

# **Flying, Running, Walking and Not Fainting**

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Isaiah 40: 27-31

Psalms 137

2 Timothy 1: 1-14

Luke 17: 5-10

I have said it before and I'll say it again. The service programs run by the church through Mennonite Central Committee around the world sometimes serve us more than they serve others. I have chosen to share with you how I was personally and profoundly changed by one experience during my term of service with the Mennonite Central Committee in Indonesia. I do this because MCC workers are famous for all of their old war stories, and how they love to share them whenever two or three are gathered together in one place!

My story has to do with a complete overhaul of my spiritual life by a rather pedestrian truth. It is a story about how a certain passage of scripture became a paradigm out of which I have lived ever since.

Following graduation from college in 1959, I entered voluntary service with Mennonite Central Committee, and found myself in Indonesia, a country I had not even heard of less than a year before I landed in it. The first months in this new setting, as a completely green college graduate straight from the wheat fields of Kansas, are what I would have to call one of the wilderness experiences of my life. I struggled with the loneliness in which I was forced to exist. Charlotte and I had been dating for several months and we were serious enough to be informally engaged, but we were living a half a planet apart from each other with nothing but an erratic mail system between us. (This

was still in the days when transoceanic telephone calls were possible, but still very difficult.) I was struggling with the responsibility of getting millions of pounds of food into the country, which was in the throes of a civil war in at least a half dozen different areas. Shipments of food regularly got pilfered in the harbors before we could manage to get them out.

One part of my job was to entertain church dignitaries from the English speaking world. These persons would come on inspection trips to see what we were doing, so that after spending three days in Indonesia they could go home and be experts. One such church leader was a bishop who came to us with orders that he wanted to be shown absolutely everything and wanted to miss out on nothing. He did not know how problematic it was just to find a car to drive around in. People were fighting each other for seats on the buses. Any truck with a running board or a bare fender would certainly have people clinging to it. I knew he would not want to travel the way I did on a motor scooter. When this man arrived, I discovered that he had brought along his personal secretary, whose job it was to make sure the bishop didn't miss anything. Everywhere we went, the secretary dutifully kept notes. The bishop would point out various things and would bark a command: "Write that down, Herbert." We would pass a beggar on the street. "Write that down, Herbert." One day we drove past a group of women taking a bath in the canal, which also served as the sewage disposal system for the city. "Write that down, Herbert."

Perhaps you will forgive me for not being overly enthusiastic upon receiving word that I was to entertain a certain Dr. John MacKay, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, who was coming to Indonesia for a visit. He was to be given VIP treatment.

When I picked him up at the airport, I met a distinguished looking gray haired gentleman, not unlike many other distinguished looking gray haired gentlemen I had met before.

On the way back from the airport, I became concerned about some of the remarks he made as we drove along. It did not seem that he knew which country he was visiting. I debated with myself on how to tactfully ease him into the awareness that he was in Indonesia. Then I decided that maybe it didn't matter whether he knew which country he was visiting. We were almost back at the guest house where I lived and where I was taking him, when we encountered one of those horrendous traffic jams at a railroad crossing, which only those who have visited Asia can understand. When I stopped the car, we were, as usual, surrounded by every form of cargo and cargo transport known to the mind of humankind, including oxcarts and horse carts and hand carts and bicycles and mopeds and bicycle taxis and military vehicles and trucks, spewing their diesel exhaust throughout the whole massive tangle of humanity while the freight train slowly crawled, car after car through the crossing. When the arms went up, I knew there would be the usual game of chicken, a grand melee with all vehicles and animals and people from both sides pushing, shoving, shouting and cursing their way across the tracks. It was no place to get caught outside your car if you had one.

My guest sat there without comment for quite awhile, and then without warning, opened his door and stepped out. "Wait a minute, Dr. MacKay, are you getting out?" Dr. MacKay stood by the side of the car for a moment. "Did you want to lock up?" he asked. "No, we are not stopping here," I said. He was obviously unaware that we were stopped at a railroad crossing. He eased himself back into the car. I breathed a sigh of

relief and realized that this particular church visitor would need a lot more than VIP treatment. He needed TLC.

Somehow Dr. MacKay made it through the receptions, tours, introductions and speeches that week. You will not be surprised that I did not look forward to his Sunday morning message at the English speaking congregation in Djakarta. But I made sure he was there on time.

His graying eminence mounted the pulpit, fumbled through his notes and began his sermon based on Isaiah 40: 28-31:

Have you not known, have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,

The creator of the ends of the earth.

Who does not faint not grow weary,

And whose understanding is unsearchable.

Who gives power to the faint,

And who strengthens the weak hearted.

Even youths shall faint and grow weary

Young men shall fall and be exhausted.

But they that wait upon the Lord

Shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings like eagles.

They shall run and not be weary.

They shall walk and not faint.

"Life brings to us all kinds of experiences," said Dr. MacKay. There are times when we mount up with wings like eagles. We seem to be on top of everything. We soar. Then there are other times when we run with all our strength just to keep up or stay even. There are also those times when all we can do is walk, and keep from fainting.

He went on to explain that God is the one who gives us the power to soar, run and walk. God does not expect us to always fly or always run. God is there to sustain us when all we can manage to do is to keep from fainting.

His sermon was spoken in the simple, soft manner of an old man who has experienced a lot of living. He lost his train of thought several times during the sermon. But he got through it. His metaphors of flying, running and walking have become paradigms in my spiritual life. I know when I am soaring. I know when I am running as hard as I can just to stay even in the race of life. I also know when I am just managing to keep from fainting. Somehow this old man helped me put away forever some illusions I had about what it means live the life of faith and be spiritual. I had grown up with the idea that being spiritual was only another term for soaring. Mounting up with wings like eagles, I thought, was what the spiritual life was all about. Somehow Dr. MacKay helped me to understand that life involves a lot of running on the ground, sweating it out, trying to keep just one step ahead. He also helped me to understand that there are times when not fainting is something we should not be ashamed of. Not fainting is in fact what God enables us to do.

Such a view of the spiritual life had somehow never been taught in my church or family. I had been led to believe that real spirituality consists in soaring — or at any rate

something a bit more heroic than not fainting. I had pursued the idealistic vision, nurtured by the gospel songs of my youth, which conveyed to me the idea that living by faith is a matter of "living on the mountain, underneath a cloudless sky. I'm drinking, from the fountain that never shall run dry." It was a matter of having that "blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, Oh what a foretaste of glory divine." It was a matter of "standing on the solid rock," while "all other ground is sinking sand." Somehow I had not been able to have the blessed assurance, nor did I experience life as a mountaintop experience "underneath a cloudless sky," and neither did I feel like I was standing on the solid rock. I had felt more like I was on a slippery slope.

Dr. MacKay demanded of me a broadening of my repertoire as to what constitutes spiritual living. There is strength to be found in soaring like eagles. Certainly we must have those times when we soar victoriously. There is also strength to be found for running the race. But there is also the strength to be found for not fainting. We should not expect always to soar, and we should not pretend that soaring is the normative spiritual experience. Sometimes it is honorable just to keep from fainting.

One of my friends got tired of trying to answer the question "How are you?" Instead of answering "Just fine," he began saying "Well, I keep showing up." People don't know what to do with such an answer. "Is that all you can say for yourself?" or "Is it really that bad?" are common comebacks. Just showing up is sometimes all that can be asked or required.

At the end of my four years of service in Indonesia, I went home quite discouraged and exhausted. I felt that I have given my best, but it was not good enough. We had trimmed the program to less than half its size because we could not keep the

food from showing up on the black market, where it made rich people out of unscrupulous types. I went back to New York for my debriefing at Church World Service, feeling pretty much like a failure. Frank Hutchinson, my director, said, "Mel, we can't tell you how happy we are with what you accomplished in Indonesia." I nearly fell out of my chair, and managed to mumble something about not feeling like it was very much. "No," he said, "You did very well. You maintained an address for us."

My first reaction was that this man is speaking in a forked tongue. But I knew that there was not a single insincere bone in Frank Hutchinson's body, so I had to accept his complement at face value. Sometimes you maintain an address, and it is good enough. Sometimes you keep showing up, and it is good enough. Sometimes you keep from fainting, and it is good enough. Amen.