

## **LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY**

by John A. Bernbaum

Living a life as a disciple of Jesus Christ is an extraordinarily exciting experience. If you desire certainty, this is not a life for you. If you want to be in control, then being a “disciple” (a follower) is not for you. This is what God has been teaching me in powerful ways during this last year and I am glad to share what I am learning with you.

The decision to leave the Christian College Coalition after 19 years was not an easy one. After four years of work as a historian at the Department of State, the Coalition was the place where I spent almost two decades, during which I lived through my 30's and 40's. Founding the American Studies Program in 1976 was a challenge which I thoroughly enjoyed. Training young Christians for future leadership roles in American society and equipping them with a vision for their work as “Kingdom agents” committed to justice and peacemaking was a powerful motivator for me and gave me a high sense of calling.

The additional challenges of developing the Latin American Studies Program (LASP) and the Los Angeles Film Study Center (LAFSC) were further extensions of the same vision. In the case of LASP, the goal was to equip Christians for ministry cross-culturally; in Los Angeles, the vision of the ASP was transferred from public policy to the film industry -- equipping students to be “salt and light” in Hollywood.

Then, in 1989, my world changed. Because of the unanticipated collapse of Communism, remarkable opportunities for educational exchange programs began to develop throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. I was asked by Dr. Myron Augsburger, the Coalition's President, to provide leadership for member colleges and universities interested in exchange programs in this part of the world. What began as an evening-and-weekend responsibility, in addition to my work as Executive Vice President of the Coalition, soon became a half-time, then three-quarter-time, and finally a full-time job.

Serving as the Coalition's Director of the “Russian Initiative” was a wonderful example of God's great sense of humor. Some of you may remember that one of my doctoral fields was Russian history, a specialization I quickly dropped after graduate school. My work at the Department of State and the Christian College Coalition did not require any continuing research work in Russian studies, so I let this specialization “go.” Little did I know that beginning in 1990 I would be living in Russia a quarter of the year and traveling there four-five times annually.

Of all the activities in Russia, the one project which captivated me from the beginning was the invitation from the Russian Minister of Higher Education to establish a Christian liberal arts university in Moscow. As this project became the focus of my work, it was clear that developing a college in Russia was not part of the Coalition's mandate and would require that I leave the Coalition staff in order to pursue this vision. Leaving a place where you have worked for almost

twenty years was not easy, especially because of long-term friendships with colleagues; leaving a regular salaried position and going on to “missionary support” was also big adjustment. Yet I knew that God was calling me to this new position. This sense of calling, which practically speaking made little sense because of all the radical changes and risks it meant for me, was so clear in my mind and heart.

These last five years, and especially the last six months since I have left the Coalition staff, have been a time of great growth for me. I have learned so much about the character of faith and learning to trust God. I thought I knew something about this, but my work has taught me new lessons. So often, when struggling with difficult issues related to the new Russian-American Christian University (RACU), I have felt overwhelmed and have been forced to rely on God’s miraculous intervention. For a “Type A” personality like me, not knowing what to do next and therefore being forced to trust in God’s provision is not where I like to be.

As I struggled through some difficult issues related to RACU during the Advent season, my pastor, Dr. Craig Barnes, reminded me of Isaiah’s insights about God being a God which we can’t fully understand or control. Our problem is we want predictability, yet God is mysterious and unpredictable. During Advent, God disrupted everyone’s lives, including the lives of the innkeeper, the Magi, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph and even Herod the Great. All of them were wrong in their expectations. One lesson from the Christmas story is that God often saves us from our own expectations!

If we believe that God is in control, if we believe He is a sovereign God, then surely we must believe that God always gets what He wants! This gives us great freedom since we know we can not outreach God and that God can free us from our desire for certainty. Our culture pushes us to develop plans, including long-term career schemes, but doesn’t encourage us to discover a dream worth living for. We have far too many plans and not enough dreams. My experience has been taught me to get rid of the preoccupation with certainty and stability and to be a risk-taker for the sake of His Kingdom.

At 52 years old, I am still asking myself what I will be when I grow up! That makes living a life as a disciple of Jesus Christ a great adventure.

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