

KICK *the*
BORING
Out of Your
LIFE

DONNA CARTER



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For Randy.

*Thank you for making me laugh, holding me when I cry, and sharing my passion to make a difference. I think of all the adventures we've shared, not the least of which is parenting, and I can't imagine my life without you. You are both the mischievous junior high boy who lightens me up and the man of integrity I deeply respect.
You are the love of my life.*

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A New Perspective

She wore a gunnysack for her prom dress by her own choice. Her mom says Kerri-Jo has always seen the world a bit differently. It's like she was born with a unique ability to see an extra dimension. The additional aspect she sees gives her a broader-than-normal view of the big and small events in her life. So when her high school senior dance approached, she was troubled by the amount of money some of her friends were spending on dresses for the occasion, albeit a special one. She was concerned that her peers were basing their intrinsic value on sequins and satin.

Now Kerri-Jo likes to dress up as much as any young woman, but she saw an opportunity to challenge the predictable priorities of her high school class and community—and raise awareness about the needs of young women in the developing world. She thought of all that could have been accomplished with the collective cash being shelled out on dresses and accessories and decided to make a statement...to take a stand. Through a friend, she found the perfect opportunity to invest in a good cause—a new vocational school in Niger, Western Africa, for girls at risk of being sold into prostitution or being married off very young. Kerri-Jo told her family and

friends that if she could raise \$10,000 for her cause, she would wear a burlap dress to the dance.

She posted her challenge on social media, and the campaign went viral. Kerri-Jo far exceeded her goal. She raised enough money to fund the entire vocational school, including supplies, tuition, and even the cook's salary for an entire year. And, yes, she followed through at her prom. She was the smart-looking young woman in burlap.

Kerri-Jo's insight and vision changed her paradigm. Instead of choosing what would make her look glamorous and feel good for one evening, she opted for looking outward and doing something that would feel great forever. Rather than ending the festive occasion with a few photos and a dress in storage, she ended it knowing that the lives of some girls were going to be changed for the better. In fact, not only were *their* lives going to be changed, but hopefully the cycle of poverty would be broken and result in generations of change. And since the vocational school was Christian-oriented and influenced by Jesus-loving teachers, eternity itself might be affected.

Kerri-Jo's unusual willingness to zoom out to see a much bigger picture than one special evening of glamor broadened her world. In deciding to wear a boring dress, she kicked the boring out of her life. Her smart decision to look beyond her immediate gratification has ignited a passion to make a difference that is infiltrating her whole life—and the lives of the people she influences.

You can stamp the humdrum out of your life too. My prayer is that by reading this book, contemplating the “Questions for Reflection and Conversation,” and, hopefully, discussing everything with a group of friends, you'll gain a broader viewpoint. That perspective, when applied to your words, your sexuality, your relationships, your pain, and your past, will purge the predictable, ignite your passion, and create a life you love.

Donna Carter

1

Think Big

*How can I live today so that I'm satisfied
with my legacy at the end of my life?*

I'm a victim of clutter. Although I'm gaining the upper hand, clutter still stalks me relentlessly like a malicious predator. It constantly threatens a hostile takeover of my in-box, calendar, closet, and desk. If I'm not vigilant, my schedule gets jammed, my filing cabinet crammed, and my in-box spammed. My desk begins to take on the ambiance of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. Even worse—at times my closet, calendar, and desk are a metaphor for my heart and mind. Too often I feel overwhelmed and uninspired.

I don't like living this way. It's just that life comes at me too fast. There is too much to deal with—commitments, decisions, competing demands. Too much mail, too much stuff, just way too much of a lot of things. Sifting through each day's psychological and physical clutter is like trying to test the water quality at the top of Niagara Falls. Before I can zero in on what I want to accomplish, I'm carried away by the sheer volume of what fills my life.

In our increasingly fast-paced and complex world, it's difficult

to home in on those priorities that really matter since we're inundated with the basic tasks of living. We need to eat, so we have to make money. We need money, so we have to have jobs. Well, good jobs require education, and that takes *lots* of money. We have to wear clothes to work. Clothes generate laundry and dry cleaning. We probably need transportation to get to work and to the dry cleaner's, and that requires gas, insurance, and maintenance funds. Now we need a second job—and the complexities continue to snowball.

Of all the appointments that compete for our time, all the paper fighting for a home, all the decisions demanding our attention, how can we know what to say *yes* to and what to say *no* to? The possibilities and opportunities life presents can be overwhelming and seemingly endless. Sometimes we say *yes* so often that the things we really value are receiving a *no* vote by default. For example, we get so distracted with the trivial papers that come to our attention that important documents get buried amid the piles on our desks or countertops before we get around to dealing with them. Perhaps a crucial appointment for which we've waited months is forgotten because of all the other commitments demanding room on our schedules.

Our interactions with too many peripheral people in our lives threaten to trample our commitments to those we love most. But if we're honest, what really disturbs our sleep and robs our joy as we lay exhausted in bed at the end of a clutter-compromised day is the possibility that we've become so consumed with the unending complexity in our lives that we're missing out on the life we really want. When our lives are so crowded, it's easy to overlook or misplace that which we value most.

Buried Treasure

What do I mean by overlooking what we value the most? Here's a case in point. William Randolph Hearst once owned the world's most influential newspaper. He was phenomenally wealthy and very powerful. He also happened to be an avid collector of art and antiques. One day Hearst saw a photo of two particularly exquisite works of art. He fell in love with them and decided that, whatever the cost, he would have them for his personal collection. The curator of Mr. Hearst's collections spent the next several weeks making contacts, traveling, and conducting research to find the coveted paintings. Finally they were located. Surprisingly, they were in a warehouse in the very same city where Hearst operated his newspaper. Mr. Hearst was elated when he was informed they were almost within his grasp. The curator took him to the warehouse containing the treasured paintings.

As they approached the entrance, Hearst asked in confusion, "This is where the paintings are?"

"Yes," answered the curator, becoming a little alarmed. "Is something wrong?"

"Well," sputtered Hearst, "I already own this warehouse. You mean to tell me the paintings have been mine all along?"

Mr. Hearst owned those paintings, and they had languished in a congested, dusty warehouse. They weren't being given the attention and respect they deserved because they were crowded and obscured by far too many other things.

Jesus said, "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be" (Matthew 6:21). The problem is that if we lose sight of our treasure amid the constant flow of clutter in our lives, if we become distracted by all the counterfeit treasure our culture foists upon us, we end up setting our hearts on the wrong things.

We say *yes* to pursuits that may be good in and of themselves, but in so doing we default to *no* with respect to that which we value most.

Let's look at some examples of how this plays out in the real world. Kristen studies hard. She desperately wants to get into graduate school, and that means she needs to be in the top percentile of her class. Her days are filled with classes, and her evenings and weekends are jammed with work. Time with her boyfriend, Brent, and fleeting glimpses of her parents and friends are pressed like mortar between bricks. Every waking thought is laden with worry over exams, assignments, and keeping both her relationship with Brent and her car running smoothly. Some days she isn't sure which one is higher maintenance.

Walking briskly across the campus one day, Kristen engages in conversation with a philosophy classmate about intelligent design. The conversation leads them into the realm of faith, and Kristen is blown away by her colleague's openness to spiritual truth. Kristen shares how her faith is the most important force shaping her life. While the words are coming out of her mouth, however, she's struck by the irony that she doesn't have time for this conversation.

Ryan is a driven advertising executive. He's well on his way to achieving the lifestyle he's set his heart on attaining. Having grown up without many of the status symbols and comforts his friends had, he's determined to do better for his family. Sure, that means working lots of overtime and missing a few birthdays, church services, and soccer games, but at least his kids won't ever know the humiliation of wearing geeky-looking, homemade clothes or being seen riding in the backseat of a rusted-out beater. One day Ryan arrives home to find his teenagers watching NCIS in the family room. Neither of them appears to notice his entrance. He stands there watching them watch TV and suddenly realizes that his kids know the characters in the

series better than they know him. As he drifts off to sleep that night, he has this fleeting thought: *Is this really what it means to be successful?*

Amanda is a busy mom. She's committed to investing in her children. She's also the third-grade-class mom in her kids' Christian school and teaches a preschool Sunday school class. She sings on the worship team and conducts the children's choir at church. Her days go by in a blur of carpooling, grocery shopping, and volunteering. There are far too many details to keep in her head. As she scrolls through her planner to review her family's busy schedule, she's reminded that the church outreach banquet is coming up. It's an opportunity for people in the church to introduce their friends to Jesus in a casual, nonthreatening way. Amanda racks her brain for the names of some friends or acquaintances she could invite from the community, but she soon realizes she doesn't really know anyone but church people anymore. She's done such a good job of protecting her children from the influences of the world that she's lost her openings to have influence in the world.

What's Wrong with This Picture?

Does something about these stories seem uncomfortably familiar? It does to me. In the fray of the frenetic pace we keep, it's difficult to even care about priorities—let alone keep them in the right order. Many people are like the naïve bride who spends hundreds of hours planning the perfect wedding. She gives her attention to each sequin, napkin, and ribbon but fails to prepare for the marriage itself. Six months after the last of the confetti has fluttered to the ground, she gazes at her beautiful wedding album. Everything in the photos is literally perfect—except that she's standing next to Mr. Wrong. She got what she'd set her heart on—a perfect wedding. What she realized too late was that her heart was set on the wrong thing.

I hate the thought that I could spend my life like a small child at

Christmastime who unwraps a shiny new toy and then discards it to play with the wrapping paper. I don't want to become so distracted by the temporary that I disregard the treasure. I need clarity to know what demands on my time, money, and energy are worth saying *yes* to and which ones should receive a resounding *no*.

How can I find the heart of what I want to live for? How can I be sure of who am I and what I'm about? If I'm a Jesus follower, I need to figure out how to distinguish the cluttered, claustrophobic life I've become accustomed to from the panoramic one God calls me to. Could "zooming out" help me identify what is important? Could a broader perspective help me find a life I can get excited about?

As we reflect on our cluttered lives, some of us, in rare moments of clarity, may consider the possibility that much of the stress related to the complexity of our lives exists because we don't let Jesus share our burdens. We welcome his invitation though:

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

That sounds like a pretty attractive invitation. We usually think of the yoke Jesus refers to in this passage as a heavy, wooden harness used to hitch a pair of oxen to a cart or a plow. We realize that the yoke makes it possible for the pair to pull in tandem, greatly reducing the strain on both animals and enabling them to pull a load greater than either animal could pull on its own. When we apply this analogy to Jesus's invitation, we get in touch with our "inner ox" and understand that Jesus wants to share our burdens with us. What a wonderful truth!

I'd like us to consider another possibility. Maybe some of our stress and clutter comes as a result of *not* sharing Jesus's burdens with *him*. In fact, a possible interpretation of what Jesus was referring to when he spoke of the yoke in this passage is a "mantle" or a "collar." You see, in the first century, you could identify the disciples of a certain rabbi by the color of the yoke they wore over their garments. In wearing "the yoke," they were making it known to the world that they accepted both the teacher and the teachings associated with that particular color or style. Some New Testament scholars believe that when Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and let me teach you," he was referring to his mantle. He was inviting people to become his apprentices and to let the world know, by the wearing of that yoke, that they've chosen to commit themselves fully to following him.

I sincerely doubt that the double meaning of the word "yoke" escaped Jesus. If we consider his mention of the burden *he gives us* later in this same passage, both interpretations of the word lead us to the same goal: the yoke as a symbol of our "followership." Wearing Jesus's yoke is a way of saying to the world, "I reject the values, priorities, and goals of my culture. I look only to the life and teachings of the Lord Jesus as a template for my life."

Adventures in Missing the Point

Wearing Jesus's yoke doesn't do away with responsibility or even stress, but through an intimate relationship with him, if we are willing, he will help us clear away the clutter and teach us to kick the boring out of life and create the one we want to live. I truly believe that when we care about the things he cares about instead of things that won't outlast time, we'll experience a fulfillment that a cluttered life drains out of us. Jesus told a story to make this very point:

A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops.

He said to himself, “What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.” Then he said, “I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, ‘My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!’”

But God said to him, “You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?”

Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God (Luke 12:16-21).

Such poor estate planning on the part of such a rich man. He’d accumulated everything he could need or want except the wisdom to realize he’d missed the point. Life isn’t about achieving status, acquiring possessions, or affording a certain type of lifestyle. What, then, *is* life about? When Jesus finished telling the parable, he turned to his disciples—those who wore his yoke—and answered that question. In effect he said, “Don’t sweat the small stuff: food...drink...clothing. I know what you need. Care about what I care about, and I will take care of the rest. In other words, wear my yoke (mantle) and I will share your yoke (harness) and pull your daily load with you.” That’s when he said, “Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be” (Matthew 6:21).

What We Can Know for Sure

“*Cogito ergo sum*,” wrote Rene Descartes. “I think, therefore I am.” An anonymous woman wrote, “I think, therefore I’m single.” Interesting statement, but not quite as universally embraced as the one made by Descartes. His statement, which became the basis of most Western philosophy, simply means that if someone is wondering

whether he exists, that in itself is proof that he does, indeed, exist. In making that statement, Descartes was backing up all the way to the first thing he knew as truth. It was the foundation on which all his other beliefs would be laid.

We too need to strip away what we've accepted as truth about what matters in life and get back to the core truths that drive us. We need to ask ourselves, "If I were to say *no* to everything else in my life, what is the foundation stone, the deep resounding *yes* that forms the basis for every choice I have the opportunity to make?" Once I discern and take possession of that deeper reality (what I know for sure), I will be guided by that nonnegotiable truth in all my future decisions.

Waking up to that deeper truth requires a paradigm shift. Like Descartes, we need to back away from all we've taken for granted: habits, schedules, personal preferences, and especially the cultural current constantly tugging at us. We need to gain a new, broader perspective. We have to zoom out all the way to what we know for sure.

A letter from novice rock climber Brenda Foltz, shared in Elisabeth Elliot's book *Keep a Quiet Heart* (2004), clarifies what it means to think big. Basically, Brenda had been persuaded to go rock climbing with some friends. Following their lead, she bravely tackled the broad rock face with determination, slowly inching her way toward the summit high above. After climbing for a while, she approached a challenging ledge and halted abruptly, trying to devise a strategy for conquering the obstacle. Suddenly, her safety rope was pulled taut and snapped back, hitting her squarely in the eye.

When her eye stopped watering, her vision was blurry, and she realized one contact lens was no longer in place. Frantically, she searched the rock, the rope, and her clothing, hoping to find the little plastic disc that was almost invisible under the best of

circumstances. Realizing the improbability of finding the lens on her own, she prayed, “Lord Jesus, help me find it.” She continued to search as long as her tiring muscles would allow her and then continued climbing to the top, resigned to her blurry vision.

Once on the summit, she had her friend check all around and inside her eye, but the contact just wasn’t there. Brenda was frustrated. She didn’t know how she would get the contact replaced while so far from home. And here she was, supposed to be enjoying this glorious vista, and all she could make out was the vague, blurry outline of what she knew must be a stunning view. As the group sat resting, she was reminded of a verse of Scripture she’d committed to memory: “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth.” “Lord,” she prayed, “you see every twig and leaf on this whole mountain range. You know exactly where my contact lens is.” *Too bad I’ll never see it again*, she thought cynically.

Discouraged and sullen, Brenda followed her friends down the path to the bottom where others were preparing for the climb. Another girl was just starting her ascent from where Brenda had. She called to Brenda and her companions, “Hey, you guys—did anyone lose a contact?” Not quite believing her own ears, Brenda rushed toward the girl. While she was still moving, the girl shouted, “There’s an *ant* carrying it on its back down the mountain.”

Barely able to believe her eyes, Brenda relieved the tiny courier of its awkward burden, splashed the lens with water, and put it back in her eye.

Later, Brenda’s dad drew an ant lugging a contact lens more than five times its size with a caption that read, “Lord, I don’t understand why you want me to carry this thing. I can’t eat it, and it’s awfully heavy. But I’ll do it if you want me to.”

We’ll never know what, if anything, was actually going through that little ant’s mind. (Do ants have minds?) It certainly didn’t know

its little anthill was surrounded by an enormous mountain range. It couldn't have known the little piece of plastic it carried was part of a much bigger story.

The Big Story

Knowing and acknowledging the scope of the stories we're part of will help connect us to our deeper truth. If the belief system we've constructed ignores the big story unfolding all around us, our lives will remain boring and insignificant. We'll be overwhelmed by minutia. Life becomes all about getting to work on time, taking the car in for an oil change, redecorating the dining room, and adding to the investment account.

When we shift the focus of our lives to the bigger picture—to what matters to God—even the smallest tasks have meaning and purpose. For example, our work matters to God. We have a responsibility to do our best, working as though God himself signs our paychecks. Our attitude should remind our coworkers of Jesus. Getting to work on time honors him and represents him well. The car still needs an oil change, but now that's just about managing the time and possessions God has entrusted to us. The dining room may still need a makeover—not so we can impress people with our affluence and good taste, but so that when we welcome guests, everything about our home says, “We care about you.” Our finances still require careful managing; not so that we can have everything we want, but so that we can invest generously in what matters to God. When we understand our vital partnership with Jesus in carrying his burdens, even the mundane has meaning.

Kicking the boring out of our lives means finding, accepting, and fulfilling our roles in God's epic, unfolding story. It means using that deeper truth to determine what demands on our time, money,

energy, and attention are worthy of our *yes* and which ones are not. Creating a great life demands conscious decision making and affects every possible facet of our days. As it turns out, there is really no such thing as “our *spiritual* life.” God cares about our life—our *whole* life.

As we look at our lives right now, how cluttered are they? How much of what we said *yes* to today does God value from his ageless paradigm? Is life for us merely a series of unrelated snapshots of tasks, events, papers, pressure, and people? Or do we live with an ever-increasing awareness of the colossal plotline unfolding all around us? If we do, then we are realizing the eternal stakes for which we play in this ultimate reality game called life. Do our lives burgeon with meaning and import or does time merely swirl around us for a while in a cyclone of clutter before being tugged, with all its opportunities and potential, down the drain to be lost forever?

Recognizing the scale of our current story invites us to compare two very different versions of life: life spent for the here and now and life spent for eternity. If we truly believe, as many of us say we do, that death is not the end of our story, then we have to learn to filter the clutter—life’s options and opportunities—through the grid of eternity. We need a long-term view and a wide-angle lens to see the big picture and determine what really matters. Like filmmakers, we have to deliberately capture the action the plot requires to make sense and crop out the unnecessary complexity that distracts from God’s story line.

We can’t be both big picture and close-up people. What is in focus in our viewfinder will be the most powerful thing in our lives. If secular culture dominates our lens, we’ll live with a shallow depth of field and a short-term perspective. We’ll waste our *yesses* on the wrong things. But if *God’s* broad vista is our focus, that is what will direct our lives. It can’t be both. James put it this way: “I say it again, that if your aim is to enjoy this world, you can’t be a friend of God”

(James 4:4). Ironically, it's when friendship with God is our ultimate priority, when we align our values with his and attend to what he cares about, that the path to a life we love becomes as clear as a glacier-fed stream.

Culture Clutter

Trying to distinguish the big picture from our cultural vantage point is a bit like trying to see one of those computer-generated, 3D hidden images in a sea of colored squiggles. The picture is hard to find initially. You sort of have to cross your eyes, stand on your head, and hold your tongue a certain way. And even when you think you've locked on to the image, it's easy to lose again. The reason we struggle to focus on God's perspective is that we're completely immersed in our culture—our twenty-first-century, Western, post-Christian, postmodern culture. Even those of us who claim to be Christ-followers have been deeply affected by a worldview futurist Tom Sine described as “the American Dream with a little Jesus overlay.” It is very difficult to separate truly biblical values and priorities from those that surround us 24/7...and to live accordingly.

Over the millennia since Jesus modeled uncluttered living, his followers have tried various means to separate themselves from culture in order to gain a purer view of Christian spirituality. In fact, the whole monastic movement is an expression of this desire. There was an ascetic who lived in the fifth century known as Simon the Stylite. He spent thirty-seven years of his life living on a platform on a column. He believed that if he could physically separate his body from the Earth he could also separate his heart and mind from it as well. It turned out that it's much harder to take the world out of the monk than it is to take the monk out of the world. Anyway, Jesus made it pretty clear in this high priestly prayer that he doesn't want

to remove us from the world. Instead, he wants us to be his representatives here:

I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world (John 17:15-18).

Jesus wants us to influence our culture, not be influenced by it. The apostle Paul explained the delicate balance of walking on the Earth in territory often antagonistic to God's big picture—and doing it with values and priorities aligned with God's:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2).

Big thinking is not simply about changing outward behavior. Over the generations, there have always been behaviors that were accepted and those that were rejected by groups of Christians. In the apostle Paul's day, it was all about where people bought their meat and where it had been before it was put on the grill (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8). For the apostle Peter, it concerned who else was invited to the barbecue (Acts 10–11; Galatians 2–3). For my parents' generation, it was all about makeup, jewelry, and Sabbath-keeping. When I was a kid, it was movies and dancing.

My mom grew up in a relatively restrictive Christian culture, though not uncommonly so for her generation. She remembers vacationing with the family of a friend during her youth. On

Sundays she'd be sweating profusely on the beach while everyone else swam and enjoyed the water. In her world, Christians didn't swim on Sunday. Had you asked her why, she would have said, "I have no idea, but we're Christians so we just don't."

Adopting culturally odd language and behaviors in order to stand apart from the world isn't what Paul had in mind when he instructed us not to copy the world's behavior. Instead, he was telling us to be *transformed* into big-picture people and change the way we think. It's about uncluttering our minds. Paul goes on to say that it's only when we're being transformed that we will be able to receive God's clear directions for our lives and truly grasp the value of thinking big. The danger Paul is alerting us to has nothing to do with the kind of legalism that keeps us sweating on the beach because Christians apparently will melt or be attacked by sharks if they swim on Sundays. It has everything to do with the assimilation by the world that occurs among Christians when we fail to intentionally live a wide-angled life.

A Distinct Society

My home country of Canada has two founding peoples (in addition to Canada's First Nations, called Aboriginals in the United States) and two official languages: English and French. Virtually every box of cereal, instruction booklet, and government document found in this country proudly displays its information bilingually. If you ever fly with a Canadian airline, before you take off you'll double your pleasure by hearing the safety procedures presentation twice—once in English and once in French.

My daughters attended a French immersion school. The idea behind this philosophy of education is that children learn language skills very quickly and naturally when they're surrounded by that language. Although I'm not bilingual, I thought it was a great idea

for my children. When I volunteered in the school, I felt as though I'd just parachuted into Montreal or Paris. When someone greets you in the hall in a French immersion school, they don't say "Hi." They say "Bonjour." The teachers speak French exclusively during school hours. When I was helping in the classroom, I had no idea what was going on most of the time. The teacher would give instructions to the children in French. The children, who understood perfectly, went off to do what they'd been instructed to do. At this point, the teacher would turn to me and repeat the instructions, this time in English. It was very disconcerting. I'd always been pretty successful in school, but suddenly I felt stupid. I felt like the teacher was saying, "Okay, moron, since you don't understand French, I'll go through this again in English—slowly—so even you can understand."

Although there are pockets of French Canadians all across the country, by far the greatest concentration is in La belle province (another name for the province of Quebec). For decades, the Canadian government has struggled to persuade Quebec to "sign on" to the constitution of Canada. Although many brilliant politicians have tried, so far everyone has failed to come up with exactly the right wording to validate the uniqueness of Quebec within Canada and pacify the rest of the county at the same time. In 1992, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his Conservative government designed the Charlottetown Accord, a meeting of all ten of Canada's provincial premiers (similar to state governors in the United States) to try to come to an agreement on the Quebec issue. The proposal that was eventually defeated by the people of Canada in a referendum contained what became known as the "Distinct Society Clause."

The clause was designed to put to rest the fears of French Canadians. They were worried that if they signed the constitution of Canada without special provisions, their language and culture would

eventually be smothered and then assimilated into Anglo–Canadian culture. They believed that special protection of their French culture and language was needed due to the constant and overwhelming influences of news, art, education, and entertainment from the rest of the country. While I wasn't necessarily in favor of the entrenchment of the Distinct Society Clause in the constitution, it was easy for me to understand the concerns expressed by French Canadians. It seems a reasonable probability that over time Quebec will not only be among the English-speaking culture but also become part of it.

Do you see what we have in common with Quebec? If ever there was to be a distinct society, it should be those of us who call ourselves Christians. Jesus followers are to rub shoulders with unbelievers every day but not be assimilated by them. To love them, but not be like them. To be relationally connected to the people around us without allowing them to set our agenda. Our calling is to swim upstream in a downstream world. The danger of being immersed in secular culture is obvious. We may not intentionally adopt its values, but because many of us have not invested enough effort into discovering and becoming familiar with Jesus's priorities (as expressed in the Bible) and then *making them our own*, we become assimilated into our culture.

Christian futurist Tom Sine wrote in his book *Live It Up*:

Conservative Christians pride themselves on maintaining a high view of scripture, but the irony and tragedy is that they often apply scripture to a small, spiritual compartment of their lives...rarely do I find Christians of any stripe who bring scripture to bear on the fundamental aspirations that drive our lives or the values on which our lives are premised. We allow the secular culture to define not only the direction of our lives but also what we value.

Aligning our values and priorities with God's means that when

we become aware of an area of our lives where our priorities have diverged from Jesus's priorities, as expressed in the Bible, we adjust our focus so the big picture comes back into view. In James 1:21-25, we're admonished:

So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

I love this word picture! Imagine getting up in the morning, stumbling into the bathroom, and prying your eyes open against the bright vanity lights. Your hair is totally flat on one side of your head and doing the Macarena on the other. You have "sleep" plastered to your eyelashes and creases from your pillowcase imprinted on your left cheek. Your teeth need brushing so badly they feel like they're wearing little polar-fleece sweaters. But instead of doing anything to make yourself presentable, you simply turn out the light, walk into the bedroom, and get dressed. You go to the kitchen, down a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee, and then head off to work.

Yes, I worry about doing this. I have a home office. Usually I get myself ready to face the day before getting to work, but occasionally the seduction of the in-box draws me in before I've made myself presentable. My fear is that one of these days I'm going to get absorbed in my work and suddenly remember an appointment. I'll forget that

I still have bedhead and fuzzy teeth and leave the house looking like the bride of Frankenstein. I'll wonder why everyone is looking at me so strangely and asking me if I'm feeling okay. Eventually what I've done will dawn on me. I'll find a nearby manhole to slither into and stay there until dark.

The spiritual version of this danger is that we get into the Word but don't let the Word get into us. We read the Bible, we make sure we understand it, but we don't apply it. We fail to draw a straight line between the words on the page and our hearts. We don't think to use God's Word as a template for decision making. And if we don't have this continual, redemptive, dynamic influence on our thinking, today's culture will happily take over that role. Our culture will dictate what's important, what's valuable, what's meaningful. And our deeper truth will lie buried like an expired coupon at the bottom of an over-filled drawer.

Without a fixed point for navigation, we are too easily influenced. We veer off course, affected by every cultural wind and wave that comes along. We say *yes* to the wrong things and then, by default, we say *no* to what we profoundly value. Thankfully, God gave us a fixed point of reference—the Bible. If we let our roots go down deep into its inexhaustible wisdom, if we intentionally sharpen our minds and inform our intuitions with it, we will almost always know how to adjust our focus and hone in on what's important. We need to know what the Bible says about our relationships, our lifestyles, our spending habits, our communications, and our sexuality. If we don't know, we'll simply get swept downstream like everybody else. So stay with me. We're going to explore these pockets of our lives and how God, through his love letter to us (the Bible), will help us think big and find an exciting life we love.