

Full Evaluation

April 30, 2012

Dear ---,

I really enjoyed reading ---. Its style and content took me back to many of the great “hero of the faith” stories I’ve read in the past, especially the sections on John Samson’s early ministry and Beit Shalom. Your grasp of language is good, and I found your writing voice pleasant and readable. I hope to see this book, in revised form, published in the future!

With that said, I can see several areas where the book can be revised for greater effectiveness. I’ll lay them out in this critique.

In the accompanying manuscript, I’ve added comments in the margins to mark specific places where these suggestions can be applied. I hope you find both documents helpful to you!

First Off, Something’s Missing . . .

Despite the claims of the preface that --- is the story of your two best friends and spiritual mentors, Larry Gordon is conspicuously absent from most of the narrative, either as a physical presence or as a strong influence on your spiritual life. His function in the book seems almost entirely to be to introduce you to John Samson.

I suspect there’s a much bigger story here that’s not currently being brought out. You probably want to do three things with this:

- Share more of Larry’s story—right now we really only have a tiny handful of anecdotes to hint at his faith and personality.
- Give us more access to your relationship with Larry, through relating events, conversations, etc. You want to *show* us, not just tell us, how close you were as friends and how much he impacted you.
- Share more, as your story continues past Larry’s death, of how his testimony and influence continued to shape and impact you. In other words, he can maintain a spiritual presence in the story even though he was not there physically.

Some of your wording toward the beginning also suggests a deep and fascinating history shared between Larry and Brother John, but we never really see this fleshed out either. Again, you may want to give more attention to telling Larry’s story as well as your own and Brother John’s.

Your Story: The Great Perspective

In the beginning, --- reads as a spiritual narrative: in the classic tradition of many Christian writers, you are telling the “story of a soul.” Despite the emphasis on the life of John Samson, this is essentially *your* story. And that being the case, there’s a great need to identify more clearly exactly what story you are telling, to deepen that story, and to trim out detail that isn’t necessary to that story.

As I took notes on your manuscript, I found myself referring to this as the story's "Great Perspective."

No anecdote or event deserves to be in your book simply because it happened or even because it is interesting or was a significant part of your life. Since you are telling the story of your soul—or, if you prefer, the story of your faith—every event and every anecdote must contribute to that story. We must see, from beginning to end, how the events in your life—especially those which are wrapped up with the lives of John Samson and Larry Gordon—challenged you, changed you, and taught you to walk with God and see Him more clearly. Your walk of faith is the Great Perspective which needs to knit all events together.

You want to keep the narrative tight and shaped like an arc: beginning when encounters with Larry and Brother John send you on a new spiritual trajectory, arching through that trajectory as you learn and are stretched in your own walk of faith, and finally landing in a place of reflection at the end of Brother John's life—looking back to the beginning and seeing how far you've come.

Specific comments on how the Great Perspective can be advanced more effectively:

- We need to get to know you, your goals, and your callings in a much more personal way. For example, your adoption stories (which are marvelous, by the way) will have more impact if we know ahead of time that you and your wife are trying to have children but haven't been able to. Your role in starting the Shepherd of the Valley school will be more powerful if we realize well before that time that you were feeling called to start a church and school. And the missions trip stories will be more powerful and effective if you let us into your heart for these trips ahead of time: what did you hope to accomplish in each one? What was God teaching you through each one? How were you being stretched, challenged, fulfilled, spoken to on a personal level? Remember, this book is not ultimately a story of events. It is the story of a personal faith and the journey that shaped it.
- Vague wording is an issue: phrases like "we had a joyous time of fellowship" or "the Lord took good care of us" don't really tell us much, and the phrasing may sound dated to modern readers. In cases like this you may find it more effective to relate pieces of conversation or give specific anecdotes that encapsulate what such times were like. As a rule, use wording that is vivid and specific, giving snapshots rather than vague overviews.
- In the last chapter of the book, you describe your relationship with John Samson as being a Jonathan-and-David type of love. Yet, we don't really see that in the book. You tell stories about John and often state how you felt about him, but we rarely really see your relationship in action. The rule "show, don't tell" is pertinent here, as is the above note about specific vs vague wording. You may want to revise this aspect of the story at a deeper, more personal level.
- You'll want to avoid giving "travel log" details about trips that don't really contribute to your inner story of growth in faith and understanding of God. Even some of the missions

trips currently fall into this category. We see what you did and what God did, but not how the events challenged and changed you—in other words, the inner story, the Great Perspective, gets lost in a series of details. Remember, you are writing this book to Christians who want a deeper walk with the Lord. It's that deeper walk, not just outward events, that we need to see. Outward events should be chosen and written in such a way that they enhance and reveal the inner journey.

- The Shepherd of the Valley school was obviously an important part of your life, but we don't ever really go beyond the surface for a sense of God's purposes and working in the school and in you through the school. I'd encourage you to think over those years and ask what the Lord was doing *in you, in your spiritual journey*, through them. Then try to bring that perspective into the stories about the school right from the beginning.

Style and Mechanics

On a sentence level, your manuscript is in good shape. Revisions here should focus on tightening up unnecessary wordiness and replacing vague wording with specifics where preferable. Neither of these issues are huge, however. I've marked a couple of examples of possible tightening in the manuscript, and I've marked many places where wording is vague.

There are also a few transitions that feel too abrupt or confusing; I've marked these.

Miscellaneous Notes

- I would advise calling John Samson "Brother John" almost exclusively from the start. Not only will that make his nickname feel more natural in the second half of the book where you use it more often, it will also avoid confusion once your son John enters the picture.
- You've occasionally used footnotes in the manuscript. I would cut these and work their content into the text itself. The notes don't fit the overall feel or flow of your story.
- You also interject short "direct address" prayers where you thank or praise the Lord. In my opinion, they don't fit the overall flow well, and I would replace them with praise that is more literary and less direct.
- The story of your adoptions presents a great opportunity to explore the concept of God's Fatherhood and adoption of His children, a theme which I'm sure has occurred to you many times in your life! You might want to bring out this theme as you write: how have the children you adopted helped you see and understand and grow in God? Again, keep every facet of your story clearly tied into the Great Perspective.

As you read through the manuscript comments, I hope you'll see clear and exciting ways to begin revising. I wish you all the best as you continue to shape this book into an amazing testimony of God's work in your life.

Blessings,

Rachel

As his attention wandered from the brown-water of the harbor and over to his right and he allowed his eye to follow the rise of the lush slope, lifting his gaze up, up, and up until he saw the Monastery complex. There it was perched atop the cliff looking down on the town, harbor, and fortress through its three levels of plain windows. The Monastery's steep, tile roofs were punctured by four smoke-stacks, all of which were in use. Protruding up through the center of the complex was a round tower, which was dotted with windows and topped with a single bell.

Comment [AB1]: Again, I see lots and lots of description. Is everything here necessary? Perhaps isolate a memorable feature and trim the rest.

The sound of falling water to his right caught the far-lander's ear and drew his attention back down the green cliff and back into Welton Banks, where he found the stream that first attracted sea-farers to the island. The water poured loudly down the cliff and pooled behind the firing wall, where it then passed through a grate and filled the moat. The outlet for the stream was on the far end of the moat, at the western end of the firing wall, where it spilled into a canal that cut a harsh, arrow-straight path through the Gap. By the time the water passed under the hedge and into the town, it was powdery white and, with each street that it passed below on its quest for the sea, the stream shrank and darkened until it finally trickled into the harbor as a filthy brown sewer.

Comment [AB2]: This is more description that doesn't seem to be leading the reader any closer to conflict and a major plot event. I recommend drastically trimming your opening and getting to the main conflict that begins your story.

Welton Banks was not a town at all, it was a hungry animal. This realization burst into the far-lander's mind like a prophecy from heaven: undeniable, palpable, absolute. A blight on the Belle Fennen, it grew like a cancer, spreading itself, roof by roof and street by street, from the Harbor across and up the slope. And behind him, as he looked down at the town, he could feel it staring at him, the head of this panting, slobbering beast: that hideous skull built into the rock. The far-lander turned toward the sea to west and saw how the black rock of the island threw its broken and twisted arm northward and curved eastward back toward itself, thus creating the harbor. This natural barrier, born of the fiery creation of the planet, nearly encircled

Comment [AB3]:
What is this?

Lying between the Skull and the Residential District was a desolate waste, void of vegetation and moisture. The ground was dusty and burnt, broken and rocky. The Boulevard maintained its perfectly straight path, smooth and wide, through this utterly destroyed terrain and into the Military District. The far-lander's legs disobeyed his half-hearted command to move forward and into the Gap. The specter of fear slid into his waistcoat and coiled itself around his chest and constricted his breathing. His face was sullen, his head and shoulders hung low, and his stride was a mere shuffle as he finally gained a semblance of control over his lower members. The far-lander's clothing soon matched his drab demeanor as his shiny boots were dulled with dust and soot, his white pants turned grey.

Comment [AB4]: Would he notice this about himself? Keep POV in mind.

Comment [AB5]: This feels like overwriting. As before, it feels formal and dated. Consider revising and making your writing simpler.

By the time he reached the other side of the Gap he looked, in both dingy appearance and broken spirit, as though he had just crossed the Arabian Desert. The far-lander wiped the dust and sweat from his brow, leaving a dark spot on his sleeve. In front of him was a moat of no less than twenty feet wide. The water in the moat was clear and fresh, its surface wrinkled by a gentle current that moved from left to right by the far-lander's reckoning. He looked down through the liquid crystal and, for a moment, forgot where he was as he marveled at the seemingly bottomless trench with light-hearted curiosity. He lifted his gaze from the water to the wall on the far side of the moat. Looking left, right, and then left again, he surveyed the wall and moat, both of which stretched for over two hundred yards, beginning at the base of one cliff to his left and running over the edge of another, and seemingly into the sea, to his right.

Comment [AB6]: There's too much description here. The reader wants a reason to care. I recommend introducing a crisis right away.

He said of Larry that the love of Jesus Christ just radiated out of him and that he had the sort of thing good Christians strive for. As we got to know John better, we also began to learn more about the large spiritual life of the man known to those close to John as the “Wee Scotsman.”

Comment [Rachel Th1]: This sentence is an awkward transition—you really aren’t talking about John in this section.

John had met Larry through flying on a plane in which Larry had co-piloted that had landed in Dallas in the spring of 1978. They had just deplaned, and Larry saw John first and had noticed that he was wearing a lapel pin in the shape of a dove on his suit jacket. Larry then commented to John, “Either you’re a lover of birds or a lover of Jesus.” John replied that he was both, and a friendly conversation ensued. After they had parted, John was disturbed with himself that, even though they had exchanged names, he had not gotten Larry’s address or phone number. The unique way that Larry had struck up the conversation intrigued John, as he thought about it afterward; and he really wanted to see Larry again. So, after attending to the affairs for which he had come to the states, John inquired at the desk of the airline that he and Larry had flown in on to see if someone could help find Larry. Now the Dallas International Airport, at this time, was one of the largest airports in the U.S., with hundreds of planes flying in and out every day. As John was trying to describe Larry to the man at the desk, the man abruptly pointed beyond John and said, “There’s your pilot.” Such was the beginning of a friendship that would become very deep in the Lord and would take them to many places throughout the world. But before going into the history of that relationship, I think it would be profitable to look first into the storied life of this unique Scotsman, known to many simply as Brother John.

Comment [Rachel Th2]: I don’t feel that this relationship—between Larry and John—is ever really fleshed out. You may want to go back to the drawing board on this ;).

John was born in the lowlands of Ayrshire, Scotland, near the small town of Cumnock, in 1912. He was the youngest of five brothers. When John was five, his father left his mother, leaving her to raise the boys alone. So, John tried to help the family and earn a

Comment [Rachel Th3]: The wording is a bit overly formal here. Keep it natural and conversational.

Comment [Rachel Th4]: This is an example of needed tightening ;). Wordiness does creep into this manuscript, but cleaning it up should not be a major task.

the house, John continued to pray. He was becoming quite concerned, but the Lord reassured him, “Have faith; trust in Me.” And the Lord delivered. Someone offered to buy the gatehouse from John, and the amount he offered was exactly the amount John needed to buy “The Orchards.”

Comment [Rachel Th5]: Is it possible to give a specific amount here? Specifics trump generalities, as a rule :).

I have included this episode in this book, not to validate any kind of “health and wealth” or “name it and claim it” gospel, but to show that when the Lord takes us into His purposes, there are divine reasons why He leads us down certain pathways. Sometimes these paths come in the way of great (or modest) blessings; at other times, they take us down the road of suffering. Either way, He is lovingly developing our character, if we will yield, in order to use us more and more for *His* purposes. John shared with me later that he was sure that the Lord had given him the responsibility of caring for this fairly large estate in order to prepare him for an even greater responsibility and ministry that He had in store for him in the future. So, John’s many hours spent taking care of the gardens and the house and , at times, entertaining large groups of people (besides all of his pastoral responsibilities) prepared him well for a future ministry that would bring much glory to God and many blessings for many people (as we will see in the next chapter) from all over the world.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Beit Shalom*

As the years passed, the Lord was good to John and Rosalie. He saw them through the end of the Great Depression and through World War II. During the war, they took care of a little girl for three years until she could be reunited with her parents after the war. John could not serve in the military because of the early injury to his right hand, so he served as a warden of a

Comment [Rachel Th6]: This wording is vague and borders on cliché (as much vague wording does). The more specific you’re able to be, the better. Where you’re going to follow a generality with specifics, you’re often better off to tighten out the generality: “As the years passed, the Lord saw John and Rosalie through the end of the Great Depression and World War II, meeting their physical needs and keeping them safe.”