

How to Dream Bigger, Decide Better,
and Leave a Lasting Legacy

GRADUALLY

THEN



SUDDENLY

Mark Batterson

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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MULTNOMAH

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When we began this journey,

I asked God for the privilege of pastoring one church for life.

You are the answer to that prayer.

Praise God for every single person who has found faith with their fingerprint on it.

Thanks to every single person who has invested their time, talent, and treasure.

The best is yet to come!

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PROLOGUE

PLAYING THE LONG GAME

“How did you go bankrupt?”

That’s the question posed by Ernest Hemingway in his 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The rather infamous reply? “Two ways. . . . Gradually and then suddenly.”¹

That’s how you go bankrupt, but that’s also how you get out of debt. That’s how you start a business, write a book, or run a marathon—and a thousand other things. That’s how entrepreneurs innovate, athletes win championships, and investors make bank. That’s how songwriters, filmmakers, and podcasters produce content. Regardless of craft or career, dreams don’t become reality overnight. Reverse engineer any success story, and I daresay it happened two ways—gradually then suddenly.

We love suddenly! Gradually? Not so much. But that’s about to change. You aren’t just beginning a new book; you’re beginning a new chapter of your life. I have no idea what dream you’ve set your sights on, but this is the day when decades happen.

“When you are born, you look like your parents,” said Dr. Crawford Loritts. “When you die, you look like your decisions.”² Destiny is not a mystery. Destiny is a series of decisions—big decisions and little decisions, predecisions and daily decisions. And every decision has a domino effect. For better or for worse, we look more and more like our decisions every day. The good news? You are one

decision away from a totally different life. My prayer is that God would give you the clarity, the conviction, and the courage you need to make that decision.

Your life is perfectly designed for the results you're getting. If you don't like who you are or where you are, don't play the victim. Play the long game! If you do the right things day in and day out, God will show up and show off. The pages that follow prove it. I hope the stories and studies that I share will inspire long vision, long obedience, and long legacy.

Is there a defining decision you need to make?

Is there a God-sized dream you need to go after?

What are you waiting for?

It's time to get started on gradually!

AROUND THE WORLD

At the 1984 Olympic games in Los Angeles, American swimmer Rowdy Gaines won a gold medal in the one-hundred-meter free-style, setting an Olympic record of 49.8 seconds. How did he do it? Two ways—gradually then suddenly.

America boycotted the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow, which means Rowdy Gaines trained for eight years—eight *long* years—for a race that would last less than one minute! Add up all the laps, and Rowdy Gaines swam a total of twenty thousand miles in fifty-meter increments. “I swam around the world,” he said, “for a race that lasted forty-nine seconds.”³

Most of us would love an Olympic gold medal, but very few of us are willing to put on a Speedo and dive into a freezing-cold pool at the crack of dawn every day for eight years. We want success without sacrifice, but there are no shortcuts. The phrase *overnight success* is an oxymoron. Success without sacrifice is short-lived. Don't settle for fifteen minutes of fame. The name of the game is

long obedience in the same direction. That's how you leave a legacy that will outlive you.

The essential thing “in heaven and in earth” is . . . that there should be long *obedience* in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.⁴

Friedrich Nietzsche applied this idea to art, music, and dance. If someone makes something look easy, I guarantee it isn't. Effortlessness is evidence of extra effort. The principle of long obedience holds true for absolutely everything. Success is showing up when others give up. It's no quit. It's consecrating yourself to a cause or a craft or a calling—“No reserves. No retreat. No regrets.”⁵

In the pages that follow, I want to help you go after God-sized dreams. By definition, God-sized dreams are beyond your education, beyond your ability, beyond your resources. You can't do it, but God can. Show me the size of your dream and I'll show you the size of your God. God makes big people by giving them big dreams. But the goal isn't accomplishing the goal—it's who you become in the process. Life is a journey, not a destination.⁶ My advice? Enjoy the journey—every age, every page, every stage!

You have to take a learning posture toward everyone and everything.

You have to cultivate a growth mindset during difficult seasons.

You have to adopt a GTS attitude—gradually then suddenly.

If your dream doesn't scare you, it's too small. Quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death. Go after a dream that is destined to fail without divine intervention. Live your life in a way that is worth telling stories about.

Mike Miller was staring forty in the face when he picked up a copy of my first book *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day*. “I felt

something awaken deep in my spirit,” Mike said. “I can only explain it as a dying and a birthing at the same time.” Mike didn’t even know he had fallen asleep, but the Holy Spirit woke him up with that still small voice: “Do you want to spend your forties telling stories from your thirties? Or do you want more stories?”⁷

Are you making a living or are you making a life?

Is your ladder leaning against the right wall?

Are you living your life in a way that is worth telling stories about?

This is your wake-up call.

IT'S ONLY IMPOSSIBLE UNTIL IT ISN'T

Almost everything is impossible, until it isn't.

When I started training for my first marathon, it felt impossible. I could barely run three miles, and I'm using the word *run* loosely! My pace was slightly faster than a sloth's. But the impossible became possible. How? Gradually then suddenly! I did seventy-two training runs over six months totaling 475 miles. Then, and only then, was I able to run a 26.2-mile marathon.

In the Lewis Carroll classic *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice says, “One *can't* believe impossible things.” But the White Queen pushes back, “I daresay you haven't had much practice. . . . When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”⁸

Is there something impossible you're believing for? You can't pull it off before breakfast, that's for sure! But if you practice half an hour a day, the impossible will become possible—gradually then suddenly. “There are three stages to every great work of God,” said Hudson Taylor. “First, it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done.”⁹

A few years ago, I wrote a book titled *Win the Day*. If yesterday is history and tomorrow is mystery, all you can do is win today. That book was built around a simple premise: *Almost anyone can accomplish almost anything if they work at it long enough, hard enough, and smart enough.*

If you're 5'3" and you want to play in the NBA, the odds are against you. But don't tell me it can't be done, because Muggsy Bogues played fourteen seasons. He had to train harder because he was smaller than his taller competitors, but that work ethic proved to be the secret to his success. Muggsy recorded 146 double-doubles during his NBA career. And even at 5'3", he blocked thirty-nine shots!¹⁰

There is an old axiom in martial arts: *A black belt is a white belt that never quit.* It's true of everything, isn't it? The way you accomplish anything is one day at a time, but here's the catch—you have to do it for *years* on end. That's what makes *Gradually Then Suddenly* a sequel of sorts. The rest of this book will solve for a simple yet exponential equation:

LONG VISION × LONG OBEDIENCE = LONG LEGACY

In the opening section, we'll reimagine long vision. In the age of immediacy, long vision is a lost art. We want success to happen at the speed of light, but success happens at the speed of a seed. Long vision is daring to dream beyond the dash on your tombstone. It takes time and eternity into consideration. It's doing what you do with the third and fourth generation in mind. Show me your vision and I'll show you your future!

In the second section, we'll reverse engineer long obedience. We want to do amazing things for God, but that's not our job. God is the one who does amazing things for us! Our job? Old-fashioned obedience. It's living for the applause of nail-scarred hands. Long

obedience is the key that unlocks our potential and God's promises. It's the key to miracles, the key to breakthroughs, the key to success.

In the final section, we'll explore long legacy. Legacy is not what you accomplish. Legacy is what others accomplish because of you. Simply put, success is succession. It's growing fruit in someone else's garden. Just as we drink from wells we did not dig, we dig wells for the third and fourth generation.

THE BRACHISTOCURVE

In 1696, a Swiss mathematician named Johann Bernoulli posed this question: Given two points A and B on a plane, what is the shape of the curve between the points that results in the shortest travel time for a frictionless ball acted on only by gravity?¹¹

The answer is obvious, isn't it? The shortest distance between two points is a straight line! Not so fast. The *shortest distance* doesn't equate to the *fastest time*! Those are two very different things. The shortest distance may be a straight line, but the fastest time is called the brachistochrone curve. Roller coasters and skate parks use the brachistochrone equation to maximize momentum. How? They design a dip that leverages potential energy called gravity.

If you ride the roller coaster called life long enough, there will be ups and downs that tie your stomach in knots! We get discouraged by the downturns, but those dips are often blessings in disguise. They are when and where and how we learn valuable lessons. They also produce grit, which is a synonym for gradually then suddenly! The fastest path to your goals is *not* a straight line—it's a brachistochrone curve.

When I was fourteen years old, the primary objective of my life was dunking a basketball. I wore elevator shoes to build my calf muscles and did box jumps for plyometric training. Trust me, I

have the scars on my shins to prove it. I tried everything, but the breakthrough didn't happen until I broke my right ankle. Wait, what? Our high school had three floors and eight periods, which meant I was hopping up and down the stairs on my left leg—all day, every day—for six weeks! When I broke my ankle, I thought my season was shot. The reality? That broken ankle proved to be a brachistochrone curve! The first time I dunked a basketball, it was with a cast on my right ankle.

“The Dip is the secret to your success,” said Seth Godin. Those dips come in lots of shapes and sizes—a difficult divorce, a dark night of the soul, or even a broken ankle. “The people who invest the time and the energy and the effort to power through the Dip—those are the ones who become the best in the world.”¹²

DREAM DEFERRED

I felt called to write when I was twenty-two, but I didn't write my first book until I was thirty-five. Those thirteen years felt like forever! In my early thirties, I despised my birthday because it felt like an annual reminder of a dream deferred.

Ever felt that way?

Like your dream is getting further and further away?

Like you're falling further and further behind?

It felt like I was falling behind the bell curve, but it was a brachistochrone curve! During that thirteen-year dip, I read three thousand books. That's how I learned to write—by reverse engineering those books. I wrote hundreds of message manuscripts, I posted thousands of blogs, and I gained lots of life experience—good, bad, and ugly. I didn't know it at the time, but I was gaining potential energy with every book, every sermon, every experience.

In retrospect, I'm glad I didn't write a book at twenty-two because I would have had to write a book at twenty-three to retract

what I said at twenty-two. Truth be told, my writing would have lacked gravity. Or maybe I should say, gravitas.

I've written twenty-five books in the last twenty years, which sounds fast and furious. More than ten million copies have been translated into dozens of languages, but it happened gradually then suddenly. There is no way I could have kept that pace without the brachistochrone curve—*slower* proved to be *faster*!

Technically speaking, *Gradually Then Suddenly* took four months to write. That's the amount of time I allot to every writing season. But packed into these pages are thirty years of blood, sweat, and tears. I didn't know it at the time, but I started writing this book when I was twenty-two. And that's true of whatever dream God has put in your heart.

KINGFISHER

Many years ago, I was part of a gathering at Glen Eyrie Castle in Colorado Springs honoring the life and legacy of author and pastor Eugene Peterson. Eugene pastored in Bel Air, Maryland, for nearly three decades. He also authored more than thirty books. I had the honor of endorsing his final book, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*.

Eugene's happy place was a cabin in Montana that his father built in 1947. He accumulated a lifetime of memories in that place, but that's also where his imagination ran wild. That lake house is where Eugene would rest and recover from the wear and tear of leadership.

At the Glen Eyrie Castle gathering, Eugene told a story I will long remember. He was sitting on his dock one day, watching a kingfisher do what it does. As the name suggests, few birds are better at catching fish. Eugene actually counted the number of attempts it took. "It took thirty-seven tries to catch a fish," said

Eugene. “And he’s the kingfisher!” Eugene paused, then asked a pointed question: “How many times have you tried?”¹³

Is there a dream you’ve given up on?

Is there a breakthrough you’ve stopped believing for?

Is there is a miracle you’ve stopped praying for?

Most of us fail for lack of trying—we give up on gradually. When was the last time you tried something thirty-seven times? For the record, Eugene Peterson’s first book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, lived up to its title. “Seventeen publishers rejected it,” wrote Eugene. Even worse? “I was advised that it was irrelevant to the concerns of contemporary North Americans.”¹⁴

Fast-forward a few decades and Eugene’s paraphrase of Scripture, *The Message*, has sold twenty million copies and counting. That is rare air in the publishing world, but let me ask the obvious question: What if Eugene had given up after the tenth or twelfth or seventeenth rejection letter? He would have gone to the grave with his music still inside him. Or maybe I should say, thirty books still inside him.

When you experience seventeen rejections, how do you react? Do you second-guess yourself? Or do you try, try again? When you fail thirty-six times, do you give up? Or do you double down? Only you can answer those questions!

What if the Israelites had quit circling Jericho on day six? What if Naaman had dipped in the Jordan River only six times? What if the disciples had stopped climbing the stairs to the upper room on day nine? The short answer is *nothing*. They would have left those miracles on the table. Those miracles are very different, but they happened the same way. They happened two ways—gradually then suddenly.

Pablo Picasso was born in Málaga, Spain, on October 25, 1881. He showed a proclivity for painting at an early age. According to his mother, his first word was “piz, piz”—a shortened version of *lápiz*, the Spanish word for “pencil.”¹⁵ His formal education in art began at age seven, and Picasso didn’t put down his pencil until his death at the age of ninety-one.

More than four decades into his career—already a world-renowned artist—Pablo Picasso was dining at a restaurant in Paris when a patron recognized him. That woman asked him if he would sketch something on a napkin for her, and Picasso obliged. Then he said, “That will be \$10,000.” A little surprised, the woman said, “But you drew that in thirty seconds.” To which Picasso replied, “No, it has taken me forty years to do that.”¹⁶

Whether Picasso was joking about the asking price, I do not know. But every piece of Cubist art that Pablo Picasso ever produced was a benchmark in his body of work. Each piece was an evolution of creative expression.

Picasso’s magnum opus, *Guernica*, measures 11.5 feet tall and 25.5 feet long. That monumental painting only took him thirty-five days to produce—May 1 to June 4, 1937.¹⁷ But the imagery and allegory depicted in that painting took a lifetime to imagine. That painting would not have been the same if Picasso had attempted it in his twenties or thirties or forties. And the same could be said for whatever it is you do.

If you find yourself in a midlife crisis, can I alleviate some pressure? The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that life *begins* at forty! “Up until then,” said Jung, “you’re just doing research.”¹⁸ Of course you’re also earning compound interest along the way!

“Compound interest is the eighth wonder of the world,” Albert Einstein is attributed with saying. “He who understands it, earns it. He who doesn’t, pays it.” Are you earning it, or are you paying it? And I’m not just talking about money! Compound interest applies

to everything, including art. How do you earn compound interest? Two ways—gradually then suddenly!

It's true of surgeons who perform the same operation hundreds of times. It's true of lawyers who try similar cases in court. It's true of baristas who pull shots, producers who mix and master music, sprinters who hurdle, and professors who lecture. It's true of you and whatever it is you do.

There are no cheat codes spiritually, relationally, or professionally. No one gets a 20 percent discount on the ten-thousand-hour rule. Regardless of what you do, it's probably going to take seventeen rejections and thirty-seven attempts! It'll take patience and time—but if you fall in love with gradually, time flies!

Ready or not, here we go.

PART I

LONG

VISION

In 1791, President George Washington commissioned a French architect named Pierre Charles L'Enfant to draft a plan for the capital city. That original map—the L'Enfant Plan—is now enshrined in a Plexiglas case breathing argon gas at the Library of Congress.¹ That plan was the genesis of Washington, DC. More than two centuries later, I live in the revelation of that plan.

When I run the National Mall or walk our dog around the Capitol or navigate Dupont Circle, I'm keenly aware that my reality—the streets I drive on and the parks I play in—first existed in the imagination of Pierre Charles L'Enfant. And that's true of absolutely everything. Don't miss this: *Everything is created twice!* The first creation always happens in the imagination, which is an expression of the image of God. The second creation involves blood, sweat, and years.

When it comes to the city where I live, the first creation was putting pen to paper and creating the L'Enfant Plan. The second creation has taken two centuries of manual labor, physical material, and billions of dollars. The nation's capital was built gradually then suddenly, but it started with long vision.

When L'Enfant presented his plan to George Washington, the sixty-eight square miles that comprise the capital city consisted of swampland and farmland. Few people saw much potential, but L'Enfant saw "a pedestal waiting for a monument."² L'Enfant had long vision, but he wasn't the first.

On June 5, 1663, a farmer named Francis Pope acquired four hundred acres of land that included Jenkins Hill. More than a century later, Jenkins Hill would be renamed Capitol Hill. Francis Pope named his property Rome, which many people thought was a playful pun on his last name. But Francis Pope was a prophet in plain clothes.

It is told of this dreamer, that he predicted a greater capital than Rome would occupy that hill and that later generations would command a great and flourishing country in the new world. He related that he had a dream or vision, in which he had seen a splendid parliament house on the hill, now known to us as Capitol Hill, which he purchased and called Rome, in prophetic honor of the great city to be.³

That vision—the Pope Prophecy—predates the Declaration of Independence by 143 years! How did Pope see the far-distant future? The short answer is long vision.

Not long ago, I had the privilege of touring the Capitol Dome. We climbed 343 steps to the top of the rotunda where we got a close-up view of *The Apotheosis of Washington*—the 4,664-square-foot fresco painted by Constantino Brumidi in 1865. Then we ducked through a door to the outdoor observatory where we were treated to a panoramic view of the city.

As I looked out over the city, I thought about the opening sentence from the book where I discovered the Pope Prophecy—*Standard History of the City of Washington from a Study of the*

Original Sources. It's a pedestrian title, but the opening sentence packs a punch.

As the beholder looks upon the Capital of the Nation today, with its wide, shaded streets, magnificent buildings, restful parks, costly monuments, and thousands of trees, it requires a vigorous play of the imagination to picture the swamps and forests which they have replaced and to realize that where is now the teeming population of a metropolitan city.⁴

As I stood on that observation deck and prayed over our city, I couldn't help but think of Francis Pope and Pierre Charles L'Enfant. If only they could see the city now! Then it dawned on me—they saw the city before the rest of us! How? With long vision!

TO THE THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATION

On the Swedish island of Visingsö, there is a forest with “immensely tall and unusually straight oak trees.”⁵ Three hundred thousand trees occupy nearly nine hundred acres, but the origin of that forest was shrouded in mystery because oak trees are not indigenous to that island. A hundred and fifty years after those acorns turned into oaks, the origin story was unearthed in a rather unusual way.

In 1980, the Swedish Navy received a letter from the Forestry Department notifying them that the ship lumber they had requested was ready. The Swedish Navy had no earthly idea what the Forestry Department was talking about. But after a little digging, it was discovered that in 1829, the Swedish parliament made an unusual request. Anticipating a shortage in lumber—and recognizing that oaks require 150 years to mature—the Swedish parliament had the foresight to order that 300,000 trees be planted on

the island of Visingsö and protected for the Swedish Navy.⁶

That's long vision—vision beyond your resources, beyond your ability, beyond your death date. We have a hard time believing God for cities, but God says, "Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance."⁷ God's vision is always bigger and better than ours! It's international and intergenerational. What God does for us is never just *for us*; it's also for the third and fourth generation.

Does your vision revolve around you? If it does, it'll be short-lived. Why? Because selfishness eventually short-circuits. A God-given vision always revolves around others. Long vision is digging wells and planting gardens for the next generation.

What wells do you need to dig?

What trees do you need to plant?

According to rabbinic tradition, after God told Noah to build an ark, the first thing Noah did was plant trees. Why? Given the size of the ark, it would take a boatload of planks to build it. Noah planted trees that took forty years to mature. Then and only then was he ready to build the ark. If you're going to dream big, you have to think long. You have to stretch your faith past the parameters of your lifespan.

SUPER GENERATION

The monarch butterfly is the only species of butterfly that migrate like birds. They spend their summers in the northern United States and their winters in Mexico, but it takes four generations of monarch butterflies to make this annual migration. It takes three generations to make the three-thousand-mile journey north. Stop and think about that—three generations of butterflies never reach their destination! All they do is help the next generation of butterflies get a little closer to the goal. That's how they fulfill their destiny.

The average lifespan of a monarch butterfly is six weeks, with

one curious exception. The fourth generation can live up to eight months. That generation—called a super generation or Methuselah generation—manages to make the migration all the way south, back to the place where their great-great-grandparents were hatched.

That four-generation life cycle raises so many questions. Why do monarchs migrate north in the first place? How do they know where to go? And how does the fourth generation find their way home? Those questions pique my curiosity, which I explored in my last book—*A Million Little Miracles*. For the purposes of this book, that migration paints a picture of long vision. Each generation is tasked with getting the next generation a little closer to the goal.

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”⁸

We love that promise, but it’s easy to overlook the context. The Israelites were prisoners of war in Babylon. A false prophet named Hananiah told them they would be there for only two years. The problem with that false narrative was this: If you have a two-year mindset, you don’t even unpack your suitcase. You rent the city. Jeremiah relays a very different strategy: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”⁹ How did they do this? By planting gardens and building houses. Why? Because God wanted them to play the long game!

It’s estimated that the average lifespan in the sixth century BC was thirty-five.¹⁰ So a seventy-year vision represented two generations. God was telling these exiles to do what they did with the third generation in mind. Why? Because that’s what super generations do.¹¹ Long vision is doing things that will make a difference

seventy years from now!

In 2014, National Community Church purchased a \$29.3 million city block on Capitol Hill that we branded the Capital Turn-around. It sits on the southeast corner of a 4.7-mile prayer circle I prayed in 1996. The fact that we purchased it eighteen years to the day, from the day, of that prayer walk is no coincidence. When we started redeveloping and repurposing that 100,000-square-foot building, we dug 109 micropiles forty-feet deep to reinforce the 1891 columns. Why? So we could build on top of the roof deck. If that acre-and-a-half roof deck were land, the asking price would be somewhere north of \$25 million. There is very little land left on Capitol Hill, and they aren't making more of it. A \$1 million investment to leverage a \$25 million roof deck makes perfect sense, but here's the catch: We have no plans to build on top of the building. Then why did we do it? Because the next generation might want to!

WHAKAPAPA

There is a concept in Māori culture called *whakapapa*.¹² You are one link in the long chain that is human history. You represent a moment in time situated between two eternities—the eternal past and the eternal future. It's an exhortation to be a good ancestor.

Whakapapa is represented by the rope of life. It's an actual rope with three interwoven strands—black, silver, and red. It's a continuous spiral that is two-directional. “At the same time as the spiral is going forward,” says an old Māori proverb, “it is returning.”¹³

All of us have two biological parents—a mom and a dad. We have four grandparents and eight great-grandparents, but that's where most of us stop the thought experiment. Go back ten generations, and we descend from 1,024 ancestors. Go back twenty generations, and we have 1,048,576 ancestors. That's why, according

to geneticists, all of us are at least fiftieth cousins. What's up, cuz!

In 1999, adidas ran an advertisement celebrating *whakapapa*. It began with the oldest living member of the All Blacks—the famous rugby team that represents New Zealand. The former All Blacks captain, Charlie Saxton, was eighty-six at the time. He put on his old jersey, but in the ad, he's reincarnated as Fred Allen, a captain and coach that followed him. In chronological order, with successive jerseys, the ad celebrates the lineage of leadership.

"You don't own the jersey," said one All Black. "You're just the body in the jersey at the time." The punch line at the end of the ad packs a punch: "The legacy is more intimidating than the opposition."¹⁴

Next time you feel intimidated by the opposition, remember the cloud of witnesses who have gone before you. They hold one end of the rope, and Jesus holds the other.

God's got this.

God's got you.

If adidas ran that ad for the kingdom of God, I imagine Elijah taking off his jersey and giving it to Elisha. For the record, Elisha performed twice as many miracles as Elijah. If success is succession, then Elisha's miracles are Elijah's legacy.

"What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments," said another All Black, "but what is woven into the lives of others."¹⁵ Long vision is not just brick and mortar; it's flesh and blood. It's seeing God-given potential in other people. It's kneeling down so the next generation can stand on your shoulders.

OVERSTORY

In the world of ecology, the tallest trees in a forest form a canopy that is called the overstory. It provides shade for the understory—all the vegetation that grows beneath the uppermost layer of

foliage. If you walk through the woods, it's the understory that you interact with. But make no mistake, it's the overstory that determines the destiny of every living thing beneath its umbrella of branches. The overstory is always writing the understory! And what's true in the world of ecology is true of our lives.

We get our narratives from our families of origin, and that includes false narratives. Those origin stories set the tone, set the table, set the trajectory of our lives. If you don't like your understory, maybe it's time to tap into the overstory! When you are adopted into the family of God, you get grafted into the story of God. Scripture is our script cure. That overstory starts rewriting false narratives and overwriting negative narratives. It reveals your true identity and destiny. If you give God full editorial control, the Author and Perfecter of faith will start writing His story in and through your life.

When I get discouraged, it's usually because I'm too focused on the understory. I fixate on the dramas and melodramas of my life. That's when I need to fix my eyes on Jesus. Even more than a vision *from God*, I need a vision *of God*.

Long vision starts with remembering the future. That may sound like a contradiction in terms. How can you remember the future if it hasn't happened yet? We've got a cheat sheet called the book of Revelation. If you're discouraged, make a beeline to the back of the book. Don't lose faith in the end of the story—the overstory!

I know politics are incredibly polarized right now, but the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.¹⁶ Administrations come and go, but the kingdom of God is forever. The day is coming when every nation, tribe, people, and language will worship around God's throne. Long vision begins with the end in mind and works backward. We believe for the redemption of all things—heaven invading earth.

Read the Bible cover to cover and there is one inevitable, undeniable, incontrovertible overstory: *God is God, and I'm not*. Someday I'll stand before the judgment seat of God, and you won't be on it. And neither will I. My advice? Quit playing God. And while you're at it, quit playing the victim. Start playing the long game, and it starts with long vision.

CHAPTER I

SIXTEEN MILES UPSTREAM

In December 1970, an American agronomist named Norman Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to the world food supply. If you've never heard of him, you aren't alone. Most agronomists fly under the radar, but Borlaug is credited with saving more than one-eighth of our planet's population! In addition to the aforementioned Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Borlaug was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. He is one of only seven people to have received all three awards.¹

In 1933, Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany while Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president of the United States. During the Second World War, Roosevelt and Hitler loomed large on the world stage. Very few people, for better or for worse, have had more impact on more people than Roosevelt and Hitler, but Norman Borlaug is one of them.

That same year, 1933, a nineteen-year-old Norman applied to the University of Minnesota but failed his initial entrance exam. Despite that inauspicious start to his academic career, he wasn't given to giving up. "Borlaug had a penchant for hastily deciding on some goal, heedless of its plausibility," said one biographer, "then working relentlessly to achieve it."² Borlaug was cut from the cloth called gradually then suddenly.

Norman Borlaug overcame that failed entrance exam and earned his bachelor of science in forestry while wrestling his way into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. He went on to earn his PhD in plant pathology at the University of Minnesota in 1942.

While millions of men his age were shipped off to the Eastern Front to fight against the Third Reich, Borlaug felt called to fight a very different battle—world hunger. Dr. Borlaug took a research post at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico where he cultivated a high-yield, disease-resistant variety of wheat.

In December 2006, both houses of Congress passed the Congressional Tribute to Dr. Norman E. Borlaug Act. According to said act, “the number of lives Dr. Borlaug has saved [is] more than a billion people.”³ Let that sink in for a second. A billion people! Very few have saved more lives than Norman Borlaug, and most people have never even heard of him. That includes the people whose lives he saved.

Norman Borlaug’s compound impact on the twentieth century is tough to tabulate. He certainly deserves the awards and accolades he received, but legacy involves multivariable calculus. Borlaug is credited with saving a billion lives, but credit is complicated because it never belongs to one person.

“Is *all* that we see or seem,” wrote Edgar Allan Poe, “but a dream within a dream?”⁴ It’s a rhetorical question, but the implied answer is *yes!* Every dream has a genealogy—it’s a dream within a dream. So let me play a little game called connect the dots.

MENTORING CHAIN

In 1943, the vice president of the United States, Henry Wallace, grew concerned about an impending worldwide food shortage. Wallace, who had also served as secretary of agriculture, helped

establish a research station in Mexico whose sole purpose was addressing food insecurity by creating hybridized wheat for arid climates. It was Wallace who appointed Borlaug to run that research center.⁵ So Henry Wallace deserves partial credit for Borlaug's success, does he not? He's the one who saw potential in Borlaug. He's the one who opened the door of opportunity. But if Henry Wallace gets partial credit for that Nobel Prize, you have to trace the food chain.

In 1891, George Washington Carver became the first Black student admitted to Iowa State University.⁶ After completing his master's degree, he became their first Black faculty member. During his undergrad years, Carver had a professor of dairy sciences who invited him over to his house on weekends. That professor, Henry C. Wallace, had a son named Henry A. Wallace. George Washington Carver used to take young Henry on "botanical expeditions" that instilled in him a curiosity for creation, a love for plants, and a vision for humanity.⁷

If Henry Wallace gets partial credit for influencing a future Nobel Prize winner named Norman Borlaug, then George Washington Carver gets partial credit for influencing a future vice president named Henry Wallace. But wait, there's more.

When George Washington Carver enrolled at Iowa State University, Joseph Budd served as head of the horticulture department. Budd had a daughter, Etta May, who taught art. She didn't just have an eye for art; she had an eye for talent. She said of Carver, "Painting was in him." Under her tutelage, Carver painted *Yucca and Cactus*, which won honorable mention at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.⁸ "I am greatly indebted [to her]," said Carver, "for whatever measure of success has come to me."⁹

George Washington Carver may not have saved a billion people like Norman Borlaug, but he did save the agricultural economy of the South by introducing crop rotation. Why did he pursue

agronomy rather than art? “Miss Budd advised me to take up agriculture in order to render a greater service to my people.”¹⁰

If George Washington Carver gets partial credit for influencing Vice President Henry Wallace—who influenced a Nobel Prize winner named Norman Borlaug—then Etta May Budd gets partial credit for influencing Carver.

We could play this game all day! What game? The long game. I love stories, but I love backstories even more because they reveal the overstories. Every dream has a genesis story, as does every dreamer. All of us were influenced by someone who was influenced by someone who was influenced by someone else.

Long vision is a long throw lens—it always aims at the third and fourth generation. But long vision also looks at life through a wide-angle lens. It always thinks ecosystem. It not only considers the consequences; it recognizes that there will always be unintended consequences.

SECONDHAND INFLUENCE

In 2014, the city of New York used a computer program called ClaimStat to map and index roughly thirty thousand annual insurance claims. The city had paid out \$20 million in settlements for playground injuries, so investigators decided to examine what was happening upstream. They discovered that one swing was responsible for five broken legs because it was hung too low! “All someone needed to do was go out and raise the swing six inches, and the big problem would have been eliminated.”¹¹ Note to self: Some really big problems have six-inch solutions!

Most of us tend to focus on downstream symptoms rather than upstream causes. That’s true of medicine and marriages and mental health. Instead of solving for symptoms, long vision looks for long-term solutions. The irony? The solution is often as simple as raising

a swing six inches!

Our actions and reactions have second, third, and fourth generation impact. Of course, the same is true of inactions. Like secondhand smoke, secondhand influence has real-world implications. For better or worse, we are more influenced by more people than we think. And whether we know it or not, people are watching us. That includes the little people who live in our homes called children.

One of the most mortifying moments for parents is when your kids say something inappropriate and they're quoting you! Kids are parrots. That said, nothing is more gratifying than your kids giving expression to the values you modeled for them. Either way, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree!

All of us have been negatively impacted by poor choices made centuries ago. We are also the beneficiaries of blessings we did nothing to deserve. We hint at these secondhand blessings when we celebrate Memorial Day or Independence Day. Freedom is not free. It was secured by soldiers whose names we'll never know.

Remember the Golden Rule? "Do to others what you would have them do to you."¹² When you bless someone, it doesn't just bless the person you're blessing. That's a shortsighted take on the Golden Rule. Why? It always has a domino effect. When I do marriage counseling, I hope it has a positive influence on husband and wife. But I'm also cognizant that it will impact their kids in tangible and intangible ways.

A few years ago, I started a coaching cohort with pastors. Why? Because pastors need pastors! If I mentor twelve pastors, I'm not just influencing twelve people. I'm indirectly influencing the thousands of people they lead. Influence is exponential.

Can I bring that idea down to earth?

MAKE SOMEONE'S DAY

Art Buchwald was a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for more than half a century. In one of his columns, he told a very pedestrian story about riding in an NYC taxi with a friend. When they got out, his friend said to the driver, "You did a superb job of driving." The cabbie was skeptical at first. "Are you a wise guy or something?" To which his friend said, "No . . . I admire the way you keep cool in traffic."

When the cabbie drove off, Art asked his friend, "What was that all about?" His friend said, "I am trying to bring love back to New York." Art said, "How can one man save New York?" Art's friend explained the method to his madness:

I believe I have made that taxi driver's day. Suppose he has 20 fares. He's going to be nice to those 20 fares because someone was nice to him. Those fares in turn will be kinder to their employees or shopkeepers or waiters or even their own families. Eventually the goodwill could spread to at least 1,000 people. Now that isn't bad, is it?¹³

"But you're depending on that taxi driver to pass your goodwill to others," Art objected.

"The system isn't foolproof," his friend admitted. "I might deal with ten different people today. If out of ten I can make three happy, then eventually I can indirectly influence the attitudes of 3,000 more."¹⁴

Long vision is perceiving God-given potential in others. It's Etta May Budd seeing potential in a young student named George Washington Carver. It's George Washington Carver taking a young Henry Wallace on walks through the woods. It's Henry Wallace appointing Norman Borlaug to his research post in

Mexico. They didn't know it, but by influencing one person, they were saving a billion lives!

Long vision sees the image of God in others. It's treating them as the apple of God's eye. It's making people feel seen, heard, and loved. It's always looking for opportunities to make someone's day. And sometimes it's as simple as a smile or a kind word.

REMOTE FUTURITY

There is a hundred-year-old photograph that hangs in our offices at National Community Church. Four men in top hats are standing on a dirt road surrounded by farmland. That dirt road is now Pennsylvania Avenue. In that picture is a fire station—Engine Company 19—that was built in 1910. Right behind it is a white house on a hill, the first residence built east of the Anacostia River. The four men in top hats would have had no idea what that house would become, but it was their vision that made our vision possible.

In 1996, a Black police officer named Sammie Morrison and a white pastor named Scott Dimock turned that home into the Southeast White House—a house of reconciliation for all people. We inherited that house many years ago, and we're doing our level best to stand on Sammie's and Scott's shoulders. That includes weekly reconciliation lunches, mentoring programs, and community gatherings.

The Southeast White House is in Ward 7, an underserved part of our city where many of the statistics we want to change come from. How do you change statistics? You don't just treat the symptoms. You go upstream. You disciple the next generation by giving them a dream. Or in this case, a Dream Center.

For many decades, there was an abandoned apartment building that sat vacant right behind the Southeast White House. But God

gave us a vision—a long vision. “You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,” said the prophet Isaiah, “Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”¹⁵ That prophecy is our testimony. We purchased that dilapidated apartment building for the back taxes and invested \$5.5 million turning it into the DC Dream Center.

The mayor of DC cut the ribbon on August 23, 2017, and we’ve been serving that part of our city ever since. The DC Dream Center operates sixty-four programs that impact thousands of kids. It’s a place where generational curses are broken. It’s a place where hope becomes habit. It’s a place where God is birthing dreams in the next generation. Like every other dream we’ve ever had, the DC Dream Center has a genealogy. It was originally inspired by Tommy Barnett, Matthew Barnett, and the LA Dream Center.

There is a word—*futurity*—whose etymology traces back to the third act of Othello.¹⁶ The Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott took that word and coined a phrase—“womb of futurity.”¹⁷ It’s a metaphor for infinite potential. It’s a place of endless possibilities. That’s what the Dream Center is. That’s what the Dream Center does.

We’re not just trying to build a church. We’re dreaming bigger and thinking longer—we’re trying to bless a city to the third and fourth generation. If you want to change statistics, you have to change tactics. If you want to bless a city, you have to go sixteen years upstream.

We’re bold enough to believe for Zechariah 8:5: “The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.” The best way to break generational curses is to bequeath generational blessings—one child at a time.

Miracles always start sixteen miles upstream!

A GREAT DISTANCE AWAY

One of the most momentous days in the history of Israel was the

miraculous parting of the Jordan River. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the people finally set foot in the Promised Land. They crossed the Jordan opposite Jericho, but that isn't where the miracle happened.

Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam.¹⁸

If you look at a map of ancient Israel, Adam was about sixteen miles upstream from Jericho. That is where the miracle happened. That is where the breakthrough began. Such is life! Miracles often seem magical, but most miracles happen gradually then suddenly. Reverse engineer them, and they almost always start sixteen miles upstream. Or maybe I should say, sixteen years.

My first book, *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day*, was published in 2006. But that book was first conceived in my spirit sixteen years prior to publishing it. When I was nineteen, I heard Sam Farina preach a message about a guy named Benaiah who chased a lion into a pit on a snowy day and killed it. When I heard that message, a thought fired across my synapses: *If I ever write a book, I'd love to write a book about that story.* That was the genesis of my first book and its sequel, *Chase the Lion*. Those books took only about four months to write, but they were sixteen years in the making.

For better or for worse, what's happening downstream is always the byproduct of what happened upstream. And that's true in big and small ways. Some people hesitate offering their opinion in the executive boardroom because of what happened in a fourth-grade classroom. They raised their hand, gave the wrong answer, and

their classmates laughed out loud. The laughter died down, but it never really died. The feeling of embarrassment keeps them from taking risks three decades later.

Most of us are Pavlovian prisoners to painful moments in our past. If you let your conditioned reflexes dictate your decisions, they sabotage success. Judas didn't betray Jesus after the Last Supper. The genesis of his betrayal happened when he was a little boy. "In the ancient shadows and twilights where childhood had strayed," said the poet George Russell, "the world's great sorrows were born and its heroes were made. In the lost boyhood of Judas, Christ was betrayed."¹⁹

Long vision isn't just the foresight to see far into the future. It's hindsight that finds perspective in the distant past. It understands that history shapes destiny. It recognizes that testimony is prophecy. The purpose of this book is to help you tap your future-tense potential, but you have to reconcile past-tense pain to do so.

The lost boyhood of Judas doesn't excuse his betrayal, but it does put it into perspective. We don't make decisions based on present-tense pros and cons. Our decisions are subconsciously framed by past-tense experiences. We don't react to current circumstances. We react to our entire lives! If you leave past-tense pain unresolved, it'll bite you in the back. Usually at the most inopportune times!

THE TRAJECTORY OF GRIEF

On June 30, 1860, then-bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, attended the thirtieth annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Seven months prior to that gathering, Charles Darwin had published *On the Origin of Species*. That book took the world by storm and divided the scientific community into two camps: evolution vs. creation. That's a false

dichotomy, by the way. Our capacity to evolve—spiritually, emotionally, relationally, intellectually, and genetically—is evidence of intelligent design.

It was at that science association gathering that Samuel Wilberforce became famous for one little quip. He asked his intellectual adversary, Thomas Huxley, if it was “through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey.”²⁰

Samuel Wilberforce and Charles Darwin were diametrically opposed in their cosmology, but they shared one thing in common. Both of them endured the heartbreaking loss of loved ones. Darwin lost two daughters and a ten year-old son to disease. Wilberforce lost an infant and an adult son, and his wife died while giving birth to their sixth child. What does that have to do with their beliefs? More than you think. It was grief that “pushed them in opposite directions.”²¹

Before setting sail on the HMS *Beagle* to the Galápagos Islands, Charles Darwin studied theology at Christ’s College with the intent of becoming a clergyman. Why Darwin lost his faith is not certain, but the loss of loved ones played a role. “Darwin was unable to reconcile the fact of his daughter’s painful death with the idea of a just cosmos ruled by a benevolent deity,” said one biographer. “Even before her death he had been moving away from the faith of his youth; it was gone forever by the day of the funeral.”²²

When I meet someone for the first time, I picture them as a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. The first time we meet, I’m seeing a snapshot. It’s easy to judge the book by the cover, but that fails to take into account the pain of their past. Again, a painful past doesn’t justify bad beliefs or bad behavior. But it does help put it into perspective. Just as dreams have a genealogy, so do nightmares. At the end of the day, grief pushes us in one of two directions—toward God or away from Him.

Which direction are you moving and why? How have

past-tense experiences shaped your present-tense feelings and future-tense dreams? May God give you the self-awareness—prophetic insight and prophetic hindsight—to connect those dots. That self-awareness will help you discern your adaptive strategies and defense mechanisms. It might even help you know what it's like to be on the other side of you!

AUDIT YOUR ANCESTRY

Along with his quick wit, Samuel Wilberforce was known for his sanctified stubborn streak. He was unwilling to compromise his convictions, even if they contradicted popular opinion. Where did that conviction come from? It was more caught than taught.

If the name Samuel Wilberforce sounds familiar, it's probably because of his famous father—William Wilberforce. It was William Wilberforce who was instrumental in taking down the slave trade in Great Britain. “God Almighty has set before me two great objects,” he said, “the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”²³

The apple didn't fall far from the tree!

Everybody is born into somebody else's story. That's true of Charles Darwin and Samuel Wilberforce, and it's true of you. We stand on the shoulders of the previous generation, and it's our responsibility to give the next generation a leg up. If you compromise your convictions, you're also compromising the next generation.

Have you ever audited your ancestry? I'm not talking about your family tree, *per se*. I'm talking about the overstory you were grafted into. For some, it's a generational curse you need to break. For others, it's a generational blessing you did nothing to deserve.

One of my earliest memories is hearing my grandfather Elmer Johnson pray for me. He had a habit of kneeling next to his bed at

night, taking off his hearing aid, and praying for his children and grandchildren. He couldn't hear himself, but everybody else in the house could. My grandfather died when I was six, but his prayers did not. There is no expiration date on prayer! There have been moments in my life—decades after his death—when I've been the beneficiary of blessings I did nothing to deserve and the Holy Spirit has whispered these words: "Mark, the prayers of your grandfather are being answered in your life right now!"

I can't tell my story without telling that story. In a sense, his legacy is my destiny. I wouldn't be who I am—genetically or spiritually—without Grandpa Johnson. The same is true of Samuel Wilberforce and William Wilberforce. The same is true of Norman Bourlag, Henry Wallace, George Washington Carver, and Etta May Budd. The same is true of you.

THE REST OF THE STORY

The apostle Paul ends his epistle to the Romans by naming names—no less than twenty-eight of them. Each person profiled influenced Paul's life in some form or fashion. Paul is giving credit where credit is due. Phoebe was the gospel patron who helped fund his missionary journeys. Priscilla and Aquilla risked their lives for him. And then there's someone named Rufus.

Greet Rufus, whom the Lord picked out to be his very own;
and also his dear mother, who has been a mother to me.²⁴

Does the name Rufus ring a bell? Most scholars believe that the Rufus in Romans is the same Rufus mentioned in Mark's gospel. It was his father, Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Christ.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander

and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.²⁵

We have no idea how old Alexander and Rufus were, but there is no way they forgot this moment on the Via Dolorosa. This was the day when decades happened. If Judas betrayed Jesus because of his lost childhood, this is the opposite of that. There was something about watching their father carry the cross, then seeing Jesus hang on it, that left a permanent imprint on their souls.

For many decades, Paul Harvey hosted a radio segment called *The Rest of the Story*. In his inimitable voice, Paul Harvey would share little-known facts about well-known people. Then he would connect the dots between the backstory and the overstory. The story of Rufus would have made for an epic episode. He makes a cameo appearance in the gospel story, entering and exiting the stage in one verse. But Rufus is the rare extra who gets a curtain call. Paul is writing to the Romans many decades later, which means that little boy is now a grown man. According to Eastern Orthodox tradition, Rufus went on to become the bishop of Thebes.²⁶

All of us could name names, like Paul did. And I would challenge you to do just that. When was the last time you thanked the people who have impacted your life? I recently tried to track down the surgeon at MedStar Washington Hospital Center who saved my life on July 23, 2000. His name? Jesus! I'm not even kidding. The *J* was pronounced like an *H*, but it felt like a God wink. After two days on a respirator because of ruptured intestines, God gave me a new lease on life. More than a quarter-century later, I think that surgeon deserves a thank you!

Who do you need to thank?

Whose dream was the catalyst that conceived your dream?

Is there someone who made a sacrifice that changed your life?

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

In 1996, we launched National Community Church with a core group of nineteen people. We've had the joy of serving tens of thousands of people over the last three decades, but I'm especially grateful, eternally grateful, for the original core group—Jay and Cari, Joe and Esterlin, Dick and Ruth, John and Janet, David and Paula, Bill and Sandra and Jeremy. They helped get National Community Church off the ground. And as we often say at NCC—once a shareholder, always a shareholder!

Our very first Easter, only forty-three people showed up. But I was over the moon because we had never had more than thirty, let alone forty! Almost three decades later, we have the privilege of hosting the Easter Sunrise at the Lincoln Memorial where thousands gather on those historic steps as the sun rises over our nation's capital. It has become a Washington tradition unlike any other, but let me give credit where credit is due. The Easter Sunrise is *whakapapa*—it's a sacred trust we inherited from pastor Amos and Sue Dodge.

In 1979, Amos was praying on the National Mall when he had a thought that he thought was a thought: *What if we hosted an Easter sunrise service at the Lincoln Memorial?*²⁷ Only 127 showed up that first Easter, but that's when and where the miracle began. When they handed the baton to us, we inherited forty years of faithfulness! And someday, we'll hand that sacred trust to someone else! Such is the kingdom of God—each of us is one link in the chain of church history.

It's not about us.

It's about the name above all names!

At that name, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.

Long vision begins with the end in mind. The day is coming

when every nation, tribe, people, and language will worship around the throne of God. The day is coming when we'll cast our crowns before that throne. Long vision is living this day—and every day—in light of that day. The end goal? The endgame? To hear the heavenly Father say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”²⁸