

**Excerpt from *Every Road Goes Somewhere: A Memoir about Calling***

by Wendy Widder

This excerpt is from a preedited version of the book. It may differ slightly from the published version.

All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or any other—without the prior written permission of the author. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews or articles.

© 2022 by Wendy Widder  
Published by Three Rubies Press  
Farmington, MN 55024  
<https://wendywidder.com>

ISBN 979-8-9864408-0-4 (paperback)  
ISBN 979-8-9864408-1-1 (e-book)

This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over time. Most names have been changed, and some characteristics have been altered. Some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible. Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

## Introduction

My high school geography class spent a lot of time making maps. Topographic maps, road maps, political maps. The capstone project was to invent an island and create a map for it, synthesizing various elements of mapmaking—scale, contour lines and corresponding topography, settlements, natural resources, and so on.

I made plenty of mistakes on my island map—drawing rivers where they couldn't possibly flow, positioning villages in unsustainable environments, and misjudging the likelihood of natural resources. My map even included extra “local color”—a grease stain from the butter dish on the kitchen table.

Turns out, inventing geography, even in two dimensions, is harder than it sounds. It's a lot easier to draw maps of places that already exist, places I've been to or studied in books.

This book is a map of my life and one I couldn't see very clearly until I'd followed its meandering path to and, more importantly, *out of* a midlife abyss. Along the way, I thought I knew where the map would take me, but I had it all wrong. Well-meaning people often told me where it was going. But they were wrong too.

We all have different maps—designed by Someone with a much better lay of the land than we have. Some maps have pristine beaches and crystal water. Some have steep hills and deep valleys, plunging cliffs and churning waves. Most include dense forests, expansive wilderness, and soaring peaks. The Mapmaker puts paths where we never would and erects mountains where we'd have put a highway.

This divine mapmaking is wrapped up with questions of calling and vocation, topics of perennial interest in the church: What is God calling me to do with my life? How can I find the right, nay, the *perfect* fit for my passions and abilities? Where, in the words of Frederick Buechner, do my “deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet”?<sup>1</sup>

What sometimes gets lost in these questions is that most maps go places we didn't expect—and not always good places, at least as we'd define good. Some journeys are marked more by disappointment than accomplishment. We forget that the world is broken—that our individual worlds are broken—and following Jesus doesn't change that.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, rev. and exp. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 119.

Our maps may all look different, but despite these variations, all the roads we travel matter because God made the map, butter stains and all.

## 1

### The Map

North-south-east-west would come—and go—later. The points on my compass as a child were more concrete, destinations I could reach on my own two legs: Killer Hill, the Boy Blue ice cream shop, Maude Shunk Library, and Thomas Jefferson Elementary School. At the center of my compass was our house on Shady Lane, a three-bedroom ranch that my parents built in one of the baby-boom subdivisions of suburban Milwaukee.

Situated on a short end of a long block, our house sat between the Murphys and the Browns. The Murphys had a dog and the Browns had a baby, but neither had children my age; for that I had to either cross the street to Jillian Lee’s house or head out the back gate to my best friend’s house. Jillian’s main draw was a Big Wheel, but Holly had a Hasbro bouncy Inchworm, a spring rocking horse, a sandbox, and junk food. Holly’s house smelled like cat litter and cigarette smoke, but I considered that a small price to pay for Hostess Twinkies and Doritos.

Most of the time, I played at home with my older sister Suzy, my parents’ surprise baby. She was born five years after my brother and eight years after my oldest sister, Bonnie. When I came squalling into the world one Sunday afternoon three years after Suzy, my dad was at church teaching an adult Bible class. Summoned to the hallway pay phone, he took the call from my mom, returned to class, and without speaking a word wrote on the chalkboard, “It’s a girl.”

Months before I arrived, my mom’s doctor had told her to expect a Christmas baby. She told him in no uncertain terms that I would be born before December 1. What she actually said was, “This baby is going to school when she’s four.” The school district’s cutoff birth date for four-year-olds to start kindergarten was December 1; any babies born after that had to wait until the following September when they were five. I suppose by child number four, my mom was ready to have the house to herself for a few hours every weekday, and sure enough, I was born Thanksgiving weekend.

Suzy and I were best of friends, most days anyway, playing Barbies and Matchbox cars,

racing down the hallway on all fours, and sledding down the basement stairs on an old couch cushion. In the basement we roller-skated loops through my dad's workroom and the laundry room, and we played house in the three-room playhouse Dad had built to match the house that sat over it: white siding, maroon trim, and real shingles. Outside we swung like monkeys on the backyard swing set, made forts with blankets slung over the clothesline, and joined neighborhood kids for fifty-scatter, a '70s version of hide-and-seek.

Shady Lane was a quiet street that made a wide curve onto Alfred Place, leaving behind a sort of cul-de-sac that was the perfect space for neighborhood games of kickball. Our house was a block removed from a primary neighborhood attraction: Killer Hill, an intense slope for winter sledding and summer rolling. Around our block the other direction was a main thoroughfare through the subdivision, a road we ran across after looking both ways twice. One summer after a car hit a girl crossing the street on her bike, we started looking three times before crossing.

My dad liked to walk the neighborhood for exercise and probably his own sanity, and we often accompanied him. I suspect his taking one or two, and sometimes three or four, children for a walk served a dual purpose for our single-income family: he could spend time with us and also relieve my stay-at-home mom from, well, spending time with us. One of our favorite destinations was the Boy Blue ice cream shop in the commercial plaza along the four-lane main street into town. The seven blocks of sidewalk between our house and Boy Blue were enough to make the walk itself most of the outing. Along the way we'd compete to see who could kick the same rock for the longest stretch of sidewalk, or one of us would skip ahead and then wait for everyone to catch up, and for sure we'd chatter about the important decision that lay ahead: which flavor of ice cream.

Along the route one afternoon I noticed slashes of paint on the sidewalks, and I asked my dad what they were for. Rather than simply answering my question, he suggested we form a hypothesis.

"A what?" I asked. I was probably school age at the time, but the curriculum at Thomas Jefferson hadn't reached the scientific method yet.

Dad went on, telling me to observe where the slashes occurred and notice what similarities the locations had. For the next couple of blocks, I paid closer attention to the slashes and the sidewalks and soon concluded that all the sidewalks with paint had cracks.

"Why do you think there's a paint mark on those sidewalks? What do you think the paint

means? That’s your hypothesis.” He went on to explain how to test a hypothesis and either discard it or move toward a theory if there was enough evidence.

I walked and talked many miles of sidewalk with my dad in the years that followed this trip to Boy Blue, but this lesson in the scientific method is the only conversation I clearly remember. When he could have simply told me that city crews were preparing to replace broken sidewalks in the neighborhood, he instead taught me how to see the world. Observe things in context. Reflect on them. Test your ideas. Be willing to be wrong. Try again.

My dad was a lifelong educator. By the time I cabooseed my way into the family, he was moving into his second career with the Milwaukee Public Schools. After teaching fifth grade for eleven years, he became a school psychologist. I never had the chance to ask him what prompted this career change, but if my own decision to do something similar years later at all reflected his, it may have been that he got bored. That he earned both a master’s degree and a doctorate in the course of his career suggests he needed a different kind of challenge than shepherding an annual herd of ten-year-olds through fractions and long division, state capitals and the solar system.

But he never stopped teaching, and my siblings and I were his perpetual students. A 1972 set of World Book encyclopedias was our Google, and a 1960s set of Childcraft encyclopedias was our go-to source of nursery rhymes, poems, and classic stories. The illustration of a rabid Old Yeller lunging against the shed door was usually more than I could take, and most of my Childcraft hours were spent with volumes 1 and 2, collections of softly illustrated nursery rhymes and other poems.

We loved words. My sister Bonnie read the dictionary for fun, but we all loved a delicious word like *discombobulation*. Some words were just more fun to say if you shifted the accent or adjusted the pronunciation, so *obstacle* in our house was usually *ob-STACK-le*, *Menards* was *MAY-nerds*, and *vehicle* was *VE-HICK-le*. When the eye doctor prescribed distance-reading practice for Suzy, my dad and brother created eye charts for her. They set their handiwork on the shelf of the secretary, and while Suzy read each card from across the dinette, the two of them waited with wry grins: U R A Q T; U N I R N A C; and C D M T C.

This love of wordplay explains one of my favorite books at Maude Shunk Library (known in our family as “Mad Skunk,” with no disrespect whatsoever meant to the matriarch of the community library, a bespectacled white-haired lady whose picture stood guard over the main lobby). On the cover of the book, a white-bearded king dressed like Father Christmas

hovered horizontally in midair while rain poured from him: *The King Who Rained*, written and illustrated by Fred Gwynne, a.k.a. Herman Munster, the lovable star of the 1960s sitcom *The Munsters*. The book follows a little girl through the bewildering and hilarious world of homonyms and idioms in her parents' speech: there were forks in the road; Daddy (who bore a remarkable likeness to Herman Munster) had a mole on his nose; Mommy's throat was a little horse; Daddy had a frog in his throat. The book was better checked out and read at home where giggles and howls didn't bring a stern look from the librarian.

The library was an easy walk due west of our house, and it was a destination Suzy and I were allowed to go unaccompanied. During the summer months, we'd eat our Corn Flakes and drink our Tang and then set out with our tattered library cards and bag of books. Turning left at the end of the driveway, we walked two blocks to where our street dead-ended at the outfield of a community ballfield. Squeezing through the fence, we'd trot to home plate and then continue past the bleachers along the lot line with the Lutheran church to the frontage road that led to the library's back entrance. The library had two entrances—the main entrance that opened into the adult library upstairs and our entrance, the downstairs back one that landed us in the children's library, where we returned one bag of books and spent the morning in search of its replacement.

As the sun passed overhead, Suzy and I would venture upstairs and head straight for the farthest corner of the reading room where a box of comic books invited us into the adventures of Archie and Jughead, Veronica and Betty, and the rest of Riverdale. We must have gone home for lunch and maybe even stayed there—but in my memories, hours spent in the library and hours spent at home merge into one. The library was home, so much so that one morning when Suzy and I arrived before the doors were unlocked, as we often did, and saw a new sign on the downstairs door, we knew we were both its cause and target: No Bare Feet.

When adolescence drew Suzy into the privacy of her own bedroom, I often went to the library by myself. *The King Who Rained* gave way to Nancy Drew, but the library and its books were still my wardrobe to Narnia, the place from which I ventured into new worlds. In the pages of hundreds of books, I scampered about places like Plum Creek and Avonlea, surrounded by friends like Ramona, Encyclopedia Brown, and Bilbo. Books opened up new worlds to be explored with everything to gain and nothing to lose.

But my love for books was about more than just vicarious experiences and adventure. It was about a love of knowledge, an unquenchable thirst for information and learning and putting

the world together. Books were where I went to learn about things I just wanted to know or about things I was too shy or embarrassed to ask. When my parents decided it was time for me to know about the birds and the bees, I was given a little paperback book and instructions from my mom to ask her any questions I might have. I didn't have any. At least that's what I thought until, sometime after the little book was buried in the deepest darkest corner of a dresser drawer, I found myself confused by junior high "locker room talk." I actually had lots of questions, but there was no way I was going to ask my mom. Instead, I went to the 1972 World Book, where I realized—with not a little preteen horror—that either the book my parents gave me had skipped some important information or I had somehow missed it (which inexplicably was, I later learned, the case). Although the 1972 World Book was outdated in many ways by the time I sought out this information, it was still spot on with its article about the birds and bees.

I often turned to books for information about my body—or bodies in general. Our family acquired a two-volume medical dictionary about the time I was learning about sex from World Book, and I asked it lots of questions. My mom usually said my pains were growing pains, but I wasn't so sure. When I had frequent headaches, I went in search of a cause other than the brain tumor I most feared (my dad's twin died from a brain tumor when they were nine). When my legs hurt, I asked the medical dictionary if my leg would need to be amputated like the neighbor girl's. If my jaw hurt, I asked if TMJ is hereditary. Even though the diagnoses I gave myself were often terminal, I couldn't tear myself away from the lure of knowledge, following one trail after another through the medical dictionary.

I loved books because they let me ask questions and process answers at my own speed. They let me follow a meandering path to wherever I ended up—and I rarely knew where that would be. The reward was the journey.

School capitalized on this hunger for books and learning, but it offered me more than the reward of the journey; it also gave me the reward of destinations, clear marks of achievement.

The lure of achievement grabbed me, so I loved school from the first day Suzy and I turned right instead of left at the end of the driveway on weekday mornings. We'd zigzag seven blocks through the neighborhood to the edge of the Thomas Jefferson playground, which butted up against the ball fields of the high school where we took summer swimming lessons. My kindergarten classroom looked out on the playground, and Miss Moore was my teacher until she added a syllable to her name at midyear, becoming Mrs. Morehead. After kindergarten, I crossed

the hall to the Misses Carter, two sisters who taught first and second grade. Miss Carter the First was the shorter of the pair, her jet-black hair perfectly coifed to frame a wide-set face and full cheeks. She wore knee-length dresses, and her shoes clicked on the tile floor. Miss Carter the Second had short brown hair with an unruly wave, the right combination with the pants and button-down shirts she typically wore.

In my three years of progress reports from Thomas Jefferson, there are only two categories with checkmarks in the “Needs Attention” column: writing legibly and knowing the “required addition and subtraction facts.” The deficit in math appears early in second grade and quickly changes to “Excellent Progress,” though I never did master the penmanship problem (though at least Miss Carter said it “Shows Progress”). I tolerated handwriting and worked hard at math, but reading was by far my strongest subject, as Miss Carter the First noted to my parents on her final report: “I don’t have to tell you to encourage her to read.”

The avid reader that Miss Carter the First promoted to her sister’s class down the hall was well prepared to shine when a class reading contest was announced. On the bulletin board overlooking the courtyard at Thomas Jefferson, Miss Carter the Second stapled a large cutout of a floppy-eared dog. Positioned along the bottom edge of the board was a row of construction paper dog bones, each with a student’s name in teacher-perfect penmanship. Every time we reported having read a book, she would write its title on a smaller dog bone and staple it above our names. The student with the biggest pile of dog bones won.

Miss Carter the First’s end-of-the-year praise aside, this was an easy contest to win for a little girl who lived in the local library while summer waxed and waned. But it was even easier because I cheated—that is, until my dad realized the error of my ways. After I had devoured every book we had at home within two years of my reading level, my dad and I hunted and gathered books from the library by the bagful. We took them home, and I read them. Or, I should say, I “read” them. I didn’t so much *devour* these books as *lick* them or *sniff* them. With a pile of books on my left, I’d pick one off the top of the pile, open its front cover, and turn every page until the end—scanning my eyes across the pictures and words with a single left-to-right swipe. I’d deposit the book on another pile and reach for the next book. Somewhere along the way, my dad discovered his little second grader’s reading method and gently set me straight: if the book was going to count for the contest, I actually had to *read* it. So I did. Every one of them.

I don’t think there was any question at home or in my second-grade class that I would

win the contest (fair and square). It wasn't even a contest: my dog bone pile soared and toppled in the leftover spaces above my classmates' names.

From Miss Moore/Mrs. Morehead's half-day kindergarten until I gave the valedictory address at high school graduation, I loved nearly everything about school. Sure, there were always classmates who tried my patience—like Billy Boondocker, who ran around our unsupervised second-grade classroom one afternoon wagging his first-grade stuff through his unzipped fly. And there were teachers whose methods were maddening or whose expectations were unclear, such as Miss Larsen, who gave me a C in tenth-grade PE because I wasn't an extrovert (what she really said was that she thought I could show more enthusiasm for the various activities we did), or Mr. Duncan, who wandered around topics as if he was lost in the fog. But bothersome classmates and frustrating teachers came and went. My only perennial disappointment in school was the hand-me-down box of crayons in my school supplies.

While my love for the library and my love for school were closely related and even complementary, they had one key difference: the library had no expectations of me, except that I wear my shoes; school, however, was full of expectations, usually clearly defined. And these expectations formed a ladder of achievement to climb.

This didn't bother me since I never met a school rung I could not climb (except for high school chemistry, which left me so baffled after two weeks that I dropped it, a decision I still regret). I often saw a rung as a challenge to go beyond, to climb another rung. School gave direction to my curiosity and creativity, and I thrived—in the journey and the destination, the learning itself and the achievements.

School—and my insatiable appetite for it—shaped me in ways I didn't realize until I was much older. Like the other neighborhood destinations that oriented my childhood, school defined my sense of who I am and what my place is in the world.

Another destination wasn't reachable on foot, but its circumscription of my life was just as clear: church, and specifically, our conservative Baptist church.

The steepled building that housed our church was almost a second home while I was growing up. The church's weekly schedule anchored our weeks, beginning with Sunday morning when the Widder family piled into our silver-gray Chevrolet station wagon—three in the front and three in the back, seatbelts optional. Since I was the youngest and smallest, I always had one of the two middle seats, either between Dad driving and Mom blotting her lipstick in the visor

mirror or in the back between my brother and my oldest sister, doing her own teenage primping in her compact mirror behind my mom.

Twenty minutes later, Dad pulled “the Silver Bullet” up to the front entrance of the sprawling redbrick building. We tumbled out, and once inside I raced through the labyrinth of cinder-block hallways to find my Sunday school room. A secretary smiled her greeting and marked my attendance, and I made my way through the room that was teeming with teachers—mostly women—readying the morning’s materials. At my assigned table, I chattered with Sunday-morning friends while we colored and cut, glued and stapled, and recited the week’s memory verse. The first bell signaled the official start of Sunday school, thirty minutes that included prayer requests, a flannelgraph lesson, and a worksheet activity.

When the second bell rang, we scooped up our papers—bound for the refrigerator at home—and scurried to the main area for children’s church. For the next thirty minutes (or more if the sermon upstairs went long), we sang songs written with black marker on poster board, dropped grimy coins in an offering basket, and listened to a second Bible lesson. Children’s church in the Primary room often included minilessons on elements of Big Church: What is worship? What is an offering—and why do we give one? What is a missionary? Once or twice a year, we’d even have a real-live missionary in children’s church. In the older grades of the Junior room, the highlight was a Bible drill competition or Bible quiz.

After church, our family went home for a quiet Sunday afternoon—naps, whether we wanted them or not, maybe some golf on TV (because it was the right pace for Sunday), and a walk to Boy Blue if we were lucky. Then at 6:30, earlier if there was children’s choir practice, Dad pulled the Silver Bullet out of the garage again, and we headed back for the Sunday evening service.

Without poster-board songs, flannelgraph lessons, or Bible drills, I relied on people watching from a pew to pass the sixty-minute service. Mr. Johnson tugging at his unruly eyebrows. Mrs. Bigelow clickety-clacking her nail clipper during the sermon. Mr. Harvey nodding and bobbing until the final “Amen.” The best part about the Sunday evening service came after the closing hymn, when Mr. Pafford, the grandfatherly head usher, buoyed the small survivors of Sunday night church with soft toffees from his pocket.

Thus went the first day of the week for the Widders. The three days that followed meant work and school, but after supper on Wednesday, we piled back into the station wagon for the

twenty-minute trip to prayer meeting. By midweek, the frenzied buzz of Sunday had dulled to barely a hum. Pastor Sawyer clipped on his lapel mic and moved from the platform pulpit to a lectern on the floor. After leading the faithful in a hymn or two and offering a brief devotional, he opened the floor for prayer requests, followed by what felt like hours of praying. Since only Pastor Sawyer had a microphone, many of the prayers were far-off murmurs interspersed with long periods of silence until the next volunteer stood to pray. Pastor Sawyer's closing prayer mercifully signaled the end of the service, and when he said "Amen," I was off in search (and need) of Mr. Pafford's toffee.

Sunday and Wednesday services were year-round stays in our schedule. During the school year, Awana Club on Friday nights was too. Awana, an acronym for "Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed" (derived from 2 Tim. 2:15), is a baptized (and largely Baptist) version of Scouts that focuses on Bible memorization. When I was growing up, its clubs began in third grade with Chums for girls and Pals for boys. My dad directed the Pals when my parents were first married. When my mom began a thirteen-year stint as director of Chums a few years later, he stayed home with us until we were old enough to attend ourselves.

We were at church whenever the bulletin said we could be. And we were there even when it didn't. My mom's responsibilities for Awana took her to church at least once during the week to set up for club on Friday night, and in our preschool days, she had Suzy and me in tow. Every such trip began with a stop at Miss Muriel's office. Miss Muriel was the closest Baptists get to nuns—a single lady who played the church organ for fifty-five years of Sundays and spent thirty-five of those years working during the week as church secretary.

Miss Muriel's office was upstairs near the end of the hall and next to Pastor Sawyer's dark sanctum of bookshelves and padded furniture, a place that people like me saw only on tippy-toes through a window in the door—and then only when I was sure he wasn't even in the building. Miss Muriel was the Mr. Pafford of the off-hours—a grandmotherly figure with a jar full of candy on her desk.

From Miss Muriel's office, my mom disappeared to her Awana room, and Suzy and I scattered. The church building was our playground, every door unlocked except the sound room off the sanctuary and the game room in the gym. Our adventures usually started with snack scavenging: the toddler room had graham crackers; the twos-and-threes room had flower-shaped butter cookies that fit like rings; the fours-and-fives had frosted oatmeal cookies. If we were

lucky, the kitchen refrigerator might have leftovers from a youth event or ladies' lunch. We were careful to moderate our thievery, taking only a sample from each stash. There was no sense raising suspicion that might result in locked drawers or closets.

The snack rounds completed, we explored the dark hallways and back staircases, the baptistery and choir loft. If the custodian was in the building, we could get into the game room, which smelled like a box of red rubber recess balls. We hauled out enough Awana game equipment to set up two-person versions of the Friday night games: plastic bowling pins marking the giant circle, beanbags positioned for beanbag grab, Velcro straps for the three-legged race. But the best thing in the game room was the hoppity hops, the red- and blue-handled balls that we sat on to bounce the length of the gym.

Being in the church building during the week—when the lights were off and no one was home (except Miss Muriel, three pastors, and the custodian)—was like having an all-access pass. I'd been in the boiler room and the waterless baptistery. I had stood behind the pulpit, sat on the organ bench, and slipped through all the rows of the choir loft. I had seen the custodian's closet open while he did his weekly chores. I had played with Sunday toys on Thursday. I had heard Miss Muriel practice the organ on Tuesday morning. I knew where the Awana candy bars were locked up. On a really lucky day, I'd even been invited into Pastor Sawyer's office, where I confirmed with my own eyes the rumor that he had his own bathroom.

On one hand, this early familiarity bred a sense of entitlement—the building belonged to me. Subsequent years of church membership and my own involvement in ministry cemented this entitlement, such that I still feel it more than twenty years after moving away. Not too long ago, I was back in town with a friend for a wedding, and we went to church to help set up for the ceremony. When the wedding coordinator was late, I tired of waiting and went in search of the needed decorations. As I explored unlocked rooms, my friend protested that we should wait or at least get someone from the church office to help. I waved him off. This place is mine, even still.

On the other hand, knowing the ins and outs of the church bred a sense of responsibility—I belonged to the church. I knew that church on Sunday (and Wednesday and Friday) didn't just happen. It took people working there all week long to make the church building ready for the Church to show up. Church happened because there were “professionals” who saw to it that it did—people like Miss Muriel and Pastor Sawyer—and there were people like my mom and my dad. I was born into church life—almost literally.

This embeddedness in the life of the church meant its beliefs also oriented my life as surely as the physical landmarks of library and school did. Many of these beliefs were caught more than taught—such as what the role of women in the world and the church should look like. I expected to grow up and be like my mom, a stay-at-home mom who invested in the life of the church. Or like Mrs. Chandler, a children’s church leader who wrote programs and skits for annual banquets, missionary conferences, and children’s programs. Or like Teacher Marianne, who, best I knew, just taught toddlers in Sunday school. The women I knew were pastors’ wives or missionaries’ wives; they were nurses or secretaries or teachers like the Misses Carter. Some were even missionaries themselves, going to deepest Africa, like Juanita Kluve. I had every expectation I would do the same.

Other orienting beliefs were explicitly taught, like loving Jesus and obeying him, reading the Bible and praying. And I did the best I could, especially once I received my first Bible. Second graders in our church’s Sunday School received their very own King James Bible on Promotion Sunday. I loved *any* new book, but the pseudo-leather-bound Bible was a weighty treasure in my seven-year-old hands. I recognized the gift for what it was: a rite of passage. I was old enough to have my very own Bible to read. And while I couldn’t understand a lot of what was in the Bible when I was in second grade, having the book in my possession meant something. It was there to grow into, a lifelong invitation to its discovery.

I loved that Bible. And I read it, even accepting Pastor Sawyer’s challenge one year to read from Genesis to Revelation during the calendar year. I slogged through a lot of it, but I did it. I underlined in it—sometimes with a straight edge (probably a church bulletin) but often not. I personalized it—with stickers that proclaimed my Baptist loyalties to Awana Clubs and with less holy stickers of fuzzy baby animals. I wrote important lists on the blank pages in the front and back—the names of the twelve disciples (twice!) and the plan of salvation (only once!). I scrawled slogans for motivation: “This book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this book.”

My Bible went to church with me every Sunday, and when I reached junior high, I took it to school and carried it on top of my books. I loved my Bible, and I was mindful that if I was going to carry it, I needed to carry it well. I needed to love and please the God who wrote it.

I used that Bible until my parents replaced it with a burgundy leather-bound New International Version on my eighteenth birthday. Its variations of oversized crooked letters and

unwieldy cursive chronicled my passage from the primary department to high school graduation. During one of those eleven years, at such a time as I'd been told that capitalizing divine pronouns showed proper respect for God, I wrote my life goal inside the front cover: "That I may KNOW Him."

I am quite sure that my understanding of this partial verse from Philippians 3 was simply this: make Jesus happy with my life. The best way I knew how to do that was to obey gladly, to be a good and faithful servant. And the best way I knew how to do *that* was not to bury my talents.

Burying my talents is an idea that comes from one of Jesus's parables in Matthew 25, on page 21 in the New Testament part of my King James Bible. With a blue pen, I marked its beginning at verse 14 and its ending on the next page at verse 30. The parable of the talents is a story Jesus told about a wealthy man heading out on an international trip. The man divides up his "talents" among his servants but not equally. He gives five to the first, two to the second, and one to the third—"to every man according to his several ability" (v. 15). While the master is gone, the servants get to work. The first two double their money, but the third "went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money" (v. 18). Eventually, the master returns and calls his servants to settle accounts with them. Obviously, he's very pleased by the returns of the first two: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (vv. 21, 23).

When the third servant comes, he tells the master he was afraid and so had buried the talent. "Here, you can have it back now," he says. Sorry—"Lo, there thou hast that is thine" (v. 25).

The master is not happy and tells the servant he should have at least put the talent in the bank to earn interest. He takes it back, gives it to the servant with ten talents, and then speaks these terrifying words: "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 30).

When I first heard this parable, I am quite sure it was accompanied by the explanation that a "talent" was a unit of money, like a dollar. But that fact was vastly overshadowed by the meaning of *talent* in my world. Talents were the abilities we have. It was a talent that I could read before I went to kindergarten. It was a talent that I easily finished my Awana memorization books before the year was half over. It was talent that produced exemplary report cards, glowing

teacher reports, good spelling, and lightning-fast timed tests.

And while I wasn't sure what it would mean to invest such talents for the Lord, I knew that I would—and that I would reap a hundredfold and hear “Well done, good and faithful servant” on judgment day. From the time I could read that parable in my King James Bible, the driving motivation for my life was stewardship—and the fear of hearing “Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness.” Not using my talents to the best of my ability in order to return more to God was unthinkable.

I don't recall anyone explicitly making the connection between this parable and God's blessing in my life, but it was certainly understood. As I grew up, I heard it in the promises given to me that God had something wonderful for my life. If I did my best to serve him, he would lead me into green pastures—a life of happy satisfaction as I used my gifts and abilities for the kingdom. It's what I lived for.

Based on the evidence around me, I believed this to be more than a hypothesis or even a theory. It was a law I could build my life on: Serve God and he will make you healthy, wealthy-enough, and wise. He will give you your heart's desires—that is, he will give you the life you want. For me, that meant getting married, having a family, and serving the church.