

Called



My Journey

— to —

C.S. LEWIS'S HOUSE

— and —

Back Again

Ryan J. Pemberton



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P U B L I S H E R S

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Introduction

Bob Dylan once said a poem is a naked person. I'm not much of a poet, but I hope you'll excuse me if I go ahead and take off all these layers.

This is a story of dreams coming true. It is a story of love and loss and adventure. It is a story of new life. But in the end, this is a story of how I failed, and what I learned about what it means to be called by the living God.



The cramped room smelled musty, like an ignored closet shut up for far too long. The blinds on the windows were pulled taut, refusing to let in much of any light. Other people were sprinkled around the room, all quietly waiting their turn to be seen.

It had been several years since my wife and I liquidated our retirement accounts in the worst economy since the Great Depression and left our jobs and the only home we had ever known to set out in pursuit of what we believed to be God's call on my life. This call had led us on a journey to England, to the

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school of my dreams. It had meant having the kind of experiences I would not have believed possible had someone shared them with me before we left.

But now I found myself back in the States, resting my head against the brick wall in the back row of a social services waiting room, reflecting on how I had gotten there. Seated beside my wife and our baby girl—who had yet to celebrate her first birthday—I felt as though this was the end of our journey. And yet, in a very real way, I realized then that it was also the beginning.

It was in that quiet waiting room, where the eyes of people silenced by humiliation bored holes into the carpet, that I realized what our journey had meant. Even though the scene amounted to nothing short of my worst nightmare, a peace surrounded me on that afternoon. It was the kind of peace that's only properly described as surpassing all understanding. It's the kind of peace that puts a smile on your face when you might otherwise feel like crying. The peace that makes you kiss your wife on her forehead, the only other person in the world who knows just as well as you do what this journey has cost. It is the inexplicable peace that makes you smile at your daughter, with her apple-cheeked grin staring back at you, recognizing for the first time that *this* is what it means to follow the living Son of God.

I had spent the entirety of my short life running from the poverty of this room. But it was only here that I learned what it means to be called. It means, in a way I would not have believed before we set out on this journey, that even sitting in my worst nightmare, I wouldn't have it any other way.

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Origins

An Unexpected Journey

You would completely misunderstand all I'm about to tell you if you didn't first know that studying theology at Oxford represents the complete opposite of everything I ever wanted growing up. If someone had told me when I was in high school that I'd one day leave a great job and move to England to study theology, I would have said they were crazy. That is, after I asked what "theology" is.

You see, I grew up in the far, far northwest corner of the States, in a valley that's home to row after row of raspberry plants and corn fields and dairy farms. My hometown lies somewhere halfway between the Cascades mountain range and the Pacific Ocean, where dairy cows outnumber people ten to one, and the lone blinking stoplight is more of a luxury than a necessity. The oldest of three, I played the role of son, brother, and father from a young age, wishing things were easier, more like the homes of other kids I knew. I remember Top Ramen and asking my mom how long

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we'd have to use food stamps and her silent, angry face. I remember standing in the outfield with my mitt on my hand wishing my dad was there, behind the chain-link fence with the other dads. I longed for my real dad, not one of the men who would stay with us for a month or two, maybe longer, with their strange, unfamiliar smells and habits. Those men who would teach me some things, and then fade away like the memory of a dream.

It took me a long time to realize I spend most days trying to not be that little boy. I still cannot eat Top Ramen.

My mom's hair is the color of sunshine, hanging from her head in a heap of curls, with a golden smile to match. My mom loved people, and she showed me the importance of helping others. When she was in high school, she worked with kids whose brains and arms and legs didn't work right. That's where I got my name, Ryan, she'd tell me. From one of those kids. "He had a beautiful spirit," she'd later tell me. I met him when I was in college. He was stooped over, with tufts of grey hair on his head, light blue circles around his eyes, and drool hanging from his mouth. I had no idea what to say. And he didn't talk.

We moved a lot growing up. I had probably lived in a dozen different homes (if not more) by the time I was in middle school. Mostly in the same town, though not always. I was a freshman in high school when I stopped unpacking all my boxes, leaving a stack in my closet that I didn't bother with. My mom always seems happy in my memories. But she wasn't. Not all the time. Sometimes I think those of us who seem most happy are actually hurting the most. I remember finding bottles under the sink and late night drives, praying we'd make it home safely. I remember waking up in the middle of the night as a young boy and finding my mom at the neighbors' house, sitting on a chair in the

kitchen wearing nothing but a blue, scratchy tarp, refusing to look at me. There were times when she'd have to go away, and my brother and I would stay with my grandfather for a while.

My father was trained as an electrical engineer in the Air Force. Later, he worked on lasers for big companies that made computers. He lived in Vermont, California, and Texas, and his work often took him overseas: England, Korea, Germany. I did not know why we weren't together, my mom, my dad, and me. I would see my dad once or twice a year, and he'd send packages in between. Once, I received a letter from my father, accompanied by a photo of him standing in front of Stonehenge, his shoulders hugging his ears against the wind. He'd send mixtapes, too—U2, The Police, and Genesis. I'd listen to the words, "I could walk to your house, walking on the moon," on the Walkman my dad had also sent while I waited for the school bus, and I'd picture my dad walking on the moon. When an older boy asked to listen, I told him I got it from my dad. He asked if my dad had made the music and I realized I didn't know. So I told him he did.

I remember seeing a commercial for green Moon Shoes as a young boy, with smiling kids bouncing high into the air and laughing. I remember thinking, *I've got to get my hands on a pair of those*. A while later, I finally saw those Moon Shoes in an oversized box in the toy store and I walked away disappointed. There's no way those things would get me to the moon, I realized.

When I visited my dad in Vermont—I was five the first time I flew cross-country on my own—he'd take me for a ride on his motorcycle. Cringing at the sound of thunder at night, he'd tell me that I didn't have to be afraid, that it couldn't get us inside. I would watch him struggle on the lake with his windsurfing board. "Not enough wind today," he'd tell me afterward. In

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California, we would travel all day in the car, and then spend the following day at amusement parks. And when he flew to Washington to see me, we'd share a large plate of nachos from a pub, play pool, watch movies, and I'd always wonder why he had to talk to everyone. Especially the women. Once, when he picked me up from the airport—his car always smelled like we were the first ones to use it—he took me to the mall and told me I could pick out some clothes. I told the woman working there that I wanted the outfit the plastic, headless white body wore. A week later, I flew home. I remember standing outside, looking at our trailer of a home, still wearing my new shirt, missing my father, and wondering why things had to be this way.

Growing up, my grandfather stood in for my dad in many ways. He taught me which is a Phillips-head and which is a flat-head screwdriver. He taught me the Lord's Prayer, and he told me that if I see something that needs to be done, I should go ahead and do it without waiting to be asked. The smells of fresh-cut wood and Coppertone sunscreen float through my memories of summers spent working on projects around the house with my grandfather. Since he has been retired for as far back as I can remember, we'd often spend our time together working on projects, like fixing things at the children's museum, where there was a full-size wooden train, and an oversized mouth with grotesque teeth and a punching bag for an uvula that you could crawl into and walk around in. Or sometimes we would pick up hot meals from the hospital and deliver them to older people who could no longer make it out of their houses. My grandfather and I did the kind of things you don't realize until you're much older that not everyone does.

At the end of a long day, we'd walk several blocks to the ice cream shop, the one with the old piano that played Ragtime tunes, mysteriously on its own, and the Elvis records and American flags and "I like Ike" metal buttons hung on the walls. We'd walk home with the sweet, creamy taste of strawberries and stories from our day's work on our lips.

One of my earliest memories is of my grandfather pulling me on a metal chute we used as a sled across the slab of concrete beside the garden behind his home; the metal against the concrete made a sound like plates of earth scraping against each other. And whenever I'd stay over on a school night, my grandpa would pack my lunch in an embarrassingly oversized, grocery-store paper bag, sending me off to school the next morning with a meal that was far too big for me to finish.

On the drive to school, he'd ask if I wanted to go to class or catch rabbits. My grandpa (who I called Bop, for reasons I cannot now remember) grew up in the South in the Dust Bowl era. The youngest boy in a family with too many mouths to feed and only his mother to raise them, he grew up learning how to catch his dinner. I don't think I ever traded school for catching rabbits. "I need to go to school," I'd tell my grandpa, and he'd say okay, put in a Ray Stevens cassette tape, and drive me to class.

As a boy, I dreamed about my future kids having two parents at home to tell them goodnight and never worrying about how the groceries were going to be paid for that month. And, perhaps naively, I figured if I worked really hard, harder than anyone else, I could form those dreams into a reality with my own two hands. That's what success looked like to me—always having fresh orange juice with breakfast, and a mom and a dad

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on the couch together for movie nights—even though I had no idea what it was I actually wanted to do with my life.



Jen was standing on stage in our high school auditorium the first time I saw her. A tiara sat atop her neatly woven, chocolate-brown hair. She was dressed in a pink gown and was wearing the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. At a time when I needed a best friend, she became mine. It wasn't long after that I stood in our kitchen and told my mom that God had created that smile just for me. A few months later, I told Jen late one night that I loved her. And I did.

Like me, Jen was the oldest of three kids. But she had the kind of childhood I always dreamed of. Her dad coached her ball teams, and she was raised in a home where they went to church not just on Sundays, but on Wednesday nights, too. She grew up with a large extended family that spent their summers on the lake. She always knew she wanted to be a mother one day, and she knew she wanted to raise her kids with the same experiences she'd had as a young girl, surrounded by cousins and aunts and uncles and barbeques at the lake.

I wanted stability, and the money that would make it possible. Jen wanted a close family. At the time, I didn't realize just how different our dreams were. In a way, it's funny to think two kids who wanted such different things ended up together, but we did. Neither one of us would have guessed when I grafted my life to hers, and hers to mine, that we'd both leave our stable jobs and move to England just a few years into our marriage so I could study theology. But that's exactly what happened.

Two classmates from middle school stand out in my mind to this day, largely because they helped shape much of the way I thought about religion for many years—about people who believe in God and those who laugh at people who do.

Even in middle school, Greg was the kid who always wanted to talk foreign policy and debate recent political news. He had a massive vocabulary, and he'd often use words that none of us knew. Greg spoke in a calm, dry tone most of the time. Except when he got worked up. Then his voice would quicken to a frantic pace.

Mindy sat in the front row at school and attended her church's youth group. She was polite, from a Christian home, and while I'm sure she made good grades, she wasn't known for her intelligence. Not like Greg.

Greg and Mindy's debates were renowned in our middle school. Their debates centered on Christianity, mostly, and the existence of God. Mindy stood on the side of belief and religion and Christianity. Greg represented those who thought such things were a joke. And Greg always steamrolled Mindy in these debates. She would often be so visibly frustrated by the time they were through that she'd only make the rest of us laugh even harder.

Though I didn't realize it until many years later, Greg and Mindy became caricatures in my mind of those who believe in God and those who do not. Believers, in my mind, were associated with Mindy: naïve and willing to accept ridiculous claims that no one in their right mind could actually believe. Those who

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cannot really explain why they should believe such things, but simply accept them because that's what they're supposed to do.

Nonbelievers, on the other hand, were associated in my mind with Greg: intellectual, rational, not accepting things on faith, but critically analyzing that which they believed before accepting it as true.

The unfortunate part about all of this is that I thought the Christian story was beautiful. My mom took me to church off and on growing up. I was even baptized when I was in the third grade, in that musty-scented church with the flannel board Jesus and the potlucks and the pastor's gray-haired wife who made the most delicious homemade applesauce. So I was familiar with the story of God entering our world to lay down his life, to make right not only the brokenness of our relationship with God, but the brokenness inside each one of us. It was the most extraordinary story I had ever heard. But I was still plagued by these caricatures. I was torn. I considered myself a relatively smart kid who could think for himself, and I didn't want people to think I was naïve. I knew there was a difference between thinking something is beautiful and thinking something is true. C. S. Lewis's writing made me think maybe Christianity could be both.

I remember reading Lewis's words on a late December night, by the light of my desk lamp in my grandparents' basement, where I lived as a college sophomore. I had never read Lewis before, so I knew very little about him. All I knew was that he wrote a few books about a lion and some children and a wardrobe (though I wasn't sure what a wardrobe was). But as I read Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, I suddenly realized this wasn't just a beautiful story. I realized Jesus was a real man, with real air in his real lungs, and real blood flowing through his real veins.

It sounds so funny to admit now, but Lewis's writing made me realize that maybe this beautiful story really did happen once. Maybe the veil was pulled back and we were all granted a glimpse of the unspeakable Mystery. Maybe the unspeakable really had become speakable; the untouchable, touchable. Most importantly, C. S. Lewis helped me realize Jesus' words had massive implications for my life.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis put his arm around my shoulder and said, "You don't have to feel like a fool for believing this, you know." That was the first time I ever felt that way. Lewis took a logical, creative approach to consider Christian beliefs. He used analogies and reason to talk about things like whether Christ was just a man or something more. And that approach was so foreign to me.

As I read his words, I found myself encouraged that I didn't have to leave my mind at the door in order to be a Christian. I felt like he pushed me to dig into the Christian faith in a way I never had before. Even though we never met, and even though he passed away more than twenty years before I was born, Lewis is the one who put my hand in the hand of our Lord and said with a smile, "Go for it, and don't feel as though you have to hold back."

"People don't realize how a man's whole life can be changed by one book," Malcolm X once wrote. And I think that's true. It's certainly true of my life. There in the dim stillness of my grandparents' basement, I put both feet into the Christian tradition for the first time. Lewis's words were encouraging me, pulling me along, inciting me to go the whole way to Christ and not look back. The Christian story became real to me that night in a way it never had before. Though I didn't realize it at the time, Lewis's words changed the entire direction of my life.



After graduating from college and marrying Jen, I began working at a marketing and public relations firm. It was there that I discovered my passion for storytelling. One of my clients made braces for young girls and boys all over the world who had trouble walking because their legs and feet didn't work right. I loved sharing their stories.

Not all of my clients' stories were as admirable, of course. And it wasn't long before I began to imagine myself many years later looking back on my career and thinking, *This is what I did with my life: I helped companies make more money.*

It was also during this time that I realized Lewis's approach to questions about God and faith, about life in Christ had captured my heart. And my mind. Because of Lewis, I was reading and writing about theology in my free time. Before long, I realized I was the only person I knew who was working in public relations by day and reading and writing about theology by night. I began to wonder what that meant. Soon, I imagined a new path for my life. Or perhaps a new path was imagined for me; I'm not quite sure. But with a bit of education, I thought maybe I could help articulate the Christian narrative, the story of God's in-breaking Kingdom. Maybe I could write and speak in a way that helped make this Good News tangible, to help people feel its texture between their fingers, feel it in their bones. Perhaps I could even help others see Christ more clearly, as C. S. Lewis's writing had done for me.

I kept this idea to myself for some time before I finally shared it with my wife. I told Jen I felt God was calling me to use my gifts of writing and speaking to help tell his story. I also

told her about my dream of going to Oxford to study theology. Even though Lewis never studied theology, that's where C. S. Lewis had studied and taught, and I knew I'd like to follow in his footsteps in some small way. Of course, this represented the complete opposite of Jen's dreams of staying near her family, of settling down and starting our own family. Without hesitating, she told me that she agreed. She thought God was calling me to this as well.

"You should at least apply," she told me. "That way you'll know if this is something we're supposed to do or not."

But I didn't. Not right away, at least. I was too scared.

Our good friends Doug and Carol were over for dinner a while after I first shared this thought with Jen. Doug and Carol are an older couple who have not only become close friends over the years, but also mentors in many ways. Carol is a bright, beautiful older woman with a singsong voice and attentive eyes. She is soft-spoken, and her warm presence feels like a plate of fresh-out-of-the-oven chocolate-chip cookies. Doug has a tall, athletic frame that spills the beans about his glory days as a basketball player. He's now a math professor; he taught Jen. Doug has a sharp, analytical mind, and we always have great conversations about faith and life whenever we're together.

The four of us were sitting around the living room, talking over coffee, after dinner at our home on this particular evening. Carol knew I had been talking with Doug about what I thought God might be calling us to do, about how I might integrate my faith with my work.

"So, where're you at with that, Ryan? What's the status of that itch?" Carol asked.

"Well, it's still there," I said, taken aback by her directness.

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“Yeah? Well, what are you going to do about it?” she replied with a playful grin. She wasn’t letting me off as easily as I had hoped.

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “Nothing, probably.”

Doug laughed from his seat across the room.

“Oh, come on!” Carol retorted. “What would you be doing if nothing was stopping you?”

I paused, to gauge if Carol really wanted to know, or if these questions were just for the sake of conversation. She looked back at me with narrowed eyes and a sly smile.

“If I could do anything? Honestly, I’d love to teach and write about theology someday.”

“Really! Oh, Ryan, that would be great!” Carol paused for a moment, holding her coffee between her two hands and looking off somewhere in the corner of the room, letting this news settle in. Then she dove headfirst into making plans.

“Now, you’d have to go back to school. Where would you want to study?”

Again, I took a second to consider whether I should pour out my heart or hold at least part of it back.

I’ve gone this far, I thought to myself, and she hasn’t laughed me out of the room yet. I guess there’s no hurt in going the rest of the way. Even though this was totally out of my comfort zone, I decided to tell her.

“Oxford,” I said. “I’d love to study at Oxford.”

Carol’s eyes got big and her mouth fell open.

“I knew it! I knew you were going to say that!”

“Really?” I asked, scrunching up my face.

“Yes, I just knew you’d want to go somewhere exceptional,” she said. “I knew you’d want to travel and go somewhere far away.”

Pausing once more, I could see her wheels turning. And then, looking at me with a smile, Carol finally spoke up.

“Well, you’re going to have to go for it, then.”

“Okay, but let’s be realistic . . .”

“Realistic?!” Carol belted out so loudly and deliberately I was almost ashamed of my words. “What’s not realistic about that, Ryan?”

Carol and Doug spent the next two hours talking Jen and me into booking a trip to England that summer. We would use the time to visit Oxford, to meet with professors, and to look into whether attending Oxford might even be an option.

“If you don’t go after this now,” Doug said from across the living room, finally breaking his silence, “you’re going to spend the rest of your life wondering, what if?”

Doug was right. I knew I had no choice. This itch would not go away on its own.

After much prayer, many conversations, and our first trip to England, I applied to Oxford. But I never believed I’d actually get in. I knew I didn’t fit the mold of the typical Oxford applicant—I wasn’t even the valedictorian at my small, rural high school, and I was one of the first people in my family even to go to college. In fact, just confessing that I wanted to go to Oxford was embarrassing. But I applied, mostly so that I could sleep at night.

When I finally got up the courage to tell my grandfather what I was doing, he asked me where Oxford was.

“England,” I told him.

“That’s the worst news I’ve heard in a long time.”

His words stung deeply. From as far back as I can remember, I only ever wanted to make my grandpa proud. Jen spoke up for

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me when I couldn't, explaining what an honor this would be if it actually came through. My grandpa was silent.

I spent three months working on applications and sitting through phone interviews. Even then, I was so sure I was not going to get in that it actually made things easier on me. The night before my phone interview, I found out only five people in the world had been accepted the year before to study theology at the college where I had applied. Only one of which was an American. In a weird way, knowing that being accepted was such a long shot erased any stress about the interviews. Jen and I were happy with our lives; we were certainly comfortable. We had great jobs, and we were surrounded by friends and family. We came to the conclusion that if I were accepted to Oxford, we'd go, and we'd pursue this calling that God had placed on my heart. And if I did not get in, well, we thought that must mean we were right where God wanted us.

"If it's where God wants you to be, it'll work out," my grandpa would eventually tell me.

On Christmas Eve, I received a letter in the mail. Were on our way to a Christmas party at the time and in such a hurry that I didn't even take the time to read the envelope, which would have told me it was from Oxford. Thankfully, I opened the letter before tossing it in the garbage with the rest of the junk mail. I was stunned to read the first sentence. Standing there in the kitchen in disbelief, all of our conversations and prayers and dreams about Oxford suddenly became a reality.

I made it to the living room, still holding the letter in my hand, just as Jen was coming down the stairs. Turning to look at me with those deep-blue eyes, she knew what had happened before I could say a word.

At twenty-five, I found myself saying good-bye to the kind of career I'd dreamed of as a young boy, worrying about things like rent and grocery bills and whether we'd stay in this house for more than a couple years. I was, of course, still the same little boy inside, lusting after a career that promised security for my family. And having no promise of security on the other side of this move scared me. Leaving a great job to go after what I believed God was calling me to felt irresponsible.

So I left my job with a cardboard bankers box in my hands and tears in my eyes, unsure of where this journey would lead us, but confident that this first step was the right one. Short of a calling that somehow came from beyond the two of us, there was no way Jen or I would have ever considered leaving behind all the comforts we enjoyed. We said good-bye to the only friends and family we had ever known, and I found myself sitting in an airport, staring out at the tarmac, waiting to board my flight to England. And it was there, waiting on this side of the Atlantic, that I found myself thinking, *This is going to change the rest of our lives. . . . What in the world have I done?*

Proof