



*by Rajmund Dabrowski*

Our son Michael was just three years old, and my wife and I were pushing him in a stroller to join thousands of others at the historic Castle Square in front of the Royal Castle—the former official residence of Polish monarchs—in Warsaw, Poland. We were joining a demonstration in support of solidarity.

Peaceful protests often turn into mayhem. That’s what happened that day in Warsaw. Songs and chants for freedom were met by the force of the state with water cannons and gas pellets shot into the crowd. Soon we were on the run, covering our faces and wiping the unwelcome burning tears from Michael’s face.

He remembers little, if anything at all, though he told me recently that he is thankful for the experience. He was being introduced to what it means to stand for freedom—sometimes at a cost.

Even today, I ask myself if it was reckless. But being passive, letting others stand up against a restricted way of



life—was that a better option? We could not then and would not today make that choice.

This experience is etched in my mind and connects with Christian values and the larger experience of scores of others who remind us to stand for what is right. A *pleiad* of God's people is an example of fidelity. A list of them in Hebrews (chapters 11 and 12) refers to a "cloud of witnesses." There is an element of solidarity that connects us with each other. We are connected through flesh and blood, work and language, suffering and humiliation. At times, though not as often, we are joined together through joy and happiness. But all too often we do not realize our togetherness, this human solidarity with a community of people.

When the Apostle Paul writes that we should carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2), he seems to suggest that solidarity with the other cannot be forced from the outside. Solidarity prefers fidelity above violence. It prefers light above darkness.

Reflecting on fidelity, philosopher Józef Tischner, wrote: "When we speak about fidelity, we are seeing a statue of the great father of faith, a statue of Abraham. He was faithful. To be faithful means to be a chooser. A chosen one and the one who chooses, together. Abraham heard a call in the desert: 'Abraham! Abraham!' He answered: 'Here I am.' He was called and he chose to answer. We remember another moment when God used a similar call. He said to Adam: 'Adam, where are you?' But Adam answered God's call by hiding. He didn't wish to be seen. Abraham was—as it were—fixing Adam's error. He chose to answer God's choice by choosing."

Abraham is referred to as a father of religion. It all started with him making a choice, and when the choice yielded the fruit of faithfulness, a community, a nation, was born.

When we walked toward the Castle Square, we walked with a clear choice—to express solidarity with the people. It was our loyalty to the community. And we couldn't do it any other way.

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by Becky De Oliveira

Yesterday, which was a Sabbath afternoon, I was walking through the neighborhoods that make up the three towns that all run into one another near my house. As I approached one lovely-looking dark blue house on a wide corner lot, I heard what I first thought was a loud television. Then I realized it was a person shouting. No, screaming. *Raging*. Like a maniac. His voice was hard, rough, loud, furious, throat-scratching. It was the angriest voice I've ever heard. Was it coming from inside the house or from the fenced backyard? I paused outside, uncertain, trying to figure out exactly what might be going on. I heard a loud thud. Then silence.

*What should I do?* I thought, frantically. My first thought was to call the police. But I don't want to be some kind of Karen. I'm already a middle-aged white woman. (For the record, based on the demographics of my town, I'd wager half my house that the screaming man was also white.) I went over the things I did not know, namely, 1) whether he was raging at a person or over the telephone or at a video game or a broken microwave, and 2) if he was in fact raging at a person, was it a person fully capable of defending him or herself without my intervention? What if I were misunderstanding the situation? What if police presence escalated it unnecessarily?

My next solution was to knock on the door and see if anyone answered. If they did, I would kindly ask whether everything was OK, whether I could help in some way. But then all the voices of my friends and family came back to me, all the people who shout, "No!" whenever I consider talking to strangers (which I often do) or otherwise behave in a manner that does not suggest an appropriate level of caution, given that I am a smallish middle-aged woman and not in fact the Incredible Hulk, which is how I imagine myself. Also, my personal safety aside, what if knocking on the door somehow made things worse?

I paced around, lurking one house down so as not to be too conspicuous for a couple of minutes, and then made a decision. I kept on walking. I consoled myself with this completely pointless thought: *I'm going to keep an eye on that house*. What? What does that *even mean*? I have no idea, although I do envision pausing outside the house every Saturday afternoon for the remainder of the time I live in this neighborhood. I see me, aged 93, pausing outside the house, cocking my good ear toward the window. And if I hear screaming, then what? What will that 93-year-old woman do that this 48-year-old woman couldn't do yesterday?

I thought about the screaming person and whomever he was screaming at. I prayed for anyone involved in this hideous situation. *Awesome: Thoughts and prayers. Exactly what everyone needs.*

When I taught at Andrews University, I used to ask my students for prayer requests before class. One day, a girl asked that we pray that she would find a ride to Niles, Michigan, just about ten miles southeast of the university,



later that day. I paused and said, “No. We aren’t going to pray about that. Anyone have a car? Anyone free to take Jane to Niles this afternoon?”

The kids looked startled. They were used to naming problems and praying about them, not solving them. A young man tentatively raised his hand. “I guess could do it,” he said.

“There you go, boys and girls,” I said. “Never pray about anything you can solve yourself.”

And I would generally say this is my attitude. It’s the attitude many of us have. It’s why we get so frustrated at “thoughts and prayers” in place of tangible actions that could make a difference. *We don’t need you to pray, we say to our leaders. We need you to act. Like only you can.*

Most people I’ve asked say they would have called someone: the police, a social worker, non-emergency services, a crisis center. One suggested prayer. Throughout my life, in other situations, people have advised me to step back. “This has nothing to do with you,” they have said. *But it does have something to do with me, I protest in my heart. It has something to do with me because I am hearing it. Because maybe I am the only one hearing it.*

I should have done something different, something better. I walked, I thought, I prayed, I formed a vague positive intention. Now it’s a new day, and all I can hope is that maybe nothing in that house was as bad as I feared, or that it was but it’s resolved, or that God really is watching and intervening. And I ask for more wisdom for the next time. And the time after that. And all the times.

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*By Becky De Oliveira—*

Maybe it's because I've been doing the preliminary work on a data file with more than 8,000 observations with several questions asking participants to rate their expectations (exceeded, met, below), but *expectations* have been on my mind lately. What are they, where do they come from, and how does an experience or person or place exceed, meet, or fail to meet them? Clearly, the reported quality of the outcome has more to do with the expectation preceding it than anything else. What if your expectations were low? It wouldn't take much to exceed them, would it? And if they were high? Well, even a spectacular outcome might not impress you much.

I wonder all the time whether, collectively, as a culture, as a church, we set our expectations too high or too low.

There's abundant evidence for both overly high and low expectations. We're only a few weeks away from a



presidential election, and there is much conversation about the candidates. There always is. And maybe this is a recent phenomenon, but I rarely hear anyone express over-the-top enthusiasm for a presidential, congressional, or gubernatorial candidate. The support is more tepid, more of the “he or she isn’t who I would have chosen, but...” variety. There is something wrong with the choices—maybe many things, maybe just one niggling thing. They don’t meet expectations. They have flaws—some major, others minor, depending on whom you ask. Often people talk about choosing “the lesser of two evils” as if to underscore the horrific nature of the choice. Others abstain from the process entirely, arguing that any amount of evil is too much for them to tolerate or support. So, we want leaders we can truly admire and put on a pedestal, but we cynically insist that they are all corrupt. What an odd mixture of beliefs!

This tendency is also evident in the church. My church is in the process of choosing a new pastor, and as anyone who has ever been involved in church knows, expectations run high, especially when abstraction is involved. (It’s like designing your dream house or dream job or dream anything—where do you start?) The members have been asked to create lists of attributes they would like the new pastor to have. These remind me of the qualities a single person—maybe especially a young one—imagines in their future life partner. Sometimes these non-negotiable qualities make it all the way to the description of “what I’m looking for” in a dating profile. I remember one I came across back when these used to be printed in magazines. The Woman Seeking a Man wanted one between the ages of 40 and 42. Six feet one inch tall. One hundred and seventy pounds. Dark hair. Slightly balding. Glasses. *Huh*, I remember thinking. *That is very specific.*

My church wants a pastor who is Jesus-centered and community-focused, who exhibits strong leadership, who is an excellent speaker and has a charismatic, dynamic personality. More specifically, he or she should be visionary, accepting of everyone, willing to be an outlier, engaging, ordained or commissioned, have managerial experience, preach Jesus all the time in every doctrine, be a strong liaison with the local church school, be willing to share the pulpit, be innovative, recognize the historical legacy of the church, have a firm understanding of Adventist doctrine, exhibit strong support for the Adventist health message, have a graduate degree, and be willing to challenge the community’s understanding of Scripture.

These are a lot of qualities! And let’s not forget the unspoken ones: He or she should be married, physically attractive, and well-dressed; should have a nice family; and should be someone any congregant might want to have a decaf cappuccino with. He or she must be adept at and willing to participate in any congregant’s favorite hobbies, from off-road jeeping to knitting. A good sense of humor is essential but not so good as to seem unholy or lacking in seriousness.

No one is going to be the perfect president or the perfect pastor. We will not—not a one of us—find the perfect mate



or the perfect job or have the perfect children. But does acknowledging this also necessarily mean trashing whatever we do get? *This isn't what I would have chosen, but I guess I'll have to live with it.* In some cases, maybe this is the best attitude we can muster. But in others, our attitude toward the people around us might transform the way we see them. What do we have the right to expect from others? How can we value what they have to offer, even when it might not be precisely what we would have chosen?

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By Becky De Oliveira—

*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

—Proverbs 15:1

Earlier this year, before the pandemic, I was booked on a flight featuring a connection. Not being a novice traveler, I should have expected something to go wrong—and normally I try to be pretty chill about delays. “The right thing happens,” I tell myself sagely, nose half tucked behind the pages of a book, disinterestedly observing other passengers rage at the airline personnel. But, in this case, I was highly invested in a particular outcome—namely, that I would arrive in Denver in time to sprint all the way to long-term parking, retrieve my car, floor it to Greeley, slide into my seat in the back row for my 11:00 a.m. class, then eat a quick standing-up lunch and run up four flights of stairs to my 12:30 class. Like an Olympic athlete, I visualized the various steps; everything would have to go just right for me to make it on time. No room for error.

So naturally, error began to appear. The night before, the first leg of my flight was delayed by two hours, but it looked like I would still make my connecting flight. So not the end of the world; just a tighter connection. I could feel my heart rate increase a little, but I calmed myself. I would make it. I could even sleep in, get to the airport a little later. I booked my Lyft and went to bed. Next morning, even though the Lyft driver was five minutes late and I began to hyperventilate, we made it to the airport with plenty of time to get through security (no line). I even had time to pull out my laptop at a little café not far from my gate. As boarding time approached, however, I began to get nervous. There was no one at the gate. No plane. No way we were taking off in 25 minutes. I had to make a series of phone calls to find out what was going on: the incoming flight was delayed, consequently my flight was delayed, consequently I would miss my connection and had already been booked on a new flight. I absorbed the news that I would miss my first class with great frustration, but I felt comforted in the knowledge that I only had to make a new plan and I’d surely arrive just in time for the second class. I did the math and was pretty confident I could get there in time. My connection was a little tight—30 minutes or so—but I knew the airport well and again envisioned myself running from one gate to another and dragging my roller behind me. It would be fine.

Then the plane sat in a queue on the runway for what seemed an eternity. I kept checking my watch, telling myself we’d make up the time in the air. We didn’t. By the time we landed, I had 15 minutes to get to my gate. The flight attendant assured me she’d call, tell them I was on my way, and ask them to hold the plane. By the time I was off the plane, I had 8 minutes to get to my gate. In spite of my best efforts, it took me 10. (I thought about knocking over a couple of elderly people and a toddler on the escalator and decided against it. Half kidding.) The plane was still on the runway, still attached to the accordion door, but the staff would not let me board.



I became upset. I begged. I raged (a little). I fumed (a lot). All to no avail. That flight took off without me, and I got on the next one. I missed my entire day at the university. And in hindsight, who cares? I offer a giant existential shrug. This was a minor inconvenience. I am the one who made it major, through deciding that it was. Missing that day of class affected my life, as far as I can tell, *not at all*. I did well in those classes; I passed my comprehensive exams this summer. Missing that day did not derail my educational or career plans at all. So why did I think it was OK to be—let's face it—*rude* to airline employees for failing to accommodate my wishes?

I could offer excuses—I was tired, I was stressed, we all have bad days—but I've never been the kind of person hoping for a good excuse. I'd rather behave better in the first place. I've been observing the attitudes and behaviors of people around me in response to the pandemic these past six months and, I'll tell you, it's not pretty. There is, of course, the much-publicized violence and rage directed at retail workers over masks, which I have not observed personally. But I was contacted this week to consult on an email for parents of first-year university students by an employee anxious to avoid an outpouring of fury from parents upset that their children are homesick. I have heard from pastor friends about church members ripping them to shreds over their actions the past few months. And I wonder if we couldn't all take a deep breath and try to be better than this. Yes, we're disappointed, maybe even grieving. No, this isn't the way we envisioned our lives. But it is an opportunity to further develop qualities we all know are important: resilience, patience, gentleness, kindness.

We made mistakes and we try again. I'm vowing to never freak out over a change to my schedule ever again. Who knows whether I will be faithful to that vow? But if I fail, I'll try again.

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*by Connie Vandeman Jeffery—*

Two Christmases ago, way back in 2018, my husband received the best gift from our son and his family. A beautiful cane with a brass duck head as a handle. The cane wasn't a joke gift or a decorative gift; it was a useful gift. He needed it. His steps were faltering a bit more, and he had stumbled and fallen twice in the months before receiving the gift. Dubbed the "Ducky cane" by our two granddaughters, aged two and five at the time, it was a huge hit.

All of us played with the cane, used it when he wasn't using it, took turns walking outside with it. He didn't leave home without it. Until he did.

The kids live only a mile away, and we arrived one evening for dinner and realized we had left the cane at home. He held my arm as we walked to their front door and rang the bell. When Kenzie answered the door, she immediately



saw what was missing.

“Let me be your Ducky cane, Grandpa,” she said, as she slipped to his side. He placed his hand on the top of her head, which turned out to be the same height as the duck head on the cane. Then, she slowly guided him into the living room and over to the couch where he always sat, all the while urging him to put all his weight on her. “Lean on me, Grandpa; I’m strong,” she said.

During the pandemic, our kids and grand-girls have been part of our quarantine “bubble,” the only four people we will be with indoors. At first, we didn’t see them, during March and April. But then, we did. We’d drive to their house or the girls would come to our house. And now, we always conveniently forget the cane. Madi and Kenzie, now four and six, become double Ducky canes, and “Grandpa” walks all over the house with his two hands gently placed on two sturdy heads.

“We will always be your Ducky canes,” they chimed together, just last week. And I can’t help but reflect on the joy they receive from being the ones “leaned upon” and the happiness they give to their grandpa, the one doing the “leaning.”

I am reminded of a favorite hymn:

*What a fellowship, what a joy divine,  
Leaning on the everlasting arms;  
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,  
Leaning on the everlasting arms.  
What have I to dread, what have I to fear,  
Leaning on the everlasting arms?  
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,  
Leaning on the everlasting arms.*

A sturdy cane, or little girls offering support, or the “everlasting arms” of our Savior—truly a joy divine!

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