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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

*Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste
they often hurry past it.*
—Søren Kierkegaard

Overnight: KLM Flight 612, Seat 22c (39,000 feet)

Friday, January 20

Today started early—up at 5:20 A.M., breakfast at Blues Café on Station Street—one pancake with crisp bacon. It was a rather ordinary beginning for what should prove to be an extraordinary journey.

Many days, most of them in fact, which end up as extraordinary, begin as ordinary days—some good, some difficult. I remember the day I was elected president of the university where I serve. The day was ordinary in nearly every respect, until my phone rang late that night. I was awakened from a sound sleep by a call from the chairman of the Board of Trustees. “Dr. Bowling, I am calling to tell you that you have just been elected as the 12th president of Olivet Nazarene University.”

What had been an ordinary day was changed in a moment, a wonderful moment. My life from that day forward would be different. Such is the difference one day can make in a person’s life.

By contrast, I was up early one day last fall, preparing for a trip to Boston, when I received a call that my father was desperately ill. Within the hour I was speeding across the Midwest toward a distant hospital. My plans were suddenly superseded, set aside, by the circumstances of life and the providence of God.

Ordinary days have a way of becoming extraordinary for good or ill. Keeping one's balance, as a person navigates the journey from ordinary to extraordinary and back again, brings both challenge and energy to life. Who knows when an ordinary moment, an ordinary day, or an ordinary life may be transformed in an instant to something quite extraordinary.

Last night at about nine o'clock the doorbell rang and I opened the door to find about 15 university students standing in the cold with a sign, Bon Voyage! I invited them in for a few minutes. It was a very nice moment, for although I hadn't been aware of it, my anxiety level about this adventure had begun to rise significantly as I realized I would be leaving on the coming day and that, one way or the other, this trip would change my life. One of the fellows jokingly volunteered to watch my car while I was gone. The others assured me they would be thinking and praying for me every day until I returned.

After the students left, I finished packing and crawled into bed at 10:30 P.M. I lay there for a moment thinking that clean sheets, a comfortable bed, and the warmth of an electric blanket on a cold winter night would soon give way to a tiny tent, a sleeping bag, and a backpack for a pillow.

Following my breakfast at Blues this morning, I attended a bank board meeting and then stopped by the office for about 30 minutes before heading home to change for the trip. Jill said she would meet me at the airport when I got back, but she didn't want to take me to the airport: "If you leave from the house and I am still here, it will seem like just another trip. But if I have to pull away from the airport and drive home alone, the realization that this is not just another trip will be more than I want to deal with."

So my friend Ray Bellomy picked me up right at noon for the trip to the airport. Jill and I said good-bye at the garage door as we had done a hundred times before. "See you when I get

back,” I said, realizing I would have absolutely no contact with her again until I returned to America in two weeks. We both knew there was a strong measure of uncertainty about what the next two weeks would hold for both of us. What unforeseen events were about to unfold?

“Let’s circle the campus on our way out of town,” I said to Ray. I wanted to see it all before I left. It was now 12:15 P.M. We didn’t talk much on the way to Chicago. I had already started narrowing my focus, and there wasn’t much room for small talk. We arrived at O’Hare International Airport in good time. I checked in at the KLM counter and made my way through the labyrinth of security measures. Once inside the boarding area, I sat down to eat a quick late lunch and begin writing these lines in my travel journal.

Journal: O’Hare International Airport, Chicago (2:38 P.M.)

It is so cold outside that it is cold inside here at the airport as well. The temperature reading on the car when I unloaded my bags was 13 degrees. It is hard to believe that I will soon be at the equator, sleeping under the stars.

In an hour or so I will depart on KLM flight 612 to Amsterdam. This will be the first leg of what, no doubt, will prove to be an extraordinary journey. The flight of 4,109 miles will take seven and one-half hours. I am scheduled to arrive at 7 A.M. tomorrow morning.

I am surrounded by scores of people and yet I am alone, really alone. It is so interesting to sit for a time in the midst of a busy international terminal at a major airport. You can travel the world while sitting still. The landscape of the globe and the map of history come walking by in the faces, voices, and appearance of passengers from nearly every nation on earth.

The staff has just announced the flight. My boarding pass is now in my hand. The jetway door stands as a sentinel before me,

guarding my next step. My mind is filled with anticipation, but there is a fair measure of anxiety as well. The next two weeks will bring daily challenges—physical, mental, and emotional.

Got to go . . .

Onboard KLM Flight 612 to Amsterdam

As I settle into my seat, I take a deep breath. I am relatively calm as I think about the adventure just ahead. I have made good preparation, even though I am sure I could have trained harder physically. Time will tell. The logistical preparation seems to have all gone well. I have good equipment, a climbing schedule that will give me an excellent chance to make it to the summit, and my mental focus is strong and steady.

It is interesting how such a trip expands and at the same time narrows one's focus. I will cross the globe and look into the eyes of people from many countries on earth. I will rub shoulders and sit beside men and women who live vastly different lives—and yet, I will speak to very few of these folks. I will see sights that are broad and expansive but sleep alone in a small tent.

I suppose living is always a balance between a person's interior being and his or her physical and social surroundings. There is a tension there but not necessarily in a negative way. Rather, like a violin that makes no music until the strings are stretched, a certain amount of tension fine-tunes a person's daily life.

This trip, the challenge of the climb itself, the reflection at the end of the day, the interaction with my fellow climbers, and my time alone with God will take me out of myself. All of these things will stretch the strings of my life—physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. I wonder what new music will follow.

The one question I have wrestled with is this, "Why am I making this climb?" Is it an expression of a delayed midlife crisis? I have some ideas as to the why, but I am not sure I fully understand it myself. I am content to not wonder too much about

the why. I am at ease to wait and see what the experience means to me as I climb, confident there are lessons to learn that will enrich my life.

Jill gave me a scripture reference for the trip from Ps. 95, “For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him” (vv. 3-4). If one applies this passage broadly, it suggests that God is there in the low points of life and also at the peaks.

Living in a busy, noisy world can lead to losing a keen awareness of the nearness of God. My sense is that living closer to nature—feeling the wind, sun, and rain; sleeping under the stars; watching the sun rise and set—helps tune one’s physical and spiritual senses.

There are times when what we look for (long for) is with us all the time, we just don’t know it. “Many search for happiness as we look for a hat we are wearing on our heads.”⁶ So what does it take to notice something that is very near, that we are looking for but do not see?

Perhaps first, we should stop looking, sit for a time, and lay aside the search. Let it come to us. This may be why I am not obsessed with why I am making this climb. I am not going because I am searching for something that is missing in my life. I am going simply to go; to leave the ordinary life behind so that I might experience the extraordinary.

At the same time, extraordinary doesn’t always mean extraordinary. I am not just playing with words; some great insights and experiences come in very subtle, simple ways. I am reminded that God did not appear to Elijah in the fire or the wind but in a still, small voice.

Leaving behind the banter and volume of daily 21st-century life to seek a quieter voice, I travel to a place of solitude inhabited only by wind and light and shadow. I seek a rhythm not made by

men and anticipate a kind of luxury-of-want waiting on the mountain.

The flight seems to be completely filled. It amazes me each time I am on such a flight just how many people crisscross continents and countries every day. For this particular flight, I am on a Boeing 747 that holds 440 people. Fortunately, I am on an aisle seat, which allows a little more room and easy access to get up and walk around. I have decided to skip the meal, forego the in-flight entertainment, close my eyes, offer a prayer, and spend my first night sleeping at 39,000 feet.

Every journey begins with one step and the real challenge of attaining any goal is to begin—begin with the end in mind. I am glad to be on my way. As I sit quietly, I think only of standing on the summit, stepping onto the roof of Africa, looking out across a continent. What will it be like to journey by foot above the clouds?

The engines hum and the cabin lights are dimmed; I am aware that Mount Kilimanjaro awaits me. I feel certain that my perspective will change concerning the physical world and the revelation of God it provides. But there will also be a change of inner perspective as well. Will I see my life differently once I've been to the mountain?

PRAYER

Dear God, the adventure has begun. I am unsure of many things; but, nonetheless, I am sure of You. I do not know what tomorrow will bring, but I know that You will be there with me and that is sufficient. Watch over me and all who fly tonight. Guide my steps as I journey. Guard my heart and mind as well. Holy Spirit, be my Teacher; let me hear Your voice in the wind and in the stillness. Let me see Your hand in the beauty and majesty of the mountain. I open myself to the lessons You will teach me. Amen.