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...for anyone who's ever asked, 'why?'

January / February 2020



The parable of the dancing bees

**New Year
life hacks**

**A rhythm
for life**

**Making the
most of my
opportunities**



At a Glance

“Ring out the false, ring out the true”

– Alfred Lord Tennyson



A day in the life

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“Frankly, my dear...”

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A rhythm of life

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New Year Life Hacks

Lose weight, quit smoking, read more books. Time to stop being predictable and think really big for 2020! Read more on page 6.



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The parable of the dancing bees

by Ian Woodley



The week had worn me out. I had been asked to mediate in a particular office dispute that had, unfortunately, not gone well. The whole sordid saga was now sliding into formal disciplinary processes. Glad that my role in it was all over, I felt completely drained.

That's when the two lavender shrubs caught my attention. These two plants, roughly a metre tall by two metres wide, were literally a hive of activity. Drawing near, I could see bees moving around the lavender, collecting pollen. I tried to count how many there were but, due to the insects' constant movement, I gave up. I guess there were around 100 bees, mainly of the bumblebee variety.

How could so many bees, all with the one urgent aim of collecting pollen from the same two shrubs, manage to continue their task in such harmony? I drew nearer to the plants. Something about the quiet buzzing hum indicated that I had nothing to fear from their powerful stings; even though such a sting taught me to be very wary of bees as a young lad.

Their movement was almost hypnotic; the bees appeared to be performing some kind of dance, gracefully moving from one flower to the next. I marvelled how they didn't appear to collide midair and it was therapeutic to find

that there was no squabbling going on. Somehow, the bees all managed to stay out of each other's way. They carried on, collecting pollen, seemingly unaware of my presence. Their harmony was infectious: I watched them for the next five minutes, feeling the stress of the day drifting away.

Eugene Peterson, a spiritual writer who passed away in 2018, once paraphrased a biblical sentiment as: "How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!"¹ I like that idea: that such harmony is beautiful. Maybe that's why the dancing bees helped sooth away my stress. I was watching beauty in action.

That day, I learned a great lesson from creation: from the parable of the dancing bees. We can all achieve our aims in life without resorting to warfare with others. It requires some effort, co-ordination and a large slice of compromise, but if the bees can do it, then surely so can we. And in the process, we may just create a little more beauty in the world.

References

¹ From Eugene Peterson's, *The Message Bible*, Psalm 133:1

Finding a rhythm in life

by Michelle Fleming

“**A** dulting” has become a common term in recent years. Usually, followed by a description of the mundane and difficult tasks that accompany being a responsible member of society. From trivial tasks like, flossing or making it to work on time every day, to more complex requirements, like navigating relationships and maintaining purpose and passion for life. We can all agree that adulting is hard.

Juggling the various responsibilities of the grown-up world is time consuming. It can be all too easy to be so consumed by wanting progress professionally and growing relationally, that all our focus goes into our external world and we ignore our internal world. In such a non-stop society, finding a good rhythm in life can be difficult.

In navigating adulthood, I have found that balance is the key to creating that good rhythm. But balance doesn't happen by itself. For me, balance is achieved through some conscious practices I use to help me find my rhythm again.

These practices involve considering my core values and then developing commitments to order my day in alignment with these values. For instance, when I feel my life getting out of balance, with too frenzied a schedule, or a lack of energy to engage in day to day tasks, I spend time reflecting on the following areas:

1. **Personal life/health:** Am I sleeping well? Is there balance in what I am eating/drinking? Do I have fitness and physical recreation in my routines?
2. **Relationships:** Am I investing in and receiving from my family and close friends? In what ways am I connecting with others?
3. **Work life:** Do my current position and responsibilities align with my gifts and talents? Is there an area where I need to develop new skills? What is the morale like on my team or at my workplace?

This reflecting and questioning highlights the areas that are out of alignment with my core values, and what I would need to commit to for there to be balance once again. I then write out my commitments as a reminder of what rhythms need to be changed.

There are commitments that are constant, like getting outside and exercising six days a week. There is something about the combination of fresh air and physical activity that helps me process my day. If I do not keep this commitment, I feel the impact in my energy and ability to be present with others.

But finding this rhythm of life also helps me explore my spirituality, too. Checking in on my internal world, attuning myself to my core values, allows me to think about the deeper things of life. In one sense we all have a spirituality, whatever you consider that to be. For me, the practice of developing a rhythm of life creates the space for me to grow in awareness of God's presence in my life, to listen for how God is meeting me and leading me during various seasons of my life. It is a continuous journey, but like most spiritual matters, progress is like



a spiral, curving around and around gradually moving closer and closer to a well-lived life.

Perhaps you are in a season where you feel the demands of adulting, and life feels a bit out of balance. I encourage you to spend some time reflecting on your core values, figuring out how you can order your day, and reflecting on the commitments you can make to have a healthy rhythm of life. I encourage you to spend time developing your spiritual as well as your physical and mental health.

It's the start of a new year, so there's no time like the present to find the sweet spot of your life's rhythm.

Making the most of my opportunities

by Barry Robinson

What is it that...

- ...flies but has no wings?
- ...you can invest, keep, save, or steal but never own?
- ...you can't buy but can lose?
- ...we can serve, waste, use and spend?
- ...you find but must make?
- ...you can kill but it still keeps marching on?
- ...is a great healer but eventually kills us all?
- ...we can never have enough of but we have all of it that there is?

The answer of course is *time*.

As we come to the beginning of 2020 my mind is focused on how I will use my time over the coming year. In the past I've made the usual New Year resolutions: eat healthily, exercise more, and shed a few pounds. They sound promising in January but I am usually beating myself up in February for not keeping them going. This year I want to think more generally about the opportunities that will come my way and aim to make the most of them.

I found it interesting that the word 'opportunity' comes from the Latin *ob portum veniens* which means 'coming towards a port.' It refers to taking advantage of a favourable wind that would blow a ship into port. In Greek mythology *Kairos* is the personification of opportunity. He is depicted with wings on his feet because he passes quickly; a long forelock so a person may grab it when facing him; and bald at the back of his head since no one can lay hold of him when he has gone (the above picture is a painting of what *Kairos* might look like by Francesco Salviati).

All of this indicates to me that when an opportunity, a good wind blows my way, I need to grab it and make the most of it because often it will be fleeting. It will soon be gone and I will have missed the chance to hold on to it.

In a country where relationships are fractured in so many ways, not least over Brexit but also in other areas – reflected in family disharmony, gang rivalry, and racial and religious tensions – I want to use my time in 2020 to cultivate my relationships. I can't solve the brokenness of society but I do have opportunities with those in my immediate circle. I can value the time I spend with my wife and children and other family members; I can be supportive, encouraging and collegial with my work colleagues; I can be caring and empathetic towards my friends, and to get know my next-door neighbours.



Perhaps this is what the biblical writer Paul had in mind when he advised his readers to make the most of every opportunity,¹ or to 'make the most of every chance you get'² – because he then goes on to write about relationships.

For me relationships are too important to start building in January and give up on in February – they take time and need to be worked on all the year through. In fact developing healthy and lasting relationships is a lifelong activity.

Will I do it perfectly in 2020? Undoubtedly not! But this year I'm not going to beat myself up over my failures. Rather I hope to learn from my mistakes so that if I miss an opportunity I can grab hold of the next one that comes my way and try to make the most of every chance I get.

As time moves inexorably forward I hope to have a relational 2020, and may it begin with me.

References:

¹ The Bible, Ephesians chapter 5, verse 16, New International Version.

² The Bible, Ephesians chapter 5 verse 16, The Message paraphrase.



Time out, world

by Pete Mill

*So look up from your phone, shut down those displays,
we have a finite existence, a set number of days.*

*Don't waste your life getting caught in the net,
as when the end comes, nothing's worse than regret.*

Gary Turk, *Look Up*

*"Don't underestimate the value of doing nothing, or
just going along, listening to all the things you can't
hear, and not bothering".*

Winnie the Pooh

These days it seems everyone you know is burning the candle at both ends and in the middle. People are stressed up to the eyeballs, anxious, burned out and just plain ill and there seems to be no way out of it, unless you run away and live in a cave!

I read an interesting approach to tackling this creeping scourge in a book entitled *Subversive Sabbath*, which suggests we bring back an ancient habit – not doing anything you would consider work for just one day a week – as an ongoing health cure for stress caused by Just Doing Too Much.

The term Sabbath is used by a number of world faiths to loosely describe taking a day out of the usual material routine and intentionally devoting that time to rest, regroup and rejuvenate; recharging both your physical and your spiritual batteries. The word Subversive in the book's title means that taking that time out is a form of resistance to a system that is steadily destroying our health.

If you think taking a whole day out to do absolutely nothing sounds impossible, why not dip a toe in the



*Put your
phone down*

water and see how that goes? You could try, for example, switching your phone to silent for a period of time, or give up technology for a day. Or become a temporary procrastinator, putting one thing off that you were thinking of doing today until tomorrow, and relaxing instead. How hard could that be?

Hmm, I must try it some time – eh, when I get a moment...

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2020 Vision

by Richard Fowler

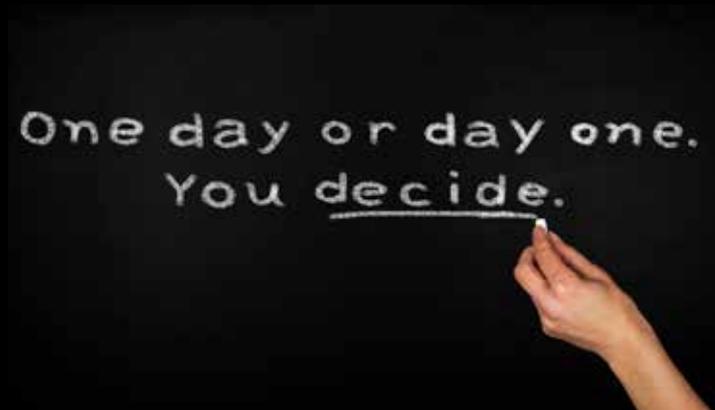
“As the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what? Ever more people have the means to live, but no meaning to live for”

Viktor Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*.

Viktor Frankl’s insights came out of the struggles he had surviving Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps. Insights that tease out some of the most compelling lessons about human nature in the midst of despair.

Man’s Search for Meaning is the book he’s best known for; if anything, it’s a treatise on hope. Hope that lifts us up, transcending our immediate limitations and circumstances, and telling us meaning and purpose can be found even in these most desperate of circumstances.

I don’t know what circumstances surround your entry into 2020: you might be jobless; homeless; single; unsatisfied with your salary; in debt; depressed; disabled, dragged down by the weight of the expectations of what it is to live in our metropolitan, hyper-techno, 24/7 world. Whatever they are, one of Frankl’s most profound life hacks is about the last of the human freedoms when everything else is taken from us.



“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”.¹

Maybe it’s that family argument that left a sour taste over New Year, or that boss you have to go back to, or just trying to make ends meet. I guess in any circumstance there is always the chance to choose our attitude, hard though that may be.

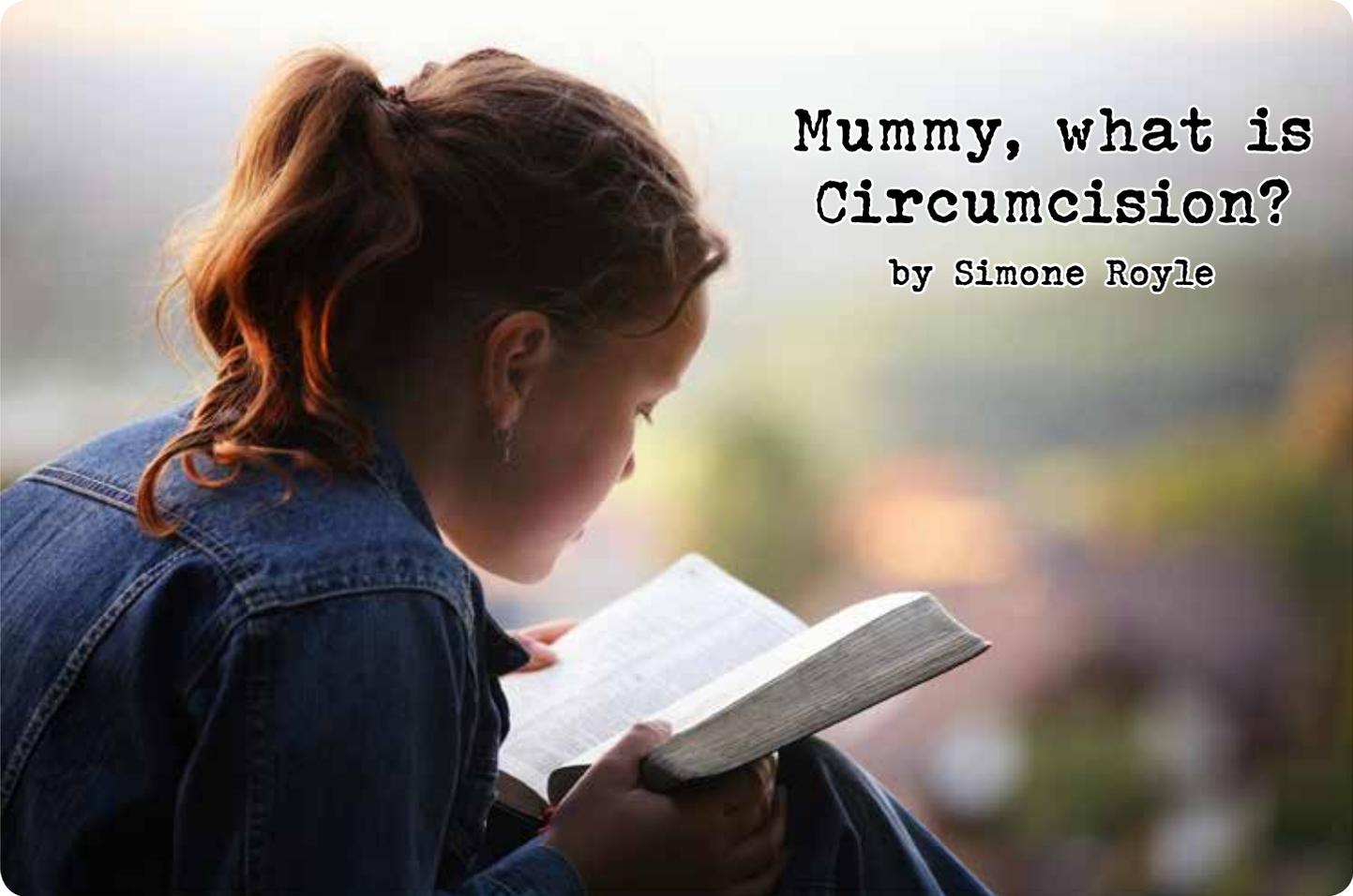
“We must never forget”, Frankl explains, “that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed...When we are no longer able to change a situation...we are challenged to change ourselves”.²

If you’re looking for where that meaning might come from, Michelle Fleming’s article on *The rhythm of life* might provide a helpful starting point.

References

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, published 2004.

² Ibid.



Mummy, what is Circumcision?

by Simone Royle

I recently read a fascinating book, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, in which the author Nabeel Qureshi, describes his mother's dedication in teaching him about the life of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. It was a contrast to my own sporadic efforts to teach my children about my Christian faith, and I was inspired. As a result, my girls and I are now very slowly working through the Bible from beginning to end. Hopefully we will finish before they leave home! (At time of writing, they are aged 8 and 10.)

We are only a short way into our journey and already it has led to long discussions and questionable explanations. Often times I find myself stuck and simply have to respond to a question with, 'I don't know, what do you think?'

During last night's session, I had to explain to my daughters what it meant when Abram had intercourse with Hagar, Sarai's slave, in Genesis. Awkward though that conversation was, we finished on a high, with reflection on the fact that Hagar refers to God as, 'a God who sees.' This is a tricky story. My youngest daughter struggled to understand Hagar's injustice at being thrown out by Sarai, seeing as she was "proud and despised Sarai". Gently, I had to explain Hagar's vulnerability to my daughter: the freedom Hagar did not have, and the world view of slaves at that time –

and yet God saw her. He heard her cry of distress.

This evening we covered Genesis chapter 17. In this chapter God makes a covenant with Abram, changes his name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. Abraham is also told to keep a covenant with God: that all his male descendants be circumcised.

Children ask a lot of questions: "Mummy, what is a covenant?" "Mummy, why did God change their names?" "Mummy, what is circumcision?"

I think I answered all their questions adequately apart from the last one – I mumbled something about it being more hygienic. There is no evidence to support this logic however. Maybe this is a question to answer at another time. (An interesting topic by the way if you choose to Google it!)

The fact is when it comes to sex, shame, abuse, violence, and vulnerability, the Bible is not shy. You cannot read the book to your children and sugar-coat it.

Does this compromise my children's innocence? It is a valid question.

Unless we opt them out, all our children will be exposed to some form of sexual education in schools, in fact it

is compulsory from age 11. The theory is that sexual predators are deterred when children can accurately name their body parts. Discussions are had about early warning signs (butterflies in the tummy, feeling shaky etc.) and when to talk to an adult, and which adults are best to speak to and which to avoid. My children's school uses a programme called Spring Fever. (See <https://springfeveruk.wordpress.com/evidence> for more information.)

Most of the resources for these lessons are excellent but we know little of how the lessons might play out in class or the conversations that might occur after with their classmates.

It is interesting that so many stories throughout the Bible, when told uncensored to children, will almost always lead to these conversations anyway. Could these passages be of value in perhaps protecting our children?

So far the early experiences with my daughters have been a revelation. My oldest starts secondary school next year, and all the difficult conversations I wanted to have beforehand to help prepare her seem to be happening naturally – all prompted by these challenging stories told in the Bible.

So I will soldier on with our family's Bible reading marathon and try not to balk when asked those awkward questions.

And I am still bracing myself for one even worse than, "Mummy, what is circumcision?"

A DAY IN THE LIFE

BY ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Ali says it's been a good day, as the light starts to fade.

It's about 4pm and I've turned the TV on so we can catch up on football, Formula 1, the rugby world cup, the tiddlywinks championship (if there was one). Anything and everything sport.

Like most 21 year olds, Ali is fanatical about sport. When he locks on to that TV, his eyes tell me he's switching off from his surroundings and switching on to this TV world; I guess through the gogglebox and sport he can be anything, do anything, and imagine anything. The next 15 minutes he spends getting comfortable, with maddening precision, before I get his feed ready and transferred via a tube straight into his stomach.

Because Ali has the Duchenne strain of Muscular Dystrophy, and things are happening quicker now.

Earlier, the morning comes at me like a dropped fridge.

The red wine the night before hasn't helped. And I'd stayed up late listening to music.



Ali with Andrew

My wife Rachel brings me a coffee – lifesaver – while I catch up on news, Facebook and LinkedIn on my mobile phone, putting off a trip to the shower as though it were a strenuous hike. The shower makes me Christian again.



Downstairs we gather what we need – more than we used to – and we're off out to the car. We're going to Church. We need more than we used to because we open up and set up. I must remember the keys! Rachel must remember 6 things, 12 if she's bringing baking. Today it's 6 things plus 2 heaters, because she's learned the Church heating system isn't working. In October. In Scotland.

We leave around 9am, P.H.O.B. (portable heaters on board) and the Power of Google says it's going to be tight.

That's earlier than we used to leave since Ali brought us into his life.

Ali lives halfway to Church.

At Ali's, I exit from a just-warmed-up car and pretend I don't resent it. Rachel will pick up Ali's Grandparents and take them to Church.

I tap the front door and walk in without waiting, that's the way we do it. He had better be ready...

He's not ready.

Morag is Ali's Mum and she is busy finishing his feed and packing. He has bags, equipment and, now in winter, layers of clothing. He has a new 'horseshoe' for his head, a new mask for his face complete with a new tube, plus packing for the tube, and a control box for the mask.

A lot of new things that remind us constantly of what is important in life and what just isn't.

But his smile is ready – it's always ready. I don't know another person who smiles so much.

We move down the house ramps, wheeling and walking, avoiding his two fearless cats, *Barney* and *The Other One*. They both have names but I can never remember *The Other One's*.

It's cold. *The Other One* gets under my feet as I open the big back door. Press the orange control, Ali tilts his chair while I open both side doors. Now it's the green control before I lower the ramp at the back. Green moves power to drive; drive moves Ali into van.

He's in, I buckle both back wheels and link the back parts of the seatbelts, and lean over to switch off his controls altogether – nobody needs a powered wheelchair inside a moving van – and then I'm back out, and bring the ramp up. At each side door I buckle each front wheel and the front part of the seatbelt. Good to go.

I've resisted the urge to kick *The Other One*, and feel good about it.

Inside, the van is freezing and I bite my lip against the cold and a little freshly remembered resentment. Ali knows and chuckles.

I check the rear-view and see Ali. He's smiling.

We're off, and for both of us it's our favourite day of the week.

Time to explain about the head 'horseshoe'. It's a contraption to support his head. Trouble is, it only works side to side, not forwards and backwards. One day, very recently, too recently, whilst accelerating the van away from lights, Ali's head falls back and he can't bring it forward again. So I find a gap in traffic and jab the brakes and – nod! – his head comes forward again. It's ridiculous. It's funny. God has a sense of humour. Yet it's heartbreaking too.

Just a week before, this wasn't a thing. Now, it's another thing.

A few weeks earlier, Ali had completed a charity walk on a Sunday.

By Monday he was in Intensive Care – Double Pneumonia. Muscular Dystrophy weakens the body generally, and particularly the neck muscles. Movement. Speech. Breathing. Swallowing.

He made it back, but it was touch and go there for a while. And now there is another new thing – he can't swallow.

Hence the stomach feed.

Things are happening fast.

Ali loves a drive. Muscular Dystrophy takes, but also gives unexpected things, and Ali has a keen sense of peripheral vision when I'm driving him.

The radio is turned LOUD, and I hear Ali singing. That's good.

Church service today includes a chat on our direction of travel, its future, and such. God keeps us on our toes with the (lack of) heating but it's nice to share a crisis, Ali's taught me that. We have the chat in a portable-heated kitchen.

Midway through the Pastor's chat, Ali lets me know with his eyes he needs that mask. It's my first time operating it, and though I had a test-run with his Mum helping, I probably should have paid more attention. God must have a sense of humour.

Putting the mask on Ali's head is like cleaning an octopus. Perhaps it's the pressure. I thought I was good under pressure. The mask needs to be tight-to-face as the oxygen is pressurised. But the mask is loose, sounding like an emptying drain, a deranged alien, an errant dentist.

It takes me 5 mins to properly fix it to his head – 5 church minutes, not normal minutes.

Mask fixed at last, Ali rewards me by going to sleep.

I assure everyone he hasn't died.

When I leaned in to hear him through his mask back in Intensive Care, my

friend Ali and I agreed his life has been unfair,

We also agreed it hasn't been unjust.

God gave him life, he got to partake in life, just like anyone who has been given a life.

When you have a friend like Ali, you see a different world full of layers of lessons.

Reach out for people who look and sound different – because they *are* different. By the way, they are also exactly the same.

Did I mention my friend Ali smiles more than anyone I've ever known.



Andrew with Ali outside the van

SPEAKING OF LIFE:

FRANKLY, MY DEAR...

BY JAMES HENDERSON

I love *CSI* and have probably watched all the episodes from the very beginning. For the uninitiated, *CSI* stands for *Crime Scene Investigation*. Of course, I prefer the original *CSI: Las Vegas* rather than the Miami and New York spin-offs.

Talking of crime, most of us, if not all of us, have been guilty of one ourselves. In all likelihood we didn't know it and didn't see the consequences. It's not rocket science to know what I'm talking about: it's how we've polluted this getting-gradually-less-blue jewel of a planet that we call Earth. The crime is the destruction of our planet.

One of my wife's favourite films contains an original one-liner that I love to use. Often. The film is *Gone with the Wind* and the one-liner is "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn". The word "Frankly" was added to the quote from Margaret Mitchell's original novel in which Rhett Butler quashed the hopeful Scarlett O'Hara by declaring, "My dear, I don't give a damn". I like the "Frankly", though – don't you? "It's your turn to wash the dishes, dear". "James", my doctor tells me, "you need to lose weight". "Should you really have that second glass of wine, Dad"? "What do you think about Brexit?" Frankly, my dears, I don't give a damn. "What about the rising sea levels?" "And the droughts in Southern Africa?" "And the disappearing rainforests?" "Don't you know that in the past 40 years or so the world's wildlife population has declined by about 60%?" Yawn. Frankly, my dear, I don't give a... but wait a moment...



I met him. The last of a sub-species. His name was Sudan, and he was the only remaining male Northern White Rhino on the planet. The first and last one I'd ever meet. He lived in the Ol Pejeta ranch in Kenya, and I had the chance to come face to face with him. Non-threatening, friendly, a gentle giant. He died in 2018. So, even though there are two females still living, it is technically the end of the line for the Northern White Rhino, which is now what they call functionally extinct – wiped out by poachers who killed them for profit.

In the grand scale of things, does it matter that yet another sub-species became extinct? Who cares? Frankly, my dear... I could and do give a damn! Of course it matters!

At the crime scene that is currently our planet, are you there as an onlooker? Or a victim? Or a perpetrator, complicit in the crime? Or as someone who cares?

To care is the start of change.

This year, when it comes to our beloved Earth, be someone who gives a damn.

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P.S. I know there are some Christians who read this magazine. Get involved in caring for the environment. If there was an investigation to discover whether you put your care into action, what would the findings be? Maybe we should have Christian Scene Investigation!

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www.because.uk.com