lives. These were some of the intentional choices I made to provide contexts in which God could give me a heart of gratitude.

Through it all, some of what God was doing was constantly renewing my perspective. When I take a hike in the mountains or a moonlit walk on the beach, my soul often finds a place of rest and assurance. Being out in creation, I am reminded of how small I am in comparison to how vast God is. Realizing God's immense power and love can help any of us face whatever life brings, whether job loss, financial difficulties, illness, depression, loneliness or fear.

Maybe most powerfully, I am reminded of the perspective of the Cross. God suffered ultimate pain, betrayal, loss, disappointment for us because of all he wanted to give us. We have a God that understands our pain and disappointments, a God that somehow is using these unwanted pains and disappointments for our good and His glory. Somehow this makes it easier, even more natural, for me to respond with gratitude.

As I look back over the last decade or so of my life, I see there was a dance of my choices and God's provision. I certainly did not always make the right choices, but I do believe I grew to make better choices. I chose to be mindful of the beauty around me. I chose to put myself in situations where he could renew my heart. I chose to receive the life God gave me, rather than looking for someone else's life. I chose to realize again and again that in his love, God has redeemed me and given my life hope. So by God's grace by the time I reached my 40th birthday I realized God had given me a heart of gratitude.

I am married now. Ironically, I have the life now that I once was convinced would take away my loneliness. I have to confess that marriage has been more wonderful than I ever dreamed! Finding a life partner and building a solid marriage is one of the most rewarding things I have ever experienced.

However, life always brings challenging circumstances, and marriage has been no different. Moving to a new city, leaving dear friends behind, and trying unsuccessfully to sell my condominium are but a few challenges I have faced. However, my life now remains a reminder that marriage does not take away loneliness and disappointment, nor does any other life circumstance you might dream about. These things are great, but only God -- and a life surrendered to the Giver and his gifts -- will bring gratitude.

“Realizing God’s immense power and love can help any of us face whatever life brings, whether job loss, financial difficulties, illness, depression, loneliness or fear.”

By Roger Edwards:

a counselor and teacher at The Barnabas Center. He is married to Jean and they have seven children.

I Am The Rabbit

surprised to be loved

The first time I saw a magician pull a rabbit out of his hat – I was astonished.

It was (can I ask you to believe this?) a perfect feeling - as if I were made for it.

I was a kid, sitting Indian-style on my living room floor, watching The Ed Sullivan show. The magician, wearing a black tuxedo, clearly demonstrated his top hat to be empty. Then with a wave of his wand and a rolled-up sleeve, he pulled out a live, kicking rabbit. A real rabbit.

"Did you see that?" I said, wide-eyed to my mother. She smiled. But the perfect feeling didn't last long.

My older brother, sensing my joy, felt obliged to enlighten me about the secret door in the hat and the hidden compartment in the table. Astonishment vanished as suddenly as the rabbit had appeared. My eyes, you could say, were opened.

Silently (sullenly?), I watched the rest of the show. From across the room, the scene would have looked routine. But inside me, the event was pivotal. For it was then that I made a subconscious, but life-altering vow. Never again, would I let my hunger for wonder be exposed.

The magician's whole intent was to persuade you to 'suspend disbelief'. You were asked to believe that he had actually pulled that rabbit from nothing. And for a moment, I did. For a moment, I believed in the central miracle of all. I believed that a creature could be spoken into existence. I was filled with delight. Without knowing it, I identified with that rabbit and was

surprised with the gift of my own existence.

But then my brother shamed me - I got the message, 'You're stupid to believe...' In a matter of minutes, mystery opened my heart and shame shut it tight again.

The next day at school, I felt obliged to enlighten my friends, 'You know how he did it, don't you?' The urge to spoil was strong. 'Gullible' was out and 'in the know' was in.

All miracles are really just tricks, I concluded. And behind every trick is a technique. Once you master the technique then you don't have to wait around for miracles. You can produce them yourself.

That's how my life-vow came about. I wanted the astonishment of miracles, but I didn't want anyone to know how much. And I didn't want to depend on anyone for it either. In short, I wanted mystery that I could control.

So I decided that I would be the magician, metaphorically speaking. No longer would I sit in the audience – gullible and dependent. I'd move up onstage. I'd wear a black tuxedo, sport a waxed moustache and wave a magic wand. With showmanship and power – I'd make my own life special. I would make my own life.

This was, as I said, subconscious and metaphorical. I don't really own a tuxedo. I don't do gigs at birthday parties. But I constantly perform tricks. Pick a card – any card – and I'll become that suit for you. When things get awkward, I disappear. And if you get on my bad side, I'll

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saw you in half. Yes, I have all kinds of relational tricks to stave off shame or to make myself special.

One after another, I pull rabbits out of my hat, hoping to reproduce that perfect feeling. But it hasn't worked. I can't fake the real miracle. I can't conjure up the surprise of being loved. I end up experiencing neither surprise nor love. At best, I get fake rabbits via technique and a round of applause. No mystery there.

No, I'm not waiting around looking gullible, but oh, how I miss astonishment. I want that perfect feeling back. I want to once again believe in the great miracle that a creature can be brought to life. No, it is more personal than that - I want to be brought to life.

Of course, all along, Christianity has been teaching me that I am that creature. But this obvious fact never occurred to me that night. I was so enamored with the independent power of the magician, that I couldn't see the blessed dependence of the rabbit. I so coveted the role of miracle worker; it never occurred to me that I am the miracle. But I see it now. I am not the magician. Never was. Never could be.

I am the rabbit.

I am the blessed creature brought to life by the hand of God. He gathered me with his fingers and drew me across an impossible distance; from nonexistence into existence, from darkness into light. The 'Great I AM' spoke and now... 'I am' too. I am the miracle. I am the man pulled from God's hat.

And so are you. Life is granted us without warning. Our father Adam didn't see his life coming; neither do we. Like the non-existent rabbit, we could have never anticipated our existence. Every human being is surprised with the gift of life. We find ourselves alive - not by our own power or merit but solely by the wish of the man with the bared arm. Existence is a grace - the original grace.

Astonishment is the perfect response to perfect love - the human corollary to divine initiative. Though repressed, the surprise of being loved is as natural to human heart as grace is natural to God's heart - as natural as a baby smiling into his mother's face. It is our built-in response to God. Though deeply repressed, we remember that we, who were once

nothing, are now someone with a face and name.

'The surprise of being loved', therefore, is the defining human experience. It is the experience we were made for - the original and formative human experience. We blink and awaken into the gift of life. We are astonished; we are loved.

When I saw that rabbit appear from nowhere, it touched an internal, ancient memory. I was only 12, yet I could remember the beginning of the world. You could even say that I was witnessing my own creation. And it activated my astonished response to the gift of life.

This experience is potential at every turn. Every morning, consciousness illuminates us as if it is the first morning. Every spring we watch the world reborn. Every time we witness a birth, smell baking bread, experience the touch of another - astonishment is provoked. Beauty and meaning beckon us to suspend disbelief and remember that we are alive. Mystery opens our heart unless fear shuts it again.

God is always pulling man out of dark places. Why? For one reason only: the Magician wishes us to live. Not because of what we've done or could do for Him, but because He wills it so. This then is the core of reality: God wants us! And that is truly astonishing.

If God's love for us is the core of reality, then the core human response is the surprise of being loved. It's been right inside me the whole time: I am the rabbit. I am that miracle creature brought from dark nothing into bright existence simply because God wants me. I am the blessed man pulled from God's hat.

Afterword: *When a person can sustain astonishment for even a short period of time, we call it gratitude.*

I want to live that way. I want to believe that a person can be spoken into existence. I want to believe that I am a miracle. I want to live as if I came from nothing - just a moment ago - and I'm seeing the world for the first time; tasting my first strawberry; watching my first sunrise; sensing, inside me, the presence of an eternal soul.

I want to live astonished that I am actually alive and then ... actually live.

“I am the blessed creature brought to life by the hand of God. He gathered me with his fingers and drew me across an impossible distance; from nonexistence into existence, from darkness into light.”

“If God's love for us is the core of reality, then the core human response is the surprise of being loved ... I am the blessed man pulled from God's hat.”

The Barnabas Letter

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Upcoming Opportunities

Date	Event	Facilitator(s)
Nov 6-7, 2009 Feb 5-6, 2010	Barnabas Training Basic — This two-day, biblically based seminar (Friday night & Saturday) helps you understand others by gaining a biblical understanding of your own heart. Includes teaching on a biblical model of people and an interactive small group experience. <i>Hosted by Christ Episcopal Church (Nov) and Uptown Christ Covenant (Feb)</i>	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Nov 13-14, 2009 Jan 15-16, 2010 March 5-6, 2010	Heart to Heart Express —This seminar teaches Biblical principles of marriage with practical application to your relationship. Includes guided confidential personal conversations. <i>Hosted by Stony Point Church & Third Presbyterian (Richmond, VA—November), First Presbyterian Church (Starkville, MS—January) and Hope Community Church (Charlotte—March)</i>	<i>Palmer Trice and Roger Edwards</i>
2010 Calendar COMING SOON	The Quest —A men's adventure weekend including adventure challenges, conversation, study and reflection. <i>April and May dates TBD—please call if interested!</i>	<i>Pete Bondy & Quest Team</i>
Tuesday evenings Groups begin Jan. 26, 2010	Honor's Program for Men —A 14-week small group program where men who struggle with	<i>John Pierce</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin Jan. 28, 2010	Honors Program for Women —For women whose husbands struggle with sexual addiction to grieve losses and make decisions about their own recoveries. Beginning and Advanced Groups. 14 weeks.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin in Jan 28, 2010	Healing Hearts —For women who have experienced abuse in childhood. It provides a biblically-based, confidential context where women can wrestle with difficult realities related to their harm. Beginning and Advanced Groups. 14 weeks.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Monday evenings Groups begin March 1, 2010	Barnabas Training Level One —Built on the Biblical Model taught in Barnabas Training Basic, this small group training will focus on application of the model as participants learn to listen, ask questions, and observe with a keener, more discerning mind and heart.	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Groups begin week of Feb 22, 2010	Barnabas Training Level Four —For graduates of BT Level 2, this small group assists 4-6	<i>Pete Bondy</i>
Group begins in Jan 2010	Real Beauty: Uncovering Your Struggle with Food, Body Image, & Beauty—An 11-week small group of women that offers you the opportunity to better understand your story as you hear from and are encouraged by others whose journeys are similar to your own.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>