

Making Adjustments

I'm not usually nostalgic about my birthday. But the other day I was in my car the day before the milestone of my fifty-eighth, and on the radio came the Beatles song: "*When I'm Sixty-four*." You know the one...

*When I get older, losing my hair,
Many years from now,
Will you still be sending me a valentine
Birthday greetings bottle of wine?*

*If I'd been out till quarter to three
Would you lock the door,
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,
When I'm sixty-four?*

I don't know what it was about "sixty-four" that made McCartney sing about it. Maybe he had a premonition that sixty-four would be a bad year, but probably it was just because it rhymed with "door." Nevertheless, it got my attention and brought up some grief in me about being divorced and sick with cancer. I felt a tiny pang of sorrow (that periodically recurs) about the loss of the dream of growing old with my wife – children and grandchildren around us as one big happy family. Growing old at all is sort of iffy at this point, let alone it happening with the wife of my youth. Don't get me wrong, I'm stoked about seeing Jesus, but if I'm being honest, leaving here sooner than later has its nostalgic downside as well.

A few years ago the prospect of bouncing back from my losses seemed remote at best. But over time my soul began to heal, and hope gradually seeped back into my heart. And while I continue to grieve those defeats, in the last couple of years my grief has become less and less of a predominant sentiment for me. As I sat in my car drying a tear or two I thanked God that it was indeed only one or two, and not the thousands I would have shed a few years ago. Jesus, the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, helps us let go even of things most precious to us when we have to. I realized that an adjustment had been made. The me that I was, and assumed I would always and forever be, began to morph into a different me – an unexpected me. Relentless grace empowering me to painstakingly make the necessary adjustments, the new way of being me – that is, the current me that I presently am, is an inexplicably happy me! It didn't happen overnight, but I recognized that all along the Father had been helping me make the alterations into these new circumstances of mine to be able to find in them a whole world of kingdom possibilities.

You can't really plan for the unexpected, since by definition, you don't expect it. We make our plans, try to live as responsibly as we can, and trust God to do what he does. Nevertheless, stuff happens in our fallen world inside and around our flawed selves that we couldn't have predicted. There's the matter of the free-will experiment in which we're engaged (where we're permitted to hurt ourselves and one another if we choose to). And then there's the factor of the clear and present danger of the dark spiritual world, relentless in its hate for us and the God who loves us. We make plans, some of which are thwarted, others were foolish and were thus doomed from the start. Regardless of the cause, we have to learn to *make adjustments on the fly*. Life isn't nearly as predictable as we would wish, so detours are a more regular occurrence than we planned when we embarked on the trip. So we have to learn to expect the unexpected, bring our fears about them to God and adapt to what happens.



Speaking of baseball...

They say in baseball, *"You gotta hit what's pitched."* That is, if the guy on the mound is not giving you anything to pull over the left field wall, you shorten your swing and take the outside pitch to right (field). Pitchers have to make adjustments too. If on a given day he doesn't have his curve ball, a good pitcher will maximize the use of the other pitches in his repertoire. When a big-league pitcher ages and can't throw 95 miles-an-hour anymore, he has to learn to get people out in other ways. And if he can't make those adjustments he'll have to find something else to do with his time besides playing baseball for a living.

We all make adjustments...

On a very tiny level, making adjustments on the fly is something we all do all the time. You're driving to work, but your regular route is jammed with traffic, so you take a quick exit and find your way on surface streets to get to work on time. Your usual sales pitch isn't working with a certain prospective client, so in order to convince them that they do need what you're selling, you change your pitch (we're talking "sales pitch" now) – you adapt on the fly. All morning you could taste the burrito you were going to savor at lunchtime at your favorite Taqueria near your office, and when you get there they're closed for renovations! For about two minutes you stand in front of the restaurant wondering if life is still worth living, or maybe you should break in there and make your own burrito with extra cheese. Eventually you make the palate adjustment to Chinese.

Some friends of mine who've made adjustments...

And then there are the colossal unforeseen circumstances that require much larger adjustments: the death of a family member or friend, divorce, health crises, loss of career. I have two widow friends who lost their husbands at about the same time a few years back. One has wrapped her entire life around her loss – her widowhood has defined her. Rather than making the adjustment to her new reality and finding an off-ramp so she can take an unfamiliar route, she's parked on the freeway shoulder hoping and waiting for her reality to transform itself. The other widow friend, though just as devastated from the loss of the love of her life, over time, she has found the courage to play the hand she's been dealt and has adapted to her new world with new dreams. These purposes very much include her late husband's memory and legacy, but circumstances are such that they will not (until heaven) include his company.

One of my greatest inspirations comes from my good friends Dan and Lynn who lost their two teenage girls when a drunk driver rammed into them on their way home from a Christian conference. Painstakingly and incrementally they began letting go of it as life was and making the adjustments to what it is. They now do a bi-monthly ministry in their local women's jail, singing songs and teaching the Bible to the inmates. They'd never been in such a place until they visited Lisa in prison, the woman who killed their girls, and developed a compassion for women in similar circumstances. Lynn and Lisa (now released from incarceration) have often served together to jails, churches, and college classes giving talks on such things as forgiveness and sobriety!

My young friend David was recently driving back to Redding after a brief visit with his family in the Bay Area. In route his radiator blew up and he had to be towed to the nearest small town. While conversing with the mechanic he asked him if he knew Jesus. The man's face, white with shock, said to David that he knew about Jesus and had that very day been pondering what it would be like to know him personally! "So, do you want to meet him right now?" David asked in a kind but bold way. Right then and there he led him in a prayer to receive Jesus. Neither David nor the small town car mechanic woke up in the morning with this encounter written into their agenda for the day. Detours

don't always have to be bad trips, they can, by divine appointment, they might put us in contact with opportunities otherwise unknown to us.

Palm trees, toy soldiers, and alcoholics adjust...

And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, "The old is better." **Luke 5:38-39**

The reason we need "new wineskins" is because they're flexible. They're capable of stretching to accommodate the new wine that's expanding inside them. The old skins are brittle and won't expand along with the new wine. Someone said, "The only way to get new wine skins is to kill an old goat!"

Jesus said that some "say the old is better." The older you get, the more you like old things, like what we call "*the good old days*." That's exactly what they are, they might have been good, but they're also old. Because they've happened already, they're not new, but old. Someone said that by definition "a conservative is someone who thinks that nothing should ever be done the first time."

"Old" wine tastes better because our palate is used to it. they like different food in India or Kenya than we do here in the U.S., not because they're born with a different kind of taste buds or because there's a *right kind* of food and a *wrong kind*. Your palate adjusts to the food and drink you give it. If God gives you something you don't like at first, you'll either learn to like it or learn to live with it, because if you don't, you'll die without it.

The palm tree is able to flex with vehement tropical winds. I've seen them bend almost all the way to the ground so as not to snap off at the trunk.

Did you ever have one of those **toy soldiers** who, when wound up and set on the floor, march until they run into something, at which point they shift course and go another direction? They don't seem to have a problem adjusting to whatever surprises crop up. Sometimes they run into an obstacle perpendicularly and get stuck marching against the wall until they run out of energy. Sadly, they don't make the adjustment, instead they insist on stubbornly beating their head against the wall until they die that way.

In recovery groups all over the world addicts desperately recite the "Serenity Prayer" by Reinhold Niebuhr. The first part of the prayer is the most familiar: "*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*" Of all people, the addict needs to adjust to what is, and not insist on it changing before he'll stop medicating himself. We all have to accept the things we can't change. But did you know there's more to the prayer?

It goes on to say, "*Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it: Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen*" If we could all learn to take the world as it is and not as we would have it, we'd be better off. Yes?

How are Pharisees at making adjustments?

Typically, Pharisees, the ones with the most hard-shelled spirituality are not very willing to modify their ideas on the flv. They tend to be more brittle than flexible in their faith. This inflexibility has a

name. It's uh, umm... oh yeah; it's called "*Religion!*" And since the Pharisees are the same "*yesterday, today, and forever,*" we should all be on the lookout for this tendency to dig our heels in and refuse to bend.

They had their orders – as they understood them – and that was it! They even had most of them memorized, categorized, simonized. They knew what they knew and weren't planning on learning anything new about what they knew. They were adamant about what God required, what the Messiah was going to look like, and where they would rate with him when he arrived. Jesus blew the doors off their preconceived notions when he didn't think, speak, or act like a good little Messiah was supposed to. Most of them just couldn't *adjust*, and what's more they were proud of it. But there were a few who were willing to adjust...

Nicodemous was a Pharisee (John 3) modest enough to inquire – how would one gain entrance into God's realm, what's this about being "born again," and how does that work exactly on an anatomical level? Jesus' response might be the Bible's most poignant statement about flexible adjustment making: "*The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*" I'm partial to the Message Bible on this one: "*You know how the wind blows this way and that, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone born from above, by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.*" If we're genuinely born of the Spirit, we will become more and more like the Spirit – as unpredictable as the wind.

Another Pharisee named Paul had an even bigger adjustment to make in order to become a Jesus follower. He thought previously that Jesus was a malevolent cult leader, and since he couldn't get to Jesus directly, he'd silence his disciples.

Surprised From his rear end on the hard roadbed he asked, "*Who are you Lord?*" He didn't say, "*You're not Jesus, because he's dead;*" or, "*You're not the Christ, because you don't act like it.*" In the duress of a brilliant beam from heaven, losing his sight, and hearing a voice, he was willing to adjust, "*Okay, okay, tell me again, who are you exactly?*"

Peter, another Pharisee at heart, was on his friend's roof praying, when in a vision, a sheet appeared filled with a bunch of non-kosher animals. When a voice called him by name, at first he was probably gratified that God knew his name and had something on his mind for him to do. If you recall, Jesus sometimes had an awful time getting a word in edgewise when Peter was near. He always had answers to questions know one was asking. He was the kid in the class that never raised his hand before blurting out whatever came to mind.

"*Rise, Peter, and kill...*" Again, interrupting, and being a good Jew, this also would've sounded pretty good to him. "*Kill them? Absolutely, Lord, these animals deserve to die, and I'm happy to kill them for you!*"

"... *and eat!*" the voice continued. "*Yes, Lord... Wait! What? No, Lord!*" It's not good for a transmission to go from drive to reverse like that, to say nothing of the whiplash to Peter's neck. There's no way that God would ask Peter to eat un-kosher – was there?

Can you imagine anything more oxymoronic than those last two words placed adjacent to each other like that ("*No, Lord!*")? I mean, if he's actually "*Lord,*" then how nonsensical is it for us to say "*No*" to him? It's pretty hard, in good conscience, to call him "*Lord*" at the same time you're saying, "*No*" to him. On the other hand, I like Ezekiel's reply to God's question, "*Will these bones live again?*" He

said, *"You know, Lord."* You see the contrast, right? Peter said, *"No, Lord"* and the prophet said, *"You know, Lord."* Which one of those is most ready to make adjustments to life's surprises?

Anyway, eventually Peter, after three visions, three voices, and three Gentiles knocking at the door, got the point and made the adjustment to carry out his bewildering heavenly orders to go Gentile food with Gentile hosts. Even the most Pharisical at heart can learn to adjust. I'm praying for a few right now.

A few more people in the Bible who were willing to make adjustments...

"Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be broken!" says my old missionary friend. Flexibility, even in my limited and temporary overseas missionary experiences, has made the difference between a great experience and an awful one. No matter how much you pray, plan, and do reconnaissance, you're always going to be surprised by what you encounter in a culture that's not your own. The things you intended to do are all up for grabs, and you'll have to be on your toes to adapt to whatever comes your way on any given day. If you're brittle you'll break. I think we should all be living our lives as though we're on a life-long missions trip, "prepared in season and out of season" to make adjustments for any eventuality.

Here are a few more of the Father's flexible followers...

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, said to Nebuchadnezzar, *"Our God can deliver us from your furnace, but if he doesn't..."* I've always been impressed by their ability to adapt to whatever God decided to do. Their conviction didn't change with whatever the outcome. They weren't going to worship at anyone else's altar under any circumstances. But they were ready to adapt to whatever God did or didn't do, and trust him anyway.

Job said, *"Though he slay me yet will I trust him,"* which to my mind is the epitome of a flexible faith. His wife, on the other hand, had a faith that was more flimsy than flexible, *"Curse God and die,"* she insisted. She couldn't make the adjustment to God's apparent non-intervention decision. *"If this is the way God treats his friends, we might as well be his enemies... Let's find a better God."* Job didn't understand God's plan any better than his wife did, but he was willing to make the adjustment to things turning out in a way other than what he'd hoped.

John the Baptist had to adjust his expectation that Jesus was the long awaited Jewish Messiah. Things weren't progressing the way he'd expected when he asked, *"Are the one, or should we wait from another?"* At least he was willing to ask the question that was in the minds of all his peers. He was the only one in the class with the courage to ask the risky questions. Everybody laughs, but they are secretly glad someone had the guts to ask.

They all expected the Messiah to arrive, but Jesus didn't fit all the criteria they had in their minds.

"Miracles?"

"Check."

"Prophetic teaching?"

"Check."

"Political agenda?... Political agenda?"

"Umm; not really, no."

"Plans to destroy the Romans?"

"I, uh... No, I don't think so."

"Hmm, probably not our guy!"

But John was willing to ask, “*Are you, or are you not our guy?*” And if he was, he was willing to make an adjustment in his thinking about how “our guy” was supposed to look. Are you?

Good grief, trust, and humility...

Does it seem to you that some Christians expect God, like a personal assistant, to keep everything on schedule and on an even keel? They might not express it that way, but their rush to hold him in contempt when Plan A is upset, delayed, or becomes altogether defunct, is pretty telling. To be disappointed – even temporarily – by setbacks is human, and leads us into the process of grieving our dead visions. But when the Plan A ship has sailed we are advised to find another vessel, preferably the one God had in mind all along. It's called *making adjustments*.

I don't think we can make a smooth transition to a new course without **grieving** the loss of the old one. We adjust to a new home or a new job or a new ministry assignment best when we grieve losing the former one. Jesus, “*the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...*” has walked me through some major transitions in my life by first helping me grieve the old and accept the new. When we adequately grieve our losses, give them an appropriate funeral, say a proper farewell to our former dreams; we're free to dream again.

Making smooth adjustments on the fly is also **a trust thing**. When everything is static and predictable there's no need to make adjustments and we don't really have to trust God much. It's not faith if we know what to expect. But when we're placed in an unfamiliar situation, we're forced to trust. David, whose life became frequently upended and reinvented is a good example of a guy who trusted God's ability to implement Plan B. Minding his own business on his father's sheep ranch he was told to be king, when trying to be king his predecessor incessantly hunted him with drawn sword, and then his very own son tried to depose him from his throne. No wonder his musical diary is so full of prayers like this one: “*In you I **trust**, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.*”

Ever since our first parents spit in his face and decided to go with the devil, God has had a lot of experience with Plan B. Of course he has the distinct advantage of always knowing beforehand that a detour is up ahead. Because we don't possess this same capability, things come to us as surprises. Therefore, it's to our advantage to keep in mind that though we're shocked by setbacks and inconvenient detours, no such surprise is his, and we can rest assured that he's ready to launch Plan B, C, D, or beyond, as a way out or a way through our unexpected circumstances.

“*We know he works in all things for the good of those who love him.*” I'm eased to know that he knows what I don't know, knows a way to a different place that I don't even know about, and knows how to get there! Know what I mean?

According to C.S. Lewis, pride is the fundamental anti-God posture. That being true, pride's opposite, **humility**, is the indispensable pro-God attitude, especially when we're trying to adapt to some new life-detour. Sometimes in my pride I'm like that toy soldier that we talked about earlier who runs into an obstacle perpendicularly and gets stuck in marching mode against the wall until he runs out of energy. Because I was too proud to make the adjustment, I stubbornly beat my head against the wall of Plan A. Humility says, “*I'm going to be stuck right here until I get over myself enough to adjust to these circumstances that are beyond my control. It may make me look like a fool for not anticipating this turn of events, but I'm going to turn now to one side or the other!*”

Finding something good on the detour...

When something gets in the way of your intended driving route – be it road construction, accident up ahead, or buffalo stampede – besides pulling over and waiting for the situation to change – your only alternative is to take a detour with which you might be unfamiliar. Detours can be frightening or annoying, but you might just discover things on that uncharted route that you didn't know existed after all those years of speeding by on the super highway above. Life (and God) has a way of impeding the best laid plans of mice and men, and diverting us to previously unexplored possibilities below. A detour might put us into contact with opportunities otherwise unknown to us. When his car broke down, my friend, David (above), was able to lead the mechanic to faith in Jesus. Because he was sold as a slave, Joseph was put into a strategic position to rescue his family from starvation. While living as a political prisoner, Daniel helped several Babylonian kings get acquainted with Jehovah and govern their country in tumultuous times.

Adjusting to an unfamiliar detour can be unnerving. Like changing lines in the grocery store, the new route might be worse than the crowded highway with which we're familiar. When delays and disasters hit, changing a course with which we've grown accustomed can be so disconcerting that we disconsolately pull over onto the shoulder and park, sometimes for too long a time, until we eventually call up enough faith in the God of Plan B, make the necessary adjustments, and venture into uncharted territory.