

August 2006

August 1

"You have one new voice mail."

So I punch "P" to play the new voice mail.

"Hi, Dale, this is Fred or Sally or whoever. Sorry I didn't catch you. What I'm calling about is such and such." And Fred or Sally or whoever goes on and on, telling you about such and such. Then more often than not, it ends this way: "You can reach me at 618-555-7145 or my cell phone, 314-555-2076 ." Huh? You said it so quickly that I only got a couple numbers.

So you go back and listen to the same message again. "Hi, Dale..." and this time you get a few more numbers, but still not enough to return the phone call.

"Hi, Dale, this is Fred or Sally or whoever..." and now you're listening for the third time. It's like the movie "Ground Hog Day," same thing over and over and over again. Maddening!

Just because you've said it, doesn't mean I've understood it. Oral communication is more than just making your point. That works in print where a reader can pause but successful oral communication needs slowness and repetition. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). That might help communication in many areas of your life, not just these confounded voice mails!

August 2

A surprising amount of my work time is spent signing documents for the seminary. I sign contracts, check requests, form letters, personal letters, memos... Every day there's a file folder waiting on the desk for my John Hancock. Your signature is sought for many things as well. Sign checks, redo your home loan, take out a car loan, sign in to enter a secured building, end a letter... You write your John Hancock.

On this date, August 2, back in 1776 John Hancock did sign his name along with 55 other colonial leaders on the Declaration of Independence. It could have turned out differently, they could have been signing their own death sentence, but thank God that we look back on it as a shining moment for our lives and our country. Sometimes when you sign your name you're putting it all on the line.

Martin Luther wrote, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith." (Preface to the Romans)

Could you sign your name to that declaration?

August 3

Francis Rossow is one of Concordia Seminary's memorable preachers. Years ago he talked about a coffee mug someone had given him. This was printed on the mug, "Expect a miracle." "You have to wonder," he mused, "about what's in that coffee."

Same way with ads for churches. "Church of miracles" is how one local church promotes itself. "Come in so we can pray for your miracle" promises another. "Celebratory music." "Transforming societies." You have to wonder about truth in advertising.

In The Divine Conspiracy (Harper San Francisco), Dallas Willard shows how instantaneous religious experiences have replaced the slow process of spiritual growth on the American scene. The slow process of spiritual growth has "been replaced by either some ritual at a point in time—baptism, confirmation—or a type of decision like Billy Graham's meetings." Patrick Kampert comments, "One of the problems with current contemporary Christianity is that every Sunday, churches are offering 'life-transforming experiences.'"

When the Bible teaches "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), it's not denying instantaneous experiences. They happen. "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). The question is: Are you overlooking the miracle that has already come into your life? Are you savoring "the old, old story of Jesus and His love?" Are you finding that "good to the last drop?" (Quotations from the Chicago Tribune, January 29; Sec. 13)

August 4

"Lizzie Borden took an ax

And gave her mother 40 whacks;

When she saw what she had done

She gave her father 41!"

Today's the anniversary of Lizzie Borden doing in Andrew and Abby Borden in 1892 in Fall River, Massachusetts. Or was it Lizzie? She was brought to trial and acquitted. Whatever, kids will have it in for dad and mom.

"Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). Martin Luther commented on that commandment: "Young people...must be taught to revere their parents as God's representatives, and to remember that, however lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are their own father and mother, given them by God" (Large Catechism, 108).

As kids in grade school, we used to sing this ditty...and we sang it out of any adult's hearing...

"I love Bosco; it's rich in poison D.

Mommy put it in my milk and tried to poison me.

But I fooled Mommy and put it in her tea

And now there is no Mommy to try and poison me.”

Sorry, Mom. Quite the wrong attitude on our part!

August 7

The office memo...as often as not, the office memo is despised. Sometimes it's the coward's way out; sometimes it's self-serving, leaving a paper trail to protect yourself.... The memo is an obvious part of office intrigue.

In 74 B.C. the Roman statesman Cicero came back from a distinguished tour of duty in Sicily . He assumed that people knew of his service; they should have. But they didn't. Some didn't even know he had been out of Rome . Cicero learned a lesson from that. "Once I had realized that the Roman People was rather deaf, but sharp-eyes, I stopped worrying about what the world heard about me. From that day on, I took care to be seen in person every day." (Anthony Everitt, p. 70)

Years later St. Paul had a similar experience. He knew that people reacted differently to his letters...shall we say memos?...than to his presence (2 Corinthians 10:10 -11). So he often wrote of his desire to see people in person. Paul's sincerity is proved by all the traveling he did throughout the Mediterranean world.

Sometimes memos have to be sent...but shouldn't love prompt more personal conversation in your office and fewer memos? Face to face or phone to phone, that might just be your Christian way of improving the workplace climate.

August 8

It irritates me, spoils my prayers. "Dear Father, we just..." and then the pray-er fills in whatever follows "just." "We just thank You for this day." "We just ask you to be with us." "We just want to praise You." I trust God's not bothered by it, but I am.

I think it's the lack of eloquence. You're addressing your words to the great God of the universe, the One no sinner can behold and live. Not suggesting stiffness here, just a bit less casualness. I suspect the great pray-ers in the history of the Church did not use the word "just" the way people today like to throw it into every other sentence of a prayer. There was an eloquence in older generations that is lacking today. Part of the reason for that eloquence was that the old-timers weren't bombarded 24/7 by words and images. In other words, the great pray-ers of the past knew silence better than we do today. "When language is no longer related to silence, it loses its source of refreshment and renewal and therefore something of its substance...." (Max Picard in Fred Craddock, As One Without Authority, p. 7). So if your personal prayer life is "just" so-so, spend more time in reverent silence before "just" opening your mouth. "Thou art coming to a King!"

August 9

Thousands and thousands of young people are getting ready to go off to college. Our daughter Katie competed in cross country and track in college, just as she had in high school. She was a very good runner, so good that her trophies and ribbons have created a family storage problem. There were some races she didn't win, when she was bitterly disappointed. As long as I live, I'll never forget giving her a hug after those loses and saying nothing, just giving her a hug.

We all need hope. The early Baby Boomers were born after World War II, when America was confident we could do anything, even go to the moon. Today's young people have been born into a less confident America. Will Social Security be there for them? Can they graduate from college and get a job they've trained for? Hope cannot be taken for granted, for young and old people as well. Is there a fundamental hope underlying all our other hopes, a hope that gives us a hug after a race, a hope that assures you there is life after the Olympics, a hope that restores you when your present world has crashed?

"Put your hope in God, for I will yet again praise Him, my Savior and my God"
(Psalm 42:11)

August 10

"I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will."

Ho Hum... That's nice. Hear that passage from Romans 12:1-2 or many other passages and nothing goes off in our minds. So routine, so untransformed.

But set that passage against something else, and you may well get a lot to think about. Read this from Os Guinness: "In the decades I have followed Jesus, second only to the joy of knowing Him has been a sorrow at the condition of those of us today who name ourselves His followers. If so many of us profess to live by the gospel yet are so pathetically marginal to the life of our societies and so non-descript and inconsequential in our individual lives, is there something wrong with the Gospel, or does the problem lie with us?" (The Call, p. 59)

Jesus hasn't asked us to die for Him as much as to live for Him. "Living sacrifices." Anything transformative happening in your thoughts?

August 11

On Sunday, the 13th, Fidel Castro turns 80. I've read that he's taken care to make sure that communist rule continues in Cuba, an effort most of us hope will prove unsuccessful. Castro came to power in 1959 and for most of his years probably had a sense of being in control today, tomorrow, and...and forever? He must realize now that he's losing his grip.

Losing control is a scary thing that comes to us all in small ways and, as the years progress, in increasingly more menacing ways. Losing control highlights the

difference between living by sight and living by faith. Knowing that you're in control of whatever it is, knowing what levers to pull to exercise that control... that's living by sight. We all live that way somewhat, be it at work, around the house, holding some office, what have you. It's exercising the dominion God gave people (Genesis 1:28). But that should be complemented and increasingly replaced by faith. Faith is simply hanging onto the promises of God, a hanging on that becomes eternally serious as you find yourself losing your grip on earthly things. "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent Word."

Funny thing... Castro has tapped his 75-year-old brother to succeed him. "No fool like an old fool."

August 14

45 years ago yesterday, August 13th in 1961, the Berlin Wall was erected. Two weeks ago I saw what little remains of that hated wall, that symbol of division between people. Most of the wall's 96 miles are gone, what's gone sometimes traced in streets or on sidewalks by a different color brick. Too bad so much is gone. We too easily forget.

Our tour group also saw the old defensive walls of Rothenberg on the Taube River . Those walls are no longer dividing people; they're luring tourist money into the medieval town to spend tourist dollars. I know!

And the worst wall we saw was the concrete and barbed wire at Dachow, the Nazi concentration camp outside of Munich . Within those walls people were stripped of their human dignity, robbed of hope and life, always tempted to turn on each other.

History teaches that walls won't last forever. How strange then that we erect barriers in families and friendships! When Philippians 2:10 -11 promises the day is coming when "every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," some people will be shamed because of the divisive walls they've built.

Are there walls to tear down in your life? "Ears that hear and eyes that see – the Lord has made them both" (Proverbs 20:12).

August 15

Have you noticed how some couples look alike as the years go by? They show it's not "me" but "we." Would you describe your relationship with God the same way? "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Have you let Him become who you are?

Today the church calendar honors "Mary, Mother of Our Lord." Talk about an inseparable relationship between a person and God! The hymn, "Crown Him with Many Crowns" describes Mary's life completely intertwined with her son and Savior: "Fruit of the mystic rose (the "fruit" is Jesus; the "rose" is Mary), as of that rose the Stem, the Root whence mercy ever flows, the Babe of Bethlehem." That's sublime poetry and if you think about it, you can only conclude that the relationship between the believer and the Savior goes beyond rational explanation.

When Jesus told His disciples that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains (Matthew 17:20), He could well have pointed to His mother, a simple girl who became mother of the world's Savior. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). So inseparable the believer and the Savior! Are you letting Him become who you are? Is it "me" or "we?"

August 16

Today was supposed to be the day. The terrorists caught last Thursday intended this to be the day they'd board planes in London, build bombs in flight, and blow to smithereens airliners heading toward the United States. I haven't heard anyone dispute that it would have been as bad as 9-11. Thank God the terrorists were thwarted.

Almost five years after that terrible day, you hear two themes woven through talk about terrorism. The two reflect two quite different assumptions about the nature of mankind. One assumption is that there are reasons why the enemy hates us and by acknowledging our faults we can persuade the enemy to peace. People are basically good and what we have here, the theme goes, is a failure to communicate. The other theme is darker. There are some evils in the world that won't be lessened by talk but can only be dealt with by force. True, God said to His people, "Come now, let us reason together" but the sequel is that they would have none of it and their defeat followed (Isaiah 2:18).

Charles Krauthammer quotes Senator William Borrah in September 1939 when Borrah learned Hitler had invaded Poland . "Lord, if only I could have talked with Hitler, all this might have been avoided." Some people don't get how bad original sin is.

August 17

"Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall" (Psalm 55:22). But I have seen "the righteous fall!" So it must be a matter of perspective. How can something bad strike you and nonetheless you affirm that God sustains you?

Found in the pocket of a fallen Civil War soldier: "I prayed for strength so that I might accomplish something. I prayed for health so that I could do greater things. I prayed for wealth so that I could use it to prosper myself and others. I prayed for authority and esteem that I might be worthily respected among men. I prayed for all these things so that I might have joy in my life. I received nothing I prayed for but received so much more than I had hoped."

Where's your perspective today, looking in the mirror or looking up? On his deathbed Martin Luther wrote, "We are all beggars." If you really get that, really know how dependent you are upon God's gifts, His grace, then, yes, you can say, "He will never let the righteous fall."

"Lord, I will today on Your love rely; Let no evil thought cloud the clear blue sky. Joyful and content with life's simpler things, Knowing all I need from Your kindness springs." (Rev. Stephen Starke)

August 18

Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto is Resident Scholar at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis . A life-long journalist who's covered tough stories, Dr. Siemon-Netto choked up when he stood in his family church, St. Thomas , Leipzig , and told our tour group about a boyhood experience.

The time was the end the end of the Nazi terror and the beginning of the Communist dictatorship. Softly, very softly, the organist improvised on the hymn "Abide, O Dearest Jesus." Though the congregation was not singing, they knew the hymn so well that they remembered the words, "Abide, O Jesus, among us with Thy grace." Then, abruptly, the organist went to full volume, so loud the church seemed to shake. With their knowledge of the old hymns of the church, the worshippers knew immediately that the organist was improvising a statement against the regime. These are the words from their memory that came full volume to fortify their faith, "That Satan may not harm us nor we to sin give place."

In the parable of the sower, Jesus teaches that some people lose faith because they don't have deep roots (Luke 8:13). Assuming that you'd like a deeper spiritual life, the words of the old hymns are a good way to send down those deeper roots. The day will come when the proven words and music will sustain you.

August 21

Hi! My name is Christian. I'm four months old. Grandpa Dale asked me to help him with today's Minute. Sometimes he worries about what to write. I tell him, "Don't worry, Opa; there's plenty of good stuff. Like the other day. Mommy set me up on the couch. People are always putting me places. Where should we put this vase of flowers? Where do you think we should put the baby? Anyway, when I was plopped like a pillow on the couch, I discovered I can make sounds. I think you big people call it "talking." I'm finding out that making sounds gets attention. "Whaaaa!" and Mommy or Daddy come real fast to wait on me. I'm going to use this a lot. That made me smile; then I found something that puzzled me, still does. I was making sounds and all of a sudden saw this thing at the end of my leg. Then I found another one at the end of my other leg. I have no idea what they are or what they're good for, but I'm sure trying to get it into my mouth. So don't have writer's block, Opa. Just look at my eyes, old guy. They're wide with wonder. Don't ever forget what a wonderful thing life is!

August 22

Five years ago I laughed when I read Paul Turner of "The Spokesman-Review" of Spokane , Washington . It tickled me as so true, and with children returning to school I trust you'll appreciate it too. Mr. Turner tells what you should not say to a 13-year-old when shopping for back-to-school clothes. (August 17, 2001 ; D1)

"Hahahahaha. Yeah, right. Like we're going to buy that."

"That's fine, honey. Go ahead and embarrass our whole family."

"I'm sorry my mere presence here in the store humiliates you. But I wish you would remember that I'm the one with the credit card."

Changes the words perhaps but you've probably been there. One thing I learned when our daughters were teenagers: Our children are not our appendages. They are independent human beings, fully equal to us in the sight of God. Yes, parents have an authority over their children (Exodus 20:12), but that is temporary. God is no respecter of persons (1 Peter 1:17). Children should honor and obey their parents, but we parents should give the highest respect to these children of God.

Heavenly Father, help us be good parents to your children...and help us appreciate the humorous moments as they grow, and help us in those moments to grow in wisdom. We ask in the name of Your Son. Amen.

August 23

Nora Ephron is a successful film director, her credits including "Sleepless in Seattle " "You've Got Mail," and "When Harry Met Sally." John McCaslin passed along some questions that Walter Isaacson put to a panel, including Ms. Ephron.

Do you have any friends who are evangelical Christians, or supporters of George W. Bush, or both? Ms. Ephron said, "No, I don't."

Do any of you know one of the 23% of Americans who consider themselves evangelical Christians? Ms. Ephron: "No, and I am not ashamed of it. I just want to say that." (Washington Times, August 16; A5).

Some Christians will instinctively bash Ms. Ephron as a typical, liberal, godless Hollywood type. Such bashing may be what led someone to display the bumper sticker I saw last Saturday, "God, please save me from Your followers."

Does Ms. Ephron not know an evangelical Christian because they're too comfortable in their own cocoon? Jesus says, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors: if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Luke 14:12 - 14).

How many non-Christians are in your circle of friends?

Salt and light

August 24

This is a day to remember that America is not invincible, that enemies can defeat us. On this date, August 24th in 1812, the British army marched on Washington D.C. At Bladensburg the British defeated American militiamen, even though the British were outnumbered. With nothing between the British and the capital, President James Madison and the government fled the city.

Stop and picture that, the President of the United States and government officials fleeing the capital.

When snipers in Washington killed four British soldiers, orders were given to destroy the White House and Capitol. Writes Robert Rimini, "The burning of the House (of Representatives) chamber was especially severe. All the mahogany furniture was piled high in the room and ignited with rocket fuel. The blaze consumed everything but the outer walls." (The House, p. 98)

Stop and picture that, the Capitol burning.

Was it just luck or was it divine Providence when a violent rain storm came and put out the fires? One Washingtonian called it a "hurricane." Was it luck or an answer to prayer that the whole city didn't burn?

"I urge, then, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

August 25

The expression should be "like a bull in a china shop," but writer and professor Mark Peters had a student write "like a bowl in a china shop." Linguists call this is an "eggcorn," a writing mistake that's the result of a guess when you don't know the true expression. If you think about it, "like a bowl in a china shop" does make sense. You do find bowls in a china shop; you don't find a bull. So the student's guess made sense, even though it was wrong. Other eggcorns: "On the spurt of the moment," "boggled down," and "put the cat before the horse." The old biblical expression to "gird one's loins" became "girdle one's loins."

Mr. Peters: "Too often, when I respond to student writing in traditional ways, the only message I convey is that the student is as dumb as a box of rocks and I'm as mean as a rabid skunk. Anything that could make talking about goofs goofier and less stressful might be worth a try." ("The Chronicle of Higher Education," August 11; C2, 3)

How do you react to the mistakes of young people? Young King Solomon prayed that God would give him wisdom (1 Kings 3). Young people's mistakes might be an opportunity for you to impart God's wisdom. That's true for anyone's mistakes.

August 28

Christian here, writing today's Minute. Maybe you remember me from last week. I'm starting to help my Grandpa Dale with his Minutes. I was born 4 months ago and Gramps asked the seminary's admission's department to send me an enrollment packet. Cute, Opa, cute, but now I'm plopped on their mailing list!

I've got questions. You say you've got this great theological library, 248,000 books. Since I'll learn to count on my fingers and toes, I wonder how many seminary workers it took to count those books. Oh, I'll read! Already my Dad and Mom have given me books. My favorites are the "Belly Button Book," "Guess How Much I Love

You?" and "My Little Book about God." Do you have books like that in your big building of books? Do you teach your students to study big people books so they can show how much God loves all His children? I hope so. I'm curious about everything, including God. I don't want to grow up and stop being curious about Him. Seems to me that big people stop being curious about God, otherwise it would be standing room only in your big book building.

Another baby book I have is "Hey, Wake Up!" That's right, big people. Hey, wake up; it's about God and people!

August 29

Today is the first anniversary of Katrina. Not everyone's life is back to normal. Over 200,000 people in New Orleans are still displaced. You get a cut, put on a band aid and recover. You break a bone, go to the doctor, get a cast, and recover. But what attitude do you adopt when something comes into your life and it'll be years before you get back to normal, if ever? Katrina, a death, a disability, a divorce...the list goes on.

Fixing blame isn't the answer. Political types are blaming their opponents about the response to Katrina, but wait! Even if we could affix blame with certainty, does that change the present hardship? People like to ask, "Why, why did this unprecedented tragedy happen to me?" Again, if you knew the answer would it change your situation? No.

Common sense should tell us that if calamities could be eliminated from human life, it would have happened sometime over the thousands of years of recorded history. Maybe we're missing the mark. God did not come into human flesh in His Son to give us trouble free life here and now on earth. Instead, He "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." (2 Corinthians 1:4)

August 30

Two interesting things happened on this date in history, but first this. In *Awakening to Equality*, Karl Lutze tells about his days as minister to a black congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma. "I remember one of our...members telling me of his traveling through the South. After purchasing gas, he'd asked the proprietor for his little son's use of the restroom. The request was denied. Meanwhile, the child's urgent need could not be postponed, and a little pool formed next to his shoe. Men standing around roared in laughter. The father, feeling for his child, in tenderness picked him up and left in bitter anger. In retrospect he told me, 'I thank God I had no gun in my car or I'm afraid I would have gone right back in there and killed that man!'" (p. 146)

On this date, August 30, in 1967 the Senate confirmed Thurgood Marshall as the first black justice of the United States Supreme Court. And on this date in 1983 Guion Bluford Jr. became the first black American astronaut in space.

"Christ did die for all of us. He died so we would no longer live for ourselves, but for the one who died and was raised to life for us. We are careful not to judge people by what they seem to be..." (2 Corinthians 5:15-16)

August 31

A company in Virginia discovered that you don't totally delete information from your cell phone when you assume you have. Account numbers, passwords, and business plans you deleted aren't really gone. Neither are infidelities. The company, Trust Digital, took a phone sold on e-Bay and resurrected a message to a married man from his girl friend. Because the man's wife was getting suspicious, she wrote, "So, I'll talk to you next week." (AP)

Psalm 139 teaches that one of God's qualities is "you think you can delete something from God's awareness but you can't." "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue You know it completely, O Lord" (vv. 1-4).

So cell phones tell secrets and God knows all. Still there has to be something in you to stop you from doing it, to make you think, 'I'd better not say or type this.' Might that be a healthy fear and a sense of shame? What if I'm found out? And about infidelity or any sin against the commandments, 'How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' (Genesis 36:9).