

Looking Past the Flaws

I can take you to the exact place, and reenact the exact scene, where the lights flickered back on in my life.

Twenty of us, from all over the nation, arrived that Sunday afternoon at the huge stone mansion called Wainwright House, located above New York City on Long Island Sound. We were guests of Guideposts magazine and had come to attend a weeklong writer's workshop.

Normal Vincent Peale, the publisher, and Catherine Marshall, wife of Guideposts editor Leonard LeSourd, had planned the workshop. They had asked writers—and writers-to-be—to submit a manuscript. It would be judged, and 20 writers would be selected to attend an all-expense paid week studying under the magazine's editors.

When I spotted the notice in the magazine, it was like Moses seeing the burning bush. Two years earlier I would have passed it by. But during the past 24 months I had been fired from two churches as pastor. The first time was in South Carolina. I had escaped, just one step in front of the T&F Committee (tar and feathers gang), to start over in Florida in another church. There I lasted 15 months and was fired again.

I did the only thing there was to do: I walked through whatever door opened. In this case I submitted a manuscript to Guideposts. If no one would listen to my sermons, maybe they would read my stories.

In late September 1967, I received a telegram from LeSourd. (I still have it, framed, on the wall of my writing studio.) Out of many entrants, I, along with 19 others, had been chosen. That night after dinner we gathered in the huge walnut-paneled great room of the old stone mansion. A fire was crackling in the fireplace. Outside the autumn leaves brushed against the leaded glass windows. We sat in easy chairs around the room.

All 20 of us. All strangers.

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The editors were introduced: John and Elizabeth Sherrill, who had written books I had never read; Catherine Marshall and her husband, Leonard LeSourd. Arthur Gordon, who later replaced LeSourd as editor, was there. So was Van Varner, who succeeded him. But dominating the room was Peale.

I was impressed but struggled with my feelings. For years I had warned others about his writings. I thought of all the times I had stood in my pulpits (before I was fired ...) and made fun of his positive thinking. Now here I was—his guest.

Jovial, relaxed, he started by saying, "Since I'm paying the bill, I should find out who you are."

We started around the room, introducing ourselves. Everyone present was a professional; I had never written anything but sermons.

As they listed their credits, I panicked. What could I say? Surely not the truth. It was almost my turn. I whispered to my neighbor, "You go next. I've got to use the bathroom."

I slipped out of the room, too embarrassed to introduce myself as the failure I was.

I waited behind a velvet curtain near the door until Peale was talking again. Only then did I slip back to my chair. I had never felt so lonely. I wanted to go home, but home was even lonelier.

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"No one is here by accident," Peale was saying. "You have each

been chosen.”

Then (and to this day I believe he looked straight at me) he said, “Not only did our editors choose you. God has chosen you. He has called you to something greater than you’ve ever dreamed. Tonight is the beginning of something bigger than any of us can imagine.” He said more, but that was all I needed. The lights had flickered back on in my life.

A man can live without faith and love. But no man can survive without hope. That night Normal Vincent Peale gave me hope. My bush was burning.

The next afternoon John Sherrill pulled me aside. A New Jersey publisher, he said, was looking for someone who could write a book. He recommended me. I walked through that door, too, simply because it opened. That was the first of 47 books—and the bush burns brightly, still not consumed.

It was Michelangelo who reportedly said of sculpture that “the finished form exists within the uncut stone; the sculptor need only release it.” That night Normal Vincent Peale picked up mallet and chisel. Looking across the room at a flawed stone, he struck a gentle blow of hope.

I heard the old sculptor was once again under attack by men such as I used to be. This time he was accused of being part of a worldwide conspiracy to seduce Christianity. I do not need to defend him. God, and history, will do that. I just wanted to write this small tribute and say, “For looking beyond the flawed surface to the finished form within, thank you.”

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Jamie Buckingham wrote 153 columns for Charisma over 13 years, first known as “Dry Bones” but later as its most-recognized “Last Word.” His singular voice was animated by a heart for

Jesus baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit in 1967 at a Full Gospel Businessmen's convention. Buckingham provided a steadying force during the scandals of the 1980s, penning the seminal article on the PTL scandal, "God Is Shaking His Church" in May 1986.