

Chapter 1, Life has got me by the tail, and it won't let go

My heart is racing and my knees are weak as I walk to the edge. I know there is no turning back once my feet have left the ledge. And in the rush I hear a voice that's telling me to take the leap of faith, so here I go...
– from the lyrics of “Dive”, by Steven Curtis Chapman

We sat across from one another, face to face in that generic grill in the small southern town of Asheboro, North Carolina. For the past year there had been a rising tide of realization that was now overflowing the retaining walls of my denial, and I realized – with a twinge of panic – that we were not living life, but life was living us. That no matter how good it may appear on the surface, we were no longer in charge. Life had got us by the tail and it wouldn't let go! And as my eyes met Kellie's across the table, we connected in a moment of life-changing decision: we have got to get out!

For me it was the breaking reality that our marriage was deteriorating, my children were not getting the fathering they desperately needed, my work in the church – among truly wonderful men and women – was not satisfying my sense of destiny, and most unnerving of all: my soul was so awash in busyness that I was no longer sure who the real me was. In fact, I wondered, have I ever really known my true self... or is my life to date simply the careless collection of miscellaneous desires, vague abilities, and other people's expectations?

And as we faced one another that cool March evening, for the first time in my life I knew I could leave. I could leave my job and my world and go anywhere, anywhere with her, anywhere with God. The dark green-brown eyes of my wife of nine years reflected back to me the truth that we needed a serious change from the cluttered and driven life we had known together. Oh, it was a good life to

be sure – a beautiful home, a loved and respected position as worship pastor, my black convertible... now that was something most pastors didn't drive!

We stared at each other. What would it all mean? Surely it wasn't practical to consider uprooting ourselves. "Practical" – I had come to hate that word! Nevertheless, we would have to pray a lot over this one! But even though we were afraid to verbalize it – afraid of what it might cost us – a hope sprang up deep within, and we knew that we were leaving. This was not just a geographical leaving, but a soul leaving – a retreat from the gerbil wheel, no... something more violent... a renunciation of the gerbil wheel! However impractical it may be, however many people who wouldn't understand, whatever it might cost us financially and relationally – we were pulling the plug on life as we knew it. This would be no quick fix, and so within three days we were settled in our own hearts that we would take a year, a full twelve months, and go find our souls, our family, and our God!

**This was a
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Breaking out

Radical? Yes, I suppose so. But don't knock radical. Simple adjustments require simple changes; life-changing corrections usually require bone-jarring, teeth-rattling transitions that are not pretty and not easy. Don't worry, you don't have to take a year off to pursue your own freedom; but in some form you will have to draw on the courage to make radical changes of your own. Our habits – our patterns of relating to our spouse, our routines of work and leisure, our responses to stress, our self-talk – these things are rooted so deeply inside us that most of us go through life unaware and unchanged at this root level. In fact, I discovered that even though I was a thoughtful and analytical kind of guy, I did not understand, and therefore could not

fix, the underlying motivations and frustrations of my heart. Why was this? Was I alone in the club of the clueless? I have come to think not.

There is a reason why so many, Christians and non-Christians alike, have lost contact with their souls. There is a soul-anesthesia that pervades the atmosphere and affects us all. Maybe you feel some of that numbness yourself! You don't have to look far to find the evidence. It's in the automatic greetings and responses we trade with one another daily....

"Hi, Joe," you say, "How've you been?"

It's a generic question, right? Calls for a generic answer, usually. And the time-proven response is, "Well, I've been _____,..." You fill in the answer. There's only one, and you know what it is: "I've been *busy!*" How many times has it come out of your mouth? How many times has it come out of mine? Busyness – the dulling reality that keeps us locked into soul-free living. But what are we willing to do about it? – ah, that is the question! Freedom is not so far away, once we set our hearts to have it.

Busyness is the drug of choice for modern America. I know it was mine. It's a rare bird indeed that hasn't succumbed to the tantalizing allure of *production*. "Do more! Do it faster!" is the anthem of our advertisers. Daytimers, cell phones, laptops, pagers, personal digital assistants – they're all helping us get ahead, get organized, and... well, produce! Busyness has the ability to bring with it a distinct "high", a momentary sense of significance, an emotional rush that can feel exhilarating, even intoxicating. And though we hate it at times, we never really challenge or question its domination of our days.

Its grip endures for three reasons: the values of the world system, our desperate yearning for control, and the addictive nature of the beast. Or to put it more succinctly, greed, fear, and pride – the pillars of all destructive behavior and the things that most grieve the heart of God.

The “world system” – that structure that motivates and directs the ambitions of people – is built upon the pursuit of power and possession. As Christians, we live within a broken world and yet are not to be ruled by its broken system (Jn. 17:15-16). But it’s not so easy, is it? It’s in the corporate air we breathe; it’s in the relational fabric we live in; essentially, its seeds are lodged in our own hearts. Most of us have been lulled half asleep by this system of thinking, by a set of priorities and assumptions that are not rooted in the Kingdom of God yet are unwittingly adopted into the daily lives of Godward men and women.

Caught up into the daily demands of ministry, I thrived on the challenges and activities of church. Ministry, like many other jobs, is never done; there is a constant and genuine cry for more and better. When you come to the end of the day, you just have to stop... but you’re not finished. Between the push and pull of love and duty, ministry was all-consuming and left little time to ask such frivolous questions as, *Why am I here? I know I am serving God and serving people, but what am I ultimately made for?* These are questions that require space – room in the mind, space in the soul. SoulSpace is a protected reserve of unallocated thinking, feeling, and willing. It is room to think, time to reflect, freedom to evaluate. Space is carving out a refuge to consciously *be* rather than *do*. Instead, as I sat with my wife that Tuesday night over dinner, I had clutter. Clutter is the opposite of space. Clutter is the chaotic jumble of life that forces us automatically forward into the next task, denying us the opportunity to rest, refocus, and re-engage upon our true calling. Fortunately for us,

clutter had crossed the threshold of pain and we felt a motivation we had never felt before. Sometimes pain is our best friend.

The pastoral staff I worked with could not understand our decision to leave. These were all good men, godly men leading a church to change a city, but the general consensus was, *Why can't you just work it out?* One of them offered the visualization that when an athlete sprains his ankle, he doesn't sit out the season but gets back on the field to work it out. My response was, "That's true, but if his leg is broken then the rules change. He needs an emergency room, and if it's bad enough, he'll need physical therapy for months before he's back out on that field." I knew in my heart that we were headed for the ER and therapy. My great desire is that you can go to school on me, gleaning from the hard-earned lessons of my journey so that you can stay in the game.

We need to know what's broken in our lives, and how bad it is, before we can determine how to go about getting healed! The problem is that very few among us will admit to being broken. Even in the Church, the assembly of the broken, it is often considered bad form to bleed on one another, to admit the depth of our brokenness. There are the acceptable sins – worry, anger, lack of discipline, even lust. But when you dig a little deeper and begin acknowledging your very poverty of soul, your missing identity, and your unresolved woundedness, then you frequently enter the domain of the "N.B.'s", as my good friend affectionately calls them – the "needy bastards" – those we know need our help but we're not anxious to be around, the "extra-grace-required" folks, candidates for inner healing. As if we don't all need to be healed, inside and out.

For Kellie and I, we didn't even know how to verbalize such things as these; we only saw that we were dying inside and needed some intensive, focused soulcare. Within three months, we had rented

out our house, thrown our stuff in a truck, and driven 1600 miles to a city where we knew four people, barely. After three days on the road, we spent our first chaotic night in Colorado Springs, packed into the Hampton Inn with three kids and two cats, all of whom were whining and fighting, all our nerves raw. The next day we began scouting houses for rent, found nothing, and just pulled over to the side of the road and began to cry. *Why are we here? What have we done? Are we crazy?*

Our souls
have a built-in
search engine,
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The quest

A quest is a search for something, usually something of great value, that takes us on a journey, over time and across formidable obstacles to finally lay hold of the prize, that compelling object of our passion. In this concept of quest I see glimmers of excitement, shadows of danger, and the sure promise of adventure! What is your quest? What is your passion?

There is an explorer hidden inside each of us, hardwired into our fundamental design as an ability and yearning to discover. This curiosity, this desire to “search out” is most obvious in us as children. As we grow up, this ability tends to either get cultivated or squelched, depending upon our influences and our soul structures. But it doesn’t die.

A contemporary band borrowed the now-popular phrase and said it this way...

There’s a God-shaped hole in all of us

And the restless soul is searching

There’s a God-shaped hole in all of us

And a void only He can fillⁱ

It's something like the restless stirring and determination illustrated in Sheila Burnford's heart-warming story, *The Incredible Journey* in which a Labrador retriever, a bull terrier, and a Siamese cat cross three hundred miles of Canadian wilderness to find their home and family. The trouble is, sometimes animals are smarter than us humans. Sometimes a pet can be more true to its heart-home than people are! Still, I believe that a restless stirring in you that caused you to pick up this book. Are you willing to take the risk of acknowledging your soullessness and pursue your heart again? If you seek it, you can find it (Matt 7:7)!

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings” (Prov. 25:2). God's favorite game, our pastor Ted Haggard loves to say, is *hide and seek*. He shows Himself to every man and woman: some more, some less – but always enough to invite them into the search.

...if they desire it. ...if they want to engage.

But the question must be asked: Why? Why would God want us to search for Him? If God really wants to be with us so badly, why would He hide Himself? Why would it feel so hard at times to find Him?

Look at it this way. What are great kings and leaders known for? Their biggest conquests? Their greatest accomplishment? Or their smallest ones? Kings have always known that the greatest glory lay in the pursuit of the greatest riches across the greatest obstacles. That which takes little effort to grasp, we value lightly. If we are motivated to go through the hassle of putting on the armor, saddling up the horse, and facing the dragons, then we stand a good chance of finding the treasure.

If not, we assuredly won't. Truly God loves it when we yearn and search for him! Well, that Tuesday night in an Asheboro grill, we saddled up and began our quest in earnest. Ours was not a running away from problems, but rather an intentional running toward the life we knew we were destined for.

Your quest, however, will look different from ours. Everyone's story is unique. God wants to take each of us by the hand, where we are, and lead us into the freedom and purpose for which we are made. As you peer through this window into our story, let the Holy Spirit call to your heart and draw your soul into the kind of space He has custom-crafted for you!

Leaving

We have talked about taking a journey and the good things that await us. But the truth is that it's sometimes hard to leave... hard to say goodbye to the familiar and known. *It may be messy, but at least it's my mess!* Unfortunately... or fortunately... to journey forward requires an absolute commitment, a fierce determination to break free of the tyranny of this world's system. You cannot reform this system, so don't even attempt superficial fixes. This system is devilish in the truest sense and cannot be trusted. This "leaving" may be internal and hidden but is very, very real! You cannot *go* somewhere without *leaving* somewhere; it's just a fact.

What's more, you cannot recreationally dabble in this new world of freedom, for one important reason: the old system is pervasive in its values and thinking, and you cannot shake its influence without adopting a radically new mentality! If you scrutinize this new thinking and set of values while under allegiance to the old system, it will appear as foolishness. Totally impractical.

Jesus called this new system the “Kingdom of God,” and it was the focal point of His message on earth. He brought to earth an entirely new way of living and loving and relating, but ultimately it was a new administration. A new King! And we cannot take a new king without leaving behind the old one. There is an intrinsic competition and hostility between these two kingdoms. Describing this conflict, Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt 6:24).

Many well-intentioned Christians look to the world to tell them how to spend their time, money, and affections!

Yet this “dual citizenship” is the practical outworking of many well-intentioned Christians who welcome the rule of Christ in their lives but unwittingly look to the world to tell them how to spend their time, spend their money, and spend their affections. So then many Christians – like their neighbors – live harried and fragmented, driven in their pursuit of non-eternal goals, and plagued by broken, shallow relationships.

Anybody want to leave that behind?

Just to be clear, the Kingdom life that Jesus holds out to us is not a pain-free life. If that’s what you want, then kill your soul and become a Buddhist. But that’s not living. And denial is not the same thing as freedom. The Kingdom God offers is a place of great joy and meaning in the midst of the sufferings of this world. One day we will awaken in the fullness of His Kingdom – heaven – and the pain will be gone. In the meantime, He beckons us to leave behind the anesthesia of this world’s clutter and open our souls to the life of the Spirit. On that day of decision, Kellie and I walked to

the edge and decided that the pain and risk of leaping was less than the pain and risk of staying.
Time to dive!

Soul prescription

- Over today's lunch hour or kids' nap time, instead of trying to check one more thing off the list, get alone and ask yourself two questions: 1) what's broken in my life? and 2) how committed am I to fixing it?

[This chapter taken from a draft edition and may contain minor discrepancies from the published edition]

ⁱSteven Curtis Chapman, "Dive" (Brentwood, TN: Sparrow Records, 1999).

ⁱⁱWayne Kirkpatrick and Tiffany Arbuckle, "God-shaped Hole" (Brentwood, TN: Essential Records, 1999).