

Pick Up Your Cross

Sojourners magazine reports the story of Nurit Elhanan and her husband, both 52, who are campaigning for an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

What's remarkable about their peace campaign is that the Elhanans are wealthy Israelis whose 14-year-old daughter was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber.

"The pain of losing our beautiful daughter is unbearable, but our house is not a house of hate," says Rami, whose father survived Auschwitz and who lost many family members in the Holocaust.

In their grief the Elhanans began looking for people like them -- from the other side.

They met Izzat Ghazzawi, a Palestinian whose 16-year-old son was killed by Israeli troops.

Together they founded the Bereaved Family Forum.

The Bereaved Family Forum now has more than 270 parents who have lost their children in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

These parents, Jews and Palestinians, are committed to working together for peace.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

A small plane with five passengers on it had an engine malfunction and was going down.

The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group:

"Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news.

The bad news is that the plane's going down, and there's nothing more I can do.

The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there.

The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you.

But good luck.

Thank you for choosing our airline, have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be."

He gives the group a thumbs-up and jumps out the door.

A woman leaps up from her seat.

"I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast.

My patients depend on me."

She grabs a pack, straps it on her back, and leaps out.

A man stands up.

"I'm a partner in a large law firm.

The office will fall apart without me!"

He grabs a pack, straps it on his back, and leaps out.

Another man stands up and says:

"I am arguably the smartest man in the world.

My IQ is so high, it's classified.

Surely you understand that I must have a parachute.

He grabs a pack and leaps out.

Only two people remain on the plane, a middle-aged priest and a teenage boy.

"Son," says the priest, "you take the last parachute.

You're young; you have your whole life ahead of you.

God bless you and safe landing."

The teenager grins at the older man.

"Thanks, Father, but there are still two parachutes left.

The smartest man in the world -- just grabbed my backpack."

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Bishop Will Willimon tells of a friend of his who hit bottom.

This fellow literally spun out of control as he crossed the median in his sports car heading the wrong way on a highway at over 100 miles per hour, totally drunk.

He was a prominent attorney who found himself stuck in the depths of alcoholism.

He came home one day to find his family, his minister, and three of his close friends all sitting in his living room.

And it wasn't his birthday.

Yet -- it was.

He's on his way back, thanks to AA.

He is a private man, so he won't share all the details, but he did say this to Bishop Willimon:

"I was always a regular at church, but in the back of my mind, I always thought the Church was for losers, for the weak.

But you would be amazed at what I've learned about God."

"Like what?" Bishop Will asked him.

"That so much of what I heard year in and year out at church suddenly became real to me," replied his friend.

"Like what?"

"Like 'Take up your cross' and 'You can only find your life by losing it.'"

Through hitting bottom, I've met God."

"And who is the God you have met?" Will asked.

"God is a tough, relentless, devastating friend."

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Last spring, a recruiter for Teach for America—a program that looks for bright, young people from college campuses to teach in America's most deprived schools visited an ivy league university.

The university had sponsored a job fair, and after some well paying prestigious job offers were promoted by different recruiters, the Teach for America gal had her chance to speak:

"Looking at you today, I don't know why I'm here.

I can tell you're all bound for bright futures, lots of success.

And here I stand, trying to recruit you for a salary of \$15,000 a year in some of the worst schools in America, begging you to waste your life for a bunch of ungrateful kids in the inner city.

I must have been crazy to come here.

But, as long as I am here, I have some literature if anyone's interested, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

And lo and behold, she is swamped by over 100 students dying to give themselves to something bigger and more important than mere wealth.

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A woman describes her 20-year battle with cancer, a battle she thought she won ten years ago, but which recently returned.

There is a difference, however, between the battle she waged then and the battle she's waging now.

This time she senses a Presence with her, one that she identifies with the suffering Christ, one who assures her that everything is going to be okay.

And while she doesn't know exactly what "okay" means: whether she's going to live, or whether she's going to die; despite that uncertainty, she trusts the "voice" she hears when it assures her that everything is going to be all right, no matter what may happen.

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In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes this same kind of trust as he is sent to the bitter cold prison camp in Siberia:

"From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you.

At the very threshold, you must say to yourself, 'My life is over, a little early, to be sure, but there's nothing to be done about it.

I shall never return to freedom.

I am condemned to die -- now or a little later. . ."

Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble.

Only the man who has renounced everything can win the victory.”

I don't know what God's call to you looks like, what it feels like, or where it will take you, but I can tell you, from personal experience, that while saying "yes" may take you through the wringer, it will also bring you a joy that nothing in this world can touch.

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